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CARFAX

World Cities, Globalisation and the Spread of Consumerism: A View from Singapore

Beng-Huat Chua

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> Life for Singaporeans is not complete without shopping!

This declaration by the Prime Minister of Singapore in his 1996 National Day Rally Speech, the most important address to the nation of the year (*Straits Times*, 18 August 1996) summarises and symbolises the sea-change of living conditions in the island nation over the past three decades—from underdevelopment to affluence, from material deprivation to material excess—brought about by rapid economic development. The process of economic development, initiated in the early 1960s, was facilitated by the 'new' international division of labour, in which multinationals from the US, western Europe and Japan were relocating production of consumer goods to inexpensive production platforms in Asia. In the past three decades, Singapore has been able to keep pace with the changes in the global economy, transforming its economic base at different times, and has managed to exit from labour-intensive industrialisation to an increasingly service economy, securing itself a place in the hierarchy of world cities in global capitalism (Friedman, 1995).

Attending the affluence that issues from the economic transformation is, of course, the emergence of a loosely organised 'culture of consumerism'. Available time and financial capacity to consume leisure have expanded across all classes but, perhaps, the lowest 10 per cent of income-earners. There is a television in practically every home. Locally produced programmes compete with imports for viewership. Television-watching consumes the greatest proportion of leisure time (Ho and Chua, 1995, pp. 40–41). In the 1990 national census, 'window-shopping' ranked as the number one leisure activity conducted away from home (Ho and Chua, 1995, p. 40). Expenditure on food has increased in the face of increasing affluence—apparently contrary to Engle's economic theory, which states that the wealthier nations spend a smaller proportion of their income on food than do the poorer ones (Mansfield, 1994). This is because the varieties of food consumed have increased and qualities have improved. Furthermore, eating out has become a common leisure activity. The average proportion of expenditure on cooked food—i.e. food purchased in restaurants or from other vendors—as part of total food expenditure per household increased by more than 10 per cent between 1977 and 1987 (Chua and Tan, 1995, p. 6). In 1995, in spite of the multiple layers of taxation adding up to a more than 200 per cent total tariff and making the prices of cars among the highest in the world, 34 per cent of all households owned at least one car and, during 1993–96, the luxurious Mercedes was among the top three selling cars.[1]

Beng-Huat Chua is in the Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore, 10 Kent Ridge Crescent, Singapore 0511. Fax: 0065 7779579. E-mail: soccbh@leonis.nus.sg.

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The emergence of this consumer culture has been codified locally into an ideological/moral discourse with two explicit dimensions: first, the criticism against the 'excess of affluence'; and, secondly, the critique against 'Westernisation' or its variant 'Americanisation'. The conceptualisation of consumer culture as 'excess' recalls the conditions of deprivation prior to industrialisation that are still fresh in the collective memories of Singaporeans. Conceptually, it is intelligible against a narrow concept of consumption as 'utility'. The critique against 'Westernisation' locates Singapore as a non-Western/Asian 'culture' and points to an awareness of the symbolic significance of consumer goods. The conceptual matrix constituted by these two components of the moral/ideological discourse is the space in which the issues of consumption in Singapore will be examined in this essay. (Though concerned primarily with Singapore, the general discomfort with the rise of consumerism, especially of the young, is repeated in some of the NICs in east and south-east Asia. Broadly similar moral/ideological criticisms of consumer culture as destructive of traditions and/or higher human values can be found in South Korea (Lee, 1994; Hart, 1993), Malaysia (Rokiah, 1995) and Indonesia (Gerke, 1995). In each of these locations, under the general anxieties of economic development and expanding consumerism, local cultural, political and economic conditions provide nuanced differences—for example, in Korea the concern is with the erosion of Confucian ethics; in Malaysia, the concern is with credit expansion into different ethnic groups; and in Indonesia, the government's worry is how conspicuous consumption will aggravate income inequalities.)

Singapore as a 'World' City

If the predominance of financial and service sectors in the economy is the defining characteristic of a 'world city', then Singapore eminently qualifies for a place in the collection of cities which are discursively grouped under this name, although it may not rank at the top of the conceptual hierarchy (Friedman, 1995). Founded as a trading post during the expansion of British mercantile capitalism in the early 19th century, manufacturing never figured significantly in the economy of Singapore (see Huff, 1994). Consequently, at the time of political self-government in 1959 and subsequent independence in 1965, the nascent industrialisation programme had to be fuelled by foreign capital in search of export production platforms and government-owned enterprises. The dominance of foreign capital and government-linked companies continues to characterise the Singaporean economy today.

The labour-intensive, export-oriented industrialisation of the 1960s was well timed as its initiation corresponded with the spatial transfer and expansion of industrial production from developed nations to cheap production sites in selected locations in Asia. The most important manufacturing relocation had been in electronic industries, beginning with low-end, consumer goods and semiconductors (see Chiu *et al*, 1997). In providing jobs and mopping up the unskilled, underemployed and unemployed labour, it alleviated the potentially socially destabilising unemployment condition in the initial years of self-government and independence; unemployment declined steadily, by the mid 1970s Singapore began, and continues, to be short of labour that had to be augmented by foreign labour.

Successful implementation of the industrialisation programme required the development of an institutional structure to facilitate, develop and control foreign direct investment (FDI). The then new institutions included crucially the Economic Development Board (EDB) which develops strategies to induce potential investors, the Development Bank of Singapore to handle financial needs and the Jurong Town Corporation to develop industrial infrastructure demands. By the 1970s, Singapore was firmly "locked into the global manufacturing circuit" (Chiu *et al.*, 1997, p. 80), this was reflected in the estimate that, in 1975, 48.6 per cent of FDI in Asia ended up

in Singapore (Mizra, 1986, p. 146). These agencies, especially EDB, continue to play an important role in the ongoing adjustments of the Singapore economy to niches and opportunities in global capitalism.

The success of the industrialisation programme contributed immensely to political stability and the legitimacy of the then nascent government of the People's Action Party (PAP), which was then still battling, although winning, the political left which had its support in radical labour unions and other mass-based organisations (see Bloodworth, 1986; Drysdale, 1984).

However, beneath this highly visible industrialisation was also the steady expansion of the service sector that supported the former process. By 1980, the service-sector enterprises had already overtaken manufacturing in economic output—"particularly impressive are the performances of financial and business services and of the transport and communications sector" (Castells *et al.*, 1990, p. 167). The expansion of the financial services was facilitated by the government's realisation that Singapore lacked the necessary banking infrastructure for an industrialised economy. In 1970, it initiated an ambitious plan to develop a new banking and corporate district along the south waterfront of the island, incorporating the existing commercial area which had been in place since the founding of Singapore. Today, this district houses not only corporate centres and smaller banking offices of all major companies, but also all the government financial agencies, including the Treasury, the Monetary Authority, the Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Trade and Industry. (For the history of this area, known locally as 'the Golden Shoe', see Chua, 1989.)

However, the service sector did not come into its own until the mid-1980s. By the end of 1970s, the government had realised that, because of its limited workforce and land, Singapore was increasingly uncompetitive with regard to labour-intensive and low-technology industries and that a new strategy was necessary in its manufacturing sector. It thus initiated a new wage regime by imposing a 20 per cent annual wage increase from 1979–81; in addition, a 4 per cent tax on the payroll of all companies was extracted to establish a Skills Development Fund for workers' training. The desired result was to push the labour-intensive industries, such as textile and low-end electronics into the neighbouring region, and free-up the tight labour market for new industries (see Rodan, 1989). The rapid wage increase without a corresponding increase in productivity and the strong Singapore dollar, coupled with slow growth in the market destinations for Singapore's exports, precipitated a recession in the Singapore economy between 1985 and 1987 (Tan, 1986). This led the government to convene an Economic Committee to rethink the development strategy for the future.

A completely new initiative was announced by the Committee in 1986. It recognised that "By the 1990s, Singapore's niche as merely an offshore production centre for the developed world will have been eroded" (*Economic Committee Report*, 1986, p. 11). The Report (p. 12) continues:

> **Beyond Manufacturing**. As an industrial centre, [Singapore] must move beyond being a production base, to being an international total business centre. We cannot depend only on companies coming to Singapore solely to make or assemble products designed elsewhere. We need to attract companies to Singapore to establish operational headquarters, which are responsible for subsidiaries throughout the region. In Singapore such headquarters should do product development work, manage their treasury activities, and provide administrative, technical and management services to their subsidiaries. Then it becomes worthwhile for them to establish a plant in Singapore, to produce goods or services for export.
>
> **Exporter of Services**. Singapore should become a major exporter of services. Services account for an increasing share of our GDP and our service exports have been growing as quickly as world trade in services. Scope for growth is still huge.

Table 1. Share of manufacturing and business services sectors in GDP (1985 prices)

Year	Percentage share of GDP	
	Manufacturing	Financial and business services
1975	21.4	16.9
1980	29.5	20.3
1985	23.6	27.1
1986	25.1	28.2
1987	27.0	28.6

Sources: Economic Survey of Singapore, various issues (quoted in Dicken and Kirkpatrick, 1991, p. 176).

> We need to promote not just Singapore-based activities like tourism or banking, but also offshore-based activities, like construction firms building hotels in China, and salvage firms operating in the Middle East. We have started to do this, but there are many more opportunities, in China and elsewhere. For example, we have expertise in hotel management, air and sea port management, town and city planning. These skills should be systematically marketed.

From then on, the service sector was targeted as the more significant engine of growth. The proportions to the GDP between industries are shown in Table 1. Of the more tractable aspects of this new orientation is the operational headquarters (OHQ) scheme, managed by the EDB, which attempt to induce multinationals, with significant tax breaks (Dicken and Kirkpatrick, 1991), to set up operational headquarters functions in Singapore. The EDB has been able thus far to meet its modest quota of attracting 6–8 OHQs annually.

As Perry (1992, p. 290), points out, Singapore's 'privileged' position in promotion of services is "derived from sustained investment in advanced telecommunications, shipping and air communications, its role as an international financial centre and centrality to some of the faster growing economies in the world", and that "prior to the OHQ scheme, Singapore was already one of the few significant concentrations of regional offices in Asia". In this sense, it could be said that the OHQ scheme is but the formalisation of an existing practice. Indeed, some of the companies that adopted the schemes were precisely those who were already conducting their headquarters functions in Singapore. Significantly, as Dicken and Kirkpatrick discover, through a very small sample of cases, the most important considerations for a company's decision to set up OHQ is neither the geographical location nor the tax incentives. Rather the most important reasons are the very high quality of business and communications infrastructure which, according to the Japanese companies studied, are superior to those in Tokyo, and the "growing scale and sophistication of Singapore's financial and business community" (Dicken and Kirkpatrick, 1991, p. 181).[2] The OHQ scheme is still in its early days, thus drawing mixed assessments. Nevertheless, selective case studies do show the intensification of business activities in the companies which set up OHQs.[3]

The effects of the above changes, among others, in the development direction into expansion of services, since 1985, are apparent from the following economic indicators. High-technology exports—bio-technology, opto-electronics, information and communications and advanced materials—from Singapore exceed those of South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong (*Straits Times*, 9 June 1997). Growth in employment in manufacturing has been declining, falling to about 1.8 per cent between 1993–1994, while financial, insurance, real estate and business services expanded by 6.3 per cent in the same period (Ministry of Labour, 1995, p. 8). The increasing sophistication of the financial industry is reflected in the number of foreign manufacturing firms seeking public listing on the Singapore Stock Exchange. Finally, there is increasing pressure, led recently by the New York Cotton Exchange (*Straits Times*, July 1997) to internationalise the Singapore currency; a move being resisted by the Singapore government because it would mean

the loss of control of the Singapore currency. The success of Singapore in selling itself as a 'global city' is nicely summarised by Kahn:

> encouraging higher tech industries; pushing low wage/low tech investment offshore (e.g. the 'growth triangle' with southern Malaysia and Indonesia), and promoting the outflow of Singapore capital into low wage economies (most recently China), at the same time working to ensure that regional headquarters and profitable producer services for these activities are located in the republic; and pursuing various 'human resources' options to upgrade the skill level of the Singapore workforce (Kahn, 1996, p. 62).

The rapid economic growth of the past three decades, along with constant upgrading of national education at every level to meet the demands of global service industries, has provided continuous expansion of wages across the board, reaching the second-highest per capita income in Asia, at US$30 000 in 1997. The economic growth and the expansion of income have primed Singapore for an explosion in the culture of consumption; an explosion which is facilitated by the presence of business services, such as finance companies and advertising agencies, and the high quality of information technologies. Indeed, the explosion of consumption is one of the logical outcomes of global capitalism (Sklair, 1995).

Singapore as a Modern Space

Before embarking on the analysis of the culture of consumption in Singapore, it should be noted that present stage of evolution of Singapore into a 'world' city is but the most recent phase of its, albeit discontinuous, unfolding as a modern space. Singapore has always been a modern city. In this insistence on its 'modernity', we are reminded of the fact that "globalization" is far from a new process" (Hall, 1991, p. 19).[4] Singapore was born of the modern age of mercantile capitalism; of steamships and telecommunications, essential to international trade between Europe and Asia; of immigrants from east, south and south-east Asia and from the colonial metropolitan centres of Europe, not exclusively Britain, all in search of economic opportunities.

Substantively, therefore, Singapore has always been part of global service capitalism, adhering to the contours of its different phases as evidenced by, historically, the successive layers of investment in its telecommunication system. Had it not been so, Singapore's position as a regional and world city in south-east Asia would not have been realised with such speed, if at all. In this sense, the period of low-tech and labour-intensive industrialisation might be an aberration; it is fast-paced but short-lived in the long period of Singapore's integration into the global economy.

The cultural entailments of global capitalism have always been part of the cultural context in which Singaporeans make their lives. Singaporeans, even before that 'name' existed to anchor their national identity, have never been strangers to modernisation and have been adaptable to each period of change in the modernisation trajectory. Modernity as a cultural context has never been an importation of the West imposed upon and destroying an existing 'traditional' culture. Singapore could not have been narrowly defined as a 'traditional' nation; given its multi-ethnic population since its founding, it has always been impossible to talk about a single 'Singaporean' tradition. Singapore was, thus, never a Third World location, culturally and economically isolated on the periphery of capitalism; rather, its very own historical trajectory has been inextricably tied to global capitalism. It is precisely because of the absence of a 'pre-colonial', traditional or tribal culture that the cultural modernity of capitalism should be emphasised, rather than conceptualising the modernity as 'Western'. Perhaps, it is this discursive division between modernity of capitalism and Western cultural modernity that enables the Singapore government and its people to inhabit a thoroughly capitalist

Singapore while espousing anti-Westernism (Ang and Stratton, 1995).

To emphasise Singapore's modernity is not to deny that each of the ethnic groups that constitutes the population does not engage in their respective particularistic cultural practices. Indeed, they do. At its most mundane, rice and noodles still remain the main staples of Singaporeans and chopsticks and hands are still the preferred utensils for all, with few exceptions. Asian languages are still spoken at home and, by government education policy, are learned in schools. 'Traditional' clothes, like the modified Chinese *sam-foo*, Indian *saris* and Malay *baju* are still the daily wear of women in their sixties or older; those who are less than that age are likely to wear contemporary fashion. The point, therefore, is that such culturally specific daily practices have always sat side-by-side with modern commodities and attitudes. Both are constitutive of the complex of social life of all Singaporeans: neither could be erased.[5]

Given the migrant status of all its inhabitants, the cultural terrain has been one in which the cultures of various ethnic groups are inscribed on each individual, including affinity to the British culture which undoubtedly provided economic advantages. With the exceptions of the small and disappearing strata of immigrants educated in the classical, vernacular traditions of their respective homelands, the cultural composition of each Singaporean has always been of varying degrees of hybridity.[6] This is very evident in the everyday life-world of street languages where individuals possess varying degrees of competency in various languages and switch and mix codes readily, and also in the crossing-over of food practices at home and at eating-places.

Ironically, as we shall see, Singapore's modernity and the cultural hybridity of its people have been made more problematic under the independent national government's multi-racial policies and its ideological transmutation of the modern component of its culture negatively into Westernisation, in the government's attempts to 'Asianise', or self-Orientalise' the population within the current ideological conjuncture.

The Emerging Culture of Consumption

Three decades of rapid economic growth have spawned an expanding middle class and, perhaps more importantly, have all but eliminated abject poverty. National economic growth becomes meaningful in the everyday life of its people when it translates into expansions and improvements of people's material lives.

Evidence of this expansion is everywhere in the island-nation. Prestigious cars are not the only famous goods known to Singaporeans. Almost every international fashion house is represented, ranging from mass-market 'diffusion' and exclusive couture lines of all known designers—such as Issey Miyaki, Sonia Rykiel, Donna Karen and Gianni Versace, respectively from different fashion centres around the world—to 'no-designer' brand-name sports wear—such as Niki and Fila—which are conveniently gathered within the ubiquitous shopping complexes everywhere on the island. All fast-food chains, but particularly American, with their global reach, are highly visible. McDonald's outlets are found not only in leisure districts, but also in the public housing estates that accommodate more than 90 per cent of the three million population. Less ubiquitous, but perhaps symbolically more significant in signifying the new affluence, are international-chain cafés, such as Starbucks from the US and Dome from Western Australia. Singapore is thus, without doubt, a space penetrated by the global-marketing strategies of producers of consumer goods. This penetration is, of course, facilitated by the highly developed telecommunications, including information technologies, and transport facilities that are central to the economic development in global capitalism.[7]

The massive improvements in material life and its attendant cultural practices constitute discursively the 'culture of consumption' or 'consumerism'. To emphasise the culture of consumption is to recognise that

> the ways in which consumption ceases to be a simple appropriation of utilities, or use values, to become a consumption of signs—and images in which the emphasis upon the capacity to endlessly reshape the cultural and symbolic aspect of the commodity makes it more appropriate to speak of *commodity-signs* (Featherstone, 1995, p. 75).

In addition, one needs to emphasise that the ability and freedom of individuals to reshape symbolic aspects of commodities are not unproblematic.

The degrees of efficacy and freedom of the consumer, either singly or as a group, constitute a contextualised terrain of contestations between different relevant agencies and individual consumers themselves. In the case of Singapore, the expansion of consumer culture is subjected to multiple layers of ideological discourse. Each discursive rendering of the symbolic meanings of singular items of consumption, or of loose constellations of items into 'lifstyles', becomes unavoidably embroiled in the politics of experience. At least three strands of moral/ideological discourse of consumption can be identified: First, there is the general theme of 'excessive' consumption, conceptualised as 'excessive materialism' in society; secondly, is the 'fear' of 'Westernisation/Americanisation', primarily articulated by the PAP government but with deep resonances in society; and, thirdly, is the displacement of the two themes onto the young for being 'materialistic/consumerist' and 'Westernised'. The following discussion will take up first the issue of Westernisation, then the discussion of youth, and then the general issue of excessive consumption.

Consumerism as the 'Curse' of Westernisation

The simplistic thesis of cultural imperialism that the Third World is being 'Americanised' by the inundation of American-produced consumer goods and entertainment now has few adherents among academics.[8] However, the same cannot be said about the use made of this thesis in the politics of many locations because of its utility in generating nationalist sentiments and identities (Classen and Howes, 1996, pp. 179–182). It becomes a thesis that is kept alive often for this purpose, as in Singapore.

Part of the official, ideological discourse of the Singapore government on consumerism takes on a particular trope of being 'anti-West' in general and anti-American in particular. While it is substantively true that Singapore is a space well penetrated by American consumer, recreational and entertainment goods, this itself is not new and is not the reason for official anti-Westernism. This is borne out by contrast: Singapore is also, very significantly, full of Japanese consumer goods, yet there is no fear of the 'Japanisation' of Singaporeans in the consumer cultural discourse, as there is of Westernisation/Americanisation.[9] The different reception lies in part in the conceptualisation of the 'cultural' contents of the goods imported from the two countries.

In general, the bulk of Japanese imports to the rest of Asia are identified with 'technology' items—for example, household goods such as cars, televisions, refrigerators, radios and other electronic goods. Japanese technological 'superiority' is recognised in these consumer goods. However, they are seen as instruments without 'cultural' substance. For example, as in the case of television or different kinds of audio-receiving or audio-recording instruments, the respective substantive television and music programmes for these instruments, in which cultural content is embedded, are perceived to be dominated, overwhelmingly, by globally marketed American products.[10] In actuality, Singapore's cultural, particularly entertainment, consumer space is equally penetrated by Hong Kong, Taiwan and to a lesser extent, India. Finally, American television entertainment is also being contested by local television productions. Indeed, the viewer-ratings of the local drama and situation comedies generally exceed those of American imports. That these local programmes

are framed within local ideologies and are aimed at contesting American products should not be surprising when one realises that all local television stations are government-owned.

Nevertheless, it is to the 'cultural' content of the American products that the anti-Western and anti-American sentiments are ideologically directed. American mass entertainment programmes are seen as the carriers and harbingers of Western/American 'liberal' values, especially individualism. The programmes are deemed to be reflective of the moral 'laxity' of liberalism, where individual rights and self-interests rule with disastrous consequences—such as, high divorce rates, strong legal rights and protection for criminals over the rights of crime victims, promiscuity in sex and drugs. These themes, common in American films, television programmes and popular music, are read as reflecting the 'reality' that is America—i.e. where criminals are turned into folk heroes and promiscuity in sex and drugs is celebrated. Ostensibly, official fear is that liberal individualism will make inroads into the cultural sphere of the local population, supposedly leading them away from local 'traditional' values and undermining local social cohesion. Built into this anti-Westernism is thus not just a discourse of value difference, but of value conflict. It is to this discourse of difference as conflict that we must turn our attention.[11]

That the moral/ideological discourse is directed at 'individualism' is, of course, no accident. The ideological link between individualism and liberal democracy poses an ideological challenge to the semi-democratic polity, fashioned by the unbroken rule of the PAP. In the attempt to preserve the ideological and political systems operant in Singapore, the political differences between Singapore and developed nations are discursively reformulated in terms of the 'Otherness' of the West. This 'othering' creates the space for a discourse of cultural 'difference' between 'Singapore' and the 'West'.

The term 'Singapore' in this discursive difference is further expanded into a more inclusive notion of 'Asia/Asian' by drawing on the convenient fact that the population in Singapore is composed of three different communities—of Chinese, Malays and Indians. At one level, the 'culture' of Singaporeans is thus constructed as being a composite, distilled from the three, Sinic, Islamic and Indic 'traditions'. The modernity of the people is discounted in this abstract attribution of 'traditions' and, instead, the reinvented 'traditional' Asian values and attitudes are inscribed on them. Thus, a 'traditional' Singapore deemed to be essentially 'Asian' emerges discursively, suppressing and denying Singapore's very modernity, which is displaced as a 'Western' cultural influence. As a 'traditional Asian' space, the 'community-oriented' culture of Singaporeans became vulnerable to the 'unhealthy' cultural penetration of the West/America (Chua, 1996). The bridgehead of this 'insidious invasion' is supposedly embedded in the 'Western culture' that is inscribed in consumer products imported from the US.

Again, the ideological/cultural critique of 'Westernisation' can be gleaned from the contrasting total absence of ideological thematisation of the fact that Singapore television, movies and popular music spaces are equally penetrated by Asian producers and products, particularly those from Hong Kong and Taiwan, and increasingly those from Japan. This is an absence that is only intelligible in the official presumption of cultural affinities, if not similarities, between the latter locations, within a discursively mystified 'Asia'. Indeed, there has been an increasing presence of programmes, including music videos, from other parts of Asia on television stations—which are all government-owned—alongside expansion of local productions. And the annual Singapore Film Festival is increasingly a showcase of films from countries in Asia.

This 'Asianisation' of Singapore, as it is elsewhere throughout east and south-east Asia, has obviously been buoyed by the rise of capital in Asia since the 1960s. This rise of capital has produced a new confidence and has led to a 'search' for cultural explanations

for the very capitalist expansion in Asia. This reworking of so-called Asian values under conditions of capitalist success has been hailed as portending to an age of 'Asian Renaissance' in the near future (Ibrahim, 1997). Backed by success in global capitalism, this Asianisation discourse is able to avoid the danger of conceptually reducing the people of Singapore into 'primitives' governed by tradition (Bhaba, 1983). It is the Western modernity of liberalism that is rejected, not the modernity of capitalism. In this sense, the reconfiguration of Asian values in Singapore does not amount to a fundamentalism, which often accompanies "the refusal of modernity" (Hall, 1991, p. 36). Instead, at its most progressive, it is an attempt to project the reconfigured Asian values as a moral system that will act to alleviate capitalist social inequalities and restrain the rapaciousness of market forces (George Yeo, Minister of Information and the Arts, *Straits Times*, 21 June 1997).

In the 'demonising' discourse on cultural difference (Mahbubani, 1993), 'America' has a central symbolic place both as a possible place of attraction for populations which are deprived of freedoms which are guaranteed by democracy, and as a place of 'moral decadence' for governments who are afraid to institutionalise the same freedoms. 'America' is simultaneously both an object of repulsion and of attraction. Both features can potentially be utilised in the cultural politics of Singapore. A symbolic imaginary America as 'land of the free' may be said to frame some of the consumption practices of young Singaporeans, as will be discussed in the next section.

That the anti-West/anti-American discourse, via the critique of consumerism, is to a certain extent self-serving on the part of local governments is quite obvious. The conservative values that they juxtapose against liberalism have the potential effect of generating support for the political *status quo*, which is the desire of the governments. (For a discussion of the similarities between conservative traditions in Western political thought and 'Asian' values, see Rodan and Hewison, 1996.) However, this official reading is not without positive public resonance—otherwise its ideological efficacy would be very limited indeed.[12] Support for the official critique of emergent 'decadence' in the cultural sphere tends to come from the generations who have just emerged from conditions of economic underdevelopment, while the targets of criticism are the generations that grow up under conditions of relative prosperity.

The Consuming Young

Generally speaking, the period between teenage and marriage—the period generically known as 'youth' or 'younger generation'—is a window for unlimited consumption for and on the self, constrained only by one's own financial circumstances. Without concerns for 'big' items, like financing the mortgage of a house or the financial burdens of familial concerns, one can freely spend on oneself. In the particular instance of Singapore, where the ownership of a car—because of its exorbitant price—is out of the question for teenagers and early entrants to the workforce, the body has emerged as a primary locus of consumption and body adornment is its primary modality.

The consumption practices of youth are thus highly visible and therefore, are an easy target for moral/ideological criticisms. The young are criticised for their lifestyles; togged out in 'designer' or 'brand-name' clothes and accessories and spending comparatively significant sums of money in discos, listening and dancing to Western music and eating at expensive foreign restaurants—a condition only aggravated by stints of living and studying in foreign lands in the case of returned students. In a context where the collective memory of material deprivation in the period before rapid economic growth remains vivid, the younger generations of Singapore are 'children of affluence'. Their highly visible exposure to and participation in globalised consumerism transform them into icons of consumer lifestyles which are

supposedly inscribed with 'Western/American decadence'.

The cultural/ideological/moral criticism of Westernisation can be best illustrated by examining youth fashion. At the general level of the sociology of fashion, there is an 'adult' puzzle as to why youth dress to 'shock' their elders—without apparent understanding that 'shock' is a mechanism through which teenagers define themselves from their parents, thus acquiring identity as 'youth'. Secondly, parents are generally sceptical regarding youth's claim to 'individuality' through fashion; they point out that the latter in fact wear similar clothes and are thus conforming to a code rather than breaking out with individualising styles. This conventional criticism is similar to that of the social scientist who suggests that, under conditions of mass production, any promises of 'individuality' through the consumption of such products must necessarily be false (Ewen, 1976). Such criticism fails to understand a central characteristic and dynamic of 'fashion': in fashion, consumers' desire to be different is a limited desire—that of individualising within a trend. Fashion is necessarily a trend which is constructed by mass participation; to be 'fashionable' is to be with the trend, with the crowd (Finkelstein, 1996, p. 82). Few desire to be totally different from the others because that would make one 'weird' rather than 'fashionable'. Individuality is expressed through the ways in which fashionable items are configured on one's own body, rather than breaking with the fashionable crowd.

At the level of 'Americanisation', the fashionable items are largely derived from 'styles' found in the globalised, popular culture industries—such as television, movies and popular music and direct advertisements. In all these media, the US may be dominant, but it is not exclusive in Singapore. However, American fashion items are easily available in stores that specialise in a wide spectrum of items that may be called 'American street fashion'. Youth are criticised for 'aping' the 'Americans' in their donning of these items. Consumption of 'American' clothes is actually very selective; while blue jeans (are they still American?) are almost uniform for youth, the hip-hop clothes of Afro-American rap singers went begging for customers, reflecting the 'middle-class' perceptions of Singaporean youth.

One reading of this mimicking is that it is symptomatic of the 'cultural' and 'identity' confusion of youth because they have supposedly lost their essential identities as 'Asians'. However, there is little to suggest this supposed confusion outside the fashion sphere. Indeed, the youth of Singapore appear to be very stable and socially responsible—including their attitude towards money, as discussed in the next section. Youth delinquency rates are not particularly high; public order is not routinely disrupted by confused and disgruntled youth. On the other hand, rates of passing stringent examinations in the highly competitive education system improve year on year.

A contesting interpretation of the fashion consumption of youth, as part of lifestyle, may be offered here. Argument of 'identity confusion' is only intelligible against a background assumption that identity formation and stability are entirely dependent on a notion of unchanging 'traditions'. However, the youth are drawn elsewhere. Youth in Singapore, as in other parts of the world, draw from a globalised 'image bank' projected in the popular mass media of movies, television and music, which in Singapore include Taiwanese and Hong Kong productions. Indeed, a major teenage phenomenon in Singapore is the 'fandom' of Mandarin and Cantonese pop-singers from Taiwan and Hong Kong (Soh, 1994/95). The reference point for Singapore's youth is, therefore, a global mix of images of youth, rather than merely local cultural images. It is the global rather than the local that provides stability for their identity as 'youth', instead of confusion. However, consumption of global images unavoidably passes through local cultural and political conditions. This, by now accepted, point will be demonstrated later in the analysis of Singaporean consumption of American media and consumer products.

In the particular instance of Singapore, where the spaces of everyday life are institutionally highly administered within reinvented 'Asian traditions' aimed at eliciting conformity from the population, America has been symbolically transformed in the local ideological mind into an icon of 'freedom'—the land of freedom, where individuality and differences rule and indeed, are celebrated. Selective items of clothes are taken as 'symbols' of the American way of life; the 'selectivity' is itself evidence that America is a symbolic reconfiguration of Singaporeans. The attractiveness of American street fashion is filtered through the suppressed desires of the Singaporeans in question.

Within the Singaporean symbolic representation of America, debates on 'Americanisation' in the local cultural sphere have everything to do with ideological contests within Singapore, rather than what is 'really' going on in America. Selective 'American' cultural products are consumed through local semiotics in which the products are used to express resistance to local repressions. The centrality of clothes in this resistance is succinctly put by a local designer, whose commercial success is built on sensual body-conscious clothes for young Singaporean women:

> In Singapore, the only protest you can make is how you look, short of taking off your clothes. So people make a statement with what they wear (Peter Teo, *Sunday Times*, 8 June 1997).

Excesses of Consumerism

In addition to being criticised for being 'Westernised', youth are also criticised for their 'excesses'. However, in this instance, youth is but part of a larger critique which indicts the entire society: that the society has turned 'materialist'. The society is thus at once both economically and morally/ideologically, couched within a language of 'thrift' of the past and of 'older' generations against the spending ways of the present and the 'younger' generations. The 'past' is constructed and recalled fondly as inhabited by individuals and families who were 'frugal' by attitude and/or character. Yet, the fact is that the older generations lived in underdeveloped conditions, in which 'poverty' and 'frugality' were indistinguishable phenomena; by force of circumstances, frugality was the only available response to poverty. The critique of excessive materialism of the present is thus a classic case of ideology formation: the historical response of being frugal is being 'naturalised' or 'essentialised', making a moral virtue out of necessity. The question remains: would those of the 'older' generations have been frugal if they had had the relative wealth of today's younger generations?

Just how spendthrift are the young, remains an empirical question that requires serious research. For example, in a newspaper-financed national survey, Singaporeans as a whole and youth in particular were found to be responsible about money, rather than being 'excessive' consumers, a popular perception promoted by the media themselves in their role as moral crusaders. It was found that if Singaporeans desired a consumer item but had no money at hand: 67 per cent would save up money before making the purchase; 53 per cent would forget about buying; no more than 20 per cent would borrow from family members, friends or banks to make the purchase or pay by instalments (*The New Paper*, 15 May 1994).[13]

At an abstract level, the question concerns the actual rate of change in people's attitude towards money: how quickly do people move from being frugal, borne of circumstances, to being spendthrift in newly industrialising nations? It would appear from the Singapore example that attitudes before rapid economic development have longer staying power than it is ideologically assumed by moral gate-keepers, from government to media.

Shifting up the age-group from youth to new entrants to the workforce and newly formed families, their ability to consume is severely hampered by the very high costs of housing and cars, two of the 'normal' items

within the expected horizon of consumption by the middle class everywhere. In a 1996 survey (*Straits Times*, 27–29 June and 26 August) of young professionals aged 21–30 years, 36 per cent were not expecting to be able to afford a flat for 6 or more years from 1996 and more than 60 per cent could only afford government-subsidised public housing flats. In terms of cars, although up to 67 per cent planned to purchase a car, 51 per cent estimated that they were only able to buy the smallest, second-hand car in the market at a cost of around S$40 000. For young families who prefer private properties instead of living among the other 90 per cent in public housing estates, the common strategies of household financial management are:

(1) not only do both spouses work, but one may take on an additional job, to the detriment of family life;
(2) compromise on the quality of both residence and car and other consumer items; and
(3) forego some items of consumption.

Whatever the strategies, the households are living tightly on the margin of their income or even slightly beyond (Foo, 1995).

Such are the financial circumstances of most young, middle-class families that the Prime Minister had to admit publicly that

> For the top 10 per cent, maybe there is enough money, but for the middle income Singaporeans, there is not enough money (*Straits Times*, 28 April 1996).

What they have is tied up in property:

> The rising level of household indebtedness on account of leveraged property purchases, and the increased exposure of financial institutions to the property market, pose systematic risks in the event of an economic slow-down and collapse in prices (Monetary Authority of Singapore, quoted in Koh and Ooi, 1996, p. 7).

These official statements should raise scepticism *re* the perception of Singaporeans as 'excessive' consumers. Meanwhile, the economy has not slowed down and most people still have discretionary expenditure; consumption continues to expand, albeit at a slower rate and at the expense of lower household savings.

Local Reception of Global Consumption Goods: Some Instances

This section will first substantiate the argument that cultural consumption of imported American products does not necessarily require the consumption of a symbolic 'America' as represented in the advertisements and the television programmes—although the cultural underpinnings of consumption are a much more complicated phenomenon that cannot be examined here. In this context, it is further significant to show how the producers of globalised commodities are not primarily interested in the cultural mission of 'Americanising' the rest of the world—in this instance, Singapore—but are more focused on profits and capital accumulation, as exemplified by the McDonald chain's attempt to insert itself into the hybridised food culture of Singapore. Finally, the section will also illustrate rising Asian confidence, both in its economy and its culture in the marketing of Asian-produced jeans. All these instances are but illustrative vignettes, thus fragments, of how the consumption sphere in Singapore is constituted; indeed, in any attempt to subject the entire sphere to analysis, it would quickly be realised that the task is endless because the 'big-ticket' items and the number of small consumer items keep proliferating, each generating its own consumers which give it symbolic significance.

Some Ads Don't Travel Well

With global distribution, advertisements of particular products often have to travel across cultural spaces and differences. Since the differences define the ways the ads are received and interpreted, some ads travel well while others do not; most fall in between. Two recent ads that may be said to be

'difficult' to consume culturally by Singaporeans are those for the new 'unisex' eau de toilette by Calvin Klein, CK1 and cKbe.

Perfume is a difficult product to advertise because the ads must hide perfume's real purpose, which is to overpower any and every odour produced by the natural body. In contrast to many physical qualities which are desired, the lack of body odour of any kind is a lack to be celebrated; transforming the suppression of body odours to the 'scent-industry'. An additional difficulty in advertising perfume is that the product is intrinsically intractable. It is a liquid, substantial and heavy when sold in 'designed' bottles. What is consumed is the vapour, insubstantial and ephemeral; consumption of the imaginary.

That perfume consumption is in the insubstantial explains largely the bifurcation of conventional ads of female and male perfumes. In ads for male 'scent', the odour of sweat is still kept in the foreground; sweat and 'manliness' are inseparable. Masculinity is to be preserved at all costs; even the word 'perfume' is tabooed lest one feminise the hunk. In women's perfume ads, the imaginary is given full expression: memory, mystery, romance, sensuality, seduction and sexuality (deodorised) and decadence (in lifestyle). Even the names of the perfumes are exercises in the imaginary: Opium, Diamonds, Romeo (Gigli): all conjure up allures and fantasies.[14]

'CK1' and 'cKbe' have subverted all that by erasing the masculine–feminine division, marketing themselves as 'unisex' fragrances—'perfume' has been down-graded; the vapour has been taken out of the scent. First, the bottle, conventionally the focus of design attention in perfume marketing, has been radically neutralised. In CK1, it resembles an old-fashioned medicinal bottle of frosted glass, with an aluminium screwed-on bottle cap. While in cKbe it is simple and black: no cut glass bottle, no rich amber liquid—just dense, pitch darkness and unimaginatively there.

The ads feature, in black-and white photography, a serial arrangement of twenty-something male and female, apparently at a party, engaged in conversation, even in heated arguments. The imaginary of femininity, which resides in the private, even solitary—the better to relive the memory of romance—is eliminated; replaced by the public-ness of a party. The 'hunk' also has been replaced. The male and female models are all 'grungily' attired in black jeans, nondescript tops and look anaemic—both the clothes and the bodies suggest the need for a wash. The group is homogenised and androgynised; apropos a perfume for both genders. It is unmistakably an American ad and is unable to traverse the cultural distance and be meaningful to twenty-something Singaporeans.[15]

This maybe surmised from the fact that the full multi-page ads, each featuring an individual model, with everyone equally grimy and anaemic, were never used in Singapore in the selling of cKbe, which was marketed after CK1. Instead, only the picture of a very plain young woman in a crumpled black day-wear tube-top, not deserving of any further visual attention, was featured. Her face is naked with no trace of make-up and she has matted hair. The fact that she is supermodel, Kate Moss, is incidental. It is her ordinariness that is emphasised. Just like her plain self, a reader is invited just to 'be' himself or herself.

Twenty-something Singaporeans are on-the-make, impatient for success. Deprivation from car-ownership, contextually the ultimate success symbol, has made their bodies the locus of consumption. Clothes and other body accessories have elevated status as expressions of 'success'. Their fashion statement does not include anaemia and dirt. That does not mean that targeted Singaporeans will not buy the perfume—not at all. These two fragrances are among the best-selling fragrances in Singapore. Attesting to the fact that consumer behaviour is governed by many reasons, never by advertisements alone.

The Cultural Difficulties of Consuming American Television

Undoubtedly, although local television pro-

grammes are immensely popular with Singaporeans, Singaporeans are simultaneously avid consumers of imported American programmes—hence, the concern for their possible 'Americanisation'. Yet, when one looks into the details of a particular piece of popular music, movie or television programme, obstacles to consuming the embedded cultural values become apparent.

One of the currently running, late-night TV sitcoms popular among younger Singaporean viewers is *Friends*, which revolves around a group of six middle-class friends, cardboard versions of American 'generation Xers', who seem to have an immense amount of free time to idle collectively. The three men and three women are always hanging out at the café in which one works as a waitress or in the sitting room of the apartment which she shares with another female friend. Every episode is built around the personal disappointments of different group members.

Of the men, one is a palaeontologist who works in a museum, is divorced and has a monkey as a live-in companion; another 'knows' that he is destined for 'something' in life—he does not know what—he works in a low-end, managerial job in data-processing; the third is an aspiring actor who always 'almost' gets a meaningful acting part. Of the women, one is an aspiring cook who came closest to a calling when she worked in a 1950s-style theme restaurant; her apartment mate is a poor little rich girl who has left the comfort of wealth to find herself, only to work as an incompetent waitress in the café where they hang out; and the third is a sometimes taxi-driver, sometimes massage-lady, who is so 'blur'[16] and off-the-wall that everyone of her on-screen statements requires a double-take from the viewers. Each is an exemplar of 'generation Xers' with a Mcjob and a dream.

An episode generally opens with them coming together at the café, before each goes off pursuing their own 'hopeful' events: a romantic evening with a new friend, a job prospect or a collective endeavour to 'do something' together. Anticipations of happiness would be dashed subsequently. The episode would then end with them returning to either of the two hang-outs to lick their wounds. One may say that it is these personal wounds that bind them together; a bunch of 'beautiful losers' against the rest of the cold, real world out there.

Each role in the programme constitutes a 'subject position' which a viewer may be able to occupy in his/her imagination. However, that they are all occupational losers makes them non-role models for Singaporean viewers in a similar age-group. This is reflected in a young Singaporean's comment: 'How could they have so much free time?'. The question reflects the all-too-anxious pursuit of their career to understand, let alone realise, the desire of chasing one's dreams—acting, cooking or the search for 'self'—at the expense of a 'future' defined in terms of material comfort. A survey of Singaporeans aged between 21 and 30 years old found that their greatest concern was career (*Straits Times*, 29 June 1997), especially since they felt that the future was going to be more difficult in the face of escalating prices. Indeed, the 'Singapore Dream'—which engaged local politicians and policy-oriented academics—is cast entirely in terms of property and cars, and their unaffordability has cast a pall of pessimism among young professionals (Koh and Ooi, 1996).

Faced with an absence of affordable accommodation, the series may have cultural resonance at one level. To live independently from family in one's own pad and meet freely with close friends is something attractive to young professionals here, as anywhere. But, then, these young professionals do not need American television to tell them of this desire. At this level, *Friends* is probably consumed as a sublimation of this desire. In the end, however, without the ability to occupy the subject positions provided by the characters in the show, the series is consumed as mere entertainment, as comedy for a laugh, providing some relief from the day, and immediately to be forgotten: little, if any, Americanisation potential there.

Singaporeanisation of McDonald's

Instead of marketing itself against local culture, as in the case of France (Fantasia, 1995), McDonald's seeks to insert itself into the Singapore context. This is most obvious in the way that McDonald's seeks to partake actively in the government's ongoing constitution of Singapore as a nation, in the latter's promotion of a national 'identity' and 'culture'.

One of the repeatedly used television advertisements, especially during the run-up to national day (9 August), begins with a morning assembly of primary school boys in a flag-raising ceremony, with the boys' choir singing, 'when the sun shines over our land'; it then cuts to an old Chinese lady in a shophouse, symbol of old Singapore architecture, opening a window to let the sunshine in; it next moves into a primary-school classroom, with children sitting on the floor learning the alphabet, 'b for boy', 'g for girl' and 'm for McDonald's'; the scene switches to a group of clean and fresh boys in a McDonald's, one of them was attracted to a girl who flashes him a smile, he says "I will have whatever it is that she is having"; he is followed by a picture showing freshly cooked French fries being poured onto a metal tray and a fishburger oozing with white creamy sauce; the next frame is of a young man driving a red convertible sports car—a very coveted possession—singing to himself the McDonald's jingle in Mandarin, driving to pick up his hamburger; he is awakened from his self-contentedness, blushing slightly, by the applause and laughter of two McDonald's waitresses; the scene then cuts to the clock tower at the Victoria Memorial Hall, a monument to Singapore's colonial past, the time is 7 o'clock in the evening; the final shot is of an old Chinese gentleman in traditional clothes, no longer worn by anyone, sitting stiffly in a rosewood chair, in a very traditionally appointed sitting room, playing the McDonald's refrain on a Chinese two-string musical instrument, the *erhu*.

That this ad aims to insert McDonald's into the daily life of Singaporeans, rather than taking them out of it and into an 'American' space, is obvious; it takes us through a 12-hour day of Singaporeans of all ages in less than a minute. Any Singaporean will readily recognise that the ad touches on the various values and their attendant activities that are actively promoted by the government as constitutive elements of a 'national' culture: the restoration of the historic landscape of Chinatown and national monuments such as the Victoria Memorial Hall (Kong and Yeoh, 1994); the emphasis on education as human capital investment for individual social and economic mobility and national economic growth and lately as part of 'Asian' values; the reference to another 'Asian' value, the veneration of the aged as part of the idea of 'family as the basic unit of society', which is legislatively enshrined as part of the national ideological system, known as the 'Shared Values' (Lee, 1989); and finally, the promotion of Mandarin as the language of all Chinese to overcome the communication gaps within the Chinese population itself, which was divided by often mutually incomprehensible 'dialects'.

State-sponsored values are recurring themes of annual national campaigns and political speeches, pervasively covered by the national newspapers. They are promoted as 'cultural ballast' against excessive Western individualism. They constitute the ideological diets of Singaporeans. With this as background, the selling of McDonald's as a sign(ifier) of 'American-ism' would be counter-hegemonic. That the Singapore government, which censors images which enter the national ideological space, would react negatively to a counter-hegemonic McDonald's is to state it very mildly. Equally, that McDonald's would incur the government's wrath and jeopardise its profits would be unthinkable. Instead, it positions itself as a loyal corporate citizen and inserts itself into the national ideology.

New Asian Confidence and the Marketing of Jeans

Giordano, an Italian name, is actually a very successful Hong Kong company which man-

ufactures and markets youth casual wear, largely jeans and T-shirts.[17] In 1995, the company produced a series of advertisements under a single theme: 'World without Strangers', which ran in Singapore movie houses, and presumably in the rest of east and south-east Asia.

In one of the ads, a young east Asian woman, donning Giordano jeans and a casual shirt, was planted in a dusty—both in environmental quality and time of the day—Latin American landscape, signifying the Third World. She met some idling locals and struck up a musical exchange with them, in a seamless weaving of the sounds of her *erhu* (the same two-stringed Chinese instrument featured in the McDonald's ad referred to above), with the strumming of the guitar of one of the locals—the two instruments standing as icons of their respective cultures.

A second ad featured a similarly attired young male east Asian in a village setting. A group of poorly clad, barefooted children playing soccer in an unpaved road, ran away as he approached. He then picked up an empty tin can and, using it as a 'ball', showed off his own soccer skills. A man, with leathery skin and deeply etched face, flashed a smile and threw him a ball from behind a pillar. The children merrily reappeared and chased the young man and his ball down the dirt path. Again, the scene represented is Third World, Latin America.

The conceptualisation of these ads is, of course, not accidental. They depict clearly the new Asian confidence, fuelled by capitalist economic success. The new confidence and the new wealth have carried, and are carried by, well-dressed and adventurous Asian youth into the Third World. No longer satisfied with the well-trodden tourist routes of Europe and North America—once the beacon of modernity that attracted aspiring Asians—the new Asian youth are seeking new territories. They are the new Asian cultural tourists, exploring poor countries, promoting South–South cultural exchanges.

Inscribed on the confident new Asian youth is new Asian capital itself. Behind or, perhaps, ahead of the adventurous youth is the adventurous entrepreneurial penetration of Asian capital into the Third World. The new Asian youth not only signify their new spending power, but are also an extension of the new Asian investment power.

The above analysis of selective examples of media cultural commodities are obviously ideologically motivated by the desire to raise doubts against all simplistic reduction of cultural consumption in non-Western locations as one of homogenisation of culture globally, with a unitary Western culture as its centre.[18] First, what the analysis has disclosed are some of the material and cultural conditions in Singapore which stand in the way of simple identification with representation of the American way of life in American fashion and media products. Secondly, it also demonstrated that local political and economic conditions are equally ideologically important considerations in the marketing of globalised products. It should be apparent that, with respect to both points, questions of how the selected instances are actually consumed remain unexplored.

Conclusion

That Singapore is a node of global finance and also a site of global marketing for both locals and international tourists is plain from its architectural landscape of corporate buildings and miles and miles of shopping complexes. This landscape represents two sides of the economic transformation of Singapore over the past three decades; the relentless drive for national economic growth translates into improvement of material life of the citizens through consumption expansion. Both processes are constitutive of the legitimacy of the PAP government and serve to underwrite certain undemocratic practices in the nation (Chua, 1995); they provide the discursive space for the government to define ideologically 'good government' against 'democracy' (Chan, 1992).

However, while the drive for continuing economic growth remains unabated through the promotion of the idea of a 'learning' society—that is, constant skills upgrading

among workers—curbs on consumption expansion are being introduced in response to emergent issues. First, the effects of income and consumption inequalities are increasingly visually apparent and politicised. A Cost Review Committee, reconvened in 1996, concluded that household spending had risen by 76 per cent between 1988 and 1993, largely due to Singaporeans consuming "more and better quality goods and services" (*Straits Times*, 7 August 1996) while inflation accounted for less than 15 per cent. The Committee recommended measures to ensure that future cost increases were moderated; for example, government was urged to maintain its very substantial subsidy in tertiary education.

Secondly, more significantly, severe controls on consumer credit have been introduced. For example, since 1992, the minimum qualifying annual income for obtaining a credit card is S$30 000. Credit is not to exceed twice the card-holder's monthly salary; card-issuers must suspend the use of the card by card-holders whose outstanding balances exceed this credit level. Card-issuers are prohibited from aggressive advertising, from issuing unsolicited pre-approved cards, from including gifts, discounts and incentive schemes to promote consumer spending in their advertisements, and from being financially involved in incentive schemes sponsored by merchants. Violations of any of these controls could lead to a moratorium on the issue of credit cards in the future (*Straits Times*, 24 March 1996). Loans on expensive cars and mortgages are also subjected to stringent controls. These measures aim to reduce household indebtedness which has been edging up in recent years causing a steady decline in private consumption rates. This decline has led to a severe downturn in the retail sector in Singapore; in 1995, combined losses of large department stores exceeded S$130 million, leading to serious downsizing and outright closures.

In so far as the legitimacy of the PAP government is tied to improving the material life of Singaporeans, measures to constrain consumption are likely to have their political effects; however, given the already very high standard of living in Singapore, disaffection may be readily contained.

Whether one can draw any wider conclusions as to the development of consumption and consumerism acting as the signifier of the 'end of Third World status' is altogether more doubtful. Singapore as a city state is by definition highly urbanised, and this has important connections with the development of consumerism. Yet it is also clear from elsewhere in south-east Asia that there has been an ongoing 'urbanisation of the rural'—that some rural districts have taken on some of the trimmings of urban lifestyles. The urbanisation of the rural in south-east Asia, though, is uneven and it is difficult to identify a point at which the spread in the distribution of consumerism across a nation has taken it out of Third World status. Certainly, to overgeneralise from the Singapore case, which has no rural hinterland, would be hazardous.

Notes

1. Prices of cars range from S$100 000 to 300 000. In addition, owners have to purchase a Certificate of Entitlement in order to have the right to own a car for 10 years; the cost of a certificate is between $40 000 and $70 000. The price of a Mercedes thus costs from $250 000 to $500 000 or more.
2. Dicken and Kirkpatrick (1991) provide a list of enterprises that constitute 'business services', or 'producer services' (see Sassen, 1991) in Singapore.
3. It is Perry's (1992) assessment that the scheme has failed thus far. On the other hand, K. C. Ho (personal communication) who is currently engaged in research on the topic, illustrates the intensification and deepening of business service activities using the example of Sony, which has its OHQ for Asia in Singapore.
4. Hall (1991, p. 20) further points out that "we suffer increasingly from a process of historical amnesia in which we think that just because we are thinking about an idea it has only just started".
5. While details of how the people 'work out' some aspects of the two sets of attitudes and practices, including use of different objects

of consumption, are anthropological research topics in their own right, I would merely suggest here that the workings out are not as traumatic as some might assume. For examples of anthropological research on incorporation of 'modern' products in Third World locations, see Howes (1996a).

6. In the case of the overwhelmingly Chinese population, even the Chinese-language educated were modernist in their political orientation, as they were divided between republicans and communists rather than loyal to the decaying Ching dynasty. Their modernity is reflected in the fact that the Chinese vernacular schools in Singapore have used Mandarin as the language of instruction since 1910, influenced by the May Fourth intellectuals in China.
7. For example, for the first time, between 9 June to 9 July 1997, the National Computer Board and the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board combined their efforts in promoting shopping by Internet during the annual month-long 'Great Singapore Sale', which involved the entire retail sector and attracted shoppers not only from the region, but from as far as south Asia and South Africa.
8. As Appardurai suggests (1990, p. 5), the relative 'homogenisation' of culture as a result of the global reach of capitalist production and consumption "often subspeciates into either an argument about Americanization, or an argument about commoditization, and very often the two arguments are closely linked". For a discussion of this simplification under the concept of 'Coca-colonisation, see Howes (1996, pp. 3–4).
9. Perhaps because of its past status as a colony of Japan, Taiwan is the only location in Asia where there are concerns with Japanisation, see Ching (1994).
10. This classification of Japanese goods as 'technological hardware' and Western products as 'cultural' is one of the plausible answers to the question: "When Japanese exports to the United States exceed American exports to Japan, is not the spectre of Western consumer imperialism an outdated myth?" (Classen and Howes, 1996, pp. 187–188).
11. Space limitations only permit brief mentions of some of these popular programmes. Among the sitcoms is the series *Under one roof*, which features what could be called the 'model' Singapore family living in a harmonious multi-ethnic public housing estate. Of the drama series, one of the most popular is currently in its second season, the 'historical' drama called *Growing Up* which features a working-class family struggling with poverty during colonial pre-industrial times. It should also be noted that the singular attempt in mimicking successful American soap operas, such as *Dallas* and *Falcon Crest*, by engaging the producer of the latter show as consultant, failed miserably for, in the words of the then manager, being 'too White'.
12. As with all ideologies, official anti-Westernism has its supporters and critics. Space limitations do not permit extensive discussion of the positions of local critics. A good sampling of these latter positions can be obtained from the theme issue of *Commentary on Democracy* (1993), a journal published by the National University of Singapore Society.
13. Similar concerns with excessive consumption may be found in Taiwan and South Korea. In one survey of South Koreans, more than 90 per cent of respondents thought that excessive consumption was a serious social problem in Korea, but more than 80 per cent of the same respondents say that they were not excessive consumers themselves (Kim, 1996).
14. Although, one should note the increasing trend of using designers' names in an inflationary fashion—for the real work of producing the scent lies with the chemists.
15. It has been exposed that the models used were either actual heroin-users or made out to look like them. This would make it even more unacceptable in Singapore, where possession of a very small quantity, 15 grams, of heroine could lead to a death sentence by hanging.
16. 'Blur' is a Singaporean idiom for someone who is always missing the point. Such individuals are sometimes referred to as *sotong*—the Malay word for squid, which swims in its own dark ink.
17. The founder of the company is Jimmy Woo who had angered the PRC by his crude critical remarks regarding the late Teng Shao Ping, which led to the shutting down of his shops in Beijing and the PRC's divestment of shares in his company. After resigning from the chairmanship of Giordano, he subsequently founded his own newspaper, the popular *Apple Daily*.
18. In fact, these are summaries of articles which first appeared in Singapore's English national newspaper, *The Straits Times*. The motivation behind the series of analysis of popular cultural instances is precisely to contest claims of 'Americanisation' of Singaporeans, either by state agencies or by private individuals.

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