# INTRODUCTION: ETHNIC DIVERSITY, IDENTITY AND EVERYDAY MULTICULTURALISM IN SINGAPORE[1]

*Mathew Mathews*

## HISTORY OF SINGAPORE'S ETHNIC DIVERSITY & CULTURE

Singapore's ethnic diversity was realised not long after the British established Singapore as a free port in the early 19th century. The economic opportunities arising from a port without the usual tariffs found elsewhere, quickly attracted migrants from China, India, the Malay Peninsula, the Indonesian archipelago, Europe and other places.[2] The

[1]The author acknowledges the able help of Rizwana Begum, Shanthini Selvarajan and Nicole Chung in the preparation of this chapter. The section entitled "History of Singapore's Ethnic Diversity & Culture" has been adapted from a previous article by the author. Mathew Mathews, "Understanding CMIO: Historical Foundations and the Way Forward for Singapore's Multiracial Policies" in *Ethnic Rhythms:Life in the Global City* (7-9), ed. Lawrence Ko (Singapore: Singapore Centre for Global Missions, 2015).The sections enttled, "Preservation of Ethnic and Cultural Identity", "Ethnic Identity Will Remain Relevant" and "Singaporean, but also Chinese, Indian, Malay or Eurasian" have been adapted from the author's previous commentary, "Taking Pride in Ethnic Identity Does Not Contradict Singapore Identity," Channel News Asia, June 11, 2017.

[2]Barbara Leitch LePoer and Nena Vreeland, *Singapore, A Country Study* (Washington, D.C.: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1991), 13.

lack of immigration controls on the island[3] meant that people could move in and out of the island without much concern. While many migrants planned to return to their homeland after they had accumulated sufficient resources in the thriving port city — a common practice then — circumstances led a large number of them to remain here.[4] By 1827 the immigrants from different parts of China became the dominant ethnic group in Singapore[5] and by the start of the 20th century the ethnic composition of Singapore had stabilised with at least 70 per cent of the population being ethnically Chinese and a sizeable portions of Malays, Indians, Eurasians and those of other ethnic backgrounds.[6] As of the most recent official population figures, Chinese, Malay, Indian and Other Residents constitute 74.3, 13.4, 9.0 and 3.2 per cent of Singapore's entire resident population, respectively.[7]

Since the British were not concerned about nation building, they had little incentive to oversee the integration of the population.[8] Early colonial administration of the island involved settling the different ethnic communities at different places on the island. The colonial administration, in a divide-and-conquer strategy,[9] looked to well-respected individuals from the different communities to manage the needs of their respective communities. Keeping the communities separate had its advantages for capitalist enterprise on the island. As European employers were told, "To secure your independence, work with Javanese and Tamils, and if you have sufficient experience, also with Malays and Chinese [;] you can always play the one against the other ... In case of a strike, you will never be left without labour, and the coolies of one nationality will think twice

[3] Ibid., 24.

[4] Ibid., 21.

[5] Ien Ang and Jon Stratton, "The Singapore Way of Multiculturalism: Western Concepts/Asian Cultures," *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 10, no.1 (April 1995): 72.

[6] Barbara Leitch LePoer and Nena Vreeland, *Singapore, A Country Study* (Washington, D.C.: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1991), 79

[7] *Population Trends, 2017* (Singapore: Department of Statistics, Ministry of Trade & Industry, 2017), 5.

[8] Lian Kwen Fee (ed.), *Multiculturalism, Migration, and the Politics of Identity in Singapore*, 1st edition (Singapore: Springer Singapore), 12.

[9] Ibid., p. 58.

before they make their terms, if they know that you are in a position that you can do without them."[10]

Based on such an administration, the ethnic cultures of the predominant communities in Singapore — the Chinese, Malays and Indians continued to thrive. In the early periods of migration, there were at least some mixed marriages, often between the Chinese and Indian male migrants and Malay women.[11] However, by the late 1800s, there was substantial migration of females from China[12] and India,[13] which made marriages and settled families possible between those of similar ethnic backgrounds. This then further strengthened ancestral cultures rather than promote the adoption of hybrid cultures, more common in cases of inter-marriage. While it would have been expected that among the wealthier Asians who had to have close dealings with the Europeans, there would have been an adoption of European culture, this too was measured. The wealthy Chinese, for instance — many who had been privileged to learn English and other Western practices that allowed them to interact well with European merchants — were still well able to preserve their cultural roots. The development of steamships allowed them to travel periodically back to China and even to send their children there for an education at its prestigious schools. This was also coupled with the Chinese interests in the *Nanyang* (Southeast Asia) where they established consulates in places such as Singapore. These consulates "worked diligently to strengthen the cultural ties of the Singapore Chinese to China"[14] by establishing various cultural and social institutions such as Chinese-language newspapers and schools to ensure cultural preservation. Based on these reasons, it was no mystery that the different communities would be culturally and socially separate to a great degree.

As an ideology, multiracialism in Singapore had its roots in the rising concerns in the 1950s, that an independent Malaya would make the status of Chinese language and education inferior. The unrest led to the All-Party

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[10] *The Selangor Journal: Jottings Past and Present, Volume 4,* cited in Lal, Reeves and Rai, *The Encyclopedia of the Indian Diaspora*, p. 178.

[11] Barbara Leitch LePoer and Nena Vreeland, *Singapore, A Country Study*, 13.

[12] Ooi, Yu-Lin. "An Exploratory Study of Asian Women and Philanthropy in Singapore, 1900-1945. Philanthropy in Asia: Working Paper No. 2." May 2016, p. 14.

[13] Ibid., p. 36.

[14] Barbara Leitch LePoer and Nena Vreeland, *Singapore, A Country Study*, 27.

Committee by the Labour Front-Alliance government. The Committee's report in 1956 "formally recognised that Singapore was a multiracial society and recommended that equal treatment be given to the four streams of education in practice — Malay, Chinese, English and Tamil."[15]

It would only be after independence however that a firm resolve would be taken, largely based on political considerations relating to Peninsular Malaysia, to emphasise the tenets of multiracialism. Singapore's pioneer leaders led by Lee Kuan Yew agreed that the communal problem, unless properly addressed, would defeat development goals.[16] The government worked hard to integrate the population through multiracial policies. While the emphasis was for Singaporeans to embrace a national identity with the different races interacting with one another in the common space, this was not pursued at the expense of the constituent cultures of the three main races. To do so was viewed as problematic and contentious. Indians, Malays and Chinese had an entrenched affinity to their language and cultural practices and wanted to retain and pass on this heritage. As such government policies sought to recognise Chinese, Malay and Indian heritage. The small proportion of those from other cultural backgrounds — commonly referred to as the "Others", were similarly accorded the privileges to retain their cultural practices although these did not receive official endorsement in the way that the other three races obtained.

The government viewed an affinity to its mostly Asian cultures as healthy and reckoned that dismantling these structures would leave Singaporeans in an identity crisis and also not provide them the much-needed cultural ballast against the negative aspects of modernisation.[17] Neither did the government, despite representing a majority Chinese population seek to bolster its popularity by making the majority culture dominant. It instead provided equal recognition for all official cultures.[18] In this, Singapore's government went against precedents set out by many

[15] Lian Kwen Fee (ed.), *Multiculturalism, Migration, and the Politics of Identity in Singapore*, 14.

[16] Chua Beng Huat, "Multiculturalism in Singapore: An Instrument of Social Control," *Race & Class* 44, no. 3 (2003): 60.

[17] Lian Kwen Fee (ed.), *Multiculturalism, Migration, and the Politics of Identity in Singapore*, 86.

[18] Ibid., 6.

newly independent nations in Asia and Africa. In these post-colonial nations, the culture of the majority group was established, while minority cultures were often penalised.

## PRESERVATION OF ETHNIC AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

The past few years have seen the opening of a number of sites dedicated to the preservation and propagation of ethnic identity. The Malay Heritage Centre was re-opened after a major revamp in 2012, the same year the Eurasian Heritage Centre was established. In 2015, the Indian Heritage Centre was officially opened and most recently in 2017, the Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre (SCCC). The establishment or reinvigoration of these cultural institutions in recent years highlights the ongoing importance the Singapore government places on a cultural identity linked to ethnicity.

Some contend that as the developed world is becoming more post-racial, cultural institutions further entrench ethnic identities and detract from the goal of building a strong national identity. But for many Singaporeans, there is no contradiction in embracing a strong Singaporean identity and yet taking pride in their own ethnic or linguistic background. In a 2013 survey of race, religion and language conducted by the Institute of Policy Studies, which polled over 4,000 Singaporean residents, when respondents were presented with a list of possible identity markers and asked to rate how important each of these were to their overall sense of self, 79 per cent of respondents rated the Singapore identity as important.[19] Most of these respondents similarly rated a race identity as important too.

Indeed, national and ethnic identity in Singapore is intricately linked, with the unique combination and interaction of Singapore's main ethnic identities being a critical element. In this hyphenated identity, the Singaporean is always a Singaporean first but then a Chinese, Malay, Indian, Eurasian or some other ethnicity at the same time[20]. In the absence

[19] Mathew Mathews, "The State and Implication of Our Differences: Insights from the IPS Survey of Race, Religion and Language," in *Singapore Perspectives 2014: Differences*, ed. Mathew Mathews, Christopher Gee and Wai Fong Chiang, (Singapore: World Scientific, 2014), 109.

[20] Chua Beng Huat, "Multiculturalism in Singapore: An Instrument of Social Control," 60.

of a clear Singaporean culture, it is inconceivable that a Singaporean's cultural identity would not incorporate at least some features of an ethnic identity. As the government has put forth, there is value in such a hyphenated identity since they enable individuals to situate themselves. As Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong put it in his speech at the opening of the SCCC in 2017, "Today we are a modern and developed society, but remain rooted in our Asian cultures. This sense of rootedness gives us a sense of identity and confidence. We are also a multiracial, multi-religious, and multi-cultural society. This diversity is a fundamental aspect of our respective identities."[21]

## ETHNIC IDENTITY WILL REMAIN RELEVANT

From Prime Minister Lee's speech and how ethnic culture is presented in Singapore officially, ethnic culture is expected to continue as integral in the Singapore identity. The Singapore government recognises that identities of race, religion and language cannot be easily replaced by a national identity — and neither has it sought to do so.

There are good reasons for this. During the post-colonial era, a number of societies decided that they would suppress the expression of primordial identities so as to forge new national identities — sometimes with limited or even tragic outcomes.[22] More recently, with global icons such as Starbucks and Facebook seemingly co-opting everyone into a global culture, people in some societies have reacted by going local. They are increasingly defining themselves in terms of their ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, and asserting their rights on that basis. When people have to reassert their primordial identities, to express substantial unhappiness and perceptions of injustice, this often reflects their sense of things having gone out of control. Hard positions about these identities are articulated, accentuating the differences between groups. This backlash appears to be

[21] Lee, Hsien Loong. "Arts, Culture and a Distinct Singaporean Identity," *The Straits Times,* May 22, 2017.

[22] Bert Klandermans, Marlene Roefs and Johan I. Olivier, *The State of the People: Citizens, Civil Society and Governance in South Africa, 1994–2000* (Pretoria: Human Science Research Council, 2001), 108.

strong among groups overwhelmed by economic pressures and a sense of hopelessness, seeking their last refuge in their ethnic identity and cultural "inheritance".[23] Trump's election and Brexit demonstrate aspects of this phenomenon. If mature societies could succumb, what more young nations like Singapore?

Many Singaporeans also aspire to the day when one's inherited markers such as racial backgrounds will not define individuals.[24] After all, nobody likes to be reduced to stereotypes or have assumptions made about them by virtue of their race. But it would be naïve to expect that such markers will not have at least some bearing on life experiences. Racial backgrounds and family heritage are what many hold dear. Most Chinese parents would probably be keen on their children learning Mandarin, and Malay parents would desire their children to be literate in Malay, even in the absence of a bilingual policy which links language choice to parental race.

At the same time, forces of identity formation extend beyond Singapore's geographical boundaries. Singaporeans live in close proximity to China, India and Malaysia — sites of cultural production for the ethnic identities from which most Singaporeans derive their origins.

With the constant movement of people, ideas and goods between Singapore and these countries, and the substantial numbers of transnational marriages between Singaporeans and residents of these nations,[25] Singaporeans are exposed to new markers of ethnic identity practised in these countries. Even without family ties, whether through language, food or even popular entertainment from these countries, we may adopt some of these new markers. How Singaporeans incorporate new culture into their own lives will vary, and some of this could lead to a "re-ethnicisation" of certain segments of the population. Further, there have been and will continue to be tugs at loyalties based on pan-ethnicity.

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[23] Alethia Jones, "Identity Politics: Part of a Reinvigorated Class Politics," New Labor Forum 19, no. 2 (2010): 12–15.

[24] Amelia Teng, "Questions Raised About Presidential Election Show That People Want Race to Matter Less: DPM Tharman," *The Straits Times*, September 21, 2017.

[25] Li Wenchao and Yi Junjian, "The Globalisation of Marriage Markets," *The Straits Times*, July 12, 2017.

## SINGAPOREAN, BUT ALSO CHINESE, INDIAN, MALAY OR EURASIAN

While there is good reason to believe that ethnic identities will continue to be relevant, the government's vision has been that such identities and the culture derived from them must increasingly be Singaporean. A fundamental characteristic of such Singaporeaness entails that cultures must be inclusive. Interestingly then, on a big day for the Chinese cultural community in Singapore where the Chinese form 74.3 per cent of the resident population, Prime Minister Lee expressed the hope that SCCC would "strengthen the Singapore Chinese arts and cultural scene," but also *reminded* the SCCC to make itself "accessible to all races… and ensure that Singaporeans remain rooted in our multi-cultural identity for many years to come."[26]

## SINGAPORE'S PLURAL SOCIETY: CO-EXISTENCES AND HYBRIDITIES

The notion of a multicultural identity, in which Prime Minister Lee hoped Singaporeans would be rooted, can entail both co-existence and hybridity. The evolution of Singapore's multicultural identity is well showcased through coffee shops (better known by its local term *kopitiam*), found throughout the island especially in Housing and Development Board (HDB) estates — making them a quintessential part of the country's public culture.[27] Over the years, from the mid-1960s to the 1980s, *kopitiams* have evolved from largely monocultural to multicultural institutions, reflecting Singapore's changing history. In the period before World War I up to the 1970s, there were ethnically separate coffee shops. For example, there were those owned by Chinese proprietors and serving a primarily Chinese clientele at particular locations. One familiar name today, Killiney Kopitiam, started out as a coffee shop set up by a Hainanese immigrant in

[26] Mayo Martin, New Arts Centre Will Promote Chinese Culture That is Singaporean-Centric: PM Lee," Channel NewsAsia, May 19, 2017.

[27] Lai Ah Eng, "The Kopitiam in Singapore. An Evolving Story about Migration and Cultural Diversity," in *Migration and Diversity in Asian Contexts*, edited by Lai Ah Eng, Francis Leo Collins and Brenda Saw Ai Yeoh, 209–232 (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2012).

1919. Similarly, there were Malay and Indian coffee shops. A Sumatran set up Sabar Menanti around 1958 at Kampung Java and an Indian immigrant set up the Indian vegetarian eatery, Ananda Bhavan, at Selegie Road in 1924. These predominantly monocultural locales, selling not only food and drinks, acted as interchanges for renewing friendship links and exchanging news and gossip. They reflected Singapore's early society, where no common will or purpose associated with nationhood prevailed.

In the mid-1960s and 1970s, as Singapore underwent a process of nation-building, urban renewal and resettlement, the monocultural *kopitiams* became transformed into multicultural institutions. These new forms of coffee shops emerged alongside the new multicultural HDB estates being built in different parts of Singapore. *Kopitiam* patrons could now find a range of ethnically-diverse owners preparing and selling cuisines reflecting their cultural traditions all under the same roof. Singapore multiculturalism began reflecting the co-existence of different cultural and religious traditions. Diners could find Chinese "economy rice", Malay *nasi padang*, Indian *roti prata* and Western chicken chop, all at the same place. It was and remains common to see members of the same family seated at a table with a multicultural spread before them, each eating whatever suits his or her palate best.

But the multicultural *kopitiams* of today do not merely provide a one-stop option for Singaporeans to savour the food of different ethnic groups. It also provides opportunity for the hybridisation of food culture. The cross-fertilisation of the different ethnic cuisines has a relatively long history in Singapore and has led to some popular dishes such as the fish head curry, *mee goreng*, *laksa* and Hainanese pork chops. Such hybridisation of food continues with chefs at *kopitiams* finding creative ways to incorporate the food of different cultures together. A case in point is the multiple varieties of the Indian dish *roti prata* available at *kopitiams* ranging from Chicken floss r*oti prata* (Chicken floss often associated with Chinese cuisine) to the chocolate sauce *roti prata* (chocolate sauce often associated with Western cuisine).

Another area where co-existence and hybridisation is obvious is in the linguistic diversity in Singapore. The four official languages — English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil — co-exist along with many other non-official languages based on the population diversity in Singapore. Bilingual policy ensures that most Singaporeans speak English and one of the other

official languages according to their racial categories. At the same time schools provide opportunities for third language learning and acquiring conversational Mandarin or Malay.

A distinct Singaporean identity through language use is observed through Colloquial Singapore English (CSE) or otherwise known as Singlish. This variety of English exhibits much hybridisation and has earned accolades for uniting Singaporeans through acts of solidarity.[28] Even foreigners living in Singapore now and then try to be a part of the same speech community by sounding local — such is CSE's appeal. CSE may have originated as a lingua franca amongst Singapore's early migrants. It incorporates words and grammatical structures from migrant communities such as the Hokkiens, Cantonese and South Indians. Many words from Malay have made their way into the CSE stock of vocabulary as well.[29] The Malay word *atas*, which is translated as "above", is one such example. However, it is not used as a replacement for the preposition "above" in CSE but rather to describe sophistication, i.e., "He is so *atas* and does not want to mix with commoners like us." Vocabulary items such as *chope*, which means "to reserve", and *kiasu*, referring to the state of being afraid to lose out, are used across ethnic groups in Singapore and denote shared Singaporean everyday life realities.

Other than vocabulary items, CSE's stock of discourse particles point to a Singaporean identity that is shared widely across different ethnic groups. Discourse particles are words carrying discourse-pragmatic effects, such as signalling speaker attitudes and emotions. They can indicate shared background knowledge between speakers too.[30] The different

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[28] Rani, Rubdy, "Creative Destruction: Singapore's Speak Good English Movement," *World Englishes* 20, no. 3 (2001): 341–55.

[29] Tay Kheng Soon and Robbie Goh B. H., "Reading the Southeast Asian City in the Context of Rapid Economic Growth," in *Theorizing the Southeast Asian City as Text: Urban Landscapes, Cultural Documents, and Interpretative Experiences*, Robbie Goh, B. H. and Brenda S. A. Yeoh (eds.), 13–27 (Singapore: World Scientific, 2003).

[30] Karin Aijmer, and Anne-Marie Simon-Vandenbergen, "The Discourse Particle 'Well' and Its Equivalents in Swedish and Dutch," *Linguistics* 46, no. 6, (2003): 1123–61; Lionel Wee, "Reduplication and Discourse Particles," in *Singapore English: A Grammatical Description — Varieties of English around the World*, (ed.) Lisa Lim (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2004), 105–126.

discourse particles used by speakers of CSE include *lah, ah, what, lor, hor, leh, meh* and *mah*.[31] Some discourse particles are favoured or even used exclusively by speakers of a particular ethnic community.[32] Others, however, are shared amongst Singaporeans. *Lah* is ethnically neutral — the majority of Chinese, Indian and Malay speakers in a study were found to use it.[33] Although the origins of *lah* cannot be determined definitively, it is likely to be Hokkien Chinese or Bazaar Malay.[34] Speakers can use *lah* for different function such as persuasion, to signal solidarity, emphasis, show annoyance or strong objection. Some examples of the use of *lah* to indicate solidarity because *lah* makes the request or assertion more polite is seen in the following phrases: "Come with us *lah*," and "Wrong *lah*."[35]

## THE NEED TO STRENGTHEN EVERYDAY MULTICULTURALISM

The social, economic and political landscapes that constitute an open-bordered Singapore are becoming increasing complex. Managing the fault lines that can arise from cultural differences needs the partnership of Singaporeans beyond just the work of the government. Multiculturalism is really an "everyday"[36] living phenomenon, where the individual actor

[31] Dick Smakman and Stephanie Wagenaar, "Discourse Particles in Colloquial Singapore English," *World Englishes*, 32, no. 3 (2013): 308–324; Lionel Wee, "The Birth of a Particle: *Know* in Colloquial Singapore English," *World Englishes* 22, no. 1 (2003): 5–13.

[32] Rizwana Begum and Thiru Kandiah, "Misrecognitions of Variability in New Varieties of English: Tamil Minority Usage in Singapore English," in *Englishes Around the World,* (ed.) Edgar W. Schneider, 189–204 (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1997).

[33] Dick Smakman and Stephanie Wagenaar, "Discourse Particles in Colloquial Singapore English," 308–324.

[34] Lisa Lim, "Mergers and Acquisitions: On the Ages and Origins of Singapore English Particles," *World Englishes* 26, no. 4 (2007): 446–73.

[35] John Platt, "Communicative Functions of Particles in Singapore English, Vol. 1," in *Language Topics: Essays in Honour of Michael Halliday*, (ed.) Ross Steele and Terry Threadgold, 391–401 (Amsterdam: J. Benjamins, 1987). Lionel Wee, "Reduplication and Discourse Particles, 105–127.

[36] Amanda Wise and Selvaraj Velayutham, "'Introduction: Multiculturalism and Everyday Life," in *Everyday Multiculturalism*, edited by Amanda Wise and Selvaraj Velayutham, 1–60 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

takes centre stage. It is individuals who interpret and negotiate meanings and borders. In interpreting, living out and protecting their visions of multiculturalism, Singaporeans have come together to make their voice heard as what happened during the well known "curry incident"[37]. This incident and others show how enlightened citizens and residents multicultural actors play an important role in managing the country's social fabric. This of course requires Singaporeans to nurture within themselves deep cultural literacies to function as such enlightened multicultural actors.

## "EVERYDAY" MULTICULTURALISM, ENLIGHTENED MULTICULTURALISM

It has been in everyday life in ordinary spaces that some of the well-known challenges to Singapore's multiculturalism have arisen. For instance, in 2011 a patron at a McDonald's restaurant, which is *halal*-certified, had voiced his displeasure following the broadcasting of a prayer call signalling Muslims' time to break their *Ramadan* fast. The patron's view was that public spaces should be emptied of religious content, evident from a Facebook comment where he said he "would like to raise a question, why are the McDonald outlets playing the Muslim chant during the dinnertime in the restaurants? Can I request to play Buddhism chant on Vesak day? Please advice *[sic]*. [C]an you tolerate if they play Buddhist chime in the restaurant?"[38]

The above Facebook post drew various responses from netizens as well as from McDonald's and the patron's employer, SingTel. A public discussion emerged with expressions of different viewpoints, including explaining the significance of the prayer call for Muslims during *Ramadan*. There were also comments calling to attention other similar practices, like the public burning of incense paper during the Hungry Ghost Festival. Some netizens called for tolerance in a multi-religious

[37] Lai Ah Eng and Mathew Mathews, "Navigating Disconnects and Divides in Singapore's Cultural Diversity," in *Managing Diversity in Singapore: Policies and Prospects*, (eds.) Mathew Mathews and Chiang Wai Fong, 3–40 (London: Imperial College Press, 2016), 16
[38] Ibid, 6-10

society.[39] In this incident, expressions of "everyday multiculturalism" were predominant. They overrode what an unenlightened multicultural actor could potentially have called for, i.e., the absolute ban of religious expression in secular public places, and instead focussed on the realities of accommodations and negotiations that have evolved over several decades of multicultural living in Singapore. The resolution of the McDonald's incident was mediated via social media, interested netizens and corporations, highlighting everyday acts, everyday people or everyday spaces as in fact significant factors that shape the complexion of Singapore's multicultural society. The incident underscored that individual actors are significant interpreters and shapers of events, with potential domino effects.

Everyday dissonance in Singapore's multicultural scene is likely to flare up now and then. In the "Channel NewsAsia-Institute of Policy Studies (CNA-IPS) Survey on Race Relations," the results showed that while most of the Singaporeans and permanent residents who participated in the study strongly endorsed multicultural values like believing that people from all races are equal and should be treated equally, stereotypes persist. Nearly half of all respondents indicated that "people from some races are more likely to get into trouble than others." Also, contradictorily, while nearly three-quarters of all respondents selected the practice of an "[e]mployer not hiring someone because of his or her race" as "never acceptable", and an even larger percentage considering this as "racist" action, Chinese, Malay and Indian respondents on the whole preferred to hire someone of their own ethnic group to help them manage their business. Results indicated a generally lower acceptance of "outsider" groups[40]. Although younger Singaporeans are more accepting of inter-ethnic relations and overall, there has been an increasing trend of inter-ethnic marriages in Singapore — from just over 15 per cent in 2006 to over 20 per cent in 2016[41] — the need for multicultural actors with deep

[39] Ibid.

[40] Mathew Mathews, "Channel NewsAsia-Institute of Policy Studies (CNA-IPS) Survey on Race Relations," accessed August 8, 2017, http://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/ips/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2013/04/CNA-IPS-survey-on-race-relations_190816.pdf;

[41] Felicia Choo, "Marriages in Singapore See Slight Dip, While Divorces Edge Up," *The Straits Times*, July 19, 2017.

skills of cultural literacy are still needed. Such actors need to be nurtured so that they can make positive judgements when confronted with various issues as they go about living their lives in a plural society.

## TEACHING CULTURAL LITERACY

While it may or may not be desirable to minimise ethnicity as a lived experience amongst Singaporeans, it is more realistic for them to be exposed to the positive side of diversity so as to function as effective multicultural actors. A society where diversity is celebrated is a society that is richer because of the creativity of its citizens and residents that is unleashed. Researchers have noted the link between a substantial and diverse inflow of migrants, interacting with other factors such as a free exchange of ideas and the trading in goods, with the creation and sustainability of creative cities.[42] Singapore as a young state and nation is characterised by a diverse migrant stock. Migration continues today because of contemporary economic objectives. Singapore's multicultural population, the complexities of which are explored in the following pages, is a ready and rich source for forming associations — in the form of friendship cliques at schools or at workplaces, or through formal associations. Citizens and residents can benefit from meeting people from different backgrounds, exposing themselves to new ideas and different ways of living. They can embark on new cultural pursuits, thus injecting creative new ideas into society. Not only is there the growth of an enlightened citizenry possessing cultural knowledge beyond that learnt from one's family and ethnic circles, society as a whole can become a bubbling scene of different cultural networks and possibilities. The multicultural citizen is thus open to the possibility of leading a richer and more fulfilling life.

Singapore students in particular stand much to gain if they approach the ethnic and religious identities that they observe around them every day and not as special events to be taken note of on designated dates such as

[42] Åke E. Andersson, "Creative People Need Creative Cities," in *Handbook of Creative Cities*, (eds.) David Emanuel Andersson, Åke E. Andersson and Charlotta Mellander, 14 55 (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2011).

Racial Harmony Day. Social scientists have noted the phenomenon of monocultural pluralism,[43] or the compartmentalisation of different cultural or religious conventions of different peoples constituting a plural society. Individuals downplay or keep out of view, or out of conversations, their visions of life, which may be shaped by their cultural or religious norms. In such a situation, displays of cultural or religious traditions, usually in the form of artefacts and costumes, emerge and are recognised and celebrated only on special occasions, to be re-packed into boxes and taken out at the next relevant occasion. Enlightened multicultural students can emerge from building multicultural educational systems that incorporate the values and perspectives of different groups of people found in that society and who are contributing members of it. This approach is far from seeing multiculturalism as an "extra" in the classroom or to be fitted into the curriculum as and when time permits, leading student to form impressions of ethnic or religious groups based on snapshots.[44] Students can be encouraged to see that inter-ethnic ties are not separate from the broader system of social relations operating in society, moving away from the fallacy of particularism.[45]

While the possibility to nurture such multicultural actors is high among a Singaporean population who are generally positive about living in a multicultural society, we must also be cognizant that a sizeable portion of Singaporeans have little interest in such intercultural understanding. For instance, based on a survey of over 3,000 Singaporean residents, the Institute of Policy Studies and One People.sg Indicators of Racial and Religious Harmony revealed that only about half of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed to the statement, "I am interested in understanding other racial groups' customs and practices." Just over half (55 per cent) agreed or strongly agreed to the statement, "I like meeting and getting to

[43] Emily Stokes-Rees, "Making Sense of a Melange: Representing Cultural Citizenship in Singapore's Asian Civilisations Museum," *Museum Anthropology* 36, no. 1 (2013): 33–50.
[44] Kamshia Childs, "Integrating Multiculturalism in Education for the 2020 Classroom: Moving Beyond the 'Melting Pot' of Festivals and Recognition Months,' *Journal for Multicultural Education* 11, no. 1 (2017): 31–36.
[45] G. Allan, "Social Structure and Relationships," in *Social Context and Relationships*, (eds.) S. Duck, 1–25 (Newbury Park: Sage, 1993).

know people from other racial groups other than my own[46]." In short, for many the need to develop a deepened level of intercultural understanding is lacking. It is imperative then that those who are interested in deepening their intercultural understanding receive all the necessary help to do so.

## SECURING SOCIETAL STABILITY

A diversity-based creative society needs social stability too. Since September 2001, when terrorists attacked key economic and political sites in New York and Washington, terrorism has become a heightened global concern. Singapore has not escaped the dangers of terrorism plots; for example, Indonesian militants have plotted a rocket attack on Marina Bay from Batam Island.[47] Singapore's officials have taken a variety of steps to ensure that society remains stable and retains its pluralistic and modern orientations. Enlightened multicultural citizens are a powerful means of helping to secure social stability. In multicultural Britain, for example, which has been hit by multiple terrorist attacks, both by Muslims and non-Muslims,[48] there have been calls in the media for Muslims to integrate into British society. "Integration" has meant "assimilation" in an atmosphere coloured by Islamophobia.[49] In Singapore, enlightened multicultural citizens and residents are better placed to resist calls for any particular ethnic or religious group to be forcibly assimilated into a plural society. Where integration is called for, it should not be read as assimilation but as equal opportunity and space for cultural diversities prevailing in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance.[50] Following a terrorist attack, there can be calls for

[46] Mathew Mathews, "Institute of Policy Studies-OnePeople.sg Indicators of Racial and Religious Harmony" accessed August 8, 2017, http://lkyspp2.nus.edu.sg/ips/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2013/08/Forum_-Indicators-of-Racial-and-Religious_110913_slides.pdf

[47] Francis Chan, "Batam Militants Jailed for Terrorism Conspiracy," *The Straits Times,* June 8, 2017.

[48] Paul Peachey, "Emotional Australian PM Visits Scene of London Terror Attack," *The National,* July 10, 2017.

[49] Christopher Adam Bagley and Nader Al-Refai, "Multicultural Integration in British and Dutch Societies: Education and Citizenship," *Journal for Multicultural Education* 11, no. 2 (2017): 82–100.

[50] J. B. Rose and Associates, *Colour and Citizenship* (Oxford University Press, London, 1969).

revenge attacks too.[51] An antidote to revenge calls is the enlightened multicultural citizen using the cultural capital gained from actively participating in everyday multicultural situations and thus offering solutions that are tailor-made to specific and unique circumstances in times of crises. Social actors who are grounded are better able to negotiate cultural differences and so their presence is crucial in challenging times.

## CHRONICLING CULTURE

The preceding discussion has demonstrated the need to equip the Singapore population with the needed multicultural competencies. Such competencies are developed through a knowledge of the artefacts, institutions and practices of different communities as well as active engagement with those from other communities[52]. Textbooks are poor substitutes for the learning offered through intercultural interactions and participation. Nevertheless they contain important insights which may help direct the questions and thoughts of those seeking to develop multicultural competencies. While this volume does not seek to be viewed as a textbook of ethnic communities and cultures in Singapore, it is a modest attempt to provide greater awareness of the Singaporean multicultural landscape with its immense diversity both of communities and practice.

While an important aim of this edited volume is to assist multicultural actors to be better informed about the rich ethnic diversity and culture that is in Singapore, the volume has been arranged according to the dominant Chinese-Malay-Indian-Other (CMIO) framework. This categorisation system has attracted substantial scholarly critique and the charge that it stifles Singaporeans from becoming truly multicultural.[53]

The CMIO categorisation system had its roots in the British colonial administration. Guided by European racial theory, which emphasised boundaries and hierarchies between ethnic groups, colonial administrators

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[51] Patricia G. Ramsey, Leslie R. Williams and Edwina B. Vold, *Multicultural Education: A Source Book*. (London: Routledge Falmer, 2003).

[52] Angela Scarino and Anthony Liddicoat. Teaching and learning languages: A guide. (Melbourne: Curriculum Corporation, 2009), 20-21.

[53] Kumar Ramakrishna and Norman Vasu, "Countering Terrorism: Multiculturalism in Singapore," *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* 5, no. 4 (Spring 2007): 152.

divided the population based on erroneous notions of cultural traits.[54] Each race was viewed as most suited, based on certain inherent qualities for a different niche within the economy[55] and was assigned a different living space. By 1886, systematic population census revealed six categories that the colonial administrators used — European and American, Eurasian, Chinese, Malays and other natives of the Archipelago, Tamils and other Natives of India, and Other nationalities. These were much more racialised categories compared to the earlier census in 1871, which had 33 vaguely defined categories that differentiated the population by place of origin, religion and socio-economic status. In the earlier census, there were options for Cochin Chinese (Chinese who lived in southern Indochina) and Javipekaans (local-born Muslims of Indian and Malay heritage, who spoke Malay), attesting to a more nuanced categorisation system.[56]

Singapore's independence in 1965 saw the government presenting a Singaporean identity built on the racialised CMIO model where each of the constituent races were separate but equal in status. The framework required substantial homogenisation of ethnic identities. Thus the rather complex identities of the population based on linguistic, religious and cultural differences were de-emphasised for the multiracial CMIO quadratomy.[57] For instance despite the existence of substantial linguistic diversity among the Chinese, Mandarin was made the official language for use in media and schools. Similarly the language differences among those who hailed from the Malay peninsular and Indonesian archipelago were eliminated with government recognition of only the Malay language.[58]

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[54] Geoffrey Benjamin, "The Cultural Logic of Singapore's 'Multiracialism'," in *Singapore: Society in Transition*, ed. Riaz Hassan (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1976), 115–133.

[55] Lily Zubaidah Rahim, *The Singapore Dilemma: The Political and Educational Marginality of the Malay Community* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[56] Nirmala Purushotam, "Disciplining Difference: Race in Singapore," in *Southeast Asian Identities: Culture and the Politics of Representation in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand*, ed. Joel S. Kahn (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1998), 51–93.

[57] Sharon Siddique, "The Phenomenology of Ethnicity: A Singapore Case-Study," *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 5, no. 1 (February 1990): 35–37.

[58] Ien Ang and Jon Stratton, "The Singapore Way of Multiculturalism: Western Concepts/Asian Cultures," *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 10, no.1 (April 1995): 81–82.

The CMIO model played a role in ordering the culture of the different ethnic groups. Each category was defined by a specific culture with the requisite cultural performances — dances, festivals and costumes. The Singapore Tourism Promotion Board was at the helm of producing ethnic goods for tourist consumption. This came in the form of ethnic enclaves where tourists and Singaporeans could consume ethnic culture — Chinatown for Chinese products, Arab Street for Malay, and Serangoon Road for Indian[59]. There were also religious spaces that corresponded with the CMIO categories such as the Thiam Hock Keng Temple to represent the Chinese and Sultan Mosque for the Malays, Sri Veeramakaliamman Temple for the Indians and St. Andrew's Cathedral for the Others. These representation of religious sites for the ethnic groups in the CMIO framework again glossed over the immense diversity of sites — the Sultan Mosque was often attended by Indian Muslims and the Sri Veeramakaliamman Temple was most appropriate as a Hindu site rather than an Indian site given that a substantial portion of Indians were Muslim or Christian. The St. Andrew's Cathedral was well attended by Indians and Chinese besides Eurasians and Europeans.[60]

Nevertheless the CMIO category has become well entrenched in Singaporean life. Based on the IPS Survey of Race, Religion and Language, even when respondents were given the opportunity to define themselves in other ways, most Singaporeans prefer the CMIO categories rather than a more nuanced identity label[61]. To the extent that the CMIO model reflects the reality of ethnic identity for a great majority of the population, this edited volume uses this as the basic framework. However, within these broad categories, the authors have ensured that the diversity of identities is discussed. In Soon Su-Chuin, Elvin Xing and Tong Chee Kiong's chapter examining the Chinese community and its ethnic culture,

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[59] Laurence Leong Wai-Teng, "Commodifying ethnicity: State and ethnic tourism in Singapore," in *Tourism, Ethnicity and the State in Asian and Pacific Societies*, ed. Michel Pickard and Robert E. Wood (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), 85.

[60] Ibid., 86-87

[61] Mathew Mathews, "The State and Implication of Our Differences: Insights from the IPS Survey of Race, Religion and Language," in *Singapore Perspectives 2014: Differences*, ed. Mathew Mathews, Christopher Gee and Wai Fong Chiang, (Singapore: World Scientific, 2014), 132–133.

they point out the different dialect groups, the Peranakans and new Chinese immigrants showing how traditions might differ for these different groups. They also note variations in cultural practice between Chinese who are Taoist or Buddhist and those who are Christian. Similarly Suriani Suratman and Siti Hajar Esa introduce readers in their section on the Malays to the Javanese, Baweanese, Minangkabau and Bugis. While they discuss the early settlement of these different groups, they also show how the distinct identities of these groups have diminished because of intermarriage and resettlement. Moreover, these groups have taken on an identity as Singapore Malays. The section on the Malays also includes discussion on the Arab community. While the authors note that some Arabs continue to identify as Arabs (and when they do, are classified as "Others" according to the CMIO model) many more accept the Malay label partly because of the educational opportunities this has provided.

Unlike both the Malays and Chinese, the section on the Indians and Others is divided into several chapters each. It is obvious that those categorised as "Others" have little cultural or geographical commonalities since the category includes a whole array of groups some hailing from Europe to others from Southeast Asia. The section includes a chapter on the Eurasians, who although small in population size have had a very significant presence in Singapore and a position which is well defined within the "Others" category[62]. There are also chapters on the Filipinos and Myanmars, ethnic communities which have grown and are increasingly defining themselves as an ethnic community here.

However, one would expect greater commonality for those classified as Indian since they derive their origin primarily from South Asia. We however decided to dedicate different chapters to each of the main Indian groups. Thus there are chapters for the Tamils, Malayalees, Punjabis and Gujaratis as well as a chapter that covers an array of Indian groups. The heterogeneity among those classified as Indians persists and there is much less cultural convergence compared to the case of the Malay and Chinese communities, which both have a single language that unifies otherwise

[62] Zarine Rocha, "Multiplicity within Singularity: Racial Categorization and Recognizing "Mixed Race" in Singapore." Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs 30, no. 3 (2012), 115

diverse groups. Even if the imposition of Mandarin was at one time contested by those who spoke dialects, today these dialects are increasingly relegated as a heritage language with only 35% of young Chinese claiming that it is an important part of their identity[63]. For the Indian community, Tamil was not selected as an official language because it could function as a unifying language in the way that Malay or Mandarin was supposed to. Rather Tamil was selected because of "political expediency" and the "numerical strength" of Tamil speakers[64] in the years leading to independence. The fact that the Ministry of Education had to allow for the teaching and examination of five non-Tamil Indian Languages in public schools by 1990 (despite the comparatively small number of students who were offered them), demonstrates how important such language identities has been for the non-Tamil Indian groups[65]. Besides the clear linguistic differences among the Indian communities, there are substantial cultural differences whether in terms of cuisine and celebrations, following the well-known North and South regional divisions as well as religious affiliation. The authors of the different chapters relating to the Indians have attempted to provide at least some information of this heterogeneity.

While it is impossible in a single volume to do justice to the extent of diversities that exist within the different ethnic communities, the book portrays at least some of these differences.

Another issue with the documentation of ethnic culture is the potential that it has to reproduce essentialist notions of culture which are positioned as static and unchanging. The CMIO framework as discussed earlier does lend itself to some generalised representations of ethnic culture that fails to recognise that culture is evolving and subject to hybridisation. The authors of the various chapters in this volume have carefully considered

[63] Mathew Mathews, "The State and Implication of Our Differences: Insights from the IPS Survey of Race, Religion and Language," in *Singapore Perspectives 2014: Differences*, ed. Mathew Mathews, Christopher Gee and Wai Fong Chiang, (Singapore: World Scientific, 2014), 134.

[64] Ritu Jain and Lionel Wee (2015). "Multilingual Education in Singapore: Beyond Language Communities?" in *Multilingualism and Language in Education: Sociolinguistic and Pedagogical Perspective from Commonwealth Countries*, (ed) A. Yiakoumetti, (*Cambridge: Cambridge University Press*, 2015), 75

[65] Ibid, 76

this. The fact that most of them are scholars and not custodians of ethnic heritage make this much easier. For the latter group, cultural practices are to be prescribed if they are to be preserved from extinction or dilution. However a scholarly perspective accepts that cultures are evolving and subject to many social, economic and political forces[66]. Thus Alexius Pereira, using an academic lens although also Vice President of the Eurasian Association, points out that much of what today is performed as Eurasian culture is actually recently invented. This he argues elsewhere is acceptable to Eurasians since it allows them a form of Eurasian culture that fits within the Singapore ethnic mosaic[67].

Given the evolving nature of culture, the authors of various chapters have had to make decisions about whether to include details about practices which are really no longer relevant to many members in a community. For instance, in their chapter on Chinese customs, the authors do not discuss the Cantonese ritual of *Kwoh Kwan* (known as a "passing through the gate" rite conducted for young children to ward them of evil influences). Marjorie Topley, a British anthropologist writing in 1951 observed this rite among the Cantonese in Singapore and wrote about them in her detailed ethnographic accounts,[68] though community experts attest that this is hardly practised today. On the other hand they have included a brief discussion on *Cu Huay Hng*, a Teochew rite of passage that has similarly not been practised for some time. In this case, Teochew clan associations have tried to revive this practice. Such efforts are worth mentioning as it provides readers an understanding of the nature of ethnic cultures — they might disappear momentarily but might resurge with some modifications and take on new meanings to those who perform them based on particular social and political realities[69].

The authors also point out various instances that modernity has brought about changes to cultural practice. In their chapter on the Tamil

[66] Joane Nagel. "Constructing Ethnicity: Creating and Recreating Ethnic Identity and Culture." *Social problems* 41, no. 1 (1994): 161–163

[67] Alexius Pereira, *Singapore Chronicles: Eurasians* (Singapore: ST Press, 2015), 53-62.

[68] Marjorie Topley, *Cantonese Society in China and Singapore: Gender, Religion, Medicine and Money*. (Singapore: NUS Press, 2011), 29–31.

[69] Joane Nagel. "Constructing Ethnicity: Creating and Recreating Ethnic Identity and Culture." *Social problems* 41, no. 1 (1994): 163–167

community, A. Mani, Pravin Prakash and Shanthini Selvarajan inform readers about the decorative *kolam*, which was drawn outside homes to ward off evil spirits and welcome people into their homes. They note that these are much less prevalent today owing to the changing role of Tamil women, who like other Singaporean women are increasingly involved in the labour market and so have little time to work on elaborate *kolam* artwork. Moreover, for most Tamils who live in HDB apartments, the space outside one's flat is seen as common space and there might be sensitivities about such religiously inspired artwork. The authors also mention the rise of ready-made *kolam* stickers that can be pasted outside one's entrance. This is an easy compromise that allows Tamil Hindu females to negotiate their cultural beliefs with their time commitments.

Hopefully in discussing the traditions, celebrations, rites and beliefs of different ethnic groups in this volume, it is apparent to the reader that the authors are not prescribing a "correct" way that a celebration or ritual is to be performed. Neither are they asserting that traditions or the interpretations given for a practice as discussed in their chapters are universally adopted and accepted. The space limitations of an edited volume do not allow multiple practices or interpretations of a practice to be discussed at great length. The authors have often chosen to highlight practices and interpretations that are most dominant. In the absence of empirical data that is generalisable about the actual cultural practice of Singaporeans or how they interpret them, it is impossible to be definite about these issues. The authors in this volume have had to rely on the opinions and assessments of community leaders and informants. Hopefully in a subsequent edition of this volume authors will be able to draw on more updated, empirical studies to guide their decisions.

In presenting the culture of the different ethnic communities, chapter authors have incorporated some religious practice, especially those related to festivals and life cycle rituals in their discussion of these communities. This represents what some see as a conflation between race and religion that is often attributed to the prevalence of the CMIO model. There is, of course, empirical support for this from census data which reveals some correspondence between ethnicity and religion in Singapore. In the case of the Malays, census data from 2010 shows that 99 per cent of all Malays here also practise Islam. Among the Indians in Singapore 59 per cent are

Hindu, while 57 per cent of Chinese were Buddhist or Taoist[70]. Thus, it is certainly understandable that in order to understand the culture of the different ethnic groups, some understanding of common religious practice is in order, even while it is not the focus of the chapters in this volume.

While some cultural practices are observed by members of ethnic communities regardless of their religious affiliation, there are modifications both in practice and how these celebrations or rituals are interpreted. Many Chinese Christians for instance celebrate Chinese New Year and Mid Autumn Festival but observe these as cultural festivals. Rather than magnifying the religiously inspired legends that are part of the celebration of these events, Chinese Christians often locate these celebrations in agricultural festivals in China. A similar trend is observed among the Javanese here, some of whom are attempting to revive the *Kuda Kepang* performance, often performed at Javanese weddings. This performance is now frowned upon because of its un-Islamic elements. Those who attempt to popularize them have to repeatedly point out that their rendition of the performance differs from how it was in the past and is now "free of the religiously objectionable rituals practised in the traditional version." [71]

## MANY CULTURES, ONE PEOPLE

The bulk of this volume discusses the many cultures and communities in Singapore, and amplifies the differences between the ethnic groups that constitute Singapore. But we should also consider how the different ethnic cultures allow us to forge a national culture that unifies the "One People, One Nation" narrative which is the subject of many state celebrations. Examining the different chapters, there are some broad themes that are apparent.

First, each of the different ethnic communities has had migrant roots and have made important contributions to Singapore's development as a

[70] "Census of Population 2010: Statistical Release 1 — Demographic Characteristics, Education, Language and Religion," (Singapore: Department of Statistics, Ministry of Trade & Industry), last modified 2011, accessed on September 25, 2017, https://www.singstat.gov.sg/docs/default-source/default-document-library/publications/publications_and_papers/cop2010/census_2010_release1/cop2010sr1.pdf.

[71] See chapter by Suriani Suratman and Siti Hajar bte Esa in this volume.

nation. Ethnic cultures too have evolved in particular ways in Singapore. Being separated by geography, political and social contexts, each ethnic culture has evolved through its contact with the different realities in Singapore such as the multicultural landscape and fast pace of living based on development goals. These cultures now do not resemble how they were practiced when migrants first arrived in Singapore and also differ from its practice in regions where the ethnic group is dominant. PM Lee aptly observed this hybridisation in his speech at the official opening of the SCCC when he stated, "Indeed, we can now speak of a Singaporean Chinese culture. In the same way, I think we can speak of a Singaporean Malay culture or a Singaporean Indian culture."[72]

Second, the celebration of many ethnic festivals here has core practices and intentions which are similar. They ultimately embody the desire for prosperity and well-being, family and community bonding and norms of generosity. Chinese New Year, Hari Raya Puasa and Deepavali, which are key ethnic festivals in Singapore, involve visiting relatives and friends, donning new clothes and having both sweet and savoury snacks. Pineapple tarts, which are bite-size pastries filled with or topped with pineapple jam, are consumed during key ethnic festivals in Singapore, such as Chinese New Year, Hari Raya and Deepavali.

An important custom during Chinese New Year is the giving of red packets containing money to younger members in the family, symbolizing good wishes for the recipient. Similarly, green packets are given out to children and teenagers who are still schooling during Hari Raya Puasa while purple packets are given out during Deepavalli.

Besides having certain similar traditional practices for ethnic festivals, the Chinese, Malay and Indian community also have similar pre-wedding traditions that often recognize the value of family bonds reaching to the larger family system. Marriage is not a personal matter but greatly involve the larger family system. For the Chinese, the presentation of betrothal gifts by to groom's family to the bride's family is carried out one to two weeks prior to the wedding day as a symbol of good luck and prosperity. This is similar to pre-wedding traditions for the Malays, where the

[72] Mayo Martin, New Arts Centre Will Promote Chinese Culture That is Singaporean-Centric: PM Lee," Channel NewsAsia, May 19, 2017.

couple exchanges gifts and dowry during the engagement ceremony known as *majlis bertunang*. Similarly, a bangle-ceremony is held a few days before the wedding of Singaporean Tamil couples, where the groom's family goes over to the bride's home with bangles for the bride.

Third, there is value congruence between the main ethnic cultures in Singapore. The values of filial piety and respect for elders are upheld by the Chinese, Malay and Indian communities in Singapore. Filial piety is considered a key virtue in Chinese culture, strengthened through religious practice and is the founding principle of many other ethnic festivals in the Singaporean Chinese community, such as Hungry Ghost Festival and *Qing Ming Jie*. Malay culture incorporates the values of filial piety and respect for elders through the performance of the act of *salam*, towards elders as a sign of respect. Similarly, Tamils, at least on special occasions go down on their knees and touch the feet of the elders, symbolically showing their desire to bow down to the experience and wisdom of the elder.

Beyond finding the commonalities between ethnic cultures here, there are many common experiences that Singaporeans share. While the chapters present the traditions and cultural icons of the different ethnic communities, not all of them represent how Singaporeans of the different ethnic backgrounds live on a day-to-day basis. Few women wear the *cheongsam*, *sari* or *baju kurung* in their everyday life. Many of these costumes are reserved for festivities or increasingly at Racial Harmony Day celebrations or workplace formal dinners which suggest ethnic wear as an option for dress. Ethnic dance, while featured in cultural educational programmes in schools, are not the most popular forms of entertainment; ballroom dancing, line dancing and salsa are more often featured at any community centre. While ethnic traditions mark certain life cycle rituals like weddings and funerals or festivals, most Singaporeans celebrate life events depending on their socio-economic background — that will determine whether they host a large celebration or make little a-do about the event. In many ways a substantial set of common life experiences such as the stressful and competitive school culture, secular rites of passage such as National Service for men and societal norms such as queuing up and even *chopeing* (reserving) seats with tissue packets cut across ethnic backgrounds and mark Singaporeaness.

Singapore is unlikely to be a melting pot for ethnic cultures. The earlier discussion amplifies that there are sufficient cultural distinctives that communities cherish, and as will be seen in subsequent chapters, communities also seek to preserve and reinvent tradition to safeguard their identities. Thus the Singapore model of ethnic diversity continues to be best described as a "mosaic" where the many ethnic cultures together make up Singapore. A closer look at each piece of this collective mosaic will however show that the boundaries between each part is steadily blurring. That is testimony to the inclusiveness of each ethnic culture and community in Singapore.

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