FOREWORD

To commemorate the 50th anniversary of Singapore's Independence in 2015, the Institute of Policy Studies launched *Singapore Chronicles*. The series provides succinct introductions to various aspects of Singapore, ranging from the fundamental to the practical, the philosophical to the mundane. Written by experts for the intelligent reader, each of the 50 volumes aims to make complex topics accessible to as wide a range of people as possible.

Together, *Singapore Chronicles* captures the story of our island-nation. There are volumes on the milestones of our history – from pre-colonial Singapore to our separation from Malaysia. There are volumes on Singapore's economy, politics, society, community, culture, flora and fauna, and food. There are volumes describing the country's key institutions – among them, the presidency, the judiciary, the military, political parties and trade unions. Whether you are a student or simply curious, a citizen or a traveller, young or old – if your wish is to understand what makes Singapore Singapore – you may linger a while on these volumes.

Singapore Chronicles is a reminder that Singapore is a human-made miracle. May it also serve as a reminder that Singapore is not defined by the accolades it receives, but by the constant striving of Singaporeans to always do better, to exceed themselves, to go beyond the achieved, the accomplished, the done.

From the beginning, the story of Singapore has always been about the future.

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THE "CHINESE" IN SINGAPORE

CHINESENESS

What do we talk about when we talk about the "Chinese" in Singapore?[1] As with any subject of study or public interest, *what* constitutes the subject matter and *how* it is treated depend on the vantage point of *who* is talking, *where* in this case a particular Chinese community is located, and *when* — on the one hand, the historical period in question and, on the other, the contemporary context that engenders interest in the subject. But this does not necessarily mean that those who can trace or claim Chinese ancestry fully share a common and distinctive set of ethnic characteristics. One prominent theme in both scholarly research and popular discourse is the "Chineseness" of people who identify themselves or are identified by others as "Chinese". Questions about "Chinese identity" are not typically raised in Chinese territories – where Chineseness may be taken for granted. As Wang Gungwu (1999, 118) points out, such questions matter for those who are part of the Chinese diaspora: "How have the different communities of the diaspora change in response to the demands of their adopted countries? What kinds of ethnic identities are being constructed to deal with other people's sense of nationhood? Does Chinese nationalism still mean anything for ethnic minorities outside China?" The last question, too, applies to the special case of the Chinese as a majority ethnic group in Singapore.

What does it mean to be "Chinese" in Singapore? There is no single or fixed answer. The point is not that "being Chinese" means whatever people want it to mean. As the study of the Chinese diaspora shows, Chinese identity is situated in time and place. Historically, Singapore has been home to a myriad of people of

Chinese descent, including those whose ancestors migrated from China many generations ago, as well as recent immigrants who have taken up permanent residence or citizenship. In addition to one's family background, a sense of Chineseness is likely to differ according to one's age, education, language use, occupation, social networks, commercial and cultural interests, and personal concerns. Such biographical and social circumstances are in turn set within changing historical conditions. Indeed, we may ask why the question of "being Chinese" matters at all – and for whom. Self-identity or identification with a group involves positioning oneself in relation to others. These "others" include not only people of other ethnic backgrounds, but also other "Chinese" who may have an interest – or even a lack of interest – in maintaining a particular kind of Chineseness. Questions about identity are raised when individuals and groups face new situations, as in the case of immigrants settling in a new land or citizens interacting with fellow citizens of diverse backgrounds, or responding to national policies. In this primer, we provide an overview of the Chinese in multi-ethnic Singapore and illustrate the varieties of Chinese identity that have developed over time.[2]

NOT A "THIRD CHINA"

Following Independence in 1965, Singapore represented itself as a new nation-state in Southeast Asia without any political allegiance to the People's Republic of China (PRC, *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo*), assiduously avoiding any criticism that the country was "the third China" in Southeast Asia, especially in the immediate neighbourhood of the Malay Archipelago. The phrase "the third China" is the title of a book by C P Fitzgerald, published in 1965, and it described collectively all the Chinese communities in Southeast Asia. The case of Malaysia, formed in 1963, figured prominently in Fitzgerald's analysis because of the sheer number of Chinese: roughly 3.2 million out of a total population of 8 million in the peninsula, 1.35 million out of 1.86 million in Singapore, 260,000 out of 800,000 in Sarawak and

115,000 out of 480,000 in Sabah.[3] Fitzgerald (1965, 107-108) concluded with this observation about the Chinese in Southeast Asia within the global context of the Cold War:

> A state, or country, in which a large community obtained full political rights might become a client of Communist China ... they are also more than ever suspect to the native peoples among whom they live. Their problem is to combine a share of political power in the countries of their residence with a continuing spiritual and cultural allegiance to China.

Indeed, for the Chinese settlers who had transplanted themselves in the Nanyang ("South Ocean"), a term which covers Southeast Asia, being physically separated from their ancestral land and making a future for themselves in a new environment, the question of what it means to retain and maintain their Chineseness becomes significant – in particular, how to remain *culturally* Chinese without being *politically* Chinese in terms of one's relationship to China. As will be discussed, the nexus between culture and politics was a major theme, especially in the pre-War decades and during the post-War decolonisation era. And the separation between the two – assuming that the two can be unambiguously separated – was a dominant preoccupation in the Singapore state's "management" of Chineseness in the post-Independence era. In essence, this means that Chinese-Singaporeans do not, and should not, owe any nationalist allegiance to China.

Singapore's official relations with China have developed in the context of regional and global geopolitics.[4] The Singapore state made it a point to formally establish diplomatic relations with China only after its neighbouring countries had done so. Singapore and China signed a joint communiqué only in 1990 and proceeded to set up embassies. Prior to this symbolically timed move, there was already an informal agreement to exchange official visits after Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew made his first visit to China in May 1976, about four months before the passing of Mao Zedong. Deng Xiaoping, the Chinese Senior Vice-Premier, visited Singapore in November 1978. With the

further opening up of the Chinese market, a trade agreement was made in December 1979, followed by the establishment of trade representative offices in 1981. Trade has been the anchor for developing bilateral relations, guided by the pursuit of mutual economic benefits. In this sense, the ties are pragmatic rather than ideological, and based primarily on economic rationality and national interests, rather than cultural affinity among the Chinese of both countries. Those who are literate in Chinese or who have maintained ties with their relatives or ancestral villages, however, may have an advantage in networking and doing business in China.[5] As for a putatively shared "Chinese culture", it is useful to note that during his visit to Singapore in 2015, President Xi Jinping opened a China Cultural Centre (*Zhongguo wenhua zhongxin*). In the previous year, however, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong officiated at the ground-breaking ceremony of the Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre (*Xinjiapo huazu wenhua zhongxin*), in effect, symbolising and accentuating the differentiation between "China culture" and "Singapore Chinese culture" (or "Chinese-Singaporean culture").[6]

"THE CHINESE COMMUNITY": CONTEMPORARY NARRATIVES

In 2015, Singapore celebrated its 50th year of Independence, and this prompted various kinds of reflection on the massive social transformation over the decades. In what follows, we highlight three contrasting perspectives on "the Chinese community" since Independence. As much as the term refers to the Chinese majority population as a single community, it also downplays the heterogeneity within it.

The Chinese-speaking

To begin with, let us consider the overall perspective taken by the celebratory book *50 Years of the Chinese Community in Singapore*, which was published during the nation's jubilee year. The publication was endorsed by two major community organisations, the Singapore

Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SCCCI, *Xinjiapo zhonghua zongshang hui*) and the Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations (SFCCA, *Xinjiapo zongxiang huiguan lianhe zonghui*), and the contributions of both are featured in its opening chapters. Established in 1906 as the Singapore General Association for Chinese Commercial Affairs, the Chamber took on the name Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce (SCCC) in 1921. In 1978, the organisation added the word "Industry" to its English name. The SCCCI has been dedicated to promoting the economic interests and social welfare of its members. The Chamber's leaders and members were drawn from the plethora of mutual aid associations (*huiguan*) that were formed since early colonial times; it supported, for example, the anti-Japanese movement and, after World War II, the granting of citizenship rights to Chinese immigrants, and the founding of Nanyang University or Nantah, the abbreviated name for *Nanyang daxue* (Hu, 2016, 3-4).

The SFCCA was officially established in 1985 as an umbrella body uniting all the clan associations.[7] By that time, their self-help functions and dialect-based identities had become less relevant with the extensive role of the state in social welfare and the use of English as the main medium of instruction in the national school system. Amid the "growing concern among the older Chinese community leaders over the 'Westernisation' of Singapore", the Federation's first objective was "to promote the understanding and appreciation of the Chinese language, culture and values" (Pang, 2016, 30-35).

The 50th anniversary book documents the contributions of Chinese pioneers to Singapore's success, but the editor, Pang Cheng Lian (2016, xix-xx), also offers an overarching narrative of the vicissitudes of the Chinese community. In the first instance, she announces that the essays "will focus on the Chinese-speaking members of the community whose many contributions are less familiar to those brought up on the strict diet of the English language". Based on the 1970 Census data, which reported that among Singaporeans 10 years or older, "the literacy rate for the Chinese-speaking segment was 58.9%, while for the English language it was 39.9%", Pang makes the following argument:

Tea receptions organised by Chinese clan associations played an important role in maintaining and promoting Chinese traditions. Courtesy of the Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations Collection, the National Archives of Singapore.

> In terms of language usage the young Republic was very much a Chinese country. One could survive, and even prosper, without knowing the English language, but one would be socially handicapped without knowledge of a smattering of Hokkien and other Chinese dialects, as well as Mandarin .... So we had this remarkable situation where the overwhelming majority of the governed was more at home in the Chinese language, but the ruling elite was largely from the English stream.

Put differently, the Chinese community up to the early 1970s was predominantly Chinese-speaking, and this was prior to the full-scale nationalisation of the education system in the 1980s, marked especially by the closure of Nanyang University (whose grounds became the campus of the Nanyang Technological Institute in 1981 and then the Nanyang Technological University [NTU] in 1991). The line that the new nation-state "was very much a Chinese country" lends itself to misinterpretation. Rather, the larger point is that vast swathes of the national population, especially among the older generation and those who did not attain higher educational qualifications – and they included Malays and Indians – were not

literate or proficient in English, especially at the levels that were required of white-collar occupations or what is known today as "professionals, managers, executives, and technicians" (PMETs). In spite of this, "it was the vigour and dynamism of the Chinese-speaking community that propelled the People's Action Party into successive electoral victory and transformed Singapore from an *entrepôt* port to an export-oriented industrial nation". There is a trace of irony in this narrative of a nation-state's modernisation led by the ruling English-educated elite, indispensably supported by the Chinese-speaking. This community was "the backbone of the Republic in its founding years", but it now faces the decline in the use of Chinese languages in a society that is predominantly English-speaking (Pang, 2016, xx-xxi).

The Peranakans

The jubilee year also provided the occasion for the Peranakan Museum, which was established in 2008 and operated by the Asian Civilisations Museum, to stage the exhibition "50 Great Peranakans". The term "Peranakans" refers to the locally born members of certain diasporic ethnic groups in Southeast Asia. They assimilated aspects of Malay culture into their original cultures by virtue of mixed lineage. Before the influx of females from China in the first half of the 20th century, a significant number of *huaqiao* or Chinese sojourners married local women, started families and settled for good.[8] Chinese groups, especially Hokkiens (whose ancestry may be traced to Fujian in Southern China), comprise the vast majority of Peranakans. They were also known as the Straits Chinese or Straits-born Chinese because of their concentration in the Straits Settlements (Penang, Malacca and Singapore). These groups were collectively known as Babas, a term which more specifically refers to the males. The females are known as Nyonyas. Beyond the Peninsula, there are Peranakan Chinese communities in Indonesia, more commonly referred to as Peranakan Tionghua. Strictly speaking, Peranakans include Indian ("Chetty Peranakans") and Eurasian groups. The "50 Great Peranakans" exhibition focused only on the contributions of prominent Peranakan Chinese over three historical periods: the

rise of commerce during the 19th century, collaboration with the colonial regime from the end of the century till World War II, and post-War development leading to Independence. The post-War period featured three Peranakan Chinese who were the founding members of the People's Action Party (PAP): Toh Chin Chye, Goh Keng Swee and Lee Kuan Yew. All three had been educated in English schools and graduated from British universities. In particular, Lee rejected the label "Peranakan" in a Legislative Assembly debate in 1959, opting to be regarded as part of "the people of Malaya". His wife, Kwa Geok Choo – also featured in the exhibition – had clarified in a 2003 *Straits Times* interview (Chong, 2015, 184): "Both Kuan Yew and I come from Peranakan families, speaking no Chinese, not even dialect." In such families, the main home languages were likely to be Baba Malay and English, especially when its members were educated in English schools or,

A Straits Chinese wedding in the 1920s. Courtesy of the Peranakan Association Collection, the National Archives of Singapore.

as a corollary, employed in colonial establishments, playing useful roles as intermediaries between the local peoples and the British. This also made them part of the local elite, culturally distinct from the mass of *sinkheh* or new arrivals (Rudolph, 1998, 103-110). In particular, Baba Malay is "a unique Malay dialect with a significant Hokkien influence" and in recent decades, "is still spoken albeit in decreasing numbers by a community proud of its history, tradition and practices" (Ee *et al.*, 2008, 41 and 43).

In 2015, however, the Peranakan community was also facing the consequences of vast social and cultural changes since Independence. A curator of the exhibition lamented the "unfortunate decline in the appreciation of the Peranakans of the past" and offered a more nuanced view of their history: "The myths of a Golden Age of the Peranakans are essentially unstable. Anglophile, Western-educated, English-speaking Peranakans have counterparts who were more centred on Chinese culture. Equally misleading is the idea of Peranakan decline after 1945: while some lost influence and moved away from politics, others continued to prosper and took leading roles in the new Singapore." (Yoong, 2015, 12, 14; see also Rudolph, 1998, 206) But the Peranakan Chinese who played significant political roles in the post-War era – especially in envisioning a multiracial society – did not assert their identity as Peranakans, as seen in the case of Lee Kuan Yew and his English-educated colleagues. They had positioned themselves vis-à-vis the British and fellow Malayans, including the Chinese-speaking masses. Yet, their Peranakan Chinese heritage did matter. As Wang Gungwu suggested, Lee's success rested on, among other things, "the core values that shaped him and the power systems that he carefully studied and carefully brought together". These values in turn were related to "his origins as someone descended from many generations of Chinese in Southeast Asia who had all lived among a variety of people and under several kinds of regimes"[9]. Thus, it might be said that in spite of the apparent decline of the Peranakan community, the longstanding roles of its members as cultural intermediaries have made a larger impact beyond its own distinctively hybrid ethnic identity.

Siapa Nama Kamu?

On the road to Independence, a multicultural society was envisioned by people across sectors of the local population, not least among those who were schooled in various language streams (Chinese, English, Malay and Tamil), which constituted the education system that had evolved in the Straits Settlements (Chelliah, 1947). By the mid-1950s, local-born Chinese increased to around 70 per cent of the Chinese population, now including especially a growing number of second-generation Chinese born to the *sinkheh* who had settled on the island.[10] An emerging "Malayan" consciousness was evident among many of the Chinese-educated (*huaxiaosheng*), who by virtue of their educational background were often distinguished from the English-educated (*yingxiaosheng*). The process of localisation was already reflected in pre-War cultural movements among

National Language Class, *a 1959 painting by Chua Mia Tee. Collection of National Gallery Singapore.*

the Chinese-educated, challenging the stereotype of them as essentially China-oriented. For example, "Malayan-Chinese Literature" (*Mahua wenxue*) came into existence in the 1920s (Fang, 1977). And the development of "Nanyang art" was marked by the founding of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) by Lim Hak Tai in 1938 (Tham, 2013).

When the newly minted National Gallery Singapore opened in late 2015, its survey of art in Singapore since the 19th century took its title "*Siapa nama kamu?*" from the words found in Chua Mia Tee's 1959 painting *National Language Class* (Siew, 2015). In the painting, "*Siapa nama kamu*" ("What is your name?") and "*Di mana awak tinggal?*" ("Where do you live?") were the questions that the Malay *cikgu* (teacher) had written on the blackboard and taught to the group of Chinese-educated students. These questions, posed in the year that Singapore attained self-government, had symbolic meanings for the artist and his contemporaries as they worked towards building a Malayan society. Malay (*Bahasa Melayu*) was commonly spoken among the local people from various ethnic groups, but the effort to learn the language represented a social commitment on the part of the Chinese-educated youth, identifying with their native land rather than with their ancestral land (Kwok, 2015). In 1955, Lim Hak Tai spoke of "the art of the Young Malayans" that was "shackled" by colonial rule: "Once we have become independent and can enjoy a good government, be free from racial prejudice, enjoy mass culture and education and freedom for artistic expression for all races, then there is a basis for the fine art of young Nanyang." (Tham, 2013, 37) In recalling the question "*Siapa nama kamu?*" in 2015 and using it to present Singapore art over two centuries, the National Gallery Singapore – and indeed many in the arts community – also posed larger questions about the progress of multiculturalism after 50 years of Independence, especially the state of inter- and intra-ethnic relations and majority-minority relations, and at a time when new Chinese immigrants were making Singapore their home. These questions, as we shall see, merit treatment in any review of the Chinese in Singapore.