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S'pore's elusive identity quest

By For The Straits Times, Shirley Lim Geok-lin

IN JANUARY, when speaking to Singaporeans living in Doha, Qatar, Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew shared his concerns about their children losing their Singaporean identity: 'If more Singaporeans worked abroad and their children forgot their roots, there will be no Singapore node to send them out...They dissolve and disappear and there is no Singapore.'

MM Lee was correct in focusing on the dilemma facing a globalising nation state: 'They become citizens of the world. What does that mean? Lost!'

The threat of 'lostness' is not merely a condition that may befall children of Singaporean expatriates but on Singapore itself. Even as politicians and educators continue to push for Singapore to become a globalised entity, the Minister Mentor cautions that with international education and marriage to foreigners, these globalised identities may signify not a win-win paradigm, as is the usual equation made in Singapore, but a win-lose paradigm for the state.

MM Lee's concern was over the loss of the fourth generation of young citizens, no longer filled with fears of regional military hostility or global isolation, but whose parents, in becoming international workers, have opened to them a different identity, formed not under conditions of enmity and danger but under the very conditions the government has worked so arduously to create over the decades - the condition of global strength.

But the doors which lead to a worldwide identity - a Singapore success story - are also the same doors which could lead to potential nation-identity oblivion.

In a moment of both paradox and oxymoron, the goal of the Singapore state, the sustainability of the nation itself, could be threatened by the success of the integration of its citizens into a de-nationalising globalised identity.

What is Singapore?

AS WITH earlier national-identity debates, today it is still not clear what composes a Singaporean identity, apart from local residency.

Paradise is hardly if ever mapped out; extinction is always too imaginable. And how can this be otherwise when most things local are persistently viewed as inadequate, needing ever more improvement, in comparison to other cultures and identities which are idealised as superior.

I think, however, that the Singaporean identity is already much present. The Singapore social and cultural world, so multiple and varied, is already in-situ and the Singapore identity does not so much need improvement or transformation as it does unpacking.

Gerald Graff, in his influential book on the cultural wars in US academia in the 1990s, suggested with wry common sense that academics might teach the conflicts. And it is perhaps with the same wryness that one could suggest, in response to concerns of Singapore identity loss, that elders, parents, teachers and cultural workers might teach Singapore identity.

Unpacking identity

AT THE very least, they might unpack it, or construct and imagine its historical and social formations and provide new generations with histories, art, artifacts, stories and songs that track and memorialise the

common story of Singaporeans.

The challenge of identity lies instead in these questions: Who is to be entrusted with instruction? Who gets to select the teachers, and based on what criteria?

National propaganda inevitably fails. Social and group identity cannot be contrived by one agency towards one target message. Social identity is a process created by many voices, contradictions, debates and differences, some uncomfortable and conflicting, even unreliable and duplicitous.

The paradox, demonstrated in the US and Europe, is that national identity is not one but many; it is able to succeed as one because it encompasses many.

The common story is an evolving narrative, so that even the telling of Singapore history must be an ongoing project.

MM Lee illustrated this self-fashioning in the course of his autobiographical writings. Twelve years ago, he wrote about his growing years and the differences between the choices he faced, having been born in 1923, and those faced by Singaporeans born in 1973: 'I was not bad at ideas, at words' and 'I built up the foundations to be a good lawyer - master the English language, master the art of talking in public'.

He was as utilitarian in his discussion of the languages for Singapore: 'It's important that you know the English language because it is the international language.' Emphasising the need for good English, he explicitly warned against the speaking of Singlish.

Yet he had also warned in 1992 against the increasing domination of English-language culture in Singapore, noting that if 'the people lose touch with their (Chinese immigrant) roots, I don't think we'll survive'.

By 1994, however, the MM was focusing not on Singapore's Chinese immigrant past but on its globalised future, predicting that 'this is one enormous big world which is going to be integrated. There are enormous opportunities. And if I were a young man I would seize them'.

He exhorted students 'to maximise your natural endowments - and then seize your chances in a given society at a given stage of development'.

Is it too far-fetched to note that in fashioning a new Singaporean who is ideologically urged to maximise his talents, to seize opportunities for professional and capital accumulation, and to hone his linguistic skills in an international English that would make him mobile in an integrated world, the Singapore system may very well be shaping a global worker rather than one satisfied to keep his talents within the confines of a small island?

How do we raise globally competitive idea-culture-technological workers and expect them to stay rooted in the very small, if not narrow, social world of the Singapore state?

Developing roots

EARLY this year, Li Shengwu, in a letter to The Straits Times titled Classroom Still Belongs to Yeats and the Bard, called to task an earlier letter praising the Ministry of Education's decision to review the literature syllabus to incorporate more local writing.

Describing himself as 'a lover of literature', Mr Li proposed instead the retention of the traditional Singapore literature curriculum, with its focus on an Anglo-American canon. Besides Shakespeare and Yeats, he recommended Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar, Aldous Huxley's Brave New World and Philip Larkin's This Be The Verse as 'works relevant to Singapore's social, political and sexual situations' and describes his criterion of 'the very best authors, poets and playwrights - regardless of their nationality or era' as egalitarian.

Mr Li's choice of Plath's novel, about a young, single, middle-class, highly educated, suicidal American woman facing gender tensions and conflicts, as most relevant for Singapore's single and married women facing Asian social and moral structures in a hyper-modern, multilingual, postcolonial South-east Asian mini-state suggests not so much egalitarian but underdeveloped values.

To insist on retaining an Anglo-American literature canon, which has already exited many British and US universities, on account of its supposed superior merit and universality indicates a mind that has not yet

grasped the relation between aesthetic judgment and the ideology that produced the judgment.

The Internet and other IT technologies have spawned a younger generation of globally interlinked and hyper-modern sensibilities. The countries that produced Shakespeare, Yeats, Plath, Huxley and Larkin have revised their university curricula to include Anglophone literature by stunning masters such as Seamus Heaney, V.S. Naipaul, Toni Morrison and other writers who have emerged from new societies to produce texts received not just as local but as world writing.

The schism between local and global, inferior and superior, that Mr Li's letter repeats is an imagined schism. Such cultural colonised subordination is not unique to Singapore. In 1990, for example, Japan published an estimated 4,000 titles in translation, more than 3,000 of them from English. But Americans published only 82 titles from Japan, according to Publishers Weekly magazine.

If Singapore authors have not received world attention, it is not because they are local. Chinua Acebe was a writer of novels from Ghana before he was seen as a world writer. Wole Soyinka was a national author before he received the Nobel Prize for literature. Similarly, Seamus Heaney's poems are drawn from a deep engagement with Ireland - like Singapore, a postcolonial island state with about 3 million people.

However, unlike Ireland whose authors seized on English, the colonial master's language that has practically destroyed the native Gaelic tongue, and made it their own, Singapore's governing elite has continuously refuted movements toward indigenisation of the English language and its potential imaginaries under the sign of global necessity.

The myth of universality

IF SINGAPORE with its declining native-born population and abandoned Confucianist values is to be re-defined by core values of human relationships that do not change, that is universal values, what specificity can be suggested by the identity marker 'Singapore'?

These policies of 'universal values' suppress or at least marginalise local identity formations as well as the development of a Singapore identity.

Ever since the formation of the Singapore state, our children's imaginations have been developed in an international curriculum consisting of Shakespeare, Yeats and Larkin, 'the very best authors', writing from Britain and the United States. This submission to criteria drawn from a colonial era when universality was understood as, well, universally accepted, might arguably be seen to explain the surprising paucity of literary achievement in a society where achievement is so highly rewarded.

The Bard himself once said that poetry seeks to give to local habitation a name. In an educational system where the local is disrespected and local speech is actively eradicated or pilloried, it is little wonder that much of Singapore poetry is less Singaporean than international, less poetry than prose.

Even as the state has turned to conservation to preserve those roots set in sites that memorialise a local history (for example the renovations of Chinatown, Geylang, Bugis Street, and so forth), these conservation policies have arguably resulted in the destruction of an authentic past, replacing the historical with its simulacra, eviscerating the real and substituting it with commodified objects set off in mall-palaces.

In such a nation-space of the hyper-modern simulacra, a generation of Singaporeans will be as much at home in Disneyland, Rodeo Drive or the South Coast Mall as in Orchard Road.

Author Catherine Lim gestures to a younger generation 'who like to call themselves Cosmopolitans rather the Singaporeans - highly educated, sophisticated, globally exposed, very savvy on the Internet', and sees this generation as 'becoming more vocal in debates', promising a new generation of dissenters.

But what appears to be emerging is a cosmopolitan elite to whom a restrictive national discourse has in fact become irrelevant. These 'lost' subjects, as the MM has now observed, are abandoning a Singapore identity for a global community in which their Asian identities are eagerly sought and valued and their talents developed and richly rewarded.

Emphasis on the local

WHAT can be done to redress the imbalance between the formation of the global subject, at home in the world, and the local citizen, rooted in Singapore?

As a literature teacher and writer, I suggest as one part of balancing the equation the production and teaching of texts of imagination that help shape the emotional sensibilities of the young.

Simply stated, to grow a Singapore cultural identity, Singapore schools must move to Singapore stories and literature.

What are the songs that come to mind when we think Singapore identity? What national poems stir, amuse and entertain the young and the old? What stories of Singapore place and people fire the imaginations of young Singaporeans?

Imagining 'a corner that is forever England', British poets did not reject nostalgia but created out of their very homesickness. In making what was local the ground of profound emotional imagining and yearning, these poets made their particular places their universals.

Benedict Anderson had argued that nations are in historical fact 'imagined communities', constituted through print medias and, if I may add, through acts of the imagination, song, art, literature, dance, costume and so forth.

By extirpating Singlish in order to ensure the dominance of international English, ejecting local literature in favour of an Anglo-British/American canon for its national curricula, strenuously erasing a physical world to raise a gleaming simulacra of plenty, Singapore is actively destroying not merely those local roots that alone can generate a distinctive national identity, but also the potential imaginative engagement of a younger generation with Singapore place and society.

Instead, the spores for growing a younger generation's identity are flying in from all over the world, via CDs, DVDs, the Internet - a hydra-headed global media, seeding perhaps a fabulous global imaginary in the vacated territory that is currently the Singapore local.

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