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INVISIBLE BUILDERS :
Uncovering the Unacknowledged Impact of Migrant Construction Workers in the
Development of Singaporean National Identity

Senior Comprehensives
Spring 2023
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Abstract

This paper delves into the relationship between Singaporean national-identity and the marginalization of migrant construction workers by the Singaporean state and people. I examine the roots of this national-identity, highlighting its immigrant-heavy origins and subsequent dependence on migrant labor to supplement its small population and ensure rapid economic development. I note how the Singaporean state and population comprehend their reliance on foreign labor, but simultaneously refuse to acknowledge said reliance. This has led to an ‘out of sight, out of mind’ mentality that has served to depersonalize migrant construction workers and shift focus solely on their labor – casting their rights to the side. Some argue that the reason for this is purely economic, that as cheap, marginal, and replaceable labor, it is obvious that these foreign workers are treated as such. However, I posit that the answer is deeper, found in the state-led construction of Singaporean national-identity that generates an ideology of survivalism, convincing Singaporeans to relinquish their individual interests for those dictated by the state – all in the name of the survival of their nation.

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Introduction

When the Covid-19 pandemic struck the world, Singapore initially stood as a paragon of curbing its spread. As early as December 2019, the government was implementing restrictions in public spaces like groceries, restaurants, and malls to ensure there would be no mass clusters of people in one space. By February 2020, Singapore had closed all its schools and non-essential workplaces, and by April they had implemented a ‘circuit-breaker’ policy that completely shut down movement in and out of the country and placed restrictions on occupying public spaces. These moves were applauded by the international community, with the World Health Organization (WHO) chief at the time, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, praising Singapore’s “all-government approach in the containment of Covid-19.”¹ They had even called all Singaporean citizens living abroad to return home, worrying that they would not be a priority in other nations’ healthcare struggles. Indeed, in mid-April Singapore seemed to be at the helm of keeping the pandemic at bay.

However, in the margins of Singaporean society a long-ignored issue was about to surface. The closing of borders at the height of the Covid-19 crisis also brought to a screeching halt the continuous inflows and outflows of low-wage migrant construction workers across the border. In a city constantly upgrading, developing, and building itself higher, these workers (or more specifically, their labor) were a fundamental unit of the construction industry that played a major role in the economic successes of the city-state. When the borders closed and the foreign labor-dependent sectors of the Singaporean economy ground to a halt, large numbers of migrant workers were left stranded in a nation where their labor validated their presence. There was no concrete plan of how to house or

¹ Joyce Teo, “Coronavirus: WHO Praises Singapore’s Containment of Covid-19 Outbreak,” *The Straits Times*, March 10, 2020, [https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/health/coronavirus-who-praises-singapores-containment-of-covid-19-outbreak#:~:text=SINGAPORE%20D%20World%20Health%20Organisation%20\(WHO,fight%20against%20the%20coronavirus%20disease.](https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/health/coronavirus-who-praises-singapores-containment-of-covid-19-outbreak#:~:text=SINGAPORE%20D%20World%20Health%20Organisation%20(WHO,fight%20against%20the%20coronavirus%20disease.)

care for this population for a long-term period, especially if they were not working. The government's solution was to spread all 300,000 of them across nine cramped dormitories (of which the largest held 24,000 men) at the fringes of Singapore and place these buildings under lockdown [see figure 1 for an example].²



Figure 1: Migrant workers in a dormitory under quarantine. Photo obtained from South China Morning Post.³

This ‘out of sight, out of mind’ attitude was in line with the treatment of these migrant construction workers throughout the recent history of Singapore. The temporality of their presence had generated a ‘use-and-discard’ sentiment towards them and their labor, and the constant demand for temporary labor from men in Bangladesh, India, and China meant Singapore would never have a shortage of migrant construction labor – and the housing for

² Rebecca Ratcliffe, “Singapore’s Cramped Migrant Worker Dorms Hide Covid-19 Surge Risk,” *The Guardian*, n.d., <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/17/singapores-cramped-migrant-worker-dorms-hide-covid-19-surge-risk>.

³ Kimberly Lim and Kok Xinghui, “Singapore’s Cramped Migrant Worker Dorms a ‘Perfect Storm’ for Rising Coronavirus Infections,” *South China Morning Post*, April 6, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/health-environment/article/3078684/singapores-cramped-migrant-worker-dorms-perfect-storm>.

these workers reflected such attitudes. By late April 2020, the number of Covid-19 cases across Singapore had increased dramatically – the week of April 20th saw 1,400 new cases reported, three-quarters of which were linked to the workers’ dormitories.⁴ Singapore climbed into a new number one spot by having the most reported coronavirus cases in Southeast Asia, and the international response was swift. Articles like “How Singapore Flipped From Virus Hero to Cautionary Tale” and “The Spike in Singapore’s Coronavirus Cases Reveals an Uncomfortable Truth About the Treatment of Migrant Workers” tarnished the stellar image that Singapore had used to garner international investment and financing, which was an issue for a nation that had made a living by integrating itself into the world economy. A 2020 study by the Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics (H.O.M.E), a local workers’ rights group, noted in particular the low and depressed wages, long working hours, lack of rest days, and restriction of access to medical care as crucial issues faced by migrant workers that were being largely ignored by companies and the government.⁵ Heightened media attention, both at home and abroad, piqued the curiosity of some Singaporeans for a while, who criticized the lack of humanity and care given to these migrant construction workers.

However, in 2023 the situation seems to remain the same. With the last of the circuit-breaker measures lifted, and life seemingly going back to normal, migrant construction workers are back on their sites to develop the nation’s public transport system, infrastructure, and glitzy business buildings. The spike in attention paid to them during the pandemic has lapsed, and Singaporeans are back in the ‘out of sight, out of mind’ mentality. But why?

⁴ Hillary Leung, “Why Singapore, Once a Model for Coronavirus Response, Lost Control of Its Outbreak,” *TIME*, April 20, 2020, <https://time.com/5824039/singapore-outbreak-migrant-workers/>.

⁵ Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics, “Coming Clean: A Study on the Wellbeing of Bangladeshi Conervancy Workers in Singapore,” August 2020, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1EqG-aQJl29sw7cNKRB7M64N-sJh-M4z/view>.

‘National Day’ (Singapore’s independence day celebration and parade) is on the horizon and we will once again see a display of patriotism and nationalistic sentiments in full glory, with references to Singapore’s high-tech public transport, stellar infrastructure, and bustling economic life. With its immigrant-heavy origins and open dependence on immigrant expertise and labor, the Singaporean state creates no facade in its reliance on migrant construction workers but simultaneously refuses to acknowledge their contributions to Singapore’s accomplishments. Thus, in this paper I look to argue that because of the state’s construction of a national-identity that generates anxieties of survival in a globalized economy, Singaporeans now reap the benefits of migrant labor without any consideration for the people providing said labor.

Methodology

This paper analyzes the relationship between state constructions of national-identity and migrant labor forces, using Singapore as its example. As a multiracial and multiethnic state with four official languages (English, Tamil, Malay, Mandarin) Singapore defies traditional frameworks of nationalism. In its early years, it lacked common national symbols for the development of a shared national-identity. Today, despite this, Singaporeans are known for their immense pride in their nation and its achievements. Therefore, in order to argue for the uniqueness of Singaporean nationalism, my literature review maps the opposing arguments of the two main schools of thought in discourses on nationalism. In the process I demonstrate their key tenets and how they clash with one another - cultural versus political, traditional versus modern, and popular versus elite constructions. In understanding these debates, pointing out their contributions to scholarship and taking note of their flaws, I then move beyond the discussions of *conceptions* of nationalism towards discussions of the *impact* of globalization on the existence of the nation, or nation-state, especially through the

resulting influx of migratory movements. While not a paradigm in its own right, these ‘post-national’ arguments allow us to map how national-identity could shift, or even deteriorate completely, in the future.

Through the literature review, I lay the foundations for demonstrating the unique characteristics of Singaporean national-identity. I then progress by highlighting the shifts in the constructions and definitions of this national-identity from its independence on 9th August 1965 till today, tracing the state government of the People’s Action Party’s (PAP) efforts at establishing legitimacy and national pride in a nation rife with ethnic conflict by establishing of an ideology of survivalism. In understanding the state-led development of the Singaporean national-identity, I then analyze how the PAP promoted the mass influx of foreign ‘talent’ to help Singapore rapidly develop and modernize. In this endeavor, they also outsourced construction jobs to a primarily Southeast Asian, and then South Asian, migrant labor workforce. These efforts in the construction sector substantiated the modernization that now forms the basis of Singaporean national-identity. My case study analyzes the attention and engagement that foreign white-collar immigrants (referred to as foreign ‘talent’ by the state) garner in Singapore, which I compare to the lack of attention paid to the migrant construction workforce that has developed into an ‘out of sight, out of mind’ attitude towards their existence. This demonstrates how the perpetration of unequal immigration laws and work policies levied against the migrant construction workforce has continued to be an issue.

As such, my paper questions why and how the Singaporean national-identity allows for the ostracization and exploitation of migrant construction workers on an individual and state level. Some argue that the reason is purely economic - they are cheap, marginal, and easily replaceable workers, and thus are highly exploitable by the construction industry. However, I believe that below this surface, the reasons are far more nuanced and tied deeply to the initial state-led conception, as well as subsequent restructuring, of Singapore’s

national-identity. As a multiethnic and multicultural society, the state firmly posits that the nation and its people should be receptive to all persons— indeed, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in 2017 noted that Singaporean diversity was a fundamental aspect of its identity.⁶ At the state-level, this reception is inclusive of foreign ‘talent’ but not of migrant construction workers - with the former being encouraged to build a life in Singapore and the latter allowed a temporary presence with the threat of disposal being ever-present. As such, we see this preaching of understanding and harmony as being unbalanced and unreflective of the major role played by migrant workers throughout Singapore’s history – a role that truly necessitates their acknowledgement and protection of human rights.

I hypothesize that the reason for this blatant inattention to migrant construction workers is due to the anxiety of survival inculcated in Singaporeans by the state. This has led to them to ‘putting up with’ mass immigrant inflows for the sake of the economic survival and success of the nation. However, because of the state’s aggressive drive to promote specifically foreign ‘talent’, Singaporeans view this group as more of a direct threat to their lives – leading to migrant construction workers (who occupy roles that Singaporeans do not want to) being pushed to the periphery of their minds and their public spaces. By this process, migrant construction workers are depersonalized, being identified solely by their labor contributions and nothing more. This ‘out of sight, out of mind’ attitude allows for construction sector companies to abuse their rights for the sake of profit, and the government does little to limit these issues as the nation directly benefits from the cheap, marginal, and temporary labor they provide. While one would believe that greater economic success would help soothe the anxieties of survival at a state and societal level, this is not the case. Despite

⁶ Hsien Loong Lee, “Singapore’s Approach to Diversity Has Created a Distinctive Identity across Ethnic Groups,” *The Straits Times*, May 20, 2017, <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/singapolitics/pm-whether-chinese-malay-or-indian-a-singaporean-can-spot-a-fellow-citizen>.

Singapore today being viewed as a key player in the global economy, this status has only served to exacerbate the anxieties of survival and propel the desire for rapid economic development that is built on the backs of marginal, cheap, and easily replaceable migrant construction workers. The moral implication of this exploitation is in dire need of investigation.

Following Connor's proposal to recognize and acknowledge "the quintessence of nationalism,"⁷ I define nationalism as a "social group which shares a common ideology, common institutions and customs, and a *sense* of homogeneity."⁸ However, within this definition I look to include that Singaporean nationalism was state-constructed, thus requiring a definition of the nation-state, to which I defer to Giddens who purports that it is "is a set of institutional forms of governance maintaining an administrative monopoly over a territory with demarcated boundaries."⁹ Thus, with Connor's definition we allow space for the appreciation of the intangible, emotional aspects of nationalist sentiments, but with Giddens' definition we also acknowledge the state's active role in building these sentiments. National-identity, therefore, is the identity based upon this nationalism and nationalistic sentiment. In Singapore, the development of national-identity was spearheaded by the PAP, who highlighted the inherent weaknesses of Singapore immediately after its independence, and developed a 'do whatever it takes' ideology of survivalism to create a shared goal and identity. Propaganda, state policies, and public engagement (through mass media and mass education) are the variables I contend with in my analysis of this independent variable. To understand how this impacts migrant construction workers, I look specifically at the male South Asian workers as they make up the majority of the migrant worker population. The

⁷ Walker Connor, "Terminological Chaos ('A Nation Is a Nation, Is a State, Is an Ethnic Group, Is a ...')," in *Ethnonationalism, The Quest for Understanding* (Princeton University Press, 1994), 89–117, <http://www.jstor.org.oxy.idm.oclc.org/stable/j.ctv39x5s6.8>. 113

⁸ Connor. 92 (emphasis is mine)

⁹ Anthony Giddens, *The Nation State and Violence*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1985). 121

government does not release the ethnic data on this group, but a 2017 study estimated that out of around 350,000 workers in the Construction, Marine Shipyard, and Process (CMP) sector, 250,000 of them were South Asian men (this corresponds with the Bangladeshi Foreign Labor statistics for outgoing migrants into Singapore).¹⁰ As of 2023, the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) notes that there are 415,000 workers in the CMP sector – utilizing the same ratio as 2017, there would be an estimated 290,000 South Asian men in the sector.

My argument is informed by academic debates regarding identity, nations, and nationalism, literature specific to state policy on migration and race in the Singaporean context, and data sets on the economic development of Singapore in the construction sector. I also rely on my informal conversations with local migrants rights workers, with whom I connected with during my volunteer work in Singapore during the pandemic. As an insider and an outsider, a Singaporean and ‘foreigner’, I look to provide a balanced argument and analysis of the issue at hand, couching my work in the constructivist framework of nationalism in order to understand and analyze the ostracization of migrant construction workers.

Literature Review

Primordialism

Primordialists contend that national identities are derived from primordial attachments that have been passed down from previous generations of an ethnic group, and that these primordial attachments come in the form of a common linguistic, racial, tribal, regional, or

¹⁰ Kellynn Wee, Theodora Lam, and Brenda S.A. Yeoh, “Migrant Construction Workers in Singapore: An Introduction,” in *Migrant Workers in Singapore*, 0 vols. (WORLD SCIENTIFIC, 2022), xiii–xlix, https://doi.org/10.1142/9789811255038_0001. xx

religious background, which serve to reinforce myths of origin and community.¹¹ Walker Connor argues that “national consciousness is a mass, not an elite phenomenon, and nation-formation is a process, not an occurrence or an event,”¹² showcasing how primordialists see the formation of said national bond as an organic, historically-developed process, rather than something constructed by an elite group, i.e. the state. Due to the historied nature of this ethnic identity, Connor argues that the national bond this generates is both psychological and non-rational. Indeed, this ‘intangibility’ of nationalistic sentiments is key to the primordialist paradigm. Primordialists like Connor take issue with the conflation of the nation with the state, arguing that some scholars fail to appreciate the abstract nature of nationalism, and thus in attempting to quantify its emotional depth, they instead erase the role and the ‘will’ of the people in the creation of nationalistic sentiments.¹³ Indeed, he separates patriotism from nationalism, outlining the former as loyalty to the state, and the latter as loyalty to a more developed form of the ethnic group. In order to ensure that the masses are appropriately represented in the definition and defining of a nation, Connor argues that a nation is born when “the members of ethnic groups become aware of themselves as such.”¹⁴ Simply put, he places heavy importance of self-awareness or self-consciousness in the manifestation of nationalist sentiment, with the primordial attachments of kinship serving as the glue for the national bonds. He notes that this self-awareness leads to specific characteristics becoming a rallying point in national struggle, citing that psychologically “people feel the need to see a ‘logic’ in their feeling of uniqueness, thus translating it into differences of religion, customs, or dialect.”¹⁵ Interestingly, he also notes that the primordial sentiments do not have to be

¹¹ Walker Connor, “Terminological Chaos (‘A Nation Is a Nation, Is a State, Is an Ethnic Group, Is a ...’),” in *Ethnonationalism, The Quest for Understanding* (Princeton University Press, 1994), 89–117, <http://www.jstor.org.oxy.idm.oclc.org/stable/j.ctv39x5s6.8>. 103-5

¹² Connor. 97

¹³ Ibid. 95, 98

¹⁴ Ibid. 97

¹⁵ Ibid. 106

based in a factual historical narratives, but rather on “sentient or felt history,”¹⁶ once again reemphasizing the non-rational nature of nationalism. After all, as Connor powerfully argues, “people do not voluntarily die for things that are rational.”¹⁷

Writing in the 1960s, Clifford Geertz takes the concept of primordial attachments and attempts to apply it to the ‘new’ states in Asia and Africa, which were characterized by their old societies. Geertz also defines primordial attachments as stemming from religion, language, and social practices – highlighting how these are considered immutable givens.¹⁸ Therefore, he fundamentally agrees with Connor on the strength and abstract nature of primordial bonds, noting that “some attachments seem to flow more from a sense of nature – some would say spiritual – affinity than from social interaction.”¹⁹ However, the context of these ‘new’ states differed greatly from the Western states of Connor’s analysis, in that they were emerging on colonial, territorial, and political foundations. Thus, the problem of the contention between a ‘weak civic state’ and powerful primordial sentiments is Geertz’s focus. He argues that the masses in these ‘new states’ are simultaneously propelled by two key motives – “the desire to be recognized as responsible agents whose wishes, acts, hopes and opinions ‘matter’, and the desire to build an efficient, dynamic, modern state.”²⁰ The former entails searching for an identity, and that identity being acknowledged as socially important. The latter entails a demand for progress – for a better standard of living, more effective political order, and greater social justice.²¹ Thus, we see the beginning of Geertz’s departure from Connor’s analysis, as he looks to acknowledge the social and political motivators of

¹⁶ Walker Connor, *Ethnonationalism* (Princeton University Press, 1994), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv39x5s6>. 202

¹⁷ Ibid. 204

¹⁸ Clifford Geertz, *Old Societies and New States: The Quest for Modernity in Asia and Africa*, 1963. 109

¹⁹ Geertz. 110

²⁰ Ibid. 108

²¹ Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essay* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1973). 258

nationalism. These desires, he argues, are mutually stimulating and yet inherently opposed to one another – the building of identity vis-à-vis nationalism formed by primordial sentiments can be destructive to the strengthening of a sovereign and civil state, as it separates the masses based on their primordial attachments and a “longing not to belong to any other group.”²² However, it is also the very formation of a sovereign, civil state that stokes the fire of primordial sentiments among the various ethnic groups of masses, leading to competing loyalties of the same general order with the aim of obtaining the ‘prize’ of the state.²³ Much like Connor, Geertz is careful to note that it is the state, and not the nation, that is threatened – arguing that “economic disaffection...threatens revolution, but [primordial] disaffection...threatens partition.”²⁴ We see here Geertz bringing to light another core tenet of primordialist discourse – that ethnic conflict, based on a desire to be recognized as a single ethnic group and to form a state body to represent this group, is essentially natural as it is derived from the ‘natural’ primordial attachments.

Using these authors, we can summarize some key formulations of the primordialist paradigm. As a whole, they derive the passion and self-sacrificing characteristic of nationalism from primordial attachments to phenomena like language, religion, territory, and most importantly, kinship. These ties are seen as largely ethnic in nature, contributing to the formation of a homogenous group around which the modern nation forms. Emphasis is placed on the role of the masses in becoming self-aware of their shared identity, rather than it being constructed or revealed to them by state forces. The primordialist paradigm contributes to the discourse on nations and nationalism by furthering our understanding of the functions of language and ethnic ties in the development of nationalistic sentiments, as well as by establishing the key links between ethnicity and kinship that generate powerful national

²² Clifford Geertz, *Old Societies and New States: The Quest for Modernity in Asia and Africa*. 111

²³ Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essay*. 270

²⁴ Geertz. *Old Societies and New States: The Quest for Modernity in Asia and Africa* 111

bonds. Both Connor and Geertz place a great deal of autonomy on the masses by emphasizing the need for self-awareness and perception of the assumed primordial givens. As such, their primordialism is of a participatory kind, arguing that there might not be an objective primordial reality, but that nationalist sentiments are tied to the belief in primordial objects and their power.

However, there remain fundamental gaps in this particular framework, as by emphasizing the primordial attachments of nationalism, primordialists neglect the social and cultural changes that these attachments are subjected to. Furthermore, neither Connor nor Geertz offer up an explanation for the rise of ethnic groups and their related primordial attachments – their insistence on the abstract and intangible nature of primordial nationalism acts as a crutch for them to claim that these groups are simply a given, a product of historically developed kinship, without elaborating on the processes by which this kinship actually developed on a ground level, or reconstructed in a dynamic process. The role of economic forces is also largely looked over – Geertz does take note of ‘economic disaffection’ and its resulting in revolution, but does not see it as a contributing factor in the manifestations of nationalism. Connor delves partially into the contributions of globalization and mass communication, which resulted from modernization that led to the spread of the idea of popular sovereignty being tied to ethnicity.²⁵ However, this places modernization as a catalyst, rather than a cause, and further does not elaborate on how this distinction is made.

Constructivism

While the primordialist paradigm assumes that the formation and continuity of ethnic groups is natural, and therefore a given, constructivist scholars disagree with this perspective completely. Instead, they argue that ethnic identities are constructed in accordance with social

²⁵ Connor, *Ethnonationalism*. 170

and political factors. In *The Nation-State and Violence*, Anthony Giddens defines a nation as “a collectivity existing within a clearly demarcated territory, which is subject to a unitary administration, reflexively monitored both by the internal state apparatus and those of other states,” and thus nationalism as “the affiliation of individuals to a set of symbols and beliefs emphasizing communality among the members of a political order.”²⁶ With these definitions, we may understand the clear tenets of the constructivist paradigm. The first is that they see nations as being tied to the state, as is noted by the emphasis on communality and political order, as well as the reflexive monitoring. This generates the idea of the ‘nation-state’ that primordialists are so averse to, and places the responsibility of the collectivity on the state apparatus, thereby countering the primordialist idea that national sentiments can override the state. The second tenet is that nationalism is still tied to a shared ethnic identity, reinforced by common symbols and beliefs.

However, nationalism itself is not exactly the center of Giddens’ concerns. In fact, he argues that it only exists in order to reinforce the territorial cohesion and communality of the nation-state; he is essentially arguing nationalism is a tool used by the state to maintain order and control. Thus, what distinguishes nationalism from earlier group identities, and nation-states from societies from the past, is the development and consolidation of a stable political administration. Geertz only brushes against this idea as he notes the desire of the masses to build a sovereign, civil state, but Giddens follows through with this analysis by noting how the success of an industrialized state’s economy depends on “a homogenizing of culture, mass literacy and ‘a fairly monolithic education system.’”²⁷ These three elements, therefore, are what allow the state to create a strong sense of nationalistic sentiments in the masses. Giddens’ emphasis on control is important – he also notes the role of the state in articulating

²⁶ Giddens, *The Nation State and Violence*. 116

²⁷ Ibid. 177

or ‘inventing’ history in a way that stirs nationalist sentiments in the masses. Connor too noted that the shared nationalist history need not be factual, but his argument was that the ‘felt’ history was a product of the passing on of sentiments through generations of an ethnic group. Giddens argues that the state can, and does, manipulate history in relation to planned or actual trends of social change.²⁸ Thus, by extension, he purports that nationalist symbols are deliberately manipulated by dominant groups in order to support their sectional interests. The state can only frame policies to be for the ‘general interest’ of the nation-state if there is a common ground of interest – which is where the utilization of national-identity comes into play. This is why Giddens argues that “nationalism lends itself readily to mass propaganda since the fate of the whole community is considered to be a shared one”²⁹

From reading Giddens, we glean a pointedly negative connotation in regards to nationalism and its utilization by the state apparatus. Giddens is much like Geertz in that he is explaining a theoretical framework that he seems to believe is inherently damaging, and yet all evidence suggests the existence of said framework. In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson defines the nation in a similar vein as Giddens, as “an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.”³⁰ The similarities are striking – there is a clearly demarcated territorial limit, the recognition of the invention or ‘imagination’ of the community, and the view of the interconnectedness of the nation and the state. However, this is where the similarities end. Anderson takes issue with the association of ‘invention’ with fabrication and falsity instead of imagination and creation, arguing for the need to trace the histories of nationalism and national-identity through its roots in order to understand its current conceptions.³¹ He traces the deteriorations of three key cultural

²⁸ Ibid. 175

²⁹ Ibid. 251

³⁰ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised Edition, 2006. 6

³¹ Anderson. 6, 12

conceptions of the pre-‘modern’ era – the privileged education of a script-language, the belief of societies being organized around high centers (i.e. persons who ruled by some divine dispensation), and the idea that the origins of the world and of humanity were essentially identical.³² Anderson points out that combined, these three conceptions formed a core basis with which the masses understood the world. However, the aforementioned deterioration came in the form of print-capitalism, shifts in perceptions of temporality, and political theories that heralded a greater participation from the masses (like the social contract). Anderson focuses quite heavily on the influence of print-capitalism and its role in the creation of a national-identity, highlighting how it “made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways,”³³ through the consolidation of print-languages. This, he argues, dealt with the issues regarding linguistic diversity both within territories and outside of them too, by creating unified spaces for exchange and communication.³⁴ Interestingly, this runs somewhat similar to the importance Giddens gives to mass literacy, but framed in a way that takes agency away from the state apparatus and gives it to the masses that attempt to adapt to the influx of print-capitalism. Regardless of its agent, Anderson makes it explicitly clear that national identities were invented, or rather ‘imagined’, due to the emergence and rapid development of capitalism.

Through this analysis, we can note that constructivists (much like primordialists) vary in the utilization of their framework. Giddens occupies a space that focuses far more on the political factors and state control, while Anderson bases the formation of an imagined national-identity on the convergence of capitalism and print technology – which he argues

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid. 36

³⁴ Ibid. 43

“set the stage for the modern nation.”³⁵ The characterization of the ‘modern’-ness of the nation is important, as it implies a process of modernization driven partly by capitalism and print technology. Though Anderson’s focus is indeed on cultural development spurred on by capitalism, and not capitalism itself, we cannot help but notice the importance that this process modernization had on the formation of the nation and of national-identity.

Ernest Gellner’s *Nations and Nationalism* delves deep into the influence that modernization and industrialism had on the development of nations and national-identity. He defines nationalism as “a political principle which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent.”³⁶ The congruency of the political and national unit aligns with the constructivist framework. Gellner, like Anderson, accepts the tangible nature of nationalist sentiment, defining it as “the feeling of anger aroused by the violation of the principle”³⁷ and therefore views nationalist movements as being stimulated by this sentiment. However, he also contends that nationalism usually does not occur in regions with a weak state, noting the role of the state as the specialization and concentration of order maintenance, siding with Giddens on this matter.³⁸ However, despite arguing that that “each state presides over, identifies with, and maintains one kind of culture and communication that prevails within its borders,”³⁹ he also notes that nationalism uses “historically inherited proliferation of cultures or cultural wealth” in a selective manner, transforming them into a binding identity for the masses.⁴⁰ Therefore, Gellner showcases that while the state does have a great deal of control and agency in modifying or reconstructing nationalist sentiments, it does not have the ability to create national sentiments where a foundation for doing so does not exist.

³⁵ Ibid. 46

³⁶ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1983). 1

³⁷ Gellner. 1

³⁸ Ibid. 3,4

³⁹ Ibid. 140

⁴⁰ Ibid. 55

Thus, Gellner looks to history (much like Anderson) to trace the birth of nationalist movements. He argues that there have been three main stages in history – the pre-agrarian, the agrarian, and the industrial, and focuses on the transition between the second and third stage to formulate his argument. Terming the second stage as an ‘agro-literate polity,’ Gellner identifies the rigid separation, based on cultural differentiation, between the ruling class and the direct agricultural producers, i.e. the peasants.⁴¹ This aligns with Anderson’s identification of the organizing of pre-modern societies around ‘high centers’ – but Gellner takes it even further by arguing that even within the sphere of the peasants, communities were laterally (rather than vertically) separated as well, due to their identity being tied to their vocation which was (for the most part) unchanging and generational.⁴² He notes that this leads to a culture drift that the ruling classes have no interest in changing – their only interest is in extracting taxes and maintaining peace.

This changes with the transition from an agro-literate polity to an industrial society. In this third stage, there was an expectancy of constant economic growth, which could only be sustained by “universal literacy and a high level of numerical, technical, and general sophistication” amongst the working population.⁴³ The necessity for them to be mobile and adept in generic training meant a permanent shift away from the generational, unchanging vocational identities of old. Industrialism required constant communication between all people with whom they had no previous association with, thus eroding the old cultural drift and disconnect. However, due to the gradual erosion of the old vocational identities, a new one needed to take its place – and Gellner placed nationalism in this seat. Highlighting it as a distinct type of patriotism, he notes that the industrial society created the conditions for the inculcation of loyalty, homogeneity, literacy, and population anonymity that generated

⁴¹ Ibid. 10

⁴² Ibid. 11

⁴³ Ibid. 35

national identities as we understand them today.⁴⁴ Homogeneity and literacy are his main focuses as he argues that public, mass education systems are what bind the state and culture together. These systems are a form of what Gellner terms ‘exo-socialization’, in that they provide training for communication in a standard written language and script, which becomes a basis of common identity for the masses. This develops a ‘high-literate culture’ which “pervades the whole of society, defines it, and needs to be sustained by the polity,”⁴⁵ becoming the foundation of their national-identity. As such, to Gellner the education system plays a vital role in instilling loyalty to the nation – but he is careful to note that this system is a result, and not the cause, of national identities and nationalist movements.⁴⁶ The emergence of an industrial society sets the conditions for the rise of nationalist movements and a subsequent state-led education system, and the state must work to develop and maintain the public, mass education system in order to inculcate a continued, sustained loyalty in the nation.

The question is, what motivates the state to do so? Gellner previously notes that the previous ‘state’, i.e. the ruling class, had no interest binding the laterally differentiated agricultural population. This shift in interest, he argues, is due to two reasons. The first is that the ‘ruling class’ also becomes subsumed into the ‘general populace’ with the emergence of the industrial era and its associated high-literate culture. Much like Anderson, Gellner underscores the deterioration of the ‘high centers’ of pre-modern society and the simultaneous proliferation of a common, shared language amongst the population – the combination of which levels the playing field, so to speak. This aligned with the industrial societal need for sustained, continuous economic growth. Thus, Gellner argues that the economy needed both the new type of central culture and the central states, and further note

⁴⁴ Ibid. 8

⁴⁵ Ibid. 18

⁴⁶ Ibid. 30

that this mutual relationship sprung from the requirements of the modern economy.⁴⁷ The nationalist sentiments are therefore harnessed towards economic growth.

With this section, we see some basic tenets of constructivist thinkers emerge. The most important is the closely linked relationship between the state and the nation, or the political and cultural spheres of society. According to them, the state plays an active role in the construction and reconstruction of the national-identity, doing so in response to social or political events. Constructivists also tend to view the processes of modernization as the cause for the development of nationalist sentiments, though Giddens stands as an example of a constructivist that is wholly engaged with the political and not the economic. Regardless, constructivists as a whole see the nation as a completely new phenomenon, never before seen in history – even if its foundations may have been based in a pre-modern or agrarian society. Thus, they stand in direct opposition of primordialists by placing ‘primordial’ attachments and histories as secondary to the role of the state and of modernizing forces (i.e. capitalism) in the development of nationalism.

However, because of this, it is argued (usually by primordialists) that constructivists do not adequately appreciate the emotional and psychological depths of national-identity, and when they do, it leads to strange contradictions. Indeed, Giddens attempts to characterize nationalism as a psychological phenomenon while also attempting to emphasize the structural nature of the nation-state. In subsuming the nation within the nation-state, the emphasis on analysis then falls squarely on the ‘state’ without truly delving into conceptions of the nation as a standalone concept. Indeed, we see this in the constructivist reliance on the state as the vehicle to construct or reconstruct national-identity, thus leading into a failure to account for the development of national sentiments through national movements prior to the formal

⁴⁷ Ibid. 140

creation of a state. Anderson does a better job of accounting for this historical development, but nevertheless makes modernism and capitalism his primary focuses. The paradigm also cannot account for multiethnic or multilingual societies, further being unable to contend with the fact that mass literacy can solidify and consolidate ethnic identities, making it incredibly difficult to reconstruct.

A new approach?

Constructivists and primordialists both contribute important analyses to the discussions of nations and nationalism in the sphere of International Relations. However, the authors we have looked at were all writing at the tail-end of the 20th century – *Imagined Communities* is the exception with its second edition being released in 2006, but it retains the overall arguments and framework perpetrated by its first edition in 1983. As such they are writing in a time where mass migration and population movements were picking up, but had not developed into the movements we know of in the 21st century. Thus, we see a limited analysis of the influence of population movements and the phenomenon of globalization on national-identity (though Connor does take note of it to a small degree, he certainly does not elaborate). As such, we must understand how scholars contend with the processes of immigration and population hybridization, connected to globalization, and the concurrent development of multiethnic societies.

In *Fear of Small Numbers*, Arjun Appadurai seeks to explain and analyze violence against minority groups. As an anthropologist, his work is not aligned with the previously discussed frameworks, nor does he attempt to quantify or qualify the existence of the nation/nation-state. However, through his analysis we do see the influence of immigration on nationalist sentiments. He purports that “there is a fundamental, and dangerous, idea behind

the very idea of the modern nation-state, the idea of a ‘national ethnos’⁴⁸ or ethnic group, and that this ethnos is not natural, but rather has been produced and then *naturalized* through conflict, education and linguistic conformity.⁴⁹ Thus, we see his alignment with the constructivist paradigm to an extent. However, he begins to demonstrate characteristics of both paradigms in his analysis of the impact of globalization. Indeed, he sees the rise in migration and refugee movements as leading to two problems. Firstly, to social uncertainty, as the question of “how many of ‘them’ are among us now?” comes to the forefront, as well as concerns surrounding the relationship between many individuals to state-provided goods.⁵⁰ Secondly, it leads to an ‘anxiety of incompleteness’, as minorities in a nation-state (be they immigrants, or citizens of a non-majority race or religion) remind the majority group of the “small gap which lies between their conditions as majorities and the horizon of an unsullied national whole.”⁵¹ Interesting here is his consideration of both the psychological, or rather, intangible characteristics of national sentiment, right alongside its political and social manifestations. Therefore, he outlines that globalization has essentially ‘unglued’ the essential procedures and the principles of the modern nation-state, having done so by introducing those not aligned with the national ethnos into the nation-state’s demarcated territory.⁵²

Appadurai’s dual consideration of both the tangible and intangible characteristics of national-identity continues into his discussion of multiculturalism. Indeed, he points out that the debate on the rights of cultural minorities, usually surrounding national citizenship and issues of belonging, furthers the aforementioned uncertainties.⁵³ In these small numbers

⁴⁸ Arjun Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006). 3

⁴⁹ Appadurai. 4

⁵⁰ Ibid. 6

⁵¹ Ibid. 8

⁵² Ibid. 6

⁵³ Ibid. 62

carrying a possibility of ‘special interests’ that run counter to ideas of ‘general interest’, social uncertainties arise. Certainly, Giddens would agree, given his analysis of the state’s role being the creation and fulfillment of the ‘general interest’ of the masses. Appadurai then taps into the psychological perspective by arguing that these small numbers cause the majorities to fear being ‘overtaken’ or ‘replaced’ by the minority.⁵⁴ These coalesce, he notes, in the 1980s and 1990s as a “time of external pressure to open up markets to foreign investment as well as the pressure to manage the capacity of their own cultural minorities.”⁵⁵ These lead to a generation of an ‘us versus them’ dialectic, with nationalist sentiments being stirred in reaction to an influx of ‘them’.

William H. McNeill takes this one step further, despite writing in 1986. He argues that “marginality and pluralism...are the norm of civilized existence,”⁵⁶ and that therefore the growth of multiethnic societies (spurred by globalization) is a positive one. He sees nations and nationalism as a transitory phenomenon that seem to deteriorate due to the need for supplies of foreign skilled labor.⁵⁷ Thus, we see that modernization and economic growth continue to be the cause of shifts in national-identity. However, McNeill’s argument of polyethnic hierarchy is one that is seen as occurring at the cost of national unity, as he assumes that the nation-state and its nationalism are antithetical to the polyethnic system. This is a somewhat contentious notion, as he simultaneously also notes the coextensive nature of the two systems.

Stephen Castles presents a similar, but less extreme, analysis of globalization and its impacts on nation-state sovereignty. He notes that the surge of permanent migration has led

⁵⁴ Ibid. 51

⁵⁵ Ibid. 65

⁵⁶ William H. McNeill, *Polyethnicity and National Unity in World History* (University of Toronto Press, 1986), <http://www.jstor.org.oxy.idm.oclc.org/stable/10.3138/j.ctvfrxbdh>. 6

⁵⁷ McNeill. 82

to the development of multiculturalism, which is not dissimilar from McNeill's conceptions of polyethnicity as it too stems from the idea of the urgent need for foreign labor to sustain growth. He also notes that it implies abandoning the myth of a homogenous and mono-cultural nation-state, and thus recognizing that different cultural communities within a nation-state require specialized rights.⁵⁸ Both Appadurai and Giddens would link this to generating massive discontent within majority communities – however, Castles disagrees. He argues that multiculturalism would implicitly assume that migration leads to a permanent settlement and the subsequent birthing of generations who would be citizens, and therefore loyal primarily to the nation of their birth instead of that of their predecessors.⁵⁹ Thus, we see that Castles aligns with the constructivists in seeing loyalty to the state and to the nation (i.e. loyalty to the nation-state) as one and the same thing. This makes the problematic of the tensions between ethnic groups a far simpler one, as he implies citizenry and national-identity go hand in hand.

Permanent immigration and subsequent assimilation, however, are not the key issues here according to Castles. Indeed, he notes that the growth of temporary, cyclical, and reoccurring migrations have led to developments of transnational identities, spurred by the influence of globalization and the interdependence of nation-states' economies on one another.⁶⁰ These forms of migration are deeply connected to rapid developments in communication and travel technologies, allowing the immigrants of today to remain connected to their countries of origin and thus not need to “fully adopt the social and cultural practices of the receiving community.”⁶¹ These communities, therefore, do not base their identity on attachments to a specific demarcated territory, but rather “overwhelmingly on common ethnicity: transmigrants feel solidarity with co-ethnics in their homeland and

⁵⁸ Stephen Castles, “Migration and Community Formation under Conditions of Globalization,” *The International Migration Review* 36, no. 4 (2002): 1143–68. 1156

⁵⁹ Castles. 1157

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid. 1154-5

elsewhere.”⁶² This is a fascinating idea, as in both primordialist and constructivist conceptions of the nation the idea of it being a fixed, distinct territorial space is seen as an obvious given. However, this raises the issue of continued trends of transnational-identity (as Castles identifies it) overriding the concept of the nation – if the majority embodies a transnational-identity rather than a national one, what becomes of the nation? McNeill would argue that it disintegrates, Appadurai would highlight that such a shift is exactly what the current majority communities fear. Castles does not give us an answer, as his focus remains on representing just how significant the impact of globalization has been on new conceptions of nations and nationalism.

These authors give us a glimpse of nationalist discourse that includes globalization in its framework. They all agree that with globalization emerged a greater influx of foreign migrants primarily for the purposes of labor, into nation-states, thus leading to the continued dilution of the largely mono-ethnic or monocultural society. They also share the argument that in the future lies the dissolution of the nation-state as we know it, and the development of a post-national order of identity. Herein lies the issue, as their focus lies moving beyond the nation rather than attempting to highlight how the nation may develop or adapt to new transnational conceptions of identity. Indeed, an example of this would be an identification with a region, as we have seen with collectives such as the European Union or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). This focus on the post-national-identity, without considering adaptations or different conceptions of nation-states as they have been traditionally defined, leads me to contend that these authors do not, and cannot, form a paradigm or theoretical framework like primordialists or constructivists. Their arguments are

⁶² Ibid.

important, and add much value to the discourse, but cannot be contained in a succinct grouping as there is too much conceptual variety.

Through this literature review, I have traced the opposing conceptions of nations and nationalism from primordialists and constructivists. The debates around conceptions of nations include cultural versus political, immemorial versus modern, popular versus elite constructed, and separated versus combined with the state. Indeed, these are simplified dichotomies, but allow us to succinctly note the differences in the key tenets of the two paradigms – there certainly can be overlap, as authors like Connor and Anderson demonstrate. I have also traced the arguments of authors that contend with globalization and its influence on nationalism, who seem to forecast the eventual deterioration of the national-identity in favor for transnational or polyethnic ones, due to the increase in migration (resulting from an urgent demand in foreign labor) and development in communication and travel technologies. It is from this junction I now look to delve into the unique conceptualization of Singaporean nationalism, which embodies various qualities from the arguments of primordialists, constructivists, as well these ‘post-national-identity’ scholars.

Singaporean National-identity

Background

Modern Singaporean history, as it is taught in Singaporean schools, begins in 1819 when the British East India Company colonized the already flourishing fishing island of Temasek (meaning sea-town in Malay) as a center for the British to trade within Southeast Asia. Led by Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, Singapore rapidly developed into a metropolis over a century and a half of British rule. In order to do so, it attracted immigrants in search of economic opportunities from East, South, and Southeast Asia, many of whom eventually

settled on the island.⁶³ In particular, it attracted a great deal of Indians, particularly Tamilians, who make up a large majority of the Indian population in Singapore today.⁶⁴ Save for a brief occupation by Imperial Japan during World War II, Singapore's modern history is distinctly marked by British influence over its territorial and administrative identity – and as such, is by and large a product of colonial modernity.

Its independence in 1965, however, was not an expected one. Singapore was eventually granted limited self-rule by the British in 1959, and in the hopes of achieving complete autonomy, the ruling government (led by the PAP) joined a merger with the Federation of Malaysia in 1963.⁶⁵ However, this led to bitter contention between the Malays and Chinese in Singapore, resulting in repeated race riots throughout 1964.⁶⁶ Combined with political differences between the PAP and the Federation of Malaysia, this led to the removal of Singapore from the merger in 1965 – bringing about its unexpected independence. The Singapore that emerged was incredibly weak on every level – its small and ethnically diverse population meant that natural cultural cohesion was impossible, and its minimal natural resources combined with its small population meant its economy was weak and lacked any distinct features.⁶⁷

⁶³ Selvaraj Velayutham, *Responding to Globalization: Nation, Culture, and Identity in Singapore*, Academic Search Complete (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2007), https://books.google.com/books?id=ba_olzVetIAC.

⁶⁴ Kellynn Wee, Theodora Lam, and Brenda S.A. Yeoh, "Migrant Construction Workers in Singapore: An Introduction," in *Migrant Workers in Singapore*, (WORLD SCIENTIFIC, 2022), xiii–xlix, https://doi.org/10.1142/9789811255038_0001.

⁶⁵ Velayutham, *Responding to Globalization: Nation, Culture, and Identity in Singapore*. 5

⁶⁶ Jamie Han, "Communal Riots of 1964" (National Library Board, n.d.).

⁶⁷ David Brown, "Globalisation, Ethnicity and the Nation-state: The Case of Singapore," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 52, no. 1 (April 1, 1998): 35–46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357719808445236>.

Early Singaporean Nationalism

As the government of the newly independent Singapore, the PAP had two main issues to tackle. The first was the lack of cohesion between the ethnically diverse and largely immigrant population of Singapore. The earlier race riots signaled the consequences of any failed attempts to reconcile the differences between the multitude of ethnic groups in the small nation. The second issue was the lack of economic stability, which was identified early on as a key component in their nation-building objective. In order to deal with both issues simultaneously, the state moved to inculcate an ideology of survivalism that stressed the aforementioned issues as leading to the vulnerability of Singapore to both international and internal threats.⁶⁸ This mirrors Anderson's 'imagined community' model, wherein the state plays a leading role in the creation of a nation-state that is 'imagined.' However, instead of basing this identity on ethnic or linguistic similarity, they instead chose to place the existence and survival of Singapore in a global context, calling for individual sacrifice being necessary in order to ensure the nation's survival. Thus, the government equated the self-interest of individual Singaporeans to the interests of the national community, subsuming the former into the latter.⁶⁹ However, as the state predated the nation and had an active role in developing its identity, we see that the state acted as a representative of the interests of the community - allowing them to implement policies in the name of the people. The resulting "communitarianism"⁷⁰ blurred the distinction between state, community, and individual interests. The development of a close relationship between state and national-identity was imperative, as it ensured the state's continued legitimacy under the guise of strengthening the nation. This does not mean that their aims were nefarious by any means – on the contrary,

⁶⁸ Brown. 39

⁶⁹ Ibid. 42

⁷⁰ Eugene K. B. Tan, "Re-Engaging Chineseness: Political, Economic and Cultural Imperatives of Nation-Building in Singapore," *The China Quarterly* 175 (2003): 751–74, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741003000432>. 764

this conflation of individual and national interests meant that the PAP could enact policy changes with relative ease, with promises of economic prosperity and an increased standard of living. Thus, the promises of a better future served as the foundation of early Singaporean national-identity.

In order to fulfill these promises, however, the government had to find a solution to its domestic labor shortages. This came in the form of relaxing its tight immigration policy in 1968 to allow permanent and temporary workers to enter the Singapore economy and workforce, a majority of whom came from Thailand and Malaysia.⁷¹ In 1973, there were over 100,000 non-citizen work permit holders in the CMP industries – which was one-eighth of the total Singapore workforce.⁷² This massive labor inflow allowed for the government to implement an export-oriented industrialization policy while simultaneously attracting a large flow of foreign direct investment by providing tax incentives, infrastructural facilities, and relatively low cost and disciplined labor. As a result, by the early 1970s the Singaporean economy had rapidly industrialized, with signs of nearing full employment.⁷³ Thus, the contributions of early migrant construction workers to the development of early Singaporean economic development, and thus national-identity, is made explicitly clear. In providing the government with a significant and inexpensive labor force that served to attract foreign investment and interest in the Singaporean economy, these workers formed the backbone of the economy. Indeed, in 1976, the first Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew stated that immigrants “will do many jobs better than the next generation Singaporean would because the next generation Singaporean will have been brought up in an easier environment that has not

⁷¹ Pang Eng Fong and Linda Lim, “Foreign Labor and Economic Development in Singapore,” *The International Migration Review* 16, no. 3 (1982): 548–76, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2545368>. 549

⁷² Linda Low, “The Political Economy of Migrant Worker Policy in Singapore,” *Asia Pacific Business Review* 8, no. 4 (June 1, 2002): 95–118, <https://doi.org/10.1080/713999166>. 96

⁷³ Low. 96

deprived him of enough basic necessities to make him really want to work so hard.”⁷⁴ The role of migrant workers in the Singaporean economy was therefore seen as imperative.

Shifting towards an ‘Asian’ Identity

The importance of immigrants and migrant workers carried on through the 1970s and into the 1980s. While the world recession in 1974 resulted in layoffs in Singapore’s export manufacturing industries (which employed large numbers of foreign workers), employers were reluctant to lay off foreign workers first as requested by the government, as these workers occupied more senior and stable positions.⁷⁵ The number of foreign workers employed began to rise again with the upturn in the Asian economy, resulting in increases in labor inflows from new areas like Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, and Bangladesh.⁷⁶ Despite attempts at an ambitious restructuring program during the 1980s that looked to phase out dependence of all ‘unskilled’ foreign workers by 1991, official productivity and growth target during this time projected an increased reliance on foreign workers.⁷⁷

It is clear to see why employers continued to be reliant on foreign workers that the government was attempting to phase out. In the 1980s, Singapore and the other ‘Asian Tigers’ of Hong Kong, Japan, Taiwan and South Korea rose to prominence with their rapid development based on so-called Asian political and economic model. Simultaneously, the Singapore government had begun to worry that the consistent foreign investment and related industrialization was leading to an influx of Western influences and interactions that was adversely affecting its youth.⁷⁸ The ‘Asian’ political model was thus framed as a good,

⁷⁴ Lee Kuan Yew in Fong and Lim, “Foreign Labor and Economic Development in Singapore.” 551

⁷⁵ Fong and Lim. 549-50

⁷⁶ Fong and Lim. 550

⁷⁷ P. Athukorala and C. Manning, *Structural Change and International Migration in East Asia: Adjusting to Labour Scarcity* (Oxford University Press, 1999), <https://books.google.com/books?id=DHgFAQAAIAAJ>.

⁷⁸ Brown, “Globalisation, Ethnicity and the Nation-state: The Case of Singapore.” 42

paternalistic government that acted in the interest of a collective national entity, and placed in direct opposition to Western liberal democracy that promulgated decadence and individualism (that is, according to the Singapore government). The economic successes of the Asian Tigers served as evidence for the superiority of the Asian interventionist developmental state model,⁷⁹ and as this success was based on the efforts and contributions of migrant workers in the CMP industries, it was difficult to loosen the reliance on their labor. Indeed, in 1991 the government decided to reverse its policy of phasing out foreign manual workers, and instead changed it to reducing dependence.⁸⁰

As such, we see that the government continued to follow the approach of constructing a national-identity based on development and economic success, and that these successes continued to be supported by migrant workers. The emphasis on the ‘Asian’-ness of Singapore was not solely emphasized through economic development, however. The 1980s also saw the government implement a transitional narrative – one that positioned Singapore as needing to constantly strive for progress in order to ensure its survival.⁸¹ This allowed for the government to continue to tap into anxieties of survival and long-term economic prospects as a way of consolidating power and enacting policy changes it deemed as necessary for the good of Singapore, even if Singaporeans did not necessarily agree. The example of the West versus Asia is important as it showcases their worry that with sustained economic achievements, a rise in literacy levels, and a strengthened middle class, Singaporeans would lose faith in the logic of continued authoritarian rule and the need for a measure of self-sacrifice.⁸² Thus, beyond economic successes, the government had to

⁷⁹ Lily Zubaidah Rahim, “In Search of the ‘Asian Way’: Cultural Nationalism in Singapore and Malaysia,” *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 36, no. 3 (1998): 54–73, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14662049808447775>. 60

⁸⁰ Low, “The Political Economy of Migrant Worker Policy in Singapore.” 101

⁸¹ Velayutham, *Responding to Globalization: Nation, Culture, and Identity in Singapore*. 52

⁸² Rahim, “In Search of the ‘Asian Way’: Cultural Nationalism in Singapore and Malaysia.” 56

implement a difference in morality systems that framed the West as an undesirable ‘other’, while promoting ‘Asian values’ as a counterbalance the influences of the decadent West. Indeed, Lee Kuan Yew noted that “[t]he question whether Asian or Western values are better will not be settled by argument alone. It will be settled by the economic transformation of Asia...The tide is rising for East Asia...Soon we shall talk to them on more equal terms.”⁸³ The grouping of ‘values’ with ‘economic transformation’ is important as it implies an interrelatedness between moral and economic authority. Lee Kuan Yew was implying that it was because of ‘Asian values,’ that promoted community and national interests over individualism, that Singapore and the other Asian Tigers were witnessing an economic boom. This ties into the idea that because the paternalistic government could ensure a stable political climate, nations like Singapore remained an attractive investment base for foreign capital.⁸⁴

The move to ‘Asianize’ Singapore was thus a significant focus of the government through the 1980s and 1990s, marked by efforts to promote the use of Mandarin among the Chinese population, introduce religious and moral education in schools, and provide support for Confucian scholarship.⁸⁵ This underscored the idea that the successes of the Asian Tigers were linked specifically to the East Asian or Chinese heritage of the majority of their population – so when the government spoke in terms of ‘Asian’ values, in reality they meant East Asian and Chinese values. While the promotion of Mandarin found reasonable success, the other two projects did not. The Confucian campaign in particular highlights state attitudes towards nation-building, as it was instituted by the ruling elite who wanted to establish a set of cultural values to further its own policies, and not because Singaporeans wanted a deeper understanding of their so-called heritage.⁸⁶ Once again we see the government attempt

⁸³ Lee Kuan Yew in Yin Pheng Chiang, “Asian Influence Will Rise,” *The Straits Times*, February 6, 1995.

⁸⁴ Rahim, “In Search of the ‘Asian Way’: Cultural Nationalism in Singapore and Malaysia.” 57

⁸⁵ Velayutham, *Responding to Globalization: Nation, Culture, and Identity in Singapore*. 57

⁸⁶ Velayutham. 63

restructure the national-identity in a way that legitimizes its own goals and policies, and frame it as one that reflects the wants and needs of the Singaporean population. However, the issue with this attempt was that while the government's initial nation-building objective was to unite the divided immigrant population through anxieties of survival and economic successes, these subsequent projects placed a heavy emphasis on relating the Chinese 'heritage' of Singapore to its economic successes – which excluded the non-Chinese minority groups. By doing so, it also minimized the importance of the low labor costs of the Southeast and South Asian migrant construction workers in attracting foreign investment. Furthermore, the efficacy of this campaign towards the Chinese Singaporeans is dubious, given that most of them already had a deep-set belief system based on Buddhist or Christian values, and that as of today Confucian 'values' are barely mentioned by the state. As such, we see that while the government does attempt to shift the national-identity to fit their objectives, these attempts are not always successful.

However, they did find success with the promulgation of 'Shared Values' as the national ideology of Singapore. In 1991, the Singapore parliament introduced the "White Paper on Shared Values,"⁸⁷ which institutionalized the government's formulation of a Singaporean national-identity. The paper underscored five basic principles: "Nation before community and society above self, Family as the basic unit of society, Regard and community support for the individual, Consensus instead of contention, [and] Racial and religious harmony."⁸⁸ A key component of this list is the positioning of nation and society above the self. Here, we see the government re-emphasizing the importance of conflating self-interests with those of the nation – and because the nation is so closely related to its state, in reality individual self-interests are being given up for the interests of the state. These

⁸⁷ Parliament of Singapore, "White Paper on Shared Values," January 2, 1991.

⁸⁸ Parliament of Singapore. 10

‘Shared Values’ also stand as a representation of the Asian political model that serves to counteract the influences of Western values vis a vis globalization. After anchoring and domesticating the immigrant communities of early Singapore as national subjects, the government then sought to anchor this newly affluent population to a Asian identity that was essentially created in reaction to Western influences.⁸⁹

A truly Singaporean identity

However, the efforts to connect Singaporean national-identity to Asian values soon collapsed with the 1997 Asian financial market crash.⁹⁰ Despite surviving the worst of the economic meltdown, the Singaporean government was left to deal with the re-emergence of the question of national-identity. They could not afford to rely solely on its transnational Asian identity, and had to carve a more independent national-identity that could withstand the waves of globalization that only grew in size going into the 21st century. Indeed, in 1997 then-Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsein Loong (son of Lee Kuan Yew) introduced National Education, an apparatus of schooling and curriculum intervention that aimed to “systematically transmit [the right] instincts and attitudes to succeeding cohorts...[to] make these...part of the cultural DNA that makes us Singaporean.”⁹¹ Thus we see the importance of the role of mass education in inculcating a national-identity in the future generations of Singapore – an element duly noted by Gellner as necessary for the sustained loyalty in the nation. However, unlike Gellner’s argument, national-identity and symbols in this case do not precede education but are instead emphasized by it. Lee’s assertion for the creation of a common, unified culture serves as a definitive admission of the anxiety the state holds

⁸⁹ Brown, “Globalisation, Ethnicity and the Nation-state: The Case of Singapore.” 42

⁹⁰ Velayutham, *Responding to Globalization: Nation, Culture, and Identity in Singapore*. 77

⁹¹ Lee Hsein Loong in Aaron Koh, “Imagining the Singapore ‘Nation’ and ‘Identity’: The Role of the Media and National Education,” *Asia Pacific Journal of Education* 25, no. 1 (May 1, 2005): 75–91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02188790500032566>. 78

towards globalization (despite its necessity for Singapore's economic development) leading to the influx of negative Western influences. This paradoxical struggle is made apparent with the government embarking on an aggressive drive to attract foreign talent to supplement its shortfalls in competitive innovation to stimulate economic growth.⁹² 'Talent' was not all that needed to be supplemented, as Singapore's domestic labor shortage in the CMP industry continued to be an issue. As such, the promotion (albeit less egregiously) of outsourcing labor was also necessary – luckily for Singapore, the Gulf Crisis of the 1990s made Southeast Asia the new destination for migrant labor from South Asia. This led to a mass influx of migrant construction workers from South Asia (the majority of whom originated from Bangladesh) whose purpose was to construct the innovative projects of the foreign 'talent.'⁹³

Thus, Singapore's reliance on immigrant labor (be it 'talent' or 'unskilled') stands in direct contention with its attempt to generate a common, unified culture that is impervious to change both by global and future forces. Indeed, attempting to cultivate a national-identity with fixed boundaries becomes increasingly difficult if competing identities and ideologies are allowed within the same boundaries. As such, National Education needed to have a strong ideological foundation to withstand these factors. According to a (now-defunct) Ministry of Education webpage, National Education aimed to promote six significant messages:

1. Singapore is our homeland; this is where we belong.
2. We must preserve racial and religious harmony.
3. We must uphold meritocracy and incorruptibility.
4. No one owes Singapore a living.
5. We must ourselves defend Singapore.
6. We have confidence in our future.⁹⁴

⁹² Aaron Koh, "Global Flows of Foreign Talent: Identity Anxieties in Singapore's Ethnoscape," *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 18, no. 2 (2003): 230–56. 231

⁹³ Wee, Lam, and Yeoh, "Migrant Construction Workers in Singapore: An Introduction."

⁹⁴ Ministry of Education, "Six Messages of National Education."

The National Education curriculum attempts to cultivate a sense of shared identity and pride in young Singaporeans, while also reminding them of the constraints and vulnerabilities faced by the small nation. In doing so, the curriculum looks to develop a drive to “remain competition, be innovative, and go global”⁹⁵ in the younger generation – a reflection of the continuation of the government ideology of survivalism. Thus, we see that despite the government’s shifting formulations and attempts at generating a core, unchanging national-identity, the common factor that linked its early acceptance of immigrants, to its adoption of Asian values, to its casting off of said values to attempt a construction of a wholly Singaporean identity, is indeed the ideology of survivalism and the transitional narrative of progress it serves to create. Basing its pride on economic development and being a small nation-state with a core role in the world economy, it is Singapore’s anxiety of failing and drive to make sacrifices on an individual and national level that truly characterizes its national-identity.

Migrant Construction Workers

Singapore’s Construction Industry

As a country proud of its world-renowned landmarks (like the Singapore Flyer, Marina Bay Sands, and more recently, Jewel Changi Airport) and its constantly developing public transport system, Singapore’s construction industry is an important factor in its success – and therefore its national-identity. As of December 2022, 498.9 thousand people were employed in the construction industry – of which only 97.7 thousand were residents (Singaporeans or Permanent Residents).⁹⁶ This means that migrant workers make up around

⁹⁵ Koh, “Imagining the Singapore ‘Nation’ and ‘Identity’: The Role of the Media and National Education.” 84

⁹⁶ Raudhah Hirschmann, “Number of Residents Employed in the Construction Industry in Singapore from 2013 to 2022” (Statista, March 13, 2023), <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1054325/number-of-residents-employed-construction-industry-singapore/>.

78% of the total number of people employed in the construction industry. Thus, we see that migrant workers in the CMP sector play a particularly important role in developing and maintaining the image of Singapore as a cosmopolitan global city. This is a continuation of what we have seen throughout the shifts and developments in Singapore's national-identity, where the prominence and importance of migrant workers and their labor is clear.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the MOM stopped accepting new entry applicants for non-resident migrant workers, and the construction industry ground to a halt with the rapid rise in COVID cases in workers' dormitories.⁹⁷ However, this policy was loosened and then ultimately reversed on March 13th, 2022, when the MOM announced new entry requirements for migrant workers that raised the cap on the number of migrant workers allowed to enter the construction sector,⁹⁸ as well as making the process far more streamlined, all in order to kick-start the construction sector once more.⁹⁹

TABLE 1. *Annual Employment Change in Construction Industry (in thousands)*

Year	Total	Resident	Non-Resident
2019	12.4	-1.7	14.1
2020	-51.8	1	-52.7
2021	4.5	2.6	1.9
2022	91.3	1.5	89.8

Source: Ministry of Manpower, "Annual Employment Level by Industry," March 15, 2023, <https://stats.mom.gov.sg/Pages/EmploymentTimeSeries.aspx>.

⁹⁷ Wee, Lam, and Yeoh, "Migrant Construction Workers in Singapore: An Introduction." xiii

⁹⁸ Ministry of Manpower, "FACTSHEET ON FOREIGN WORKFORCE POLICY ANNOUNCEMENTS AT COS 2022," February 2022, <https://www.mom.gov.sg/-/media/mom/documents/budget2022/updates-to-ep-framework.pdf>.

⁹⁹ Kok Yufeng, "Entry Requirements for New Construction, Marine and Process Work Permit Holders to Be Streamlined," *The Straits Times*, March 6, 2022, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/entry-requirements-for-new-construction-marine-and-process-work-permit-holders-to-be-streamlined>.

As we can see from Table 1, the pandemic saw 52.7 thousand migrant workers leave Singapore, and only 1.9 thousand return during 2021 when restrictions loosened slightly. However, it was only with the introduction of the new policy that 89.9 thousand migrant workers entered the construction sector workforce. Indeed, this move turned out to be the right one. After being heavily impacted by the pandemic, the construction industry is now in rapid recovery, being valued at SGD 22.4 billion¹⁰⁰ after a growth of 10.4% in the final quarter of 2022.¹⁰¹ As such, we see the direct impact of migrant construction workers on the Singaporean economy, thus highlighting their continued and critical role in ensuring that the government can continue its narrative of continuous economic progress.

Deplorable Conditions of Workers

The treatment of these workers, however, does not reflect their critical role in the Singaporean economy. The act of even getting to Singapore is often a herculean one. In the case of Bangladeshi workers, Singaporean construction companies contract Bangladeshi recruitment agencies to shore up potential candidates. In turn, these agencies hire local middle-men known as *dalals* to draw in aspiring migrants from more rural areas.¹⁰² Thus, a significant distance is created between the Singaporean construction companies and the actual hiring practices, allowing them to dodge accountability for any exploitative practices. And indeed, such practices are prevalent. Bangladeshi migrant construction workers have reportedly been made to pay between SD 10-16k with the promise of securing a decent

¹⁰⁰ “Singapore Construction Market Report” (Global Data, 3 February 2023.), <https://www.globaldata.com/store/report/singapore-construction-market-analysis/>.

¹⁰¹ Justin Ong, “Manufacturing Slumps, Construction Shines in Q4 as Economic Growth Slows to 3.8% in 2022: MTI Estimates,” *Today Online*, January 3, 2023, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/manufacturing-slumps-construction-soars-gdp-2083871>.

¹⁰² Kellynn Wee, Theodora Lam, and Brenda S.A. Yeoh, “Migrant Construction Workers in Singapore: An Introduction,” in *Migrant Workers in Singapore*, 0 vols. (WORLD SCIENTIFIC, 2022), xiii–xlix, https://doi.org/10.1142/9789811255038_0001.

paying job in Singapore.¹⁰³ Often, these fees are shored up by extended families and even communities to ensure employment for aspiring migrants. However, many arrive in the country to find their employers paying far less than was promised. The pay rates of South Asian workers are incredibly low – a worker with 10 years of experience is paid on average SGD 30/day, while a worker with less than 2 years of experience is paid on average SGD 18/day.¹⁰⁴ Migrant workers' rights groups like the Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics (HOME) have noted that there have even been cases where workers are only paid SGD 16/day.¹⁰⁵ Comparing these rates to 1992, we see that South Asian migrant construction workers then were paid SGD 17-19/day, which adjusted for inflation is worth roughly SGD 37. As such, we see that the real wages of these workers have actually plummeted over time. This is concerning as these rates do not come close to being able to cover basic living expenses, much less medical emergencies, which continue to rise. Indeed, the monthly rental price for a bed in a workers' dormitory rose from SGD 272 in 2019 to SGD 316 in 2022,¹⁰⁶ while monthly food costs totaled around SGD 130 for catered meals or SGD 150 if workers split costs amongst themselves and cooked.¹⁰⁷ As a minimum wage is not implemented by the government, employers are free to pay their migrant construction workers what they want.

This is even further exacerbated by employers often not paying overtime, forcing workers to work on Sundays (their only day off) and public holidays without pay, and not

¹⁰³ Transient Workers Count Too, "Covid Is over, Let's Extract Money from Migrant Workers Again, Part 1," March 22, 2023, <https://twc2.org.sg/2023/03/22/covid-is-over-lets-extract-money-from-migrant-workers-again-part-1/>.

¹⁰⁴ Stephanie Chok and Jevon Ng, "Wage Theft & Exploitation Among Singapore's Migrant Workers" (Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics, January 2017), https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a12725612abd96b9c737354/t/5a1fce6f652dead776d3c970/1512033911372/Position_Paper_Wage-Theft-Exploitation-among-Singapores-Migrant-Workers.pdf. 9

¹⁰⁵ Chok and Ng. 9

¹⁰⁶ Liang Eng Hwa, "Written Answer by Minister for Manpower Dr Tan See Leng to PQ on Prices and Adequacy of Bed Space in Migrant Worker Dormitories," October 20, 2022

¹⁰⁷ Chok and Ng. 9

giving workers annual-leave pay.¹⁰⁸ The construction companies hold these workers at a moral distance, down-sourcing the responsibility of these workers by subcontracting them and employing bureaucratic measures to negate any ethical responsibility.¹⁰⁹ Important to note is that these issues are not rare by any standards – HOME noted that in 2015 and 2016, 51.4% of workers who approached them sought assistance for unpaid or late payment of wages.¹¹⁰ Indeed, these recruitment fees and ill treatment are illegal – but this is where the multiple layers of financial transaction and bureaucratic measures serve as a way for employers to feign ignorance and shift the blame of wrongdoing either on the local middle-men or on the workers themselves. The government, who should be protecting the labor that constructs their world-class landmarks and public transport system, instead focus their policies on ensuring that Singapore remains a competitively viable investment for foreign capital, and therefore tend to hurt migrant construction workers rather than help. Workers are issued ‘Work Permits’ – visas that are incredibly restrictive in nature. They last 2 years, with a max period of employment of 14 years, and are tied directly to the employer, therefore greatly limiting job mobility and impacting their ability to speak up against rights abuses. Furthermore, these workers are not permitted to bring in their families, nor are they allowed to marry Singaporeans or Permanent Residents without the permission of a state official.¹¹¹ In comparison, Employment Pass holders (professional white-collar workers designated as foreign ‘talent’) are allowed to bring in their families, marry a Singaporean or Permanent Resident, and can even apply for Permanent Residency. The stark difference in immigration policies highlights the lack of care and attention given to migrant construction workers.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Wee, Lam, and Yeoh, “Migrant Construction Workers in Singapore: An Introduction.”

¹¹⁰ Chok and Ng, “Wage Theft & Exploitation Among Singapore’s Migrant Workers.” 9

¹¹¹ Wee, Lam, and Yeoh, “Migrant Construction Workers in Singapore: An Introduction.” xx - xxi

As such, it is clear that transience and disposability are key factors in Singapore's immigration policy in regards to migrant construction workers – the government and construction companies understand that these workers are attracted by the promise of economic prosperity and freedom that Singapore seems to offer, and simultaneously rely on their low wages as a way of remaining economically competitive in the global market for investment. Unfortunately, the transience and disposability of the workers are not lost on them, and the constant threat of deportation and replacement has an incredibly negative impact on their mental health. The government does place levies on employers that hire migrant workers and put into place quotas to incentivize the hiring of local workers – but these costs are often simply offset onto the workers themselves through the aforementioned withholding of pay.¹¹² Largely benefitting from the cheap, disposable labor that these migrant construction workers bring to the economy, the government therefore finds it simpler to deal with high profile cases or those that are brought to them by workers' rights organizations rather than implement policies to crack down on employers. As such, despite their significant contribution, these workers are neither appreciated nor appropriately compensated.

Depersonalization and Disconnection

The view of Singaporeans towards these workers and their mistreatment also does not reflect their critical role in developing Singapore's economy (and therefore its national-identity). Attitudes fluctuate from “those...construction workers are definitely people Singapore needs because no Singaporean would want to do their jobs”¹¹³ to feeling “invaded as they tend to gather in large numbers at certain places, and I don't feel safe going to those

¹¹² Ministry of Manpower, “FACTSHEET ON FOREIGN WORKFORCE POLICY ANNOUNCEMENTS AT COS 2022.”

¹¹³ Online Respondent in Velayutham, *Responding to Globalization: Nation, Culture, and Identity in Singapore*. 187

places anymore.”¹¹⁴ This ‘invasion’ refers to the gathering of foreign workers across sectors in public sectors on Sundays, their one day off work. The distinct lack of empathy from the second respondent, combined with the apathy of the first, highlight the extent to which the anxiety of survivalism is imbued in the Singaporean national-identity. Singaporeans must contend with having to both rely on migrant labor for the long-term economic interests of the nation, while disliking their physical presence within Singapore.¹¹⁵ What emerges is an intense depersonalization of the migrant workers, who are seen as merely a source of labor and development rather than as actual people, thus leading to a large-scale aversion to acknowledging their mistreatment.

It is important to note that this depersonalization began to take root with the government’s aforementioned aggressive drive to attract foreign talent into the Singaporean economy in the early 2000s. In the times immediately after its independence and during the economic boom of the 1970s and 80s, there was a relatively greater acknowledgement of the role of migrant laborers in the development of Singapore – though it can be argued that this still was not enough. However in 2001, the drive for foreign talent hit an all-new level, signified by then-Minister of Communication & Information Technology Yeo Cheow Tang stating that “talent...is a passport and is nationally blind,” arguing its contribution in “realiz[ing] the full potential of our economies and substantially raise the standards of living of our people.”¹¹⁶ We see him invoking the ideology of survivalism and the transitional narrative of progress as a means to legitimize immigration and economic policies. However, unlike the migrant construction workers who did jobs that Singaporeans did not want to do,

¹¹⁴ Online Respondent in Velayutham. 188

¹¹⁵ Velayutham. 186

¹¹⁶ Yeo Cheow Tong, “Keynote Address Asia Society Conference,” March 12, 2001, <https://www.imda.gov.sg/content-and-news/press-releases-and-speeches/archived/ida/speeches/2001/20061212120153>.

the foreign talent occupied much higher positions, thereby generating a fear of greater competition in the job market. As such, focus shifted away from the existence of the migrant construction workers and towards the foreign talent that were seen as ‘stealing jobs.’

Singaporeans had to once again grapple with the anxiety of survivalism, as the promotion of this foreign talent seemed to have a more direct impact on their livelihoods, thus threatening to override their ability to ‘put up with it’ for the sake of the nation. This shift in focus pushed migrant construction workers further into the peripheries of the Singaporean mind. The government’s repeated usage of the ideology of survivalism further saddles Singaporeans with the sense that their status as a developed nation can be easily lost if they are not careful,¹¹⁷ and as such they focus more on immediate issues that pose a threat to their life rather than the mistreatment of the migrant construction workers that have allowed them to become ‘developed’ in the first place.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have traced the conceptions of Singaporean national-identity from the moment of its independence in 1965 till today, highlighting its development from an economically weak and ethnically fragmented nation-state to a bustling cosmopolitan and culturally united one. The PAP, having inherited the colonial state apparatuses of the British Empire, utilized this monopoly of authority to inculcate an ideology of survivalism in its fragmented population – that if the people of Singapore did not band together, make the necessary personal sacrifices, and strive for greatness, their nation would be doomed to being consumed by external influences and internal strife. In short, the government attempted to unite the population through generating a sense of anxiety about their personal wellbeing, and tied it to the success of the nation-state. In the name of survivalism and thus economic

¹¹⁷ Velayutham, *Responding to Globalization: Nation, Culture, and Identity in Singapore*. 193

development, the government promulgated an open immigration policy that attracted foreign talent to make up for its lack of expertise, and foreign labor to make up for its small population. Combined with the government's control over the public, Singapore became an attractive opportunity for foreign investment and developed exceedingly quickly alongside other Asian nations. This led to a distinct shift in strategy from the government, who sought to combat the rise of decadent Western influences by positioning the Singapore national-identity squarely with those of the other Asian Tigers. Crediting 'Asian values' as the reason for Singapore's success, the government positioned itself to appreciate its Chinese 'heritage' by promoting Mandarin and Confucianism within the ethnic Chinese population. However, the success of this was limited, as it only served to undo the ethnic harmony that was based on survivalism. With the crash of the Asian market in the 1990s, the government realized the importance of carving out their own independent identity, and thus looked towards a transitional narrative or a constant path towards progress as their next building block. Having reached a high level of development and quality of life, Singaporeans began to base their nationalism on the economic successes of their small nation-state that was striving for greatness against all odds – and this is where it stands today.

However, beneath this ideology of survivalism sit highly complex and repressed feelings towards government policies. While Singaporeans may have put up with mass influxes of foreign talent and migrant labor during Singapore's early and middle stages of development, entering the 21st century we see a drastic shift in attitudes. With the government embarking on an aggressive drive to attract immigrant labor (a move antithetical to its attempts in the 1980s to reverse reliance on said labor) Singaporeans began to feel their space and nation being encroached upon. Attention and protest was directed towards the influx of foreign talent whose existence posed a direct threat to Singaporeans, while migrant workers were highly depersonalized and reduced to being mere vehicles of their labor – leading to the

development of an ‘out of sight, out of mind’ attitude towards the latter group. This allows for the continued mistreatment of a group that continues to contribute valuable and much-needed labor to the upkeep and development of Singapore’s construction industry – the foundation of Singaporean’s pride in their public transport systems, landmarks, and infrastructure. It is the ideology of survivalism – the desire to constantly remain competitive and the anxiety of failing and being quickly consumed by foreign influences – that leads to not only Singaporeans, but the Singaporean government, to avoid the continued mistreatment and lack of recognition for the workers who have, since the start of Singapore’s modern history in 1819, strove to ensure it continues down its path of constant progress.

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