Chapter Eighteen

Cosmopolitanism Disposition: Cultivating Affinity Ties

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Introduction

Cosmopolitanism gradually became a buzzword in Singapore from the 1990s onwards as politicians and policymakers mobilised the idea to reinvent the country into a world-class city and to emphasise nation building. This chapter examines how cosmopolitanism frames aspirations as well as risks. But it also considers how Singaporeans invoke territorial belonging to argue against recent immigration. The chapter further reflects on whether our multiracialism model is able to accommodate the greater cultural diversity in Singapore today. Can we cultivate instead a cosmopolitan disposition that values the biographical ties that we cultivate with one another, Singaporeans and foreigners alike, through our interactions in daily life?

Cosmopolitanism is one of those chameleon-like words that morph into different meanings depending on whom it is used by and for what purpose. As early as 1988, former Minister of Information and Arts George Yeo suggested that the growing international travels of Singaporeans signal the emerging cosmopolitan character of Singaporean society.[1] Then in 1992 he described Singapore's international business connections as a form of 'cosmopolitan economic life'.[2] In such renderings, cosmopolitanism is used descriptively to refer to the international character of a society or country.

By the late 1990s, cosmopolitanism as used in political parlance denoted an aspirational quality. In the words of former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, in the new millennium the city-state should aim to become a 'world-class' cosmopolis that would be 'a magnetic hub of people, minds, talents, ideas and knowledge'.[3] In this portrayal, cosmopolitanism refers to a stage of international development Singapore should aspire towards.

Cosmopolitanism simultaneously carries risks. Prime Minister Goh coined the labels, 'cosmopolitan' and 'heartlander',[4] to propose the possibility of a growing social divide between globally mobile Singaporeans and their localised counterparts. He warned that this will not only result in a less socially cohesive Singaporean society but also threaten the country's longer term sustainability

if cosmopolitan Singaporeans treated it more like a 'hotel' than a home to call their own.[5] In other words, cosmopolitanism also connotes risks to the national wellbeing.

Outside of Singapore, cosmopolitanism can be traced back to the pre-Hellenistic period, but it was a Greek philosopher who introduced the word, 'kosmopolitan', to describe a world citizen. Then in the eighteenth century cosmopolitanism became introduced as a model for political governance. Immanuel Kant famously proposed the idea of cosmopolitan law for managing inter-state relations so as to reduce international conflict. In this vision of how the world should be organised, a cosmopolitan person would have a sense of affiliation to the world community that exceeds narrowly defined national or cultural interests.

However, contemporary approaches towards cosmopolitanism are more likely to frame it as a set of dispositions or lifestyle habits associated with international mobility. In this framing, the cosmopolitan is someone who claims to be a citizen of the world because of his or her globe trotting lifestyle and expensive tastes.

Cosmopolitanism as Myth

In the Singaporean discourse, we see distinct but overlapping dimensions of cosmopolitanism mobilised in a variety of settings. For the political elites and urban planners, the vision of a cosmopolitan city is to be achieved by building urban infrastructure simulating the grandeur of global cities such as New York and London. They believe that this would make Singapore an inviting place for highly skilled international talent, and through them, create a culturally diverse setting that would inject a cosmopolitan vibe into Singapore.

Urban theorist Ananya Roy refers to such urban inter-referencing as 'worlding practices'[6] that draw on global exchanges of capital and expertise to accumulate global wealth and prestige. We see this made tangible through majestic architectural projects in Singapore, such as the Esplanade Theatres on the Bay at the start of this millennium, and more recently, Marina Bay Sands and Resorts World Sentosa.

But it is not enough to make Singapore into a cosmopolitan city with world-class urban infrastructure. Purportedly, the Singaporean population must grow in 'cosmopolitan' character too, meaning to become more internationalised and globally minded. From the late 1990s onwards, Singaporean businesses have been encouraged to invest overseas and grow the domestic economy beyond its territorial limits. Singaporean business emigration is seen as a means to propel Singapore's globalisation drive alongside the pro-immigration policy.

Many Singaporean professionals and youths aspire to go overseas to work or study. They see their time abroad as an avenue to acquire the educational qualifications, professional experience and global cultural competencies such as language skills and knowledge of cultural norms considered advantageous to them in the workplace.[7] Singaporean political leaders regularly remind them to use their overseas stint to acquire global exposure and competencies that would benefit Singapore.

Yet the Singaporean political leadership is also anxious about the emigration of Singaporeans because of its impact on Singapore's future demographic composition, labour force regeneration and political leadership renewal. This concern has now materialised into concrete policy initiatives aimed at keeping overseas Singaporeans connected to Singapore. For example, citizenship legislation was amended in 2004 to make it easier for overseas Singaporeans to pass on their citizenship to children born abroad.[8] Subsequently the Overseas Singaporean Unit (OSU) was established in 2006 under the Prime Minister's Office to lead and coordinate the work done by different government agencies to reach out to the Singaporean diaspora. The OSU's signature event is Singapore Day, an annual rotating festival to celebrate Singaporean culture and remind Singaporeans of 'home' and 'homeland'.

Even as cosmopolitanism is framed as a set of aspirations by political discourses and policy initiatives, it is also deployed to paint a crisis *of* cosmopolitanism. On the one hand, cosmopolitanism is associated with the urban infrastructure and cultural diversity that contribute to Singapore's global city image. It can also be interpreted as the cultural characteristics associated with globally mobile Singaporeans that can help improve the country's global competitiveness. On the other hand, cosmopolitanism can also mean the loss of globally marketable Singaporeans or precipitate a growing social divide within Singaporean society, both of which would jeopardise the longer-term survival and stability of the nation. As a type of rhetoric constructed to achieve particular political visions, the myth of cosmopolitanism is meant to cut both ways.

Grounding Cosmopolitan Dispositions

But there is another way to approach cosmopolitanism. How may cosmopolitanism translate into a disposition to guide the social interactions of our everyday life? At the core of cosmopolitanism lies the principle of respecting social and cultural diversity. There are similarities between cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism since both advance recognition for cultural diversity. Multiculturalism in Singapore, or multiracialism as it is known officially, has become a founding tenet to guide social interactions. It became tangible with the constitutional recognition for racial equality, as well as policies such as the ethnic quota in public housing estates in 1979 and the bilingualism policy where Singaporeans adopt the English language as a medium of interracial communication, but learn a second language associated with their ethnicity so as to preserve the cultural pluralism associated with multiracialism.

Yet, can it be the same 'multiracialism' with which we have become so familiar that impedes us from being cosmopolitans today? Multiculturalism policies have been critiqued within Singapore and internationally for compartmentalising complex and fluid ethnic identifications into overarching racial categories.[9] But through the decades of nation-building, the CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian and 'Others') categorisations underlying the multiracialism policy in Singapore now also prioritises framings of ethnic identity tied to earlier waves of settlement and immigration during the pre-independence or immediate post-independence periods. For the Malay population, post-independent Singapore retained their status of indigeneity stemming from the island's former inclusion in the Federation of Malaya during 1956-1959, and also in view of the political sentiment of neighbouring Malay states. As for the Chinese and Indian populations born in Singapore (after their immigrant ancestors settled), they lay claim to social belonging that has evolved generationally; the Eurasian progeny of European and Asian inter-marriages (under the 'Others' category) are in turn portrayed as part of Singapore's early history and nation-building project.[10]

Where once multiracialism and the CMIO model had been a decision made by Singaporean political elites to downplay ethnic divisiveness that might be detrimental to postcolonial nation-building,[11] arguably the logics of the model has filtered into the everyday psyche of Singaporean society through the decades and is projected as an integral part of national identity today. Inclusion in the CMIO model as set out in the temporal frames described above is used

to legitimise social belonging for those who have figuratively journeyed with Singapore as it faced the tumultuous years of early independence. In contrast, immigrants that came *after* the 1990s, when globalising Singapore sought to tap on highly and lowly skilled foreigners to fill gaps in the domestic labour market (coinciding with state-driven calls for Singapore to become cosmopolitan or a cosmopolis),[12] are looked upon as late post-independence newcomers with a secondary sense of belonging to the nation.

In these ways, belonging to the nation and national territory is conflated with the idea of birthplace and generational belonging (or autochthony)[13] captured in the phrase, 'local'. Juxtaposed against the image of the local is the figure of the foreigner. Persons considered 'foreign' are to be excluded socially as part of the national community, even if they are of Chinese or Indian ethnicity (part of the CMIO categorisation) as long as they have a different nationality from Singaporeans. Sociologist Philip Krestedamas[14] refers to social exclusion based on ideals of territorial belonging as a form of 'territorial racism'.[15]

Take for example the furore over an event proposed by Filipino volunteers to celebrate the 116th Independence Day of the Philippines at Orchard Road in 2014. A Facebook page protesting against the event drew 26,000 'likes'.[16] Web users also posted comments such as, 'don't let them celebrate their independence day at Takashimaya... We should stop them and throw them back to their country'.[17]

In recent years, consecutive protests have been held at Hong Lim to express anti-immigration sentiments. These sentiments associate 'local' attachment with a cultural ideal of the natal homeland; in this view, a person is more deserving of rights if Singapore is his or her country of birth. Territorial racism not only concerns cultural attitudes but also manifests as demands for policies to systematically differentiate foreigners from locally born Singaporeans.

Clearly there are tensions raised by the Singaporean state's pro-immigration policy of previous years. But insular framing of territorial belonging or non-belonging fail to tackle the systemic shortcomings to do with housing and transportation issues in our urban infrastructure, or the workplace differences that trouble Singaporean society today. It seems easier instead for human nature to fixate upon skin colour, or more subtly, the way immigrants carry themselves (e.g. attire and accent), and take that to signify social difference as non-belonging.

Would a cosmopolitanism outlook in our daily social interactions that respects both the similarities and differences[18] that immigrants have with Singaporeans be more likely to facilitate mutual understanding between the newcomers and

Singaporeans? It is in the fleeting encounters of proximate urban settings – at the housing estate, in the workplace, strolling the shopping mall, waiting for taxis – where we can begin to cultivate an everyday cosmopolitan disposition.

Such social encounters are likely to be marked by ambivalence and uncertainty but also hopefully an innate curiosity that allows us to develop mutual knowledge and respect for one another's differences. For that to happen, Singaporeans also need to confront the social prejudices they harbour about the class, ethnicity or nationality backgrounds of immigrants.

Affinity and Biographical Connections

As a parting thought, I offer another insight on the potential of a cosmopolitan disposition in relation to belonging, migration and diversity. One of the underlying grouses Singaporeans have towards recent immigrants is they do not remain in Singapore over the long term. In other words, they are not stakeholders in the 'Singapore Story'. Singaporeans question what immigrants can contribute and how long they will remain to make those contributions count?

I suggest that we have neglected the resources offered by immigrants who form part of what is called an affinity diaspora. Affinity refers to connections forged out of ties other than blood relations. Or in the case of nationhood and belonging, premises of ancestry and birth places. In other words, affinity can be borne out of biographical ties such as through residency in a country over a period of time, which allows for cultivating emotional attachments to the place and people there.

So far Singaporean policymakers have focused on mobilising overseas Singaporeans for their contributions while they are abroad. Popular and policy understandings of the Singapore diaspora limits cultural inclusion to those who consider it their natal country and with permanent residency or citizenship status in Singapore. However, immigrants can be considered part of a wider affinity diaspora for Singapore even after they re-migrate from Singapore. Individuals tend to adopt an identity or connection with a country by the social fact of having lived there and interacted socially with the other members of that community. The nature of these social encounters impact their impressions of the country.

Other countries have long recognised the potential resources offered by immigrants that later re-migrated. Initiatives such as the Japan Exchange Teaching (JET) Program co-administered by several government departments and organisations, which brings foreigners to Japan for international exchange

and cultivates affinity ties. The JET Program encourages former JET participants to direct their experiences towards enhancing relations between their home countries and Japan. Similarly, countries such as Scotland, Ireland and Canada are starting to recognise former immigrants, overseas students and others with a biographical link to the country as potential diaspora resources.[19]

The significance of the affinity diaspora is not limited to migrant professionals and business people only. Even the lowly paid migrant workers doing less skilled work amongst us can be considered part of an affinity diaspora for Singapore. One need only think of the semi-autobiographical story depicted in the film, *Ilo Ilo*, inspired by the director's memories of a foreign domestic worker who worked for the family previously. That is from the viewpoint of a recipient of care. How about the perspective of the migrant towards how they were treated by Singaporean society when they worked here?

Their working experiences or biographical links with Singapore impact the stories they share with their family members, communities and co-nationals about their lives in this city-state. While Singapore offers opportunity for migrant workers to improve their income and support left-behind family members, as a nation we are similarly supported by this spectrum of migrant workers for our construction needs, domestic labour as well as in the service industry. They deserve to be treated with dignity and respect, as part of a culturally diverse Singaporean society while they remain here.

Even after they re-migrate to their homeland or to a third country, the extent to which they feel their affinity with Singapore is valued impacts the migration decisions of those they know personally or even at the policy level (we need only think about the sporadic 'maid bans' by Indonesia, and more recently, Myanmar as well).

Further, the systematic barriers to working dignity that migrants face as lowly paid workers might cohere in certain aspects with the experiences of Singaporeans employed in blue-collar '3D' jobs (dirty, dangerous and demeaning). Efforts to lobby for the rights of migrant workers to decent living and working conditions while they are employed in Singapore can in fact bring into view the common dimensions of '3D' work done by Singaporeans as well as exacerbating poverty issues in the global city-state.[20]

Recognising the value and significance of an affinity diaspora for Singapore may facilitate a shift in the way we evaluate immigration and cultural diversity, or the social mixing which geographer Doreen Massey refers to as a 'thrown-togetherness'[21] arising from globalisation and migration. Notions of belonging

situated in a national territory are developed out of past experiences of social solidarity, but it is equally cultivated through co-presence in the present guided by an ethos of cosmopolitan sociability. A cosmopolitan city, in other words, is produced not only through urban place branding or cultivating a national population with global competencies.

Affinity is what brings us, 'locals' and foreigners alike, together in this city-state at this time. Decentring the insularity of birthplace and purported birthright to hold in view instead our affinity with the immigrants living amongst us is more likely to foster social respect and inclusion. If one would have it, immigrants may also be considered a potential resource pool for Singapore in the longer term. These insights open up new avenues for developing a cosmopolitan disposition through our everyday interactions. A cosmopolitan city is not one that merely celebrates urban place branding or a national population equipped with global competencies, rather it is one that also values the affinity ties and nurtures social inclusion borne out of shared life stories in a particular time and place.

More immediately, the debates over migration opens up opportunities for forging new understandings that extend beyond what we presume makes up the nation. As the Singaporean population matures in political reasoning, rather than thinking of the foreigner as 'taking' something away from the society, a radically different way of inverting the reasoning is to see the very thing that immigrants purportedly take as something they give back to us.[22] Instead of falling in line with familiar narratives that reinforce narrow-minded portrayals of what constitutes Singaporean nation, the questions we pose and the answers we arrive at, hopefully, will be based upon and foster a cosmopolitan disposition that nurtures respectful negotiation amongst diverse social and cultural groups.

[33]Ibid.

[34]P.S. Suryanarayana, 'Nathan releases Netaji's biography', *The Hindu*, 6 July 2011, http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/nathan-releases-netajis-biography/article2163168.ece.

[35]See Yow, 2007, 276. Yow, Cheun Hoe 游俊豪 2007. '向永恒拷问: 南洋大学的文化符号' (Probing the Question of Eternity: The Cultural Iconology of Nanyang University). In Lee Guan Kin 李元瑾 ed. 2007. 《南大图像: 历史河流中的省视》 (Nantah Images: Looking from Historical Perspectives). Singapore: NTU Centre for Chinese Language and Culture: Global Publishing, 271-290. Also see: The Old Nantah Gateway Arch Being Restored 南大旧牌坊恢复原貌. The Association of Nanyang University Graduates, 2001. http://www.nantahalumni.org.sg/news-2000-3107.htm.

[36]Tan Chuan-Jin, Speech by Minister of State Tan Chuan-Jin - Celebrating and Co-Creating a Rooted Community, 6 March 2012, http://www.mnd.gov.sg/BudgetDebate2012/Speech_by_Minister-of-State_Tan-Celebrating_and_Co-Creating_a_Rooted_Community.html.

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[2]George Yeo Yong-Boon, "Address by BG(Res) George Yeo, Minister For Information And The Arts And Second Minister For Foreign Affairs, At The National University Of Singapore (Nus) Political Association Forum On Thursday, 20 August 1992 At 6.00 P.M.," *National Archives of Singapore*, accessed 25 November 2014, http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/speeches/record-details/718c3fad-115d-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad.

[3]Goh Chok Tong, "Cities: Leading the Way to the Next Millennium. Address by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong at the Dinner of the World Conference on Model Cities on Monday, 19 April 1999, at the Collyer Room, Westin, Stamford, at 7.30pm," *National Archives of Singapore*, accessed 25 November 2014, http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/gct19990419g.pdf.

[4]Goh Chok Tong, "National Day Rally Address by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, Speech in English on 22 August 1999: First-World Economy, World-Class Home," *National Archives of Singapore*, accessed 25 November 2014, http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/speeches/record-details/773bbd69-115d-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad.

[5]Goh Chok Tong, "Strengthening the Singapore Heartbeat. Speech by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong in Parliament on Wednesday, 13 October 1999," *National Archives of Singapore*, accessed 25 November 2014, http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/gct19991013i.pdf.

[6]Ananya Roy, "Slumdog Cities: Rethinking Subaltern Urbanism," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*,35 (2) 2011: 223-238.

[7]Elaine L.E. Ho, "Migration Trajectories of 'Highly Skilled' Middling Transnationals: Singaporean Transmigrants in London," *Population, Space and Place*, 17 (1) 2011: 116-129.

[8]Elaine L.E. Ho, "The Singaporean Diaspora Landscape," in *Changing Landscapes of Singapore: Old Tensions, New Discoveries*, eds. Elaine Ho Lynn-Ee, Woon Chih Yuan and Kamalini Ramdas (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013), 158-176.

[9]Chua Beng Huat. "Multiculturalism in Singapore: An Instrument of Social Control." *Race and Class* (44) 2003: 58–77; Michael D. Barr and Jevon Low, "Assimilation as Multiracialism: The Case of Singapore's Malays," *Asian Ethnicity*, 6 (3) 2005: 161–82.

[10]For example, political luminaries of Eurasian ancestry include David Marshall who was the first Chief Minister of Singapore from 1955-56, Benjamin Henry Sheares who was former President from 1971-1981, and Edward Barker who was a former Member of Parliament from 1964-1988.

[11]Daniel P.S. Goh, "From Colonial Pluralism to Postcolonial Multiculturalism: Race, State Formation and the Question of Diversity in Malaysia and Singapore," *Sociology Compass*, 2 (1) 2008: 232-252.

[12]Elaine L.E. Ho, "Negotiating Citizenship and Belonging in a Transnational World: Singapore, a Cosmopolis." *Social and Cultural Geography*, 7 (3) 2006: 385–401.

[13]Peter Geschiere. *The Perils of Belonging: Autochthony, Citizenship, and Exclusion in Africa and Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

[14]Philip Krestedamas, *Migrants and Race in the US: Territorial Racism and the Alien/Outside* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

[15]Although we usually associate racism with ethnicity, here Krestedamas is arguing that similar dynamics of defining inclusion and exclusion can be found in claims to territorial belonging that emphasise 'native' identity despite immigrant genealogies.

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[19]Jane Yamashiro, "Working Towards Conceptual Consistency in Discussing 'Diaspora' and 'Diaspora Strategies': Ethnicity and Affinity in the Case of Japan," *Geoforum* (forthcoming 2015).

[20]I refer here to Sassen's seminal theses on the social polarisation found in global cities and subsequently on the 'expulsion' of outcast populations through government and corporate instruments; Saskia Sassen, *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014); also see Sharanjit Leyl, 'How do Singapore's poor families get by?', *BBC News*, 27 February 2014, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-26349689. .

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