Singapore's Search for National Identity: Building a Nation through Education

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Higher education institutions in the United States are often concerned with access, affordability, diversity, research, and ranking, but there is less of an emphasis on building national patriotism and unity. In the case of Singapore, universities are concerned with all of the aforementioned issues, but they have also been charged by the Ministry of Education (MOE) to implement National Education, which is a program created to instill a historical understanding of the nation, but also a love for country. Singaporean politicians helped implement National Education in 1997 out of a need to create racial harmony in Singapore's multicultural society, as well as an economic desire to build national loyalty in its citizenry, in order to avoid further brain drain.

Singapore (*Singa-pura* in Malay, meaning lion city) is a small island nation of 5.18 million people, with a diverse population of Chinese (76.8 percent), Malay (13.9 percent), Indian (7.9 percent) and Caucasian (1.4 percent) citizens (Tan 2008). In the last 49 years of independence, Singapore has experienced a number of changes including economic growth, rising immigration, and increased Westernization, which have made it difficult for the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) to create a national identity. It was once a British colony (1819-1942), then a Japanese one (1942-1945), then it became one unified nation with Malaysia (1963-1965), only to separate from Malaysia and gain its independence in 1965 (LePoer 1989).

In the late 1990s, a *New York Times* article reported that out of 800 Singaporean students aged 14 to 28, many Chinese Singaporeans expressed they would rather be Caucasian or Japanese (Richardson 1999). Many of these Singaporeans wanted to identify themselves with the world's leading economic and cultural powers, namely America, Europe, and Japan. Chang

Han Yin, a sociology lecturer at the National University of Singapore who conducted the survey alluded to fears that globalization and economic success were leading to an identity crises in Singapore's youth (Richardson 1999). With this crisis of identity, Singapore's MOE sought to create a new national curriculum called National Education (NE).

In addition, in 1996, the Singaporean MOE conducted student surveys that found that many Singaporean students knew little about the country's recent history. Students knew more about Singapore's past as a British colony, but few knew about the separation from Malaysia, the racial riots of the 1960s, or the nation building efforts of the People's Action Party (PAP) government (San and Goh 2003). In response, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong announced the launch of NE: a new curriculum for primary, secondary, and post-secondary education institutes that would instill national ideals, history, and racial respect in young Singaporeans. The PAP government created a national holiday in conjunction with the launch of NE, called Racial Harmony Day, to commemorate the Malay and Chinese racial riots of 1964. Some scholars believe NE is simply propaganda, while others laud its emphasis on critical thinking as a positive shift from the traditional rote memorization for which Asian schools are often criticized (Tan and Chew 2008).

Singapore may only be a small island nation in Southeast Asia; however, its educational approach has implications and applicability to other countries facing increasing globalization, spreading of Western values, and rising global Islamic fundamentalism (Tan and Chew 2008; Velayutham 2007). As Singapore faces challenges to their social cohesion, the government constructs citizenship curriculum that inculcates youth with Chinese Confucian values, historical knowledge, and national pride, in order to prevent brain drain, main-

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tain economic stability, and foster a racially tolerant society (Han 2009). Singapore provides a unique experiment in nation-building and societal value transmission by instituting required NE curriculum, seminars, and field trips during a student's college years (Singapore MOE Website 2007). This Singaporean case begs the question, what does it mean to be a citizen of a multicultural nation in a globalizing world?

The concepts of nation and national identity are complex ones at best. Is the nation a geographical location, a construct of the government, or an imagined community as Anderson (1991) purports? Koh (2005, 2006) argued that the Singaporean national identity is artificially constructed by the government, through media and schooling; in order to keep political stability, resist Western influences (i.e. globalization), and maintain racial harmony. Koh (2005) supports his argument by citing several speeches by Singaporean political leaders that contain nation building language as well as news coverage that indicates a lack of identity on the behalf of Singaporean youth. In a 1999 speech by Prime Minister Goh, he urged Singaporeans to become a "Singaporean tribe" (Koh 2005, p.77).

In another speech, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, predicated the need for NE on the notion that national instincts and "cultural DNA" (Koh 2005, p. 80) must be passed down from one generation to the next, in order to insure the survival of Singapore. Koh interprets this language as a call by the government to reclaim an authentic Singaporean identity that has never truly existed. The author goes on to assert that the Singaporean government has never recovered from the trauma of being ousted by Malaysia. The PAP government was born from crisis, thus it constructs new dilemmas in order to mobilize a "collective will" and legitimize its control (Koh 2005, p. 84).

The curriculum and pedagogy of NE is not taught as one course, but is infused across the curriculum in social studies, civics and moral education, history, and geography. The message at the primary level is to love Singapore, while the message at the secondary level is to know Singapore, and at the junior college level (pre-university), the message is to lead Singapore. For the less academically inclined students attending institutes of technical education (the United States' equivalent to vocational institutes), the NE message is that these students' role in society is to aid their families and Singapore by working hard and maintaining a stable social order, while university students should learn NE curriculum in order to lead and shape the country's future (Koh 2006). This hierarchical division of societal roles, Koh (2006) argues, seems counterintuitive for a national curriculum that aims to build a national consciousness. Other criticisms of NE are that it presents only the PAP's version of Singaporean history, which could lead to conformist thinking, or on the other spectrum, outright student rejection of the historical material (Koh 2006). Furthermore, most teachers were born post-independence; therefore, they too may disregard the new patriotic and nation-building curriculum as "jingoistic [government] propaganda" (Koh 2006, p. 367).

Sim (2008) offers a different view of NE. While critical of the authoritarian approach of NE that lacks critical questioning of national history and identity, Sim (2008) also offers a realistic portrayal of why the government still enforces NE. Chua (1995) and Sim (2011) explain that the People's Action Party is constantly concerned with Singaporean survival, their monopoly on Singaporean politics, and national stability in light of bombing threats of the Changi Airport by Islamic terrorist group, Jemaah Islamiya. Singapore has no real natural resources, is flanked by two developing Muslim nations (Indonesia and Malaysia), and has had violent racial riots in its past and as a result, the government feels it is imperative for the nation's survival to create racial harmony, foster a sense of loyalty, and cultivate educated workers.

In the 2007 Committee on National Education Executive Summary, the MOE gives data that indicates that NE is working for students at the college level, and the document also provides information on NE efforts being made at the college level. Statistical footnotes in the document indicate that over 90% of students at every grade level have reported positive responses for the measure: "I am proud to be a Singaporean" (MOE 2007) from 1999 to 2005. Furthermore, when asked if they value multi-racial characteristics of Singaporean

society, 94 percent of polytechnic students responded positively. While these figures indicate that NE's message of meritocracy, racial harmony, and loyalty to country are being instilled in pupils, one figure illustrates cause for concern for policy makers. When asked if they would stay in Singapore if given the chance to live anywhere in the world, only 23 percent of university students answered yes. The National Population Secretariat's data suggests that 180,000 Singaporeans resided abroad as of 2010, 20 percent of the top performing junior college students end up working abroad, and the number of college educated Singaporeans looking for work in Australia, Europe, and the United States continue to increase (Chan-Hoong and Soon 2010). The fear of an imminent brain drain led Singaporean political leaders to call for a strengthening of emotional ties to Singapore, and as a result, National Education was implemented to help retain Singapore's best and brightest (Chan-Hoong and Soon 2010).

At the higher education level, NE is carried out in different ways. National University of Singapore (NUS) students are required to take a course from the Singapore Studies department, which offers classes on local and global cultures and politics, such as "Singapore Film: Performance of Identity" and "Singapore, Asia, and American Power" (NUS website 2009). Other institutions, such as Singapore Polytechnic have devised a NE student committee that not only takes students on fieldtrips to culturally relevant sites (such as military bases and ethnic neighborhoods), but has also created its own curriculum called Active Citizenry: Beyond *Kopi Tiam* (Malay, meaning coffee shop) Banter, that teaches students about national history, values, identity, and future challenges (Singapore Polytechnic Website 2012).

In addition, Singapore Management University (SMU) offers a Singapore social studies program, which utilizes constructivist pedagogies and small learning communities to educate students on the rich culture, art, economy, and society that make up this unique island nation. Both NUS and SMU are compelling examples of Citizenship Education implementation at the college level that have yet to receive a great deal of attention from higher education scholars in Singapore

or America. Future research should focus on a comparative analysis of patriotic views, historical understanding, multicultural awareness, and conceptualizations of national identity for both American and Singaporean college students. Studies such as this, could reveal more about how to build national unity in a diverse and continually globalizing world.

Singapore's education system has had to do a complex balancing act between maintaining a local identity, in light of a globalizing world. The government has striven to instill national pride in their young citizens, in order to keep them from venturing off to Europe, China, Australia, and Europe for job opportunities. Singapore's development of Asian values curriculum is unique in the sense that the government forged an Asian identity out of a Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Eurasian population. The need for this forging of national culture is illuminated when viewed through the prism of Tönnies transition from *gemeinschaft* (community) to *gesellschaft* (society). *Gemeinschaft* is explained as a house or family in pre-modern times in which its members cared for one another, were bound by a common ancestry, and worked together for a "common goal" (Tönnies 1957, p. 42). As the rural household or community was replaced by an industrialized society that was profit driven and selfish, the individual transformed from a communal being to an isolated social actor. Contemporary social scientists have reconstructed the *gemeinschaft-gesellschaft* antinomy to represent the conflict between the nation-state and the global society. One can draw parallels with the example of Singapore, in which the country represents a *gemeinschaft* striving to preserve its local culture in light of a dominant Western cultural *gesellschaft* threat.

The NE curriculum was thus infused with Asian values that resemble Tönnies' *gemeinschaft*: Confucian vales of familial duties, hard work, collectivism, and respect for authority (Lee et. al. 2004). Whereas, in the Western counterpart, or *gesellschaft*, individualism, materialism, and democratic values are prized. Singapore's semi-authoritarian government has come to embrace the Western free market economy, but has shied away from subscribing to Western notions of political democracy and human rights. This political and cultural

cherry picking is best explained by Japanese philosopher Masakuza Yamazaki's schema, which described East Asian countries as having adopted and adapted Western political practices at the governmental level (first strata), retained their nation's civilization in their legal institutions (second strata), and preserved their traditional cultures on the familial level (third strata) (Kennedy 2005). This schema problematizes Tönnies duality, and adds another layer of analysis, going from the most public governmental strata, to the most private familial strata. The Singaporean government began to see a tidal shift in this third strata of familial values and cultural identities of young citizens, thus it decided to take action.

NE is a fundamental part of going global and staying local because it strives to instill young citizens with the values the government hopes will boost loyalty to the country, but at the same time teaches students the value of temporarily working abroad (Koh 2007). The government's motive for creating this civic nationalism is for economic productivity and social cohesion. As Foucault's notion of governmentality (Foucault, Burchell, Gordon, and Miller 1991; Koh 2007) indicates, a government manages a country's wealth, provides health care, creates jobs, and ensures the general welfare of its people. In addition, there is a psychological dimension to party rule that involves "the cultivation of a certain mind-set and habitus conducive to guiding the conduct of human beings" (Koh 2007, p. 183). In other words, those in power prescribe youths with certain values, through schooling, in order to create loyal and productive workers that will contribute to a national economy.

In Singapore we see a society in transition. It is a nation-state that has achieved economic success in a short span of time, has overcome ethnic tensions, and gained first world status. The government has tried to limit cultural globalization but has at the same time encouraged economic globalization. The PAP encouragement of Western values and at other times Asian values may seem paradoxical, however, it is simply a mark of the difficult waters a young nation such as Singapore must navigate in a world of competing ideologies and expanding global markets.

American citizenship education at the college level is not as strong as it is in Singapore, in terms of inculcating national history, values, unity, and pride. Some US universities provide multicultural and service-learning courses that are important for fostering knowledge of different cultures and civic engagement; however, there needs to be a discussion not only of our differences, but of what makes us American in the United States. While Singapore is only a small island nation, the US may be able to take a page from Singapore's education system about how to encourage social cohesion through a common history, value system, and shared national identity.

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