Review

Reconfiguring the Singapore identity space: Beyond racial harmony and survivalism

Selina Lim [a], Wai Wai Yang [b], Chan-Hoong Leong [b,*], Jerrold Hong [b]

[a] SIM University, Singapore
[b] National University of Singapore, Singapore

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ABSTRACT

The city-state of Singapore is often considered the jewel of Southeast Asia where residents enjoy a high standard of living and a stable socio-political environment. The former British colony has come a long way since the end of the Second World War when it was engulfed in the throes of domestic and regional turbulence, marked by racial tensions, economic uncertainty, and a hostile neighbourhood gripped in political instability. With the 1950s and 1960s set as a critical juncture of change, the political leadership of Singapore has propelled the city-state forward to emerge a stronger and more resilient nation following the rupture that occurred in 1965 - Singapore's expulsion from the Federation of Malaya. Singapore's development was made possible by state technologies and symbologies that created a social climate promulgating meritocracy and collective ownership. This system of behaviour is centred on a prescribed set of social policies and economic developmental goals that enabled policymakers to implement strategic action plans swiftly and effectively. This political strategy has served the nation well until recent years. Increasingly, the signs seem to indicate that the city-state is now at the epicentre of a new attractor, one that is rooted in global identity and individual agency.

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* Corresponding author at: Institute of Policy Studies, National University of Singapore, 1C Cluny Road, House 5, Singapore 259599, Singapore. Tel.: +65 6516 5601.
E-mail addresses: leong.chanhoong@nus.edu.sg, chanhoong@email.com (C.-H. Leong).

1. Introduction

History provides a rich repository of events, notable people, monuments and institutions from which a national community constructs its identity and stories about its people. Their successes, trials and tribulations, as well as moments of triumph, form the narratives of a nation. For empires and city-states alike, the trajectory of nation-building is often conveniently captured in shared public narratives, leaving behind a historical footprint in every civilization. Nation building and discourse, however, rarely always follow a linear progression.

Theoretical evidence in support of this postulation can be found in dynamical systems or complexity theory (Bousquet & Curtis, 2011; Geyer & Pickering, 2011). Social systems, while interconnected across socio-economic and political spheres, are not programmed to follow a predetermined trajectory. Systems are dynamic, non-linear, and uncertain. They are in a constant state of flux, shaped by the interplay, interactions, and interjections that take place within and between various individual personalities, social groups, and institutions at each intersection in time (Fisher Onar, Liu, & Woodward, 2014; Liu, Fisher Onar, & Woodward, 2014). Critical events at a specific historical juncture thus help to refine and chart the future paths of a system, opening up new possibilities for the entity. Ultimately, however, it is the dynamics of individual personalities, groups, and institutions within the system that will determine whether the openings created at the "critical juncture" are seized upon and snowball into a "rupture," or if the system is to be firmly anchored by forces that have a vested interest in maintaining a semblance of continuity in the current system (Fisher Onar et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2014).

Another key concept in dynamical systems theory is the attractor (Vallacher, Coleman, Nowak, & Bui-Wrzosinska, 2010). An attractor is "a subset of potential states or patterns of change to which a system's behaviour converges over time. Metaphorically, an attractor "attracts" the system's behaviour, so that even very different starting states tend to evolve towards the subset of states defining the attractor" (p. 265). Attractors catalyze the transformation of the system as they favour particular configurations of elements in the system as stable, and render other configurations as unstable.

Suffice to say, society as a system is not immune to dynamic fluctuations. The challenge for the state protagonist is, of course, to identify the historical critical juncture with hindsight and to detect the next emergent disjuncture and its related "attractors" with foresight. Liu et al. (2014) took a step further in their theorization of complexity. In regarding society as a complex system and articulating the importance of historical critical junctures, three distinct but related analytical tools are advanced, namely: (i) symbologies of the state; (ii) technologies of the state; and (iii) identity spaces.

Firstly, symbologies of the state refer to the socially constructed narratives, discourses, and symbols that legitimize a particular form of governance. Symbologies exert a powerful influence in shaping social attitudes; they reflect the desired agenda of the political establishment that define and reinforce the prevailing norms of the day. Secondly, technologies of the state represent the established or inherited institutions, policies or agencies that are designed to enable effective governance; they allow governing bodies to chart the strategic direction of the nation state through institutionalized rules, policies, and norms. Thirdly, identity spaces in the system are arenas where groups contest for the mandate to define, shape and construct the system's collective identity. In the case of a nascent state, that collective identity that groups are contesting to shape would eventually become the coalescent national identity in the nation-building trajectory. These identity spaces exemplify the inherent tensions and discourses found in dynamic systems.

This paper will analyze the case of Singapore using the critical juncture theory. It will (i) offer a brief account of the city-state's developmental trajectory rooted in the events of the 1950s and 1960s that shaped socio-political discourses for the present generation; (ii) explore the intersection of the analytical parameters associated with the critical juncture theory; and (iii) show how the emerging global and domestic landscape is providing the backdrop for the next critical juncture in nation-building for the city-state.

2. The case of Singapore

Singapore is a relatively young nation-state with less than two hundred years of national history. The former British colony was founded by Sir Stamford Raffles in 1819. It was briefly occupied by the Japanese forces during the Second World War but the island quickly reverted to British governance after the war ended. In 1959, the British crown granted Singapore full internal self-government. Singapore briefly joined the Federation of Malaya in 1963, but subsequently became an independent state in 1965 when it separated from the Federation (Bellows, 1967; Bradley, 1965; Cheah, 2006; Ong, 1975).

The Singapore story is a notable one. The city-state of 650 km² has achieved an advanced standard of living in the span of fifty years. From an initial per capita income of US$511 in 1965 (World Development Indicators database, The World Bank), Singapore now boasts a per capita income of US$56,498, making it the third richest country in the world in 2013 (The World Bank, 2013). The city-state is also home to the world's busiest port and world's most awarded airline, and was ranked the best place to do business in the world in 2013 by The World Bank. At the time of its independence in 1965, the city-state had no local defence force and little-to-no skilled labour to speak of. Unemployment was hovering around 10 per cent (Singapore Ministry of Trade and Industry, see www.mti.gov.sg). Suffice to say, economic survival and the management of inter-ethnic strife were paramount goals for nation building. Yet, in less than half a century, the formerly impoverished entrepot-based