



Negotiating our Singaporean Identity

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Singaporeans left a year of hotly contested elections in 2011 and found themselves reacting in a near nation-wide outcry of a different kind early this year when Sun Xu, a National University of Singapore scholar from China remarked on social website Weibo that there were 'more dogs than humans in Singapore'. The highly offensive remark aggravated underlying tensions between locals and foreigners and a number of tax-payers and netizens responded by demanding that Sun's scholarship be revoked on grounds of ingratitude and disrespect to his host country. The furore created has increased the space for re-thinking what Singaporeans hope to claim in terms of ownership and identity other than political activism. The strong response to Sun's comments reminds us that the Singaporean identity is still evolving and there is no consensus on the roles and responsibilities of both citizens and residents.

The Sun Xu incident highlights the discomfort in some quarters about the rise of the number of foreigners residing, studying or working in Singapore. The influx of foreigners into Singapore has been used to support the city-state's economic imperatives for long-term growth. As observed in ministerial dialogues and on social media platforms, the flood of negative sentiments towards foreigners show no sign of subsiding as many Singaporeans believe that they bring considerable social costs to the citizenry. The discomfort with guests over-staying their welcome is constantly played out. In the attempt to define what being Singaporean is, there is also an ongoing discussion about the 'other'. This evokes an instinct of self-defense on the citizen's part. However, a consensus for mutual acceptance continues to be contested in a society where the notion of national identity remains emergent but not clearly seen. Therein begets the question at stake, just what are Singaporeans trying to (re)claim in terms of ownership?

Navigating the Discourse and Taking the Reins

A Singaporean identity associated with economic success is common but remains gestural and is not conducive in the long run for a more emotional pledge towards nation building. By world standards, Singapore has achieved remarkable recognition for her award-winning (housing and business) infrastructure marking her skyline, having excellent airports and achieving high aviation standards amongst other accolades; while boasting an impressive

GDP of US\$62,100 per capita at the same time. However, efforts to forge a Singaporean identity, when compared to its economic achievements, seem less tangible and concrete.

Taking into consideration the need to sustain Singapore's current level of economic growth and a robust economy, the relationship between foreigners and citizens can be said to be a symbiotic one. This requires a balancing act – with the need to attract foreigners as part of a dynamic workforce while safeguarding citizens' socio-economic interests at the same time. Foreign labour is necessary especially in sectors where Singaporeans are reluctant to work in, such as construction, healthcare and hospitality. While political leaders emphasise that foreigners enable Singapore to remain competitive in a global economy and this holds economic benefits for Singaporeans, there remains a degree of mistrust on the part of citizens as efforts to accommodate foreigners are perceived to be at the expense of Singaporeans. The spillover effects of this sentiment include feeling a sense of being 'second-class' citizens in one's own country where generous scholarships are being awarded to foreign students and the experience of constant jostling for space in schools, at work, and even on an over-crowded transport system. Therefore, the blunt sword of competitiveness continues to be sharpened and the constant shaping of an identity associated with economic success unravels in the light of foreign-local tensions. Instead, a more rooted and permanent approach taken towards active ownership could culminate in forging a shared ground for Singaporeans to rally on, in good or bad times.

This is Home Truly

The good news however, is that a distinct Singaporean identity is slowly emerging. There are some indications that more Singaporeans and concerned residents are rallying together to co-create a distinct Singaporean identity. The preservation of areas or monuments iconic in the history of Singapore is an on-going issue as the country continues to undergo urban transformation. The need to stay in touch with one's heritage for example, found its voice in groups of Singaporean residents who campaigned to save Bukit Brown Cemetery from demolition after the land was marked by transport authorities to make way for a highway and future housing developments.

The tussle between transport authorities and heritage and environment conservationists exemplifies the constant contest for one's identity in an increasingly economically-dynamic state. It can be argued that an increase in grassroots activism could deepen a sense of ownership by enabling citizens to share a space for deliberation and more participation.

Media reports suggest that many younger Singaporeans are taking a more assertive stance towards ownership in the society in which they live by becoming more involved and informed at the grassroots level through interaction on the ground. If this trend continues, it augers well for the construction of a Singaporean identity as an impetus towards responsible society building. This is effectively more credible and sustainable since it stems from a deep sense of civic belonging and national pride rather than premising a sense of national worth on material achievements which cannot be guaranteed or constant.

Agree to Disagree

As Singaporeans align their voices through the rise of social media, it would also be useful to emerge from the screens of anonymity and assertively take responsibility for what we say.

There is a need for the ownership of an identity which one can defend based on a collective shared experience backed up by actions other than finding a state of (un)rest in unhappiness exchanged over disagreements and controversial behaviours of individuals or even groups.

In the end, Sun's unbecoming actions have earned him both social and financial penalties. While Singaporeans disagree on the extent to which Sun should be punished – with some feeling outraged that Sun's punishment was insufficient and others accepting NUS's verdict as sufficiently just – they could affirm that Sun's disciplinary penalty of three months of community service would hope to re-negotiate the parameters of ownership by steering him towards giving back to a society of people whom he had demonstrated absolute disregard for previously. In this case, advocating community service as a medium for advancing social cohesion should not only apply to foreigners, but for all Singaporeans to come together and work collectively for the public good. Another incident of a Singaporean polytechnic student's Twitter post regarding the Indian minority highlights the necessity for a coordinated response to behaviour that threatens a cohesive identity of multicultural respect. The objective of claiming this space therefore, is to foster civic responsibility as a means towards an end. Singaporeans need to see that any claim to ownership should bear the end goal of advancing Singaporean society as a whole.

Onward Singapore

Perhaps, the current model of economic efficiency has unwittingly emphasised the importance of economic progress and in the process, there is little incentive to be agents of change but to be critics of *all* which threatens to upset our comfort zone. The moral of the story therefore, is not to 'reflect on ourselves' in the midst of scathing name-calling by a young foreigner or to launch a full scale verbal attack on individuals and groups in retaliation. Rather, it is to exercise a collective ownership of ties and social responsibility towards society in Singapore *from* Singaporeans; and to re-write *our* notion of belonging and pride. It will be a shame if this and other episodes divide the country by posing that citizens are always articulating resentment towards others but are not exercising meaningful ownership in society. A more united stand towards this claim would be more credible than treading the line of xenophobia indefinitely.

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