Emerging sense of S'porean identity independent of ethnic heritage

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A recent survey on ethnic identity shows that many Singaporeans rate speaking English as a more important trait of being Singaporean than being able to trace one's ethnic heritage.

The run-up to Singapore's first reserved presidential election two months ago was marked by contention over what exactly constitutes an "authentic" Singapore Malay.

As the 2017 presidential election was reserved for Malay candidates, some scrutinised the presidential hopefuls' heritage, their fluency in Malay, and their participation in cultural activities. But without an established consensus on what the most important distinguishing features a Singapore Malay should possess or practise were, the debate among the citizenry could not be easily settled.

This is to be expected. While self-identification is an important part of determining ethnic identity, notions surrounding identity will invariably be contested - groups within each community and the broader public have different opinions as to who legitimately qualifies to use a particular ethnic label.

To better understand public views on this topic, we had earlier set out to survey a representative sample of over 2,000 Singaporeans. The resulting Channel News Asia - Institute of Policy Studies Survey on Ethnic Identity, among other things, gave a list of nearly 40 ethnic identity markers for each major ethnic community in Singapore, and asked respondents how important they felt these were for one to be considered a Singapore Chinese, Malay, Indian and Eurasian.

So, each respondent, whether Chinese, Malay, Indian or Eurasian, would be given the same lists for all four ethnic groups. They were also asked to state their race, so that their views on their own group could be appropriately matched. This project would then allow us to have some ground-up notions of the markers of ethnic identity in Singapore.

Across the three main ethnic groups, respondents were unanimous in ranking vernacular language proficiency (Mandarin, Malay and Tamil) and the marking of key festivals as being of much greater significance than other traits such as having close friends of the same ethnicity, the ability to eat in a traditional way (with chopsticks or hands) or appreciating ethnic music and art.

At least 90 per cent of respondents from each of the three major races ranked reading, writing and speaking in the community's language as among the top three most important markers of ethnic identity in Singapore.

Nearly 92 per cent of Chinese regarded the celebration of Chinese New Year as at least a somewhat important identity marker of a Singapore Chinese, as did 95.9 per cent of Malays when it came to Hari Raya Puasa for a Singapore Malay, and 88.2 per cent of Indians on Deepavali for Singapore Indians.

The fact that a greater proportion of respondents picked a choice involving the Singaporean identity indicates that the notion of "Singaporean-ness" resonates with many of us. In contrast, comparatively fewer see themselves purely in ethnic terms.

Respondents were also near unanimous in their agreement that the ability to read or write in an individual's ethnic language (93.3 per cent) and converse in one's ethnic language (94 per cent) was at least somewhat important to be passed down to future generations.

These findings were consistent across all age groups (our study tapped the views of mostly Singaporeans aged 21 to 74). For instance, 93 per cent of those aged 21 to 25 thought it was important to transmit the ability to read and write in their ethnic language. The proportion of 56- to 65-year-olds reporting similar sentiments was the same.

STATE-LED POLICIES' IMPACT

The convergence towards the importance of ethnic language proficiency and festival celebrations can be interpreted as partly resulting from state-led policies.

The bilingualism policy, in place since 1959 and which makes it compulsory for students in mainstream schools to learn both the English language and a mother tongue language for at least 10 years, has arguably conveyed the notion that being a Singapore Chinese, Malay or Indian is closely associated with the ability to speak and write in his or her mother tongue.

Preserving mother tongue languages via a bilingual education policy has given generations of students cultural ballast amid the perceived worries of the effects of globalisation.

Respondents' identification of festive cultural celebrations as a key marker of ethnic identity suggests that state-supported observance of key cultural festivals associated with the different ethnic groups through public holidays, and celebrations in schools and community organisations, have had some effect in fostering a sense of community identity. This is no doubt strengthened by Singaporeans' own celebrations of such festivities in their own families and social circles.

THE ROLE OF ENGLISH

One finding worth highlighting was that around 80 per cent of respondents in each of the three main ethnic groups viewed speaking good English as important to being considered a Singapore Chinese, Malay and Indian. This was accorded more weight than ethnic lineage and heritage markers, such as tracing one's ancestry.

The focus on English as an identity marker for a Singapore Chinese, Malay, and Indian, despite our different backgrounds and heritage, would probably not have figured as prominently among first-generation immigrants to Singapore.

That this emphasis on English is now considered important today, and the fact that it occurred across respondents from the three main races, suggests that there is some acknowledgement of one of the features that binds us - a common language.

It also leads to the notion that ethnic identity is just one part of how we think of ourselves. The other is the idea of "being Singaporean".

Which figures higher in our consciousness though? When asked whether they identified more with their ethnic or Singaporean identity, it was the combination of the two that resonated with the most respondents (49 per cent, compared to 35 per cent for Singaporean identity only and 14.2 per cent for ethnic identity only).

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As Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said in May, when we deal with nationals from countries where our forefathers came from, "we are confident of our own Singaporean cultures and identities, even as we are conscious that we are ethnic Chinese, Malays, Indians or Eurasians".

This embrace of national identity over ethnic identity - that many citizens see themselves as Singaporeans first, and then Chinese, Malays or Indians next - has other implications.

It suggests that, for many of us, there is no contradiction between the dual, hyphenated identities of someone seeing himself as a Singapore Chinese, Malay, Indian, or Eurasian.

Because of our immigrant history, and our proximity to China, India and the Malay Archipelago, there have been concerns that loyalties based on ethnic or historical ties may surface from time to time, leading to conflicted allegiances among some. But the survey results suggesting that many respondents view themselves primarily as Singaporeans first indicates a substantial sense of loyalty to this budding nation composed mostly of immigrants, or descendants of immigrants, from diverse backgrounds.

Another finding from our survey backs this up. Fewer respondents across all ethnic groups ranked "feeling a connection to the country where ancestors came from" as an important identity marker.

Two other aspects of ethnic lineage and heritage: being able to trace one's ancestry to some part of these foreign lands, or visiting the region where one's ancestors came from, were similarly not important markers to most respondents.

Our nation-building project is far from over, but the perceptions of respondents from the CNA-IPS study should galvanise us to continue working towards strengthening both our national pride and identity, and the rich ethnic identities that undergird it.