

The Case of Singapore: The Impact of Co-Ethnic Populations on Bilateral Relations

Introduction

Various social and political movements in the 20th and 21st centuries have divided ethnic populations beyond traditional national borders, such as in the pertinent case of Russia and Ukraine, or the Eastern parallel of China and Taiwan. In these cases, the homeland states often try to appeal to ethnic commonalities to influence bilateral relations and further their own interests. Vladimir Putin has justified his “special military operation” in Ukraine upon the basis that “Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians are all descendants of Ancient Rus,”¹ and has long backed Russian separatists in the Donbass region, accusing Kyiv of “persecut[ing] ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking citizens.”² China views Taiwan as a “renegade province” and “vows to eventually unify Taiwan with the mainland.”³ Beyond Taiwan, China has shifted the targets of its *luoye guigen* (translates to “return to original roots”) foreign policy from *huaqiao* (Chinese nationals abroad) to include *huaren* (foreign nationals of Chinese descent).⁴ While initiator states’ foreign policies have destabilized domestic politics in some host nations⁵, one nation in Southeast Asia has managed to weather through and preserve its sovereignty: Singapore.

The Southeast Asian city-state has a population formed out of indigenous Malays, most of whom immigrated from peninsular Malaya, Chinese immigrants (mainly from the southern coast of mainland China), Tamil immigrants, and a minority of Eurasians. Its strategic trade location

¹ Putin, Vladimir. 2021. “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians.” President of Russia. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

² Fisher, Max. 2022. “Putin's Baseless Claims of Genocide Hint at More Than War.” The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/19/world/europe/putin-ukraine-genocide.html>.

³ Maizland, Lindsay, and Robert D. Blackwill. 2021. “Why China-Taiwan Relations Are So Tense.” Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/china-taiwan-relations-tension-us-policy>.

⁴ Suryadinata, Leo. 2021. “How China's rise is affecting ethnic identities in Southeast Asia.” South China Morning Post. <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3137620/indonesia-singapore-chinas-rise-affecting-ethnic-identities>.

⁵ Suryadinata, “How China's rise is affecting ethnic identities in Southeast Asia.”

and “capital enterprise” in the Straits of Malacca made it an attractive settlement for immigrants seeking better livelihoods.⁶ Despite the relative socio-political stability the island now enjoys, the racial and political riots during Singapore’s early years reveal China’s and Malaysia’s concerted attempts to further their geopolitical interests through co-ethnic populations in Singapore.

In China’s effort to “incorporate Chinese overseas”⁷ in the 1930s, the Kuomintang (KMT) opened branches in Malaya—a region comprising peninsular Malaysia and Singapore—and “work[ed] assiduously among the Chinese workers and students in Chinese schools.”⁸ The CCP also set up the Nanyang Communist Party and Nanyang General Labor Union in 1928, which were eventually reorganized into the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) and Malayan General Labor Union (MGLU) in 1930.⁹ The communist movement took advantage of linguistic commonalities, the grievances of the Chinese diaspora, as well as the success of the CCP back in China¹⁰ to “export communist revolution”¹¹ to Singapore. Following the end of the Japanese Occupation in WW2 in 1945, these two organizations began infiltrating student unions, trade unions, cultural organizations, and even political parties to cause political turmoil in a bid to establish a communist republic in Singapore.¹²

⁶ Ee, Joyce. 1961. “Chinese Migration to Singapore, 1896-1941.” *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 2, no. 1 (March): 33.

⁷ Thunø, Mette. 2001. “Reaching Out and Incorporating Chinese Overseas: The Trans-Territorial Scope of the PRC by the End of the 20th Century.” *The China Quarterly* 168 (December): 910-29.

⁸ Suryanrayan, V. “Rise of Communism in Malaya (1930-1948).” *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 38 (1977): 613–20. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44139123>.

⁹ Singapore Infopedia. “Communist Party of Malaya.” *Singapore Infopedia*, https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2018-03-28_141257.html.

¹⁰ “Milestones: 1945–1952.” Office of the Historian. Accessed April 24, 2022. <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/chinese-rev>.

¹¹ Hsiao, Russell. 2019. “A Preliminary Survey of CCP Influence Operations in Singapore.” Jamestown Foundation. <https://jamestown.org/program/a-preliminary-survey-of-ccp-influence-operations-in-singapore/>.

¹² Hsiao, “A Preliminary Survey of CCP Influence Operations in Singapore.”

Malaysia's interactions with its co-ethnic population in Singapore became more prominent during the merger to form the Federation of Malaysia in 1963.¹³ The People's Action Party's (PAP) government in Singapore was seen as "a challenge to the existing multi-racial Alliance regime" and "a Chinese challenge"—due to the majority Chinese make-up of the PAP—to Malaysia's "Malay-first" policy.¹⁴ Political tensions spilled over when United Malays National Organization (UMNO), which led the Alliance government in Malaysia, set up a local subsidiary Singapore UMNO (SUMNO) and won no seats in Singapore's 1963 general elections, despite running in three areas with Malay majorities.¹⁵ This led Malay activists within UMNO to launch a campaign through SUMNO conventions and local Malay newspapers to accuse the PAP of oppressing Malays in Singapore, culminating in the bloody race riots of 1964.¹⁶

This paper aims to examine the conditions under which states use the concept of transnational nationhood to advance national interests in bilateral relations, as well as the mitigating measures states on the receiving end take to preserve their sovereignty. The analysis starts by investigating the conditions surrounding the ethnic conflicts in Singapore in its early years, before revealing the motivations of both China and Malaysia in mobilizing their co-ethnic populations in Singapore. This paper then examines the key figures and structural factors that led to the introduction of Singapore's own counteractive policies to preserve its sovereignty, followed by an evaluation of the impact of said policies. This paper essentially presents the argument that though co-ethnic populations serve as a viable vehicle for strategic gains in bilateral relations, host

¹³ The Straits Times. 1963. "Up Goes The Flag." NewspaperSG.

<https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19630917-1.2.2>.

¹⁴ Leifer, Michael. 1965. "Singapore in Malaysia: The Politics of Federation." *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 6, no. 2 (Sep.): 55.

¹⁵ Han, Jamie. 2014. "Communal riots of 1964." NLB eResources.

https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_45_2005-01-06.html.

¹⁶ Han, "Communal riots of 1964."

states on the receiving end have the means to contain forces of ethno-transnationalism and foster a stronger civic identity through the implementation of effective policies.

Literature Review

Primordialism vs. Constructivism in Building Transnational Ethnic Ties

A prominent argument rationalizing ethno-transnationalism is the appeal to a non-territorial ethnic commonality. One of the most notable voices of this paradigm is political scientist Walker Connor, who holds the primordial view that the basis of civic identity is “tied inextricably to ethnicity,” or an “intuitive conviction of common descent.”¹⁷ Primordialists therefore argue that ethnic identity gives individuals a sense of “communal membership” in “culturally defined and bounded worlds.”¹⁸ In the context of ethnonationalist movements, primordial views appeal to transnational ideologies, “narratives that exceeded the territorial nation,” like pan-Asianism in the 20th century.¹⁹ However, primordialism crucially overlooks cases in which dispersed ethnicities have been indifferent to transnational movements. In *Transnationalism and the Predicament of Sovereignty*, historian and professor of East Asian studies at Duke University Prasenjit Duara highlights the failure of the “narrative of national greatness focused on Han racial superiority over primitive peoples unlimited by territorial boundaries,” perpetrated by the Chinese republican revolutionaries in Singapore and Malaya.²⁰

¹⁷ Conversi, Daniele. “Conceptualizing Nationalism: An Introduction to Walker Connor's Work.” *Debating the Breakup of Yugoslavia*, 2-3.

¹⁸ Breuilly, John. 1994. *Nationalism and the State*. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 401.

¹⁹ Duara, Prasenjit. 1997. “Transnationalism and the Predicament of Sovereignty: China, 1900-1945.” *The American Historical Review* 102, no. 4 (Oct.): 1046.

²⁰ Duara, “Transnationalism and the Predicament of Sovereignty: China, 1900-1945.” 1046.

Constructivism attempts to fill in these gaps by asserting the malleability of ethnic identities through external variables, processes, agents, and motivations.²¹ In addition, constructivists point out that “ethnic categories that individuals identify with are constructed and change across time.”²² Postmodernist constructivists, like Nelson Kasfir, even posit that “identity may shift dramatically not only from one ethnic category to another, but from ethnicity to class to religion.”²³ Political scientist Kanchan Chandra echoes the sentiment that “ethnic groups are unstable to some degree,” with destabilizing factors such as political alternatives, ethnic group size, and multidimensional political choices, therefore rendering the primordial approach an oversimplification of the tensions between ethnic and civic identities.²⁴ This paper attempts to synthesize viewpoints from both primordialism and constructivism to understand the opportunities and limitations of co-ethnic identities in bilateral relations.

Reductivist Arguments in Transnational Nationhood

Chandra explains that “demands made by ethnic groups are zero-sum” and “are motivated by a desire for relative rather than absolute gains.” She demonstrates how, when “ethnic groups accord equally high symbolic value to the same good,”²⁵ a zero-sum conflict naturally arises. In a zero-sum conflict, the benefit of one ethnic group is the loss of others. This leads to a display of realist behavior as an ethnic group pursues relative over absolute gains to “distance between its own position and that of others.”²⁶ From a transnational perspective, the preexisting realist tendencies of ethnic groups make it appealing to initiator states seeking to

²¹ Chandra, Kanchan, ed. 2012. *Constructivist Theories of Ethnic Politics*. N.p.: Oxford University Press.

²² Chandra, Kanchan. 2001. “Ethnic Bargains, Group Instability, and Social Choice Theory.” *Politics & Society* 29, no. 3 (Sep.): 337-49.

²³ Kasfir, Nelson. 1979. “Explaining Ethnic Political Participation.” *World Politics* 31, no. 3 (Apr.): 372.

²⁴ Chandra, “Ethnic Bargains, Group Instability, and Social Choice Theory.” 338.

²⁵ Chandra, “Ethnic Bargains, Group Instability, and Social Choice Theory.” 341.

²⁶ Chandra, “Ethnic Bargains, Group Instability, and Social Choice Theory.”, 342.

advance their own interests through co-ethnic populations in a host state. Rather than pursuing their interests through diplomatic means, co-ethnic populations provide an alternative route to generate bottom-up pressure on their governments to shape policies in line with the initiator state. In a democratic society, it is arguably harder to deny the demands of one's people than the demands of another state, therefore providing the initiator state a means of circumventing the sovereignty of the host state.

Chandra notably prefaces these claims by stating that individuals in ethnic groups "must have a strong sense of distinctiveness" for "relative gains seeking to occur."²⁷ It is therefore imperative that the initiator state orchestrates a transnational narrative that cultivates a "strong sense of distinctiveness" to mobilize the primordial and realist tendencies in its target co-ethnic population. However, the limitations of the primordial and realist approaches are exposed when constructions of ethnic identity in an ethnic group are ignored, as in the case of China's failed narrative of Han racial superiority vis-a-vis the Singaporean Chinese in the 1920s.

Constructivist approaches help to explain instances whereby ethnic groups generally pick their civic identity over their ethnic alignment in political situations. Chia-Chou Wang, a professor of public policy at I-Shou University in Taiwan, proposes a new conceptual framework consisting of four theories that combine elements of constructivism and primordialism to determine the factors that influence Taiwan's regime acceptance with China, therefore providing a new avenue of insight into the tensions between civic and ethnic identity.

Social identity theory adopts the primordial view that one's personal knowledge of belonging to a social group will inherently lead to the determination of "systemic significance of

²⁷ Chandra, "Ethnic Bargains, Group Instability, and Social Choice Theory." 343.

the individual in relation to other people.”²⁸ This reinforces the aforementioned example of China’s promulgation of the Han racial superiority narrative in Singapore. Rational choice theory recognizes the individual agency that members of an ethnic group have in determining their identity by maximizing the “effectiveness of their preferences,” as well as “personal gain and benefit.” This theory reveals an element of realism on an individual level of analysis that is overlooked at the domestic level and explains cases where Taiwanese people exhibit higher levels of identity alignment with mainland China if they have vested economic interests.²⁹ Social contact theory posits that the presence, or lack thereof, of understanding and trust in interpersonal relationships will either reinforce or reduce prejudice between ethnic groups. The quality of these relationships are based on five factors: “equal status among interacting groups, sharing a common goal, cross-group cooperation, support from officials and potential friendships.”³⁰ Therefore, a higher amount of social contact between ethnic groups may or may not reduce inter-group prejudice. Political socialization theory states that the political attitudes of members in an ethnic group can be shaped by four agents: family, educational institutions, peer groups within social networks, and mass communication media.³¹ This paper will use Wang’s four-theory framework to show how a combination of constructivist and primordial factors create both opportunities and limitations for initiator states to mobilize their co-ethnic populations in host states. This combination sets up a holistic approach to determining the push and pull factors

²⁸ Chia-Chou, Wang. 2017. “Primordialism, Instrumentalism, Constructivism: Factors Influencing Taiwanese People’s Regime Acceptance of Mainland China’s Government.” *Journal of Contemporary China* 27, no. 109 (Aug.): 140.

²⁹ Wang, “Primordialism, Instrumentalism, Constructivism: Factors Influencing Taiwanese People’s Regime Acceptance of Mainland China’s Government.” 142.

³⁰ Hamberger, Jurgen, and Miles Hewstone. 1997. “Inter-ethnic contact as a predictor of blatant and subtle prejudice: Tests of a model in four West European nations.” *British Journal of Social Psychology* 36: 173.

³¹ Wang, “Primordialism, Instrumentalism, Constructivism: Factors Influencing Taiwanese People’s Regime Acceptance of Mainland China’s Government.” 142-3.

in co-ethnic populations choosing between ethnic or civic identity, therefore giving host states agency in formulating public policies that safeguard their sovereignty in the face of ethno-transnationalism.

Analysis

China and Singaporean Chinese

Under British colonial rule in the 19th and 20th centuries, the Chinese community cemented itself as the “industrious race” in the eyes of the British colonial regime in Singapore, with a sizable number of Hokkien, Teochew, and Cantonese immigrants becoming successful merchants.³² Recognizing that the wealth of *huaren* in Southeast Asia could be redirected to China in the form of remittances, both the Qing state and republican revolutionaries drew upon transnational ideologies, especially Han racial superiority, to draw Singaporean Chinese loyalties back to the mainland.³³ As rational choice explains, the Singaporean Chinese population would maximize the effectiveness of their preferences for personal benefit,³⁴ therefore explaining their initial favor towards the relative “peace and economic opportunities” their Singaporean identity could offer that their ethnic identity could not. A combination of initial persecution from the Qing government towards *huaqiao*,³⁵ socio-political instability in China³⁶, as well as the continued economic prosperity in Singapore, entrenched the Chinese immigrant community in the Singaporean civic identity at the start of the 20th century.

³² Lai, Chee Kien. n.d. “Multi-ethnic Enclaves around Middle Road: An Examination of Early Urban Settlement in Singapore.” *National Library Board*. https://biblioasia.nlb.gov.sg/files/pdf/vol-2/issue-2/v2-issue2_MultiEthnic.pdf.

³³ Duara, “Transnationalism and the Predicament of Sovereignty: China, 1900-1945.” 1043-6.

³⁴ Ee, “Chinese Migration to Singapore, 1896-1941.” 37.

³⁵ Duara, “Transnationalism and the Predicament of Sovereignty: China, 1900-1945.” 1046.

³⁶ Ee, “Chinese Migration to Singapore, 1896-1941.” 33-5.

The post-World War I depression, however, presented opportunities for a swing towards ethno-transnationalism for China. The “world-wide economic depression” heavily impacted Singaporean Chinese laborers, or “coolies,” therefore making them “inclined to consider communist ideas favorably.”³⁷ The tight-knit clanship and secret society culture in Singaporean Chinese communities³⁸ provided the social networks for political socialization of communist ideology, while the local CPM party and MGLU labor union promulgated propaganda in Mandarin and capitalized on the economic grievances of the Singaporean Chinese.³⁹

The real tipping point came about in World War II, when the Sino-Japanese War and Japanese Occupation of Malaya generated intense “anti-Japanese feelings among the Chinese” which the MCP “fully exploited.”⁴⁰ The popularity of the MCP’s military arm, the Malayan People’s Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA), and its affiliated civilian organization, the Malayan People’s Anti-Japanese Union (MPAJU), in resistance against the Japanese gave the MCP political clout to mobilize the co-ethnic Chinese population in Singapore. The MCP was also a majority-Chinese party, and the concurrent success of the 1949 communist revolution in China would have inspired co-ethnic Chinese to choose ethnic over national identity for the potential relative gains in political agency. Then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew identified the MCP as a clear communist threat, especially after the Internal Security Council found the party to be

³⁷ Suryanrayan, “Rise of Communism in Malaya.” 615.

³⁸ “History of Singapore.” n.d. Nations Online Project. Accessed April 24, 2022.
<https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/History/Singapore-history.htm>.

³⁹ Mok, Florence. 2021. “Disseminating and Containing Communist Propaganda to Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia through Hong Kong, the Cold War Pivot, 1949–1960.” *The Historical Journal*, (Dec.), 1-21.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X21000790>.

⁴⁰ Suryanrayan, “Rise of Communism in Malaya.” 616.

instigators of the 1956 Chinese riots by appearing to be “defenders of Chinese culture and champions of the workers.”⁴¹

However, intra-party conflicts (sparked by alleged “hidden traitor” and leader of the party Lai Teck) and a firm reaction from the British quelled the communist threat,⁴² before Lee Kuan Yew’s People’s Action Party (PAP) controversially expelled suspected communist elements in cultural organizations, trade and student unions, and political parties through the 1963 Operation Coldstore and the Internal Security Act.⁴³ When passing the 1974 Newspaper and Printing Presses Bill amendment to safeguard local publications from foreign interference, then-Minister for Culture Jek Yeun Thong highlighted the “Eastern Sun” as an example. The newspaper was being funded by a Hong Kong-based Communist intelligence agency. When further traced back, the Eastern Sun was only one of many publications in Singapore that were a result of CCP efforts to export communist propaganda and literature through Hong Kong. Even British colonial administrators had already identified this phenomenon as a significant obstacle to “Malayanization,” or an assimilation of all races in Malaya, and de-Sinicization.⁴⁴

Nevertheless, the PAP then managed to mitigate backlash from local Communist sympathizers by being “champions of [...] Chinese interests” in Singapore,⁴⁵ hence reducing the gap between civic and ethnic identity in potential relative gains. In other words, an ethnic

⁴¹ “Internal Security Council’s Decision and Statement on Communist Conspiracy.” Official Reports - Parliamentary Debates. Parliament of Singapore, April 9, 1963.

https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/topic?reportid=018_19630409_S0004_T0009.

⁴² Suryanrayan, “Rise of Communism in Malaya.” 618-9.

⁴³ Ramakrishna, Kumar. 2015. *Original Sin? Revising the Revisionist Critique of the 1963 Operation Coldstore in Singapore*. N.p.: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. 3-5.

⁴⁴ Florence Mok, “Disseminating and Containing Communist Propaganda to Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia through Hong Kong, the Cold War Pivot, 1949–1960,” *The Historical Journal*, December 7, 2021, pp. 1-21, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0018246x21000790>.

⁴⁵ Rahim, Lily Z. 2007. “Singapore-Malaysia relations: Deep-seated tensions and self-fulfilling prophecies.” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 29, no. 1 (May): 42.

Chinese person's social identification as a Singaporean presents more relative gains, as compared to an ethnic Chinese person in Malaysia, therefore making a Singaporean Chinese's civic identity more appealing. Singapore's strategies in giving its civic identity a comparative advantage will be detailed later in the analysis portion of this paper.

Malaysia and Singaporean Malays

Singapore's post-colonial merger with Malaya brought many fundamental disagreements between the ruling parties of PAP in Singapore and UMNO in Malaysia, with the prevalent one being between UMNO's policy of *ketuanan Melayu*, or Malay supremacy and affirmative action towards the *bumiputera* ("son of the soil"), and the PAP's policy of multiethnic equality. UMNO also had vested interests in growing its political agency over the majority-Chinese nation. With Chinese involvement in the communist movement fresh in the minds of UMNO, and deep-rooted "economic inequalities between the ethnic Malays and Chinese" from colonial-era policies,⁴⁶ Singaporean Malays were even more predisposed to viewing their political demands as a zero-sum game. Seeing the affirmative action that Malaysian Malays enjoy, Singaporean Malays would be more inclined to choose ethnic over civic identity due to the former's inherent relative gains. Social identity theory reinforces this by showing how ethnic Malays can recognize their constitutional privileges as indigenous people, therefore sparking inclinations to act on their perceived "systemic significance over others."⁴⁷ Additionally, the lack of social contact as a result of primordial "ethnic enclaves"⁴⁸ led to a dearth in understanding and trust in inter-ethnic group relations, thereby reinforcing inter-group prejudice. The aforementioned factors in social

⁴⁶ Furlow, Christopher A. 2009. "Malaysian Modernities: Cultural Politics and the Construction of Muslim Technoscientific Identities." *Anthropological Quarterly* 82 (1). 10.1353/anq.0.0056.

⁴⁷ Wang, "Primordialism, Instrumentalism, Constructivism: Factors Influencing Taiwanese People's Regime Acceptance of Mainland China's Government." 140.

⁴⁸ Lai, "Multi-ethnic Enclaves around Middle Road: An Examination of Early Urban Settlement in Singapore."

identity and social contact show how Singapore was fertile ground for Malaysia's local arm, SUMNO, to instigate the 1964 racial riots.

There were significant tensions in political socialization, as seen through PAP and UMNO's opposing political messages, though UMNO managed to politically socialize its co-ethnic population through SUMNO conventions and local Malay newspapers. By turning the political attitudes of Singaporean Malays against the government, the local co-ethnic population was primed to mount pressure on the PAP for their ethnic rights and privileges, putting them in line with Malaysia's *ketuanan Melayu* policy. The inflammatory tactics of UMNO's ethno-transnationalism culminated in the 1964 race riots, and Singapore's separation from the Federation of Malaysia in 1965.⁴⁹

Even post-independence, Singapore-Malaysia tensions continued to be a point for inter-group provocation and domestic instability. A 1967 parliamentary debate surrounding then-SUMNO head Ahmad Haji Taff and *Utusan Melayu*, a Malaysian publication, revealed concern over attempts to enrage Malays inside and outside of Singapore by instigating on the basis of the nation-state's purported anti-Malay agenda.⁵⁰ The incident was timed to spark racial tensions while Singapore was in its early years of independence, in the hope of destabilizing the young nation and keeping it, at the very least, in Malaysia's shadow.

The Singaporean Blueprint of Counteractive Policies

⁴⁹ Thio, Li-ann. "Irreducible Plurality, Indivisible Unity: Singapore Relational Constitutionalism and Cultivating Harmony Through Constructing a Constitutional Civil Religion." *German Law Journal* 20, no. 7 (2019): 1007–34. 10.1017/glj.2019.75.

⁵⁰ "Humiliatory Articles on the Republic in the *Utusan Melayu*," Official Reports - Parliamentary Debates (Parliament of Singapore, March 13, 1967), https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/topic?reportid=018_19670313_S0005_T0010.

In the face of both ethnic Chinese and Malay demands that destabilized domestic politics, Singapore's leaders recognized the need to decouple co-ethnic populations from their origin countries, as well as reduce domestic inter-race tensions. Following is an explication of some of the key policies that have contributed to Singapore's success in countering ethno-transnationalism. In identifying the success factors in Singapore's policies, this analysis attempts to outline a blueprint for other states to follow in safeguarding their own sovereignty.

Institutionalizing Multiracialism: A Post-Colonial Outlook

One of Singapore's earliest policies in institutionalizing multiculturalism was its colonial-era Chinese, Malay, Indian, Others (CMIO) demographic framework. Scholars trace the CMIO framework back to the first census taken in 1824, when the British colonial administration had to find a way to manage the island's diversity⁵¹. Daniel PS Goh, an associate professor of sociology at the National University of Singapore, argues that the framework represents an institutionalization of racial pluralism in Singapore, in what he terms "communitarian multiracialism."⁵² However, colonial-area pluralism meant "disparate communal groups" that were managed by "prison-like physical segregation," with little to no meaningful social contact.⁵³ While initially a tool to classify the diverse population, the CMIO "racial grid" also doubled as a colonial "disciplinary tool" to curb trans-ethnic solidarities.⁵⁴

Professor Goh cites the example of "multiracial alliances encompassing Chinese, Malay, and Indian secret societies and warlords" in the 1860s to 70s while under British colonial administration, and the eventual erosion of inter-ethnic acculturation as the CMIO framework

⁵¹ Buckley, C. B. (1984). "An anecdotal history of old times in Singapore 1819–1867." *Singapore: Oxford University Press*: 154. Call no.: RSING 959.57 BUC-[HIS].

⁵² Goh, Daniel P.S. "Diversity and Nation-Building in Singapore." Global Centre for Pluralism, April 2017. https://www.pluralism.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Singapore_DGoh_Complete_Case_EN.pdf.

⁵³ Goh, "Diversity and Nation-Building in Singapore." 2.

⁵⁴ Goh, "Diversity and Nation-Building in Singapore." 2.

successfully molded the political economy for the races in Singapore. In *The Making of Race in Colonial Malaya: Political Economy and Racial Ideology*, sociologist Charles Hirschman shows how colonial racial ideology pigeonholed the CMI races into specific stereotypes. From “Malay laziness” to Chinese greed and docile Indians,⁵⁵ Hirschman reveals how colonial perceptions of the races in Singapore led to the differentiated governance of each racial group.⁵⁶

The CMIO framework then manifested itself in a form of “consociational democracy,” as political parties like UMNO, the Malayan Chinese Association, and Malayan Indian Congress formed along clear racial lines. In a consociational democracy, inter-group stability is achieved between divided groups by giving equal political agency to the representatives of each group.⁵⁷ Even the PAP, which won the 1959 general elections to gain internal self-government from the British, was a multiracial party and therefore provided the “platform for inter-ethnic bargaining”⁵⁸ at the highest political level.

However, even in post-colonial Singapore, the CIMO framework retained its colonial-era purpose: ease of governance. The racial grid that the British colonial administration cemented caused racial communities to thrive in parallel, separated. This was evident in the urban planning of ethnic enclaves, as the British situated the “Chinese in the downtown area, the Malays in Kampong Glam and Geylang Serai, and the Indians in Serangoon and Sembawang.”⁵⁹ This physical separation of the races was exacerbated by another issue, as Goh describes:

⁵⁵ Hirschman, Charles. “The Making of Race in Colonial Malaya: Political Economy and Racial Ideology.” *Sociological Forum* 1, no. 2 (1986): 330–61. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/684449>.

⁵⁶ Goh, “Diversity and Nation-Building in Singapore.” 2.

⁵⁷ “Consociationalism,” Encyclopædia Britannica (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., n.d.), <https://www.britannica.com/topic/consociationalism>.

⁵⁸ Goh, “Diversity and Nation-Building in Singapore.” 3.

⁵⁹ “Multiracial Singapore: Cultivating a Harmonious Society,” Global-Is-Asian (Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, August 22, 2019), <https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/gia/article/multiracial-singapore-ensuring-inclusivity-and-integration>.

In addition, each category of the racial grid was an ideological convenience papering over the diverse migrant realities of a city that had experienced waves of migration for over a century and a half. The Chinese did not form a single community, but comprised communal groups divided along linguistic, regional, ancestral, religious and class lines. The Malays were almost all migrants from the surrounding archipelago, divided too into the diverse ethnic groups of that archipelago. Tamils from South India made up the majority of Indians, but diversity similar to the Chinese prevailed.

The CIMO framework intentionally homogenized racial differences to simplify the relevant administration's governing efforts. This colonial ideology was further entrenched by the PAP when it sought to institutionalize CIMO multiracialism as its promise for a pluralistic Singaporean society, albeit at the expense of "specific communal groups and the general erosion of communal identities."⁶⁰ Goh terms this "communitarian multiracialism," whereby only a certain degree of multiracialism is institutionalized by the state, effecting a nationally-accepted multiracial identity through a top-down approach. While acknowledging its racist colonial roots, it is imperative to track how Singapore adapted the CIMO framework to pragmatically institutionalize multiracialism as the foundation of the Singaporean identity.

The post-colonial government was also quick to realize the uphill battle of instilling communitarian multiracialism after more than a century of colonial separation of the races. When investigating a plot by the Angkatan Revolusi Tentera Islam Singapura (ARTIS) to incite Chinese-Malay clashes in 1961, then-Minister of Culture S. Rajaratnam highlighted how ARTIS tried to leverage "economic distress among the Malays" and other governmental actions to allege

⁶⁰ Daniel P.S. Goh (Global Centre for Pluralism, April 2017), https://www.pluralism.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Singapore_DGoh_Complete_Case_EN.pdf, 8.

that the Chinese were being favored over the Malays.⁶¹ He then reiterated the “urgency of creating a Malayan nationalism and outlook at the earliest possible moment” or risk “racial carnage.”⁶² In his book *Responding to Globalization: Nation, Culture, and Identity in Singapore*, Selvaraj Velayutham outlines the complexity of this issue by showing how Singapore’s population make-up of immigrants rooted its identity in transnational political and cultural links. A dearth of meaningful social contact among racial groups during colonial times meant that Singaporeans’ social identity fell largely among racial divides, rather than forming a collective civic identity embracing multiracialism. In the aftermath of the foiled 1961 plot and 1964 racial riots that destabilized domestic politics, Singapore made multiethnic equality constitutional and established the Presidential Council for Minority Rights to give minority groups legislative oversight.⁶³ By institutionalizing multiethnic equality, Singapore sought to transform the ethnic and civic identity conundrum into a positive-sum game, a win-win.

(National) Education: Singapore’s Answer to Political Socialization

Education formed the cornerstone of the government’s efforts to shape political socialization and social identity in Singaporeans. Spearheading this effort was then-Minister of Education Ong Pang Boon, who recognized the “necessity to use education as an instrument to weld national unity and to build a nation out of its heterogeneous population.”⁶⁴ Empowered by structural and economic factors, Singapore’s government implemented the policy of introducing

⁶¹ “Angkatan Revolusi Tentera Islam Singapura (Plot to Precipitate Clashes between Malays and Chinese),” Official Reports - Parliamentary Debates (*Parliament of Singapore*, January 11, 1961), https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/topic?reportid=005_19610111_S0004_T0007, 939-40.

⁶² “Angkatan Revolusi Tentera Islam Singapura (Plot to Precipitate Clashes between Malays and Chinese),” Official Reports - Parliamentary Debates (*Parliament of Singapore*, January 11, 1961), https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/topic?reportid=005_19610111_S0004_T0007, 946.

⁶³ Thio, “Irreducible Plurality, Indivisible Unity: Singapore Relational Constitutionalism and Cultivating Harmony Through Constructing a Constitutional Civil Religion.” 1007-34.

⁶⁴ Ong, “Report Presented by the Minister of Education Mr. Ong Pang Boon for the Conference of Education Ministers of Asian Member States of UNESCO in Bangkok from November 22 - 29, 1965,” National Archives Singapore, n.d., <https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/PressR19651127e.pdf>, 13.

a “national language,” or “lingua franca,”⁶⁵ while reinforcing its CIMO framework. This enabled Singapore to shape its own civic identity while appeasing a multiracial populace.

Lee Kuan Yew first tabled the idea of introducing English as a “common thread running through” Singapore’s multiracial grid in 1955, in the wake of Chinese student hostility towards the government. When later discovered to be instigated by the communist CPM party, domestic racial sensitivities were further highlighted as a point of exploitation for trans-ethnonationalism. Minister Ong then sought to establish public education that would give it the structural capacity to implement the education of a national language. From 1958 to 1965, Singapore constructed 83 new school buildings, at the “rate of one school a month.”⁶⁶ The English-instruction schools were also backed by the colonial administration during Singapore’s period of internal self-government and was well-funded⁶⁷, while vernacular-taught schools charged high fees, paid teachers poorly, and had bad learning conditions.⁶⁸ In addition, government-run schools guaranteed “10-year primary and secondary education finishing at the minimum age of 16.”⁶⁹ In terms of quality and accessibility, the government’s public education system had a clear comparative advantage over vernacular schools backed by private institutions. The efficacy and ubiquity of the public education system allowed the state to achieve the structural capacity needed to swiftly introduce English as a common language to the masses. With public education favored by Singaporeans, a bilingual education policy was then introduced in 1966 to “[break]

⁶⁵ “All-Party Committee on Chinese Education,” Official Reports - Parliamentary Debates (Parliament of Singapore, May 25, 1955), https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/topic?reportid=008_19550525_S0003_T0008, col. 267.

⁶⁶ Birger Fredriksen and Jee-Peng Tan, *An African Exploration of the East Asian Education Experience* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2008), 84.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ “This Plan to Get Better Citizens Will Cost Singapore Another Million,” *The Straits Times*, December 11, 1953, p. 9.

⁶⁹ “Thirst for Learning 'Puts S'pore in Lead',” *The Straits Times*, September 26, 1965, p. 7.

down the language barrier in Singapore, and [...] enable students of one language stream to appreciate the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of those in another language stream.”

External economic factors also played a key role in spreading English education in Singapore. English did not just play a role as a common language, but also as a “primary utilitarian tool in Singapore’s effort to make the world its marketplace.”⁷⁰ Ong’s educational policies had a clear vision of making Singapore “a center for technical and technological education in South-east Asia,”⁷¹ as he sought to push the nation into “an economy where the language of business is English.” As the world had already begun adopting English as a *lingua franca*, this bilingual policy was key to integrating Singapore’s workforce into the international market. Early adoption of this policy also made Singapore a preferred hub in a geographic region with nations that exclusively spoke their native languages. The benefits of an English education under the government were clear, as was the shift in popular sentiment towards English as Goh and Gopinathan documented:

Although the government continued to provide for vernacular education, a major consequence of the transformation of the Singaporean economy from 1959 onward was the consistently strong tendency for parents to enroll their children in the English language schools. In 1959, only 47 percent of children entering primary grade one were in the English stream, and 46 percent were in Chinese schools. Twenty years later (in 1979), the English stream enrolled 91 percent of all children in primary grade one with only 9 percent in the Chinese stream and a negligible number in the Tamil and Malay

⁷⁰ Birger Fredriksen and Jee-Peng Tan, *An African Exploration of the East Asian Education Experience*, 83.

⁷¹ Ong, “Report Presented by the Minister of Education Mr. Ong Pang Boon for the Conference of Education Ministers of Asian Member States of UNESCO in Bangkok from November 22 - 29, 1965,” 16.

language streams. This dramatic shift was brought about by the *free choice of pragmatic parents* in response to the nation's drive toward high value-added industrialization and to an economy where the language of business is English.

Minister Ong Pang Boon effectively tapped into rational choice theory by capitalizing on the economic benefits of an English education that come with a stronger civic identity than racial identity. Within a capitalist society, the economic benefits of English would also be tied to social capital, meaning that all racial groups had absolute gains by learning English. The proliferation of a common language that was not tied to any racial group simultaneously oiled the wheels for increased social contact between the racial groups that had been segregated by colonial governance and urban planning, and linguistic barriers.

In tackling the primordial social identity within the racial groups, former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong mobilized educational institutions as the primary agent for political socialization. He introduced the “National Education” curriculum centered around racial and religious harmony, and sought to “build the Singapore ‘tribe’ where ‘the sense of belonging to a state’ would outweigh ‘the primordial instinct of belonging to a tribe.’”⁷² This civic education curriculum is embedded into all primary, secondary, and pre-tertiary institutions, with formal approaches including Civics and Moral Education classes, and informal approaches including reciting the pledge daily, or school visits to key heritage sites and commemoration of Racial Harmony Day.⁷³ Core to this newly-crafted civic identity is Singapore's “survival rhetoric” and

⁷² Thio, “Irreducible Plurality, Indivisible Unity: Singapore Relational Constitutionalism and Cultivating Harmony Through Constructing a Constitutional Civil Religion.” 1007-34.

⁷³ “Speech by BG (NS) Lee Hsien Loong, Deputy Prime Minister, at the Launch of National Education at Television Corporation of Singapore (TCS) TV Theatre on Friday, 17 May 1997 at 9.30 AM,” *National Archives of Singapore*, May 17, 1997, <https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/1997051607/lhl19970517s.pdf>, 7-10.

desperate need to establish a common heritage, or the “Singapore Story.”⁷⁴ This emphasizes the heroic story of how Singapore “succeeded against the odds to become a nation,”⁷⁵ while reiterating the many vulnerabilities of the country and the importance of cooperation among its citizens and the government to ensure its continued success.

It is also worth noting that Singapore swiftly tackled anti-establishment communalism through harsh legislation, from the 1960 Internal Security Act (enabling preventative detention), to the 1966 Trade Union Act (controlling of workers’ unions, the source of Chinese riots). This framework of legislation worked in tandem with the steady inculcation of common values among racial groups through National Education to execute a “steady and systematic de-politicization of a politically active and aggressive citizenry.”⁷⁶ Despite the seemingly draconian nature of this approach, the PAP has justified its actions as being in the best interest of Singapore, and has arguably gained sufficient public trust by improving the quality of Singaporean life over the past few decades. The efficacy of political socialization over the years is reflected in studies that show consensus between Singapore’s racial groups “concerning crucial events in creating nationhood,”⁷⁷ like the merger and independence of Singapore, as well as the race riots. The “hegemonic representation” of key leaders in Singapore’s history has also been attributed to fostering a strong civic identity.⁷⁸

Public Housing: A Social Contact Mechanism

⁷⁴ “Speech by BG (NS) Lee Hsien Loong, Deputy Prime Minister, at the Launch of National Education at Television Corporation of Singapore (TCS) TV Theatre on Friday, 17 May 1997 at 9.30 AM,” 4.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Chan, Heng Chee. “Nation-building in Southeast Asia: The Singapore Case” (p.51)

⁷⁷ Liu, James H., Belinda Lawrence, Colleen Ward, and Sheela Abraham. 2002. “Social Representations of History in Malaysia and Singapore: On the Relationship between National and Ethnic Identity.” *Asian Journal of Social Psychology* 5:16-17.

⁷⁸ Liu et al. “Social Representations of History in Malaysia and Singapore: On the Relationship between National and Ethnic Identity.”16.

The lack of positive social contact in Singapore's early years was another major pillar of inter-group conflict. Ethnic enclaves divided communities and bred racial tensions, and moreover, most of such enclaves were unsanitary and cramped.⁷⁹ A successful solution depended on three key factors: the Housing and Development Board (HDB), the Land Acquisition Act (LAA), and the Ethnic Integration Policy (EIP).

The HDB was instituted to replace the colonial-era Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT) which failed to implement a public housing program that could keep up with Singapore's rapid population growth. Under the first chairman of the board, Mr Lim Kim San, the HDB constructed a whopping 21,232 units in three years. For comparison, SIT constructed just 23,019 units in 32 years. The Bukit Ho Swee fire incident in 1961 further fueled public trust in the HDB when the board raced to build an average of three-and-a-half emergency units a day to house those displaced.⁸⁰ By 1964, state-owned newspaper *The Straits Times* reported that "lower income groups in Singapore [...] can today move into a Housing and Development Board flat within days of applying for one."⁸¹ Government subsidies also made rental "uneconomically low" so that public housing was affordable for those that needed it most.⁸² In less than half a decade, the government had alleviated its acute housing shortage and gained credibility in the eyes of the public. The HDB had also centered itself as the lessor, financier, and legal provider for the majority of the population.

To expand the state's structural capacity for infrastructure development and the public housing program, then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew introduced the 1966 Land Acquisition Act

⁷⁹ "Housing a Nation, Building a City," Public Service Division, Prime Minister's Office, 2015, <https://www.psd.gov.sg/heartofpublicservice/our-institutions/housing-a-nation-building-a-city/>.

⁸⁰ "Housing a Nation, Building a City," Public Service Division, Prime Minister's Office, 2015, <https://www.psd.gov.sg/heartofpublicservice/our-institutions/housing-a-nation-building-a-city/>.

⁸¹ "A Flat Every 45 Minutes," *The Straits Times*, August 31, 1964, p. 10.

⁸² *Ibid.*

to enable the state to acquire land from private owners at market prices. Its sweeping powers were controversial, but Lee Kuan Yew explained:

When we were confronted with an enormous problem of bad housing, no development, overcrowding, we decided that unless drastic measures were taken to break the law, break the rules, we would never solve it. We therefore took overriding powers to acquire land at low cost, which was in breach of one of the fundamentals of British constitutional law – the sanctity of property. But that had to be overcome, because the sanctity of the society seeking to preserve itself was greater. So we acquired at sub-economic rates.⁸³

Transparent legal safeguards and an appeal process were implemented to ensure that these sweeping powers were not abused by the state.⁸⁴ Under the LAA, the government became the biggest landowner in Singapore, owning 76.2 percent of the island and with it constructing more than 500,000 flats to house over 80 percent of the population.⁸⁵ Acquiring land for the construction of public housing also allowed the HDB to ensure that affordable housing was accessible for Singaporeans. Lee Kuan Yew then saw home ownership as the next key tenet of Singapore's civic identity, as well as political stability. Lee believed that the transition from tenancy to property ownership would give Singaporeans a tangible stake in the country, and a stronger civic identity that was "vital for [a] new society which had no deep roots in a common

⁸³ "Housing a Nation, Building a City," Public Service Division, Prime Minister's Office, 2015, <https://www.psd.gov.sg/heartofpublicservice/our-institutions/housing-a-nation-building-a-city/>.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Shaun Oon and Tin Seng Lim, "Land Acquisition Act 1966," Singapore Infopedia (National Library Board, April 8, 2014), https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2014-04-09_112938.html.

historical experience.”⁸⁶ This led to the launch of the Home Ownership for the People Scheme in 1964, and home ownership rates were accelerated, especially when Singaporeans could pay for mortgage using their Central Provident Fund, a state-run pension fund. Today, Singapore boasts one of the world’s highest home ownership rates at around 90 percent.⁸⁷

The 1989 Ethnic Integration Policy was introduced by then-Minister of National Development S. Dhanabalan when he discovered ethnic enclaves re-forming due to the slowing down of the HDB’s building program and the growth of the resale market. The EIP set racial quotas in public housing neighborhoods to accurately represent Singapore’s multiracial population in these living quarters, to which Dhanabalan attributed racial tolerance and harmony. These housing estates placed members of different races in close proximity to each other, centered around common spaces and amenities such as schools, community centers (which are run by state-owned grassroots organizations), and markets where people inevitably interact and mingle as they go about their daily lives.⁸⁸ The deep penetration of racial diversity in Singaporean life is only made possible because the LAA and affordable HDB-built public housing had laid the foundations for the EIP to have such an impact. With most of Singapore living on state-owned land and in public housing, the EIP forcefully broke up and prevented ethnic enclaves.

Singapore successfully improved positive social contacts in an ethnically heterogeneous society in order to build a cohesive civic identity that trumps the divisive potential ethnic

⁸⁶ “Housing a Nation, Building a City,” Public Service Division, Prime Minister’s Office, 2015, <https://www.psd.gov.sg/heartofpublicservice/our-institutions/housing-a-nation-building-a-city/>.

⁸⁷ Mark Byrnes, “How Singapore Fixed Its Affordable Housing Problem,” Bloomberg, March 23, 2015, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-03-23/the-housing-legacy-of-singapore-s-first-prime-minister-lee-kuan-yew-who-passed-away-last-sunday-at-the-age-of-91>.

⁸⁸ Keshia Naurana Badalge, “The Country Where Diversity Is Enforced by Law,” We Are Not Divided (Reasons to be Cheerful, October 22, 2020), <https://wearenotdivided.reasonstobecheerful.world/the-country-where-diversity-is-enforced-by-law/>.

identities. In a society that enforces multiethnic equality, “unequivocal access to education and job opportunities,” and “meritocracy above race and connections,”⁸⁹ there is little spectrum in an ethnic group’s preferences in rational choice theory, as one’s ethnicity does not give an individual actor relative gains. A rational actor would therefore opt for civic identity over ethnic identity.

Conclusion

Through these measures that comprehensively target Wang’s four-theory framework, Singapore employs constructivist approaches to subjugate primordial tendencies. As demonstrated through Singapore’s early years, external socio-political circumstances can amplify ethnic groups’ primordial tendencies and therefore require targeted policies to minimize the advantages of primordialism. In other words, Singapore’s policies have effectively turned ethnic demands from zero-sum to positive-sum, where ethnic groups do not see their demands in competition against one another, and all seek to benefit equally. Under such circumstances, it is harder for states to mobilize co-ethnic populations within Singapore as there are little to no advantages for ethnic identities. This paper has also shown that an individual level of analysis is as essential as the domestic level to understanding ethnic group behavior.

As a relatively young state by global standards, with an ethnically diverse population, situated in a Malay-Muslim majority region, Singapore’s relative economic and socio-political stability make it an interesting case study for other states (eg. Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Ethiopia) looking to mitigate the effects of ethno-transnationalism on their ethnic populations. Despite its success thus far, it is imperative to note that the city-state continues to experience the forces of

⁸⁹ Tulshyan, Ruchika. 2015. “Singapore's forced housing integration fueled its economic success.” Quartz. <https://qz.com/436056/singapores-forced-housing-integration-fueled-its-economic-success/>.

ethno-transnationalism within its borders. Malaysia's *abang-adik* (elder brother-younger brother) mentality towards Singapore still explains why "UMNO and other Malay and Muslim organizations in Malaysia tend to see themselves as protectors of Singapore's 15 per cent minority Malay population."⁹⁰ This manifested in the saga during Singapore's 2002 ban on the *tudung* (Islamic headscarf) in public schools, which drew criticism from several Malaysian officials, including a provocative offer by Malaysia's Deputy Minister of Education to enroll one of the Muslim students involved in the controversy.⁹¹ Most recently, former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahatir Mohamad caused an uproar by saying that Malaysia should reclaim Singapore" as it is "*Tanah Melayu*," or "Malay land" in English. He continued riling primordial sentiments by implying that much of the Malaysian peninsula, including Singapore, was losing ownership to non-*bumiputera*.⁹² In the face of such inflammatory remarks, Singapore's counteractive policies and ability to maintain domestic stability among racial groups continue to be tested.

China's Xi Jinping has reiterated China's policy of *luoye guigen*, "urging Chinese overseas, regardless of citizenship, to be oriented towards China and to serve Beijing's interest."⁹³ *A Preliminary Survey of CCP Influence Operations in Singapore* by Russell Hsiao has also revealed that the CCP has advanced this policy through business associations, clan associations, grassroots organizations, and media influence in Singapore.⁹⁴ This foreign policy has manifested in a 2016 row with Singapore when China seized nine Singapore Armed Forces military vehicles

⁹⁰ Lin, Chang Li. 2003. "Singapore's Troubled Relations with Malaysia: A Singapore Perspective." *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 268. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27913238>.

⁹¹ Anil Netto, "Row over Islamic Head Scarf Goes Beyond S'pore," *Malaysiakini*, February 22, 2002, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/opinions/21181>.

⁹² "Ex-PM Mahathir Says Malaysia Should Claim Singapore and Riau Islands," *The Straits Times*, June 20, 2022, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/ex-pm-mahathir-says-malaysia-should-claim-singapore-and-riau-islands>.

⁹³ Suryadinata, "How China's rise is affecting ethnic identities in Southeast Asia."

⁹⁴ Hsiao, "A Preliminary Survey of CCP Influence Operations in Singapore."

in Hong Kong. Businessmen, members of Parliament, and clan associations in Singapore were pressuring the government to ease tensions with China, thus demonstrating how the CCP could still mobilize bottom-up pressure on Singapore through co-ethnic populations. China's *luoye guigen* foreign policy also aids in its efforts to establish its "Nine-Dash Line" claim in the region,⁹⁵ especially among rumors that the 2016 incident was a power move by China to express displeasure toward Singapore's stance on South China Sea disputes and military exercises in Taiwan.⁹⁶

In reaction, Singapore's prime minister Lee Hsien Loong firmly reiterated "Singapore's overall interests" and sovereignty in the face of great power pressure in the region, as did other prominent ministers.⁹⁷ Additionally, in light of foreign interference in other states' domestic politics (Russia and the United States' presidential elections), Singapore reinforced the earlier mentioned 1974 Newspaper and Printing Presses Bill amendment by passing the controversial Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Act in 2021.⁹⁸ This was a clear development in the city-state's efforts to safeguard its own domestic politics from foreign meddling.

As these events continue to play out, it is worth monitoring Singapore's policy reactions in an effort to maintain its state sovereignty.

⁹⁵ Hass, Ryan. 2014. "The US and China's Nine-Dash Line: Ending the Ambiguity." Brookings. <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/the-u-s-and-chinas-nine-dash-line-ending-the-ambiguity/>.

⁹⁶ "State of Singapore's Relations with China in View of Seizure of Terrex Vehicles," Official Reports - Parliamentary Debates (Parliament of Singapore, January 9, 2017), <https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/sprs3topic?reportid=oral-answer-1579>.

⁹⁷ Hsien Loong Lee, "National Day Rally 2016," Prime Minister's Office Singapore, August 21, 2016, <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/national-day-rally-2016>.

⁹⁸ "Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Bill," Official Reports - Parliamentary Debates (Parliament of Singapore, October 4, 2021), <https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/search/sprs3topic?reportid=bill-531>.

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