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Islands and national identity: the metaphors of Singapore

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Abstract

There have been numerous studies on Singapore's history, culture, and education, but few have focused specifically on the relationship between national identity and "islandness." This paper examines how islandness and identity are inextricably intertwined and manifested in sociopolitical attitudes and language behavior. Since metaphors are our primary means of conceptualizing the world, an analysis of the metaphors of Singapore, as used by its leaders, over the past decade, will give us a greater understanding of the sudden emergence of this phenomenal nation-state, an island whose political, economic, and social significance far exceeds its size.

Introduction

Newly independent states are often preoccupied with nation building, which essentially involves the welding together of their population in terms of a forging a shared culture as well as creating a sustainable economic order. Their leaders often engage in the creation of a sustainable distinct identity in relation to the multifarious nationalities of the world, failing which a deep-seated malaise often emerges, leading to a breakdown in the structure of the society. Only in this way can young nations hope to develop a viable culture, justify their existence, draw loyalty from their people, and keep them from emigrating or contemplating such an action.

While numerous sociolinguistic studies have been conducted on several islands around the world, only a few have focused specifically on the subject of national identity and their relationship to "islandness." Generally, the relationship between islandness and national identity has not attracted serious attention from researchers, this is no exception in the case of Singapore, an island with an area of 626 square kilometers,

which attained its independence in 1959 from the British colonial masters. Singapore has been the subject of many political, social, cultural, historical, and linguistic research efforts (cf. Birch 1993; Chew and Tan 1993; Ho and Platt 1996; Kandiah and Kwan-Terry 1994; Gopinathan et al. 1994). Few if any have drawn the link between its geographical attributes as an "island" and the social-political policies pursued by its leaders in their efforts to wield together a new and distinct nation.

Islands such as Singapore usually exist in relation to a mainland. While it has been noticed that islanders are never happier with their insularity than when assessing that they are completely different from their neighbors, particularly in regard to language, custom and laws, currency, system of government, and other symbols that demonstrate the existence of a small self-contained universe (cf. Donmen and Hein 1985), their mainlands are, nevertheless, their umbilical cord to the wider world. In the case of Singapore, the mainland is fluid. Like a chameleon, its history of perceived mainland(s) is characterized by a state of fluidity. Adhering to the survivalist principle of permanent interests (rather than permanent friends), there can be discerned in the case of Singapore four mainlands, usually differently in focus at different points in its short history. Singapore's mainland is simultaneously Malaysia, Southeast Asia, China, and the world. While its primary mainland is Malaysia, since it is linked to it physically by a three-quarter-mile-long causeway, Singapore has been careful to cultivate cordial relationships with its other Southeast Asian neighbors, in particular Indonesia, as a useful "hedge" against Malaysia. With the rise of China as an economic power, Singapore has also found it prudent to cultivate careful ties through its investment policy there and through programs such as the "Speak Mandarin Campaign" from 1979, among the 75 percent of its population that are Chinese. Finally, perceiving globalization as the irreversible trend of the twentieth century, Singapore has also looked toward the world as its marketplace.

On attaining independence, Singapore faced a constellation of problems that often confront small developing island countries (cf. Dolman 1985). These include a growing population, scarcity of jobs, multiracial tensions, and lack of natural resources. As a small island, its capacity to overcome these predicaments appeared to be limited, taking into consideration the lack of a critical mass necessary to initiate and sustain the processes of technological development.

Islandness also made Singapore an inherently weak competitor for limited markets, and its affluence relative to its geographical mainland threatened to make it a high-cost producer. Then, it also lacked technical

and managerial resources essential to the initiation of any industrialisation program. However, Singapore managed to overcome these disadvantages and embark on an industrialization program with an aggressive export orientation, a path earlier blazed by South Korea, Taiwan, and, of course, Japan. In the early 1960s, tax incentives were offered to multinationals with ready markets, to urge them to situate their manufacturing plants on the island.

Most important of all, and directly relevant to my discussion here, the government launched a consistent and focused program to build a highly cohesive nation with a unique identity, one that would be essentially supported by economic success. These goals can be discerned in important speeches by Singapore's key leaders, which are replete with the metaphors of "survival," such as "danger," "competitiveness," and "the race to succeed."

In this discussion, I shall portray Singapore's response to its geographic and economic reality vis-à-vis its primary mainland through an analysis of language in the state discourses of its leaders. The same political party has ruled Singapore since its independence, and Mr. Lee Kuan Yew (SM Lee), the chief architect of the nation, is still in the cabinet as Senior Minister (SM) and Member of Parliament for Tanjong Pagar Constituency. Power is overwhelmingly in the hands of the People's Action Party (PAP). Opposition parties are inconsequential, and civil society, comprising trade unions, free churches, liberal professions, and autonomous universities, all nongovernmental organizations, is weak. What adds to the impressive record is that the very powerful PAP is freely elected and opposition parties are legal. The language of the PAP can therefore be surmised to be the language of the nation.

Language is as much about the speakers as it is about the society. The way it is used is a valuable index not only of individuals' but also of a society's values and assumptions, in short, their ideology. Since all language is a mixture of the literal and the figurative, and since every linguistic utterance has some element of the customary and the novel, one way in which ideology may be extracted in its essence is to examine the way metaphors are used (cf. Chilton and Lakoff 1995). Metaphors are a primary means of conceptualizing the world, and they structure the way we think, the way we act, and our systems of knowledge and belief in a pervasive yet fundamental way. To a very great extent, we shape our attitudes and our lives by our preferred metaphors, and when we signify things through one metaphor rather than another, we are constructing our reality in one way rather than the other (Goatly 1997).

Like that of an individual, the identity of a state is shaped around certain constructs through the help of preferred metaphors. In Singapore,

metaphors relating to statehood have become institutionalized through habitual use, so much so that they have become "invisible." By this I mean that Singaporeans are no longer conscious of the ideological character of these metaphors, and many, including social scientists, regard these as reflecting pragmatism, the only rational choice, and therefore nonideological (Chua 1985).

While much has been written about Singapore's history, society, and economy, and much has been said about the development of its own variety of English, "Singapore English," the state has not been analyzed in terms of the predominance of metaphors in the speeches of its elected political leaders. Recently, however, Ong and Govindasamy-Ong (1996) have highlighted the dominance of metaphors in Singapore life, but this has been done specifically from the pedagogical angle of rhetoric, persuasion, and communication. The discussion does not cover the larger societal, linguistic, and political implications and/or geographical characteristics of being an island-state.

A dangerous part of the world

Taken critically, the notion of "islandness" contrasts with the notion of "mainland" in that it connotes qualities of being "detached" or "isolated," "penetrable," and "insecure" (cf. Dolman 1985). These imply vulnerability in an unfriendly and hostile world and may be said to characterize Singapore. This consciousness is at the core of all the national policies from which its identity is constructed. This is in sharp contrast to mainland Malaysia, where the issue of paramount importance is not so much one of survival in a hostile world but one of building a nation based on an indigenous foundation that can be a source of national pride and esteem (Asiah 1994). As SM Lee remarked, small states are perpetually "in danger" and "There is always a fear that small states will become satellites of larger ones, or will be absorbed by them ..." (*Sunday Times* [Singapore], 8.12.96). At a National Day dinner in 1995, Deputy Prime Minister Brigadier-General Lee Hsien Loong (BG Lee) reminded Singaporeans that "Singapore is in a dangerous part of the world as the Asia-Pacific is not as benign as Western Europe ..." (*Straits Times* [Singapore], 5.8.95).

This preoccupation with geographical reality is reiterated in Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's (PM Goh) claim that "threats are everywhere" and factors lurk constantly to "derail the country's path to future growth" (*Straits Times* [Singapore], 6.12.1996). In an interview with the *New York Times*, SM Lee again spoke on the "unnaturalness"

of a "successful" island and expressed his constant worry that "man-made Singapore" was "vulnerable to external conditions" and must be "built to fit the needs of the modern world" or "risk shrivelling on the vine." On other occasions, the metaphor becomes more material, in line with daily eating and living, important concerns for the largely Chinese population of the island:

But whether it [Singapore] will continue to be viable as a city-state is another matter. It depends on the kind of world we live in, whether it is safe enough for small little countries or whether we will be eaten up (*Business Times* [Singapore], 16.8.95).

Can we hold together, suffer together? Are we willing to sacrifice for each other? That is a problem. If the national cake gets smaller and smaller, can we share the burdens and eat less and less? (*Straits Times* [Singapore], 25.2.1988).

Such metaphors of danger and vulnerability are largely absent from the politics of Malaysia, a relatively underpopulated agricultural mainland rich in mineral and agricultural resources. It follows then that Singapore's perception of an adverse environment leads to questions of survival, and this concern enters the national discourse at every opportunity. This sense of siege enables the government to push through otherwise unpopular policies and to create a centralized and tightly organized efficient state (cf. Clammer 1985).

A "crisis mentality" is discernible in the republic and is fed from a general notion that there is a need to be vigilant at all time, a sad allusion to the island's forcible ejection from the Malaysian mainland in 1965. Words such as "survival" and "problems" become the starting point for all socioeconomic policies and constantly occur in major national speeches. The Civil Defence Food and Water exercise, an emergency exercise deemed essential to prepare the country to react to war or calamity, underlines the need to maintain "urgency and vigilance" (*Straits Times* [Singapore], 23.6.1989). The previous Civil Defence Chief, Commissioner Chng Teow Hua, defines it as "peaceful preparations" since "the best time to prepare for war is during peace time. It is like taking out an insurance policy. You buy the policy in case something happens. Training Singaporeans in civil defence is like insuring for wars and disasters" (*Straits Times* [Singapore], 23.6.1989). It is this kind of reasoning that motivates the island to look beyond its logical mainland and to attempt to claim affinity with Southeast Asia (particularly Indonesia, its closest neighbor, spatially speaking, after Malaysia), China, and the world. Singapore's commercial companies are now urged to

look beyond their northern neighbor and to push hard into the emerging economies of Indonesia, Myanmar, Vietnam, China, and India.

The urge to survive also includes a military arm. On its separation from Malaysia in 1965, Singapore began to lay emphasis on the formation of its own armed forces. Conscription was introduced for all male citizens and a sizeable portion of the budget allocated to its maintenance. The island is now small but armed and strong. As its Chief Architect proclaims,

Supposing I have been a different person and when people throw darts at me, I smile at them. Then they will take an arrow and put arsenic on the tip and strike me, and I smile back? You think today's Singapore would have come about? How do you think today's Singapore came about? Because everybody knows if I say that we are going in a certain direction and that we're going to achieve this objective, if you get out to block me, I will take a bulldozer, and clear the obstruction (Lee Kuan Yew, NP 2.2.1995).

PM Goh has often used militaristic images to drive home the crucial need to survive in a competitive environment. Economic policies are executed based on a military strategy. In a major speech to university students entitled "The Gordian Knot — is there an upper limit to our prosperity?",¹ he referred to economic stagnation as a "martial enemy," a central metaphoric concept that was extended through the use of other metaphors such as *pincer strategy, battle, trap, defeat, beat, combat ration, haemorrhage, bleeding, parachutes failing to open and the need for modern ships and survival, rough waters*² (cf. Ong and Govindasamy-Ong 1996: 128–147).

In 1990, PM Goh explained his role as leader:

... I think Mr Lee is like the leader of a revolutionary force; so he himself is a strategist, propagandist, a commando, a fighter — and that is the way he is. Whereas I am more like a commander-in-chief of a conventional army in peace time (*Straits Times* [Singapore], 14.3.1996).

In his 1996 National Day Rally speech, PM Goh called on Singaporeans "to do something for their country beyond just looking at themselves" and also for National Servicemen to pass on the "fighting spirit":³

I say to all Singaporeans: you have to feel — passionately about Singapore. Being Singaporean should resonate in our hearts and minds. We built this country. We live, work and raise our children here. We will fight and, if we must, we will die to define our way of life and our home (*Straits Times* [Singapore], 24.8.1996).

The economy is king

Since 1965, Singapore's survival as an independent country and its economic success have been linked as one and the same thing. As Clammer (1985) points out, by 1970, "the economy" had come to take on a symbolic rather than an empirical meaning. This contrasts with the mindset of Malaysia, where economic success is not equated with national identity and takes second place to the policy of assimilation and integration, the creation of a new culture after the divisive elements of participating groups have been eroded (Hassan 1994). "Survival" for Singapore's primary mainland is not so much bread-and-butter issues but those of communal harmony; the establishment of Malay dominance in politics and Malay-Chinese equality in business.

Aware that islands, especially small ones, have limited access to capital markets and are often extremely dependent on foreign trade, the Singapore government decided to aggressively foreground its economic needs in all major state policies. From the 1960s through the 1980s there was an emphasis on technical and vocational education so as to provide the needed labor for expanding industries. In the same way, since English was the key to scientific and economic success, it also became the *de facto* national language of the country.⁴

Individual identity also became closely linked with the economy. For the individual, the most important goal of all was to earn a living to contribute toward the economic and industrial development of the state. This meant developing in the individual an interest in raising incomes and improved standards of living. It also meant state support of consumerist and productionist orientations. In the workplace, the overarching cultural ethos became one of "mutual trust and cooperation" between labor, employer, and state in order to maximize production from the workers, profits from the enterprises, and the achievement of the national objective of economic growth and survival. At a more abstract level "excellence" was and is still being promoted as a national goal.

This single-mindedness is revealed in the language of official speech. Koh (1980: 297) observed that the government could only speak in a meaningful way to the public in the language of competitive economics. Words like "pragmatic" and "relevant" became fashionable. She noted that the then-Prime Minister Lee, addressing principals of schools in Singapore on 29 August 1966 in the post-Malaysia period, had talked in mechanical terms of "jacking up standards" and the "reshuffling of values" to produce "the ideal product" who will be the "spearhead in the society." If required "to make the whole thing work," he had stressed, the "carrot and stick" will be used on parents, principals, and

inspectors. As “better qualified pre-university types” are being produced now, “all misfits” in the teaching profession will be “weeded out.” He concluded that “It is cruel: it is harsh, but none the less necessary.”

In contrast, for the mainland, Malaysia, the banner words focus on race and politics rather than the economy. For example, this focus is evident in the words *merdeka* ‘self-government,’ which signifies the achievement of independence from colonial rule in 1957; *bumiputra* ‘sons of the soil,’ which refers to people considered indigenous to Malaysia; and *rakyat* ‘the Malaysian people’ which incorporates Malaysia’s multiethnic population based on using the ethnic Malay language (Lowenberg 1995).

Competition: the winning formula

In Singapore, however, the key banner word is “competition,” which through the years has become the island’s central metaphor. As BG Lee said, characteristically, “Singaporeans must take regional competition in their stride, for if they worry that others will catch up, Singapore will be finished ...” (*Straits Times* [Singapore], 23.11.95).⁵ In 1996, even after the country’s past rapid growth — averaging 9 percent a year from 1970–1995 with only one year of negative growth in 1985/1986, SM Lee stressed there was no guarantee of future success. Addressing university students, SM Lee urged them to focus on “maintaining the country’s competitive edge and to improve their productivity ... Singapore has a future than can be as promising as the last 30 years only if your generation has the determination, the energy and the industry to ensure that we remain competitive” (*Straits Times* [Singapore], 6.12.1996). This cry continues to be echoed: “there must be no let up ... the going will be tougher now than before because we have reached the high GDP per capita level of over US\$25,000” (*Sunday Times* [Singapore], 8.12.96).

Competition has become bound with everyday life in Singapore and is revealed in the constant sense of comparison with others in terms of relative advantages or deprivation in consumption. “Upgrading” becomes institutionalized and, in the Singapore context, it is the process of becoming better in order to be the best; what is a normative idea (upgrading as improving in quality) becomes only a quantitative one (upgrading in order to improve productivity) (Kuo and Chua 1993). At the state level, Abel (1996) found the idea of “upgrading” present in 12 of the 75 television broadcasts she studied. She found numerous references to developments such as “first in Asia” or “first in the world,” or of other countries wanting to share Singapore’s expertise in a specific area. The only statement about Singapore’s position in the world that

could be construed as negative was a statement that "Singapore's R&D [research and development] expenditure ranks 23rd in the world; and this was presented as a reason for an announcement by the Trade and Industries Minister that the government was going to inject \$300 million into a research investment trade.

Competition as the key to the overcoming of problems is often buttressed by the metaphor of running a race. In *Singapore. The Next Lap*, a book that spells out the government's long-term plans to make Singapore a nation of distinction in the next century, PM Goh called on the citizens as family members, comprising "good sons and daughters," to "run the next lap together":

Singapore can only do well if her good sons and daughters are prepared to dedicate themselves to help others. I shall rally them to serve the country. For if they do not come forward, what future will we have? I therefore call on my fellow citizens to join me, to run the next lap together (*Straits Times* [Singapore], 24.2.1991).

Working in tandem with the government the leading newspaper, the *Straits Times* summarized the book as "a new lap in the race among nations, to stay ahead in this competitive world" and it was careful to echo the cherished state metaphors:

Phew, Producing Singapore; the next lap proved to be a bit like *running a quick sprint* for those involved. Some described it as a *long distance baton relay*, others thought it was more of a *hurdle jump*. All agree that it was *run at breakneck speed* (*Straits Times* [Singapore], 24.2.1991).

The papers also referred to Brigadier-General George Yeo, then Acting Minister for Information and the Arts, as the "team captain," as it was his task "to see that the baton was passed from public to private sector and back — all in double quick time." The "race" metaphor was applied not just to all aspects of the economy but also to the military arm, seen widely to be supporting the economy. "Now sons of the earlier cohorts of National Servicemen are doing national service themselves. We have completed one lap. But the next lap must be run. We cannot let down our guard without letting go of our freedom to live the lives we choose."⁶

A subcategory of the "race" is that of the national perception of "Singapore as a world player" (*Straits Times* [Singapore], 17.8.1992). One of PM Goh's speeches headlined as "Get ready for super league contest" with the sub-headline, a direct quote: "No choice but to compete with world class players if we want higher living standards." The speech

reinforced the idea that “tougher times” were ahead since Singapore was now competing in the “super league of developed nations”:

Competition in the international marketplace was like playing football in the semipro league. We want to be in top league and competing with First Division and better still finish amongst the top teams (PM Goh, *Straits Times* [Singapore], 17.2.1992).

To win is, of course, to come first in the race, a theme echoed later in the week by Communications Minister Mah Bow Tan on the occasion of the national football team’s poor showing that season. He said that the team’s poor showing “should wake Singaporeans up to the importance of staying competitive and hungry for success” (*Straits Times* [Singapore], 23.8.1992). He used the dismal performance of the footballers to drive home the point that Singapore’s economy would decline rapidly unless the people “stayed on their toes”:

Most years we have been at or near the top. But this year we find ourselves struggling at the bottom, and worse still, in danger of relegation to the Second Division. Some people call it unthinkable — Singapore playing Division Two football next season. Well the unthinkable has become a distinct possibility. We have become complacent, we have stuck to the same formula, we have not changed, while others have become more professional, more determined, and hungrier for success. The way football standards had declined could also apply to the economy, warned Mr Mah, who is an MP for Tampines GRC. Staying competitive as a nation is no different. We have worked our way up the ladder to be among the top newly industrialising economies, but that is no guarantee that we will remain among the top next year, and the year after (*Straits Times* [Singapore], 23.8.1992).

Success and failure

Competition is only a means to an end. In the context of Singapore’s nationhood, only two end scenarios are possible: success or failure. The objective is to win and winning is equated with success. Not to come in first is to lose and there is widespread belief that Singapore will suffer if it fails to be number one. Indeed, the term “success” has become symbolically synonymous with the history of the past three decades since independence. In contrast, mainland Malaysia is not so obsessed about “winning” or being “number one.” For Malaysia, competition is not so vital since, in the first place, it perceives itself as underpopulated and there is not enough of a population to compete with. Population growth is viewed differently: it is seen as a cornerstone of Malaysian economic and social policy.

In Malaysia, it is hoped that the country will be industrialized by 2020 and that the large population, which it hopes will further increase from its present 17.6 million,⁷ will act as an effective domestic market and so cushion the economy from the fluctuation that a purely export economy encounters. There is therefore no vital urgency to be always ahead.

With its much smaller population (3.5 million) and limited space for expansion, Singapore needs to export aggressively in order to survive economically. Hence, the emphasis on achievement and "winning." Material prizes are visibly displayed to motivate the people to participate in the "race." Prizes can be seen in material benefits such as cash awards, tax subsidies, upgrading of government flats, and bonus payments for government servants. As PM Goh reiterates, "We intend to let as many people as possible who participate and help in the nation's growth get a participation prize. In other words, we will speed the benefits of economic growth around" (*Sunday Times* [Singapore], 30.12.1990). On higher rewards for certain people in key government offices, PM Goh promised that any surplus in the budget would be used to "ensure that everybody who participates in the nation's growth gets some prizes beyond their daily bread" (*Sunday Times* [Singapore], 30.12.1990).

The inability to win the race means failure. In the words of SM Lee, "If it doesn't work, we will fall like a pack of cards. It is as sad as that" (*Straits Times* [Singapore], 6.12.1996). However, failing is only the end result of a process since a web of rewards and punishments is woven around every aspect of life in Singapore. Measures, however, are taken to forestall this fatalism. Punishment in the event of failure is present in terms of denied opportunities. It also takes the form of caning for certain criminal offences, a variety of fines to enforce orderliness, isolation such as the imprisonment of political dissidents, expulsion for those who don't live by the rules, and early streaming in the educational system. The deterrent "big stick" is openly discussed:

I am not using the big stick anymore, says Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew. PM Goh Chok Tong has to carry his own big stick. "If he doesn't want to carry the big stick, then he has got to have somebody carry it for him," says Mr Lee. This is because "now it's his policy and his responsibility to see his policy through," according to the Senior Minister (NP 2.2.95).

Often, history is invoked to remind the citizenry of the price of failure. The past is taken to signal backwardness and retrogression and there is a fear of "returning back to the starter's gun."⁸ Another favorite metaphor is the touting of the "deep fault lines" (Lee Kuan Yew, *Straits Times* [Singapore], 1.1.1997: 23), an allusion to Singapore's multiracial colonial

past and the reminder of possible racial conflicts that might arise once again. SM Lee has often warned the population that “the racial strife which threatened to set this country ablaze three decades ago could very easily return to haunt Singapore” (Lee Kuan Yew, *Straits Times* [Singapore], 22.6.1996).⁹

References to the past, such as workers’ strikes, racial riots, and economic impact of the British pullout in the 1960s, become a part of the package of failure (Goh Chok Tong, *Straits Times* [Singapore], 30.7.1989). In July 1996, DPM Lee Hsien Loong emphasized that the lack of awareness and understanding of Singapore’s history was a “serious gap” in the education of its people. His call echoed PM Goh’s speech as emphasized in the headline, “Do you know what happened 32 years ago? Few remember bloody, racial riots of July 21st 1964” (*Straits Times* [Singapore], 22.7.1996). Such periodic references to the perceived “Chineseness” of Singapore in Southeast Asia, its second mainland where the Malay race predominates and where Malay is a strong lingua franca, show once again the island’s sense of isolation.

Geography is the next item to be invoked, and here the populace is constantly reminded of the nation’s inescapable islandness and its non-viability in an increasingly competitive world. Without natural resources, land, or water, the island republic is touted as “unthinkable” as an independent political entity. Periodically, there are reminders to historical estrangement with the mainland. Lee Kuan Yew reminded his audience in one speech that

We faced the prospect of economic decline with Indonesia confronting us and cutting off all economic links, and Malaysia also determined to by-pass Singapore and deal direct in her imports and exports (*Sunday Times* [Singapore], 9.12.96).

Training for the race

A good coach is needed to counter the disadvantageous effects of history and geography, and thus, the question of leadership receives high priority. According to PM Goh, leadership was required to make “tough decisions” and to “mobilise support,” otherwise the country would “slide downhill and the economy would lose its competitive edge” (*Straits Times* [Singapore], 6.12.96). It became important to “keep the brightest at home to run the country”:¹⁰

International competition meant that Singapore had to be nimble always in tapping the right market, attracting foreign talent and retaining its own. “Just one

star player and that team does very well” but “if you don’t pay the star players well, those star players will go to another team.”¹¹

Such views lie behind the creation of a highly competitive social order and educational system with room at the top for only a special few. Here the discourses of pragmatism and meritocracy (particularly its eugenic and Social Darwinist elements) were used to construct a series of policies to justify the system. In 1970, Lee Kuan Yew gave a speech in which he argued that intelligence was genetically based and determined by socioeconomic level, children of professionals and executives having higher IQs than those of manual workers (*The Mirror*, 5.1.1970). This led to the infamous “graduate mother” policies in the 1980s. Women who had university education were given priority in enlisting their children in the primary schools of their choice, while women with lower educational achievements were given a cash grant of \$10,000 to dissuade them from having more than two children (cf. Chew and Tan 1993).

The coach is often equated with a strict but benevolent parent-trainer. Interviews with SM Lee often portray an authoritarian and at times quite angry Confucian patriarch. PM Goh himself confirms this metaphor:

... Mr Lee was like a critical parent — very disciplined, very demanding, very impatient of faults and wanting to improve these faults very quickly. I would think I am more of a nurturing parent; that means, I would give more positive strokes and be a little more tolerant of mistakes ... (*Straits Times* [Singapore], 24.11.1990).

The parent-trainer trains the citizenry to run the race. Fitness to run the race becomes important, as underscored by a newspaper headline: “PM: Singapore must be united and trim” (*Straits Times* [Singapore], 1.1.1991). It also implies a number of qualities such as teamwork and flexibility and the restructuring of the educational system to produce the needed players. “Singaporeans should stay cohesive if they want to win the global race for markets and investments,” said DPM Lee Hsien Loong. At the People’s Action Party meeting he remarked that “While individually, we may not be as good, as a team we performed.” If Singapore maintained this approach, “we can stay ahead,” he added (*Straits Times* [Singapore], 6.12.93).

BG Lee has often stressed that where decision making was concerned, there were “no solo players”:

No solo players in team

... There are several star players in my team, but no one is a solo player. We do not try and upstage one another. When we disagree, we are not interested in proving

who is right and who is wrong, but how to arrive at the right decision (*Straits Times* [Singapore], 14.4.1991).

Speaking on his political alliance with PM Goh, he said:

As a doubles pair we can win many tournaments

... I have come to the conclusion that we will be more effective as a pair than if we were to play separately first and second singles. He is very quick and sharp with his smashes. I can plan. I can cross or drop the shuttle-cock over the net. Together we can win many tournaments. And that's the way I plan to win for Singapore, as a doubles pair (*Straits Times* [Singapore], 14.4.1991).

Besides teamwork, other qualities such as flexibility are recognized. In 1995, in explaining why civil servants would receive smaller pay rises, BG Lee continues the team-player metaphor: "We have to make sure that we are quick on the response so when something happens, we are prepared to roll with it" (*Straits Times* [Singapore], 19.6.95).

The school system plays a crucial part in training the next generation for the race, as education has always been seen as an investment in human capital. For an island state without natural resources, dependent on the mainland for most of its food and water, the only exploitable resource, "human resource," must be continuously developed and upgraded (Chua 1985). The Edusave Scheme, for instance, had been modified to give scholarships to only the top students in the country's schools. "It is to get people to treasure knowledge, to strive for knowledge, to compete and to distinguish themselves academically" (*Straits Times* [Singapore], 17.8.1992).

One of the duties of the school is the classification and tabulation of the players, a crucial process, as shown by Foucault (1979) in the regulation and production of "docile" bodies in eighteenth-century Europe. Docile bodies are also believed to be more economically productive than critical ones. In education, hierarchy becomes important and players are ranked from first to last, thus contributing toward an orderly society and ensuring stability for free-market economics to be implemented and thus to generate wealth. At elementary school, children are streamed according to their natural intelligence into different categories, which in turn fixes their positions in the complex division of labor of the industrial work place (Chua 1985).

Conclusion

The Singapore story of nationhood is at once simple and complicated. Economic success and nationhood have become one and the same

thing. It is also remarkable in the sense that while it has taken other countries centuries to forge their peoples into a nation, Singapore has managed to compress the process into just over two generations through a coherent and tightly knit strategy as revealed by its official metaphors. The island-state has evolved into an economically viable nation whose significance reaches beyond its shores, a remarkable fact bearing in mind that many islands without natural resources have a chronic and worsening balance of trade and payments (Dolman 1985).

What is little realized, however, is that it is its very "islandness," that is, its isolation, size, and penetrability, that has totally influenced the construction of its own national identity. The success it has achieved in carving out a nation from its motley of races and cultures is mainly because it has perceived itself as alone and vulnerable. This inspired a great pressure to "succeed." The nation's *raison d'être* is also constantly expressed in the distinctiveness of its political and socio-economic policies in relation to its geographical mainland and in its adoption of additional "mainlands." In other words, it is the extremities of its island identity that have concentrated its vision and catapulted its growth.

Certainly, language is more metaphorical and less literal than we are likely to think. To use Singapore's own foundational metaphors, one may conclude that the island state has succeeded because it created a rugged competitive spirit that is hungry for success, distributed trophies as reward, instituted penalties for failure, hired star players, institutionalized a parent-coach, and emphasized the spirit of teamwork in a systematic and hierarchical social order. As the *Straits Times* puts it, "It's Team Singapore Against the Rest of the World" (*Straits Times* [Singapore], 17.2.1992).

While the policies geared toward nationhood "have worked," a commonly used phrase to justify the continuation of its central metaphor, whether it will continue "to work" remains anyone's guess. When asked by a group of foreign journalists about Singapore's chances of survival within a ten-, twenty-, and fifty-year range, Lee Kuan Yew, the archetypal Singaporean, gave his characteristic pronouncement on the political and economic precariousness of newly emergent island states: "This is 1995. Can it go on for another 50 years? I'm not sure. Can it go on for 20 years? Maybe. Can it go on for 10 years? I would say, most probably" (*Straits Times* [Singapore], 16.8.1995).

Notes

1. A term borrowed from one of the stories about Alexander the Great, whose military prowess is legendary.
2. Speech given at the Democratic Socialist Club, National University of Singapore (*Straits Times* [Singapore], 1.8.1985).
3. "PM calls on NS men to pass on fighting spirit" (*Straits Times* [Singapore], 14.3.1996).
4. The Malay language, however, remained the *de jure* national language of the country and is used mainly for ceremonial purposes such as in military commands and the national anthem.
5. See also SM Lee: "In the global market, competition is relentless. That goes also for Singapore. We are all competing in one global market" (*Sunday Times* [Singapore], 8.12.96).
6. PM Goh on the importance of National Service (*Straits Times* [Singapore], 14.3.1.1994).
7. *New Straits Times* [Malaysia], 31.12.1992.
8. Chua Mui Hoong: "Why better, best are just not good enough for Singapore" (*Straits Times* [Singapore], 5.5.1991).
9. Leslie Fong, "Up to you to make Singapore a multiracial nation." Speech given by Lee Kuan Yew on the need to survive (*Straits Times* [Singapore], 22.6.1996).
10. Lee Kuan Yew in *Straits Times* [Singapore], 9.11.1993. See also "Why the Best and Brightest must Govern" (*Straits Times* [Singapore], 15.1.1994).
11. PM Goh, "Four years off target: tough going on tomorrow. Vision 1999" (*Straits Times* [Singapore], 17.2.1992).

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