

Original Paper

Forging National Identity: Journey from Economic Struggles to Cultural Harmony

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Abstract

After gaining independence from colonial rule, faced a complex domestic situation. To avoid religious and cultural conflicts among its diverse ethnic groups, the government adopted a multicultural governance approach for multi-ethnic management, supplemented by a supranational identity governance strategy, which maintained social harmony and stability. In this process, the political system ensured a basic balance of power among ethnic groups, a pragmatic economic development model met the survival needs of various ethnicities, and a liberal cultural environment preserved the historical heritage of each group. However, harmonious Singapore still falls short of becoming a true nation-state. To achieve the goal of nation-building, the Singaporean government has begun to emphasize cultural identity and seeks to foster a sense of being "Singaporean." With English as the lingua franca, Singaporeans can communicate in a common language, the preservation of historical buildings retains a shared cultural memory, and efforts to promote "shared values" are gradually fostering national identity among citizens.

Keywords

ethnic governance, ethnic identity

1. Introduction

Since Singapore became the British trade entrepot in Malaya in 1819, it has embarked on a unique development path. Singapore, which subsequently experienced British colonial rule and Japanese occupation during World War II, also announced its independence from British rule in 1959 and became an independent nation-state in the wave of nation-state independence after the victory in World War II. Due to Singapore's small land area, lack of hinterland, lack of resources, fragile security environment at home and abroad, and special domestic racial structure, Singapore faces severe survival challenges after independence. Therefore, Singapore joined the Federation of Malaysia in 1963 under

the leadership of the People's Action Party. However, after the merger, the two sides had many conflicts due to different ethnic governance concepts. Malaysia demanded the implementation of a Malay Malaysia and controlled the country's main political power. in Malay hands. However, Singaporean leaders pursue a multi-ethnic policy, advocate the equality of all ethnic groups, and hope to build a Malaysian Malaysia. Under the backlog of conflicts, Malaysia forced Singapore to secede from the Federation in 1965, and Singapore became independent again.

After being forced to become independent, Singapore once again faced two major problems: a national survival crisis and domestic separatist tendencies. To ease domestic conflicts, the People's Action Party implemented a series of realism-oriented measures. After decades of development, Singapore has become a modern country with a diverse and harmonious culture, steady economic development, a clean and efficient government, and a well-ordered society. Singapore's 2020 census data report shows that the ethnic composition of Singapore's permanent population remains stable, with Chinese accounting for 74.3%, Malays accounting for 13.5%, Indians accounting for 9.0%, and a small number of Europeans, Arabs, and other ethnic groups. The religions followed by various ethnic groups are also different. Behind Singapore's modernization is the social reality of Singapore's long-term harmonious coexistence of diverse ethnic groups, which provides a solid backing for Singapore's political stability and economic prosperity. So how does Singapore achieve the goal of harmony among all ethnic groups in the social reality of a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, and multi-religious society, and form a civic identity of 'Singaporeans' based on multi-ethnic identity? This article will explore the development of Singapore, which naturally lacks national identity, from institutional identity to cultural identity to build a harmonious society based on the multi-ethnic governance plan chosen by Singapore.

2. Multicultural Governance Strategies

There are three solutions for the governance of multi-ethnic groups in academic circles. One is assimilation. The result of assimilation is that other ethnic groups give up their cultural characteristics and accept the cultural traditions of the dominant ethnic group. It is believed that national identity should be generated on the premise that the identity of all ethnic minorities disappears; the second is the multicultural plan, which believes that there is no distinction between good and bad culture, that is, it has an inclusive and open attitude towards all ethnic groups in the country and allows the free inheritance of the culture of all ethnic groups. It is the fundamental guarantee for tolerating ethnic differences in a pluralistic society and ensuring the rights of ethnic minorities to survive and develop; thirdly, there is the supranational or pan-national identity scheme, which serves as a supplement to the multicultural approach. This scheme emphasizes national-level identification while respecting the cultures of various ethnic groups. While focusing on national culture, we also pay attention to the identity of each ethnic group at the national level. On this basis, multi-ethnic countries can explore ways to maintain a national community by "seeking common ground while reserving differences". Except for the Malays, Singapore's diverse ethnic groups are not native to Singapore. Most of these

ethnic groups migrated from other countries for historical reasons. Different ethnic groups still have their unique national memories and cultures, as well as their pursuit of political and economic interests. Once the national identity of a certain ethnic group overrides Singapore's national identity, it will inevitably lead to dissatisfaction and resistance from other ethnic groups, and Singapore will also fall into a crisis of secession. Therefore, the assimilation program is not suitable for Singapore. Based on the analysis of reality, the People's Action Party has chosen the multicultural plan that is most suitable for Singapore. The basic connotation of this plan is that all ethnic groups have equal status, freedom of religious belief, and the right to freely learn and use their own languages. However, if the equal status of all ethnic groups is confirmed based solely on the liberal principle of building a nation-state, in the actual social life and communication process, due to language and cultural barriers, most of the time, various ethnic groups will only develop within the national social life. If the ethnic groups in Singapore only participate in political life and carry out economic activities within the scope of their own ethnic groups, Singapore will in fact fall into a situation of division.

Therefore, after confirming the equal status of all ethnic groups, as a supplement, Singapore adopted a supra-national identity program to build the national identity of each ethnic group and cultivate common national cultural characteristics. These plans ensure that Singapore unites all ethnic groups on the basis of religious freedom and cultural equality, and achieves harmony and stability in Singapore.

3. Ethnic Identity and National Identity

3.1 Ethnic Identity

The content of national identity is mainly cultural identity, and individuals have a strong sense of belonging to national identity. It emphasizes a unifying properties and shares objective elements such as common ancestors, blood, language, region, culture, and customs. With common characteristics, the ethnicity cannot be abandoned. The definition of ethnic identity is divided into two concepts: broad and narrow. Ethnic identity in the narrow sense is an individual's personal cognition and emotional belonging to the ethnicity to which he or she belongs, and is the recognition of one's own ethnic culture. As far as its target is concerned, it is the recognition of the blood inheritance and cultural traditions of the ethnicity, specifically including the internal identity of the ethnicity, ethnic language, religious beliefs, and ethnic customs. Broadly defined ethnic identity, also known as national identity, is the recognition of a sovereign country in the context of the establishment of a nation-state.

In the process of establishing a nation-state, the ethnic boundaries and the national boundaries usually coincide geographically. At this time, identification with the ethnicity is identification with the country. However, in a nation-state composed of multiple ethnicities, there are different ethnicities within a sovereign state. The ethnic identity at this time is a narrow sense of ethnic identity. The boundaries of this ethnic identity are not consistent with the boundaries of national identity. Its boundaries only include some citizens of the country and the issues between ethnicities often become the source of conflicts. Ethnic identity in a multi-ethnic country is a multi-dimensional system that can be divided

into three aspects: micro, meso, and macro. The subject of ethnic identity at the micro level is the social individual, and the object is the ethnicity to which the individual belongs. Its target is the ethnic and physical characteristics and historical and cultural traditions, and it is the identification of belonging to the common ancestors. Micro-ethnic identity is something that individuals cannot give up. Their bloodline inheritance reflects the innate characteristics of this identity. The meso-level ethnic identity is a unique phenomenon in multi-ethnic countries. The subject is an internal ethnicity of a multi-ethnic country, and the object is another internal ethnicity of a multi-ethnic country. The goal is to tolerate and understand the culture of foreign ethnicities, that is, ethnic mutual recognition between them is reflected in the social practice of respecting and acknowledging the cultural traditions of other ethnicities. The meso national identity can play a role as a glue in the efforts of multi-ethnic countries to achieve social harmony. The scope of macro-ethnic identity is the same as that of broad national identity. Its subjects are citizens of a sovereign country, and its objects are nationalities that are born in a multi-ethnic country transcend all domestic ethnicities, and can have national ethnicity distinguishing meanings to the outside world. The target of this identity is a high-level national identity, which is an identity constructed by a modern country.

3.2 National Identity

The ancient country adhered to the ideas of the “divine right of kings”, “integration of politics and religion”, and “shepherding the world”. Its sovereignty rested with God and was granted by representatives of the church. However, after the Treaty of Westphalia, some Protestant countries gained sovereignty independent of the church. The modern state is the product of a social contract. Due to the shortcomings of the state of nature, the lack of clear laws, impartial referees, and the difficulty in executing rulings, the public has partially surrendered its rights through contracts to avoid wars that may result from the shortcomings. Therefore, modern national identity is a political and emotional identity in which members of different ethnic groups form a political community called a “nation” through contracts as their own identity and emotional belonging. Therefore, the national identity of a modern civil state is not based on state force but on the interaction between citizens and the state. As far as the subject of national identity is concerned, the subject is a citizen within a country. Citizenship is different from the national identity that relies on blood relations. This identity is based on the rights of citizens and has the characteristics of equality and openness. Regardless of the differences in blood, race, religious beliefs, historical traditions, and cultural customs, citizens will be regarded as equal subjects in the country and enjoy equal rights, and this equal status is universal. In a multi-ethnic country, the subject of national identity is the unity of individual citizens and ethnic groups. In a multi-ethnic country, national identity is manifested as the unity of individual citizens and ethnic groups. It is the recognition, approval, and sense of belonging that individuals and groups have towards their country's territory, history, culture, ethnicity, and governmental organization in the context of the existence of other nations. This recognition forms a sense of ownership and responsibility for defending the country's sovereignty and interests. Openness is reflected in the fact that the state is a decisive

political unity. As the subject of politics, people must use the state as the field of their political practice. When discussing openness, we cannot ignore the role of the state as the core political entity. Within this framework, individuals, as political subjects, often center their political practices around the state. The various rights enjoyed by modern people are fundamentally supported and guaranteed by the state. Furthermore, modern democratic systems grant individuals the right to autonomously choose their national affiliation, a choice that reflects not only individual freedom but also deep contemplation of national identity. An individual's national identity encompasses attitudes and emotions towards the state and involves recognition and understanding of the nation's values and ideals. The object of national identity is the modern state mentioned above. The object of national identity is a country's political system, national institutions, legal norm system, and legal environment, as well as the derived economic and cultural environment. It is the political identity generated by affirming the country's specific political, economic, and social and cultural systems.

The formation of national identity is different from national identity. This process is non-attachment and is the result of the joint construction of citizens and the state. It has a civic nature. In a multi-ethnic country, this recognition process does not rely on blood and homogeneous characteristics but relies on the recognition of domestic ethnic groups who jointly participate in the establishment of a social contract and the interaction in the social practice of citizens exercising their rights and obligations. Emotional dependence on interests is a transcendence of national identity. The ultimate goal of national identity is often to build a nation that transcends all ethnic groups in the country, which is equivalent to building a new nation that controls the overall situation based on multi-ethnic groups, and deepening citizens' belonging to the country based on the "imagined community" sense and loyalty. National identity is the highest level of identity, with fundamental and dominant significance. It focuses on the overall interests of the country and can govern multiple identities such as ethnicity, religion, culture, and systems without any sense of violation. In the process of building national identity, if there are obstacles to mutual recognition between multiple ethnic groups or citizens are treated unfairly and unequally, it will endanger the stability of the original contract and lead to the country facing a trend of fragmentation. Therefore, the construction of national identity is crucial to national development. Quite necessary. As a symbol of public power, the state represents the public will. The value of the state ultimately lies in realizing the value of all its citizens, which is the prerequisite for the survival and development of the people. Therefore, the construction of national identity needs to be based on the satisfaction of the needs of the people and the satisfaction of the people.

4. Meeting Ethnic Needs in Times of Crisis

After independence in 1959, Singapore faced an economic recession. During the colonial period, Singapore's economy was highly dependent on international trade at entrepôts, and its market scope was mainly in Europe, the United States, Japan, and Southeast Asia. With Singapore's independence, its market share gradually decreased. Its independence from Malaysia in 1965 made Singapore's economy

even worse: Singapore became a country without an economic hinterland. The shrinking commercial trade has led to a sharp deterioration in Singapore's employment situation. In the early 1960s, Singapore's unemployment rate once reached over 10%. Moreover, by 1968, the British military's expenditure in Singapore accounted for 20% of Singapore's GDP and provided nearly 70,000 jobs in Singapore. Once the British troops withdraw, the unemployment rate in Singaporean society will continue to rise. It can be said that developing the economy to ensure people's living standards has become an important goal of Singapore since its founding. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, basic physiological needs are the most basic needs, above which there are higher needs for safety, belonging, respect, and self-actualization. The most urgent need of the people is not the freedom to write editorials, but issues such as food, housing, education, and medical care. Without the material support of economic development results, Singapore's goal of building a racially harmonious society will become empty talk.

To this end, the People's Action Party is determined to increase employment opportunities through industrial production. After the failure of the initial import-substitution industry, Singaporean leaders believed that economic growth could not be achieved by relying on Singapore's own small hinterland, so they looked to the outside world, quickly adjusted the direction of the manufacturing industry to export-oriented, and promoted the domestic foundation Facilities construction, a series of tax and land preferential policies, and a clean government management agency established under the authoritarian rule of law. With low labor prices, it attracted a large number of foreign capital to invest and build factories in Singapore, providing a large number of jobs in Singapore, and by the mid-1970s, Singapore's unemployment rate had fallen below 3%. Later, as the international economic environment changed, starting in 1979, Singapore began the process of its second industrialization and eventually established the service industry and manufacturing as the two major driving forces for economic growth. It regarded information and finance as the two pillars of the service industry, focused on the development of capital- and technology-intensive industries, and became a vibrant, dynamic, and diversified economic structure by the end of the 1980s. By the end of the 1990s, Singapore had developed into an economy that integrated the modern service industry, advanced manufacturing, and traditional industries guided by the 'knowledge economy'. Sufficient employment positions in society ensured that the people's basic living needs could be met.

In terms of housing conditions, the government has launched the "HDB Housing Construction". Singapore's leaders believe that 'those with permanent property have perseverance.' People who have property rights in Singapore will defend Singapore's interests, which naturally includes the realization of a racially harmonious society. And work hard. At the same time, the government compulsorily stipulates the proportion of the population of different races through the 'racial quota system in HDB housing estates' to avoid the formation of single-racial settlements. Through these measures, based on improving housing conditions, ethnic exchanges have been promoted, social harmony has been maintained, and the national identity of Singapore citizens has been deepened.

5. Balancing Ethnic Power in Times of Turmoil

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory: After people's basic economic needs are met, their level of needs will rise, and then they will pursue the satisfaction of safety, social, and esteem needs. The construction of national identity must also respond to the higher-level needs of citizens promptly and realize these needs in the form of nation-building. The Singaporean government has always been committed to harmony and stability among various ethnic groups, avoiding conflicts and conflicts, and making all ethnic groups feel safe and respected in Singaporean society. In addition, the racial conflicts and riots in Singapore in the early days of the founding of the People's Republic of China brought social turmoil and pain, which also made the Singaporean government spare no effort to maintain inter-ethnic harmony.

After independence, Singapore's original social balance was broken, and there was an urgent need to regain a basic balance of rights and interests among the diverse ethnic groups. The Chinese account for the vast majority of Singaporean society, while the Malays consider themselves indigenous and are the largest ethnic group in the Malay Peninsula. Indians also demand equal ethnic status. Although Singapore gained independence, it is not a country with a common national identity, but a society of multiple races, religions, and cultures. Harmony and stability among races are particularly important to Singapore. Once racial power is imbalanced, Singapore may move toward division.

Against this social background, Singapore urgently needs strong means to stabilize the situation and overcome the difficulties it faces. This is a difficult challenge for Singapore's ruling party, the People's Action Party. Although the People's Action Party came to power in the democratic electoral system provided by the British colonialists, as the ruling party of a post-development country, it must shoulder the heavy responsibility of national construction and economic development. Facing the complex domestic environment determines that it cannot rely solely on democratic methods to formulate policies for national development. Based on this, the People's Action Party has made a series of efforts to maintain the balance of order.

The first is language policy. Singapore has established Malay as the national language through law, and other Chinese, English, and Indian languages are official languages. Among them, English is the common working language in Singapore. Language is closely related to race and culture. In Singapore, language is also closely related to politics. The policy of using all four languages as official languages not only allows all ethnic languages to have equal status but also respects and protects the inheritance and development of each ethnic culture. At the same time, relatively neutral English, as a common working language, can promote communication among various ethnic groups and increase understanding of each other. At the same time, it also creates a common language and cultural memory for all ethnic groups. Moreover, although the Chinese population accounts for 70% of Singaporean society, Singapore has not established Chinese as the common language. This approach respects the rights of Malays and Indians and prevents Singapore from falling into chaos in the fight for language status. Second is the military service system. Singapore requires all citizens of appropriate age to

participate in military service, which means that citizens of different races, languages, and religions need to participate in serving the country, and they can all use English in the military camp to deepen their understanding and promote Tolerance and understanding of each other, and deepened the identification with Singapore. The fourth is the legal system. Under Singapore's laws that protect freedom of religious belief and racial harmony, residents tolerate different religious beliefs and cultural habits, promoting stability and unity among races. Finally, there is and they can all use English in the military camp to deepen their understanding and promote Tolerance and understanding of each other and deepen their identification with Singapore. The fourth is the legal system. Under Singapore's laws that protect freedom of religious belief and racial harmony, residents tolerate different religious beliefs and cultural habits, promoting stability and unity among races. Finally, there is the electoral system. The People's Action Party creatively established the group constituency system, which mandates that candidates participating in MP elections should be in groups of three, and each group must have at least one ethnic minority. Once a PAP member in a group is elected, the entire group is elected, otherwise, all three seats go to the opposition party. This system design better balances the proportion of various ethnic groups participating in national affairs. While they represent their ethnic groups in participating in national affairs, they will also promote their own ethnic groups' sense of national identity in Singapore.

6. Shaping National Identity Amidst Diversity

The successful practice of Singapore's system design and economic development has provided inclusive development space and pragmatic interests for all ethnic groups to interact and promoted the long-term existence of ethnic harmony in Singapore society. The policy of freedom of religious belief also ensures the preservation of the history and culture of all ethnic groups. Inheritance, different religious beliefs, and cultural traditions can coexist with each other in the same HDB estate without religious conflicts, frictions, and cultural contradictions.

However, this multicultural coexistence is not enough to make Singapore a true nation-state. Lee Kuan Yew mentioned in his book 'The Hard Truth on Which Singapore Lives' that a true country is one where people are united regardless of race or religion and are willing to sacrifice for each other when necessary. But Singapore was founded on the basis that its people have nothing in common. Today's "Singaporean" can only be regarded as a concept. It is still a fragile country and a country still in creation. In other words, Singapore does not have a social basis for national identity and has not yet formed a unique national identity. On the one hand, as a country mainly composed of immigrants, there is no local culture that all ethnic groups identify with. On the other hand, Singapore has historically experienced British colonial rule, and Japanese occupation, and then briefly joined Malaysia. It does not have a stable ruling authority identity politically. A large number of immigrants come to Singapore simply because they are pursuing profits. In other words, there is no common value that resonates and unites the various ethnic groups in Singapore. Moreover, Singapore is a transportation hub connecting

the East and the West, and Eastern and Western cultures have always been blended here. Coupled with Singapore's bilingual policy, English has gradually become the de facto universal language in Singaporean society, which has also made it easier to spread Western culture. With the impact of Western individualism, hedonism, and other cultures, the traditional values of various ethnic groups in Singaporean society are also facing challenges.

Culture is closely related to the nation. National culture is the main content of national identity. The culture of a nation bears the blood inheritance, history, religion, language, customs, and other contents of the nation. Therefore, individuals have a strong sense of belonging to the national culture. Cultural identity, as the cornerstone of the community, plays the most stable and lasting cohesion role. The Singaporean government believes that every country and nation has its own unique national culture. Singaporean society, which is dominated by Asian ethnic groups, cannot fully accept Western culture and completely deny its own traditional culture. Otherwise, this will lead to Singapore losing its direction and forgetting the cultural values that drive its success. Based on this, the shaping of Singapore's national identity is particularly important. Combining historical traditions and current development, the Singaporean government proposed unique Singaporean common values in 1991: country first, society first; family as root, society first; care and assistance, respect for individuals; seeking common ground while reserving differences, consultation, and consensus; racial harmony, religious tolerance. As Singapore becomes more open, despite the increasing collision of Eastern and Western cultures, Singapore's common values have contributed to the building of national consensus.

Common values do not have the mandatory binding force of legal provisions, nor are they as detailed as legal provisions. They are extremely flexible, and different ethnic groups can understand and implement them according to their cultural characteristics and religious teachings. Chinese people can use Confucian culture, Taoist culture, and excellent traditional Chinese culture to understand and apply common values. The Malays and Indians can also use their own Islamic and Indian cultures to explain and practice common values. In other words, the national identity shaped by common values is not based on completely abandoning the original cultural traditions of each ethnic group, but based on retaining the traditional culture of each ethnic group to construct Singapore's unique cultural concepts.

In addition, Singapore also attaches great importance to shared cultural memory. Historical buildings are solidified culture. When shaping the national identity of the country, the protection and repair of ancient buildings is an important task of the government. And with the improvement of conservation awareness, Singapore's national identity is also undergoing subtle and far-reaching changes. Historical buildings are gradually becoming an important part of the common memory and identity of Singaporeans. In another survey on race, national identity, and citizenship among Singaporeans aged 15 and above, the protection of historical buildings as symbols of the country and nation ranked third after the national anthem and knowledge of Singapore's history. It silently tells Singapore's unique cultural memory and shapes the national identity of Singaporeans.

7. Conclusion

After gaining independence, Singapore went through a period when it was not favored by the international community. At that time, Singapore was seen as a city abandoned by the British and a threat cast off by Malaysia, facing a complex political situation and a difficult economic environment. But in just 10 years, Singapore has been built into a stable society where multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, and multi-religious people coexist harmoniously. It can be said to be a miracle.

Under the leadership of the People's Action Party, Singapore has blazed a path unique to Singapore with pragmatic decision-making based on its reality in terms of elections, employment, education, housing, culture, etc., and has made remarkable achievements in multi-ethnic governance. In the face of the challenges posed by globalization and immigration to a multiracial society, Singapore has also adhered to its open and inclusive attitude and actively helped new immigrants understand and integrate into Singaporean society.

The governance of a harmonious and pluralistic society achieved by Singapore has effectively prevented Singapore from becoming divided, enhanced the people's national identity, and promoted Singapore's goal of becoming a true nation-state. Due to the inherent lack of national identity foundation for national identity construction, Singapore's national identity construction could only rely on institutional identity at the beginning. However, with the orderly development of multi-ethnic governance, unique and common national cultural memories has sprouted in Singaporean society.

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