

Managing Chineseness: Identity and Ethnic Management in Singapore

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In this book, the author made attempt at delving into the relationships among identity grafting, double hegemony and born-again Chinese. This helps readers to rethink the nature and construction of Chineseness in the context of Singapore with a particular focus on the conceptualisation of Chinese identity grafting. The book employed different evidence to buttress the arguments, in dialogue with Max Weber's thoughts, for articulating the concept of Chineseness as spectrum.

In Chapter 1, the author utilised the Weberian framework to draw how varied paths of economic success in Greater China added to the complexity in discussing Asian modernity and identity grafting. Given the developmentalist approach adopted in social engineering reforms, Singapore is unique in its unique ethnic management and the national project of Chinese identity grafting against the geopolitical context that Singapore straddled between East and West (p. 9). On top of that was Singapore's deviation from mainstream postcolonial models that it welcomed multi-national corporations (MNCs) to augment state legitimacy. Using the example of "Eurotech Consortium International (ECI)", the chapter illustrated the discriminatory measures towards local Singaporeans in a way that they were positioned in roles complementary to those of their Mainland Chinese counterparts (pp. 24-25). Economic justifications were so strong that they preceded other factors in defining cultural roots in the corporation, although coveted internal stratifications persisted and showed strong prominence in lunch cliques (pp. 28-29). These stratifications were part of the prominent effect of dialect-primacy in creating Singaporean Chineseness, which emerged as results of varied permutations under the same schooling efforts. This explained and outlined the author's objective of carrying out this research by adopting the method of interview, being a disguised employee in an MNC. She also traced teachers' dispositions to see how a Singaporean was socialised into being Chinese by the family, ethnic management, schooling and professional dispositions.

Chapter 2 illustrated the historical root and explained the complexity of the ethnic differences between the Singapore "CMIO" (Chinese, Malay, India and others) population. The author approached the concept of "development" from the accustomed focus on fostering economic growth and tangible economic deliverables. Singapore Government paid high attention on the ethnic management of the "CMIO" population not merely because of the legacy of colonial administration, it was also for the purpose of augmentation of state power (pp. 61-62, 64). The developmental state realised the importance of nationalisation of education in stemming the British political force, which in turn also contributed to the tight management of Chineseness (pp. 62-63). Despite undermining the Singaporean national consciousness and heritage (pp. 66, 70), Anglicisation had successfully transformed Singapore into a "total business environment" which favoured foreign investment,



especially those from the Western MNCs (p. 66). However, Singaporean people desired to strike a balance between economic growth and social coherence, especially when the social landscape was getting more complex (p. 74).

In Chapter 3, the author raised her experience at the National Day Parade to elucidate the importance of understanding the typologies and stereotypes in Singaporean identities to contemplate the social engineering of Singaporean Chineseness. To offer a full picture, the cases of Cantonese usage in Canton and Hong Kong as well as subaltern studies of India were drawn to illustrate the dual hegemonic framework that laid upon Singaporean Chinese (pp. 90-91). Based upon this framework, the author subsequently outlined different topologised groups of Singaporean Chinese, under the hegemony working in ECI, that survived and evolved accordingly. Among them, Situational Chinese referred to those who adopted transcendentalist approach responding to cross-cultural differences. The ambiguity of which was reinforced by the importance of English during the 1980s Mandarin Revivalism. Born-Again Chinese referred to those who kept their primordial networks with Chinese community previously served for maintaining comparative advantage over their Mainland counterparts in workplace. Integrated Chinese referred to people who recombined varied cultural scenarios to find their adaptive solutions in addressing social gap. There also came the Repressive Chinese, who aspired professionalism to the vertex that led to an almost complete exclusion of authentic expression and had beliefs of hard work to balance out socioeconomic differentials entrenched through Confucianist schooling (pp. 101-102). These stereotypes, be they self-inflicted and grafted collaboratively or not, efficiently supplanted the “exogenous” normative realities into the Singaporean local context.

In Chapter 4, the author discussed how “the Complex” of Chinese affected one’s favouritism and practice in making political, economic and social decisions. Repressed Chinese demonstrated the echoes of auto-orientalism in the beliefs of Chineseness as an inferior attribute and entrusting all decisions by the top management. Situational and Integrated Chinese affirmed that culture had no direct linkage to the ability; yet, the key noticeable distinction in their practice was less confrontational compared to that of Born-again Chinese (pp. 120-125). The Situational Chinese delved for transcending the orientalist stereotypes of Chinese by the cases like English-primacy corporate representatives and English-primacy socioeconomic status childhood with a prosperous, middle-class background.

Chapter 5 discussed the worldviews and the reconstruction the identities of Born-Again Chinese on the basis of their linguistic primacies. First, the author pointed out that China’s economic growth and its rejection of Western dominance led to “dual hegemonic contestations” in Singapore. She, hence, stated the necessity of the alignment with China and the importance of the need to acknowledge China as the “ascendant regional hegemon” (p.141). Within the dual hegemonic framework, she further took the worldviews of Born-again Chinese and Integrated Chinese into account. The Born-again Chinese saw themselves as a part of Pan-Chinese network and prioritised proximal cultural networks than distant networks. On the other hand, Integrated Chinese chose to reconcile cross-cultural differences and negotiated the balance of powers. In addition, based on the school memories and linguistic primacies of the corporate representatives, the author critically compared their reconstruction of identity grafting to Chineseness. The education experiences facilitated the optimism of the Mandarin-primacy Born-Again Chinese. Also, the cultural engagement among them was inspired by the interpretive value of selective alignment of one’s affiliation. In contrast, Dialect-primacy Integrated Chineseness, as soft-balancing mediators, identified the dialect exclusion as the result of symbolic-struggles between English and Mandarin rather than cultural marginalisation.

In Chapter 6, the author turned to concentrate on the use of peer orientalism among ECI corporate representatives, whereas the state discourse, addressing Malay community as “lazy native” and “willful native”, disclosed the symbolism of peer orientalism in the identity grafting of Chineseness. While “lazy native” shed considerable light on the reinforcement of

Singapore's Chineseness and rootedness to East Asia (p. 169), "willful native" view of peer oriental saw disengaged Malays as signs of "passive aggression" (p. 173). Although both constructions were associated with negative connotations, they differed on the grounds for objection which such position subjected to the reference point against which cultural comparisons were made. Given that socioeconomic and linguistic backgrounds framed the judgements on social proximity (p. 181), the construction of Malayness and Chineseness differed in terms of the position taken. Accordingly, the Born-Again Chinese and Situational Chinese adopted "lazy native" and perceived Malay community as farther in terms of social proximity, whereas Integrated and Repressed Chinese chose "willful native" and "feel ambivalent" to view themselves as closer to "Malays outsider" than "Western outsider" (p. 180). At last, the author suggested that the dominance of the dual hegemonic framework downplayed the devitalisation of Chinese cultures which were not the prototypes of its hegemony (p. 183).

Chapter 7 restated the identity work of ECI corporate representatives within the global political economy, followed by the comparison with the identity work of teachers within the global education context. Since linguistic primacy came from dominant childhood language, it correlated with current power distance dispositions pointing to its function as an enduring influence on the habitus. Therefore, through comparing Dialect-primacy and Mandarin-primacy teachers, it revealed that linguistic primacy shaped their earlier experiences. The statistical analysis in the chapter showed that linguistic primacy predisposed enduring worldviews in power distance among Singapore teachers (p. 196). The author compared the dispositions of ECI corporate representatives as recipients of schooling and teachers as makers of schooling in order to draw the implications of identity grafting in terms of political and theoretical aspects. It pertained to policy gaps that identity grafting required further attention.

Chapter 8 stated that proactive management of Chineseness characterised Singapore's ethnic and identity management (p. 233). Chineseness had now become more diffused. Nonetheless, the author still believed that orientalism prevailed in the mindscapes of corporate representatives (although state discourses put an end to the deployment of zero-sum positions in the articulation of new state visions) (p. 236). Childhood socioeconomic status and linguistic primacy explained the reproduction of orientalism in the everyday construction of Chineseness (p. 237). Finally, the author was shocked by the gendered stratification of professional roles between ECI corporate representatives and teachers. Within the hierarchy of civil service careers, "elite masculinity" characterised the upper rungs in politics, and females populated the teaching profession (p. 248).

We think that the book, full of novel arguments, can provide at least three critical viewpoints that need further empirical support and discussion. First, the origin of identity grafting was from the Singapore Government's ethnic management of the "CMIO" population and nationalisation of education with a view to augmenting the state power. Second, among different typologised groups of Singaporean Chinese which survived and evolved under the dual hegemony, Born-Again Chinese paid greater efforts in reconnecting with the Chinese community previously served for maintaining comparative advantage over their Mainland counterparts in workplace. China's economic growth and its rejection of Western dominance led to "dual hegemonic contestations" in Singapore. Third, the Born-Again Chinese and Situational Chinese perceived Malay community, who was less competitive, as farther in terms of social proximity. The dominance of the dual hegemonic framework downplayed the devitalisation of Chinese cultures. Despite its difficult abstractions, we recommend the book for researchers who are interested in the topics of Chineseness, state formation and identities.

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