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(Re)Imagining a Singaporean National Identity

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Abstract

In his memoirs, Singapore's first prime minister Lee Kuan Yew bemoans the lack of a cohesive national identity at the time of the republic's founding in 1965. "How were we to create a nation out of a polyglot collection of migrants from China, India, Malaysia, Indonesia and several other parts of Asia?" he laments. Now, after nearly 50 years of nation-building, flag days, and National Day parades, a national identity for Singaporeans is still arguably very much in flux. Some commentators have even characterised Singaporeans as being in the midst of an identity crisis, and such a characterisation may indeed be quite valid given the official shift in recent years from the cultivation of an imagined national community to encouraging Singaporeans to conceptualise the city state as a global city serving as a cross-road for a larger global imagined community. Accompanying this shift has been a massive influx of immigrants, which has impacted many Singaporeans' sense of belonging and prompted increased debate on the issue of what constitutes a Singaporean identity. While some commonly proposed elements, such as pragmatism and a materialistic mind-set are, in fact, compatible with a global city identity, others, like Singaporean cuisine and Singlish, our home-grown vernacular, are decidedly more in line with a localised national identity. This article reviews survey data, official discourse, and opinions expressed by Singaporeans in blogs and Internet chat boards in an effort to shed further light on this current hot-button issue of Singaporean identity.

Keywords: *identity, imagined community, pragmatism, Singapore, Singlish*