

*International Conference on "Ethnic Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia:  
a dialogue between tradition and modernity"*

Singapore, June 30, 2001

## **Local and National: a dialogue between tradition and modernity**

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You will be familiar with the idea that, while we talk a lot about national politics, all politics is ultimately local. From the study of the ethnic Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia, I suggest that, while there are modern national traditions, living traditions are ultimately local, especially among peoples of immigrant origins. Let me begin with a comparison of the people of Chinese descent in the two countries. Today, they both strive to be modern but have different responses towards tradition. Those in Malaysia are community-centred, with a strong sense of locality, because what is national for them does not provide them with equality. Thus, although they are modernising themselves through outreach to other communities and to the world outside, their local identities have allowed them to keep many of their own older traditions alive. Those in Singapore, however, had the chance to take a different course and have established a clear national identity with reference to a globalising world. They no longer live with a sense of what is local and have not had to depend on Chinese-based traditions.

The changes to their respective ways of life have created a significant difference between the Chinese in the two countries. This difference raises questions about how the two communities within their different national frameworks will develop and how either will relate to the other. It makes it important for these Chinese to understand the nature of the divergence. It is a divergence that is especially relevant to the theme of tradition and modernity in this conference. However, before I turn to that theme, I should explain what I mean by the two key words here, local and national, and also have them placed in historical context.

The word "local" here has at least two layers of meaning. Historically, it refers to the strong sense of locality, that is, identification with home district, clan and speech group, that the early

Chinese immigrants brought with them from China. Today, it also describes the new sense of locality that has developed in various parts of a large country like Malaysia. For example, those who live in Johor have their own sense of locality when compared with those in Selangor and Perak, and there are significant differences among those who settled in Kelantan, or Kedah and Perlis, or Sarawak, or Sabah, or Penang. There is ample evidence to show that Chinese traditions, especially those belonging to the Little Tradition, have always been closely linked to locality, and that the local and the traditional remain connected in that way, whether these traditions are old or new.

The word "national", however, emphasises the political good of the larger community, and places that ideal high above parochial interests. The nationalist cause, therefore, plays down the needs and traditions of the local, if not replacing them altogether with new symbols of the nation-state. The idea of the national among the overseas Chinese had begun with a new national consciousness in China. The impact of that on the huaqiao in British Malaya was considerable. After the independence of Singapore and Malaysia, however, the link with the Chinese nation had to be abandoned in favour of their respective nation-building efforts. In the enlarged and complex federation of Malaysia, the hopes for a new multicultural nation turned into anxiety for the Chinese, as they became concerned that they might not have equal rights in it. Until they could identify fully with that nationhood, the many local communities have turned to their own store of tradition. This has influenced the education they have provided for their children in support of their quest for modernity. Singapore, however, is a small nation-state seeking a modern and global security in a large, unstable and variegated region. Its nation-building policy since independence in 1965 has ensured that the local and the national are not distinguishable. In any case, the idea of the national is seen by many as being shaped by the ethnic Chinese majority.

Both what is local and what is national can also be modern. By modern, I refer to those challenges to local traditions that have been brought to the region by industrial capitalism, colonialism, imperial expansion and social revolution. There is no contradiction between this modernity and both the local and the national. Local traditions can be modified to meet modern challenges. What is national, however, being directly related to the nation-state, led to the independence of former colonies and confirmed the sovereignty of such states in a globalised world. Here are multidimensional challenges to the nation, and the interests of the national are always expected to take precedence over the local and the traditional.

### Being local

I need now to place these concepts in historical context. Early in the 19th century, only the word local really mattered. Whether Chinese immigrants passed through Singapore and moved on, or went directly to the Malay states of both West and East Malaysia, or came to Singapore and went no

further, they all had a strong sense of the local. For some, that came from their place of origin in China; for others, it was shaped by their own local communities elsewhere in Southeast Asia. They carried with them their village and dialect group identities, and their distinctive variants of the Chinese Little Traditions from Guangdong and Fujian provinces. In time, most of them adapted themselves to local conditions in this part of the Malay world.

The one notable difference among the Chinese was that between the Baba Chinese who had settled in Malacca and its environs earlier on, and those who arrived from China during the 19th century. The former were localised in having distinctive traditions of their own that were developed in a Malay environment, while the latter held to the traditions of their home localities in China. The British found this difference convenient. For their purposes, it was advantageous to employ the Baba, the truly local, to help them establish their trading networks while encouraging some of the later arrivals to exercise their entrepreneurial talents, adapt to local conditions and perhaps settle down. With the establishment of the Straits Settlements, all the local-born were qualified to become Straits Chinese. When British rule was extended to the Malay peninsula, more localised Chinese were brought into the fold as protected subjects, the precursors of the Malayan Chinese the British came to recognise during the first half of the 20th century.

Under these circumstances, being local implied holding on to certain sets of traditions. For all except the Baba, these initially meant traditions originally from China. But, by the end of the 19th century, some Chinese had begun to acquire other local characteristics, for example, those who lived all their lives in Kelantan, Penang and Selangor were distinguishable from those of Singapore. They might have had common dialect origins and shared basic customs, but they had to deal with a different mix of Malays and other races in each place, and they had different experiences of the increasingly powerful British authorities. At this point, although all Chinese were still traditional, they could be divided into those who were primarily China-traditional and those who could be called local-traditional. As more of the latter were local-born, what was evolving was a new kind of Chinese-speaking peranakan, most notably in Penang and Singapore and spreading along the West coast of the Malay peninsula. But both kinds of Chinese could draw on distinctive living traditions.

The condition of being local was open to changes brought to the region by European colonial rulers. By the beginning of the 20th century, these were characterised by the dominance of capitalist economics and the pressures of social revolution that came to be identified with modernity. The impact of such transformations, however alien they first appeared, spared no one. There was, in any case, nothing to prevent the local from seeking to be modern if they wanted to. Depending on where the Chinese were localised in British Malaya (this included Singapore) and northern Borneo, they were becoming modern at different rates. Differences of access to modernising environments, and the relative remoteness of some localities, separated those who modernised fast from those who did so

gradually. Everywhere were those who were looking to modify, update, even upgrade, their respective traditions. For example, traditional organisations based on dialect and descent groups were intertwined with newer social and occupational clubs and societies. As long as they were established for Chinese, they followed recognisably traditional practices. The one growing difference was that between those who were oriented towards changes in China and those led by Chinese-speaking peranakan whose sources of modernity were found locally or derived directly from Britain.

#### The chance to be national

But nation-building in the two countries, and the new power of the national, brought further changes. There came the chance for people of all races and communities to reach out for what many saw then as the ultimate in modernity, the nation-state. This was the secret of European power, the source of their economic and military success and, therefore, the critical institution for people living in colonies to regain their self-respect. The driving force was the humiliation of having been conquered and ruled by foreigners. As long as the Chinese were sojourners waiting to return to China, this was not a problem for them in their localities abroad. Their awareness of the national was raised only after the opening of the Treaty Ports of coastal China, some of which were close to the very localities from where most of them had come. It was not surprising that these Chinese were moved by the chance to overthrow the weakened empire ruled by the Manchu and replace it with a Chinese nation. Thus, new leaders like Sun Yat-sen were given a hearing. The encounter with the ideas of race and nation as promoted by China's first modern politician was a riveting one for most overseas Chinese. Over the next three decades, Sun Yat-sen and his nationalist followers began to unite the young and the frustrated and overcome their local differences, no matter where they were and what dialect group they belonged to.

It was this force that brought the concept of huaqiao to the region. This was a call for the unity of all Chinese that placed the emphasis on what was national in China. It was a call that began to diminish the differences among the Chinese of various distinctive localities of British Malaya and elsewhere. The growth of the Chinese press that tied it directly to political, economic and cultural advances in Shanghai, and gave a new national perspective to developments in Guangzhou, Xiamen and Shantou, was a powerful factor for rapid change. The introduction of modern Chinese schools in all the territories quickly transplanted the idea of the national into the consciousness of local-born Chinese of all classes. Even some of the Baba who had looked up to the British, and were uneasy at the strong emotions aroused, found this national cause in China difficult to resist.

A similar national ideal awakened the Malays and other communities as well. During the 1930s, at least three competing national appeals were being made by various groups of Malays, Indians and Chinese. Despite the different sources of inspiration, the drive to nationalist mobilisation

was a serious barrier to local social harmony. Each set of national leaders sought support exclusively from their respective communities. The British wrestled with the implications for local order, and for the future of their authority in Malaya, until the Pacific War swept all their plans away. The Japanese further aggravated the nationalistic differences, and the War ended with three potential "nations" for the British to pacify when they returned.

The outcome is familiar to us. Intricate negotiations had led to the creation of the Federation of Malaya, with the separate colony of Singapore detached. The Malayan Emergency drove a larger wedge between the Chinese and the Malays. This wedge led eventually to the formation of Malaysia and the failure to keep Singapore in the new federation. Outside, what pressed on both Malaysia and Singapore was the ideological hot war in the region and the efforts at an experimental regionalism with ASEAN. Underlying the whole process were the different degrees of success in nation-building among the neighbours. But there was no turning back on the need to modernise by being national through the nation-state.

The most important result for the Chinese who had stayed on in Singapore and Malaysia and did not return to China was the double divide for them on both nationalist and ideological grounds. The rejection of Chinese nationality, with the abandonment of the idea of being huaqiao, was the first step. The disillusionment with communism following the excesses of the Cultural Revolution in China was the second. Now was the time for the local Chinese in both countries to focus on the development of the national in their respective adopted countries.

### Tradition and modernity

I have suggested that the sense of locality can lead people to modernise the traditions that they have inherited, but the pressure to become national presses people to subsume their local traditions to new unifying symbols. Thus, the dialogue between tradition and modernity held in Singapore and Malaysia has bifurcated over the past three decades. Today, the differences deserve to be studied closely. What lies at the heart of the two separate dialogues?

Singapore has provided the Chinese with a majority status that has been played down by the stress on a multicultural nation-state. The country is, in any case, too small to have internal localities with any meaning. State policy has diluted the appeal of most traditional organisations. It has encouraged the minimising of residual local differences by stressing the nation-state that has been defined by external pressures on a global scale, especially in economic competition. In that context, what is national has been real for the Chinese there. The nation-building process has been one in which they have participated equally, one in which traditions associated with a Chinese national

identity are no longer appropriate. Instead, what have taken precedence are measures to meet global technological challenges that entail different attitudes towards the very idea of tradition itself.

Singapore's uniform national education has, in fact, all but eliminated local traditions. The policy of emphasising English in order to facilitate nation-building, tap available international resources and globalise the economy, has been carried through. For the Chinese, the Speak Mandarin programme has reduced the value of the original mother tongues. The use of simplified characters and pinyin has been justified for its practical value, but the emotional linking with China has been carefully avoided. The approach towards tradition has been redefined as one that starts afresh to build a new set of national values, of patriotism and loyalty directed primarily to Singapore. Such a tradition might be further enriched by customs and practices from other parts of the world that have been brought in to enhance the nation's chances for survival and sustained prosperity. All these would one day add up to a distinct national tradition, but that is not a priority and not sought for its own sake. To use the language prevalent today, the challenge is to keep up with the shifting demands of a modernity that is global and ever changing, and that calls for the "creative destruction" of all that stands in the way.

In Malaysia, multiple traditions have drawn sustenance from their different community origins, and from the mix of races and cultures in separate localities. They have survived a nation-building process that has been widely seen as discriminatory. Those of Chinese descent seem to have accepted the process as a temporary stage. In the meantime, they have reserved the right to preserve as many as possible of the organisations they had inherited, and also try to cultivate some modernised but distinctive traditions of their own. They have reacted in this way because they see themselves as targets of a nation-building process that is aimed at changing them to conform to something external to their traditions. They also feel that the struggle to contribute equally to a new nationality has been postponed again and again. Also, the prospect of such equality actually appears to have dimmed over time. The promise of becoming modern through what is national has thus been replaced by one that challenges the Chinese to be modern through adapting their local community traditions to the demands and opportunities of the world outside their country.

Thus, the urge to enhance the local has taken various forms. One has been that of a truly local identity through which they could identify with wherever their new homes are actually located. I have mentioned variations among Chinese communities in localities like Johor, Selangor, Kelantan, Sarawak, Sabah and Penang. Some of the local Chinese in each place could, of course, still hope to influence national policy by making a sub-national contribution, but when they turn to political action, their activities could be seen as communal and against national interests. Whether manifested locally or communally, that is the product of an incomplete national experience that allows, if not encourages, the Chinese to hold on to the traditions they already have and seek to modernise them in

their own distinctive ways. It also allows them to reach out beyond national borders to other Chinese who feel incompletely national in similar ways, and use modern communications technology to help them build overarching transnational networks. The proliferation of such networks wherever there are such Chinese may be an index of the resilience of tradition in each modernising local community.

The two dialogues between tradition and modernity thus provide a contrast for the Chinese in both countries to learn from. They raise many important questions that deserve attention. Let me end with three of them:

1. Local community traditions have survived over long periods of time, and have ensured the vitality of the modern Chinese in Malaysia. Is there still a role for these traditions in the lives of the Chinese in Singapore?
2. The division created between the two groups had come about because the Chinese had to choose between different national frameworks. What kind of framework would make it possible for the Chinese in both countries to share their traditions again?
3. The Chinese of the two countries have adapted creatively to a variety of adverse changes largely beyond their control. How can they ensure that future generations will be able and willing to go on doing so?

The history of the Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia suggests that, when what is national is found wanting or inadequate for one reason or another, the answers may be found in the idea that traditions are ultimately local.