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MILESTONE IN SINGAPORE'S MULTIRACIALISM

A tale of two Chinese cultural centres

EUGENE K B TAN



Is there one Chinese culture or a variety of Chinese cultures? One might be confused, as there are now two Chinese cultural centres in Singapore in close proximity to each other.

Established by China's government, the China Cultural Centre (CCC), in the heart of the Civic District, was opened in November 2015 during China's President Xi Jinping's state visit to Singapore. Today, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong will open the Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre (SCCC), located in the financial district.

The opening of the SCCC, established by the Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations, marks another milestone in Singapore's multiracialism. In 1965, the idea of a Chinese cultural centre was a non-starter, given the tense race relations then. Half a century later, Singapore's racial composition and the geopolitical realities remain unchanged.

But what has changed is the confidence Singaporeans of different races have in expressing and promoting their ethnic identities.

Chinese Singaporeans, too, can manifest their identity and culture without being perceived to be exclusive or domineering.

Today, we have the Malay Heritage Centre in Kampong Glam and the Indian Heritage Centre in Little India, opened in 2005 and 2015, respectively, and managed by the National Heritage Board.

Through exhibitions and other programmes, the centres promote public awareness and appreciation of Malay and Indian heritage, arts and culture to Singaporeans and visitors.

Nation-building has helped to nurture an overarching Singaporean identity that did not marginalise our distinct racial identities and cultures.

There was the pressing need to build a new society from the ashes of the failed merger with Malaysia (1963-65). The Singapore government consciously sought to develop a Singaporean identity while also recognising the special position of the indigenous Malays.

On the international front, it ensured that Singapore was not seen as the "third China". Singapore's sensitivity to the feelings of its closest neighbours saw her establishing formal diplomatic ties with China in October 1990 only after Indonesia had

normalised relations with China. (Malaysia had done so in 1974.)

English is the first language for the purposes of commerce, industry and education. The economic rationale afforded the importance placed on the English language. More significantly, the widespread use of English resulted in the closure of many vernacular schools.

To be sure, amid the public displays of tolerance and racial harmony, there were latent fears in the Malay and Indian communities that their language, culture, religion and values would be marginalised in a Chinese-majority Singapore. The Chinese community in turn bore a similar fear, given the promotion of the English language and the pervasive influence of Western culture through the mass media.

The Government had to deftly manage this perennial concern even as it tackled the threat of an erosion of the traditional value systems that had sustained the various communities. The political leadership took the view that, as a young nation-state, it was important to draw on the rich ancestral past and cultural heritage to further augment the Singaporean identity for the long-term survival of Singapore. A confident and secure cultural identity provides the ballast to face adversity and challenges with fortitude and confidence.

The Government's starting premise is that language and culture can provide the necessary inoculation against deculturalisation. Bilingualism and the mother tongue policy are therefore deemed critical in reinforcing the racial and cultural identities of Singapore while also maintaining social discipline and social values.

In particular, the mother tongues are officially recognised as a crucial part of our values, roots and identity, providing direct access to our cultural heritages, and a world-view that complements the perspective of the English-speaking world.

The Goh Keng Swee 1978 education report and the Ong Teng Cheong 1979 moral education report set the stage for the promotion of Mandarin (and other mother tongues), and laid the groundwork for the promotion of Malay, Indian and Chinese identities and cultures through the education system and in public policy.

This emphasis on one's cultural roots and heritage as a cultural and moral compass resulted in the Speak Mandarin campaign, launched in 1979.

In the same year, Special Assistance Plan schools were established to

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encourage good academic performance in a rich Chinese cultural environment.

Returning to the two Chinese cultural centres in Singapore, although Singapore and China share a common cultural heritage, the culture and identity of both countries will continue to develop differently.

Chinese Singaporeans must also continue to be attuned to our geopolitical environment. The SCCC can play a crucial role in this development.

The SCCC and CCC can help both countries cultivate a deeper respect and richer appreciation of each other's arts and culture.

The importance of this cannot be overstated, given the ascendancy and growing assertiveness of China in global politics and economy.

Accompanying this is the conscious promotion of Chinese soft power riding on a 5,000-year civilisational history, culture, language and the arts.

This is done primarily through

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the many Confucius Institutes and the China Cultural Centres found in many cities, including Singapore.

Given our multiracial context and imperative, Chinese culture and language will have to be promoted in a manner that is acutely sensitive to the domestic and regional contexts.

The emphasis must be on a Singaporean-Chinese culture and identity. The Chinese-Singaporean communi-

ty must demonstrate that its political standpoint and loyalty is solidly based on Singapore's national interest as a sovereign nation and an abiding commitment to multiracialism.

In particular, the community needs to be continually sensitive to the feelings of the racial minorities.

Singapore's policy of multiracialism is likened to four overlapping circles, where each community main-

tains its unique cultural identity and heritage.

The overlapping area — the common space — must continue to enlarge, without diminishing the communal identities, if our diversity is to work for us rather than against us.

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