A Sense of Place, a Sense of History: Rethinking the Question of "Roots" In and Beyond Singapore

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National identity is anchored in shared roots and common aspirations. The shaping of a collective identity is particularly challenging in multicultural societies. Given humankind's long history of migration, diverse civilisational influences have, for centuries, converged to shape cultural identity wherever humans have settled. In Singapore, we have only recently begun to reframe our national history by going back 700 years. As Singapore embarks on its 60th year of independence and looks to the future with an emphasis on "deepening roots", Kwok Kian Woon, Vice-Chancellor of the University of the Arts Singapore, highlights the need for us to explore deeper questions about our "roots" and what that concept truly entails.

The theme "Celebrating SG60: Deepening Roots, New Momentum" presents an opportunity for rethinking the question of "roots", which is embedded in a complex set of intellectual and social issues explored by many thinkers across the arts, humanities and social sciences. Due to space limitations, I can only provide a preliminary outline of a work in progress, drawing on the insights of a few key thinkers.

To anticipate my broad argument, the issues centre around a leitmotif in human life, involving our capabilities of sense-making and imagination: individually and collectively, we find our bearings in the present by relating ourselves to the past and the future. Indeed, there are many possible ways in which these processes intertwine as we grapple with contemporary challenges. The question of "roots"—for example, "where do we come from?"—is indelibly tied to concerns about the present and the future. Living in the present invariably entails recollecting a past and projecting a future. The future, which is inherently unpredictable, is imagined, but the past is also constantly being *re- imagined* in each instance of recollection, shaped by our present circumstances and our hopes for the future.

The Partiality of Historical Accounts

This is what makes the study of history so important, and why many thinkers refer to related concepts such as "memory", "heritage", and "tradition". There is a basic distinction in the idea of history: history as what "actually" happened in the past and as how the past is remembered, recounted, and reinterpreted. It is impossible for human beings to understand the past in an entirely comprehensive or objective way. All historical understanding draws from selected sources and partial perspectives—partial in the double sense of being both incomplete and guided, consciously or implicitly, by specific concerns about the present and the future. As much as academic historians strive for trustworthiness in the choice and use of sources, or truthfulness in interpretation and narration, they would also acknowledge that any historical account must be provisional—that is, open to questioning in the light of new sources and perspectives. Paradoxically, while the past may be thought of as unchanging or unchangeable, our understanding of the past keeps changing with the times. The work of historians—and our task as bearers of memory—is never done.

"Singapore must explore deeper questions about its 'roots' as it reflects on 700 years of history and 60 years of independence."

Any understanding of the past, therefore, can be critically reevaluated from various viewpoints, which begs the normative question: how should people relate to the past? Even if the question is not posed within and outside academia, we may say that some identifiable ways of relating to the past are already operating at any given time. These ways evolve and are shaped under conditions of significant social change, that is, when people experience profoundly new circumstances, often with a palpable sense of discontinuity with the past and uncertainty about the future. The massive social transformation in different parts of the world in recent centuries is encapsulated in the word "modern". The concept of "modernity" suggests a break, perhaps even experienced as a rupture, between past and present, ushering in a new social order and engendering new possibilities but also threats to preexisting ways of life —for example, with the advent of digital technology in many societies. This partly explains why responses to radical social change include nostalgic sentiments about a mythic past or calls for a return to traditional ways of life.

Official and Everyday Discourses in Singapore

Concerns about how individuals and groups relate or should relate to the past are commonly articulated in official and everyday discourses in many societies. Singapore is a prime example of a relatively new nation-state that is continually defining and redefining its relationship to the past amid rapid modernisation, led by an avowedly pragmatic and future-oriented political leadership. It is therefore unsurprising that, in marking 60 years of nationhood, the theme of "deepening roots" has again emerged. In effect, this implies an ongoing awareness that the resident population has relatively shallow roots that do not trace back to more than a few generations in Singapore. Hence, the often-repeated narrative of Singapore as an "immigrant nation"—although the term, commonly used to describe countries such as Australia and the United States of America, has been criticised for not recognising the status and rights of indigenous peoples.

Several recurrent and evolving themes can be highlighted in a critical overview of the successive discourses on "roots" in Singapore. From the 1950s onwards, government leaders have been concerned with defining and shaping a national culture or a

"Singaporean identity". With "multiracialism" as a central ideological pillar, nation-building efforts emphasise the respective group identities of the three main "races": Malay, Indian, and Chinese, whose "traditional values" provide a counterweight to "Western" values and lifestyles, often critiqued as decadent. At the same time, from 1965, the political leadership made a deliberate effort to instill a nation-centric consciousness, the clearest example being the framing and recitation of the national pledge, which calls for unity "regardless of race, language or religion" and the building of "a democratic society based on justice and equality".

Dualities, Old and New

From the early days of nationhood, therefore, we find a dual emphasis on both traditional values rooted in ethnic cultures and modern values rooted in the constitutional framework of the nation-state and the learning of science and technology, with English as the dominant language of education and administration. The dual preoccupation with modern meritocratic principles and traditional moral values was also reflected in the educational reforms of the late 1970s, resulting in the introduction of streaming and the revamp of the Civics curriculum. The latter was replaced by a compulsory Religious Knowledge programme, covering the major world religions and "Confucian Ethics", which received the most attention in curriculum design and public discourse. By the end of the 1980s, Religious Knowledge was withdrawn as a compulsory subject because of concerns about religious revivalism and the need for the secular state to practice neutrality in managing religious matters. But government leaders continued to be preoccupied with the need for social cohesion and discipline founded on secular moral values.

By the early 1990s, there were two developments along such lines. Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong had earlier expressed the need for a "national ideology", which led to the White Paper on Shared Values passed by Parliament in early 1991. The five officially identified values, which were taught in schools, were communitarian values that contrasted with "Western" liberal and individualist values. In the ensuing years, these communitarian values continued to figure prominently in public and even international discourses, this time in the guise of the "Asian values debate" led by Singapore's former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew and Malaysia's prime minister Mahathir Mohamad. Among other things, the so-called Asian values were promoted as serving economic growth and political stability in the region, again an example of the dual thrust of earlier discourses. By the end of the 1990s, another version of the dual approach was reflected in Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's idea that social cohesion depended on a sense of obligations between two categories of citizens: "heartlanders" who are locally rooted and uphold traditional values and "cosmopolitans" who are internationalised in their outlook and advance the nation's competitiveness in the global economy.

Throughout, the school curriculum has been a major vehicle for socialising youths through "national education" or "citizenship education" programmes. The key messages focused on Singapore as homeland, meritocracy, national security, and an ethos of survival and progress, and, as a corollary, "preparing students for a global future". In parallel, the making of the nation was narrated in the school history curriculum against the backdrop of the pre-colonial past, the colonial legacy, the Japanese Occupation and the political contestations of the postwar era.

Evolving, Overlapping Narratives

But the narrative has also evolved over the last two decades, situating modern Singapore within a longer historical timeframe and a broader geographical canvas. Independence in 1965 is still officially regarded as the beginning of Singapore's national history, as attested by the celebrations of SG50 in 2015 and SG60 in 2025. The colonial legacy is also acknowledged, for example, in the bicentennial commemoration—rather than celebration—of Stamford Raffles' establishment of the island as a trading port in 1819. However, these two pivotal historical moments are now located within a much broader narrative of 700 years of history, traced back to the regional maritime trade and the Malay world of the 14th century, and substantiated by archaeological and archival research.

Nationalism and cosmopolitanism—and, gradually, a more pronounced regionalism—also undergird cultural policies, which facilitate the development of local arts and the promotion of national heritage, as well as the showcasing of Singapore culture on the global stage. For example, the National Arts Council provides support for artists exhibiting and performing abroad. The National Heritage Board has made successful bids for the Singapore Botanic Gardens to be recognised as a World Heritage Site (2015) and "Hawker culture" and the Kebaya listed as part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (in 2020 and 2024 respectively), under the aegis of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Significantly, the proposal for the Kebaya was a joint submission on the part of Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand.

To be sure, the cultural orientation towards Southeast Asia is relatively more well-developed in two specific areas. In the visual arts, this is evident in the collection and curation of the art of the region over decades, culminating in the work of the National Gallery Singapore (established in 2015). In academia, the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) was founded in 1968, a year after Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand formed the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

It is tempting to criticise the earlier and current discourses by summarily dismissing the official formulations and pronouncements as "ideological"—for example, by treating the messaging in the national education or history curricula as "propaganda". Yet, we can expect that the political leadership of any nation-state would tend to propagate a version of a national past in keeping with its definition of national interests. At the same time, however, this would involve, as in the case of Singapore's national pledge, articulating a vision of progress and a model of a desired social order, with its concomitant social obligations. These are genuinely profound concerns in human life that could be said to transcend the agenda of nation-building. In other words, an idea of what constitutes human advancement, a good society, and social solidarity is not necessarily or solely defined by national interests. Indeed, for the idea to be compelling rather than superficial and rhetorical, it would have to speak to fundamental human concerns. If this argument has any merit, then the very question of "deepening roots" must itself be deepened by us asking deeper questions, as we develop a sense of place and a sense of history at this juncture of the 21st century.

Whether or not this kind of questioning is readily evident in the thinking of political leaders, it should be part of the intellectual substrate of a society, with thinkers and scholars playing a significant

role in developing critical perspectives on cultural inheritance and nation-building. Examples of such intellectual work in our neighbouring countries include the parallel contributions of Professor Osman Bakar in Malaysia and Professor Ahmad Syafil Maarif in Indonesia. Within the contexts of their nation-states, each with a predominantly Muslim population, they have unpacked and probed questions relating to the relationship between religion and modernity: Professor Osman on the need for civilisational dialogue, and Professor Maarif on Islam, democracy, and national identity.

In my view, the dual thrust of the official discourses in Singapore reflects iterative attempts at grappling with several apparent dilemmas and contradictions: tradition and modernity, religion and the secular state, communitarianism and meritocracy, Asian values and modernisation, local cultures and cosmopolitan mindsets, the colonial legacy and postcolonial consciousness, and national history and regional history. Many questions remain unresolved: How can traditional values be retained under modern conditions? How do values rooted in religious traditions matter in a multi-religious society governed as a secular state? How can communitarian values thrive amid the prevalence of meritocratic individualism and social inequality? Are so-called Asian values inimical to democracy and human rights? Does cosmopolitanism exclude specific groups in a global city (like migrant workers in Singapore)? Should colonial history be more critically reevaluated? How can Singaporeans better understand and find affinity, if not common cause, with the diverse peoples of the region, strengthening ASEAN as a community of nations? And beyond the showcasing of local arts and culture, how can Singaporeans and Southeast Asians contribute meaningfully to shaping a shared humanity, giving substance to the UNESCO idea of a "heritage of humanity" in ways that transcend national interests—a particularly pivotal issue in an era of geopolitical polarisation?

Deepening Our Intellectual Questioning: Two Examples

Instead of concluding with these questions held in suspension, let me highlight two recent examples of how they may be addressed by intellectuals in Singapore and the region. First, I refer to the two volumes of *The Modern in Southeast Asia,* edited by T.K. Sabapathy and Patrick Flores and published by the National Gallery Singapore. This compendium presents 300 writings—those in vernacular languages translated into English—by Southeast Asian artists and thinkers on the experiences of modernity in their countries, mostly from the late 19th century to the late 1970s. Taken together, these texts document the particular yet intersecting histories of how the most sensitive and creative minds of the region struggled with the roots of the modern in their countries, offering a plethora of clues to how we can retrace their steps and reframe our questions about contemporary times.

Second, I refer to Professor Wang Gungwu's *Living with Civilisations: Reflections on Southeast Asia's Local and National Cultures*, which provides an insightful analysis of the making of Southeast Asia over many centuries, with local (and later national) cultures drawing on the influences of Indic, Sinic, Islamic and modern European civilisations. Civilisations, as distinguished from cultures, embody deep reservoirs of spiritual, intellectual

and philosophical resources that address fundamental questions about human existence, social order and moral character. Civilisational influences are borderless, transmitted across empires through written traditions and facilitated by maritime trade and the exchange of ideas. Southeast Asian countries creatively selected and adopted these civilisational influences, shaping their local and national cultures as they modernised.

It is perhaps not accidental that these two exemplary works, offering insightful ways of thinking about Southeast Asia as a region, are published in Singapore—a perpetually modernising nation constantly in search of its roots as it navigates its future. Singapore's past, present and future are not self-contained within its territorial borders but are inextricably and inescapably linked to the region, whether conceived as Nusantara, Nanyang, Southeast Asia, or ASEAN. So, too, our evolving sense of place and sense of history as an island-city-nation-state will be enriched or impoverished by the breadth and depth of our archipelagic—rather than insular—imagination, reaching out to neighbouring lands and beyond, and drawing from a complex regional history of multiple civilisations and intersecting modernities. □

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(In lieu of citing a vast literature and some of my earlier writings on related themes, I have listed works by Singapore and Southeast Asian thinkers that readers may find useful. Although I have not directly referred to Kuo Pao Kun in this essay, his work remains of great relevance.)

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