Popularising Policy: (Re)forming Culture and the Nation in Singapore

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**Keywords** culture, cultural policy, mediatory discourses/mediatisation, nationhood, national songs, popularisation

**Abstract** Cultural policy in Singapore arguably takes on a ‘policing’ dimension, as it is typically about media censorship vis-à-vis the maintenance of social and political control. At the same time, it aims to extract economic productivity from citizens working in the arts and cultural sector. This paper analyses the cultural mentality of the Singapore government by taking a new look at cultural policy positions in Singapore. It provides a brief summary of recent policy statements, namely: Singapore 21 (1999) and The Renaissance City Report (2000), and looks at how these messages of (re)forming culture are relayed and popularised to the Singaporean public. To ensure that these messages reach and engage the people, the Singapore Government employs a mass popularisation strategy where popular cultural items – most notably national pop-songs, music video clips and images of Singapore as youthful and ‘cool’ – are heavily mobilised. As this paper will evince, the lyrics and mediated video images of national songs are not only powerful purveyors of the myth of nationhood, they are also essential tools of national culture and policy. This approach, as this paper will argue, has an immediate dual effect of reinforcing the hegemony of the economic and the legitimisation of the political in Singapore.

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Realising the ‘Reality’ of Singapore

[T]his is one of the greatest strengths about Singapore: Its willingness to face reality including the 9th of August. [...] Every year, on this 9th August for many years ahead – how many, I do not know – we will dedicate ourselves anew to consolidate ourselves to survive; and most important of all, to find an enduring future for what we have built and what our forbears will build up.

Lee Kuan Yew (Prime Minister of Singapore, at the first National Day Rally Speech, 8th August 1966).

On the eve of the first anniversary of an independent Republic of Singapore, 8th August 1966, then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew delivered his inaugural National Day Rally Speech to the nation. Among other things, Lee recounted the unpleasant chain of events leading to Singapore’s sudden (re)jection from Malaysia on 9th August 1965. The official reason was that Malaysian leaders appeared unwilling to officially embrace a ‘Malaysian Malaysia’ agenda, where non-communalist politics and multi-racial integration were paramount (Lee, 1965; see also Ministry of Culture, 1966). In short, Singapore was to become the antithesis of Malaysia. In his speech, Lee reiterated his government’s social and cultural policy of multiracialism – encompassing the well-rehearsed traits of multilingualism, multiculturalism, and of...
multireligiosity – which ‘survives’ to this day. Indeed, Singapore’s first National Day was filled with politically-charged innuendos and the rhetoric of national survival as national culture.

Lee forged Singapore’s national ‘reality’ with his decree that every 9th August was to be set aside as a day of dedication. Lee’s original idea of a ‘national day’ bears little semblance to the pomp and pageantry or the ‘carnivalesque’ elements of contemporary National Day Parades (NDP). National Day envisaged by Lee had a phlegmatic demeanour, akin to a memorial service to honour victims or veterans of a war. Lee’s intention was always to orchestrate the invention of a state-defined Singaporean national culture/identity (see Velayuthum, 1995: 42). Although the precise shape and definition of a ‘Singaporean’ culture remains vague and contentious to this day, it was made patently clear from the outset that it had to be distinct from Malaysian culture/identity. Multiracialism as non-communalism yet communitarian in practice became the founding and foundational cultural policy of modern Singapore.

Singapore’s National Day has always been a prime site for the articulation of national strategic directions. It is an excellent opportunity for the ruling People Action Party (PAP) government to announce and ‘soft-sell’ new policy agendas. Despite the historical, political and cultural gravity of Singapore’s National Day, not many critical insights have been proffered on the event, with the exception of the usual journalistic reports and government statements. Comments on Singapore’s National Day have tended to focus on its grandeur and levels of nationalism (if at all measurable) invoked at the annual Parade. To the extent that it has become a cliché to consider the Parade a highly ritualised and stylised attempt at cultivating nationalist sentiments, thus developing a habitus of the ‘imagined communities’ of nationality (a la Benedict Anderson’s widely acclaimed work, 1983). This by-now familiar perspective is taken on board by Singaporean sociologist Leong Wai-Teng (1999) in his analysis of the NDP as a commodity to be consumed by two fairly disparate groups of Singaporeans: the ‘believers’ of the myth of the Singapore ‘nation’ and the ‘unbelievers’. The believers are simply those who are mostly convinced that Singapore is governed by the best possible bureaucrats and power-holders; whereas the unbelievers are the not-so-patriotic citizens, described by Leong as ‘repressed consumers’ who prefer to find other modes of distraction. Some of these take full advantage of the 9th August public holiday for a brief overseas escape (Leong, 1999: 12). Theresa Devashayam (1990) makes a similar observation when she highlights the significance of identities’ formation within the annual NDP, and the resulting (lack of) response from the people.

Another approach is to treat the NDP as a media and/or mediatory event. Irvin Lim’s (1999) semiotic cum textual analysis of the live-telecasting of the 1993 NDP on Singapore national television offers an excellent case study. As Lim points out, the media(ted) spectacle of the NDP is a very powerful tool in engendering public consumption and ‘staged’ participation of this national event. Selvaraj Velayutham (1995) takes a slightly different approach when he positions the NDP as a mediatory event aimed at publicising and negotiating the differences, divisions, conflicts and contradictions inherent in disciplined multiracial multi-religious, multilingual and multicultural society (see Purushotam, 1998). As Velayutham notes, the NDP is actively involved in processes of identity mediation and the management of difference for “the purpose of positioning the nation and the character of its people” for the sake of economic progress (Velayutham, 1995: abstract).

Whilst acknowledging the aforementioned mediatory and other signifying practices of the annual National Day Parade, this paper aims to accentuate the importance of new populist or popularisation strategies adopted by the Singapore Government in its annual planning and execution of the National Day celebratory events in recent years. As this paper will argue, whilst the date of 9th August has been kept since Lee Kuan Yew’s ordination, the elements, style and focus of the event have shifted with the times. For instance, the concept of a national ‘celebration’ surfaced only in August 1969, three years after the first National Day event. Prior to that, the emphasis was
mostly on being and becoming different from the neighbouring country.

The 4th National Day Message delivered by Colonel R. J. Minjoot, Chairman of the 1969 National Day Parade Committee, elucidates the cause and purpose of celebration:

_We celebrate each National Day with unfeigned happiness and pride for this is the day that is dedicated to the people of Singapore. We celebrate the achievements of the past year and take note of our failings and we set our minds and steel our hearts to carry the nation forward to yet another milestone of progress in the coming year._


Since then, the concept of ‘celebration’ has become the _sine qua non_ of the annual National Day event, with each National Day becoming more elaborate and each Parade promising greater fanfare and spectacle. As a result, younger generations are either unaware of the ‘reality’ of Singapore’s independence or are simply uninterested in dull, historical details. As a matter of fact, the National Day celebrations of recent years have become ‘mass entertainment’ (Chng, 2000). Yet, rather than decry the lack of interest shown by the people, the Singapore government has decided on a strategy of ‘popularisation’ to win over hearts and minds of Singaporeans, especially those belonging to the ‘unbelievers’ category.

If successfully implemented, the popularisation of events and symbols associated with Singapore’s National Day has an immense potential to change social and cultural attitudes. Whereas listening to a speech delivered by the eloquent Lee Kuan Yew was a popular activity in those days (perhaps even today), it would certainly be difficult to incite and excite the same crowd fervour and participation today. Likewise, while the national days of yesteryears emphasised the pertinence of political survival and nation-building, the National Day of present times would have to reflect the changing social, cultural and political demands of the present and future Singaporeans. Nevertheless, there was – and still is – a need to engage the people in as many ways as possible. This is where the cultural policy cum strategy of popularisation comes into play. By popularising national events and symbols, the ‘nation’ becomes socially, culturally and aesthetically pleasing, even entertaining, to the ordinary consumer as citizen, thus rendering the often arduous task of communicating government messages and policy ideas more manageable. The move towards creating an atmosphere of celebration and entertainment via the popularisation of national events, songs and symbols can also be perceived as a strategy of engagement, where Singaporeans – especially the young and/or the politically-less-informed – would be incited to participate by internalising the sights and sounds of nationhood.

This paper considers Singapore’s cultural policy by looking at the National Day celebration of the year 2000 and the discourse of national songs. It aims to show how the nation’s cultural policy is asserted and framed in and through the promotion of fun and entertainment as well as the popularisation of media and cultural products. This paper takes a particular interest in the audio cum visual making – and remaking – of a few well-known national songs (MITA Media Release, Aug 3, 2000). The composition and commissioning of heart-moving national songs has arguably emerged as one of the most powerful and successful popularisation strategy adopted by the Singapore government. By analysing the lyrics and video images portrayed by these national songs, one can gather or make sense of Singapore’s cultural policy and direction.

**Popular Policy**

_Cultural displays can be used to say new things, foster new understandings, promote old ones, valorize and legitimate stances by governments, peoples, or communities_ (Kurin, 1995: 12).

Since Singapore’s independence, National Day organisers and their respective
committees have sampled various ways of instilling nationalistic pride on ‘campaign-hardened’ Singaporeans. Visually appealing items such as laser shows, fireworks, military hardware displays and stunts, free-falling commandos, multi-coloured floats, mass flashcard and other cultural displays have become a regular part of the National Day Parade programme. The mobilisation of a celebratory mood and an atmosphere of fun are equally, if not more, important to incite crowd participation. Far from merely symbolising the nation’s survival, the 9th of August has become possibly the most popular social and cultural event in Singapore. Its popularity is comparable to a sell-out rock music concert, with aspiring spectators having to queue overnight, often for more than twelve hours, just to obtain two tickets to the big parade (The Straits Times Interactive, Jul 2, 2000). Those unable to obtain tickets would have to be contented with live telecast via the ubiquitous television set. Alternatively, one could go online to find out more about ‘National Day Special’ or watch the NDP ‘live’ over Internet webcast, options made available to the digitally-advanced since the 1994 National Day (Teo, 2000). Not only is the NDP webcast a powerful demonstration of Singapore’s technological competence and readiness for the new information economy, it enables the transcendence of the traditional domestic sphere of a national audience to a greater global audience, reaching out particularly to Singaporeans residing abroad (Lim, 1999: 142).

The NDP is irrefragably a great source of entertainment, with the live-telecast of the NDP consistently attaining one of the highest free-to-air television ratings, the degree of patriotism and/or national pride instilled, if at all quantifiable, remains somewhat questionable. Leong suggests that for some, a less than desirable motive for attending the Parade is to receive the free parade kit containing a wide range of goodies and discount vouchers (Leong, 1999: 11). On August 8, 2000, The Straits Times daily reported that the much-coveted tickets to the NDP were being sold on the Internet for amounts ranging from S$50 to S$250 or more per ticket (Arshad, 2000: 1). These transactions occurred in spite of a “Not For Sale” note printed at the back of each ticket, with sellers using ‘free-market’ reasons to justify their greed and buyers rationalising the ‘black market’ price as a ‘token of appreciation’ for long hours of queuing.

Like any other forms of popular culture, Singapore’s National Day – the Parade as well as the event in general – is a discursive site of meaning-making and contestation. It is ideally suited for debates surrounding the imaginary status of the ‘nation’, as exemplified in issues pertaining to national identity and culture, shared values, patriotism and parochialism, and so on. For example, as National Day approaches every year, the national press finds itself inundated with letters about the representation of the national flag and whether displaying it outside one’s home signifies patriotism (Leong, 1999: 12). Debates of such nature are always-already polarised, even futile, with some believing that raising the flag demonstrates national pride (The Straits Times, Jul 31, 2000: 36), and others arguing that true patriotism or loyalty to the nation needs no public showcasing (The Straits Times Interactive, Aug 1, 2000). Of course, there are yet others who are simply unperturbed or unmoved. These people would fit neatly into the aforementioned category of ‘unbelievers’ advanced by Leong (1999). The hoisting of a national flag, however, is circumscribed by the rules and regulations governing its public display and use. According to a Ministry of Information and the Arts memorandum (issued in May 2000), not only are the flags to be raised strictly between August 1 to 31 every year, each flag must be treated with utmost respect:

The flag must also be washed and dried indoors separately, and not together with other laundry. If it is torn or worn-out, it should be disposed of by packing it in a sealed, black trash bag. Or it can be handed to the nearest Residents’ Committee or community centre for disposal (The Straits Times Interactive, May 26 and Jul 7, 2000).

With clear instructions for virtually all occasions, Singapore’s notoriety as a well-regulated – or perhaps over-regulated – nanny state is made manifest here. While it
remains uncertain if the abovementioned rules pertaining to the state flag are properly adhered to, what is interesting is the way in which in contestation of ideas and meanings take place in Singapore. From an issue as mundane as how to, or whether or not to display the national flag, one catches a glimpse of the PAP government's highly measured but successful approach to policy administration, demonstrated in and by its exactitude in rule-making. At the end of the day, strangely enough, most Singaporean homes can be found neatly adorned with the national flag and other decorative ornaments – but whether this is done proudly or perfunctorily, as an annual decorative ritual without much afterthought, remains a moot point.

The host of events and debates that characterises Singapore's National Day makes it an ideal site for the articulation of cultural policy, understood here as the "clash of ideas, institutional struggles and power relations in the production and circulation of symbolic meanings" (McGuigan, 1996)⁵. Singaporean authorities are well aware of the need to constantly produce and circulate new symbolic meanings with the sole aim of maintaining political power via the control, or to use Foucault's (1977) term, the 'disciplining' of its citizens. In other words, cultural policy in Singapore is predicated upon the notion of controlling thought and behaviour of people, what American anthropologist Richard Kurin (1995) calls the capturing of 'broad public sentiments'. A crucial part of this control and shaping of public sentiments is getting Singaporeans to imagine themselves as disciplined, law-abiding and patriotic citizens – not of the present alone, but of the future. According to David Birch, power-wielders in Singapore are perpetually eager to maintain "reality-myths which position Singapore as a society always in danger, always attempting by hard work and sacrifice to avert some future crisis" (Birch, 1993: 3). Elsewhere, Birch (1996) makes clear that cultural policy in Singapore is really a strategic policy of control, part of an overall economic and developmental policy insisting upon political and social stability at all cost. Indeed, Singaporean geographer Lily Kong (2000b) points out that in 'pragmatic' Singapore, the major motivation behind cultural policy is economic(s)⁷. After all, as Kong expalics, the economic works in and through the socio-cultural (Kong, 2000b: 410). Therefore, as long as Singaporeans perceive culture and cultural policy from an economic standpoint, the government has little to fear in terms of policy non-compliance or electoral backlash at the polls.

Yet the emergence of younger, better-educated and more globalised middle-class Singaporeans has meant that the government can no longer treat the present population in the paternalistic ways of the past. Like large multinationals and conglomerates, bureaucracies around the world are now having to behave like good corporate citizens and take public relations and opinion seriously. Singapore is no exception. In recent years, the Prime Minister has utilised the annual National Day Rally speeches, now delivered towards the end of the celebratory month of August, to flesh out new ideas and prospective policy directions. This enables the authorities to mentally-prepare the people for policy changes, and/or to gauge public opinion sufficiently early so as to make an informed decision on the next political move.

In 1999, Singapore 21: Together We Make The Difference, Singapore’s vision splendid of the 21st century, was unveiled. The Singapore 21 vision, which aims to strengthen “the intangibles of society – social cohesion, political stability and the collective will, values and attitudes of a people” (Singapore 21, Preface), is first and foremost an exercise in economic and political expedience. Concomitantly, due to its call for Singaporeans to embrace attitudinal change, it is also, by extension, a statement of cultural policy. The government’s desire to increase the inflow of white-collar workers from overseas to boost the republic’s competitiveness in the new information and knowledge-based economy provides the best illustration of Singapore 21’s agenda for socio-cultural change. The concept of Singapore 21 was first promulgated by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong in his 1997 National Day Rally Speech entitled ‘Global City, Best Home’. Among other things, Prime Minister Goh opined that just as are many Singaporeans living and working overseas, there is also a need for Singapore to “gather talent and make Singapore a cosmopolitan city” in the likes of London, New York and Hong Kong (Goh, 197: 28-39). Goh seized the
opportunity to foreshadow the imminence of a major shift in government policy. Apropos, this simple speech was to radically affect practically all government ministries and departments, including those managing the arts and cultural portfolios. Sure enough, less than two months after the prime minister’s speech, the project of Singapore 21 was launched to look into immigration policy, global labour arrangements and other equally pertinent national issues (Fernandez, 1997: 1).

Although the plan to inject foreign know-how into Singapore is a sound policy insofar as economics is concerned, the prospect of born-and-bred Singaporean citizens losing their ‘rice-bowls’ to foreigners did not go down too well with many people. In short, it was an unpopular policy as xenophobia, ignorance as well as false patriotism soon began taking over. The government had to manage such overtly nationalistic sentiments not by withdrawing or reversing the policy, but by assuring every Singaporean that they would be well looked after in an increasingly global era. There was, in other words, a need to ‘popularise’ the policy position by mobilising the mass media, the press, government departments and statutory authorities and other public apparatuses to speak favourably on the issue. Veritably, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong decided to give greater prominence to the issue of ‘gathering talent’ at the next National Day Rally Speech in 1998. This time, however, the term ‘foreign talent’ was used to remove possible traces of ambiguity. In a clear attempt at assuaging public discontentment, Goh articulated:

For while we attract foreign talent and welcome foreigners who contribute to our economy, Singapore must always have a hard core of citizens, cohesive and totally committed to the country, around whom we can attract other talent and build a nation (Goh, 1998).

As government departments have had ample time and feedback to prepare an all-inclusive policy and vision statement, the final outcome, presented as five broad pillars of Singapore 21, was thus able to embody and alleviate some of the key concerns of the people. The five pillars, designed to encompass an extensive range of issues and concerns, are:

1. Every Singaporean Matters;
2. Strong Families: Our Foundation and Our Future;
3. Opportunities for All;
4. The Singapore Heartbeat; and,
5. Active Citizens: Making a Difference to Society.

Popularisation in the Singapore context does not imply that a policy is well-liked or fully supported by the people. Rather, the strategy of popularisation aims primarily to minimise opposition and attain, if necessary, blind or generally muted acceptance of the government’s supposedly flawless foresight and performance. The ‘struggle for the popular’, according to Tony Bennett’s analysis of Marxist cultural politics in Britain, is conceived as one of “seeking to displace current and actual forms of ‘the people’s’ culture with a different content” in the hope that the ‘people’, that is the sphere of the general public, might eventually be led to appropriate the new content, and therefore culture, as their own (Bennett, 1983: 17). In other words, popularisation is utilised as a strategy to manage socio-cultural change by attaining political legitimacy and public endorsement not necessarily for the betterment of society at large, but for the maintenance of power. With immense power to define the future mould of Singapore’s citizenry vis-à-vis the ‘foreign talent’ issue, and to construct the terms on which the people should be mobilised, Singapore 21 is undoubtedly a useful popularisation strategy of the PAP government in enacting and enforcing a cultural policy of control.

The next section extends the notion of popularisation by looking at the employment and deployment of national songs within Singapore. Rather than perceive national songs as peripheral or mundane accompaniments to the annual National Day Parade and key celebratory events such as the National Day Rally Speech by the Prime Minister of the day, this chapter raises the (symbolic) profile of national songs by
positioning them as tools of cultural policy, thus political strategies and ‘realities’ in their own right. In so doing, one might be able locate the populist aspects of Singapore’s popularisation strategy in exacting further cultural and ideological control over the citizenry (Birch, 1996; Lee and Birch, 2000).

**Culture Reformed and Performed**

According to Leong, the admission of popular cultural items such as music, dance performances and pop-songs since the mid-1980s has incited greater participation from the masses (Leong, 1999: 4). But perhaps the most participatory element of National Day celebrations is the mass singing of national songs (along with the national anthem), which Leong describes as a clear “populist strategy to engage the masses” (Leong, 1999: 4). Leong’s view is echoed by feature writer Rosemary Chng when she notes most cogently in her preview of NDP 2000:

> The build-up for the NDP and National Day starts with the latest Singapore [national] song played over the TV and radio in July. There is also a Sing Singapore Committee… to discover and promote original songs written by Singaporeans. Songs such as ‘Count on Me Singapore’ and ‘Stand Up for Singapore’ have become NDP classics. Always sung at the NDP, they never fail to bring forth a swelling of national pride even for viewers at home (Chng, 2000: 18).

Some of the better-known national songs, or ‘NDP classics’, include:

- *There’s a Part for everyone* (1984) – part of the centralised and collective effort by the Singapore Government to launch Singapore’s ‘total defence’ foreign policy.
- *Stand Up for Singapore* (1985; revised 2000)
- *Count on me, Singapore* (1986; revised 2000)
- *We are Singapore* (1987; revised 2000)
- *One People, One Nation, One Singapore* (1989)
- *Shine On Me* (2000)
- *Majulah Singapura* (1959; revised 2001) - Singapore’s National Anthem
- *We Will Get There* (2002)

These national songs are usually written and performed by well-known or identifiable local artistes or television/radio celebrities. The songs – and the artistes, who are really more interested in boosting their public persona and hence net economic worth – receive extensive publicity over local television, radio and the Internet through the month of August (sometimes beginning as early as July). In addition, these songs are generously commissioned and officially endorsed by the Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts (MITA). As a result, national songs have become powerful mediators in the relay of nationalist messages and images to the Singaporean community as a whole. In recent years, not only are these songs aired over the dominant local mass media, they are recorded in digital format, distributed and sold in various formats, including compact disc (CDs), video-CD (VCD) and digital versatile disc (DVD). Examples include: *NDP 33:Remembering Our Past 33 National Day Parades* (1999, VCD format); *My Home, Singapore: Documentaries and music videos on Singapore* (1999, VCD format); and, *Singapore: One Voice* (2000, VCD and DVD formats), which boasts a complete collection of national songs accompanied by high-quality music video clips. With these recordings, Singaporeans can not only have their favourite national songs ‘on-demand’, they are able to screen images of National Day and the nation within the private domain of their living rooms. The notion of the NDP as a ‘mediatory’ event as advanced by Velayutham (1995) thus takes on an additional cultural dimension.
The appeal of a well-composed national song, like a good and timeless piece of music, is one that traverses both time (à la ‘NDP classics’) and space, since the live-telecasting of the NDP reaches out to media audiences, whether they are watching at home or in attendance at the Padang (field), the Parade ground outside Singapore’s City Hall. To ensure that home-viewers get the best of a live-telecast parade, lyrics of national songs that are being sung are subtitled in real time so as to encourage participation in a sing-along fashion à la karaoke (Lim, 1999: 133). More recently, the lyrics, soundtrack and music video clips of most national songs have also been lodged on cyberspace, on the ‘Sing Singapore’ website. This website vividly captures the essence and imagination of Singapore’s high-tech status by allowing listeners to download any national song in MP3 format into their personal computers and/or portable music devices. Any accompanying music video may also be downloaded for future viewing. The National Arts Council (NAC), the statutory body tasked with the responsibility of managing these national songs, has spared little effort in making them widely and easily available to Singaporeans at home and away. After all, making these songs easily accessible via all means possible is clearly one of the most, if not the most, rudimentary aspect of promotion and popularisation of the nation.

In a landmark study into the background and traditions of ‘national music’, Carl Engel contends that the form and spirit of popular music compositions vary greatly in different nations. From an anthropological perspective, the study of national music and songs is useful as it illustrates the distinctive characteristics of various countries and their people (see also Williams, 1963). Engel notes the significance of national songs in marking out or promoting a particular period or event in a nation’s history (1866: 12). According to Engel:

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\text{The term National Music implies that music, which, appertaining to a nation or tribe, whose individual emotions and passions it expresses, exhibits certain peculiarities more or less characteristic, which distinguishes it from the music of any other nation or tribe (Engel, 1866: 1).}^{9}
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Engel also submits that the more a nation advances in civilisation and self-esteem, the more it seeks to symbolise and express its feelings about itself via popular songs, folklore and other monuments. Engel’s observation is reflected with cogency in the Renaissance City Report (2000), a government report which outlines the strategic steps that will be taken to revitalise Singapore’s arts and cultural industry. On a global scale, Singapore aspires to become, as the title of the Report suggests, a premier renaissance city of the arts of the 21st century, benchmarked against the likes of New York, London, Melbourne and Glasgow. On a local level, however, the aim is to ‘strengthen the Singapore Heartbeat’ or its collective identity through the expression of ‘Singapore stories in culture and the arts’ (Renaissance City Report: Executive Summary). National songs perform a similar function as the lyrics and themes tend to focus on the distinctive aspects – the ‘peculiarities’ – of Singaporean culture and identity. In this way, the discourse of national songs become a part of the physical, social, cultural and political ‘renaissance’ or (re)construction of Singapore nationhood.

The emotive and heart-warming appeal of the national song Home (1998), for instance, attempts to capture, as Engel (1866) points out, the peculiarities and other intangible aspects of being Singaporean. Written by reputable singer-songwriter Dick Lee and performed by local pop-singer Kit Chan, this melodious ballad suggests that Singapore is ‘home’ wherever one chooses to go. The lyrics of Home read:

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\begin{align*}
\text{Wherever I am feeling low, I look around me and I know} \\
\text{There’s a place that will stay within me, wherever I may choose to go} \\
\text{I will always recall the city, know every street and shore} \\
\text{Sail down the river which brings us life, winding through my Singapore}
\end{align*}
\]
Chorus:
This is home truly, where I know I must be
Where my dream waits for me, where that river always flow
This is home surely, as my senses tell me
This is where I won’t be alone, for this is where I know it’s home

When there are troubles to go through, we’ll find a way to start anew
There is comfort in the knowledge that home’s about its people too
So we’ll build our dreams together, just like we’ve done before
Just like the river which brings us like, there’ll always be Singapore

In this song, ‘home’ is depicted both as a metaphysical construct as well as a geographical reality. It is a place that stays ‘within’ one’s ‘senses’ while at the same time an urbanised ‘city’ with ‘its people’, a flowing ‘river’, ‘street and shore’ and so on. In short, the song suggests that Singaporean identity does not simply consist of rooting oneself geo-physically on Singapore soil, it is more important to stay passionately true to Singapore, for it is where ‘my dreams wait for me, where the river always flow’.

The easy-to-understand lyrics of Home re-enact the aforementioned Singapore 21 vision, a document which, among other agendas, calls for Singaporeans to be cosmopolitan or global in their outlook. It is thus consistent with Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong’s call to encourage foreign talents and thus embrace cosmopolitanism so as to turn Singapore into a truly vibrant global city akin to the renaissance era (Goh, 1997 and 1998). While not overtly expressing it, the song also issues a call for skilled Singaporeans residing or working overseas to return to the ‘streets and shore’ of homeland Singapore. Concomitantly, those Singaporeans who do not venture abroad, euphemistically referred to by Singapore politicians and the mass media as the ‘heartlanders’, are also assured of their place in a society that is ‘about its people too’.

The national song Home, in effect, popularises and performs Singapore’s current cultural policy statement as exemplified in Singapore 21 as well as the Renaissance City Report. Putting the ideals of the government into a national song not only entertains, it fulfils erstwhile aims to further root Singaporeans – near or far – to their ‘imagined’ beloved nation, while signalling and preparing the people for further cultural (policy) changes ahead. In this case, one can expect the city, street and shore to be filled with non, or more appropriately ‘new’, overseas-born and/or foreign-trained ‘Singaporeans’. A ‘patriotic’ Singaporean who calls Singapore ‘home’ must therefore ‘go through troubles’ and accept changes graciously, or be left behind, if not economically, then socio-culturally. Such is the new social and cultural ‘reality’ of Singapore as proposed by the Singapore 21 vision.

The Ministry of Information and the Arts’ re-make of the 1985 ‘NDP classic’ Stand Up For Singapore for the National Day celebrations of 2000 is perhaps the most blatant attempt at popularising Singapore as a ‘hip’ and ‘cool’ cosmopolitan city which embraces culture and the arts. It is also the most illustrative as the music video, made to accompany the new revamped version, was a radical departure from convention. While the original video-clip of the song is most strait-laced and austere in its message of how and why one ought to ‘stand up’ and support Singapore, the new release is the exact opposite. Energetic and youthful in every respect, the new video clip is certain to make heads turn. Whether this is done in disdain or admiration is not so important, its ability to signify and portray a culturally vibrant city-state is more lasting and potent.

In Stand Up For Singapore (2000), the four lead singers (two males and two females), probably in their late-teens to mid-twenties, are seen disco-dancing – in the subway station, on the streets, in the parklands, on the rooftop of a skyscraper and other aesthetic locales – to a jazzed-up version of the song. In a video which (over) emphasises the vigour of youthful Singapore, one of the lead male singers even spots long and unkempt hair. This caricature is somewhat shocking if one recalls the well-circulated rumour that men with long hair entering Singapore have had their hair trimmed by airport customs officers. Furthermore, to this day, male officers in the civil
service, and many other Singapore organisations, are not permitted to wear a long hairdo to work. This indicates, among other things, that the authorities are now prepared to overlook rules that are dated and less relevant from an economic standpoint (Kong, 2000b). The belief is that the new economy demands entrepreneurial and artistic creativity, and by showing that Singaporeans are able to loosen up, foreign executives and businessmen would be persuaded to invest in the country. The closing sequence of the video, which depicts a group of police officers, military men and other uniformed staff joining the lead singers in jumping and dancing to the music and beat, bears testament to this newfound ‘truth’. One could be mistaken to think that the song was entitled ‘jump up’ or ‘hang loose’ for Singapore!

Stand Up For Singapore (2000) exemplifies the Singaporean government’s popularisation strategy par excellence. Not only does this rendition debunk many of the myths associated with Singapore, it is successful insofar as it is able to promote Singapore as a truly progressive city of the new millennium. It is also able to didactically impart this new social and cultural image to the younger generation of Singaporeans – many of whom risk defecting into the dubious category of the ‘unbelievers’ (Leong, 1999) – clearly the prime target audience of this national song and video campaign. The popularisation of Singapore as young, energetic, (pro) active, vibrant and ‘cool’ is aimed at displacing the old perceptions of Singapore as a sterile city-state of boring, economy-centric leaders and humourless people. The gradual perfection of the popularisation strategy means that Singapore’s cultural policy of control to achieve rapid economic growth and development is no longer visibly or overtly enforced, since after all, the material fruits of economic success are openly manifested for all to see. Instead, citizens are urged to actively participate and support, thus legitimising, the state’s panoramic vision, whether this comes in the form of a ministerial speech, the Singapore 21 blueprint (1999) or the Renaissance City Report (2000). In the final analysis, popularising Singapore is about attaining political legitimacy and longevity for the ruling party. As Kong elucidates most cogently:

[T]he ultimate concern is to develop in Singaporeans a love for their country, a sense of patriotism, and a willingness to support the ruling elite who have led the country through the short years since independence to tremendous development (Kong, 2000b: 418).

In this regard, the ‘reality’ of Singapore has not really changed.

Conclusion

The PAP government recognises that popularising Singapore via parades, carnivals, national songs, and other modes of entertainment are extremely effective in mobilising the people to support government-led initiatives and policies. As discursive symbols of nationhood, the consumption of these popular cultural items has the potential to raise public consciousness regarding the framing of a communitarian culture and national identity, a noble agenda that is likely to find little resistance (Chua, 1995). As a result, the popularisation of national songs, for instance, a project which began in the 1980s, has intensified in the late 1990s, and looks set to continue into the 2000s.

Putting the money where the mouth is, the government has poured in large sums to commission the audio and video production of new songs. In a typically Singaporean fashion, the older favourites, including Stand Up For Singapore, have undergone major revamps with new arrangements and innovative new music videos made to captivate and capture new audiences. In 2001, the much-revered national anthem Majulah Singapura received a makeover to the tune of S$200,000 to make it “more accessible to all Singaporeans” (MITA Press Release, Jan 19, 2001). The official announcement emanating from the Ministry of Information and the Arts proclaimed that:

A new recording of the National Anthem, Majulah Singapura, with a grander
and more inspiring arrangement, is set to become more popular with Singaporeans. The new recording also comes with a revised English translation of the lyrics so that the meaning of the Anthem can be better understood (MITA Press Release, Jan 19, 2001).

Like other national songs, the new rendition of the national anthem comes complete with its own music video and music score sheets. In addition, to ensure that the anthem becomes ‘more popular’ with all Singaporeans, seven different versions of the anthem, including orchestral, choir/solo and piano, have been recorded for teaching and singing purposes (see Tan, 2001a/b). Indeed, no stones have been left unturned.

The popularisation of the national anthem fulfils two objectives. First, the song has been given a slower tempo and transposed down a tone from the key of G to F to make it easier for people to sing it. Children, who are required to sing the anthem at school assembly every morning, would thus be able to reach the notes comfortably and, hopefully, be moved by it. The second, and arguably more pertinent, objective is the fact that a revised English translation of the lyrics has also been produced. As Birch (1993: 1) has observed, while most are able to sing the song ‘with pride’, very few actually understand what the Malay lyrics mean. Singapore’s desire to spurn all things Malaysian means that it is important to remedy this language barrier not by teaching conversational Malay, but by translating it into English, the neutral lingua franca of Singapore. After all, Majulah Singapura, or ‘Onward Singapore’ in English, symbolises and celebrates Singapore’s newfound freedom – first from British colonial rule, then from Malay/sian ethnic dominance. The ‘reality’ of 9th August is thus embedded within the discourse of national songs and cultural policy.

The popularisation of the nation in celebrations and the singing of national songs and anthem is a strategy not only for the long-term evocation and sustenance of nationalist pride, it has an immediate effect in reinforcing the hegemony of the economic and political. While new policy statements and strategies may be devised from time to time, the aim of producing and/or maintaining docile but economically-useful and politically-compliant citizens remains the zeitgeist of cultural policy-making in Singapore. For reasons highlighted throughout this paper, the strategy of popularising policy is the preferred mode of social, cultural and political engagement, at least for the foreseeable future.

Footnotes and References


(1966) Transcript of Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew, at the National Day Rally held at the National Theatre on the eve of National Day, 8th August, 1966.

(2001b) ‘It’s easier to sing now’, The Straits Times Interactive, Singapore, Jan 22.

An earlier version of this paper was presented on 21 June 2003 at a symposium on teaching and research in Southeast Asia at the University of South Australia’s Magill campus. I am grateful for comments and ideas given by colleagues at the symposium. The responsibility for this paper rests with me nonetheless.

The Prime Minister’s annual National Day Rally speech, which bears semblance to the presidential State of Union Address in the US, is continued to this day. Unlike the first Rally speech (1966) which was held on the eve of National Day, the Rally speech of today marks the ‘close’ of Singapore’s National Day celebrations.

The first National Day Parade was aptly called the ‘First Independence Anniversary Parade’ (Chng, 2000: 17).


The study of ‘cultural policy’ comes in different variants, with some using the term to refer to museum and arts administration (e.g. Paul DiMaggio, 1986; Bennett, 1988, 1995 and 1998), and others linking culture with the economy to form ‘cultural economic policy’ (see Kong, 2000a/b). In this paper, I approach culture and cultural policy from a broad perspective, that is, as a means of understanding the Singaporean way of life, and how it is framed, controlled and governed.

See Chapter 3 of Chua (1995) for an explanation and critical assessment of the PAP government’s employment of the ideology of pragmatism.

This paper does not imply that Singapore 21 was a wholly successful exercise in public consultation and consensus-seeking. Although Singapore 21 has been couched as a large-scale consultative exercise involving some 6000 Singaporeans, many views and comments were conveniently overlooked both before and after the exercise. For a deeper understanding or analysis of Singapore 21, read the vision in its entirety and/or see Lee (2001; 2002).

Sing Singapore was introduced by the Ministry of Information and the Arts (now known as the Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts) in 1988 to promote national bonding through group singing of national songs. In 1995, the National Arts Council (NAC) took over the organisation of the Sing Singapore project (Website as at March 2004: http://www.singsingapore.org.sg/).

The use of the term ‘National Music’ covers a whole range of musical types, including Volksmusik (folk music in German), popular music, songs, tunes, anthems, various musical performances and instruments, etc. These terms are used somewhat interchangeably in this paper.

The Renaissance City Report was recently given a new lease of life – known as ‘Renaissance City 2.0’ – as a section in a larger and all-encompassing Creative Industries Development Strategy, unveiled in September 2002 by the Creative Industries Working Group (CIWG), as part of a whole-of-government economic restructuring agenda. To access this report, go to: http://www.mita.gov.sg/mita_business/b_creative.html (last accessed on 10 March 2004).

For further reading on the works and ‘new Asian’ appeal of Dick Lee, see: Wee (1996).

Other national songs that were revamped and re-released in 2000 include: Count on me, Singapore and We are Singapore (Singapore: One Voice, 2000).

The original tune and lyrics of Majulah Singapura was composed by the late Zubir Said in 1957. It made its public debut in 1959 and was adopted as Singapore’s national anthem in 1965.
Audio/Video Sources

NDP 33: Remembering Our Past 33 National Day Parades (1999, VCD format) 
Singapore: Television Corporation of Singapore.

My Home, Singapore: Documentaries and music videos on Singapore (1999, VCD format) 
Singapore: Ministry of Information and the Arts.

Singapore: One Voice (2000, VCD and DVD formats) 
Singapore: Ministry of Information and the Arts.