

# CRITICAL PATRIOTISM: THE CASE OF SINGAPORE

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# The Debate

Should we promote patriotism in schools?

- **Defenders:** Benefits of loving one's country e.g. spur to civic duty; sense of belonging and identification
- **Opponents:** difficulties of cultivating patriotism e.g. distortion problem; how to educate the emotions; emotions cloud civic and political judgements of citizens
- Westheimer (2008, p. 1): "But patriotism is never simple ... patriotism is highly contested territory, especially when it comes to the daily activities of school-children."

# Despite the Contestations

- Patriotism: important concept driving national education in many parts of the world, including Singapore
- Many governments want citizens who are patriotic and willing to give more in their roles as citizens
- Patriotism deserves much more attention in the citizenship education literature
- Westheimer (2008, p. 2): What and how should we teach students about patriotism? How should we best prepare them to participate in the civic life of their community and nation?

# Patriotism

- Dictionary: Patriotism is love of one's country
- Nathanson (1993, p. 34-35):
  - Special affection for one's own country
  - A sense of personal identification with the country
  - Special concern for the well-being of the country
  - Willingness to sacrifice to promote the country's good
- Ladson-Billings (2007, p. 19): "Patriotism is not what you say; patriotism is what you do."

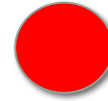
# Critical Patriotism

- Critical patriotism:
  - constructive patriotism (vs blind patriotism) (Staub, 2003)
  - democratic patriotism (vs authoritarian patriotism) (Westheimer, 2009)
- A capacity to think critically about one's attachment to the nation and to express dissent and moral outrage when a set of principles or values derived from distinctive political traditions of the nation have been undermined
- Critical: A perspective that analytically examines taken-for-granted assumptions, seeks to challenge inequities, and unmask power relations in the social order to establish a more just society; concerned with social justice
- Compatible with democratic citizenship education
  - Socialization and Counter-socialization (Engle & Ochoa, 1988; Ochoa-Becker, 2007)

# Singapore: Overview

- Small nation-state in Southeast Asia
  - Population: 5.5 million; 3.4 million are citizens
  - Multiracial: Chinese (74%), Malays (13.3%), Indians (9.1%), Others (3.2%)
  - Multi-religious: Buddhism, Free-thinker, Islam, Christianity etc
- Lack of natural resources, 2 major racial riots
- Sandwiched between 2 big Muslim countries: Indonesia and Malaysia
- British colonial era 1819-1942; Japanese Occupation 1942-1945; British Crown Colony 1948-1963; Internal self-government 1955-1963; Merger with Malaysia 1963-1965; Republic of Singapore 1965-present
- Kicked out of Malaysia: 9 Aug 1965

# The Little Red Dot









# Singapore: Politics

- Governed by the People's Action Party since independence in 1965
  - Strong legitimacy, transformed Singapore from 3<sup>rd</sup> world into 1<sup>st</sup> world in 3 decades
- Singapore's income gap is one of the widest among developed countries at 0.478 Gini coefficient (Chan, 2014; Economist, 2015) [went down to 0.458 in 2016, lowest score in 10 years]
- A (post-) developmental state (Low, 2001; Gopinathan, 2007)
  - Single-minded pursuit of citizenship education for nation-building
- Parliamentary system of representative democracy
- Limits to democracy are necessary for the country's survival and prosperity, citizens can give up certain sociopolitical freedoms in exchange for this (Chua, 1995)

# Securing Singapore

With the terror threat facing Singapore at its highest level in recent times, the Home Affairs Ministry yesterday highlighted the three areas which will be significantly enhanced to tackle the problem:



## Remain vigilant, stand in solidarity: President Tan



## Singapore a 'prime target' amid growing threat in region: Shanmugam



Singapore

## Changi voted World's Best Airport for 5th consecutive year

Singapore's Changi Airport has been voted the World's Best Airport by air travellers at the 2017 World Airport Awards for the fifth consecutive year.



Mr Lee Seow Hiang (L), CEO of Changi Airport Group, receiving the Skytrax World's Best

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ST VIDEOS

Deal with N. Ireland part

# Citizenship in Singapore

- National interests first: patriotism, duty, responsibilities over rights
- Maintain public order and national unity, protests and unlawful gatherings prohibited
- Citizens encouraged to participate through official channels and government platforms

## 5 Shared Values

- Nation before community and society before self
- Family as the basic unit of society
- Community support and respect for the individual
- Consensus, not conflict
- Racial and religious harmony

# Citizenship Education in Singapore

- Centralized education system; all citizenship related curriculum are developed by the MoE
- Vehicles: National Education (NE), flag-raising ceremony (national anthem and pledge taking), flag in the classroom, Social Studies, Citizenship and Character Education
- National Education (NE): 6 Messages
  1. Singapore is our homeland; this is where we belong.
  2. We must preserve racial and religious harmony.
  3. We must uphold meritocracy and incorruptibility.
  4. No one owes Singapore a living.
  5. We must ourselves defend Singapore.
  6. We have confidence in our future.
- Commemoration of 4 NE events
  - Total Defence Day
  - International Friendship Day
  - Racial Harmony Day
  - National Day





**We, the citizens of Singapore**  
**Pledge ourselves as one united people**  
**Regardless of race, language or religion**  
**To build a democratic society**  
**Based on justice and equality**  
**So as to achieve happiness**  
**Prosperity and progress for our nation**







# Social Studies in Singapore

- Compulsory examinable subject at upper secondary (15-17 years old)
- Curriculum organized around two core ideas “Being Rooted” and “Living Global,” and required students to:
  - build and sustain a politically viable, socially cohesive, and economically vibrant Singapore;
  - develop thinking skills for lifelong and independent learning;
  - have a sense of shared destiny, national identity, and a global perspective
  - be empathetic citizens who participate responsibly in a multiracial and multi-religious society (MoE & UCLES, 2015, p. 2).
- Critical thinking, source based case study that introduces alternative sources and views, open ended (Sim & Print, 2005)

# 2017 Revised Social Studies Curriculum

Revised social studies syllabus for secondary schools: Hot-button issues featured in textbook



It has been revised to place greater emphasis on promoting active citizenship and critical thinking, with examples that are more topical for students.





### 3.2 Competition for Resources

Historically, Singapore had flourished as a society of migrants who became immigrants in a land that they eventually called home. This has always been a source of strength. In recent times, increases in the number of foreigners have created tensions and these tensions have caused some prejudice and discrimination as explored earlier.

One of these sources of tension is due to the competition for resources. These resources could be in the form of opportunities or availability of infrastructure. With the inflow of foreigners into Singapore, there will be questions on how Singaporeans are able to cope with the increased competition for opportunities and living space.

**In the Past**



▼ Figure 6.17 Indian and Chinese immigrants working together at the junction of South Bridge Road

▼ Figure 6.18 A protest was held in 2013 against the increasing numbers of immigrants in Singapore.

**Today**



## PROTEST HELD IN 2013 AGAINST POPULATION WHITE PAPER

A section in the textbook discusses the challenges of living in a diverse society, such as greater competition for resources with the inflow of foreigners into Singapore.

It features a photo of a crowd protesting in Hong Lim Park in 2013 against the Population White Paper.

The paper detailed plans the Government was making to prepare for a population parameter of 6.9 million by 2030 but this sparked an uproar among citizens about the lack of consultation.

# Singapore: Interesting Case Study

- Literature on critical patriotism dominated by a Western paradigm and perspectives
- Takes a dichotomous view of patriotism that can be limiting in studying non-liberal Asian democracies
- Singapore: Non-liberal communitarian democracy that complicates enactment of critical patriotism
- How does teaching for critical patriotism look like? What is critical about it? What are the tensions faced?
- Highlights of 5 teachers' understandings of patriotism, how they teach for patriotism, and the tensions they faced from 2 projects

# Understanding of Patriotism: Critical Edge

- Encompasses both the “loyal and the critical citizen”

“A patriot is a responsive and responsible citizen, who has a sense of obligation and sense of belonging but is also critically aware of the environment and contributes actively to its construction.”

“Patriotism is not about defending a particular party...survival of the state takes precedence over acceptance of any authority. It is the “constitutional right and duty of every citizen who sees something wrong with the government, to do something about it... we need the ability to make that judgment call, to accept that social contract as it is when it’s proper, but when it’s *not*, be able to rise up against it and say otherwise.”

- Emphasizes action, doing

“...take an active role as a social advocate and a catalyst for change to confront inequitable and undemocratic social structures.”

“a role and a privilege”...a role, implied responsibilities toward the nation while a privilege implied a sense of pride of being a citizen...a patriot should not be subservient but needs to be participants.”



# Understanding of Patriotism: Critical Edge

- **Emphasizes informed, critical thinking**

“...the ability to think and question and to see a bigger picture to understand why certain things are done in certain ways.”

Maria referred to a controversial historical event such as Operation Cold Store: “There are two perspectives...Lee Kuan Yew’s version in *The Hard Truth* and *From Third World to First*...and an alternative version of what happened in 1963, I always say, cannot have only one view.”

- **Concerned for social justice, issues of equity and discrimination**

“honouring our relationship with others and the place we call home...involves representing groups that are disadvantaged, disempowered, or discriminated against in society...”

“The government promotes this idea of a conventional family. But how are single mothers not conventional? They are contributing to the society; their children are going to be your precious resource, so why aren’t they entitled to the same rights?”

# Understanding of Patriotism: Critical Edge

- **Appeal to universal rather nationalist values**

“This relationship extends beyond national boundaries...patriots should also honour their relationship with the global fraternity.”

“Care and concern need to extend to larger humanity ultimately...there must be a higher ideal guiding our actions.”

# Enactment of Patriotism: Vignette 1

**Playing the devil's advocate and asking provocative questions to challenge assumptions and simplistic views on complex issues**

E.g.: With regards to The Parenthood Priority Scheme, which gives married couples priority to public housing, Farah challenged her students:

“Do you think this concept needs to be challenged? While it may have been valid in the 1970s and 80s where people were more traditional in their views about family life, now it's a new millennium and Singaporeans are more progressive in their thinking. We are talking about the LGBT community today. Do you think the notion of public housing tied to procreation is still valid? Who will fall through the cracks?”

Yet, she explained on the government's behalf:

“Governance is never the easiest thing in the world. The Singapore government is known to make very pragmatic decisions.”

## Enactment of Patriotism: Vignette 2

**Exposing students to multiple, contrasting perspectives to develop critical consciousness and responsible view**

E.g.: Exposing students to dissenting views at the 2013 protest, challenging students to address issues, yet always trying to take a ‘balanced’ approach, qualifying that:

“The government really has our best interest at heart. A lot of the policies that are harsh turn out to be good for the people.”



# General Observations

- Social studies was enacted in a democratic, yet sensitive, manner in the two vignettes
- Teachers promoted respect for different points of view and for authority, even as they encouraged students to question and challenge ideas and policies
- In a relatively authoritarian and communitarian context like Singapore, critical patriotism is expressed differently in citizenship education
- It is less confrontational and more constructive, less about contesting and more about coming to a consensus, a balanced and informed decision and view

# General Observations

- To bring about change, teachers preferred a gradual approach to a radical approach, working within the system, rather than against the system
- They stopped short of taking action to promote social justice, perhaps afraid of dismantling existing conventions
- Teachers are in a state of tension, critically-reflexive
- It is more a “constructive patriotism” – teachers did not see a state hegemony that had to be resisted, but rather saw themselves as a people of conscience who kept the government in check and prevented the abuse of authority through exercising their voices constructively



# Implications and Some Questions

- Can this be described as ‘critical patriotism’?
- The need to be sensitive and understand patriotism in context
- Argue for a more nuanced understanding of ‘critical patriotism’ not a dichotomous either blind/authoritarian or democratic/critical understanding patriotism
- Critical patriotism as a continuum, a continuous work-in-progress, pushing along to a better ideal
- Constructive rather than confrontational
- Given the strong state control and contained civil society in Singapore, is there a more viable alternative?
- Is there only one way of being ‘critical’?

Thank you