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# **Chinese Singaporean, Singaporean Chinese or Simply Singaporean: Ramifications of Various Self-identities with ASEAN and China**

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## **Abstract**

Local ethnic Chinese form the majority of Singapore's citizen population. While Singapore regards itself as a secular country, not one based on race/ethnicity, given that local ethnic Chinese are the majority, their influence within Singapore no doubt penetrates deeply into all spheres of life. This paper explores the various self-identities adopted by the majority Singapore citizen population and how it has changed over time and still continues to evolve. As the majority population of Singapore, their self-identities affect that of Singapore at large. All these are in the context of Singapore as a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and how the majority of Singaporeans see themselves does have a sizeable impact on the country as a whole. This paper seeks to analyze three Singaporean identities: Chinese Singaporean, Singaporean Chinese or simply Singaporean and examine how a good understanding of each identity would enable us to see its implications on Singaporean society and to do cross-comparison studies across other ethnicity and nationality related issues.

**Keywords:** Chinese Singaporean; Singaporean Chinese; Identity; Local ethnic Chinese in Singapore

## **I. Introduction**

Southeast Asia is home to the largest Chinese diaspora in the world, with different countries having different proportions of them. Singapore as a country in Southeast Asia stands out given it being the only one with

majority local ethnic Chinese population<sup>1</sup>. The local ethnic Chinese in Singapore often have multiple identities, i.e. being ethnic Chinese, being Singaporean, and in the larger context being Singaporean of which Singapore is an ASEAN member in an era of the rise of the region's powerful neighbor, China.

## 1. Background of Singapore

Judging by physical size, Singapore is a small city state, one of the smallest countries in the world. Yet, in terms of Gross Domestic Product, it is also one of the richest countries in the world, despite being in a region having a much lower economic well-being.

Singapore defines itself as having four major racial/ ethnic groups, namely Chinese, Malay, Indian and others<sup>2</sup>. Therein also lies the idea of meritocracy, where one is not judged by language, race or religion, as mentioned in the national pledge. This is seen as important in the context of the founding fathers of Singapore deciding that while Singapore is comprised of a mainly ethnic Chinese population, all races are deemed to be equal by law, of which due to limitations the history of why such is so will not be discussed here.

However, regardless of constitutionally guaranteed equality and what not, having a majority ethnic Chinese population does have its implications, especially so for a Chinese ethnic majority society. Despite the idea of meritocracy, being part of the dominant ethnic group in Singapore undoubtedly has its benefits in comparison to those belonging to minority ethnic groups (Barr, 2016). Adding to the mix of this is the peculiar fact of the existence of a local ethnic Chinese majority society; that is not a part of China<sup>3</sup>, as well as being a part of ASEAN.

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<sup>1</sup> In many ASEAN countries, many of the people may have Chinese ancestry but do not identify themselves as such both recognition by law or culturally based on various situations in their home countries, and thus it is difficult to identify the proportion of local ethnic Chinese in these countries. Singapore however, through both state imposed and cultural reasons is able to maintain a clearly defined local ethnic Chinese majority population.

<sup>2</sup> The category "others" is a blanket category that does not fall neatly into the other three categories.

<sup>3</sup> Singapore is the only recognized independent country by China as being a sovereign country with a majority ethnic Chinese population other than China itself.

In light of this, the paper seeks to look at the varying ways in which the Chinese community here is being defined, of which I would highlight the use of the following three ways: "Chinese Singaporean, Singaporean Chinese or simply Singaporean", followed by the implications of what the understanding of these identities can lead to.

## **2. What is a Chinese?**

The term, "Chinese", is very much confusing. "Chinese" can refer to both nationality as well as ethnicity (Tsu, 2005). The Chinese nationality would refer to the citizens of the People's Republic of China (PRC), whereas the Chinese ethnicity would refer to those who culturally identify themselves with being "Chinese", be it if they hold PRC citizenship or otherwise. What actually constitutes a "Chinese ethnicity" is again itself a confusing one, as there are many ethnic groups in the PRC<sup>4</sup>.

For the purpose of the paper, I will use the term "Chinese" in the context of the ethnic Chinese Singaporeans to be one that refers to ethnicity. I would also assume that they generally see themselves as having originated from a part of Chinese (mostly Southern China), and assume themselves as "Han" Chinese<sup>5</sup>, which is the majority of China. "Han" Chinese is actually made up of an extensive range of sub-groups speaking non-intelligible dialects to one another<sup>6</sup>.

## **3. Living in the Context of Singapore**

Singapore is a country made up mainly of immigrants, with its 3 main ethnic groups defined by the Singaporean government as being the Chinese, Malays and Indians. While Malays are often said to be the "original" people of Singapore, this is actually not entirely accurate as majority of the Malay

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<sup>4</sup> There are Han, Mongolians, Manchurians as well as Hui just to name some of its many ethnic groups.

<sup>5</sup> Han Chinese are the majority ethnic group in China. What makes one a Han Chinese is actually not something that can be clearly defined.

<sup>6</sup> Singaporean ethnic Chinese as with most Southeast Asian ethnic Chinese descend from the various dialect groups of Southern China, such as Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese and Hakka.

population had not originated in the location of what is today's Singapore, but rather from various parts of the Malay world<sup>7</sup>.

Singapore is clearly not the only country that was founded primarily on an immigrant population, as the same can be said for many countries, such as the USA. The difference lies in the emphasis in which Singapore strongly emphasizes the 4 major groups, namely Chinese, Malay, Indian and others (CMIO) (Alviar-Martin & Ho, 2011).

Countries have varying policies in which they manage their ethnic groups, where there can be policies of assimilation or integration etc. Regardless, while there are also other countries which promote the heritage and culture of their respective ethnic groups, few go so far to the extent to create clearly defined categories amongst its ethnic groups, as in Singapore's case. For example, in the Identity Card (IC) which Singaporeans have, their racial affiliation is clearly imprinted there. Even in the education system, students would learn their compulsory mother tongue language requirement based on their racial affiliation (Ng, 2014).

All in all, the context of Singapore is one where racial affiliations are strongly played out and ingrained in Singaporeans, and thus cannot be easily ignored.

## **II. On Identity: Chinese Singaporean, Singaporean Chinese or simply Singaporean?**

Due to limitations in this paper, I am referring here specifically to ethnic Chinese in Singapore who hold Singapore citizenship. Apart from the ethnic Chinese who hold Singapore citizenship, there are also various other ethnic Chinese groups holding other passports. This would be namely the Southeast Asian Chinese diaspora as well as those from mainland and greater China. Recent years have seen a significant population of Chinese mainly from mainland China who have come to live, study and work in Singapore, which as a group itself also leads to further implications in relation to the local ethnic Chinese population (Yeoh & Lin, 2013), of which will be very briefly mentioned later.

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<sup>7</sup> This would be predominantly what mostly today's Malaysia and Indonesia regions is.

I would be looking at the three terms in a linear form, whereby the term Chinese Singaporean resonated more with the local ethnic Chinese of newly independent Singapore, while the term Singaporean Chinese resonated more for the second generation onwards. In terms of being simply called Singaporean, this would have started from, but not necessarily, the second generation onwards, to the current period.

While a linear explanation is used, this merely shows a preference for their identities in the varying periods, and is not definitive in anyway. In fact, the way they saw themselves could easily swing around depending upon the context, which will be explored later.

Finally, the arguments of this paper are based upon my perceptions and analyses of such and there are many varied ways to see these terms. There is also probably more often than not overlapping as well as situational uses of these terms, as we shall see later.

## **1. Chinese Singaporean**

While the idea of being Singaporean might have already taken root pre-1965, I would here parochially use the period of post-1965 onwards where Singapore gained its independence, as it was then that people were international recognized as being Singaporean, citizens of a sovereign state (Yew, 2012).

Ethnic Chinese have long been in Singapore prior to 1965. But prior, Singapore as a state took on many different identities, such as being part of the various sultanates and kingdoms in the region, to being part of the British Empire, as well as later on the Japanese. It was from 1965 onwards that those residing in Singapore had to choose to officially become Singaporeans, or choose to be non-Singaporeans residing in Singapore, a situation similar to all the other newly independent states in the region.

A Chinese Singaporean is what I see as a local ethnic Chinese holding Singaporean citizenship, but puts the identity of the ethnicity of being Chinese as his/ her foremost identity, followed by being a Singaporean. This would be especially true, but not limiting to, the local ethnic Chinese at this point in time, since the idea of the Singapore nation was rather new, and prior to this they could have assumed a multitude of identities apart from being a Singaporean. They may have seen themselves as Singaporean, but

saw what being ethnically Chinese as what defines them most (Skinner, 1959).

## **2. Singaporean Chinese**

The term Singaporean Chinese would be as I define the reverse of the Chinese Singaporean, where the emphasis is upon being Singaporean first as his/ her main identity marker, followed by a secondary identity of being ethnic Chinese. Such an identity formed over time, in particular for the second generation onwards in independent Singapore, with local ethnic Chinese seeing a greater sense of belonging to Singapore, and where the Singapore identity becomes more important than the ethnic identity, but in no means forgetting one's ethnic affiliations.

## **3. Singaporean**

The final term would be seeing one simply as being Singaporean, and not at all affiliating with his ethnicity. I would argue that while such is becoming more common, it is still nowhere close to being taken to be a majority identity of local ethnic Chinese. However, this does not mean that local ethnic Chinese identifying themselves purely as just being Singaporean is not worth exploring.

The reason for identifying one as only being Singaporean and not relating to his/her ethnic affiliation could be due to a range of reasons to make one desire to do so. Possible reasons would be:

1. Local ethnic Chinese of mixed parental heritage, such that while their IC may put him/ her as being Chinese due to the patrilineal lineage, he may be of mixed ethnic background which makes the identity of being Chinese less relevant;
2. The changing perceptions of what being Chinese in Singapore means, in particular vis-a-vis the economic and political rise of the PRC, as well as the increasing large PRC population in Singapore.

As mentioned, what it means to be ethnically “Chinese” is itself something that is not fixed, and if local ethnic Chinese in Singapore seeing themselves as being increasingly unable to fit into the defines of what it means to be ethnically Chinese, they would simply end up drifting away from such an identity in the long run. The situation has been ever more stick with the

sizeably large PRC population in Singapore, whom as ethnic Chinese as well feel very different, making the local ethnic Chinese feel very different from what is the supposed “authentic” ethnic Chinese, since these ethnic Chinese come from the original place of ancestry, China.

#### **4. Fluidity in self-identification of local ethnic Chinese**

At the same time, one should also recognize the fluidity of self-identification of local ethnic Chinese in Singapore, such that it varies greatly across internal or external influences, over time and space.

For one, when local ethnic Chinese are overseas, they often simply refer to themselves as being Singaporean, for practical reasons of simplicity to relate to foreigners. It would probably be confusing for foreigners who know little of Singapore's context to identify oneself as Singaporean Chinese or Chinese Singaporean. It could be that also being in a foreign country would make nationality appear to be of greater importance as compared to back home where one need not emphasize his nationality on home ground (Kong & Mani, 1997).

It is also worth noting that for a small open country like Singapore, it is heavily influenced by what is around it, which could explain why such fluidity happens even for those who have a rough way of identifying oneself being able to switch to another so easily. This idea would bring us to the context of being a part of ASEAN and having the powerful China as the region's neighbor.

### **III. The Three Identities and its Intersection with ASEAN and China**

For Singapore, given its geographical location as being in Southeast Asia, its relations with ASEAN countries is one whose importance cannot be understated, be it in terms of political or economic prosperity and stability. At the same time, China's rise in the world and in particular Asia has made it a country whose influence is not one that ASEAN and Singapore can afford to ignore, given how increasing profound the influence of China is being felt in the region (Storey, 2013).

As mentioned, being the majority group in Singapore, their self-identity will in turn affect how Singapore is seen as well as how it positioned in the

diverse and ever-changing landscape, and could spell all kinds of implications, both the good and bad for Singapore.

## **1. The three identities and ASEAN**

Southeast Asia is a highly diverse region, be it in terms of politics, economic levels as well as socio-cultural characteristics. However, despite their differences, one thing that ties them together as that of a region is that of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which provides a common platform and recognition of its members as being part of the same region and having certain shared interests. ASEAN as an organisation clearly has had both its share of successes as well as failures, of which would not be the focus here. The purpose of bringing up ASEAN would be more to show that regardless of the differences amongst the various Southeast Asian countries, there is still recognition of the identity of being part of the region and how their fates are intertwined as a region to varying extents.

In light of such, the three identities show different inclinations vis-a-vis ASEAN. While Singapore is as it defines itself, a multi-racial country, majority of its citizens are ethnic Chinese. How they perceive themselves thus does make a difference with regard to relations vis-a-vis the ASEAN identity. By identifying one as Chinese Singaporean, it may mean putting the importance of the Chinese ethnicity above the identity of being Singaporean, which is an ASEAN member and a founding member nevertheless. This may in turn be perceived as leaning towards China, regardless of whether this is true or not, since the idea of being "Chinese" lies with ethnicity rather than nationality in Singapore. Likewise, the varying effects could be said for identifying one as Singaporean Chinese or simply Singapore. All of which would yet have to be further explored, but not in this paper, again due to limitations.

## **2. The three identities and China**

The above mentioned point with regard to a possible leaning or lack of such would relate in turn to the relations with China. There is no doubt that the China in the recent decade is no longer the economically weak and closed country that it was at the initial couple of decades during the founding of the PRC. China today has great political and economic influence in the world and in particular over its immediate neighbours, Southeast Asia. While the idea of identifying with being Chinese in Singapore is more of an ethnic one

and not based on nationality, this does not mean it plays no significance in the perception of the relation to China.

People who identify themselves as ethnic Chinese as a main identity could be seen as leaning towards China, and China does indeed wish to reach out to the overseas Chinese diaspora, which it sees as its citizens scattered around the world (Chang, 2013). There also exists in China enormous amounts of work done on overseas Chinese, which carries on to this day.

Identifying oneself as being ethnic Chinese could have positive effects, such as being seen by China as a "relative" and potential partner to work with, seen with China traditionally conducting economic ties through the Chinese diaspora in the respective Southeast Asian countries (Gerke & Menkhoff, 2003). As a society that largely has the culture of working based on relations, or "guan xi", Singapore identifying itself as a majority ethnic Chinese society, in many ways related to China, could thus tap on this to better ties with China.

### **3. The intersection of the three identities with both ASEAN and China**

Recapping, how the three identities affected Singapore's relationship with ASEAN and China and the intersection with both would be based on the premises that:

Placing the importance on the Chinese ethnicity or Singaporean identity, of which a Singaporean identity would be more linked to being a citizen of an ASEAN member<sup>8</sup>, while the Chinese ethnicity would see more of a leaning to China.

ASEAN as mentioned is in itself comprised of highly diverse members, making its identity as an organisation highly malleable and easily affected by externalities. China's rise and influence in the region is one major factor in ASEAN's identity as an organisation and region. It was only a couple of decades ago that the world was still dominated by one superpower, the United States of America. China's rise to power, although arguably not yet at the extent of the USA, has undoubtedly been a major world power regardless, and its neighbours in particular have to face up to the new reality.

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<sup>8</sup> While Singapore as mentioned at the start sticks out like a sore thumb amongst ASEAN members, the point here is to make such less apparent if Singapore wants to be seen as part of ASEAN by other members.

The intersection of the ASEAN identity has become ever the more complex given the rise of China. As immediate neighbours of a powerful neighbor China, ASEAN countries need to decide how they would each handle the rise of China, with each member clearly adopting different strategies given their varied needs and circumstances. There is a need to balance the needs of each country's own interest, the interest of ASEAN as an organisation, as well as that with the China, which is surely in no way easy to strike a balance.

Using the recent string of issues since the start of 2017 that Singapore faced with China, it shows how the three identities intertwine with both ASEAN and China. This would include the issues of the South China Sea dispute, the detention of Singapore's military vehicles in Hong Kong, as well as criticism of Singapore by China for its military trainings in Taiwan. The purpose here again is not to say whether China or Singapore is right, since the factors and reasons behind these issues make it far too complicated to be simplified to any side being right or wrong.

In the South China Sea dispute, Singapore took the stand of ASEAN needing to collectively settle the issue with China, whereas China wanted to isolate the dispute to settling it individually only with claimant countries. This was clearly an intertwining of issues of both ASEAN identity and with China. Also, it should be noted that while not a deciding factor in China's reaction towards Singapore, the idea that an ethnic Chinese country showed no support for China did play a part, of which the extend of which would be hard to gauge.

Another issue to note is the diversity within ASEAN itself, as well as the fluidity of this ASEAN identity. The "ASEAN Way" of consensus making, also means that members do not enforce their decisions upon one another, and rely on consensus making, which at many times would not work when it came to more serious global contentious issues, such as that of the South China Sea, of which a major power is involved and different countries would have its own policies with regard to dealing with China.

Again, the main point is not as to whether China, Singapore or ASEAN members were right or wrong, but rather to highlight the complexity of the issue. The three identities of seeing one as Chinese Singapore, Singaporean Chinese or just Singaporean would put it as one leaning more towards China, one leaning more towards Singapore, and also possibly also considering

ASEAN, yet still taking into account China's viewpoint, of varying degrees subordinate to the interest of Singapore. Finally, seeing one as solely being a Singaporean would clearly mean Singapore's interest is first and foremost the most important above all other issues.

The implications of all three identities are not easy to find out as they all exist alongside each other, meaning that a situation where one outward dominant identity capable of fully influencing Singapore's stand is clearly non-existent for us to gauge.

#### **IV. What then: Chinese Singaporean, Singaporean Chinese or just Singaporean?**

It beckons the question as to which identity would prove more beneficial for Singapore's local ethnic Chinese community, and in turn Singapore as a whole. Given the complexity of the issue, and how fast things change in this ever-changing world, there probably is no answer to this question. And indeed, even if there was an answer, it would probably be pointless as these various identities would continue to exist and change in proportion accordingly, which is not something that can be controlled.

Also, as the world becomes increasingly globalized and connected, new identities are also continuing to form just as we speak. The three terms used for ethnic Chinese in Singapore were identities that developed in the country's short span as a young nation, since its independence in 1965. With the increasing interconnectivity, we can only be sure that new identities would start to form at an even more rapid pace. It thus would mean that it really is not a question of whether the "Chinese Singaporean, Singaporean Chinese or just Singaporean" issues of identities are in themselves what is important, but rather the implications they bring about.

Comparing a particular identity to the other bears little meaning as seen throughout the paper, there is no one identity that is more beneficial than the other, as these identities do not exist by themselves, and are greatly affected by various internal and external factors. Furthermore, since people cannot be simply controlled fully into accepting particular identities even with the use of propaganda, it is not meaningful to make a comparison of which is better amongst the respective terms.

## V. Conclusion and Implications

In learning about the three identities, what matters than is the implications that an understanding of them means to readers, regardless of where they might come from, be it Singapore, ASEAN, China, or anywhere in the world.

What is learnt from the three identities can be compared and contrasted to various forms of identity, be it supra-national level identities, national level identities, ethnic identities etc. After all, in this day and age with the fast changing landscape of the world, identities are what people are struggling to make a meaning out of, and rightfully so, as identity affects everyone, be it individually, at the societal and national level, or the international level.

It may not be surprising that in the future, for instance, if ASEAN as a community becomes increasingly integrated, identities such as “ASEAN Singapore”, “Singaporean ASEAN”, “ASEAN Singaporean Chinese” may just appear. The possibilities of all kinds of identities being shaped in the future is filled with boundless possibilities.

Knowing more about these identities can allows us to make better sense of how identity, nationality and ethnicity can intertwine to bring about impacts to the country which cannot simply be ignored. A clear potential possibility of a cross-comparison could be to for example India and that of the Indian diaspora in Southeast Asia. Of course, as mentioned above, new identities will continuously continue to emerge and they would too be able to be compared and contrasted to.

Further research and work would definitely need to be done to create better understanding, especially from the viewpoint of the country in which the diaspora resides rather than from the country of ancestral origin. Often, the country or region of origin for the diaspora would see the diaspora in terms of the connection to itself, and not focus upon the multi-faceted self-identities of these peoples. This is not to imply that research from the country or region of origin should be downplayed, but rather it needs to be complemented by research from both within the countries involved, as well as alongside various other sources.

## **The Author**

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