Confucian Rappers and Rockers?
Singaporean Youth in the Nineties[*]

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1. Introduction

Since emerging an independent republic in 1965, the economic trans-formation of Singapore has been truly phenomenal. In the space of just a few decades, this tiny island has progressed from a colonial entrepot plying the regional trade in tropical produce to become a major center in inter-national trade, manufacturing, banking, finance and services. In the course of this transformation, the living standards of the population as a whole have been improved immensely. Today, Singaporeans enjoy one of the highest per capita income levels in Asia, second only to Japan.[1]

The growing affluence of Singaporeans has wrought profound changes in the social and cultural landscape of the country. One of the most con-spicuous of these is the emergence of a generation in their teens or twenties that, on the surface at least, seem to be thoroughly Westernized. Whether through the medium of television, movies, magazines, music, or for the more fortunate, travel or study abroad, this generation seems to have as-similated key elements of a Western, and most particularly, American pop culture. This is reflected in a variety of ways: the widespread use of fash-ionable Christian forenames; the pseudo-American accents; the ubiquitous handphones; the musical preferences of this generation; and perhaps most prominently of all, their tastes in clothing and fashion accessories (see e.g. Vatikiotis 1996).

Given this extensive 'Americanization' of young Singaporeans, it would be reasonable to expect this generation to possess a set of social and politi-

[1] For a fuller discussion of this process of transformation, see e.g. Huff (1994).

cal values considerably more liberal than their elders. As anecdotal and survey evidence suggest, however, this is not the case. On a broad range of issues, young Singaporeans still hold staunchly conservative views that are very similar to those held by generations before.

This paper seeks to account for this enduring conservatism in Singapore youth, despite the dramatic changes that have taken place in their life-styles. It suggests that this is largely to be understood in the light of two factors: firstly, the pervasive social and political controls exercised by the state in Singapore, which have reproduced these conservative values and suffocated any emergence of a more liberal alternative; and secondly, the ongoing process of globalization, and most particularly, the strategies of international marketing and advertising associated with this. As a consequence of these strategies, a sanitized version of Western pop culture stripped of any social or political content has been served up for sale in countries such as Singapore. Despite the ready acceptance of Western pop culture amongst the young, therefore, its impact has been purely super-ficial, with no substantive challenge being posed to prevailing conservative values.

To begin, the following section will briefly review some indicators of conservatism in Singapore youth. In Section 3, the discussion will then move on to consider how such conservatism may be perpetuated through deliberate state policy and the processes of global advertising and market-ing. Section 4 concludes the paper and will also draw out some wider im-plications of the study.

2. Conservatism in Singaporean Youth: Some Indicators

The selection of a set of indicators to gauge the conservatism of Singapore youth will always be a difficult and perhaps contentious exercise. The indi-cators offered here are by no means comprehensive, nor should they be understood as in any way providing a definitive profile of conservatism. They have been selected mainly because surveys have recently been con-ducted on these issues in Singapore, from which some broad generaliza-tions may be drawn. Bearing these caveats in mind, the discussion will focus on the attitudes of young Singaporeans towards five main issues: marriage, the family, saving, and finally, politics.

Marriage

In Asian societies, marriage is often considered a key institution holding society together. The young in Singapore seemingly still share such a view.

Marriage remains the predominant basis of cohabitation, with very few entering into de facto relationships or living as single parents (see e.g. Rajakru 1996). Many also continue to subscribe to traditional gender roles within marriage. As a national survey of recently married couples revealed, three-quarters believed that husbands should remain the main provider. Two-thirds accepted that women should do more household chores than men (George and Wang 1994). Another survey revealed that many couples continue to hold traditional views on the purpose of marriage. A vast majority of respondents (72 %) accepted that the main reason was procreation and the continuation of the family line. Less than a third (29 %) mentioned companionship or love (Quah 1988: 26, see also Rajakru 1996).

Family

One of the hallmarks of Asian society is its strong emphasis on the preservation of the extended family and the entire system of responsibilities and obligations associated with this. Filial piety is ranked highly, as is the obligation of children to care for their elderly parents. This stands in some contrast to the Western situation, where the formation of nuclear households is the norm and many elderly parents have independent households separate from their children. Surveys of young adults in Singapore suggest that while the trappings of Westernization are very much in evidence, traditional views on the family are still very strong. In one survey, for example, an overwhelming 96 % of respondents agreed that it was their responsibility to care for their aged parents (*Far Eastern Economic Review* 1996b). In another study (Ibrahim 1994), it was found that 82 % of young working adults gave money to their parents at least once a month. Only 20 % did not visit their parents regularly, while 45 % paid visits at least weekly. On the basis of these findings, it would seem that traditional intergenerational ties are still accorded a high priority by the young in Singapore and have not been eroded by their greater exposure to Western culture (see also Rajakru 1996).

Saving

In Western societies, a typical caricature of Asians (and most especially Chinese) would portray them as extremely frugal, abstentious people. In many Asian societies, Westerners would be caricatured in exactly the opposite way, as carefree and spendthrift, concerned only with present gratification and having little regard for the future. While it is to be conceded that these are only caricatures, it would nevertheless be reasonable to expect that with the growing Westernization of Singapore youth, some movement would have taken place away from the traditional Asian empha-

sis on financial discipline towards a more relaxed view on money, spending and saving. As a survey conducted by Lim and Teo (1997) found, however, this was not the case. A culture of thriftiness placing an extremely high emphasis on saving was still very much in evidence amongst the young in Singapore (see also Elegant and Cohen 1996). Despite their apparent Westernization thus, this generation has certainly not emulated the more carefree consumption and spending patterns of their peers in the West.

Politics

In comparison with the West, most Asian societies display a far higher level of tolerance of political authoritarianism. There are, of course, a variety of factors behind this. In Asian cultures, for instance, far greater emphasis is accorded to respect for authority, the primacy of the group over the individual, and the obligations of the individual to society. By contrast, in Western political culture, authority is held to be contestable, while the primacy of the individual is upheld with the rights of individuals of paramount importance. With the growing Westernization of the young in Singapore, it would be reasonable to expect some change to have occurred in the political views espoused by this generation. While this may take a variety of forms, a broad movement towards slightly less conservative political views may be expected, with perhaps a greater readiness to respect individual rights and freedoms. Recent surveys, however, show otherwise. In these, values such as an orderly society and respect for authority were consistently rated as important. Freedom of expression, by contrast, was considered unimportant. Nearly half (47 %) the respondents agreed with the statement, "Personally, I don't care about human rights issues" (*Far Eastern Economic Review* 1996a). These results were duplicated in a number of other studies. In a survey conducted by Hitchcock (1994), for example, none of the Singapore respondents considered personal freedom or individual rights to be of critical significance. In yet another survey, they displayed a high level of tolerance of official censorship. Up to 42 % of respondents approved of current levels of censorship. Perhaps more significantly, a higher proportion felt that censorship should be *stricter* (Gunther and Ang 1996).

To sum up: It should be stressed once again that the indicators above are extremely imperfect and by no means provide an accurate depiction of conservatism in Singapore. On the basis of these, however, it is possible to draw a broad portrait of the young in Singapore to assess the extent of change in their social and political views. The picture that emerges may be somewhat surprising. Despite the evident Westernization of Singapore

youth, many still subscribe to traditional views and values that were held by older generations. But why is this the case? What can account for this enduring conservatism in the young of Singapore? It is to these questions that the following section shall turn.

3. Explaining the Conservatism of Singapore Youth

According to Singapore's outspoken former Prime Minister and current Senior Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, it should not be surprising that despite their ready assimilation of Western cultural symbols, the young in Singapore have retained their traditional values. These values, after all, are culturally ingrained; they are the "software", so to speak, of young Singaporeans, inherited and immutable (see e.g. Zakaria 1994). This assertion by Lee may be debated extensively.[2] Given the limits of this paper, however, this is a task that will not be pursued. Instead, it should suffice to note that while there may be some truth to Lee's remarks, it must be recognized that there are a number of other processes at work in Singapore that contribute to the perpetuation of such conservative values. As mentioned before, two deserve special mention: the pervasive social and political controls exercised by the state, and the strategies of international marketing and advertising.

Political and Social Controls in Singapore

It is by now well known that the state has an ubiquitous presence in Singapore. Through a variety of instruments, the ruling Peoples' Action Party (PAP) influences virtually all aspects of citizens' lives (see e.g. Lim 1983, Tremewan 1994, Lingle 1996). The array of instruments at the disposal of the state is quite extensive. In what follows, the discussion will focus only on a small sample of the more significant and interesting of these, through which conservative values have been cultivated.

By far the most important in this regard must be the education system. By manipulating the curriculum, the state has introduced material that is explicitly supportive of traditional, conservative values. A good, and by no means isolated, example of this was the introduction of Confucian studies

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[2]   There is a voluminous literature on this "Asian values" debate. For a survey of the issues involved, see e.g. Chew (1994), Tremewan (1994), Emmerson (1995), Hill and Lian (1995), Lingle (1996) and Tamney (1996). See also the special issues devoted to the "Asian values" debate by *The Pacific Review* in 1996 (Vol. 9, No. 3) and the *Journal of Democracy* in 1997 (Vol. 8, No. 2).

during the eighties (see e.g. Kuah 1990). Beyond the curriculum, however, it should also be pointed out that the highly competitive nature of the education system serves as a fertile breeding ground for conservative attitudes. As many observers have noted, the intense competition engendered by the system produces a uniquely Singaporean trait: *kiasu* behavior (see e.g. Wilkinson 1988). Translated from the local Hokkien dialect, the term *kiasu* means, quite literally, 'a fear of losing'. This unusual trait helps shed considerable light on the conservatism of Singaporeans, both young and old alike. Accustomed to high standards of living - a product of existing social and political arrangements - most Singaporeans would balk at doing anything that might remotely jeopardize these arrangements. Hence, while they may avail themselves of the articles of Western consumption and, for the young at least, the symbols of Western pop culture, they would shy away from the more liberal Western social and political values associated with these. As these liberal values may precipitate the wholesale unraveling of society and the destruction of everything that their prized prosperity rests upon, they are rejected completely (see also Jones and Brown 1994).

This bias towards retaining the existing framework of social and political relations is reinforced by another key instrument of control: national service. In Singapore, all males attaining the age of eighteen are required to undergo two years of military service. During this time, they are immersed in a hierarchical and authoritarian culture, where an intense nationalism is cultivated, as well as discipline and an unquestioning obedience to authority. Emerging from this stint in the military, most young males would identify strongly with the prevailing set of social and political relations. They would, as well, have a deep respect for authority (both military and civilian), and given their strong sense of nationalism, a greater preparedness to place society's interests above those of the individual (see e.g. Tremewan 1994).

Beyond the education system and military service, there are a wide range of statutes and government policies that encourage the retention of traditional values. Singapore, for example, is unique amongst countries in having an explicit law that makes children responsible for the care of aged parents (the Maintenance of Parents Act, passed by Parliament in 1994). Under its provisions, 'deserted' parents may sue children for compensation and maintenance. Several other policies also encourage the preservation of intergenerational ties.[3] The state's housing policies, for instance, accord extended family units priority in housing allocation. In a country where more than three-quarters of the population live in public housing, this is a

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[3]   For a fuller discussion of these, see e.g. Hill and Lian (1995).

powerful instrument ensuring traditional customs are respected. Equally powerful policies exist to ensure that a culture of thriftiness endures. For Singaporeans, there is, indeed, very little choice in this matter as savings are raised through compulsory levies on employers and employees, which are paid into the state-run retirement scheme, the Central Provident Fund.

Any discussion of social and political control in Singapore would be seriously lacking if it failed to mention the mass media. Given the state's complete control over the print, television, and radio media, it has at its disposal an extremely powerful instrument to influence public opinion and values. The media has been used extensively in the past to popularize traditional values.[4] During the push to inculcate Confucian or "Asian" values, for instance, it was a matter of course to see, hear and read messages extolling the virtues of such values and cajoling citizens to adopt these. From television, radio and newspaper commercials, to billboards in subway stations, to banners strung across streets, these messages were inescapable and probably played no small role in influencing the thinking of the young. Apart from these traditional values, the media has also been used to promote nationalism, and most particularly, an attachment to the status quo. It is not uncommon, for example, for catchy songs and jingles singing the praises of the existing order to be given extensive airtime. On television, these same jingles are accompanied by footage that highlight grand achievements, a towering city skyline, and the like (see e.g. Kong 1995, Phua & Kong 1996). While debatable, it would be reasonable to presume that such catchy tunes and impressive imagery would have had some impact on the young, perhaps contributing towards their more conservative disposition. Finally, before leaving this discussion of the media, mention should also be made of one other stage-managed event that has had a profound effect on the consciousness of young Singaporeans: the annual National Day Parades. As a study by Kong and Yeoh (1997) shows, these are spectacular events that are carefully choreographed and managed to instill awe and admiration of the prevailing order. For many young Singaporeans, they have precisely that effect, while also raising their nationalistic fervor and willingness to sacrifice for the good of "Singapore". These parades, as such, are yet another device through which conservatism in the young may be cultivated and any desire for fundamental change forestalled.

Pervasive as these social and political controls in Singapore are, they do, however, occasionally fail. Instances have arisen in the past where young Singaporeans have emerged to challenge the received wisdom and ideological hegemony of the PAP. University student movements have been

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[4] See e.g. Kuo (1984) for a discussion of the "Speak Mandarin" campaign.

prominent in this regard, especially during the late sixties and up to the mid seventies. More recently though, it has principally been young Christians drawing on Liberation Theology or strands of fundamentalist evangelical thought (see e.g. Tamney 1996). In all these cases, the state has invoked the notorious Internal Security Act to crush these movements. Activists have been arrested and subjected to grueling interrogation, through which signed "confessions" have then been obtained criminalizing their activities (see e.g. Tremewan 1994, Lingle 1996). For other young Singaporeans, the lessons to be learned from these well-publicized affairs are abundantly clear. Any attempt to criticize or challenge the existing order would not be tolerated and would be dealt with severely by the state. At a general level, the resulting climate of fear ensures that the young will be unwilling to entertain or express opinions contrary to the established wisdom. As a result of the intimidation exercised by the state, a conformity to traditional conservative values is enforced.

To summarize then: There exist in Singapore a wide range of instruments that both cultivate and perpetuate traditional conservative values. Even when these instruments fail, the state has available to it punitive measures to ensure compliance and the destruction of any alternatives. In the light of this, it should not be surprising that the young in Singapore have remained conservative. This is, ultimately, a product of deliberate and conscious social engineering by the state. But this is only a part of the story behind the enduring conservatism of Singapore youth. The strategies of international marketing and advertising are another factor, and it is to this that attention shall now turn.

International Marketing and Advertising

On a heavily overcrowded international marketplace, ways must be found to differentiate a product and distinguish it from the competition. Since most competing products today share virtually similar characteristics and perform nearly the same range of functions, this process of differentiation cannot rest solely on real differences in the products themselves. Instead, a basis of differentiation must be manufactured artificially. Generally, the current practice is to conjure up some sort of "image" around the product that purchasers are likely to either identify with or aspire to. By assiduously cultivating this "image", a share of the market may then be carved and sales preserved.

The creation of these "images" is one of the principal tasks of international marketing and advertising. To construct these, nothing is sacred: everything ranging from social or cultural practices to outdoor pursuits may be enlisted, so long as these are appropriate to the "image" being

crafted. In recent years, particularly following the emergence of music video clips and the growing popularity of MTV, considerable effort has been made to cultivate popular music as a foundation to project these "images". The results of these efforts are now plain to see. In many MTV clips today, the performance itself is only of secondary importance. What really matters is the projection of a certain "image" that may influence the consumption decisions of viewers; the implicit or even explicit endorsement of certain products.

This is a process that has important implications. For the musicians themselves, it results in a depreciation or devaluation of their work, which now loses much of its artistic, social and political significance. In this respect, the story of gangsta-rap provides a good illustration of what may occur. Born in the slums and poverty of south-central Los Angeles, gangsta-rap had a profoundly violent and radical political message. Once it had gained in popularity, however, it was plucked from its social, economic and political context, commodified, packaged and transformed into an "image" to promote the sales of products such as CDs, designer clothes and fashion accessories, around the world. In the process, the original radical message of the genre was lost altogether. Performers were transformed into nothing more than mannequins and models to showcase the latest trends, fashions and products.

For consumers such as the young in Singapore, the implications of this process of commodification are no less significant. Building on the example of gangsta-rap, it may be said that what they receive through the agencies of the global entertainment industry is, in many ways, a sanitized version of the genre, stripped of all its social and political content. Hence, while young Singaporeans may mimic the music, dress codes and even behavior of the performers, they remain totally oblivious to the origins of gangsta-rap, its message and values.

With some exceptions, what is true of gangsta-rap may be said to be true for Western pop culture as a whole. In broad terms, it would be no exaggeration to say that Western pop culture is now so extensively commodified that it functions as little more than an advertising arm for the handful of transnational corporations dominating the world economy. Thus, even though the young in countries like Singapore may possess an extensive range of symbols from Western pop culture, these are typically nothing more than vehicles for the ostentatious display of wealth. The symbols paraded are totally devoid of any of their original meaning, and in no way pose any challenge to established values. Little wonder then that the young in Singapore have remained so conservative.

4. Conclusion

This paper set out to account for the enduring conservatism of Singapore youth despite their apparent assimilation of key features of Western pop culture. As it has been suggested, this is largely to be understood in the light of two factors. The first of these is the extensive social and political controls in Singapore which act to cultivate and perpetuate these conservative values. The second is to be found in the strategies of international marketing and advertising. As these strategies empty Western pop symbols of their social and political content, despite their transmission to other cultures, no significant challenge is posed against prevailing values.

The observation that youth in Singapore have remained quite conservative may give rise to some concern. As others have pointed out, there is a strong association between pop culture, mass movements and processes of social and political change (see e.g. Garofalo 1992). This has given rise, in the East Asian context, to an expectation that with the growing Westernization of youth, nonconformity, rebelliousness and resistance may emerge and pave the way in later years for a process of political change and democratization. If the Singapore situation is any guide, however, these expectations may need to be revised. As the young in that country have remained staunchly conservative, it would seem that the likelihood of any political change would be quite remote. Quite to the contrary, a *preservation* of the authoritarian status quo may be expected.

In the light of Singapore's experience, some questions may also be raised about what may reasonably be expected of the globalization process. Globalization is now often portrayed as an agent of profound economic, social and political change. There is, without a doubt, some element of truth to this. What this paper has highlighted, however, is that there may be some important exceptions or limits to this. As it has been shown, despite their apparent Westernization, young Singaporeans have remained impervious to more liberal social and political values. This, in turn, is mainly because globalization has remained an essentially commercial process, and has not acted in any way to challenge established social or political norms. In view of this, there may be a need to re-assess the revolutionary potential of globalization. Can this process truly function as an agent of fundamental change? Or is it so circumscribed that it can only transform the economic dimension of society, leaving the social and political very much as it found them?

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