

Singaporean Exceptionalism and Its Implications for ASEAN Regionalism

ERIC C. THOMPSON

Singapore is a unique polity in the world and in Southeast Asia. A survey conducted at the National University of Singapore (NUS) of perceptions generally of countries worldwide and specifically of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) demonstrates a sense of Singaporean exceptionalism. While respondents to the survey have a distinct sense of ASEAN as a regional grouping, they see Singapore as largely apart from rather than a part of Southeast Asia. The article examines the results from Singapore, with reference to comparable surveys carried out in four other ASEAN member states. The unique sense of Singaporean exceptionalism is attributed to Singapore's own unusual characteristics, struggles with national identity, and overriding economic imperatives associated with nation survival. This sense of exceptionalism exemplifies challenges to ASEAN integration that are not only of relevance to Singapore but to the region generally.

Keywords: ASEAN, regionalism, Singaporean exceptionalism, culture, perceptions.

Singapore is an odd country. It is a city-state in a world of nation-states (Kwa 2002; Low 2002). It is in Southeast Asia but not, some might say, of Southeast Asia. Singaporean national identity, according to at least one prominent Singaporean scholar, is marked as much by an absence as by a presence (Chua 1998). We can find Singapore on a conventional map just off the tip of Malaysia, the country of which it was briefly a part. But conceptually, where is Singapore? Is it developed or developing? Is it part of Southeast Asia or a bit of East Asia gone astray? Is it a beacon of Asian values, such as its Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew has championed for many years

now? Or is it as “Western” as its not-too-distant neighbour Australia and former colonial power England? More importantly, how do Singaporeans see their own country in relationship to its neighbours and the rest of the world? This article seeks to provide some insights into these questions and their implications for Singapore’s role and future in the context of ASEAN.

During 2003–2005 I conducted a survey of perceptions of Southeast Asia among undergraduate students at the NUS. The survey was conducted in the broader context of a comparative project on perceptions of Southeast Asia carried out with comparable populations at universities across the region. This article draws on the results of the research in Singapore, with reference to results from elsewhere for comparative purposes. The study shows a distinctive sense of Singaporean exceptionalism in Singaporeans’ perceptions of their own country to the member states of ASEAN. The results of the survey do not give a definitive or simple answer to the questions posed above. Rather, and more importantly, they suggest an active ambivalence in the local imaginary of Singapore’s national identity and relationship to the region.

Scholars writing about Southeast Asia have taken contrary positions on the extent to which it is a region that is historically interconnected despite its apparent diversity or is a largely invented construct of post–World War II geopolitics (for example, Beeson 2002; Emmerson 1984; Glassman 2005; Legge 1992; Reid 1988, pp. 6–7; van Schendel 2002). The scholarly debate notwithstanding, it is clear that the ASEAN framework for regional cooperation has become increasingly robust, particularly since the end of the Cold War. Several authors have argued that an important aspect of ASEAN’s development hinges on issues of *identity* — the ability and desire of the state actors in the region to see themselves as members of a collective unit with shared goals, norms, and values (for example, Acharya 2000; Estanislao 2001, pp. 68–69; Bizziouras n.d.; Narine 1998; Vatikiotis 1996, pp. 167–93). Since at least the 1990s, ASEAN has also progressively evolved — or at the very least, sought to evolve — from a diplomatic forum to a more robust framework for economic, political, and social exchange and integration. In this context, the study of perceptions of Southeast Asia at universities is intended to shed some light on the degree to which Southeast Asia is considered to be a cohesive region in different nations and the similarities and differences in the way the region is configured conceptually in different places. The research at NUS suggests that while the respondents perceive Southeast Asia to

be a distinctive region, they do not see Singapore as being part of that region. I argue that the ambiguous position of Singapore in the realm of the international nation-state system results from the way in which Singapore is perceived as a unique polity and the pre-eminence of economic-developmentalism as *raison d’être* of the nation-state in Singapore.

In the following sections, I describe the parameters of Singaporean exceptionalism in the minds of Singaporean university students with regard to the Singapore’s place in the world and specifically the ASEAN region. The first sections focus on the students’ “cognitive maps” of ASEAN and the world. Correspondence analysis of judged similarity data is used to produce a multidimensional representation which yield insights into how a set of Singaporean respondents view ASEAN and non-ASEAN countries and the criteria they used in making comparisons among these countries. I then turn to more descriptive, qualitative data collected both in the survey and from pile-sort interviews with Singaporean students regarding the ways in which they describe countries within and outside of ASEAN and their perceptions of those countries with regard to Singapore’s future direction.

Methods and Scope of the Survey

The survey of students is not meant to be taken as a representative sample of Singaporeans statistically generalizable to the population of Singapore as a whole. Rather, the results are instructive of a pattern of thought prevalent in Singapore. The methods are derived from cognitive anthropology and used to study cultural patterns of thought among small, non-random samples of populations and estimate “cultural knowledge” of individuals. In general, this is a robust method for demonstrating normative, culturally shared patterns of thought about specific domains. The choice of students was both practical and substantive. Practically, students are similar enough to each other to treat them as a common group that justifies drawing conclusions from the results. Internal tests of the data, such as consensus analysis, reinforce this a-priori assumption (Romney 1999; Romney et al. 1986). Other groups that might be of interest, such as policy-makers or businessmen, are relatively inaccessible and a survey of a representative sample of “the public” at large would require resources that would be difficult to justify (because not only are “the public” less accessible, but they are so diverse that a much larger sample would need to be drawn to account for all the variables

of age, educational background, and the like, which are relatively invariable among the student population).

Substantively, university students are interesting in the case of this study for two reasons. First, the cultural knowledge of the domain we are examining is not by and large derived from direct or specialized personal experience. We learn to think about the nation-state system through mass media and formal education. The students at NUS and similar leading universities in Southeast Asia are systemically selected as among the most successful products of national educational systems. The knowledge they share, particularly of a domain such as "countries", can be assumed, by and large, to be a product of those systems and the wider mass-mediated environment in which they have grown up. As Howell (1986) has argued in similar research conducted in the 1970s and 1980s, students' views can be taken to be strongly reflective of the political and agenda-setting elite of a nation who generate media representations and shape the contents of national educational systems. Moreover, university students are members of the next generation of the nation's professional middle class who are likely to shape its future.

A semantic domain is "an organized set of words, concepts, or sentences, all at the same level of contrast, that jointly refer to a single conceptual sphere" (Weller and Romney 1988, p. 9; Spradley 1979, pp. 100-5). The research conceptualized "countries" as a semantic domain in which items in the domain (that is, countries) are meaningfully understood in relationship to all other items in the domain. This does not encompass all ways in which countries (or any domain) can be meaningfully understood, but it is widely recognized as an important, foundational aspect of cultural knowledge (Spradley 1979; Romney and Moore 1998).

The first step of the formal research was a free listing exercise, in which NUS students ($n = 184$) listed names of countries. Comparison of results across Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines and a sample of students at a university in the People's Republic of China showed that ASEAN member states were highly salient to respondents in the first four nations. ASEAN countries, as a group, were somewhat less salient in the Philippines and of relatively low salience to students in China (Thompson and Zhang 2006). In this regard, Singaporean students displayed a strong awareness of ASEAN's member states, similar to that of their counterparts in other ASEAN countries.

Following the free listing exercise, two further exercises were conducted — a questionnaire-based survey of judged similarities

and differences of countries and "pile sorting" interviews. In the questionnaire, students evaluated the similarity and difference of countries in comparison to each other based on a triad question format. Students were given a series of sets of three countries and asked to circle the country they considered most different from the other two, for example:

Singapore Myanmar Brunei

Three different questionnaires were used, each based on a set of ten or 15 countries: one set of 15 representing countries "Worldwide" (selected from among the most salient countries in the prior free listing exercise; $n = 62$), a set of "East Asian" countries (the ASEAN countries, plus China, Japan, North Korea, South Korea, and Taiwan; $n = 82$), and one set of the ten members of ASEAN ($n = 68$).

The triad responses produce very large data sets that are difficult if not impossible to interpret in the form of a matrix or table. Correspondence analysis and multidimensional scaling reduce the complexity of the data in order to make the results more interpretable and allow us to represent the data visually.¹ These techniques produce what I term "cognitive maps" of the domain (Figures 1 to 3). The

Figure 1
Perception of the Relationship of Countries in ASEAN:
First and Second Dimensions of Contrast

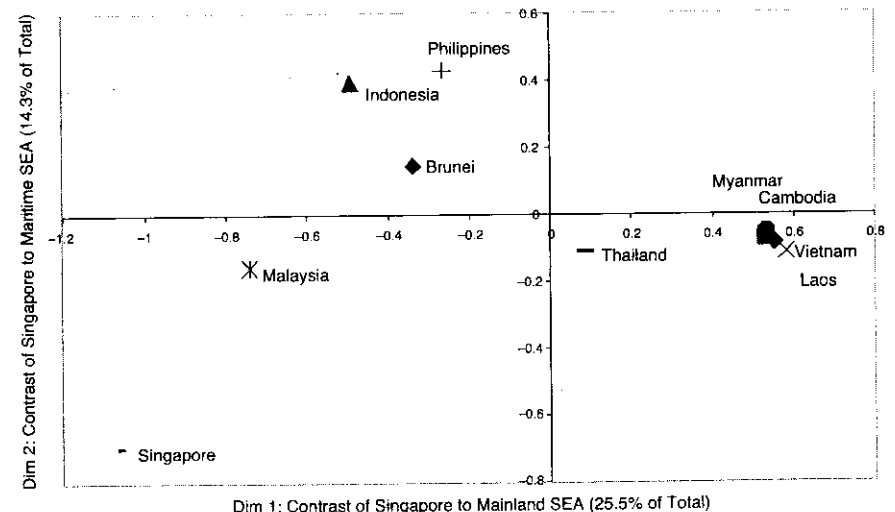


Figure 2
Perception of the Relationship of Countries in East Asia:
First and Second Dimensions of Contrast

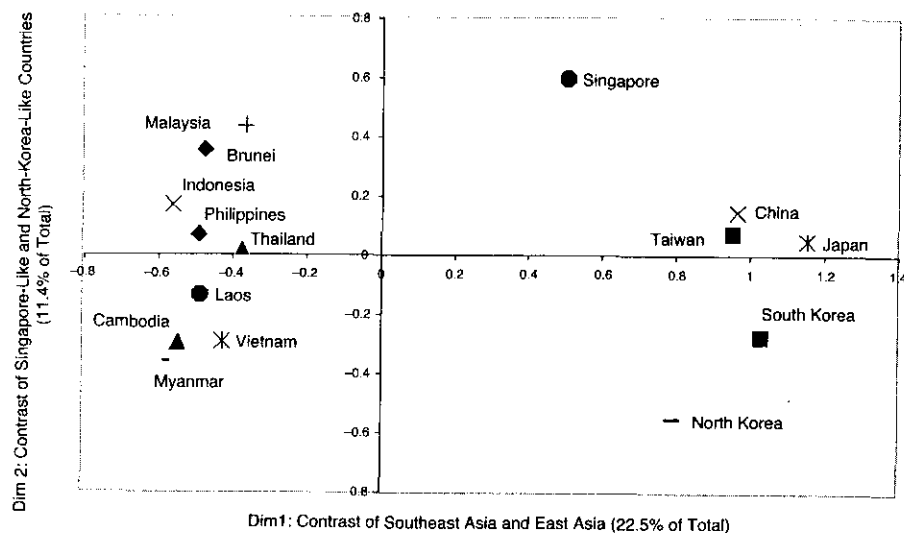
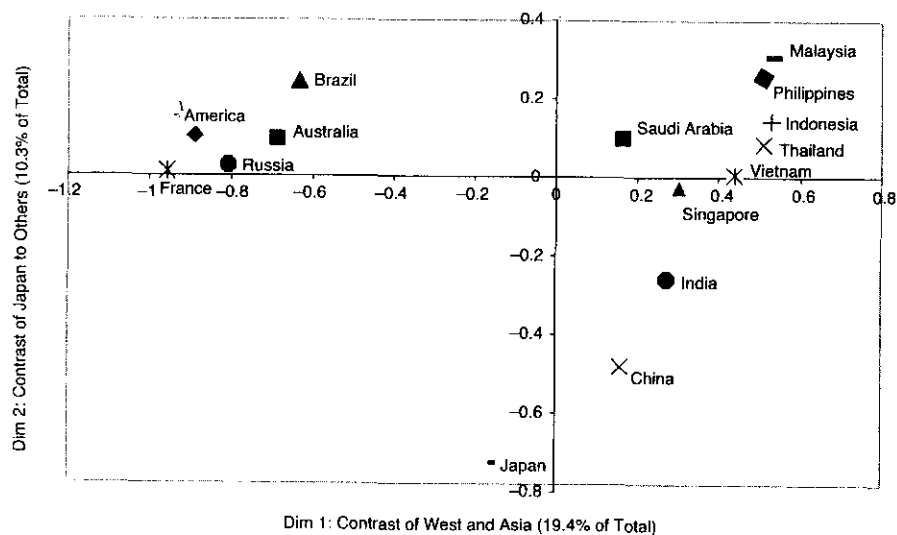


Table 1
Common Groupings (Pile Sorting, Singapore)
List of All Groupings Made by Three or More Respondents (n = 72)

Grouping	Made by No. of Respondents
Asia	
ASEAN groupings	
ASEAN-10	19
Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam	5
Malaysia, Singapore	5
ASEAN (excluding Malaysia and Singapore)	4
Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam	4
Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia	3
Northeast Asian groupings	
China, Japan, South Korea	14
Japan, South Korea	11
China, South Korea	3
Other Asian groupings	
China, India	7
China, India, Japan, South Korea	7
All Asia (15 countries)	4
India, Saudi Arabia	4
Brunei, Saudi Arabia	3
Japan, Singapore , South Korea	3
West	
Europe	
Europe (England, France, Germany, Italy)	16
Europe (including Russia)	13
Americas	
America, Brazil, Canada	14
America, Canada	14
Anglophone countries	
America, Australia, Canada, England	4
America, Australia, Canada	3
Other Western groupings	
America, Australia, Canada, England, France, Germany, Italy	3
Brazil, England, France, Germany, Italy, Russia	3
Other groupings	
China, Russia ("communist")	5
Germany, Italy, Japan ("fascist/axis")	3

Figure 3
Perception of the Relationship of Countries Worldwide:
First and Second Dimensions of Contrast



maps represent the primary dimensions through which respondents think about the relationship of items in the domain.

In pile sorting interviews, students ($n = 72$) were asked to sort a set of 24 countries into groups based on which countries they felt were similar to each other (see Tables 1 to 3). The pile sorting technique poses a similar question to respondents as the triad questions, but in pile sorting, respondents are treating the countries as groups rather than directly judging the similarity and difference of specific countries. Both the pile sorting and triad questionnaires included additional qualitative questions and descriptions of individual countries and groups of countries that support the interpretation of the survey.

In the discussion that follows, I am concerned with the normative views expressed in the survey, rather than differences among respondents. The respondent samples included only Singaporean citizens. In all cases, samples were gender-balanced and in most cases were drawn from students across several different faculties. Tests of the data show that gender has very little effect on the results and the students' disciplines of study have none. The majority of respondents, reflecting the populations of Singapore and of students at NUS, are

Table 2
Countries Appearing Alone (Pile Sort)

Country	No. of Respondents
Australia	35
Saudi Arabia	30
Brazil	22
India	19
Russia	13
Singapore	7
China	4
Japan	3
America	2
Canada	2
Malaysia	2
Philippines	2
South Korea	2
Brunei	1
England	1
Indonesia	1
Thailand	1

Table 3
Regional Exclusivity (Pile Sorting)
Groupings Based on Principles of Inclusion and Exclusion;
Excluding Countries That Appeared Alone

Grouping	Excluding Countries	
	Number	Percentage
Among all groupings (328)		
Exclusively "Western" groupings	111	33.8
Exclusively "Asian" groupings	160	47.8
Mixed Asian/Western groupings	57	17.4
Among Western groupings (111)		
Exclusively European groupings	36	32.4
Exclusively Non-European groupings	39	35.1
Mixed European and Non-European	36	32.4
Among Asian groupings (160)		
Exclusively ASEAN groupings	67	41.9
Exclusively non-ASEAN groupings	50	31.2
Mixed ASEAN and non-ASEAN	43	26.9

NOTES

"Western" includes America, Australia, Brazil, Canada, England, France, Germany, Italy, Russia.

"Asian" includes Brunei, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand, Vietnam.

"European" includes England, France, Germany, Italy, Russia.

ethnic Chinese. Ethnic difference has been an overriding concern of national and social policy in Singapore, as the state was founded in the context of severe political and economic tension between Malay and Chinese communities (resulting in, among other things, the separation of Singapore from Malaysia in 1965). In order to test the extent to which Chinese-Singaporean and Malay-Singaporean views might differ in perceptions of the nation-state domain, independent samples of Malay students were drawn in both the free listing exercise and triad questionnaire of the ASEAN set of countries. The results show some small differences, with Malay-Singaporean students somewhat more oriented towards Southeast Asia as compared with East Asia, relative to their Chinese-Singaporean counterparts. However, this result needs to be put in the context of comparison with results from Malaysia, where a far greater difference in Malay and Chinese orientations was found (Thompson 2004). Singaporean students have a far more

common perspective among themselves regardless of ethnicity than their counterparts across the causeway.

Cognitive Maps

Figure 1, which is based on the domain of ASEAN countries, shows the extent to which Singaporeans consider their own country to be apart from rather than a part of Southeast Asia. There is a weak contrast between mainland and maritime Southeast Asia in general. More substantially, the responses indicate the sharp contrast between Singapore and the countries of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam. The latter are clustered so closely together as to suggest that Singaporean students make no cognitive distinction between them as unique entities. The second dimension contrasts Singapore to its maritime neighbours. Malaysia is most similar to Singapore, yet still appears at a considerable distance. At all scales, ASEAN is a regional cluster, but Singapore falls outside of that cluster.

Figure 2 demonstrates even more emphatically the conceptual distance between Singapore and the rest of ASEAN. In the normative opinion of the respondents, Singapore has more in common with the countries of Northeast Asia than Southeast Asia. At this scale, the contrast with Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam is reiterated, as well as a strong sense of difference between Singapore and North Korea.

At a "worldwide" scale, and in keeping with respondents from other ASEAN nations, Singaporean students place greatest emphasis on the difference between "Asia" and "the West" (Figure 3). These are, of course, categories that conflate various senses of geography, history, and ethnological imaginations. Australia, for example, is consistently in the West in results from different ASEAN universities, and Saudi Arabia consistently in Asia. While the results from Singapore are similar to those of other countries, they show a less categorical difference between Asia and the West, particularly given the medial position of Japan. The implication is that a country like Japan can be "in between" East and West. The position of Singapore at this scale is again ambiguous. The countries of ASEAN are both the most unlike the West and unlike Japan. Singapore is situated in between ASEAN and the rest of Asia. The conceptual location of Saudi Arabia is also remarkable; Saudi Arabia is closer than Singapore to the members of ASEAN in the vertical dimension of contrast (between Japan and ASEAN). Again, this is a unique result that has not appeared in data elsewhere.

The responses to the questionnaires also show an apparent lack of consensus over the position of Singapore vis-à-vis Southeast Asia. While there is no doubt among the respondents in general that Singapore is significantly and decisively different from and conceptually "outside" of Southeast Asia, they do not agree on the degree of difference. Among other things, this is indicated by a relatively wide confidence interval for the mean position of Singapore in the ASEAN domain (Figure 1). Almost all respondents locate Singapore outside of Southeast Asia, but some place it much further away than others.

Grouping ASEAN and Others

In the pile sorting exercise, the most common grouping was the ten members of ASEAN (Table 1). There seems little doubt that on the whole students recognize ASEAN as a regional grouping. But here too, ambivalence in the relationship of Singapore to ASEAN appears. A notable number of students made groupings of ASEAN members, but excluded Malaysia and Singapore (a number of students also grouped Malaysia and Singapore together). Even more students separated Singapore in a group unto itself (Table 2); all of which reflects the position of Singapore (and secondarily Malaysia) in the cognitive map vis-à-vis the rest of ASEAN (Figure 1).

In grouping countries, NUS students generally separated Asian from Western countries (Table 3), reiterating the Worldwide cognitive map (Figure 3). Within Asia, the tendency of Singaporean students to make groupings of exclusively ASEAN countries (41.9 per cent) was stronger than among Thai students (36.4 per cent). But their inclination to create groups that included both Asian and Western countries (17.4 per cent of all groupings) was stronger, for example, than that of counterparts in Thailand (11.9 per cent in the same exercise). In both this and the cognitive map, the sense of difference between Asia and the West is weaker in Singapore than elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Students most often justified the association of countries across the West versus Asia divide on the basis of economic criteria of wealth and development. The strength of this theme came across consistently in all of the qualitative data.

Descriptions, Perceptions, and Schema of Countries and Regions

From the descriptive terms collected along with the triad questionnaires, Singaporean students described their own country most often as:

“small”, “clean”, “rich”, “multiracial”, and “developed”. Descriptively, with these terms and others (such as “democracy”, “advanced”, and “capitalist”), Singaporeans associated Singapore more closely with America, Australia, France, and Japan than with any other countries, particularly those in ASEAN. The descriptive repertoire that Singaporean students used for the ASEAN region was heavily weighted towards terms such as — “poor”, “undeveloped”, “developing”, “backward”, “Muslim”, and “big”. The first three applied primarily and overwhelmingly to the countries of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam, but also to the region in a very general way. Every country, even Brunei, was described at least once as “poor”, “backward”, and “developing”. Every country except Laos was also described at least once as “big” (again surprisingly including Brunei). “Muslim” (or “Islam”) was, not surprisingly, among the primary descriptors for Singapore’s immediate neighbours Malaysia (most commonly described as “Malay” and “Muslim”) and Indonesia (“big” and “Muslim”).

The case of Brunei being described as “poor”, “backward”, “developing”, and “big” (albeit only once each) is instructive of the way in which the region as a whole is seen through this lens. While Brunei was overwhelmingly described to the contrary with the terms “oil”, “rich”, “Muslim”, and “small”, the fact that it was described with the almost opposite terms indicates its lumping into the region, and simultaneous distancing of Brunei and the region as a whole from Singapore. The evidence for Singaporean students’ inclination to do this is further reinforced by examining specific triad questionnaire answers. In cases where Singapore and Brunei were matched with Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar, the majority of Singaporean respondents chose Singapore as the most different of the three. All other respondents (Indonesians, Filipinos, Thais, Malaysians) overwhelmingly chose the mainland country as most different (and by implication, Singapore and Brunei as relatively similar to each other).

Two general criteria or schema for evaluating the relationship among countries emerged in the overall survey among university students across different nations. The first were cultural-historical considerations, such as Indonesian students’ perceptions of a strong association of the three “Malay-Muslim” countries of ASEAN (Brunei, Indonesia, and Malaysia) and Thai students’ perceptions of an affinity among ASEAN’s five mainland and largely Buddhist countries. Such cultural-historical linkages among ASEAN states was largely absent from the data collected in Singapore. Rather, Singaporean students gave the greatest weight to the second general type of criteria: economic-developmental.

Like Singaporeans, Filipino respondents also placed greatest weight on economic-developmental considerations. The economic-developmental dimension for Filipinos was largely a straightforward matter of “rich” and “poor”. By contrast, Singaporeans used a criteria of industrialization and development. Thus Brunei, while “rich”, was judged to be rather more like Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand than like Singapore, because Brunei is not considered to be “developed” in the ways that Singapore and, to a lesser extent, Malaysia are.

Everywhere, in terms economic-development criteria, a strong tendency is apparent to associate up and dissociate down. Respondents in Thailand, for example, tended to associate their country “up” with Malaysia and Singapore and to dissociate “down”, particularly from their mainland neighbours. In the case of Thailand, this produces a complex pattern due to the cross-cutting influences of the two criteria (historical-cultural and economic-developmental) by which countries are judged. But in Singapore, it drives the unique form of Singaporean exceptionalism apparent in the cognitive maps, which places the country conceptually outside of ASEAN.

Historical-cultural criteria, when they influenced thinking about the world for Singaporeans, were more often negative rather than positive — they mark groups of others who are “not like us” more than creating a sense of identity between Singaporeans and others. The most potent indication of this is the unique position of Saudi Arabia in the cognitive map of countries worldwide (Figure 3). The qualitative, descriptive data collected suggests that its location in the proximity of Southeast Asia is due to the prevalent impression that Singapore is surrounded by large, Muslim neighbours. The salience of this perception makes these important criteria that respondents used in thinking about the world, and thus the affinity between Saudi Arabia and Southeast Asia (in particular, Brunei, Indonesia, and Malaysia).²

Looking East, Looking West, but Not Looking to the Neighbourhood

In the context of the pile sorting interviews, Singaporean students were asked “If Singapore were to change and become more like another country, what country do you think Singapore should become like?” The question was structured in a three-part hierarchy. If they answered the initial question with a country outside of Asia, they were then asked

what "Asian" country they thought Singapore should become like. If this answer was a country outside of Southeast Asia, then they were asked about "Southeast Asia". Some responded with more than one country, and some also made a distinction between which country Singapore "should" become like, and which it "will" become like. The responses show that in keeping with their sense of Singapore's position outside of ASEAN, NUS students also are looking to a future modelled on countries outside the region. But also, they hold a strong view of Singapore's uniqueness and pride in the nation as it is.

In responding to the initial question, Japan and America came out dead even among the respondents and far ahead of any other countries (24 respondents each). Australia was also cited frequently (16) and to a lesser extent China (10), England (7), Canada (4), France (4), and Germany (4). Ten respondents answered "none" — that Singapore should not become like any other country. Saying, for example, "Singapore is good enough as it is", or that "Singapore is a model of development for other countries".

Within Asia (which assumes that the respondent cited a non-Asian country in the first instance), Japan came out far ahead (14), followed by Malaysia (5) and China (4). Eight respondents also answered "none". Within Southeast Asia, the number who responded "none" jumped yet higher. Thirty-three respondents said that Singapore will not and should not become like any other country in Southeast Asia. For those that did name a country, the most common response was Thailand (9) followed by Malaysia (3). The only other ASEAN countries mentioned at all in response to this series of questions (once each) were: the Philippines, Indonesia, and Myanmar. In mentioning the Philippines, a student said "Singaporeans should take the initiative to be more welcoming and warm" (like Filipinos). The respondent who cited Indonesia qualified, "only in a certain sense ... they are more politically active and have more political choices. Singaporeans are governed by fear. Indonesians don't seem to have that problem." The respondent who mentioned Myanmar said that Singapore "should" become more like Myanmar because "people there are more peaceful and harmonious. Life is not so stressful there." But at the same time, he said that Singapore "would" not become like any other country in Southeast Asia — "How to go back one step?"

In their responses, Singaporean students often focused on one or two aspects (such as those above) in reference to countries that they thought Singapore should or would become like in the future. Among these, economic prosperity, political and social freedoms, social

welfare, cultural values (including a unique sense of identity), and a more relaxed pace of life were some of the most important aspects of different countries that they highlighted. America and Japan tended to combine some aspects of the first two elements (prosperity and freedom) in the minds of many of the respondents. Japan was also admired for being "hardworking", "creative", and having a strong sense of its own identity. Australia, on the other hand, was most frequently mentioned with reference to a more "relaxed lifestyle", as well as desirable for more political and social freedoms combined with relatively good economic prosperity.

For those who mentioned Thailand within Southeast Asia, cultural values, Thailand's perceived sense of cultural identity, and a relaxed lifestyle made it a place to emulate. "Thailand and Malaysia ... have a good mix of rural and urban. Thailand's culture is such that citizens can relax in the rural areas after working in the urban areas. Malaysia too, has a similar culture, but perhaps not to the same extent as Thailand". When Malaysia was mentioned as a place to emulate, the context was more often one of convergence — that Malaysia and Singapore are already similar in many ways (for example, with multi-ethnic populations and economic prosperity), thus in the future they would become more like each other.

In general, Singaporeans are clearly not looking to the region in imagining the future direction of Singapore, but rather looking "East" (specifically to Japan) and looking "West". Japan, America, and, to a lesser extent, Australia, China, and a few other countries embody qualities of economic prosperity, social and political freedoms, and so on that Singaporean students see as desirable. At the same time, in numerous cases, students said that Singapore "will" become like certain other countries (especially again Japan and America), even though this would not be in a positive direction — citing for example, moral degeneration or an even more ruthless, stressful political economy. But in both respects (positive or negative changes), relatively distant countries in the "East" and "West" are taken as the benchmark, not immediate neighbours. Furthermore, when asked to choose a country to emulate specifically within Southeast Asia, even when they did mention a country the students would frequently note that this was a "forced" choice; with statements such as "Malaysia, for lack of a better choice" or "I would choose Thailand, if forced to choose". Overall the students displayed a strong sense of pride in Singapore's position in the world (and even more so in the region), stating that Singapore should not change. Most often this was on economic grounds, though

also sometimes with reference to Singapore's multi-ethnic make-up and stable political system.

Sources of Regional Perceptions

Culture, at least from a cognitivist perspective, is learned, shared knowledge, which can be understood in terms of systems of meanings (Chabal and Daloz 2006, pp. 22; D'Andrade 1995). Saliency of terms, ordering schema, and patterns of association and difference, such as those evident in the cognitive maps presented above, give us a sense of the system of meaning. Simply put, they tell us something of what our respondents think about the domain of nation-states. But this cultural knowledge should not be taken as a static given "Singaporean way of thinking", as is too often the case when "culture" is poorly used as a residual category to explain some thought or behaviour that seems to have no other explanation (Chabal and Daloz 2006, pp. 10–11). Culture is learned and shared, produced and reproduced in contexts of political power, historical circumstance, and institutional structures.

The data presented so far shows us in some detail the normative perceptions and patterns of thinking about the nation-state domain among young, educated Singaporeans. But pin-pointing the source or sources of these perceptions — the many factors and conditions that shape them — is a much murkier task. An important part of the explanation lies in the leading role of Singapore's political elites and their perceptions of Singapore's place within Southeast Asia. From early in Singapore's independent national history, its long-time Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew was given to comparing the situation of Singapore, as a vulnerable small Chinese-majority state, to that of Israel in the Arab world (Chan 1971, p. 54). This perception of threat to the island nation surrounded by large, Malay-Muslim neighbours continues to shape defence and strategic policies (Huxley 2000, pp. 30–72). The perceptions recorded by NUS students certainly reflect these elite-driven national political ideological concerns. But a broader set of political and historical circumstances are at play, including the primacy of economic rather than ethno-cultural nationalism and the mediated representations of nation-states, the nation-state system, and the ASEAN region in particular, especially that found in the educational curriculum.

Self-image, economic imperatives, and mass-mediated environment (including formal education) play into the pattern of perceptions that

the survey reveals. Singapore is different things in different discursive moments. In some instances, it is a global city and a Southeast Asian entrepôt. In other instances is it a nation-state. The two are not entirely contradictory, but neither are they entirely compatible. The modern nation-state is founded on territorial sovereignty and bases its legitimacy on representing a people (that is, the "nation"). The 21st century global city and historical Southeast Asian entrepôt thrive on exchange across porous ethnological boundaries and long-distance, borderless trade networks. Official discourse in Singapore attempts to strike a balance between the obligations and impulses of nationalism and the entailments of the successful entrepôt in facilitating the movements of people and goods that make it a nexus for commerce and other sorts of exchange (such as the intellectual exchange underpinning a vibrant knowledge economy). More often than not, in Singaporean discourse, imperatives of economic development trump ethno-nationalism.

Two things combine to make economics conceptually paramount in the public sphere, specifically with regard to Singaporean cultural knowledge of countries as reflected in the research results. First, economics is elevated because the nation is rhetorically dependent on the entrepôt. The Singapore story since 1965 has been founded on success through internationalization of the economy. Singapore has been an entrepôt since at least 1819 and even much before that if one traces the history of the island to the 14th century polity of Temasek. But since 1965, the entrepôt has been wedded to the fate of a nation. Most global cities and modern entrepôt operate in the context of a much larger territorial nation-state. Since 1997, this has been true even of Hong Kong, Singapore's closest analogue in the contemporary world. For Singapore, the nation-state and entrepôt are uniquely coterminous.

Second and in contrast to the clear imperatives of economic prosperity, the nation, in the sense of a Singaporean "people" has been decidedly elusive. Like many other post-colonial polities — Singapore's neighbours Malaysia and Indonesia come most readily to mind — Singapore as nation-state came into being as a territorial entity encompassing a population that did not conform to the ideal of ethno-cultural singularity entailed in the European concept of a "nation". Nation-building, like elsewhere in the post-colonial world, has been a process of forging a sense of national identity. But unlike some places (again, Thailand and Vietnam come to mind) where the prevailing mode of nation-building has been assimilation to a numerically and

politically dominant ethno-national norm (for example, Thai or Viet), due to Singapore's historical circumstances, the state led by Lee Kuan Yew and the People's Action Party (PAP) rejected conceptualizing the nation as predominantly Chinese, despite the numerical, political, and economic supremacy of Singapore's Chinese community.

Instead, Singapore has been conceptualized as an explicitly multi-ethnic nation of "Chinese, Malays, Indians, and Others". In this context, "historical-cultural" criteria, which drive judgments of what "countries" (that is, nation-states) are in other places, are devolved to ethnic communities in Singapore and not associated with the nation and country. Thus, where Thais conceptualize their country as Theravada Buddhist and associate it with other Buddhist countries and Indonesians associate their country with other "Malay-Muslim" countries, Singaporeans do not conceptualize their country in these sorts of historical-cultural terms.

For most of the countries of Southeast Asia, the responses from Singapore suggest a lack of distinctiveness, in the minds of respondents, with regard to many of the countries within Southeast Asia, particularly those of mainland Southeast Asia. Information about Southeast Asia is not especially lacking in Singapore. The *Straits Times*, as the nation's leading English-language newspaper, for example, contains daily, dedicated pages to the region. On the other hand, educational curriculum is not particularly strong in teaching young Singaporeans about the region they live in.

In their secondary school education, Singaporeans do not receive a great detail of information about the ASEAN region, judging from a survey of the curriculum in geography, social studies, and history. In history courses, recent Secondary One textbooks focus on the ancient history of China, India, and Southeast Asia. Like other aspects of the social studies curriculum, the emphasis is on the Chinese, Indian, and Malay roots of the majority of Singapore's citizens. As the curriculum progresses and the closer one gets to the present the more Southeast Asia disappears. "Modern World History" is framed largely as a European narrative, punctuated by World War I, World War II, and the Cold War, with some attention paid to Japan and China. Textbooks for 'N' and 'O' level examinations on the "History of Southeast Asia with emphasis on Malaysia and Singapore" provide much more of the latter than the former. Southeast Asia outside of Malaysia and Singapore largely vanishes after the first two chapters that cover the late-colonial and early nationalist periods (late 19th and early 20th centuries). And as one of the books notes, those first two chapters are "non-examination topics".

The same disappearance of the region occurs in Social Studies texts for Secondary Three and Secondary Four. The first of these opens with a 12-page chapter on "Southeast Asia: From Colonies to Nations", after which little or nothing is heard about the region until a short four-page overview of ASEAN. In the Secondary Four text, ASEAN and member states are absent all together, while full chapter case studies are devoted to Switzerland, Japan, and Venice, with other extensive case studies on Sri Lanka, Northern Ireland, Britain, Israel, Korea, India, China, and Hong Kong. Attention to the region is slightly more substantial in Geography texts, where Indonesia, Brunei, and Thailand are used as case studies along with various other countries. Throughout all of the social science textbooks, Singapore and secondarily Malaysia are the overwhelming focus of attention.

The Singapore national school system is well known as having among the highest-quality educational curriculum and textbooks in the world, and all of the texts referred to above are of the highest standards in production quality and content. The students, assuming they absorb this content, will be highly educated about a lot of things. In the realm of geography, civics, and nation-states, for instance, they will learn a great deal about the political and social system of Switzerland, which Lee Kuan Yew and others have long held out as a model for Singapore's development (Chan 1971, p. 51) But they will know little about Southeast Asia. Unfortunately, this state of affairs is more common than not throughout the national educational curricula of ASEAN members. The ASEAN Secretariat and related organizations are sponsoring programmes to promote more ASEAN-related content in national curricula, but such initiatives are still in their infancy (cf. Jones 2004).

Conclusion

The survey suggests that Singaporeans have a strong sense of ASEAN as a region, but they are ambivalent about Singapore's relationship to that region. The results reflect arguments elsewhere that Singaporean national identity is founded on a sense of insecurity and ambivalence towards its immediate neighbours (for example, Da Cunha 2002; Kwa 2002; Leifer 2000). The lack of consensus over Singapore's relationship to the rest of Southeast Asia, and particularly in contrast to its immediate neighbours, would appear to reflect this sense of ambivalence towards the region. As one Singaporean student put it, in discussing Singapore's place within Southeast Asia, Singapore "can't escape being part of Southeast Asia geographically". Unfortunately,

such negative imagery and metaphor of "escape" reflects a more general attitude among Singaporean students. With some exception for Thailand and Malaysia, Singaporean university students at the beginning of the 21st century do not see much to attract them to their immediate regional neighbourhood and instead are oriented to more distant countries.

Whether in terms of economic prosperity, trade, or national security, the relationship of Singapore to its immediate neighbours and other nations is an ongoing concern for the country (Da Cunha 2002; Dent 2002; Leifer 2000). Much of the maintenance, negotiation and development of such relationships are of course in the hands of political, diplomatic, and business elites. Assessments of how such individuals view the relationship of Singapore to the rest of Southeast Asia and the world would be a worthwhile avenue for further research (Festervand and Mpoyi 2001; Leifer 2000, pp. 68–130). At the same time, the view presented here provides a window on the perceptions of younger Singaporeans and reflects the challenges of bringing Singapore into closer relationship with its ASEAN neighbours.

The challenge derives in largest part from the conundrum of Singapore itself. It is a unique combination of unresolved, and perhaps irresolvable sociological entities — a plural society, global city, nation-state, and entrepôt. The contradictions and conflicting imaginings of what Singapore is and what Singapore should strive to become in the future may be a barrier to closer integration within a Southeast Asian community. But the challenges of imagining Singapore may also provide fertile ground for envisioning an evolving ASEAN.

The strong sense of economic and developmental criteria as a medium for judging the relationships among and identity of countries is an acute impediment to strengthening a sense of affiliation among ASEAN members. This is not simply a matter of the practical impediments to transnational movements of goods and peoples in a region marked by sharp economic disparities. It also underlies, as we have seen, a subjective impulse to associate up and dissociate down when thinking internationally. While similar inclinations are found among others throughout the region, the impulse in Singapore to isolate the island state from the rest of ASEAN exemplifies this problem. The ambivalence and dissociation of Singapore from its immediate neighbourhood is an impediment to the small but relatively prosperous country taking a strong and positive leadership role in the context of ASEAN. It is also reflected in the poor regard which others in the region often display for Singapore (for example, Huxley 2001, p. 207).

At the same time, Singapore's inability to fit neatly into the imaginings of a nation-state suggests other ways of being in the world as a political entity. Singapore's leaders and citizens grapple with two major challenges: balancing nation-state sovereignty with entrepôt openness and balancing the need for common political will with a respect for difference in a plural society. Neither of these challenges has been "solved" definitively in Singapore, but it is a site in which these problems are continually worked on in ways that have direct relevance to the ASEAN community. ASEAN is the contemporary manifestation of a region that has flourished on international trade since before recorded history (Hall 1992). Negotiating the trade winds is likely to become increasingly important to ASEAN and its members with the rise of Asian economic prosperity. Likewise, in contrast the European Union, with which it is almost incessantly compared, ASEAN is not easily conceived as a nation-state writ large, with a trans-ethno-national identity (as in the case of "European"). Rather, ASEAN is more appropriately imagined as a "plural society" writ large. In this respect, Singapore, its history, and the experience of its people have much to offer for thinking about models for ASEAN cooperation, economics, and the future of the ASEAN community. The challenge is to imagine Singapore as a part of Southeast Asia in ways that make such a contribution possible.

NOTES

* The author wishes to thank Zhang Juan and others, too numerous to mention by name, who assisted in this research. The research was supported by National University of Singapore, FASS, Faculty Research Grant #R-111-000-047-112.

- 1 Details of these techniques can be found in Borgatti (1996a, 1996b); Moore et al. (1999); Romney et al. (1995, 1996, 1997, 1998); Weller and Romney (1990), and Wish et al. (1972).
- 2 Results from both Indonesia and Malaysia suggest that Southeast Asian Muslims, conversely, distance their own countries from Saudi Arabia; but discussion of those results is beyond the scope of this article.

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