

'In Defence of Asian Values': Investigating Lee Kuan Yew's Postcolonial 'Garrison Mentality' for the "Singapore Story"
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Abstract

This article seeks to distinguish the 'Asian values' component of Ryoko Nakano's 'reverse Orientalism' notion from Singapore's first prime minister Lee Kuan Yew's 'postcolonial-oriented, garrison mentality.' By adopting a postcolonial lens, this research utilises historical representations in order to elucidate how Lee Kuan Yew's conception of a postcolonial Singaporean 'identity' has been represented over time and how this conception does not conform to the dichotomies and assumptions that characterise Nakano's conceptualisation of 'reverse Orientalism'. Rather, this research posits that Lee Kuan Yew's championing of 'Asian values' stems from his postcolonial-oriented, garrison mentality and pragmatism as opposed to a 'reverse Oriental' discourse of power.

Keywords: Asian values, reverse orientalism, postcolonialism, garrison mentality, historical representations, Lee Kuan Yew, Singaporean identity, discourse of power.

Introduction

From a poor colony of the British Empire to a bustling metropolis that boasts one of the world's most competitive economies, the history of the island state of Singapore is replete with battles against colonialism and ethnic strife. Globally accredited with facilitating this extraordinary ascent into world politics, Lee Kuan Yew strong-armed this feat despite dismal predictions over Singapore's very survival. Having gone through 'the trauma of war in 1942 and the Japanese Occupation'², Yew's political thought was deeply influenced by the grossly unequal power relations observed during the course of Singapore's history as a British crown colony as well as Imperial Japan's occupation of Singapore. In addition, Lee was also profoundly impacted by the force of the anti-colonial wave and the rallying calls for *merdeka* ('independence') which swept across Malaya, bolstering the determination to end British rule in Malaya and Singapore.

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² Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story: 1965–2000* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2000), xiii.

In his book, *From Third World to First World: The Singapore Story, 1965–2000*, Lee Kuan Yew makes clear his aim of addressing the youth of multicultural Singapore who ‘took stability, growth and prosperity for granted’.³ This line of thinking posits that it is complacency that could threaten the security and interracial, interreligious harmony of Singapore. Lee stated that his biggest concern was ‘how to make the young more conscious of security. By security I mean defence against threats to our survival, whether the threats are external or internal’.⁴ Taking this position into consideration, this research aims to investigate the postcolonial orientations, namely, the enduring legacy of British colonially constructed race-relations in British Malaya, of Lee Kuan Yew’s garrison mentality and how he sought to challenge this colonial legacy through his blueprint for ‘Singapore’ as a multi-racial nation.

As previously stated, Yew’s political thought was greatly impacted by his first-hand experiences with British and Japanese colonialism, along with the mistreatment suffered by Japanese colonies. In her thought-provoking research, *Beyond Orientalism and ‘reverse Orientalism’: Through the looking glass of Japanese humanism*, Ryoko Nakano discusses the exemplification of ‘reverse Orientalism’ by Imperial Japan and contemporary Asian politicians who champion ‘Asianism’. While this concept certainly explains the discourse of power that was employed by Japan’s colonial empire, it does not sufficiently explain politicians, such as Lee Kuan Yew, conception of ‘Asian values,’ as his understanding of this notion was not guided by imperialistic or hegemonic ambitions. Rather, this research contends that instead of ‘reverse orientalism’, it was a postcolonial-oriented garrison mentality along with pragmatic considerations which influenced both his championing of ‘Asian values’ and his critique of Western universalism.

By employing historical representations, this research will first trace the evolution of Lee Kuan Yew’s idea regarding the identity of Singapore through three time periods: following the ouster of Singapore from the Federation of Malaya in 1965; during 1965–1967 amid the People’s Action Party’s (PAP) struggle for the survival of newly-independent ‘Singapore’; and in 1972 when the idea concerning the Singaporean economy’s shift towards an outward-looking, export-oriented policy of industrialisation was accepted and proceeded with success. Next, this research will scrutinise this ‘politics of survival’ as an enduring facet of Lee Kuan Yew’s pragmatic political philosophy and his postcolonial-oriented garrison mentality. Finally, this paper will critically examine Ryoko Nakano’s ‘reverse

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Derek Davies, “Lee Kuan Yew: Leader of Singapore who brought wealth and stability to the new state at the cost of personal freedoms,” *The Independent*, 23 March 2015, www.independent.co.uk/news/people/news/lee-kuan-yew-leader-of-singapore-who-brought-wealth-and-stability-to-the-new-state-at-the-cost-of-10128809.html.

Orientalism' as a discourse of power and a Trojan horse for contemporary 'Asian' societies that harbour sympathy for the 'Asianism' cause. This research posits that contrary to her argument regarding the contemporary 'Asian Values Debate' as emblematic of 'reverse Orientalism,' Lee Kuan Yew's championing of 'Asian Values' was rooted in his and the PAP's 'politics of survival' narrative as opposed to the hegemonic ambitions that Nakano had ascribed 'reverse Orientalism' as operating around.

The 'Orientalism Debate' and postcolonial politics of 'survivalism'

As a cultural perspective or as a profound discourse of power, 'reverse Orientalism' can be taken as an appropriation of Edward Said's understanding of 'Orientalism' as a hegemonic system which he believes represented 'a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident"'.⁵ In her compelling read, *Beyond Orientalism and 'reverse Orientalism': Through the looking glass of Japanese humanism*, Ryoko Nakano sought to characterise Imperial Japan's colonial policy as an exemplification of what she calls 'reverse Orientalism'. By utilising and appropriating the same dichotomies such as 'center-periphery, rational-spiritual, and modern-pre-modern'⁶ that were constructed by the original Saidian understanding of Orientalism, Nakano contends that 'reverse Orientalism' emerged as Imperial Japan's 'success' in its modernisation project. Endeavouring to bolster the belief surrounding Japan's capability of matching European colonial powers on equal footing and redefining its engagement with the new international order vis-à-vis the West, the construction of an 'imperial myth' designated Japan as the exclusive defender of Asiatic unity – the chief entity which would steer Asia out of its 'backwardness'.

Amid the imaginative mode of constructing this imperial myth and its indispensable ties to Oriental history, Nakano makes a compelling case regarding Imperial Japan's utilisation of a discernibly inverted Oriental discourse through its 'discriminatory practices against, among, or between nations, histories, and cultures within the Japanese empire'.⁷ Nakano is also of the view that in the contemporary sense, the 'Asian Values' debate which gained momentum in the 1980s and 1990s mirrors this discourse of 'reverse Orientalism' in terms of inverting the same binary categories and dichotomies that Orientalism constructed. With reference to the 1993 Bangkok Declaration that sought to codify and endorse what was termed as 'Asian Values', Nakano accuses these prospects of Asiatic unity/Asianism

⁵ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), 10.

⁶ Ryoko Nakano, "Beyond Orientalism and 'Reverse Orientalism': Through the Looking Glass of Japanese Humanism," in Robbie Shilliam, ed., *International Relations and Non-Western Thought: Imperialism, Colonialism and Investigations of Global Modernity*, (London: Routledge, 2011), 128.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 128.

among East Asian states of going down the same path as Imperial Japan. In other words, Asianism as an idea was at risk of being undermined by its susceptibility to the same Trojan horse that is 'reverse Orientalism,' under the guise of challenging Western universalist logic.

In addition to Nakano's elucidation on 'reverse Orientalism,' Michael Hill's, *'Asian Values' as reverse Orientalism: Singapore*, offers another means by which to examine and categorise this phenomenon. Rather than designating this notion as a 'discourse of power' the way Nakano views it, Hill approaches 'reverse Orientalism' as a 'search for surrogates to the Protestant ethic and subsequently developed into a canonisation of Confucianism as the new motor of Asian capitalist development'.⁸ As conspicuous as the parallels between the 'Asian Values' ethos and the Weberian Protestant ethic appear at first-glance, Hill acknowledges and proceeds to sketch how the inclusion of a Confucian-oriented moral framework into this 'Asian Values' dilemma was a rather late occurrence. In Hill's understanding, 'reverse Orientalism's mimicking of Orientalism lies in its promotion of 'a similar polarised contrast [to Orientalism] in which the positive and negative polarities are simply reversed'.⁹ Hill's approach towards 'reverse Orientalism' does not draw on power politics or hegemony; rather, it focuses on postcolonial Singapore's struggle towards fostering a national-identity and tying it to what can be termed a 'garrison mentality' or to the 'politics of survival'.

Following its expulsion from the Federation of Malaya in 1965 and still reeling from the psychological impacts of two varying forms of 'Eastern' (Japanese) and 'Western' (British) colonialism, Singapore found itself in a precarious state where it was neither militarily nor economically secure enough to hold optimistic prospects concerning its survival as a newly independent state. According to Lee Boon-Hiok, Singapore's survival from a political and economic standpoint remained the overarching priority. Surrounded by what they perceived as hostile and belligerent states (Indonesia and Malaysia), Boon-Hiok explores PAP chairman Lee Kuan Yew's rationale on how 'Singapore's survival depend[ed] on the ability to adopt a new set of attitudes, a new set of values, a new set of perspectives: in short, on the creation of a new man'.¹⁰ This strategy also necessitated the formation of a 'tightly organised society'¹¹ which would be cultivated so as to 'mobilise to the maximum what it is capable of'.¹² One of the pioneers behind the development of the 'garrison mentality' thesis, particularly regarding the case of Canada, eminent Canadian literary critic and literary theorist Northrop Frye not only coined this term but sought to demonstrate

⁸ Michael Hill, "'Asian Values' as Reverse Orientalism," *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 41, no. 2, (2000): 188.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 177.

¹⁰ Lee Boon-Hiok, "Singapore: Reconciling the Survival Ideology with the Achievement Concept," *Southeast Asian Affairs* 1978, no. 1 (1978): 230.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 230.

¹² *Ibid.*

how Canada grappled with the 'immense power of American [economic and cultural] penetration into Canada'.¹³ Identifying what he referred to as the 'mindless hostility of nature'¹⁴ as the basis for his 'garrison mentality,' Frye posited that this approach sees as a group coming together to confront 'a huge, unthinking, menacing, and formidable physical setting'.¹⁵ Contending that 'Canadians were held by the land before they emerged as a people on it',¹⁶ Frye's point bears an uncanny resemblance to the plight of newly independent Singapore as an impoverished British colony that lacked natural resources and was fraught with racial and ethnic strife. Hence, this idea of a 'formidable' setting can be applicable in the Singaporean case as well, as Lee Kuan Yew and the PAP aspired to cultivate a national consciousness that would alleviate the 'the tension between the mind and a surrounding not integrated with it',¹⁷ similar to Canada. As Canada sought its own national identity that diverged from British and American cultural domination, Frye's 'garrison mentality' represented an attitude and approach of a community that felt isolated from cultural centres and inundated by what was seen as a hostile landscape.

Keeping the notion of 'survival' at the forefront of its politics, the PAP sought the assistance of Israel, who was all too eager to garner recognition and acceptance in Asia, owing to the similarities in their objectives and their 'garrison mentality'. Designating Israel as a 'garrison state', Abadi scrutinises the depth of Singapore's admiration for Israel through Lee Kuan Yew's comments on the matter, stating that Lee's 'reference to Israel as a model country was no mere rhetoric and he apparently tried not only to learn from the Israelis how to build a formidable army but also fashion a political and social system akin to Israel's'.¹⁸

Charles Hirschman offers a comprehensive examination concerning the British colonial classification of Malaya's residents along racial and ethnic lines, documenting how British colonial designs 'contained the potential of [inter-ethnic] acculturation and even assimilation'¹⁹ and played an instrumental role in constructing and 'transforming "racial relations" by the colonial experience'.²⁰ Hirschman argues that colonial intervention exacerbated any inter-ethnic tensions that existed in pre-colonial Malaya and consequently narrowed any prospects of assimilation between the Malays and Chinese immigrants over the course of the nineteenth century. He links

¹³ Northrop Frye, *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination* (Toronto: Anansi, 1971), 342.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 356.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 342.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 324.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 200.

¹⁸ Jacob Abadi, *Israel's Quest for Recognition and Acceptance in Asia: Garrison State Diplomacy* (London: Frank Cass, 2004), 179.

¹⁹ Charles Hirschman, "The Making of Race in Colonial Malaya: Political Economy and Racial Ideology," *Sociological Forum* 1, no. 2 (1986): 332.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 332.

the promotion of engineered 'race relations' to a dramatic shift in European colonial thought over its relationship with the 'other'. By rooting racial stratification theory in 'scientific' postulations, Hirschman contends that the prospects of conquering were given a 'moral' character and the naturalisation of these unequal power relations were consolidated through racial classification in Malaya. He cautions that it is also important to view this within the purview of Malaya's transformation into an export economy built on immigrant (primarily Chinese and Indian) labour. Given the ties between the Malay feudal aristocracy and the colonial administration, British colonialism 'reinforced Malay xenophobic attitudes'²¹ by refusing to recognise Chinese and Indian residents as 'members of the Malayan permanent community'.²² According to Hirschman, this xenophobic reinforcement remained an enduring feature even in the decolonised 'Federation of Malaya' where ethnic strife was rampant. Rizal Yaakop contends that the very definition of what constitutionally defined a Malay was rooted in colonial origins, arguing that the very notion of a Malay identity was 'derived from a 1913 colonial enactment in which "a Malay was a person belonging to any Malay race who habitually speaks the Malay language . . . and professes the Muslim religion"'.²³ Through this definition, the Malay ethno-nationalists reinforced this colonially oriented identification to bolster their own racially based power politics, whereby the idea of 'Malaya for the Malays' became the rallying call for the newly decolonised Federation's Malay political elite.

In what may be regarded as a continuation of the colonial racial grid, the essentialising of each ethnic group concerning their own differing (and seemingly oppositional) attributes was internalised and became one of the leading causes behind the Federation's decision to eject Singapore in 1965. R. S Milne sought to deepen the argument surrounding the 'increasingly racial nature of the power struggle which culminated in Singapore's expulsion from Malaya'.²⁴ Contending that while political power was primarily accorded to the Malays and economic power to the Chinese in the newly decolonised Federation of Malaya, Milne argues that 'in each case the Malays were being required to extend certain rights, previously enjoyed mainly by Malays, to non-Malays. The one thing which the Malays were not prepared to give up, on either occasion, was their political supremacy'.²⁵ He further elaborates that the Malay political elite began viewing expulsion as the most feasible option for safeguarding 'Malay' Malaysian interests, maintaining the delicate 'racial balance' in favour of the Malays, and putting Singapore

²¹ *Ibid.*, 353.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Rizaal Yaakob, "The British Legacy and the Development of Politics in Malaya," *Global Journal of Human-Social Science: (D) History, Archaeology & Anthropology* 14, no. 1 (2014): 56.

²⁴ R.S. Milne, "Singapore's Exit from Malaysia; the Consequences of Ambiguity," *Asian Survey* 6, no. 3 (1966): 175.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 178.

in a position of dependence. As a result, Singapore was forcibly expelled from the Federation in 1965. The glaringly racial nature of this development can be viewed as confirming Hirschman's initial thesis on the enduring legacies of colonial intervention in terms of constructing race-relations and, consequentially, exacerbating ethnic tensions in Malaya.

'The Singapore Story': Chartering through Survivalist Identity Politics

Often regarded as the 'birth' of the Singaporean 'nation,' 1965 marked the ouster of Singapore from the Federation of Malaya. Lee's efforts towards maintaining the union of Singapore and Malaysia were undone by the communal strife and inter-ethnic tensions which ensued in the Federation following its decolonisation. The 'colonial vision of race'²⁶ that Hirschman describes profoundly constrained the multicultural and multilingual values that Lee's PAP championed, as the Malay political elite appeared to subconsciously internalise the colonial reception towards the Chinese and Indian population as 'outsiders', of a 'foreign culture' whose loyalties were viewed with scepticism. This period of heightened inter-ethnic tension may be seen as a vehicle for the early conception of what was to be a distinctly 'Singaporean' identity, with the city-state left to grapple with dismal prospects concerning its survival, as well as the scars of separation that were unmistakably rooted in the colonial construction of 'race relations' and allocation of political power to the Malays.

In its forward-looking approach, this period can also be viewed as a starting point 'in response to this "crisis" of being abandoned and to fend for itself that the survival rhetoric has been repeatedly mobilised as the motif in the discourse of Singapore's nation building'.²⁷ Following the intermittent war that was the Indonesian Confrontation between Indonesia and the Federation of Malaysia, comprising of Singapore and the Malaysian Peninsula, between 1963 until 1966, the newly independent state of Singapore was left to labour for its survival while being encircled by hostile neighbours. Moreover, the precariousness that accompanied this feeling of abandonment for the new nation only heightened as Britain reached a sudden decision in 1967 to withdraw all of its troops from Singapore by the early 1970s. Coming as a shock to the Singaporean Government who decried that the Singaporean defence was only in its infancy with no means to adequately defend itself, Lee Kuan Yew also argued that the presence of the troops 'gave people a sense of security, without which we would not get investments and be able to export our goods and services. That was the only way we could create enough jobs to absorb our school leavers and prevent

²⁶ Hirschman, "The Making of Race in Colonial Malaya," 337.

²⁷ Aaron Koh, "Imagining the Singapore 'Nation' and 'Identity': The Role of the Media and National Education," *Asia Pacific Journal of Education* 25, no. 1 (2005): 84.

massive unemployment'.²⁸ However, Lee remained determined that Singapore would defy the slim odds of its survival in the international arena, proclaiming that '[f]rom now on we had to be responsible for our own security.... We had to learn to survive, without the British military umbrella and without a hinterland'.²⁹ Replete with uncertainty, confrontations, and concern about its very survival, this period demonstrates that the circumstances following Singapore's independence only reinforced and advanced the notion of a politics of survival.

The Singaporean state's clinching of a politics of survival followed its objectives of addressing and alleviating the racial and ethnic strife that underpinned its expulsion from the Federation. Keen to cultivate a form of racial, religious, and ethnic harmony, Lee sought the development of 'a multiracial society of equal citizens, where opportunities are equal and a person's contribution is recognized and rewarded on merit regardless of race, language, culture, or religion'.³⁰ Amid the construction of its national-identity project, from a postcolonial standpoint, Lee's vision may also be interpreted as challenging the institutionalisation of the colonial race-relations through his consistent endorsement of a multi-cultural, multi-racial Singapore. Chua Beng-Huat makes a note of the legal framework concerning Singapore as a constitutionally declared multi-racial and multi-cultural nation, stating that this ensured the new nation would "'protect" the Malays and Indians by formally denying the Chinese majority dominant status in all spheres of social life'.³¹ Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew would proclaim 'We are going to build a multi-racial nation in Singapore. This is not a Malay nation, not a Chinese nation, not an Indian nation. Everybody will have a place in Singapore.... We will unite regardless of race, language, religion, and culture.'³² Furthermore, Michael Hill and Kwen Fee Lian contend that Lee and the PAP sought to 'espouse multiculturalism as an ideal and simultaneously operationalise it consistently that it has indeed become a structural feature of society'.³³ This institutional overturning of colonial 'race relations' in postcolonial Singapore went on to becoming synthesised with a perceptibly 'survivalist' practice of state-endorsed identity politics, particularly on the economic front but also through its overall nation-building endeavour.

According to Lee Boon-Hiok, the notion of 'perseverance' and survival for the PAP 'meant the task of inculcating new values in a

²⁸ Lee, *From Third World to First*, 31.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 47.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 254.

³¹ Chua Beng-Huat, "Culture, Multiculturalism and National Identity in Singapore," in K. Chen, I. Ang, H. Kuo, H. Mang, and H. Ming-Chu, eds., *Trajectories: Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* (London: Psychology Press, 1998), 189.

³² Timothy P. Demy and Jeffrey M. Shaw, *Religion and Contemporary Politics: A Global Encyclopaedia* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2019), 359.

³³ Michael Hill and Kwen Fee Lian, *The Politics of Nation Building and Citizenship in Singapore* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 1988), 95.

population which was often loyal to their countries of origin and which had little sense of national identity'.³⁴ In addition to the inculcation of 'non-ideological, pragmatic values' of multiculturalism and multilingualism, Boon-Hiok contends that 'the political strategy related to these twin concepts was influenced by the fact that for a predominantly Chinese island state to survive in Southeast Asia, it was essential not to be labelled a third China'.³⁵ Moreover, Stephen Ortmann elaborates that '[t]he rulers were aware that Singaporeans needed to be motivated to produce economic growth, which was the primary impetus for fostering a sense of national identity during this period'.³⁶ In this manner, the Singaporean nation-building project was pursued to ensure social cohesion and multi-racial harmony. This objective became intertwined with state survival through economic survivability.

What are 'Asian Values?'

Following what then-Foreign Minister of Singapore, S. Rajaratnam referred to as the notion of a 'global city' in 1972, a consensus was reached that 'if Singapore is to survive, it must establish a relationship of interdependence in the rapidly expanding global economic system'.³⁷ This vision alluded to the need for shifting the national economy 'from an import substitution policy to an outward-looking export oriented policy of industrialisation'.³⁸ Stephen Ortmann notes that Singapore's significant progress in terms of economic growth and the subsequent emergence of a consumer culture risked bringing along the 'vices of Westernisation' in Singapore. These 'vices' included the advent of 'individualistic behaviour such as materialism and the atomisation of the family'.³⁹ Moreover, Ortmann contends that 'the more Singapore prospered, the more Singaporeans wanted to have more than just economic growth',⁴⁰ giving rise to considerable tension in the state-sponsored national-identity project. Given the elementary status of Singapore's nationhood and identity, Aaron Koh delineates how 'Singapore's national identity is still very much "work in-progress",⁴¹ which is why this became one of the state's prime concerns.

Michael Hill places Singapore's newfound 'soul-searching' and inward 'reflection' concerning the non-material aspects of nation-building (and the national-identity project) as grounded in the familiar principle of

³⁴ Boon-Hiok, "Singapore: Reconciling the Survival Ideology with the Achievement Concept," 229.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 229.

³⁶ Stephen Ortmann, "Singapore: The Politics of Inventing National Identity," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 28, no. 4 (2009): 28.

³⁷ Boon-Hiok, "Singapore: Reconciling the Survival Ideology with the Achievement Concept," 229.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 230.

³⁹ Ortmann, "Singapore: The Politics of Inventing National Identity," 30-31.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁴¹ Koh, "Imagining the Singapore 'Nation' and 'Identity'," 78.

pragmatism. He maintains that '[g]iven Singapore's dependence on foreign capital, the reduction of Western investment in Southeast Asia because of recurrent economic crises was a source of deep concern...and necessitated a major government effort at rehabilitation. This was done through the reconstruction of history'.⁴² Taking the notion of the postcolonial-oriented garrison mentality as carrying through Singapore's economic leaps, it can be contended that the state's internalisation of this particular mind-set was also reflected in its decision to steer Singapore towards adopting a set framework of 'cultural values' to ensure the survival of the multi-racial 'harmonious' society it sought to cultivate. From the late-1970s and early-1980s onwards, the desired 'cultural values' that Lee was keen to have Singapore exemplify were "'thrift", "industry", and "filial piety"'⁴³ and these notions came to encompass 'Asian Values'. Lee sought to position these 'values' as a 'remedy' to what was viewed as the decadence of Western individualism, by advocating for the 'strong assertion of the Asian values common to all ethnic groups, stressing the virtues of individual subordination to the community'.⁴⁴

Given the Singaporean state's championing of its hybrid, multi-racial national-identity coupled with its decision to keep English as the common language, Michael Hill contends that the problem of 'Westernisation' was sure to be more pronounced among Singapore's youth with whom the survivalist ethos may not have resonated as strongly as the first-generation of Singaporeans. However, this championing of 'cultural' values and newfound focus on the non-material dimensions of the national-identity project may not fully be understood if it is to be approached in dichotomous and seemingly oppositional binaries that accompany Oriental (and or 'reverse Oriental') discourse. Hill interestingly identifies Lee's eagerness to push for an 'amalgam of the best characteristics of the eastern and western values so that Confucian ethics, Malay traditions and Hindu ethos might be combined with more sceptical Western methods of scientific inquiry'.⁴⁵ It is worth mentioning that this project appears to take on a more inclusive approach, rather than vouching for an outright rejection of any methods that be may considered quintessentially 'Western'. S. Rajaratnam had also refrained from endorsing what was labelled as 'Asian values' by admitting that, 'I have very serious doubts as to whether such a thing as "Asian values" really exists – or for that matter "Asian" anything'.⁴⁶

⁴² Michael Hill, "'Asian values' as Reverse Orientalism: Singapore," *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 41, no. 2 (2000): 184.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁴⁴ Mark Richard Thompson, "The Survival of 'Asian Values' as 'Zivilisationskritik'," *Theory and Society* 29, no. 5 (2000): 663.

⁴⁵ Hill, "'Asian Values' as Reverse Orientalism," 186.

⁴⁶ S. Rajaratnam, "Asian Values and Modernization," in Seah Chee-Meow, ed., *Asian Values and Modernization* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1977), 95.

By viewing this 'debate' through the complex integration of diverse value-systems in order to fill the void of the political imaginary that was postcolonial Singapore's national-identity project, the construction of a national consciousness through embracing not only 'Eastern' but also 'Western' values only reinforces the argument concerning the enduring place of pragmatism for the Singaporean state. While this national project may appear dichotomous on a surface level, it is pertinent to note that Singapore's promotion of multi-cultural values is a testament to the state's commitment towards ensuring the survival of its 'harmonious' society and, in turn, challenging the institutionalised colonial legacy of engineered race-relations.

Distinguishing 'reverse Orientalism's' discourse of power from Singapore's endorsement of 'Asian Values'

One of the most contentious developments in contemporary East Asian political culture, the sway of the 'Asian Values' debate is predicated on 'cultural relativism'. According to Michael Barr, advocates of 'Asian Values' often endorse a hierarchal view of society which places emphasis on 'interdependence and social nature of human beings'.⁴⁷ This discernible existence of 'hierarchy' and 'paternalism' in Southeast Asian societies is often juxtaposed to "'Western" liberal and atomistic views of society that emphasise the autonomy of the persons and lead to decadence.'⁴⁸ The latter line of criticism was most pronounced during the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna where Western criticism of 'perceived' human rights abuses was met with Southeast Asian governments' accusations of Western 'cultural imperialism'. If one understands 'cultural imperialism' as 'the use of political and economic power to exalt and spread the values and habits of a foreign culture at the expense of a native culture',⁴⁹ the tactical use of this accusation deeply resonates in postcolonial societies, as Barr explores how advocates of 'Asian Values' sought to 'redress the West's perceived imbalance between rights and responsibilities'.⁵⁰ This point also alludes to the argument calling for human rights to be 'decolonised'. Salil Shetty examines this dilemma by unearthing the symbiotic relationship between colonialism and modern human rights which he contends 'still casts a long shadow over current understandings of human rights'.⁵¹ In addition, he shines light on the 'appropriation and domination of human rights by

⁴⁷ Michael D. Barr, "Lee Kuan Yew and the 'Asian Values' debate," *Asian Studies Review* 24, no. 3 (September 2000): 311.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Alan Bullock and Oliver Stallybrass, *The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought* (London: Harper & Row, 1977), 303.

⁵⁰ Barr, "Lee Kuan Yew and the 'Asian Values' Debate," 311.

⁵¹ Salil Shetty, "Decolonising Human Rights," *Amnesty International*, 22 May 2018, www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/05/decolonizing-human-rights-salil-shetty/.

Western powers, often for neo-colonialist projects.... And human rights...became associated with the dominant political and economic models promoted by powerful western countries...'.⁵²

Owing to this historical backdrop of modern human rights, this conference saw the advocates of 'Asian Values' reach a consensus; while they acknowledged the point that human rights are universal, they were also of the view that such rights had to be contextualised against a "dynamic and evolving" backdrop of norms, histories, cultures, religions, and national and regional particularities'.⁵³ Moreover, Michael Barr acknowledges that there is indeed an 'element of validity' to the criticisms lodged against Western championing of 'universal' human rights and contends that this 'new-found assertiveness on human rights was perceived as a hypocritical attempt to keep Asia subservient to the West politically and economically'.⁵⁴ This 'hypocrisy' became all the more pronounced when both Europe and the United States 'stood wringing their hands while Muslims in Bosnia were massacred by Serbian Christians while the final UN conference was in session in Vienna'.⁵⁵ Moreover, the endemic social dilemmas in the Western world could no longer be ignored either as Barr argues that '[c]rime, drugs, family breakdown, shootings, homelessness and racial tensions were so rife in the United States that even President Clinton and his advisers were questioning whether the American ethos of individualism had gone too far'.⁵⁶

Coming to Ryoko Nakano's suspicions concerning the prospects of 'Asian Values', it is imperative to understand that in her discussion on 'reverse Orientalism,' she posits that this discourse utilises the same 'center-periphery, rational-spiritual and modern-pre-modern'⁵⁷ dichotomies advanced by 'Oriental' discourse. These dichotomies, she contends, are merely flipped around using the same Orientalist logic and disposition against the 'non-Western Other'. Using the case of Imperial Japan to exemplify the application of 'reverse Orientalism', Nakano emphasises that not only from a Western colonial standpoint but also from a 'reverse Oriental' and Japanese colonial lens, the 'lesser' entity, the 'object' and the 'other' remained the 'East'.

However, this point concerning the inversion of the original dichotomies and binaries of Orientalism-proper can be challenged in Nakano's argument regarding contemporary Asian societies' endorsement of 'Asian Values' as falling under 'reverse Orientalism'. While Imperial Japan did, indeed, champion a misleading garb of cultural affinity and

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Seng Tan, "The 'Singapore School' of Asian Values: Down But Not Out?," *Carnegie Council*, 26 January 2016, www.carnegiecouncil.org/publications/articles_papers_reports/762.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 314.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 313.

⁵⁷ Nakano, "Beyond Orientalism and 'Reverse Orientalism'," 128.

'Asianism' or 'Asiatic unity', it is worth noting that in the Japanese case, it was only Japan that was to be the 'center' and any prospects concerning 'unity' were underpinned by hegemonic ambitions and the expansion of its empire. Singapore's professing of 'Asian values' or warming towards 'Asiatic unity' and encouraging the formation of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) to promote regional peace, collaboration, and mutual assistance was not dominated by hegemonic goals or expansionism. ASEAN itself is defined as 'a vast, decentralized, orbiting intergovernmental congress in intermittent session'.⁵⁸ According to Donald Emmerson, ASEAN has 'fostered and reflected good relations between its members. Notwithstanding its founders' rhetoric for economic and cultural cooperation, and their avoidance of a military pact, the Association has succeeded above all politically, diplomatically, and in security'.⁵⁹ Interestingly, Emmerson notes that ASEAN's success is not just limited to ensuring cordial ties of cooperation and coordination between member states but also '[i]n dialogues with the United States, the European Community, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand, ASEAN has facilitated the security of its members within an emerging network of relationships across the Pacific and beyond'.⁶⁰

This demonstrates that contrary to the binaries discussed concerning the parallel discourses of 'Orientalism' and 'reverse Orientalism', the categorisation of contemporary Asian societies' endorsement of 'Asian values' cannot come under the 'reverse Oriental' discourse of power. Emmerson's exposition seems to contradict Nakano's point concerning how '[a] slow progress of policy coordination and implementation in multilateral institutions raises not only practical questions about the limit of institutions in delivering outcomes, but also normative questions about the relative importance of global norms and local cultural values'.⁶¹ Rather, Kishore Mahbubani and Kristen Tang go so far as to argue that '[i]n an era when globalization and technological advancements are bringing once-distant civilisations closer together, ASEAN is a living laboratory which proves that the clash of civilisations can be avoided'.⁶² Moreover, in the case of Singapore, its survivalist ethos was underpinned by its internal security qualms of protecting its multi-racial harmony against the legacies of the colonial racial grid in British Malaya. Its turn towards filling its ideological void must be viewed in tandem with the region's colonial history which was replete with colonially engineered racial strife. This is also the case for Malaysia and other former colonies in ASEAN who looked towards 'Asian

⁵⁸ Donald Crone, "Does Hegemony Matter? The Reorganization of the Pacific Political Economy," *World Politics* 45, no. 4 (1993): 522.

⁵⁹ Donald K. Emmerson, "ASEAN as an International Regime," *Journal of International Affairs* 41, no. 1 (1987): 2.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Nakano, "Beyond Orientalism and 'Reverse Orientalism'," 125.

⁶² Kishore Mahbubani and Kristen Tang, "ASEAN: An Unexpected Success Story," *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs* 29 (Spring 2018), 113.

values' as a concept, an idea or a project to challenge the contentious charges of 'human rights abuses' and lack of 'democracy' from Western powers who still, as Salil Shetty contends, hold on to universalising and colonial-era pretensions. Hence, it is imperative to remain cognisant of the colonial conditions and the longstanding colonial legacies which these East Asian countries are still seeking to undo, when it comes to approaching the 'Asian Values' debate.

Conclusion

The Singaporean national-identity project is a multi-layered endeavour, one that cannot be understood in isolation from its colonial history nor its short-lived Union in the Federation of Malaya. Its painstaking search for a national-identity along with its lack of a 'national imaginary'⁶³ are what propelled Lee Kuan Yew to fill in the ideological and non-material void with complementary 'cultural values.' Leaning towards the 'Asian Values' dilemma during the course of the 1970s and 1980s, it is imperative to recognise the necessity that pushed the state towards looking in this ideological direction. Michael Hill sees the Singaporean state's focus towards this non-material dimension as something of a 'hesitant afterthought',⁶⁴ especially its turn towards Confucian ethics which the Western media reductively singled out as the foundation of Lee's 'Asian Values'. Hence, it may be contended that the new nation's move towards inculcating a hybrid ideological foundation alongside 'communitarianism, multiculturalism and...pluralism'⁶⁵ was rooted in pragmatism and its 'politics of survival'.

In spite of its economic leaps and relative political stability, the PAP continues to cling to the postcolonial-oriented garrison mentality which formed the basis of Lee's material and non-material pursuits towards multi-racial and multi-cultural Singaporean national-identity. Philip Holden proclaims that 'the city-state of Singapore is in many ways an exceptional postcolonial space'⁶⁶ and this certainly holds true. Neither hegemonic nor characterised by imperial hubris, Lee's (and the PAP's) prospects for Singapore were guided by a guarded, somewhat pessimistic but pragmatic approach. An approach that has and continues to shape Singapore's national-identity project amid its quest to fill in the void of its 'political imaginary', Lee's resolve to ensure that Singapore 'set[s] an example'⁶⁷ as a thriving multi-racial nation shows how determined the Singaporean state is to undo the damage and enduring legacy of colonially constructed race-relations.

⁶³ Koh, "Imagining the Singapore 'Nation' and 'Identity'," 78.

⁶⁴ Hill, "'Asian Values' as Reverse Orientalism," 186.

⁶⁵ Daniel Goh, *Diversity and Nation-Building in Singapore* (Ottawa, CA: Global Centre for Pluralism, April 2017), 1.

⁶⁶ Philip Holden, "Postcolonial Desire: Placing Singapore," *Postcolonial Studies* 11, no. 3 (2008): 345.

⁶⁷ Demy and Shaw, "Religion and Contemporary Politics," 359.