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"Authenticity" and "Foreign Talent" in Singapore: The Relative and Negative Logic of National Identity

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Singapore's constitutive sociocultural hybridity has meant that this postcolonial island-nation's national identity has always been a problematic construct. The developmental state's pragmatism and self-re-inventiveness further undermine the efforts to construct a stable national identity, frustrating the desire for an authentic nationhood in the essentialist and positive sense. Focus on the more recently arrived "foreign talent" subjects who inhabit the margins of the Singaporean imagination of the national body informs an alternative analytical angle on the question of Singaporean national identity. It is suggested that a sense of national togetherness and belonging emerges through constructing these national Others as "inauthentic". Examination of two particularly visible and controversial types of "foreign talent" in Singapore — foreign sports professionals and foreign students who have received scholarships from the Singapore government — and of the ways in which they are discursively framed suggests that the "foreign talent" unwittingly constitute a relative and negative solution to Singapore's national identity problem.

Keywords: Singapore, national identity, authenticity, "foreign talent", China.

National identity has always been a problematic issue for Singapore. Situated in maritime Southeast Asia, the island historically formed part of various premodern Malay polities and was an integral, albeit marginal, part of the Malay-Islamic civilization of the region. However, the starting point of modern Singapore is commonly taken to be 1819, when it was established by the British as a trading post. Since then, this originally sparsely populated island thrived,

continuously attracting migrant populations from around the region and beyond, most notably from coastal regions of southeast China. Into the mid-twentieth century, Singapore was a "settler country" (Chua 2003, p. 59), virtually all of whose population had descended from migrants. What made Singapore stand out in its largely Malay-Muslim vicinity was that it had become a predominantly Chinese society. Ethnic Chinese accounted for some three quarters of its population, in addition to ethnic Malays, Indians and a small percentage of "others" — hence the classic "CMIO" formulation (Siddique 1990). Under the "divide and rule" policy of the British colonial administration (Tan Tai Wei 1994, p. 62), a laissez-faire approach applied to education and social interaction, and there was limited social, cultural and linguistic integration among these various ethnic groups. The nature of Singapore's plural society, along with its lack of land and natural resources, fostered a belief that Singapore would be untenable as an independent nation-state. Indeed, Lee Kuan Yew and his People's Action Party (PAP), which has governed Singapore since 1959, successfully forged the merger of Singapore with the Federation of Malaya in 1963, in the hope of securing a future for the island and its inhabitants. However, two years later, with the collapse of the merger, "the unimaginable had become reality" (Chua 1995, p. 9). As the Singaporean sociologist Chua Beng Huat puts it, "Singapore as an independent nation-state was first and foremost a political reality foisted on a population under conditions beyond their control. Once this was a fait accompli, a 'nation' had to be constructed." (ibid., p. 69)

Thus, a sense that the Singapore nation was not intended to be has marked it from the very moment of its birth. It lacked various attributes common to peoples considered nations, such as deep roots in a relatively stable cultural tradition, relative ethnic homogeneity (or at least tight integration among ethnic groups) and a common language (Kymlicka 1995, Chapter 2). It might be said that, as a nation, Singapore lacked a sense of constitutive *authenticity*.

The precarious circumstances that attended its inception and its apparent geopolitical vulnerabilities left early post-independence Singapore very much preoccupied with survival. This preoccupation

made imperative, in the minds of its leaders, the principle of economic pragmatism (Aaron Koh 2007, p. 181). Singapore embarked on an aggressive project of modernization that is by now a well-told, well-known success story (see Chong 2010; Lee 2000; Sandhu and Wheatley 1989). However, the city-state's remarkable economic success, which relied fundamentally on international trade and global flows of capital, knowledge and people, itself continues to present challenges to the state's efforts in the areas of symbolic and cultural nation-building. The official discursive construction of Singapore's national identity has rested on the principles of pragmatism, fluidity, and self-renewal, yet this official discourse does not go uncontested by other voices. These voices emanate from Singaporeans at both elite and non-elite levels who seek to anchor the Singapore nation in certain "regimes of authenticity" (Duara 1998). They invest in these regimes the hope that the latter will give rise to stable senses of national identity. Notwithstanding various projects, both official and truly grass-roots, of "manufacturing authenticity" (Chong 2011), the troubled nature of the island-nation's authentic identity remains.

The so-called "foreign talent" policies adopted by the state in the 1980s and vigorously implemented since the 1990s have seen ever larger numbers of new immigrants become visible on the Singaporean "ethnoscapes" (Appadurai 1991; Aaron Koh 2003). In common wisdom, foreign talent are believed to be vital to Singapore's continuous economic success, yet the influx of these immigrants is seen as hindering the successful emergence of a unique Singaporean identity. Examining recent discourses on the foreign talent, however, adds nuance to this view. This article focuses on two types of highly visible and controversial foreign talent — foreign sports professionals and foreign students who have received Singapore scholarships — and the ways in which they are constructed as figures of otherness and "inauthenticity" in Singaporeans' imaginations. It argues that the view of foreign talent as a threat to Singapore's national identity is simplistic. Rather, concern over foreign talent represents the very site from which some sense of national togetherness and belonging emerges, through a relative and negative logic. This identity-making

logic is *relative* and *negative* because it involves no essentialist claim to or positive assertion of a Singaporean national identity; instead, by dismissing the foreign talent Others as inauthentic — inauthentic talents, bogus moral subjects, and ultimately, inauthentic citizens ineligible for incorporation into the national body — this logic engenders a *sense* or *feeling* of belonging among Singaporeans. In other words, foreign talent are the margins that make a "core" possible, even though that "core" remains emergent and undefined.

This article restricts its focus to foreign talent from China and examines their position in relation to *Chinese Singapore*. The expression "Chinese Singapore" is used here in the same way scholars in the field of Asian American Studies (see Eng 2001; Daniels 1988; Bill Hing 1993) speak of "Asian America", to refer to a particular ethnocultural subset of a multicultural society. Singapore cannot be equated to Chinese Singapore; indeed, this issue of the difference between the two lies at the heart of Singapore's identity problem. Nevertheless, as ethnic Chinese make up the mainstream of Singapore society, examining this group's responses to foreign talent suffices for the purposes of this paper. The focus here on foreign talent from China has a similarly pragmatic and strategic rationale. People from China probably constitute the largest group of new immigrants to Singapore, and therefore the subject of most contention (Yeoh and Lin 2013, pp. 35–36). More importantly, the degree to which Singapore has become "Sinicized" since the 1980s (Lai 1995, p. 142; Teng 2005) means that Chinese foreign talent may present the greatest threat to Singapore's ambivalently held national and cultural identities. Conversely, drawing a clear line that denies this group of Chinese participation in those identities may serve to de-emphasize racial and cultural divisions among Singaporeans and to foster for them a more perceptible sense of togetherness.

Singapore's "Catch-22" National Identity: Pragmatism and Culture

Discussing national identity always represents a challenge. In the specific context of Singapore, one way of approaching this challenge

is to focus on the tensions between the two contesting thrusts in the definition of national identity: the pragmatic and the cultural. "Culture" or "the cultural" is another loaded concept (see Appadurai 1996, p. 12), and one may indeed view the ideological pragmatism of the Singapore state as itself a kind of "culture" (Yao 2007). In the present context, "culture" is used in a more restricted sense to refer to the particular customs, practices and value systems seen as enduringly related to particular groups of people. This somewhat orthodox and old-fashioned definition has direct bearing on the notion of *authenticity*, and serves the deconstruction and re-appropriation of this notion that I advance in the next section.

The paramount urgency of economic survival, whether real or perceived, meant that Singapore's identity as a nation is primarily couched in terms of pragmatism and economic realism, to the neglect — or, indeed, with deliberate suppression — of cultural dimensions of the national identity. While Chua obviously intended his statement that "there was no past to be resurrected when Singapore became an independent island-city-state in 1965" (Chua 2006, p. 470) as a rhetorical exaggeration, he notes usefully that, in the early decades after independence, "The promotion of a disciplined work-force was … given precedence over the promotion of other cultural practices" (Chua 1995, pp. 105–6). Although the country's founding ideology of "multiracialism" has long acknowledged and enshrined the society's ethnocultural complexity and has accorded, for example, Malay the status of "national language" and Chinese, English, Tamil that of "official languages", in actual fact, however, the state promoted English with singular energy for its utilitarian value in better connecting Singapore to the world economy. In a similar fashion, it suppressed the various "dialects" originally spoken by Singaporean Chinese in favour of Mandarin, initially in order to close intra-ethnic fissures. Later, Mandarin also served as a vehicle for the state's programme to inculcate Confucian values and as a means of taking advantage of the rise of China. This regime of "linguistic instrumentalism" (Lionel Wee 2003) treats languages — along with that to which they serve as a most salient index, authentic grass-roots

cultures and identities — as a residual category to be revamped in the pragmatic interest of economic nation-building.

Singapore's pragmatism and economic realism also manifested themselves in the enshrinement of ideological principles that, in contrast to the problematic spheres of culture, have effectively become the cornerstones of Singapore's identity as a nation. For instance, as Singapore positioned itself as an export-oriented manufacturing economy in the 1960s and 1970s (see Bercuson 1995, Chapter 3), the state adopted a soft-authoritarian (Roy 1994) or state-corporatist (see Brown 1994, Chapter 3) politics as most suitable in guaranteeing the cost-competitiveness of local labour and a stable political environment for foreign investments. This "disciplinary modernization" (C.J. Wan-Ling Wee 2001) entailed, among other things, the co-optation of the trade union movement, resistance to the introduction of a welfare state and, more generally, limitations of certain forms of political freedom. Not unrelated to anti-welfarism, an ideology of meritocracy and elitism was assiduously inculcated in the Singaporean collective subjectivity through the education system (see Barr and Skrbis 2008, Chapters 6–10).

These themes of crisis, vulnerability, survival, meritocracy, pragmatism and continuous progress — all in the context of a formal recognition of the multicultural reality of the society — remain "the dominant and privileged political rhetoric and discursive markers of Singapore's national identity" (Aaron Koh 2005, p. 75). Although the most recent state discourse of a "new way forward" for Singapore gives some emphasis to notions such as compassion and fairness (AsiaOne 2013), the core identity of Singapore as a radically pragmatic, forward-looking, self-renewing country has remained intact.

Such a national identity, constructed on the basis of ideological pragmatism and economic realism, has a significant drawback. While supposedly holding together a nation and people otherwise divided along cultural and ethnic lines, it seems to provide an insufficient foundation for strong senses of belonging and togetherness, whether between the citizens and the state or among fellow citizens. For

instance, instrumentalist language policies have caused the erosion of more authentically felt community identities rooted in the use of "dialects" and replaced them with broader but arguably much weaker forms of identification among citizens. Similarly, meritocracy and elitism in the realms of education and employment have encouraged a competitive individualistic ethos, at the cost of lateral social empathy and solidarity. As a result, some have argued that there has been "a weakening of social bonds" (Kluver and Weber 2003, p. 380) among Singaporeans. Former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong seemed to refer precisely to this weakness when he suggested in a 1997 speech that to many Singapore still felt more like a hotel, rather than "a Home for a People" (Goh 1997).

In short, Singapore's national identity problem represents a "Catch 22" situation. Because of the country's constitutive cultural hybridity, the Singapore state emphasizes a national identity that is more pragmatic than cultural. Without the cultural elements, however, a weakening of social bonds seems to occur. Yet, when authentic cultural traditions are invoked, they seldom promise to create a common identity that all Singaporeans can comfortably assume. Rather, they pose the danger of further entrenching ethnic and cultural divisions among the multiracial population (see also George, 2000). Put simply, the problem is the lack of a uniquely "Singaporean" cultural authenticity. Social anthropologist Geoffrey Benjamin observed in 1976 that "many Singaporeans seem still to be looking for the grand cultural foundation of a 'Singaporean Singapore'" (Benjamin [1976] 1997, p. 79), despite which,

> It is commonly held to be futile, even meaningless, to talk of the national culture of a country that has no great historical depth. Many Ministerial speeches in Singapore over the years have taken this line, normally by projecting the emergence of a homogeneous and distinctive Singaporean culture indefinitely into the future. (ibid., p. 68)

This observation is admittedly dated, and it is possible to argue that a Singaporean identity has indeed grown out of the heterogeneous population's decades of coexistence in peace and prosperity. Uniquely

local cultural forms such as "Singlish" do verily invoke feelings of belonging to the island-nation regardless of ethnic or other divides. But the paucity of "authentically Singaporean" identity markers still strongly points to the fragility of feelings of national belonging in the island-nation. Dissenting voices, alluding to institutionalized disadvantages faced by certain ethnocultural groups, continue to challenge a common Singaporean identity. As the next section of this article shall demonstrate, successive projects of "manufacturing authenticity" do not effectively address this problem, as various contradictions and problems scar these projects.

Problematic Quests for Authenticity

Cultural authenticity serves as a cornerstone of modern, and especially postcolonial, nation-states (Skurski 1994). Nation-building seldom lacks a cultural and symbolic dimension. According to Prasenjit Duara (1998, 2003), the sacrality of the nation hinges on the "regime of authenticity", which seeks to inscribe the nation with timeless values and traditions and thereby to distinguish it from other nations. It gives the nation-state an orientation, an anchorage and, in short, an identity. At the same time, Duara's work on the case of Manchukuo shows that authenticity is a social construction (Duara 2003), often motivated by political calculations. Thus, instead of the everyday reified understanding of authenticity as quintessence, genuineness or originality, in the context of sociopolitical representation, authenticity ought to be understood as resulting from processes of imagination, construction and negotiation. In the words of Vannini and Williams (2009, p. 3),

> Authenticity is not so much a state of being as it is the objectification of a process of representation, that is, it refers to a set of qualities that people in a particular time and place have come to agree represent an ideal or exemplar.

Nonetheless, just as Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities" thesis shows that nations are not any the less for the revelations that they are imagined (Anderson 2006), authenticity also retains

its sociopolitical efficacy even in the face of our awareness of its constructed nature. In fact, all nation-states arguably engage in projects of manufacturing authenticity in some manner or another. In the case of Singapore, however, these projects seem particularly problematic.

Social discourses bespeaking a quest for authenticity became prominent in Singapore as early as the 1970s, as the country emerged triumphant from a decade of challenges to its survival. The country's integration into the international economy and the rise of a population with Western-style education prompted fears in the PAP government that Singaporeans were succumbing to negative "Western" values such as liberalism, hedonism and individualism (Chong 2011, pp. 887–91). Lily Kong notes that the state's cultural policies in the 1970s centred on a search for a "truly Singaporean art" (Kong 2000, p. 412) to counteract the "decadent" cultural influences coming from the West. Then parliamentary secretary to the minister of culture, Inche Sha'ari Tadin, said in 1973, "It is important to have a rich, established cultural tradition particularly at this time of Singapore's development" (quoted in Kong 2000, p. 412) — a statement that is not faulty but most revealing because of the contradictions in terms it contained: it was as if "a rich, established cultural tradition" were something that could simply be brought into existence to serve the interest of Singapore's development "at this time".

Terence Chong has examined several "cultural impulses" (Chong 2011, p. 877) in the history of Singapore through the prisms of "authenticity manufacturing" and national identity making. According to him, the first such impulse was a Malay literary movement of the 1950s that sought to locate authenticity in the rustic Malay identity, posited in opposition to European colonialism. The second dates to the 1970s, when fears of "Westernization" translated into a series of cultural and educational policies that included the initiation of "religious education" in schools, a high-profile "Speak Mandarin Campaign" and the famous "Confucian Values" discourses of the 1980s (Hill 2000; Kuah 1990; Tan Huat Chwee 1989). This latter impulse located authenticity in what were asserted to be genuine "Asianness" (Thompson 2000, p. 664) and Asian values. Chong labels the third

cultural impulse a "regime of authenticity" that currently "offers the most popular symbols of national identity in Singapore" (Chong 2011, p. 877). It takes the form of a romanticized portrayal, conveyed through local cinematic representations (especially those of film director Jack Neo), of the Singaporean "heartlander" (ibid., p. 892) identity. In this romanticized portrayal, the authentic Singaporean is a good-hearted, dialect- or Mandarin-speaking, working-class *Chinese* male (ibid., p. 894) who is a victim of "global capitalism and/or the PAP state's education, bilingualism and foreign talent policies" (ibid., p. 892). He is alienated by Singapore's capitalist knowledge economy and by the middle-class English-educated and English-speaking Singaporeans, who in contrast are portrayed as "rootless and inauthentic" (ibid., p. 895).

Further highlighting the urgency of finding an authenticity to enable a sense of national cohesion, in May 1999 then prime minister Goh Chok Tong urged Singaporeans to become "a Singaporean tribe" (quoted in Aaron Koh 2005, p. 77). Aaron Koh interprets Goh's words as a discursive attempt to "rekindle the loss of an 'authentic' Singaporean 'culture' and 'identity' through nostalgia" (ibid.).

Goh's recourse to nostalgia was not new. The first two authenticity-manufacturing cultural impulses analysed by Chong (2011, pp. 880–91) both drew on premodern Asian value systems and saw them as moral resources. Yet the fundamental contradiction that characterized both projects and the reason that they failed is obvious. Appeals to authenticity based on cultural nostalgia or atavism threaten to unravel the precarious unity of the Singapore nation. Each movement of nostalgic imagination of cultural continuity with the past inevitably leads to a "home" country or civilization that is *not* Singapore. A regime of authenticity rooted in rural Malay identities could not have been sustained in light of Chinese numerical dominance in Singapore, as Chong acknowledges (Chong 2010, p. 887), while the Confucian value discourse and in particular the "Speak Mandarin Campaign" — which sought to revitalize the Chinese authenticity of Chinese Singaporeans — left Malays, Indians and other Singaporeans awkwardly unacknowledged. Recognizing this problem, Benjamin sharply pointed out several decades ago,

> "Culture" as an object of public discussion in Singapore almost always means a traditional, ethnically delimited culture, a Golden Age to which each "race" can look back separately for inspiration. "Singapore culture", on the few occasions when that term is used, refers normally not to any new Singaporean synthesis or innovation but simply to an agglomerate formed of the separate Chinese, Malay, Indian and European cultural traditions. Each "culture" remains unchanged and unmerged with the Others. (Benjamin [1976] 1997, p. 72)

Neither is the third of Chong's cultural impulses, centred on contemporary cinematic representation of Singaporean "heartlander" identity, exempt from this criticism. The heartlander is always portrayed as an ethnic Chinese, and the cultural-linguistic medium for his authenticity is Chinese dialects or sometimes Mandarin. Not dissimilar to the second cultural impulse Chong analysed, this again leaves the multicultural and multi-ethnic make-up of Singapore in an awkward position.

In thus critically assessing cultural projects or movements in Singapore that have aimed to manufacture authenticity, I do not seek to label them illegitimate or to dismiss their claims, whether these claims were made in efforts undertaken by the Singapore state, as in the cases of "Asian values" discourses and other official cultural policies, or in literary and artistic elites' representations of mass desires or sentiments, as in the cases of the Malay literary movement of the 1950s and Jack Neo's films. Indeed, each of these authenticity projects was problematic precisely because they had legitimacy in their own way but each nevertheless contested with the others. This contestation reflects Singapore society's constitutive complexity. Instead, my aim here has been to show that making positive claims about Singapore's national identity on the basis of essentialist constructions of cultural authenticity is a constitutively bedevilled endeavour. A radical rethinking of the notion of authenticity as it relates to national identity in Singapore is required. And one approach to this rethinking is to conceive of authenticity in the relative and negative, as *not something that one has but something that the "other" does not have*. This approach privileges formulations of

senses or feelings of belonging or togetherness instead of formulations centred on identity or identification. The latter requires something tangible with which to identify, whereas feelings of belonging or togetherness may result simply from the need to face or from opposition to a common Other. As Julie Skurski notes, "While the concept of nation represents itself in abstract terms, representations of national belonging weave together images that promise collective unity as well as collective exclusions" (Skurski 1994, p. 610). This insight is suggestive of the effect of discourses of exclusion relating to Singapore's "foreign talent" in fostering a Singaporean sense of belonging and unity.

"Foreign Talent"

State-led efforts to consciously attract foreign talent began in the early 1980s (Quah 1984, p. 178). From the 1990s, in tandem with Singapore's leaders' aspiration to make a globally competitive knowledge-based economy out of the city-state, efforts to lure talented immigrants intensified. To attract "foreign talent" in the shape of skilled professionals and businesspeople, the Singapore state operates a "bifurcated" foreign manpower management system (Yeoh 2006). Talented or skilled immigrants walk a red carpet through smooth immigration procedures and liberal naturalization policies, whereas semi- or low-skilled immigrant labour forces are subject to a highly regulated transient status (Yeoh 2004, p. 2439). "Foreign talent" can also take the shape of students. Singapore launched an ambitious "Global Schoolhouse" project in the early 2000s with the objective of attracting a critical mass of 150,000 foreign students to Singapore and of thus making it a regional centre for education and knowledge creation and diffusion (Ng and Tan 2010). In addition, since the 1990s various government-linked scholarship schemes have aimed to attract able students from neighbouring countries to study in Singaporean institutions (Aaron Koh 2012, pp. 198–99). These scholarships often carry "bonds" requiring recipients to work in Singapore for a number of years after graduation. The "scholars"

who receive them come from many Asian nations, but most notably from China (Yeoh and Lin 2013, p. 40; Yang 2014 forthcoming).

In 1990, on the eve of the initiation of the foreign talent programmes, the population of Singapore was 3 million, of which 90 per cent were citizens; by mid-2013, the population had grown to 5.4 million, out of which Singaporean citizens accounted for just more than 60 per cent (Department of Statistics Singapore 2013). Of the over 1.3 million members of the foreign workforce in the country as of the end of 2013, roughly a quarter falls into the "talent" category (Ministry of Manpower Singapore 2014). The number of foreign students in Singapore has been close to 100,000 in recent years (Davie 2010). Apparent reluctance on the part of the government to release sensitive data makes it impossible to know exactly what proportion of the foreign talent in Singapore are from the People's Republic of China (PRC), but there can be little doubt that this group is the largest or that it constitutes the focus of the most strident commentary (see Yeoh and Lin, 2013, pp. 35–36).

Against the background of such steep rises in the number of immigrants and building social discontent, foreign talent has become an increasingly contentious topic. In early 2013, when the government released a White Paper that proposed building infrastructure for a projected population of 6.9 million in 2030 (see National Population and Talent Division), a few thousand Singaporeans took to Hong Lim Park to protest and thus triggered a heated national debate (see, for example, Lim and Ong 2013). Even earlier, both the 2011 General Election and the 2012 Presidential Election campaigns had pointed to the electorate's strong dissenting sentiments on, among others, the foreign talent issues (see, for example, Gomes 2014, p. 22). In spite of this, extant research on foreign talent in Singapore, much of it now rather dated, has largely neglected local socio-discursive responses to the subject (see Beaverstock 2002; Beaverstock, Taylor and Smith 1999; Butcher 2006; Hing, Lee and Sheng 2009; Lam and Yeoh 2004; Thang, MacLachlan and Goda 2002). The following sections of this article examine two types of foreign talent from China, in the context of the foregoing discussion of national identity

and authenticity in Singapore. Empirical data on popular discourses are drawn from the two major Singapore broadsheets, the English-language *Straits Times* and the Chinese-language *Lianhe Zaobao*. Both these newspapers, but especially the *Straits Times*, offer considerable space for members of the public to express opinions on social issues. In particular, the "Forum" page featuring readers' letters to the *Straits Times* seems to offer a microcosm of what Kluver and Powers (1999, p. 373) have termed "civic discourses", or conversation within a society that "serves as the defined rubric of national identity", in the context of Singapore.

Foreign Sports Talent

One type of foreign talent with great social significance is the "Foreign Sports Talent" (FST). First launched in 1993 as "Project Rainbow" with a view to bringing high-calibre foreign athletes to Singapore to augment the country's national teams and to give a prod to local sporting standards, the "Foreign Sports Talent Scheme" (FSTS) became formal after cabinet approval in 1997 (*Straits Times* 2003). Since then and through much of the 2000s, various sports organizations in Singapore have recruited FSTs. Out of a larger number of FSTs recruited and put through training regimes, those deemed to have potential in representing Singapore in high-profile international competition receive invitations to take up Singapore citizenship. According to a 2008 report (Lim 2008), 54 foreign-born athletes had become Singaporeans between the inception of the scheme and that year. More current information suggests that in 2011, 33 out of the 994 athletes on national squads were foreign born (Au Yong 2011).

Despite these apparently modest totals, the contributions of FSTs to Singapore's international performance have been significant. For instance, in the 2002 Commonwealth Games, FSTs helped clinch all of Singapore's twelve medals (Peh 2003). Also, Singapore's table tennis squad, whose top players are virtually all China-born FSTs, has won 22 of the 56 Commonwealth Games medals awarded in

the sport since 2002 (Agence France Press 2010). Foreign talent contributed 34.9 per cent of Singapore's forty-three gold medals at the 2007 Southeast Asian Games in Thailand, even though they made up only 7.6 per cent of the 423-strong Singapore contingent (Lim 2008). And, most memorably, Li Jiawei, Wang Yuegu and Feng Tianwei — all PRC-born naturalized Singaporeans — won a silver medal in the women's team table tennis at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. It was the first Olympic medal that Singapore had won since 1960, five years before its independence. Again at the 2012 Olympic Games in London, Singaporean athletes originally from China clinched bronze medals in the women's singles table tennis and in the women's team table tennis.

As the 2008 Olympic triumph perhaps attracted the greatest attention, it may serve as a case through which to illustrate a politics of in/authenticity regarding FSTs in Singapore. Just days after the victory, a reader, Zheng Enli, wrote to the *Straits Times* Forum page to express his or her qualms with the authenticity of the win. The letter illustrates the entanglements of FSTs with the anxiety regarding authenticity and Singapore's national identity so effectively that it is worth quoting here in full.

China team No. 1 v China team No. 2? Too true

> I congratulate Li Jiawei, Wang Yuegu and Feng Tianwei on their individual achievement in winning the women's table-tennis team silver medal — "individual" because, in my opinion, the glory is theirs and not Singapore's.
>
> As a small nation, Singapore undoubtedly needs foreign talent to supplement its talent pool. This is beyond doubt for business, scientific research, academia and many parts of the economy. However, I think using foreign talent in sports is a step too far.
>
> Sports is not just about winning, moving up medal tables and statistics. In many ways, sports is the only arena where national passion, pride and achievement can be safely demonstrated. It defeats the point to make foreigners Singaporeans, just so they can represent Singapore and win medals for us.
>
> It has been argued that Tan Howe Liang was also born overseas in China, but the difference is he moved here at the

> tender age of four. Our table-tennis players came much later in their lives — Wang became Singaporean in 2005, and our semi-final "heroine" Feng was hurriedly made a Singaporean only early this year. Only Li has been in Singapore a significant amount of time.
>
> This makes our silver medal victory ring hollow. The perception that the final was between China's first team and China's second team is not without justification. Holding pink identity cards may make these players technically Singaporean, but are they truly our own? On television, a refrain is played ad nauseam that after 48 years, "we have done it". But have we really done it? Sporting pride cannot be bought.
>
> Finally, the argument that many other countries also adopt foreign sports talent to compete does not hold water. Just because everyone else does something, does not make it right. I think many Singaporeans would share my opinion that we would rather wait another 48 years for a medal, than celebrate a medal that was not truly won by Singaporeans. (Zheng 2008)

The doubt that this letter casts over the authenticity of the technically Singaporean players as truly Singaporean people is self-explanatory. What is worth highlighting is the suggestion implicit in the fourth paragraph of the letter that this politics of in/authenticity has a relativistic dimension. Because of the constitutive hybridity of the Singapore people as a nation and the resultant difficulty of saying who is authentic and who is not, practical compromises are necessary. The 1960 Olympics medallist Tan Howe Liang, who came to Singapore from China at the "tender age of four", may thus be regarded as truly Singaporean, whereas the Chinese athlete who was more recently "hurriedly made a Singaporean" could not. The letter writer argues, echoing many others in Singapore, that Tan developed his sporting talent in Singapore, and that this consideration makes his achievement authentically Singaporean. But have the more recent Chinese-born medallists not gone through training and talent-nurturing in Singapore before achieving honour for Singapore? The writer seems to use a relativistic yardstick to draw a rather arbitrary line between true Singaporeanness and its opposite, on the basis not of qualitative differences but of the relative degrees of "authenticity".

The above case formed part of a wider social discourse that had long questioned the authenticity of the FSTs and the practice of recruiting FSTs per se. In a 1999 letter to the *Straits Times* Forum page, reader James Huang compared the practice to the use of mercenaries (Huang 1999). Just as mercenaries' loyalty is constantly suspect, so too has the loyalty of foreign talent to Singapore often faced suspicion. Jeffrey Law (2002) wrote to the *Straits Times* Forum page in 2002 and brought up this point, contending, "If these imports were to play for Singapore against their country of origin, there would be a conflict of national interests." Another reader pointed out the lack of loyalty of foreign talent and their use of Singapore as a "stepping-stone" by observing,

> Zhang [a China-born Singapore table tennis player] obtained her Singapore citizenship in 2001, was groomed to be a top player and had beaten other international top players during the Athens Olympics in 2004, but chose to leave Singapore for China to be with her husband. All this within a short span of five years.… Another China-born former Singaporean table-tennis player, Xu Yan, has also left our country, for Germany. (Lin 2007)

Besides widely shared suspicions about players' loyalty, the occasional doubts about their personal character have arisen. In one case, the president of the Singapore Athletic Association alleged that the FSTs that he had brought in from China had "abused [his] generosity" by being overly demanding and trouble-making (Leong 2007). Perhaps also annoyed by the disloyalty and ungrateful behaviour of some FSTs, one reader, Vernon Sim (2008), wrote the *Straits Times* a 2008 letter strikingly entitled "Punish disloyal foreign sports talent".

Pursuant to ideological pragmatism, the Singapore state and those among the citizenry who align with it have defended the FSTS, insisting on the scheme's practical benefits and reiterating the place of inclusiveness as a crucial Singaporean value. One may regard, for instance, the then acting community development, youth and sports minister Vivian Balakrishnan's remark, "Talent is what counts, not where you're from" (Peh 2004), as the cornerstone official rhetoric justifying the entire foreign talent project in Singapore. In

contradistinction to the official ideology, a potent ground-up societal discourse has engaged in a politics of in/authenticity to cast doubt over the loyalty of the foreign talent and over their eligibility for authentic Singaporeanness. In this process of projecting and calling attention to the foreign talent as an inauthentic Other figure, some Singaporeans derive a sense of belonging among themselves, as, that is, "authentic" Singaporeans.

Foreign Talent Students

Another variety of equally visible and controversial foreign talent consists of foreign students receiving Singapore government scholarships. This group is far larger in number than the athletes discussed above. And, as students, they study and live among ordinary Singaporeans. In recent years, the Singapore government has reportedly given out more than 1,000 scholarships per year to foreign students at the undergraduate level (Yeoh and Lin 2013, pp. 39–40). Most such tertiary-level scholarships carry service bonds of either three or six years. In addition, the government also offers bond-free scholarships for secondary school students. While official statistics remain unavailable, students from the PRC again make up the majority of this category of foreign talent.

The fact that foreign talent students are often "bonded" to stay and work in Singapore for a period of time signifies the government's hope that these "scholars" will sink roots in Singapore. While undoubtedly many eventually do so, there is widely felt doubt in Singapore society about the loyalty of these scholars. In this view, they are opportunists who will use Singapore as a "stepping-stone" to somewhere that they consider better. The following remarks, found in a letter a member of the public wrote to the *Straits Times*, exemplify this sentiment.

> We should try to attract foreigners who have the potential to assimilate into our society and would consider making Singapore their permanent home ultimately. If we do not do this, foreigners will treat Singapore as a stepping stone. They will stay when the

TABLE 1
Singapore Government Sponsored "PRC Scholarships"

Singapore government-sponsored PRC scholarship Schemes	Operating years	Sources of scholars	Phase (in China) at which scholars are recruited	Yearly intake	Full scholarship duration	Singapore participating education institutions	Bond
"SM1"	Mid-1990s–present	Top junior middle schools in various Chinese provinces	End of junior middle school	approx. 200	Secondary 4 to end of Junior College (JC)	Approximately 30 secondary schools;[a] JC depending on scholars' own choices/ applications	n/a
"SM2"[b]	1997–2016 (planned)	Top senior middle schools in various Chinese provinces	Senior middle school Year Two	100–400	18 months "bridging course" and Undergraduate	NUS NTU (since 2011 also SUTD)	6 years[c]
"SM3"	1992–2011	Approximately 20 highly ranked Chinese universities[d]	University Year One	approx. 100–400	6 months "bridging course" and Undergraduate	NUS NTU (since 2011 also SUTD)	6 years

Notes:

a. A list of Singapore's SM1 participating schools, dated May 2011, is provided on the following webpage based in China: <http://hi.baidu.com/zhuliang123/item/9399818ad2924857e73d1964> (accessed 1 January 2014).

b. Chapter 3 provides a detailed look at the SM2 programme.

c. The six years is to be understood as three additional years plus the three-year bond attached to all recipients of the Singapore government "tuition grant".

d. See <http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E4%B8%AD%E6%96%B0%E5%A5%96%E5%AD%A6%E9%87%91%E9%A1%B9%E7%9B%AE> (accessed 1 January 2014).

Source: Based on author's fieldwork.

> economy is prosperous and leave when times are bad.… It would be a waste of our precious resources if they do not contribute to Singapore and leave after a few years. (Koh Kheng Wah 1997)

On one occasion, a Singaporean youth was reported to have said regarding foreign talent scholars, "I can't help feeling that we're being used. Is there some way of making these foreign scholars stay in Singapore after receiving our education?" (Teo 2004).

While the creation of a contractual bond represents an attempt *legally* to ensure that foreign talent scholars perform their obligations, Singaporeans seem to understand loyalty also as something more, as a *moral* obligation on the part of the scholars. Indeed, the discourses of suspicion about foreign talent scholars often carry strong moral overtones, questioning whether they were "authentic" talents truly worth having. In early 2012, Sun Xu, a scholar from China studying at a Singapore university caused an outburst of public anger by making insulting remarks on Singapore and Singaporeans on a social networking website (see Yeoh and Lin 2013, p. 45; Gomes 2014, pp. 25–26). This incident reinforced the simmering uneasiness of many in Singapore with the "PRC scholars" that has built up in the past decade or so thanks to several similar cases involving scholars behaving objectionably (Zhu 2012). This uneasiness has also grown out of more mundane experiences of contact, which inevitably give rise to misunderstanding, discomfort and conflict. Arguably, the "PRC scholar" gradually takes shape in many Singaporeans' imaginations as an ungrateful, disloyal, rude and occasionally morally suspect figure. One can interpret these imaginings through the lens of the politics of in/authenticity.

For example, a reader wrote to the *Straits Times* in August 2008 to tell the following story.

> At a seminar last year, I met a Chinese scholarship holder with a prestigious statutory board. In our short conversation, he lamented how he dreads having to serve his six-year bond, for after studying at a prestigious university in Britain, he found there were many other attractive job opportunities and he felt his talent was under-used in Singapore.
>
> Given that the statutory board focused on Singapore's external enterprise growth, he was assured an exciting opportunity to work in its overseas offices as part of his training programme.

> Not that it mattered, for he was thinking of how to break his bond, for he wanted success, not after serving his bond but immediately. He felt staying in Singapore would impede his ability to let his talent shine, for it was too small for him.
>
> In fact, he shied away from being associated with Singaporeans. When I commented that his English was tinged with a British accent despite his years of study in Singapore, he beamed and said he was happy to get rid of his Singapore English accent: "Do I sound British? Oh great."
>
> I left the seminar with a heavy heart. Have we made the right choice in grooming foreign talent, only to have them snub us? Indeed, we have allowed them to realise how fortunate they are to study in top universities abroad — so much so, they feel they are too good for Singapore. (He 2008)

This vignette not only vividly captures all the typical suspicions and discontent that the Singapore public has felt towards "PRC scholars", but it also allows us to observe an intricate politics of in/authenticity surrounding the English language in the context of Singapore, with bearings on the issue of national identity. Singaporean English can be a source of "cultural cringe" for Singaporeans, due to the troubled nature of its authenticity. Yessar Mattar (2009, p. 180), for example, argues that English language pop music made in Singapore is stigmatized for being inauthentic, given that the regime of authenticity operant in relation to pop music privileges Western/Anglo-Saxon English(es). Underlying Singapore's "Speak Good English" campaign (Hoon 2003; Rubdy 2001), it may be argued, is not just an instrumental rationale — so that Singapore becomes more conducive an environment to global investors — but also Singaporeans' own ambivalence over and doubts about the social and aesthetic value of Singaporean English. However, in this vignette, the twist is that the PRC foreign talent is seen using the undesirability of Singaporean English to "snub" Singaporeans; in response, the Singaporean writer becomes evidently protective and assertive of her own identity as Singaporean. Confronted with an Other in the shape of the PRC scholar who "snubbed" the Singaporean writer, this writer turns what ambivalence and "cultural

cringe" she might have over Singaporean English as inauthentic into a protective, even proud, feeling towards it as an index for authentic Singaporeanness.

Besides doubt about their loyalty and moral character, foreign talent students are also subject to suspicion over the authenticity of their status as talent. Writing a letter to the *Straits Times* (Wong 2001), a member of the public warned, "We must not be blinded into thinking that foreign talent means superior talent", for otherwise, "we may end up getting third-rate foreigners who come here because they are not doing well in their own countries." Another reader of the newspaper, who called inauthentic foreign talent "liabilities, not assets" (Wee Ka Min 2001) to Singapore, echoed this same view. In 2011, a reader's letter to the *Straits Times*, somewhat aggressively entitled "Keep out the less talented among foreign students" (Oh 2011), suggested that "the sentiment persists that Singapore offers sponsorship to too many foreign students of average calibre". Interestingly, in their use of terms such as "third-rate foreigners", "liabilities" and "assets", the Singaporean public seems to be re-appropriating the ideological vocabulary of the Singapore state to contest the state's foreign talent policies and practices.

As in the case of sports talents, the Singapore state stands firmly by its pragmatism in the face of doubts and protest over student talents, defending the policy of recruiting "scholars". To ease the public's doubts, the Ministry of Education has variously pointed out that it revokes only three per cent of foreign students' undergraduate scholarships (Amelia Tan 2009), that sixty-seven per cent of foreign talent scholars earn degrees with upper second class honours and higher (*Lianhe Zaobao* 2012), and that two out of three foreign students stay on to work in Singapore for ten years or more (Davie 2008). Yet facts such as these are not likely to dispel the sentiments of doubt, suspicion and occasional hostility towards the foreign talent, because such sentiments are precisely a way for Singaporeans to feel they belong to one another. Put more bluntly, in evoking an "it's-unfair-for-us-Singaporeans" feeling, Singaporeans are enabled and empowered to say, "We are the true Singaporeans".

The *Straits Times* of 20 February 2008 carried a letter from a graduate of Nanyang Technological University, Zhou Zhiqiang, apparently written after he encountered some "PRC scholars" studying at his alma mater.

> I was in the top 15 per cent of my cohort — and performed better than some of these scholars. While studying at NTU, I had to work as a pizza delivery boy to earn my allowance. Upon graduation, I had to start paying off a $24,000-student [*sic*] loan. Why are *Singaporeans* like me not treated as considerately as such scholars? My study loan took five years to pay off after I started working. The China scholars receive financial support, a free education and start their working lives debt free. Their six-year bond is seen as a contribution to Singapore. Am I not contributing as much, if not more? Non-scholar *Singaporeans* are not treated in quite the same way as foreign talent, regardless of how well we perform. The disparity is disheartening. Don't *Singaporeans* like me who have done well deserve some relief? (Zhou 2008; emphases added)

The frequent invocation of the identity label "Singaporean" here has the quality of an emotionally charged plea, as if the writer's own authenticity as a Singaporean were at risk and needed reasserting. An even more manifestly emotional expression was found in a news feature in the *Straits Times* of 8 December 1999. Members of a locally grown chamber music quartet lamented the Singapore government's blind favouritism towards foreign talent and the fact that "it seems that the authorities in Singapore are ashamed of us, ashamed of local talents. They seem to be afraid that we will disgrace them." Their supplication to the Singapore state was, as captured in the striking title of the feature piece — "We are yours, please make use of us!" (Li 1999).

Conclusion

Scholarly literature often argues that the Singapore national identity is troubled and that bonding among Singaporeans on the basis of nationhood is somewhat weak. Yet the discursive moments relating to the two types of Chinese foreign talent examined above show that, when confronted with a *relatively* speaking much more "inauthentic"

and suspect figure of *otherness* such as the PRC foreign talent, Singaporeans are able to evoke a powerful sense or feeling of national belonging or togetherness. In concluding this analysis, I wish to highlight two points. First, in the Singapore context, and arguably in other contexts involving constitutive sociocultural hybridity, the notion of cultural authenticity as a foundation of national identity-making is constitutively problematic. This article deconstructs the notion of authenticity and at the same time re-appropriates it in the formulation of authenticity in the relative and negative in order to render it analytically more productive. Second, instead of speaking of national identity or identification, the article uses the "sense" or "feelings" of national "belonging" or "togetherness". These terms, by highlighting the affective substance of national sentiments and the relational and negative ways in which they emerge, avoid the pitfalls of positivity and essentialism in the discussion of national identity.

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