

Music for State

To understand something of the National Day celebration in Singapore, I should like to relate certain events pertaining to them. The first is the news (Channel News Asia) on Sunday morning July 7 2002, when it was announced by the Ministry of Defence that tickets (free of charge) would be made available when the collection centres were announced at 6am. Tickets would be distributed subsequently. According to news reporters, there was already a long queue before the distribution of the tickets were to take place; it seems that people were able to predict the venues. By 7.20am Sunday morning, the tickets were all distributed out and an even longer crowd was annoyed that they had to wait an hour and a half to discover they were not going to get any tickets. An official for the Singapore Armed Forces insisted that there had been no ‘leaking’ of information. By Wednesday morning, there were notices posted over the internet advertising ‘free’ National Day Parade tickets for at least S\$500 each. Evidently, a National Day ticket was worth quite a lot of trouble. Why would 60-70 thousand people want to be witness to the year’s celebrations?

The National Day Parade NDP

These excerpts reveal something of the NDP as an event. From what we gather, there are Singaporeans who want to be there, to soak up the sights and sounds, the spectacle, their participation as the spectacle and the atmosphere which must be for them memorable. There is music. First of all there is ceremonial music, played by the Military Band with the contingents and the march pasts. `Music from the Military Band, a long remembered source of music-making in Singapore since 1829 (from the records of the Colonial Governor’s annual expenditure account), fulfils the necessary duties. The National Anthem is sung and the pledge taken. Majallah Singapura was originally in the 1950s after the island went through a period of political and industrial turmoil.¹ Singapore became a city on September 22 1951 and the Municipal council became a City Council. The Rendel Constitutional Commission of 1955, which recommended partial internal self-government, provided for the Peoples Action Party (PAP) emerging as the leading party and Ong Eng Guan was elected Mayor while Ong Pang Boon elected Deputy Mayor. The City Council, despite its municipal functions and anti-colonial sentiments, wanted an official song. The former superintendant of the Victoria Theatre Yap Han Hong recalled, “*I had orders to look or a theme song to be used by the City Council.....the song had to be vigorous, in other words, with a sense of martial tempo to it.*” Yap remembered coming across Zubir Said who composed songs for Cathay Keris films. Zubir Said was then approached by a City Council member Syed Ali Redha Alsagoff to compose a ‘patriotic’ song for the Council. The song was to be titled Majallah

Singapore based on the same words displayed in Victoria theatre after the renovations of 1958. Zubir recalled his task *It is not a film song. It is not a romantic song. It is a special kind of song I realised...first I had to consider the contents of the lyrics. It should be in simple language, easy enough to sing and easy enough to understand by all races in Singapore. Secondly, I should know the policy of the government, the social life in Singapore and wish of the people and how to progress to prosperity.*

The song had to be composed in Malay so a Malay language teacher Muhd. Ariff Ahmad was consulted. The first run had no lyrics and the tune was played out on a piano and recorded on tape which was sent to the committee specially formed for this purpose. Ong Pang Boon liked it and advised Zubir to improve on it. Once the song was approved, Paul Abisheganaden, conductor of the Singapore Chamber Ensemble was coopted into the process with the intention of getting his choir to sing Majullah Singapura during the grand finale of the concert commemorating the opening of the newly renovated Victoria Theatre on September 6 1958. Paul recollects the moment, *the response was most satisfying. The people who had come were surprised that a song was specially written, especially in the national language [Malay] which was becoming important at that time....*

The City Council was dissolved in 1959 as Singapore attained self-government in 1959. When looking for symbols and a song, Zubir Said's City council anthem was recalled. Dr. Toh Chin Chye, then Deputy Prime Minister and PAP Chairman explained his interest in the anthem as a political instrument to unite different races of Singapore, *we are a multi-racial society and in the 1950s there were not many people who spoke English. English was not the lingua franca in Singapore....the Malay version of the National Anthem would appeal to all races. It would strike no discordant note. It can be easily understood and at the same time easily remembered.*

A number of musicians and orchestras were involved in the changes to the National anthem. Paul Abisheganaden, Dick Abel, a Filipino conductor working for the Radio Singapore Orchestra, Aishah Ghows, the Military Forces Band, The Radio Singapore Orchestra and not least, the Berlin Chamber Orchestra, who gave a performance at the Victoria Memorial Hall. Dr. Toh, who was present at the concert, requested the conductor to re-composed Majullah Singapura. Not a musician himself, Dr. Toh had to rely on the musicians The piece was finally adopted, shorter than the City Council version, and the best version was put up by the Berlin Chamber Orchestra. The National Anthem along with the state Flag, State Crest were unanimously accepted by the representatives of the Legislative Assembly and formally presented to the nation during the launching of 'Loyalty Week of 3 December 1959, after the installation of The first Malaysian-born Yang Dipertuan Negara of Singapore, Yusof bin Ishak.

Evidently, there are Singaporeans who want to be there, to soak up the sights and sounds, the spectacle and the atmosphere which must be for them memorable. The first National Day Parade in 1966 is described by Vernon Cornelius² with a 23 thousand strong parade at the Padang. This first National Day parade was staged at the Padang, the site of a colonial past, both as a locus of power and civic pride, which served as a cricket ground as well as a ceremonial ground. Kong and Yeoh³ describe the symbolism of the green completely absent in the wake of the boots of the several thousand parade participants arranged *in serried ranks and wielding military and musical instruments, flags and other paraphernalia*. This green cricket ground that once symbolised white colonial rule⁴ was the site of the witnessing of the emergence of a nation from its colonial past. The ceremony it seems took place in the morning with crowds gathering as early as 7am. At 9am, formal ceremonies began with a Presidential salute, parade review and a 21-gun salute in the presence of the Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, cabinet ministers and members of Parliament and a number of other dignitaries. This was followed by a march past. Participants included informed contingents from the Singapore Armed Forces, Ministers, MPs, Parliamentary secretaries and officials. This was followed by uniformed contingents from schools of all language streams, *displaying the colour and rhythm of the four cultures of Singapore...the members and flag-bearing cadres of the peoples Action party all dressed in white, followed by the as smart and large contingent from member of the National trades Union Congress. A mass display of 60 lions and dragons performing simultaneously brought a rousing end to the parade at 10.30 am*. The marching contingents continued their procession through the Chinatown and Tanjong Pagar area greeted by cheers from the packed crowds on 5-foot ways and roadsides and from those perched on balconies and bridges. The entire parade was also televised live for the benefit of thousands more at home. First day cover stamps were issued depicting Singapore's policy of progress through industrialisation. The entire city was *bedecked and draped with the finest festive fittings. At night, multicoloured lights festooned streets, buildings, temples, churches, mosques, parks and along the waterfronts of the Singapore River and the sea*. The President and the First Lady hosted a cocktail party for about 1000 guests and they were able to partake of a privileged view of the fireworks display at Fort Canning. *For 90 minutes the night sky dazzled with explosive streaks and starbursts of colour, light and smoke to the delight of cheering crowds watching the display in the city. Later that night at the National Theatre, the audience was treated to a marvellous mix of multi-racial and multi-cultural performances featuring the Metro Philharmonic Society, Sriwana Malay Dance group, Singapore Ballet Academy, Nan Hwa Girls School, Performing Arts Studio, Suara Singapura Singers, Singapore Amateur Players, Mareoti & his Band, Bhaskar's Academy of Dance and Maureen Lim Dancers.*

*Community Centres, too, held their own celebration dinners and cultural shows around the island.*⁵

The Practice of National Day Celebrations in Singapore on every 9th August⁶
Lily Kong and Brenda Yeoh analyse four strands of the annual National Day Celebrations in Singapore:

1. Constitution of ceremonial space
2. The contribution to display and theatricality;
3. The composition of parade participants; and,
4. The selection of parade motifs.

From the outset Kong and Yeoh emphasise that their starting point is that nations and national identities are socially constructed. National Day parades are analysed as secular or civic rituals which are stage managed annually. An account of one spectator in the Straits Times 10 August 1994 offers a little more:

Chou Shixian 11.....His spirits soared as he screamed, sang and then screamed some more. He needed no prompting as spontaneity was in the air. Shixian was not alone. There were 60 000 others like him at the stadium that night, some older, some younger. All of them determined to have a party. They cheered as they waved their small red and white plastic flags at a man who stood in for President Ong Teng Cheong. Standing still, they sang the national anthem and took the pledge. Finally they the Happy Birthday song to Singapore when a giant two-tiered pink cake was wheeled into the stadium. I was amazed at hat I saw because all of this happened at a parade review. Then yesterday, I saw a repeat performance by 60 000 other spectators. What a spectacle it was, seeing, hearing and feeling Singaporeans cheering for Singapore. I had seen the parade three times before and yet I felt the goosebumps. The Singapore spirit had hit me. Yesterday, this cynic became a convert.

After this, one feels like one would fight and die for Singapore
(Parade spectator, quoted in Straits Times 10 August 1986)

These observations illustrate the effect National Day parades have on ordinary Singaporeans in terms of convincing the sense of belonging and identity and the feeling of pride. In 1966, the first National Day parade was stages at the Padang, the site of a colonial past, both as a locus of power and civic pride, which served as a cricket ground as well as a ceremonial ground. Kong and Yeoh describe the symbolism of the green completely absent in the wake of the boots of the several thousand parade participants arranged *in serried ranks and wielding*

military and musical instruments, flags and other paraphernalia. This green cricket ground that once symbolised white colonial rule⁷ was the site of the witnessing of the emergence of a nation from its colonial past. The symbolism of such a moment is all too obvious and telling. These National Day celebrations, which have continued to this very day, are considerably reliant on combining *architectural spectacularity of the past and the animated spectacularity of the present.* By the 1990s this spectacular construction has for the majority of the people less meaning as a site of the colonial past. The parades do not occupy static central space but allow for the movement through space by diffusing the participants of the spectacle. If the parade were held at the Padang, the marching contingents would continue through Chinatown cheered by the people waving from windows, clambering over bridges and balconies, crowding along roadsides and 5-foot ways, who on any other occasion would have been *indifferent to police and soldiers* (*Straits Times 10 August 1966*). In the subsequent years and into the 1970s, marching columns traversed the satellite towns and housing estates like Alexandra and Queenstown (*Straits Times, 10 August 1968, 1969* respectively). Between 19756 and 1984, before the advent of live telecasts, the National Day parades were held throughout 13 selected centres at the heart of residential areas, allowing for residents from all parts of Singapore to witness a scaled-down version of the unified whole while at the same time celebrate the pomp and pageantry, *combining local resources with national prestige in the production of spectacle.* From 1976 onwards, the National Stadium (completed in 1973 to coincide with the hosting of the then South East Asian Peninsula Games SEAP for short), with its capacity of 60 000 (the Padang could only accommodate 20 000) became home to these National Day celebrations. Tickets were issued free of charge to ‘people from all walks of life’. From 1985 onwards the National Day parades would alternate between the Padang and the National Stadium.

National Day Meaning and Messages

As a mass event such as this requires a high degree of orchestration, The National Day parade embodies the hierarchical structure of Singapore society: Ordinary citizens either in the galleries or on the parade-ground wait upon and/or are reviewed by the ruling elite. All matters of protocol and procedure are oriented around the office of the President. There have been occasions in the early years of independence signifying the integration of ruler and ruled. An example of this was in 1968 when there was a severe downpour and all at the Padang, from the acting vice-president to the civilians and students stood in the hour-long rain (*Straits Time 1968*). This ethos of nation-building, according to Kong and Yeoh⁸, *allowed no room for flinching (outwardly)...each is expected to...a show of defiance...individual sacrifice and togetherness ‘whatever the odds’* (*Straits Times, August 10, 1975*). As Kong and Yeoh point out⁹, *the National Day parade has from its inception combined both strategies* (ritual

ceremony and carnivalesque in Smith 1995; 143) *in its attempt to remind people of their common experience as citizens and as a statement of collective identity and Singapore's nationhood.*

Kong and Yeoh note that from the mid-1980s there was a concerted move toward opening up more space for the peoples participation. *In a dramatic change of format, the 1985 to 1989 Parades became Peoples Parades. The spectators.....became active participants in song and movement (Souvenir Magazine 1990:20).*

As the national Day celebrations took on a more distinct air of informality, the ceremonial portion (pledge, inspection of guard-of-honour, 21-gun salute and march-past) was condensed while the celebration segment—airial displays, mass parades on the parade ground and spectator participation was augmented. An hour before the start of the parade, the ritual of audience-loosening exercises to set the atmosphere for the parade (August 10, 1986) included rock and pop groups and local pop stars providing entertainment and locally composed tunes while the military strains, the standard fare were taken out. In the last ten years, the spectators have become the parade; waving flags, participating in crowd colour and pattern displays, singing specially crafted National Day songs lustily and unabashed nationalistic flag-waving. In the words of one young spectator-participant, *we all had a part to play. We were not here just to watch the Prime Minister or the contingents. (August 19, 1986).*

According to Kong, four messages emerge consistently, even unfailingly, through the years;

1. Multiracialism, Multiculturalism, Multilingualism and Multireligiosity; no discrimination, avoidance of racial chauvinism, racial and cultural sentiments and identities should exist only alongside a larger identity based on secular, non-cultural national values. These themes have been explicitly and implicitly articulated over the years:
 - ◆ Joy of Harmony 1976
 - ◆ Living harmoniously in a multicultural blend 1985
 - ◆ Unity in Rhythm 1986
 - ◆ Many races, one nation/Many cultures One people 1988
2. Youthfulness. The metaphor is equally applicable to the youth, the youthful workforce and youthful nation. The exuberance, vibrancy and energy of youth are celebrated in song and dance. The participation of the school going population is nearly always a given in these items.

3. Teamwork. Values like social discipline, efficiency and technological rationalism were actively promoted as necessary values for a nation to progress. The NDP is the propitious occasion to render the ideological exercise. The entire parade theme in the 1970 NDP was *work together for security and prosperity*. This was evident in the 1973 *Unity and progress* mass displays and floats highlighting the importance of unity. When Singapore went into a recession in 1985/6, the exhortation was *Together Singapore and Count on me Singapore as well as the Pursuit of Excellence*.
4. The importance of education and training so that economic development can be achieved and maintained; the emphases here being technological rather than humanities based. Moreover education and training are not seen as ends in themselves rather as keys to a more promising future.

There have also been other themes alongside these main ones. The first of these has been one people. The Souvenir Programme in 1991 offered the message *We are proud to be Singaporeans. The celebration expressed all that we feel about ourselves, our country and the world in which we live. My Singapore, the place that I call home.*¹⁰ A reiteration appears in 1992 *We are Singapore* and in 1993 when the official theme of the celebrations was *My Singapore My Home*. A spokesman from the newly formed Ministry of the Arts and Information (MITA) suggested that the theme was *an expression of the pride Singaporeans feel for their homeland.*¹¹

Kong and Yeoh read the parade and its attendant messages, implicit or otherwise, as strategies to elicit citizens' sense of attachment and belonging to Singapore given the perceived threat of global forces....westernisation. *It reveals the concern that Singaporeans must be rooted in their Asian heritage while importing the more progressive elements of western developments all the time maintaining their ties, loyalty and 'mystical bond' (Penrose 1993: 29) with place (Singapore)*¹².

The exhortation to exult in pride for the nation is put alongside another dependent factor; to strive for excellence for Singapore. Given that Singapore has achieved in the 1980s what most Third World nations would aspire to, reinterprets the earlier ideology of survival and a rugged society as excelling. It is an interesting message that seems to coincide with a teething problem in the wake of a massive acceleration of the HDB programme. Many complaints were raised about shoddy workmanship in both the finished work of the flats and those responsible for the internal renovations. The 1986 ND message valorises skill, precision and alertness, qualities for a nation of excellence moves on in the 1987 version 'towards a brighter tomorrow' and in 1988 the message underlined

is

'We, the people of Singapore, regardless of race, language or religion, together celebrate our National Day with singing of national songs and spectacular display....Singapore, a nation of excellence for all'.¹³

That is not to suggest that support of these parades of national consciousness has been unanimous throughout the nation. In 1966, opposition parties condemned the parade as phone independence and a waste of public money (August 10 1966). In 1970, anti-government banners were found (August 10, 1970). In more recent years, the different reception Singaporeans have had of the National Day Parades has not been openly confrontational. The readings elicited from respondents in Kong and Yeoh's survey fell into three categories:

1. Feelings of resentment among those who participated in the parades; These consisted of national servicemen: I was on duty, I had to do crowd control. I was outside the stadium. I was reluctant and I resented it. Students of schools participating in the parade: *I was sent by my school. We didn't like it. None of us liked it. We were there because my principal wanted us to be there..* those expressed the view that rehearsals were frustrating and tough because *you've got to be disciplined and wait and wait and go through the sequences again and again.* This came despite the acknowledgment that the hard work did result on the day in a feeling of patriotism and fervour but it was short-lived. *I was grateful to break the routine of having my Sunday burnt...Life was back to normal after that. We went back to our routines and I was glad.*

2. Feelings of unhappiness about the nature and extent of the parade; The resentment felt extended to those who were put off by exorbitant sums of money spent in putting together these parades; the perceived routine and lack of creativity every year; the blatant nature of the ideological messages (*Its so deliberate you feel really skeptical*): *It makes us think that everything is good, that we are having a good life in Singapore...everybody has a job...but it doesn't draw our attention to the more realistic aspects of life...I think it makes us apathetic because we think everything is fine. We are diverting our attention from some of the real problems that do exist. Everything is made to look very positive.*

3. Those who enjoyed and appreciated the parades for reasons different than those intended by the state.

There were vendors for whom the parades represented opportunities for quick monetary gains. Prices of cold soft drinks, portable fans, caps, to name a few, depend on demand; they were usually overpriced.

Students did this for extra points for their extra curricular activity by participating. Some students thought their principals wanted to get their schools to gain from the limelight by participating.

That does leave out those for whom the parade was a thoroughly enjoyable experience; *my little cousins enjoy the song and dance; its one way of keeping my children entertained.* Those who enjoyed it compared the parade to a football match, a party, an opening of a shopping centre. Students thought it was a good day to ‘hang out’ with friends for legitimate reasons; *it wasn’t a chore because I could be out there with my friends at weekly rehearsals and scream my lungs out. It was a thoroughly enjoyable experience; I found it quite fun because there were other schools there and you can get to know people from other schools.*

As the subsequent years of independence, the National Day Parades have tended to display less military flavour and displaying a huge array of military armaments and placed greater emphasis on the role of citizens in the nation. Current defence ideology has been adopted and adapted from the Swedish model of Total Defence, the kind that involves all citizens, united as a nation. Evidence of this does abound:

There was a great spectacle. The feeling was one of a great festival; it was very carnivalish. There was a sense of euphoria, heightened emotions, patriotism and everything. It was wonderful.

The Practice of National Day songs¹⁴

Lily Kong’s account¹⁵ explores the state encouraging and commissioning of National Day Songs or **Sing Singapore** songs promoted by the Psychological Defence Division of the Ministry of Communications and Information in 1988. The various texts of the programme, including the Sing Singapore book contains the lyrics and scores of 49 songs, the accompanying tapes and video clips aired on national television, are examined. These songs are an indelible part of Singaporeans. Lily Kong articulates the ways in which such messages cannot but reach the average house/flat dweller in Singapore.¹⁶ They are taught, practised and sung in schools during music lessons and sometimes during school assembly sessions; this is a Ministry of Education directive. Moreover, they are broadcast over television in between scheduled programmes a few months before the event and even singing sessions are organised in community centres. These means, in Kong’s view, are to assist the objective, which is to convince Singaporeans of the idea that it has come a long way from 1965 and Singaporeans must continue to play their part in maintaining this dramatic development. The ultimate concern, Kong postulates, is to develop in Singaporeans a love for their country, a sense of patriotism and a willingness to

support the ruling elite who have led the country. Dr. Yeo Ning Hong, then from the Ministry of Communications and Information, wrote in his message for **Sing Singapore** 1988 songbook: *Singing the songs will bring Singaporeans together, to share our feelings one with another. It will bring back shared memories of good times and hard times, of times which remind us of who we are, where we came from, what we did, and where we are going. It will bring together Singaporeans of different races and backgrounds, to share and to express the spirit of the community, the feeling of togetherness, the feeling of oneness. This, in essence, is what the **Sing Singapore** programme is about.*¹⁷

The lyrics are written in all four official languages and through national songs Singaporeans are encouraged to express feelings of love and pride for and of belonging to their country. This ensures inclusiveness and although the main songs may be sung for the greater part in English or Mandarin, each of the songs are explored in such a way as to be sung in all four languages with the same melodic configuration. Songs are in the planning stage once the main themes have been formed and the conceptual framework understood. The composer, lyricist and arranger must then ensure empathy for sentiments of love, belonging and pride must be translated into more active manifestations and through singing these National Day songs, Singaporeans are exhorted to attain excellence for Singapore. This idea of excellence encompasses various concepts such as unity, commitment to Singapore, productivity, hard work and teamwork. These concepts are reinforced elsewhere by ministerial speeches in settings, which may or may not even bear resemblance or relevance to the event. Additionally, the newspapers prominently display facts or findings like “Singapore top investment site for Western businessmen (Straits Times 9 April 1991). According to Kong, *these messages are encoded in the lyrics of many national songs...the ideological message purveyed is that excellence is possible only when Singaporeans remain united...*¹⁸

Through the Sing Singapore Songs, Lily Kong argues... *the state is constructing its version of the nation, one in which citizenry is bound by ‘core Asian values’, chief of which must be the notion of society above self*¹⁹...*from the days of independence, the state has attempted to employ music to develop a sense of national identity and patriotic verve. From the organisation of national song-writing competitions (to encourage the production of distinctly Singaporean songs) to hosting Asia-Pacific song competitions (in which the representative participation of Singaporeans will hopefully whip up a sense of nationalistic support from fellow Singaporeans), music has been part of the state’s strategies in the symbolic construction of nation. Kong explains that the Sing Singapore programme while not singular in the history of state exploitation of music...is singular in its degree of organisation and commitment as well as in the extent of its reach and influence. The relatively recent-ness of*

this strategy is explained; *allegiance to the state...which could be achieved in the past via delivery of economic goods, have now become more difficult to gain in recent years with a better educated, wealthier and more sophisticated population...Music has therefore been developed to form part of a multipronged strategy for support for the nation including dance, religion and other non-cultural forms.*²⁰

No national event it seems exists without some opposition. Just as Kong pointed out negative criticism in the newspapers of 1966 and anti-government demonstrations in the 1970s, she identifies a more subtle mode of protest in the 1990s. The irony is of course that such means have been made possible through those considered to have greater educational achievement. Kong quotes Anderson and Gale (1992, 7) who point out that *powerful institutions (including nations) can ...work to ensure that what are partial, culturally-bound interpretations of reality are accepted as natural and correct by the public at large*, while Gramsci 1973 has pointed out hegemony is never total and the dominant group's preferred reading of texts can be often met with contested meanings. Such an example is **Not the Singapore songs book**. This book was first published in 1993 and reflects how a form of subtle cultural resistance, transported by popular music, can be used as social commentary on government policies and the ugly Singaporean.

One example of alternative set of lyrics to the same tune is Ong Cheng Tat's **Count Mummies of Singapore** sung to the tune of the original **Count on me Singapore**. While the original exhorts Singaporeans to give "their best and more" (**Sing Singapore** 1988 p.95) Ong's version exhorts Singaporeans, women in particular, to reproduce (**Not the Singapore song book**, 1993, p.35). While this collection does not resort to borrowing every available tune from the **Sing Singapore** collection but the lyrics do point to a variety of topics. Ee Kay Gie's the **SDU March** (Social Development Unit) is sung to the tune of **Colonel Bogey** exhorting women to get married as a form a national service—child bearing—reflecting the view of the Prime Minister that it is nature not nurture that produces the intelligent, hard-working offspring in the mould of 'excellent' Singapore. Colin Goh's **Babies keep forming in my bed** (sung to the tune of **Raindrops keep falling on my head**) make social commentary on child-bearing, all dependent on the wealth and tax rebates. Desmond Sim turns **What I did for love** to **What I bid for Love** commenting on the **Certificate of Entitlement** for cars (or CoE for short). Another mainstream topic is educational streaming—hence Sam Wan's **What we always do is stream** to the tune of **All I have to is Dream**.

This is not new in music of popular culture; **Weird Al Yankovic** was only one such example of setting alternative lyrics to **Michael Jackson's** songs. As Kong

points out, it is not just government policies that form the basis of such commentary—it is also about opposition discourse to groups identified as yuppie or nouveau riche (sometimes they are one and the same) and the greedy, spoilt, ungracious citizen also known as the ugly Singaporean who indulges in an ostentatious lifestyle.²¹ There is also further comment about the spirit of **kiasu**—translated as the fear of losing out, hence Goh Eck Kheng’s **Oh my kiasu** sung to **Clementine**. This is not the only version. Another version of **kiasu** in the early 1990s, is a rap modeled on a hit by the group **Naughty by Nature**. More recently, the sudden craze by Macdonald’s offering of a variety of **Hello Kitty** dolls with every Macdonald’s breakfast meal has had queues hundreds of metres long at outlets across the island not only highlight a current craze for infantile passions but also the spirit of not wanting to lose out on these newly-found passions and the concomitant raised tempers which have resulted in police intervention not to mention arrests. Not too long later, a number of radio stations were airing a **Hello Kitty** done to the tune of Lionel Richie’s **Hello**.

In a society where confrontation of issues have always been carefully screened to minimise potential civil strife via themes of racial prejudice or problems, these alternative lyrics dressed in familiar tunes adopt satire as a means of making polite commentary. However, as G. Heng (Straits Times, May 28, 1992) points out, the end effect is not so much questioning or confronting social issues or governmental policies but rather an enculturation process and a spirit of acceptance. Music is employed here as entertainment but more as a vehicle in the expression of “live and let live”.

Through the Sing Singapore and National Day Songs, Lily Kong points out... *the state is constructing its version of the nation, one in which citizenry is bound by ‘core Asian values’, chief of which must be the notion of society above self²²...from the days of independence, the state has attempted to employ music to develop a sense of national identity and patriotic verve. From the organisation of national song-writing competitions (to encourage the production of distinctly Singaporean songs) to hosting Asia-Pacific song competitions (in which the representative participation of Singaporeans will hopefully whip up a sense of nationalistic support from fellow Singaporeans) music has been part of the state’s arsenal in the symbolic construction of nation.*

She goes on to state that the *Sing Singapore programme is hence not singular in the history of state exploitation of music. However, this programme is singular in its degree of organisation and commitment as well as in the extent of its reach and influence. In the past, allegiance to the state and ruling elite, which could be achieved in the past via delivery of economic goods, have now become*

*more difficult to gain in recent years with a better educated, wealthier and more sophisticated population. The state therefore has had to step up its efforts in the hegemonic construction of nation. Music has therefore been developed to form part of a multi-pronged strategy including dance, religion and other non-cultural forms.*²³

Despite the claims that the political culture of Singapore does not encourage open conflict and confrontation, Singaporeans, it seems, have had other ways and means of expressing their opposition to preferred meanings. Kong mentions the Feedback Unit, letters to the Editor, among other approved channels. **Not the Singapore Song Book** is one manifestation of a sophisticated voice of opposition for Singaporeans, who while not nourished on a staple of open conflict, are less condoning of policies and policy decisions taken for which they seem to have no control or choice over – including aspects of unacceptable behaviour by fellow Singaporeans. At least with a song, the dissenting voice is likely to be more successful in being heard and message delivered in full.

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