

Race, Space and Architecture: an open access curriculum

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Yeoh, Brenda S. A., and Lily Kong. 2003, *The Politics of Landscapes in Singapore: Constructions of "Nation"*. New York: Syracuse University Press.

CHAPTER ONE**INTRODUCTION****LANDSCAPE POLITICS AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF "NATIONS"**

In an age of globalization, scholars have increasingly paid attention to questions about the continued existence of the state and nation. While some have focused on the state's continued existence in terms of its enduring role as an effective economic entity (Ohmae 1995; Gereffi 1996), others have focused more specifically on the continued existence of the nation-state as a consequence of globalization, shifting the emphasis from the economic to the cultural and political. In this literature, it has been suggested that the nation-state as the primary institution of social life has declined. Guehenno (1995), for example, argues that the "end of the nation-state" is apparent and serves as a potential threat to personal liberties while Shapiro (1994) views it more positively as heralding a more emancipatory "post-sovereign ethics". Yet, current wisdom also acknowledges that there is no simple one-directional process - namely, the decline of nationhood - with globalization. Indeed, it is acknowledged that population movements as a consequence of globalization can "engender

absentee patriotism and long-distance nationalism" (Pieterse 1994,165). Some even argue that this is a "time of continuing and even heightening nation-state building processes" (Glick Schiller et al. 1995,59), amounting to a "reassertion" and "celebration of the nation" (Pieterse 1994,52).

In this book, we acknowledge that at any one time, there are competing centripetal and centrifugal forces shaping the formation of "nation". While many of these forces must be contextualized and understood within larger global discourses and flows, we also recognize that many attempts to construct "nation", both discursive and material, are effected within the boundaries of the state. Our concern here is to examine specifically the "internal" strategies that a particular state (Singapore) uses to construct a "nation", focusing on both ideological and material projects. In particular, we scrutinize the part played by landscapes in the making of the Singapore "nation".

Conceptually, we adopt the perspective that "nation" and "identity" are simultaneously social constructs while rooted in historical material circumstances. As we elaborate in Chapter Two, the "nation" is an "imagined community" (Anderson 1983) and thus conjectural, but it

is also rooted in the materiality of socio-political and socio-economic lives. Likewise, identity comprises unstable formations and sites of differences, and is relational rather than existing as an "essence". It is thus subject to multiple (re)constructions. Yet, like "nation", it is not only discursively constructed but also grounded in historically situated material conditions. Our interrogation of these conceptual ideas within the specific context of Singapore illustrates how analysis of the notion of a socially constructed "nation" must be understood within the specificities of time and place.

The social constructedness of both "nation" and "identity" suggests that their constitution can be negotiated and contested. We proceed with the notion that the idea of "nation" and "national identity" are contested by different social, economic and political groups who sometimes actively resist powerful state-centrist perspectives in overt ways, and at other times, negotiate meanings through re-interpreting state perspectives in more ordinary ways in their everyday lives. Our emphasis in subsequent chapters will thus be as much on the state's construction of "nation" and "national identity" as on the lived experiences of other actors within Singapore.

Landscapes play an integral role in the (re)construction of "nation" and relatedly, "national identity". Landscapes naturalize ideologies by making the cultural appear natural (Duncan and Duncan 1988). Thus, particular ideological constructions of "nation" are made to appear natural when concretized in the landscape. The (re)creation of landscapes is therefore unlikely to be an "innocent" event, but must instead be read as deeply ideological. At the same time, landscapes may be re-interpreted by people in their everyday lives in ways divergent from the imposed meanings of the dominant. The power relations which define and contest the "nation" are therefore often played out in and through landscapes.

SINGAPORE: ARCHETYPAL YET SINGULAR

We have chosen to examine the conceptual arguments outlined above within particular time-space specificities. In this regard, Singapore is an excellent case study for exploring the construction of "nation" and "identity". As a country which gained statehood as recently as 1965, contending with a colonial past (1819-1963) and then a turbulent time in union with (then) Malaya (1963-1965), the imperatives of "nation-building"

are compelling. As a multiracial, multicultural entity with a people of largely immigrant stock, there is more divergence than there is common ground and shared experience to draw on in the exercise of nation-building. At the same time, upon independence, the social, economic and political problems that confronted the country were staggering, and both ideological and material battles had to be fought in the process of constructing a "nation". In these various ways, Singapore's experience is not unique, but parallels that of many other newly or recently-independent countries, often from Third World contexts. An understanding of Singapore's case may therefore, in some ways, throw light on processes of nation-building elsewhere. Yet, Singapore's case is also unique at the same time. Within a very short frame of ten to fifteen years from independence, Singapore had propelled itself out of the material difficulties of the 1960s and early 1970s. Indeed, it has moved from developing country to newly industrializing economy to its present status of "advanced industrializing nation". For over a quarter of a century from the 1960s, Singapore, together with the other "tiger economies" of Hong Kong, South Korea and Taiwan, maintained the highest rate of GNP growth in the world, in the process, winning substantial shares of the world market economy. Their economic and social conditions were substantially transformed. "Nation-

building" has therefore taken place in contexts which have radically changed over a short period of time. Singapore's case is also unique in its smallness, and the consequent significance of geographical constraints on its material and physical development. This has led to the justification for widespread and substantial landscape change. The reconstruction and management of landscapes has become a critical factor in the material and ideological shaping of Singapore.

In the exercise of constructing a "nation", the state in Singapore has emphasized various ideological positions which, as we will illustrate in this book, often draw on the materiality of landscapes for their legitimization. Specifically, in Chapter Three, we elaborate on the ideologies of survival, discipline and pragmatism; multiracialism (and multilingualism, multiculturalism and multireligiosity); meritocracy; and "Asian" communitarianism. The state has consolidated many of these ideologies in the form of five Shared Values. Together, these ideological constructs are aimed at maintaining economic development, building a modern(ist) city-state, and developing a "gracious" society, all of which undergird the state's attempt to achieve ideological hegemony and maintain political legitimacy. In subsequent

chapters, we illustrate how these ideological constructs shape and are shaped by various landscapes.

THE CHAPTERS AHEAD

While postcolonial nationalism often takes on economic forms such as import-substitution and protectionist policies, social and cultural projects are equally crucial to the nation-building enterprise, even though often “the object of all this hard work [in the social/cultural sphere is to support or effect] a neo-liberal restructuring of the economy so that the [“nation”] can compete for a place in the new globalising world” (Weekly 1999,338). Without downplaying the importance of economic projects in constructing nations, or denying the interconnections between the economic and cultural spheres, we wish to give attention to a variety of landscapes which are usually considered essentially non-economic in nature. These we call landscapes of sentiment (places of worship and places of final repose), quotidian landscapes (housing and streets), and landscapes of aesthetics (performance places) and heritage (historic areas and symbolic icons). We argue that each of these landscapes feature as a major strand running through both the imaginary and material body of

the “nation”. They represent landscapes borne of different social-cultural projects and illustrate varied relationships between people and landscapes – from the taken-for-granted to those of intimate significance, from the private to the public, from the functional to the iconic.¹

Landscapes of sentiment – at both the personal and communal level – are intimately related to the core of meaning in a person’s life, implicating meanings that are often central to a person’s deeply held beliefs and deepest sentiments. We have chosen two dimensions of life of intimate significance to individuals: first, those landscapes associated with the end of life (deathscapes) and second, those associated with intensely held beliefs (landscapes of religion). In Chapters Four and Five, we explore how these landscapes are centers of meaning for communal groups, and how the state’s anxiety to build a “nation” prompts it to rewrite these landscapes in its

1. The arguments we craft in relation to each of these landscapes are built on a range of information sources: archival material (such as parliamentary debates, ministerial speeches and annual reports of government departments); newspaper reports; interviews and correspondence with representatives of the state in various capacities, including officers in the Ministry of Environment, the Housing and Development Board (HDB), Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) and National Arts Council (NAC); interviews with non-state agents and civic groups, such as Chinese clan association representatives, religious leaders and members of the artistic community, as well as with individuals in various capacities, for example, religious adherents, residents of heritage districts, and HDB residents affected by upgrading programmes.

own terms, drawing on its range of ideological apparatus. They include, for example, the principles of modernist and pragmatic planning, wrenching religious and racial groups away from their original orientation towards communal ties and beliefs, and reorientating them towards the "nation-state". We illustrate how the rewriting of deathscapes and landscapes of religion is critical to this project, but also go on to examine how individuals and communal groups find ways of negotiating and resisting the state's dominant landscape meanings.

While the landscapes of sentiment we focus on often hold meaning for people in a conscious, self-reflective way, quotidian landscapes are distinguished by their taken-for-granted character. In this regard, they are critically important landscapes to examine, for their very taken-for-grantedness make them particularly well suited to ideological appropriation. In Chapters Five and Six, we examine Singapore's public housing landscapes and street names respectively, exploring both the state's inscription of ideological meaning in the process of constructing a "nation", as well as ground response to such inscriptions.

Finally, we focus on landscapes of heritage and aesthetics, which might ostensibly be interpreted as

particularly distinct from our selected quotidian landscapes in terms of functionality. Whereas housing landscapes and street names are patently practical, heritage and aesthetics (here represented by artistic pursuits, in particular, landscapes for the performing arts) may be construed as "luxury" rather than "necessity". This was certainly the case in the early years of Singapore's independence when the country faced pressing social, economic and political problems. However, by the late 1980s, the discourse was shifting. The ideological and material roles that heritage and the performing arts and their associated landscapes have played since then are examined in Chapters Seven and Eight.