Higher education and entrepreneurial citizenship in Singapore

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ABSTRACT
Focusing on Singapore’s ‘Global Schoolhouse’ project, this article discusses how efforts to transform Singapore into a ‘world class’ knowledge economy entail changes to the status of citizenship in Singapore. The project of wooing top foreign universities to Singapore is permeated with an entrepreneurial ideal of Singapore as the ‘Boston of the East’. Since Singaporeans tend to be viewed by the Singapore government as particularly risk averse compared to Westerners and other Asians, the government has increasingly relied on ‘foreign talent’ to provide entrepreneurial dynamism to Singapore. The expansion of high-quality university education in Singapore serves as a vehicle of this ‘foreign talent’ policy as much as it accommodates the needs of local students for higher education. The ensuing questions about citizenship in Singapore’s knowledge economy are finally discussed in terms of a differentiated ‘entrepreneurial citizenship’.

KEYWORDS
citizenship, entrepreneurialism, foreign talent, Global Schoolhouse, higher education, Singapore

Let the tourists play; we Singaporeans take a proper rest and prepare for work.
Former PM Lee Kuan Yew (quoted in Seah 2012b)

As a way of introducing the central concerns of this article on higher education in Singapore, I would like to start off in a rather unlikely place – that is, Singapore’s gambling industry. Until recently casinos as well as other forms of high-stakes gambling were illegal in Singapore. When the People’s Action Party (PAP) first came to power with self-rule in 1959, it made the stamping out of gambling and other forms of ‘yellow culture’ a cornerstone of its nation-building efforts and a powerful symbol of the transition from the backward and superstitious Asianness of the colonial era to a progressive,
rational and productive Asianness fit for an independent nation. This approach to gambling stood until 2005 when the PAP government announced, after a protracted national debate, that it would build two casinos. The aims were to boost tourism and tap the huge Asian gambling market as well as to announce to the world that Singapore is reinventing itself in a big way – that Singapore no longer simply stands for discipline, orderliness and clean streets, but has turned itself into a fast-paced, dynamic and playful ‘global city’ on a par with Hong Kong or Tokyo.

The two casinos opened in 2010 and early indications are that, in economic terms, they have paid off beyond all expectations. They are already estimated to be among the most profitable casinos in the world and Singapore is now, rather astonishingly, on the verge of overtaking Las Vegas to become the second biggest gambling centre in the world behind Macau (Seah 2012b). In this sense, the casinos have indeed become what the government hoped they would be – icons of a new risk-embracing, fast and furious Singapore. What is paradoxical, however, about these icons of ‘the new Singapore’ is that they shun Singaporeans. The casinos are explicitly spaces marked out for ‘foreigners’, not for Singaporeans. Initially, the government considered banning Singaporeans from entering the casinos altogether (Wee 2012: 23). When this plan had to be abandoned, the government introduced instead a spate of measures to keep all but the wealthiest Singaporeans out: whereas foreigners enter for free, Singaporeans have to pay around USD90. No credit can be extended to Singaporean citizens, who are also served exclusion orders if they are bankrupt or receive social assistance. In this sense the casino scheme simultaneously projects two contradictory images of Singapore. On the one hand it projects an image of Singapore as a reinvented global city where hard play and risk taking have become a way of life. On the other hand it projects an image of Singapore as a slightly timid Asian population that lacks the ability to master risk and manage it to the advantage of themselves and society as a whole. They are simply not up to the effervescent game of risk taking and should therefore be kept away from it.

In marking out risk taking as a space for playful foreigners rather than timid locals, the casino scheme raises questions of access and exclusion, of belonging and, ultimately, citizenship that I believe to be inherent to Singapore’s entire endeavour to reinvent itself as a twenty-first-century dynamic and entrepreneurial knowledge economy. In this paper I focus on the ways in which these questions play out in Singapore’s efforts to turn itself into a global education hub – a ‘Global Schoolhouse’. The paper is divided
into four sections. The first section gives an overview of recent changes in Singapore’s university sector – most notably the ‘World Class Universities’ scheme which aims to attract top universities from around the world to Singapore. The second section argues this scheme is permeated with an ideal of ‘the entrepreneurial university’ and that this ideal, compared to an earlier ideal of ‘Asian values’, implies a new kind of deference to a Western, and specifically American, cultural model of economic development. In the light of this model, the third section argues that Singaporeans themselves come increasingly to be seen as unfit for the demands of a knowledge economy and, by means of initiatives such as the Global Schoolhouse project, ‘foreign talents’ are therefore imported in large numbers to provide the economy with entrepreneurial dynamism. The last section discusses the implications of this for the notion of citizenship and argues tentatively that a new kind of ‘entrepreneurial citizenship’ may have emerged which, however, dovetails paradoxically with the Singaporean tradition of ‘differentiated citizenship’.

Going for world class: the Global Schoolhouse project

Over the last 15 years the university landscape in Singapore has changed dramatically. Until the late 1990s there were only two public (and no private) universities in Singapore – the National University of Singapore (NUS) and the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) (Ng and Tan 2010: 179). As is the case in most other post-colonial contexts, these universities were primarily dedicated to the immediate purposes of nation building. Thus, their focus was above all on ‘manpower development’, on training professionals to fill the ranks of the new bureaucracies (Wong et al. 2007: 942). In 2000, however, a third university, the Singapore Management University (SMU), was established as an autonomous, not-for-profit university. In 2006 the two other universities were corporatised and also acquired the status of autonomous universities. Finally, in 2011, a fourth university opened, the Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD).

The fact that the SUTD announces at the very top of its website that it is established ‘in collaboration with MIT’ (where its President was previously a Dean of Engineering) should be enough to indicate that more is at stake in this expansion of the university sector than simply providing better educated and wealthier Singaporean families with more opportunities for higher education. The expansion of local universities should equally be viewed as
one component of a much larger project which aims to make Singapore a top international brand name in education, a ‘global education hub’ capable of attracting high-quality students and scientists from all over the world, with a particular focus on Asia.

This is the project that has become known as the ‘Global Schoolhouse’ project. One component of this project is the effort, indicated above, to instil more diversity and autonomy (as well as accountability) in the local university system. Another component is the avalanche of reforms to shake up the rigidities of pre-tertiary education in Singapore by promoting thinking and communication skills, by diversifying curricula, by encouraging schools to adopt individual profiles and niche programmes and so on.2 The most well-known, if not the most important, part of the Global Schoolhouse project, however, is the effort to raise quality in the university sector by wooing foreign universities to set up operations in Singapore. This strategy has also been adopted by other Asian countries from Malaysia to Hong Kong. What distinguishes Singapore, however, is the single-minded (and, of course, extremely expensive) focus on the highest echelons of global higher education – those select ‘brand name’ research universities (Sidhu 2009) that dominate international league tables in higher education.

This strategy, known as the ‘World Class Universities’ (WCU) scheme, was officially launched in 1998 when the Economic Development Board – the Singapore government’s economic development agency, until then best known for its successes in wooing multinational corporations to Singapore – announced its ambition to attract 10 world-class universities to Singapore within 10 years (Olds 2007: 963). The immediate impetus for the WCU scheme was a review conducted by MIT in 1997 of engineering education in Singapore’s universities. The most important finding of this review was that systemic changes should be undertaken in order to make Singaporean engineering graduates more entrepreneurial (Sidhu 2009: 243). Subsequently, the Singapore government proposed an educational alliance between MIT and Singapore’s two universities at the time, the NUS and the NTU. This alliance was subsequently followed up by similar alliances and partnerships in other fields deemed to be of strategic importance to Singapore’s developmental objectives: with Johns Hopkins and Duke universities in medicine; with INSEAD (Institut Européen d’Administration des Affaires), the University of Chicago and the University of Pennsylvania in business; with Stanford in environmental sciences; and with the Karolinska Institutet in the field of bio-engineering, just to name a few (for a comprehensive list, see Olds 2007:
These collaborative ventures between Singapore and the WCUs have taken a number of different forms, from post-graduate programmes to joint degrees and the establishment of collaborative research centres. In 2007 one of the most ambitious initiatives, an agreement with the University of New South Wales (UNSW) to set up a full-scale second campus in Singapore, failed when UNSW had to pull out due to student enrolment below expectations. Despite this and other setbacks the WCU scheme remains on track as evidenced by the announcement in June 2012 of an agreement between Yale and NUS to set up a joint Yale-NUS Liberal Arts College in Singapore.

‘The Boston of the East’: making universities entrepreneurial

The WCU scheme, and indeed the Global Schoolhouse project in general, is indicative of a broader shift in Singapore’s meticulously planned and coordinated development strategy. It was launched in the wake of the Asian 1997–8 financial crisis from which Singapore recovered with relative ease, but which nevertheless challenged all countries in the region to rethink their development strategies. Even more significantly, it coincided with the rise to prominence among policy makers around the world of the notion of ‘the knowledge-based economy’, launched by the OECD in 1996 (OECD 1996). This notion became a cornerstone of government discourse in 1999 when the Singapore government launched a vision – ‘Singapore 21’ – to chart a course for Singapore, its economy as well as its national identity, in the new century. Here, it was made clear right from the start that the key to Singapore’s future was to be found in the new acronym ‘KBE’:

‘KBE’. This will be one of the most important acronyms if the next century. The ‘knowledge-based economy’ is one in which information and knowledge, rather than material resources, drive activities…. Singapore has no choice but to join the network. The nations that can ride the fast-moving waves of IT are the ones that will succeed. All Singaporeans will need to be prepared for the ride. It will be scary for some, exhilarating for others, but necessary for all (Singapore Government 1999: 9).

In 2003 this vision was fleshed out in more conventional economic terms by the report of the Economic Review Committee (ERC) which proposed comprehensive changes to Singapore’s economic structure in order to make Singapore ‘a knowledge economy, banking on creativity and innovation to power the economy’ (ERC 2003: 117). One important proposal in this context
was that the higher education sector should be developed since ‘a vibrant university sector’ would help to ‘create jobs and wealth’ (ERC 2003: 160).

To the extent that they were viewed as crucial in bringing about the knowledge economy, Singapore’s universities were now accorded a very high priority. But this also implied that they had to be transformed into a different kind of university. In the post-colonial context of nation building the emphasis had been on ‘manpower development’ – and, on the research side, on absorption and diffusion of knowledge from First World countries, rather than on ground-breaking and innovative research (Wong et al. 2007: 942). Under the aegis of the knowledge economy, however, these priorities were bound to shift towards the creation of new knowledge. In order to fulfill the crucial role ascribed to them in Singapore’s knowledge economy, Singapore’s universities thus had to boost research performance and, increasingly, to conceive of themselves as regional and global universities competing with others at the forefront of science rather than simply as national universities.

The WCUs have played a crucial role in accelerating this transition to a much more research-oriented university sector in Singapore. Firstly, the WCUs themselves have introduced a huge amount of ‘research muscle’ into Singapore’s higher education landscape. Secondly, they have served to strengthen the research performance as well as the global profile of local universities by bringing world-class competition and collaboration into Singapore itself. In this sense they provide benchmarks of global research excellence against which Singapore’s universities can measure and improve themselves on a daily basis. It is not, however, simply in terms of overall research quality that the WCUs are to serve as benchmarks and models for Singapore’s own universities. It is not just any kind of research university that Singapore’s universities are encouraged to emulate. Here it is no coincidence that it was the MIT which gave the impetus to the WCU scheme. The kind of excellence promoted by the WCU scheme (and the Global Schoolhouse project more generally) is exactly the one that the MIT found lacking in Singapore and which it itself embodies – that is, entrepreneurialism. The university model that Singaporean universities are encouraged to adopt (as has already been done by the NUS which brands itself as a ‘Global Knowledge Enterprise’, Sidhu et al. 2011: 33) is ‘the entrepreneurial university’ – that is, a university that does not simply stand out in terms of sheer research quality, but also in terms of the dynamism and innovation they contribute to the economy and society as a whole.
This view of universities, not as pristine sites of learning but as catalysts of entrepreneurial buzz and dynamism, comes out very clearly in then Education Minister Teo’s famous vision of Singapore as the ‘Boston of the East’:

Our vision, in shorthand notation, is to become the Boston of the East. Boston is not just MIT or Harvard. The greater Boston area boasts of over 200 universities, colleges, research institutions and thousands of companies. It is a focal point of creative energy; a hive of intellectual, research, commercial and social activity. We want to create an oasis of talent in Singapore: a knowledge-hub, an ‘ideas-exchange’, a confluence of people and idea streams, an incubator for inspiration (Teo 2000).

The catchphrase ‘Boston of the East’ aptly captures one of the most salient paradoxes of Singapore’s ambitions to come out on top in the knowledge economy. On the one hand these ambitions are indicative of the optimism, the increasing confidence of being able to compete at the highest echelons of the global economy that at present pervades Asia (Koh 2006, cited in Sidhu 2009). On the other hand, however, they are indicative of the opposite – that is, a new kind of deference to Western, and specifically American, cultural models.

This is all the more noteworthy since, in the 1980s and early 1990s, the Singapore government was one of the most vocal proponents of a triumphantist Asian culturalist discourse on economic development, usually referred to as ‘Asian values’. Given America’s apparent economic decline in relation to East Asia and, especially, Japan, it was claimed at the time by proponents of Asian values like Singapore’s then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew that Asian and, specifically, Confucian values such as diligence, thrift, and subordination of the individual to the collective constituted a modernisation formula in many ways superior to the Western liberal model.

This did not prevent Singapore (or other states adhering to the Asian values discourse) from relying heavily for their economic development on the transfer of technology and skills from the West. This, however, was not viewed as incompatible with the Asian values model since it was conceived as a matter of incorporating culturally neutral technologies and skills into an essentially Asian cultural model – an Asian ‘spirit of capitalism’. However, within the current project of creating ‘entrepreneurial universities’ – and an entrepreneurial economy, more generally – this kind of compartmentalisation does not work anymore and in that sense it can be claimed that today the WCUs play the opposite role of the multi-national corporations (MNCs)
of earlier decades. The MNCs were used to secure the transfer of technologies and skills, without the American spirit of capitalism. What the WCU scheme targets, on the other hand, is ultimately not specific technologies and skills, but precisely the ‘entrepreneurial spirit’ of American capitalism. In this sense the qualities needed for economic success and dynamism now come to be associated with an ‘elsewhere’ – ‘America’ or, more generally, ‘foreigners’. In order for Singapore to succeed in the knowledge economy these ‘foreign’ qualities therefore have to be injected into the population. This, however, can take several different forms. As I show in the following sections, the Global Schoolhouse project epitomises the ambivalences of this new project of population enhancement – or ‘biopolitics’, to use Foucault’s term (Foucault 2008) – since it cultivates the entrepreneurial qualities of Singapore’s population, but does this to a large extent by changing the very composition of this population itself. While all Singaporeans are enjoined to be entrepreneurial, entrepreneurialism is simultaneously symbolically marked out as a space for foreigners recruited not least through the Global Schoolhouse project. In this sense the Global Schoolhouse project is part and parcel of the ‘foreign talent’ philosophy to which I now turn.

Entrepreneurialism and the biopolitics of ‘talent’

Since the mid-1990s Singapore has embarked on an aggressive strategy to woo ‘foreign talent’ – persons with managerial, entrepreneurial, scientific and advanced technical skills – from around the world to come to Singapore to work and, ideally, to take up citizenship. This policy was mooted publicly for the first time in the Singapore 21 vision which made it clear to Singaporeans that Singapore ‘needs to look beyond its shores for the human talent that can help generate the extra spark. Only in this way can more opportunities be created for us all to enjoy’ (Singapore Government 1999: 32). Of course, Singapore is far from alone in wooing foreign talent. In the last decade the notions of ‘talent’ and ‘global war for talent’ have become something of a staple of managerial discourse. Still, the extent to which the Singapore government has pursued this policy stands out. In the last 20 years immigration has pushed Singapore’s population from 3 million to 5 million people – an extraordinary population increase by all standards, even if it should also be noted that most of it is due to the influx of so-called ‘foreign workers’ (construction workers, domestic maids etc.) rather than the high-end ‘foreign talents’.
The importance ascribed to foreign talent in Singapore cannot be separated from the fact that ever since independence in 1965 the notion of ‘talent’ has functioned in Singapore not simply as a managerial catchword, but as the key to national survival. According to Singapore’s first Prime Minister and ‘founding father’, Lee Kuan Yew, the problem of survival faced by Singapore, as a tiny island state on the tip of the Malayan peninsula, was not simply geopolitical, but, just as importantly, biopolitical. With an urban population of three million people and with no hinterland to draw on, Singapore suffered according to Lee from a ‘talent pool’ of alarmingly small proportions. This notion of talent was conceived in openly eugenicist terms, as a set of inborn physical, mental and moral qualities which naturally divided the population into a large mass of ‘followers’ – trained to exhibit ‘social discipline’ and not ‘spit all over the place’ (Lee cited in Barr 2000: 110) – and a small group of exceptionally gifted ‘leaders’. It was on this tiny group that national survival was believed to depend and it was therefore in these few select individuals that scarce national (specifically, educational) resources were invested. Additionally, in order to uphold the talent pool, a series of birth control policies was implemented to encourage ‘graduate mothers’ to have more children and non-graduate mothers to have fewer. In the mid-1980s, however, these attempts at governing the reproductive patterns of Singaporeans had failed definitively. This paved the way for a new strategy, one which had previously been tried in vain, but which now proved more successful, not least thanks to the recent opening up of China to the global economy – that is, replenishing Singapore’s talent pool by importing foreign talent.

In this sense the foreign talent policy provides an answer to a biopolitical problem – ‘the dearth of talent’ – which the government has always deemed crucial to national survival. If, in the last decade, this policy has reached massive proportions, this is also because the notion of talent itself is today conceived by the government in new terms – terms which only seem to aggravate the scarcity of talent from which Singapore suffers. As indicated above, talent used to be seen in squarely biological terms. From this perspective the amount of talent in a population was directly proportional to the size of that population. Today, however, talent is increasingly viewed in cultural terms. In government discourse, talent is to a large extent identified with a specific ethos – the ethos of the entrepreneur. This ethos is viewed as being culturally, rather than biologically determined – as the outcome of cultures which encourage and reward risk taking, independent thinking and individuality.
If this conception of talent aggravates Singapore’s ‘dearth of talent’, this is because Singapore’s own culture is viewed by the government – as well as by the population at large – as unfit to foster this kind of talent. This is not unique to Singapore. When a decade ago Lee Kuan Yew deplored the ‘East Asian reverence for scholarship’ (Hamlin 2002), he echoed a view found in many other East Asian countries. Almost everywhere education systems are blamed for ‘rote learning’, for rewarding accurate reproduction of textbook knowledge and success in competitive examinations rather than promoting the kind of independent and critical thinking that can foster the entrepreneurial ethos needed in the emerging global knowledge economy (for China, see Thøgersen 2012).

In Singapore, however, there is a common perception of being doubly disadvantaged in this respect – in the sense that the obstacles of East Asian (or ‘Confucian’) culture to the entrepreneurial spirit are redoubled by Singapore’s national culture. In spite of all the economic and education reforms introduced over the last 15 years, Singapore is still experienced by many as a ‘nanny state’ where the government takes care of everything, where people are not supposed to think or act for themselves, but simply to walk the secure and well-trodden paths of social conformity and materialist pursuits. At the popular level this is given expression in the common self-stereotyping of Singaporeans as being kiasu – a Chinese dialect word meaning ‘fear of failing’ or ‘fear of losing out’. This perception of Singaporeans as being at opposite ends from the daring entrepreneurial ethos (see also Low 2006) is shared by the government itself which frequently – citing foreign employers – scolds Singaporeans for lacking initiative and requiring hand-holding. Thus, Singaporeans come to be compared unfavourably by the government not only with Westerners, but also with other East Asians, especially mainland Chinese, who are deemed to be ‘hungrier’ (Hamlin 2002) than Singaporeans – precisely to the extent they have not been spoilt by the paternalist benevolence of the government itself.

In the light of this perception of Singaporeans as conformist and risk averse it is no wonder that the ERC report concludes that there is a ‘long time lag for promoting a more entrepreneurial culture among Singaporeans’. (ERC 2003: 124) This may raise the question whether the project of making Singapore entrepreneurial should be separated from the project of making Singaporeans entrepreneurial – that is, whether the government would do better to import entrepreneurial talent from abroad rather than waste scarce resources on making risk-averse Singaporeans entrepreneurial. This last pos-
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sibility has been mooted most openly by a prominent former government minister, George Yeo:

Minister of Trade and Industry Yeo goes so far as to voice doubts about whether the government should even be in the business of trying to hatch entrepreneurs.

Singapore, he suggests, should follow the example of Venice, Milan and Florence.

‘How did they bring in talent?’ he asks. “By opening the doors, not by scouring for the odd Venetian, Florentine or Milanese entrepreneur (Hamlin 2002).

These tensions and ambivalences of the foreign talent policy come very visibly to the fore in the Global Schoolhouse project. Even if this project is often justified in terms of the huge size of the global – and, specifically, Asian – market for higher education (see MTI 2002: 1–2), this kind of market rationality does not (at this point, at least) seem to constitute its most important component. Actually, many foreign students in Singapore’s top universities do not pay fees since the Singapore government provides about 2,000 scholarships each year, worth about USD30 million, to foreign students (Seah 2012a). In this sense – acknowledging that the global competition for talent ‘actually starts before the talent reaches the labor market’ (Wong et al. 2007: 943) – the Global Schoolhouse project is very much about attracting brilliant students (and researchers) who can give credibility to Singapore’s ambition to become an entrepreneurial ‘Talent Capital’.

For Singaporean students, on the other hand, it is debatable whether the massive expansion of the university sector in Singapore has led to significantly improved opportunities for university education. In spite of its constant injunctions to gear up for the knowledge economy, the Singapore government keeps the admission to university education at only 23 per cent of Singaporean high school leavers (Sidhu et al. 2011: 37). While it is not openly justified in such terms, this is certainly consistent with the government’s talent philosophy. As Lee Kuan Yew has made clear to Singaporeans, they are not getting smarter, just better educated. From this perspective educational resources are better spent on foreign students who add to the talent pool instead of simply keeping it constant. As a consequence, each year lots of hard-working and able Singapore students with impeccable examination results are rejected for a place in Singapore’s universities. They are therefore compelled to provide for their own higher education needs as fee-paying
students in overseas, and especially Australian, universities. Even for the minority of families who can afford this, it demands large sacrifices – as evidenced by frequent news stories about parents who have to sell off their cherished homes in order to finance overseas education for children rejected in Singapore’s universities (Seah 2011).

This is seen by many Singaporeans as a betrayal of the government’s promise to ‘develop each individual to his fullest potential’. In Singapore and, arguably, in East Asia more generally, no public services are more coveted than higher education. The experience of being ‘second, and even third, class citizens when it comes to education’ (Seah 2012a) therefore raises serious questions about the status and, indeed, the very notion of citizenship itself. It is to these questions that I turn in the last section of this paper.

Entrepreneurship as differentiated citizenship

As indicated by the preceding discussion, it can be argued that in Singapore a new kind of ‘entrepreneurial citizenship’ has emerged, which is predominantly accorded to foreigners and which is bestowed with privileges that, as suggested by Aihwa Ong (2006), in some ways eclipse those of national citizenship. This might be interpreted in terms of Ong’s notion of ‘neoliberalism as exception’ – the constitution of physical, economic, legal and cultural zones which operate according to ‘neoliberal’ rules that do not apply in national space as such. That something like this constitutes an important strand in governmental reasoning in Singapore is undeniable. Ten years ago, influenced of Richard Florida’s Rise of the Creative Class and, specifically, his ‘bohemian index’ (Florida 2002), Lee Kuan Yew proposed that in order to attract creative talents Singapore should construct ‘little Bohemias’ – well-bounded cultural zones where more bohemian lifestyles could unfold without corrupting the traditional Asian morality of the native population. A few years later Biopolis, arguably the most prestigious of the many new science parks that have recently shot up in Singapore, was constructed in close vicinity to Holland Village, the most well-known expatriate ‘little Bohemia’ in Singapore. Together they constitute just such a zone of ‘neoliberal exception’, an aesthetically and socially stimulating playground for ‘the weird and the wonderful’ (George Yeo, quoted in Yeoh 2004: 2436) where (presumably) exceptional and predominantly foreign talents are given free rein to pursue creative lives at a safe distance from the conservative morality of ‘ordinary’ Singapore.
Still, I would argue that if a new form of ‘entrepreneurial citizenship’ is emerging in Singapore, this should not be seen as a purely ‘exceptional’ citizenship reserved for foreigners, but rather as a paradoxical extension of a long-standing Singaporean tradition of differentiated citizenship. While such differences may be observed in most, if not all education systems, in Singapore they are made an explicit objective of the education system (Ho et al. 2011a). Thus the desired outcomes of National Education (NE) – the overarching framework of citizenship education in Singapore – are very different for students at different academic levels. For students in the post-secondary vocational institutes, NE should make them understand ‘that they would be helping themselves, their families and Singapore by working hard, continually upgrading themselves and helping to ensure a stable social order’ (Singapore Ministry of Education, quoted in Ho et al. 2011a: 211). As for students bound for university, on the other hand, ‘NE must instil in them a sense that they can shape their own future in Singapore and, even more importantly, a realization that upon many of them will lie the responsibility of playing key roles in shaping the Singapore of the future in the years to come’ (ibid.). Thus, there is no pretence of uniform citizenship. Citizenship is openly conceived as ‘differentiated citizenship’ (Ho et al. 2011b) where, according to their level of talent, Singaporeans perform different citizenship roles, which each in their own way contribute to upholding the integrity and competitiveness of the nation.

To a large extent the project of creating an entrepreneurial culture for Singapore can be viewed as an extension of this tradition of differentiated citizenship. Even if the government is often perceived as viewing locals as irredeemably kiasu compared to entrepreneurial foreigners, in the last 15 years it has nevertheless taken a series of initiatives in order to make Singaporeans themselves more entrepreneurial – most notably the introduction in 2004 of Innovation and Enterprise (I&E) as a new framework for educational reform in the Singapore school system. While this framework stresses familiar characteristics of entrepreneurialism such as creativity and innovation it is, however, noteworthy, that the version of entrepreneurialism promoted for Singapore students and schools is markedly different from the American-style entrepreneurialism associated with the ‘weird and the wonderful’ who inhabit the ‘little Bohemias’ and science parks. In its materials on I&E, the Ministry of Education associates entrepreneurialism not with bohemian lifestyles, but on the contrary, with moral character and strong values. In response to concerns over the potentially immoral aspects of in-
novation and enterprise, it makes clear that success in innovation and enterprise can come about only ‘when the individual has developed a spirit of determination and self-discipline so that he perseveres despite setbacks and resolutely picks himself up when he fails’ (MOE 2004: 44). In order to strengthen these qualities – as well as to acquire ‘a sense of teamwork and ‘giving back’ to the community’ (MOE 2005) – students should preferably participate in ‘rugged’ activities, such as uniformed groups, camps and sports competitions.

What is remarkable about this ‘home grown’ model of entrepreneurialism is the extent to which it anchors experimentation and innovation in personal discipline and wholesome communitarian values. Entrepreneurship education becomes almost indistinguishable from moral education. In this sense innovation and enterprise paradoxically come to dovetail, not with the American-style entrepreneurialism celebrated in the WCU scheme, but with the Asian values of the 1990s – now, however, divested of their timid and kiasu aspects by the stress on initiative, persistence and ‘trying again’. This is an entrepreneurialism for Asian subjects deemed unfit for American-style exuberant and bohemian innovation and creativity. By anchoring entrepreneurialism in discipline and ‘strong values’ it makes entrepreneurialism morally acceptable and ensures that Singaporeans, unaccustomed as they are to risk taking and independent thinking, do not go astray in their entrepreneurial ventures.

Conclusion

In the last few years immigration and the perceived prospect of losing out to foreign talent have become major issues of public concern in Singapore. In the 2011 General Election the PAP government suffered a major electoral setback and even if some curbs on immigration have since been imposed, public concern – even anger – still persists as evidenced by subsequent electoral losses for the government.

In one sense, however, there is something slightly paradoxical about this anger over immigration and the foreign talent policy in particular. When the Singapore 21 report divides the population into those who ‘generate the extra spark’ (Singapore Government 1999: 32) and those who are simply ‘hard working and willing to learn’ (Singapore Government 1999: 34), it may be seen as simply reiterating the division between ‘scholars’ (the educated elite) and ‘commoners’ (Barr and Skrbis 2008: 179) that has been crucial to
population management in Singapore ever since independence – and which has until recently been widely accepted by the population.

The difference, of course, is that this division is no longer simply a division between two parts of the national population, but also between ‘foreigners’ on the one hand and ‘locals’ on the other. In this sense it is as if the inequities of Singapore’s system of ‘meritocracy’ finally become publicly visible, precisely to the extent that they are now mapped onto the relationship between foreigners and locals. But whether public unhappiness will eventually go beyond a backlash against immigration so as to substantially challenge the elitist structure of population management in Singapore remains to be seen.

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Notes
2. These initiatives are usually put together under the heading ‘Thinking Schools, Learning Nation’, the catchphrase used by then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong when he launched the current round of education reforms in 1997 (Goh 1997).
3. The government has indicated that it intends to go up to 30 per cent, but documents recently published by WikiLeaks suggest that it may plan to stay between 20 and 25 per cent (Seah 2011).

References


