Desire Bound: formation of a Malay minority agency in Singapore

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Chapter 5 "Change Attitudes" in Action: The Issues of Education and Women in the 1970s

The previous chapter documented the propaganda for "Change Attitudes" implemented by Malays in the 1970s. This chapter focuses on the same decade, but singles out specific issues in order to show how the general push for "Change Attitudes" was enacted in more concrete terms. The most prominent discourses of "Change Attitudes" during that decade were about education and women, and these are the areas that will be examined.

The landmark seminar of 1970 set education as a target area for Malays to work on to improve themselves (see 3.4). This required critical self-investigation in relation to education and the prescription of remedies that had far-reaching implications for Malay culture in Singapore. As for Malay women, they specifically were also required to change their attitude to make themselves suitable to the Singapore context of national development. We will see how some Malay women formed an agency to enact the set of conducts required by "Change Attitudes" to contribute to national development, driven by their desire to become the part of the Singapore mainstream, like women from other ethnic groups.

5.1. "Change Attitudes" in Education

The paper presented by Ma'arof Salleh at the landmark seminar in 1970 set out a diagnosis of the problem:

> "Despite what the government has done, the benefits to Singapore Malays judging by the number of Malays who have gained admission into, and graduated from the University and Technical Institutes remain negligible. It is obvious therefore that a more concerted and sustained effort is imperative if we hope to see any meaningful improvement in the educational qualifications of Singapore Malays." [1]

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[1] Sharom Ahmat & James Wong eds., *Malay Participation in the National Development of Singapore*, Singapore: Eurasia Press, 1971, p11. [quotation in original English]

The desire of Malays for "meaningful improvement" is accepted as a given. And to achieve this desire, Malays need to examine themselves for problems. The Malays are at fault; they have not been achieving enough despite state support. The same paper also urged that "obviously the Malays themselves must show they are willing to sweat and toil for improvement, otherwise it becomes invidious to expect others to come to their assistance."[2] So, in order to improve themselves, the Malays would proceed with critical self-examination in the field of education during the rest of the decade.

As an aid to understanding the significance and direction of this development it is necessary to say a few words about the significance of education in the Singapore context, and what the ideal education system was from the viewpoint of becoming part of mainstream Singapore society. This will show the standard of comparison that Malays set themselves. Secondly, we will see how, as part of the conduct of "Change Attitudes," the Malays turned their critical gaze of self-examination onto the value of Malay language and Malay stream education, as they strove to detect obstacles thwarting their desire to become as good as other ethnic groups. Thirdly, we will examine the practical steps engendered in "Change Attitudes" in relation to two proposals made by the Singapore Malay Teachers' Union for changes to education for Malays.

5.1.1 Background: Significance of education in Singapore

Huge importance was placed on education in Singapore society. This was shown by a remark of the Malay MP, Sha'ari Tadin, in the landmark seminar in 1970.

> "If education is the ladder which leads to progress, and it has been and is currently being regarded by non-Malays as such, then education should be regarded by the Malays as a magic wand." [3]

And another Malay MP, Ghazali Ismail, said elsewhere:

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[2] Sharom & Wong eds., 1971, p11.
[3] Sharom & Wong eds., 1971, p4.

"The living standard of the Malays in this republic will be improved if the educational standard of the Malays is improved."[4]

These remarks unequivocally connect education and social advancement. The instant connection between these two elements makes particular sense in the Singapore context, because education in Singapore was overtly designed to meet the demands of economic necessity.[5] In the 1970s, Singapore was undergoing industrialization. On the international economic map the division of labour was shifting so that the task of supplying industrial workers, from engineers to factory workers, was moving partly from the first world to Singapore. Industry was the life line for the Singapore economy. In line with this global division of labour, the Singapore education system was tailored to produce the necessary labour force for Singapore's economic development. At university level, engineering and related disciplines were promoted. Similarly, the status of polytechnics and technical secondary schools such as Upper Serangoon Technical School, which could train mechanics or skilled technical workers for factories, increased in response to the economic trend.[6] At the lower levels of education, the subjects of maths, science and English were given primary significance, and (as mentioned) science and maths were taught in English in schools of every language stream, to make Singapore a part of the world market.[7] Also, from 1969, all male lower secondary pupils were required to have some exposure to technical subjects while girls were given a choice between technical subjects and domestic science.[8] The education system functioned to manufacture the necessary labour force.

By linking economic demand and education so closely, the state aimed at maximizing national human resources to serve economic development. In such circumstances, doing well at school, and in particular being good at the emphasized subjects of

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[4] *Berita Harian*, 6th June 1968.

[5] S. Gopinathan, 'Education,' in Ernest C.T. Chew & Edwin Lee, *A History of Singapore*, 1991, pp.268-87, at p279. "Education thus became a tool to meet the challenge of a growing population, and the state took the path of conventional wisdom in developing new skills and work attitudes to accommodate new economic activities, diversifying education and investing in technical education".

[6] *Berita Harian*, 26 August 1973. Teknikal Upper Serangoon was described as the central facility for Malay students to study technical subjects.

[7] Gopinathan, 1991, p278. "The Prime Minister defended the continued use of the English language, seeing it as a primary utilitarian tool in Singapore's efforts to make the world its market-place."

[8] Gopinathan, 1991, p297.

English, maths and science, can be connected directly with more job opportunities. In this context the comment above by Ghazali Ismail does make sense. And it means that improvement in education level simultaneously contributes to improvement in another target area set in the landmark seminar, that of employment. Thus the issue of education inevitably became a focus of "Change Attitudes."

The educational trends described above had an impact on the Malay organizations' own activities to improve the educational level of Malay students. The courses conducted by the Malay organizations emphasised the important subjects of maths, science and English. For instance, Singapore Malay Youth Library Association (Taman Bacaan) announced in 1971 that the main emphasis of its support courses for Malay students would be on English and maths in line with the education policy of the government.[9] And the Singapore Malay Teachers' Union, which conducted similar courses, announced in 1978 that it would begin to provide courses in English and maths at secondary school level.[10]

To put this linkage the other way round, Malays tended to evaluate education on the basis of whether it made their children good at maths, science and English. If it did, then in the most successful cases perhaps the child could go on to obtain a university degree, and later obtain a professional job, for instance as an engineer or accountant. Or as a more usual case, the child might gain the education to become a skilled technical worker in a factory – also socially encouraged.

A 1973 article in *Berita Harian* titled "More Malays change their attitudes and shift to becoming science and technology experts" reports such a trend in attitudes among Malays. It proudly introduces a young Malay woman, Sukaimi, who managed to graduate in Accountancy at the National University of Singapore, complete with a portrait-style photograph of her.[11] As a winner from among the Malays, she is presented as a model and celebrated, since her achievement ranks high on the Singapore standard applicable to non-Malays. Now Sukaimi's status as a winner entitles her to make a statement:

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[9] *Berita Harian*, 23rd October 1971.
[10] *Berita Harian*, 20th February 1978.
[11] *Berita Minggu*, 26th August 1973.

"The attitude among Malays students that subjects involving calculation are difficult seems to be an issue which has not yet been quite overcome. Hard work and determination, along with serious guidance from parents and friends – these are the only things that can enable Malay students to study at a high level, and these students should discard notions that a subject is difficult when they haven't even tried it." [12]

Her case is a successful example of "Change Attitudes" in terms of educational achievement. A Malay student who has a good command of English, has knowledge of maths and science, and manages to enter and graduate from University, can become an expert in a sought-after field such as engineering, or in Sukaimi's case, accounting. She personifies the way to be, to her fellow Malays.

To sum up, the goal for Malays in education is this: to reach the level of students from other ethnic groups, especially in English, maths and science, so that they can enter and succeed in higher education, and later attain a standard of living as high as people from other ethnic groups. Education thus tends to be re-examined by Malays in that light. How relevant is the current system of education to these desires, and how well does it help to achieve them?

5.1.2 Malay stream education: an inferior system

In this context Malays came to scrutinise the value of their own language and of Malay stream education, as part of their critical gaze of self-examination. To understand this, let us outline the basic structure of the education system for Malays in Singapore at that time. At the start of the 1970s, the education system offered Malay primary and secondary school students a choice between attending a Malay stream school or an English stream school. [13] In a Malay stream school, by the new education policy introduced in 1969, they would study the three core subjects of science, maths

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[12] *Berita Minggu*, 26th August 1973.
[13] In the same way, a Chinese (or Indian) Singaporean student could also choose between a Chinese stream (or Tamil stream) school on the one hand and English stream school on the other. Raj Vasil, *Asianising Singapore: the PAP's management of ethnicity*, Singapore: Heinemann Asia, 1995, p56.

and English through the medium of English.[14] That amounted to 43% of their class hours. They would study other subjects through the medium of Malay, amounting to a further 43% of classroom hours. These included geography, history and civics. The remaining 14% of classroom hours were devoted to ancillary subjects such as art, sport, and music, and were also taught in Malay.[15] On the other hand, a Malay student could attend an English stream school instead. In this case, s/he would naturally be taught the three core subjects of maths, science and English through the medium of English (43% of class hours). Other subjects amounting to 43% of class hours – under what was termed a 'bilingual education' policy – were taught in Malay.[16] However, the Malay student could now opt to study in English for ancillary subjects such as art, sport, and music, which amounted to an extra 14% of teaching hours in English.[17] What is more, in such a school the Malay student would also be exposed to much more English informally, both in and outside the classroom, than in a Malay stream schools.

At post-secondary level, no education was available in the medium of Malay. No higher education institutions in Singapore such as universities or polytechnics taught in the medium of Malay.[18] By contrast, there was both an English language medium university and a Chinese language medium university in Singapore. So all Malay students were forced to switch to English as their sole medium of instruction at university level, regardless of whether they had previously attended an English-medium school or not.

Within this context, Malays in Singapore began to criticise Malay stream schools for not giving their students enough exposure to English. A critical article in *Berita Harian* titled "Which is better, English stream or Malay stream education?" stressed the importance of English for Malay students:

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[14] 竹下秀邦 [Takeshita Hidekuni], シンガポール：リー・クワン・ユーの時代, [Singapore: the era of Lee Kuan Yew], アジア経済研究所 [The Institute of Developing Economies, Japan Extra Trade Organization], 1995, p292.

[15] A. Ghani Nasir, "Exposure to Malay continues to cause detriment to Malay students", *Berita Harian*, 30th June 1974.

[16] *Ibid.*

[17] *Ibid.*

[18] Tania Li, *Malays in Singapore: culture, economy, and ideology*, Singapore; New York: Oxford University Press, 1989 p118.

"To continue education to a higher level, one issue which we cannot neglect is proficiency in English, because English is the medium language at the higher levels, and all texts are written in English... In Singapore, command of English is important for anyone who wishes to continue their education at university no matter in what discipline"[19]

Here the critical gaze focuses on whether this Malay stream education system is relevant to achieve the desire of Malays to make Malay children as successful as those of other ethnic groups. In this light, it is detected as less promising than English stream education. It makes the Malay children less fluent in English than other children and less able to continue their education beyond secondary level.

This idea that Malay education puts children at a disadvantage is overtly expressed in another *Berita Harian* article. It compares the position of Chinese children with that of Malays. Talking about the problem of children not learning enough English in Malay schools, it said:

"The same problem was faced by Chinese stream schools. Their children, however, are destined for better things because the Chinese community has already realised the significance of tertiary education. That realisation has brought success to Chinese education by the forming of *Nanyang* University in 1953, which was the result of hard work by Chinese."[20]

Although Chinese stream schools too were facing a dramatic decline in student numbers due to competition from English stream schools,[21] and although Nanyang University was destined to close down in 1980 and be integrated into the English medium National University of Singapore, the point here is that during the 1970s

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[19] *Berita Minggu*, 30th June 1974.
[20] *Berita Harian*, 1st October 1971.
[21] Raj Vasil, 1995, p58. "Many in Singapore had then been surprised by the ease with which increasing numbers of parents, especially Chinese, had begun readily, and willingly, to subordinate their deep emotional attachment to their community-based educational institutions (which in the past had been one of the most important promoters of their different languages and cultures) to the practical need to secure for their children the education and training which was the best and which prepared them most effectively for higher education or the job market."

Malays could compare their situation with that of Chinese and feel themselves to be at a disadvantage.[22]

Malays looked bluntly at the weakness of Malay schools in equipping their students with adequate English. An article titled "Is the problem of language only a temporary one? Scholarship participants from Malay stream education" quoted Malay students themselves talking about their efforts to cope with English during their post-secondary studies. One student, currently at the National University of Singapore, said:

> "Because English plays a significant role in University education, students from Malay stream education must give much more serious attention to developing their English language ability... The majority of our friends come from Malay stream schools and were disappointed when they continued their study at University. This is because they have inadequate knowledge of English. We have many ways to cultivate our knowledge of English. Firstly, students should read a lot of books, magazines and newspapers in English... Secondly, we must socialise with non-Malay students." [23]

Another Malay student said

> "We need to take every chance to talk with students from English stream schools whenever the opportunity arises, during our school years."[24]

These voices above reveal students' consciousness of their weakness in handling English and their felt need for further efforts to make their English sufficient if they are from Malay stream education. Such stories by students were not so different in the polytechnics. A Malay student of a polytechnic asserted that the Malay stream education system caused anxiety to the Malay students about their ability in handling

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[22] It is worth noting that although Nanyang University was founded at the initiative of the Chinese community, in the 1970s it was supported by the government. This is therefore an instance when comparable facilities were not offered to the Malay community, yet rather than mentioning this discrimination (which anyway would have been well known to some readers), *Berita Harian* mentions only the initial hard work by Chinese, as an implicit criticism of the Malay community.

[23] *Berita Minggu*, 11th July 1971.

[24] *Ibid.*

English.[25] An article titled "Institute of Technology also encourages Malay students to gain diplomas" reported that the institute's language laboratory provided remedial support for the Malay students to practise their English intensively. [26] It also quoted a Malay student as saying how helpful this was:

> "The problem of English seems to be a short term problem – only when we started our study. As time goes by, perhaps because of our awareness that we must study seriously to improve our English, this problem can be overcome."[27]

The speaker confirmed that Malay students at the polytechnic are concerned about their English, saying: "They are afraid that they cannot be competitive in studies taught in English."[28]

Malays detected problems with Malay schools not only for continuing their education to a higher level, but also for getting jobs. For one thing, English was the language of communication in many working places. An analytical article in *Berita Harian* titled "New attitudes in children's education for our hopes and for national development" emphasises how important English was for that reason:

> "English has become the language stream in every sector of business and every corporation. Therefore, English is important for everyone wishing to work here [in Singapore]. "[29]

Another article in *Berita Harian* also commented critically on the value of Malay stream education for obtaining jobs, by quoting the voice of ordinary Malays interviewed. One such man in the street was quoted as saying that Malay education does not have as much value as before, because "in the private sector, a Certificate of Malay Education cannot have direct value [to obtain jobs]."[30] This voice continued:

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[25] *Berita Minggu*, 21st September 1975.
[26] *Ibid.*
[27] *Ibid.*
[28] *Berita Minggu*, 21st September 1975.
[29] *Berita Minggu*, 23rd March 1975.
[30] *Berita Minggu*, 24th December 1972.

"Graduates from Malay schools seem to find it harder and harder to obtain work. They already cannot have the same chance as students with certificates from other language stream schools."[31]

Having quoted a voice like above, the writer of the article summed up the value of Malay stream education in harshly pragmatic terms:

"It is clear that a certificate from an English stream school enables students to obtain jobs, rather than one from a Malay stream school. Although [students from both streams] have a certificate declaring the same status .... the economic value of Malay stream education can be evaluated from two points of view: firstly, whether it makes it easy or difficult for students to obtain a job, secondly, whether it is valuable for students in continuing their higher education. Measuring from these two perspectives, it is clear in our eyes that a certificate of Malay stream education has lower economic value than one of English stream education." [32]

Malay parents themselves become sceptical about Malay stream education. They questioned the command of English that it gave to children for their higher education and their employment prospects. An article highlighted this concern by parents in its title: "Why most parents do not want to send their children to Malay schools." The writer said that the poor English environment of Malay schools was identified as a problem by parents, and asserted, "English is understood to be only the second language at Malay [stream] schools, therefore, it is indeed true that [the students'] ability in handling this language is inadequate."[33] A second *Berita Harian* article similarly focused on this concern of parents. Titled "Malay parents are reluctant about exposure to Malay language", it reported how Malay parents with children at Malay schools worried that they would not gain a solid and certified command of English. And the writer voiced the hopes of parents that the poor environment of Malay children for learning English could be enriched:

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[31] *Ibid.*
[32] *Berita Harian*, 24th December 1972.
[33] *Ibid.*

"What we hope is that our children can be given better chances to be exposed to English. We all are aware that English is very important because English gives a more assured future, from the point of view of economics and of knowledge."[34]

As the value of Malay stream education came to be gradually doubted by more Malays themselves, the response of some Malay parents was to send their children to an English stream school instead. Statistics showed a decline in the number of students choosing Malay stream education year by year.[35] This move was regarded as part of "Change Attitudes" and was therefore positively perceived, as we see in one article:

"One of the changing attitudes evident in Malays is that of sending their children to the [English stream] primary school. What cannot be denied is that Malay parents are no longer so happy to send their children to a Malay stream primary school ... this recent attitude of the Malays to pursue higher education is now being demonstrated. "[36]

And another article refers to this action of Malay parents in a highly approving way:

"This situation [where English is vital for a child's future] is acknowledged by those Malay parents who are competitively sending their children to English schools. They are thinking about how seriously and urgently this issue must be addressed."[37]

So taking one's children out of a Malay school is something done by parents who think seriously about their children's education, and who want to enable their children

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[34] *Berita Harian*, 20th June 1974.
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Medium of Instruction	1972	1982
English	64.66	88.52
Chinese	31.71	11.36
Malay	3.35	0.10
Tamil	0.27	-

Primary School Enrolments, 1972 and 1982 (Reference: Raj Vasil, 1995, p59.)
[36] *Berita Minggu*, 26th August 1973.
[37] *Berita Minggu*, 23rd March 1975.

to compete with those from other ethnic groups. At the same time it is a way of responding to a problem they see with Malay stream education: that it fails to equip Malays to compete successfully in later life.[38]

5.1.3 "Change the education system": Malay proposals

Individual responses to the perceived weakness of Malay stream education were matched by proposals for change at the systemic level. This involved two proposals to change the education system itself: one in 1971 and one in 1974.

The first of the two proposals, in 1971, was the more radical. It involved the merging of all streams of education into a National System of Education. The key element was that all schools in Singapore would use English as the sole medium of instruction. This idea was first presented by the Singapore Malay Teachers' Union itself, in 1971. The Union discussed it at a meeting as follows:

> "An awareness of the lack of socio-economic value of Malay education has been acknowledged publicly; this is not limited to Malay intellectuals. Because most parents today have stopped trusting Malay education, they are already sending their children to English schools. Because of this situation, the proposal by the Union is that the education system be organized as one system by using English in all schools. This seems an issue that needs to be discussed urgently." [39]

This proposal was largely motivated by the desire of Malays to make Malay students as competitive as those other ethnic groups. This was acknowledged by a member of the Singapore Malay Teachers' Union at the time, Wan Hussin Zoohri. According to him, this proposal was intended to "let the Malay students compete on equal strength

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[38] In 1983, it was announced by the government that all schools in Singapore would switch to English as the sole medium of instruction at all levels by 1987 (see Raj Vasil, 1995, p60). Regarding the end of Malay stream schools specifically, a Malay man working at the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) called it "a slow death". He added that these schools "died naturally, because there was not much need [for them]". Conversation in English on 29th November 2002.
[39] *Berita Harian*, 3rd April 1971.

for employment without being stigmatized as coming from English or non English stream schools."[40]

An article in *Berita Harian* supported this proposal by the Singapore Malay Teachers' Union as follows:

> "Since 1970, various subjects such as science and maths have been taught in English from primary school onwards so that Malay students' knowledge of English can be intensified. Apart from this, if the Malay secondary schools are integrated [with English schools], the Malay students can then have a full chance to activate their English and to foster understanding and harmony [with other ethnic groups]"[41]

Such a Malay initiative is well in keeping with the theme of "Change Attitudes." To enable Malays to stand alongside other groups as acknowledged equals was an ultimate purpose of "change attitudes." If English is crucial for Singaporeans to become good at maths and science or as a tool to climb up the social ladder, and English stream education has the greater value, then Malays must accept English and seek an education in English, in order to improve their educational level and thus their standard of living.

Besides its core element that all schools in Singapore would use English as the sole medium of instruction, this 1971 proposal contained two other elements. Firstly, Malay language would be taught as a compulsory subject at all schools, as the national language. Secondly, non-Malay students would also learn their own language (e.g. Mandarin or Tamil) as a subject, while Malay students would instead learn Malay literature, including the study of Islamic texts.[42] Those extra provisions would make Malay more widely studied and raise its value in Singapore society. They would help to preserve Malay language, although admittedly weakening its identification with the Malay community. It seems to be due to one or both of these extra conditions that the proposal was rejected – although the government never stated clearly its reasons for

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[40] Wan Hussin Zoohri, *The Singapore Malays: the dilemma of development*, Singapore: Kesatuan Guru-Guru Melayu Singapura, 1990, p24. [quotation in original English]
[41] *Berita Minggu*, 24th December 1972.
[42] Wan, 1990, p24.

rejecting it. Commenting on the proposal, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, S. Rajaratnam, said "It seems that the Union has already entered the trap of people who have a sectarian outlook." [43] That remark suggests that for the government, the condition of teaching Malay language to all students in Singapore was a display of Malay ethnic chauvinism. And Sidek Saniff, then head of the Singapore Malay Teachers' Union, confirms that in his opinion the condition that Malay be taught as national language was the government's reason for rejecting this proposal. [44] This outcome provides an illustration of how an attempt by Malay interests to set 'rules' for the whole of Singapore was coldly rebuffed, reinforcing for Malays the lesson that basic criteria must be set by the majority in power.

Three years after the above proposal was rejected, in 1974, the Singapore Malay Teachers' Union made a second proposal. This proposal was accepted by the government later that year. [45] The successful proposal was to increase the exposure to English of those Malay students who were studying in the English stream schools. As we recall, Malay students at English schools received 43% of their tuition through the medium of Malay, and another 43% through English (plus the remaining 14% optionally in English). The Singapore Malay Teachers' Union now proposed that the proportion of core teaching in English be increased by another 10% by reducing that of Malay to 33% only. It made this proposal in a memorandum to the government in June 1974, in which it argued that the current exposure of Malay students to English was not sufficient. [46]

This proposal met with support from Malays outside the Singapore Malay Teachers' Union, too. An article in *Berita Harian* a few days after its announcement strongly supported the proposal and connected it with the wishes of Malay parents. The article was by the Malay journalist A. Ghani Nasir and was titled "Exposure to Malay continues to cause detriment to Malay students". It asked:

[43] *Berita Harian*, 26th April 1971.
[44] My interview in English with Sidek Saniff at the Ministry of Education on 7th September 1996. According to him, this element of the proposal was considered as ethnic chauvinism of the Malays.
[45] *Berita Minggu*, 25th July 1974.
[46] *Berita Minggu*, 25th July 1974.

"Why do the Malays teachers treat this matter of 43% of exposure [to Malay in English stream schools] as a serious issue and ask to have the amount cut down? I am certain that not only they but also the Malay parents want it cut down." [47]

A. Ghani Nasir went on to explain that parents want the proportion of Malay-medium class hours reduced because of the low value of the Malay language compared to English and Chinese. And in another article the following month, titled "Malay parents face a dilemma under the bilingual system", he again urged Malays in the direction of more English:

"Malays do not wish to see their children speak Malay and get a certificate which cannot guarantee their future or give them a good job. ... English will guarantee their future. And, in order to obtain concrete results from our sweat and our efforts, it is English to which we must give our full attention."[48]

Some voices of Malay parents heard in this article also expressed their frustration with the limited exposure to English in English stream schools. Mohd. Palali bin Ismail, a 43 year old working in the army, complained about the current bilingual education system. He had checked the textbooks of his children and realized that many of them were written in Malay. He feels that this situation made it difficult for his child, Zainuri, to speak and socialize in English although Zainuri was studying in the English stream.[49] He complained:

"Although this education system is the instruction of the government, it does not satisfy my purposes." [50]

Another parent, Hashim bin Abdul Rahman, also objects to the lack of English exposure in his child's English stream school:

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[47] *Berita Minggu*, 30th June 1974.
[48] *Berita Minggu*, 21st July 1974.
[49] *Ibid.*
[50] *Ibid.*

"My worthy intention has been to enrol my child to study in an English stream school. However, this bilingual education system puts more emphasis on the Malay language [than English], which is frustrating."[51]

During that month another article by A. Ghani Nasir appeared too, this time titled "Malay students will be more successful with more English exposure." It said:

"Singaporeans who wish to participate in and to increase the prosperity and progress that result from economic development based on English, must be able to handle the language. This has long been acknowledged by Malays, and it is why the Malays send their children to English stream schools... the pressing situation here has caused all Malay stream schools to become empty. This is now a fact and we cannot deny the power and the value of English."[52]

This article by A. Ghani Nasir also talks in revealing terms about the past and present role of English in Singapore. The writer poses the question "So now, should the Malays love English? Do they want to adore or glorify the language of the colonizer who shackled them during earlier times?" The writer's own answer is this:

"This love [of English] is rational because English is a passport to get a job ... the opportunities from this language are more impressive [than from Malay] and enable us to come out ahead..."[53]

This comment is remarkable for its cool gaze at English, the tool of the colonial master. Such a short time after independence, Malays have already managed to stop looking at English as a tool of the colonizer. The cultural value of English in the past is denied or no longer of concern. Now English is just "a passport" to a better job in Singapore. This remark indeed reveals 'mockery' in Bhabha's terms. The coloniser's perception of the value or meaning of having English as one's language is displaced by the Malays. It becomes a tool that Malays make use of, by their own preference.

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[51] *Ibid.*
[52] *Berita Minggu*, 7th July 1974.
[53] *Ibid*

What is more interesting still about this remark is the limits to its dispassionate gaze. It recognises English as a legacy of the colonial oppressors, and coolly decides not to care. But that gaze is not turned upon their relation to their "own" government in independent Singapore. Why must they have English once again, now that the colonial masters have left? Who has set English as such a powerful tool in Singapore this time? The urgency of Malays' desires to become as competitive as other ethnic groups in every field, makes it difficult for them to see the nexus between the state's ideology and their actual conduct under the name of "change attitudes." Their own conduct in fact nicely functions to complement the state ideology. In this case, their passion to perform "change attitudes" drives them to emphasise English over Malay language by their own will and for their own good.

We can now sum up the Malays' opinions and proposals about education in the 1970s within the context of "change attitudes". Malays compared their own education system and own language with those chosen by other ethnic groups, to calculate their worth in terms of achieving their desire to be as good as those groups. This gaze of self-examination detected a number of problems. Malay language had low value in educational and economic terms. It could not ensure success in the key subjects of maths, science and English. It did not promise a future for Malay children, either in higher education or in employment. To fix these problems in education, the Malay teachers proposed two solutions: firstly, for Malay schools to be merged with other streams, and secondly, for Malay students to use less Malay in English schools – the latter of which was adopted by the government.

These proposals were driven by the Malays' desire to be equal to the ethnic groups. As we saw earlier, Malay teachers made the first proposal for the sake of "letting the Malay students compete on equal strength for employment without being stigmatized as coming from English or non-English stream schools."[54] This desire to be able to compete with other ethnic groups on equal terms is at the heart of "change attitudes." And the attitude of Malay teachers in making these proposals was praised by some other Malays. Wan Hussin Zoohri, who used to be a member of the Singapore Malay Teachers' Union in the 1970s and later became a member of the parliament, remarked about the first proposal in 1971 that:

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[54] Wan, 1990, p24.

"It took intellectual courage on their part to voluntarily advocate the 'abandonment' of the Malay stream schools which could affect the security and tenure of the Malay teachers themselves."[55]

And a year after the second proposal had been accepted, *Berita Harian* praised the attitude that lay behind it:

"This attitude of The Singapore Malay Teachers' Union ... deserves our attention, because the Union is looking seriously at the destiny of Malay students in the various schools here... This is a step that had to be taken, and it shows how far ahead they are looking in the future to guarantee that Malay children have a command of English." [56]

The agency of Malays that we see in this section is interesting in the light of Bhaba's observations. Bhabha says that when the dominated/minority turns its gaze upon the dominant/majority, in imitating ('mocking') the conduct of the latter, it actually performs differently from it. It thus creates a new agency for itself, which is located between the majority and its own original position (see 1.3.3.1). This is certainly true of our Malay agency that performs "change attitudes" here. However – unlike in Bhabha's own illustration of a minority agency – this Malay agency does not displace the ideology presented by the majority or power-holders. Instead in its very own way it consolidates that ideology. This process occurs when the Malays propose more use of English and less use of Malay for their children through their own will and choice. As a minority, they did not assert the primacy of Malay language over English for Malays, nor criticize the power imbalance that had arisen between English and Malay language. Their desire to become as good as other ethnic groups meant they cooperated in the subordination of their mother tongue.

5.2 "Change Attitudes" for Malay Women in the 1970s

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[55] Wan, 1990, p25.
[56] *Berita Minggu*, 23rd March 1975.

The same kind of agency animated "Change Attitudes" for Malay women in Singapore in the 1970s. Specifically, they were required to change their attitude to make themselves suitable to the Singapore context of national development. Perhaps the story of how women were dragged into the process of nation building is a familiar one, seen in every new nation-state. The concern of this section however is rather on discourses about the roles of women by Malay women themselves that formed and sustained an agency to carry out the set of conducts of "Change Attitudes," in the name of contributing to national development. It is the story of how the state-sanctioned vision of the woman's role in Singapore was internalized as a goal by Singapore Malay women, in yet another dimension of the "Change Attitude" project.

5.2.1 The location of women in the context of Singapore in the 1970s

As often seen in the history of nation-forming in other nation-states, the government-sanctioned position of women in Singapore in the 1970s was formulated in order to maximize their labour potential or capacity to contribute to national development. The 1970s was an era of industrialization in Singapore.[57] Factories and businesses in Singapore needed more workers to sustain this economic boom. To fill this demand, especially for factory workers, the Singapore government encouraged women to work in jobs outside the home. This was a junction where the state met Singaporean women. Aline Wong explains this encounter well:

> In 1971, the Prime Minister made an appeal to the Singapore Employer's Federation to plan for employment of more young women workers. By this time, rapid industrialization had caused a labour shortage, and foreign workers had to be employed to fill in the gap. The Prime Minister remarked, "in case we reach the "cut off" point for work permits... may I suggest we start planning now how we can employ our young women workers? They are underutilized."[58]

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[57] For a succinct summary of industrialization in Singapore see Carl A. Trocki, *Singapore: wealth, power and the culture of control*, New York: Routledge, 2006, p163.
[58] Aline K. Wong, *Women in Modern Singapore*, Singapore: University Education Press, 1975, pp.31-33.

In this same year of 1971, statistics to support that idea of Lee's were submitted in a report by the National Productivity Centre on how to increase the country's effective supply of labour. The report stressed that Singapore's female labour force was being grossly under-utilized.[59] It thus sought to design the lives of women to meet the demands of national economic development.

Girls were encouraged to stay at school and to become educated. This education would make them suitable to contribute to the labour force by fostering both skills and the right mentality for work. As Wong puts it:

> "It is generally recognized that education ... provides women with the occupational skills, as well as the "modernistic" attitudes required by the modern industrial system, such as rationality, achievement-motivation and individualism, etc."[60]

In short, girls were being constructed to become suitable productive workers after their education.

A potential labour force can consist not only of young recently educated women, but also of married women. To turn those married women who were engaged in domestic labour into members of the paid workforce as well, a policy to control the number of their children was appropriate. A White Paper on family planning had been published in 1966 outlining a five-year plan. Its chief purpose was stated as follows: to "liberate our women from the burden of bearing an unnecessarily large number of children and as a consequence, to increase in human happiness for all."[61] How this increase in human happiness for all would be achieved was explained by the Minister for Health, Chua Sian Chin, in 1973.

> "In an industrialized and highly urbanized Singapore of the 1970s, a large family is a tragedy for the children, a burden to their parents, and a drag on the whole society... As our economy expands, wages will go up. But the rise in

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[59] Wong, 1975, p33.
[60] Wong, 1975, p39.
[61] Chang Chen Tung, Ong Jin Hui, and Peter S.J. Chen, *Culture and Fertility: The Case of Singapore*, 1980, p20.

wages will not bring a better life to those families who increase their burden by having more children to feed, clothe, and nurture. When parents have more children than they can adequately feed and care for, these children will have poorer diet and health. Their education and training will suffer and they will remain at the lower levels of incomes and unskilled jobs. No amount of subsidies by the Government can remedy the lack of adequate food and care at home... In fact, the greater the feather-bedding of large antisocial families, the greater will be the numbers of large families... Moreover, social friction and tensions will increase because [children in large families] will do poorly because they are deprived of adequate food and care. It is a vicious circle which we must break. It is kinder in the long run to put disincentives on large families. Certainly it will carry less danger of social tensions, overcrowding, and generally lower standards in the very limited space of Singapore... To bring each child to his or her full potential, we must break this vicious cycle."[62]

So, large families were antisocial, and would cause the whole society to lag behind in development. When this policy was launched, the central slogan for its publicity and education campaign was "Plan Your Family." In 1968, the slogan was changed to present the rather precise intention of this policy. The new slogan was "Plan your Family Small."[63]

To educate Singaporeans about this new idea of "planning your family small," a multi-media campaign was conducted. A two-child family as the normative shape for a family, and sterilization as a birth control method for couples with two or more children, were encouraged and promoted as a part of the policy of population control. For the purpose of population control, two Acts were passed in 1970, one making abortion legal and one making voluntary sterilization legal. Services were provided at several government hospitals for female sterilization and abortion.

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[62] Janet W. Salaff, *State and Family in Singapore: restructuring a developing society*, Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 1988, pp.37-38.
[63] Chang, Ong, and Chen, 1980, pp.20-21.

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The connection between small family size and the supply of female labour is precisely pointed out by Linda Y. C Lim as follows.

> "The drastic reduction of family size to a 2- to 3- child norm, facilitated by an intense and comprehensive national family planning campaign, reduced the time and effort required for reproductive tasks like child-bearing, nursing and rearing and housework, while the new jobs created in offices and factories did not require heavy physical labour at which women would be disadvantaged."[64]

This small nuclear family size also matched the housing planning of the Singapore government. To utilize the limited physical space in Singapore, the government launched a housing policy based on state-designed housing. The Housing and Development Board (HDB) was in charge of replacing old style *kampong* and squatter houses with high rise buildings which could accommodate more families within a smaller space than houses. The new government flats in these high rise buildings were not designed to meet the demands of the actual size of families, but rather, the size of the flats helped to shape the size of the family. Small sized families were also given priority in the allocation of the flats. Until 1970, priority of access had been given to families with larger numbers of children. This policy was reversed in 1970, so that small families with no more than three children were now officially given priority over larger families in the allocation of HDB flats.[65] So through the government's housing plans as well, "Plan Your Family Small" was encouraged.

Women's participation in national development did not end with carrying out birth control and becoming workers for industry. Those women who were mothers bore the added responsibility of raising a new generation that possessed the necessary skills and knowledge to serve the economic prosperity of Singapore. They were expected to do this by ensuring that the child obtained as much and as good an education as possible, and by supervising the child's education at home as well.

In summary, the ideal women is designed to contribute to national development both inside and outside the home. Young female students are encouraged to study hard to

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[64] Linda Y.C. Lim, *Women in the Singapore Economy*, Singapore: Chopmen, 1982, p5.
[65] Chang, Ong, and Chen, 1980, p25.

obtain a suitable mindset as well as ability in relevant subjects to work in a modernized industrial setting. Women who are already married are strongly recommended to have a small family with a maximum of two children, and to become a source of labour for industry at the same time. As mothers, women are obliged to reproduce the next generation who can perform meritocracy ideology in their turn and contribute to national development. Women are expected to juggle their roles inside and outside the house. This was the government-sanctioned picture of being a woman in Singapore society. The next question is how the Malay women responded to such a picture.

5.2.2. Opening speech at the seminar "Malay Women's participation in the development of Singapore society"

In 1974, a seminar titled "Malay women's participation in the development of Singapore Society" was organized by the women's wing of the Central Council of Malay Cultural Organizations, Singapore (Majlis Pusat). This seminar, which was held by Majlis Pusat, was reported in some detail in *Berita Harian*. Furthermore, a collection of all the papers from the seminar was published by Majlis Pusat in booklet form (titled *Seminar Penyertaan Wanita Melayu Dalam Pembangunan Masyarakat*). The opening talk at the seminar was by Asmah Alsagoff, the vice chair of Majlis Pusat. We will examine this speech to see how it declares the intentions and desire of Malay women in Singapore – a desire underlying performance of "Change Attitudes" during that decade. Asmah Alsagoff began by observing:

> "This is the first time that Malay/Moslem women can get together at the Council like this to exchange our ideas and think about the problems, big or small, that we are facing."[66]

By this introduction, she establishes that the seminar was a women's version of the landmark seminar 'Malay participation in national development' in 1970. In that earlier seminar, leading Malay figures had placed themselves and their fellow Malays

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[66] Jabatan Wanita Majlis Pusat, *Seminar Penyertaan Wanita Melayu dalam Pembangunan Masyarakat, Singapore*, Singapore: Chopmen, 1975, p4. [quotation translated from original Malay by Yasuko Kobayashi]

under scrutiny as a group which was lagging behind the other ethnic groups. In the same way, at this seminar in 1974 Malay women specifically put themselves under scrutiny to detect their problems. And as Asmah Alsagoff continues her speech, we see another similarity. Malays at the landmark seminar had deployed comparisons with non-Malays as a basis for detecting their own problems. And so too Malay women are invited to compare themselves with non-Malay women, for the same purpose:

> "We believe that many problems currently faced by Malay and Muslim women do not seem to be problems for other women. We are certain that half of the problems related to everyday life and life as social beings are faced more by Malay/Muslims than by other ethnic groups. For instance, the issues of nutrition and of choosing suitable life priorities seem to be 'non-problems' for the Chinese community and the Indian community. These issues still seem to be discussed and debated [in the Malay community]." [67]

The message here is that Malay women are different from the rest, and that 'different' means 'behind'. Malay women are felt to have problems which other women in Singapore do not have, or no longer have – from matters of basic health to basic setting of priorities in life.

The mention of life priorities above seems to imply a problem of attitude. And Asmah Alsagoff indeed regards "Change Attitudes" as the essential conduct for Malay women. They are lagging behind other women in Singapore in terms of changing their attitudes:

> "We are aware that "change attitudes and our way of life" seems difficult. It seems a time-consuming process. Maybe [it will take] a couple of decades, or perhaps a couple of generations, or perhaps a couple of centuries. "Change" requires sacrifice, and its results are yet to be clearly seen or felt. We are aware

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[67]Jabatan Wanita Majlis Pusat, 1975, p4. [quotation translated from original Malay by Yasuko Kobayashi]

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of this. We are also aware that among us women, old ways of thinking are still strong; whereas in our society, the winds of change are blowing."[68]

The distance between Malay women and other women can be measured in decades, generations, or even centuries, in terms of how long it will take to catch up. However, this feeling of being lagging behind is not itself the core of the Malay agency that is forming here. Rather, that feeling creates a desire to be as good as people from other groups. Asmah Alsagoff goes on to express a future wish on behalf of Malay women at the seminar to improve themselves, to become good enough to compete with other people in Singapore.

"...participants [in the seminar] will have a chance to find out about aspects of society and development which may not have been quite clear before now .... We pray that ... through this seminar, our zest for knowledge, and our desire to join in the race as part of the competition of life in a multi-racial society, can be fostered and strengthened... we also hope that through this seminar, old notions which are already outdated and unsuited to the pace of this era can be discussed and removed so that they do not remain as obstacles to the progress of Malay/Moslem women. And we hope that new concepts of life which are suited to [this new] era can be discussed and raised. We as a group of women must be good at adapting ourselves, at equipping ourselves for the developments of the age. If we do not do that, then the age will leave us behind..."[69]

Here Asmah Alsagoff rallies her audience to detect the obsolete notions that are holding back Malay women and hindering their fitness for competition in modern Singapore, and set them as targets for fixing.

These discourses about how Malay women should improve their lives display another similarity to the landmark seminar in 1970. At that earlier seminar, prominent Malays declared that there was no further need for affirmative action – that Malays should and

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[68] Jabatan Wanita Majlis Pusat, 1975, p4. [quotation translated from original Malay by Yasuko Kobayashi]

[69] Jabatan Wanita Majlis Pusat, 1975, p4. [quotation translated from original Malay by Yasuko Kobayashi]

must help themselves. And at this 1974 seminar, self-effort by Malay women is similarly declared as the way to improve their community:

"We must try to improve our destiny by ourselves, before hoping that other people will help or support us in improving it... We Malay and Muslim women can more or less try to seek ways to fix our problems by ourselves, so that our lives will not be too deprived and backward."[70]

This opening speech of the seminar is an important public statement on behalf of Malay women about their position in Singapore. It expresses a desire to match the picture of the ideal capable woman in Singapore like women from other ethnic groups. It is apparently this shared desire that leads others among Malay women to perform "Change Attitudes" during the coming decade by examining themselves as a group, detecting problems, and setting them as targets for fixing.

Ucapan penutup dari Cik Asmah Alsagoff.

1) Opening speech by Asmah Alsagoff[71]

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[70] Jabatan Wanita Majlis Pusat,1975, p4. [quotation translated from original Malay by Yasuko Kobayashi]
[71] Jabatan Wanita Majlis Pusat, 1975, back cover.

Para peserta dalam sidang pleno.

2) Participants in the seminar[72]

5.2.3 Performance of "Change Attitudes" for Malay women

The specific problems relating to Malay women identified and set as targets for fixing can be grouped under three main headings: family planning, participation in the workforce, and helping children to succeed at school. As we consider how these issues were handled we will notice how Malay women themselves took an increasingly active role in performing "Change Attitudes". At the start of the 1970s this set of conducts tended mostly to involve Malay men detecting problems with Malay women that needed fixing. But Malay women accepted such diagnoses of their problems by Malay men, and as the decade went on, it was largely they who began to examine themselves in order to detect their own problems and set them as targets for self-improvement.

5.2.3.1 Family Planning

The issue of family planning for Malay women was mainly about controlling the number of children by using contraceptive pills or other methods of contraception. A family with a maximum of two children was considered the standard type. However, the Malay women's high fertility prevented them from achieving such an ideal style. This high fertility was detected as a problem by using the familiar comparative

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[72] Jabatan Wanita Majlis Pusat, 1975, back cover.

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framework of Malays vs non-Malays. A 1972 research study of the national family planning program reported:

> "Of the three major ethnic groups, the Chinese are most likely to have one or no child on their first visit [to a family planning clinic to arrange contraception]. The proportion is 33% for the Chinese, 23% for the Indians and Pakistanis, and 19% percent for Malays. On the other hand, 43% of the Malay 'acceptors' already have at least five children on their first visit..."[73]

The same study also reported that "among the three ethnic groups, the Malays are the most likely to be new to the practice of birth control: four in five among those with at least three children had never practised contraception before."[74]

Once the problem had been quantified in this way, it was soon taken into serious consideration by the Malays themselves. In the same year, a TV forum was held to discuss the family planning of Malays. Here Malay male figures outlined solutions and reconfirmed the direction for the Malay women to take. The forum was chaired by the Malay MP Sha'ari Tadin. It took the form of a discussion among three participants: a child welfare officer, Mansor Haji Fadzal; a registrar from the Syariah Court, Abu Bakar Hashim; and a doctor from a hospital at Outram, Ghazali Ismail.

Mansor Haji Fadzal argued that Malay women should limit their number of children, saying: "In the context of Singapore today, Singaporeans need to have a small family – this is purely to give maximum opportunities to the children later..."[75] Abu Bakar Hashim agreed with him, adding, "If by having a certain number of children we feel we can guarantee them a better life in the future and can give full attention to them, then I think we must limit the size of our family."[76]

The discussion thus showed clearly the attitude that Malays should adopt: plan to have a small family. As an adjunct to this theme, Dr Ghazali Ismail prescribed a concrete

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[73] Chang Chen Tung & Stephan H.K. Yeh, *A Study of Singapore's National Family Planning Programme*, Singapore: University of Singapore, Economic Research Centre, 1972, pp.57-8.
[74] Chang & Yeh, 1972, p59.
[75] *Berita Harian*, 25th July 1972.
[76] *Ibid.*

way to put this attitude into action: use the contraceptive pill. He acknowledged the widespread fears among Malay women about the health risks of the pill, but stated firmly that using the pill does not harm a woman's health.[77] He explained that initial symptoms of using the pill (nausea or headache) can cause scepticism among the Malay women, but that these symptoms will disappear after a couple of months of use.[78]

In addition to medical approval for using the pill there was religious approval from Abu Bakar Hashim. He explained the Islamic understanding of contraception, assuring viewers that contraception was not against Islamic religion. This was because it was not a measure to directly prevent the birth of a child, but only to regulate or delay the birth of a child.[79] Abu Bakar Hashim quoted a verse (*ayat*) from Islamic scripture which says: "Do nothing which causes harm, and do not cause harm to ourselves". He offered his interpretation of that verse as follows:

> "Here [in this *ayat*] we can see that, in a case where having a baby would bring harm to the mother and the family, then Islam forbids us from doing it."[80]

In other words, if having another child would bring social or economic harm to the mother and family by making the size of the family too large, then it is wrong to have that child.

This TV program, and the feature article in *Berita Harian* reporting on it, showed Malay women how they should change their attitudes regarding family planning. They should control their problematic fertility by using the contraceptive pill properly and with religious approval. These voices are those of male Malays, and so it appears that such diagnoses about Malay women were being made from a male Malay viewpoint, not by Malay women themselves. However, we also hear the voices of Malay women – largely members of the elite but also some ordinary Malays whose discourses are cited approvingly in *Berita Harian* – who have come to accept and to appropriate

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[77] *Ibid.*
[78] *Ibid.*
[79] *Ibid.*
[80] *Berita Harian*, 25th July 1972.

these diagnoses. They became dynamic performers of "Change Attitudes" by their own choice.

One such performance was a talk by Salamah Baharuddin to other Malay women at the 1974 seminar. Here she declares that they must reduce their fertility and follow family planning to improve the quality of their lives.

> "Family planning will improve the standard of living per family. A woman does not need to produce children every minute. [With a small number of children] she can feel happier in managing domestic work while watching her child. And only in such a condition can a father feel at peace with his wife and children. In this way, a husband does not need to stay out of the house, to avoid coming back to see his children or wife in an atmosphere with no peace. Children [in a small family] can obtain better education and guidance from their parents. With family planning, children can have a better chance of gaining a higher education."[81]

Here Salamah Baharuddin forcefully argues the benefits that Malay women can win for themselves, their husbands, and their children by taking a more sensible attitude to family planning.

More Malay women evidently came to share the conviction that a small family was a road to greater happiness and success. An article in *Berita Harian* in 1976 was titled "Most agree that a small family is a better guarantee of the future." It reported that many Malay women had stated to *Berita Harian* that they had changed their preference to having a small family.[82] It featured two Malay families and interviewed them about their family life.[83] A Malay female teacher, Aishah Akil, stated the benefits that a small family brought her:

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[81] Jabatan Wanita Majlis Pusat, 1975, p31. [quotation translated from original Malay by Yasuko Kobayashi]

[82] *Berita Minggu*, 28th March 1976

[83] *Ibid.* The views of the Malay women from the other family, Hasni binti Ma'azid, were not reported in the article.

"With a small-sized family, I can continue my career success and can see that my family has sufficient financial capacity for everyday life which is indeed becoming more expensive." [84]

The achievements of Malay women in adopting family planning were also celebrated in a 1977 article in *Berita Harian* by a Malay female journalist, Zawiyah Salleh. In the past, she said, Malay women had wrong notions about family planning:

"Around five or six years ago, it was difficult for us to see Malay women in particular going to the clinic to ask about family planning... most Malay women thought that family planning was to prevent them from having children. Consequently, they did not understand the concept of the family planning."[85]

However, Zawiyah Salleh asserted, most of her fellow Malay women think differently nowdays:

"Most woman now not only understand the concept [of family planning], but are no longer shy about meeting doctors and talking with them [about family planning] if there is a problem." [86]

"Most Malay women have changed, and have now accepted the concept of family planning. They have changed their attitudes during the past five or six years."[87]

In this section we see how some Malay women came to regard old attitudes to fertility as a problem and take steps to fix them. They can gain a feeling of satisfaction by following the way of the majority in this regard. When prominent Malay women came to think that Malay women should have smaller families and to tell them so, we can expect that they feel they are doing it for the Malays. When ordinary Malay women adjust their attitude in the same direction, they most likely feel they are doing it for

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[84] *Ibid.*
[85] *Berita Harian*, 17th January 1977.
[86] *Berita Harian*, 17th January 1977.
[87] *Ibid.*

themselves and their families – as Aishah Akil does above. However this conduct in fact nicely overlapped with what the state wishes them to achieve.

1) The blessed family of Aishah Akil [88]

2) A cheerful and happy atmosphere seen in the faces of a small successful family watching TV together[89]

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[88] Photo from *Berita Minggu*, 28th March 1976.
[89] Photo of Hamid Ahmad Shad's family, also interviewed, *Berita Minggu*, 28th March 1976.

5.2.3.2 Becoming working women

The state's expectation in the 1970s that women would obtain education and a job to help fill the shortage of labour (see 5.2.1.) also affected the Malays. Like women of other ethnic groups, Malay women were encouraged to obtain jobs outside the house. The year after the Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, appealed for more female workers to be employed (see 5.2.1), the Young Women Muslim Association (*Persatuan Pemudi Islam Singapura*) organized a public lecture by a member of Majlis Pusat, Sharom Ahmat, on how Malay women should behave regarding jobs. Firstly, Sharom Ahmat outlined for these Malay women the basic elements of the 'Malay problem' in Singapore, as it had been formulated at the landmark seminar a year earlier:

> "The fact we should be aware of in the context of Singapore is that we as a minority cannot hope that the government will change the policy for Malays or other ethnic groups in education, economy or other social issues. Conversely, we ourselves must be aware that the Malays in Singapore are lagging far behind. Therefore, we Malays cannot keep ourselves silent about this issue [of Malay backwardness]. We ourselves must be responsible and change our situation."[90]

After this statement that Malays can expect no affirmative action and must change their situation themselves, Sharom Ahmat went on to emphasise that message, by adding that "we must work hard to change our destiny."[91]

This time Malay women were expected to make changes in their attitudes to work. By Sharom Ahmat's diagnosis, these attitudes of Malay women were a problem.

> "Among Malay young women, there are those who are reluctant to take factory jobs that are low-paid. The issue of salary is not only experienced by the Malays, it includes all factory workers. If we acquire high skills, we will

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[90] *Berita Harian*, 15th April 1971.
[91] *Ibid.*

have no difficulty in getting well-paid jobs in factories. However, if our skill is low, we must start from the bottom."[92]

The attitude at stake here is Malay women's reluctance to take jobs for low wages. If only demeaning and low paid jobs are available that is because of their own weakness because they have not acquired the right skills. How they should change their attitudes is by grasping any job available, to help supply labour to factories.

Sharom Ahmat also recommends that Malay women work in hotels as waitresses.[93] Conventionally, from an Islamic viewpoint, working as a waitress was considered wrong because dealing with pork or carrying pork was a sin. However, he explains that this view of work as a waitress was incorrect:

> "The Islamic Religious Council has provided interpretations by experts about work in hotels. Some Malay mothers prevent their children from working in hotels because they think it is unlawful... Working as a waitress forces them to carry dishes like pork. From a religious viewpoint, touching pork is filthy, and considered unlawful. However, a waitress carries pork that is sitting on top of a plate. Is it also unlawful to carry pork without touching the pork itself?"[94]

This recommendation to work as a waitress also corresponds to the new labour market of the 1970s. Tourism was expanding in Singapore, and was considered as a key new money-generating industry. Whatever new job opportunities arise, wherever labour is needed, Malay women should make themselves fit in – for example by discarding conventional attitudes about being a waitress.

These attitudes to work suggested by Sharom Ahmat precisely correspond to Lee Kuan Yew's ideas about utilizing female labour in Singapore. Their attitudes to work were examined to diagnose problems, such as choosiness in jobs or lack of enterprise in embracing new possible types of work.

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[92] *Ibid.*
[93] *Ibid.*
[94] *Berita Harian,* 15th April 1971.

The ideas propounded here by Sharom Ahmat about problematic attitudes of the Malay working women began to be expressed by some Malay women too. A Malay female reader of *Berita Harian* in a letter the following year, titled "Women in factories: do we still want others to support us?" claimed that Malay women themselves were already practising to fix these problems:

"Are women unaware about this current era? Oh, no no. We choose to seek work. No matter where jobs appear, we will rush off quickly... When there is a chance given to young Malay people, then I think we must seize that opportunity. There is no point in us being unwilling to take a job just because the salary is small and the working environment is not pleasant. We must not take such an attitude."[95]

This letter by a reader of *Berita Harian* warns against outdated choosy attitudes to job seeking and asserts that Malay women are abandoning such attitudes themselves. She claimed they were now willing to take any type of job. This type of conduct of "Change Attitudes" by Malay women is also illustrated in a 1973 article titled "More Malay girls choose to become a waitress in a coffee house."[96] It reported the voices of Malay young women working as waitresses. One Malay waitress said "my work is not as dirty as many of our parents thought that it would be"[97]. Another said,

"My parents now encourage me to work at this job, because they are aware of how it can be difficult to find work, and because being a waitress is not a humiliating job."[98]

The 1974 seminar gave politically active and aware Malay women another forum to enact and consume this type of conduct. Here, Malay women participants exercised their gaze of self-examination to detect the problems of Malay women in obtaining jobs. A paper on this very topic by Firdaus Akip discussed how Malay mothers should help their daughters to become more able to compete for jobs. In particular, she said,

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[95] *Berita Harian*, 14th August 1972.
[96] *Berita Harian*, 6th November 1973.
[97] *Ibid.*
[98] *Ibid.*

mothers should be aware that their children's command of English is crucial for them to be able to get good jobs:

> "English is very important for a student to become successful in this world. English allows our girls to obtain more knowledge about the duties and work of a judge, or of a nurse, and so on...We must plant in the minds of Malay girls   a strong spirit of effort and diligence [in learning English][99]

After the seminar, some other Malay women continued to detect problematic attitudes of Malay female workers. The female journalist Zawiyah Salleh did so in two articles in *Berita Harian*, that year and the following year. In the first of these, titled "Are Malay women still reluctant to work as bus conductors?," she criticised Malay women's choosy attitudes to work – using the familiar comparative frame between Malays and Chinese. She acknowledged that in terms of jobs in factories, Malay women had already changed their attitudes and began to take those jobs more willingly. However, she said that in relation to other jobs, such as that of bus conductor, Malay women were still hampered by their old attitude of reluctance. They felt that jobs such as bus conductor only suitable for men – even though young Chinese women as well as men already did them.

The article introduced the voices of young Chinese women who worked as bus conductors. One of them, Chia Sai Cheng, talked about her job.

> "My life is good, because the enthusiasm of us women is wanted at work as well these days... This job is not so heavy, contrary to what most women imagine."[100]

After citing this example of a good attitude, Zawiyah Salleh contrasts it with the attitude of Malay women. They are still particular about what work they do:

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[99] Firdaus Akip, 'Masalah pelajaran yang dihadapi oleh gadis-gadis Melayu,' in Jabatan Wanita Majlis Pusat, 1975, pp.23-29. [quotation translated from original Malay by Yasuko Kobayashi]
[100] *Berita Harian*, 24th September 1974.

"Half of, well, maybe most of Malay women still like to be choosy about their work and want to obtain jobs out of line with their qualifications. They stay unemployed waiting for an opportunity to work in a factory or office so that they can work in a job which they regard as suitable for themselves." [101]

Such attitudes will not enable one to become like women from other ethnic groups – women who can take any jobs, without regard for preference or conventional notions of what is suitable work for a woman. Such work attitudes are already actualized by Chinese young women, but not by Malay women yet. Malay women must aspire to this goal, in order to be as good as other women in Singapore. Zawiyah Salleh's remark, "We can see many non-Malay women who have already become bus conductors. Why can't we be as capable as them?" [102] expresses a kind of frustration to her fellow Malay women readers while urging them to change and become as good as other women in Singapore.

A year later, another article by Zawiyah Salleh appeared on the theme of problems of women in work. Titled "Are women at the level of men?", [103] it took the approach of comparing men and women in Singapore generally, and the problems of the latter in terms of attitude to work outside the home. However, once again she is addressing Malays, in a Malay newspaper, in order to detect the problems of women in work; so she is in effect urging Malay women once again to improve their attitudes to work.

Zawiyah gives reasons why women are less successful in the workplace than men (citing statistics to support each point). Firstly, women change their place of work more frequently than men do. Secondly, female blue collar workers tend to resign their jobs for reasons of family, because they take their family more seriously than jobs. Lastly, women tend to think about desirable jobs in terms of conventional choices such as being a teacher or a nurse. This attitude prevents them from obtaining jobs in areas involving technology. [104] To sum up, Zawiyah detects women's lack of real commitment to paid work and their stereotyped notions of suitable jobs for

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[101] *Ibid.*
[102] *Ibid.*
[103] *Berita Harian*, 21st January 1975.
[104] *Ibid.*

women, as attitudes that they need to change. And this message is directed to Malays, as her audience of readers.

During the late 1970s, articles in *Berita Harian* came to celebrate Malay women's increasing success in changing their attitudes. A 1978 article titled "Five Malay girls accept the challenge of the shipping docks," by Khairani Ahmad, focused on young Malay women who had obtained jobs at a dockyard and were undergoing a training course there.[105] These girls, the writer explains, "choose heavy work because they hope to prove that women can also do work which is monopolized by men."[106] One of the young Malay women, Faridah Beram, aged 18, said

> "Perhaps most people imagine that heavy work like this can only be done by male workers. But, it seems that if women are also capable of working at heavy duties and are determined to face challenges, then they will be able to obtain expert jobs like men."[107]

> "I am lucky because I was chosen to participate in the course. It is not so difficult for me to understand the operation of the work because I am from the technical [college education] stream."[108]

These comments pose a contrast to the problematic attitudes of Malay women that were identified earlier. Malay women used to be choosy about the type of work they did and moved from one workplace to another with little passion or commitment toward their work. But now they are willing to shed the conventional notions of what female work is and to enter fields that are unfamiliar for women. Hardworking and determined, they want to stay in the same job and train to obtain high technical skills in their field.

Another example of Malay women who had conquered the old work attitudes appeared in another *Berita Harian* article in the same year by Zawiyah Salleh. These women had succeeded in becoming supervisors in a factory. Some of them earned

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[105] *Berita Minggu*, 11th June 1978.
[106] *Ibid.*
[107] *Ibid.*
[108] *Ibid.*

1) Samiah Rahman (left) and Faridah Beram are carrying out their tasks. [109]

from 700 dollars to 1,000 dollars a month. The key to the success of these women was their perseverance in staying in the same job for long enough to build their skills and win promotion. One Malay woman in such a supervisory position stated:

> "It is certain that their success is nothing other than the result of their determination or patience in working at the one kind of job. They do not want to change their job, but rather want to increase their skills in the one field."[110]

These women are not only working for money, but also for the personal satisfaction obtained from working at a skilled and challenging job. This supervisor goes on to say:

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[109] Photo from *Berita Minggu*, 11th June 1978.
[110] *Berita Minggu*, 9th July 1978.

"Those who like to change jobs are likely to face a future of working in unchallenging jobs. Usually this type of person will suffer disadvantage, because they will not obtain the positive and meaningful experiences of working in a skilled specialised field."[111]

These comments by these Malay women reveal how they performed "Change Attitudes" in the workplace to fix their problems and so become more like women from other ethnic groups. Such conduct also provides a source of satisfaction and confidence for Malay women; the confidence that enables the factory supervisor above to declare:

"It can be said that the majority of Malay girls have already become as competitive at work as girls from other ethnic groups."[112]

While this performance of "Change attitudes to work" was a response to new priorities in the developing Singapore economy, it cannot be understood as something that was forced upon Malay women by the state or imposed on them by Malay men. It appears that increasing numbers of them took this path as a way of obtaining meaningful goals, including notably, the desire to match the success of women from other ethnic groups.

5.2.3.3 Guiding children academically

Just as the roles of Malay women outside the home were redefined to suit the Singapore context, so were the roles of Malay women inside the home as mothers. This was done by singling out a specific duty of mothers for overriding emphasis; namely, the duty to guide one's children to achieve high success at school. Emphasising this duty reflected the fact that education was the key vehicle to ascend the economic ladder in Singapore (see 5.1.1). The main challenge presented to Malay women with regard to this duty as mothers was to fulfil it successfully while at the same time pursuing their exemplary role of worker and income-earner outside the home.

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[111] *Berita Minggu*, 9th July 1978.
[112] *Ibid.*

This expectation of Malay mothers was stressed by Sharom Ahmat in the 1971 public lecture organized by Young Women Muslim Association mentioned earlier.

> "The role of our women in the process of national development is vital, because they are the ones to educate our children who will become the next generation. Mothers must plant in their children a spirit of enthusiasm, so that their children can improve their level of education and standard of living in the future."[113]

Sharom Ahmat asserts here that the crucial duty of Malay mothers is to educate their children, and particularly to motivate them to do well at school and in work.

The responsibility of mothers for their children's education became a topic discussed in the 1970s in *Berita Harian*. In order to succeed in education, Malay children themselves were expected to work hard. However, what children can do by disciplining themselves has limits. In a series of *Berita Harian* articles, some Malay women – writers, or the women they interviewed, or both – examined their duty to guide their children's education and the extent to which they succeeded in fulfilling it.

A 1972 article titled "Why Malay children are weak in education", focused on how parents can help their children to do better at school. [114] Four Malay parents, two fathers and two mothers, presented their own opinions about how parents could participate in that goal. While the Malay fathers mentioned how parents should discipline their children, [115] and should be involved in educating their children at home, [116] the two Malay mothers focused on the difficulty that they had in fulfilling those duties properly. Both felt that their absence from home due to their long hours of work caused their children to lack discipline.

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[113] *Berita Harian*, 15th April 1971.

[114] *Berita Minggu*, 16th July 1972.

[115] *Ibid.* "Our children are aware that we always pay attention to how much they study. And recently, they feel scared to ignore their study."

[116]*Ibid.* "I think that in guiding children, parents play an important role. During their time at home [after school] there is plenty of free time. Parents need to quiz them on all subjects and review all their exercise books and give them necessary practice..." "Parents need to organize a tutorial to lead their children's studies or take their children to after-hours coaching school. This is happening in Singapore quite a lot... Parents should take serious action and examine what the children have studied at school."

Zainab Abdul Rahman pointed out that Malay families with a low income had no choice but for both parents to work outside the home for long hours. This can harm the children's education, she said, because parents could not then supervise their children's study or check and test the child on the work that the child had done.[117] And without their parents to supervise them, their children could also come to mix with the wrong people, such as "naughty friends who like marijuana."[118]

A similar point was made by Hosminah binti Mohd.Yunos. She too said that while parents are out of home working long hours and unable to supervise their children, the children could associate with friends of bad character. And she said that Malay parents had to try to guard against this:

> "Parents also have to pay attention to the issue of friendship, of whose children they are mixing with – because it does happen that our children associate with badly behaved friends and that this causes them to carry out illegal conduct. If this type of thing continues, it will harm our students."

The remarks above by these Malay women show they accept that it is their duty to supervise their children's academic and moral education, and that they find it difficult to do so. The main challenge is juggling those duties with their duties outside the home. Their discourses demonstrate the idea that both sets of duties are essential for Malay working women: they cannot escape the responsibility for their children's education because of their jobs.

At the 1974 seminar too, Malay women participants again discussed their duty to guide their children's education. A Malay teacher, Salmah Yunos, presented a paper titled "Child development and education." She asserted that a key way for a woman to contribute to development of the society was through her duty to the family, and in particular her duty to produce a good next generation. This entailed providing good heredity for her children, by making sure of her own health as a mother before giving birth; as well as providing a good environment after the child is born. And the main

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[117] *Berita Minggu*, 16th July 1972.
[118] *Ibid.*

way to create such an environment for the child was to give the child the right education.[119] After the seminar, similar understandings about the role of women in the education of children continued to be enacted and consumed through *Berita Harian*. Two more articles by the Malay female journalist, Zawiyah Salleh appeared, both urging Malay working mothers to be mindful of their responsibilities to educate their children. In one of them, titled "Advice for working mothers: Do not ignore education for your children," Zawiyah Salleh starts with this observation:

"The current social infrastructure causes the majority of housewives to work outside the home to supplement the income of their husband. However, doesn't this have a negative impact on their children's education? This becomes a problem for most working mothers… many children are left to do what they like and become obsessed with playing games because there is no one to watch or guide them at home."[120]

Zawiyah Salleh is not telling Malay women to go back to being full time housewives and mothers, and so make sure of their children's education. Rather, she sees the problem as being one of ignorance or negligence by working mothers in guiding their children's education. She asks:

"What efforts should be made by the working mothers to ensure that their children are not neglected and that they study as diligently [when their mother is at work] as when their mother is at home?"[121]

By way of answer, the Malay teacher Salmah Yunos is quoted as giving this concrete advice on how working mothers should perform their duties at home.

"No matter how tired the working mothers are, they must make time to look at various books with their children. What is important for working mothers is that they have a serious attitude towards children's education. If a mother

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[119] Salmah Yunos, 'Perkembangan Kanak-kanak dan Pendidikan,' [Child development and education] in Jabatan Wanita Majlis Pusat, 1975, pp.10-15.
[120] *Berita Harian*, 2nd July 1974. The other article, which took a very similar line, was titled "The duty of working wives to domestic work is more important," and appeared on 25th February 1975.
[121] *Berita Harian*, 2nd July 1974.

neither does [school] work with her child nor pays attention to the child's education, then as a result of this indifferent attitude of hers towards education, the child will become a weak student. But if a working mother takes her child's education seriously after she gets home from work, then the child will certainly sense this serious attitude of its mother towards education."[122]

And a model is provided of a Malay working woman who does manage to fulfil her duties as a mother successfully. The model for this exemplary ritualized performance is Siti Muzakker, who works as a secretary for a textile company. She explains how she fulfils her duties as a mother:

"In my case, after coming back from work, I eat dinner and have a rest, and then usually I sit with my children for about an hour to teach them. In the evenings, to fill in empty time that the children have, I give them homework to do, such as ten maths problems to do, and also homework in other subjects. And, on Sunday, I teach my children for two hours. In addition, every day, mothers must not forget to listen to their children as they read aloud from various kinds of books. If the children make mistakes in reading aloud or do not understand the book, then the mother must help them." [123]

After describing here how she successfully supervises her child's learning, Siti Muzakker goes on to say as Salmah Yunos did earlier that the mother must set the correct model of a serious attitude for the child to follow:

"Working mothers cannot be free from the responsibility of educating children, in particular, their school education. School children do not understand how significant education is, so children are influenced by mothers' serious attitude about education." [124]

As well as this secretary, a factory worker Salibia Ahmad also displays an exemplary attitude to her child's education. Salibia Ahmad says:

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[122] *Ibid.*
[123] *Ibid.*
[124] *Berita Harian*, 2nd July 1974.

"the issue of [school] children is very complex. Although I work at the factory and so do shift work, I certainly manage to perform my task of teaching the children... I always force my primary school children to read books."[125]

Salibia Ahmad admits that she cannot supervise the study of her older children who have finished primary school, since she herself did not get sufficient education to do that. She reports that in the case of those older children, as part of her duty as a responsible mother she sends them to a coaching college in the evening after their regular school.[126]

Through these Malay women – both Zawiyah Salleh and the three Malay women she interviews, looking after the child's education after getting home from work is presented/ performed as a vital obligation for working mothers.

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This section shows some voices articulated by Malay women themselves, in relation to issues of family planning, work and children's education. The critical examination of Malay women's attitudes by Malay male leaders was re-asserted and re-created by Malay women opinion-leaders and consumed and enacted by others among them; ordinary women whose voices are heard through readers' letters or interviews in *Berita Harian*. In this way such Malay women formed an agency of "Change Attitudes" to enact a set of conducts to make them as successful as women from other ethnic groups.

5.3 Conclusion

This chapter examined a set of conducts by Malays under the name of "Change Attitudes" in relation to two issues, Education and Malay women.

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[125] *Ibid.*
[126] *Ibid.*

Both issues demonstrated a covert complicity between the ideology and conduct of the minority and that of the dominated. The minority were certainly working hard for their own good and satisfaction, by their own will. This conduct is best understood not as something forced upon them, but as something chosen by their desire to improve their position in Singapore. Their conduct becomes a way to obtain temporary satisfaction.

This nexus between state ideology and Malays' pursuit of their own desires explains some puzzling answers I met while I was in Singapore. During my first months in Singapore, I visited several Malay/Muslim organizations just to get to know about them and deepen my understanding about Malays in Singapore. The people at these organizations kindly explained about their organizations and projects to me. When these staff claimed how unique and enterepreneurial their projects were, I could not help seeing a clear nexus between the state ideologies and their self-initiated projects. Then I would delicately enquire whether they had any kind of support from the government, and they would answer with words to this effect. "Government? No, nothing *lah*. We do if for ourselves, our own organization. We are different."

What did it mean to be Malay in the 1970s? In part it meant performing a set of conducts: self-examination, detection of problems, setting them as targets for improvement, and getting temporary satisfaction by doing so. This patterned behaviour of "Change Attitudes" gradually became internalized as a natural and reflexive response when new challenges or targets were set. This new formation of Malay agency became a most effective force for the state to manipulate during the following decade – the 1980s.

Chapter 6 Changed Attitudes: the Foundation of *Mendaki* - Council on Education for Muslim Children

In the library of the National University of Singapore, there is a "Singapore Malaysia" section. This section contains collections of newspaper clippings about different issues – and one such collection is about the Malays in Singapore. This particular collection starts from 1982. This date is not coincidental, as 1982 was a memorable year for the Malays in Singapore. It is the time when the Council on the Education of Muslim Children (Majlis Pendidikan Anak-Anak Islam, or *Mendaki*) was publicly launched.[1]

The foundation of the Council on Education for Muslim Children (*Mendaki*)[2] was a response to a new challenge presented by the government at the beginning of the 1980s. As the 1970s had begun with a public declaration by Malay community leaders of Malay commitment to meritocracy and self-improvement (in the form of the landmark seminar: see Chapter 3); the 1980s opened with a new challenge from the government to prove that commitment.

This chapter attempts to understand the foundation of the Council as a continuation of the patterned conduct of "change attitudes" performed in the 1970s. At the start of the 1980, the government explicitly compared the performance of different ethnic groups in Singapore in education and employment, through newly released census figures, and these statistics placed Malays at the bottom of the ladder. In response to this stigma combined with a series of speeches by ministers which subtly or less subtly branded Malays as lagging behind, politically engaged Malays responded with that familiar set of conducts. The term "change attitudes' itself fell out of use after the 1970s, but the set of conducts appears to have been already patterned and even naturalized in the minds of these Malays. So when their underachievement was pinpointed by non-Malay Singaporeans in the early 1980s, this provoked and aroused their long-standing desire to become a part of mainstream Singapore society. And this

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[1] *The Straits Times*, 17th May 1982.
[2] The name of the same organization has been changing over the course of the time. However, when it was started, the name of the council was the "Council on Education for Muslim Children." See Mendaki, *Making the Difference: 10 years of MENDAKI*, Singapore: Yayasan Mendaki, 1992, p8. Therefore in this chapter, the Council is described as "Council on Education for Muslim Children."

time the response took the shape of conceiving and forming the Educational Council, Mendaki.

6.1 State attitudes to ethnicity in the 1980s

Lily Rahim asserts that the state's approach to the Malay/Muslim community in the 1980s shifted to "an interventionist approach" whereby it openly pinpointed Malays as a problematic group in society.[3] Behind this shift were certain conditions which enabled the state to touch upon Malay issues more openly and less sensitively than before.

At the end of the 1970s the Singapore government began to handle the sensitive issue of ethnicity differently. During that decade it had viewed ethnic groups as a source of ethnic chauvinism. Ethnic riots had taken place during Singapore's earlier history and left the government fearful of ethnic groups being politicised. It attempted to avoid this by downplaying the existence of ethnic differences and stressing a single unified Singapore national identity.

Around the turn of the decade this strategy changed. Ethnic groups were now depoliticised not by avoiding mention of their cultural differences but by encouraging each to identify with a selected set of cultural elements, as a component of Singapore's national identity. This re-creation of ethnic identity was marked by the introduction of the 'Speak Mandarin' campaign aimed at Chinese Singaporeans in 1979. The government provided a re-essentialized package of being Chinese Singaporean: "Chinese ethnicity, Chinese language, and Confucianism" The timing for this state revival of Chinese culture and language is not a matter of chance, but is linked to the completion of the task of removing the remnants of the Chinese Community Party (CCP) in Singapore. The government gained control of Nanyang University, a bastion of Chinese intellectuals, and a year later (1980) forced it to close

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[3] Lily Zubaidah Rahim, *The Singapore Dilemma: the political and educational marginality of the Malay community*, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; Oxford, U.K.; Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp.211-212.

down.[4] It also restructured and gained editorial control over what had been the largest-circulation Chinese newspaper in Southeast Asia, *Nanyang Siang Pau*, ensuring that it would never provoke society again.[5] The Labour Union, too, successfully transformed into a legitimate and harmless body. Having eradicated the legacy of the CCP from the social space, the state could safely summon a tamed and compliant Chinese-ness to serve its ideology, a version that matched the orientalist gaze of those products of a colonial education system, Singapore's English- educated leaders.

In line with this Chinese Singaporean model of ethnicity, the state began to reinforce a parallel version of Malay ethnicity and Indian ethnicity as well. The Malay version consisted of: 'Malay ethnicity, Malay language, and Islam', while the Indian version consisted of 'Indian ethnicity, Tamil language, and Hinduism.'[6] Packaging ethnicity in this way helped turn the ethnic groups into managable elements. The process was forcefully implemented by such means as the 'Speak Mandarin' campaign, so as to allow no reminders or whispers of the older style of ethnicity that had played a role as a political vehicle.

A consequence of such changes was that the government became more willing to mention ethnic groups, including their 'problems'. In the reworked context, mentioning ethnicity was less likely to arouse political sentiments than to stimulate cultural identity – and this could be encouraged as ethnic groups and national identity were conceived by the state as complementary to each other.

In the 1980s, then, the 'Malay problem' was more publicly exposed to other ethnic groups than formerly. It began to be mentioned in government publications like the *Mirror* magazine, and more importantly, in the national newspaper, *The Straits Times*. The coverage of Malay issues in *The Straits Times* in the 1980s is much greater than during the 1970s, when there had been very little mention of them.[7]

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[4]竹下秀邦 [Takeshita Hidekuni], シンガポール：リー・クワン・ユーの時代, [*Singapore: the era of Lee Kuan Yew*], アジア経済研究所 [The Institute of Developing Economies, Japan Extra Trade Organization], 1995, p389.
[5]竹下 [Takeshita], 1995, pp.382-383, p386.
[6] John Clammer, *Race and state in independent Singapore, 1965-1990: the cultural politics of pluralism in a multiethnic society*, Aldershot, Hants., ; Brookfield, Vt.: Ashgate, 1998, p157.
[7] I have compared the amount of coverage of Malay issues in *The Straits Times* with that in *Berita Harian* in the 1970s and then the 1980s.

The timing was perfect for the government to initiate a new project for the 1980s of cracking down on the lowest achievers, the Malay/Muslim community. There was little danger of causing a chauvinistic backlash from Malays by doing so. A 1980 article in *Berita Harian* reports with some justification that Malays by that time did not generally regard ethnic identity as a political issue.[8] Even if the government singled out one ethnic group to pin down with the label "you are the bottom of the society," this did not tend to foster feelings of ethnic chauvinism, so long as ethnic groups could be constructed as sub-groups of the one nation.

We should bear in mind that the "interventionist approach" to the Malay problem only represents one side of the state's approach to the Malays. The fundamental ideology of meritocracy remained unchanged. Therefore when it came to the issue of *support* for Malays by the state, there was no intervention. In this respect the state took a hands-off approach. As Tania Li states:

> The firm suggestion from the government was that Malays should seek to solve these problems... The Prime Minister stated that no government efforts could help the Malays as effectively as could the Malay leaders themselves.[9]

Therefore the government undertook to urge, stimulate and provoke Malays to make greater efforts in the 1980s, without providing any affirmative action for them. And the way it did that was essentially the same as in the previous decade, as we will see shortly.

6.2 New state targets set for Singaporeans

At the start of the 1980s the state challenged and provoked Malays by once again labelling them as underachievers compared to other ethnic groups. Their performance was put under new scrutiny with regard to education and employment. In order to

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[8] "Singapore succeeds in preventing language from becoming the issue of chauvinism," *Berita Harian*, 4th May 1980.
[9] Tania Li, *Malays in Singapore: culture, economy, and ideology*, Singapore; New York: Oxford University Press, 1989, p 174.

understand why this was done, a brief explanation of the changes taking place in the Singapore society is needed.

From 1979 to 1985, Singapore entered a Second Industrial Revolution.[10] In order to continue its economic growth, Singapore aimed at shifting from a labour-intensive industrialized economy to one that focused on capital-intensive, high technology industries, such as information technology. The latter was given special emphasis and in 1981 a National Computing Board was founded. Therefore Singapore now urgently needed a labour force able to engage in such high technology industries. Under the state's new policy, training such a highly skilled labour force was given top priority. The state sought to raise educational levels by setting up a Vocational and Industrial Training Board and by emphasizing engineering and the sciences in tertiary education. It also invested heavily in the promotion, research and development of high technology.[11]

The adequacy of the current education system for this new economic era was also examined. A government study produced the "Goh Report" in 1979 on problems of the education system. One conclusion was that educational resources were being wasted without making children achieve the expected standard, and that this could impede the production of the necessary human resources for high technology industries.[12]

The education system was thus redesigned to be maximally efficient. Firstly, as early as primary school, students were identified as fast, medium or slow learners based on their academic ability.[13] The fast learners as the elite-to-be enjoyed a curriculum and materials designed to continue their education to university level. On the other hand, those identified as slow learners followed a curriculum to provide basic literacy and numeracy in preparation for training at vocational institutes.[14] In other words, more and better resources were given to those who were brilliant, and less given to those

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[10] Jonathan Rigg, 'Singapore and the Recession of 1985,' *Asian Survey*, vol. 28, no.3 (March 1988), pp. 340-52, at p342.
[11] Rigg, 1985, p343.
[12] Paul Cheung, 'Educational development and manpower planning in Singapore,' *CUHK Education Journal*, vol. 21, no.2, & vol. 22, no.1, 1994, pp.185-95, at p187.
[13] Cheung, 1994, p187.
[14] Cheung, 1994, p187.

who were not. The minister in charge of this educational reform, the then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, described this system as one "customized" by the government "to maximize the potential and creativity of every Singaporean."[15]

What did this educational reform and economic structural change mean to the everyday life of Singaporeans? An individual or ethnic group that wishes to become successful, must be highly educated enough to work in high-technology industries. Membership of Singapore's meritocratic community now required one to become such a human resource. This is the context in which Malays were set a renewed and now more urgent challenge: to catch up to the other ethnic groups in education.

6.3 Speeches by ministers about Malays in 1980

The first event that provoked Malays over their achievement compared to other ethnic groups was the release of results of the latest national census figures in 1981. The report had divided up its results by ethnic groups in order to clearly compare the participation and performance of each group, at different levels of the education system. This displayed the Malays as in bottom position across the range of educational indicators (see Goh's speech later). The announcement of the census results made the Malay leaders feel "deeply depressed,"[16] and, "calling each other on the phone, they reached the conclusion that "this time, something just had to be done."[17]

Following closely on that event were three speeches about Malays made in the same month of August 1980. Two were by the Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and one by the Minister of Trade and Industry, Goh Chok Tong. Through the comparison of Malays with other groups in the census results and these speeches, the government subtly or less subtly put a renewed challenge to the Malays to catch up to the other groups.

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[15] Goh Chok Tong, "*Speech by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong at The May Day Rally at the National Trades Union Congress Centre, On Marina Boulevard, on 1 May 2004*," Ministry of Information, Communications and The Arts, http://app.mfa.gov.sg/pr/read_content.asp?View,3830 (accessed 15th May 2006).
[16] Mendaki, 1993, p53.
[17] Mendaki, 1993, p53.

On 11th of August, 1980, Lee delivered his *Hari Raya Puasa* message to the Malays.[18] His reference to Malay achievements was couched as praise – but in terms that made it clear that their task is to catch up and join the mainstream. Lee said:

> The far–reaching changes in the physical landscape are self-evident. What is not so visible is the equally significant change in the mental outlook of Singaporeans, including Malay Singaporeans. Instead of hovering on the sidelines, filled with anxieties about their national identity or their future, they have plunged into the mainstream of life, in the schools, VITB [the training courses founded by Vocational & Industrial Training Board], Polytechnics, Ngee Ann [Technology Institute], the University, in the factories, offices, hotels and shopping complexes. They have made steady progress in raising their education levels and in acquiring technical competence and skills to improve their socio-economic status. [19]

What is interesting here is his wording, "including Malay Singaporeans." By adding them to Singaporeans, he actually emphasises their separateness from them. Similarly, by saying that Malays "have plunged *into* the mainstream", he reveals that the Malays in Singapore are not quite a part of the mainstream. And his praise of their actual achievements in education and work, that they "have made steady progress", suggests that they are catching up, closing the gap. So in his message to Malays, he does two things. He mentions the issue of how well Malays are doing, and he raises subtly the notion of a time lag between Malays and other Singaporeans in terms of participating in national development. That notion of a time lag is one he will develop bluntly and at length in a speech to Malays two years later (see 6.4.3.1).

A week later at the National Day Rally, Lee again addressed remarks to Malays, which were also reported in *Berita Harian*.[20] In this speech he asserted that there were no problems special to the Malays in Singapore.

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[18] Lee Kuan Yew, *"Prime Minister's Hari Raya Puasa Message - 1980* (official translation from Malay into English)," Speech Text Archival and Retrieval System, National Archive of Singapore, http://stars.nhb.gov.sg/public/index.html (accessed on 15th May 2006).
[19] Lee Kuan Yew, *Ibid.*
[20] *Berita Harian*, 18th August 1980.

Every year at this National Day Rally ... I ask all Malay Ministers and MPs for their assessments of any special problems or concern of the Malay community so that I can make reference to them and seek solutions for them. For the first time, they each told me there are no special Malay problems. Jobs, education, resettlement, demolition of old mosques, building of new mosques, they have been sorted out. The problems of life for the Malays in Singapore are the problems of life faced by all Singaporeans – Malays, Indians, or Chinese. There are problems, but they are the same problems common to Chinese, Indian and Malay Singaporeans – problems over work attitudes, overtime, shift work, and impatience in training.[21]

If in the next 15 years Malay Singaporeans make the same progress that they have in the last 15, Singapore will be a better society where Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and Christians can worship in their different ways without any cleavages in the social life of our new towns.[22]

By stressing that there are "no special Malay problems," Lee is not saying that Malays have overcome their problems, and are now doing as well as other ethnic groups. That is very clear from the final sentence of his extract above. There he gives a clear message that Malays are still behind the other groups, despite the improvements they have already made – and that it will take them at least another 15 years to catch up. Moreover, he suggests that Malay backwardness is disrupting national unity ("cleavages in the social life"). So the message here is that Malays have yet to win the acceptance and approval of other Singaporeans. In that case, when Lee says "there are no special Malay problems", what is he telling them? He means Malays face no structural problems that are unique to them by virtue of their *Bumiputra* status, which call for special help and support. They are on the right track by now to catch up to the others – they just haven't caught up yet. As all ethnic groups face the same challenges, there are no grounds for affirmative action for Malays to help them improve their situation.

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[21] Lee Kuan Yew, *"Prime Minister's Opening Speech in Malay at the National Day Rally on 17 Aug 80 At the National Theatre,"* Speech Text Archival and Retrieval System, National Archive of Singapore, http://stars.nhb.gov.sg/public/index.html (accessed on 15th May 2006).
[22] Lee Kuan Yew, *Ibid.*

The government's view about the achievement of Malays/Muslims emerged more explicitly in a speech by the Minister of Trade and Industry, Goh Chok Tong, the same month. Goh's speech was to Malay members of the PAP, and was given full-page coverage in *Berita Minggu*, the Sunday edition of *Berita Harian*.[23]

Goh drew on the recently released census statistics comparing the performance of the ethnic groups. He began by praising the progress of Malays in both employment and education. He cited census figures that showed a rise in the number of Malays participating in the workforce between 1966 and 1978. Similarly, he cited figures to show that during the same period the number of Malay students passing final primary school examinations, completing a vocational qualification, passing GCE O levels and passing GCE A levels had all increased, while the number dropping out of school had decreased.

However Goh then clarified the implied message of Lee's speeches, by explicitly saying that Malays must do better. He told his audience that even though Malays were participating more overall, they were not doing so at the higher levels of education and employment.

> "...what we should bear in mind is that that the improvement demonstrated through the statistics today is only in the amount of participation.
>
> Increasing the total participation is important, but the quality of participation is more important. It is particularly so now, as Singapore is undertaking the process of overall economic restructuring.
>
> Expert skills need to be improved and high technology has to be given attention. Raising the total percentage of participation must now continue in the form of enhancing quality, as well."[24]

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[23] *Berita Minggu*, 31st August 1980.
[24] *Berita Minggu*, 31st August 1980.

Goh also gave specific examples of sectors where Malays should enhance the quality of their performance. One was the elite employment sectors of business and the professions. The proportion of working Malays who were business people had risen only fractionally between 1966 and 1978 (from 10.8% to 11.2%), and so had the proportion of working Malays who were professionals (from 5.0% to 6.0%).[25]

In short, Goh told the Malays that they were not producing top quality human resources – the kind that was in demand for the new high technology era. He concluded his talk with these provocative remarks:

> Generally speaking, Malays can be proud of the progress they have achieved, however, feeling proud is not enough. It is worse still if that attitude is actually the only result that you achieve.

> The progress which has been made so far should be considered as just a beginning. There is still much more that should and can be done to order to keep developing and not be left behind. The challenge faced by the Malay community now is how to activate more of their children to enter university and technical colleges in the near future, while also activating those young Malays who are already working to improve their skills and qualities. This is not difficult to achieve.[26]

Here Goh emphasises just how far Malays still have to go (it is "just the beginning;" there is "much more to be done".) He suggests they are still being "left behind" the other groups and urges them to work harder to catch up, issuing the provocative challenge that "it is not difficult to achieve".

Combining the above speeches by Lee and Goh, the comprehensive view of the Government about the Malays can be seen more clearly. Malays are recognised to be doing better than they were in education and employment. But to meet the demands of the new high technology era in Singapore, expectations have been raised – and Malays

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[25]*Ibid.*
[26]*Ibid.*

are once again not doing well enough. They need to improve themselves by their own efforts and without expecting any affirmative action, to produce highly educated and qualified workers like other ethnic groups. This is the new target set for Malays. And the gap between target and achievement prevents them from being accepted as part of Singapore society.

6.4 "Total Approach"– a Malay response to state criticisms of underachievement

Malays responded to these criticism by the state with the formation of the Council on Education for Muslim Children (Mendaki) in 1982. Mendaki was and is a source of pride for many Malays. Its establishment is regarded as an epoch-making moment. One Malay leader told me that "this was the time that Malays got together, grassroots leaders and Malay MPs, to work with each other."[27] This Malay voice makes it sound as if the foundation of the Council was an "alternative" action by Malays. What this section attempts to do is to demonstrate that it was performed by the same Malay agency of "change attitudes" as in the 1970s. That slogan of "Change Attitudes" itself had become obsolete, however the discourses and behaviour of Malay leaders and organisations directed to improving the educational level of Malays in the early 1980s reveal that familiar patterned set of conducts, aroused by the same desire.

Since the name of the new Council was the Council on the Education for Muslim Children, it is possible to ask whether it is a response of Malays or Muslims. This unity between being Malay and being Muslim needs to be explained. Firstly, practically all Malays in Singapore are Muslim (99.6% as at 1990),[28] and Malays also comprise the overwhelming majority (85.2%) of Muslims in Singapore.[29] Secondly, the unity of being Malay and being Muslim was now assumed in the context of the 1980s. As shown previously (6.1), ethnic groups in the 1980s were now depoliticised by encouraging each to identify with a selected set of cultural elements. Under these circumstances, it was highly acceptable for Malays themselves to present Islam as if it

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[27]Casual conversation with a former leader of a Malay educational organization in the mosque at Ang Mo Kio on 18th June 2002.
[28] Eddie C.Y. Kuo & Tong Chee Kiong eds., *Religion in Singapore*, Singapore: SNP Publishers, 1995, p8.
[29] Kuo & Tong eds., 1995, p9.

were one of the core elements of being Malay. For the wider Singapore society, the term "Muslim children," was virtually synonymous with "Malay children."

6.4.1 Naturalised "change attitudes"

In the 1980s, the slogan "change attitudes" was used less and less in the discourses of Malays. This does not mean that the spirit and set of conducts embodied in that slogan had faded away. On the contrary, they had apparently become a natural part of life for many Malays through a decade of pursuing their desire to become like other ethnic groups in Singapore. They had absorbed into their veins a quasi-ritualized set of conducts of "change attitudes" by performing it through their everyday lives: self-examination in comparison with other ethnic groups, detecting problems within themselves, and setting them as targets for fixing. This set of conducts had also become a regular source of temporary satisfaction derived from their achievement. So when new problems and challenges were presented to Malays in the new era of the early 1980s, "change attitudes" was the conditioned response. It was Malays who must change themselves, once again, to be suitable and relevant to the society.

An article in *Berita Harian* in February 1980 illustrates how this attitude persisted. Titled "Achievement and its meaning to Singaporeans"[30], it discusses the attitudes suitable to current Singapore society. Without using the catch-cry "Change Attitudes," it displays the spirit embodied in that slogan.

> Those people who achieve success in life have a basic attitude, namely, a confidence in their own ability to face the problems of one era to another. If this sort of attitude can be enhanced in children then it will make them happy in their future life.

> In this era, especially in Singapore, an attitude of longing for achievement or of chasing success in work or economic activity is utterly necessary. The

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[30] *Berita Harian*, 13th February 1980.

Malays in Singapore should also create developments in all fields of Singapore's economy."[31]

Here the writer shows the essence of "change attitudes". Malays are advised to develop confidence in their own ability to meet the shifting challenges of each new era, and to instil such an attitude of confidence in their children as well. They are also told they should acquire an attitude of longing for material success. What is also interesting here is that such an ability to change attitudes involves "confidence." Malays can derive satisfaction by feeling secure in their own ability to change on demand in order to pursue each new target set by Singapore society.

This way of thinking by the agency of performing attitudes can also be seen in a reader's letter to *Berita Harian* in the same year, 1980. The writer starts as follows:

> How far do we still want to go towards being recognized and towards achieving our target of achieving an socio-economic status equal to the national status?"[32]

Here the writer is explicit about the desire that drives this particular Malay agency, namely to be recognised as equal in achievement to other Singaporeans; and then rhetorically poses the question whether they should keep pursuing it. The writer continues:

> We need to think how the Malays want to be embodied in Singapore. Do we want Malays to improve their technological achievements? Be hard-working and diligent? Be disciplined? Loyal, and capable of speaking English and Malay fluently? Highly moral? Tolerant of other languages and ethnicities? Educated? Knowing the value of art?[33]

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[31] *Berita Harian*, 13th February 1980.
[32] *Berita Harian*, 13th October 1980.
[33] *Ibid.*

Here Malays are told to think about what they want to achieve. In what ways do they want to improve themselves? What are they trying to become? The writer concludes with a vigorous call to Malays to work harder to meet the challenges of the new era:

> "The Malays in Singapore are heading on a course of living in an urbanized and industrial centre. We must work and be competitive with other ethnic groups here, who are clearly already ahead of us. The Malays must not only face their duty to improve their achievements, to be competitive as a part of the socio-economic nation, but must also face the challenge of identity..."[34]

So Malays must fulfil their normal duties to work hard and become more competitive in order to catch up the other ethnic groups, plus more as well. They also have a duty to work out exactly what they want to be. This uncertainty about their own identity is just one more problem that Malays must fix about themselves, one more attitude that they must change, in order to fulfil their dream of becoming worthy Singaporeans.

As the agency of performing "change attitudes" was evidently ingrained for some Malays by this time, it is not surprising that it was triggered by an alarming message from the government in the 1980s: that Malays were performing poorly in education compared to other ethnic groups. This message frustrated and provoked the desire of the Malays concerned to become a decent part of Singapore society.

6.4.2 Response of the Malay leaders

Malay MP and non-MP leaders analysed the situation. A Malay MP, recalling that difficult period, says that the task for Malay MPs at the time was to "analyse trends and problems, and opportunities, so that we could gather our resources and provide effective leadership for the community."[35] As for the basic problem, it was that Malays were being evaluated as poor achievers compared to the other groups. [36] And as a first step in tackling the problem, the Malay MPs looked critically at the existing efforts of the Malay community to improve their children's education. During the

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[34] *Berita Harian*, 13th October 1980.
[35] Mendaki, 1992, p54. This is the recall of the Malay MP Mansor. [quotation from original English]
[36] Mendaki, 1992, p57. [quotation from original English]

previous decade Malay/Muslim organisations had already set up various tuition and scholarship programs for Malay children. So why weren't Malay students doing better? As one Malay MP said, recalling the situation a decade later:

> "These organizations had been rendering service to Muslim students and their parents through the tuition classes. They felt they were doing *"kebajikan"*, good service, and the parents were grateful. But I knew, and many others knew, that the children who went to the tuition classes still did not do well in school, while many of the students who did well in school did not attend tuition classes."[37]

Malay MP and non-MP leaders started to work together to plan how to deal with the problem of Malays' underachievement in education. As the first step towards such a relationship a symposium was held at National University of Singapore, on the 18th of July in 1981. Its purpose was to examine Malay problems in education and present resolutions on how to deal with them.[38]

6.4.2.1 Symposium on problems of Malay education in July 1981

One Malay MP and two non-MP Malay leaders were invited to speak at the symposium. Mansor Haji Sukaimi was the Malay MP, the others were Yatiman Yusof, a journalist from the Malay newspaper *Berita Harian*; and Abdul Hamil Kader, the president of the Singapore Malay Youth Library Association (*Taman Bacaan*). The speeches of all three were reported in detail in *Berita Harian*.

This symposium was constructed in a familiar way of approaching Malay issues. The notion shared by participants from the outset was that Malays faced a problem, namely that "Malay children's education still has not been able to improve to the level of non-Malay children's,"[39] and that Malays must find a way to fix it by themselves.

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[37] Mendaki, 1992, p55. [quotation from original English]
[38] *Berita Harian*, 15th July 1981.
[39] *Berita Harian*, 8th September 1981.

The first speaker, the Malay MP Mansor Sukaimi, presented a paper titled "Problems and new developments in the education of the Malay children." He stated that many old problems of Malay education had already been largely fixed. The old reluctance of parents to educate their daughters, and their reluctance to send their children (especially daughters) to an English stream school, had been fixed through changing attitudes of parents. The financial problems that prevented Malay children from continuing their education to higher levels had been largely dealt with, through the supply of scholarships by Malay organizations.[40] Mansor posed the question: What is the new problem now? His answer was:

> "While various sorts of efforts to help have been made by the government and by local organizations involved directly in education, what is left now is students, parents, and their family themselves."[41]

So, *all* Malays now had to work together to improve education, especially those who were most intimately involved of all: the students and their families. This idea of a 'total approach', a concerted effort by all Malays, was a cornerstone of Mendaki.

The next speaker, the Malay journalist Yatiman, presented a paper "Education and the Malays: past and present." He started by saying that Malay organisations had not been doing well enough in raising the education of Malays:

> About 20 Malay organizations here are active in the field of education... Most of them were formed a couple of decades ago, and they have been satisfied with the educational achievements of Malay children. Haven't they pondered on the adequacy of their efforts since then?"[42]

As for what should be done, Yatiman's proposal was very similar to that of Mansor Sukaimi. Yatiman Yosof argued that all possible Malay parties: parents, family, school, and society, should work together to raise the education level of Malays.[43] He captured this idea by using a term highly familiar to Malays, *gotong-royong* (working

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[40] *Berita Minggu*, 8th September 1981.
[41] *Ibid.*
[42] *Ibid.*
[43] *Ibid.*

together in mutual cooperation). [44] And he linked this notion of *gotong-royong* to self-reliance by Malays and rejection of affirmative action by declaring to his audience that if their response was "based on *gotong-royong*", the Malays would not need to depend on support from the government." [45]

The third speaker, the President of Taman Bacaan, Abdul Hamil Kader, spoke on "Social achievement and Malay children's education: the role of volunteer Malay/Muslim organizations." Like the two speakers before him, he found fault with how well these organisations were doing in raising the education of Malays. Abdul Hamil Kader talked mainly about how such organizations could play a more impressive role. He stated that they should continue to conduct tuition classes for Malay children while also giving them different forms of stimulation and encouragement as well. This rather vague proposal shares a basic element with those of Mansor Sukaimi and Yatiman Yosof: that Malays should tackle the issue of education for Malay children more broadly than they have been doing so far.

To sum up the symposium, the three talks dimly pointed to a direction for improving the education of Malay children. The main thrust was that (a) the efforts of the various organisations did not add up to a satisfactory result, and (b) all Malays must work together. These two ideas led to a consensus by the Malay MPs and the non-MP Malay leaders that Malays must take a more unified approach: a 'total approach'.

6.4.2.2 Lee Kuan Yew's 1981 National Day rally speech

Around this time Malays received an extra spur to action in the form of further public criticisms by Lee Kuan Yew. Lee gave a National Day rally speech two days after the symposium. In it he called on all Singaporeans to help boost economic growth, and singled out Malays for some blunt criticisms. He gave that section of the speech in Malay, but as well as being reported in *Berita Harian* it was faithfully summarised in the English language national daily *The Straits Times*. [46]

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[44] *Berita Minggu*, 8th September 1981.
[45] *Ibid.*
[46] *The Straits Times*, 22nd August 1981.

Lee's speech echoed the theme of Goh's speech earlier (see 6.3), that Malays were not reaching high enough levels of education. He remarked in his speech on the relatively large proportion of Malay children who still failed to continue their schooling or vocational training to the age of 18 – saying he was confident that this state of affairs would be improved by the end of the decade.[47] He stated that 63% of Malays in Singapore did not have O levels, and stressed that the skills and income of this group needed to be raised. He further pointed out that of this group, 42% had not even passed their Primary School Leaving Examination.[48] He emphasised in his speech that the education and training of those Malays must be given top priority by the Malay leaders and educationists."[49] So in this speech the achievements of Malays in education were publicly compared with those of other ethnic groups and judged inadequate. Looking back a decade later on this 1981 speech of Lee, the official Mendaki book recalled that his speech was a "call to action" for Malays and that it produced a flurry of activity during the following weeks by grassroots activists and government officials.[50]

6.4.2.3 The establishment of Mendaki

Two days after Lee's above speech Malay MPs called a meeting, to which representatives of the Malay/Muslim organizations were invited to discuss a concerted, unified approach to the problems of education.[51] Leaders of a large number of Malay organisations attended, including most of the major ones.[52] Participants at the meeting agreed that the strategy to be taken was this: to found a central organization, which

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[47] *Ibid.*
[48] *Ibid.*
[49] *Ibid.*
[50] Mendaki, 1992, p56.
[51] Mendaki, 1992, p54.
[52] Mendaki, 1992, p54. Mansor Sukaimi recalls that members of the following organizations attended: Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS); Central Council of Malay Cultural Organisations, Singapore (Majlis Pusat); Singapore Malay Teachers' Union (KGMS); Prophet Muhammad's Birthday Memorial Scholarship Fund Board (LBKM); Singapore Malay Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DPMS); Malay Youth Literary Association (4PM); the Singapore Malay Youth Library Association (Taman Bacaan); Islamic Theological Association of Singapore (PERTAPIS); Muslim Missionary Society, Singapore (Jamiyah); and Singapore Religious Teachers Association (PERGAS). He recalled that other organizations were also invited and participated, however, the names of them were not recorded.

would coordinate the efforts of the entire Malay community to improve the education of Malays.[53]

After two such meetings, as well as various meetings privately among Malay MPs and among leaders of Malay/Muslim organizations at different levels of authority,[54] a task force was set up to form the Council on Education for Malay Children (Mendaki), in late August of 1981.[55] The Malay MP Mansor Haji Sukaimi, a decade later, described the general aim of the new organization as follows:

> The main objective of MENDAKI (the Council) was to help raise the capacity of the Muslim organizations, individuals and parents, so that they could take on new and better work with greater result.[56]

This description captures the broad nature of the strategy. Mendaki was to be a central organization to activate and motivate the entire Malay community, organizations, families, parents, and Malay children themselves, to improve the problems that had been identified in Malay children's educational achievement. It took the shape of a kind of think-tank. It would detect problems and design strategies and projects to overcome them, which might involve any part of the Malay community as needed. As Ahmad Matter said, looking back a decade later:

> "Whatever is done by the government, including the education system, whatever the encouragement by MENDAKI and its intellectuals and activists, it will not be able to replace the attitudes necessary for every family, every individual and every student." [57]

This endeavour to bring about an en masse change in attitudes to education by Malays was named a "Total Approach" by the President of Mendaki, Ahmad Matter, and "total approach" became the key term for the new challenge.

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[53] Mendaki, 1992, p55.
[54] Mendaki, 1992, p57. Further details of these additional meetings are not documented by Mendaki, 1992.
[55] Mendaki, 1992, p57.
[56] Mendaki, 1992, p55.
[57] Mendaki, 1992, p102.

The task force to found Mendaki consisted of 24 members. A concentration of the leaders from both parliament and the Malay/Muslim organizations was considered crucial for its success and to embody the philosophy of a "total approach." The chairman of the task force was Ahmad Matter, the Minister for the Environment. The secretary was the Malay MP Mansor Sukaimi. The assistant secretary was Abdullah Musa, secretary of the Prophet Muhammad's Birthday Memorial Scholarship Fund Board (LBKM), and the treasurer was Kalil Haron from the Singapore Malay Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DPMS). Other representatives in the task force included six other Malay MPs,[58] and leaders of other Malay/Muslim organizations. All the major Malay/Muslim organizations were represented, including the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS), the Central Council of Malay Cultural Organizations, Singapore (Majlis Pusat), the Prophet Muhammad's Birthday Memorial Scholarship Fund Board (LBKM), the Singapore Malay Youth Literary Association (4PM), the Singapore Malay Teachers' Union (KGMS), the Singapore Malay Youth Library Association (Taman Bacaan), and Singapore Malay Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DPMS).[59] The budget to found the Council was managed by the Central Malay Provident Fund.

6.4.3 The Mendaki Conference: May 1982

In October 1981, Mendaki was officially founded. Some months later, Mendaki's approach to Malay education was revealed in detail to the Singapore public. This took place at a three day conference held for that purpose from 28th to 30th of May 1982, at the Singapore Conference Hall. Before Mendaki's Total Approach was unveiled at the conference, Lee Kuan Yew gave an opening speech to participants. This speech by Lee is well worth examining for its interesting remarks about Malays.

6.4.3.1 Lee's opening speech at the Mendaki 3 day conference

Lee's speech was a provocation to Malays. He made sharp and fundamental criticisms of Malay attitudes towards and achievements in education – more openly than in his

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[58] Sidek Saniff, Wan Hussin Zoohri, Rahan Kamis, Abbas Abu Amin, Othan Harin Eusofe, Saidi Shariff.
[59] Mendaki, 1992, p57.

earlier speeches in 1980 or even his speech of 1981 (see 6.3). Even at this time when Malays were obviously taking steps already to meet the new state target of performance in education, Lee sharply reminded them yet again that they were lagging behind the other groups, and were not yet part of mainstream Singapore society. This time he emphasised how deep-rooted the 'Malay problem' was; how it was linked to Malays' cultural and historical background. This speech was published not only in *Berita Harian*,[60] but also in the main English language daily, *The Straits Times*,[61] so Lee's points about Malays were publicized to the whole Singapore society.

First of all, Lee presented statistics to show that Malays' performance in education had improved little in the five years from 1976 to 1981.[62] He showed that the proportion of Malays who graduated from university was still only a small fraction of the Malays entering primary school. Lee also presented results showing that Malay children performed worse at school in English and in Science when they were at a school with many other Malay pupils.[63] They did better if they are in a school where most of their fellow students are non-Malays instead. Lee remarked on this:

> It is valuable to know that when the Malays are forced by their smaller numbers in school to speak in English with their fellow students, their score improved.[64]

Lee laid much of the blame for the weakness of Malay stream students on Malay parents. He said that by choosing to speak Malay at home with their children, they stopped their children from being exposed to English. To back up this point, Lee quoted statistics showing that Malay children who used more English at home did better in English at school.[65] And he declared that:

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[60] *Berita Harian*, 29th May 1982. Lee's speech was published in Malay translation in this issue.
[61] *The Straits Times*, 29th May 1982.
[62] The source of the statistics presented by Lee in his speech is not mentioned in the newspaper reports of that speech.
[63] *Ibid.*
[64] *Ibid.*
[65] *Ibid.*

"Parents have to decide on the trade-off between the conveniences of speaking Malay or the mother tongue at home with their children at the cost of English language as first language." [66]

However, Lee did not stop there in blaming Malays. He claimed that the reason Malays failed to do well in education was because of deep-seated flaws in their attitudes towards it. Malay parents and children lacked awareness of the importance of education because of their history and their culture. Lee declared:

"There are no easy or quick solutions. The attitudes of Chinese and Indian parents to learning as the road to progress are the result of historical experience. However, the basic values of parents take a long time to get established. These basic values have a profound influence on their children." [67]

"For more than 2,000 years, off and on, as dynasties rise and fall, the Imperial examinations in China offered every Chinese the chance of becoming a magistrate and a high official through scholarship. So the importance of performance in examinations has become part of the culture of Chinese. For over 100 years in India, the British ran competitive examinations for entrance into the Indian Civil Service. Hence the Indians too are keenly aware of the importance of studies and examinations as the road to success. I am sure Muslims can draw similar lessons from Islamic teachings and culture." [68]

The specific logic of this explanation is not the point. The significance is that Lee here maps a racial/ethnic hierarchy based on "cultural" characteristics constructed through "length" of history. The hierarchy is created by connecting ethnic groups to their historical past and their cultural practices during that past. The Chinese are located at the top of the hierarchy. The Indians are placed second. The Malays are placed last – and as for their history, Lee does not even bother to investigate it. They are located as a peripheral group historically and culturally. His vague remark about being "sure Muslims can draw similar lessons from Islamic teachings and culture" lacks

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[66] *Ibid.*
[67] *Ibid.*
[68] *Ibid.*

conviction – his clear message is that Malays have been harmed rather than helped by their own culture and history.[69]

What needs to be pondered here is why Lee reveals his neo-racist beliefs about the Singapore racial hierarchy without reserve. His purpose is to stress how large and difficult the task that faces Malays is. The Malay/Muslims must catch up to groups who have a head start of at least a hundred years, and as many as two thousand. This echoes with Goh's message earlier, "There is still much more that should be and can be done in order to keep developing and not be left behind."[70] It re-creates a gap between the Malays and the rest of Singapore society. In the 1970s the Malays did manage to visibly improve their performance. Now the challenge is renewed. The gap still exists between the Malays and the rest of the Singapore society, and is revealed to be fundamental since it is deeply rooted in historical and cultural factors.

Lee also told Malays that the state would not provide any further support to them to help them face their daunting challenge:

> "You can better succeed because you will be more effective with Malay/Muslim parents than government officers or school teachers and principals. You can reach them through their hearts, not just their minds. You have the motivation, the dedication and commitment, this emotional/psychological support can make a vast difference, between a student who tries, fails, and tries again and another who fails and gives up."[71]

This remark displays a twin set of meritocratic notions. Firstly, it is not for the government to provide affirmative action or resolve the problem, but for the Malays alone to tackle it. Secondly, the success that Malays achieve will be equal to the amount of the effort they make and the psychological commitment they invest.

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[69] Clammer identifies this kind of neoracist notion used by the Singapore government, although he does not use the term 'neoracism.' He observes: "The view that economic participation differences are to be explained on genetic grounds occasionally rears its ugly head." See John Clammer, 1998, p39.
[70] *Berita Minggu*, 31st August 1980.
[71] *The Straits Times*, 29th May 1982.

There is also a new twist not evident in the 1970s; but which was prefigured in Goh's speech: the 'Malay problem' is now framed as a problem for all Singaporeans. Lee declares:

> "It is in the interest of all to have Malay Singaporeans better-educated and better qualified and to increase their contribution to Singapore's development. Your real achievement is one which will raise the living standards of the majority.[72]

The struggle by Malays to catch up to other groups, reported in the national English-language daily, now becomes a public spectacle, and the message is that their poor performance is harming the living standards of the Singapore majority as well. The Malays are indeed being well-provoked to greater efforts to prove themselves as potential members of mainstream society.

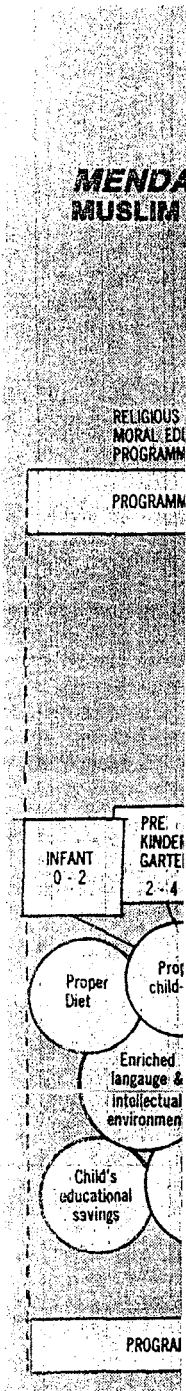*6.4.3.2 The unveiling of Mendaki and its 'Total Approach'*

After Lee's opening speech, Mendaki's Total Approach was unveiled for discussion by conference participants. The centrepiece of its Total Approach was a set of detailed guidelines for the education of a Malay child to adulthood.

If the project under the slogan of "Changing Attitudes" in the 1970s to improve Malay education had lacked concrete detail and direction, the Council was determined not to make the same mistake again. Its guidelines were presented in an elaborate chart (see Table 1 below). In this chart the life of a Malay was objectified in a blueprint for the engineering of their education. As explained in a paper presented by Mendaki at the conference titled "Formal Education"[73], their life was plotted in seven

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[72] *Ibid.*

[73] 'Pendidikan Formal' [Formal Education], in *Kongres Pendidikan Anak-anak Islam anjuran MENDAKI* [The Congress for Education of Muslim Children sponsored by MENDAKI], Mendaki: Singapore, 1982, pp.45-55. [quotation translated from original Malay by Yasuko Kobayashi]. Before it was revealed by this paper at the 3 day conference, the chart was already revealed to Malays by *Berita Minggu. Berita Minggu,* 31st January 1982. Note that all papers were delivered in English at the conference; however, this 1982 Mendaki publication consists of Malay translations of all the papers in full.

Table 1. Chart for analysing and planning Mendaki projects and activities[1]

MENDA
MUSLIM

RELIGIOUS
MORAL EDL
PROGRAMM

PROGRAMM

PRE:
KINDER
GARTEI
2 - 4

INFANT
0 - 2

Proper
Diet

Proj
child-

Enriched
langauge &
intellectual
environmen

Child's
educational
savings

PROGRAI

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[1] *The Straits Times*, 24th May 1982

MENDAKI COUNCIL ON EDUCATION OF MUSLIM CHILDREN

PROGRAMME VII

PROGRAMME VI

PROGRAMME V

PROGRAMME IV

PROGRAMME III

PROGRAMME II

RELIGIOUS AND
MORAL EDUCATION
PROGRAMMES

PROGRAMME I

OBJECTIVES

* Better citizens
* More knowledgeat skilful, productive professional
* More cultured, civil social conscious
* Responsible family member

INDUSTRIAL SKILLS TRAINING

POLY-TECHNICS

VOCATIONAL TRAINING

BASIC VOCATIONAL & COMPETENCY TRAINING

MONOLINGUAL

EXTENDED

Pri 4, 5, 6, 7 & 8

NS

POST GRADUATE 27 - 35+

UNIVERSITY 22 - 27

PRE-U I&II JC I 16 - 18

PRE-U III & JC II 18 - 19

SEC 4 (GCE 'O') & SEC 5 15 - 17

SEC 2 & SEC 3 13 - 15

SEC 1 12 - 13

PRI 6 (PSLE) 11-12

PRI 4 & PR 5 9 - 11

PRI 3 (Streaming) 8 - 9

PRI 1 & PRI 2 6 - 8

KINDER-GARTEN 4 - 6

PRE-KINDER-GARTEN 2 - 4

INFANT 0 - 2

BETTER EMPLOYMENT & PRODUCTIVITY
* in the professions
* in business and industry
* in skilled jobs
* in creative work

POST SCHOOL & CONTINUING EDUCATION

HOSTEL

PRE-HOSTEL ACTIVITIES

RESOURCES DEVELOPMENT

ORGANISATIONAL & LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Research and Development

Close monitoring in view of likely poor progress

Close monitoring & beefing-up in view of PSLE

Close look & guidance

Continue close look & guidance

Give close attention to school work

Promote story-telling & reading

Proper child-care

Proper Diet

Enriched langauge & intellectual environment

Child's educational savings

Priority in education

Improve family and peer interaction

General knowledge & nature study

Encourage inquiry and correct speech

Start self-study system

Improve self-study system

Correct bad habits

Proper study methods & regimen

SCIENCE

MATHS

SECOND LANGUAGE

ENGLISH

PROGRAMME 7

PROGRAMME 6

PROGRAMME 5

PROGRAMME 4

PROGRAMME 3

PROGRAMME 2

PROGRAMME 1   EDUCATIONAL & DEVELOPMENTAL PROGRAMMES AT FAMILY AND ORGANISATIONAL LEVELS

stages from birth to adulthood. The chart explained what duties or efforts should be performed by Malay children, adults, families and organizations at each of these seven stages of a Malay person's development. To take one example only, at the stage from age 0 to 6, it was incumbent upon various parties to provide the child with a proper diet, to provide the child with proper care while the parents were at work, to save money in order to budget for the child's education, to enrich the child's linguistic and intellectual environment, and to prioritize the child's education at home. The information in the chart was also supplemented with a separate, detailed written commentary about how to implement each step on it.

The mapped course on the chart also covered the life of a young Muslim adult. The Council created a scheme for a happier marriage,[74] part of which was a training course for Malay newly-weds about their health, finance, and education for children.[75] From cradle to responsible adult age, the chart covers and instructs on 'Dos' and by implication 'Don'ts' for the education of Malays.

In essence, this schematised chart is a Do It Yourself system for the Malays to perform "change attitudes" in their everyday life in a very concrete sense. By presenting the fundamental 'Dos' as an encompassing model it reminds them constantly of their duties or efforts toward the goal of to producing successful Malay children. Malay parents and organisations especially could use this map of required actions and attitudes as a reference to "pin-point areas which need improvement and rectification."[76] They could critically examine themselves for the extent and effectiveness of their own efforts to help Malay children.

The conference paper "Formal Education" concluded with the remark that "parents need to take an attitude of "Total Approach" towards the education of their children."[77] A shift in attitude is thus required for Malay parents to strive to integrate their children's education into all facets of daily life, in both the public and private sphere.

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[74] *The Straits Times*, 8th February 1982.
[75] *The Straits Times*, 15th February 1982.
[76] *The Straits Times*, 28th May 1982.
[77] 'Pendidikan Formal' [Formal Education], in *Kongres Pendidikan Anak-anak Islam anjuran MENDAKI* [The Congress for Education of Muslim Children sponsored by MENDAKI], Mendaki: Singapore, 1982, pp.45-55. [quotation translated from original Malay by Yasuko Kobayashi.]

In pursuit of this target of improving the education of Malays, all possible parties from the Malay/Muslim community were called on to participate. Some participants mentioned in articles in *Berita Harian* and/or *The Straits Times* during these years of 1981 and 1982 are as follows. The Council formed a pool of 30 professionals including doctors, sociologists, teachers and journalists, to work as volunteers to help run its projects.[78] The doctors, for example, were enlisted to deal with the importance of the diet in a child's growth.[79] The teachers were to provide guidance for Malay parents in how to help improve the educational performance and achievement of their children.[80] Malay university students were also urged to support the Council, for instance by teaching supplementary courses designed by the Council to help Malay pupils to improve their performance at school. In response to this, some Malay students at National University of Singapore displayed their readiness to teach on these courses. One of them, a Zaid bin Hamzah, represented this willing attitude with his comment quoted in *Berita Harian* that "Malay/Muslim university students must come forward to help to make the project of the Council successful.[81]

Islamic religion was mobilised as the source of moral/ethical values to serve this target. Apart from the fact that Muslim organisations offered tuition programs for Malay students, the Malay Theological Society (a Muslim body) conducted the above-mentioned training course for Malay newly-weds, [82] and mosques offered their meeting rooms as classrooms for the projects of the Council. For instance An-nur Mosque in Woodlands provided its meeting room as the classroom for the Malay/Muslim students to take a tuition course of the Council which prepared them to take their A level examination.[83]

6.4.4 Winning the hearts of Malays

A Total Approach naturally cannot involve Malays at the mechanical level of systematic Dos and Don'ts without also winning their emotional commitment to the

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[78] *The Straits Times*, 28th January 1982.
[79] *Ibid.*
[80] *The Straits Times*, 1st February 1982.
[81] *Berita Minggu*, 11th October 1981.
[82] *The Straits Times*, 15th February 1982
[83] *The Straits Times*, 3rd June 1982.

target. As the president of the Council, Ahmad Matter announced at the 3 day conference:

"Mendaki can do everything but if the students are not interested, nothing can be achieved. Parents too must realize the importance of education and must accept that education of their children is an investment."[84]

And in other speeches to Malays as well in those months of mid-1982, Ahmad Matter called upon them to foster an attitude of deep and serious commitment to education – speeches that were reported in the national daily, *The Straits Times*.[85] And he also urged newspaper journalists to stress the issue of education in their writings, in order to remind parents how important it was for their children.[86]

To urge Malays to participate in the shared project, Mendaki also found a less conventional way to appeal to them. A documentary titled "A Mother's Hope" was produced in Malay language by Zainab Rahim from the Singapore Broadcasting Commission, in cooperation with Mendaki, and was screened at Channel 5 on the evening of the 26th of May (shortly before the three-day conference). Its story was reported in detail in *The Straits Times*, as follows.[87]

The main characters in this documentary are three Malay children, Mislan, Zalina, and Noor, and their parents. Mislan is a child who spent his free time selling food at his family's hawker stall. Due to the relaxed attitude of his mother toward her children, Mislan falls into bad company in high school. What with his daily shuttle between

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[84] *The Straits Times*, 28th May 1982.
[85] (i) *The Straits Times*, 18th April 1982. '*Let study come first*'.
      "Help correct the attitude subscribed to by some old-fashioned parents and grandparents that their children, especially their daughters, must marry early in life. We must discard the thinking that if a girl is not married during her teens, she is considered to be on the shelf."
  (ii) *The Straits Times*, 21st June 1982. '*Advice for Malay parents from Dr Matter*'
      "Malay parents should take great interest in their children's education and supervise their study more closely...They should also be ready to act as advisers, inspiring examples and counsellors to their children. Only then can they ensure their children's educational success."
 (iii) *The Straits Times*, 22nd July 1982. '*Muslims urged to change attitudes on education*'
      Dr Ahmad Matter urged Muslim families to change their attitudes towards education.
 (iv) *Berita Harian*, 31st May 1982. "Escape from mentality of begging"
      "Dr Ahmad Matter stressed that a mentality of begging will not only damage the image of Malays but also bring nothing good."
[86] *The Straits Times*, 29th August 1982.
[87] *The Straits Times*, 24th May 1982.

playing with friends and working at the family stall, he fails his O level examinations. By contrast, the two other Malay children devote most of their time to books. Zalina scores four distinctions in her O level examinations and is now studying in Hwa Chong Junior college. Noor Hakim is doing even better. He has done well in his A level examinations and is an aspiring doctor.

What makes these three Malay children different is the attitude of their parents. Marian, the mother of Mislan, believes strongly in the value of a sound education but does not know how to discipline or encourage her children to study. Apart from nagging them occasionally about the need to study hard, there is nothing much she can do. She only wants them to be obedient and not to argue with her. Her idea of what her son should be is this: a decent hardworking young man who tells his mother where he is going and helps the family to make ends meet.

By contrast, Zalina's mother, Puteh, encourages her daughter in her education. Although she does not have much time to spend with her daughter since she works as a domestic servant to pay for her daughter's education, whenever she does have free time, she sits and talks with Zalina. She encourages Zalina to study hard, although she is unable to help with her homework. Zalina is left very much on her own. But she is a disciplined girl and attends classes organized by Mendaki to learn the best methods of studying.

Noor Hakim's mother, Asmah, is a rare gem. She takes an active interest in her children's progress at school. She dedicates her time to supporting her children by providing food and drinks while they are studying. She and her husband, Syukur, both impose strict control over the activities of Noor, and also of his sister Norseha who is a final year undergraduate in National University of Singapore. The children are only allowed limited time to watch television. Outings are family affairs. Each must have a very good reason for wanting to go out on his own.

This story of three Malay children sends the message that permeates Mendaki's DIY chart, namely, that the crucial thing is your attitude. And the story also poses a challenge to Malays. It copies the state's own way of provoking Malays, by displaying

to them an image of poor achievers and high achievers, and asking them: which one do you want to be? Can you do it?

The meaning of "total approach" now becomes clearer. All Malays were to dedicate their minds and hearts to pursuing a common goal of improving the education of their children. And this required them to examine themselves, and detect any flaws in their attitudes and conducts as targets for improveemnt. "Change attitudes" now had a new name, 'total approach." The foundation of Mendaki in the 1980s is another initiative by that same Malay agency of the previous decade.

6.5 Conclusion

The founding of the Council on Education for Muslim Children constructs the same Malay agency of "change attitudes" as we observed in the 1970s.

The government compared Malays in Singapore with other ethnic groups for their educational achievement and declared publicly that they were achieving poorly. In line with meritocratic ideals, where success is equated with amount of effort made to achieve it, Malay leaders and members of organizations accepted the verdict passed upon them and posed no questions about structural factors that might prevent them from competing equally with the other groups in Singapore. Instead they accepted that their 'backwardness' was due to their own lack of effort as a group, and strove to improve themselves enough to catch up to the other groups and prove they were decent members of Singapore society.

We also see something else that we have noted in earlier decades about this Malay agency. By performing this conduct, the Malays concerned are able to gain temporary satisfaction, such as feelings of renewed confidence and pride. What Malays can feel proud of this time is not only their achievement in forming Mendaki but also their established pattern of handling problems. That is illustrated in this statement by a paper presented at the 3 day conference:

> "The thinking of the Malays towards education, and particularly the problems
> faced by the Malay community in this respect, is closely linked with political

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developments in Singapore. But in this process, the Malays have shown that they are able to adapt themselves to the realities of living in a country where they do not form the majority and one in which the political philosophy is based on the development of a multi-racial society. They have also shown that they realise their own problems and have taken serious measures to solve them."[88]

This Malay agency finds the core of its confidence in the way it performs "change attitudes". Malays who demonstrated this agency can take pride in their patterned way of adapting themselves to social changes. This attitude harmonises nicely with meritocratic ideals. When society changes in some way, Singaporeans must change themselves in order to succeed under the new conditions, and may not blame structural factors for their failure. And there is satisfaction for these Malays in knowing that they too can now perform as meritocratic agents in this way, by themselves.

At this point there is no conflict between the majority and the minority. We saw this with Malays under "change attitudes" in the 1970s as well. Malays as members of the lowly minority actively pursue their desire of becoming decent Singaporeans for their own confidence, dignity, and good. It is a meaningful goal that yields satisfaction. Ironically though, by the different logic of the state, the Malays are also conforming to what it demands and are obediently serving its economic and social goals.

The word *mendaki*, as well as being an acronym for the Malay name of the Council, is a Malay word that means 'to climb, to ascend'.[89] And as that name suggests, Malays in the 1980s had to continue their efforts to climb higher and higher in Singapore – towards the place where one day they can stand beside the other ethnic groups.

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[88] Mendaki, 1992, p96.
[89] Mendaki, 1992, p51.

Chapter 7 'Change Attitudes' into the 21st Century: the Case of a Volunteer Organization[1]

"Malays are a minority. It is always important for us to be credible in the eyes of other communities." (Fieldwork conversation with Fuad bin Abdul Kodir, a leading member of An-Nisaa organization in Singapore)

In previous chapters we have seen how "change attitudes" was expounded, enacted, and imprinted in Malay minds in Singapore up to the early 1980s. By the beginning of the 1980s the slogan itself had faded away and only rarely appeared in Malay discourses. However, as we have just seen in the previous chapter, this did not mean that the agency that performed "change attitudes" also weakened. On the contrary, after a decade of performance, that set of conducts had apparently become internalized into the thinking and behaving of many Malays. Even without that slogan, the agency that performed it could be aroused in pursuit of the dream of becoming part of mainstream Singapore society.

We might ask now whether that agency of 'change attitudes' is still alive at the start of the 21st century. As it turns out, this Malay agency is still a vital one. We had a hint of that from two vignettes offered in Chapter 1, both from 2002 and concerning the issue of religious extremism. The government created two categories of extremist and moderate Muslims in Singapore, and called on Malays/ Muslims to prove that they are capable of being moderate Muslims in Singapore by speaking up against extremist Muslims.[2] One Malay Muslim, as we saw earlier, replied to Goh's call as follows:

> I would like Mr Goh Chok Tong to know this: I am a Muslim and I will give
> up everything I have for Singapore willingly, including my life if need be ... I
> also wish to assure PM Goh that Muslims here are as Singaporean as other

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[1] Much of the material in this chapter has appeared in Yasuko Kobayashi, "Mocking without Mockery," in *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs*, vol. 38, no.1, 2004, pp.99-122, or in Yasuko Kobayashi 'Borders in our mind: border control at a cognitive level,' in Peer-reviewed Proceedings of the 15th Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia, 2004. (http://coombs.anu.edu.au/ASAA/conference/proceedings/Kobayashi-Y-ASAA2004.pdf)

[2] "Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong yesterday urged Singapore's Malay/Muslim community to speak up against extremism and build a model Muslim community that is progressive." *The Straits Times*, 19th August 2002.

Singaporeans, and we are prepared to play our part just like the others.[3]

And in the other vignette we saw from the same year, a Malay woman who was working as a cleaner in a university library anxiously assured me that she was a moderate Muslim, not an extremist, unlike Muslims in Indonesia. The issue of Malay discourses on Islamic extremism is outside the scope of this thesis, and those two instances above of Malays responding to Goh's provocative call with assurances that they held the right attitude to Islam and to Singapore, were just ones that I happened to come across during my fieldwork. But these instances do suggest that the old Malay agency of "change attitudes" is alive and well at the start of the 21st century. They suggest too that this agency can explain the behaviour of Malays in realms outside those issues of work and education examined in earlier chapters. And those contentions are borne out by a study that I made in 2002 of a quite different issue for Malays – which is the topic of this chapter.

That study concerns a volunteer group called *An-Nisaa*. This group, whose name *An-Nisaa* means 'woman/women' in Arabic, holds classes in a mosque once a fortnight for Indonesian domestic workers in Singapore. Their story demonstrates how the agency of performing "change attitudes" is aroused at the start of the 21st century in the everyday life of some Malays who are not members of a major or a well-known organization. This chapter tells the story of the Malays who started this volunteer activity and of what it means to them.

The members of An-Nisaa are Singaporean Malays who teach English conversation, Koranic reading, and handicraft skills to Indonesian female domestic workers, or 'maids' as they are often called in Singapore. This unique approach by these Singaporeans to the issue of Indonesian maids appears to demonstrate a virtuous side to Singapore society that contrasts with the picture painted by the many stories of abuse of foreign domestic workers by Singaporean employers. What created a possible space for An-Nisaa in Singapore? Is it that the minority agency of these Malay Singaporeans contested the agency of the majority and took different action from that majority? Or is it that a global Islamic network enables these Malay

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[3] *The Straits Times*, 20th August 2002. The author of this letter to the editor is Mohamed Taufiq Abdullah.

Muslims in An-Nisaa to feel solidarity with Indonesian maids, in contrast to the feelings of the Singapore majority, which draws such a clear line between Singaporeans and migrant workers from Indonesia? Actually, we will see that An-Nisaa is largely motivated by the desire of these Malays to be regarded as part of decent Singapore society. The Indonesian maids pose a threat to the image of Malays/ Muslims in Singapore. The Malay agency of "change attitudes" is aroused to detect the problem posed by the Indonesian workers and take steps to fix it. In the past, this Malay agency was often provoked into action when the state pinpointed Malays as lagging behind the other ethnic groups. This time the same desire to be accepted as part of Singapore drives Malays in An-Nisaa to perform "change attitudes" by detecting and targeting the problem before the state even needs to brand them as a backward group.

This chapter will firstly show the place of Indonesian domestic workers in Singapore society by examining the discourses of Chinese Singapore employers about them. Secondly it will explain how and why Indonesian foreign domestic workers came to be a concern for the Malays of An-Nisaa and shed some light on the apparent intentions behind the project of An-Nisaa. Thirdly, it will show the actual scheme of An-Nisaa which is designed to fix problems of Indonesian domestic workers detected by certain Malay Muslims in Singapore.

7.1 Where Indonesian domestic workers are located

Indonesian domestic workers are 'half-persons.'[4] This term accurately reflects how Indonesian domestic workers are seen by Singaporeans both at state level and in the popular view. Firstly, the state policy toward unskilled migrant workers supports the idea of half-person by keeping unskilled migrant workers under rigid control as demonstrated in the guidelines for visa permission on the website of the Ministry of Manpower.[5] Singaporeans often mention how brutally the state can treat unskilled migrant workers if they stay in Singapore illegally. This state control is justified by

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[4] This term was used to describe the position of Indonesian domestic workers by a Chinese Singaporean, a student of NUS, in a conversation with me on NUS campus on 24th April 2002.

[5] Ministry of Manpower, "For Employers of Foreign Domestic Workers," http://www.mom.gov.sg/ProceduresAndGuidelines/WorkPermit/ForEmployersofForeignDomesticWork ers/ (accessed on 4th April 2006).

Singaporeans in their everyday discourse through several images. Unskilled domestic workers are believed to be from underdeveloped countries and poorly educated, they are desperate to work in Singapore, they are construction workers or domestic workers, and they perform work in which Singaporean are reluctant to be engaged. In short, unskilled migrant workers are working in less preferable occupations since "they are uneducated people from poor countries."[6] This entails the idea that they are potentially criminal. Since they are poor, they steal; since they are not educated, they commit rape.[7] Such discourse provides an excuse for the state to control them and for people to make a contrast between Singaporeans and migrant workers.

In the case of foreign domestic workers, this contrast between Singaporean employers and foreign domestic workers is reinforced by a charging system. Firstly, every Singaporean who wishes to have a foreign domestic worker is required to pay a levy ($345 or $250 per month) to the government.[8] Secondly, employers must pay a security deposit of $5000 and this will be lost if the maid gets pregnant and the employer fails to repatriate her as soon as her pregnancy is detected.[9] Thirdly, Singaporean employers will be charged if foreign domestic workers commit any crime. These are state regulations which at the same time legitimize and justify absolute power of Singaporean employers over Indonesian domestic workers.

These levies and fines are broadly interpreted in two ways. Firstly, for some Singaporean employers, such charges are part of the price of foreign domestic workers they paid. The maids thereby become a commodity, dehumanized, to operate at their employer's will. Thus it is reasonable to say. "We paid for her. What is wrong if we treat her as we want, ah?"[10]

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[6] Said to me by a Chinese Singaporean during a casual conversation, while I was visiting her socially at her home on 25th April 2002.

[7] When I interviewed people living in the north tip of Singapore (Marsiling, Yishun, Admiralty, Sembawang), residents of these areas often mentioned this area was less safe than other areas, because non-Singaporean workers cross the border every day from Malaysia to enter Singapore. Interviews from 10th May to 6th July 2002.

[8] A family with a child aged below 12 or parents aged above 65 can get a discounted levy which is 250 dollars a month.

[9] Maids may not become pregnant even through marriage, since they are barred from marrying Singaporean citizens during their service.

[10] Said to me by a Singaporean employer of an Indonesian domestic worker in a conversation on 26th May 2002.

The process of dehumanization is also constantly reinforced by maid agencies. Foreign domestic workers are displayed in a video tape 'showcase.' When the camera focuses on her, the foreign domestic worker states her name, age, languages spoken, where she is from, what housework she is good at, her previous experience, and so forth.[11] These video tapes are run constantly in maid agency waiting rooms. Some agencies display photographs of domestic workers with a brief description.[12] In both cases, the women strike the same pose with their hands together in front of their chest. Some agencies actually display live maids wearing a costume calculated to create certain images for the market. [13] For instance, some wear a simple shirt and skirt, while reading a book in order to appear intelligent; others wear a short-sleeved shirt and pants to appear diligent.

The price is set by market demand. Those who speak English (usually from the Philippines) are more expensive than those who do not. Those who are educated (again mainly from the Philippines) are also more expensive. The price of Indonesian domestic workers is lower since they are presumed not to meet either of these criteria.[14] Although this does not reflect the reality, as some Indonesian domestic workers can speak English and are educated, an image of non-English speaking and less-educated Indonesian domestic workers is nonetheless established by the maid agencies and influences the price paid. A Singaporean told me that "Indonesian ones are cheaper lah," [15] thus inscribing the location of "cheapest available products" on them.

The second way that some Singaporean employers interpret the system of fines on employers outlined above is to feel that they are legally allowed to supervise their foreign domestic workers strictly in order to prevent them from committing any loose or illegal conduct. Levying a fine in Singapore conveys an order to comply with state

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[11] This style of displaying pooled foreign domestic workers is used in the maid agencies in Arab Street.
[12] This is one of the common styles taken by various maid agencies in Singapore including several in Clementy.
[13] This style is used by agencies in Bukit Timah shopping complex.
[14] According to the maid agencies I asked, Indonesian domestic workers are generally 200 dollars a month cheaper than Filipino domestic workers.
[15] A Chinese Singaporean employer of a Filipino maid, a resident in the same block of HDB flat as me, on 18th April 2002. She proudly explained that her affluence enabled her to afford a more expensive maid.

policy.[16] In order to comply with this, supervision of domestic workers is necessary. This interpretation provides Singaporean employers with power to prevent their foreign domestic workers from going out. They can prohibit them from using a home telephone, since the workers might get tips for wicked conduct from other domestic workers once they start having contact. [17] "If something happens with my maid, I have to pay for her." [18] Strict control over purchased commodities sums up the relationship between Singaporean employers and Indonesian domestic workers.[19]

In such a situation, how do Singaporean employers describe the abuse of Indonesian domestic workers? Basically their discourses tend to be constructed in order to protect their face. Upper-class Chinese who are relatively well off might blame problems on the lower stratum. "We have been using maids for a long time. We know how to use maids. Those who are having problems with maids recently are newcomers. They are not used to dealing with them. Therefore, they have problems." [20]

The middle class, those who are novices as employers of maids in the eyes of the upper class, tend to justify abuse by pointing out the poor qualifications of Indonesian domestic workers. "These maids are terrible lah. How? Example ah. They do not know how to use electronic machines such as washing machine and vacuum cleaner. Terrible kampong people." [21] Another Chinese professional lady mentioned her experience. "Since they are not trained, they do not know how to look after our children. They have no sense of hygiene. I had terrible experiences."[22]

The pattern here is Singaporean/Indonesian; employer/domestic worker; educated/less educated; urbanized/rural; advanced/backward; hygienic/unhygienic. Another

[16] This is frequently-heard discourse in Singapore. Singaporeans cite as an example the fine charged in the train station if you eat on the platform at the train station
[17] Conversation with a Chinese Singaporean employer, the elderly relative of a friend of mine, on 14th April 2002.
[18] Conversation with a Chinese Singaporean employer, a young professional female, a social acquaintance whom I met through a friend, on 5th May 2002.
[19] Regarding how Singaporean employers of foreign domestic workers control their workers, see Yasuko Kobayashi, 'Risk-Management of Foreign Domestic Workers,' Asia Rights, issue 5, 2005. (http://rspas.anu.edu.au/asiarightsjournal/Kobayashi.pdf)
[20] Conversation with a friend, a young female Chinese Singaporean postgraduate student whose parents employ an Indonesian domestic worker, on 6th June 2002.
[21] Conversation with a middle-aged Indian Singaporean women living in the same block of HDB flats as me, on 2nd September 2002.
[22] Conversation with a Chinese Singaporean female, an employee of NUS, on 9th September 2002.

employer explained that Indonesian domestic workers can be untrustworthy. "These people are not quite educated and have no commonsense. They sometimes do tricky things. They can make overseas calls from my house and use my stuff."[23] In the end, these discourses relate to character: sensible Singaporeans versus untrustworthy Indonesian domestic workers.

All this discourse about Indonesian domestic workers place them firmly below Singaporeans. There is no equality of regard. A person never lets a half-person talk back. This silence is where Indonesian domestic workers are.[24]

7.2 The gaze of Malays at Indonesian domestic workers

We have just seen how Singaporean Chinese employers of Indonesian domestic workers tend to draw a clear line between themselves and those maids, and locate the latter as inferior to themselves by a particular gaze on them and by their everyday discourses. On the other hand, the Singaporean Malays of An-Nisaa try to educate these Indonesian maids. What make the Malays of An-Nisaa take this approach, and what is their own gaze at the maids?

Most members of An-Nisaa have a connection with Indonesia through their relatives, and say that this personal connection with Indonesia motivates them to help Indonesian domestic workers. Such ties, however, were by no means the sole motivation for them to start An-Nisaa, as discussed shortly.

Fuad bin Abdul Kadir is one of the three leading members of An-Nisaa and was the one to generate the idea of An-Nisaa. The other two leading members are his uncle, Faruhan bin Hassan, and Faruhan's wife, Omayah Hassam.

Fuad bin Abdul Kadir attributes his starting of An-Nisaa to an association with Indonesia through his family. He is a Malay Singaporean who did his university study

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[23] Conversation with a female Chinese Singaporean PhD student whose sister employs a foreign domestic worker, on 8th September 2002.

[24] For discussion of how Singaporean employers demarcate themselves psychologically from foreign domestic workers, see Yasuko Kobayashi (2004) 'Borders in our mind: border control at a cognitive level,' in Peer-reviewed Proceedings of the 15th Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia. (http://coombs.anu.edu.au/ASAA/conference/proceedings/Kobayashi-Y-ASAA2004.pdf)

in Malaysia,[25] and he also has blood relatives in Indonesia and business connections there. He asserts that these ties to Indonesia enabled him to see the complex structure of the problem that Indonesian domestic workers were having in Singapore.

Fuad analyses the situation as follows: although the host society of Singapore subscribes to the conventional idea that Indonesian maids come to Singapore just to earn money to support their families, in reality, they also expect a new life with better chances for themselves in Singapore. In short, they come to Singapore both for a job and for a life. Their desire to seek a new life motivates them to explore the most highly urbanized space in Southeast Asia. As they cannot afford to buy goods in Singapore, they end up walking around Orchard Road or gathering in public spaces such as the Botanic Gardens.[26] Consequently, "we now see bunches of Indonesian domestic workers walking around the town."[27]

A question to ask here is why that sight of groups of Indonesian maids attracted Fuad's attention. It is because he saw these maids as a problem due to their misbehavior as Muslims. Firstly, their dress code is inappropriate for Muslims in Singapore: some walk around town in a short-sleeved shirt and short pants, showing their skin to the public. Secondly some of them are known to have sexual relations with Pakistani Muslims. Fuad cites two causes for such misbehaviour, one being simply that they are ignorant of how to behave in Singapore. He said

> "Since Singaporean Muslims are well educated, we know how to behave as Muslims. But Indonesian maids just do not know how to behave in Singapore. They are lost in Singapore just because they do not know." [28]

The other reason Fuad gives for maids having relations with Pakistani Muslim men is that the maids' lack of English makes them unable to communicate properly with

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[25] Conversation with Faud bin Abdul Kadir on 12th May 2002.
Fuad was born in Singapore in 1954 and identifies himself as Malay in Singapore. Racially speaking, his background is mixed. His father's father was a Bugis from Sulawesi and descended from a Bugis aristocratic family, while his father's mother was Indian from Malaysia. His father thus shares those two backgrounds. His mother is born in a Chinese family, but was adopted by a Malay Muslim family during the second World War and raised as a Muslim.
[26] Conversation with Fuad bin Abdul Kadir on 26th May 2002.
[27] Conversation with Fuad bin Abdul Kadir on 26th May 2002.
[28] Conversation with Fuad bin Abdul Kadir on 23rd June 2002

Singaporeans in general, which encourages them to seek solace in the company of people who at least share their religion and their position as foreigners in Singapore. Fuad explains that the inability of Indonesian domestic workers to communicate with most Singaporeans due to language differences isolates them from society.[29]

We can see how Fuad draws a clear line between Singaporean Malay Muslims and Indonesian Muslims, and at the same time locates the latter as inferior (e.g. as 'uneducated' instead of 'educated'). In that sense there is little difference between Fuad and the Chinese Singaporean employers of Indonesian maids. Why, despite this, does he care about the Indonesian maids in Singapore? Or more broadly, why should Singaporean Malay/Muslims be concerned about their behaviour? Fuad provided an answer to that during casual conversations I had with him. He asserted that their behaviour can damage the reputation of Malays/ Muslims in Singapore. As he put it on one occasion:

"Malays are a minority. It is always important for us to be credible in the eyes of other communities. Our effort to be good Muslims will be spoiled by their misbehavior." [30]

This is the second important point about the place of Indonesian maids in Singapore. Although in the minds of Malays these Indonesian domestic workers are clearly different from themselves, in the eyes of the other communities this is not so. Singaporeans tend to regard Indonesians maids as the kindred of Malay Singaporeans,[31] as their fellow Muslims and as a part of them. And it is this gaze of the Singaporean majority upon Malays that is crucial. Malays have long tried to prove that they are worthy to be a part of Singapore mainstream society. And by now, even

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[29] Conversation with Fuad bin Abdul Kadir on 9th June 2002.

[30] Conversation with Fuad bin Abdul Kadir on 23rd June 2002. This idea that the misbehavior of Indonesian maids damages the reputation of Malays/ Muslims in Singapore was asserted by Fuad in another conversation with me on 26th May 2002 as well. It was also expressed separately by the other head members of An-Nisaa as mentioned in this chapter. The same idea was also expressed by a member of the Singapore Muslim Converts Association in a conversation with me on 8th August 2002.

[31] A Singaporean Indian woman whom I knew well in Singapore expressed this idea with the phrase "their own people". She asserted that for Singapore Malays, the Indonesian maids are their own people, as they share the same language and same religion as them (conversation with her on 7th April 2002). This attitude prevails in Singapore even though not all Indonesian domestic workers in Singapore are in fact Muslim.

without being goaded once again to prove themselves by the government, they can examine themselves for flaws and detect problems which will thwart their desire to be accepted as equal Singaporeans – as Fuad does here. Even if the problems do not lie within the Malays themselves, that it is not the point. The ritual performance of "change attitudes" by Malays can be stimulated by the flawed attitudes and behaviour of the Indonesian domestic workers.

One day in August 2000, while Fuad was pondering on this problem of Indonesian maids, he bumped into one in the World Trade Centre building. Her name was Sugiarti binti Nurcholis. Later, she became one of the first registered students of An-nissa. She explained to him that she had nowhere to go in Singapore because of the high prices, she had no close friends to talk to, and she had difficulty communicating since her English was not adequate. As a result she had begun to feel lost in Singapore.[32] This conversation showed Fuad that "Indonesian domestic workers need a place to go and spend time, to learn English and to learn how to behave in Singapore."[33]

This analysis neatly fits the problems that Indonesian maids pose to Malays. Having "a place to go and spend time" will help to reduce their visibility. It is better to make these problematic "kindred" less visible by accommodating them in a certain place than to have them gathering in public and attracting attention. Learning "how to behave in Singapore" will include learning how to dress more modestly. Fuad believes that poor religious teaching in Indonesia has failed to instill adequate knowledge about Islam and Islamic practices. Due to this, Indonesian maids do not know how to practise Islam properly, including how to dress as proper Muslim women.[34] Learning how to behave as Muslim women in Singapore will also discourage them from loose sexual conduct, for example with Pakistani Moslems. Learning English is intended to discourage that behaviour as well. Conversation skill in English will enable them to communicate more with Singaporeans, and thus feel less isolated. It will also help them to avoid misunderstandings with their employers that make employers angry with them and which heighten the risk of abuse.[35]

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[32] Conversation with Fuad bin Abdul Kadir on 26th May 2002.
[33] *Ibid.*
[34] Omayah Hassam shares this view of Fuad that the maids' dress code is due to the inaccurate Islamic education they received in Indonesia. Conversation with Omayah Hassan on 12th May 2002.
[35] Conversation with Fuad bin Abdul Kadir on 9th June 2002.

The problems with maids have been detected and the remedy devised. Now Fuad needed a place to put the plans into action – a place to accommodate Indonesian maids and educate them. Fuad discussed this issue with his uncle, Faruhan bin Hassam, a member of the trustee committee of the Sultan mosque and also its chair. Faruhan's position as chair entitled him to make final decisions about any issue related to the mosque. Faruhan agreed to support this project and to provide the facilities of the Sultan mosque for it.

Although Faruhan too claimed an ethnic link with Indonesia, he had other motives as well. Firstly, like Fuad, he regarded Indonesian maids as a danger to the good standing of Malay Muslims in Singapore. He believed they were already harming the credibility of Malay Muslims due to their behaviour and reputation.[36] Secondly, this project suited a particular ambition of his. He was keen to enhance the reputation of the mosque in Singapore and in Southeast Asia. When he joined the trustee committee of the Sultan mosque in 1985, the committee members hoped to make the mosque a centre of the community by organizing activities for the benefit of Muslims. Faruhan submitted a petition to the government in 1989 asking for financial support for a new building. In 1993 this Annex building was declared open by the Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong, and in the same year Faruhan was elected chair of the committee. Faruhan said to me:

> "Later on, some of Indonesian maids in An-Nisaa will start the same type of school in Indonesia. Then what will happen? The Sultan mosque will become known as a model."[37]

Faruhan's attempts to promote the Sultan mosque in the region matched the policy of the government to promote Singapore as a key centre in Southeast Asia in all fields (including education, technology, medicine, and Islamic banking). His initiative will therefore count as a contribution to achieving state policy, which is a way for Malays to prove themselves as a part of mainstream Singapore society.

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[36] Conversation with Faruhan bin Hassam on 19th April 2002
[37] Conversation with Faruhan bin Hassam on 28th April 2002.

The next step was to set up a committee for the project and recruit volunteer members for it who would carry this project at an operational level. The lead members of An-Nisaa, Faruhan bin Hassam, Omayah Hassam, and Fuad bin Abdul Kadir, set up the committee together.[38] As for finding volunteer members for it, Faruhan Bin Hassam consulted his wife, Omayah Hassam. As female chair of the committee, she was another lead member who found the misbehavior of Indonesian domestic workers problematic for the reputation of Malay Muslims.[39] Omayah took full charge of selecting and recruiting people to serve as volunteers on the project. Six more such members were recruited, all Malay Muslim women.[40] These six members function at an operational level for An-Nisaa without payment. For instance, they are in charge of teaching the Koranic reading course or the handicraft course.

7.3 The scheme of An-Nisaa

The name of the organization was selected. *An-Nisaa* literally means "woman/women" in Arabic. In fact, it means more than that for the Singaporean members of An-Nisaa. Omayah Hassam explains that it means "respected" woman.[41] And Fuad Bin Abdul Kadir agrees, saying this name An-Nisaa was chosen because "we want Indonesian maids to be respected by the society."[42] As we have discussed, this desire in turn reflects the desire of these members of An-Nisaa for they and other Malays in Singapore to be respected themselves. These Malays have detected problems that threaten the fulfillment of that desire and have set out to fix them.

Details of the courses run by An-Nisaa are as follows. The English course is organized and taught by Fuad bin Abdul Kadir. Fuad teaches English by using concrete examples

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[38] Conversation with Omayah Hassam and Fuad bin Abdul Kadir on 12th May 2002.
[39] Conversation with Omayah Hassan on 12th May 2002.
[40] The members of the An-Nisaa Committee as at June 2002 were:

Daing Faruhan bin Hassam	(lead member)
Daing Omayah Hassam	(lead member)
Daing Fuad bin Abdul Kadir	(lead member, and English teacher)
Suaida bte Ali	(handicraft teacher)
Juminah bte Ahmad	(Koranic lecturer)
Norsam bte Iblahim	(handicraft teacher)
Rukinah bte Hj. Mukmin	(handicraft teacher)
Nuraminah bte MD. Noor	(handicraft teacher)
Marhamah bte Beujol	(handicraft teacher)

[41] Conversation with Omayah Hassam on 12th May 2002.
[42] Conversation with Faud bin Abdul Kadi on 9th June 2002.

for maids about what to say in common situations, especially ones where they are talking to their employers (e.g. how to answer when their employer asks them to bring fruit to the table).[43] Here the main point is how they can use English not to displease their employers. It is better to use "Could I" or "May I" when they want to ask if they can do something. If they want their employer to do something, the appropriate beginning is "Could you". Any time they need to address their employer, they should start with "Sir" (or "Madam"). If they are asked to bring fruit to the table, they should not forget to answer "Yes, Sir". Not only English but also manners commonly used in Singapore everyday life are explained.[44] Through these tips about what to say and how to interact during their daily life in Singapore, they can learn how to ease their communication problems.

The second subject is a Koranic reading course. As we saw, Fuad bin Abdul Kodir and Omayah Hassam blame Indonesian teachings about Islam for some problems with Indonesian maids in Singapore. This is particularly true for dress code. They see the problem as this: while in Singapore the dress code for Muslim women is long sleeves, long pants or skirt, and a head cover, this is not necessarily the case in Indonesia. At An-Nisaa the dress code in the mosque is strictly kept. When Indonesians attend any courses conducted by An-Nisaa, they are expected to wear long sleeves, pants, and a head cover (*tudung*). As most of them do not have a head scarf, there are spare head scarves in the Sultan Mosque.[45] Their trying on a head cover through An-Nisaa is a chance to learn new manners.

The difference between Singaporean Muslims' interpretations and daily practices of Islam, and those of Indonesian maids, is not simply a matter of difference. Omayah Hassan remarks

> "In Java, for instance, they burn incense to pray as my parents do. But we do not mix up the local customs with Islam. But they still do." [46]

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[43] Fieldwork observation in the Sultan Mosque on 26th May 2002 and 9th June 2002.
[44] Fieldwork observation in the Sultan Mosque on 26th May 2002 and 9th June 2002.
[45] Fieldwork observation in the Sultan Mosque on 12th May 2002 and 26th May 2002.
[46] Conversation with Omayah Hassan on 12th May 2002.

In Singapore the right Islamic practices prevail, while in Indonesia Islam is not practiced in a pure form. Here, the line between superior (and modern) Malay Muslims in Singapore and inferior (and backward) Indonesian domestic workers is clearly drawn.

Learning how Islam is practised in Singapore through Koran reading and explanation is meant to help maids improve their conduct in other ways as well. This includes their relations with men. Fuad comments that when Indonesian maids loiter in the company of men on busy Orchard Road, dressed in skimpy clothes, as "Muslims", they look disgraceful to many sets of eyes.[47] The course of Koran reading is designed to give them a notion of where they are as Muslims in Singapore society.

The last course provided by An-Nisaa is a handicraft course. In this course, Indonesian domestic workers can learn how to make accessories by skills such as beadwork and how to arrange flowers. Pieces of work done by both teachers and students are displayed and sold as souvenirs to tourists visiting the Sultan mosque.[48] The handicraft course functions indirectly to help Indonesian maids improve the problems of miscommunication, In this course, they are advised to offer their employer the handicrafts that they have created as a gift. Fuad bin Abdul Kodir said, "giving their handicrafts in this way may be of use to improve their relation with their employer."[49] In order to be recognized as more acceptable in Singapore society, it is the Indonesian domestic workers who bring a gift to their employers.

In An-Nissa, all Indonesian participants are referred to as students. Singaporean teachers instruct them. Omayah Hassam, the female lead member, has selected certain students to be representatives. She says this is in order to make An-Nissa an interactive venture between Singaporean committee members and Indonesian domestic workers.[50] What it also indicates is that not all students are free to communicate with the Singaporean teachers outside class hours. Only the student representatives occasionally come into the room for the Singaporean teachers to have

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[47] Conversation with Omayah Hassam on 12th May 2002.
[48] Conversation with Omayah Hassam on 12th May 2002.
[49] Conversation with Fuad bin Abdul Kadir on 26th May 2002.
[50] Conversation with Omayah Hassam on 26th May 2002.

a chat with them.

An-Nisaa also maintains a good relationship with the employers of its students.[51] An-Nisaa sends a letter to employers inviting them to come and have a close look at what their domestic workers are learning and experiencing at the Sultan mosque. According to them, this invitation is intended to deliver an accurate picture of what An-Nissa is doing, and so create a better understanding between employers and domestic workers. An-Nisaa also keep the record of attendance of each student. This record is also sent to their employers.

What does the project of An-Nisaa actually do? It is not a form of bi-lateral relations to help Singaporeans and Indonesian domestic workers to bridge the gap separating them. Rather, it is Indonesian domestic workers who are required to suit themselves to the Singaporean code of conduct. The Malays of An-Nissa seek to turn Indonesian domestic workers into something more suitable to that society. Objectified Indonesian domestic workers are reshaped through education and taught how to use English, how to dress and how to behave properly as Muslims, as Malays in Singapore themselves have been objectifying and correcting themselves in similar ways and for the same purpose of learning to be accepted as decent Singaporeans.

In earlier chapters we saw how Malays in Singapore regularly gained confidence and satisfaction through their performance of "change attitudes." Likewise, in the course of this project, Singaporean members of An-Nisaa began to gain satisfaction in various ways. Positive responses from the employers also helped them to feel virtuous about their project.

"We are having a good response and reputation from employers. Having seen all activities, they are quite happy about what we are doing".[52]

This approval from employers also meets their desire to gain credit from the other communities in Singapore and keeps the members of An-Nisaa happy about their activities. Fuad bin Abdul Kadir mentioned that there was no government subsidy for

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[51] Conversation with Fuad bin Abdul Kadir on 26th May 2002.
[52] Conversation with Fuad bin Abdul Kadir and Omayah Hassam on 26th May 2002.

this project and told me "we are doing this out of our own heart and initiative, not by the state"[53]. When the national newspaper, *The Straits Times*, came to cover An-Nisaa and wrote it up, the committee was overjoyed.[54] There was much greater celebration than there had been over the earlier recognition of An-Nisaa by the Indonesian embassy. Although the problems of Indonesian domestic workers had not been completely fixed yet, Malay Muslims in Singapore had achieved some official recognition and approval from the mainstream of Singapore society.

7.4 Conclusion

What makes An-Nisaa possible? It arises mainly from the desire of Singapore Malays to be recognized as part of decent Singapore society. Malay Muslims in Singapore do not see Indonesian domestic workers as part of themselves and locate the maids as inferior to themselves through their discourses and conduct. But the Singapore majority does look upon Indonesian domestic workers as a part of the Malay/ Muslim community in Singapore, and that gaze is what matters. This makes the maids a potential problem for Malays, and some among the Malays are moved to detect and to fix that problem – this time without even being spurred into action by the state. The agency of performing "change attitudes" can now be aroused in all kinds of contexts. It is a part of everyday life for many Malays and can be exercised mundanely at the core of their thought and behaviour.

This case of An-Nisaa illustrates another idea from earlier chapters too. Bhabha asserts that minority agency displaces and subverts the discourse of the majority, through mockery. An-Nisaa shows once again how 'mocking' by the minority community is sometimes rather too serious to allow a space in the mind to be playful enough to displace the dominant discourse. Just as the maid agencies institutionalize Indonesian maids to make them suit the norms of the Singapore society, so too do the Malays of An-Nisaa. Their desire to be added to the dominant majority drives them to consolidate the dominant discourses of that majority without necessarily being aware

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[53] Conversation with Faruhan bin Hassam on 28th April 2002. The expenditure for An-Nisaa activity is covered by donations to the Sultan mosque.
[54] This coverage appeared in *The Sunday Times*, 11th August 2002. When I was at the Sultan mosque two weeks later, Omayah Hassam and the other female volunteer members of An-Nisaa discussed the coverage excitedly with me. (25th August 2002).

of it.

In short, the same basic desire and familiar set of conducts based on that desire remain important for Malays even into the 21st century.

Conclusion

This thesis helps us to understand how Malays as an ethnic minority have attempted to locate themselves in Singapore society since Singapore's independence. For this task the study traces the formation of a certain Malay psychological agency, using Lacan's notion of agency as further developed by Slavoj Žižek and Ghassan Hage. The study finds that when Malays perceive a threat to their desire to be accepted as equal Singaporeans, they are driven to perform a patterned set of conducts: examining themselves critically, detecting flaws and setting those problems as targets for improvement. They do this by their own initiative and for their own good, without necessarily being aware that their discourses and conducts are reconfirming the mainstream ideologies.

The study traces the formation of this agency over time in order to provide a fuller understanding of it. The story starts in the period from 1965 to 1970. We saw how Malays were located by the new government of an independent Singapore, and how this agency was aroused among politically engaged Malays – first Malay MPs and then leaders and members of Malay organisations as well – in response to the challenge by the state for Malays to embrace meritocracy (Ch 2 & 3). Next we examined how this psychological agency developed during the 1970s. Malay MPs and other leaders of their community led Malays to make themselves more fit to perform by the logic of meritocracy like the other ethnic groups in Singapore. This gave rise to a set of Malay conducts for self-improvement under the slogan "Change Attitudes" (Ch 4 & 5). Politically engaged Malays began to participate in that set of conducts through a series of public seminars and through newspaper forums and discussions, while it was also consumed by a broader audience of Malay newspaper readers. During this decade this behaviour also became a way for Malays to obtain temporary satisfaction, by demonstrating measurable achievements that brought them closer to acceptance as decent Singaporeans.

By the early 1980s, this Malay agency had developed to a new stage by which it now performed the relevant conducts of "Change Attitudes" without the need for that explicit slogan any longer (Ch 6). This is the culmination of the development we have

traced through from the late 1960s. By now the pattern was set for how Malays responded when they felt compared to other ethnic groups. For our purposes the late 1980s and 1990s are not very significant; although that period too saw vulnerabilities for Malays regarding their position in Singapore and provocations for Malays,[1] the agency in the logic of meritocracy was not shaken. Finally, we saw how the same psychological agency is still active in the 21st century. The origins and practices of a small and newly created volunteer organisation (Ch 7) reveal how the desire to be accepted as equal Singaporeans influences the conduct of some ordinary Malays in their everyday lives.

If Malays keep trying long enough and hard enough to improve themselves through the patterned set of conducts examined above, can they one day achieve their goal of being accepted as equal Singaporeans? This would appear to be logically impossible. From the viewpoint of the majority, the logic is plain. In order to validate and maintain their own sense of self as majority, they are compelled to differentiate some other people as minority. They can recognize themselves only beside others who are different from themselves. The precise grounds on which the minority can be demarcated do not matter; new grounds can be constantly created, the point being to keep the mechanism of differentiation working and serving its purpose.

On the side of the Malays, too, their desire for acceptance by the majority can never be more than temporarily attained. The agency of "Change Attitudes" is aroused and maintained only by finding problems within oneself and making efforts to fix them. This set of conducts creates a sense of purpose and is a source of pride and confidence, so that for the Malays concerned it becomes part of their everyday life. Thus the uneven relationship between power/majority on the one hand and minority on the

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[1] One issue arose in 1986 when the then Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, raised the question of the loyalty of Singapore Malays – as Muslims – to the Singapore nation at the time of the visit of the Israeli President (see *The Straits Times*, 15th December 1986). A related issue arose in 1987 when the Minister of Trade and Industry and Second Defence Minister, Brigadier-General Lee Hsien Loong, mentioned his scepticism about the loyalty of Singapore Malays to the Singapore nation. The general stated that Malay Singaporeans identified strongly as Muslims and that this created a potential conflict of loyalties for them, so that the Singapore Air Force tended not to hire Malays as air force pilots (see *The Straits Times*, 25th February 1987).

other is mutually constructed by both parties, for their own needs and by quite different logic.

Some mention of the scope and limitations of the thesis is appropriate here. This study attempts neither to create another meta-narrative about a homogeneous Malay community nor to create a sole collective Malay identity. The term "identity" is very vague. Malays in Singapore can have multiple identities in different contexts. This study is an attempt to show one agency that is aroused among Malays in a particular context; namely, when Malays see themselves juxtaposed with (members of) other ethnic groups. It thus concerns only one way by Malays of trying to locate themselves in Singapore society. This way is, however, an important one. This Malay agency can be aroused both in personal contexts where interethnic relations are concerned as well as in political contexts where Malays feel their community to be compared with others. Understanding this agency thus sheds light on the power relations of Singapore society at both the individual and community levels. It reveals how this minority actively helps to maintain the mechanisms for control by the government. That insight may also be useful for understanding how the Singapore state manages people more broadly, not only Malays, with such success.

In a related point, one might ask how widely shared this psychological agency is among Malays in Singapore. As discussed before, the range of Malay voices examined in the thesis is limited. Most of the voices examined might be regarded as edited to a greater or lesser degree, and moreover, the range is largely confined to Malays who are politically engaged – if only to the extent of contributing to newspaper forums and discussions. The last chapter perhaps goes some way to complementing the types of voices examined in the earlier parts of the thesis, by examining the unedited discourses and the conducts of a few Malays who were not leaders or members of an established organisation, but simply people who decided to set up a small one themselves.

One implication of the findings in this study concerns the clear division of labour between studies of nation and of ethnicity found in many previous academic works. The agency of Malays in Singapore revealed here demonstrates that these Malays are not constructed simply as an ethnic group. Instead, an agency of ethnicity interacts

with an ideal model of being Singaporean presented by the powerful or the majority as nation to arouse the agency in question. This shows that it is important to untangle how these two elements (nation and ethnicity) are inscribed, in order to understand an agency of an ethnic minority.

The study also has implications for earlier work on Malays in Singapore specifically. It enhances and in some ways modifies the picture of Malays presented by those studies (see Li and Rahim)[2]. Li's work touches on the psychology of Malays when she suggests that Malay political leaders (MPs) have been passively inculcated with the stereotypical view of Malays as lagging behind, through the ideology of the non-Malay majority (especially politicians). Rahim's study presents an image of Malays as a community marginalized by state policies and structural factors, one might almost say an image of Malays as victims. [3] However, Malays in the present study are neither passive recipients of state ideology nor victims of the socio-economic and political structure in Singapore. On the contrary, they pursue meaningful goals by their own initiative and derive satisfaction from doing so. Moreover, those very attitudes and conducts are revealed to be another factor that maintain their marginality in Singapore society.

As for previous work on Singapore society more broadly, this study is helpful for understanding relations between that society and the state. Specifically, it leads us to examine the points at which and the logic by which Singapore state and society are harmoniously compatible with each other. It shows how a minority helps to consolidate the state ideology for its own purposes rather than for the sake of the state. This raises the likelihood that mechanisms of complicity based on psychological agency are also at work between the state and other groups in Singapore.

Another implication of this study is for Bhabha's model of minority agency. This study finds a different type of agency from the one presented in Bhabha's model. It shows that a minority agency does not always function to displace the majority

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[2] See Li, 1989. Rahim, 1998.
[3] Hussim Mutalib criticised Rahim's work since it does not grasp active voices of Malays in Singapore. Hussin Mutalib, 'Singapore's Quest for a National Identity: the triumphs and trials of government policies,' in Ban Kah Choon, Anne Pakir & Tong Chee Kiong eds., *Imagining Singapore*, Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2004 (2nd ed), pp - .

discourses by virtue of its other-ness or difference. When the Malays in Singapore interact with the majority this does indeed create a 'third space' as Bhabha suggests. The Malays cannot help changing themselves through their interaction with the majority. However this particular Malay agency does not displace the ideology presented by the majority or the powerful as Bhabha suggested in his model. It is not as playful as that of Bhabha's "mocking" minority; it does not make fun of the dominant norms or ideologies and so subvert them. An earnest desire to be a part of mainstream Singapore society cannot afford such a playful agency. Instead, in its very own way this Malay agency consolidates the norms or ideologies of the powerful/the majority.

That finding in turn yields an insight into how one must analyse an agency of a minority. It is necessary to focus carefully on how difference is constructed, and in particular how it is perceived and experienced by the minority. Bhabha, an academic from the third world, created his model of minority agency for a certain political purpose: to prompt us to read non-western histories as an expression of agencies that are different from those of the colonizers and are aroused in complicated intersections. By forming his model he asserts the existence of a site at which narratives of the non-west may be articulated. For this purpose, his strategy was effective. What needs to be done after Bhabha, however, is not to present the colonized/ minorities through wishful thinking by invoking his model as suitable in all cases. Instead we should also try to understand the mechanisms by which more 'disappointing' types of minority agency may be aroused – at the junction between positive performance with autonomous spirit on the one hand and unaware subordination on the other.

Whether this way that Malays locate themselves in Singapore is the best way for them to behave is not for us to discuss here. However we might wonder whether it is the only possible way. That question is obviously not only one for those Malays. A similar pattern of agency of an ethnic minority in Japan is also demonstrated by Tomiyama Ichiro. Tomiyama examines Okinawans, who became a part of Japan after modernization and tended to be considered as inferior to those Japanese who lived on the mainland. This ethnic minority attempted to improve themselves by promoting a standard mainland variety of Japanese and banning use of their own Okinawan dialect. By displaying their willingness to promote standard Japanese over their everyday

dialect, they were aiming at becoming a part of the mainland Japanese, rather than being regarded as inferior like other colonized people, such as Taiwanese in Taiwan.[4]

Taking an example closer to home, that same question is also one for me myself and for minorities in Australia whenever white nationalism becomes prominent. In December 2005, racial attacks by white Australians directed at Lebanese Australians took place at a Sydney beach. Shortly afterwards an Australian-born Lebanese posted his thoughts to *The Sydney Morning Herald*. His letter was placed as main feature of the Letters section under a large heading "In defence of loyal, hard-working Lebanese." What especially caught my attention were these phrases of his:

> The majority of Lebanese [here] love Australia, and appreciate what this country has to offer. Many, like me, would be willing to pay the ultimate sacrifice for this beautiful country.[5]

This voice resonates in harmony with Malay voices across the seas in Singapore. It seems hard to find a way to co-exist with the majority other than trying to prove we can live up to the code of conduct defined by its norms. One step in this direction perhaps is to know whose desire we are really seeking to fulfil. We always need to be aware that an innocent affirmation of seemingly positive terms such as 'acting for ourselves', by 'our own will' and for 'our own sake,' can unguardedly and unconsciously subordinate us to others.

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[4] 富山一郎 [Tomiyama Ichiro], 『戦場の記憶』 [*Memories at the War Front*], 日本経済評論者 [Tokyo: Nihon keizai hyoronsha], 1995.
[5] *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 21st December, 2005.

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