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How to be Singaporean: becoming global national citizens and the national dimension in cosmopolitan openness

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at how cosmopolitanism is practised amongst Singaporeans who have experienced Singapore’s education reform in the 1990s. Cosmopolitanism in Singapore is tied to state-intervention with a national orientation. To complement Singapore’s push towards cosmopolitanism, the education reform in the 1990s promoted the idea of a national citizen with a global orientation. I looked at 40 Singaporeans born after the year 1990 to investigate cosmopolitan attitudes that have emerged from the tensions between cosmopolitanism and nationalism. To meet the state’s ideals of cosmopolitanism, these Singaporeans employed strategies to practice a particular form of cosmopolitan openness which prioritise national interests. Nationalism and cosmopolitanism co-exist in Singapore and share a dialectic relationship as I argue that these Singaporeans are global national citizens.

KEYWORDS
Globalisation, cosmopolitanism, Singapore, foreign others, nationalism, education
Introduction

What does it mean to be Singaporean? Being a Singaporean is a difficult task. Singapore has been pushing for cosmopolitanism for the last two decades and aspiring towards becoming a world-class global city. Concurrently, the Singapore government also pushed for nationalism to ground Singaporeans to the country. Despite Singapore’s cosmopolitan nature, local-foreign tensions are on the rise due to a huge influx of immigrants in the last decades. The then Singapore minister, George Yeo, once stressed the importance of the balance between these two ideologies when he stated in 1989 that:

We (Singapore) cannot be a trading nation, if we are not cosmopolitan. We cannot be a nation, if we are not nationalistic. We must be both at the same time. (cited in Green 1997, 150)

The Singapore state wanted a cosmopolitan Singapore, while at the same time promoted a strong national identity. One way in which this has been done is through the centralised education system by introducing an education reform in the late 1990s. To be a Singaporean is to embrace both national and global identity. The contradiction between these identities remains as tensions between locals and foreigners continue to rise as Singaporeans aspire to become cosmopolitans.

To meet the challenges of a rapidly globalising world, cosmopolitanism has often become the subject of interest in national education curriculums. With the inclusion of cosmopolitanism into national curriculums in the last two or three decades, this study will look at cosmopolitan practices of national citizens who have experienced this kind of education from the start of their educational career. Singapore provides an interesting case to examine how the tensions between the global and national are reconciled through everyday cosmopolitanism. National Education (NE) in Singapore was born as a result of a nation-building initiative in the late 1990s to address the contradictions between global and national identities. Adults born after the year 1990 are the first group of people who have experienced NE. Thus, this paper seeks to find out how these adults reconcile this contradiction to possess both cosmopolitan and patriotic attitudes. The results of this study could be used to improve local-foreign tensions in Singapore and provide a model to ease the similar tensions of a rapidly globalising world of nation-states.

Cosmopolitanism within national contexts

As a concept, ‘cosmopolitanism’ has manifested in many forms but is often used as a blanket term to describe everything from possessing toolsets for interaction with international diversity, to appreciating international music. While cosmopolitanism has many conceptualisations in the literature, one common theme is openness and willingness to engage with foreign others (foreigners and foreign cultures) (Hannerz 1990; Szerszynski and Urry 2002; Tomlinson 1999). In my paper, I will proceed with this conceptualisation. Key ideas that underpin this idea of cosmopolitanism include ‘primary allegiance … to the community of human beings in the entire world’ (Nussbaum 1994, 3), or ‘an intellectual and aesthetic stance of openness toward divergent cultural experiences’ and ‘willingness to engage with the Other’ (Hannerz 1990, 239). However, a limitation of this definition is the non-specificity of defining the context in which cosmopolitanism occurs and lingers in ‘abstract notions of openness, awareness and cultural engagement’ (Skey 2012, 484). Cosmopolitanism as a practice that is grounded in the everyday should be investigated, especially in regards to its relationship within the national context.

Some scholars argue that the adoption of cosmopolitan attitudes is context-specific and largely driven by pragmatism. As Skey (2012, 482) contends, ‘individuals are more than able to shift between discourses, and this may involve them adopting contradictory positions as they struggle to make sense of particular
issues’. The preferences displayed towards foreign others can change across different contexts. Despite this, cosmopolitan research has yet to rigorously investigate ‘who exactly these (cosmopolitan) engagements involve and exclude (and the type of resources and constraints that they operate with and/or under), where they emerge, what form they take, and how they are understood and articulated’ (Skey 2012, 484). Cosmopolitanism is indeed driven by pragmatism as it is often marked with inconsistencies and shifting positions (Skey 2013). As per Skrbis and Woodward (2007, 745)’s suggestion, cosmopolitanism may be better imagined as ‘a set of increasingly available cultural outlooks that individuals selectively deploy to deal with new social conditions’. In their study of ordinary cosmopolitan openness amongst the middle-class population, they found that participants offer a pragmatic view on globalisation; embracing the benefits but at the same time are aware of its downsides. With the acknowledgement of this pragmatism, cosmopolitanism may be practised differently in a specific context, and in particular, when individuals are primed to think nationally. Building on this, this paper seeks to explore the variability of the adoption of cosmopolitan attitudes vis-à-vis national identity and the strategies individuals employ to reconcile the tensions between these.

Despite its connotation of ‘borderlessness’, cosmopolitanism cannot escape its association with nationalism, as they share a peculiar relationship. Influential scholars on cosmopolitanism have initially described these two concepts as two distinct concepts. Nussbaum (1994) has argued for the superiority of the cosmopolitan outlook over nation-centric outlooks. Beck (2002) has even listed nationalism as one of the ‘enemies’ of cosmopolitanism. However, understanding these two concepts on mutually exclusive terms would be unhelpful because as Pheng Cheah (2003) argued, the nation, as was originally conceived, had much in common with cosmopolitanism, based upon the same universal principles. Viewing them in opposition would fail ‘to recognise that nationalism is also a universalism because both nationalism and cosmopolitanism are based on the same normative concept of culture’ (Cheah 2003, 8).

There has been a shift towards viewing them as complementary or co-existing in order to formulate a more dialectic relationship between them. Appiah (1997) argued for the possibility of ‘rooted cosmopolitanism’ to show the co-existence of patriotic sentiment and cosmopolitanism. Moving forward, even Beck (2006, 61) has warned against placing too much attention on the dichotomy of these two concepts, as ‘realistic cosmopolitanism presupposes nationalism’ and vice versa. Cosmopolitanism exists within the national space as explained by Brett and Moran (2011). Brett and Moran (2011) found that the fears and anxieties revolving the consequences of increased diversity in Australia were contained when their interviewees appealed to the nation’s history of being an open society. They used the nation as a frame for understanding openness to diversity. More recently, Bello (2016) showed the importance of macro processes that shape national identity in understanding openness because when inclusive socio-political factors are involved in their national identity constructions, individuals will have an open positive attitude towards immigrants. National identity is intertwined with openness and cosmopolitan identity. Furthermore, the national referent in openness is itself reproduced in many definitions of cosmopolitanism, where the ‘Other’ and ‘Self’ is distinguished through the nation. Individuals have to navigate the relationship between the national and global outlook as they learn to frame cosmopolitanism within the contours of national identity. This form of learning takes place within the nation itself, especially through education.

Education provides the necessary socialisation for individuals to learn and participate in the ‘imagined community’ of the nation (Anderson 1991). Through education, individuals learn to be national citizens by understanding their roles within the legal framework of the state they live in. At the same time, the learners also live in a constantly shifting, globalised world, which means that they could have a sense of belonging that may not prioritise the nation. Mirroring such trends, there has been an increased focus and emphasis on global outlook and cosmopolitanism in citizenship education globally (Bromley 2009).
Globally orientated content is being added into many countries’ curriculum (Goren and Yemini 2017). Nations are preparing individuals to be citizens of the nation and the world.

Yet, national citizenship remains as the dominant agenda in most education curricula. Mitchell (2003, 399) argues that there has been a shift in educational reforms, where ‘national narratives are now in the process of shifting away from multiculturalism and towards a sense of individual patriotism’. The discourse of nationalism and national interests has more influence over the discourse of cosmopolitanism and global citizenship in the education curricular in many parts of the world (see Camicia and Zhu 2011; Chou and Ting 2016; Engel and Siczek 2018). Global trends suggest that there is more focus on national political structures, with global citizenship distant from national curricula (Kennedy 2012). Particularly in Asia, the global dimension is utilised to enhance competitiveness in a global market (see Goren and Yemini 2017; Law 2013). Citizenship education is still predominantly about serving the nation state. The national context still largely frames the context of cosmopolitanism in education.

The tension between the global and national dimensions is being played out in the education curriculum. Recipients of such education are left to execute and reconcile these tensions in their everyday life. This paper is concerned with the everyday where strategies to practice and reconcile the tensions are investigated. Using the definition of cosmopolitanism as being open to foreign others, I will thus explore how recipients of such education practice cosmopolitanism in a globalising world within the context of the nation, using Singapore as a case. Singapore presents an interesting case as to how education could be used for both nation building and preparing its citizens to compete in the global economy. Singapore is constantly managing the tensions of both global and national imperatives while embracing the opportunities and taking on the challenges of globalisation, especially through educational reforms (Baildon and Sim 2013). Singapore’s education system has also designed a curriculum in promoting a global outlook that is tied to the nation (Ho 2009). Singapore is an excellent example in terms of helping one understand how national citizens operate in the discourse of globalisation.

Cosmopolitanism and governance in Singapore

Cosmopolitanism in Singapore takes on an interesting form as a result of state intervention. As a developmental state ruled by only one political party since its independence in 1965, the Singapore state is the key player in the nation's identity as a cosmopolitan city-state. ‘Cosmopolitanism’ has been highlighted as favourable and important to the nation in National Day Rally Speeches over the years (see Goh 1999, 2002; Lee 2006). National narratives on cosmopolitanism arose from state-led projects with a purpose to make the city a ‘cosmopolis’ in order to secure a position in a global future (Yeoh 2004). Driven by a survivalist mentality, the state wanted Singapore to stay competitive in the global arena. In pursuit of cosmopolitanism, the state has implemented multiple projects over the years. There has been increasing focus in becoming an international hub, especially in the financial, education, or trading sectors. Singapore has welcomed and hosted multiple international events such as the Youth Olympic Games in 2010, the F1 Night Races, and the Trump-Kim Summit in 2018. The government is determined to create a cosmopolitan space where travellers or expatriates can feel at home (See Lee 2006). While these projects serve various purposes, locals were also exposed to these cosmopolitan experiences. Due to Singapore’s open economy, the city–state also enjoys products and services from around the world. The average local would be able to encounter international brands, media, and culture, and experience a cosmopolitan lifestyle all from the comfort of their homes.

The main idea is that Singapore should remain globally competitive, in particular through its human capital. This means that there is a need to govern the inflows and outflows of foreigners and Singaporeans
respectively. Singaporeans are one of the world’s most frequent travellers. The number of overseas trips made by Singaporeans has continued to increase over the years; from 5.5 million outbound trips in 2006 to 9.1 million trips in 2015 (Singapore Tourism Board 2016). On average, Singaporeans travel abroad for leisure more often than the global average (Singaporeans Travel More Than… 2015). Furthermore, schools are initiating more overseas programmes for students, encouraging deeper engagement with foreign others. As the educational attainment and income levels of Singaporeans rise, they are more inclined to afford and desire overseas exposure, which will likely result in more cosmopolitan openness in the future.

Despite having been well-travelled with extensive cosmopolitan experiences, tensions between Singaporeans and foreigners continue to worsen at home. The space within Singapore has changed to become more transnational with higher volumes of foreigners entering Singapore. The opportunities to interact with foreign others are abundant. In 2017, Singapore received more than 17 million international visitors (Singapore Tourism Board 2018). One of the most prominent projects the state has embarked on is immigration. Singapore's total population has been increasing at a rapid rate, almost doubling from 3 million in 1990 to 5.6 million in 2017 (Ministry of Trade & Industry 2017). However, the Singapore citizen population only increased from 2.6 million in 1990 to 3.4 million in 2017 (Ministry of Trade & Industry 2017), indicating the large influx of foreigners. This influx is expected to increase as shown in the publication of the Population White Paper in 2013 that forecasted an estimate of 6.9 million population in Singapore by 2030. The rapid increase in population size through importing foreigners has resulted in a rise in nationalistic sentiments.

With all the transnational processes occurring within the country, the state wanted citizens to embrace these new foreign others. Besides economic competitiveness, these cosmopolitan cultural policies put in place were also tasked with (re)constructing national identity (Chang 2012). Cosmopolitanism (as constructed by the state) ‘draw selectively on cosmopolitan imaginings of the colonial past and build in highly contradictory ways on the multi-racialism of post-independence times’ (Yeoh 2013, 102). Cosmopolitanism in Singapore carries a connotation of being multiracial, multicultural, and multireligious as held together by a strong nation-building framework (Yeoh 2004). In order to execute this form of cosmopolitanism amongst its citizens, promoting openness towards foreign others becomes an important task at hand. Singaporeans are continually encouraged to be welcoming of foreigners into the country.

However, despite urging Singaporeans to be cosmopolitans, tensions continue to rise. Ho (2006) found that Singaporeans do challenge and contest this hegemonic construction of cosmopolitanism by the state. Singaporeans have come together to express concerns regarding foreign others, particularly foreign talent, labelling them as ‘inauthentic’ (Yang 2014). The white paper also resulted in multiple protests (e.g., as seen in The Straits Times, October 6, 2013) and frustrations over foreigners. This influx of migrants has resulted in many turning to online platforms to express their xenophobic sentiments and opinions of the government and its policies (Gomes 2014). Why are tensions rising in Singapore despite the push towards cosmopolitanism? Does this mean that the cosmopolitan ideology was not effectively conveyed to the population?

Even though Singaporeans are well-travelled, cosmopolitanism is promoted to be uni-directional – Singaporeans should be welcoming of foreigners, but Singaporeans should not look for a new permanent home abroad (Ho 2006). Together with cosmopolitanism, the state also wanted to cultivate a sense of nationhood and rootedness in its younger generation, particularly through education. The state has a stronghold in its central education system which is used to cultivate ideologies within the population. Education is highly valued and a form of strategic investment to the state’s governing ideologies. The state has pursued various forms of citizenship education with the purpose of nation-building (Chia 2015).
It has a history of designing education curricula to achieve desired goals, such as designing the history subject curriculum for the prospect of national identity formation (Goh and Gopinathan 2005).

The education system took a turn, most notably, through the ‘Thinking Schools, Learning Nation’ (TSLN) initiative introduced in 1997 in response to a globalising world. There was a recognition of the need to maintain the competitiveness of Singaporeans and to train a global workforce through direct intervention in the education system. The revised curriculum was to prepare Singaporeans for new opportunities in the globalised economy while also grounding Singaporeans to the nation through NE. NE introduced six messages to ‘address both knowledge and feelings (in its citizens) about Singapore at every level of the education system’ (Ministry of Education 1997). These six messages are (Ministry of Education, 2012; as cited in Chen 2015):

1. Singapore is our homeland; this is where we belong. *We treasure our heritage and take pride in shaping our own unique way of life.*
2. We must uphold meritocracy and incorruptibility. *We provide opportunities for all, according to their ability and effort.*
3. No one owes Singapore a living. *We find our own way to survive and prosper, turning challenge into an opportunity.*
4. We must ourselves defend Singapore. *We are proud to defend Singapore ourselves, no one else is responsible for our security and well-being.*
5. We have confidence in our future. *United, determined and well-prepared, we have what it takes to build a bright future for ourselves, and to progress together as one nation.*

At the introduction of NE, then deputy prime minister Lee Hsien Loong stated in a speech (Lee 1997) that in response to the uncertainty of the world, a sense of nationhood must be systemically transmitted through the education system to ‘make these instincts and attitudes part of the cultural DNA which makes us Singaporeans’. Gopinathan (2007, 65) thus argues that the direction of the education system since the 1990s portrays ‘a strong state acting with a view to strengthening the local and the national in order to deal better with the regional and international’ rather than a weakening state in the globalising world. This push continued following the introduction of the social studies course designed to articulate to Singaporean students the demands of being a nation in a global world (Ho 2009).

NE is more than just a focus on citizenship education, it has an intricate purpose of aligning educational outcomes with the nation’s development goals. Global economic competitiveness persists to be key for the nation’s survival. However, a global workforce and an increasingly mobile population then also is accompanied by the fear of brain drain. It could be argued that the intervention is to ‘ensure that whilst Singaporeans go global, they remain rooted in Singapore’ (Koh 2006, 367). In 2007, the next phase of NE was implemented to continue to strengthen rootedness to Singapore and promote the notion of Singapore as home regardless of their geographical location (Ministry of Education 2007). Ironically, the press release was titled: ‘Preparing Students for a Global Future’, signalling more mixed messages on the expectation to be more global and more local.

Thus, NE is part of an effort to manage the tensions between local and global outlooks to prepare youth to be national citizens who can thrive in a globalised world. The state expects Singaporeans to place Singapore first. To be mobile but rooted, to stay but remain welcoming. There are multiple key tensions in the TSLN and NE’s agenda to prepare for national citizenship in a global world that needs further investigation (Baildon and Sim 2013). The demands placed on Singaporeans and whether the management of the tensions is effective is a question to be explored. Chen (2015) found that

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1 The NE messages were updated with the elaborations in italics in 2007 by the Ministry of Education (MOE).
cosmopolitanism is a dimension of Singaporean citizenship, when she did a study on how teenagers construct their cosmopolitan identities. However, the study was tied to mobility and geographical cosmopolitanism, with less focus on management of tensions. While Ho (2006) also found that Singaporeans are reluctant to be welcoming of foreigners and challenged the state’s ideals of cosmopolitanism, the data was collected in the early 2000s, which may not reveal the full impact of the education reform. This reformed education system expected Singaporeans to subscribe to the state’s ideology, leaving them to navigate their identity as a national citizen and simultaneously possess cosmopolitan attitudes.

As a whole, Singaporeans are exposed to various kinds of foreign others as the state pushed for both cosmopolitanism and nationalism. Given the concurrent push in these two seemingly conflicting ideologies in the education system, how do Singaporeans who have received such education navigate this social environment and reconcile the two ideologies? In this paper, I have thus looked at 40 Singaporeans dealing with the complexities as presented by these socio-political changes. Sandwiched between learning to be a national citizen but also a global citizen, this study will focus on Singaporeans born after the year 1990. They started schooling on or after the year 1997, and thus experienced the full impact of the 1990s education reform, especially the TSLN initiative introduced in 1997. Due to the strong presence of the government in national education, it is reasonable to hypothesise that these Singaporeans will reflect similar cosmopolitan views as disseminated by the Singapore government. As discussed earlier on, cosmopolitanism is strategic and often framed within the national context, and thus, these Singaporean will likely exhibit cosmopolitan views towards foreign others as a national citizen. It is likely that these Singaporeans would simultaneously become rooted, global national citizens.

Methodology

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted, taking into account the subjective nature of cosmopolitan openness. 40 undergraduates studying in local universities were recruited through a procedure designed to reach a reasonable quota of gender and race as they are important individual attributes. There were 18 males and 22 females, aged between 21 and 25 at the time of the interview in late 2016 and early 2017. There were 29 Chinese, five Malays, and six Indians, reflecting Singapore’s ethnic ratio. Only Singaporeans were recruited because the foreign others as defined by Singaporeans differ from Non-Singaporeans. All the participants were born after 1990 and started formal education after 1997, the year when NE was implemented. Each of them had undergone more than 10 years of education in Singapore, which meant that they were exposed to and received the ideologies that the education system disseminated. All of the participants’ names as presented in this paper were changed to pseudonyms.

The interviews were held in locations that were convenient for the participants such as in university libraries, classrooms, and other common spaces. I built rapport with my participants through informal conversations about my research prior to obtaining informed consent. Before each interview, the participants were asked to fill in a simple questionnaire regarding their demographics and their overseas experiences. Each interview lasted around 60 min. The semi-structured interviews were formulated around common themes and followed up with relevant questions. The questions were open-ended where the participants shared about their cosmopolitan attitudes towards different kinds of foreign others in the context of Singapore, how they preferred to practice cosmopolitanism, and possible considerations before being open to foreign others. I also asked them questions surrounding topics on immigration, national identity, and patriotism. The interviews were not recorded to provide an environment where the participants could feel more comfortable to share their views. The presence of the recorder could affect
the willingness of participants to share (Al-Yateem 2012). Participants could be less honest to present a more favourable image. Detailed interview notes and their main arguments were taken down during the interview. Immediately after each interview, the notes were reconsolidated to create a detailed summary with key findings reviewed.

I employed a latent thematic analysis approach. I was interested in the ways meanings were constructed, and what the underlying assumptions are in its constructions. Two of the main initial themes were nationalism and cosmopolitanism. I noted instances when participants were open to foreign others, and when they were thinking in reference to Singapore. However, cosmopolitanism and nationalism were interlinked and dialectical, and were often context-specific, resulting in many dilemmas and tensions in the way the participants talked being open to foreign others. Billig (1987) observed that people’s way of thinking can be derived from their argumentation process as they try to make sense of the world from opposing point of views. Thus, I noted down the main arguments and counter-arguments during the interview, which is in a dialectical relationship. This gives rise to themes that structure their discourses on what it means to be open to foreign others. By focusing on the dilemmas, it would also allow me to draw out the process of reconciliation between global and national outlooks and the context in which cosmopolitan openness occurs in. I further coded the conditions and strategies the participants used to understand these contradictions. In addition, to see if the participants reflected ideologies reflected by the government, I coded the data based on the six themes of NE.

Research findings

Cosmopolitanism and nationalism, although on the surface seemed contradictory, are not equally practised and prioritised across contexts. These Singaporeans portrayed their cosmopolitan and national identity separately, but also employed various strategies when they encounter foreign others in ambivalent situations that blur the global and the national boundary. When asked about their general attitude, every participant, as cosmopolitans, had ‘a state of readiness, a personal ability to make one's way into other cultures through listening, looking, intuiting and reflecting’ (Hannerz 1990, 239), and displayed openness to engage with foreign others. As a default state, participants identified as a cosmopolitan. They were willing to learn about other cultures, travel, and interact with foreigners. However, when the questions were contextualised, their cosmopolitanism became biased in the face of national interests. Singapore was consistently used as a lens when looking at other cultures, and identified as a point of comparison when compared to other countries. This is consistent with Skey (2013)’s finding that his respondents carried a taken-for-granted national identity and positioned themselves as people of the nation.

My participants reported feelings of being privileged having been born in Singapore when they saw flaws of other countries. Cosmopolitan attitudes then become biased, when participants treated foreign others as an unequal heterogeneous group characterised by their relationship between them and Singapore. This contextualisation helps participants to rationalise their nationally bounded cosmopolitan attitudes. The national dimension of cosmopolitanism is shown through the various strategies and justifications used to practice and understand their cosmopolitan attitudes and nationalism.

Nation first, cosmopolitanism second

Cosmopolitan thinking is driven by national boundaries. As the default state, participants felt that they were open-minded in their daily life towards foreign others, displaying cosmopolitanism in the conventional sense. However, openness is no longer the neutral state when a threat to the nation is foreseen. There are always conditions, in relation to the nation state, that the foreign others should meet
before participants could be open to them. This is shown in a comment from Nadia (Malay, Female) who ‘have no issues with foreigners until they start to do things that are not respectful in our society’, where she elaborated that she does not like them not because of their nationality but the way they behave in Singapore.

Here, for Nadia, being open to foreign others is a given regardless of nationality, but only if they are respectful and do not pose a threat to the nation. When cosmopolitanism comes into conflict with the nation state, the nation was prioritised over foreign others. Participants are generally uncomfortable with foreign others if there is any potential threat towards Singapore regardless of their personal feelings towards them. For example, Felicia (Female, Chinese), despite liking and being positively open to the Japanese culture, foresees a threat that the Japanese people might pose if they were to immigrate in large numbers to Singapore. She expressed that while she likes Japanese culture and wishes she was born there, she does not think that the Japanese should migrate to Singapore in large volumes. She elaborated: ‘after all its my own country so we should give jobs to citizens first. I just think that if I am born here, I feel like I should place my own countryman first.’

Felicia felt a need to prioritise and protect her nation first in the face of job competition. People are bounded to their national identity, rather than their global identity. The nation state is consistently used as a frame for cosmopolitan attitudes, as participants used it as a gauge to determine whether they should be open, where ultimately, the relationship between the foreign others and Singapore mattered more than being unconditionally open. These limits and conditions of cosmopolitanism extend beyond Singapore as the nation state. This idea that cosmopolitan openness should only occur within the national frame extends to general behaviour. As expressed by Anita (Female, Indian), the individual should adhere to national standards:

Foreigners should accept the countries’ practices. There are people who want their own way of living, and change the practices of the country, I wouldn’t be welcoming of them. Or they should just practice it on their own and not influence other countries to do it. Every person has their rights to do whatever they want, but don’t try to force a country to change for you.

Cosmopolitan practices are nationally bound, relative to the nation they are in. The nation takes precedence in prescribing how one should behave. There was a consensus that one should adapt when they are overseas and an expectation that foreigners should adapt when they are in Singapore. As ‘guests’, foreigners are expected to show respect and display proper travel etiquette. As such, participants themselves were more open overseas and also expect others to be. Min Qi (Female, Chinese), drew a comparison between countries and homes, where she claimed that ‘If you visit someone’s house, you should abide by their rules. You should follow the rules of the country you visit. This is the same for my behaviour when I visit other countries.’ This is the expected behaviour that Cindy (Female, Chinese) also expects from foreigners:

I would prefer people who can integrate to Singaporean culture. Even in my own case if I go overseas, it is my job as a foreigner to respect their culture and their way of living. I will do my best to adapt to them because I don’t want to cause disagreement and make Singaporeans look bad. You should adapt wherever you go.

Here, these two participants support the idea that one should be cosmopolitan overseas. It is a duty to practice cosmopolitanism with respect to national boundaries. At the same time, they also expressed the

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2 All the quotes from the participants were edited by the author, but care was given to retain the original main points conveyed during the interviews.
notion that they are less open to foreigners who were unwilling to adapt to Singapore, rather than being open to these foreign others regardless. Participants considered foreigners who were less willing to adapt to Singapore as threats so as to protect Singapore. The national lens thus takes priority in thinking about cosmopolitanism.

However, there are contexts where the nation state does not always take priority. There are various strategies that the participants used to justify when they prioritise and not prioritise the nation state. The ‘threats’ that they perceived unveils their categorisation of foreign others, guided by national principles.

**Encounters with foreign others in or out of Singapore**

Cosmopolitan openness changed when foreign others moved from the global to the national context. One of the main strategies participants used to justify the differences in cosmopolitan openness is consideration of foreign others in Singapore versus those overseas. The participants presented contrasting cosmopolitan attitudes, where they were less willing to be welcoming of foreign others in Singapore.

The participants presented an open-minded attitude towards respecting various cultures and that even if they disagreed with specific aspects, they would be willing to learn, understand, or empathise. However, this mindset shifted when foreign others were found in Singapore. In this case, foreign others are at the very least expected to be willing to learn and integrate. This is due to the perceived amplified threats of foreigners in Singapore compared to if they are overseas. There were concerns about the ability to integrate, communication barriers, cultural threats, or increased competition with locals. These perceived threats lowered participants’ level of openness towards foreign others, as exhibited by Ruby (Female, Chinese), who despite liking the Japanese because they are ‘nice’ and ‘polite’, expressed concerns:

If the Japanese migrate to Singapore, it might be scary because they are known for their efficiency. They will be competition towards educated Singaporean especially. There is also a language barrier, they can’t speak English well, so it will be a challenge to integrate in Singapore.

As shown here, although this participant liked Japanese culture, her view changed when asked about her feelings towards Japanese people migrating to Singapore. There were concerns regarding competition, social integration, and cultural differences. Many participants echoed the sentiment that it is difficult to be open to foreign others in Singapore given all these challenges, and was a perceived threat towards fellow Singaporeans. Thus, foreign others are tied to nationally bounded categories.

**National ideologies governing cosmopolitanism**

With the education reform in the late 1990s, it is expected that elements of NE were integrated within the participants’ cosmopolitan attitudes, and used to justify their attitudes towards differential cosmopolitan openness. With the concurrent push for cosmopolitanism and nationalism, participants manage the contradictions by framing their cosmopolitan openness using key ideological messages as reflected in NE. Some of them understood Singapore as their home, and cosmopolitan openness as governed by ideologies of meritocracy, multiracialism, and duty of national citizenship.

‘**Singapore is our homeland; this is where we belong**’

Singapore was thought of as home. While there were others that hoped to migrate in the future, there were also those who wanted to stay in Singapore because it is their home. This feeling of home restricted their willingness to move to another culture in the long-term. Even for those that insisted that they were not as patriotic, Singapore remains as the place where they felt that they belong in. For example, Eric (Male,
Chinese) elaborated that while he would like to travel the world and see ‘romantic’ places while he is young, he would eventually like to settle back in Singapore to build a home, simply because he could not envision another ‘home’. He even tried to explain that he is not a patriotic person, yet still sees Singapore as home because it is where he is from.

This is supported by Cindy (Female, Chinese), who expressed that she would always want to come ‘home’ whenever she is overseas:

I am happy to be a Singaporean. I consider Singapore as home. I wouldn’t necessarily want to migrate although I do disagree with some of the things here … When I go overseas, I want to come home.

There was a sense of belonging and a shared sense of ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 1991) with other fellow Singaporeans, especially if they are overseas. Being overseas heightened their sense of national identity. Although participants reported not being patriotic, patriotism was amplified overseas. They felt proud to tell others about Singapore and identified much better with other Singaporeans overseas, as expressed by Ling Yan (Female, Chinese): ‘If I see another Singaporean overseas, it is like we are from the same hometown. I feel good.’ This reflects a shared sense of national identity even with a stranger when overseas.

‘We must preserve racial and religious harmony’

One of the main arguments posed for why Singapore should be less welcoming of certain foreigners was the fear of disruptions to Singapore's ‘harmony’. These groups include foreigners who are perceived to refuse to integrate, thereby posing a big threat to harmony, as shown in Jia Jun (Male, Chinese)’s comment:

When rich foreigners come in, they bring in a sense of superiority. They have a sense of entitlement and superiority which can get out of hand. If they have a disdain of local culture, I don’t really welcome them.

Social cohesion and social harmony is key in Singapore.

This sentiment is echoed by participant Pushpa (Female, Indian), who welcomes all foreigners except for those who threaten harmony in Singapore: ‘I have no issues with foreigners in general. I would have an issue if they are less tolerant towards other people. We need to keep peace and harmony’.

This harmony is framed in terms of religious and racial harmony. Religiosity of foreign others was a point of consideration as participants tended to dislike foreign others who are perceived to be too religious. This was exacerbated due to existing fears of extreme practices that might disturb religious harmony. This concern is expressed here by Jane (Female, Chinese):

When it comes to cultures I am open to, I am a lot more concerned about religion than nationality. I’m concerned about religious extremism. Before allowing people into Singapore, there should be strict checks towards people of certain beliefs.

Jane, along with others, supported stricter restrictions on foreigners who are perceived to be narrowminded or unwilling to assimilate because they were worried about them disrupting social cohesion and harmony. There were also biases against people who do not respect racial harmony, Han Jie (Male, Chinese), in particular, does not agree with welcoming foreigners that are racists:
These foreigners are racists and before they are allowed into our country, they should be educated properly. They are the people that I would be less welcoming of. Not because I hate them, but they affect the safety of Singaporeans. And they are racist, so they might disrupt racial harmony.

‘We must uphold meritocracy and incorruptibility’

Conversely, meritocracy was cited as a reason to be open to foreigners. The concept of meritocracy was reiterated to justify foreign competition in local job markets. Participants did not hold negative views towards them because they felt that only the best candidate should get the job. They did not discriminate between different types of foreigners as long as competition was based on merit. Despite feeling threatened, participants generally did not hold negative views on foreigners because they felt that the foreigners deserved it due to their merit. Pushpa (Female, Indian), echoed this view: ‘I know foreigners increase the competition but if I know that I’m good enough, I will get the job. If not, I don’t deserve to get a job. I don’t feel entitled to a job.’ Similarly, participants such as Lisa (Female, Chinese), viewed that: ‘To be entirely diverse and meritocratic, we should get people in based on merits regardless of their cultural background.’ They are more welcoming because only qualifications matter.

Alternatively, this belief of meritocracy also created a view that Singapore should only welcome foreigners that are capable and who can contribute to the economy. Foreigners viewed as less useful to Singapore were less welcomed, as shown by Victor (Male, Indian)’s sentiment where he is open to everyone coming to Singapore, but only if they ‘prove that their skills are crucial to the economy.’

‘No one owes Singapore a living’

This NE message could be interpreted to mean that Singaporeans should rely only on themselves because no one owes them a living. This mindset was dominant in the participants when they justified their openness towards importing low-skilled foreigners. These participants thought that Singaporeans should be more open to low-skilled foreigners because they were doing Singapore a ‘favour’. Although they felt grateful to low-skilled foreigners, they were also ashamed that Singapore had to rely on them. Some participants also expressed that Singaporeans, especially young Singaporeans, were too picky in choosing a job, and not working hard enough to contribute to the nation. This line of argument was also found in welcoming mid or highly-skilled foreign competition in Singapore; Singaporeans should work hard themselves before complaining about others. Singaporeans should not expect a job just because they are Singaporeans. There was a sense that one should always improve themselves before blaming foreigners, as shown by Siti (Female, Malay)’s sentiment:

I don’t think it’s wrong to import so many foreigners if Singaporeans are not taking up these jobs. I know that the government knows that we don’t want these jobs because we are pampered. We also have young people who are broke and looking to find a job but don’t want to work hard enough to build Singapore.

The idea of self-improvement is also reflected in Ming Jun (Male, Chinese)’s comment here:

You choose the best person for the job. So obviously, the foreigners who are getting employed, they are employed for a reason. If you are unemployed, you have to do something about it. I think the government is trying to push people to learn new skills, so that’s good. You got to improve to compete.

This perspective was shared by Meng Tian (Male, Chinese), who advised Singaporeans that, ‘Instead of whining, we should improve ourselves so that people would want us over foreigners.’
‘We must ourselves defend Singapore’ and ‘we have confidence in our future’

These two messages could be interpreted as a need to rely only on Singaporeans to defend Singapore and a shared goal of working towards the progress of Singapore in the future respectively. There is a concern for the uncertainty of Singapore’s future because there are lesser Singaporeans doing low-skilled jobs, which worries participants. Ling Yan (Female, Chinese) expressed this concern by stating:

Singaporeans don’t want to do cleaning or construction jobs. Our generation wouldn’t want to do it because everyone holds a degree. Those that hold a diploma can find a better job than become a cleaner. We emphasise the importance of education and in the future, there will not be anyone without an education. So who will do these jobs?

The presumption that increased access to higher education would eventually lead to an undersupply of Singaporeans willing to do low-skilled jobs, has increased openness to foreigners who can then fill in these jobs. At the same time, some participants felt that an overreliance on foreigners would result in a worrying future for Singapore. Such negative views about foreigners stem from the need to protect Singapore in the future. For example, Martin (Male, Chinese) expressed that he is divided on the opinion of low-skilled foreigners because while he recognises that ‘they are cheaper labour, hiring foreigners does not provide an incentive to invest in technology, thereby harming Singapore in long run.’ The influx of foreigners in recent years has wavered some participants’ confidence in Singapore’s future. These participants preferred if Singapore relied less on low-skilled foreign workers and instead invested in alternatives such as reinventing Singapore’s existing labour force for a more sustainable future.

Cosmopolitanism as nationalism

In analysing the rules that govern cosmopolitanism amongst participants, it was clear that the line between cosmopolitanism and nationalism was blur. Participants reconciled these two concepts by focusing on their similarities. As discussed earlier, cosmopolitanism is a nation-building project in Singapore. Similarly, this study concurs that cosmopolitan openness was a result of nationalism.

This study supports the idea that ‘nationalism becomes an important source of accepting, or even tolerating differences’ (Chang, 704), as participants use national narratives to understand their cosmopolitan openness.

Singapore’s national identity hinges upon being a cosmopolitan. Although participants did not admit to being patriotic or nationalistic because they believed that they were cosmopolitans, their answers showed that these two ideas were intertwined. Words like ‘multiculturalism’, ‘racial harmony’, ‘migrant society’, or ‘meritocracy’ were used commonly to justify openness towards foreign others. These were aligned with the ‘4’M’s + M (Multi-racialism, Multi-culturalism, Multi-lingualism, Multi-religiosity plus Meritocracy)’ (Yeoh 2013, 102) that Singapore’s founding philosophy is built on. These words are a crucial part of the national narrative, and might arguably be the ‘defining’ characteristics of Singapore. This shows that to be a Singaporean, one must be cosmopolitan. These participants’ reasoning was that since Singapore is an immigrant country, founded by immigrants, Singaporeans should inevitably embrace these new immigrants. This national narrative was reflected in participants who stated that the national identity of Singapore is to be inclusive and embrace diversity:
My grandparents were immigrants. Singapore has seen an influx of foreigners from the start, that is our national narrative. This national identity should be an inclusive one. When people asks what it means to be a Singaporean, it means being inclusive and embracing of diversity. (Tim, Male, Chinese)

This line of argument was dominant amongst participants. They generally felt that Singaporeans should not be threatened by immigrants because Singapore is a multicultural society. The idea of multiracial and multicultural harmony being the norm in Singapore influenced participants to be accepting of diversity because they trust that different types of foreign others would not cause problems in Singapore. When asked about his feelings towards foreigners migrating to Singapore, Eric (Male, Chinese) replied: ‘If it is good for the economy and culture, why not? We embrace racial harmony.’ Multiracialism and harmony became the reason for embracing foreigners. Here, the main concern was the infrastructure being unable to support the sheer number of foreigners coming to Singapore, rather than the diversity that will threaten Singapore culturally. This sentiment was echoed by many others, including Andy (Male, Chinese), who defined the Singapore culture as cosmopolitan:

Singapore culture? What is our culture? Our culture is an agglomeration of many other cultures. Our culture is fundamentally multicultural, introducing more cultures to the mix doesn’t change the equation.

The narrative of being a Singaporean is so similar to the ideals of cosmopolitanism that it is difficult to differentiate between the two. Cosmopolitanism was embedded within nationalism, due to the national narrative that Singapore is indeed cosmopolitan. Nationalism and cosmopolitanism, in the case of Singapore, does not have a binary relationship; they co-exist. These Singaporeans were cosmopolitans because of nationalistic sentiments.

Discussion and conclusion

What is the role that this generation of Singaporeans need to play? Amidst all the socio-political changes in Singapore and in the world, Singaporeans are required to be mobile. Even when they remain local, they need to be global. With the increasing influx of foreigners and heightened transnational processes happening at home, Singaporeans are expected to deal with the aftermath. The state wanted both ‘global’ and ‘local’ outlooks, and pushed for such in its education reform in the 1990s, with the hope that the new generation would be able to fulfil this desired ‘brand’ of what it means to be a Singaporean. Singaporeans are expected to be open towards foreigners, but also retain a strong national identity. To only be cosmopolitan when the nation needs them to be. These seemingly paradoxical messages have left Singaporeans to negotiate the tensions and dilemmas of these ideals using their own strategies.

The resulting cosmopolitan openness that emerged is thus one that is framed by national interests. This study has shown that these Singaporeans do enact cosmopolitan attitudes, although individuals shift their positions and level of openness depending on the ‘otherness’ they encounter. This is supported by earlier empirical studies on cosmopolitanism (Skey 2013; Skrbis and Woodward 2007). Each participant weighed different factors related to Singapore differentially before reaching a conclusion about their overall cosmopolitan attitude. The participants used various strategies to manage tensions between their nationalistic and cosmopolitan views, but it was clear that their cosmopolitanism was strongly rooted in national interests. They showed open-mindedness to at least one aspect of foreign others while also displaying multiple biases, strongly influenced by foreign others’ relationship to Singapore. They can thus be seen as ‘biased’ cosmopolitans. Their openness was affected by the potential threat levels to the country. They were more open to foreign others if they were deemed as desirable to Singapore, and less open if they were deemed as threatening to Singapore. These strategies were influenced by the dominant
national ideologies such as meritocracy, multiracialism, and other ideas reflected in the NE messages. These participants viewed foreign others through the lens of a national citizen. There were many overlapping similarities between Singapore’s national identity and being a cosmopolitan. They were more open because cosmopolitan openness was embedded within their national identity of what it means to be a Singaporean. While they are pragmatic in practicing cosmopolitanism, this pragmatism stems from their nationalism – to protect Singapore but also further the state’s agenda in pushing for cosmopolitanism. They were first and foremost, national citizens before cosmopolitans. To be a Singaporean is to be a global national citizen who is ready to take on and embrace the world, but only if the world does not threaten national interests. To be a Singaporean is to embrace the opportunities and benefits of the foreign others as long as it is beneficial to the nation in itself.

The main limitation of the study was the lack of diversity in the education level in the participant pool. The participants were studying at the undergraduate level. Participants indicated that they were influenced by their university education to be more open-minded. As such, there was no comparison of cosmopolitanism across varying education levels and age groups. Future research could explore these factors by including a more diverse sample. Furthermore, participants have yet to exit Singapore’s education system, which meant that they were still receiving NE at the university level. It would be interesting to find out if these first batch of recipients of NE would continue to retain national ideologies once they exit the system. Nonetheless, the participants did display the ideologies perpetuated by NE. This study still provides valuable insights on how Singaporeans’ attitudes reflect upon the ideologies within the education system, mainly NE, to be global, but national citizens at the same time.

This study has shown that these group of Singaporeans exhibit a particular brand of cosmopolitanism that is highly influenced by state narratives. It is possible to adhere to a national identity while still possessing a global outlook. Existing xenophobic attitudes in Singapore as mentioned earlier could be a result of a generation gap. Singaporeans, who have gone through the education reform and the cosmopolitan direction of Singapore in the 1990s, may be more likely to accept foreigners in Singapore. Other age groups who may not have this experience may be the ones raising these concerns about foreigners and may have a different interpretation of nationalism. Policies could start with promoting such values to the masses instead of limiting it to formal education. Educational campaigns promoting cosmopolitanism and NE could potentially reduce local-foreign tensions in Singapore in the future. The state could continue to draw from cosmopolitan ideals to build on a national identity to encourage future citizens to be more open. However, cosmopolitanism as shown in this research, is also nation-centric, with more priority given to the nation rather than the global sometimes. Future education curricular could build on this research to understand gaps in the reconciliation of the two concepts, so as to give equal weightage to them both. As Osler and Starkey (2003, 252) put it:

Cosmopolitan citizenship does not mean asking individuals to reject their national citizenship or to accord it a lower status. Education for cosmopolitan citizenship is about enabling learners to make connections between their immediate contexts and the national and global contexts.

Continually promoting cosmopolitanism would be beneficial for the nation because if done effectively, the presence of the national identity would be enhanced, in addition to strengthening a global outlook.
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