

# Young, Educated and Pragmatic:

## A Case Study of the Younger Generation's Democratic Consciousness in Singapore

### Abstract

This study joins current debate on democratic consciousness of the younger generation in Singapore through a case study of three groups of university students. Using both quantitative and qualitative methods, this study found a fundamental pragmatic approach of the study sample on Lee Kuan Yew's authoritarian political and media approach. Contrary to a growing optimism about the younger generation's democratic consciousness as suggested by some observers in recent years, the study seems to support a more established hegemonic analysis of Singaporean politics and media systems as discussed by many in the existing research literature.

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### Introduction

Singapore's achievement of nation-building and modernisation within less than one generation has been a telling story in recent world history. In its former Prime Minister and now Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew's words, Singapore under his leadership achieved a 'from the third world to first' transformation (Lee 2000). While this economic success is widely recognised, the country's authoritarian political and media systems have long been a subject of academic debate. The ruling People's Action Party (PAP) has consistently maintained that in a multi-racial small city-state like Singapore, a Western-style democratic political system and (as part of it) a free press would mean ethnic-religious conflict and social unrest. The PAP thus argues that for the so-called greater good of the whole society the civil rights and freedoms (including freedom of speech) of the citizens must be reasonably restricted (e.g., Lee & Willnat 2006; Singh 1992; Vasil 2004). More recently (since the late 1980s), the PAP has further reinforced this argument through its deployment of the 'Asian values' discourse that suggests a harmonious society based on the Confucian notion of collective interests of family-society-state over individual-civil rights (e.g., Rodan 2006; SIM 2001; Zakaria 1994). For many, this Singaporean story of economic success without genuine political democracy and press freedom is a typical hegemonic case where the economically capable and politically sophisticated PAP government has won majority votes in each election since 1959 (e.g., Birch 1993; Chee 1999; Mauzy & Milne 2002; Rodan 1992, 1996; Seow 1994; Sim 2001, 2006; Singh 1992; Tamura 2003; Vasil 2006).

In comparison with this somewhat pessimistic hegemonic analysis of Singaporean politics and media, some critics have suggested an emerging Singaporean middle class with growing democratic consciousness. In particular, they have given much credit to the more educated, more technologically wired and more Western-influenced younger generation of Singaporeans. In the Singaporean context, this so-called younger generation is often referred to as the 'post-independence generation' (those born after Singapore's independence in 1965) aged from late teens to early forties. It is argued that unlike the less educated and more conservative older generation of Singaporeans who are more vulnerable to Lee Kuan Yew's authoritarian legacy, the younger generation is supposedly more politically critical and independent and may not necessarily place the same kind of faith as their parents in the PAP (e.g., BBC 2006; Hao 1996; Oehlers 2001; Rodan 1996). If this assumption is true, then the younger generation could make a significant impact on Singaporean politics, considering the growing percentage of the post-1965 generation in eligible voters. For example, while only about one-fifth of voters in the 2001 election were born after 1965, the

post-independence generation for the first time made up more than half the electorate in the 2006 election (Chin 2007). Singapore's opposition parties seem to have seen this as a great opportunity for them. In the words of Chee Soon Juan, general-secretary of the Singapore Democratic Party, '[t]he government is terrified of losing control, especially with a younger generation pushing for more openness' (Chee 1999). This optimism is also shared by some Western media. As one BBC article suggests, '[y]ounger, upwardly mobile voters—many of whom have been educated overseas—say they are increasingly alienated by the PAP's authoritarian style' (BBC 2006). Youth's democratic consciousness in Singapore has also been a focus of recent debate on Singaporean political communication. Hao (1996), for example, warns that a younger, better educated and more critical audience may eventually begin to question the credibility of Singapore's state-controlled press. More recently, Lee and Willnat (2006: 18) also suggest that 'the state of political communication in Singapore may be set to change as a growing number of young and educated people become more outspoken'. Meanwhile, some scholars have suggested that the rapid development of the Internet in Singapore will empower its citizens, particularly the younger generation, in resisting and challenging the officially orchestrated hegemonic political-media discourses (e.g., George 2002).

But for those who remain pessimistic about the political and media environment in Singapore, it is simply too hard to imagine an emerging democratic political-media culture among the younger generation while the country's middle class as a whole remains politically pragmatic and apathetic. As Lam (1999: 274) suggests, the majority of Singapore's middle class is sceptical of democracy and 'prefers the PAP to stay in power despite its authoritarian tendencies insofar as the party continues to satisfy their material needs'. Similarly, Rodan (1996: 62-63) argues that the Singaporean middle class is seeking autonomy from the PAP as consumers rather than political challengers. Rodan believes that this is because of their vested interest in Singapore's current social structure and class relations based on the country's dominant and institutionalised elitist ideology of meritocracy. Tamura (2003: 184) also finds a Singaporean middle class that seems to have little problem trading off their civil liberty to maintain their economic comfort. Some optimists have highlighted the fact that though the PAP won the same number of seats in the 2006 polls as in the previous election in 2001 (82 out of 84), the overall votes that the party gained in 2006 actually fell sharply by 8.7 percent points (from 75.3 percent in the 2001 polls to the current 66.6 percent) (Bowring 2006). Meanwhile, at least according to one survey of 1,000 voters (aged 21 and above) conducted post-election, only 55 percent of post-1965 voters gave their votes to the PAP (An 2006). But

pessimists may argue that while it is true that the votes the PAP gained in the 2006 election dropped significantly, this 'fact' should however be treated cautiously. This is because the so-called 'voters' here actually refer only to those who actually went to the polls instead of total eligible voters. As the PAP comfortably received 'walkovers' in 37 out of the 84 seats on the nomination day (27 April 2006), therefore 'only just over half of the electorate (56.6%) had the opportunity to vote as they lived in contested constituencies' (Chin 2007: 704). Meanwhile, as no detail is available on how the abovementioned survey was designed and conducted (particularly the method of sampling and the percentage of post-1965 voters in the sample), the reliability and representation of the outcome is questionable. Interestingly, the PAP in the meantime remains confident with its dominant influence among the younger generation and believes it is able to continue to win over the post-1965 voters. As the Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong claimed at a post-election press conference in 2006, his ruling PAP had already 'struck a chord' with young voters because the latter 'understand what's at stake and have voted rationally' as evidenced by his Party's overwhelming victory in the election (Ramesh 2006).

The discussion above suggests that debate on Singapore's younger generation's democratic consciousness is far from conclusive. One major research gap in the research literature is that both pessimists and optimists have to date provided little solid, empirical evidence to support their points, leaving their arguments largely theoretical assumptions. As one attempt to narrow this research gap, this study joins the current debate through a case study of three groups of Singaporean university students' perception of Lee Kuan Yew's authoritarian political and media approach. The study aims to quantify and qualify the attitude of the study sample on Lee's approach. The primary research interest of this study is to attempt to *test* the optimistic/pessimistic assumption on the younger generation's democratic consciousness in Singapore by measuring and analysing the study sample's perception of Lee's authoritarian political-media approach. It is not this study's intention to politically and/or morally *judge* either Lee's approach itself or the study sample's perception of the approach.

## Methods

Primary data used for analysis in this study were collected from three sample groups' written comments on a BBC television documentary on Singapore's achievements and challenges under Lee Kuan Yew's authoritarian style of governance. The three sample groups were non-randomly selected based on

three existing undergraduate classes majoring in the same discipline program of a Singaporean college. The study sample well fits into the younger (post-independence) generation category in the Singaporean context in terms of age. Data were collected in three consecutive years during the early 2000s when one particular class (of the three sample classes) started a particular (same) course. The sample groups were asked to watch a BBC documentary (more details later) and then write a short essay to critically comment on Lee's authoritarian political-media approach as reflected and debated in the documentary. As each time (year) a different sample group (class) was asked to analyse the same text (the BBC documentary) over the three-year research period, cross-group comparison over time becomes possible. Before the screening of the documentary, students were also recommended to read certain related articles for a better understanding of the debate on Lee's authoritarian political-media approach in the research literature. 84 copies of written responses were received from sample group A, 68 copies from group B and 61 copies from group C after the screening of the documentary. The overall sample size is 213. A careful review of the study sample's responses found that the overwhelming majority of the study sample engaged in debate on Lee's approach actively. A close look at the wording, rhetoric and context of the responses also suggested no clue of an alleged reputation of Singaporean students for 'being "exam-smart"—able to give examiners what they want'.<sup>i</sup>

The research method of this study is both quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative part involves analysis of the three sample groups' written responses after viewing the BBC documentary based on a Likert-type scale from 1 (positive) to 3 (negative) with single student work as the unit of analysis. A 'positive' response is operationally defined as one that either completely or primarily agrees to Lee's major arguments as shown in the documentary. A 'negative' response is operationally defined as one that completely or primarily disagrees with Lee's points. A 'neutral/balanced' response is operationally defined as one that is descriptive and does not have a clear standpoint, or takes a balanced view (partly agrees and partly disagrees to Lee's approach). The qualitative part of the research method involves a textual analysis of quantitative findings by placing them into relevant contexts in relation to the research topic. As a case study of a comparatively small, non-random sample, this study does not pretend that the sample is capable to sufficiently represent either the 'younger generation' in general or 'university students' in particular in Singapore. While a more delicately selected larger random (or non-random) sample may generate more representative data, such a research design is not always financially and technically possible for a researcher. In addition, such a research design may also face certain socio-political constraints in the Singaporean context as

large-scale independent political survey does not seem a commonly accepted research practice by either the authorities or the general public. In spite of this, this study can be useful for gaining a better understanding of Singapore's more educated younger generation's democratic consciousness for a couple of reasons. First, the study sample's perception of Lee's authoritarian political and media approach in this study reflects at least partly the younger generation's democratic consciousness. Furthermore, considering that empirical study of the younger generation's democratic consciousness in Singapore has to date remained a fairly under-researched area as mentioned earlier, findings of this study can be used to compare with findings from similar studies in future.

Titled *Doing It My Way* (BBC 1993), the BBC documentary is an educational television program about Singapore under Lee Kuan Yew's authoritarian political and media approach. The 30-minute 1993 documentary was hardly outdated for the study sample's general understanding of Singapore's political and media environment as the Lee-style iron-fist approach had (and has) changed little in Singaporean politics and political communication over time as observed by many scholars (e.g., Huang 2006; Lee 2003; Sim 2006; Tamura 2003; Vasil 2006). It is noteworthy that while the overall narrative of the documentary was critical against Lee's approach from a Western liberal standpoint, it was by no means a radical piece attacking either the ideas of Lee or the basic socio-political values of Singapore. In fact, Lee was given plenty of time to explain and defend his arguments in the program. The program also interviewed some business leaders and members of Singapore's opposition parties about Lee's policies. In short, as a considerably informative and balanced documentary about Lee's authoritarian political and media approach, the program serves as an ideal 'agent' to detect the study sample's perception of Lee's authoritarian approach. Below are some of the key issues and viewpoints as shown in the documentary:

Responding to the BBC interviewer's question that whether he was disappointed at Western criticisms of his authoritarian approach, Lee replied that '[w]ithout order and stability, nothing can be achieved'. Lee also rejected the interviewer's suggestion of his ban of chewing gum in Singapore as a typical and laughing example of his authoritarian control of the society.<sup>ii</sup>

Responding to the question of government control of satellite television in Singapore, Lee said that 'I'm not going to have a television dish sticking out of every home' and thus allow 'all sorts of undesirable pornographic and other materials flushing in from the skies.' Otherwise, these materials would negatively 'affect the values and the thinking of young people (in

Singapore)'. Lee then defended government control of mass media and social life in Singapore by suggesting a sort of 'man is evil in nature' thesis. In Lee's own words:

*If you believe that man in natural state will do what is good and right and proper...then I say good luck to you. ... I belong to a culture that believes man would be likely to do all things which satisfy his sensual desires but at the great expense to the good of society as a whole. That must be prevented (through government intervention).*

Interestingly, Lee's iron-fist approach seemed not to bother the business community in Singapore much. As Koh Boon Hwee, then Chairman of Singapore Telecom, told the BBC interviewer: 'I don't think the businesses really care so much about the political structure. They care about the stability of the country'. 'If this (economic prosperity) is achievable because of one-party government,' Koh added, 'so be it!'

But Lee lacked no critics either. For example, Chiam See Tong, then general-secretary of the Singapore Democratic Party, criticised that Singaporeans had been ruled by an authoritarian government for more than 30 years and it was time to have a democratic change. Chiam emphasised that such a change would not happen 'unless there are [is] more freedom (of speech) in Singapore and people are allowed to voice their opinions'. Kanwaljit Soin, then non-party MP nominated by the PAP government, also expressed her concern about the outdated Lee-style top-down approach when interviewed. 'In the Singaporean context, people accept these (top-down political and media) policies because there is a high degree of social discipline,' she said. And 'I think that we must have more input from the ground, must have more public interest bodies and there must be less of top-down approach.'

The documentary concluded that regardless of people's perception of Lee as either 'mascot' or 'dictator', 'no one argues about Singapore's success or the single-mindedness of the man who brought it about.' Being proud of the way he had governed the nation, Lee himself showed no intention to shy away from directly spelling out his authoritarian approach. In his own words (as quoted at the end of the documentary):

*If you look at Singapore today...marvellous, everything works. But I know why it works, because I made it work. Because I got people trained, disciplined and educated... If my successors forget that and they think it comes from doing it naturally, then they will go back to the unhappy days.*

## Findings and Discussion

As shown in Table 1, it is found that more than 50 percent of the study sample in each of the three sample groups agreed with Lee on his iron-fist political and media approach. The average percentage of students who agreed with Lee across the three sample groups was 58.4. Chi-square tests suggested no significant difference between any two groups of the three in terms of agreement percentage.<sup>iii</sup>

As also shown in Table 1, the average percentage of students disagreeing with Lee across the three sample groups was about 22 percent, or a little more than one fifth of the study sample. Again, chi-square tests showed no significant difference between any two groups of the three in regard to disagreement percentage.<sup>iv</sup>

Relevant data in Table 1 also indicate that the average percentage of the study sample who took a 'neutral/balanced' position on Lee's authoritarian political and media approach across the three groups was about 20 percent, or one fifth of the study sample. Based on chi-square tests, no significant difference was found between any two groups of the three in terms of percentage of those who took a 'neutral/balanced' position across the three sample groups.<sup>v</sup>

*Table 1: Distribution of opinions of the study sample on Lee's authoritarian approach*

	Group A (84)	Group B (68)	Group C (61)	Total (213)
Positive	45 (53.5%)	37 (54.4%)	39 (64%)	57.3%
Negative	18 (21.4%)	18 (26.4%)	12 (19.6%)	22.5%
Neutral/ Balanced	21 (25%)	13 (19.1%)	10 (16.4%)	20.2%

While the findings as mentioned above are themselves interesting, it is important to have a look at their deeper meaning by placing them into

relevant contexts as discussed in some detail in pages that follow (including the ‘Conclusion’ part). The so-called ‘relevant contexts’ here are basically three-fold: the texts of students’ written responses to the BBC documentary, the existing research literature in relation to the research topic and Singapore’s current political economy environment.

*The patriotic/uncritical majority.* As shown in their written responses to the BBC documentary, students who fell into the ‘positive’ category as a whole seemed to be quite comfortable to uncritically accept Lee’s arguments as expressed in the documentary. For example, Lee argued that the Western-style press freedom did not suit Singapore as it would inevitably lead to racial conflicts and social instability and thus eventually ruin Singapore’s economy (BBC 1993). Apparently convinced by this argument, many students agreed totally with Lee that the PAP government’s strict control of the media and the nation was not only absolutely necessary but also a great success as ‘proved’ by Singapore’s economic achievements under Lee’s leadership. Some of them defended Lee’s authoritarian approach passionately by angrily refusing Western criticisms of Lee. As one student concluded, liberal approach as a whole was totally unacceptable because it would cause social instability and unruly behaviours as ‘witnessed’ in many Asian liberal societies like India, the Philippines and Thailand. Another student argued that while Lee’s authoritarian approach might not make one feel comfortable, it was necessary and admirable because whatever Lee did was for the wellbeing of his country.

Some students defended in particular Lee’s tight media control policy against local and international media outlets in Singapore. One student, for example, warned that press freedom could cause major problems in Singapore as it might expose Singaporeans to Western liberal ideas. Another student wrote that the influx of foreign media into Singapore was dangerous for Singaporeans as they might be influenced by too many anti-government opinions. Instead of critically analysing Lee’s ‘bread or freedom’ thesis that suggested a tight control of press freedom and other civil rights was a precondition for economic development, one student declared that the loss of freedom of speech and other civil rights, like the loss of the freedom of chewing gum in Singapore, was just a small price to pay to enjoy a first-class living standard.<sup>vi</sup>

*Critical yet pragmatic.* Taking up about one fifth of the study sample by average, students who fell into the ‘negative’ category highlighted many flaws of the PAP government under the shadow of Lee’s authoritarian approach: the government’s monopoly of political power, its control of the media, its top-down policy decision-making process, its economic

determinism and the negative impact of all these on Singaporeans’ mind-set. Typical criticisms from this group of students included: Lee had always been trying to use economic reasons to sidetrack debate on serious socio-political issues in Singapore but there were more than social stability and economic comfort that defined a successful nation; in Singapore everything was so scheduled and systematised; and Singapore was like a replica of George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*.

Many in this category felt particularly disappointed at the government’s strict control of the flow of information. As one student criticised, in Singapore news and knowledge about the country and the world had been sent to censors before reaching the audiences. Another student wrote that the frustration as a result of government control of the media had been felt most by the younger generation. Similar criticisms included: the PAP’s control of the media and monopoly of political power had combined to deepen the impression of its authoritarian top-down approach; the rigid media control policy had made many Singaporeans become ignorant and narrow-minded; Singaporeans should never allow themselves to be manipulated by the government and the media as the two had worked together against the people’s right to know; and the government’s control of the media and its thought moulding of its citizens had made Singapore a place that was culturally boring and lacked possibilities and alternatives.

However, it is noteworthy that in contrast with these sharp criticisms of Lee and the PAP, the solutions suggested by many of these young critics on how to reform the current political and media systems were extraordinarily pragmatic. First, radical approach was not at all an option as none of them suggested immediate and substantial liberal political and media reforms. Instead, many of them preferred a gradualist approach of liberalisation, or to explore the possibility of setting up a ‘platform’ between the government and the citizens to try to find an acceptable political reform plan by both sides. Second, the role of opposition parties and civil organisations in the democratic process was virtually completely ignored. Instead, many believed that putting one’s hope on PAP government’s self-reformation would be a far more practical and safer option. Third, regarding the issue of press freedom, only very few called for a liberal free press while many more insisted the necessity of a continuing ‘responsible’ government control of the media. Meanwhile, the Internet was taken for granted by many as a major means to challenge state control of the freedom of speech. There was however little discussion about tough government legislations against Internet companies and individual users and widely-practiced self-censorship by both individual and institutional Internet users in Singapore (e.g., Gomes 2000, 2001, 2002; Lee 2002, 2003, 2005).

*The 'neutral/balanced' middle.* As mentioned earlier, about 20 percent or one fifth of the study sample took a neutral/balanced position, declining to show a clear or prevailing standpoint against Lee's authoritarian approach as shown in the BBC documentary. As one student wrote, the younger generation should be more politically active though one must also remember Lee's warning that without order and stability nothing could be achieved. According to another student, Singapore indeed needed more democracy but no one wanted to see a liberal but chaotic Singapore. Meanwhile, some other students called for combining the 'best' elements of Lee's soft-authoritarian approach based on the so-called 'Asian values' and the Western-style liberal democracy to create a superior hybrid political model in Singapore. These are good but highly general ideas. For example, how much democracy is not too much or too little and who should have the final say? What are the 'best' elements of an authoritarian system and how to 'combine' them with a democratic system?

## Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest an interesting 60-20-20 pattern (roughly) that shows by average about 60 percent of the study sample agreed to, about 20 percent of them disagreed to, and about another one fifth of them took a neutral/balanced position on, Lee's authoritarian political and media approach. Meanwhile, no significant difference has been found in relation to the three sample groups' responses to Lee's approach across the three categories of test ('positive', 'negative' and 'neutral/balanced') based on chi-square tests. This suggests a statistically coherent pattern during the three-year research period in regard to the distribution of the three sample groups' perception of Lee's authoritarian approach across the three categories of test. With the majority of the study sample took a positive view on Lee's authoritarian approach and a fundamental pragmatism was found among the study sample, the findings of this study seem to overall support a more established pessimistic-hegemonic, rather than optimistic, view on the younger generation's democratic consciousness in Singapore.

The pragmatic approach as expressed by many of Lee's critics in the study sample is particularly symbolically significant. Preferring to keep the current status quo or some sort of top-down political reforms under the PAP government, very few of these young critics were willing to accept any major political change that might risk their current economic comfort under the PAP government. There was little sign of interest from Lee's critics in the study sample in transforming their criticisms and complaints against the PAP

into some sort of organised real political actions. It can be argued that this established political pragmatism is on the one hand a result of the PAP government's effective political framing of the Singaporean society in the past few decades through various political strategies and means including a controlled mass communication sector. On the other hand, this established political pragmatism may continue to function as the popular base for the continuation, if not strengthening, of the PAP's hegemonic rule of the nation in foreseen future. But this will not happen automatically. The PAP knows clearly that to maintain its hegemonic rule, it has to find ways to continue to persuade the younger generation and win them over. Already, the PAP has started a strategy that aims to recruit more young talents into its ranks to further consolidate its position among young voters (Dansong 2006; Tamura 2003). More recently, the PAP government even took initiatives to engage 'a young, not-too-friendly Internet generation' (Chiang 2007). As well, the state-controlled *Straits Times* has tried to publish more critical comments on public affairs from readers in its expanded 'forum' section since the early 2000s. In spite of remaining largely a symbolic gesture, this move was already credited by some in the study sample of this study as an 'evidence' of the government's efforts on political reforms.

In his maiden national day rally speech in August 2004 as Singapore's new Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong called for 'a fresh and bold approach' to meet the challenges ahead. Lee said that Singapore 'can never afford to be satisfied with the status quo'; instead 'we have to be less conventional, we must be prepared to venture' (Lee 2004). But as Lee warned not long after his 2004 speech, his and his party's political adaptability was not without limit or bottom-line. In his visit to Australia in 2006, Lee proclaimed that in comparison with the host country's often inefficient and irresponsible multi-party political system, Singapore's one-party-dominated politics had performed well and must continue (Loh 2006).

The debate between pessimists and optimists on the younger generation's democratic consciousness in Singapore continues. Hopefully, this study as a small attempt can stimulate more empirical investigations into this research topic.

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- <sup>i</sup> Quoted from an anonymous referee of an earlier version of this study.
- <sup>ii</sup> In March 2004, the Singaporean government partly lifted its ban on chewing gum, only allowing sales of 'therapeutic' gum in pharmacies to those with a prescription. Anyone who smuggles chewing gum into Singapore could face one year in jail and a 10,000 Singapore dollar fine (BBC 2004).
- <sup>iii</sup>  $\chi^2 = 0.02$  between Groups A and B,  $\chi^2 = 1.69$  between Groups B and C and  $\chi^2 = 2.06$  between Groups A and C (df = 1,  $\rho = 0.05$ ).
- <sup>iv</sup>  $\chi^2 = 1.17$  between Groups A and B,  $\chi^2 = 1.75$  between Groups B and C and  $\chi^2 = 0.15$  between Groups A and C (df = 1,  $\rho = 0.05$ ).

<sup>v</sup>  $\chi^2 = 1.39$  between Groups A and B,  $\chi^2 = 0.38$  between Groups B and C and  $\chi^2 = 2.96$  between Groups A and C (df = 1,  $p = 0.05$ ).

<sup>vi</sup> However, others may argue that the government's ban of chewing gum and its restriction of political freedom are actually based on the very same authoritarian rationale as advocated by Lee. One may also argue that one can find no substitute in the marketplace for the absent political freedom in Singapore which is essential for a true and dignified first-class standard of living. It can be also argued that as a post-industrialised society Singapore does not have to choose between bread and freedom; she can have both.

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