

## **Patrolling Chineseness: Singapore's Kowloon Club and the ethnic adaptation of Hong Kongese to Singaporean society**

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**Abstract:** In combination with their strategy to recruit foreign talent, Singaporean state authorities have increasingly focused their attention on community integration schemes for Chinese professional newcomers. The government facilitated such integration with the creation of the Kowloon Club in 1990. The Kowloon Club is not only a government experiment that has been repeated three times since then, but also the only new migrant association that does not explicitly target Mainlanders. Through in-depth interviews with the Club's leadership, I explore the ethnic adaptation of the Kowloon Club membership as it negotiates the evolving sense of Chineseness found in state designs and Singaporean society. Much like the emergence of the 1997 Hong Kongese identity, the Kowloon Club's activities have shifted in strong reaction to the racialized category put forth by state authorities and embodied by Mainlander professionals in that the Club's activities now symbolize and help patrol what Chineseness means as everyday performance in the city-state.

**Keywords:** Singapore, Chineseness, new migrant association, Hong Kong

## Introduction

Local ethnic relations in Singapore are shifting: whereas tensions used to arise from differential treatment of local state-defined races, now they arise from a stronger divide between citizens and foreigners. Even if ethnic tensions among different racialized groups remain significant, in recent years, there have been considerable schisms between citizens and foreign workers, especially workers from Mainland China. Since independence, the government's official platform of multiracialism aimed to simplify the management of a multiracialized population. However, the 1990s and 2000s have been characterized by a combination of biculturalism and foreign talent recruitment aimed at benefitting Singapore economically from closer cultural relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC). The city-state's strategic re-positioning in the international knowledge-based economy has been one of staking out a middleman position between Mainland China and Western societies, and has not only sustained the national goal of economic development, but has also directly impacted local ethnic dynamics. In addition to provoking negative reactions from local non-Chinese citizens, this opening up to the PRC has also reiterated a reframing of Chineseness<sup>1</sup> that obfuscates local Chinese historical and sociological distinctions, including Huaren cultures, Peranakans and Babas.<sup>2</sup> As such, the local nationalistic sentiments that have surfaced can be understood as a reaction to Singapore's international re-positioning, and these sentiments are manifested concretely through various forms of protest against the government-facilitated increase in the number of PRC foreign workers, including the 2011 'cook curry' movement.<sup>3</sup>

The cultural rapprochement to the PRC appears in everyday Singaporean life through various social engineering measures put in place by state authorities to support the immigration and social integration of newcomers from Mainland China. Because these 'desirable migrants'

fill the city-state's skilled labour needs, they are privileged in recruitment and naturalization matters.<sup>4</sup> As newcomers, they also encounter specific measures to ensure their social integration, including four 'new migrant associations' that were created to support the settlement of Chinese professionals and their families. New migrant associations have made their way into local Singaporean social life since the early 1990s as local community associations that lie outside the traditional clan system and the city-state's residential club system.<sup>5</sup> In addition to receiving official recognition, the four registered associations - the Kowloon Club, the Tian Fu Club, the Huayuan Association, and the Tian Jin Club - also have privileged links to the Chinese Embassy in Singapore, as well as to their own business networks in Mainland China.

Hong Kongese professionals who came to work in the city-state at the end of the 1980s soon found one new migrant association, the Kowloon Club, to support their integration into Singaporean everyday life. With the Club's creation in 1990, the Singapore government started to facilitate the recruitment, integration and naturalization of these desirable migrants and their families, breaking with the traditional community matrix partially composed of Chinese clan associations. The Kowloon Club is not only a government experiment that has been repeated three times since then, but it is also the only new migrant association that does not explicitly target Mainlanders. Membership in and activities of the Kowloon Club are a partial product of the government's strategies to facilitate their recruitment and social integration. However, the membership has shifted over time in that it now sides with local Chinese Singaporeans in critiquing and resisting the government's intent to increase immigration from Mainland China as a way to bring in more foreign talent. Hong Kongese Singaporeans - especially as seen through the Kowloon Club - speak of what Sharmani Patricia Gabriel describes as the 'complex entanglements of diasporic identity into an "in-between" strategy that troubles binaries of

identity and notions of cultural authenticity to mobilize new cartographies of desire and attachment'.<sup>6</sup> The intent here is thus to understand the ethnic adaptation of Hong Kongese Singaporeans within the context of a growing divide between the government's focus on Mainlanders as desirable source of immigration, on one side, and nationalistic local reactions against this government platform, on the other.

Following Yao Souchou's perspective on figuring out 'how one claims to be Chinese'<sup>7</sup> in Singapore, I examine and unpack Hong Kongese Singaporeans' ethnic adaptation, as expressed by those involved in the local Kowloon Club activities. I argue that Hong Kongese identity-formation in Singapore has shifted toward the local practices of Chineseness rather toward than a PRC-centric and government-driven racialized identity. This ethnic adaptation is reminiscent of the identity formed around Hong Kong's 1997 reversion to Mainland control. It also highlights the dialectical relationship between the lived experiences of Chinese identity in Singapore and state designs, which frame Chineseness as a cultural and racialized category. In other words, Hong Kongese in Singapore may see themselves more and more as Chinese Singaporeans as they participate in local performances and practices of ethnic border patrolling. They do so as a way to reinforce their sense of what it means to be Chinese as well as to react against the sense of Chineseness that is desired by state authorities and embodied by Mainland newcomers. After a brief discussion of what Chineseness means and how it has evolved in Singapore, I turn to Singapore's Kowloon Club to discuss the association's activities and put them in the broader perspective of Hong Kongese diasporic experiences. I then explore the Kowloon Club's critique of the Singaporean state in order to shed light on a process of patrolling Chineseness in which the main state narrative is contrasted to everyday performances.

Insights for this reflection come from archival work, 51 semi-structured interviews and 16 participant observations I conducted in Singapore in 2008. I will be drawing from five in-depth interviews with Kowloon Club members and executives in particular, as well as from one participant observation during the association's Annual Gala Dinner in March 2008. Whereas interviews help to position the association's leadership in local community politics and government initiatives, the participant observation is used to document the non-verbal components of the association's ethnic adaptation practices. The focus here is thus on exploring the unique position of the Kowloon Club and its members - as Hong Kongese Singaporeans - rather than on making broad claims about either Chineseness in Singapore or the societal functions of the four new migrant associations.

#### Framing Chineseness in Singapore

The government's approach to managing ethnic relations has been based on a colonialized framework in which racialized categories permit an exclusionary classification. This multiracial system - known as the CMIO system for Chinese, Malay, Indian, Other - creates strong pressures for individuals to fit into the model of a state-assigned race, which is determined by a correlation of language, religious affiliation and visible ethnic markers.<sup>8</sup> This CMIO framework was applied without regard for inter-ethnic hybrid identities and masked strategic sociological differences within each category, especially within the Chinese racial category.<sup>9</sup> In this section, I briefly discuss how Chineseness might be examined productively at the intersections of social claims and state designs. I do this to highlight some of the implications for the recent evolution of local ethnic tensions in Singapore. In contrast to everyday variations of what it means to be Chinese, the state's definition has served as a framework for shaping education, immigration, integration

and community relations dynamics, hence contributing to the recent rise in tensions between local nationals and foreign workers.<sup>10</sup>

One of the main difficulties in defining Chineseness is its incomplete and abstract nature. As a broad and normative notion used to describe Chinese identity-formation in various contexts, Chineseness and related claims need to be investigated through the various intersections, interactions and negotiations with other local and transnational entities.<sup>11</sup> Even if it has been broadly defined as a cultural principle with operative power, and as a cultural essence with roots in sinocentrist practices and deep opposition to Whiteness, a crucial dimension of Chineseness is found in the act of defining oneself as Chinese and interacting with a dominant culture and political entity.<sup>12</sup> As such, Chineseness is utilized as a government category to classify minorities, as a tool for Chinese officials to bring awareness to a specific ethnic identification and history, and more generally, as a factor in the geopolitical calculations of states.<sup>13</sup> In the Southeast Asian context, the history and adaptations of Chineseness claims therefore differ from those of Mainland China, as its main definitions have been motivated by a desire to create distance from references to China and the Chinese race.<sup>14</sup>

This was especially the case in the 1990s, when the responsibility for defining and representing the global sense of Chineseness gradually fell to the Chinese diaspora, while the economic, political and social rise of the PRC was leading to significant pressures to relocate Chineseness within a China-centric and Mainlander model. The de-centering of the cultural center of Chineseness onto the diaspora was perceived by scholars such as Tu Wei-ming as a way of flexibilizing its definition, notably to incorporate other values such as Confucian humanism and democratic liberalism. But Chineseness nonetheless remained a critical site of meaning production and contestation between social groups, dominant cultures and political

entities.<sup>15</sup> For instance, the creation of the World Federation of Overseas Chinese Organizations in 2001 was seen as a way for the Chinese diaspora to be a proactive part of defining Chineseness, as well as a way for the PRC to disseminate its official political messages to Chinese communities around the world.<sup>16</sup> In Southeast Asia, this transnational dynamic resulted in Chinese communities becoming ‘more locally integrated, more assertive about their rights, and more interested in China’.<sup>17</sup>

In the Singaporean context, Chineseness can be better understood by what Yao Souchou calls a ‘culture-performing Chineseness,’ that expresses itself through a significant attachment to specific language, food and family value choices.<sup>18</sup> Defined through local performances rather than broader questions of race or culture, Chineseness becomes an everyday matter of individual choice and border patrolling to maintain some collective coherence: ‘What you need is a kind of Chinese culture with a barb-wired fence to keep out the performing pretenders’.<sup>19</sup> Even if this way of framing Chineseness differs from a top-down government approach that defines racialized categories in terms of cultural competencies and skill sets, it is compatible with the Singaporean state strategies of determining Chineseness locally. Since independence, the diversity of local Chinese populations, especially in terms of Chinese languages spoken, has been shaped through various government policies aiming at unifying them around a single Chinese language - Mandarin - hence designing an unified image of Mandarin-speaking Chineseness in contradistinction to other local racialized groups. The main intent was to reduce the plurality of Chinese languages in order to form a more coherent racialized category of Chineseness through which the Singaporean national identity could be reinforced.<sup>20</sup>

The emphasis on socializing local Chinese populations into speaking Mandarin has a racialized aspect in that government categories excluded other Chinese languages in people’s

official identification.<sup>21</sup> The government's emphasis on eradicating what were perceived as Chinese dialects and related clan associations, although not the only factor in the city-state's racialization of Chineseness, has supported the design of a Chinese culture and identity that makes a more explicit case for why local Chinese populations benefit from speaking Mandarin (namely, to establish easier and stronger links with Mainland China). State authorities were able to design the 'Chinese Singaporean' through many educational and linguistic initiatives in which language is a prime locale and medium to shape a specific sense of Chinese identity.<sup>22</sup> For instance, starting in the 1990s, state educational initiatives emphasized a more China-centric definition of locally experienced Chineseness through an explicit and direct focus on China's history and Mainland practices, rather than on local Chinese distinctiveness, including dialects and local history.<sup>23</sup>

As such, government initiatives supported the definition of a Singaporean Chineseness as one of the racialized pillars on which a strong national identity narrative can be built.<sup>24</sup> The government's attempt to unify what it means to be Chinese can be understood with reference to Singapore's nation-building project, which has been developed in the context of a multi-ethnic and immigrant environment and a history of traumatic events arising from ethnic tensions.<sup>25</sup> Known as the 4Ms or 5Ms - referring to multiracialism, multilingualism, multiculturalism, multireligiosity and sometimes meritocracy - the nation-building project makes economic development, success and wealth a significant pillar of unity for all Singaporeans. Although community life is important to frame one's racialized identity, Singapore's national identity is understood through the ability to live one's race in a diverse society working together for economic and political survival with similar Asian (as opposed to Western) values, including putting the nation before one's community, and society before oneself.<sup>26</sup> As such, Singaporean



national identity is founded on a dialectical position of self-confidence in its economic success and a fear of failure due to internal social vulnerabilities. As Tony Stockwell notes, ‘state and the individual have cemented solidarity, while planning and prosperity have engendered a national self-confidence. Side by side with self-confidence, however, stalks fear - fear of attack, fear of failure, fear of forgetting the rugged society’s struggle to succeed. Fear, too, has reinforced national solidarity’.<sup>27</sup>

In this view, the government’s focus on China-centric Chineseness, or what Rey Chow calls sinocentrism, in various linguistic, educational and immigration initiatives, must be understood as part of the national ethos of maintaining the already defined and potentially unstable ethnic diversity of the city-state. Running parallel to efforts to socialize new generations of Singaporeans into these racialized categories are the international recruitment strategies focused on the preferred racialized audiences for immigration.<sup>28</sup> With the move towards foreign talent to fuel the local economy, especially in sectors related to the global knowledge-based economy, the government’s policies of foreign worker recruitment and immigration have focused on Mainland China as a prime source of Chinese populations that are desired for their cultural competencies that match the local design of Chineseness.<sup>29</sup> Suspicions that people of Chinese origin have been privileged in the immigration process have been documented by correlating Singapore’s racial ratio, which has remained stable since independence, with the fertility rate of each racial category, rates that suggest that the size of the Malay and Indian communities are actually growing in comparison with the size of the Chinese community.<sup>30</sup> More recently, the Ministry of Trade and Industry released information about Singapore’s demographic trends showing that the proportion of Chinese residents in Singapore is decreasing slightly in proportion to other official races, down from 76.8% in 2000 to 74.1% in 2010.

However, there are no statistics available for the ethnic backgrounds of foreign workers, and there are suspicions that they would show an increase in the proportion of the Chinese population, and of other key racialized audiences such as the Indian population.<sup>31</sup>

As a way of further shaping Chineseness to reach the preferred racialized parameters, the immigration and social integration platforms of Singaporean state authorities have been conducted in ways that are detrimental to the traditional social matrix of local Chinese communities, especially dialect-based clan associations. This is of course in line with a broader trend since the 1960s of Singaporean state authorities redefining the city-state's social matrix to the detriment of the activities of local Chinese voluntary associations, especially when state authorities have questioned these associations' allegiances to Singapore.<sup>32</sup> Notwithstanding various measures to close down, marginalize and relocate Chinese clan associations, it was by invoking racial harmony as a key objective for Singapore that many Chinese clan associations' daily activities were emulated by state authorities in the creation of club associations for residents living in the same building.<sup>33</sup>

More recently, the creation of new migrant associations to recruit and cater to newcomers from China and Hong Kong starting in the 1990s mimics the adaptation efforts of some Chinese clan associations at the end of the 1980s, when the focus was on the social integration of newcomers, youth and cultural programs. To complement the government's direct initiatives to support newcomers' integration, new migrant associations have made their way into local Singaporean social life as local community associations outside the traditional clan system for Chinese migrants to Singapore.<sup>34</sup> As one local expert on government-community associations in Singapore mentioned, new migrant associations are 'reminiscent of clan associations'.<sup>35</sup> Aside from receiving official recognition, the four registered associations - the Kowloon Club, the Tian

Fu Club, the Huayuan Association, and the Tian Jin Club - also have privileged links to economic and political circles in Mainland China, which emulates the changing model of Chinese voluntary associations at the end of the 1980s, a time when they moved from catering to a restricted and localized membership to fostering transnational networks and co-ethnic affiliations.<sup>36</sup>

This government platform facilitates the recruitment and social integration of desired Chinese foreign workers to Singaporean society through a separate set of community associations. The new migrant associations represent the ambiguous government trajectories of the 1990s, as they speak to a period when Singaporean state authorities were more strongly committed to developing a national identity narrative while at the same time opening up quite confidently and explicitly to the PRC through various business and educational reforms. State designs combine initiatives to synchronize local Chineseness with the importance of opening up to China as a step towards the multi-ethnic nation's economic and political survival. At the same time, these state designs have displaced ethnic tensions from those arising between local races to multi-ethnic coalitions that advocate for Singaporeans first. With the public perception that much of the foreign talent is recruited from Mainland China, social incidents between PRC foreign workers and local Singaporeans in the 2000s have returned the issue of national Singaporean identity to the forefront of public debates about social cohesion. Whereas Singapore's nation-building project has traditionally been carried out without a 'hatred of foreigners',<sup>37</sup> nationalistic feelings, especially from local Chinese populations against the increasing numbers of PRC foreign workers and pro-Mainland platforms, seem to be pushing for a clearer national identity beyond consumerism and narratives of economic success and survival.<sup>38</sup> This has resulted in Chinese-educated Singaporeans - that is Chinese Singaporeans who are educated in China, rather

than English, schools - turning to a Taiwanese and Hong Kongese culture-performing Chineseness rather than a Mainland-focused and state-driven identity.<sup>39</sup>

#### Situating the Kowloon difference

Of the 35,000 to 38,000 people of Hong Kongese origin living in Singapore, 2,000 families are active participants in the Kowloon Club. Although not representing all of Hong Kongese living in Singapore, the Kowloon Club membership mobilizes a significant proportion of this population and serves as a prime catalyst in showing how this specific Chinese identity is performed, branded and celebrated locally.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, the history of the Kowloon Club is only one facet of the historical and social linkages between Hong Kong and Singapore but it serves as a main local narrative to frame Hong Kongese identity and Chineseness.<sup>41</sup> The story presented by the association traces Hong Kong immigration to Singapore over the last 60 years, especially as a means of supporting Singaporean needs in terms of expertise and capital. The 1950s were characterized by the recruitment of Hong Kongese with specific skill sets, such as civil servants and Singaporean students studying in Hong Kong to become physicians. In the 1960s, however, Singapore recruited Hong Kongese business people to work in British companies, and in the 1970s, at Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's encouragement; there was an influx of Hong Kongese capital and investments. In the 1980s, Hong Kongese came to Singapore to work in the booming high technology sectors, including television production and aerospace sectors. In official speeches in 1989, Hong Kongese were identified as model immigrants and new measures were created to facilitate increasing numbers of newcomers from there.<sup>42</sup> Even if Hong Kong immigration to Singapore does not exactly fit the usual stereotypes of the cosmopolitan business elite associated with the Hong Kongese diaspora, it is within this context that the Kowloon Club was created to support and facilitate more immigration from what the government saw as a

desirable population.<sup>43</sup> In this section, I document the Kowloon Club's activities and position them within local ethnic politics by highlighting the linkages between these local practices and broader ethnic adaptation processes associated with Hong Kongese diasporic experiences.

At its inception in 1990, the Kowloon Club catered mainly to two types of newcomers from Hong Kong: one was young professionals, and the other was astronaut families in which the husband and father would travel abroad quite often for business purposes, leaving wife and children to settle on their own.<sup>44</sup> Singaporean authorities created the Kowloon Club not only to facilitate their integration, but also to increase immigration from Hong Kong by having the Club conduct various recruitment seminars in Hong Kong in the early 1990s.<sup>45</sup> With its three pillars of integrating, socializing and contributing, the association's *raison d'être* is to support 'its members integration into the society by organizing activities with focus on cultural, recreational, educational and charitable natures'.<sup>46</sup> As such, the Kowloon Club works mostly as a social organization that produces its own publication, offers sports tournaments and outdoor activities, promotes volunteering opportunities, and provides various skill development courses to its members.<sup>47</sup> Through specific activities like its annual gala, the Kowloon Club also offers networking possibilities for business purposes, as well as a wide range of scholarships and charity work, expanding beyond its membership to target both Chinese and non-Chinese vulnerable groups, such as orphans and migrant workers living in Singapore.<sup>48</sup>

In spite of the initial strong local reactions against the creation of such an association, and the government's emphasis on Hong Kongese professionals as model migrants, the association grew local roots while also maintaining a transnational network. For instance, the Kowloon Club has extensive everyday ties to Singaporean society, particularly with associations representing the traditional Chinese networking groups such as the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce

and Industry (SCCCI) and the Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations (SFCCA), as well as ties with other new migrant associations. It also maintains strong government linkages with the Prime Minister's Office, the Hong Kong government and the Chinese Embassy, while fostering private sector relationships, especially with the Hong Kong-based airline, Cathay Pacific.<sup>49</sup> With its privileged linkages to the Malay community and associations that cater to Chinese newcomers, like the Overseas Chinese Students Union, it supports various local and foreign vulnerable groups living in Singapore.<sup>50</sup>

With the Hong Kongese reputation of being a model migrant group, the Kowloon Club serves as a consultant to the government for issues related to the integration of newcomers: 'We are a modern community. The government is keen to show us, and ask us to engage new immigrants on how to integrate'.<sup>51</sup> For instance, the Kowloon Club has been leading charitable efforts to deal with rising social issues in Singapore, including by providing financial support to Chinese study mamas<sup>52</sup> and PRC foreign workers, whose immigration strategy and visa restrictions have created difficult living and working conditions to support themselves legally.<sup>53</sup> For some external observers, the Kowloon Club was the first community association to take on specific causes, and it did so because Hong Kong itself experienced similar issues when it opened up to newcomers from Mainland China: 'Not surprising that the Kowloon Club is sponsoring study mamas, because they lived the same thing'.<sup>54</sup> It is also important to note that such model integration and commitment to give back to the community mirrors the identity-formation of Hong Kongese in other diasporic contexts, in which the main concern has not been with China's politics, but rather with how Mainlanders live in the host society. Identifying in relation to local Mainlanders is seen as a way for Hong Kongese to better negotiate their own position in local ethnic and racialized politics.<sup>55</sup>

In this view, a strategic re-positioning of Hong Kongese towards local Chineseness can be seen in Singapore through the Kowloon Club's drastic change over the last 23 years, as its purpose shifts while the government increases its emphasis on Mainlander immigration. While it began with the purpose of facilitating social integration into Singaporean society, the Kowloon Club's main goal now is to preserve its membership's distinctive Hong Kongese heritage and culture, especially for the children of its members. As mentioned by a Kowloon Club executive, 'The main challenge? It's getting new members as a new social club (...) The objective is changing from integration to reach out to the rest of society'.<sup>56</sup> Locating this shift within the government's more explicit turn to Mainland immigration and business networks, a past president of the Kowloon Club indicates that 'in the 2000s, Hong Kong is not the flavour of the month anymore'.<sup>57</sup> The institutionalization of various integration mechanisms outside of the community association's reach has thus widened and pushed the Kowloon Club to redefine its role: 'I did not join for integration because work did it and the companies help. With expatriates, many groups are formed before they arrive'.<sup>58</sup>

The Hong Kongese identity, with its ambiguity towards other practices of Chineseness, has been deployed in many other locations in a way that subverts the main PRC narrative and celebrates its linguistic difference. Similarly, the Kowloon Club's priority has become to promote and disseminate its distinct heritage within contemporary Singapore, since its members are often perceived by other Singaporeans in daily life as Mainlanders rather than Hong Kongese.<sup>59</sup> The Kowloon Club's participation in the national Chingay parade in 2008 illustrates this point. The membership presented a float resembling a mountain of roasted pork buns (char siu bao), a specific cultural Hong Kongese symbol, to celebrate and brand its distinct heritage in contemporary Singapore.<sup>60</sup>

The Kowloon Club's shift in purpose speaks of its changing location in ethnic and community politics, as it shows an increasing awareness of how distinct it has become from both traditional Chinese clan associations and other new migrant associations in everyday life. On the one hand, the Club seems similar to some clan associations in that it stresses the differences in what it means to be Chinese in Singapore and how those differences are experienced. Like clan associations, the Kowloon Club criticizes Singaporean authorities' attempts to homogenize Chinese culture, saying it obscures significant distinctions from and within Mainland China. For example, an active member of the Kowloon Club expressed uneasiness with some Singaporean ministers' speeches that refer to China as the 'motherland.' The Singapore government may not be aware of the dissonance it causes in increasingly using this expression in Mandarin-language speeches which are written by shadow speechwriters who are originally from Mainland China.<sup>61</sup> Such an attitude is reminiscent of Hong Kongese elsewhere siding with local citizenry to reinforce its local standing as 'less of an outsider', especially on issues related to immigration from the Mainland and the main PRC narrative of Chineseness.<sup>62</sup>

On the other hand, the Kowloon Club has increasingly been critical of and has distanced itself from the traditional Chinese clan associations, as they do not play a strong role as a social and cultural bridge in Singaporean society while it has become a key purpose of the Club: 'Clan associations did not integrate new migrants and it created a schism between old and new clans (...) new migrant associations are not there for integration (of new migrants) but to maintain the bridges with old society'.<sup>63</sup> Seeing itself more as a cultural and generational bridge between old and new Singapore, the Kowloon Club's leadership expresses its Chinese difference from the state model, while also supporting vulnerable groups, including Mainlanders, and dealing with other societal trends in contemporary Singapore. Similar to the emergence of the 1997 Hong



Kongese identity, the Kowloon Club's positioning in the city-state transcends allegiances to either Western or Eastern societies, embodying the perfect bridge between cultures and symbolizing a more modern, adaptable and open identity than the one expressed by traditional Chinese clan associations.<sup>64</sup>

Furthermore, the Kowloon Club's internal shift - from supporting integration to serving as a cultural and social club - is a way to distance itself from other new migrant associations catering to Mainlanders. All of them are seen officially as new migrant associations, but the Kowloon Club is perceived to be better organized and better structured than the others. It has demonstrated that it is reaching out to Singaporean society, whereas other new migrant associations are still very focused on creating and maintaining business networks to Mainland China: 'It is a two-side efforts: to fuse into the system and positively affect society, but it is easy to get isolated if not done properly. New migrants should play more a role in society'.<sup>65</sup> The shift echoes broader features of the Hong Kong diaspora: ambivalent attitudes towards the imagined homeland, and an emphasis on the local requirements of integration, notably by joining the local population in its dissatisfaction with state policies regarding PRC foreign workers.<sup>66</sup>

Moreover, the association's core strategic goals in terms of identity politics are quite opposite from those of the other new migrant associations. Whereas the Kowloon Club celebrates, brands and maintains the Hong Kong difference of Chineseness, the other new migrant associations are competing to capture a single Mainlander identity among the same pool of people.<sup>67</sup> The Kowloon Club remains mostly a social organization with a strong and distinct Chinese heritage - particularly through the use of Cantonese as its common language. But most new associations recruit Mainlander newcomers without having this Chinese difference to celebrate. This is exacerbated by the fact that their identity is also embodied in official state

designs, and that their numbers are growing locally: ‘Now, there are lots of PRC Chinese living in Singapore and the need for such (new migrant associations) community associations is getting weaker and weaker (...) Needs are different because new generations from Mainland China are not keen to join these Chinese societies’.<sup>68</sup> Building on the 1997 Hong Kongese identity’s well-documented refugee and ‘caught between two colonizers’ mentality, this move reinforces the marginality of the Hong Kongese subject which finds clearer meaning in opposing what PRC Chinese living in Singapore are doing.<sup>69</sup>

Carving out a role for itself between the traditional Chinese clan associations and the new migrant associations that cater to Mainlanders, the Kowloon Club is able to reach out to both groups through its historical roots and ethnic adaptation practices. This change is reminiscent of various Hong Kongese identity shifts occurring in other locations in the 1990s. It is characterized by the subversion of the main PRC narrative of Chineseness, as well as the ambiguity of using Westernness to define itself in opposition to other Chinese peoples, and Chineseness for find a stable identity as not Western.<sup>70</sup> Sparked by government initiatives in the Singaporean context, however, the Kowloon Club clearly demonstrates a preference to side with Chinese Singaporeans over Mainlanders, despite its original purpose.

#### Critiquing Chineseness - Hong Kong style

Members of the Kowloon Club seem to express genuine pride in belonging to Singapore, Hong Kong and the PRC. This three-pronged identity allows for a unique critique of the Singaporean state authorities’ policies towards Mainland China. In the following section, I will discuss the Kowloon Club’s critique of the state designs of Chineseness in order to draw out a process of identity-formation and ethnic adaptation that resembles the emergence of a 1997 Hong Kongese identity in the period leading up to Hong Kong’s return to the PRC. This critique focuses mainly

on language and immigration policies and sheds light on the Kowloon Club's ethnic adaptation, including how it echoes the 1997 Hong Kongese identity's border patrolling against the state's designs of a racialized Chinese identity. In other words, the Kowloon Club's critique of the emphasis on Mainland immigration is both a deeper critique of how Chineseness is shaped by state authorities, and a sign of the association's new role in patrolling its meaning.

A starting point for the Kowloon Club leaders' critique of the Singaporean state authorities is the issue of facilitating mobility to and through the city-state. A former Kowloon Club president echoing the experiences of Hong Kong in utilizing mobile elites to internationalize the local economy<sup>71</sup> says: 'Singapore, like Hong Kong, is too permeable and it (sic.) is going to cause its demise'.<sup>72</sup> While speaking of the porosity that Singapore's borders need to maintain its economic growth and to meet state objectives, he also seems to see danger in the government's failure to acknowledge newcomers, particularly from the PRC, who have no interest in supporting its objectives and goals: 'Hong Kong people come to Singapore as a destination. It is not our ticket out of China. We are here by our own choice in adult life'.<sup>73</sup> Whereas the Hong Kongese and Chinese Singaporeans appear to be utilizing mobility in a manner compatible with state objectives, this former president of the Kowloon Club expresses concerns for the newcomers' motivations and finds cultural differences between Mainlanders and Hong Kongese in terms of how they utilize mobility to Singapore as a way to pursue the 'good life'.

His critique is of the government's inability to see the limitations of welcoming people who fit an already defined category of Chineseness based on skills such as speaking Mandarin. In his view, members of the desirable migrant group of Mainlanders are recruited for their racialized profile and global talent, but live at the margins of Singaporean society, at least

linguistically: ‘Mainland Chinese are not entering the mainstream because they are not speaking English well and stay peripheral (sic). It is a new era for voluntary migration but now PRC migrants are coming out of China as passing through more, and going after’.<sup>74</sup> Speaking specifically of the Singaporean immigration strategy that focuses on occupation, but in a social context shaped by a strong Mandarin-English duality, one integration problem identified here is not only the inability of less privileged Mainlanders to speak English, but also of their assumed willingness to learn, as everyday Chineseness in Singapore is also intrinsically defined through one’s ability to live and work in English.

Echoing the Hong Kongese role as cultural bridge for their host society and their role in transcending allegiances to either Eastern or Western societies, the Kowloon Club sees as ineffective and disconnected from society the government’s strategies to utilize its already defined category of Chineseness.<sup>75</sup> As highlighted by Matt: ‘the government is stressing that foreign talent is necessary but there is a lot of caution to have (...) the policy is good but it is too framed and over-justified’.<sup>76</sup> As with local sentiments favoring Singaporeans first, the Kowloon Club leadership presents the government’s over-emphasis on foreign talent, notably from the PRC, as a problem. Even for the Kowloon Club, this government strategy is not adapted to the Singaporean Chineseness realities: ‘Mandarin policy limits Singapore. It does not promote it as an advanced skill (and the society) does not live it as mother tongue’.<sup>77</sup> As such, even if the government designed immigration and integration schemes to reinforce its idea of Chineseness for domestic cultural and international economic reasons, it seems that from a Hong Kongese perspective local efforts to support Chinese cultural training are not well adapted and do not achieve what the state intends.

In this context, the Kowloon Club's critique of the city-state's authorities is based on the distinction between performing and designing Chineseness, assuming for the Kowloon Club a role in patrolling its meanings.<sup>78</sup> Such patrolling can be seen through the reasons given by Matt - a former president of the Kowloon Club - to distinguish between the Chinese identity as lived by Hong Kongese and local Chinese Singaporeans, and Chineseness as designed by state authorities and embodied by Mainlanders. In his view, Hong Kongese and Chinese Singaporeans are said to live their sense of Chinese identity by genuinely giving back to their community as it was inherited from its British colonized past, rather than by utilizing the top-down racialized category of Chineseness for the purpose of advancing more personal political and economic objectives. These different relations to the local community translate into opposite networking cultures. The Hong Kongese and Chinese Singaporeans, particularly local Chinese clan associations, live their Chinese networking culture organically as polite, long-term and patient. This is in stark contrast to how Mainlanders' networking culture - and indeed, the entire process of opening up to Mainland China - is perceived as being created by top-down categories of Chineseness and plagued by impatience, short-term gains and rudeness. For Matt, such differences are a blind spot in government immigration strategies that focus on Mainlanders. Hong Kongese and local Chinese Singaporeans are said to perform what it means to be Chinese in Singapore in a more homogeneous way despite their cultural plurality, as they centre on developing a good life for themselves as professionals and for their families. However, the government's definition of Chineseness focuses on a specific skill set to attract foreign talent, to the detriment and exclusion of other factors. In his view, one result has been that the pool of Mainlanders may in fact be diverse in its intentions, and specifically that their intention for migrating to Singapore is to pursue their own objectives rather than serve the city-state.<sup>79</sup>

Whether one agrees with the Kowloon Club's approach to patrolling Chineseness, such reasoning is telling of the Hong Kongese ethnic adaptation in Singapore since the Club's creation in 1990. It also echoes the emergence of the 1997 Hong Kong identity, which has developed through everyday performances and patrolling practices of everyday Chineseness that disrupt and subvert the main state narrative of Chinese identity.<sup>80</sup> With the return of Hong Kong to the PRC in 1997, the local public debate in Hong Kong about what a Hong Kongese is in contrast to a Mainlander quickly shied away from re-grounding their Chineseness in traditional Chinese culture in order to better integrate with Mainland China, and focused instead on the importance of becoming 'more Chinese, whatever the word means'.<sup>81</sup> The 1997 Hong Kongese identity emerged as a product of living in Hong Kong and embodying a distinct identity crisis, caught between a Westernized and pre-Communist sense of Chineseness and the main PRC narrative.<sup>82</sup> In a dialectical manner, the 1997 Hong Kongese identity suggests both a re-nationalization project of promoting a PRC-centric sense of Chineseness, while simultaneously resisting it and unsettling it as a simplistic and homogenized political message in times when there is social anxiety about China going global: 'It's no longer the Chinese becoming ghosts, but rather the ghosts becoming the Chinese'.<sup>83</sup> Such patrolling and critique of the main state narrative is found in everyday practices in which Chineseness is evoked as a distant, nostalgic and feminizing gaze. Public discourses and images that oppose a more modern Chineseness in the 1997 Hong Kongese identity because of its British heritage have dismissed to some extent the main PRC narrative as an ambiguous rhetoric glorifying a distant and non-threatening past.<sup>84</sup>

It is within this context that the Kowloon Club's critique of Singaporean state designs of Chineseness must be understood. By reducing Chineseness to speaking Mandarin and using it as a tool for cultural rapprochement with Mainland China, Singaporean state authorities are

marketing what it means to be Chinese in a simplistic and homogenized way. Such a critique echoes Rey Chow's concern with focusing on Mandarin as the standard Chinese language as a way to manage ethnic diversity and define Chineseness primarily in distinction to other racialized identities like Whiteness, while also dismissing the other Chinese languages as 'incidental realities'.<sup>85</sup> State authorities are looking for quick profit and access to Chinese business opportunities, but they are doing this to the detriment of the lived nuances and differences in being Chinese in Singapore. These differences are found in the city-state's history as well as in its new migration patterns.<sup>86</sup> The Kowloon Club represents not only the views of the young professionals who Singapore state authorities are targeting through their Chineseness model; it also represents a strong critique of the disarticulation of everyday life in Singapore, where artificial, simplistic and anachronistic constructions of Chineseness and race are at play. By focusing on its new role as cultural and generational bridge between Singapore's old Chinese society and new trends, the Club is revealing important cultural biases that are built into the project, and it is dealing with direct unintended consequences.

## Conclusion

Singapore's national narrative of political and economic survival is combined with the social and cultural necessity to draw closer to a rising Mainland China. Local ethnic and community politics are thus readjusting: whereas being Chinese rather than one of the other state-defined races used to be perceived as an advantage in Singapore, now there is a perception that PRC foreign workers are more privileged than even local Singaporean citizens of any race. As part of this shift, the Kowloon Club, a community association created by Singaporean state authorities in 1990 to support the recruitment, immigration and integration of Hong Kongese professionals,

has quickly evolved to oppose what the Mainlander image represents in terms of a main state narrative of Chineseness.

The Kowloon Club's focus on bridging old and new Chinese Singaporean societies and realities is an expression of how Hong Kongese have adapted and negotiated their role in the Singaporean context with other local ethnic groups. This role has been to subvert the state narrative of Chineseness through its daily performances and patrolling practices, which notably meant to grow closer to local Chinese Singaporeans in their fight for the celebration of their Chinese difference. The Kowloon Club draws from critiques familiar to traditional Chinese clan associations when it questions the use of the word 'motherland' by Singaporean ministers' shadow speechwriters from Mainland China. This questioning exemplifies, moreover, the Club's role in patrolling the border of Singapore's culture-performing Chineseness. Such an example also reflects its transition from a voluntary association for the integration of newcomers to one of the gatekeepers of Chinese ethnicity in multiracialized Singapore.<sup>87</sup>

Adapting to the Singaporean context, the Kowloon Club positions itself by creating some distance from local Chinese clan associations, other new migrant associations and state designs, notably as it pertains to what it means to be Chinese in the city-state. The association's ethnic adaptation points to a problem of social cohesion within local Chinese populations themselves, as state authorities tend to reinforce locally an outward-looking and unified sense of Chineseness on which a multi-ethnic narrative of national identity and economic success can be built. Nonetheless, the Club's critiques constitute its leadership's clear and direct involvement in these national discussions, taking on the voices of, patrolling on behalf of, and acting as, Singaporeans.<sup>88</sup> As Singapore's nation-building project and state platforms for economic development have often sparked local opposition and constant negotiation with various



racialized groups, these now include an increasing role for Hong Kongese Singaporeans in showing the importance of pluralizing the government understanding of Chineseness. Beyond helping to understand Singapore's evolving ethnic and community relations, this change in the Kowloon Club's vision informs us of significant ethnic adaptations in a global sense of Chineseness, partly defined by the Chinese diaspora, and partly fought over by state interests.

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#### Notes

1. Chua, "Being Chinese," 240. In light of Beng-Huat Chua's argument, it is important to mention that speaking of 'Chineseness' in the context of Singapore has linguistic limitations in English, as it does not reflect the distinction between a China-centric definition and the local Huaren, as portrayed in Mandarin.
2. Chua, "Being Chinese," 240-45, 48; Reid, "Escaping Burdens," 285; and Rudolph, *Reconstructing Identities*, 9-12.
3. Gomes, "Xenophobia Online," 31-2; Kin, "Implications of Modern Education," 246.
4. Montsion, "Talent Meets Mobility," 470-3.
5. Liu, "New Migrants," 291-316.
6. Gabriel, "Migrations of Chineseness," 123.
7. Souchou, "Being Essentially Chinese," 261.
8. Reid, "Escaping Burdens," 285-88; and Yeoh, *Contesting Space*, 1-7.
9. Channel News Asia. "ICA to Develop Double-Barrelled Race Options." Accessed May 31, 2013. <http://news.xin.msn.com/en/singapore/article.aspx?cp-documentid=4548400>; Chua, "Being Chinese," 240; Reid, "Escaping Burdens," 286; and Rudolph, *Reconstructing Identities*, 9-12. Still well anchored in its multiracial framework, recent changes to the system include a recognition of the Eurasian race, as well as the possibility for Singaporeans to declare one primary and one secondary race.
10. Chua, "Being Chinese," 248-49; Gomes, "Xenophobia Online," 22.
11. Cho, "Diasporic Citizenship," 474; Knowles, "Seeing Race," 519; and Wickberg, "Global Chinese Migrants," 178.
12. Ang, "No to Chineseness," 227; and Chow, "Introduction," 6-10.
13. Ang, "Not to Chineseness," 224; Siu, "Ethnicity in Globalization," 47; Wang, "Chinese History," 202-3; and Wickberg, "Global Chinese Migrants," 183.
14. Souchou, "Being Essentially Chinese," 258.
15. Ang, "No to Chineseness," 229-30; Bhattacharya, "Chinese Nationalism Reinforced," 120; and Siu, "Ethnicity in Globalization," 47.
16. Nyiri, *Mobility and Cultural Authority*, 54.
17. Reid, "Chineseness Unbound," 199.
18. Kuah-Pearce, "Politics of Clan Associations," 59; and Souchou, "Being Essentially Chinese," 258-59.
19. Souchou, "Being Essentially Chinese," 259.
20. Mauzy and Milne, *Singapore Politics*, 106-09; Pan, *Encyclopedia of Overseas Chinese*, 114; Tan, "Change and Continuity," 42-3.

21. Chow, "Between Colonizers," 12-3; Wee and Wah, "Ethnicity and Capital," 337; Yeoh et al., "Introduction," 210.
22. Bokhorst-Heng, "Language Ideological Debates," 243-54; Chua and Yeo, "Singapore Cinema," 123; Lau, "Nation-Building," 225; Montsion, "Chinese Ethnicities," 7-9; Pan, *Encyclopedia of Overseas Chinese*, 209; Tan, "Re-Engaging Chineseness," 754-55 and Teo, "Mandarinising Singapore," 129-32.
23. Chua, "Being Chinese," 246-47; Montsion, "Chinese Ethnicities," 8-10; Souchow, "Being Essentially Chinese," 257; and Yeoh and Tan, "Negotiating Cosmopolitanism," 146-68.
24. Pan, *Encyclopedia of Overseas Chinese*, 213.
25. Kin, "Implications of Modern Education," 229; Kopnina, "Cultural Hybrids," 249-53; Kuah-Pearce, "Politics of Clan Associations," 57; Lau, "Nation-Building," 224-29; and Suryadinata, *Understanding the Ethnic Chinese*, 21.
26. Kong and Yeoh, *Politics of Landscapes*, 30-46.
27. Stockwell, "Forging Malaysia and Singapore," 213.
28. Chow, "Introduction," 6.
29. Kin, "Implications of Modern Education," 246.
30. Rahim, *The Singapore Dilemma*, 128-33.
31. Abhijit, "How Many Indians, Chinese, Malays and People of Other Races in Singapore's Total Population?" Pressrun.net (blog), Accessed June 1, 2013), <http://www.pressrun.net/weblog/2010/07/how-many-indians-chinese-malays-and-people-from-other-races-in-singapores-total-population.html>; Department of Statistics, "Population Trends 2012," 3; and Gopalan Nair, "Singapore: State Sanctioned Racial Discrimination," *Singapore Dissident* (blog), Accessed June 1, 2013, <http://singaporedissident.blogspot.ca/2011/06/singapore-state-sanctioned-racial.html>.
32. Kong and Yeoh, *Politics of Landscapes*, 32-6.
33. Kuah-Pearce, "Politics of Clan Associations," 61.
34. Liu, "New Migrants," 291-316.
35. Interview with Bella, February 27, 2008.
36. Kuah-Pearce and Hu-Dehart, "The Chinese Diaspora," 14-20; Rahman and Kiong 2013)
37. Stockwell, "Forging Malaysia and Singapore," 212.
38. Chua, "Being Chinese," 248-49.
39. Suryadinata, *Understanding the Ethnic Chinese*, 21.
40. Sinn, "Xin Xi Guxiang," 375-6; and Wah and Wee, "Ethnicity and Capital," 330.
41. Interview with Matt, February 20, 2008.
42. Interview with Matt, February 20, 2008.
43. Bhattacharya, "Chinese Nationalism Reinforced," 124; Lan, "Negotiating Boundaries," 709; and Wickberg, "Global Chinese Migrants," 183.
44. Bun, "Family Affair," 195; Interview with Bella, February 27, 2008.
45. Interview with Matt, February 20, 2008.
46. Kowloon Club. "About Us." Accessed May 31, 2013. [http://www.kowloonclub.org.sg/about\\_us.html](http://www.kowloonclub.org.sg/about_us.html).
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48. Participant observation at Kowloon Club Annual Gala Dinner, March 2, 2008.

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49. Interview with Brock, March 15, 2008; and Participant observation at Kowloon Club Annual Gala Dinner, March 2, 2008
  50. Interview with Matt, March 20, 2008.
  51. Interview with Matt, February 20, 2008.
  52. Montsion, "Everyday International Relations," 938-39; and Ng, "Migrant Women," 105-6. In the context of Singapore, study mamas refer to mothers moving to the city-state to support their child's studies. These children are being recruited as part of Singapore's emphasis on international education to meet its labour needs.
  53. Interview with Harry, March 8, 2008; and Interview with Matt, March 20, 2008.
  54. Interview with Bella, February 27, 2008.
  55. Lan, "Negotiating Boundaries," 711.
  56. Interview with Brock, March 15, 2008.
  57. Interview with Matt, March 20, 2008.
  58. Interview with Brock, March 15, 2008.
  59. Lin, "Hong Kong and Globalization," 71; Lo, "Look Who's Talking," 168; and Wong, "Going Back," 157.
  60. Participant observation at Kowloon Club Annual Gala Dinner, March 2, 2008.
  61. Interview with Matt, March 20, 2008.
  62. Lan, "Negotiating Boundaries," 713-14.
  63. Interview with Matt, March 20, 2008.
  64. Lan, "Negotiating Boundaries," 714-15; Lau, "Context, Agency," 601; and Wong, "Going Back," 154-57.
  65. Interview with Oscar, March 17, 2008.
  66. Chua, "Being Chinese," 248-49; Gomes, "Xenophobia Online," 22; and Lan, "Negotiating Boundaries," 710.
  67. Interview with Matt, March 20, 2008.
  68. Interview with Oscar, March 17, 2008.
  69. Chow, "Between Colonizers," 158; Lan, "Negotiating Boundaries," 710; and Lin, "Hong Kong and Globalization," 71.
  70. Lo, "Look Who's Talking," 168; and Wong, "Going Back," 154.
  71. Bhattacharya, "Chinese Nationalism Reinforced," 124; and Wickberg, "Global Chinese Migrants," 193.
  72. Interview with Matt, February 20, 2008.
  73. Interview with Matt, March 20, 2008.
  74. Interview with Matt, February 20, 2008.
  75. Lau, "Context, Agency," 601; and Wong, "Going Back," 157.
  76. Interview with Matt, March 20, 2008.
  77. Interview with Matt, March 20, 2008.
  78. Souchou, "Being Essentially Chinese," 529.
  79. Interview with Matt, March 20, 2008.
  80. Lan, "Negotiating Boundaries," 720; and Lo, "Look Who's Talking," 168.
  81. Chang, "Hong Kong Viscera," 385.
  82. Chang, "Hong Kong Viscera," 384-88.
  83. Chow, "Me and the Dragon," 550.

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84. Chan, "Food, Memories," 207; Chow and de Kloet, "Blowing the China Wind," 59; Enri, "Who Needs Strangers," 79-83; and Wong, "Going Back," 147-54.
85. Chow, "Between Colonizers," 13.
86. Interview with Matt, March 20, 2008.
87. Souchou, "Being Essentially Chinese," 259.
88. Kong and Yeoh, *Politics of Landscapes*, 210-11.

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Brock. Personal interview with an executive of the Kowloon Club, Singapore, March 15, 2008.

Harry. Personal interview with an executive of the Overseas Chinese Students Union, Singapore, March 8, 2008.

Matt. Two personal interviews with an executive of the Kowloon Club, Singapore, February 20, 2008 and March 20, 2008.

Oscar. Personal interview with an executive of the Zhejiang University Alumni Club, Singapore, March 17, 2008.

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