

# Singapore's Rat Race to *Create* a Strong Nation

A study on how Lasalle students experience the competitive education system,  
and how they want to contribute to the welfare of the nation



The two people on my left and right are alumni from Lasalle.

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## Introduction

*When I repeated the first year of Junior College, I was still really bad. I was ranked last three in the entire course, and everyone knew that I did not want to be there. So the principal met me and my mom in front of [all my] lecturers, [but] at that point in time, I really did not care. I just wanted to finish, get my certificate and enrol into Lasalle [a tertiary arts institution in Singapore]. The problem was that he [the principal] was really obsessed with grades and how my grades would [potentially] affect the image of the school.*

*I do not know whether he was trying to [apply] reverse psychology. Maybe when I think positively he was [perhaps] trying to push me to make me hate him and in turn, work hard you know, but this does not work for me.*

*I will never forget that day. I was frustrated and I just blocked everything out. I just sat there and he said whatever he wanted to say, because he did not listen to what I had to say. The worst part of the entire session was the fact that he provoked me by saying that "I heard you want to go to Lasalle. You think Lasalle even wants you?" I was so numb by then, and on top of that my mom was convinced that I was going to be a failure in life.*

*- Melati -*

In order to become a successful country in terms of economy, Singapore recognizes the importance of investing in education. The education system in Singapore is based on a Confucian model, just like in other East Asian countries such as China and Japan.

The Confucian model is based on a strong nation-state that closely supervises the institutions. There is a high participating rate in tertiary education, a 'one chance' examination at the end of high school, and the government invest a lot in research science (Marginson 2010: 594). In order to reach such a high participating rate, Singaporeans usually invest a lot of money in private tutoring. After regular school hours most students engage in tuition and so from a very young age, students realise how important school, and above all, your grades are. Students face a lot of pressure when it comes to examinations given that everyone achieves to do well. These examinations mediate competition between classmates, as nobody would want to disappointment their parents or themselves.

This competition however, stretches among different schools as well. These schools want to be recognized as one of the top schools in Singapore, thereby explaining the principal's attitude towards Melati. He wants his school to do well, and fear that one academically poor student could possibly affect the entire reputation of the school. Melati

only went to Junior College (JC) initially, because her mother wanted her to go there. She actually wanted to study media at polytechnic, but her mother was convinced that she was mixing with the wrong crowd. "You do not know what you want and there are not a lot of options if you were to choose this." So Melati attended Junior College instead, a route that leads directly to university. I will explain the education system in further detail in chapter three.

In Confucianism, self-formation through learning as an act of filial piety is a duty you should fulfil towards your parents so you will bring honour to the family (Marginson 2010: 598). A lot of students, just like Melati, feel pressure from their parents who expect them to do well in school hence follow the most desirable pathway that leads directly to university.

This model however, has its potential limitations. In Singapore, rather than keeping a critical distance, like that of western countries, the government has a lot of power in the university. They for example, have the authority about what research can be done and they financially favour applied and commercial research that has a strong profit driven output rather than research for the sake of science only. (Marginson 2010: 595).

Moreover, the perceived honour graduates receive for having a university degree is usually only granted to those with a degree from the more pragmatic studies. For example, law, science or business. Studies with a certain prestige usually go hand in hand with economic wealth. When students do not have good grades or opt for a less pragmatic field of study, they feel the need, to justify themselves to their family, relatives or society on the whole.

The economy in Singapore is, just as in many countries, driven by neoliberal values. In the neoliberal context people are focused on being self-sufficient and economically successful. This responsibility however, lies with the individual and it seems harder for students who opt for a less pragmatic field of study to adhere to these values. Melati enrolled in Lasalle, but with a degree in arts it is less easy to find a job with a high payment. It appears that society perceives, students and alumni from Lasalle as individuals who do not adhere to expectations that is set forth in the neoliberal context in Singapore. They are, therefore, subjected to prejudices and need to justify their choice of study.

This is not to suggest that Lasalle is not following a model based on Confucian values. All the students I have talked to, discuss for instance, the importance of academic results.

They do stand out from other students however, as they study arts, a track that does not have economic prestige. To understand the pressure that students in Singapore experience in school, I have chosen to focus on an extreme case, namely students from Lasalle who opt for a career in the arts. In doing so, this will clarify and make pre-existing tensions within the Singapore society more explicit.

Alan Bryman (2012) makes a distinction between five different case studies. The extreme case is usually used to highlight something extremely prominent at the time of research and as such, holds an intrinsic interest that makes it essentially unique. Case studies are not used to generalize beyond the specific case study, but it does give the possibility to intensively examine one single case in relation to which it then engage in a theoretical analysis. It makes us better understand the theoretical framework and what this means for situations outside academia.

I have spent three months in Singapore to observe and conduct interviews with students and alumni from Lasalle. We discussed their experiences about the education system in Singapore and how everyone, from their parents to their friends, put pressure and expectations upon them and how they cope with that.



Lasalle College of the Arts

In this thesis, I will seek to answer the following question: How do Lasalle students justify their choice of study in an education system that is based on neoliberal and Confucian values? Simultaneously, their justification is a way to cope with the pressure and expectations that derive from the education system locally.

My informants claim that a career in arts can adhere to values that derive in an economy, driven by neoliberal values. One alumnus for example, would like to set up his own business to help the local economy grow, and may potentially create more job opportunities for fellow Singaporeans. Secondly, my informants argue that art is a means of communication that can be used to connect people. A nation might need a strong economy, but they also need a community that is willing to fight for their country and citizens need to feel connected with one another. My informants, therefore, hope they can use art to discuss social sensitive issues and contribute to an identity as Singaporeans through the use of art.

In chapter one, I describe my field of study and my informants, namely students and alumni of Lasalle College of the Arts. It also includes the qualitative research methods that I have used and its limitations. I will also discuss ethical issues and reflect on my own position in the field.

Chapter two is about the theoretical framework. I will first explain the neoliberal values, I mentioned before and how these mediate competition in society. This competitive mindset can be linked to both Confucianism and the neoliberal discourse. Then, I will continue with theories on identity building and nationalism. Art can contribute with the creation of identity and nation branding and this is how my informants justify a career in arts, as it explains how they can contribute to society.

Chapter three and four are ethnographic chapters. Chapter three is about the experiences of my informants on pressure and competition they have to cope with, both in school as in their career, and how this has affected them. In chapter four, I argue how some of my informants want to use art to contribute to the nation state and how this at the same time is a form of justification for the fact that they went to study at Lasalle. Art is a means of communication and they want to use art to discuss social sensitive issues to create a more cohesive community.

In the conclusion, I will summarize my argument and answer my research question.

# **1. Anthropological fieldwork**

## **1.1 The Community**

This research is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted from January till March 2017. The main informants are students and alumni from Lasalle College of the Arts, a tertiary education institution in Singapore. Lasalle offers a range of degrees in acting, animation arts, arts management, dance, design, fashion, film, fine arts, music and musical theatre and it is the most prestigious art school in Singapore.

I decided to focus on one art school instead of several, because I did not have the time to make a comparison with other schools and I wanted to keep my field small. The only exception is Wen Tjun, a Singaporean who is taking a degree in music in the US. I decided to share some of his experiences not to make a comparison, but rather because of his reflection on his experience of the education system in Singapore that are quite similar to those of my other informants. My research however, is not multi-sited, but that does not imply that my informants from Lasalle are a homogenous group. They study for different degrees and not all the students are local.

One of my most important findings is about how some of my informants think they can contribute to the nation state through the cultivation of a national identity for example. This makes 'the field' not any simpler as my informants have different ideas about how to do so. Some want to keep it very local and want to ask for recognition and preservation for local ethnic art, while others would want to invest in the creative industry in Singapore. Doing so would allow Singapore to be on par with other global powerhouses, such as New York or London.

Moreover, Singapore has a multicultural society. The biggest ethnicities in Singapore are the Chinese, followed by Malays and Indians. Most grandparents or great grandparents are migrants from other countries, but most Singaporeans identify themselves based on nationality rather than on the basis of race. The population however, is set apart from one another due to top down racial categorizations. Furthermore, Singapore is not isolated from the rest of the world. It is influenced by its British colonial history and other connections it has beyond its own territorial borders and so we cannot speak of a homogeneous site.



This building for example, houses the National Museum of Singapore, but the architecture is part of its colonial heritage

So neither my field nor my informants are homogeneous.

## **1.2 Main Research Question and Sub Questions**

*In my research I will seek to answer the following research question:*

- How do Lasalle students justify their choice of study, as they seem at first sight, not to adhere to the expectations that are set forth in the neoliberal context of Singapore's educational system?

*In order to answer this question, I break it down in three sub-questions:*

- How do Lasalle students experience the education system in Singapore?
- How do Lasalle students want to contribute to society?
- How do Lasalle students want to use art to create a national identity?

### **1.3 Research Methods**

This section discusses methodological choices and their possible limitations.

#### **Data collection**

The aim of qualitative research is not to generalize the results, but to enrich contextual understanding and provide rich data.

In order to answer my research question, my most important method was the semi-structured interview, but I also conducted two focus groups and several observations. These qualitative research methods have given me the advantage to study my case in depth. To construct narratives together with my informants and describe and analyse in great detail how Lasalle students experience the education system in Singapore and how they hope to contribute to society. Despite what people think of their choice of study.

I was initially hoping that I could go to Lasalle and have informal conversations with people outside the school, but this turned out to be quite uneasy. It felt more like an interrogation. I was the only one asking questions and they would only give me brief answers and waited patiently for my next question. Therefore, after the first week in the field, I decided to approach people by only introducing myself and explain the topic of my thesis, and then ask if they would be interested to do an interview with me. Unfortunately, many people were a bit hesitant and I got to know most of my informants through a snowball sampling. The people that were interested in an interview with me would tell their friends about me and if they were open to it, gave me their numbers. This way, I got to know other students and alumni from Lasalle and for that I am very grateful.

#### **Interviews**

I conducted semi-structured interviews, as I wanted to ensure we would discuss certain themes. At the same time, I wanted to give the interviewee the opportunity to talk about topics, I have not thought about, but could appear to be relevant.

The advantage of conducting interviews is that the interviewee can reconstruct events such as why students decided to go to Lasalle, how they hope they can contribute to society and they could elaborate about the pressure and expectations they feel from their social environment. A limitation of this method however, is that it is time-consuming. It was not

easy to schedule the interviews, given people's busy schedules. Some of the alumni would often cancel one hour prior to the interview, with reasons such as needing to work overtime or students were falling ill. Another problem was that even if I managed to interview them, the interview process was sometimes too short.

A limited amount of time can affect the interview negatively since it is only after the interview proceeds, that people's deeper feelings are revealed. Over the course of the interview, people tend to change their answers due to the fact that they are able to reflect more deeply about what they want to say and often come to a new understanding of their own behaviour, as they clarify and articulate their answers more precisely than their initial statements (Hiller & Diluzio 2004). If I were to come to know that my informant had only a limited span of time to spare prior to the interview, I might have asked for shorter elaborations regarding certain questions of less priority. Or when we were almost out of time and my informant would keep watching the clock, I would feel stressed too. In these situations, I was more focused on what was yet important to ask rather than listening attentively to the conversation. Moreover, when there was only a limited amount of time, I talked less about myself. This could have affected the rapport, I built with my informant and therefore the information I received. Despite these limitations, interviews continued to be the main source of information for this thesis.

### **Focus group**

An alternative method to the interview was organizing a focus group. In the time spent in Singapore, I conducted two focus groups consisting of four students from Lasalle each. I conducted these focus groups at a great green yard, just outside the school, so that the environment resembled that of a park; a casual place where everyone would feel at ease.



The green yard

I asked the same questions as that of the one-on-one interviews, but these instances were slightly different in that my informants had the opportunity to discuss their answers as a group. The advantage of this method is that it allows people to probe each other's reasons for holding a certain view, which offers me the opportunity to study the ways in which individuals collectively make sense of a phenomenon and construct meanings around it (Bryman 2012: chapter 21). Initially, people would indeed disagree with each other, but halfway through the interview, everyone just started to confirm with what the other was saying. This did not turn out the way I expected it to.

What I personally found difficult was to ensure that everyone would feel engaged in the conversation. It was very clear from the beginning which person tended to be more dominant, and who I needed to address personally. I am well aware that it is not so much important who is talking more as long as the quality of the information gathered is good.

However, I was especially uncomfortable when I noticed that one girl during the first focus group would constantly use her mobile phone rather than joining the conversation. I therefore decided that it would be more optimal for me to conduct one-on-one interviews, as it would be easier for me to connect with the other person and therefore, retrieve better data.

## **Participant observation**

Not all data can be revealed through words, so in order to obtain such knowledge we need to enter the zone of cultural intimacy (Herzfeld 2009). Participant observation has the advantage that it looks beyond of what is being said, but in order to do so we have to understand what we have to look for and how we can interpret such actions. The researcher however needs time to acquire such understanding. So it is important to keep in mind that people can act in ways that only people who share the same gestures, are able to interpret. It is our job to gain the ability to interpret those actions correctly. It also implies that I have brought my Dutch gestures into the field, which has affect the way, I have interpreted the observations made.

Furthermore doing research in an urban setting has its own difficulties, and for me it was especially hard to become part of a group of students that I could follow around. Therefore, the observations I made are often unconscious and simply made because of the fact that I was there in the field.

There was this one time that I was sitting in the MRT, the metro line in Singapore, when I saw a girl who was about 12 years of age. She was holding some papers in her hand with notes from school and I could read that she was in her first year of secondary school. One of the questions being probed was about how she feels and thinks about herself. Her answer was 'useless and weak'. She also needed to write down a wish for herself, and she wished that she would gain more self-confidence.

In 2015, I have studied one semester at the National University of Singapore (NUS) and there I have met more people who were very insecure. Most of the time this had to do with how they performed in school. They were so worried that they would be a failure and therefore, the observation in the MRT made me feel very sad. The emotional reflection by this girl resembled more of a norm in society rather than an exception.

How students in Singapore experience the education system seemed therefore a vital part of their everyday life and I decided to ask more about this in the interviews. At the same time the data from the interviews also influenced how I interpreted my observations. All the information I gathered changed my perspective and how I looked and interpreted things. My methods therefore have in a way complemented each other.

## **Data analysis**

First of all, I have transcribed the recordings of the interviews and focus groups. After I

transcribed all of them, I coded the transcriptions under different themes and concepts and I did the same for my field notes from the participant observations. I coded my data in categories such as nation building, neoliberalism, pressure/stress, ethnic art and language. Furthermore, I created a relation between the different categories and ordered them. I used a thematic analysis, so the focus lies on what is being said rather than on how it is said. Moreover, I have been looking for recurring topics, and explore how my informants agree or differ about them. (Bryman 2012).

My main findings are about how Lasalle students experience stress in school and how they believe they can contribute to society. Therefore, I use a phenomenological perspective 'to give attention to lived experiences, i.e. the perceptions and feelings of people associated with what they experience' (Ashforth et al 2007: 56). So I tried not to edit quotes from my informants when unnecessary so as to give them an authentic voice. Finally, I analysed my findings through relevant literature.

#### **1.4 Ethics**

As anthropologists we have to protect our informants from any possible harm the research project can cause them. This research discussed some personal issues, such as how their parents reacted when they told them they wanted to study arts, something not highly appreciated in Singapore, or when we discussed the amount of stress and pressure in school. They would sometimes get a bit angry when they were reflecting on what for example, people in their environment said about the fact that they study at Lasalle, but the interview itself did not cause any mental harm. I also always requested permission to record the interviews and whether they wanted to remain anonymised. Both requests were never a problem. I do use pseudonyms however, since I can never be sure that what my informants have shared with me will never be used in a negative way against them. Especially in this digital era, where documents become so easy accessible, the chance that people can read or have access to my thesis will not be unlikely. Although the subject of my thesis is not very sensitive, I would still want to protect my informants from any possible harm due to what they revealed to me and how I interpreted that information.

#### **Reflection**

When I introduced myself in the field, I told my potential informants that I am a student in

anthropology from the Netherlands and that I was in Singapore for a three-month field research for my master thesis. Since my focus changed over the fieldwork period however, the information I have given to my first informants about the topic of my fieldwork is not fully applicable anymore. In no way however, have I tried to mislead them.

In order to gain their trust and build rapport, what I did do during interviews was to relate to them. For example, by saying that I also have roots in Asia since my mother is born in Indonesia and my great grandmother had a Chinese parent. Or that I could understand the amount of stress in Singapore as I have done an exchange at NUS so I know what it is like to study in this environment. At the same time, NUS is the standard pathway for Singaporeans and I felt the need to justify myself for going there, by making myself smaller and telling them that I took courses from the Southeast Asia department, which is part of the least desired faculty. Even though I do not feel ashamed about it at all. In fact, the modules in NUS were one of the best I ever enrolled in.

I also tried to relate to my informants by saying that I can understand that their parents are not really happy with them studying arts as my father was also not very happy with me studying anthropology as he was concerned about my future livelihood. That he does not say this anymore is something I did not share. I wonder therefore, how ethical it is to highlight certain points and leave out others, only to use and share this personal information for instrumental reasons. As an anthropologist it is important to gain peoples trust and you do that by sharing information about yourself and try to relate to them. In the first place therefore, I was sharing this information, because I wanted to have information from my informants. On the other hand, all the information is truth and after we build up rapport, I did not only share information out of instrumental reasons anymore.

I think it is important for the reader(s) of my thesis that I am transparent and reflect on my own position in the field. This way, the reader can see for himself where I might have been biased. As an anthropologist, you yourself are a research instrument, and so who you are and where you are coming from, geographically, study background, or gender is very important for the data you gather and for the reader to know. It partly determined how I have looked at certain information and interpreted them.

As for my informants, in order to be transparent, I am willing to share my results with them if they want to. With results, I refer to the transcript of the interviews I have had with them personally, and the thesis as a whole. If the informant disagrees with my analysis, but I can convincingly argue that my interpretation is valid, I will not change my findings. David Mosse (2013) argues for example, how the NGO where he did his research disagreed with his

representation and did not want him to publish certain data, because it would harm the organisation. He however, argued that he had enough substantive data to make the argument the way he did and therefore did not change the publication. If I were to argue that my analysis is valid indeed, I have to make sure that I have the substantive data to support my case.

## List of informants

### - Students from Lasalle

- Melati: Arts management
- Janice: Arts Management
- Heidi: Fashion Media and Industries
- Jingrou: Design Communication
- Seri: Fashion Media and Industries
- Chris: Interior Design
- Ana: Design Communication
- Rachel: International student Design and Communication (Indonesian but has lived in the United States for the last 14 years)
- Amalina: Interior Design
- Felicia: Arts Management
- Daniel: Arts Management

### - Alumni

- Jenny: Interior Design
- Sebastian: Arts management
- Vanessa: Interior Design in Lasalle (She is Chinese Malaysian)
- Dione: Arts Management
- Zhimin: Interior Design

### - Not from Lasalle

- Wen Tjun: Music

I have used my friends name as pseudonyms, but I want to clarify that the people in this thesis are not the same as whom I mentioned by name in my acknowledgements.

## **2 Theoretical framework**

The importance of academic results can cause a lot of stress for young students, but this competitive mindset is not only something from the Confucian tradition. It is also incorporated in an economy that is driven by neoliberal values. People feel the pressure to create economic security, to become self-sufficient and autonomous, in a system that is based on competition.

### **2.1 Neoliberalism**

Traditionally, anthropologists study neoliberalism either within the Marxist paradigm of political economy that focuses on structural adjustments, policies in the Global South, post-socialist transformations and the increased flow of commodities and commodification. Or within a Foucauldian framework that focuses on the ideology of governance and technologies of self (Ganti 2014: 94). Harvey (2005) is considered a Marxist, but tries to bridge the two by saying that neoliberalism has become a hegemonic discourse that determines how we interpret and understand the world we live in (Ibid: 98). People incorporate norms and values such as economic independency and autonomy and since that seems hard to reach with a career in the arts, students of Lasalle are subjected to prejudices and have to justify themselves.

In January I spoke to an engineer who now works as a junior recruiter and he told me that the government in Singapore subsidises Master Programmes in Engineering because, they believe that a career in this field can generate money for the country. It is up to the technical engineer to make a product that others can sell and so the government wants to have more people working in this industry. Moreover, parents are more willing to pay for cheaper studies that still lead to a so-called successful future.

In the current global economy, educational institutions put an emphasis on neoliberal values such as self-responsibilization, entrepreneurial risk-taking, and human capital development (Ruddick 2003; Anagnost 2013 in Cheng 2015: 1080). An economy driven by neoliberal values promotes, just like the Confucian education model, self-cultivation as a route to a successful life (Türken et al 2015: 34). It is the individual who is responsible for her or her life course no one else.

It is easier to adhere to these values, when people follow a more pragmatic study. Thus

through education, states try to govern their citizens. Educational institutions are sites where people can internalize norms and subjugate themselves into the ideal citizens, but when they fail to do so they are subjected to prejudices.

Students from Lasalle seem less focused on neoliberal values, hence they endanger Singapore's position in the global economy. The Singapore government's vision to secure a good position in the global economy, has relied on biopolitical instruments of meritocracy and pragmatism (Tan 2008). Biopolitical refers to the incorporation of the idea that as long as one works hard and chooses a pragmatic career, one will do well in Singapore and so too will the economy. Under the principle of meritocracy, individuals are encouraged to earn their place in the society through a system of "merit" measured by grades at school and university (and performance in the work-place)' (ibid: 1081). Singapore wants to have citizens who can economically secure the future and well-being of the nation. My informants claim, however, that they are not a loss for the economy and that they also have something to contribute to the nation. A strong nation needs also a cohesive community and my informants claim they can contribute to that.

Countries nowadays need something to make it attractive for people to stay within their country. With globalization and a global economy, that Singapore is taken part in, it becomes very easy for Singaporeans to settle down overseas. Singaporeans speak English, they are probably hard-workers and their degrees are worldwide recognized. Therefore they are desirable workers for countries other than Singapore. Hence, if Singapore wants to keep people in the country, who can contribute to the welfare of the nation, they need to ensure that Singaporeans feel connected to their country. 'They need a reason to stay' is how one of my informants phrases it. My informants argue that art can connect people and that it can be used to create an identity as Singaporeans. This identity can create a sense of belonging to Singapore and therefore people might want to stay.

## **2.2. Creating Identities**

People can identify with different sub-groups, based on ethnicity or profession, or they can identify themselves as a sister or a student. One person, therefore, can identify with different groups, but for this thesis I focus on the creation of a national identity as Singaporeans.

Identities are created through boundaries between 'us' and 'them' and these can be drawn either from within the group or made by others. Boundaries between different groups 'were principally considered to be social constructs establishing differences (between class,

gender, or race) and producing identities (national, ethnic, or cultural communities)' (Fassin 2011: 214). Such boundaries are created through symbolic differences that separate different groups.

Norma Mendoza-Denton (2008) studied students in *Sor Juana High School* who either speak Spanish or English and how the use of each language is linked to the *Norteña* or *Sureña* youth gang. One of the questions that guided her research was 'how did the individual girls in their communities of practice come to create styles that indexed complex, ideology-based identities?' (Mendoza-Denton 2008: 295). Norteñas relate more to the United States and mainly speak English while Sureñas feel more related towards Mexico and mainly speak Spanish. The use of language creates solidarity within the groups. However, not everyone chooses to use the language they speak the most at home. Güera migrated to the US at a young age and is a native English speaker, but because her parents have sent her back to Mexico for a while, she identifies more with the Sureñas in her high school and refuses to communicate in English.

Who belongs to which gang is revealed through symbolic practices such as the language they speak, but also other indexical markers such as make-up, music they listen to and haircut (Ibid: 59). Mendoza-Denton mentions however, that the indexical markers that are revealed in her study could be specific to her informants only. This implies that the students, I have spoken to can have different ideas about what creates or symbolizes a national identity. Moreover, it does not mean that everyone agrees on the indexical markers being used, even when they agree that they are all Singaporeans. For example, one informant wants to focus on the preservation of different Chinese dialects in Singapore, but someone else might find the preservation of artefacts more important. The story they want to tell with art can also differ.

Daphne Winland (2002) studies how homeland and overseas Croatians in Canada try to revitalize a national identity, but there is friction about who belongs, what should be captured in Croatian identity and who has the authority of representing the Croatian identity. Croatians are distinguished between 'good' versus 'bad' Croatians, the good being the ones who were solidly behind efforts to reimagine the new Croatian state through romanticizing the past (Winland 2002: 697). The representation of identity always involves a struggle over who has the authority over what this identity should capture and what should not belong.

I do not want to argue that my informants from Lasalle think they know best about what should be captured in a Singaporean identity, and we have to be critical towards the representation of identity through art. Identity always involves a dialogue about what to represent and what to leave out, and I am well aware that this also has implications for the

creation of a national identity through art. Nevertheless, art can contribute to the creation and representation of identities and for my informants this can be used as a justification for studying art. This is their way of contributing to society.

### **Scale making**

Boundaries between different groups also vary depending on which scale (Tsing 2000) you look at a certain group from. Mendoza-Denton (2008) showed for instance, how Norteñas and Sureñas are two different gangs, but placed in a context with people from other ethnic backgrounds such as Afro-Americans they are united as one group.

There is also a difference in self-identification and the identification made by others. Outsiders for instance, group all Hispanic people together while Hispanic people group themselves differently. They, for example, make a distinction based on the Spanish accents people have, if they come from a rural or urban environment and from which Latin American country they come from (Mendoza-Denton 2008). Therefore the question of who belongs to which group depends on context and scale. It is important to know who is making the distinction and if that is made from a national, continental or other kind of scale.

Diaspora and homeland Croatians for instance, have different ideas on cultural markers but also between generations people differ about what makes them Croatian. Moreover, the state for example, puts ethnicity at the core of national identity while homeland Croatians on the ground put more emphasis on the region they come from and socioeconomic class (Winland 2002: 705).

Outsiders might identify Singaporeans all together even though within groups, people are not homogeneous and boundaries are not clear-cut. James Ferguson (1999) shows for example, how people in Zambia perform different styles, which he calls localism and cosmopolitanism, but within each style, people value their style differently and have different motives to perform and acquire a certain style. A woman in a modern outfit, that shows a lot of skin for example, can be performing a cosmopolitan style. If her husband sees her like that however, he might want her to cover her body, even though he considers them both as cosmopolitan.

When you look at Singaporeans from different scales, different indexical markers will become important, and different groups and boundaries will be created. For example, Singaporeans do form one group when you look at national scale making and compare them with other countries. When you look at it from an individual scale, however, people in

Singapore differ in race, religion, mother tongue, occupation, generation and so forth and so on. My informants look at it from a national scale. They define themselves as Singaporeans, and therefore I will explain a bit more about nationalism and how this relates to the process of identity making.

### **2.3. Art and Nation Building**

Benedict Anderson (2006) defines the nation as an 'imagined community'. 'Imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. Even though the nation is a *social and cultural construction*, it is very real for people living under it' (Anderson 2006: 5-6). Nationalism has arisen in different ways, but one important wave was popular nationalism that was made possible through vernacular languages.

In the sixteenth century, Europeans discover a world beyond Europe and they realised that they were not the only or most important civilization. 'In due course, discovery and conquest also caused a revolution in European ideas about language' (ibid: 70). Languages were no longer sacred and all languages were equally worthy. For example, in bilingual dictionaries, the two languages have a common equal status.

People started to study local languages and were publishing in their own vernacular. At the same time more and more people learned to read and they could imagine a community that reached beyond the boundaries of physical contact. For example, there is a relation between the rise of the bourgeoisie and vernacular print-capitalism. Due to print-capitalism, the bourgeoisie became to visualise the existence of thousands of other people like themselves. 'Thus in world-historical terms bourgeoisies were the first classes to achieve solidarities on an essentially imagined basis' (ibid: 77). The solidarity was limited however, to people who could read the same language. Nevertheless, a solid imagined community could come to exist. Moreover, the use of local languages made people develop a national consciousness. People could create an identity based on speaking the same language, imagining people they had never met, but with whom they shared a language for instance. Wherever such imagined communities existed, popular support for nationalism could arise.

Nevertheless we have to be critical towards the relation between nationalism and language. Values like brotherhood, solidarity and the creation of an imagined community is not always established through print-capitalism.

John Hoffman (1979) discusses the unequal relationship between the Dutch colonial ruler and the Indonesians who were ruled. His focus is, just like Anderson (2006) on language, but in the Dutch Indies, languages were not equally worthy. Only Dutch people spoke the Dutch language properly and they did not want the Indonesians to learn Dutch. A hierarchical relationship was maintained to exist. Dutch was the language for politics and as long as the *inlanders* did not speak it, they could never gain a high position in the government. The relationship between ‘us’ and ‘them’ was in a way made through language, but the inlanders were not a unified group either and they spoke all kind of different languages.

To make it possible for people to communicate with each other, the Dutch wanted to use Malay, a language that was not the mother tongue of both ruler and ruled. But rather than creating a feeling of solidarity and equality, through use of the same language, the distinction remained.

Anderson (2006), however, sees language as something that has both including as excluding effects. It excludes people, because if you want to be part of the group you need to speak the same language. On the other hand it includes people, because everyone can learn a language.

Furthermore, Anderson (2006) argues how nationalism in Europe became a model that people all over the world could copy, but Partha Chatterjee (2005) criticises this modular thinking. ‘Even our imaginations must remain forever colonized’ (Chatterjee 2005: 239). Prescribed models take away the freedom of imagining. It would imply that people are not free to form their own community based on local, cultural aspects that might be different from the West. Chatterjee disagrees with this argument, because these models are only partly applied in anticolonial nationalist movements.

According to Chatterjee the imagining of a community starts before the struggle over political boundary making. Nationalism is divided between the outside and inner domain. The imagined community exists in the inner domain, the spiritual one. Imagining takes place in the inner domain and this is free for own local and cultural thoughts. Therefore people in Asia and Africa were able to remain their own cultural distinctiveness from the west. The outside domain is that of economy and state- craft which is taken over from the western model (ibid: 240). Hence according to Chatterjee, the inner domain is more important and this is where people can escape top down ideas that have been enforced by the state and think about what they on the individual level think of what creates a Singapore community. In the case of

students from Lasalle for example, this could be the focus on ethnic art and the preservation of different dialects.

Language might not have created united communities everywhere like in the Dutch Indies, but when people speak the same language, this can create a feeling of solidarity and allow people to recognize that they belong to the same group. Moreover ethnicity and language are often linked with each other and so language can be part of people's cultural heritage.

### **Imagined community**

It is not only language, but also art forms such as dance, artefacts and theatre that can create solidarity and a sense of belonging to a culture or nation.

In the formal colonies in Southeast Asia, 'three institutions of power, the census, the map and the museum, together shaped the way in which the colonial state imagined its dominion- the nature of the human beings it ruled, the geography of its domain, and the legitimacy of its ancestry' (Anderson 2006: 163-164).

The British census divided Singaporeans in four categories, which I will explain in further detail in chapter four because it is very specific to my case. These CMIO-categories, Chinese, Malay, Indian or Other still have implications in Singapore today.

Now and in the past, the ethno-racial classifications have been used for policies, but it also created an imagined community from a top down approach. These communities could be based on the same language, customs or a shared religious affiliation. 'In particular, religious shrines, schools, and courts – access to which was determined by individual popular self-choice. Not the census- continued to flourish' (ibid: 169). The colonial ruler could not do anything else, but to try to regulate and subordinate these institutions. In reality, however, it became zones of freedom, since the colonial ruler had no absolute power there. It became a place where people could later congregate to fight for nationalist battles (Anderson 2006: 170).

The map also created an imagined community, based on territorial boundaries, but more relevant for this thesis are the three reasons why the colonial ruler invested in archaeological sites. The first reason is that it had to become part of the new educational program. Secondly it made a hierarchic division between the colonial ruler and the ones being

ruled. The colonisers were the ones reconstructing the archaeological sites, which were surrounded with rural poverty, and therefore they claimed ‘our very presence shows that you have always been, or have long become, incapable of either greatness or self-rule’ (Anderson 2006: 181).

The third reason has to do with the legitimacy of colonial conquest and their presence in the region. More and more Europeans were born in the region and tried to make it their home. ‘Monumental archaeology, increasingly linked to tourism, allowed the state and so the colonisers, to appear as the guardian of a generalized, but also local, tradition (ibid: 181). They were the ones preserving and reconstructing the sites and so their presence was legitimised.

The post independence state continued to use museums for political aims, meaning that the government used art in order for people to relate to a place. Point it out as belonging to them and that it is part of their national heritage. Monuments or other archaeological sites could function as a symbol for a national identity, because people immediately recognize what it is and where it is located. The monuments became iconic and belonged to a group of people who could then imagine their community. The monument or archaeological site represents a common history that connects them with other people who belong to the same community.

As for print-capitalism it is again capitalism that helps to spread the idea of an imagined community, but this time through art. For the colonial ruler it was never about the archaeological site itself such as the Borobudur for example, a famous Buddhist monument in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. It was rather about the replicated series of the Borobudur on photos and prints. This way the image became available for a wide audience to imagine a community they belonged to.

I am well aware however of the tension that gets created between what is important to use and how the representation of art influences the creation of a national identity. I will touch upon this and remain critical when I discuss how my respondents want to capture an imagined community, that is spread and represented through art, but to fully explore this would bring the reader too far afield.

## **Memory culture**

In order to create an imagined community, not only language but also a shared past creates a form of solidarity and the representation of the past. Through memory and heritage is how some of Lasalle students hope to contribute to this sense of belonging.

According to Halbwachs memory is a social activity characterised by two important points. Memory is a reconstruction of the past, constructed by people in the present, who (un)-consciously shape and reshape the past, so it can be used for their contemporary needs and interests. Secondly, a shared past can be used for the creation and maintenance of a collective identity. (Pattynama 2012: 178). Memory culture then is not about the true representation of the past, but how people use memory in a particular way, depending on their needs. How people remember past events is important, not the past itself. Memory culture can be used as an instrument to create a potential national identity, however this identity is always under negotiation. Memory culture can create boundaries that divide people in 'us' and 'them', but even within one group people have different narratives. On the other hand, these differences as long as they are discussed can stimulate people to think, debate and contest what it means to be Singaporean for instance.

## **Politics of Representation**

Memory culture can also be shared with people that at first sight seems to be outsiders, such as immigrants or people who do not share the exact same event, but have experienced something similar and can therefore relate to it.

In hybrid societies such as Singapore it is important to discuss how memories can include different narratives that are either on the same topic or in another way related to it. 'A diversity of ethnic groups and religious affiliation in a society brings with it a diversity of traditions and different views of history (Erl: 2011: 4). Therefore, from the government's point of view, memory can be used for political means to create a more inclusive society and maintain ethnic harmony. It can show people that they belong to a common past or that some of their traditions show similarities with traditions from another culture. This way people can relate to each other rather than focusing on what makes them different.

Another political aspect is that memories are subjective and include selective reconstructions. 'Re-membering is an act of assembling available data that takes place in the

present' (Erll 2011: 8). In Singapore, the government has the authority over which events to focus on and which art forms to preserve and so the representation of all this is never objective.

The elements used to create a memory culture however, are not objective either. The British historian Eric Hobsbawm, has written a popular article about how most traditions we cherish as part of our past are in fact new creations. Tradition has less to do with historic truth than with needs of the present.

The nation-state for example, uses tradition to create an identity that is linked to a shared past, but the traditions are only invented in the present. Moreover, what is been represented as traditional and symbolic for peoples ethnic identity can be created by someone who does not belong to the group represented. Jenny who recently graduated from Lasalle told me for example, how the kebaya, a traditional dress that is used to represent Singapore's culture is in fact designed by the British. Based on how they perceived people in Singapore. Therefore, we have to be critical towards the representation of arts and what it tries to tell us. Tradition and heritage are used for needs in the present, but what is being used does not always reflect the right representation. It can be based on prejudices such as that in the case of the kebaya and on top of that, people only use the parts of the past or traditions that is in their best interest. Memory culture therefore is a process of selective remembering and forgetting.

### **Politics of Recognition**

Memories, however, can also be inclusive. They can include a wider audience and be multidirectional. Michael Rothberg (2014) discussed this for instance, with his case study on Muslim migrants in Neukölln, a neighbourhood in Berlin.

"Neighbourhood mothers" is a group of mainly Muslim women in Neukölln who work together with an organization dedicated to the social welfare of immigrant families. The women's desire to understand both the history of Germany, the country where they live as immigrants or refugees, and Germany's memory culture has led to the creation of a project in 2006. This project was meant to help the women –many of them were not educated within the German educational system- to find out more about the Holocaust and its legacies and to create their own modes of participation in German's memory culture. In order to thicken Germany's memory culture the women had made a movie about their recent visit to Auschwitz and how such a memorial site affected them, and how they became bearers and transmitters of a historical memory that is not their own. These women never experienced the

Holocaust, but they have for example, family members who experienced consequences of genocides elsewhere and therefore they can relate to such an event. They may also have really good friends who have shared personal stories about the Holocaust and because they care for their friends, they feel connected to this historical memory.

At the same time, memory culture can be used for a politics of recognition. Immigrants in Germany can have the feeling, that they are considered 'others' even though they speak German, have lived there for more than one generation and so on. Thus as a form of activism they can address Nazism and the legacies of the Holocaust in order to locate their own place in relation to a national past marked by violence towards groups considered to be 'others'. It is partly to show the negative side, of being positioned as 'other', but also to develop new forms of cultural memory, which are simultaneously vernacular and cosmopolitan. Vernacular is when it is about the same event and cosmopolitan is when they link it to a similar event that has taken place in another country, or towards a different group of people. Eventually the aim is that they want to participate in the making of a memory culture and become part of the 'in' group.

Such collaboration can lead to multidirectional memories. This is caused by the different personal memories of one big event like the Holocaust. People have different stories about the Holocaust, or they have stories about something similar like another genocide. All these stories together form the basis for a multidirectional memory and so a memory that initially wasn't meant for 'others' can now be shared with a bigger audience.

In this thesis I will not discuss how migrants influence ideas on identity and belonging in Singapore, but the migrants case study resembles what can happen in a multicultural society, such as Singapore. It illustrates how people with different racial backgrounds, traditions and art forms, that capture different historical events, folklore and myths can invoke discussions on similarities and therefore, create a feeling of sameness and lead to multidirectional memories.

Before I explain how my informants want to use art to create a more cohesive society, I first explain why they have to justify themselves in the first place. The next chapter therefore, elaborates on the students' experience of the education system in Singapore and why they justify their choice of studies in terms of how they hope to contribute to the welfare of the nation.

### 3 Singapore's Rat Race



*On a big screen right outside Raffles MRT station, in the centre of the central business district, a commercial from the 'UOB KidSmart Programme - Is success defined by academic grades?' caught my attention. It shows two young adults speaking at an exhibition on how to nurture a successful child. The two argue that academic grades do not define success given they were not "successful" in school either. Yet now the boy is a successful artist and the girl a professional creator of artisanal cakes. Therefore, they encourage parents, to love and accept their children even if they do not do well in school. The conventional path simply does not work for every child.*

UOB is an acronym for United Overseas Bank, which is a Singaporean multinational banking organisation. This commercial immediately caught my attention, because it made me wonder if it meant that the government wanted to do something about the amount of stress children experience in school and if they wanted to do something about the pressure that parents placed on their children.

In Singapore, you cannot broadcast something that could possibly discredit the government without prior permission. Thus the fact that this commercial was broadcasted in a public space meant that the government supposedly supported this idea. Therefore, I discussed with my informants how they experienced pressure due to academic prestige and what they thought about this mindset.

### **3.1 The Education System in Singapore**

As explained in the introduction, Singapore's education system is based on a Confucian model, but instead of only one final exam there are different routes to university.

In the fourth year of secondary school you have to do the OCE 'N' level examination. If you do well you can go to year five, and otherwise you enter the Institute of Technical Education (ITE) where you follow vocational training.

In the sixth of Secondary school you do the OCE 'O' Level examination. If you do well you can go to Junior College, which is another 2 years or you go to the Polytechnic something similar to University of Applied Science what we have here in the Netherlands. After the Institute of Technical Education you can also go to a Polytechnic.

In your second year of Junior College you have to do the OCE 'A' level examination. With a higher score, you will be able to apply for a better University.

Thus, to enter University you either have had followed the path towards the A-level examination or you have completed the Polytechnic education. After obtaining a diploma from Polytechnics you can still go to University as long as the study is similar to what you did in Polytechnic.

So there are different routes to reach the 'prestigious' level of university, but the desired pathway is to enter after completing studies at the Junior College. That is why their grades are very important. Parents want to invest in private tutoring, because the better academic results you get, the better secondary schools you can go to and therefore the better chance you have to enter a Junior College and do the A-level exam.

Janice who studies arts management in Lasalle, told me that because of the current competitiveness in school, some kids try to or commit suicide. The government therefore initiated campaigns to convince parents that it is okay if your child does not do well in terms

of grades as long as they work hard. If your child does the best he can and parents focus on their child's strength, their future will be fine as well. The idea behind this is that as long as you cultivate what you good at, you will find an opportunity to succeed, just like the two spoke-persons in the UOB commercial. "The conventional path does not work for everyone".

‘Nowadays, many students in Singapore do not practice to learn from each other. Students will never say ‘Oh I’ve got a problem, can you help me’. The mindset is that they only have themselves to rely on and they cannot be seen as having a problem. Academic success however should not be about grades and students should rather pursue what they like to do’.

It will take time to change this mindset, since it is so deeply embedded in the current education system. Nobody wants to be seen as a failure, and so students do not feel comfortable sharing the difficulties they face with (part of) the curriculum. They would rather try to figure it out on their own than ask another student, who may think that his peer is less smart. Moreover, the parent's generation grew up with the idea that good grades are really important to secure a good living later on in life. It will not be easy therefore to shift from the importance of academic grades towards cultivating one's strengths. Both the parents generation and the students have to develop a different mindset.

Alumnus Jenny, who graduated as an interior designer, told me how she believes that the importance of education was cultivated by her parent's generation.

‘[It was] cultivated through the years of my parents generation because, our parents generation was competitive. Most of them are actually hard workers so education to them, those who had education, have really moved up there. So most of them I guess are really hard workers. They learned from hard work and stuff’.

Most people from that generation did not go to university, so for those that did, they did very well in school. Jenny, therefore, believes that they must be very hard workers. That is also why her parent's generation believed that if one works really hard, one can go to university and this gives the opportunity to lead an easy life.

‘So from that generation they learned that you actually need to have the education to later on, live an easy life. So they have cultivated that in us, their kids. You have to study in a university, you have to do masters, you have to do this and that, if not, you cannot earn enough money to live a good life. That kind of pressure, therefore, forces us to become something like that’.

Also Heidi who studies fashion Media and Industries, told me that she thinks that

‘In general most parents especially from my parents generation they were brought up to be ‘oh your math, your English has to be good’. They think that a lawyer or working in banks or being a doctor, those sort of very good income, that is what they want [for their children]’.

Parents want to send their children to university, because the idea behind it is that when you graduate from university you can earn enough money to live an easy life. A good income however is usually earned when you chose a more pragmatic career.

‘With a creative career you do not get to earn as much. But I think for parents, although we did not chose the path our parents wanted us to do, eventually they want us to be happy’.

With a career in arts it seems to be much harder to earn a good income, but at the same time parents want their children to be happy and so most informants I talked to do have the support from their parents. Most parents do however need some sort of convincing from their children. Heidi’s parents for example, were a bit worried when she told them that she wanted to study fashion in Lasalle.

‘I think they weren’t like really very enthusiastic about it. I think what they want for [their] kids, especially in Singapore, what they want is a good life for their kids. So I grew up having them bring me up right. In terms of maybe [pushing to study] accounting, or they want our grades to be high and not really, they do not educate us in terms of going to the creative side. So I had a hard time deciding on that. They were okay with what I choose, because as long as what I choose is what I like. They were fine with it, but they were not very enthusiastic about it’.

Her parents were not enthusiastic about it because it does not guarantee a good life. According to Heidi, bringing your children up the rightway is to make sure that they will get the best in life. Parents therefore try to stimulate the more pragmatic careers and some of my informants felt more pressure from their parents than others.

Jingrou, who is in her second year of design communication, told me for instance how she experienced pressure from her parents when she was younger.

‘There is always an expectation. Especially from parents, and unnecessary stresses. Even like our education. As young as primary school you have streaming from the age of 9. So what top-class you go to and even the kind of school that you go. I feel the pressure all the time. And I have two older sisters who went to better schools and my mom would be like ‘oh why are you not like that’ so it is very pressurising, but I just learned to accept the fact’.

After her O-levels she went to a business school in polytechnic, because this was something her parents expected her to do. She still did not do well however, and eventually she decided to study something she liked. It was difficult for her however to acknowledge to herself that she likes the creative side more. ‘I guess I just wanted to push it away, because I did not want to acknowledge that I like the creative. Like "Why, out of all things why!"

Parents in Singapore want their children to follow the conventional pathway that expect students to not only get good grades, but also choose a more pragmatic study as their parents hope this will lead to an easy life.

Jingrou has disappointed her parents before because for one she did not get good grades like her older sisters. To acknowledge that she wanted to go to Lasalle and cultivate a skill she is good at, was therefore, really difficult for her. She did not want to let her parents down. Eventually her parents supported her decision, but that was not easy.

The education system in Singapore is based on self-cultivation as an act of filial piety, but this self-cultivation has for now more to do with good grades and to choose a pragmatic study then cultivating something that you like to do.

### 3.2 Is Success defined by Academic Grades?

The focus on grades causes a lot of stress for my informants. Seri who studies fashion has experienced a few mental breakdowns, especially when it is close to submissions. She gets mind blocks or does not find the inspiration. 'It is really tiring'. When she is stressed and breaks down, her mother takes her out for dinner. "Let's go for ice cream and after that, you can get back to work". Seri feels grateful for her mother, who is being a great supporter, since she mentally suffers from the current education system.

When I did my exchange semester at NUS in 2015, I had a little exposure to the education system in Singapore myself. I as well noticed the strong focus on academic results and the importance of your GPA, but because I come from the Netherlands and grew up in a different education system I was curious about how people in Singapore reflected on their education system after studying in a different system. Wen Tjun is currently taking a degree in music at Berklee College of Music in Boston and so I asked him about his experience.

'I did the diploma here [in Singapore] and it is way more competitive here. People I feel are less helpful here. Like everyone is: "Hey I need to succeed and I am not going to help you". You know, that might hinder my program, but when I got to the United States and started school there, I felt like the guys actually want to help to make everyone better. To move everyone forward, because it is not really a competition. If the whole level goes up, the whole level goes up. Which I find is lacking in the mindset, when I went to school here'.

This mentality is what Chris, a student from the interior design faculty, also encountered in Lasalle. 'What I especially like about Lasalle is that teachers encourage you to share your ideas, because that is when you learn. As much as you want to be the best, if you do not learn from others, no matter how hard you try you will never be the best'. That is the culture in Lasalle, and what he appreciates very much.

When I attended Lasalle's open house, one of the professors from Arts Management told the audience that it is not about grades here in Lasalle. 'When students come from poly or JC they have learned to be very competitive, but in year two, most students gradually change this mindset and although there is still this competition going on, students are open and willing to help each other'. Felicia told me that in Lasalle, she found a safe place to learn from

one another. She and her classmates did not worry about sharing knowledge and resources with one another anymore.

Vanessa, who is originally from Malaysia and graduated from Lasalle in 2014, told me that in Lasalle the competitiveness is really up to you. 'How much effort do you want to put into it? Everyone that enters Lasalle, sort of embraces that everyone there is talented. It's inspiring to see all that talent'. Dione another alumnus said that: 'Lasalle encourages you to be yourself. Everyone is special, but equally so. It is okay if you do not fit in the usual box'. Dione went to Junior College before coming to Lasalle, and everyone was focused there on academic results.

My informants are relieved that the mentality in Lasalle is that, even though the system is competitive, the students allow themselves to share their knowledge with one another. According to the professor they needed time to change their mentality however. They were used to doing everything by themselves and mainly focus on grades, but when you are in an environment that encourages you to learn from one another and where professors argue that grades do not reflect everything you learned, this mindset can be changed. Dione was especially happy about the fact that she found a place where she was accepted for pursuing a career in arts and that you do not always have to follow the conventional pathway.

### **The conventional pathway**

The desired pathway most parents wish for their children is that they go to university and choose a pragmatic study that more or less guarantees a good income. According to Wen Tjun, 'parents want a solid back up for their child'. To secure this route, most parents want their children to attend Junior College as this leads directly to university.

Melati's mother more or less forced her to go to Junior College, but she could not find the motivation to study.

'One of the teachers came up to me, and was like "why are you here? What are you doing?" He was not my teacher, but he oversees all the CVs. So he is like, "You have been doing a lot of things but it's nothing to do with being here. So what do you want to do after?" "Like I don't know. I am just here because of my mom"'.

Instead of studying however, Melati focused more on her extra curricular activities such as organizing concerts and other events in school. As a result she needed to repeat the first year of Junior College. After looking at the content of her extracurricular activities, the teacher suggested that arts management would maybe something for her. That is when she decided she wanted to go to Lasalle College of the Arts. She did not tell her mother however, until she got in.

‘If my memory is right, I did not tell her about arts management until I got into the school. My mom still feels like "What are you going to do after", but since I got into the school myself and I won a scholarship so they are not paying for my tuition fee they are okay you know. [My mother] is more convinced now that I will do well, because I got so far without any of her help. [The latter] scares her, but at the same time it assures her that you know, no matter what the situation, I will do what I want [and succeed]’.

Her mother still worries that a degree in arts does not give her daughter many career options and so she worries for her daughter’s future livelihood. At the same time her daughter proved to her that she is a dedicated and hardworking woman, and that when she has set her mind to something she will do everything she can to make it happen.

This attitude is what the UOB commercial hopes to instil in more parents. That if your child focuses on their strengths and works hard for it they will as well reach success in life even if this means that they do not follow the conventional pathway.

For now however, most parents still focus on the conventional pathway. Chris his parents initially wanted to send him to Junior College too.

‘The initial idea was [that] my parents wanted me to study at the local Junior College as a fast track to university and it is easier to enter [if you do the A-level exam]. That is every parents dream, to send their kids to university. However, after some convincing they supported me. At that point in time my dad was saying "You are old enough to make your own decisions"’.

Alumnus Sebastian said that the mindset in Singapore is as follows: ‘Its glorious to go to JC, if you to go poly and take a diploma you are an average person but when you do the ITE you

are hopeless'. ITE is the institute of technical education that you can enter after your N-levels exam. This you do in your fourth year of secondary school.

Ana who is now in her first year of graphic design has attended ITE and disagrees with Sebastian.

'In Singapore people look down on ITE, but you cannot, just judge the book by its cover. You have to go there yourself. I used to judge ITE a lot, but the thing is [only now that] I've been in there, I know what it is like to be there. People look down on you but they do not know what is good in there'.

### **Prejudice**

Now that Ana is in Lasalle, people do not look down on her anymore except for her grandmother.

'She just thinks that I am like those random artists, like van Gogh. She thinks I do that art, but the thing is I do not. But she does not understand, because of the old school thinking. So [my grandmother] thinks I do those paintings and she is very worried, because they never sell'.

Since her grandmother is old however, she does not bother defending herself. For my grandmother there is no stopping her from [judging]. She thinks a lot and she does not like to listen to [her] grandchildren. I guess it is an Asian thing, they just do not want to listen'.

When other people criticize her although they have no affiliation with art and do not understand what she is studying, she does get angry. 'You will never be able to appreciate until like you do it yourself. Let them think whatever they want, unless they are insulting my friends. If it was just me, I would not care, because I mean they have nothing to say over my life'. Ana does not want anyone controlling her life and firmly believes that she should just follow her passion. It bothers her however that people who do not have experience with ITE or do not understand what she is studying have a negative opinion about it.

Melati found it very tiring that she needed to keep explaining herself in the beginning about why she had chosen Lasalle. 'I have had friends, acquaintances who wanted to convince me

that I could do events management and still study arts right, or I can do design and business and I would still study something I like. At least partially, and I was like, why would I do that!'

People tried to convince her to do a study that would give her more opportunities for a job, and they were worried that she was making a mistake.

'Lasalle is not a local university. It is probably not recognized by businesses or something, but I don't know. When I was shifting from JC to university everyone was just obsessed with the fact that you have to get into a local university, which I do not get. At the end of the day, if you are going to work outside of Singapore, a university is a university. Singapore's universities are maybe higher than Lasalle Goldsmith but you are [still] getting a degree. I think a degree is a degree. What matters is what you study, where and how you study. You may have friends who are taking part time degrees and think that their certificates are not recognized, but if their skills prove otherwise then they are not going to have a problem. So it was really annoying'.

Most people still do not understand why you would choose a study in arts, because the mindset is that you should secure a good income in order to have a good life. Also Wen Tjun experienced some negative reactions.

'Most of the time people who are not really close friends it is always like this. There is this whole, wow really, like you are risking and spending so much money to study music! And my mom told me that when she told her colleagues that I went to the US to study music they asked her why? There is still this sort of perception that studying music is not as good as like business a lawyer of doctor and stuff'.

Wen Tjun however is not that much affected by it and quite honestly he does not understand why people still have these prejudices. He thinks that every job is equally hard if you think about it.

'It is not easy to be a lawyer. It is not easy to be a doctor. I am sure that there are people who try to be a lawyer but fail. There are people who try to be a doctor

and fail. Same for failed businessmen. So I do not see why it is only in the arts that people go like "Hey it is hard to make money, don't do it." Every job is hard and has its own challenges and expectations. They differ however from job to job.

I would not say that it is easier to be a lawyer than a doctor or that it is easier to be a doctor than a musician.

People should think about their mindset whenever they see someone who studies music. [Do not think] oh what are you going to do you know'.

Wen Tjun claims that there are no guarantees in life and every job and sector has its own problems. They are all competitive and there is no such thing as an easy job or a safe route to success. People should not judge so easily.

### **3.3 Careers and an Economy based on Neoliberal Values**

As mentioned before, one important value within both neoliberalism and Confucianism is self-cultivation. In order to compete with other people, you need skills that set you apart. My informants think that most people can learn technical skills and because they change all the time, it is not something you have to focus on in school. Vanessa thinks that 'a lot of technical skills you can pick up while you are working but the technical innovation happens so fast that probably the ones you learn in school are already irrelevant when you graduate'. If you are book smart you can always cultivate these skills and if you do not have skills that are more unique it becomes easy for a company to replace you.

In fact when I interviewed a beautician about her job for a course I took at NUS, she told me how she switched from working in the corporate world to a career as a beautician. She believed that she cultivated a skill now that no one can take away from her, and is less easy to replace.

My informants think that what sets them apart from the rest is a certain mindset they have cultivated in Lasalle. Vanessa, for example, said:

'The idea is more of rather than teaching you all the technical skills it is more of looking, opening your mind to conception. You can see things and you can conceptualize. Technical skills you can learn when you go out to work but the mindset is difficult to set. When she did an internship people were saying 'Oh

you are from Lasalle, the conceptual people'. Technical skills you can learn them yourself and since there is less focus on that in Lasalle, some of us are not good in that. So they are the artsy fatsy'.

Also during the first focus group, the participants were claiming that the way you think is what is important. 'Technical skills can be learned, replaced, but your thinking is unique'. They believed that the most important skill they bring from Lasalle is to learn how to think creatively, open up your mind and cultivate your imagination and transform that into something you can develop in the world out there.

When Zhimin graduated and started to apply for jobs, he noticed that people were less interested in his degree and that it was all about his skill set. They all asked him about how he can contribute to the company, what are his strong points, and not so much about what kind of degree he has. The first three years Zhimin worked for a small company so he could pick up different skills. He claimed that this was more fruitful than if he had worked for a big well-known company. 'What you can bring into the next company is more important than from what company you come from'.

Most of my informants are worried about finding a job after graduation and although they have a passion for art and went to Lasalle, they decided that within the range of studies they could choose from, they would rather do the more practical ones.

Rachel for instance, likes fine arts more, but decided to go for graphic design. She believes that it will be easier to find a job with a degree in design than with fine arts as she will learn more practical skills and therefore, create more career options. She could always choose to work in marketing for example. Her dream, however, is to open her own gallery one day.

I also spoke to another student who wanted to study fine arts, but her parents did not allow her to so now she studies design communication in Lasalle. Furthermore, Ana wants to become a book illustrator, but is studying graphic design as a back up plan. With graphic design, she learns a wide range of skills that makes it easier to find a job. Her dream job however, is to become an illustrator.

Finding a job is a big concern for not only for students in Singapore, but also for me and my friends in the Netherlands for example. My informants however are also concerned about the work culture and how they have to cope with that.

My informants think that it is an unhealthy lifestyle. They talked for example, about peer pressure, how everyone is studying and working in this rat race and that it is very hard to step out of it. However, they think this is part of the Asian culture rather than having to with neoliberal values.

Zhimin told me that ‘Chinese people are called like crazy workaholics and [that they] leave the impression that they live for the boss. Or the boss believes that if you do not want to work overtime, you do not want to work hard enough. [To work overtime] is part of the requirement’. Zhimin thinks that bosses create peer pressure and make use of this weakness rather than focusing on people’s strengths. ‘For you 10 others!’ It sets the wrong mentality. Instead of scaring people off, you should focus on their strengths and create a more positive vibe.

Jenny for example, wanted to become an architect, but she has changed her mind.

‘It is very tiring I guess. And I do not want to live my life living in this rat race until I am retired. I don’t know. That is not what I want. And also, I want to have a family and I do not want to have no time for my family. [At the same time] it is very hard to say ‘okay I am not wanting to take part of this rat race’, because everyone is doing it. So if you are stepping out, society will look at you differently’.

It is important in Singapore to strive for a good paid job and if Singaporeans fail to do so they have only themselves to blame (Cheng 2015). This mindset is deeply embedded and when people step out of this rat race, people will not understand this choice. ‘In Singapore we have this mindset that if you do not work hard, people think you like slacking or being lazy, but actually that mindset is not very good’. Jenny wants this mindset to be changed, but she does not know how.

Some of my informants are afraid that when put their career above anything that they lose something along the way. ‘If you ask me, I would not be like "oh I want the best thing, because I have to be the best". After aspiring that, there is a really high chance that you get whatever you want to, but there is [also] a very high tendency that you would lose yourself. That is not what I want’.

Jingrou is worried that if she put her career first it will cost her much more in the end. She rather does something she likes to do and earn less money, than striving to be the best and lose herself.

Most of my informants want to have children some day and although Yi-en Cheng (2015) argued that it is because of family that they strive for a good career so they can provide for their family and afford housing. My informants, however, would rather have a less paid job but more time to spend with their family.

Amalina, who participated in the first focus group, also wanted to continue with studying architecture at NUS, but now she changed her mind. It is not the lifestyle she wants to live. 'Being an architecture student is restless sleep. No time off to see your family'. So she changed her priorities and would rather have time for friends and family than put her career first. Now she is thinking of becoming a teacher. Seri also wants to put her family first:

'A career is important to some extent but everyone reaches an age where they want to settle down and start their own family. 'Because you work so hard and it is meaningless'. At the end of the day because when you go home there are not a lot of people it is...I rather have more flexible time, spend more time with my family then focusing on my career. I rather want a low paid job then a lot of working. I do not see the point'.

For Jenny social media also plays a prominent role in how she thinks the ideal life should look like.

'It's the middle and upper middle class that is struggling to survive in the society here now. Cause everyone wants to be different wants to be better. Nowadays people are promoting the healthy lifestyle and everyone wants to play and they say like Yolo and just go and travel. Do not worry about work and that kind of things. And you know it is more possible than before, but not everyone can be a blogger and not everyone can have free trips all around. These people they promote the wonderful life everybody smiles and you think what am I doing here'.

So on the one hand social media motivates people to choose a different lifestyle, but on the other hand it can bring its own pressure, because to live a certain kind of lifestyle you need money and if you do not come from a wealthy family, and this is the lifestyle they promote, it means you first need to work hard in order to enjoy the good things later in life. This however sounds not very different from what most parents have told my informants ever since they were young.

Other of my informants think it would be better if they started their own company at some point in their life, because then they do not have to work for a boss and it is something from them. They would have ownership over their work and entrepreneurship is something that is stimulated in this economy that is based on neoliberal values. You are your own boss, independent and autonomous and if you are successful, you did it all by yourself.

Zhimin who now works as an executive interior designer also wants to contribute by starting his own company in Singapore.

‘It’s something you want to create for your country itself. And spending money in your country is a way of contributing. It is not out of the country. Maybe you can earn more money overseas, but if you are doing it in your own country, you are helping your own people. Creating business opportunities for people in Singapore by giving jobs to people. The more jobs you create for local people, the more you help your country grow even further’.

Zhimin refers a couple times to his ‘own’ people, and creating job opportunities for ‘local’ people. He identifies strongly with fellow Singaporeans, and he does want to have his own business to help them, hence his country. If there are more job opportunities in the country, people do not have to move overseas, and if more people can have a job this is good for the social cohesiveness and for people on a more personal level. If people have a job and can participate in society, chances are high that they do not feel socially excluded and there will also be less poverty. This will reflect on the society as a whole and so aspirations for entrepreneurship can be good for the country in multiple ways. It also represents values such as autonomy and self-cultivation. Zhimin would become a person that would not only be responsible for himself, but also for fellow citizens.

Not everyone is happy however, with an economy based on neoliberal values. In this economy, art has become a valuable commodity. In the neoliberal context, therefore, artists are supposed to move away from their 'arts for arts' sake mentality. In other words, fine artists should learn from the design and media sectors to exploit their creativity to make money' (Ooi 2011: 127). Ana, who studies design communication, does not like this however.

'It does bother me sometimes. If I want to do something for a company and they want it to be more commercialized than eh more artsy, I will get a bit offended. I went to an art school, I study all this, [learn from] amazing people and try to put what they have done into my work and then after that you scrape it off. To make it for other peoples need, so it's quite sad'.

Rachel on the other hand, is partly positive about the commercialization. "Commercialization has brought art to a wider audience and so it does not have to be a bad thing". Then again, it should not be all about the money, and artist should still be able to produce art for art sake. "When money becomes the focus, it is wrong".

Alumnus Jenny worries that as soon as she starts working, that she will be chased by the economy and industry. Therefore, she is considering doing a masters in design at Lasalle. Then she can become a lecturer. 'I guess that when you teach part time, you can at least keep the passion'. Furthermore, while the arts industry in Singapore is getting bigger, fine artists still suffer from a low occupational status and Singaporeans are not encouraged to go into arts (ibid.:132). In the next chapter, therefore, I will argue how Lasalle students justify a career in the arts.

In both the Confucian and neoliberal discourse it is important that the individual can contribute to the welfare of nation. People should cultivate themselves into a person that can contribute to the economy, hence the nation state. I will argue that my informants can contribute too, by using art to create a more cohesive society. These days it becomes easier to find job opportunities overseas and so it will be important for a country to make it an attractive place. If Singapore wants to continue to have a strong economy, they have to make sure that talents want to stay. Lasalle students can contribute to that by using art to create a more inclusive society, and a place that people feel connected to.

## 4 'Creating' a Nation

*Singapore has a trickle down system and so for the government certain things are important, like the economy must be good. Economy must be good means businesses. Therefore people want to become a lawyer or a doctor. That is a very Asian thing unfortunately. It is the kind of stability that we always been thought to have.*

*Slowly however, a shift has been taking place and art becomes more prominent. On the one hand from a societal level, people are looking for more entertainment and on the on the other hand it is coming from a governmental level. The Singaporean government wants to create a more holistic citizen. The government thinks that in order to be a first world citizen you need to have art. That is why you have art classes in school. So you can say oh I learned music, I did art.*

*-Felicia-*

In the newspaper 'Today', an article was published on Saturday 18 February 2017, about how the ministry for Culture, Community and Youth wants to give Singaporeans a new 'shared experience' such as a trip to the museum or theatre<sup>1</sup>. According to minister Grace Fu, 'such plans for "one more point that defines us" as Singaporeans are in the offing'. This new experience should help build a richer identity as Singaporeans she said.

Ms Grace Fu is concerned about the widening rifts that many developed and established societies are seeing among ethnic groups, locals and immigrants, as well as economic classes. She therefore wants to create a more inclusive and caring society with two aims in mind. The first is to create more harmony in turbulent times, due to the increased terrorist attacks and threats for example. Secondly with more and more people moving overseas she hopes that if people have a heart for Singapore, 'that process of imbuing that kind of caring mentality among Singaporeans, it becomes part of their psyche, their identity as Singaporeans. Then there will always be a string back to Singapore'.

In this chapter, I will argue how art can be used to contribute to the nation state and how this could be a form of justification for the fact that my informants went to study at Lasalle.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.todayonline.com/singapore/visit-museum-theatre-be-new-shared-experience> 'Accessed 29/6/2017'

#### **4.1 The meaning of Art**

I have asked my informants what art means to them, and many said that to them it is another mean of communication. It is an instrument that is able to connect people and touch upon issues that otherwise would be too sensitive to talk about.

‘Art is an expression. It is someone deciding that they want to talk about something. They are going to talk about love, about anything. It is a way of expressing. And the beauty in that is that sometimes people can relate and sometimes you cannot. However, that is not the point. It is about that it is out there and it is for you to access. It creates a kind of bond. It allows people to connect in ways that are very intangible. Someone is trying to pull you closer to a story and connects with you through the expression’. –Felicia-

The interaction the maker tries to create with its audience is also important to Daniel. For him it is about the emotional aspect and how art interacts with you.

‘It makes me feel human. In Singapore it is the only thing that makes me feel human. I do not know how true it is, but I feel like living in a time of this social climate, people have stopped being human, because they lack the time and opportunity to dwell on their emotions and understand that emotions’.

Daniel is convinced that people have less time to interact with one another nowadays or to think and reflect upon their emotions. The fast pace lifestyle in Singapore, results in that people do not have much free time. When people are busy all day with work or study, they have less time to spend on their emotions and relations with other people.

This fast pace lifestyle is not limited to Asia or Singapore, but it is part of the globalized economy we all take part in. Everything has to happen fast, there is a lot of competition going on and there is less time to ponder about the simple things in life. Moreover with social media people can have the feeling that their relations with others become less intimate. So when Daniel goes to see art it is then that he feels connected with people again. He is especially interested in performance art.

‘When I go to an arts program or listen to a performance, watch performance, it takes me out of my daily routine. I am in a place that is purely about human energy and these emotional triggers make me feel human. Its more intimate than watching a movie to a certain level because you see actual people doing something. That is why I think art is important’.

Social media has changed the nature of relations people have with one another, but on the positive side it allows us to keep easily in touch with people all around the world who we have met either over internet or during our travels abroad.

It is so easy nowadays to travel and meet new people and hence to get exposed to other cultures. The world has always been a connected place, but nowadays it happens at a much faster pace and more people can participate and travel the world. Due to this interconnectedness some people feel more like a global citizen than that they feel connected to only one place.

Others however miss this feeling of belonging to a local place. They feel the need to search for that place, or a group of people to whom they belong too. Thus, even though the world becomes more interconnected other people increasingly search for a local identity. What is making their place unique from all the other places they can visit, and what makes their culture different from others.

#### **4.2 A National Identity created through Heritage**

Michael Rowlands (2002) argues that when people search for a local identity they often use their past and heritage, which is a symbol of the past. A local identity can for example, be found in a past that is unique for each country.

The past however never belongs to only one group of people or only one country. Singapore’s past has been connected with events that has also taken place outside Singapore like WOII, and Singapore’s past not only includes Singaporeans, but also Europeans who have settled in Singapore when it was a British colony for example.

What is true however, is that each country has its own heritage and its own relations with places and people elsewhere. This idea of, in a sense, a unique heritage can create a local identity. Many artefacts that are been used to represent Singapore’s history however, come from different parts of the world and some have been collected centuries ago. So the identity created through art is multi sided and my informants are well aware of this fact. The term local

becomes therefore problematic. Instead of 'local', I will refer to how they try to identify as Singaporeans. I will not define what this identity is or should be, but I do discuss how my informants try to create such an identity with the help of art.

Art allows us to debate, exchange and express multiple perspectives, which can transform the memory culture and identity people are trying to create.

A shared past always involves different narratives and the beauty of that is that it allows us to contest and debate the narratives that are represented. As a result, we can create a more cohesive narrative all together. Art can be used to renegotiate boundaries between different people and bring them closer together. Instead of what makes people different from one another other it allows them to focus on similarities for example.

### **CMIO Categories**

To create an identity as Singaporeans is not easy in Singapore partly due to top down categorizations. If we look at Singaporeans from the perspective of the state, the population is categorized within one of the four racial categories: Chinese Singaporean, Indian Singaporean, Malay Singaporean or Others. The British have introduced these categories back when Singapore was still a colony and they were used in order to simplify the administration of the population.

Singapore was a British colony from 1824-1946 and only became an independent nation state after 1965 when they separated from Malaysia. The government in Singapore has kept the ideology of multiracialism in order to maintain racial harmony, but it also fosters inequalities. Malays for example, can never hold high positions in the army, afraid that when Singapore would be in war with Indonesia or Malaysia they would not support Singapore but the people with whom they share the same religion. Public voicing of grievances however is seen as criminal behaviour against the racial harmony and quickly suppressed (Chua 2003: 75).

The CMIO categories are an example, of the institutionalization of ethnic identity, but within this framework, people can renegotiate what it means to be Singaporean. Even within one sub category you cannot speak of a homogeneous group. The categories are usually associated with language and religion, but within the Indian community most people might have descendants from the Tamil speaking area, however you can also find Punjabis and Gujeratis. Or within the Malay category you will also find people with Indonesian descent (Siddique

1990: 36). When the British first introduced these categories, people did not necessarily recognize themselves as belonging to the same group of people they were categorized with. It had however real life implications since it has influenced policy making. Nowadays you can still find schools with bilingual education and every child has to learn his or her mother tongue for at least 12 years. Furthermore, in 1960 the Housing and Development Board (HDB) decided that in each HDB block, that is where most Singaporeans live, the apartments are allocated in such a manner that ensures that each race is represented in proportion to its share of the total population (ibid: 37).



The apartments you see here on the photo are all HDB apartments.

Such policies have been implemented to create racial harmony, but at the same time it highlight the division between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Instead of being Singaporean they are categorized in four possible racial categories.

When these categories were first introduced, mixed marriage was not yet very common, but nowadays children from parents that belong to different CMIO categories usually opt for the father’s category when they reach the age of 12. It is also important however how others perceive them (Rocha 2014, Siddique 1990). Some people are forced to belong to a certain

group based on the category without the feeling that it is the place where they belong. A Caucasian-Chinese man who has been interviewed by Sharon Siddique wanted to be categorised as Chinese Singaporean, but since he did not speak Chinese people did not think that was the right category for him. Furthermore, a Eurasian-Indian girl categorized herself as Malay as this was her second language. For her the relation between race and religion is important and "well, I cannot be an Indian because Indians are Hindus and I'm a Muslim. I am certainly not Chinese. So I might as well be Malay." (Siddique 1990: 53). Her classmates however, disagreed with her own categorization. When she later found out that one of her classmates was Sikh but categorized as Indian Singaporean, she opted for that category. Eurasian belongs to the category others but is usually associated with Christianity and therefore this was neither an option for her.

The CMIO categories have created boundaries between the different races, and every race is linked with other indexical markers. For example, a 'true' Chinese Singaporean should be able to speak Mandarin. Some however do not feel they belong to a prefixed category because they have parents from different categories or they want to be acknowledged as Singaporean without the racial prefix. Not every Singaporean necessarily identifies him or herself more with people from the same race than with other Singaporeans. This is especially true for the youth. Thus, there is a tension between group identification from within and created by others.

### **An Identity as Singaporeans**

Janice who, just like Daniel and Felicia studies arts management in Lasalle gets very angry when people say that Singaporeans do not have an identity of their own.

'We are building it. We are trying to. I would say Singapore is very different [nowadays, in comparison with] who we were years ago. We were labelled as someone from China, someone from Indonesia, someone from India, but right now we merge as one and it is just that our ethnic groups and our classification is so diverse. Even Eurasian is so diverse that it is really hard to put into one'.

The education system emphasise the ethnic differences by sending children to Chinese or Malay class and asking people about their race, but according to Janice this categorisation is not necessarily a bad thing.

‘It is hard to eradicate [race] entirely. To wipe it out is to say that... If you actually take out this element, of you are being race X, you actually lose your roots. It is where we came from and that is our history. You cannot change our history or wipe it out’.

On the other hand, she also shows that it is up to the individual with whom you identify with.

‘I have a friend who is a Chindian [mix of Chinese and Indian parent] but she is more towards Malay culture. And I have another friend who is ethnically Chinese but adopted by a Malay family but she does not relate to any of them. I really think its up to the individual’.

It is hard to pin down what makes up an identity as Singaporean. Janice believes it is something that should come from the individual, but one need something one can identify with. She claims that the preservation of Chinese dialects is such a heritage people can choose to relate to, and therefore, it should be protected.

### **Language and Heritage**

Singapore is besides being a multi-ethnic country also a multi lingual one. It has 4 official languages: English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil. English has been the official language in school, work and the public sphere and every Singaporean has to study one of the other three up till high school. Mother tongue is one if the indexical markers that is been used to identify with one of the CMIO categories. Siddique (1990) interviewed a mother who said that ‘if she [her daughter] studies Mandarin, she will acquire Chinese values, which are very important. Besides, she should not forget that she is half-Chinese’ (Siddique 1990: 51). Another case however, shows how a child is learning Chinese out of economic reasons. Chinese Singaporeans are the largest group in Singapore and from an economic point of view it is therefore, the most lucrative language to learn.

Language does not only have an important role in the creation of ethnic boundaries however, but it has also played an important role in nation building. Through the use of the same language for example, members can recognize one another as belonging to the same group and it can create feelings of solidarity.

Janice wants to preserve Chinese dialects such as Hokkien, Cantonese or Teochew, because she claims that this is a very important heritage. ‘Personally I am a more Chinese person and I think that there are a lot of dying treats and traditions in Singapore, that probably could be considered for preservation’. She is especially interested in the preservation of Chinese dialects. ‘It is part of Singapore’s identity and we should not lose it’. Language and ethnicity are closely linked, but Janice believes that the focus on Mandarin has endangered the other Chinese dialects that are or have been spoken in Singapore. This would be a lost for the Chinese Singaporean identity.

‘Singapore is been trying to find its identity. This is it!

You are losing it, so if you want to find it [do it] now. I mean the older generations are passing on soon and if you do not start preserving these dialects now, then it’s lost and I mean when it’s lost, it’s lost forever. Even if you try to go back to that country to learn the language and bring it back. It makes a whole lot of difference, because through decades [a lot has changed] and there are a lot of things lost’.

In the past it was actually Hokkien and not Mandarin that was most widely spoken by the Chinese Singaporeans. In fact, ‘the 1957 census shows that only 1.8 per cent of the population spoke English and only 0.1 per cent spoke Mandarin as mother tongues’ (Bolton 2014: 308).

Lee Kuan Yew, the first prime minister of Singapore from 1959 till 1990, and also referred to as the founding father of the nation, most probably made Mandarin one of the official languages, because it is the official language of the Republic of China. Hokkien is a dialect spoken in a specific region, so choosing Mandarin would mean that Lee Kuan Yew was not discriminating against one of the other dialects, said my friends.

Lee Kuan Yew, said in a speech in 2012 that the use of Mandarin was intended to unite the different dialect groups and a mother tongue would make sure that people do not forget where they were coming from. ‘[It] reminds the Singapore Chinese that they are part of an ancient civilisation with an unbroken history of over 5,000 years (ibid.: 310)’. It gives them the

feeling that they belong to a particular culture and this can increase people's self-confidence and self-respect (Ibid.: 310). Janice claims that language is an index for people's culture and so she wants to preserve the other Chinese dialects as well. To her they are all part of Singapore's heritage.

### **4.3 Connecting People through Art**

Melati rather wants to use art to connect different races together. Instead of focusing on what differentiates them, she wants to create a space to discuss similarities and connect the different races.

‘There are similarities between Malay art like shadow puppetry in Malay art and Taiwanese shadow puppetry. Similarities between Indian dance forms and Malay dance forms. Some moves are similar. There is so many things that are similar that I think once Malay art can get the same exposure as the other two or the other ethnic forms then. You feel, you complete the Asian’.

Melati wants to push for Malay art because she thinks that it is important that the Malay art form does not only stay within the Malay community in Singapore.

Ethnic art can represent some ones culture, but it does not capture ‘the’ culture. Art can function as a lens through, how to think and articulate other people's culture and identity. It will however, never capture the entire culture. It is merely one possible narrative out of many others. Moreover, ‘the’ culture does not exist. Ideas on culture changes overtime and people value different aspects and have different narratives about what their culture is and means to them. If you discuss different narratives that people hold however, it can stimulate a debate about what to include and what not in order for people to feel more connected to this society.

In a country such as Singapore, where you have different races living together, it can be fruitful to share different ethnic art forms, so everyone feels included. Ethnic art can be used for a politics of recognition. This means that minority groups for instance, want to be recognized so they can claim political rights, but Melati assured me that that is not the case in Singapore. She does not think that there is more support for art from one particular race in Singapore or that sponsors are less interested in ethnic art from one of the smaller racial groups, such as Malays.

I mean there is a lot of talk about Chinese privilege and how being a minority would be underprivileged, but I think in regards to art forms and exposure and everything, its for Malay art specifically that I feel like it's the fact that the [Malay] community is not pushing enough. Everyone is just happy so see it within the community so if you have arts events right. You just keep it within the circle of the Malay community. Which is a question why. Like why don't you start thinking of ways to allow the art form being appreciated by other people. So that people will be aware [of the art]. It is about appreciating you know. The audience does not have to be a practitioner'.

Melati does not want to use Malay art as a means for recognition, in order to assert political rights. She wants the Malay art out there, so other people can recognize and discuss similarities with other ethnic art forms. Hence, this can create more solidarity and appreciation for the art form.

The representation of art however, is never objective. That is why you always have to question who has the authority to decide what to preserve, what to represent and in what way. "Things of value' have to be preserved in order to justify and legitimize accounts in the past' (Rowlands 2002: 108). At the same time this memory culture can silence events that is better not to be remembered, and would have created an entirely different narrative. In Singapore, the state has an important authority in this.

### **The Representation of Art**

In Singapore, also the government has a lot of influence on the representation of art and what can be discussed. This consequently influences the identity that can be created or reinforced through heritage. Daniel noticed that

'Now they are becoming more diverse in their support for the arts., so not only traditional art forms. Except for those that are very transgressive towards the state or maybe very sensitive [and endanger] the peace in Singapore. Any radical issues, for example racism [should not be discussed]. Singapore is very rooted in its party to be multicultural, the illusion of racial harmony. They present

themselves to the rest of the world [as] we have all this different cultures living together and we do not have racism we do not have any kind of resentment’.

Daniel wants to discuss the resentments however, because it is only then that you can change this. The government is worried however, that this endangers the peace in Singapore. They rather install the idea that there is no racism in Singapore and there are people in Singapore who believe what Daniel refers to as the illusion of racial harmony.

‘Some [people] do not recognize this. They let the government sit in their heads. [They believe] that there is no racism or friction caused by racial issues. I foresee that kids who are ignorant to that, when they go to army they will realise it. Especially in the army, as it is a very racist place. But everything is more controlled because of the commodore you have. So I can hate you because you are Chinese, Malay or Indian but I still need your help. So there is this weird dynamic that comes into place.

As I mentioned before, Malays usually do not have high positions in the army out of fear, so Daniel felt lucky that he was placed in the artillery academy.

‘Not a lot of Malays are in that vocation and all the officers and all the officials are Chinese there. So when they see a Malay guy, they went hard on me. They gave me a lot of shit. But I took it, I could have gotten angry but I took it in and proved them wrong. I did the best in my course to give them a big fuck you. That motivated me’.

Daniel would really like to talk about this issue and he thinks that art would be a good medium for it. As for now, however, this will be difficult, because you have to do it within the lines the government, allows you to work in.

‘I think arts should talk about racial issues, but it is so hard. The company, I hope to find a fulltime job after I graduate produced a play that touches upon this issue.

It is set in the army, and basically it is about this Malay and Chinese guy who are found, they killed themselves. But the audience do not know whether they

shot each other or if they killed themselves. So the premise was that it was a double suicide. They never specifically tell the audience what happened but during the play they highlight tensions within the environment. Because of the racial discrimination and prejudices. The conclusion however was very safe and very easy, because the parents of both characters who died came together and they reconcile because they both lost a son so it does not matter what tensions were in place. Everything else however was really good’.

The play could touch upon racial issues, but it needed to have a happy end and it could not be critical towards the government for example. Thus the representation of art is very important for the narrative it can tell and the audience always have to remain critical. Always keep in mind who produced the art and what story they want to tell the audience. Is it very leading or are you more free to discuss the narrative for example.

In the newspaper ‘Today’ an article was published on 18 February 2017, about the Syonan Gallery in Singapore<sup>2</sup>. This gallery has an exhibition about the Japanese occupation during WOII and serves as a reminder that something like that should never happen again. The curators also want to teach the younger generation about a shared history. ‘The intention is to remember what the forefathers went through, and commemorate the generation of Singaporeans who experienced the Japanese occupation’. People in Singapore however have complained about this name as they felt that the name ‘appeared to honour the Japanese Occupation while evoking painful memories’. Therefore the Communications and Information Minister Yaacob Ibrahim has made his apologize and they renamed it to ‘Surviving the Japanese Occupation: War and its Legacies’. The exhibition has not changed but the name is slightly more positive and it focuses more on Singapore’s strength as it survived it instead of the focus that they have been occupied. Even a name, therefore, has consequences for the representation of history.

How art should be represented is something that people do not agree on. It also depends on who is curating the art, and what story he or she wants to tell.

Melati disagrees for example, on how people would like to preserve traditional art.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.todayonline.com/singapore/name-syonan-gallery-be-changed-surviving-japanese-occupation> ‘Accessed 29/6/2017’

‘From my perspective, from where I am from I feel like everyone is just to worried about destroying traditional arts. But it’s not destroying if you try to create awareness of it in a different matter. So to me that is sad.

[They think that if the art form is presented in a different way you are destroying it.]

‘Oh but that is not how you traditional do it you know. This is not the art form’. When you have a traditional dance and then you incorporate contemporary moves as well and then in that case you are not labelled as a traditional art. If you are still pushing for awareness however, [why would it be a bad thing to present it in a modern way?]

She finds this a big struggle. To preserve the art and making it attractive for other people to watch is more important to Melati than ideas on tradition and authenticity.

For the government, the idea of tradition was more important. They invested in art because they hoped it would evoke traditional values, but nowadays Daniel claims that the reason they invest in art is out of economic incentives.

‘I think they surely realized they fucked up. The initial process of developing the country. It’s not something that is quite new. I think even in the 1980s they kind of recognized that. They started to put emphasise on the importance of art. But they saw art as something with traditional values. So the only kind of arts they were recognizing were traditional art forms. So like Chinese opera, Indian dance and Malay drama. So they wanted to, because people were becoming to modernised, or to western thinking, too capitalistic, so they wanted to retain Asian values within the society’.

#### **4.4 Globalisation and Economic Incentives**

Sponsors and other people who are investing in art can also influence the narrative that is being told but Daniel argues that the government motivates to invest in art has not much to do with creating an identity as Singaporeans.

‘They could not decide what they wanted to use it for so as for now the reason that they want to invest in art, I would say from my understanding is because one thing they recognize is if they are going in the direction of how globalization occurs, Singaporeans will start to leave. They do not have a reason to stay in Singapore. They can live anywhere else in the world. You know how Singaporeans tend to be very hard working, driven so I can go anywhere why would I want to stay in Singapore. So generations will be lost.

So to invest in art, the most important reason is out of economic concerns. The potential economic growth and to put an empathise on a very innovative creative industry. For the government it is about the economic incentives that they are supporting the arts’.

According to Vanessa, who works in Singapore since she graduated in 2014, the government is currently investing more money in small and medium enterprises to partly encourage the creative industry. Vanessa thinks that this might have to do with the fact that they realize that art is part of the culture or can be used to create a culture.

‘The government wants more money flowing and help young adults to achieve things. This is also a way to keep the young talents in the country and to help build an identity for the nation.

To invest in the creative industry would not only be a good thing to keep creative people in the country however, but it is also a way to attract other people to come and visit and for the locals to create a feeling of belonging. Zhimin thinks that art can be used to represent your country. ‘If you create a space or a building, it can make people think, ‘oh this is a nice place!’ or Wow! This is typical Singapore’. Zhimin especially likes the iconic building of the Marina Bay Sands and believes it leaves an impression of Singapore in people’s minds.



The marina bay sands, is the three pillars with the ship on top.

In chapter two, I explained how images of the Borobudur could create an imagined community and Zhimin feels the same about the Marina Bay Sands. For him it represents his country, and when people see it they know immediately where it is.

In this globalized world it becomes very easy to move abroad so you need to make a country attractive if you want people to stay. This means that there needs to be an opportunity for people to find a job so that they can afford living in the country. To stop people from moving overseas, it would be a good idea to invest in the creative industry. If people in Singapore want to pursue a career in arts they do not have to move overseas, but they could work and live in Singapore without necessarily switching careers.

Daniel who studies arts management in Lasalle wants to stay in Singapore but he is worried about the living costs for example.

‘I have a love-hate relationship with Singapore because everyone wants to feel... Especially when you are born somewhere you want to travel the world. Singapore has become more liberal, more modernised, it is becoming hard [to live here]. You kind of lose yourself to Singapore, because when you travel to

other cities in the world, you can basically say that any Singaporean can live there and they will be fine. So what entails you to stay here? It is getting harder and harder, because for example, [the rising] living costs.

I am definitely worried about the living costs, especially when you are working in the arts.

I want to stay here, because I want to be part of a solution, but at the same time I feel I have to step one foot out of the door. For example, that [I] have the possibility to move to Malaysia. Definitely I want to stay in Singapore however’.

Daniel wants to stay in Singapore, but with living costs rising he is worried that he should look for a future elsewhere like Malaysia. From my own experience, Singapore is indeed an expensive city to live in and Daniel is not the only informant who is worried that if s/he wants to pursue a career in arts, s/he might have to move overseas. According to my informants, the creative industry in Singapore is still growing. In general, however, it is difficult to find a job nowadays, and thus my informants are convinced that this will most certainly apply for a niche market like the creative industry. At the same time, my informants do not want this uncertainty prevent them from study something they like and they do believe that art is important.

I have argued in this chapter, how my informants claim that art can be used to talk about social sensitive issues to create a more cohesive and inclusive society. The top down CMIO categorizations makes the racial division in Singapore explicit and there are still racial tensions in Singapore. To create a more inclusive identity, art should be used to discuss these issues. Heritage can also be considered important for an identity as Singaporeans, as it reflects people culture. The creation of this identity moreover, can foster a sense of belongingness to the country. Hence a study in the field of arts does not have to be a loss for the countries economy. A more inclusive society makes it a more attractive place, for people to want to stay, but art can also attract tourism for example. Both can be good for the nations economy.

## Conclusion

In this thesis, I sought, to answer the following research question: How do Lasalle students justify their choice of study in an education system that is based on neoliberal and Confucian values?

It is important for a nation to have a strong economy therefore, the government in Singapore, has invested a lot in education. To make sure that Singapore continues to economically flourish, they have implemented an education system that is based on Confucian and neoliberal values. In both Confucianism and neoliberalism, it is up to the individual to succeed in life. Self-cultivation, therefore, is an important value. In Confucianism, self-cultivation through learning is also an act of filial piety. Students in Singapore consequently experience a lot of pressure from their social environment.

The parent's generation, have learned that in order to live an easy life, students should strive to go to university and enroll in a so-called pragmatic study, such as law or business. A field of study that more or less guarantees a good income, to live an easy life. My informants however, have chosen to go to Lasalle College of the Arts. Hence most parents are worried for their child's future livelihood. Ana's grandmother for example, thinks that Ana will become an artist that will never sell a piece, but Ana is not even studying fine arts. She does not try to defend herself towards her grandmother, however, out of respect for the elderly. She also thinks that her grandmother's mindset cannot be changed anymore, as she is already old.

Academic prestige is so deep embedded in society and although the government wants to help and change this, as shown by the commercial from the UOB for example, this will not be easy. For now it seems therefore, that my informants do not adhere to expectations that is set forth in an economy driven by neoliberal values. I have argued however, that with what my informants want to do after their studies, or why they think art is important, match certain values that are important within the Confucian and neoliberal discourse.

To explain this, I first elaborated on the education system in Singapore and how my respondents experience pressure and stress due to the system locally. This system is based on competition, and people are concerned that they will become an academic failure. For some of my informants, like Jingrou, it was hard to accept the fact that she wanted to pursue a career in arts. She did not want to disappoint her parents, but the conventional pathway does not

work for everyone. My informants showed me however, that what they want to do with their degree or what they value in art, is still informed by this system.

My informants have cultivated the idea, that as they do well in school, this will secure a good future, for themselves but it will also be good for the country. My informants sequentially value both. They may not pursue to become rich, but in the future they want to have a job they like, and to them it is more important that they study something they are passionate about. I also argued that what my informants value in art, is also valuable for Singapore on the whole.

The government in Singapore invests in education to secure a strong economy, but Singapore also participates in a global economy. Other countries try to attract new talents and Singapore has to find ways to ensure that people wants to stay in the country. Especially, when it becomes easier for people to look for opportunities overseas and settle down there. Thus to make sure that the academically talented people stay in the country, Singapore should not only be an attractive place in economic sense, as other places might be attractive too in that way. People rather have to feel connected to Singapore.

Ms Grace Fu, the minister for Culture, Community and Youth wants to invest in the art scene to create a more cohesive society. She hopes that a visit to the museum for example, would become something iconic for Singapore. That it will be a new shared experience that connects people to one another. One of my informants, Daniel, thinks that it is important that art can touch upon social sensitive issues, such as racism. The government has the authority in Singapore to decide what is and what is not allowed to publish, and they are too worried that discussing social sensitive issues would disturb the social peace. Daniel however, thinks they do not want to talk about it, out of concern for protecting the idea they promote of racial harmony. If art would talk about racism, it could also be considered an attack towards the government, but Daniel does not want to use art to go against the government. He has experienced forms of racism however, and in order to create a more cohesive society, people should be exposed to a place where they can safely discuss these issues.

Janice and Melati focuses more on heritage in order to build a stronger community. Janice wants to preserve Chinese dialects, because to her, this is an importance heritage for Singapore. Heritage is important to her, because it symbolizes from which culture they came from. Therefore, the preservation of dialects for example, is import for the cultural identity in Singapore.

Melati wants to expose Malay art to a wider audience, because she claims that the similarities it has with other ethnic art forms complement the idea of Asia. She is more interested in the art form and preservation of it however, than that she is concerned with connecting people from different ethnicities.

Zhimin claimed that art could also be an instrumental tool for nation branding. He is an interior designer and iconic buildings can change the city landscape and attract tourists for example. If people see this building they will link it to Singapore, and it can become a tourist attraction. Singaporeans in return can use such images, to imagine their country and community, and feel more connected to Singapore.

In this thesis, I have argued that my informants do not evade from the Confucian and neoliberal values that are important in Singapore's society. As this case study has made implicit, students in Singapore experience and have to cope with pressure and stress due to a system that is based on competition and academic success. When students opt for a less pragmatic study, therefore, they have to justify themselves. In order to cope with prejudices, my informants explained what they think is important about their study. Art to them is a means to connect people. Art can also represent ones culture or nation, although we have to be critical about this and keep the politics of representation in mind. Art is created by people and therefore, it cannot be objective. Neither is culture nor nation branding.

Furthermore, my informants claim that their study is, just like pragmatic studies, important too. The academic prestige should not be granted to the more pragmatic studies only. It does acquire time however, before academic success is not defined by grades anymore, and for people to cultivate the idea that you can contribute to society in different ways and through different studies. As the UOB commercial already mentioned, 'the conventional pathway does not work for everyone'. This mindset should be considered okay. People can still succeed in life, even if they choose a different pathway.

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