Chapter 19

State Fatherhood: The Politics of Nationalism, Sexuality, and Race in Singapore

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Postcolonial governments are inclined, with some predictability, to generate narratives of national crisis, driven perhaps—the generous explanation—to reenact periodically the state's traumatic if also liberating separation from colonial authority, a moment catastrophically founding the nation itself qua nation. Typically, however, such narratives of crisis serve more than one category of reassurance: by repeatedly focusing anxiety on the fragility of the new nation, its ostensible vulnerability to every kind of exigency, the state's originating agency is periodically invoked and ratified, its access to wide-ranging instruments of power in the service of national protection continually consolidated. It is a post-Foucauldian truism that they who successfully define and superintend a crisis, furnishing its lexicon and discursive parameters, successfully confirm themselves the owners of power, the administration of crisis operating to revitalize ownership of the instruments of power even as it vindicates the necessity of their use.

If a postcolonial government remains continuously in office for decades
beyond its early responsibility for the nation's emergence, as is the case in the Republic of Singapore, the habit of generating narratives of crisis at intervals becomes an entrenched, dependable practice. While the metaphors deployed, causes identified, and culpabilities named in the detection of crisis necessarily undergo migration, accusation by the government of Singapore—whose composite representation is overwhelmingly male, Chinese, and socioeconomically and educationally privileged—has been increasingly directed in recent years to such segments of society as do not give back an image of the state's founding fathers to themselves. Precise adequacy on the part of the citizenry to an ideal standard of nationalism then becomes referenced, metonymically, to the successful if fantastic reproduction of an ideal image of its fathers. Crisis is unerringly discovered—threats to the survival and continuity of the nation, failures in nationalism—when a distortion in the replication or scale of a composition deemed ideal is fearfully imagined.

NATIONALISM AND SEXUALITY: IDEOLOGIES OF REPRODUCTION

That an obsession with ideal replication in the register of the imaginary can lend itself to somatic literalization—transformed through acts of state power into a large-scale social project of biological reproduction—is the disturbing subtext of one of the most tenacious and formidable of state narratives constructed in Singapore's recent history, with consequences yet proliferating at the time of this article. Hanging precisely on a wishful fantasy of exact self-replication, this narrative of crisis posits, as the essential condition of national survival, the regeneration of the country's population (its heterogeneous national body) in such ratios of race and class as would faithfully mirror the populations' original composition at the nation's founding moment, retrospectively apotheosized. In an aggressive exposition of maternal distress in August 1983 that ranges authoritatively over such subjects as genetic inheritance and culture, definitions of intelligence, social and economic justice and responsibility, and gender theory, the nation's father of founding fathers, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, levelled an extraordinary charge against the nation's mothers, incipient and actual—accusing them of imperiling the country's future by wilfully distorting patterns of biological reproduction. The disclosure of a reproductive crisis took place, suitably, on the anniversary of the state's birth, during the Prime Minister's annual National Day Rally speech, as part of the celebrations commemorating the country's emergence as a national entity.1

The crisis, as formulated by him, received this inflection: highly-educated women in Singapore, defined as those with a university degree, were not producing babies in sufficient numbers to secure their self-replacement in the population, either because of a fail to marry, or, having married, a failure to bear more than 1.65 children per married couple, he declared. On the other hand, poorly-educated women, defined as those who do not complete the equivalent of an elementary school education (women of "no education" or "no qualifications," as they came to be called), were reproducing too freely, generating 3.5 children each; women with only an elementary education, producing 2.7 children, were also outstripping the "graduate mothers," as the Prime Minister called them.

This was a problem, Lee reasoned, because graduate mothers produced genetically-superior offspring, the ability to complete a university education attesting to superior mental faculties, which would be naturally transmitted to offspring through genetic inheritance. Eighty percent of a child's intelligence, Lee explained, citing certain studies in genetics and sociobiology, was predetermined by nature, while nurture accounted for the remaining twenty percent. Within a few generations, the quality of Singapore's population would measurably decline, with a tiny minority of intelligent persons being increasingly swamped by a seething, proliferating mass of the unintelligent, untalented, and genetically inferior: industry would suffer, technology deteriorate, leadership disappear, and Singapore lose its competitive edge in the world. Since his was a tiny country of no natural resources and few advantages other than the talents of its people, if measures were not immediately taken to counteract the downhill slide caused by "lopsided" female reproductive sexuality, a catastrophe of major proportions was imminent a scant few generations down the line.2

It would seem that men did not figure prominently in the Prime Minister's dystopian vision because his statistics revealed to him that Singapore women as a rule selected mates of equal or superior academic standing; graduate mothers alone, therefore, could be relied on to guarantee the genetic purity of the tribe. Closer examination of his tables consequently revealed that class and race, however, were the major, suppressed categories of his anxiety, since the women of recalcitrant fertility were by and large Chinese, upper- and middle-class professionals, while those of inordinate reproductive urges and no university degrees comprised, by a stunning coincidence, working-class women of Malay and Indian ethnic origin—members, that is, of Singapore's minority racial groups. The Chinese majority, then 76%, was shrinking at the terrifying rate of 7% in each generation, even as Malays, a mere 15%, were wildly proliferating by 4% per generation, and Indians, then 6% of the population, by 1%. The threat of impending collapse in the social and economic order, for which an unruly, destabilizing, and irresponsible feminine sexuality was held to account, was covertly located at the intersecting registers of race and class. Chaos, in
this prophecy of national disaster, was visualized as the random interplay of excess and deficiency among female bodies, which, left unregulated, would produce disabling, unenviable, and unsafe equations of class and race.3

If Lee's articulation of genetic inheritance, culture, education, intelligence, and reproductive sexuality seems inordinately mechanical, his faith in the assumed implausibility (and univocity) of statistics oddly uncritical, and his commitment to the logic of racial and class regulation relentless, it is because he subscribes, without apology, to a projective model of society as an economic and social machine. His stated preference, on the controversial issue of intelligence, for genetic catalogues and theories of determination over such arguments as would consider the interplay of social, psychic, historical, cultural, environmental, and genetic forces operating on the human subject (the reductive impatience leading him to extract, from a small-scale study on identical twins by Thomas Bouchard of the University of Minnesota, easy, simplistic axioms and catch-phrases on universal essences of human nature, expressed in tidy percentages) merely evinces a concomitant desire for the human organism to function, also, like a machine. The language of eugenics is precisely for Lee a language of efficient automation—a syntax and grammar congenially identical to his own, and to that routinely employed by his ministers and cohorts in public discourse—the appeal of eugenics residing, for him, in its very premise, however fugitive it might seem to others, of state-of-the-art biological replication; a superior technology to guarantee the efficient manufacture of superior-quality babies (the machine of eugenics confirming the body machine).4

The investment in mechanical models of human reproduction, social formations, and the body, exposes, of course, the desire for an absolute mastery, the desire that mastery be absolutely possible. Functional machines in everyday life—machines as they are recognized by Lee, and used in Singapore society—are predictable and orderly, blessedly convenient: malfunctioning ones can be adjusted, faulty components replaced, and the whole made to work again with a minimum of fuss. Most pointedly, a machine presupposes—indeed, requires—an operator, since a machine commonly exists in the first place in order to be operated: relieving all suspicion that full supervisory control may be impossible (exercising that is, the specter of desire, instability, and an unconscious from human formations), the trope of the machine comforting suggests that what eludes, limits, or obstructs absolute knowability, management, and control, can be routinely evacuated.

The indictment of women, then—working-class and professional, Malay, Indian, and Chinese—inscribes a tacit recognition that feminine reproductive sexuality refuses, and in refusing, undermines the fantasy of the body-machine, a conveniently operable somatic device: thus also undoing, by extension, that other fantasied economy, society as an equally operable contraption. Indeed, the disapproval, simultaneously, of an overly-productive, and a non(re)productive feminine sexuality registers a suspicion of that sexuality as noneconomic, driven by pleasure: sexuality for its own sake, unproductive of babies, or babies for their own sake, unproductive of social and economic efficiency.5 That women of minority races should stand accused of a runaway irresponsibility, moreover, neatly conjoins two constituencies of society believed to be most guilty of pursuing the noneconomy of pleasure (pleasure as, indeed, noneconomic): the female, and the "soft" Indian/Malay citizen, whose earthy sexuality, putative garrulosity, laziness, emotional indulgence, or other distressing irrationality conform to repress stereotypes of ethnicity and gender that have, in recent years, prominently found their way into public discourse.

In the months that followed his sketch of a future, feminine-instigated apocalypse, controversy of a sort arose around the issue, whose political volatility was at once and slyly undercut, however, by its characterization in the national press and electronic media (which are in Singapore either directly state-owned, state-dominated, or subject to severely restrictive licensing laws) as a "Great Marriage Debate." Its reduction to merely a "debate," and over merely an old, respectable, and comfortably familiar institution, marriage, strategically moved the issue away from any explicit recognition of or engagement with its deeply political, and politically extreme, content. The English-language newspapers would have it, moreover, that the vast majority of their readers were concerned merely to help the Prime Minister accomplish his goal of increased numbers of graduate babies; and since access to popular opinion through media uninfiltrated by state control was, and still remains, unavailable, the character of public response could only be gauged from what was selected for publication in newspaper letters' columns, or broadcast on state-run radio and television programming.6

Even as public discussion began, however (a discussion mercilessly regulated by speeches and pronouncements from government cohorts of every description, all tirelessly repeating and expatiating at length on the Prime Minister's arguments in a concerted drive to overwhelm public opinion), the government moved with characteristic preemptive speed to launch a comprehensive system of incentives and threats, together with major changes of social policy, to bend the population in the direction of the Prime Minister's will. Cash awards of S$10,000 were offered to working-class women, under careful conditions of educational and low-income eligibility, to restrict their childbearing to two children, after which they would "volunteer" themselves for tubal ligation. The scheme was piously tricked out in the language of philanthropic concern and state munificence—one fawning newspaper headline even proclaiming it the "Gov't's S$10,000 Helping Hand for the Low Income Families" [sic]. At the same time as the formal statement from the Prime Minister's
Office grandly and unctuously trumpeted its benevolence, maternity charges in public (that is, government-run) hospital wards most frequently used by working-class mothers were increased for those who had already given birth to their state-preferred quota of two children.

To entice graduate women to have more children, on the other hand, generous tax breaks, medical insurance privileges, and admission for their children to the best schools in the country were promised, _inter alia_—prompting legal scholars and others to object that such discriminatory, class-inflected practices were manifestly and blatantly unconstitutional. Changes in school admissions policy to further privilege the privileged were nonetheless implemented, the government countering criticism with a massive disinformation effort which shamelessly sought to persuade the disadvantaged that their children, too, would profit from the new hierarchies (“Non-graduates Will Also Benefit,” one newspaper headline soothingly cajoled the public; another announced, with unremitting cruelty, “More Good News for Non-graduate Mums: All Primary Schools are of Fairly Equal Standard”). Other transformations in social policy followed—altered entrance criteria to the country’s only existing university to favor men over women applicants, since the Prime Minister’s statistics had suggested to him that male more than female university graduates tended to marry and have children; a revised family planning program that now urged all who could afford it to have at least three children (where its former policy encouraged the two-child family as the ideal norm for all, equally); and, more recently, the suggestion that certain restrictions may be placed on legalized abortion, freely available in Singapore since 1974—but with their relationship to the priorities advertised in the so-called Great Marriage Debate officially denied, minimized, or simply passing unreported and undiscussed.

Among its own employees, the government decided to require members of the Civil Service in the higher echelons—Division One officers, who no doubt qualify as intelligent—to submit detailed personal information on themselves and their families, including their “marital status, the educational qualifications of their spouses, and the number of children” they had; and, at least one civil servant was summarily selected (“assigned”) to undergo an experiment in the use of commercial matchmaking services abroad.

Cabinet ministers began to exhort graduate women to marry and bear children as a patriotic duty. Obediently taking their cue from the government, two (nonfeminist) women’s organizations accordingly proposed, in a disturbing collusion with state patriarchy, that women be required to bear children as a form of National Service—the equivalent, in feminine, biological terms, of the two-and-a-half-year military service compulsory performed by men for the maintenance of national defense. A sexualized separate species of nationalism, in other words, was being advocated for women: as patriotic duty for men grew out of the barrel of a gun (phallic nationalism, the wielding of a surrogate technology of the body in national defense), so would it grow, for women, out of the recesses of the womb (uterine nationalism, the body as a technology of defense wielded by the nation). Men bearing arms, and women bearing children; maternal and/or military duty: the still-recent history of Nazi Germany grimly but not uniquely reminds us that certain narratives of nationalism and dispositions of state power specifically require the exercise of control over the body, the track of power on bodies being visited differently according to gender. The demand that women serve the nation biologically, with their bodies—that they take on themselves, and submit themselves to, the public reproduction of nationalism in the most private medium possible, forcefully reveals the anxious relationship, in the fantasies obsessing state patriarchy, between reproducing power and the power to reproduce: the efficacy of the one being expressly contingent on the containment and subsumption of the other.

As the Prime Minister himself spoke with ominous nostalgia of the traditional means by which women had been variously coerced into bearing children in most Asian cultures of the past, the dependence of paternal power—its assurance of regenerative survival—on the successful conception and discipline of female reproductive sexuality within hierarchical structures dominated by patriarchs, explicitly surfaced. Lee spoke feelingly of the past, when families could force the marriage of their daughters by arranging marriages of convenience without their daughters’ consent. He expressed regret at his government’s socialist policies in the heady days of early postcolonial independence, when women’s suffrage and universal education relinquished to women some control over their biological destinies. He speculated thoughtfully on the possibility of reintroducing polygamy (by which he meant _polygyny_ rather than _polyandry_), outlawed in Singapore since the Women’s Charter of 1961, and voiced frank, generous admiration of virile Chinese patriarchs of the past, whose retinues of wives, mistresses, and illegitimate children unquestionably testified, under principles of social Darwinism, to their own, and thus their children’s genetic superiority.

Men, it would seem, figured prominently in Lee’s dystopian vision after all. Behind the ostensible crisis of maternity and reproduction—too much or too little, never exactly enough—was a crisis of _paternity_ and reproduction. A few women suggested, with irony, that if increased numbers of superior children were exclusively the issue, then women ought to be encouraged, nay, urged to have children outside the institution of marriage, with all stigmatization of single mothers and illegitimate offspring removed. Many women, they challenged, did not wish to marry, but wished nonetheless to have children; should not the government in their urgent desire recommend moves toward women-headed families? Recognizing the threat to patriarchal authority vested in the
traditional Asian family—after which its own hierarchies and values were after all patterned—the government conspicuously failed to generate enthusiasm for this alternative. A future in which women might conceive and raise children with the support of society, but without the check of a paternal signifier, could not be thought, even in the name of putative national survival. Addressing as it did the hidden stake in Lee’s narrative of crisis, whose undisclosed object of concern was precisely the stable replication of the paternal signifier and its powers, this vision of women-led families struck at the core of state fatherhood itself, the institutional basis on which governmental patriarchy was postulated.19

The narrative behind Lee’s narrative could then be read: a fantasy of self-regenerating fatherhood and patriarchal power, unmitigated, resurgent, and in endless (self-) propagation, inexhaustibly reproducing its own image through the plant, tractable conduit of female anatomy—incidental, obedient, and sexually suborned female bodily matter. His sentimental indulgence in the saving visions of a reactionary past, selectively idealized, stages that past as the exclusive theatre of omnipotent fathers: state fathers, whose creative powers incorporate and subsume the maternal function, as attested by their autonomous birthing of a nation. The subsequent show of protective solicitude over the national offspring then aggressively, if fantastically, repays the cherished moment of paternal delivery: by arresting change and difference in the national body, and wishfully transfusing the population in its original composition at birth, a living testimony to the founding moment is made perpetually available, a constantly present reminder; and the fearful threat of material transmogrification—growth, alteration, difference, the transformations wrought by an undisclosed, never-certain future (imagined, conveniently, as issuing from mothers, that displaced, but ever-looming, ever-returning source of threat and competition)—is simultaneously warded off and disengaged.

Out of that obsession with a pastness ideologically configured had come, then, the script of a dangerous agenda of racial and class manipulation: the very agenda explicitly renounced by the publicly subscribed goals—democracy, equality, and social justice, regardless of race, gender, creed, or class—on which Lee’s government had so prided itself, for which it had won the country freedom from Britain, and by which its public mandate to govern today is still declatively based. It is as a defense against his fear of the future—a future which finds its representation and threat, for him, in a race-marked, class-infected, ungovernable female body (so commonly figured as the receptacle of the future that it is the perennial locus of social accusation and experiment)—that Lee’s Great Marriage Debate was invented. The past—that ground in which the powers of reproduction and the reproduction of power had seemed miraculously to converge in a self-legitimating moment of plenitude echoing through time—served, in this case, as in the case of so many other nations and nationalisms, as the imaginary treasure-house of a superannuated political fantasy.

NATIONALISM AND RACE: REPRODUCTIONS OF IDEOLOGY

Concurrent with the rhetoric of crisis identifying what might be called the threat from within the nation that inaugurates the “Great Marriage Debate,” there has also been over recent years the discovery of a threat from without, a cultural crisis of an equally disturbing magnitude. Represented as the intensified danger of contamination by the West, this particular crisis has required the formulation of related themes in defense of the social body—the retrieval of a superior, “core” Chinese culture in the name of a fantastic “Confucianism”; the promotion of Mandarin, the preferred dialect of the ruling class of imperial China, as the master language of Chineseness; and the concoction of a “national ideology,” grounded in a selective figuration of Confucianism, to promote the interests of the state.

All three themes take shape as urgent national priorities to combat this other, external threat to the survival, prosperity, and identity of the nation: “Western” values, variously depicted as individualism, relativism and hedonism at worst, or as an unstable pluralism and a needlessly liberal democracy at best.20 The decadent individualism of the West, cabinet ministers declare, has caused the economic decline of the United States relative to Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore, the so-called “four Asian tigers”; concomitantly, these East Asian economies are said to owe their prosperity to their Confucian-based cultures, their “communitarian value system,” industry, thrift, and social cohesion being attributed to a changeless Confucian essence that has been preserved intact through the ages, an essence which not only survives transmission without alteration, but which has made possible rapid industrial development. Taught in Singapore schools since 1982, Confucianism has been offered as an option to Chinese secondary students, who are encouraged to study it in place of a religion in “moral education” classes. Preceding this initiative by a few years is the “Speak Mandarin” campaign for the preservation of Chineseness: if all Chinese Singaporeans spoke Mandarin, this argument goes, they could communicate without the use of English across dialect boundaries; Chinese values would be disseminated without the dilution and distraction that multiple dialects threaten, and the auditory unity of a common tongue would assure the dangers of the West.21

Like the script of the “Great Marriage Debate,” racial and sexual categories
are conjoined in the attribution of value and accusation in the detection of crisis. Prime Minister Lee has often reiterated his conviction that the industrial prominence of East Asian societies over the relatively less developed economies of the Indian subcontinent and Malay archipelago is rooted in the “hard” values of the former over the “soft” cultures of the latter, unapologetically proffering, in simultaneous praise and contempt, figures of phallocentric toughness and gynocentric laxity that are scarcely disguised. Indians, moreover, Lee confidently proclaims, are “naturally contentious”; like women, they are loquacious and theatrical, too indulgent and irresponsible (“soft”) to be capable of the social discipline of “hard” Confucian cultures which renders East Asian societies increasingly potent as political powers to challenge the West. Lest one miss the point, Lee has mused aloud if Singapore could have achieved its economic and social strides if the population had been composed of an Indian racial majority and a Chinese minority, instead of the other way around. State policies instituted to manipulate female reproductive sexuality in preferred ratios of race and class leave no doubt as to what his government believes the answer to be.

Because almost all Singaporeans under the age of forty speak English today, a variety of reasons as diverse as the language instruction in schools, the language of instruction, and the language of business. Encouraged by British colonial policy for over a century, the dominance of English was institutionalized after decolonization by Lee’s own government which established it as the preferred language of education and business and as the de facto language of government: a privileged medium of access to Western science and technology which augmented the nation’s attractions to multinational capital. In the 1950s and 60s, when the Malay Communist Party was influential among the Chinese-educated in Singapore and Malaya, the policy of both the British colonial administration and the postcolonial governments that succeeded it involved the diminution in social and political status of Chinese education: “left-wing activist,” “Communist,” and “Chinese-educated” were virtually synonymous, interchangeable terms (“the English-educated,” as Lee put it then, “do not riot”). The association of English with progress and economic enfranchisement resulted, by the mid-1970s, in a considerable reduction in the number of Chinese schools, and the closure of the only Chinese-language university in Singapore.

Ironically, thirty years after independence, the very political authority that had institutionalized the language now expresses “doubt about the wisdom of teaching Singaporeans English.” “If one went back to Korea, Taiwan, or Hong Kong 100 years from now,” Lee speculated in a wistful fantasy of paternal control, “their descendants would be recognizable because what they took in from the West was what their leaders decided to translate into their books, newspapers and t.v. programmes.” In Singapore, on the other hand, “we have given everybody a translator in his pocket and all doors are open.” In this nightmare vision—the unresisted seduction of a vulnerable, “soft,” social body feminized by language (“all doors are open”)—Lee saw “a wholesale revision of values, attitudes of good and bad, or role-models and so on.”

Once the conduit of rapid economic development that consolidated the power and legitimacy of the new state and its founding fathers, is now a dangerous passage facilitating an invasion of difference that would rupture the continuity of cultural identity, and alter the course of ideal generational propagation.

These changing fantastic definitions of threats to the state, requiring sporadic redeployment of valid and invalid identities, languages, and cultures in narratives of history and national survival, reveal, then, the essentialist counters of race and culture as amenable to arbitrary representations, inflected by interests of state power. Differences within cultures and races—and the conflation of these two terms is a necessary gesture in the essentialist discourse of nationalism—are converted into differences between cultures and races, into differences that strategically serve to distinguish valid, enabling, or potent cultural identities from those other identities represented as seductive and disabling, subverting the firmness of national purpose. Narratives of history and survival thus deployed in the production of differences support specific formations of power; the past itself becomes a category produced by present causes to legitimate the exigent directives of the state, and is punctually offered as a reusable counter to vindicate genealogies of state dispensation. Each construction of an essential identity requires a reconfiguring of the past: the equation of “Confucian Chineseness” with the interests of the state demands not only the discounting of Singapore history in the 1960s and 1990s, but also a radical retropod of the enabling conditions of economic development and modern nationhood. No longer is an absorption of Western values, liberal democracy, technological organization, and habits of objectivity deemed sine qua non the legitimizing prerequisites of a modern state. That Singapore, like Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, has “arrived” as a developed economy is to be traced instead to the presence in these societies of “core” Confucian virtues—to the efflorescence, as it were, of what has always been there, fully present, denying the perceived absence or lack that instigated the movement toward the West in the immediate postcolonial period. Locating the ideological source of the modern East Asian state in an unchanging Confucian essence allows, moreover, the idealized recuperation of the entire history of Chinese culture as a seamless narrative of continuity and cohesion, suffering neither a fall (as into communism) nor a lack—allows, that is, an ideological fantasy of transgenerational replication, where a signifying essence gendered in a particular modality of authority reproduces itself across history and national boundaries in unobstructed transcendent
resurgence. The history of Singapore is then a single moment in the history of Chinese racial culture, written into an integrated script of transnational ideological revitalization.

The mystifications exercised in this figuration of (trans)national ideology should not, however, be read as implying irrationality. The very discovery of Confucianism is articulated by the need to manage, not to resist, an increasingly successful industrial nation. Confucianism accordingly is promoted in Singapore as constitutive of the rational organization of society, and has itself been subjected to stringent inquiry, that it might be systematically delivered as an object of knowledge, a rational and authoritative epistemology. Confucian scholars are hired from abroad (from metropolitan centers such as Harvard and Princeton, among others) to staff an Institute of East Asian Philosophy at the National University of Singapore: they help to formulate the syllabi and design the texts for school courses, sift Confucian tenets consciously for useful emphases and prescriptions, and systematize the propagation of the subject. Bizarre as this programmatic exercise might seem to Western eyes, it merely repeats, in effect, the modalities of producing and using knowledge long assumed in the West by the social sciences, including the discourse Edward Said calls Orientalism. Based on expertise and scholarly systematization, the knowledge produced is then delivered as a rational, objective, disinterested and coherent (philosophical) system, conferring legitimacy on the state which establishes the promise of a truly rational organization of society, even as it enables the state to police the boundaries of permissible discourse through the continued regulation of knowledge. Thus mantled in objectivity and knowledge, the state assumes what Foucault calls its “pastoral” function, subjecting its citizens to a “set of very specific patterns” that totalizes the operation of an apparently benign, implicitly paternal power. In Singapore, the paradigms of economic or corporate management and their protocols of rationality serve at once as the model and chief beneficiary of the state’s pastoral power, submitting citizens to a structure of values which best subordinates, with minimal fuss and resistance, the efficient working of state corporatism and multinational capital. The location of this structure of values in Confucianism, moreover, and the figuration of Confucianism itself as racial and (trans)national identity, continuous with other East Asian societies and with an organically fecund past, stages the modern state and nationalism as merely the theater where a primordial paternal signifier can gather to itself new instruments of potency, without the irritation of difference to trouble its timeless sway. The description of history as the movement and repetition of the same discovers an aggressive and ruthless absorption of contemporary forms of power: few nations can boast the degree of thoroughness to which the founders of Singapore have carried the paternal logic of the modern state.

The policies of the Singapore government cannot therefore be dismissed as an instance of a peculiarly irrational but unique Oriental despotism, for their exercise of power is enabled, in large measure, by the reinscription of Western modes of discourse in an Asian context. Represented as an invasive threat to Singapore society from without, Western modalities are in fact already operating as instruments of power for the local production of subjects within the nation. The strategic deployment of selective material from contemporary metropolitan disciplines such as genetics and sociobiology (in the fabricated exigency dubbed the “Great Marriage Debate”) is one explicit instance of state collusion with Western institutions of power/knowledge. Indeed, the domestication of an economy of power operative and operable as rationality—knowledge as a technique, a circuit, of power—is crucially necessary to the constitution of a “native” center of authority. Though the ultimate horizon of complicity between authoritative knowledges in the metropolitan West and formations of power in the postcolonial state is beyond the scope of this article, a few of the productive effects of this complicity can be briefly described.

The institution of what can be called, for suggestive convenience, an “internalized Orientalism” makes available to postcolonial authority the knowledge-power that colonial authority wielded over the local population, and permits, in Singapore, an overwhelmingly Western-educated political elite to dictate the qualities that would constitute Chineseness. Internalized orientalism allows the definition of an idealized Chineseness fully consonant with the requirements of a modern market economy, and supplies the mechanism of justification by which qualities deemed undesirable (and projected as forms of racial and sexual accusation) may be contained or excised. Thus simultaneously concerned with replication and containment, internalized orientalism supervises the erosion of the rich cultural resources of dialects spoken over countless generations, and arbitrarily names Mandarin the single repository of core Chinese virtues so as to facilitate cultural dissemination and bring within the possibility of governance a Chineseness that might otherwise have remained, like female reproductive habits, too resistantly diverse and prolific.

Ignoring the materiality of Chinese history, internalized orientalism writes its own narratives of history and nationalism, in service to the state. In the effort to establish congruence between the individual’s place in a “natural institution like the family” and the individual’s loyalty to an “omnipresent government” (see note 20 above), the Singapore brand of Confucianism suppresses the fact that loyalty to family and clan functioned frequently in Chinese history to subtract from loyalty to the state. State fatherhood specifically requires, of course, the intimate articulation of the traditional family with the modern state, and the ostensible homology of the one to the other, claimed by Singapore Confucianism, facilitates and guarantees the transfer of the paternal signifier
from the family to the state, the metaphor of state as family then rendering “natural” an “omnipotent government.”

For all the anti-Western rhetoric that characterizes this detecition of crisis, then, internalized orientalism in fact supplies state fatherhood with an efficient mechanism for the processing of Western culture—an apparatus of definitions, selection, and control that manipulates the rationalizing power of Western modes of knowledge and organization for the efficient management of local capitalism, even as it sets aside as waste what is deemed seductively decadent and dangerous: in short, it presents the ideal regulative machine to the modern Asian state. Whether it provisions the state with a schematic Confucianist system of knowledge or selected statistics from genetics and sociobiology, internalized orientalism serves a paternal master: a gendered formation of power absorbed in fantastism repetition, and seeking a reliable machinery of efficient self-regeneration. Recent discoveries of national crisis—in female reproductive sexuality, and the social insufficiency that must be rectified by Confucianism, Mandarin and a national ideology—mark significant breaches, or failures of repetition. The narratives of identity, sexuality, history, culture, and nationalism officially issued with their discovery merely reinstate the proper mechanisms of correction.

In the reproductions of ideology contained in these narratives, then, a dream of a timeless paternal essence emerges, splendid, transcendent, immortal. Masking its power in myriad forms, but somehow always managing to reveal itself, this paternal signifier moves across history, and national boundaries, harboring within itself a Chinese soul wielding a Western calculus of choice (so the fantasy goes). Triumphant resuscitation through many ages, countries, and cultures, always appropriating to itself new, and ever-pulsating forms of contemporary power, it finds that it is checked nonetheless in its primordial play, in one location on the globe, by a troublesome figure of difference. Invariably, that figure is feminine. Whether represented by actual women (as in the “Great Marriage Debate”) or “other” races and cultures whose identifying characteristics are implicitly feminized—whether, that is, it is a sexual, or a social, body that haunts and threatens—the figure of threat, auguring economic and social disintegration, dismantling the foundations of culture, undermining, indeed, the very possibility of a recognizable future, is always, and uncannily, feminine. The Great Marriage Debate, and the great cultural crises of Singapore—the threats from within and without—merely reposition an age-old reminder, repeated in the scripts of many nations, many nationalisms:

Women, and all signs of the feminine, are by definition always and already anti-national.

NOTES

1. The trope of father and daughter is so commonly invoked in Singapore to express the relationship between the governing political party which won Singapore independence from Britain (the People’s Action Party, or PAP), and the nation itself, as to be fully naturalized, passing unremarked. Singapore is never imagined, by its government or citizens, as a “motherland” or “mother country” (identifications reserved exclusively for the ancestral countries of origin of Singapore’s various racial groups—India, China, etc.), but rather as a female child, or at best, an adolescent girl or “young lady.” A letter to a national newspaper, entitled “Dear PAP...”, and signed by “Singapore, A Young Lady,” in the persona of a respectable growing daughter petitioning for greater freedom from her stern father captures the tenor of the relationship perfectly (The Straits Times [Singapore], January 5, 1985). (An answering letter, fictitiously from “PAPA,” subsequently appeared in the same newspaper.) The psychic economy of the nation prominently circulates between these two gendered positions, tropes of the mother appearing only as counters of facilitation and reinforcement of the father-daughter dyad.

2. “If we continue to reproduce ourselves in this belpside way, we will be unable to maintain our present standards. Levels of competence will decline. Our economy will falter, the administration will suffer, and the society will decline. For how can we avoid lowering performance when for every two graduates (with some exaggeration to make the point), in 25 years’ time there will be one graduate, and for every two uneducated workers, there will be three?” (“Talent for the Future: Prepared Text of the Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew’s Speech at the National Day Rally Last Night,” The Straits Times [Singapore], August 15, 1983).

3. Lest anyone assume that Lee’s articulation of race, class, and gender in the detection of reproductive crisis is unique to Singapore, attention might be drawn to the increasing number of articles in popular U.S. magazines which describe similar discoveries in alarmist, prophetic tones like his—see, e.g., “A Confederacy of Dunces: Are the Best and the Brightest Making Too Few Babies?” in Newsweek (May 22, 1989), and R. J. Herrnstein, “IQ and Falling Birthrates” in the Atlantic Monthly (May 1989), the latter glossed by the cover headline: “In This Issue: Why Are Smart Women Having Fewer Children?” Lee, in the latter article, is admirably played up as a stalwart example of farsighted and courageous leadership that dares to take measures to rectify envisaged future disaster. Significantly, he is cast in this favorable light with Arthur Balfour, the prime minister of Britain who moaned in 1905 that “Everything done towards opening careers to the lower classes did something towards the degeneration of the race.” The
eugenic nightmare of a representative of British high imperialism is echoed thus across the century—the cadences of alarm, fear, and threat remaining unchanged—by the postcolonial prime minister of (a formerly British) Singapore. Nor is Lee’s reductive faith in the genetic transmission of intelligence a subscription exclusive now to retrograde third world autocrats. Even as a redoubtable Jay Gould stirred himself to counter Lee’s misuse of scientific arguments (“Singapore’s Patrimony [and Matrimony]: The Illogic of Eugenics Knows Neither the Boundaries of Time nor Geography,” *Natural History*, May 1984), U.S. genetic determinists Thomas Bouchard, Jon Karlsson, and the seemingly indefatigable William Shockley, lent themselves to eager support of Lee’s vision: “The Singapore program, says Schockley, ‘is discriminative in a very constructive way. Discrimination is a valuable attribute. Discrimination means the ability to select a better wine from a poorer wine. The word has become degraded. And social engineering? As soon as you’ve got welfare programs, where you prevent improvident people from having their children starved to death, you are engaged in a form of social engineering. Of genetic engineering even. We have these things going on now, but we’re not looking at what effects they have, and that’s where the humanitarianism is irresponsible’” (see “The Great Debate Over Genes,” *Asiaweek*, March 2, 1984).

4. Lee has, on occasion, referred to the people of Singapore as “digits,” their inherited attributes as “hardware” to be “programmed” with “software” (ideology, education, culture, etc.). A cohort of his recently suggested, in public, that people “interface” more with one another to increase human communication and understanding. Typically, Lee’s National Day Rally speeches (the August 1983 one is no exception) begin with a report of the nation’s economic progress for the year in a detailed statistical format, the machinery of statistics representing, for him, and for his government, the power of a penultimate, absolute, and unarguable force. That his statistics in this particular instance are not immovable, however, is suggested by curious vagrancies in the figures subsequently cited, with confident authority, by various government individuals in his support (the “1.6” children born to graduate parents sometimes mutating, for instance, into “1.3” or “1.7” children).

5. Thomas Laqueur’s contention that feminine pleasure (and in particular the female orgasm) was historically read as essential to the economy of female reproductive sexuality suggests that its functional removal from that economy has specifically marked it as superfluous, irrelevant (“Organism, Generation, and the Politics of Reproductive Biology,” in Catherine Gallagher and Thomas Laqueur, eds., *The Making of the Modern Body: Sexuality and Society in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 1-41). The pleasurable and the economic are not only read as separate in Singapore today, but inimical (the trope of the machine allowing no role for pleasure, which by its very concession of uselessness, nonnecessity and excess disables the fantasies of order and regularity on which a local notion of the economic must depend): indeed, pleasure is tacitly suspected of subverting what would otherwise have been an economic reproductive sexuality, distorting this instead into its opposite, a self-indulgent noneconomy.

6. The *Straits Times*, publishing 31 of the 101 letters it received immediately following the Prime Minister’s speech, defended its decision not to publish the remaining 71 letters thus: “Sifting through the pile, one can detect some misunderstanding of Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew’s message. Most of the correspondents did not address their thoughts to the main issue: The better-educated segment of the population should be encouraged to have more children (that they are having now) to bring about a more balanced reproduction rate. Instead, they interpreted the speech as one more setback for the less intelligent in our society” (A. S. Yeong, “What the Others Said: An Analysis of Unpublished Letters on the PM’s National Day Rally Speech,” *The Straits Times* [Singapore], August 29, 1983). Among the letters published—no doubt because it was thought acute and useful—was an argument to do away with the right of every adult citizen to an equal vote in national elections: “If, at any stage, there is a threat to progress due to increasing numbers of incompetent people, government may even think of introducing a weightage factor for every vote that comes from a ‘qualified’ person so that power and administration are kept in the hands of truly competent persons. In a democratic set-up, the principle of ‘one person one vote’ is fast becoming a menace to society” (G. Rangarajan, “Maintain a Competent Majority,” letter to the *Straits Times* [Singapore], August 19, 1983).

7. The statement from the Prime Minister’s Office declares, in officialese borrowed from sociology: “Unless we break this low education large family cycle, we will have a small but significant minority of our people permanently trapped in a poverty subculture, whilst the rest of the population will move even further up the economic and social ladder” (Margaret Thomas, “Govt’s $10,000 Helping Hand for Low Income Families,” *The Sunday Monitor* [Singapore], June 3, 1984). The aim of this money incentive, according to the report, “is to encourage poorly-educated and low-income Singaporeans … to stop at two so that their children will have a better chance in life.” The writer of this article, driven to notice the coincidence of class and race in the encouragement of this particular group of citizens, nonetheless finds in it an opportunity to play up the dewy-eyed innocence and ingenuous charity of the proposal: “Thought it is not splinted out in the statement, a significant proportion of the people caught in the poverty trap are Malays … The relatively disadvantaged position of the Malay community is a matter of concern to both leaders of the community and the Government.”

8. The relevant clause in the Constitution, article 16(1)(a), reads: “there shall be no discrimination against any citizens of Singapore on the grounds only of religion, race, descent or place of birth … in the administration of any educational institution
maintained by a public authority and, in particular, the admission of pupils or students or the payment of fees." Of six unnamed "legal experts" consulted by one newspaper, four agreed that the privileging of certain children over others in the proposed new admissions policy was in direct contravention of this clause (see Siva Arasu, "Unconstitutional? What Legal Experts Say," The Sunday Times [Singapore], March 4, 1984). Protests against the scheme were lodged by one government Member of Parliament (Tan Ban Huat, "A Violation of Constitution, Says Dr. Toh," The Straits Times [Singapore], February 13, 1984); the lone opposition-party Member then in Parliament (see "House Throws Out Motion by Jeyon on Entry Scheme," The Straits Times [Singapore], March 14, 1984); the National University of Singapore; Singapore's Union in a petition carrying 3,000 signatures (Hedwig Alfred, "NUS Students' Union Wants to Mee Dr. Tay," The Straits Times [Singapore], March 14, 1984); and "500 undergraduates or nearly 40 per cent" of the student population of the Nanyang Technological Institute ("NTU Students Pen Protest Against Priority Plan: A Class System Would Arise, They Say," The Sunday Times [Singapore], February 19, 1984).

9. The Minister of State for Education at the time, Dr. Tai Eng Soon, repeatedly characterized the country's top schools (a description earned on the basis of examination results and the traditional reputation of the institutions) as schools that were merely "popular" as a consequence of public misconception (see "Equal Standard, Equal Chances" and Hedwig Alfred, "More Good News for Non-Grad Mums: All Primary Schools Are of Fairly Equal Standard—Dr. Tai," The Sunday Times [Singapore], March 4, 1984). In the midst of public anxiety, resentment, and anger over the proposed changes, the Minister admitted, in an interview with The Straits Times, that for all the fuss and trouble, only 200 children were eligible for the new privileges that year (June Tan, "Non-Graduates Will Also Benefit," The Straits Times [Singapore], January 24, 1984). Despite Tai's assurance in January 1984 that the new policy would be a permanent one, public opinion nevertheless triumphed, and the demise of the scheme was announced in March 1985: "Education Minister Dr. Tony Tan has decided that Singapore can do without the controversial priority scheme which favored the children of graduate mothers but made a whole lot of people angry" (see "Graduate Mum Scheme to Go," The Straits Times [Singapore], March 26, 1985).

10. In August 1983, Lee pronounced the larger number of male to female university graduates a source of satisfaction (Bob Ng, "PM: Watch This Trend: Talent Problem Will Worsen When Women Graduates Are No Longer in the Minority," The Straits Times [Singapore], August 22, 1983). By October, a change in university admissions policy was announced: "This more-girls-fewer-boys trend was worrying, [the Vice-Chancellor] said, on general principles. Asked if the new policy had anything to do with the Great Marriage Debate—that many women graduates are staying unmarried because a lot of male graduates are marrying less educated women—he said it was unfair to say so. But if [the National University of Singapore] continued to take in more girls than boys, the problem of unmarried women graduates will be aggravated" (June Tan and Abdulhamid Tarmugi, "NUS Relaxes Rule on Second Language: To Redress Imbalance between Male and Female Undergrads," The Sunday Times [Singapore], October 30, 1983).

11. "Whatever the changes, the two-child family will remain the norm, except that now well-educated parents who have the means to bring up children in a good home are encouraged to have more than two" (June Tan, "New Family Planning Slogan: Message Will Tell Different Things to Different People," The Straits Times [Singapore], January 31, 1984). A year later, in 1985, restrictions on abortion began to be publicly discussed (Irene Hoe, "When MPs Shake Their Heads Over Unwed Mums," The Straits Times [Singapore], March 17, 1985).

12. The information to be furnished compulsorily was formidable: "They must state whether the spouse has a pass degree or is an honors graduate, and if so, which class it was obtained and the name of the college or university. Those with spouses having a pass degree or lower qualifications have to furnish details of the examinations they sat for, the grades achieved, the name of the school and the year they got their certificates" (see "Officials Asked to Disclose Spouses' Education," The Straits Times [Singapore], September 9, 1983, and Teresa Ooi, "Singapore Diplomat Is Asked to Try Out Match-Making Service," The Straits Times [Singapore], September 18, 1983).


fear of feminine generative uncontrollability—the physical transfixing of the woman being itself an admission of her “controlling power” of reproduction (“Women in White, Men in Feminism,” Yale Journal of Criticism, 2, 2 [1989], p. 223).

15. “In the old days, matchmakers settled these affairs . . . I remember, as a young boy, hearing my grandmother talk, and she got my aunt married off. She was already 20 plus . . . and there was a widow with no children. Well educated, highly suitable. The result is a family of five, all of whom made it to university. My cousins . . . We are caught between and between, from an old world in which these matters are thoroughly considered and carefully investigated and properly arranged, to this new world of hit and miss” (“Talent for the Future”).

16. “When we adopted these policies they were manifestly right, enlightened and the way forward to the future. With the advantage of looking backwards, educating everybody, yes, absolutely right. Equal employment opportunities, yes, but we shouldn’t get women into jobs where they cannot, at the same time, be mothers. . . . You just can’t be doing a full-time, heavy job like that of a doctor or engineer and run a home and bring up children . . . we must think deep and long on the profound changes we have unwittingly set off” (“Talent for the Future”).

17. “Mr. Lee told an audience of university students that polygamy allowed the mentally and physically vibrant to reproduce. He said that all the society, successful men had more than one wife. Citing the example of former Japanese Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka as a man who had a wife and a mistress and children by both, he said the more Tanakas there were in Japan, the more dynamic its society would be” (Kong Sook Chin, “Woman MP Questions Notion of Polygamy,” The Sunday Times [Singapore], December 28, 1986).

18. In a forum conducted by the Sunday Times, two women, who went by the pseudonymous names of “Veronica” and “Mrs. Chan,” produced the following dialogue: “Mrs. Chan: ‘No woman would support polygamy.’ Veronica: ‘But there are women like me who would love to have children even though we’re unmarried.’ Mrs. Chan: ‘Yes, a lot of women would like that. Our laws should not penalize such women. Those who are professional and financially self-supporting are quite capable of bringing up their children alone. We should encourage single motherhood, allow such interested women to have artificial insemination.’ Veronica: ‘It needn’t be by artificial means.’ (Laughter)” (Tan Lian Choo, “Marriage and the Single Girl: The Sunday Times Roundtable,” The Sunday Times [Singapore], July 20, 1986).

19. Single motherhood appears to make patriarchy of the first-world as much is the third-world variety equally uneasy. In a Newsweek article (October 31, 1986) on what seems to be a highly successful program of state-supported single motherhood in Sweden (the title of which—“What Price Motherhood? An Out-of-Wedlock Baby Boom in Sweden”—strategically projects an affect of doubt and skeptical disapproval), Neil Gilbert, “who heads the Family Welfare Research Group at the University of California at Berkeley,” is quoted as saying piously: “If people aren’t willing to make commitments . . . you wonder what kind of society you will have down the line.”

20. Professor Tu Wei Ming of Harvard University, the government’s most prominent Confucian “expert,” has offered the view that “democratic institutions . . . are institutions that, if not diametrically opposed to, are at least in basic conflict with natural organizations such as family. . . . Some very deep-rooted Confucian-humanistic values are values that need to be fundamentally transformed to be totally compatible with democratic institutions.” The newspapers that published the text of Professor Tu’s talk glossed it thus: “Democratic institutions are opposed to basic Confucian ideas like the primacy of the family, an omnipresent government, and a preference for a community of trust rather than an adversarial relationship” (emphasis ours). See “When Confucianism Grapples with Democracy,” The Sunday Times [Singapore], November 27, 1988.

21. Singaporeans are commanded by the most prominent slogan in the campaign to “Speak More Mandarin, Less Dialects” (sic), as if Mandarin itself were not a dialect. Mandarin is now referred to as the “mother tongue” of all Chinese, though virtually all Chinese in Singapore, left to themselves, would likely identify their “mother tongues” as Teochew, Hokkien, Cantonese, Hainanese, Shanghainese, Hakka, or some other regional dialect spontaneously used in their family. Their official “mother tongue,” by contrast, has to be acquired through formal education, a large percentage of Chinese schoolchildren proving so inept at it as to require extensive extracurricular private tuition. The government has gone to great lengths, nonetheless, to promote Mandarin, including dubbing Cantonese feature films and soap operas from Hong Kong into Mandarin for Singapore television, and instituting a campaign to discourage taxi drivers—notoriously resistant to government regulation—from speaking in dialect. By the government’s own estimate, the measures have been successful; 87% of Chinese Singaporeans, they claim, can now speak Mandarin.

22. Recently, in defending a government policy to import up to 100,000 Chinese from Hong Kong to redress declining birth rates among Chinese Singaporeans, Lee repeated the scenario of crisis he sketched in inaugurating the “Great Marriage Debate” in marginally more delicate terms: “Let us just maintain the status quo. And we have to maintain it or there will be a shift in the economy, both the economic performance and the political backdrop which makes that economic performance possible” (see “Hongkongers’ Entry Won’t Upset Racial Mix,” The Straits Times Weekly Overseas Edition, August 26, 1989).


25. Significantly, the notion that East Asian industrial powers owe their prosperity to a Confucian essence circulates prominently also in the West, repeated so often in U.S. print and electronic media as to be naturalized as fact. The image of a ruthlessly efficient Confucianist Orient, with a highly commendable "communitarian value system," celebrated in the West chiefly, one suspects, for the purpose of promoting a particular reorganization within Western industrial societies, is shared by the Orient itself to promote a similar agenda: the efficient management of capitalism.

26. For instance, in The Gates of Heavenly Peace: The Chinese and Their Revolution, 1895-1980 (New York: Viking, 1981), Jonathan Spence quotes a writer who blamed "Chinese faith in the family for having destroyed all possibilities of true patriotism" (340), and cites Lu Xun's contempt for Confucian scholars, the fictionist asserting in a story that these Confucians had survived through the centuries because they "had never laid down their lives to preserve a government" (122).

27. Recently, speaking on the problem of escalating emigration from Singapore, First Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong introduced a plaintive inference of the trope of state as family: "No country is perfect just as no family is perfect. But we do not leave our family because we find it imperfect or our parents difficult" ("The Emigration Problem," The Straits Times [Singapore], October 6, 1989).

28. Personal immortality is sometimes claimed by the representatives of paternal essentialism as well. An issue of Newsweek (November 19, 1990) quoted Prime Minister Lee as saying, in concern over the future of Singapore: "Even from my sickbed, even if you are going to lower me in my grave and I feel that something is going wrong, I'll get up."

Chapter 20

From Rough Lads to Hooligans: Boy Life, National Culture and Social Reform

Seth Koven

In the autumn of 1893, Hugh Legge, a member of one of England's ancient aristocratic houses and a recent graduate of Trinity College, Oxford arrived in Bethnal Green, the heart of the slums of East London. He came to live among the poor as a resident in Oxford House, the high Anglican university settlement established less than a decade before. In an age of fashionable slumming, settlement houses enabled young Oxford and Cambridge graduates to "peep into" the nether world of darkest London, literally to settle among the poor, while recreating the relationships, comforts and rituals of the all-male world of the university. The men's settlement movement was a self-conscious attempt to create nation and community through vertical bonds of comradeship across class lines. Legge quickly established the Repton Club for boys in a notoriously unrespectable street and reserved an entire floor of the club for boxing, one of East Londoners' favorite pastimes. Legge found the respectability of collar-wearing boys "uninteresting," "not at all the sort my club was meant for." He referred to the "rough lads" who came to the club as "my lads" and "my boys."