

## State Formation, Hegemony, and Nanyang University in Singapore, 1953 to 1965\*

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### ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the connections among state formation, hegemony, and the Singapore government's policies toward Nanyang University--a private college operated by the local Chinese to perpetuate Chinese cultural tradition. When Singapore underwent decolonization after World War II, the state was under pressure to blunt the cultural distinctiveness of the Chinese residents and subdue the growth of Nanyang University. However, after the British installed popular elections, the state, which legitimacy depended increasingly on the support of Chinese people, had to avoid being too oppressive against the college. To resolve this dilemma, the ruling authorities absorbed Nanyang University and transformed it into a state institution, yet at the same time endeavored to dilute its "Chineseness." This historical case suggests that state formation may entail contradictory demands and that scholars analyzing state hegemony should conceptually differentiate the dimensions of institution and culture.

Key Words : hegemony, state formation, higher education, chinese culture,  
Singapore

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Using the notions of hegemony and state formation, I analyze the strategies adopted by the Singapore government to handle Nanyang University, a defiant private Chinese college, from 1953 to 1965 in this article. Hegemony, according to Antonio Gramsci, is a form of domination built upon the culture and institutions of the subordinated. When this mode of unequal power relations is formed, the ruling group, instead of sweeping away the culture and institutions of the ruled, incorporate and then re-organize them into a form that consolidates their own advantageous position (Apple, 2000; Bennett, 1986; Boccock, 1986; Gramsci, 1971; Mouffe, 1979; Sassoon, 1987; Williams, 1980). The idea of hegemony presupposes that domination is built by giving concessions to the subordinated group. This accommodating approach enables the ruling class to transform the values and cognition of the subordinated group, split oppositional forces, and win consent from at least some fractions of the dominated group. However, we should avoid seeing hegemony in static terms because the domination resulting from hegemonic strategies is merely a temporary condition of power equilibrium. When new confrontations arise or antagonistic forces garner more social support, the ruling group must readjust its strategy in order to prolong its dominant position (Mouffe, 1979; Jessop, 1982, 1990).

State formation is the historical process through which the ruling group struggles to construct a local or national identity, integrate society, win the consent of subordinated groups, and outmaneuver political antagonists.<sup>1</sup> The project of state building is complicated. In the first place, like all other interventions of the state, there is no guarantee that the policies used for state formation will achieve their intended goals (Dale, 1989; Jessop 1990). Second, as the ruling authorities consistently face multiple and conflicting demands, their project of state formation entails multiple and at times contradictory “core problems” (Carnoy and Levin, 1985; Dale, 1989; Dale, 1997; and Offe, 1984). Therefore the ruling group can seldom resolve all problems of state formation simultaneously. Inevitably, the ruling regime can handle only some challenges and must leave other core problems unresolved. Third, the state can never satisfy all of the contradictory demands from civil society. The steps taken by the ruling regime for state formation usually win legitimacy from

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<sup>1</sup> This definition of state formation is mainly borrowed from Green (1990).

some quarters but provoke resentment from others (Omi and Winant, 1986, pp. 70-86; Wong, 1999, pp. 41-2). In this sense, the process of state formation is always contradictory, ongoing, and unfinished.

The relationship between hegemony and state formation is by no means direct and mechanical especially when the factor of racial politics is taken into consideration. In monoracial milieus, ruling regimes can more easily construct state power through incorporating and then remaking the culture and institutions of the dominated group. But in multiracial societies, some demands for state formation can limit the state's capacity for cultural incorporation. If the state accommodated the culture of one of the subordinated ethnic community, it would perpetuate racial segregation and elicit opposition from other racial groups. This inability to engage in cultural incorporation can subject the ruling regime to deeper contradictions in state formation: It can alienate the racial groups whose culture and institutions are not accommodated by the state and allow antagonistic forces to incite anti-state actions by exploiting the resultant sense of resentment (Wong, 1999, pp. 39-41).

To avoid leaving the above theoretical arguments at an abstract level, this article will demonstrate the conjunctural and contradictory connection between hegemony and state formation by discussing the historical case of Nanyang University in Singapore. Nanyang University, or Nantah in its Chinese abbreviation, was a private college inaugurated by the Chinese communities in Singapore and the Federation of Malaya to perpetuate the Chinese culture and language. Since Nantah transmitted Chinese-centered values and obstructed the formation of a common Singapore consciousness, the state sought to disenfranchise it by means of many measures. Nevertheless, this strategy of the state alienated the Chinese people, exposed Nantah to Communist infiltration, and allowed antagonists to accuse the state as anti-Chinese. To escape this impasse, the ruling authorities employed the strategy of institutional incorporation without cultural accommodation, which meant absorbing Nantah as a state institution yet discarding the Chinese culture it instilled.

## Background

Before World War II, British colonizers in Singapore had offered higher education almost exclusively in English. There were two higher learning establishments in the prewar era. The King Edward VII College of Medicine was founded in 1904 and provided medical training. Raffles College was inaugurated in 1928 and offered primarily three-year courses in Art and Science. These two colleges admitted only students from English schools (Cheeseman, 1979, pp. 135-6; Singapore Department of Education, 1946, p. 2; Tregonning, 1990, pp. 1-4). Lacking avenues to local colleges, many students completing education in Chinese middle schools, which were generally private institutions maintained by local Chinese residents, went to mainland China for higher education (Cheng, 1949). As universities in China were at that time deeply enmeshed in political struggles (Cleverly, 1985; Hu, 1988; Li, L., 1994; Pepper, 1996), these external ties offered political forces in China a gateway to influence Chinese schools in Singapore (Gopinathan, 1974; Tan, 1997).

The British authorities continued the English-dominant policy of higher education after World War II. In 1946 they rehabilitated both the King Edward VII College of Medicine and Raffles College (Singapore Department of Education, 1946, pp. 132-3). Three years later, the Singapore government followed advice from the Carr-Saunders Commission and founded the University of Malaya (UM) (Tregonning, 1990, p. 4). The UM, which accepted only students with a sound background in the English language, excluded students from vernacular schools (*NCJP*, 23 April 1950; *SCJP*, 9 November 1950). This situation prolonged the reliance of Chinese schools upon China for higher education and impeded state formation in postwar Singapore.

In September 1945, the British returned to Singapore after an absence of more than three years caused by a humiliating defeat by the Japanese in 1942. After resuming control, the colonizers were confronted by furious anti-imperial mobilizations at both the local and international levels (Lau, 1990; Tarling, 1993). In addition, the British were haunted by severe animosity between the Chinese and Malays. During the Japanese occupation, the Chinese had been treated brutally while the Malays were solicited by the Japanese to be ruling partners. The Chinese

ruthlessly retaliated against the Malays, resulting in bloody interracial brawls during and after the war (Cheah, 1983; Krastoska, 1997). Furthermore, the British's dominance was challenged by the Malayan Communist Party (MCP). The MCP spearheaded underground anti-Japanese struggle after the British surrendered in February 1942. Through this campaign, the Communists won the hearts and minds of many Chinese and developed into a formidable force. In the immediate postwar years, the MCP fought using constitutional means. But in 1948, after a string of bitter conflicts with the British, the MCP went underground and launched violent insurgency. The Communists aimed to oust the British and build a "Malayan Democratic Republic" (Cheah, 1983; Clutterbuck, 1984).

This scenario put the British under new set of demands in state formation. Responding to resilient anti-imperial mobilization, London began decolonizing Singapore. This move necessitated the construction of a Singapore-centered consciousness shared by all local ethnic communities--the Chinese, the Malays, and the Indians. Also, to preclude social disintegration, the British wanted to moderate tensions between the Chinese and the Malays (Hill and Lian, 1995). Furthermore, to prevent Malaya from "turning red," London maneuvered to subdue the MCP (Stubbs, 1989). With these developments, a linkage between local Chinese schools and universities in China, which inculcated Chinese patriotism and, starting in 1949, a pro-Communist outlook, was antithetical to state formation in Singapore. To sever this tie, in the late 1940s the British restricted travel and passport regulations.<sup>2</sup> This move effectively barred many students from leaving for China, but had the effect of escalating local Chinese's demands for a Chinese university (Van der Kroef, 1964).

Notwithstanding this circumstance, specific conditions of state formation inhibited the state from providing higher education in the medium of Chinese. Since the British had to mix the Chinese with other racial groups and construct a common Singapore-centered identity, it was crucial for the ruling authorities to suppress the "Chineseness" of the Chinese residents. In addition, after World War II the Malays, the dominant group in the neighboring Peninsula of Malaya, launched a strong nationalistic, anti-Chinese movement (Amoroso, 1998). To avoid provoking the

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<sup>2</sup> *SB*, 4 August 1949 and Singapore Political Report for September, 1950, CO 825/82/2.

Malays and worsening racial tension, the Singapore state was under strong compulsion to prevent the “over-formation” of the Chinese’s ethnic identity. Furthermore, after 1949, the Singapore government, with more than 70% of its citizenry racially Chinese, had to allay the fears of neighboring countries such as the Federation of Malaya and Indonesia that the small island was a “Little Beijing” deployed by the Chinese Communist government for political subversion in Southeast Asia (McBeath, 1983, pp. 232-5; Smith, 1988). This external dimension of racial politics added to the impetus for the Singapore to block the founding of any Chinese college.

### The Making of the Disenfranchization Strategy

In early 1953, Tan Lark Sye, the president of the Hokkien Huay Kuan--the largest Chinese clansmen’s association in Singapore--proposed to establish a university using Chinese as the medium of instruction. This proposal was advanced, Tan pronounced, because after mainland China came under Communist control, students graduating from Chinese middle schools in Singapore had no avenue to university education. Tan reiterated that the proposed university was essential for the survival of Chinese culture in Singapore and the Malay Peninsula (*SCJP*, 18 January 1953; Tan, 1972, p. 15). The Chinese communities on both sides of the Johore Causeway quickly supported this plan. In February 1953, the Hokkien Huay Kuan donated 500 acres of land for the college (*SCJP*, 3 February 1953). Soon thereafter, a conference held by the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce--the most overarching Chinese association in Singapore--and some 279 Chinese organizations installed a preparatory committee to found the suggested university (*SCJP*, 13 February 1953; Tan, 1972, p. 28). The proposed college was soon named Nanyang University (Nantah). Afterward, the preparatory committee urged Chinese bodies throughout Singapore and the Federation of Malaya to raise funds for Nantah (*SCJP*, 3 March 1953). Considering the proposed university as vitally important in safeguarding their language and culture, the Chinese people in both territories responded with zeal (Wilson, 1978, p. 148).

These moves of the Chinese community immediately provoked negative reactions from other racial communities. Days after Tan's advocacy, a spokesperson from the Independence of Malaya Party commented that a Chinese university would create more "little Beijings and Nanjings" in Malaya and preserve Chinese permanently as a separate entity. *Warta Negara*, a Malay newspaper in Penang, condemned the idea of Chinese university as dangerous (*SB*, 29 January 1953). Some Malay revivalists also countered Tan's suggestion by advocating a Malay university--another racially segregated institution.<sup>3</sup> In March 1953, E.E.C. Thuraisingham, a Malay and the Member of Education of the Federation government, publicly disparaged the proposed Chinese university (*SB*, 26 March 1953).

The British authorities also viewed the proposed Chinese university with apprehension. As early as January 1953, the Malayan Political Intelligence Report summarized the motives behind the project as restoring Chinese racial power.<sup>4</sup> Later, a secret paper commented that should the colonial government endorse Nanyang University, people would interpret it as a direct encouragement to those who pledged themselves to a Chinese government, either Beijing or Formosa.<sup>5</sup> Given that the Chinese-educated were generally regarded as pro-Communist, the British also worried that Nantah, the apex of Chinese education, would be used by the Malayan Communist Party for subversive activities. Consequently, Malcolm MacDonald, who oversaw the British's anti-Communist maneuvers in Southeast Asia, called upon the Malayan Chinese not to rush to finalize plan for the proposed college (*SB*, 29 January 1953). MacDonald soon saw that he had not overreacted. The Malayan Communist Party urged its followers to support Nanyang University,<sup>6</sup> and leftist students from Chinese middle schools actively fund-raised for the college (*SP*, 26 and 31 December 1953 and 7 January, 6 and 25 February, and 6 March 1954).

Witnessing these ominous signs, the colonial authorities might have considered "killing off" Nantah. However, as the university enjoyed overwhelming backing from

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<sup>3</sup> Extract from FM Sav. 642, 11 April 1953, CO 1022/346.

<sup>4</sup> Malayan Political Intelligence Report for January 1953, in CO 1022/346.

<sup>5</sup> Secret Paper: Nan Yang University, Singapore, in CO 1022/346.

<sup>6</sup> Secret Paper: Nan Yang University, Singapore, in CO 1022/346.

the Chinese masses, they decided not to be overtly oppressive.<sup>7</sup> Instead, they followed a policy of disenfranchization. They rejected the application to register Nantah as a university. Later, the preparatory commission of Nantah shifted tack to register the college as a private company. The British, wary of infuriating the Chinese masses, approved such registration only reluctantly. However, the colonial authorities insisted on withholding financial assistance from the University. They also refused to recognize officially the qualifications that Nantah conferred (Ong, 1983/84, p. 3). Using the tactic of procrastination, the British suggested that such recognition could be proffered only when the university proved to have sufficiently high academic standards (Ong, 1983/84, pp. 9-10). This policy disadvantaged students at Nantah in terms of employment and further education opportunities. To smooth out this disenfranchization tactic, the ruling authorities urged the University of Malaya (UM) to accommodate students from Chinese middle schools. They hoped that once the UM had taken in a considerable number of students from Chinese institutions, Nantah would become unnecessary.<sup>8</sup>

This disenfranchization approach had its limitations in terms of state formation. As it did not seek to compromise with the Chinese community, it hamstrung the British from incorporating Nantah and then shaping it as Singapore-centered and non-communal. Also, this strategy confirmed people's judgment that the British authorities were prejudiced against Chinese culture and education. The widespread sense of frustration that this tactic generated handed the Communists opportunities to enlarge their support base by portraying the British as anti-Chinese.

## Decolonization and Contradiction

Subsequent developments revealed that the founding of Nantah played havoc with state formation in Singapore. In 1955, when the university held the first entrance examination for its preparatory classes, only four of 605 participants were non-Chinese (*SB*, 10 March 1955). These figures clearly indicated that Nantah would

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<sup>7</sup> CO 1022/346.

<sup>8</sup> Secret Paper: Nanyang University, Singapore, in CO 1022/346.



be racially segregated. In addition, the first batch of senior academic staff hired by Nantah was predominantly composed of China-born scholars. Almost all of them had spent a substantial part of their education and professional careers in China and had no previous record of research on Singapore, Malaya, or Southeast Asia (Singapore Nanyang Cultural Publishing, 1956, pp. 189-91). As such, the professors at Nantah were extremely China-oriented in outlook and the worldview they imparted to students was unlikely to be Singapore-centered.

Events in the mid-1950s also shattered the British's previous hopes of steering Nantah onto non-Communist terrain by means of friendly counsel and assistance.<sup>9</sup> In early 1954 Lin Yu-Tang, a prominent Chinese scholar, was appointed by the Nantah preparatory commission as its first chancellor. The Chinese community welcomed this appointment (Tan, 1972, p. 37). The British also liked this development because under the leadership of Lin, who was ardently anti-Communist, Nantah had a better chance of becoming a politically benign institution. However, the leftists attacked Lin after he publicized his intention to make Nantah an anti-Communist base in Southeast Asia. They disparaged Lin as appropriating the university for an ulterior political cause (*SP*, 14 and 28 August 1954). This assault continued after Lin assumed the chancellorship of the university (*SP*, 23 and 25 November 1954). Lin's popularity waned. Later, disagreements between Lin and the chief financiers of Nantah about the development of Nantah deteriorated into bitter conflicts. Lin resigned in April 1955 (Tan, 1972, pp. 37-48). This incident underlined the leftists' capability to influence Nanyang University from the outside.

More menacingly, leftists infiltrated Nantah. The university admitted many leaders of the Singapore Chinese Middle School Students Union--a Communist front organization. These radical students sought to found the Student Union of Nanyang University (SUNU) (Government of the Federation of Malaysia, 1964, p. 5). They also organized *Hsueh-Hsih* (learning) groups, formed a number of student organizations, and launched many pro-Communist publications (Lee, 1996). Reports from Kuala Lumpur also revealed that the SUNU had strong ties with external Communist groups, such as the International Union of Students and the Communist

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<sup>9</sup> Establishment of Nanyang University at Singapore, 26 April 1954, CO 1022/346.

Clandestine Organization in Sarawak (Government of the Federation of Malaysia, 1964, pp. 14-5).

When all evidence indicated to the British that Nanyang University was becoming a malignant institution, the University of Malaya (UM) made negligible progress in absorbing students from Chinese middle schools. The UM opened a Chinese Department in 1953. However, offering only a few select classes, that department provided students from Chinese schools no chances for admission to the UM (*SCJP*, 13 October 1953). In April 1955, the UM resolved to allow students from Chinese schools to sit for its entrance examination. However, it required six passes, including English, in the Senior III Exam--the school leaving-examination for students completing six years of education in Chinese middle schools--and two years of further learning in Post Senior Middle III class as prerequisites.<sup>10</sup> Students from Chinese schools were unlikely to find that plan attractive, because, should they advance along this path, they would be aged 23 or 24 by the time they completed these Post Senior classes.<sup>11</sup> This minor progress would not make Nantah an unnecessary institution in Singapore.

In addition to these limited measures, a series of changes further inhibited the Singapore government from taking oppressive actions against Nantah. In 1954, the British accepted the Rendel Report and set into motion decolonization. According to that report, the general election held in 1955 would bring about a largely representative Legislative Assembly and a ministerial form of government (Yeo and Lau, 1991, p. 127). Equally important, the British introduced a system of automatic registration of voters for that election. This change enlarged the electorate from 76,000 to 300,299 and led to a predominance of Chinese voters. (Yeo, 1973, pp. 256 and 259). In this context, most political forces struggling to inherit power from the British had to win the goodwill of the Chinese, who made up more than 70% of population in Singapore.

In 1955, the Labour Front (LF) unexpectedly “won” the General Election after securing only 26% of the total votes. After assuming office the LF government,

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<sup>10</sup> Monthly Report by Chief Inspector of Chinese Schools for the month of March 1955, SCA15/54.

<sup>11</sup> Conference of Directors of Education of British Territories in Southeast Asia, 13-15<sup>1</sup> September, 1954. In CO 1030/47.

which lacked a strong mass base, was desperate to gain more backing from the Chinese.<sup>12</sup> These transformations prompted the state to modify its Nantah policy. In October 1958 the LF government headed by Lim Yew Hock announced that it would subsidize the university by about \$840,000, with about half for ongoing expenditures and the other half for student bursaries (*SCJP*, 31 October 1958). It was the first time that a Singapore government financially sponsored Nantah. In March 1959, the LF government bestowed on Nantah the status of university by enacting the Nanyang University Ordinance (*SCJP*, 5 March 1959). This new policy was adopted because Lim Yew Hock wanted to use Nantah as a political pawn to secure greater support from the Chinese masses in the 1959 general election (Ong, 1983/84, pp. 11-5).

Nevertheless, the LF did not entirely abandon the disenfranchization approach. It still declined to grant full recognition to degrees conferred by Nantah. Continuing the tactic of procrastination, Lim Yew Hock established the Prescott Commission in January 1959 to evaluate the advisability of such recognition (Ong, 1983/84, pp. 3 and 16). The LF also failed to get a firm grip on the university--the Nanyang University Ordinance enacted by the government allowed only three of 27 members of the council to be state-appointed (Singapore Government, 1959, p. 9). This proportion did not give the ruling authorities a strong presence in the highest management body of Nantah. Obviously, the minor concessions granted by the LF were insufficient to entice Nantah to relinquish more power.

## The People's Action Party and Deeper Contradictions

Political developments in the late 1950s gave the Chinese residents in Singapore an even stronger position to determine the fortunes of all contending political parties. The ordinance for the 1959 general election provided for an all-elected Legislative Assembly formed under the system of compulsory voting. Along with the new

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<sup>12</sup> The LF won that election only because the traditional pro-British political parties such as the Progressive Party had no strategy to build connection with the Chinese masses; the fledging People's Action Party, wishing only to be an opposition in the Legislative Assembly, fielded only four candidates; and the Progressive and Democratic parties split the conservatives' votes (Yeo and Lau, 1991, pp. 132-3; Wong, 1999, p. 88).

Citizenship Ordinance passed in 1957, the government virtually enfranchised all previously excluded “Chinese aliens” (Ong, 1975, pp. 61-3). These changes further spurred the contending political forces to reckon with the interests of the Chinese masses and to pledge to adopt a concessionary Nantah policy.

Triumph in the general election in 1959 enthroned the People’s Action Party (PAP) as the new ruler in Singapore. The PAP comprised two groups—the English-educated moderates (such as Lee Kuan Yew and Toh Chin Chye) and the Chinese-educated radicals (such as Lim Chin Siong and Fong Swee Suan) (Bellows, 1970, pp. 18-21). After assuming office, the party faced a dilemma in terms of Nantah policy because of the conflicting demands of state formation. The PAP, eager to hold the hearts and minds of the Chinese masses, was compelled to abandon the disenfranchising approach. Thus, a spokesperson from the PAP pledged to support the Nantah (*SCJP*, 2 June 1959). This pressure for concession intensified in 1961 when the extremely popular Chinese-speaking leaders split with the English-educated group and formed a new party—the Barisan Socialis (BS) (Lee, 1996; Yeo and Lau, 1991). Furthermore, being consistently charged with discriminating against Chinese education by antagonists both from the left (the BS) and the right (e.g., the Singapore People’s Alliance),<sup>13</sup> the PAP had another reason to avoid being branded as anti-Nantah.

Nevertheless, other demands of state formation swayed the PAP to toughen its Nantah policy. After becoming an internally self-governing state in 1959, the logical next step for Singapore would have been independence (Yeo and Lau, 1991). This scenario made it of the utmost important to inculcate in the minds of the people a common national consciousness. In addition, with the PAP actively pursuing a merger between Singapore and the Federation of Malaya, Lee Kuan Yew and his associates were keen to dilute the Chineseness of Singapore and ensure that the government across the Johore Causeway did not consider the language and educational policies of the island unacceptable (Ong, 1983/84, pp. 23-4). Nantah, being racially segregated and China-centered, was incongruous with both these goals.

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<sup>13</sup> For the leftists’ assault against the PAP, see various issues of *The Plebeians* (the official publications of the BS) from 1963 to 1965. For the attack from the right, see pertinent reports from *SCJP*, 4-18 July 1963.

Furthermore, evidence revealed that leftists had planted a very strong influence in Nantah. If the PAP did not rout this antagonist, the university would continue to be an anti-PAP stronghold (Lee, 1996). To handle these contradictory pressures of state formation, the PAP adopted a strategy of institutional incorporation without cultural accommodation, which meant absorbing Nantah as a state institution yet diluting its Chinese culture.<sup>14</sup>

## Incorporating Nantah

The PAP sought to tighten its control over Nantah after its triumph in the 1959 general election. In July 1959, it formed a commission headed by Gwee Ah Leng to review the Prescott Report and make recommendations for reforming the university (*SCJP*, 24 July 1959). The Prescott Report had been produced under the previous government to examine the advisability of officially recognizing degrees conferred by Nantah. Judging Nanyang University as “lacking in most of the essential requirements of a university,” it recommended against recognizing its degrees (Singapore Government Printer, 1959, p. 27). In February 1960 the Gwee Report was published. It recommended that the government and the university “work together” to replace its existing administration. The report also proposed as a first step the installation of a provisional council of representatives from Nantah and the government (*SCJP*, 10 February 1960). The PAP accepted the Gwee Report, but Nantah did not (*SCJP*, 11 and 24 February; 3 and 5 March; and 14 April 1960). A stalemate lasting about two years ensued. In October 1961, Nantah instituted its

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<sup>14</sup> This argument does not presuppose that culture and institutions can be separated in real world. I endorse the point of William H. Sewell, Jun., who deconstructed the distinction between material and culture and averred that the materiality of social life, institutions included, could have never come into being without the constitutive inputs of symbols, concepts, and ideas (Sewell, 1995). However, I do not see the distinction between institution and culture in my thesis of institutional incorporation without cultural accommodation as problematic because the notion of culture in my argument refers specifically to Chinese people’s language and ethnic identity. Also, I am not suggesting that institutional incorporation did not involve ideas and symbols; nor am I claiming that the cultural suppression approach of the Singapore government had no institutional base.

University Council by picking up the almost forgotten Nanyang University Ordinance enacted by the previous government in 1959. Shortly afterward, they asked the government to send three representatives to serve on the Council. As mentioned, the Nanyang University Ordinance prescribed the installation of such a council as the highest decision-making body for the university. This body, however, had not been previously formed (*SB*, 18 October 1961). Nantah took this initiative at this juncture probably because the 1959 ordinance permitted the government to send only three delegates to the 27-member Council. This proportion of official representatives on the council was much lower than that proposed by the Gwee Report. To gain entree into the Nantah administration, the PAP yielded and sent three delegates (*SCJP*, 18 May 1962).

The PAP employed stronger action against Nanyang University after the events of the 1963 general election. The Barisan Socialis (BS), the PAP's chief adversary formed by Chinese-educated radicals breaking away from the PAP, fielded 46 candidates--no fewer than ten of them alumni of Nantah--to contend for the seats of the Legislative Assembly (*SCJP*, 13 September 1963). During the election campaign, Tan Lark Sye, founder and chair of Nantah, and students from the university gave tremendous support to the ex-Nantah candidates (Lee, 1976, pp. 35, 49-50; Lau, 1998, p. 38). With this backing, the BS won 32.9% of total votes and 13 of 51 seats. Although the BS failed to dislodge the PAP, its performance was impressive--especially when we take into account that the BS had been disadvantaged by the PAP through a variety of tricks, including arresting the most popular radical candidates before the election (Lee, 1976, pp. 20-2).

Days after winning the 1963 election, the PAP worked to clear the way to overhaul Nantah. As a first step, they revoked the citizenship of Tan Lark Sye, who was accused of "collaborating with the Communist group in Nantah" and "playing the racial card" in the election (*SCJP*, 23 September 1963; *SB*, 2 October 1963). This pressure ultimately forced Tan to relinquish his chairmanship of the Council of Nanyang University (*SB*, 2 October 1963). The PAP also raided Nantah and used the Preservation of Public Security Ordinance as the grounds for arresting a number of its students and alumni (*SCJP*, 27 and 28 September 1963). To mollify the public, the PAP emphasized that its actions went against the subversive elements of Nantah, not

the university *per se*. The government also urged the university to reopen negotiations with the government. Once Nantah was successfully reformed, the government promised, it would be subsidized on terms equal to the University of Singapore and recognized by the governments in both Singapore and the Federation of Malaya (*SCJP*, 24, 25, and 27 September 1963). The PAP and Nantah soon re-started the conversation (*SCJP*, 3 October 1963).

After several months' negotiation, the PAP government took a big step forward to incorporate the institution of Nanyang University. In early June 1964, the liaison committee between the government and Nantah agreed to reform the university on the basis of the Nanyang University Ordinance and the Gwee Report. The liaison committee also agreed to found a new council. To sweeten the reform plan, the government promised to keep Chinese as the medium of instruction of Nantah and give the university treatment equal to the University of Singapore after reform (*SCJP*, 6 June 1963). These agreements, perceived by many students of Nantah as infringing the autonomy of the university, provoked protests. To soften their resistance, the government announced to give Nantah scientific equipment and library books of a value of S\$1 million and to subsidize the tuition of Nantah students who held Singapore citizenship (*SB*, 24 June 1964). On 4 July 1964, Nanyang University formally accepted the agreements of the liaison committee (*SCJP*, 5 July 1964). These triggered resignations of some of the most eloquent Nantah leaders, including Chuang Chu Lin and Lau Geok Swee (*SCJP*, 9 July 1964; and *SB*, 8 July 1964).

In the same month the new Nanyang University Council was formed (*SCJP*, 21 July 1964). Members of this body included 12 representatives from the sponsors of the university, three professors, two alumni, five "prominent members of the society," and six government delegates. The sponsors of Nantah still enjoyed numerical superiority on the new council. However, this new group of representatives was "far more disposed to seek agreement and compromise." They were not insurmountable obstacles blocking the PAP's reorganization plan (*Straits Times*, editorial, 8 June 1964. In Ong, 1983/84, p. 53).

After reaching an agreement with the Nantah administration, the PAP intensified its actions against subversive elements inside the university. In July 1964, the university expelled 101 students, dismissed 75 staff members, and warned 150

students (*Plebeians*, 18 July 1964; *SB*, 22 July 1964). A month later, the university authorities dissolved the Student Union of Nanyang University (*SB*, 19 August 1964). In March 1965, the PAP ordered the disbanding of the student co-operative society and a number of other student organizations at Nantah. They also promulgated more rules to regulate participation in student organizations (*Plebeians*, 3, 20, and 27 March 1965).

The PAP government also weakened the autonomy of Nantah in student recruitment. In October 1964, it announced that from 1965 on, applicants with qualifications from the Upper Secondary II Examination, a test conducted by the Singapore Ministry of Education to evaluate students finishing six years of education in Chinese middle schools, would be exempted from the entrance examination to Nantah (*SCJP*, 11 and 13 October 1964). Almost simultaneously, Huang Ying Jung, who was very willing to cooperate with the government, was appointed as the new vice-chancellor (*SCJP*, 12 February 1965).

To preempt unified resistance from the Chinese community, the PAP offered improved material support to Nantah. In November 1964, the ruling regime announced that S\$2 million had been earmarked to build a new library for the university (*SCJP*, 19 November 1964). One year later, the government improved the terms of service of Nantah staff members. The new scale of payment made the salaries of teaching and other personnel at Nanyang University equal to their counterparts at the University of Singapore (*SCJP*, 23 December 1965). When unveiling this scheme, the PAP also made public that the government had put S\$ 3.8 million to support Nantah since the reform plan was launched in mid-1964 (*SCJP*, 18 December 1965). In 1968, the PAP finally officially recognized degrees from Nanyang University (Ong, 1983/84, pp. 51-65).

## De-Sinicizing Nantah

Although the PAP government, using a carrot and stick approach, sought to incorporate Nanyang University into a state institution, it was far less compromising when dealing with the Chinese culture embodied in the university. In 1965, the government appointed a committee headed by Professor Wang Gungwu, then a



history professor at the University of Malaya, to review the academic standards and curriculum at Nantah. Professor Wang was a prominent scholar completely proficient in both Chinese and English and extremely knowledgeable about both Chinese and western culture. Under his leadership, the committee published a report in September 1965. That report, known as Wang Gungwu Report, made the following comment on the communal nature of Nantah:

*the University has so far served only a limited purpose...without fundamental objectives of higher education in a plural society. It has so far catered only for students from the Chinese medium schools in this country. We feel that this function is too narrow and a great deal can be done to re-orientate the University.*  
(Nanyang University, 1965, p. 1)

To make Nantah less culturally segregated, the same report gave many recommendations to improve the curriculum of the university. It advised the correction of the Chinese-centered tendency of language training in Nantah, as the following remark shows:

*It is ... not in the interest of the graduates themselves to be proficient only in Chinese nor is it in the interest of the country for the University to continue producing graduates of this kind. We feel strongly that the graduates should have fluency in the National Language [Malay] as well as English if the University is to play its full and effective role in the country. (p. 2)*

To correct this bias, it suggested:

*language courses should be carefully drawn up to meet the needs of different groups of students. Students with proficiency in Chinese should not be required to take freshman Chinese. (p. 2)*

And it proposed to establish a Department of Malay Studies.

In addition, the Wang Gungwu Report commented on the Sino-centric tendency of Nantah's curriculum. It suggested that the university de-Sinicize its official knowledge by placing Chinese language and culture in the context of Singapore and Malaysia:

*[The Department of Chinese Language and Literature should] place greater emphasis on courses pertinent to the culture, literature, and linguistic background of the Malaysian Chinese. The students should be prepared to adapt themselves to the language conditions of the country, and be equipped to study subjects like the nature, distribution and use of local Chinese dialects, Chinese society in Malaysia and the relationship between Chinese and Malay. It is hoped that graduates of the Department will play their part in contributing towards the maintenance of inter-communal harmony in the country. (p. 14)*

Furthermore, it recommended that

*courses in the Department of History should deal primarily with the history of our own region and that this be supported by the study of the histories of other parts of the world. We find the existing courses resting too heavily on the side of Chinese History. While we recognize the importance of Chinese history, we cannot agree that it should be given so much prominence at the expense of Southeast Asia and particularly Malaysian history. (p. 14)*

The Report urged students from the Colleges of Science and Commerce not to be too predominantly Chinese in outlook or linguistic capacity:

*Science students who in our local conditions must of necessity rely on works in the English Language for the pursuit of their study should be encouraged to use English in essay writing, laboratory reports and in the examinations. They should also be given every opportunity to improve their standard of English so that they have no difficulty in reading the latest publications by the time they are admitted to the honours classes. Students should take the appropriate courses offered by the Language Centre and make full use of the facilities provided by the Centre. (p. 25)*

In addition:

*In the context of Malaysia, where English is still the commercial and legal language, the importance of the language should not be overlooked. In addition, many reference books on business subjects which the students must consult frequently are written in English. Also it would be increasingly important for the students to know the National Language [Malay]. We therefore recommend that*

*the Language Center establish a language laboratory for the College of Commerce to assist the students to acquire a good working knowledge of the necessary languages in the shortest possible time. (p. 35)*<sup>15</sup>

The government endorsed these recommendations. Days after the publication of the Wang Gungwu Report, a Chinese newspaper revealed that the PAP government had established a committee to prepare a program for the smooth implementation of the report (*SB*, 22 September 1965).

## Effects on State Formation: Some Preliminary Views

Like many other state policies, this approach of institutional incorporation without cultural accommodation brought about multiple and contradictory repercussions. This strategy served the PAP's state formation project in several ways. It gave the state greater leverage to subdue students and staff who were of leftist persuasion. Through giving Nantah better material support and official recognition, the PAP improved its popularity, at least temporarily, from some quarters of the Chinese community. The concessions granted by the PAP also split the social movement of Nantah and isolated the leftists. For instance, when leaders of Nanyang University accepted financial assistance from the PAP in June 1964 (*SCJP*, 23 June 1964), the leftist students staged a hunger strike to protest this decision (*Plebeians*, 4 July 1964). This conflict as well as subsequent quarrels between the two parties (*SCJP*, 5 July 1964 ; *Plebeians*, 11 July 1964) indicated that a wedge had been driven between the leftists and the leaders of Nantah.

Nevertheless the tactic of institutional incorporation without cultural accommodation had its dysfunctional consequences as far as state formation was concerned. In the first place, actions taken by the PAP to persecute some of the popular leaders of Nantah, such as Tan Lark Sye, arrest leftist students, and remove

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<sup>15</sup> My analysis of the Wang Gungwu Report in this paper does not suggest that Professor Wang had any anti-Chinese intentions. I consider that Wang's bicultural and bilingual background made it natural for him to advise Nantah to be less monocultural. Also, I am not making a value judgment on whether Wang was right or wrong.

Chinese culture from the curriculum of Nanyang University had alienated many Singaporean Chinese, especially those educated in Chinese schools. Coupled with other actions against Chinese education and language, these Nantah policies of the PAP caused anguish and a strong sense of cultural crisis among the Chinese-educated (Kwok, 1995; Y. J. Li, 1994; Sai, 1997). Even today, many Chinese-educated still regard the PAP's Nantah policy as to blame for the demise of Chinese schools in Singapore--or, in more accusatory wordings, "beheading Chinese education."

These lingering sentiments of anger and frustration could be easily exploited by oppositional force for anti-PAP instigation. An outstanding example was the case of Tang Liang Hong, a candidate of the Workers' Party in the 1997 Singapore general election. Tang, a Chinese-educated lawyer with little previous record of political activism, campaigned mainly by accusing the PAP of discriminating against the Chinese-educated. Frightened, the PAP targeted Tang instead of other well-known oppositional figures during the campaign. They attacked Tang as a dangerous "Chinese chauvinist." Despite his inexperience and the PAP's violent assault, Tang captured many votes in this election, though he failed to win. To intimidate opponents trying to imitate Tang's strategy in future campaigns, the PAP adopted any means possible to harass Tang afterward, including filing 13 defamation suits against him and launching a tax probe of his law firm. Under this pressure, Tang fled to Malaysia, Hong Kong, and then London (Chin, 1997).

The PAP's tactic of de-Sinicizing the curriculum at Nantah also had serious limitations in terms of state formation. This approach, even when implemented smoothly, could only stop Nanyang University from spreading Chinese-centered outlooks. However, this "deconstruction move" was never sufficient, because the PAP's ultimate goal was to construct a common Singapore-centered culture. As I have argued elsewhere, the PAP, which inherited a fragmented and outward-oriented field of cultural production, encountered many difficulties in creating a common and local culture of Singapore. Without an ideal Singapore culture as a replacement, the PAP's action to remove Chinese culture could only result in the problem of de-culturalization or cultural vacuum, which damaged state formation (Wong, 1999).

## Conclusion

From this discussion, we can see that successive ruling regimes in Singapore employed diverse strategies to handle Nanyang University. When Singapore was still ruled by the British, the colonizers opted to disenfranchise Nantah. This marginalizing approach was followed because, though the ruling authorities found the communal institution antithetical to their project of state formation, they dared not to take oppressive action against a college that enjoyed overwhelming backing from the Chinese community. This tactic, however, was soon outdated by progress in decolonization. From the mid-1960s on, when the transfer of power brought about the popular election and the enfranchisement of the previously excluded Chinese residents, all political forces contesting state power struggled to win the goodwill of the Chinese. It propelled the ruling regime to adopt a more supportive and accommodative Nantah policy. Nevertheless, other “core problems” in state formation generated from decolonization put the state and Nanyang University into severe contradiction. As Singapore was becoming an independent nation, the Chinese-centered and China-oriented outlooks spread by Nantah could delay or derail state building. Worse still, without appropriate monitoring from the government, Nantah was infiltrated and captured by the Communists, a formidable antagonistic force.

To resolve this dilemma, the PAP followed the approach of institutional incorporation without cultural accommodation. They, both by exercising forces and providing financial enticements, absorbed Nantah into a state institution yet at the same time endeavored to dilute its Chinese culture. The ruling authorities wished to make Nantah less culturally segregated and China-centered without eliciting unified and strong resistance from the Chinese community. This approach resulted in contradictory consequences. It benefited state formation by allowing the PAP to have a stronger position to suppress the leftists inside the university and split the social movement of Nanyang University. However, this strategy also damaged state formation as the PAP’s actions to persecute popular leaders of Nantah and remove Chinese culture from school curriculum of the university alienated many Chinese, especially the Chinese-educated. Also, without a ready-made common Singapore

culture as substitution, the state's de-Sinicization move could have resulted in de-culturalization, a risky move.

The historical case of Nantah offers some crucial theoretical implications. It confirms that as the state is always under contradictory pressure and state policies can bring about multiple and contradictory results, scholars in state formation should not misconceive state building as a coherent project. Instead, we should investigate the conflicting demands that the ruling authorities have to resolve in order to consolidate their position and consider state formation as an ongoing and contradictory process. In addition, the history of Nantah also suggests that the connections between state formation and hegemony are conjunctural and subtle. In multiracial settings like Singapore, the state elites may feel under compulsion to dilute or eliminate the culture of some racially segregated institutions, yet at the same time they need to secure popular support from the racial groups concerned. In this situation, the state may incorporate and give official status to these institutions but at the same time seek to dilute the ethnic culture embedded. This history clearly indicates that the state may adopt different approaches when dealing with the institutions and cultures of the subordinated group under certain contexts. Because of this, the dimensions of institution and culture have to be conceptually differentiated when analyzing hegemony and state formation.

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# 國家權力形構與霸權 --新加坡南洋大學個案分析

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本文使用霸權(hegemony)與國家權力形構(state formation)兩概念分析戰後新加坡政府處理南洋大學的策略。義大利新馬克思主義者葛蘭西指出，統治者在建構統治權力時必須吸納、改造--而不是消滅--被統治者的文化及社會組織，使它們轉化為有利於維持既有的宰制關係。這種統治的手法稱為霸權。一九四九年共產黨取得中國大陸的政權。為了防止共產主義的滲透，新加坡殖民地政府阻止華人子弟回中國升學。華人們於是在一九五三年自發創辦南洋大學，以解決華校生升學無門的困境。然而南洋大學灌輸的是以華人及中國為中心的世界觀，有違政府要將新加坡轉變成一個種族融和的、獨立的國家的目的。此外，南大自創校後被馬來亞共產黨所滲透，這使該大學跟新加坡政府發生嚴重的衝突。但是，南洋大學被視為保護海外華人語言文化的堡壘，新加坡政府不能對南大過份打壓，否則會觸怒華人、影響統治的合法性。為了解決這國家權力形構的矛盾，新加坡政府採取的對策是「沒有文化讓步的組織吸納」(institutional incorporation without cultural accommodation)。他們將南洋大學從一所私立大學吸納轉變成為受國家資助及管制，然後著手壓抑南大的華人文化及激進的意識形態。本文在理論層面上有其重要性。它指出統治者對被統治者的社會組織及文化可能有不同的態度及處理手法，因此在研究國家霸權時應將二者在概念上清楚劃分。

關鍵詞：霸權、國家權力形構、高等教育、華人文化、新加坡。