

Speaking Out
&
Speaking Up
Xinjiao Perspectives

Edited by
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Speaking Out & Speaking Up. Xinjiao Perspectives

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Contents

Foreword	vii
Acknowledgements	ix
List of Speakers	x
Introduction	xii
A Singaporean in Xinjiang	2
Wong Ee Vin	
Sex for Sale and Second Wives	10
Xue Jiarong	
Singapore Families: Mixed Salad or New <i>Rojak</i>?	16
Darren Lim	
Singaporean-Burmese, Burmese-Singaporean or Both?	22
In Jin Zaw	
Foreign Workers: Seen but not Heard	28
Mohammad Muzhaffar & Rohith Misir	
Wheel You Ride?	36
Khew Pei Xuan	
Gaelic Kallang Roar	42
Kate Whyte	
Gaming Virtual Reality, Seriously	48
Lin Junkang & Low Kai Loon	
Cyber Vigilantes: Mobs or Cops?	58
Timothy Lim & Hermanth Kumar	

Online Dating: Waiting for the Stars to Align	66
Alex Cherucheril & Muhammed Ismail	
Tying the Knot, for Better or Worse?	74
Emilyn Phang & Hollie Dawson	
The Poor in Singapore: Whose Fault is It?	84
Samantha Lee & Xue Jiarong	
Is Singapore a Tax Haven-Reading Between the Lines	92
Lin Junkang & Low Kai Loon	
Sputtering or Starting Up?	100
Darren Lim & Ella Lim	
Songs from the City in a Garden	110
Ang Yu Ann & Benjamin Tan	
Singapore™ in a Brand-Mad World	120
In Jin Zaw & Muhammed Ismail	
<i>Char Kway Teow</i> Goes Global	132
Edwin Tan	
Myself and the Other: A Cross-Cultural Exchange	138
Alex Cherucheril & Wong Ee Vin	
On Play and Profit	150
Foo Xian Fong	
Life is School, School is Life: A Finnish Perspective	158
Lim Ziwei & Markus Rönnerberg	
Manufacturing a National Myth	166
Mackenzie Schmidt	

Singapore, a Cosmopolis?	172
Charlotte Lamboley	
Don't Talk Cock: Defamation in Singapore	180
Michael LeGrand & Edwin Tan	
Esplanade: The Show Must Go On	186
Lin Junkang	
On Local Fashion Brands	194
Emilyn Phang & Hollie Dawson	
In Praise of Paris Fashion	204
Aude Bertrand & Charlotte Lamboley	
Standing Up for the Greybeards	212
Darren Lim & Ella Lim	
Dogs for the Aged?	218
Lim Dao Qing & Mackenzie Schmidt	
References	223
Editors & Contributors	248

Introduction

In 2015, we developed a new course, *Singapore in the World, the World in Singapore* to coincide with Singapore's jubilee year celebrations. The idea was to bring together local and exchange students at Singapore Management University to develop a deeper understanding of Singapore's extraordinary progress in the past half century. As part of the 2015 course, students wrote individual, pair and group essays, and interacted with academics as well as local and foreign diplomats. A selection of these essays appeared in a volume entitled *Within and Without* in early 2016.

We ran the course again in 2016. Over sixty students enrolled in the class, half of them exchange students from Asia, Europe and North America. They interacted with speakers from academia and the world of business and diplomacy, and wrote over one hundred essays on Singapore's development and evolving identity. Their diverse perspectives – Singaporeans interpreting their experiences through a wider lens and exchange students bringing their views from home to make sense of a new country – challenge and augment the national narrative absorbed by locals who have been through the Singapore school system.

This book is a selection of papers written for the second run of the course. Entitled *Speaking Up and Speaking Out: Xinjiao Perspectives* – *xinjiao* in local parlance refers to young people – it groups essays under three headings: *Locating the Fringe*; *Breaking the Mould* and *Hearing Different Voices*. Readers can sample the essays in any order. We draw attention here to a few essays that reveal unconventional or idiosyncratic views on familiar issues.

Locating the Fringe, the first part of the book, opens with *A Singaporean in Xinjiang*, in which Wong Ee Vin reflects on his experience of racial tensions and wonders whether there are lessons to be drawn from Singapore's enviable record of maintaining racial harmony. The same section includes Xue Jiarong's essay titled *Sex for Sale and Second Wives* which takes a critical view of legal prostitution in Singapore, yet also sees it as a pragmatic way to alleviate the plight of women caused by China's patriarchal system. *On a lighter note*, *Gaming Virtual Reality, Seriously* by Lin Junkang and Low Kai Loon raises the issue of whether excellence in eSports can offer a viable career. Kate Whyte writes in *Gaelic Kallang Roar* about Gaelic football, a subculture most Singaporeans are

unaware of but which has a growing number of enthusiasts in Singapore and other countries. In so doing, she gives us a glimpse of a pastime enjoyed by the expatriate community.

In the second part of the book, *Breaking the Mould*, several essays examine stereotypical perceptions of Singapore. In *Online Dating: Waiting for the Stars to Align*, Alex Cherucheril and Muhammed Ismail analyse this phenomenon in Singapore, looking at its dysfunctional aspects, especially from the perspective of Americans, and concluding that Singaporeans seeking partners need to rethink their views and expectations about online dating. In *Songs from the City in a Garden*, Ang Yu Ann and Benjamin Tan re-examine the view that Singapore is well-placed to become a significant player on the world's stage. In *Sputtering or Starting Up*, Darren Lim and Ella Lim challenge a widespread belief that Singapore is bereft of original ideas and lacks in the spirit of entrepreneurship, when in fact, Singapore has a thriving local start-up community. Edwin Tan in *Char Kway Teow Goes Global* pours cold water on a widely-held local view that Singapore food can make it to the world stage. The hard truth, he says, is that Singaporean food is not well-known globally and attention instead should focus on nurturing an authentic local food culture that values tradition and quality.

The third part of the book, *Hearing Different Voices* includes essays that question what their writers see as systemic inequalities or injustices in Singapore. Foo Xian Fong's essay, *On Play and Profit*, celebrates the joy of play and argues for a more relaxed approach to childhood as a better answer to higher productivity and more creativity. In *Manufacturing a National Myth*, Mackenzie Schmidt queries whether the artificial creation of the Merlion captures the true Singapore spirit in contrast to the Canadian beaver. Emilyn Phang and Hollie Dawson in *On Local Fashion Brands* take a critical view of Singapore's fashion industry, dubbing it a follower rather than a trendsetter. Their perspective is different from *In Praise of Paris Fashion*, a laudatory essay by Aude Bertrand and Charlotte Lamboley. Hearing a different voice, the last essay in this volume, *Dogs for the Aged?* by Lim Dao Qing and Mackenzie Schmidt make a case for the greater use of dogs as a solution to the daily challenges that a fast-growing ageing population faces in Singapore.

Essays in this volume range from racial tensions in Xinjiang to online dating, defamation, food, fashion and the therapeutic benefits of dogs for the elderly. They reflect the views of young people, views that in many cases are

refreshingly sceptical or critical. One does not have to agree with them to appreciate the optimism and thoughtfulness of the young in Singapore as well as those from other countries. Readers, we hope, will find infectious their energy, excitement and openness to the possibilities for change.

Part One

Locating the Fringe

A Singaporean in Xinjiang

Wong Ee Vin

WHAT/WHERE IS XINJIANG?

When someone speaks of Xinjiang, it brings to mind great expanses of dust and stone punctuated by the occasional shrub under a cloudless sky, stretching over vast distances as far as the eye can see; its desolation terrifying and awe-inspiring in equal measure. Yet, the bleak terrain yields to grasslands and fruit orchards, thriving through irrigation and sheer determination of the local Tajiks. That was my first impression of Tagharma Valley, Tashkurgan, within the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in Western China.

Xinjiang is home to many of China's ethnic minorities, including the Uyghur and Tajik peoples – Turkic groups with histories tightly intertwined and as ancient as the land itself. This sight would also have greeted the merchants of old as they plied along the Silk Road through Xinjiang into China, bringing different goods, religions, and cultures into the region. In many ways, therefore, Xinjiang has always been the focal point of conflict between viewpoints that we still struggle with today: between tradition and progress, and between nationality, race and religion. These two themes resonated with me as a Singaporean visiting Xinjiang for the first time.

ON THE LOSS OF THE OLD CITY

We landed in Kashgar, Xinjiang after a 15-hour flight from Singapore. I had expected bustling bazaars and beautiful architecture, but I was disappointed to find Kashgar a medium-sized city with the usual consumerist trappings: shopping centres, fast food, and the local overpriced coffee franchise. This, our supervisor informed us, was the government's doing: great tracts of Kashgar's historic old city, with centuries-old mud-bricked buildings, were demolished to make room for modern infrastructure. Uyghur families who had lived in the old city for generations were made to move into newer facilities; only a small section was cordoned off as spectacle for tourists. Many Uyghurs protested at the lack of consultation with the very residents involved in the relocation program; some saw it as a concerted effort to marginalise Uyghur culture. Needless to say, the program constituted a dangerous flashpoint between the Uyghurs and the authorities, and sparked off an international condemnation at the perceived excesses of China's rapid economic development.

The reality in Xinjiang is, however, much less black-and-white, as the redevelopment program also significantly benefits the Uyghurs. While party officials point to safety hazards, China's desire to build greater economic relations with other Central Asian states is likely the driving factor. Given Xinjiang's geographical location as a corridor into Central Asia, its residents stand to gain from such trade. Indeed, the modernisation of Xinjiang has already begun to bear fruit: many Uyghurs I spoke to agreed that their standards of living have risen in the past ten years.

As a Singaporean, I could not help but notice parallels in the way global trade has impacted the social fabric. During Singapore's infancy in the 1960s, a central tenet of its industrialisation strategy was large-scale public housing – a task the incumbent government executed with cold pragmatism despite widespread resistance. Many rural communities, affectionately called *kampongs* but officially designated as slums, were torn down to make way for high-rise living. While indisputably ensuring Singapore's survival in those trying times, Singapore's rapid land renewal schemes in the present day raise debates on balancing heritage conservation with progress. A recent controversy concerns the destruction of the Bukit Brown cemetery, a 200-hectare cemetery with graves dating back to the 19th century. Without such sites rooting Singaporeans to their heritage, activists argued, historical amnesia takes its toll. But as with most policy choices there are never right answers, only the trade-offs we choose to live with; and Singaporeans clearly prefer to live in the present rather than dwell on the past. Nevertheless, as numerous publicised debates, campaigns, and talk-shows can attest to, Singaporeans today face an identity crisis which, on deeper introspection, seems to stem from an indifference to the historical, and a yearning for the return of a communal sense of belonging – the proverbial *kampong* spirit.

Similarly, Xinjiang faces difficult questions on how to balance the economic progress with heritage conservation. With an even older tradition than Singapore, Uyghurs have created an identity that is tied to the very city itself. Kashgar has survived so many regime changes – from Turkic states to the Mongols – that to be told by the Chinese authorities that the destruction of the old quarter is necessary for Xinjiang's prosperity must sound disingenuous. If they had survived so many centuries, would they not continue to endure into the future? It is easy to see how these decisions can be construed as repression of the Uyghur identity.

Secondly, the Uyghurs have only marginal say in the development of Xinjiang; while technically autonomous, Beijing still maintains effective policy control. The destruction of the old city even in the face of Uyghur resistance must have been a visible symbol of their political impotence.

Therefore, unlike Singapore, discourse centres not around how balancing should be done – by redefining what it means to be a Uyghur in the face of modernity – but instead on what the response to the dictates of the Chinese government should be. As such, the situation in Xinjiang is a quagmire of overlapping issues such that any conflict is difficult to solve. Economic development has brought many benefits to the Uyghur people, yet it is no wonder why economic development is seen as an attempt to make Uyghurs “live like Chinese people”.

ON TOLERANCE AND ASSIMILATION

We took a bus from Kashgar to a sleepy hamlet in Tagharma Valley, where our community project was involved in building a Tajik cultural centre. We were kindly hosted by the village elder, a large Tajik man with a weather-beaten face; his stern visage belied a burning curiosity to learn more about these loud-mouthed youths who were not quite Chinese. He was interested: did our parents build us a house when we were married off? Wherever we went we noticed the Tajik reaction towards other cultures was marked by a drive to understand them, likely a cultural paradigm that was necessary to navigate through the diversity of conflicting political interests in ancient Tartary. Whether through trade or war, the fortunes of ancient kingdoms in Xinjiang were dependent on playing off the rise or fall of more powerful states.

In contrast, the Chinese experience of interacting with different cultures has largely been brusque for a variety of reasons. Firstly, the philosophical conception of China has always been of Chinese exceptionalism – states beyond its borders were regarded as barbaric. In the historical sense, the hundred years of Chinese humiliation stretching from 1839 to 1949 left an indelible mark of xenophobia and distrust in the collective Chinese psyche. Finally, China has remained a relatively homogenous civilisation-state; it is overwhelmingly Han Chinese with a Confucian value system. Xinjiang therefore uncomfortably fits into China as a province. It is significantly populated with Turkic minorities who

do not resemble Han Chinese, adhere to cultures that have integrated Perso-Arabic influences, are predominantly Muslim, and historically have regarded themselves as politically autonomous kingdoms or tributaries. Apart from being under Chinese political control and the economic benefits that brings, there are few reasons for ethnic minorities to identify with a Chinese nationhood that is still significantly defined by the majority's ethnicity and culture.

It comes as no surprise to see the push by some groups in Xinjiang for a separate East Turkestan Republic from Mainland China, accompanied by sporadic outbreaks of violence. In response, Chinese authorities clamped down and repressed social, political and associative activities of the Uyghur people; as a consequence, Islam has become politicised in that region. The Chinese see it as a subversive ideology – tellingly during one of my university courses, a Chinese exchange student referred to the Uyghurs as 'Muslims' and Han Chinese as 'ordinary people' – as if Islam was incompatible with contemporary society. Whatever their justifications, authorities instituted intrusive rules, such as banning fasting on the holy month of Ramadan. Further, Han families have migrated *en masse* into Xinjiang; these migratory movements, along with economic inequality between Han Chinese and Uyghurs and an under-representation of Uyghurs in high-skill sectors and political offices, have fuelled perceptions of Han colonisation of Uyghur lands and perpetuated the cycle of violence.

Like Xinjiang, Singapore faced similar challenges in building a functional society from a diverse group of cultures and religions. Singapore's society is predominantly Chinese, the descendants of immigrant workers. Malays, however, were the indigenous people of Singapore. Similarly, there is a diversity of religious perspectives in Singapore. Hence, from its earliest days, racial and religious differences have always been the greatest challenge to societal stability; such as in 1950, when riots broke out over a court ruling for a child, brought up as a Muslim under Malay foster parents, to be returned to her Dutch Catholic parents. In subsequent decades such differences were managed with a combination of laws such as the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, which allows detention of offending persons without trial, and a Singaporean identity that was constructed partly from national duties that applied to all citizens regardless of ethnicity, such as compulsory English language education and mandatory military conscription for all Singaporean males.

The Singaporean model is not perfect. Ethnic minorities such as the Malay population continue to lag behind economically and are under-represented

in high-skilled jobs and tertiary institutions. However, Singapore's approach towards handling multiculturalism is much more nuanced than its Chinese counterparts, because of its emphasis on tolerance over assimilation: Singapore is built on the assumption that beyond the minimum required of a citizen in a democratic society, there can be a diversity of worldviews, and such diversity must be tolerated to the extent of limiting free speech. The majority does not force the minority to assimilate, far from it. All citizens are made to unite under a common national identity rather than racial or religious ones. To the extent that Chinese authorities continue to restrict religious practices, and where Chinese identity continues to be defined by ethnic traits of the majority rather than nationhood, Xinjiang will remain a security concern for Beijing.

Yet, can the Singaporean model ever be replicated in Xinjiang? Highly unlikely. Even if Chinese authorities removed all forms of political and social control, Xinjiang's success depends crucially on a mature civil society: on a Han Chinese population that is discerning enough to tolerate racial or religious differences, and on a Uyghur population that is willing to play the metaphorical game rather than kicking the table over. The Chinese situation requires novel solutions – solutions that will require time to be formulated.

WHAT NEXT?

We spent another two weeks in Tagharma Valley completing the Tajik cultural centre. I had expected the village elder to preside over the opening ceremony, but to my surprise, it was attended by a government official. As the official and our project supervisor posed for photographs amidst the staccato of clapping by Tajik onlookers, I felt a sense of disquiet. For the past few months we spoke about empowering the Tajiks, yet I felt as if we had just done them a disservice by relegating the proud Tajik culture to the walls of a Chinese museum. The voyeuristic nature of the whole enterprise – like gawking at animals at the zoo – was not lost on me.

Later that night, we ate a farewell dinner at the village elder's house. As we were eating, the village children entered the room with excited chatter, and turned on the radio. The thump of Tajik turbo-pop emanated from the speakers as they invited us to stand up; it was a traditional dance-off! We each faced a child, and as we wobbled about, pirouetting at the end of a line with a flourish, the children guided us effortlessly, laughing at our feeble attempts

at dance. But it was a dance nonetheless, and as two people worlds apart met at the centre – the stumbling Singaporean and the graceful Tajik – I could only marvel at the brief moments of synchronicity we achieved. If only we had all learnt to dance.