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The ‘Government’ in Our Lives:
An Exploratory Study of Ideology
and the Singapore Middle Class

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ABSTRACT

Ideology is closely linked to politics, where the former guides and justifies the latter. Singapore’s economic success and the ideology that has allowed it to flourish have also been studied. However, existing scholarship has not addressed how ideology plays out in the everyday life of Singaporeans; while studies have been carried out on class in Singapore, literature on the convergence of ideology, class and everyday life in Singapore is lacking. In this study, I will explore how the central tenets of the PAP’s ideological system – namely pragmatism and economic orientation, which were instrumental in achieving the PAP’s preeminent goals of economic survival – are reproduced by middle-class Singaporeans and manifested in everyday life, through their attitudes towards issues such as education, mobility, ‘foreign talent’ and the government. Therefore, I aim to demonstrate that the PAP government has established an enduring ideological hegemony that has not waned despite decades of economic success.

Keywords: Singapore, ideology, middle class, mobility, pragmatism, education, everyday life

Word count: 9,995
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CHAPTER 1:

IDEOLOGY AND THE MIDDLE CLASS IN SINGAPORE

1.1 Ideology

In *The German Ideology* (1977), Karl Marx likened the workings of ideology to the effects of a *camera obscura*, where reality is represented through inverted images of everyday life. Ideology corresponds to the beliefs and ideas of the ruling group in a society. It results in a “false consciousness” of the dominated, as they are misled to remain content with their oppressed situations. This false consciousness is similar to what Steven Lukes (2005) has termed the third dimension of power, where the preferences of the subjugated are shaped such that willing compliance to domination is secured. Through ideology, domination can ‘induce and sustain internal constraints upon self-determination’ (Lukes 2005: 122); it can mislead and subvert individuals’ judgements as to how best to advance their interests (Lukes 2005).

It is also argued that beliefs are ideological when they are shared by a group of people; these ideological beliefs concern matters important to the group and function to justify the activities and attitudes characteristic of its members (Plamenatz 1970). Politics and ideology are seen as inseparable, with ideology as a belief system that guides and defends political action (Thompson 1984). According to Antonio Gramsci, ideological hegemony, which has a material basis, and is the ‘ideological subordination of the working class by the bourgeoisie, which enables it to rule by consent’. Ideology thus becomes ‘uncritically absorbed’ commonsense (Lukes 2005).

1.2 The Case of Singapore

Singapore is known for its economic ‘success story’, which is synonymous with Singapore’s post-independence history. This attracted much scholarly attention: while some argue for a state of depoliticization in Singapore, others see the Singapore citizenry as clouded by a ‘false consciousness’ perpetuated by the People Action Party (PAP)’s supposedly totalitarian rule.

1.1.1 The ‘Depoliticization’ Thesis

Many have proclaimed that politics in Singapore is ‘unencumbered by ideology’. This view of ‘depoliticization’ in Singapore, Chua Beng Huat argued, is due to the successful ideological work undertaken by the PAP in establishing an ideological hegemony, where the ‘system of ideas of the ruling group is loosely accepted and reproduced by the governed as part and parcel of the latter’s “natural reality of everyday life”’ (Chua 2002: 128). The citizenry assumes an instrumental role in propelling a country to prosperity – here, attention
has been drawn to the ‘cultural underpinnings’ of Singapore’s economic progress, or the ideology established that allowed the economy to flourish. This ideology has been mobilised by the PAP to inculcate ‘prerequisite cultural values and appropriate attitudes’ needed among Singaporeans ‘in order for the economy to take off and for subsequent sustained growth’ (Chua 2002:1).

Ideological hegemony exists when ‘central tenets of the ideological system are used by Singaporeans as rational concepts to organize and rationalise their mundane reality’ (Chua 2002:55). This ideological system is a loosely organised complex conceptual system guided by a few core concepts (Chua 2002), which for the PAP are its pragmatism and economic development orientation. At the time of political independence in 1965, Singapore saw a rapidly expanding population coupled with high unemployment rates, compounded by its severely underdeveloped economy and industry. These conditions were translated by the first independent PAP government into an issue and ideology of national survival, and served to rationalise state policies. Thus policies, even when not fully democratic or popular, were justified as the pragmatic thing to do to ensure the country’s survival.

The pragmatism of the PAP government cannot be seen in isolation from its vigorous economic development orientation, especially when the ‘overriding goal of PAP pragmatism is to ensure continuous economic growth’ (Chua 2002: 68). Economic development was seen as the way to social and political stability, and thus vital for national survival. Such an orientation towards industrialization and economic development emphasised ‘science and technology and centralized rational public administration’; these features were identified as the ‘natural’, ‘necessary’ and ‘realistic’ ways of nation-building (Chua 2002: 59), and it is this emphasis on the ‘natural’, ‘necessary’, and ‘realistic’ that characterises the PAP government and their nation-building strategies as pragmatic. Thus the pragmatism that characterised and rationalized state policies stemmed from this rhetoric of ‘national survival’.

It is argued that Singaporeans have shown continual electoral support for the PAP despite several unpopular policies, on the basis that PAP pragmatism has brought about the economic growth and material improvements that they proclaimed their ‘tough but unpopular’ and ‘necessary’ policies would bring. Thus, the main premise of the legitimacy of PAP’s sustained rule was the material improvement it brought to the electorate, resulting from the success of their policies in ‘delivering the goods’ (Chua 2002: 74).

Following their desire to ‘extract the best from each citizen in pursuit of economic growth’, meritocracy entailed as another of the PAP government’s main ideological focuses, serving to not just encourage individuals to work for their own success, but also to legitimate and justify
social inequalities as the natural outcome of individual differences in ability and effort (Chua 2002:27).

1.1.2 The ‘False Consciousness’ Perspective

Singapore’s economic success has come at what many perceive as a lack of democracy – many see Singapore as one of the most intensely policed and closely controlled countries (Trocki 2006). Similarly, the citizenry has been criticised for its passivity in allowing seemingly autocratic rule in exchange for economic stability, leading to suppositions that Singaporeans were under variations of a ‘false consciousness’. This is especially true of the middle-class majority, who have been known for its docility and passivity; Mak and Leong (1994) put such docility down to a few reasons. Singapore had been an immigrant society since its founding and immigrants tended to be more concerned with economic security than political status. This docility is also due to the PAP continuing the style of colonial rule that demanded political compliance in exchange for ‘a stable environment that allowed for individual economic advancement’ (1994: 5), justifying some form of authoritarian government.

Yet, this supposed ‘false consciousness’ seemed to take a turn during the General Elections (GE) 2011, where the PAP came under openly harsh criticism by opposition parties and citizens. Of great concern were issues surrounding immigration and foreign workers, and the perception that the PAP government was privileging the economy over citizen welfare (ABS-CBN News 2011). Although the PAP was returned to government, it was the PAP’s worst showing in all of Singapore’s history. Political figures termed it a ‘political landmark’ for Singapore (Channel News Asia 2011) and it was labelled a ‘watershed election’ even by former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew (Straits Times 2011). This led to proclamations that Singaporeans experienced a ‘political awakening’ (ChannelNewsAsia 2011) and that the PAP was losing its hold over Singaporeans.

1.2 Main Research Questions

In this paper, I aim to tie up these two perspectives and argue that the view of ‘false consciousness’ and resultant ‘political awakening’ of the Singapore citizenry is due to the endurance of the PAP’s ideological success. While Chua (2002) has traced the PAP’s ideological trajectory, its resultant phenomena come across as generalizations and there is a lack of inquiry into how the citizenry experiences the PAP’s ideological work in their everyday lives. Chua (2002), in his study of PAP ideology, overlooks the importance of class distinctions in Singapore society.
Studies concerning stratification have concluded that class, more so than ethnicity, is a significant basis of social and political differentiation in Singapore (Chua and Tan 1999, Tan 2000). This is due to the PAP government’s ‘social engineering of ethnicity’ (Tremewan 1994: 151) through ‘multiracialism’, where they attempted to create ‘a society that did not allow the issue of race to divide people’ (Tremewan 1994: 141) so as to prevent racial conflict from undermining Singapore’s economic progress. There has been the tendency to classify Singapore as a one-class society (Mak and Leong 1994), as exhibited in Chua (2002)’s analysis of PAP ideology. However, Singapore has a middle-class majority (Tan 2004), which is highly differentiated (Chua and Tan 1999). Therefore, class dimensions must be taken into consideration in any study of Singapore society.

While there is comprehensive literature about both the middle-class citizenry and PAP’s ideology in Singapore, the existing scholarship has not addressed how the two intersect. Therefore, this paper addresses how ideologies generated by the PAP are accepted and reproduced by the governed – specifically the middle class – in Singapore as part and parcel of the natural reality of everyday life. In this study, I will explore how middle-class Singaporeans experience the ideologies propounded by the PAP in their quest to develop Singapore’s economy. This research aims to address several questions: firstly, how do Singaporeans display pragmatism and economic orientation, attitudes the very first PAP government sought to inculcate within Singaporeans? How is the endurance of such pragmatism unshaken even after decades of continued economic progress? How do middle-class Singaporeans conceptualize and speak of the government in their everyday lives, and what does it say about PAP ideology? Through this, I hope to demonstrate the endurance of the PAP’s ideological hegemony.
CHAPTER 2:
METHODODOLOGY

2.1 Who is in the Middle Class?

The middle class, being the numerical majority in Singapore, is an integral part of a country that is in theory politically democratic. Therefore, the middle-class vote is crucial in the continuation of PAP rule and the PAP would take an interest in securing it. However, this discussion cannot proceed without delineating exactly whom the middle class in Singapore comprises. The middle class is a residual class; thus, it assumes a position relative to the lower and higher class, and can be defined only after the latter two are delineated (Mak 1994).

The Singapore middle class has also been referred to as the “sandwich class”, of which both definitions have shifted over the years. While previously defined as not poor enough to qualify for state subsidies and programmes targeted at the least well-off (Straits Times 1997), the sandwich class, with rising living standards in Singapore, now consists of a second group who are not rich enough. These Singaporeans are considerably well off and live comfortably (Straits Times 2008), but cannot afford private housing (Straits Times 2011).

In previous studies concerning the middle class in Singapore, housing type was the main criteria to ascertain the boundaries demarcating the middle class. For Mak, it was that of “five-room households as the lower limit and dwellers in semi-detached houses as the upper limit” on the basis of “housing ownership and its related net worth as a measure of class position” (1994: 321). However, with the overall increase in educational attainment among the population (and resultant upward shift in occupational and income strata), as well as the increase in housing prices over the years, housing type is now no longer as clear-cut an indicator of class, especially when HDB housing prices have risen 356% over the last 17 years (Housing and Development Board 2012). Consequently, each housing type has risen in its related net worth in present day Singapore, even after adjusting for inflation (Department of Statistics Singapore 2012a). Therefore, the lower limit of household type to measure class position and the middle class is now considerably lower than Mak (1994)’s measures.

However, housing type is still a useful indicator of class in Singapore – with 82% of the Singapore population living in HDB housing (Housing and Development Board 2011), the rich would be more likely to live in “landed” property, while the middle-class would more likely be residing in HDB flats and private condominiums. As respondents for this study were located through snowball sampling and it is considered rude to ask acquaintances about their
income immediately, HDB housing constituted the basis upon which respondents were located. Individuals living in private condominiums were excluded as they may also include those above the middle class. After respondents were located, they were asked about their income and financial situation.

Following Chua and Tan (2000) and Tan (2004), income was the primary indicator of class, with the cut-off between the middle and working classes being the median population income, which was $5000 in 2010 (Department of Statistics Singapore 2012b). Proportionately, the upper income limit was set at $12,000. However, quantitative indicators alone were insufficient – an income might serve one household well, but another might struggle to make ends meet with the same amount. Therefore, respondents were asked about the quality of their financial lives. As the middle-class is defined residually, it was ascertained that the respondents were part of the middle class by virtue of not being in the working or upper classes. These were defined as, respectively, elastic demand for basic necessities, and inelastic demand for items such as ‘luxury’ goods and cars.

2.2 Qualitative Interviews

Interviews were conducted to understand respondents’ subjective experiences and the meanings they attach to their daily experiences as Singaporeans. From September 2011 to February 2012, semi-structured interviews were conducted in English with 21 respondents, who all identified themselves as belonging to the “middle class”. The interviews revolved around issues such as education, standard of living, work, and politics in Singapore.

As this research intends to capture the respondents’ subjective experiences as Singaporeans, it was vital to understand the respondents’ perceived class positions, as this affects their daily experiences. Therefore a survey, similar to that conducted by Tan Ern Ser (2004), was administered via email to respondents, who were asked about their perceived financial situation through indicators such as their perceived position within a six-category and a four-category class ladder. Of the 21 respondents, 16 returned responses.

2.2.1 Difficulties Encountered

Many respondents were reluctant to speak their minds, especially when asked about the PAP government or politics in Singapore. This was particularly prevalent among older respondents, who were more familiar with the PAP’s history of overt repression of perceived political subversion (Chua 2002). This proved to be a barrier in getting them to voice their opinions, as many gave what appeared to be politically correct answers. Some potential respondents were hesitant about having their interviews recorded or refused to be interviewed.
upon hearing that issues regarding politics would be covered. Even younger respondents worried about “getting into trouble”. The reluctance or refusal to be interviewed or to be truthful in their answers significantly contributed to the difficulties encountered in data collection. In order to alleviate respondent’s concerns, the respondents were assured of anonymity and confidentiality, to get them to as forthcoming in their answers as possible.
CHAPTER 3: 
THE ENDURING HEGEMONY OF PRAGMATISM

Chua has argued that the affluence of Singapore and its citizens due to economic growth ‘poses problems for pragmatism as an ideology because the compelling element in its rationality is that of necessity’ (2002:74). Therefore, the ‘talk about the necessity to ensure the basics’ of survival finds ‘few sympathetic ears’ (Chua 2002:74), because an increasing percentage of the electorate have not experienced the difficulties of earlier years on which PAP pragmatism was built. Thus, pragmatism would lose its hegemony and relevance among Singaporeans.

Should that be the case, Singaporeans would no longer see economic survival as a priority. However, I found that despite Singapore’s prosperity, pragmatism still finds an enduring place in the lives and minds of Singaporeans – even those who have no recollection or experience of Singapore’s onerous beginnings. In other words, pragmatism has not declined because economic growth and material wealth is still of central significance. Indeed, respondents prominently displayed attitudes of pragmatism in interviews.

3.1 Positioning Singapore’s Success as Uncertain

The endurance of pragmatism among Singaporeans is due to the government’s positioning of Singapore’s prosperity as precarious and vulnerable to threats, especially in light of recent global financial meltdowns. Singaporeans are consistently urged to continue to accumulate or protect the wealth that Singapore has amassed, lest the nation plunges into economic despair. This allows the government to justify policies with pragmatism and economic growth, and render an economic development orientation still relevant among the citizenry.

To illustrate this point, a search for news articles showed that within slightly more than a month, current Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam voiced the warning at least thrice that ‘troubles are brewing once again’ for Singapore, whose people will have to ‘build up skills and get ready for the future’, which holds the ‘very real possibility, of a severe slowdown of the global economy and rough times ahead’ (Straits Times 2011). This was despite the economy growing 4.8% in 2011 (Ministry of Trade and Industry 2012). Another example is then-Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong’s comments on a news article covering his Mayday speech, titled: 'Don't worry, the outlook is good, says PM Lee':
I got quite worried... We must always worry [about the economy]!... 'Outlook is good, but be careful and work hard'! That's a good headline... You must have confidence and at the same time, have a sense of danger, sense of threat. So you never need to despair because we are ready, but you are never overconfident and say 'no sweat'. We will sweat. (Straits Times 2005)

Even when the economy is doing relatively well, the government still presents to its citizenry a sombre outlook to ensure their continued effort for sustained economic growth. More importantly, it ensures that the importance of economic growth is still relevant among the citizenry; thus, state policies, if met with dissatisfaction, can be justified in the name of ensuring economic growth, as can be seen in their justification of ‘foreign talent’ in the subsequent sections.

When quizzed about their greatest worries as a Singaporean, respondents frequently named the future of Singapore’s economy. Echoing such a sentiment was Wee Kim*, a 41 year-old manager, who was concerned about:

What’s going to happen the next 5, 10 years. Singapore is too small. I think we are at the peak, [so] there’s nothing much else for us to expand [and] to do.

Like the government, respondents presented Singapore’s economic success as impermanent and the future as uncertain. This then justifies the government’s constant urging of the citizenry to not take the current situation for granted, and continue to work towards sustained growth.

The endurance of pragmatism can be attributed to the ‘garrison mentality’ (Tan 2008:72) of the PAP government as demonstrated above, manifested in a ‘perennial concern’ with issues such as the state’s finite resources, the preservation of the country’s stability and success, and its political vulnerability (Tan 2008). This is analogous to what Chua terms the ‘crisis mentality’ of the PAP, which was generated by the ideology of ‘survival’, resulting in their ‘overanxious tendency’ to take ‘pre-emptory’ measures to ‘avoid certain presumed problems’ (2002:19). As seen earlier, these measures can come in the form of repeated warnings of ‘tough times’, as a way of managing the expectations of the general Singapore population and to ensure that the ethos of pragmatism, ‘survival’ and hard work is not lost.

This garrison mentality and pragmatism feed off each other – with the former, Singapore’s accumulation of economic success is positioned as unstable, with Singapore bound to face ‘tough times’ even if in reality it was not so. Therefore, Singaporeans are constantly encouraged by the government to work hard and ‘build up skills’ to square up against

* All names used in this study are pseudonyms
economic downturns, and policies adopted by the government may be done so in the name of pragmatism.

3.2 Ideas about Meritocracy

Meritocracy emphasizes the importance and necessity of working hard to ensure the country’s economic wellbeing. It also encourages the citizenry to work their hardest to improve their own lives, thus serving to justify inequalities within the society as the result of individual effort and abilities (Chua 2002). Consequently, the government is justified in their limited welfare provision, and can instead channel their efforts and resources to the ‘necessary’ achievement of continued economic growth (Chua 2002). On this account, meritocracy is ideologically complementary with pragmatism.

Ideas of meritocracy are evident in the PAP’s public discourse on immigrant workers in Singapore, a prickly issue among Singaporeans due to the perception that they are depressing wages and taking jobs away from Singaporeans. For example, then Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew declared that the belief that “Singapore had enough local talent, was popular but wrong” and because Singapore had inadequate talent, they must “go all out to recruit talent to compete with cities that have a much larger catchment to draw from” (Straits Times 1999).

Similarly, another minister said that foreign talent was necessary because:

Suppose we want to set up a new industry - let's say biomedical - we would need to have a certain pool of talent to be viable. But do we have the necessary skills and expertise? If we don't have enough of our own talent, we have to bring it in from overseas. (Straits Times 2006)

In the case of ‘foreign talent’, meritocracy and pragmatism go hand in hand – the government sees it as ‘necessary’ to hire ‘foreign talent’ because they are the most skilful. The PAP government in their public discourse about foreign talent and the economy frequently make references to the idea of meritocracy, alongside that of pragmatism and necessity – foreign talent is necessary in Singapore because they possess the skills and expertise that Singaporeans do not.

This ‘meritocratic’ thinking was similarly manifested in respondents’ accounts regarding ‘foreign talent’. They rationalised the influx of ‘foreign talent’ according to the logics of pragmatism and meritocracy, echoing the government’s public discourse and attesting to the ideological hegemony that the PAP has established. Doreen, a financial planner, said:

If we [Singaporeans] cannot perform, I think it’s okay to have foreign talent in to help us. Singaporeans are very pampered…they ask for higher salary. But when you look at like India right, they have a lot of engineers. They can do the same quality of work; they don’t mind lower pay and longer hours. A lot of companies will hire them because they can do certain jobs that Singaporeans cannot.
Doreen, in a pragmatic approach to this issue, sees it as necessary and practical to hire more skilled and cheaper employees. Additionally, she believes that the large presence of migrant workers in Singapore is due to the incompetence of Singaporean employees as compared to their foreign counterparts. With this reasoning that is in line with that of meritocracy, she is approving of having migrant workers in Singapore despite the potential squeeze and competition they may present to Singaporeans. Similarly, Belinda, a personal assistant, spoke of the perceived disparities in the competence of Singaporeans and ‘foreign talent’:

We have to improve ourselves… Have to upgrade ourselves to stay competitive.

Here, Belinda believes that in order to remain employable and economically productive in the eyes of the government, they will have to ‘improve’ and upgrade themselves to match up to ‘foreign talent’. This also showcases her belief in the ideas of meritocracy.

Respondents tended to rationalize other phenomena within Singapore society through lenses of meritocratic ideas, often emphasizing the importance of working hard for one’s livelihood and survival, which is a matter of individual effort. For instance, Joanna, an accountant, asserted that:

A lot of people are saying that government is…not taking good care of the people, trying to make things difficult for the poor… If they do not actually do that to the common people, everyone will take advantage… Laziness is always in the nature of human being… In Singapore you would have to work hard in order to have a good life. Even for the poor there’s a lot of organizations that support them, but… It’s just temporary help and after that it’s up to you if you want to do anything for yourself. But I kind of pity the people who have mental illness. They can’t work… But then again if you think about people with disabilities… there are people without legs who can run. So it’s really a mental thing. It’s up to the individual.

Joanna puts success and having ‘a good life’ down to individual effort, saying that it is ‘up to the individual’ to work for the life that he/she wants in Singapore, instead of relying on the government. By raising the example of ‘people without legs who can run… it’s really a mental thing’, she shows her belief in individual effort to make a living and that those who are poor or are unable to earn a proper living are either lazy or unable to overcome the difficulties which they can overcome if they want to. In believing that each individual is responsible for his own success or failure, regardless of their circumstances, Joanna is essentially rationalizing the inequalities present in society through the lenses of meritocracy, relinquishing the state of any responsibility for its citizens.
CHAPTER 4:

ORIENTATIONS TOWARDS ECONOMIC ADVANCEMENT

As mentioned earlier, the goal of economic development has been the preeminent concern of the PAP government. The conditions with which they were faced at the time of political independence resulted in ‘an ideology that embodies a vigorous economic development orientation’ (Chua 2002: 59) that has continued to present day. This has trickled down to the citizenry and resulted in certain attitudes manifested in everyday behaviour.

4.1 Singapore as a Corporation

Respondents had framed the PAP government in certain metaphorical language. This was significant as ideas circulate in the social world through words; thus, language is a reflection of ideology and the means through which ideology is expressed. Therefore, studying discourse, or “actually occurring instances of expression” (Thompson 1984:8) is vital to the study of ideology, which must also be extended to the domain of everyday life to be effective (Thompson 1984). Additionally, language reflects speakers’ conceptual systems, which are largely metaphorical and shaped by their functioning in their physical and cultural environment (Lakoff 1984). The usage of metaphors conveys meanings and attitudes which ‘literal’ and ‘semantically neutral language would be incapable of expressing’ (Mullins 179: 151). Therefore, the study of language and metaphors in everyday discourse shed light on speakers’ beliefs and attitudes regarding everyday life. Through the analysis of language used by respondents to conceptualize the government, I hope to further shed light on how PAP ideology is manifested in the everyday lives of Singaporeans.

While speaking of the ‘government’, respondents frequently used metaphorical language with reference to work and framed Singapore as a corporation, describing the PAP government in terms of a profit-driven, efficiency-maximizing corporation. For instance, Teck Ghee, a building technical officer, said of the PAP government:

…[T]hey always think about money – they don’t want lose money. They only think about the solution to make money back from your side.

The respondents also seem to see themselves as the employees of the government, framing themselves and the government within an employer-employee relationship. For example, while on the topic of ‘foreign talent’, Doreen quipped that:

If we [Singaporeans] cannot perform, then of course it’s okay to bring in foreign talent.
Doreen talks about Singaporeans’ inability to ‘perform’ and not being competent as ‘foreign talent’. She speaks of Singaporeans collectively as employees within a corporation, where their work performance and abilities are assessed according to standards set by an employee, and liable to be replaced should they not be able to ‘perform’ according to standards.

As a ‘strong developmentalist state’ where the primary focus is economic survival and success (upon which national identity is built), citizens are primarily treated as human resources to achieve these goals (Kwok and Ali 1998). Accordingly, the respondents see themselves primarily as workers rather than citizens, and consequently as employees within a corporation. They have to improve and ‘upgrade’ themselves, as seen in Belinda’s statement in the previous chapter, to contribute to the economic productivity and growth of the nation/corporation.

The respondents’ sentiments echoed the PAP’s public discourse, where the PAP has tended to frame important issues in Singapore in terms of the impacts on the economy. This can be seen in their justification of the influx of foreign workers – the PAP government had claimed that heightened competition from foreign workers would push Singaporeans to do better and this would in turn ensure that the country’s growth does not slow down (Straits Times 1997). Similarly, a former Minister claimed that restricting the number of foreign workers in Singapore's economy was difficult, as it would turn away foreign investments, and represent lost opportunities for growth for the Singapore economy (Straits Times 2011).

The government places an overwhelming focus on productivity and efficiency within the economy in its public discourse, positioning economic growth as the greatest priority, despite the citizenry’s discontentment. In fact, Singaporeans were told to “understand” the situation and the benefits that foreign workers would bring about for the economy. In placing economic growth as the nation’s utmost priority, the PAP also frames the people in Singapore (both immigrants and citizens alike) as tools with which to achieve such growth. Consequently, the citizenry not only demonstrates an orientation towards economic growth and productivity, but is also inclined to see the country as a corporation with productivity and efficiency as the main focuses. Thus, they liken themselves to employees as reflected in their language and metaphor use.

Respondents also frequently repeated that “the government is doing a good job”. Here, the employer-employee relations previously expounded are reversed. In judging that the government is “doing a good job”, the citizenry makes assessments of the government’s performance as if they are supervising them. For example, Jonathan, a manager in an automotive company, said:
I mean they’re doing a good job and everything…[but] I don’t think they should be resting on their laurels.

Not only does Jonathan make an assessment of the government’s performance, he also asserts the belief that they should not be lazy but continue with their efforts. When probed about what was meant by a ‘good job’, respondents replied that it was in developing the country and its economy. Thus, they were assessing the government’s performance in terms of the economic growth achieved under their rule. Similarly, Teck Ghee, while discussing ministerial salaries, said:

I give you high salary then you stay is it? That’s not right! That’s not politics anymore.

Here, Teck Ghee speaks as if he is the employer paying the ministers, suggesting that he is in a superior position and that the government needs to work for their money’s worth.

This makes sense when understood alongside the PAP pragmatism that has permeated the everyday reality of the citizenry. Given that the ‘overriding goal’ of pragmatism was economic growth and entailed the promise of ‘delivering the goods’ (Chua 2002: 74) to citizens’ lives, and was also the basis of the PAP’s legitimacy, the citizenry would then tend to assess the government in terms of their ability to improve citizens’ lives and Singapore’s economy. Thus, the metaphorical language respondents have used in talking about the government showcases the economic orientation the PAP has inculcated in the citizenry.

4.2 Pragmatism in Choice-Making

Due to the focus on economic production, Singaporeans tend to place more importance on activities that are economically productive at the expense of cultural activities and development, especially when the PAP sees economic growth as the best way to achieve social and political stability for national survival and growth (Chua 2002). Continuous economic growth is seen as the ‘wellspring of all else in a Singaporean’s life’; thus, all aspects of social life are to be ‘instrumentally harnessed to this relentless pursuit’ (Chua 2002: 59).

The attendant development among Singaporeans was that they perceived certain disciplines of studies to be ‘better’ and ‘more practical’, preferring educational disciplines with real-world relevance and scientific rationality, such as business and medicine, over that of the fine arts and humanities (Chua 2002), at each stage of the education system.

Shah, 26, is an undergraduate majoring in Drama Studies, and will graduate to become a drama teacher. Drama as a course of study is less popular or ‘economically productive’, as it
is closer to the realm of fine arts. Throughout the interview, Shah proclaims to have a deep passion for drama but says:

...There aren’t enough opportunities for [drama practitioners] to do theatre full-time if we want to make money... I will be teaching O level drama so whatever experience I have as a trainee will be helpful. But even then I see drama as a supplement to my real career path, which is to teach. If I want to make theatre, I won’t make any money, so I’ve to teach and then try as much as possible do what I love.

[Interviewer: Would you have still chosen to pursue drama if it wasn’t offered?]

I would if my family were rich and I didn’t need to work for money... But that’s not the case so I probably would have done something that would allow me to make money.

Even in choosing to pursue his passion in drama, Shah chose teaching, which he sees as the most viable route to moneymaking, as he believes that he ‘can’t make any money’ pursuing drama full-time. Thus, drama is relegated to ‘a supplement’ to teaching. Additionally, Shah admitted that he would have pursued another major should drama have not been offered, for pursuing drama otherwise would not be economically productive. Even individuals such as Shah who are invested in fine arts are more liable to do so only when it allows them to be economically productive and earn a living simultaneously. From here, we see that economic value and moneymaking is accorded much more significance and precedence over cultural meaning and pursuing one’s passion. In demonstrating such pragmatism and economic orientation in their choices, the emphasis on moneymaking also points to a preoccupation with mobility that was also present among other Singaporeans.

Throughout the interview, Shah continuously emphasized the importance and role that drama plays in enriching students’ educations in Singapore, which he described as ‘highly cerebral’:

I want to teach students to reconnect with their bodies with drama, to express themselves, have listening skills – soft skills. Managing relationships with people, to give back to society, feel a sense of purpose and learn more about themselves and others. Drama is not just a form of performance skill. It is pedagogy, thinking skills... [D]rama would make a more aware citizen, of what’s going on in their lives, and his place in society.

In speaking about his course of study, Shah repeatedly tries to demonstrate the real-world relevance and practical uses of drama, emphasising that drama is more than ‘just a form of performance skill’. In doing so, he could be trying to justify his choice in majoring in drama as a pragmatic one, because it is commonly perceived to be lacking in real-world relevance; he believes drama has more instrumental value than Singaporeans assume. Shah could also be trying to frame drama as something practical and with real-world relevance in Singapore’s context. Either way, there’s an undeniable focus on the practical and productive aspects of drama on Shah’s part. Thus, Shah’s example is indicative of the pragmatism that has permeated everyday life. This is especially so when Shah can be seen as an exception among the respondents – the other respondents had made conscious decisions to take up courses of
study they felt were more ‘useful’ and ‘practical’, such as business, because of its real-world relevance and potential for economic productivity. Shah’s choice in pursuing drama is an anomaly as it is more of a fine art, but even in doing so, Shah still displays a considerable degree of pragmatism and economic orientation in his choices for his future. These views parallel the government’s stance (Straits Times, 2010) that studies with real-world relevance are regarded as more important and practical.

The PAP’s overwhelming focus on and concern with economic production has seeped into another aspect of social life in Singapore – it affects how Singaporeans view educational disciplines, privileging those with more real-world and economic relevance. As alluded to earlier, this also demonstrates a preoccupation with mobility among middle-class Singaporeans. Educational attainment, occupational status and income are the most common indicators of socio-economic status (Quah 1991) and an increase in a combination of these three indicators would lead to upward mobility. This is especially so in the case of Singapore, where statuses of power, prestige and wealth are achieved rather than ascribed (Quah 1991). This preoccupation with mobility will be further expounded in the subsequent chapters.
CHAPTER 5:
ORIENTATIONS TOWARDS EDUCATION

5.1 Emphasis on Education and the ‘Certification of the Self’

Part of the orientation towards economic growth is the PAP government seeing education as ‘an investment in human capital’, which is the ‘only exploitable resource’ in Singapore (Chua 2002). This development of ‘human capital’ has been translated entirely to mean formal education, which Singaporeans thus see a great deal of importance in. The attainment of educational qualifications is taken to mean that one possesses such human capital – the higher the qualifications, the more skilled and valuable a resource an individual is. As mentioned earlier, as status in Singapore is achieved rather than ascribed, much of one’s upward mobility is achieved through merit in educational attainment and industriousness at work, both of which are associated with increased income. Education is seen as the deciding factor in social and economic mobility in Singapore (Chua 2002), as it is believed that school education is necessary for a better future (Quah 1991), especially when educational qualifications would enable one to find a job of higher occupational status and thus income.

Following this preoccupation with upward mobility and how education is seen as the best (if not only) way to achieve it, most respondents placed considerable emphasis on the importance of education in Singapore. Among those still within the education system, there was an observable trend of what Chua Beng Huat termed the ‘certification of the self’ (2002:112), where individuals measure their self-worth through the attainment of educational qualifications and certificates. Accordingly, education is seen as necessary, and highly educated individuals are seen by both themselves and others as better individuals than those who are not.

This can be seen in how Natalie, a student, asserted that:

Everything is [about having a] certificate… In Singapore… a degree is very necessary… if you don’t have a degree [then] you’re just nothing.

Natalie attaches the worth of an individual to the obtainment of a university degree – she perceives an individual to be “nothing” or worthless within the Singapore society should he or she fail to achieve one. Similarly, Stacey, an undergraduate said:

…I’m just getting what everyone has [a degree] to get that standing within the society.
We see the meaning Stacey attaches to a degree – she believes that having a degree would enable her to be of a better 'standing within the society' and to be equals with others who have obtained degrees.

This phenomenon was also observed among respondents whose experiences are closely related to education, such as adults with school-going children. This ‘certification’ is imposed upon their children, to whom their parents have transferred their aspirations of higher education, and thus upward mobility and a comfortable life. Many respondents demonstrated concern for the social and economic mobility of their children by emphasising the importance of their children’s education in relation to their future, and this is exemplified when Wee Kim recalls how his school-going son constantly compares the material situation of his family to the superior ones of his peers in school:

…[my son] asked, why is my friend staying in such a big house, has a maid, bigger cars. I told him, you cannot compare this way – I didn’t go to university or college... I’m just an O level grad... If you want to be like your friend’s parents now you have to study hard. You have a good education, get a better job, earn more money than what I am getting now. You need to reach a certain level of education so that people don’t look down on you.

Wee Kim does not only demonstrate this ‘certification’ and orientation towards advancement, but also attempts to inculcate it within his son. Having only received secondary school education, Wee Kim feels that his lack of education has resulted in him being unable to provide his son with the material comfort that the latter would like. Consequently, he transfers these aspirations to his son, wanting him to “study hard” and “have a good education”, to achieve economic mobility and “earn more money” for his material comfort. Also, he believes that the attainment of educational qualifications would make an individual better so that ‘people don’t look down on you’ – in other words, he believes that qualifications imbue an individual with worth.

The government’s emphasis on skilled human capital through education has trickled down to the citizenry and resulted in this ‘certification of the self’. Singaporeans recognise the demand for educational qualifications in order to participate in the economy and achieve upward socioeconomic mobility, and that the value of an individual lies in his employability as a worker and based on the education certificates he has accumulated. Therefore, it is important for them to receive as much education as possible in order to not just be employable and economically mobile, but also an individual of worth and value.

One exception was Daniel, a sales and marketing consultant, who felt that education in Singapore was “overrated”, because:
…to get hold of a government [job] you have to have a diploma. To get promoted and all that you need a degree... But that’s not really necessary in the real world at all. Just because you’re a degree holder does not mean that you know how to do what an O level student can do.

Daniel stands out from the rest of the respondents, who felt that educational qualifications were necessary in Singapore. Despite having only O level qualifications, Daniel is doing well in his job, earning more than $8000 each month. He also believes that Singapore was “full of opportunities because there’s a lot of government grants for companies or start-up entrepreneurs”, which he had benefitted from. These “opportunities” he talks about refer to opportunities in the working world, which he feels that education is only one of the many possible ways to in Singapore. He believes that too much emphasis has been placed on education and there is:

…this climate that we’ve created where paper is so damn important... That makes people afraid to step up, innovate or do something that’s out of the box. We talk about entrepreneurs, and obviously when you’ve a society where people think that paper is king, nobody wants to step up because they’re afraid that they’ll fail so they take the safe route and just study.

Daniel sees education as “overrated” only because he recognises that there are alternative routes to being successful and mobile in Singapore; he has taken that alternative route and is relatively well to do. In addition, Daniel, like previous respondents, linked education to a ‘good job’ and moneymaking. Thus, even though we see that Daniel does not think education is important, he still demonstrates pragmatism in prioritising economic survival, only that he sees more than one way (that is education) to achieving it. He, too, demonstrates an economic orientation propounded by the PAP, and a preoccupation with mobility, both of which are typical of middle-class Singaporeans.

5.2 Education and the Rationality of Singaporeans

As seen earlier, respondents made the link between ‘studying hard’ to obtain formal educational qualifications and securing a job that would allow one to enjoy upward mobility and a comfortable life. In doing so, the respondents demonstrate an instrumental orientation towards education. For example, Natalie had asserted that if “you don’t have an education, you don’t have much of a chance to survive in Singapore”. In making the direct connection between education and economic survival, the emphasis on education on Singapore is due to the desire to obtain certificates of formal education in order to secure a better job for a better material life (Chua 2002).

The formal rationality of Singaporeans leads them to see education as a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. This was manifested in how respondents spoke about their education. Adeline, an undergraduate, stated:
For me it’s like a culturally ingrained idea that university is the route for you to go… Then when I went to university I didn’t know what to do. [My current course of study] was my one and only choice because I really didn’t know what to do… Most of my friends, me inclusive, we don’t really know why we’re doing a degree…

When quizzed about she thought her degree might be for, Adeline replied:

[A] basic degree can grant you access to anything. It’s like…A stepping-stone.

[Interviewer: A stepping-stone to what?]

To jobs in the future?

Adeline acknowledged the importance of university education, but placed more emphasis on completing her undergraduate studies to obtain a degree – regardless of its course of study – so she could secure jobs with ease in the future, rather than finding meaning within her studies. Such an attitude is representative of the other undergraduate respondents, who continue with university education in order to obtain a degree for the sole purpose of better job prospects. In other words, formal education for many Singaporeans is seen as a means to an end, with that end being a job that ensures economic mobility and thus a comfortable life. In Daniel’s exceptional case as seen in the earlier section, while he does not see education as extremely important as did the other respondents, he also demonstrated an instrumentality in positioning education as a means to an end to economic survival and mobility, although unlike the other respondents, he recognised alternatives to this end.

We have seen how the priorities of the respondents are influenced by economic orientation and PAP pragmatism. This pragmatism has resulted in an instrumental rationality – as pragmatism involves doing what is ‘necessary’ and ‘rational’ in order to achieve economic growth, Singaporeans see education as a ‘necessary’ means to an end, namely that of moneymaking, and economic participation and mobility. The respondents see education as an important instrument of economic mobility, as they constantly make the connection between doing well in school or attaining paper qualifications, and ‘survival’ and having a comfortable life. In addition, mobility is equated solely to monetary wealth, as respondents frequently emphasised the importance of “earning more money”.
CHAPTER 6:
IDEOLOGY AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

6.1 ‘Foreign Talent’ as a Threat to Mobility

The respondents’ pragmatism, economic orientation and resultant attitudes towards education converge to reveal an underlying preoccupation: upward socioeconomic mobility. In general, respondents who were dissatisfied with their financial situations tended to be more concerned with mobility. Another concern stemming from the preoccupation with mobility is that of ‘foreign talent’, with whom Singaporeans have been voicing a lot of dissatisfaction, due to the perception that they were depressing wages and taking up jobs meant for Singaporeans, thus limiting their socioeconomic mobility. Karen, an underwriter, said of foreigners in Singapore:

It’s one thing I don’t really like. Singapore is already so small. They take up so much space, take up so many jobs. The more they come here the more Singaporeans will suffer, right?

Karen’s statement sums up the sentiment that ‘foreign talent’ were a threat to the mobility of Singaporeans, which was reiterated by other respondents. Karen’s perception that foreigners were limiting the opportunities and mobility of Singaporeans aligns with her perception that her financial situation was below average. This is in sharp contrast to Doreen and Belinda, who both believe that their financial situations are above average, and their earlier views of ‘foreign talent’, whom they see as justified rather than a threat to their advancement opportunities. This correlation between one’s perceived financial situation and the concern with mobility, and perceived threats to this mobility (especially ‘foreign talent’), was uniformly observed among the respondents.

6.2 Discontentment with the PAP Government

The pragmatism and economic orientation of Singaporeans has resulted in a perception where issues in everyday life are reduced to not just matters of ‘technical difficulties and solutions’ (Chua 2002: 50), but in economic-monetary terms as well, especially when mobility is of such great concern. As mentioned earlier, the basis of the PAP government’s legitimacy was the economic progress and improved material wellbeing of Singaporeans, resulting in assent to continued PAP rule despite certain largely unpopular policies (Chua 2002).

However, the PAP has of late come under heavy criticism from citizens and this was no different among respondents. The poorer the respondents perceived their financial situations to be, the more critical they were of the incumbent government; as mentioned earlier, they were also more concerned with socioeconomic mobility. With the increasing criticism of PAP
and their declining popularity, it would seem that the PAP was losing its hold over the citizenry ideologically. However, the rising dissatisfaction with the PAP boils down to its own ideological success in instilling pragmatism and economic development orientation among the electorate. This attests to the endurance of the hegemony of pragmatism as a central ideological tenet among Singaporeans, and reveals a major point of discontentment with the PAP government.

Many respondents professed unhappiness with rising costs of living due to housing and car ownership, among other issues, which they attributed directly to the government. For instance, Teck Ghee said:

Every month, every day, they take your money away. It’s just like our water bill, our electricity bill. It’s so high. There’s nothing free in Singapore. Keep on paying. Daylight robbery.

Whenever the government had justified unpopular policies on the grounds of pragmatism, the achievement of economic growth had implied and entailed a corresponding improvement in the private material lives of Singaporeans as well (Mak and Leong 1994). The legitimacy of the PAP was based on the rhetoric of improvement and mobility, and they had from the start strived to provide Singaporeans with better opportunities for social mobility (Quah 1991). However, with issues such as the influx of immigrant workers and housing costs in which the government has had an instrumental role, many middle-class Singaporeans now find their aspirations of upward mobility severely curtailed. Increasingly, they find that their material lives, although still considerably comfortable, no longer match up to the economy’s continual growth, despite the continuation of PAP’s authoritarian style of rule.

Thus, despite the apparent increase in dissatisfaction with the PAP government, the PAP has not lost its hold on Singaporeans ideologically, as seen in earlier chapters. Rather, this is a result – and possibly an unintended consequence – of their successful ideological work. Just as there is a material basis to the PAP’s legitimate rule, it is this material basis upon which the citizenry makes assessments regarding the competence of the government. Consequently, the expectation of material comfort and mobility has been entrenched within the Singaporean mindset, and with rising costs of living, unhappiness with the PAP government rose as they found that their material lives were disparate with the nation’s economic growth.

Among respondents who were still students, there was a lack of concern or dissatisfaction with their finances and thus the PAP government, as they were still financially dependent on their parents. Yet, they still prominently displayed an economic orientation. For instance, while discussing the PAP, Adeline interjected:
A lot of Singaporeans think the government don’t care about the people. But... they may be caring but in a way [that] we’re not seeing it... They’re actually doing things because of some outcome that they want in the near future for the country and economy. It’s for the better of the people. But... they’re suffering now, so they feel that the government doesn’t care... If you think... you’d find that the government cares about the people...

In speaking up from the perspective of and for the government, there is an obvious economic development orientation within Adeline’s proclamation. But at 19, Adeline grew up in an already affluent Singapore, with no personal experience of Singapore of the turbulent 1950-60s. Yet, her proclamation was echoed by other student respondents, who were concerned with Singapore’s economic growth. This further attests to the endurance of the PAP’s ideological hegemony.

6.3 Concluding Remarks

With respondents uniformly demonstrating the attitudes the PAP had sought to inculcate within citizens – namely pragmatism and economic development orientation – to facilitate their goals of economic growth, the ideological hegemony that the PAP has established cannot be disputed. This can be seen in respondents’ preoccupation with mobility, attitudes towards and rationalization of issues such as education and ‘foreign talent’, and even in their use of language. The ideological hegemony can be ascertained through how the private discourse of the respondents and the conceptualizations they have used in fact echoed the public discourse of the government with regards to issues such as foreign workers and economic productivity.

One limitation of this research can be attributed to the small sample size in the study – it was unlikely to be representative of the highly differentiated middle class, as middle-class Singaporeans who lived in private housing and non-English-speaking respondents were excluded. Furthermore, a number of potential respondents refused to be interviewed, effectively excluding from this research an integral part of the middle-class – those who are fearful of the PAP government. Including non-English-speaking respondents would reveal another dimension of the multi-faceted middle class in Singapore and allow more comparisons to be drawn. While the middle class is the focus here, future research could be extended to both the working/lower class and the upper class, especially when social inequality is on the rise in Singapore.

The middle class in Singapore, being the numerical majority, has an instrumental role to play in Singapore politics. This study has shown a caveat of discontentment among the middle-class with the PAP government, whose legitimacy is now on the decline in the eyes of those unhappy with their material lives and financial situations. Does this really represent the start of a ‘political awakening’ that seemed imminent during the General Elections of 2011? Is the
Singapore middle-class starting to lose the political docility it has long been known for? Can such a “political awakening” happen alongside the ideological hegemony that the PAP has established?
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### APPENDIX

A. Details of respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name / Age</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Approximate monthly household income / Household size</th>
<th>Living arrangements</th>
<th>Educational Qualifications</th>
<th>Perceived financial situation</th>
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<tr>
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<td>HDB 5-room</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>Average / middle class</td>
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<td>8 Nadia / 26</td>
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<td>Operations executive</td>
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<td>O Levels</td>
<td>Above average / Lower middle class</td>
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<td>$6000 / 3</td>
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<td>Degree</td>
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