

# Singapore and Public Diplomacy

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**June 2021  
Figueroa Press  
Los Angeles**

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Published by  
FIGUEROA PRESS  
840 Childs Way, 3rd Floor  
Los Angeles, CA 90089+  
Phone: (213) 743-4800  
Fax: (213) 743-4804  
www.figueroapress.com

Figueroa Press is a division of the USC Bookstores

Produced by Crestec, Los Angeles, Inc.  
Printed in the United States of America

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ISBN-13: 978-0-18-001673-2  
ISBN-10: 0-18-001673-3

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## **Abstract**

Public diplomacy as a field of practice and study has often been premised upon issuing propaganda over the heads of target governments with the aim of endearing one's government and its policies directly to a foreign population. The prehistory and history of public diplomacy in Singapore's case suggests that one looks to non-state information campaigns as precedents for projection of identity and political causes. This has implications on how post-1965 Singapore projects its soft power through people-to-people dimensions.

## Introduction

As a modern political entity in international relations, Singapore had to be invented. It is a 55-year-old, *imagined* nation-state since it has by and large communicated its political, economic and social causes successfully. (Chew, 1991) However, this creation of Singapore through the vigour of communication did not always emanate from a state. This much must be understood if we are to understand public diplomacy and its connections to Singaporean nationhood and statehood.

In its earliest modern origins under British colonialism, we find the predecessors of public diplomacy initiated by the foreign business community who had taken up residence in Singapore which is basically a small island half the size of London. British colonial immigration policies introduced to the island elements of ethnic groups who were not native to Southeast Asia. The arrival of Chinese and South Asian settlers in the fledgling colony brought into the local political equation significant elements of nationalist propaganda from China and India. By the time the Bolshevik Revolution and the founding of the Chinese Communist Party took place between 1917 and 1921, communist agitation from abroad into Singapore complicated the ideological ferment of the colonially governed medley of peoples—who were not yet a nation.

Meanwhile, Singapore's original indigenous population were linked by blood ties to the Malay peoples of the Malay Peninsula and the islands of Indonesia. This added the strand of a Malay nationalism that emanated from just across the many narrow straits that surrounded Singapore and attracted the controversies of how the Malay peoples ought to be modernized and retrieved from their subjecthood under European colonization. Along the way, discussion

and support for Malay nationalism became intertwined with Islamic discourse from the Arab world and socialist ideas borrowed from the erstwhile USSR and Mao Zedong's communist party. The degrees of non-religious inspirations varied from one political party to another.

But every stripe of opinion agitating for independence wanted to synchronize their respective causes with transnational world trends. This aspiration was perhaps most intensely embraced by the handful of financially affluent secular nationalists from Singapore's nascent, non-white middle class who were fortunate to have studied abroad, principally in Britain itself. While there, they constituted their own circles for seeding the ultimate downfall of British colonialism in Singapore. It is therefore feasible to expedite this brief chapter historically to uncover the ingrained nature of public diplomacy in Singapore's short history as a modern nation-state enmeshed in and also practising public diplomacy: the colonial era (1819-1941); the nationalist awakening (1942-65); and the ongoing quest by the independent Singaporean state to establish a niche identity in both the global economy and international diplomatic community (1965-present) through image promotion and discourses of diplomatic hospitality towards ideologies of all stripes, while deftly minimizing antagonism from the ideologically hostile entities in a globalizing world.

## **Definitions**

This piece adopts Hans Tuch's definition of public diplomacy as 'a government's process of communication with foreign publics in an attempt to bring about understanding of its nation's ideas and ideals, its institutions and culture, as well as its national goals and policies.' (Tuch, 1990, pp. 3-4) Those inspired by the proliferation of campaigns by the governments of Tony Blair, William J. Clinton, George W.



Bush, Barack Obama and Xi Jinping, as well as the personal efforts of Canadian Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy throughout much of the 1990s, coined even more additions to the lexicon of public diplomacy (Axworthy, 2003; Nye Jr., 2004; Chong, 2007). Others suggest that public diplomacy is the product of a slick advertising campaign and a matter of making smart choices in 'strategically targeting' foreign audiences to change their dispositions towards the governmental campaigner more positively. (Fisher & Brockerhoff, 2008; Löffelholz, et al., 2014; Cull, 2019) Still more polished examinations including the elaborate, engineering inspired *Soft Power 30* annual report that was temporarily suspended by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, suggest that any particular state's soft power could be measured by aggregating objective data like the attractiveness of government, digital infrastructure, national culture, engagement and enterprise, along with polling data on that particular state's image of friendliness, technological products, foreign policy, liveability, association with luxury goods, culture and even cuisine! (McClory, 2020)

What is extremely pertinent in the case of Singapore is to understand that public diplomacy exists within a social context, and is usually cultivated over the long term through the mobilization of intellectual and material resources. As will be shown in the following pages, Singapore's experience with public diplomacy actually begins outside of statehood. To paraphrase Hans Tuch's definition earlier, nascent civil society back in the 1800s and 1900s attempted to communicate with foreign publics and governments in attempts to bring about understanding of its particular ideas and ideals, its institutions and culture, as well as direct their domiciled territories' goals and policies. Public diplomacy is called into action because public opinion matters to the workings of government, regardless of whether it is democratic, authoritarian, or totalitarian, or stripes in

between, because it is a way of winnowing out diversity and contradictions in the people's voice. The latter is in turn an important pillar of legitimacy for whatever policies the governments of the day put out. Moreover, public opinion can support war, peace or austerity measures if guided to do so in the name of the public good *qua* national interest.

### **Precursors of Public Diplomacy in the Colonial Era (1819-1941): The Civil Society Dimension and Non-State Public Diplomacy**

In mainstream political science, civil society is understood to be that portion of a nation-state where the government does not control (but can attempt to influence) its citizens and other transient persons who theoretically enjoy the liberal freedoms of rights to speech and expression, and especially, uncoerced association. In democratic theory, such as the branch embodied by John Locke and Alexis de Tocqueville, civil society acts in loose unison as a check against tyrannical turns in government policies. Civil society checks government by mounting its own syncretic versions of public diplomacy across all sorts of boundaries without necessarily representing any recognizable statehood. This is where one must appreciate why Singapore's experience with public diplomacy can be traced to vocal civil society groups of all ideological stripes and professions, including business entities. Of course, this may not be strictly public diplomacy by conventional measures, but agents of opinion becoming vocal across bureaucratic and political boundaries serve as the wellsprings of full-scale public diplomacy in the postcolonial era.

Under the incipient British colonialism in the 1819-67 period, the mercantile community came under the jurisdiction of the English East India Community (EIC). The latter's concerns, while profit driven, did not always favour

uniformly low taxes and zero tariffs across all categories of commerce and cross-cutting jurisdictions. Between Stamford Raffles' founding of the Singapore trading settlement for the EIC and the formal transfer of the fully fledged colony to London's direct control, the Malay potentates on the island enjoyed the 'power' to tax merchants at will according to custom and prestige. Subsequently, the EIC headquarters in India cooked up their own plans to impose duties. This riled the merchants from both Europe and Arabia, as well as the Chinese and other Asians, who had set up shop on the island on the strength of the EIC's promises of a free port. (Gillis, 2005, p. 28) The clamour for an end to such irregular taxation on trade united the mercantile community into venting their anger at the EIC in the fledgling newspapers in Singapore and in nearby EIC colonies. This even culminated in campaigns to mobilize sympathetic government departments and politicians in London. In this sense, early mercantile civil society improvised a proto public diplomacy that transcended Singapore's borders. Similar campaigns were kept up by the same merchants even after formal control by the British government ensued in 1867 on other issues like the combat of piracy, the introduction of steam transportation, the introduction of copper currency, land policy and the maintenance of law and order. (Gillis, 2005, pp. 29-30)

This proto public diplomacy mirrored the unusual administrative mosaic that was British colonial authority between 1819 and 1942, when the Japanese briefly ended British colonialism. Under both the mercenary EIC, and the more formal British Crown control, Singapore was administered under the principle of 'divide and rule' in terms of favouring some segments of the island's population while marginalizing the others, varying from issue to issue. This was a source of much frustration but also incitement towards the mobilization of propaganda movements.

The Malay population in Singapore was regarded as willing but subordinate partners in the EIC's original vision of building Singapore into a free port *par excellence*. This unequal partnership degenerated very quickly as seen earlier with the transnational lobbying by merchants against the taxation practices of the Malay royalty. Right from the start, the British never treated the Malays seriously as ready participants in a modern capitalist economy. (Roff, 1967, pp. 6-11) Instead, the socio-economic plight of the Malays as drivers, house servants, policemen, peons and small shopkeepers languished till the 1890s when their economic presence was bolstered by the arrival of Javanese who established themselves as indentured labourers or peasant settlers, and many did so for the ostensible purpose of earning enough to feed themselves and ultimately to pay their way for the pilgrimage to Mecca. Singapore was a convenient stopover for maritime routes to the Arab holy sites. (Roff, 1967, pp. 35-37) With this role came even more Arab traders who settled in Singapore. This intermingling of Muslims and ethnic Malays from the Malay Archipelago around Singapore inspired a religious tone to their awakening as suffering economic subjects in British run Singapore. This precipitated the early nationalistic press like *Al-Imam*, *Al-Manar*, *Jawi Peranakan* and the *Bintang Timur*, a Straits Chinese publication sympathetic to the Malay plight. Between the 1890s and the early 1900s, these newspapers and periodicals afforded Malays the space to reflect on their plight, pose sharp questions as to how colonial modernization impacted their young people's sense of propriety, manners, worldliness and piety, and whether western style change was even desirable. In this sense, a form of non-state public diplomacy was taking root at the confluence of Muslims and Malay peoples sharing and contesting views. (Roff, 1967, pp. 56-90) This ensured that the nationalism of the Malays of Singapore would inevitably be entwined with rising political consciousness in the Dutch East Indies, up and down the Malay Peninsula and the politics

of the Middle East. This was perhaps no better exemplified than the intra-Malay propaganda ferment that contributed to one of Singapore's biggest post-1945 race riots—the Maria Hertogh riots of 1950. (Aljunied, 2009, pp. 8-24)

The other two major ethnic groups in Singapore were imported by colonial policy, but no less driven to pursue their own versions of preliminary public diplomacy to root themselves. The Chinese had been attracted to Singapore by the possibilities of trade and craftsmanship relating to boatbuilding, furniture and construction. With these aspirations in mind, they also brought with them their dialect-based clans and family connections. (Turnbull, 2009, pp. 70-71) Further down the list of low skilled occupations the colony required were in the pepper, sugar, gambier and the then fledgling rubber plantations on Singapore's offshore islands. The point about this industrial economic profile is that the Chinese population exhibited signs of purposive migration away from the Qing Dynasty's inept economic management in China, while being lured expeditiously by British policy. (Chen, 1967, pp. 12-20) This profile also meant that the Chinese had to be succoured in their mercenary loyalties by the British by ensuring the Singapore economy could not fail them in their quest for greener pastures. At the same time, Singapore as part of the emotive moniker 'Nanyang' (Southern Seas) was psychologically regarded as either a social borderland, or one of the peripheries of temporary exile vis-à-vis a corrupted Chinese motherland in need of redemption over time by those exiled from it. This set the stage for the Chinese workers and merchants in Singapore to establish a congeries of public diplomacy under assorted labels such as philanthropy, endowments for education at all levels, and most definitely an assortment of newspapers focussed upon the fortunes of both the Qing Court in Beijing, as well as the revolutionary strength of various anti-Manchu nationalist movements. The latter

famously included Sun Yat-sen's *Tongmenghui* which had branches in Singapore. One widely read Singapore-based paper, the *Lat Pau*, was treated seriously in the 1890s by both the British and the Qing government as a bellwether of whether events in both China and the Colony had affected local Chinese opinion adversely vis-à-vis their respective legitimacy. (Chen, 1967, pp. 40-48)

The autonomous history of Chinese primary and middle school education before Singapore's independence is testimony to how textbooks imported from China served unsubtly as channels of non-state public diplomacy by Chinese patriots as well as communists. This posed a huge reservoir of political power for the communist front in the 1950s when they agitated against the British. Moreover, the biography of the notorious Chin Peng, the final leader of the Communist Party of Malaya (and Singapore), recorded that it was extremely common right up to the 1940s and 1950s for Chinese middle and working class homes to hang portraits of both Sun Yat-sen and other Kuomintang generals, read histories of Chinese resistance against oppressive dynasties and be examined on patriotic Chinese literature. (Chin Peng, 2007, pp. 29-49) By the 1920s and 1930s, both sides in the protracted Chinese civil war, that is both the Kuomintang and Chinese Communist Party, were sending agents to actively recruit Singaporean and Malayan Chinese for their causes. (Chin Peng, 2007) In this sense, the print media of books and newspapers and the vastly intricate personal and familial networks of the majority of Chinese in Singapore had already operated the trappings of what we dub public diplomacy through state-sponsored means today.

The third major ethnic group within colonial society were broadly the Indians. This label was actually a misnomer. The British encouraged immigration by Gujaratis, Bengalis, Ceylonese, Malayalees and Punjabis who were interested in

trading with and from Singapore, and in the earliest years of the colony, mostly 'imported' Tamil convicts from the southern part of the Indian subcontinent. The convicts came for punitive purposes since Singapore (along with Malaya) were distant from the subcontinent by nineteenth century standards and imprisonment in Singapore was tantamount to physical isolation in every sense of the term. Just as importantly, Tamil convicts were viewed as instantly available cheap labour for public works in developing the colony. The British colonial penal system was mostly lenient towards most of them, encouraging them to pick up technical vocational skills such as brick making, tailoring, printing, carpentry and even photography. (Turnbull, 2009, p. 74) This was part of the British design to encourage the Tamils to stay behind in the colony and start over, while also building the island's infrastructure and economy. The growing economic bases of the various 'Indians' could not but induce them to follow nationalist trends back in British India and learn socialist ideas that were percolating from both Russia and Europe by the 1920s.

The Tamil ex-convicts turned working class were inspired by the nascent Dravidianism strand of socialism popular in South India as well as the separatist ideas of Ramasamy Naicker. (Kaur, 2017, p. 24) This manifested in labour unionisation amongst Tamil workers in both Singapore and Malaya and the establishment of bodies such as the Tamil Reform Association of Malaya and Singapore. Meanwhile, the other 'Indians' such as the Ceylonese, Malayalees and Bengalis, hailing from mercantile and better educated backgrounds filled middle class occupations such as civil servants, lawyers and corporate clerks. Understandably, they were open to voices mobilizing them for advancing their political rights and English language educational privileges under British colonial rule. (Kaur, 2017, p. 25) These would either gravitate towards the Indian National Congress

associated with Pandjit Nehru and Mohandas Gandhi, or negotiate compromises with British attempts to experiment with limited 'indigenous' representation in legislative councils and other bureaucratic mechanisms. (Turnbull, 2009, p. 161; Kaur, 2017, p. 25) By the time of the Japanese Occupation, the 'Indians' would be caught up in the boldest public campaign to politicize them in militant nationalism oriented towards India.

In sum the period from the founding of the British Colony of Singapore to the eve of the Japanese Occupation in World War II revealed that significant non-state, almost diasporic, preliminary forms of public diplomacy were practised by the three main ethnic communities in Singapore. The thrust of these activities was aimed at pushing for political rights as much as they kept alive a sense of transborder political identity with the ancestral motherlands outside Singapore island. This was to both prove nettlesome for an independent Singaporean statehood and a practised pathway for diasporic public diplomacy targeting Singapore's domestic politics.

### **The Nationalist Awakening (1942-65)**

We next turn attention to the Japanese Occupation through to Independence in 1965. There can be no perfect justification for compressing what some might argue to be the holistic drama of the Japanese Occupation cum World War Two; the nationalistic propaganda that assisted constitutional and electoral agitation for independence from colonial rule; and the parallel communist-run revolutionary propaganda and civil disobedience campaign. In fact, one can possibly argue that the latter two played out concurrently with the Japanese Occupation. That said, this was a period of Singapore's political history that also witnessed considerable encounters with public diplomacy emanating from both



state and non-state actors that responded to the attractive stakes that decolonization entailed.

When Japan invaded Southeast Asia in 1941 in one of several almost simultaneous opening acts of initiating the Pacific chapter of World War Two, it viewed Southeast Asia and Singapore as both prizes of empire as well as potential allies against racist western powers. In the latter ambition, the Japanese were not averse to playing the race card for invoking a grand strategy of decolonization. But as many accounts have showed, including eyewitnesses from the middle and lower ranks of the Imperial Japanese Army deployed to Malaya and Singapore, the cruelty and avarice within imperial ambition got the better of Occupation policy on the ground. (Frei, 2004, pp. xxiii-xxvi) In Singapore, a Lieutenant Colonel Oishi Masayuki, an elite officer of the Military Police Academy in Japan came to head the notorious local chapter of the *Kempeitei* (military police), exercising almost absolute power over the civilian population. As recounted by his subordinates, Oishi's priority was not public diplomacy but population interrogation and control. Insofar as his subordinates recall, he instructed them to recruit local Asians to serve as police officers, private detectives and volunteer guards. In the latter roles, the Asian collaborators were to assist in gathering information about suspected anti-Japanese individuals and officials in the defunct British colonial administration, and more importantly about 'communists, [military] volunteers and guerrillas'. (Frei, 2004, p. 148) All in all, Oishi devised a system of vetting every resident in Singapore through an elaborate checkpoint system, upon which those who cleared the *Kempeitai's* interrogations (including some instances of physical manhandling) were issued with 'good citizen certificates'. (Frei, 2004, pp. 148-150) The Chinese population was subjected to additional interrogation and many were sentenced to summary executions by firing squad. The entire climate on the ground

was one of fear and intimidation, antithetical to the spirit of public diplomacy. (Frei, 2004, p. 154) But the approach of categorizing the population into segments could have served public diplomacy well, had this been the strategy all along. It was belatedly in 1943, that Japan made a tepid attempt at drumming up support for a vision of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.

Originally announced in August 1940 by Japanese Foreign Minister Matsuoka Yosuke, the vision of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere was a bid by Tokyo to take on a self-constructed mantle of pan-Asian leadership amidst Tokyo's rising tensions with the western powers over its aggression in China. It was only in early November 1943, almost a year after Japan's successful invasion of the European colonies in Southeast Asia, that Tokyo convened a formal conference with that title. On that occasion, Japan 'recognised' the occupied territories of Burma and the Philippines as 'independent' since they were nominally led by parties of local collaborators who openly embraced Japanese occupation as the true liberation from western colonial rule. (The Asahi Shimbun Company, 2015, p. 83) Even Thailand, officially 'allied' with Japanese military ambitions, could claim it participated as an 'independent' Asian state. In a not unexpected gift to Japanese propaganda, Prime Minister Ba Maw of Burma spoke passionately about Japan's sincere liberation of subject Asian peoples and praised Japanese forces for providing him refuge following his escape from a British-controlled prison in Burma. The pro-government Japanese broadsheet, *Asahi Shimbun*, trumpeted the event as a watershed in world history and a 'morally upstanding' event. (The Asahi Shimbun Company, 2015, p. 84) Realities on the ground in both Singapore and Malaya undercut a great deal of this act of glitzy wartime public diplomacy. And as the Pacific War ground on in favour of the Allied Powers, Tokyo's claims appeared less credible by the day.

While the Chinese population was mostly persecuted with a heavy hand, the Malays and the Indians were favoured by the Japanese in a tragic reprise of Britain's 'divide and rule' colonial policy. Even though most historians have not done so, the latter can be treated as public diplomacy, albeit a divisive and targeted ploy. (Wang, 2000, pp. 20-21) Different ethnic segments were incentivized to align with the colonial masters for their cynical, self-serving national interests. In the case of Singapore and Malaya under Japanese rule, the Chinese were made out in the starkest terms to be the deviant community and the one unsynchronized with Japan's liberation plans for all Asians. Amongst the Malays, the Japanese favoured the most radical organised group, the left leaning *Kesatuan Melayu Muda* (KMM) and supported the authority of the older ruling elite, the Sultans, and the Islamic teachers, the *ustaz*, as means of enlisting local 'collaborators' amongst the non-urban Malays. In many rural districts in Malaya, the KMM were lent by the Japanese delegated authority as gendarmes and governing representatives of the military government for most of 1942. (Cheah, 1983, pp. 104-106) Better still, around the time of East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere Conference, the Japanese convinced Ibrahim Yaacob, the leader of the KMM to reorganize his rank and file into the *Giyu Gun* (Volunteer Army) and *Giyu Tai* (Volunteer Corps for coast guard duties and civil defence). Ibrahim himself underwent arms training at a Japanese military camp in Singapore and appealed for all Malay youths to join him. (Cheah, 1983, pp. 110-112) In this regard, the unprecedented experience of combat training as a prelude towards a military struggle for independence would theoretically have done wonders for Japan's war effort while also emboldening radical Malay nationalists to anticipate a prospect of achieving independence under Japanese tutelage, a propaganda point unimaginable under pre-1941 British policy. In any case, non-KMM Malay nationalists were also inspired by these precedents to stand up to the post-war

British colonial diktat where it contravened their awakened political consciousness.

In both Malaya and Singapore, the Japanese were even bolder in cultivating the Indians as allies in their campaign to conquer Asia. In fact, the nascent Indian nationalist movement, especially in the person of Subhas Chandra Bose, was equally willing to avail themselves of what they viewed as the fratricidal world war between western powers that was World War Two. The Japanese were however psychologically embraced as fellow Asians, willing to liberate their brethren from the cruel yoke of western imperialism. Indeed, Singapore's volatile, unintegrated colonial society of Asian peoples could not have been isolated from these currents. As early as 1939, Subhas, who was briefly President of the Indian National Congress and enjoying some degree of support from the founder, Mahatma Gandhi himself, openly declared his impatience as a 'cold-blooded realist' opining that the impending war was the ripe time for an India wide 'assault on British imperialism'. (Bose, 2016, pp. 125-126) Understandably, Subhas felt that any anti-status quo power at the time could act as a potential ally against British power in the subcontinent. As such, he courted Nazi Germany and Stalinist Soviet Russia through various proxies. (Bose, 2016, pp. 140-145) For a brief few months in 1941 and 1942, the Germans facilitated his broadcast of Azad Hind Radio (All India Radio) from Berlin to Asia. (Bose, 2016, p. 225) But it was the Japanese who actually provided succour to Subhas' full spectrum public diplomacy towards the transnational Indian diaspora. By early 1943, the Japanese reached an understanding with their German ally to facilitate Subhas' transfer to the Asian theatre to invigorate a pro-Japanese 'fifth column' Indian National Army that had been founded in Japan under another exile Rash Behari Bose. After a lengthy clandestine journey by submarine across the Indian Ocean, and thence by air from Japanese controlled Sumatra to

Tokyo, Subhas eventually formed a Provisional Government of Azad Hind to officially undermine the British Raj in India.

Its formation was symbolically launched on 21 October 1943 in Singapore, which now served as a base for mobilizing large numbers of diasporic Indian workers, displaced by Japan's Occupation economy and war, for the task of liberating their homeland. This was of course a huge irony. Japan caused the Singapore and Malaya based Indians considerable displacement, yet Subhas' charisma as a principled and firebrand nationalist was sufficient to sway diasporic loyalties to his militant cause on Japan's side. Subhas cleverly portrayed himself as *samyavadi*, one espousing universal egalitarianism and self-determination. (Bose, 2011, p. 11) As one historian recalls, Subhas was not simply a wartime leader, he demonstrated a knack for bridging India's regional and linguistic divisions: 'he spoke in stirring English or Hindustani, rapidly translated into Tamil for the large Tamil-speaking diaspora and the audience responded with equal fervour...'. (Sengupta, 2011, p. 8) It is estimated that some 40,000 Indians from Singapore and the Malay Peninsula swelled the ranks of the INA whose main camps and training grounds were in Singapore. (Sengupta, 2011, p. 8) In this sense, the very visible presence of the INA and its leader in Singapore incorporated the island for a time into the mental geography of the Indian road to independence. As Nilanjana Sengupta described it, 'it was a time of kampongs and vegetable farms in Bukit Timah, when the Azad Hind Radio was located at the Cathay building, when the INA men went for morning runs on Dunearn Road and the "Ranis" marched down Bras Basah!' (Sengupta, 2011, p. 9) That latter label was the affectionate short form for the Rhani of Jhansi regiment comprising all-women soldiers who volunteered from Malaya and Singapore. This was a revolutionary development sired by Subhas' vision.

Although the INA saw action alongside Japanese Army units on the Imphal and Kohima fronts along the Indo-Burmese border in 1944-5, the declining fortunes of the Japanese on all fronts by early 1945 dimmed Subhas' prospects of fulfilling his vision of forging the much vaunted 'advance to Delhi' alongside the momentum of a relentless Japanese offensive into India. Subhas himself kept the spirit of the INA by laying the foundation stone of the INA martyr's memorial at Singapore's city centre seafront. (Sengupta, 2011, p. 8) After the atomic bombing of Nagasaki that precipitated Japan's surrender on 15 August 1945, Subhas still held out hope for his cause by persuading his Japanese allies to fly him to Manchuria presumably to establish a new base there knowing that the British would return to Singapore and prosecute the INA members for treachery to the Empire. But the flight was ill fated after it stopped over in Taipei where engine failure caused Subhas' plane to crash upon take-off. Subhas died a hero in many senses and the two major volumes cited in this account note that when news of Subhas' death arrived in India along with the disbandment and 'trial' of the surviving INA leaders, spontaneous disturbances against British rule stretched from the remainder of 1945 into early 1946, unnerving the British. The latter appeased the aroused Indian public by dispensing with the sentences against the INA after the trial. (Bose, 2011, pp. 8-10) The rapturous accolades recorded in Subhas' memory in India's parliament on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Indian independence confirms that the INA's mythical and psychological significance proved far more impactful than its actual combat experiences. (Bose, 2011, p. 12) This perhaps contains a lesson for modern Singaporean public diplomacy to psychologically punch above the republic's territorial limitations.

The third and most important practitioner of public diplomacy amidst the potent anti-colonial climate was the

mostly Chinese dominated Malayan Communist Party (MCP) who boasted that its armed wing, the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA), had acted consistently as the main anti-Japanese insurgent underground during the period of Japanese Occupation. As early as the 1930s, the MCP had practised preliminary but effective forms of public diplomacy without the trappings of statehood by endearing their cause through the propaganda of supplying communist-leaning textbooks to Chinese schools from primary through university levels of education in both Malaya and Singapore. As the infamous MCP leader Chin Peng's biography recounts it, there was little difference in school instruction between imbibing Sinicized Marxist views of history and society *and* patriotic learning of China's history of humiliation and its struggle for self-determination. (Chin Peng, 2007) The many storied activities of the MPAJA sabotaging Japanese troops and their supply lines were haplessly approved by the British since the MPAJA were the only well organized resistance movement who were prepared to take the fight to the enemy in Singapore and Malaya while British military forces were pinned down in Burma and the Middle East. Britain's famous clandestine Force 136 collaborated with and supplied arms to the MPAJA throughout the war.

When the Japanese authorities in Malaya and Singapore capitulated without warning weeks after the atomic bombing of Nagasaki, the MPAJA bolstered its image by acting as the instant *de facto* 'new government' recruited mostly from the Chinese population and former guerrillas who had escaped the clutches of the *Kempeitai* or kept a low profile until now. Not only did they protect the newly liberated Chinese population from roving bandits, they paid dutifully for food and supplies that ordinary people could sell. (Cheah, 1983, pp. 175-177) In currying favour with the oppressed Chinese population, the MPAJA kept the remnants of the once invincible Japanese Army holed up in defensive pockets

and exacted revenge against Japanese recruited Malay and Indian policemen through 'people's courts' that called on self-credentialed witnesses to establish charges against the guilty, a tactic ostensibly borrowed from Maoism. In this way, all sorts of alleged informers and turncoats were summarily executed by gunfire or bayonet during the tumultuous weeks and months before Britain reasserted its authority in both Singapore and Malaya. (Cheah, 1983, pp. 177-185) Through these bloody and vindictive gestures, the MCP's armed wing delivered a public relations boost to the communist cause especially amongst the Chinese.

Cleverly, the MCP instructed the MPAJA to superficially comply with the British demand that the latter disband after the war in a parade that was characterized by much pomp and pageantry, topped off with the spectacle that Lord Mountbatten, the Supreme Allied Commander of the Southeast Asia Command, presented medals to MPAJA leaders, including Chin Peng himself. (Turnbull, 2009, p. 232) The MCP took full advantage of the vacuum in British authority between 1942 and 1945 by entrenching a Singapore Town Committee that in turn operated through several 'front organizations'. One of these was the General Labour Union, which on paper enjoyed the ability to turn out large numbers for strike action and other protests. Other legal fronts included the New Democratic Youth League, the Singapore Women's Association, the MPAJA Old Comrades Association and the Malayan Democratic Union. Notably, these superficially civic associations allowed the MCP's public diplomacy to plug the line that there was popular support for it and that it was mainstreamed. The Malayan Democratic Union was even a full-fledged political party that featured prominent left leaning politicians who were even friends of the leaders helming the rival People's Action Party (PAP). For a brief few years after the British return to Malaya, at least up till the time the MCP formally switched to



armed revolution in 1948, even the MCP itself was accorded legal status as a political party. This was shrewd public diplomacy as it allowed the MCP leaders to openly attract support from the uncommitted but politically awakened population after the Japanese interregnum. Moreover, all these open front organisations allowed the MCP to fund schools, welfare activities and other socially conscientious projects that could draw support from moderate sectors of public opinion. (Clutterbuck, 1985, pp. 45-53)

The Singapore Town Committee of the MCP was the centre of a spider like web of cells and organizations in Singapore that sought to capitalize on every visible public grievance against colonial misrule throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Protests against wage reductions, mistreatment of workers, food shortages, government discrimination against Chinese education and scholarship, hikes in public transportation fares and the institution of national service all served as first rate fodder for the MCP's public diplomacy through the incitement of protest. (Clutterbuck, 1985, pp. 62-86) Of course, the reader might balk at how this chapter is treating political subversion and subterfuge as public diplomacy. But one must not discount the fact that Singapore's political history is replete with instances of how political manoeuvre, propaganda strategies and black operations pioneered innovative forms of public diplomacy enacted by non-state actors. This is a challenge that remains to this day albeit under guises such as ISIS, Jemaah Islamiyah and other diasporic information activities on Singapore's soil. It should be noted that the MCP emphasised special techniques involved in socializing students and structuring the process of education. An entire system of seniors and juniors were to be set up in several student bodies and cells dedicated towards mentoring the young in an appropriate manner. Moreover, senior students and 'class monitors' ought to hold dual appointments inside and outside the

school. Student activism via communal lunches, tea parties, manning a newsletter, production of dramas and visits to cinemas and exhibitions ought to be designed for building camaraderie towards a general cause. (Clutterbuck, 1985, pp. 86-94) Most importantly, any number of study groups and tuition cells ought to be organized where the 'the method of criticism and self-criticism [must be practised] so as to carry on a struggle against all the bad phenomena which are harmful to the enterprise of the people and the undertakings of the party.' (Clutterbuck, 1985, p. 95) Is this not fully reminiscent of today's public relations and information campaigning by any number of dedicated agencies for public diplomacy?

### **Ongoing Quest for a Niche Identity in the Global Economy (1965-Present)**

Singapore's unexpected independence came on 9 August 1965. The PAP leaders failed to convince the Premier of Malaysia, Tunku Abdul Rahman, to experiment with a looser form of federation after nearly three years of bitter infighting between the central government in Kuala Lumpur and the independent-minded politicians running Singapore. Right off the bat, Singapore wanted to keep its distinct identity as a non-aligned international trading hub open to all comers. Although this was the height of the Cold War, the PAP government did not wish to see ideology get in the way of uplifting its population through servicing Asia and the world at large in the re-export of goods, processing of mineral fuels, industrial raw materials, and the provision of financial services to multinational corporations and governments alike. Maoist China and Nehru's India were welcomed as trading partners even if their leaders did not openly favour Singapore's quasi-colonial 'internal self-government' between 1955 and 1963. Significantly, in Gretchen Liu's history of the Singapore Foreign Service, she recorded

Foreign Minister S. Rajaratnam's open call in January 1964 for 'a few politically skilled, roving ambassadors [to] be recruited for a diplomatic crusade in Asia, Africa and Latin America.' (Liu, 2005, p. 15)

Since then, Singapore's foreign policy has been almost synonymous with public diplomacy. Rajaratnam's landmark speech on Singapore's 'omnidirectional' and ideologically-neutral foreign policy at the United Nations in 1965 continues to resonate in the way Singapore not only embraces the objectives of ASEAN and the UN today, but also in its willingness to maintain communication channels and quietly productive economic relations with states that have rocky relations with the West such as Iran, North Korea and Myanmar. (Chong & Ong-Webb, 2018) Singapore's omnidirectional foreign policy also manifests in how it strives very hard to maintain even handed relations with the United States and China and between China and Japan, China and India. The public diplomacy dimension of these balancing acts is manifest in the wide spectrum of special economic agreements and trade arrangements the Republic has signed with all of these major powers, while it also hosts substantive exchanges with government-linked think-tanks based in these great powers. With ASEAN, there is also the added people-to-people dimension of fostering learning and exploratory exchanges amongst small and medium sized enterprises, schools and the respective civil service departments.

It is also a testimony of Singapore's formal public diplomacy sophistication that senior Ambassadors such as Tommy Koh, Kishore Mahbubani and Chan Heng Chee are often invited to semi-diplomatic colloquiums that involve the USA and the EU. Ambassadors Barry Desker and K. Kesavapany are in turn closely associated with Singapore's permanent campaign to support economic

multilateralism. Finally, Ambassador Ong Keng Yong is closely associated with supporting ASEAN having served for a time as the regional body's Secretary-General. It also helped that Singapore reinforced the people-to-people dimension of ties with ASEAN member populations through the award of ASEAN Scholarships to non-Singaporean students to study in Singapore's prestigious universities and undertaking humanitarian assistance and disaster relief efforts in Indonesia's Aceh province, and the Leyte region in the Philippines between 2004 and 2013. Mass tourism and labour migration between Singapore and Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Myanmar and Vietnam have also bolstered public diplomacy towards those countries despite the occasional ups and downs that arise from changes in government and leaderships.

In many ways Singapore's many economic promotion agencies such as the Economic Development Board, the Enterprise Singapore and the Ministry of Trade and Industry are all acting as entities engaged in public diplomacy whenever they attempt to 'market' Singapore's hospitality to foreign investors in high technology companies and other sunrise industries such as biotechnology and robotics. The dedication shown by each official in these bodies to match foreign investors with local partners and other start-up firms reveals a human side to the economy that is quite unrivalled internationally. Singaporean 'economic diplomats' are extremely enthusiastic about designing and co-investing in the best possible collaborative arrangements between foreign entities and local ones. (Schein, 1996; Chong, 2014)

Today, Singapore's biggest challenge to its survival and prosperity is also a multidimensional one: globalization of people on the move and economic activities transcending borders. The COVID-19 pandemic that struck the world between 2020 and 2021 has brought home both the

fragility of globalization's links and ironically, more than ever, the need to patch it back. Globalization refers, of course, to the growing socio-economic interconnectedness of a worldwide capitalist economy that started with the expansion of European industrialization into colonization and trade since the 1800s. (Waters, 2001) This in turn brought about unprecedented intercultural contact across hitherto geographically isolated peoples. (Bauman, 1998) In alternative geographies and histories, some scholars even argue that partial globalizations have occurred along the ancient Silk Roads across the Eurasian landmass, within the expanses of the erstwhile Roman Empire, and within what we term East Asia stretching from Japan, China and Korea down to Southeast Asia and South Asia. (Frankopan, 2015; Chong & Ling, 2018) 'Singapore Incorporated', along with nation-state Singapore, cannot remain an island in political imagination. It has to reprise its historical pathway since its invention in the 1800s as an entrepot of both goods and ideas, and increasingly intercultural understanding.

This is where the Singapore International Foundation (SIF) comes into its own as a focused practitioner of Singaporean public diplomacy. In its practice of 'people diplomacy', it works with Singapore citizens—youth, academia, businesses and civil society, enabling collaboration with their overseas counterparts to effect positive change. It believes that "countries that bring their citizens into the fold and proactively engage the publics of another state in order to build mutual trust, respect and a shared future, have the edge. They tap into the growing influence wielded by non-state actors and, together with state-driven initiatives, enrich the tapestry of relations between nations." (Tan, 2017) Parlaying compact Singapore's developmental expertise, the SIF is humbly extending bridges through its volunteer programmes in healthcare and education and good business initiatives in social entrepreneurship. The SIF also

engages a diverse and talented group of artists to share Singapore's multiculturalism and contribute to positive social change through collaborations with international artists. Leveraging the power of digital media to connect communities and inspire collective actions globally, the SIF's digital storytelling initiative, *Our Better World*, aspires to harness digital disruption for social impact. The globalizing world is still not yet one devoid of conflict, but at the very least Singapore's public diplomacy can transform an island state of historical accident into one of global possibilities through microcosmic demonstration of good governance while also learning about the island state's fragility through the eyes of others. (George, 2001)

## Conclusion

Singapore is stereotypically an *imagined* nation-state and mostly a product of colonial creation. Public diplomacy has served as its discursive fence. Although we have assumed that public diplomacy refers to 'a government's process of communication with foreign publics in an attempt to bring about understanding of its nation's ideas and ideals, its institutions and culture, as well as its national goals and policies' (Tuch, 1990, pp. 3-4), it is quite clear that non-state public diplomacy has been especially pronounced at all stages of the island republic's political evolution. The very attempt at promoting each assorted non-state cause helps to shape the imagination of Singapore for its residents as well as the projection of its population's external orientations and kinship ties.

Put in another way, the non-state precedents of public diplomacy illuminate a structural tension. The thrust of these activities was aimed at pushing for political rights at home as much as they kept alive a sense of transborder political identity with the ancestral motherlands outside Singapore island.

This will act as a permanent handicap for an independent Singaporean statehood and a practised pathway for diasporic public diplomacy targeting Singapore's domestic politics. At the same time, the people-to-people dimension of linkages whether one calls it public diplomacy, international relations or economic linkages, or social ties, will always be crucial to the way Singapore manages its soft power. Going forward, for organizations such as the SIF, public diplomacy ought to always be attentive to the historical legacy that social and emotional ties will always be privileged by target audiences over official political dealings. This is a dilemmatic strength as well as a weakness for Singapore's foreign policy.

## Author's Biography

**Alan Chong** is Associate Professor at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore. He has published widely on the notion of soft power and the role of ideas in constructing the international relations of Singapore and Asia. His publications have appeared in *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, *The Pacific Review*; *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*; *Asian Survey*; *East Asia: an International Quarterly*; *Politics, Religion and Ideology*; *the Review of International Studies*; *the Cambridge Review of International Affairs* and *Armed Forces and Society*. He is also the author of *Foreign Policy in Global Information Space: Actualizing Soft Power* (Palgrave, 2007) and editor of *International Security in the Asia Pacific: Transcending ASEAN towards Transitional Polycentrism* (Palgrave, 2018). He is currently working on several projects exploring the notion of "Asian international theory". His interest in soft power has also led to inquiry into the sociological and philosophical foundations of international communication. In the latter area, he is currently working on a manuscript titled 'The International Politics of Communication: Representing Community in a Globalizing World'. In tandem, he has pursued a fledgling interest in researching cyber security issues. He has frequently been interviewed in the Asian media and consulted in think tank networks in the region.



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