

Patterns and Traditions of Loyalty in the Chinese Community of Singapore, 1900-1941

FROM THE EARLY nineteenth century to the outbreak of World War II, Singapore was constantly subjected to outside pressures emanating from Britain and China. Direct British rule facilitated the gradual spread of British influence into many aspects of Singapore life while the influx of large numbers of Chinese immigrants brought many Chinese institutions and ideas in its wake. These two influences persistently shaped and re-shaped the ways of life and thinking of the Singapore Chinese, and determined the patterns and traditions of loyalty in the Chinese community of Singapore, 1900-1941.

Before the emergence of a Malaysian-oriented loyalty in post-war Singapore, two patterns of loyalty could be found: one Chinese-oriented and the other British-oriented. The Chinese-oriented loyalty grew out of political, economic and cultural ties with China and prolonged psychological and emotional attachments to China. The British-oriented loyalty aimed at closer Chinese political, cultural and emotional links with Britain and the British Empire. These two patterns of loyalty co-existed in the Chinese community throughout the period under discussion.

As the Chinese community in Singapore by the 1940's was, to some extent, an immigrant society,¹ it can be assumed that many of these immigrant Chinese still owed their loyalty to China. Attachments to China existed in the nineteenth century in such mild forms as remitting money to the kin in the southern provinces, retiring to rest and die on Chinese soil, and shipment of remains to the birthplaces of the deceased for reburial. Such sentiments were largely emotional and psychological, but they were strengthened and extended to the political, economic and educational spheres with the rise of Chinese nationalism at the turn of the century.

¹ *Numbers and Percentages of Non-Malayan born Chinese in Singapore, 1921-1947.*

Year	Non-Malayan born Chinese	% to total Chinese population in Singapore
1921	236,191	74.9
1931	269,531	64.4
1947	292,890	40.1

Source: M. V. Del Tufo, *A Report on the 1947 Census of Population*, London, 1949, pp. 40 and 84.

The growth of Chinese nationalism in Singapore can be traced to China's defeat in the first Sino-Japanese War and the abortive Hundred Days of Reform of 1898 which made the overseas Chinese more aware of China's sorrowful position and anxious to play a part to lift China's status in the modern world. The frequent visits of both reformists and revolutionaries at the turn of the century established in Singapore a base for political agitations and campaigns among politically-conscious Chinese. The Chinese in Singapore, like their counterparts in other parts of South East Asia, responded vigorously to the causes of both the reformists and revolutionaries by donating funds, organising political clubs and parties and spreading political ideas among their compatriots. Disillusioned and confused by the failure of republicanism following the 1911 revolution, the Chinese in Singapore were overjoyed at the unification of China by the nationalists in 1928. In the 1930's Chinese nationalism reached its height with campaigns to save the motherland from the ever increasing Japanese encroachments. The problems confronting China nationally, notably the Japanese invasion, met with an immense emotional response among Chinese in all parts of the world. At the regional level, China's difficulties during the first forty years of the century — drought, famine and other natural disasters — also drew great sympathy from the Chinese in Singapore.

Though much can be said about the spontaneous response of the overseas Chinese to the misfortunes of a dispirited China, there can be no denying that the Chinese governments, both the Manchu and later the republican, did make some tangible attempts to win their loyalty. Chinese officials were sent to the Nanyang to promote Chinese education as early as 1905. Chinese schools, such as the Chi Nan at Nanking,² were especially established for the overseas Chinese students. Parliamentary seats were reserved for and allotted to the overseas Chinese from 1913. Moreover, the Kuomintang government established in 1928 an Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission to deal with all overseas Chinese matters. This Chinese Commission was instrumental to advancing overseas Chinese interests on the one hand and, on the other, to winning overseas Chinese loyalty towards China.

Chinese-oriented loyalty took many forms in the course of its growth. It found expression, for instance, in the formation of political clubs and parties, such as the Tung Meng Hui, various Reading Societies and the Kuomintang (KMT). Though the Colonial Govern-

² The Chi Nan primary school was established by the Manchu government in 1906 at Nanking. It expanded and became a university in 1927.

ment banned the Singapore branch of the KMT in 1914, nationalist activities continued to be carried on under the cover of Reading Societies or disguised Associations. The 1927 split between the KMT and CCP in China witnessed the rise of more radical political organisations in Singapore and Malaya, including the Modern Revolutionary Committee of the Kuomintang of China, the South Seas Communist Party, the Communist Youth League and the South Seas General Labour Union. The influence of these organisations was concentrated among workers and students attending Chinese schools. One significance of these organisations was that their activities in the 1920's, together with the anti-British and anti-Japanese campaigns of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) in the 1930's, began to establish a radical political tradition for the Chinese community in Singapore. On the whole, these political clubs and parties mainly worked for a strong and viable China capable of resisting foreign invasions and of protecting the interests of the overseas Chinese.

In the cultural field, Chinese-oriented loyalty represented the desire to provide and promote Chinese education in both China and Singapore. The rise of Chinese nationalism brought about a Chinese school system in Singapore in which Mandarin was the medium of instruction. The majority of the teachers were from China and the textbooks were exclusively published in China. Such a system of education naturally tended to inculcate Chinese-centred values and loyalties. Moreover, the use of Mandarin as the medium of instruction helped to create a national identity as it served to break down regional and dialect origins of the Chinese students. In short, the command of a Chinese language, the opportunity of studying and appreciating Chinese literature and history, and the employment of the teachers from China produced a Chinese-oriented feeling among the students. And some of the able and wealthy students, after completing their studies in Singapore, went to higher institutions in China such as the Amoy, the Sun Yat-sen, the Chi Nan and the Peking Universities.

In the rising tide of the Chinese nationalism, overseas Chinese, including those from Singapore, contributed so much money for building and maintaining schools in China that they helped to raise the standards of Chinese education among the Chinese in Kwangtung and Fukien provinces.³ By far the most conspicuous contribution to education by the Chinese in Singapore was the establishment of the Amoy University in 1921. Until its takeover by the Nanking Government in 1937, the University was largely financed by Tan Kah Kee, a Singapore Chinese millionaire who spent several million Malayan dollars on it. In addition to education, the investment by overseas Chinese in industry, commerce and communications in their home provinces represented another manifestation of loyalty. Indeed, the growth of commerce, industry, communications, transportation and steam navigation in southern China before 1940 has been attri-

³ Chen Ta, *Emigrant Communities in South China*, Shanghai, 1939, pp. 149-72.

buted to the technical knowledge and capital investment of the overseas Chinese, including those from Singapore.⁴ Though capital investment in southern China during these forty years may have been motivated by a desire for profits on the part of the overseas Chinese, there was also a genuine movement in the years 1929 to 1933 among the Chinese in Singapore and Malaya to improve the social and economic conditions of the poverty-stricken villages in southern China by raising funds for schools and other projects.⁵

Chinese-oriented loyalty was fostered through annual commemoration of the birthday of Dr Sun Yat-sen, the founder of the Chinese republic and the celebration of the Double Tenth, the day which marked the downfall of the Manchu regime. While pressing for legalisation of the KMT in Singapore from 1914 on, KMT sympathisers, including Aw Boon Haw, urged the Colonial Government in the 1930's to make the Double Tenth a public holiday for the Chinese.⁶ Loyalty took a militant form in the boycott movements against Japanese goods (1908-1941), which helped create a sense of solidarity and national consciousness among the Chinese in Singapore.

While Chinese nationalism was intensifying and claiming the loyalty of the overseas Chinese, there were essential institutions in Singapore which helped to promote such loyalty. The various Chinese political clubs and parties served to rally people of like mind to work for the cause of China. Members were normally furnished political literature of a propagandist nature so that they could better serve the cause. The press was an invaluable instrument for the spread of political ideas and ideologies to all Chinese. Early Chinese newspapers run by members of the Tung Meng Hui and later sympathisers of the KMT, including *Chong Shing Jit Pao* (1907-1910) and *Kok Min Jit Poh* (1914-1919), were effective though shortlived. In the 1920's and 1930's, two commercial newspapers, *Nanyang Siang Pau* (1923-1941) and *Sin Chew Jit Poh* (1929-1941), successfully strengthened the Chinese-oriented loyalty by disseminating a great quantity of information on Chinese affairs and national crises to their readers. Eager to obtain first-hand information on the Sino-Japanese War, many Chinese subscribed regularly to these two newspapers, enabling them to become money-making concerns.⁷

The Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce (SCCC), a pressure group which mediated between the Chinese community and the British administration, worked for closer links with China. The SCCC was endorsed as a recognised institution by the Ministry of Agriculture, Industry and Trade in Peking and it had direct com-

⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 195-226.

⁵ See *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, 1929-1933. During these four years, there was much reporting on this movement by the *SCJP*. The Hokien Huay Kuan in Singapore was one of the most active bodies to initiate and support this movement.

⁶ *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, 27 March 1931, 30 March 1931, 31 August 1931.

⁷ A contemporary writer reported in 1935 that the circulation of the *SCJP* was 30,000 in Singapore and Malaya, while the *NSP* had almost 10,000 subscribers. See Cheng Chian Loo, *Three Months in Nanyang*, Shanghai, 1935, pp. 41 and 46. (Text in Chinese.)

munications with the central government in China as well as with chambers of commerce. The SCCC played a conspicuous role in launching fund-raising campaigns during the pre-war years for relieving victims of natural calamities in China. The Chinese Consulate was another important institution which aimed at promoting closer links between the Chinese in Singapore and China. It was established in 1877 and provided consular services to Chinese wishing to return to China and also helped to keep the Chinese community in Singapore informed of affairs in China.

Of all the instruments linking the Singapore Chinese with China, however, by far the most important was the leadership of the community. For it was the Chinese leadership which was largely responsible for the launching and implementing of the Chinese-oriented loyalty through the activities described above. The predominant characteristic of this elite was that it was largely comprised of Chinese businessmen ranging from shopkeepers, on the one hand, to merchant capitalists on the other. Among its most influential and popular members were wealthy multi-millionaires, Lim Peng Siang, Tan Kah Kee, Aw Boon Haw and Lee Kong Chian, all of whom were members and/or office-bearers of the SCCC founded in 1906. In fact, a selected study of twenty-six leading members of the SCCC during the years 1906-1941 reveals that about ninety per cent of them were China-born.⁸ Thus a second characteristic of this group was their association with the SCCC. A third feature of this elite was its Chinese education: only a few had an adequate command of a second language, that is, English or Malay. Lastly, these leaders were all enterprising self-made men who had succeeded in establishing themselves in the community after years of struggle and hard work. In short, the leadership of the immigrant Chinese community was in the hands of a China-born, Chinese-educated, enterprising merchant class. Because they were China-born and Chinese-educated, these leaders tended to desire to inculcate their loyalties in the Chinese people in Singapore. Moreover, the fact that these leaders enjoyed little political power under the Colonial rule may well have been responsible for their readiness to advance the cause of China.

British-oriented loyalty in this period was not a new phenomenon. It apparently first took root in the 1860's when the Straits-born Chinese were officially recognised as British subjects entitled to the rights and privileges accorded to a British national.⁹ As British subjects, the Straits-born Chinese tended to develop closer links with Britain by undergoing English education, adopting Christianity and assisting the British administration in the Legislative Council. An intensification of this British-oriented loyalty took place in the 1890's. Its growth coincided with the growth of its Chinese-oriented

⁸ Yong Ching Fatt, 'A Preliminary Study of Chinese Leadership in Singapore, 1900-1941', *Journal of the Southeast Asian History*, IX, 2 (1968), 274-275.

⁹ Lee Yong Hock, 'A History of the Straits Chinese British Association', B.A. Hons. Academic Exercise, Singapore, 1960, p. 8.

counterpart, but was not prompted by the latter. Its promotion rested with the energetic Straits-born, British university-trained Chinese who proudly looked to Britain as their motherland. On the initiative of Dr Lim Boon Keng, a medical graduate of Edinburgh University and Song Ong Siang, a qualified lawyer from the Middle Temple and Downing College, Cambridge University, the Straits Chinese British Association (SCBA) was formed on 17 August 1900 in Singapore in order to 'encourage and maintain their loyalty as subjects of the Queen' and to 'promote the general welfare of the Chinese British subjects in any other lawful or constitutional manner.'¹⁰ From 1900 to 1941, the sentiments of the Straits-born Chinese towards Britain were strengthened partly as a result of a deliberate British policy to improve their status and position in society¹¹ and partly because the two world wars prompted them to work for the survival of the British Empire which they so admired.

Their attachment to Britain during these four decades was amply demonstrated in a variety of ways and on many occasions. For example, their appeals in 1900 for a contingent of Straits-born Chinese volunteers to fight with the British in the South African War and to fight against the Boxers and the Manchus in northern China during the Boxer Uprising illustrated their attitude towards the British Crown. On that occasion, their efforts resulted in the formation in 1901 of the Chinese Company of the Singapore Volunteer Infantry for local defence. The First World War saw the Straits-born Chinese community in Singapore fully committed to the British cause. Leading Straits-born Chinese, including Tan Jiak Kim, Lim Boon Keng, Song Ong Siang and Chan Sze Jin, wrote a pamphlet pledging loyalty to the Crown, and urging the Straits-born Chinese to become volunteers and to join the Reserve Force and Civil Guard.¹² To support the British war effort, campaigns were launched in 1915 to raise funds for the National War Loan instituted by the British Government. The Straits-born Chinese supported the Colonial Government's call for a War Tax Bill based on income, which was eventually passed into law in the Legislative Council in January 1917. While urging the use of British goods and products during the First World War,¹³ the Straits-born Chinese also campaigned for funds to buy battle-

¹⁰ Song Ong Siang, *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore*, Singapore, 1923, pp. 319-20.

¹¹ Sir John Anderson to the Earl of Elgin and Kincardine, 21 February 1907, on 'Memorandum Suggesting a Special Decoration for Chinese British Subjects', C.O. 273/326, Public Record Office. Sir John thought that the granting of a special decoration to the Chinese British subjects could encourage the sentiment of pride in the British nationality amongst the native-born or naturalised Chinese. Another aspect of this policy was the traditional practice of the British administration to nominate the Straits-born and English-educated Chinese as members of the Legislative Council.

¹² Tan Jiak Kim, Lim Boon Keng, and Song Ong Siang (eds.), *Duty to the British Empire During the Great War*, Singapore, 1915.

¹³ W. Feldwick (ed.), *Present Day Impressions of the Far East and Prominent and Progressive Chinese at Home and Abroad*, London, 1917, p. 834.

planes for Britain.¹⁴ During World War II, their loyalty to Britain was demonstrated when the Straits-born Chinese were enthusiastically enrolled in the Chinese Company of the Volunteers which assisted in the defence of Singapore against the Japanese.

The Straits-born Chinese community in Singapore was conscious of the strengthening cultural ties with Britain during these four decades; promotion of these ties was reflected in their desire to improve English education in this island. Like their Chinese-educated counterparts, many of the leading figures of the Straits-born community sat on school committees and donated money for the institution of the King Edward VII Medical School in 1905 and the Raffles College in 1929. Both colleges, of course, were later amalgamated to form the University of Malaya, now known as the University of Singapore. Inevitably, the Straits-born Chinese wanted their children to be English-educated and preferred that they further their higher learning in Britain. Their preference for English education was, to a large extent, determined by the fact that English education provided a passport to prestigious employment. In the 1930's, the Straits-born Chinese leaders fought against Sir Cecil Clementi's pro-Malay policy, agitating for the adoption of a free primary school education in English for the community and advocating English, the 'lingua Britannica', as the lingua franca for the colony.¹⁵ Though their strong reaction towards Sir Cecil's education policy was chiefly motivated by self-interest, their worry and irritation over the issue also shows their admiration for English education.

The acquiring of some British values by the Straits-born Chinese also served to create closer links with the British. Their considerable interests in such sports and games as lawn tennis, cricket, football, chess and billiards, which were seldom played by the immigrant Chinese, tended to make them feel and believe that they were truly British. Such feeling of being British has now gone, as these sports and games have become less exclusively identified with Britain and more international in character.

Directly or indirectly, various instruments served to foster the British-oriented loyalty. Firstly, the SCBA, the stronghold of the Straits-born Chinese in Singapore, mobilised its members to serve the community and to exert considerable influence on the Colonial Government in times of peace and united the Straits-born community to give their undivided loyalty to the Crown and Empire in times of war. Without this organisation, the Straits-born community could not have become so cohesive and influential as it did. Secondly, the Legislative Council functioned as an institution for training the Straits-born Chinese leaders and as well for sustaining their loyalty towards Britain. Often these Straits-born Chinese representatives in

¹⁴ The Malayan Chinese, including the Straits-born Chinese from Singapore, contributed generously towards the purchase of a fleet of 53 battle-planes during the war. See Song Ong Siang, *One Hundred Years' History*, p. 518.

¹⁵ *Straits Times*, 21 November 1933.

the Council tended to identify their interests with those of the Colonial authorities. Thirdly, the English school system played a rather significant role in conditioning Chinese sentiments towards the British nation and institutions. For the contents of teaching were naturally British-orientated with a heavy emphasis on the English language and literature and on British and Empire history and geography. As compared to the Chinese school system which aimed at creating a national feeling for China, the English school system represented the other extreme. And lastly, the Straits-born Chinese leadership was crucial for the growth and consolidation of the British-oriented loyalty. This leadership was controlled by a group of progressive and intelligent English-educated professionals and merchants who were steeped in British ideas and traditions. Many of them became part of Singapore's early political elite, through virtue of their position in the Legislative Council.¹⁶ In recognition of their contributions and services to the community and the British Empire, some of these outstanding leaders were awarded titles and honours by the British Government.¹⁷

While the Straits-born Chinese consistently cultivated favourable sentiments toward Britain, they were also the people who planted the seeds of nascent loyalty towards the land of their adoption. Such a pattern of loyalty, though weak, was nevertheless tangible and unambiguous. It took the form of agitation for a greater share of power, an essential process towards the attainment of a self-government. In the 1920's, the Straits-born Chinese leaders demanded constitutional reforms which resulted in the addition of six more unofficials to the Legislative Council and three unofficials to the Executive Council, an institution which served as a cabinet for examining and dealing with all official matters of the Straits Settlements. In the 1930's, they successfully campaigned for the opening of the Malayan Civil Service to the British subjects of non-European descent. These two incidents suggest that some of the Straits-born leaders had envisaged the gradual establishment of a self-governing Malaya, where local people would play a major part in national affairs. By contrast, this kind of loyalty was relatively absent in the immigrant Chinese community of Singapore.

The Chinese community in Singapore in the pre-war years was mainly subject to the pull of a Chinese and a British-centred loyalty. These two diverse but tangible patterns of foreign-oriented loyalty created distinctive political, ideological and cultural traditions which were carried over into the immediate post-war period.

¹⁶ Chinese members of the Legislative Council representing Singapore in the years 1900-1941 were as follows: Tan Jiak Kim, Lim Boon Keng, Lee Choon Guan, Song Ong Siang, Wee Swee Teow, Chan Sze Jin, Lim Han Hoe and Tay Lian Teck. See *Straits Chinese British Association, Golden Jubilee Souvenir*, Singapore, 1950.

¹⁷ Tan Jiak Kim received C.M.G. in 1912, Lim Boon Keng O.B.E. in 1918, Song Ong Siang was awarded C.B.E. and K.B.E. in 1927 and 1936 respectively, Wee Swee Teow O.B.E. in 1935, Chan Sze Jin C.M.G. in 1941 and Lim Han Hoe received his C.B.E. in 1941 and his K.B.E. in 1946.

Politically, the Chinese-oriented loyalty left behind a pro-Chinese tradition which was further fostered by the Chinese civil war between the KMT and CCP in the immediate post-war period. Though the Chinese civil war split the immigrant and Chinese-educated community into a pro-Communist and a pro-KMT faction, the community on the whole was intensely concerned about creating a viable and independent China. The pro-Communist faction was led by Tan Kah Kee, whose influence was particularly strong in the Hokkien community, while the pro-KMT faction was led by Tay Koh Yat, a director of the KMT organ, the *Chung Hsing Jit Pao*, which followed an anti-Communist line. Although both these two factions differed with each other in political ideology and objectives, they were both fundamentally pro-Chinese.

On the other hand, the British loyalty created for some of the Chinese community of Singapore different orientations. In the post-war era, their tradition of allegiance was reflected in their readiness to help the British administration and to see Singapore remain a British colony. In an age of rising Malayan nationalism after the war, leading members of the Straits-born community, such as C. C. Tan and Thio Chan Bee,¹⁸ campaigned for the retention of British status and nationality. Moreover, they were outspoken against the granting of local citizenship to large numbers of immigrant Chinese and favoured government policies on the expansion of English education and on establishing English as the sole official language in the legislature. In local and international politics, the Straits-born Chinese leaders adopted an anti-Communist policy. For example, the Straits-born group deplored Britain's attempt to recognise the Chinese People's Republic and praised British action in banning the radical Democratic League newspaper.¹⁹

Moreover, the Chinese-oriented loyalty established for the Chinese community in Singapore a tradition sceptical of western parliamentary democracy and favourably disposed to revolutionary change. The establishment of such a tradition was conditioned by the fact that democracy had never worked in China and that the immigrant Chinese community in Singapore had had little opportunity to practice it. Again, such a tradition was substantially strengthened by the contents of Chinese education which were republican and revolutionary in character. Such being the case, the Chinese community was therefore exposed to influences of left-wing and revolutionary ideas. In contrast, the British-oriented loyalty left the Straits-born Chinese community with a tendency to favour parliamentary democracy. The Straits-born leaders were guided by the British administration through the proceedings of both the Executive and

¹⁸ Both C. C. Tan and Thio Chan Bee were members of the SCBA. They helped to found on 25 August 1947 the Singapore Progressive Party (SPP) which aimed at peaceful post-war constitutional reforms. The SPP represented the interests of the Straits-born Chinese community in Singapore.

¹⁹ G. William Skinner, *Report on the Chinese in Southeast Asia*, New York, 1958, p. 38.

Legislative Councils during the first forty years of the century. These proceedings involved debates and criticisms on the part of the members and therefore resembled the proceedings of parliamentary democracy in form. Traditional British orientations together with decades of experiment and experience of such political proceedings enabled the Straits-born Chinese to accept such a form of government more readily.

In the cultural arena, the Chinese-educated were taught to respect, promote, and, if necessary, to defend Chinese culture, including Chinese language and education. Such a tradition with a strong pro-Chinese education character may account for the sensitiveness, and at times, violent response to some governmental policies regarding Chinese education in Singapore in the post-war period. One of the successful moves to preserve and strengthen Chinese education in Singapore was the establishment in 1956 of the Nanyang University which recently received official recognition by the PAP government's acceptance of its degrees. On the other hand, the British-oriented loyalty inculcated in the minds of the English-educated Chinese an equal attachment to English language and education. The rapid expansion of English as compared to Chinese education in post-war Singapore²⁰ was, to some extent, made possible by the policy of the English-educated leadership which was naturally committed to the cause of an English education. Part of the reason for this, however, can be attributed to the practical problem of obtaining employment for the Chinese-educated.

Year	Chinese		English	
	Schools	Students	Schools	Students
1947	154	53,478	70	28,840
1948	184	58,096	85	33,214
1949	271	68,434	102	37,655
1950	287	76,200	120	49,676
1951	288	75,974	139	54,812
1952	279	74,104	150	63,271
1953	273	79,272	276	71,297
1954	277	81,605	204	84,418
1955	277	94,244	239	96,658

Source: The Annual Reports of the Singapore Education Department, 1947-1955. Cited by Yeo Kim Wah in his M.A. thesis, 'Political Development in Singapore, 1945-1955', Singapore, 1967, p. 361.

In summary, it may be said that there were two distinctive patterns of loyalty co-existing peacefully with each other during the pre-war period under study. Despite the fundamental differences between the Chinese and English-educated communities in terms of language, education and political ideology, co-existence was possible, for there were cordial relations among the Chinese and English-educated leaders and also those sensitive issues had not yet become explosive.²¹ Of the two patterns, the British-oriented loyalty that aimed at strengthening political, cultural and emotional ties with Britain ran

²⁰ *Number and Student Intake of Chinese and English Schools, 1947-1955.*

²¹ Yong Ching Fatt, pp. 280-83.

less strongly than its Chinese-oriented counterpart. These two crystallised patterns of loyalty helped to create for the Chinese community in Singapore both a pro-Chinese and a pro-British tradition in politics, in ideology and in education.

Though these two distinctive patterns of loyalty did not stand the test of time and were rapidly swept away by the rising tide of Malayan nationalism which aimed at a loyalty neither to China nor Britain but to Malaya, both the pro-Chinese and pro-British feelings still linger on.

YONG CHING FATT

University of Singapore

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