Elite schools, postcolonial Chineseness and hegemonic masculinities in Singapore

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Published online: 11 Dec 2015.

To cite this article: Daniel P.S. Goh (2015) Elite schools, postcolonial Chineseness and hegemonic masculinities in Singapore, British Journal of Sociology of Education, 36:1, 137-155, DOI: 10.1080/01425692.2014.971944

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2014.971944

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Elite schools, postcolonial Chineseness and hegemonic masculinities in Singapore

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(Received 29 January 2014; final version received 29 September 2014)

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was a political watershed. The long-time ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) received the lowest percentage of votes (60%), and the opposition won the most seats (six seats) since independence in 1965. However, the gender composition remained unchanged. Sixty-eight of the 87 elected parliamentarians are male. The number of male parliamentarians educated in elite schools dropped from 54 to 47, but the decline in graduates of elite Chinese schools and Catholic English schools accounted for this drop. The number of graduates from the secular elite English schools \((n = 14)\) and Protestant English schools \((n = 14)\) remained the same, with 11 from ACS.

This stark pattern of male dominance in Parliament suggests that the study of political power in Singapore cannot ignore the production of masculinities in colonial-heritage elite schools. One of the key institutional sites for the social reproduction of hegemonic masculinities in the West is the elite school (Connell 1989; Mac an Ghaill 1994). Hegemonic masculinities refer to the sets of physical characteristics, psychological qualities and cultural roles approximated by men of elite status and ideologically and institutionally promoted to be ideal for all men. The sets are not fixed in time and place, as intra-elite competition and contestation in wider society cause them to change and diversify. In western societies, the cultivation of masculinities in elite schools has been changing towards being more open and embracing of minorities due to criticisms of gender, racial and class inequalities (Kenway 1995; Khan 2011). Scholars have also noted that the globalizing of capital and international politics have produced emergent transnational masculinities (Hooper 2001; Haywood and Mac an Ghaill 2003; Kenway, Kraack, and Hickey-Moody 2006), most notably the Anglo-American variant of the disciplined and driven man of remarkable financial acumen and career success striding out, as Whitehead (2002, 123) puts it, ‘across a global male subconscious.’

The shaping of hegemonic masculinities in elite schools in postcolonial societies such as Singapore is affected by similar trends to those in western societies, except that the colonial roots of boys’ schools which have shaped the postcolonial elites make for a more complex case of contradictory, competing, anxiety-ridden elite masculinities. In this article, I argue that the ambivalence of colonial masculinity, which involved the effeminizing of the colonized by virtue of their race to keep them in subordinate class positions (Connell 1993; Jayasena 2007), has a profound influence on the changing hegemonic masculinities cultivated and promoted by the elites of postcolonial societies, from the nation-building and economic development stages up to the present moment of engagement with globalizing capital. In Singapore, as I will show, the ambivalence of colonial masculinity and the colonized’s response to it revolve around the best way to reform and modernize local Chinese society to match the imperial Victorian masculinity that British missionaries promoted in the schools established to educate and civilize the boys of local Chinese elites.
Connell (2005) argues that we need to analyze hegemonic masculinities at three empirical levels: the local of immediate communities, the regional of the nation-state, and the global of world politics and transnational business. This schema is not merely synchronic, as it maps unto the historical trajectory of elite schools and their shaping of hegemonic masculinities from the colonial to the national and globalizing periods. The modernizing reform debates that took place in local Chinese society at the end of the nineteenth century in Singapore produced competing visions of elite masculinities, but they were debates that concerned the reform of the immediate and local Chinese community in the colonial context. The level of the nation-state became significant only after the War, during the period of decolonization and independence, when the imperatives of building a new nation and pursuing industrial development defined the purpose and content of elite schooling. The level of the global became important in the 1990s, when Singapore, with its open economy, enacted economic restructuring to transform into a global city for financial and business services and to globalize its local society and enterprises to become more competitive.

The method I use here focuses on the construction of the male subject through practices of cultivating the teenage boy’s knowledge of the self and his body, which are always positioned against racial, gender and class others – a discursive principle that constructed ‘imperial white masculinity’ in the very first place and which was then inherited and transformed by the nationalist elites (Mohanram 2007). I track the case of ACS through the three periods – the colonial–local, the postcolonial–national and the globalizing – because the school, being one of the oldest and most prestigious Christian schools in Singapore, was caught in the center of the contest between Christian and Confucian reformers of local Chinese society in the colonial period. As Taga (2005) observes, hegemonic masculinities in East Asia are not only influenced by the success of modernization, but also compounded by the deep cultural traditions of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism that many of these men grew up with, and, I would add, also the rapid growth of the Christianity among the elites.

For my sources, I rely on accounts published by ACS, especially Earnest Lau and Peter Teo’s The ACS Story (2003, 2007). Lau and Teo published the 350-page first edition of The ACS Story in 2003 after two years of intense research drawing on the ACS archives. The revised edition was published just four years later with an additional 50 pages of information, the significance of which I will discuss below. Lau and Teo are not historians. The late Earnest Lau was a former teacher and principal of ACS who subsequently became the archivist of the Methodist Church in Singapore. Teo was the editor of the Methodist Message, the Church’s monthly magazine. The ACS Story is the only full-length account of ACS history and is not an objective history, by admission of the editors. It is rather a celebratory narrative of how ACS developed ‘as a private Christian institution in response to the educational
requirements of Singapore society’ (Echo, February–March 2008) through trials, tribulations and tensions to achieve its contemporary triumphs, with more potential to realize in line with the ACS motto ‘The Best is Yet to Be.’ I study both versions of The ACS Story to select episodes considered by the Lau and Teo to be significant for the school’s evolution in relation to societal development, paying special attention to the discourses and practices related to issues of masculinity and cultivation of the male subject. I also do the same for the school’s bimonthly newsletter Echo, which features contemporary development in the past decade, and the Straits Chinese Magazine, the nineteenth-century magazine of the young men who were educated in the elite colonial schools, including ACS, paying particular attention to the debates on education and religion.

As I discuss in the next section, the contest between Christian and Confucian reformers over modern education defined the ambivalence of colonial masculinity for the local Chinese elites. The racial and class anxieties of the elites were projected unto the gendered schooling of boys to become men who were physically rugged to withstand tropical enervation and morally righteous and caring for the women and the lower classes of the race. In the following two sections, I discuss the hegemonic production of this elite masculinity in the postcolonial–national era, as elite schooling at ACS adapted to and was co-opted to foster, respectively, national ruggedness to prepare the new citizenry for industrialization and class humility to prevent elitism from scuppering the horizontal citizenship. In the last two sections, my analysis turns to the globalizing era and the changing hegemonic production of elite masculinity to emphasize economic competition and cosmopolitan openness, while the renewed class and racial anxieties of the elites were again projected unto gendered bodies.

Colonialism, Christianity and the Chinese race

In 1885, Methodist missionary William Oldham was sent on a mission to Singapore. Strolling in Chinatown, he chanced upon the Celestial Reasoning Association, a literary club founded by Straits Chinese businessmen to hone their English language skills. Oldham quickly became associated with the businessmen and started ACS to educate their sons. Enrolment grew rapidly from 13 students in 1886 to over 200 in 1888. In these early years, the school became closely associated with the Anglicized Straits-born Chinese businessmen, who were British subjects co-opted by the colonial government as political leaders representing the native population. Enrolment rose to over a thousand in 1908 and reached a height of 1795 students in 1921, in tandem with the rise of Straits Chinese society (Lau and Teo 2003, 9–14). Oldham’s educational philosophy was one of not discriminating between ‘evangelistic and educational work,’ so all pupils were made to attend daily chapel service and Bible lessons. To not neglect the
marginalized while attending to the elites, he gave free tuition to ‘sons of widows and poor people’ and made sure they formed 10% of the enrolment (2003, 15).

In 1896, a letter written by ‘Isaiah’ criticizing the school for carrying out active proselytizing was published in local newspapers. Prominent local leaders subsequently dissociated themselves from the school and many parents withdrew their sons. After the incident, religious exercises were made voluntary (Lau and Teo 2003, 16). This was the period when the new generation of Straits Chinese political leaders became concerned with modernizing reforms. Education at ACS became a key battleground between different factions as the reformers took positions within the triangle of loyalty to the British Empire, leadership to reform local society and commitment to modernize China. The main debate over moral education boiled down to those who felt that Christianity was the best vehicle to reform and modernize local Chinese society and China at large and those who believed that it was necessary and desirable to revive and modernize Confucianism for the same purpose.

This battle was fought over in the Straits Chinese Magazine, the journal established in 1897 by the reformers. In the fourth number that year, Seah Liang Seah wrote about the duties of parents and teachers established by ‘the ancient sages of China.’ Seah argued that parents have the duty to give their children the best education but cannot do the teaching themselves because of parental tenderness, while teachers must be strict and severe to fulfill their duty. Underpinning these duties were the fact that ‘education was indispensable to the nation’ and that ‘manhood means more than maturity,’ for ‘moral and intellectual powers’ were more important than ‘bodily growth’ (Seah 1897, 147). Seah would later found the Straits Chinese British Association with Tan Jiak Kim, who supported ACS but distanced himself after the proselytizing controversy, and the editors of the Magazine, Lim Boon Keng and Song Ong Siang, all legislative councilors or would-be councilors.

In the subsequent issues in 1898, Song Hoot Kiam, the founding member of the Straits Chinese Church and editor Song’s father, wrote a series of articles memorializing the late Reverend Dr James Legge, an important missionary and scholar of China. In Song’s account, one reads about Legge, when he ran the Anglo-Chinese College in Malacca, rising early to study Chinese, teaching his boys in both English and Chinese, severely punishing troublesome ‘dull boys,’ and devising ‘fresh ways and means’ to stimulate the dullard’s ‘latent energies.’ He described Legge as ‘one of ourselves’ in the playground and being so ‘full of life and fun’ the boys would join in the outdoor exercise (Song 1898a, 13 and 14). Song followed Legge to England for his higher education, where he was presented to Queen Victoria with two other Straits Chinese students. Song’s account presented Legge as both the exemplary parent and teacher of Chinese tradition as imagined by
Seah. Legge was both tender and strict and cared for both the mental and moral growth as well as the physical development of his charges. He was no Confucian sage, but the exemplary Chinese Christian. Song, approved by the Queen herself, was a demonstration of the modernizing and moralizing force of Christianity.

The representational sparring between Confucians and Christians escalated in the last number of the *Magazine* in 1898. An pseudonymous article called for the reform movement to take over the secular Raffles Institution to ‘prepare pupils who may be sent to China to open schools and spread the light of civilization without the awkward necessity of making science and art subservient to the requirements of religion’ (One of Them 1898, 174). Subsequently, editor Lim Boon Keng picked up the case. In an 1899 article, Lim criticized the ‘total absence of moral culture in the existing secular schools of the Colony’ coupled with ‘the total lack of religious life’ except ‘the meaningless practice of idolatry and the performance of sacrifices to the dead’ among the local Chinese translated to widespread anomie. As a consequence, western religions have little impact, since presence at a religious service would only ‘excite a feeling of superstitious awe’ and not ‘aesthetic and religious effects’ (Lim 1899, 102). Lim advocated bilingual and bicultural education, that ‘the Chinese must have moral schools … in which the young may be regularly taught the great ethical system of Confucius, which, as every one knows, is the foundation of all that is good in Chinese culture.’ These schools would rear ‘a new race of Straits Chinese’ to ‘push onwards the cause of civilization’ (1899, 105).

The key term of the debate between Confucian and Christian reformers was the proper rationality to be cultivated in the education of Straits Chinese boys. Both Confucian and Christian reformers sought to do away with the popular practices of Chinese ancestor and spirit worship and replace them with what they thought of as rational ethical systems. However, Confucian reformers like Lim believed that Confucianism was not only the natural cultural option befitting the Chinese race, but was actually superior to Christianity because it was an ethical system closer to the secular rationality of modern science and government. Although recognizing that it was ‘the absurdity of traditional religions and customs’ that drove the Straits Chinese ‘to embrace the creeds of other races,’ Lim (1904, 26) criticized Straits Chinese converts nevertheless for ‘vainly’ imagining ‘that modern Christianity as professed by the missionaries … is the source of life and power to the Europeans.’

On the other hand, the Christian reformers did not see any issues in their conversion, believing that a hybridized Chinese Christianity provided for the basis for a sound moral education as well as the cosmopolitan resolution of their inferior racial status in colonial society because the British would recognize them as fellow Christians. Thus, Song wrote positively of his experience in England, of being ‘everywhere received with kindness by the Christian people’ and Queen Victoria speaking to the three of them ‘very
kindly’ and expressing the hope that they would ‘become good Christian men’ (Song 1898b, 107). This was an anomalous privilege given to the three Chinese students, since many Chinese reformists in this late Qing period were feeling that China was being effeminized by western imperialism (Huang 2006).

The Confucian–Christian debate was inextricably bound up with the intertwined racial and class anxieties felt by the Straits Chinese elites, as they negotiated their inferior status in the colonial racial hierarchy and superior status as political representatives of the local Chinese masses. Colonial masculinity, as Chari (2001, 283) argues, was ambivalent; it constructed images of manly Englishman against effeminate natives, but at the same time projected fantasies of virile male bodies with an erotic gloss unto specific native groups. The Straits Chinese elites were caught in this ambivalence. They were effeminized as members of a weak and sickly oriental civilization, but their Anglicization had transformed them into examples of cultured virility, whose manliness was recognized by the British in the assigning of the Straits Chinese as leaders of their fellow countrymen. Christians sought the equality and charity of religion that would elide racial and class distinctions. Confucians sought the resolution by investing in the revival of Chinese high culture that they believed would link them organically with the Chinese masses while affording them racial respectability for being more protestant than the British.

The ACS was not merely the target of reform politics. It was actively producing individuals who shaped the Confucian–Christian debate. Chew Cheng Yong, who helped translate the New Testament into Baba Malay (the patois of the Straits Chinese), and Goh Hood Keng, the first local Methodist minister, were respectively president and secretary of the Social Purity Union, which was at the heart of the Strait Chinese social reform efforts (Lau and Teo 2003, 27–29). Ong Soon Tee, among Oldham’s earlier pupils, was also another key figure in the reform movement and became the first Honorary Secretary of the Singapore Chinese Girls’ School (2003, 23).

Lim and Song founded the latter school in 1899 because they believed that education for girls was no less important than education for boys. In addition to literacy and elementary mathematics, they thought that every girl should be taught skills and ethical lessons to prepare her to become ‘daughter-in-law, wife and mother.’ Lim and Song agreed with the Director of Public Instruction who blamed ‘absolutely ignorant, prejudiced and superstitious’ Straits Chinese women for being ‘stumbling blocks to real enlightenment’ of their boys. But they thought this was not the women’s fault but ‘the outcome of the conservative and unreasonably prejudiced policy of their own fathers and grandfathers’ (Lim and Song 1907, 41–42). This proto-feminist sentiment articulated by the leading Confucian reformer (Lim) and Christian reformer (Song) brought unity to the Anglo-Chinese masculinities split by their racial and class anxieties. By becoming caring
benefactors to Straits Chinese girls, liberating them from their retrograde patriarchs so that they could take their proper place to nurture and support their men, the Straits Chinese elites became men embodying paternal severity and maternal tenderness, Chinese pride and cosmopolitan beneficence, and moral and physical fitness.

By 1909, the *Magazine* became the *Straits Chinese Annual*, its subscriptions funding the Girls’ School. The 1909 *Annual* opened with ‘A Thanksgiving Song’ from the schoolgirls to the men who wrote, ran and read the *Annual*. This was followed by Lim’s article on ‘Race Deterioration in the Tropics,’ in which he compared the Straits Chinese with his China-born counterpart, which includes the laboring masses in Singapore. Lim concluded that the Straits Chinese’s physical inferiority, social anomie and indolent extravagance were due to tropical ‘sexual precocity,’ degenerate social atmosphere and ‘defective education’ and needed the correctives of social purification and moral education (Lim 1909, 5). The article reads like a sermon introduced by a choir of schoolgirls, the racial and class anxieties subliminated by the gendered hymn into a postcolonial homily.

**The developmental state and national ruggedness**

After the War, the Straits Chinese elites were quickly being left behind by the politics of decolonization. Their political dominance, grounded in their English education, was eclipsed by mass nationalist politics. Thio Chan Bee, the first Asian principal of ACS in 1952, and Tan Chin Tuan, illustrious banker and ACS graduate, were appointed by the colonial government to the Legislative Council, but this conferment of recognition quickly became outdated in the tide of nationalism. Thio subsequently joined the pro-British Progressive Party and were elected to the Council in 1951 by limited suffrage. Left-leaning parties sidelined the Party when suffrage was expanded after 1955. Leaders like Tan and Thio were displaced by marginal Straits Chinese elites like the PAP’s Lee Kuan Yew and Goh Keng Swee, an ACS graduate, who adopted radical political ideologies, developed plebian respectability by learning Chinese languages, and honed their political skills fighting alongside and, then, against leftist unions in Singapore.

Once Singapore became a fully-fledged independent state in 1965, the conservative Straits Chinese elites lost all political relevance. Their economic dominance was also being pushed aside by the PAP government’s policy favoring the building up of state-owned corporations as it pursued rapid industrialization by way of foreign investments. It was in this period that ACS faced a general reorientation. The government established a national school system with a curriculum emphasizing the subjects of science and mathematics and cultivating disciplined diligence to ready the nation for industrialization. ACS adapted its colonial-era traditions to this development and yet maintained its unique identity amidst the mass standardization.
The development of its colonial-era traditions went through three phases. The first phase emphasized physical education to improve the health of the boy and was pioneered in the early years of the school by Oldham, who blamed poor health on parents allowing the boys ‘to gorge themselves with new cucumber, fiery chilly sauces’ (Lau and Teo 2003, 52). Physical education was introduced and the first Anglo-Chinese Athletic Championships were held in the 1890s, thus succeeding in ‘stirring the physically lethargic students’ (ACS 1976, 38). Athletics was an expression of the paternal severity of teachers favored by the Straits Chinese reformers against spoiling parental tenderness. But importantly, this was worked on the body of boys rather than the moral and mental development emphasized by the reformers. In other words, athleticism, as championed by the British principals, was more about the civilizing process of colonialism, marking on the boy’s body the difference between western fitness and native degeneration.

The second phase took place in the 1930s when the literary, geographical and photography clubs became active. World events were debated, lectures on regional ethnology and world history were organized, and excursions were made to plantations, forest reserves and quarries in Malaya, exposing the boys to a larger world beyond Singapore (Lau and Teo 2003, 55–57). These were the golden years of the Straits Chinese elites, who were gradually taking over the running of the school and its curriculum, counting their own, like Thio, among the teachers. This phase therefore expressed the aspirations of the Straits Chinese elites. In 1938, the ACS Old Boys’ Association was founded with Tan Chin Tuan as President and Thio as Honorary Secretary. Literary meetings, debates and talks were organized and an employment register was established for the hiring of fellow ACS graduates (2003, 59–60).

The third phase involved the revival of Christian emphasis in the 1950s. Supported by Principal Thio, a Boys’ Brigade Company was formed in 1954 and their bible class and evangelical meetings in 1955 led to over 200 student conversions. A Sunday chapel was subsequently established in the school premises, and schoolgirls from the Methodist Girls’ School were said to have ‘flocked to the church’s activities,’ leading the ‘school boys’ church’ to mature into the ‘regular and vibrant’ Barker Road Methodist Church (Lau and Teo 2003, 86). This narrative finds its resonance with the gendered hymn introducing Lim Boon Keng’s homily about tropical sexual precocity. This time, the Christian emphasis drew no controversies. Significantly, the management of ACS was handed over by the Church to a Board of Governors in 1955, leaving the school in the hands of ‘successful Old Boys’ who, ‘like [our] political leaders,’ had ‘too many challenges to face for sentimentality to encroach upon nation-building’ (2003, 115).

Among the three traditions, athleticism was especially emphasized in the postcolonial period to match the PAP government’s emphasis on building a rugged Singapore society that would enable the small city-state to survive
separation from Malaysia. A sports complex comprising a gymnasium and an Olympic-size swimming pool was completed in 1970. This was the first school swimming pool in Singapore and the aim was to ‘make every school leaver a swimmer, besides training swimming champions’ (ACS 1976, 23). The Military Band, National Cadet Corps, National Police Cadet Corps and enhanced physical education were introduced to promote ‘physical and mental ruggedness’ (Lau and Teo 2003, 85) and to instill ‘a deep sense of loyalty and love for their organisation, their School and their country’ (2003, 122). By the 1970s, ACS became the leader in training Singapore’s sportsmen and Olympians (2003, 121).

The principal of the secondary school was cited as saying in 1967 that the emphasis of ACS ‘remained on the development of mind, body and spirit to build “a rugged and robust society of dedicated, loyal and God-fearing people who will make a distinct contribution to the life and progress of the nation”’ (Lau and Teo 2003, 118; original emphasis). The principal of the junior school added a fourth ‘R’ – ‘ruggedness’ – to the traditional three ‘Rs’ of reading, writing and arithmetic, which would be fulfilled by extra-curricular participation in sports, clubs and uniformed organizations (2003, 228). In all these, there was a presaging of Lee Kuan Yew’s vision of his own masculinity writ large to the nation’s masculinity through his autobiography, The Singapore Story (1998), where manliness was exemplified by oriental ruggedness, ethical self-discipline, austere severity and self-made entrepreneurialism that would ultimately serve the national interest (Holden 2008, 168–188).

Humility and the new elitism

ACS could not, however, remake itself quickly enough to match the new Spartan male the nation demanded. The school struggled to maintain the balance between two sets of conflicting demands: to provide the best education demanded by the majority of boys from elite background and yet lessen the social distance between them and the minority from working-class background, and to differentiate boys of different abilities so as to tailor the education program and yet give fair treatment to all boys to instill in them the spirit of achievement.

In 1949, classes were organized into ‘A,’ ‘B’ and ‘C’ according to ability, with the ‘B’ and ‘C’ boys ‘deliberately mixed ‘so as not to give students any feeling of superiority or inferiority”’ (Lau and Teo 2003, 196). The logic was to differentiate the upper class of able boys to give them an elite education and force the middle and lower classes to mix for a more ordinary education. Carefully selected able boys from non-elite background were thus cultivated as new cadre members of the elite, and this meritocracy served to socially reinvigorate the elites with fresh talents. In 1961, an afternoon session was started for boys who did not qualify for the first 200
places in the morning session. While this was meant to accommodate weaker students, it inadvertently created a ‘stratification’ that ‘created stigmas which gave rise to unhealthy feelings among students and parents’ (ACS Old Boys’ Association 1986, 55). Yet it was not until 1974 that the distinction was removed by moving all lower secondary levels to the afternoon and the upper classes to the morning. Standardized national streaming forced a more broad-based meritocracy unto ACS. By 1981, two-fifths of ACS primary school boys were not good enough to enter the secondary school. Board members became concerned that the increased enrolment of non-ACS students, requirement to teach moral education in Mandarin, and other measures imposed by the Ministry of Education ‘would lead to a serious dilution of the ACS spirit and tradition’ (Lau and Teo 2003, 306).

The trend towards elitism culminated in the criticism by members of the PAP government in 1980 of ‘student-snobs of ACS’ (Lau and Teo 2003, 126). The singling out of ACS coincided with a whole range of educational reforms spearheaded by the government to prepare Singapore for the next stage of high-tech industrialization. An integral part of the reforms was the introduction of moral and religious knowledge education to combat individualism and westernization in the use of English language and mass consumption of western popular culture. The government went on to launch its Confucianization movement, which, although later abandoned, substantively defined the ruling technocrats as honorable Confucian gentlemen, whose cosmopolitan Chineseness, moral purity, humility and honesty were beyond reproach. Significantly, this was a reworking of the Straits Chinese Confucian reform discourse of Lim Boon Keng, with colonialism replaced by western liberal individualism as the problem. Once again, the ACS became a target.

The school’s response was ‘Operation Anti-Snob,’ which saw the school focusing on the inculcation of ‘strong Christian character and moral conduct’ (Lau and Teo 2003, 306). ACS Junior focused on correcting anti-social habits and organized a slogan campaign, a ‘Love Thy Neighbor’ workshop, student discussions of anti-social acts and ‘talks and daily devotions … on humility, service and care for others.’ As a result, it was observed ‘there was no more flaunting of wealth, or boasting about their father’s limousines’ (2003, 218). In addition to the official school motto ‘The Best is Yet to Be’ and the popular motto ‘ACS for Ambition, Character and Service,’ favored by the Old Boys’ Association to characterize the ‘inimitable ACS Spirit that … gets into the blood’ (2003, 338), ACS Junior adopted ‘Aspiring, Confident and caring Servant-leaders who are a Joy to self and others’ to match its acronym (2003, 232). The image of the servant-leader evoking the servant Christ vividly expresses the strategy that the school was adopting to overcome elitism: by reviving its Christian tradition.
We have thus returned back to the Confucian–Christian reform debates, in which the education of boys and the cultivation of masculinities were key discursive battlegrounds. Yet again, the racial and class anxieties that afflicted the Straits Chinese rose to the surface. But this time the anxieties rose in postcolonial forms and within the ambit of the developmental state as the fear of deculturalization among the Chinese middle classes and as the income gap between the westernized middle classes who benefited most from the PAP’s rule and the vernacular-speaking working classes who were starting to vote for opposition parties widened. The PAP government sought to promote the Confucian masculinity and ACS responded by redefining the same masculinity shrouded with Christian humility and virtues. The tension persisted as Protestant Christianity was, by now, anchored in strong church institutions spread across the island and attracting many converts among upwardly mobile Chinese, but was seen by most as a religion of the westernized, the educated and the elites.

**Globalization, class anxieties and athletics**

As Singapore headed into globalization in the 1990s, its economy liberalized and social structures rigidified. The political and economic elites became an increasingly cosmopolitan class with strong transnational links to other global elites in both Asia and the West, while the middle classes consolidated their position in the new informational society, leading to fewer opportunities for upward mobility for the working classes. It was in this context that a second ACS secondary school was established at the old Barker Road site in 1994, after the first secondary school became an ‘Independent School’ with greater autonomy and moved to a brand new campus. ACS (Barker Road) aimed to give ‘hope to many an ACS boy who could not make the grade for ACS (Independent) and to continue his education within the ACS family’ (Lau and Teo 2003, 251). This was the Board’s solution to the growing problem of ACS primary school boys failing to make the grade for the elite secondary school in the 1980s. Structurally, it echoed the 1949 policy of differentiating the ‘A’ students and mixing the ‘B’ and ‘C’ boys. Discursively, its establishment also echoed the 1949 policy. ACS (Barker Road) expressed ‘the belief that human relationship is the key to influencing and nurturing the young’ into ‘students are accepted as they are’ and given the ‘equality of treatment, regardless of grades and ability,’ so that ‘late developers’ would be ‘given a second change,’ ‘boisterous boys … given time to grow up, restless youths … given time to settle down’ (Lau and Teo 2003, 251).

But the fact was that the two schools were differentiated by student ability measured at 12 years of age, when parental wealth, social connections and cultural capital mattered a whole lot. ACS (Barker Road) was bound to be the lesser of the two. Furthermore, it is identified in the parentheses by
its provincial locality compared with a status laden with the meanings of freedom and mobility. A different gloss was given to the masculinity cultivated at ACS (Barker Road). Ruggedness and humility remained key attributes of the masculinity, but to these were added the emphasis on self-control and perseverance. Athleticism achieved a greater significance in this respect. Like Song’s description of Legge seeking ways to draw out the latent energies of dullards, Lau and Teo’s *The ACS Story* describes the effect of sports on two boys. One boy ‘learnt to exercise greater control over his temper’ through playing water-polo. Yet another recalled his participation in the ACS (Barker Road) water-polo team victory over the ACS (Independent) team as an ‘unprecedented’ victory ‘won through dogged determination and perseverance’ (Lau and Teo 2003, 261).

Because the class distinction between the two schools translated into resentment and rivalry on the sports field, class anxieties easily erupted at the fraternal surface. By the 2000s, rugby – which was seen as more spirited and manly than football in Singapore – became the sport identified with elite schools. In 2002, the two ACS schools finally met on the rugby field for the national finals. The underdog ACS (Barker Road) team found themselves holding a slim lead over the other team, until a last-second penalty converted by the ACS (Independent) team stole victory. Incidentally, the face off was repeated in the water-polo finals, but this time the ACS (Barker Road) team, again the underdog, snatched a last-gasp victory. This coincidence was relished by ACS (Barker Road) Principal and interpreted as ‘divinely rehearsed,’ showing ‘how God has treated each school fairly, both of which He dearly loves’ (*Echo*, April-May 2002, 16). Again, the Christian frame provided the basis to smoothen the class anxieties.

But the tension remained and constantly appeared in the *Echo* in the form of the nature–nurture debate. Political leaders featured as exemplary alumni in the *Echo* spoke of ACS sports education as formative of their character, but that it was natural inclination and talent which brought them to love sports in the first place. Ministers Ng Eng Hen and Tharman Shanmugaratnam, both rising stars in the PAP, spoke of their obsession with sports, which brought them into camaraderie with people of different social backgrounds and taught them mental discipline in the struggle for victory and humility in the face of defeat (*Echo*, October–November 2002, 20–21; April–May 2003, 18–22). Economic Development Board Director Chan Chin Bock was more direct, opining that it was ‘not too different leading ACS’s top athletic team to win a relay and leading a team of young engineers to clinch a desired project from a global MNC for Singapore’ and that ‘leaders are typically born, not made’ (*Echo*, May–June 2006, 5).

A feature essay about the role of nature or nurture in ACS sports excellence countered that ‘the schools’ belief in the individual’ was what mattered, as ‘Champions are carefully nurtured and provided with the environment of support, expertise, understanding and dedication’ and that
success resulted ‘from the individuals believing in themselves and the schools believing in them’ (Echo, July–August 2003, 5). Another article added to the success formula ‘the acknowledgment that God is the leader of the team’ (Echo, February–March 2005, 7). Alumni who had become luminous national sportsmen were quoted as saying that they were no ‘natural sportsman’ and that it was ‘sheer hard work,’ that ‘great things can be achieved by anyone, regardless of who or where they are’ (Echo, August–September 2004, 18; August–September 2005, 6). The pattern dividing the political leaders and the school’s self-representation along the nature–nurture divide is indicative of the hardening of the social structure. The elites were achieving social closure as the state nobility (Bourdieu 1996) who believed in the natural fate of things, while the middle classes kept faith in an achievement-oriented meritocracy in which success could be nurtured.

**Cosmopolitan masculinities and feminine sublimination**

What was at stake here was not only the unity of the nation in the face of intensifying internal divisions as it engaged globalization, but also the need for the meritocratic renewal of Singapore’s talent pool to meet the challenges of globalization. However, the rugged and humble national masculinity was no longer sufficient for the task at hand. Through the 1990s and 2000s, the state continuously reformed the education system to create multiple streams and tiers to diversify educational opportunities and promote innovativeness to transform Singapore into a global city for the arts and financial services. At the heart of the reforms was the need for a new transcultural elite man who could transcend race and class divisions, and therefore master the persistent race and class anxieties underlying elite masculinity, to lead the nation in the brave new world of heightened capitalist competition, multidisciplinary complexities and multicultural differences. This burden fell to the core of elite Independent Schools. Thus, while ACS (Barker Road) was still focusing on character-building through athleticism, ACS (Independent) moved on to articulate the vision ‘to be a world-class institution in nurturing the holistic development of our students’ (Echo, February–March 2003, 15).

This did not mean the neglect of sports, but the reverse – an intensified management of athleticism involving getting all students ‘involved in sports and games, at competitive and recreational level,’ the ‘careful selection and placement of students’ at ‘each entry point to the school’ and ‘benchmarking at the international level’ for selected sports (Echo, July–August 2003, 20). Sports would no longer merely be the province of exemplary manliness and the favored tool for cultivating a particular kind of masculinity, but one instrument in a global human resource training, management and evaluation system, where individuals are matched to appropriate masculinities. Thus, students would be put through the formal Pastoral Care and Career
Guidance program involving regular counseling and work attachments, so as to match each individual to fitting vocations (Lau and Teo 2003, 142). An annual Festival of Arts was organized to cultivate different forms and levels of aesthetic taste. Social awareness and responsibility was inculcated through the Community Involvement Programme. The annual Life Sciences Symposium was launched in 2001 to foster student interest in what the government has identified as a key technology for its long-term strategic economic plan.

The shift in focus saw the Principal taking greater pride in his school becoming world champion in the international Odyssey of the Mind competition held in Colorado, a Boys’ Brigade student winning the organization’s Cross of Heroism for saving a man from an oncoming train in Thailand, and the drama, choir and orchestra groups staging an award-winning Broadway musical directed by old boy and acclaimed London-based actor–director Glen Goei in 2002 (Echo, October–November 2002, 15). This was an important departure because it means that the reference group for ACS (Independent) is no longer fellow elite schools in Singapore but the global field of competition and achievement. Boys are now encouraged to take on diverse masculinities that fit their abilities – Olympian, inventor or engineer, self-sacrificing hero, great artist – but with a common attribute. The school sees its task as ‘breeding navigators for a turbulent sea,’ to prepare cosmopolitan elite leaders ‘for the wide-open world of the future.’ The school organizes an annual Overseas Programme, where a whole cohort of boys is flown ‘from the reassuring familiarity of home to a destination far removed’ and, together with their teachers, ‘launched into an adventure in alternative education.’ In 2000, the boys went to Chiangmai, Thailand to learn how the Thais lived, ‘while absorbing the details of geothermal power and the history of a nation that had never bowed before colonial masters’ (Lau and Teo 2003, 149).

The evocation of the distant colonial past in the age of globalization is not strange at all. The economic liberalization of post-Mao China has been a major reorienting force for the ruling elites, who became self-avowed Confucians after strong early links were established with China. The remasculinization of a long-humiliated China was long a key concern about the Straits Chinese reformers. This concern, which I have argued was one to which ACS was intimately linked, has not been eroded by nationalism and globalization, but has been transfigured into a form of racial pride in seeing resurgent China assume a leading role in the rise of Asia. In turn, this role is often seen by the Singaporean elites as a moral and intellectual renaissance that, in contrast to western modernity, is politically powerful but peaceful and cosmopolitan, and beneficial for the next stage of advancement of world civilization. It speaks as much about the elites’ fear that China would not turn out to be so benevolent after all, but become a malevolent superpower.
That is why Earnest Lau, the co-editor of *The ACS Story* was particularly excited with his discovery in 2005 that Li Denghui, a Straits Chinese who was the first President of Fudan University, was one of Oldham’s ‘prized pupils.’ He is memorialized as an important supporter of the May 4 student movement who, maternally, sought to take in and protect orphaned student activists expelled from Beijing University into Fudan, only to see many of these students fall victim to state repression (*Echo*, February–March 2006, 18). This discovery was important enough to warrant the publication of a revised 2007 edition of *The ACS Story* with Li Denghui heading the list of illustrious early ACSians.

The other important addition to the revised edition was a chapter on ACS (International), a new co-educational school for boys and girls that opened in 2005. Headed by Reverend Dr John Barrett, chair of the World Methodist Council and former headmaster of a Cambridge public school, ACS (International) aims to ‘nurture students to be future leaders and global citizens in an environment that would promote their intellectual as well as spiritual development’ (Lau and Teo 2007, 291). The enrolment in 2006 comprised 256 Singaporeans and 179 foreigners, mainly from East Asia (2007, 294). The curriculum is also international in character, in ways more cosmopolitan than ACS (Independent); for example, conducting exchange visits to ‘Russia, Japan and Africa’ and holding ‘school devotions on global themes such as poverty and hunger’ (*Echo*, May–June 2008, 29). In this sense, ACS (International) would train the super-elite stratum of Singaporeans, who would be embedded and socialized into a multicultural, transnational environment from young and would move confidently around the globe.

Vice-Principal Kathleen Manley, a British citizen, describes the school as ‘back to the future,’ grounding the *raison d’être* of the new school in the imagination of a cosmopolitan Oldham ‘born in Bangalore, British father, Irish-Indian blood, educated in the USA,’ ‘a pioneer whose passion for God and compassion for humanity led him to live, study and work on three continents.’ Interestingly, she situates herself in the hybrid space of Singapore vis-à-vis the school and the world. Noting that she is ‘a “foreigner” everywhere and to everyone in Singapore,’ she ceases to be one in ACS (International), where ‘we dare to believe that we are equal and, therefore, valued partners in the community.’ The confidence and knowledge of one’s ‘value and worth’ hence bring respect and true friendship, ‘a friendship by which Buddhists, Muslims, Christian and Jews can not only sit together and eat in harmony but also live, work, hope, laugh and even cry together’ (*Echo*, May–June 2008, 29).

The utopian cosmopolitanism expresses the hope of the Singaporean elites that they would be able to master the turbulent sea of globalization with the attendant class and racial anxieties – from domestic class resentment to elitism, xenophobic backlash against foreigners in global city
Singapore, clash of civilizations linked to global inequality, misplaced racial pride in the rise of China. The more important point here is that these anxieties are now sublimated in an international co-educational school where the feminine would cultivate the cosmopolitan masculinities.

**Conclusion**

The colonial masculinity that Reverend Oldham hoped to impart unto the sons of the Straits Chinese elites has come a long way to the present era. Schooling in ACS transformed through the ages, adapting to decolonization, nationalism, development and globalization to produce a series of accreted hybrid masculinities. These masculinities were all postcolonial in the sense that the colonial heritage of athleticism, scholastic pursuits in humanities and the arts, and Christian religiosity was transfigured in specific ways by the Anglo-Chinese elites to maintain their competitive edge over other men as Singapore prospered.

It is because the Straits Chinese elites have been able to harness what Connell (2005, 851) calls the ‘social embodiment’ of masculine norms and practices at the level of the local in the ACS to engage the changing hegemonic masculinities demanded by the nation-state and now the transnational context that the elites have been able to reverse their political decline during decolonization and remain a dominant political force, as I have indicated in the number of ACS old boys in parliament. This has helped sustain the gender hierarchy in Singapore, where males dominate public life. The racial and class contradictions embodied in the Anglo-Chinese masculinity have already produced ‘new ways of living, new forms of expression, new relations of production’ (Ouzgane and Coleman 1998), but in ways that have secured the rise of Christian-Chinese elites who have allied with the Confucian elites to run the country.

However, the gender dynamics are changing as Singapore society liberalizes with globalization. Females now play an increasing role in the fostering of elite masculinity, as can be seen in ACS (International). Yet this does not promise gender equality, but the functional co-optation of femininity in the cultivation of the next round of transfiguration of postcolonial masculinity for enhanced competitiveness in the capitalist circuits in globalizing Asia. Class dynamics are also changing, as the results of the 2011 general election suggest, particularly in the drop in the number of male parliamentarians from elite school background. The ruling party now promises a more inclusive society and to improve social mobility. One recent initiative was to rotate the principals of elite schools and transfer them to neighborhood schools, including transferring the male principal of ACS (Primary) of nine years to a school in the northern public housing town of Woodlands. Yet this merely papers over the structural causes of class inequality, diffusing
the hegemonic masculinities embodied in the elite school principals as dispensation to the masses.

This does not bode well for Yegenoglu’s (2005) call to not dismiss nationalisms still capable of expressing the will of excluded subaltern peoples in the seeking of cosmopolitan ways of belonging beyond the nation-state. In Singapore, we see a racialized masculinity that weaves together cosmopolitanism, nationalism, nostalgic postcolonialism and capitalism and its class inequalities to maintain the hegemony of the ruling elites. Perhaps it is a coincidence that the articulate voice echoing the Anglo-Chinese cosmopolitan utopian imaginary is a British female voice, that of Vice-Principal Manley, but the resemblance to the Queen exhorting Song Hoot Kiam and his fellow students to ‘become good Christian men’ is certainly uncanny.

Acknowledgements
The author is grateful to Jane Kenway, Aaron Koh, Maud Lavin, Lucy Davis and Kenneth Paul Tan for their comments on earlier versions of this paper. This paper was first presented at the 59th Political Studies Association Annual Conference, Manchester, UK, 7–9 April 2009.

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