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Tracing Everyday Developmental Idealism in Singapore

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Abstract

Developmental idealism (DI) provides a robust framework for conceptualizing the psychosocial effects of development theory in everyday life. DI implies that several facets of modern development originate from Western thought, and post-developmentalist criticize these frameworks because they are not suitable for developing countries in the non-Western world. Only few countries have transcended the boundary between ‘developing’ and ‘developed;’ the most prominent of the few known as the East Asian Miracles (Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan). Previous research attributes their success to an East Asian Model of development, which contradicts some of the fundamental aspects of Western modernity, such as individualism and pluralistic democracy. While previous studies have examined DI models in China and India, this study focuses on Singapore, which has a historical association with both ‘Western-style capitalism' and ‘Asian political characteristics.’ This study examines how DI interacts with the East Asian Model of development through conducting 17 semi-structured interviews with Singaporean nationals and foreign residents in Singapore. I find that ordinary individuals hold both Western modernity and Asian values salient in their conceptualization of Singapore’s development, demonstrating the need for a more nuanced theory. These findings provide evidence that a more complex development schema exists in the minds of ordinary individuals, and the DI cultural model may need to reform its assumption that Western values continue to be the baseline for modernity and development in the developing world.

Key words: developmental idealism (DI), post-developmentalism, East Asian Model, state-sponsored capitalism, Singapore, interview data, abductive analysis

"When I came to Singapore, it was like a breath of fresh air… Singapore has the warmth of Asia but comforts of the West."

– Pranav, Singaporean citizen on migrating from India to Singapore

Introduction

Post-developmentalists argue that the notion of development via free markets and liberalized economies is inherently a Western construct. For states to be considered in the international community as "developed," they must adhere to these normative standards, even if these were not appropriate models for non-Western regions of the world (Escobar, 2011). Arland Thorton introduces the notion of "developmental idealism" as the foundation of mainstream international development research and policy. Developmental idealism argues that development originates from "elite, Western scholars," and these theories from academia can affect how development is understood from the ground-up. In turn, these perceptions of what *is* development influence people's decisions as they seek to live a 'developed' (Western) lifestyle.

How does developmental idealism operate in a space where development has been largely portrayed as independent from a Western model? The 'East Asian Tigers' (Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan), for example, are praised for their state-sponsored capitalism, which goes against several principles of a Western development model. In this paper, I explore the developmental schemas of ordinary individuals living in Singapore, a country that propelled into the 'developed world' by leveraging Western economic growth models while preaching Asian-styled social values. I draw on the notion that developmental idealism has since transcended its Western origins, creating a version of itself in non-Western societies that reflect a hybrid between the two theories.

Through conducting semi-structured interviews with Singaporean nationals and foreign residents of Singapore, I find that Western modernity and Asian values are salient participants' conceptualization of Singapore's development, demonstrating the need for a more nuanced development theory. These findings contrast the attributes of democracy and freedom identified by most celebrated development models and rather identifies benevolent leadership and social cohesion as sources of development. By diving into how a non-Western country can integrate attributes of Western modernity into its own version of 'development,' I find that existing models insufficient for conceptualizing development in the East Asian context. This study serves as a first step towards building up a new model that captures the nuances of localized knowledge and conceptual frameworks.

The following section discuss the competing conceptual theories in the development literature, namely the neoclassical development model, post-developmentalism, developmental idealism, and the East Asian Model. These models are introduced as mental schemas that ordinary individuals might use to conceptualize development. Then, I discuss why Singapore makes an ideal case selection to explore a hybrid development model, justify why interview data is best equipped to explore these mental schemas, and highlight my key findings. The final sections discuss this study's limitation and the implications of developmental schemas on ordinary individuals, then concludes with areas of future research.

Identifying Conceptual Models of Development

The prominent theoretical framework in the development literature focuses on neoliberal economic policies, characterized fiscal austerity, privatization of public services, free-market trade liberalization, and government deregulation. In recent decades, post-developmentalist have criticized development theory for its Eurocentric concepts that failed to improve the inequality

and economic condition of developing countries. Developmental idealism has brought forth a psychosocial component to development theory, which explores the effects of development paradigms on ordinary people and their day-to-day decisions. This section briefly contextualizes development theory, discusses central critiques, and proposes the East Asian Model as a competing paradigm to Eurocentric modernity and development.

Neoclassical/Neoliberal Development and Critiques

Traditional concepts in the development literature focus on economic growth, utilizing performance indicators such as GNP per capita, population, and—more recently—quality of life metrics, such as the human capital index (Sen, 1988). Since the late 1980s, development paradigms have focused on neoliberal economic policies that aim to control inflation, reduce fiscal deficits, enact pro-market reforms, and privatized and deregulate domestic markets. However, according to critics of development discourse, these reforms revolve around a capitalist-centric economic theory that assumes a unilateral, linear model of development. The measures of development, furthermore, originate largely from scholars and economists who uphold Western constructs of a modern society (Sreemany, 2016; Huntington, 1996). For example, uniform policy prescriptions, such as the Washington Consensus, were mostly unsuccessful in the Latin American region and resulted in rampant inequality. Given that current development policies have only perpetuated global wealth inequality (Gore, 2000), development theory critics aim to redefine the notion of development by detaching its measures from a Eurocentric bias.

Post-Developmentalist Eurocentrism

As a prominent post-developmentalist, Sachs (1992) provides a seminal critique of modern development discourse, arguing that the Eurocentric origins of development dictate

today's normative believes about socioeconomic growth in the developing world. Development discourse, therefore, perpetuates a Western hegemony by imposing post-colonial mental hierarchies between the 'developed' and 'underdeveloped,' preventing the 'developing' world from attaining 'developed' status.

These Eurocentric concepts, such as citizenship rights, the state, civil society, and the individual, however, do not necessarily *belong* to Western thought (Chakrabarty, 2007). Moreover, the globalization of development norms has provided an opportunity for the international community to reframe Western development within their respective social structures (Thornton, Dorius & Swindle., 2015). For development to be successful, post-developmentalist argue that alternative methods must incorporate "local cultural knowledge" (Escobar, 2017).

In Mehmet (1995), Asian Newly Industrialized Countries (NICs), namely Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan, are exemplars of development because these countries successfully integrated development programs with their "endogenous cultural values" of family and community (as cited by Lehman, 1996). The author suggests that the emphasis on cultural differences in Asian NICs allowed them to implement "policy pragmatism." This pragmatism led to their rejection Western industrial capitalism and mercantilism, focusing instead on redistributive policies for the collective rather than the individual.

Developmental Idealism as a Cultural Model

Whereas post-developmentalism addresses on the shortcomings of modern development discourse, developmental idealism (DI) aims to identify its causal mechanism and effects. The two theories work in tandem to explain *what* development means, and *how* these ideologies diffuse onto ordinary people. Arland Thornton first introduced DI as a cultural model that posits

economic growth is caused and effected by social outcomes (Thorton et al., 2015). DI is an all-encompassing model that transcends regions, eras, or societies. This psychosocial approach to development claims that beliefs about development are assumed by individuals, groups, nation-states, and international actors as unquestioned "truths" about the world regarding how to live a "good" life. However, many of these attributes are associated with "Western" social structures, institutions, and norms, as summarized in **Table 1**.

Table 1: *Attributes Associated with Modernity and Valued by Developmental Idealism*

National Resources and Social Structures
Wealth and Health Technological sophistication Industrial and urban society
Social Institutions
Free and open markets Educated citizenry Democratic social and political institutions
Social Norms and Values
Pluralistic norms and laws An emphasis on the individual, rather than family and community Universalism Freedom Equality Human rights Secularism (including the separation of church and state) Scientific-rational decision making
Individual and Family Decision Making
Monogamy Marriages contracted at mature ages by the younger generation Planned and low fertility Gender egalitarianism High degree of personal autonomy and self-expression Clothing style of northwest Europe

Note from authors: The listed items are not intended to be an exhaustive list of the elements of the developmental idealism cultural model, but rather, illustrative of its central features.
Source: Thorton, Dorius & Swindle (2015)

These values are aligned with Eurocentric developmental standards, and according to the authors, this is because DI emerges from a long history of Western developmental research concepts. DI does not prescribe a normative assessment as to whether Western modernity legitimately fosters development; rather, they claim the cultural model is a reflection how the world subscribes to Western ideologies.

According to Thornton et al. (2015), these models played a substantial role in shaping global economic and social policies, such as education equality and institutionalizing democracy. As highlighted in **Table 2**, many of these mechanisms historically originate from Eurocentric forces, such as colonization, but the spread of DI has also resulted from the dominance of Western-aligned international organizations, businesses, and educational programs.

Table 2: *Mechanisms for the Spread of Developmental Idealism*

Transnational Actors
Christian missionaries United Nations Governments Non-governmental organizations Western businesses Writings of developmental scholars
Programs, Movements, and Institutions
Mass education Mass media Family planning programs Foreign aid programs Social movements (e.g., communism, civil rights, democracy, women's equality)
Transnational Flows and Interactions
European and American exploration Western colonization International conflicts Tourism

Note from authors: The list above is meant to be illustrative, not exhaustive, of the mechanisms for the spread of developmental idealism.
Source: Thorton, Dorius & Swindle (2015)

The underlying hypothesis with DI is that mental schemas of development and modernity have been widely disseminated through the above mechanisms, and these schemas play a crucial role in changing social dynamics around the world. Specifically, ordinary people are motivated to adopt “modern” (Western) lifestyles that are considered necessary for socioeconomic development (Allendorf & Thornton, 2019). Binstock et al. (2013) collected survey data from individuals in Argentina, China, Egypt, Iran, Nepal, and the United States, asking participants to rate countries on a scale of development. The authors discovered that perceptions of development and developmental hierarchies are similar across the diverse countries, and those with formal schooling ranked the countries’ development close to the UN evaluations. The study suggests evidence for developmental idealism spreading via mass education to ordinary individuals. Binstock & Thornton (2007) examine the application of DI on family structures in Argentina and found that development ideas provide participants a framework for recognizing patterns of “traditional” and “modern” family organizations. The authors imply that the existence of DI thinking in Argentinian teenagers has a causal connection to the rise in “modern” families in the country. DI delineates a causal claim that Western modernity and development have a top-down effect on behavior and culture.

Critique of Existing Development Theories

While DI concepts assume a global adoption of Eurocentric values, Thornton & Xie (2016)’s summary of DI research in China demonstrate that these concepts can be met with considerable resistance once they conflict with more “traditional” values. This poses a challenge to the universality of developmental idealism. DI scholars argue that these concepts continue to spread throughout the modern word, but the literature also suggest it must compete with “traditional beliefs.”

“Traditional beliefs” is a broad term; however, research on East Asian “traditional values” often have central focus Confucianism (Chang, 2002; Eisenstadt, 2000). Prominent public figures in East Asian politics have also advocate for Confucianism as part of an “Asian” model of development. Notably, Singapore’s first Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, famously justified stringent authoritarianism and paternalistic government policies by claiming it was democracy with “Asian characteristic” (Barr, 2000). This came to be known later as the “Singapore model,” which leveraged both “political Confucianism” and “Western democracy” to create a hybrid notion of modernity and development (Thompson, 2015).

This notion of an East Asian Model does not directly conflict with traditional development measures, but it reflects a different approach to achieving similar developmental outcomes (e.g., capitalist markets, low fiscal deficit). Instead of government deregulation and neoliberal economic policies, the East Asian Model functions on “state-sponsored capitalism,” where governments invest in specific sectors of the economy to stimulate growth in new private-sector industries. Thus, development with “Asian characteristics” is often equated with strong state intervention, democratic socialism, a collectivist citizenry, and a lack of political dissonance. These facets are deemed rudimentary to efficent policymaking and rapid growth.

Tu (2014) argues that Confucian East Asia’s (Japan, Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan) successful modernization without complete Westernization is evidence that modernity can assume multiple cultural forms. Rather than a unilateral erosion of ‘traditional’ to ‘modern’ development, “Western Enlightenment values” were molded into the Asian context, creating an alternative version of Western modernity in Asia. Thus, despite the historical privilege Western countries once had to dictate global modernity, non-Western countries now have more autonomy to reframe development norms with globalization of DI. In turn, political

leaders and governments can have great influence on how ordinary individuals perceive the 'Western' and 'non-Western' facets of their country's development.

While previous post-developmentalist literature has explored the theoretical underpinnings of development's Eurocentric discourse, and DI has paved the path for a grassroot analysis of development, this paper adds to the growing body of literature by addressing how competing modernities rising out of an East Asian model may influence perceptions of development. How is development understood in this context, and what existing paradigms do ordinary people use to conceptualize rapid growth in Asian NICs? Understanding the mental schemas of ordinary individuals should provide insight into how these competing ideologies change social dynamics and notions of 'living a good life.' **Table 3** provides a summary of the relevant competing development theories.

Table 3: *Summary of Relevant Development Theories and Schemas*

Theory	Main Argument
Neoclassical/Neoliberal Development	Characterized fiscal austerity, privatization of public services, free-market trade liberalization, and government deregulation. Policy prescriptions have been largely unsuccessful in developing countries (i.e. Latin America).
Post-Developmentalism	'Modernity' and development concepts reflects a Western hegemony. Criticizes previous failures to acknowledge the vast cultural differences in the Global South, which has resulted in the unequal distribution of global wealth.
Developmental Idealism (DI)	A psychosocial approach to development that posits mental schemas of development affect how ordinary individuals choose to live their lives. DI is identified by a set of beliefs and values that reflect modernity from a Western perspective (e.g., free and open markets, democratic institutions, individualism, etc.).

Development with "Asian Characteristics" (East Asian Model)	An alternative theory to neoclassical regulation that emphasis "state-sponsored capitalism." Adheres by traditional development outcomes (capitalist markets, low fiscal deficit etc.) but believes "Asian values" (i.e., democratic socialism and collectivist citizenry) are central to developmental success.

Research Technique

Singapore: The Case for a Hybrid Model

Singapore serves as a well-suited case study to observe the top-down effects of DI, and it has the potential to support a post-developmentalist alternative development model. The city-state is situated in the Southeast Asian region as a 'gateway to Asia for the West.' Although S Former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's policies remain controversial, his authoritarian rule efficiently implemented a combination of foreign investment, business reforms, and robust social programs, such public housing, mass education, and universal healthcare.

Singapore has championed itself as a 'global city' that can invite multicultural businesses, people, and ideas. Considering its colonial legacy persists into the present day, with the prominence of Christianity among the local population and English as one of the country's national languages, Singapore appears to be one of the most Westernized countries in the Southeast Asian region (Ang & Stratton, 1995; Goh, 2009). Despite this, the state dismisses notions that Westernization was a fundamental part of their development and continues to champion itself as a leader of 'Asian capitalism,' (Nast, 2015; Yang & Lim, 2000).

While the DI cultural model has been transposed on some East and South Asian countries, namely China and India (Thornton & Xie, 2016; Thornton et al., 2015), it has not been explored in Singapore. Moreover, as one of the Asian NICs, Singapore's economic growth has

been exponential during their single-party dominance. Given city-state's colonial history and state-led socioeconomic policies, it is unclear whether ordinary individuals will attribute Singapore's success to its 'Westernized' economy or an 'Asian society.' These facets, therefore, make Singapore a compelling site to explore how DI interacts with 'Asian characteristics.'

For this paper, I conducted qualitative interviews to explores *how* development and modernity are conceptualized at the grassroot level, relying on the causal mechanism from DI that governments and elite institutions influence ordinary people's beliefs and values. The purpose of this study is to explore how these dogmas are conceptualized.

Data Collection

I conducted 17 semi-structured interviews with individuals living in Singapore from various national identities. Ten of the respondents were Singaporean nationals or Permanent Residents, and the remaining seven respondents were nationals of North America, Eastern Europe, and Western Europe. The choice to include non-Singaporean citizens in the study was motivated by statistic that 40% of Singapore's population is foreign-born, so it seems suiting to include their perspective (Ministry of Manpower, n.d.). Furthermore, these individuals who relocated to Singapore for various reasons and opportunities—mostly from historically "developed" countries in the Western hemisphere—provide additional insight as to how an outsider, with their unique understanding of DI, conceptualizes Singapore's development.

All respondents have obtained some level of tertiary education, whether it be a university or technical degree. Given Singapore's top-tier education standards (ranking first in 2018 PISA exam scores) as well as strict immigration regulation for high-skilled migrants, this level of educational attainment is commonplace among ordinary citizens (OECD, n.d.). While I only collected demographic information that was directly relevant to nationality and occupation,

respondents sometimes mentioned their background in conversation, which varied in age, race/ethnicity, and occupation. I summarized this information in **Table 4**.

Table 4. *Demographic Breakdown of Interviewed Participants*[1]

Demographic Information	*Participant Sample (n = 17)*	
		Number of Respondents
Gender	Female	5
	Male	12
Age	30-40	9
	40-50	5
	50-60	3
Racial Background	Chinese	9
	Indian	2
	Caucasian	5
	Other	1

Respondents were asked a variety of questions regarding their opinions about development, their experiences, and their observations of development in Singapore. Generally, the structure of each interview consisted of background questions, a discussion of their daily activities living in Singapore, questions on social notions of development (e.g., how Singapore has changed over their lifetime, and what countries are similar to Singapore). If relevant, respondents who have lived in other countries were asked to consider developmental differences between countries (see **Appendix A and B**). The questions were largely open ended, allowing respondents space to include information they deemed relevant or crucial for their answers.

Interviews were facilitated over the video conferencing platform Zoom and lasted between 40-50 minutes. All interviews were conducted in English given that it is one of

[1]To maintain their anonymity and ensure participants felt comfortable sharing information with me, I decided not to systematically ask about participants' age, gender, and racial background. Thus, unless it was explicitly mentioned by participants, I had extrapolated this demographic information from our conversations.

Singapore’s national languages, and the sample of individuals interviewed were fluent English speakers. The Zoom calls were recorded and transcribed via Otter.ai, a machine learning tool that generates text files for audio clips in real time. Respondents were initially recruited through contacting family and friends’ networks for referrals.[2] After speaking with initial referrals, I used a snowball sampling method to identify and recruit later respondents. The eligibility requirement for potential participants was that they must be of adult age and either a Singaporean citizen, Permanent Resident, or currently residing in Singapore. To conceal any potentially identifiable information, I use pseudonyms for each respondent in the proceeding section.

Method

While previous studies on the grassroot ideas of development have involved surveys and mixed method designs (Binstock et al., 2013; Melegh et al., 2013), I interview respondents in an effort to make sense of ordinary people’s experiences in this space. Previous survey studies have asked participants to rank countries in terms of their “development;” however, this does not address how people conceptualize development itself. Interview data provides a more nuanced understanding of mental constructs and amplify respondents’ perspectives, which can sometimes conflict even within the same individual.

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[2] As an individual who has previously lived in Singapore but is not native to the country, I spent many of my formative years in the both the local and expatriate community. Therefore, I find it necessary to address my researcher positionality and its potential influence on the participants’ demographics and responses. Participants were recruited out of my personal network and through family relationships (e.g., my parent’s previous colleagues or friends, and my previous classmates’ parents, who are a mix of Singaporean and foreign nationals). As a result, the interviewee pool skews towards more affluent, ‘white collar’ professionals from highly educated backgrounds, who are likely to highlight traditional definitions of development (Binstock & Thornton, 2007).

Although Chinese Singaporeans are the predominant ethnicity in Singapore, I believe my own ethnic background facilitated a higher response uptake in Chinese Singaporeans than other ethnic groups. While I cannot know for sure, I want to note that this self-selection process can alter the responses and paradigms explored in my findings.

Nevertheless, I believe my unique positionality as an ethnically Chinese individual who has networks in both the local and foreign populations allowed me to hold conversations with various groups while not presenting as an ‘outsider looking in.’ Furthermore, my contextual understanding of the local culture—and foreign tensions with regards to that culture—allowed conversations to flow more organically.

Throughout the data collection process, I read through each the preliminary transcriptions before developing codes for the data. Because this study focuses on the experiences and perceptions of ordinary citizens, I utilize the framework from Thornton, Dorius, & Swindle (2015) (**Table 1**) to extract attributes of DI in respondents' answers.

With the codes explicitly outlined in this framework, I used the qualitative coding software, Atlas.ti, to group quotes from respondents into coding schemes for wealth and health, technology, urban/industrial society, free markets, educated citizens, democratic institutions, pluralism, individualism, freedom, equality, human rights, secularism, scientific-decision making, Western-styled expression. Since the East Asian model does not have an explicit framework for identifying developmental thinking, I codified my own framework based on existing literature. Themes such as collectivism in the societal or family unit, justification for authoritative rule, and strong social welfare are prominent in the East Asian model.

Once these themes were outlined, I synthesized the data by noting observations that were surprising and potentially contrasted the literature. This method aligns with Timmermans & Tavory (2012)'s theory on abductive analysis. In contrast with inductive process, which sets aside preconceived theories to extract emerging ones from the data, abductive analysis interacts with existing heuristics and knowledge to inform empirical puzzles identified in the observed data. Abductive analysis is also an interactive process that highlights anomalous empirical findings, comparing the data against various sociological theories. I conducted this analysis to extract evidence that diverge from anticipated Western development ideologies, as hypothesized by DI, and converge with the East Asian Model. While respondents may or may not accurately reflect Singapore's development story, their mental schemas are viewed as legitimate frameworks that exist among ordinary individuals in Singapore.

Findings

The results from the interviews provide insight into how Singaporeans and residents in Singapore conceptualize the DI cultural model. In the proceeding sections, I address the evidence for both Western DI values as well as conceptions of an East Asian model of development. There are two key findings uncovered in the interviews:

1) Respondents defined development largely with the frameworks of DI; but

2) These ideologies do not appear to uphold a Western modernity; instead, respondents seem to attribute Singapore's success to an 'Asian' model of development.

These findings provide early evidence for how the Singapore development model is perceived at the grassroots level given these competing ideologies, and it demonstrates the need for a more nuanced development cultural model.

1) Development largely conceptualized within a DI framework

The interview data contained several attributes of development that were well-aligned with post-developmentalist theory and DI. These values and beliefs include the country's 'hardware' (e.g., infrastructure, technology, wealth, and health), along with its 'software' (e.g., individualism, pluralism, and equality). However, while DI claims that these attributes are tied to Western origins, respondents did not necessarily agree with that notion, rather associating DI values back to 'Asian characteristics.'

Infrastructure, Technology, and Urban society

When asked what development in Singapore looks like, the most common response related to resources, infrastructure, transportation. This aligned with what would be expected out of the DI literature. Aside from economic indicators (i.e., GDP per capita, GINI coefficient), respondents suggested that "development" can be easily observed through physical changes in

the city's skyline and transportation networks; specifically, the increase in stations for the Mass Transit Railway (MRT) system. Ethan, a German national who has lived in Singapore for eleven years, claimed that development can be seen in the continual construction of the city. He stated that the "big buildings," the "city skyline," and even the presence of a sports stadium means "there's money." Other respondents suggested that human-centered designs for transportation, such as having sheltered pathways from the MRT to the bus stop or indoor spaces, demonstrates Singapore's urban development and modernity.

Technological Sophistication

Respondents also cited that Singapore's technological advancements allow the city-state to develop. According to Edward, an American national who has lived in other East Asian countries as well as Western and Eastern Europe, Singapore is a "hub" in Southeast Asia due to its high economic complexity. The country's ability to adapt its technology to various businesses sets it apart from regional peer hubs, most notably, Hong Kong. Another respondent, Samuel, a Chinese Singaporean, identified that Singapore is up to date with technological trends, such as using WeChat or AliPay—the dominant social media and online payment app used in China.

Technological advancement is not only considered a facet of development, as expected under DI, it is also a means of comparison to other countries. Lily, who has lived in Singapore her entire life, believes that Asia's technological sophistication and skills are "catching up" to the West. She claimed, "I guess Europe and US were more developed compared to the Asia region 20 years ago. … when we talk about computers, digital technology, we used to think about the US, but now? Hello, India is the one, you know, that are experts in this area." [3] These

[3] It should be noted that I have not modified the grammatical and colloquial structures of my interview data in order to maintain the original voice of my participants. I believe it is important to retain their originality and opinions rather than impose my own interpretation.

developmental schemas, therefore, are utilized by the locals to *conceptualize* as well as *compare* how Asian development outperforms Western world, where these standards were first developed.

Wealth and Health

Respondents also highlighted the sheer wealth in Singapore and the policies that allow one to amass it. Several respondents found it important to discuss how the Singapore's tax system, which is progressive yet provides steep benefits to the ultra-wealthy, manages to create a strong social security for the local population.

While respondents did not feel that statistical metrics of Singapore's wealth were representative of the actual wealth of the people, they cited the high cost of living and widespread material goods as crucial indicators of development. Several of these material goods were also associated with Western products and brands. Richard, an American educator, provides an example:

> "We used to live two blocks over where cars would crawl up Thompson Road and get on the highway. … we would open up the windows to the balcony, … and every time, one of those high-performance cars like a Lamborghini, Ferrari, would rev up. Every day, I see one of these cars. … those are high performance sports cars that are made in Europe, some in America, and you could hear that every day. That's been around for a long time."

The excessive spending of luxury cars from Western brands was unprecedented to Richard, who had previously lived in Bolivia and the Czech Republic before Singapore. Nishant, an Indian Singaporean citizen, similarly finds that his neighbors demonstrate their wealth through high-end cars despite living in government housing. "You find this one particular family that has a Ferrari, an Audi SUV, they have a Mini Cooper, and you know, the wife's Mercedes Benz," he explained. To both individuals, these material goods are a demonstration of wealth, and hence, also of development. According to another Singaporean respondent, one consequence of

Singapore’s amassed wealth is the increased pressure to adhere to a certain “lifestyle” that appears to be expensive and displays a higher quality of life.

Furthermore, wealth is a measure that respondents use to compare Singapore’s development to the rest of the world. As Nishant’s comments suggest, Singapore’s ranking in the world is far above its regional Southeast Asian peers:

> “So, I maintain the view that I'm a minority in a Chinese dominated country. A lot of the Singaporean identity is tied with the Chinese identity. … But the identity is a degree of superiorism [sic]. The superiorism [sic] comes from being prosperous, and more ‘first world’ than the surrounding region. So, you can think of yourselves as superior to the Malaysians and Chinese Malaysians, to the Indonesians, to the Southeast Asian countries.”

Nishant’s point on Singapore’s wealth, however, diverges from the notion of Western modernity. Rather than associated the accumulation of wealth with the West, he claimed that valuing wealth and money is a “Chinese thing,” and “prosperity” is a core value in Chinese culture. While the definition of ‘wealth’ remains the same as in the DI literature, Nishant suggests these are not inherently Western concepts and are rather adopted from an East Asian culture.

Individualism

Respondents had varying opinions about the role of individualism in development. Some believed that the development of urban areas slowly erodes a sense of community, replacing it with an individualistic lifestyle. For example, Craig, an American national who previously lived in Taiwan and Korea before Singapore, argued individualism is a byproduct of development:

> “I would say also… [there’s] sort of a work culture [discussing what development looks like]. Whereas you see people relaxing in developing countries, enjoying each other's company, eating a leisurely lunch laughing with each other. I see it in markets and roadside food stalls in less developed places, but in more developed countries, I see everyone who isn't rushing somewhere sitting alone in coffee shops with headphones in. In Korea, ‘it's get to work, get home,’ you know. Japan seemed similar to that, just not as much smiling and laughing. And so, I think there's sort of a mindset, but there's also a lot of the physical [referring to physical outcomes of development].”

Richard, additionally, compares the Singaporean "work culture" to the protestant work ethic, explaining that Singapore's persistent progress makes him "think the two countries are very similar" in their mentalities. Ethan agreed; as a self-proclaimed "outsider," he observes that Singapore continues to "dream big" and "wants to be ahead even though [it is] small." Thus, respondents seemed to associate this individualistic work ethic with Singapore's metropolitan and "developed" lifestyle.

Pluralism

While pluralism under DI relates more to democracy and representation, pluralism in Singapore focuses on multiculturalism. Every respondent discussed 'racial harmony,' and 'multiculturalism' as central values to Singapore's identity. Regardless of whether respondents believed in the legitimacy of this so-called 'racial harmony,' they all stated that Singapore aims to portray this image as a part of being an advanced society. Because the country's growing economy has resulted in increased immigration, which demands multi-ethnic integration, many respondents saw diversity is a necessary facet of development. As Edith puts it, "harmony is very important for Singapore and Singaporeans. People from other country nationalities work in Singapore, so it's no longer just a few races ... we are working towards a very diversified workforce, diversified economy, and global space."

Multi-culturalism was considered an indicator of development for non-Singaporeans as well. Richard claimed the racial quotas implemented in Singapore's public housing, known as the Housing Development Board (HDBs) complexes, are beneficial for society:

> "From what I gather from talking to people is there's a racial number that every HDB has to have. So, you get this intermixing of people all the time. You know, you want to talk about like implicit bias within kids, like when kids grow up, and there's all different people around them, because it's *engineered* in that way; that changes things [emphasis added]. Whereas in America, in the town I grew up in, a lot of people look like me [referencing the fact that he is white]."

Pluralism is one value that converges most with Western modernity and DI. Given Singapore's multi-ethnic agenda and high immigration rates, respondents felt that diversity in race, thought, and experiences are important indicators of development.

One consequence of this increased diversity is the need for Singapore to be more palatable to a Western audience, which would result in increased immigration, foreign investment, and therefore, more wealth and growth. A few respondents, who are American nationals, considered Singapore to be "Asia-like" and "pretty Western oriented and accepting," making it "easy" for foreigners to live. Moreover, despite the veneer of diversity, ethnically Chinese Singaporean respondents made an intentional point to separate themselves from "mainland" Chinese and Indian immigrants due to the differences in culture and social etiquette. According to Beatrice, a Chinese Singaporean who currently lives in Thailand with her husband and children, Caucasians are at the "apex of the food chain." The social stratification of race and ethnicity—with Singaporeans distinguishing themselves from new immigrants in the greater Asia-Pacific region—demonstrates the cognitive effects of DI. With Singapore's socioeconomic proximity to the Western world, many retain this hierarchical schema of who is at the top and the bottom of this social pyramid.

It is evident that several attributes from the DI paradigm exist among respondents, but it is not necessarily true that DI characteristics are attributed to the West. Yet, one outcome of these frameworks is a mental separation between Singapore's regional location in Southeast Asia and its geopolitical position in the developmental hierarchy, which seems to reinforce DI paradigms of a Western modernity.

2) Development Mostly Attributed to 'Asian values'

The interviews reveal evidence that the state-sponsored capitalism model in East Asia is also an integral part of people's mental schema of development. Many respondents attributed Singapore's success to stringent government policies that limit individual freedoms and support a single-party system. These findings contrast the attributes of democracy and freedom in the DI cultural model. Surprisingly, respondents also claimed attributes that are historically associated with Western modernity were innate to "Asian values."

Deferring to Authority and the Value of Virtuous Leadership

DI argues that there is a bidirectional relationship between economic development and democracy; that is, free and open markets are both a cause and an effect of democratic political institutions. Contrary to this bidirectional relationship are the "Asian values" advocated by Prime Minister Lee. Singaporean politicians have compared these values—such as respect for authority and collectivism—to Imperial Japan during the Meiji Restoration period, where authoritarian rule through benevolent leadership led to successful growth (Parameswaran, 2015). The respect for authority and hierarchical relationships can be observed in a breadth of social dynamics, from familial responsibilities in a multi-generation household, to the honorifics used to address authority figures or elderly individuals.

This value of authority seemed to translate into respondents' faith in Singapore's social institutions and public leadership. Although they identified Singapore as an economic 'hub' with a capitalist structure and open markets, they believed this ease of doing business resulted from government intervention. Singaporeans and foreign residents alike agreed that democratic institutions do not necessarily promote economic growth. 'Development' was possible in Singapore because of benevolent leadership, low corruption, and effective policymaking. Kenan,

a Singaporean civil servant and the only respondent who requested not to record our session, argued that Singapore's development was largely attributed to "good planning from the government." He also claimed the country ran a "good budget" and implemented robust social reforms, such that "if you go to the streets in Singapore, it's common for people to have either a diploma or a degree." According to Kenan, this demonstrated Singapore's commitment to on education and human development.

When I asked Beatrice what is core to Singapore's identity, she stated, "I think people know us to be efficient. And we are a very rich country, … I think corruption level is very well manage, supposedly a meritocratic country, and a fast-paced country." The emphasis on government institutions as not only core to Singapore's identity but to its growth reflects a divergence from the original DI cultural model.

Furthermore, some respondents claimed benevolent leadership contributed to Singapore's development. While democratic institutions legitimately exist and operate, it was seen as a hinderance to progress. Pranav, an Indian Singaporean citizen who migrated to Singapore for employment, suggests the country's lack of democratic competition has led to efficient policymaking: "you look at other countries, right. Some of them, I think that there is a lot of politics in terms of pleasing the masses in order to get the vote bank. So, a lot of policies are passed out, which are not necessarily helping the country." He claimed the singlehanded leadership of Singapore's first Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, paved the way for development:

> "Look at where this country was back in '65. No natural resource. They just got one good guy, who's still a legend, honestly speaking, across the world. And he came up with ideas, which we are talking here, and we are still struggling to find out one more country that compares, correct? … you have one guy [who] was willing to dedicate himself and think objectively, and that guy can change anything. … there is no excuse that it's the big countries, small country, to be honest."

Other respondents suggested that the purpose of political opposition is to pressure the current ruling party, the People's Action Party (PAP), rather than represent legitimate democratic opposition. Alice stated that that Singaporean politics didn't need to have an "equal 50-50" split between the ruling party and opposition parties; instead, opposition parties exist to "scare [the PAP] off" and "to give them a warning."

The PAP leadership also seemed to bring political stability, which apparently attracts foreign investments. Attributes such as safety, lawfulness, and stability were all associated with Singapore's development. Lily defines developed countries as being "very stable" where "not much changes." In her words, what makes Singapore attractive is social security. She claimed, "you can walk on Singapore's street, you can go for jogging, you know. So, this kind of security, and also, our rules. And our rules are very clear cut, very clearly defined. All this definitely makes Singapore attractive." Granted, economic growth under stringent government rule comes at price. As Edward puts it:

> "Clearly the first thing that differs [Singapore] from all of the other [Southeast Asian countries] is stability. It's been able to maintain political stability. Now, it's done that through one party rule, but at the same time, there is an election. People are allowed to vote for whatever they want. … But I think political stability has allowed Singapore to implement or to have kind of long-term planning, right. … I think they have also been able to build a system that would appear is free of corruption."

While respondents disagreed on whether Singapore's stringent governance could be transplanted to other regions of the world, they believed that the current system has served Singapore well. One non-Singaporean respondent suggested that top-down economic and social policies were only effective in countries like Singapore and China because there is a culture where people "are taught to follow certain rules." In her opinion, these restrictions would not be successful in Europe, where "everyone can think with their own head." Thus, this association of

individualism in the Western world and collectivism in Asia is not only present in respondents' mental schemas but also a seen as integral to Singapore's success.

Individualism vs. Collectivism and Development

The DI cultural model implies a mental distinction between 'traditional' and 'modern' societies, such that development replaces 'traditional' social norms for 'modern' (typically Western) ones. One example is the transition from a collectivist focus on family and community to an individualist focus on the self. Collectivism is commonly associated with "Confucian values" in East Asia, where social harmony is maintained if people play their respective roles in society, whereas individualism is archetypically associated with the Western world, where individual outcomes and merit are supposedly rewarded.

In Singapore, however, respondents noted a cognitive dissonance between identifying 'modernity' as Western and 'traditional' as Asian. Given the existing literature on competing East Asian modernities with the rise of Japan and the Asian Tigers (Eisenstadt, 2000), it was somewhat expected that respondents argued for social norms unique to Singapore as evidence of a modern society. These findings highlight how respondents conflicted on notion that individualism equated to modernity and collectivism to tradition. According to respondents, individualism—while deemed as an outcome of development—is also hinderance. Collectivism, contrary to the literature, is not considered a 'traditional' value but rather is a modern value admired in other 'developed' East Asian countries.

As previously mentioned, many respondents noted that individualism is a social indictor of development, such that people in their day-to-day lives are more focused on themselves and not their community or surroundings. However, other respondents claimed that this form of individualism is unique to Singapore's culture, and this individualism was not seen as a positive

value. Aloysius, a Chinese Singaporean, summarizes the cultural competitiveness and individualism through a phrase in the Hokkien dialect known as "*kiasu*," or the fear of losing out. *Kiasu* can be in reference to missing out on a career opportunity, social events, or a good bargain.

Mia argued that Singapore's competitive culture, engrained at a young age, is a sign of individualism. As an expecting mother, she raised concern about her children's mental health under Singapore's high performing but rigorous education system:

> "If you're getting a promotion and your colleague is not getting it, or if a new person joins the company, there's always this tension between the new-comers and the those that are already at the company. … because they're creating competition and ambition, from a little age, that you need to stand out, which is good I would say in most of the cases. But I think it's quite difficult … to be left with that kind of feeling."

The "Singaporean" notion of individualism diverges from the assumption that DI schemas are attributed to the West but also contrasts assumptions about collectivist 'Asian values.' Therefore, individualism is one area where there is strong cognitive dissonance between separating 'Western' modernity from 'traditional' Asian values.

Collectivism continues to be a highly valued social construct, and for some, it is also a signal of modernity. One Singaporean respondent considered Singapore's social etiquette somewhere between Japan and China—arguing that Japan has the highest social awareness and China has the lowest. When asked to elaborate, the respondent stated that Japanese people demonstrated a collectivist mentality in their everyday activities, such as orderly waiting in queue, letting passenger off a train before boarding, and cleaning up public spaces. According to this respondent, the orderliness and prioritization of community is indicative of Japan's development. Singapore, however, possesses some of these qualities but falls short because of its individualistic, competitive culture. Thus, the value of individualism seemed to hold Singapore's

‘social development’ back while the collectivist qualities of other Asian societies are deemed more desirable.

Overall, respondents’ notions of development aligned with the DI literature, but many of these attributes were associated with ‘Asian values’ rather than a ‘Western modernity.’ Although Singapore’s development is conceptualized through the lens of capitalism and economic growth metrics, ordinary residents attribute these successes to Singapore’s ‘Asian characteristics,’ such as state-led economic policies, benevolent leadership, and collectivist social attitudes. Factors of social development typically associated with the West—specifically individualism—were seen as a negative trait that set back social advancement, even though respondents believe these ideas are also engrained into Singapore’s culture. The data unveil the complexity behind DI paradigms; while these social notions have their origins in the West, my findings demonstrate how individuals conceive development amidst competing ideologies fed from the top-down.

Discussion

This study explored the grassroot interpretation of Singapore’s development by citizens and residents, contributing to previous literature on developmental idealism, post-developmentalism, and the potential for an Asian modernity. In the case of Singapore, where the country’s took advantage of being both Westernized and Asian to develop its economy, I find that ordinary people conceptualize and discuss growth using a DI mental framework. Respondents demonstrated an understanding of DI, but they also acknowledged separate ‘Asian characteristics’ as critical to Singapore’s development. Some attributes from the DI cultural model—namely individualism and pluralism—were met with conflicting responses. On the one hand, several respondents noted Singapore’s competitive nature seemed individualistic and a

uniquely Singaporean characteristic. On the other hand, other felt that collectivism and social cohesion were social indictors of development, especially in other Asian countries.

Pluralism, moreover, did not translate to a pluralistic democracy but a need for diversity and multi-ethnic acceptance. Respondents noted Singapore's government has extensive social policies that enforce integration, but as evident from their mental racial hierarchies, these top-down approaches did not fully translate to the grassroot level. This was one of the most surprising findings from the analysis because it puts into question the underlying assumption that DI makes about developmental concepts: elite institutions and government policies affect social perceptions of ordinary individuals. In the case of pluralism and "racial harmony," top-down approaches did not seem to eliminate the reminiscence of a post-colonial racial hierarchy in many respondents' minds. Perhaps, the observed cognitive dissonance on topics of individualism, collectivism, and pluralism exists because these values are where 'Western modernity' conflicts with the 'East Asian Model.' Future research on this subject should dive deeper into these conflicts to further explore the potential of a hybrid development model theory, combining what are seen as 'Asian characteristics' with Western-styled development.

While this study attempts to capture the opinions of ordinary people, there were certainly limitations. For example, certain demographics are unintentionally excluded in this analysis. Due to the nature of snowball sampling and my researcher positionality as a non-Singaporean, ethnically Chinese, native English speaker, my sample lacked broader representation from Indian and Malay Singaporeans communities as well as non-white migrants. Furthermore, the ages of interviewees skewed towards an older generation. With no representation from young adults in their twenties, there is a gap in the conceptual understanding from younger age groups, who had experienced Singapore's 'developing' years and only know the country's current modern state.

Future studies would benefit from capturing a more robust sample of perspectives of 'ethnic minorities' and the younger generation in Singapore. Moreover, it may be worth exploring these demographic differences (e.g., race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and immigration status) systematically and quantitively, as previous survey studies have done (Melegh et al. 2013). Since Singapore is also a unique case in terms of their historical and regional placement as an entrepôt to Southeast Asia from the Western world, it would be interesting to assess how developmental idealism paradigms differ in other regional and historical contexts. Studies on DI have focused on China, India, and Japan, but there has been less research on smaller countries in the Asia Pacific region.

Conclusion

It is crucial to recognize the effects that development models have on ordinary people. Some respondents mentioned that despite having wealth and stability, many Singaporeans are still unhappy. They stated that the material wealth has become an arena in which people feel the need to compete, making the overall social environment feel purposeless. Thus, policymakers and scholars should not be the only ones concerned with the sociology of development. My findings and previous ones in the literature demonstrate that the underlying social norms of 'development' affects the behavior and mentality of individuals within a society. Developmental idealism teaches us that these theories have tangible effects on people's livelihoods.

This study demonstrates early evidence for a hybrid form developmental idealism in the context of Singapore, where Western modernity found a home in 'Asian values' because of the country's complex history of being in both worlds. Moving forward, it will be interesting to observe whether these dynamics maintain, or if alternative modernities from larger Asian countries (i.e., Japan and China), will redefine development in these potentially hybrid countries.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide for Singaporeans

1. Background
    a. Can you tell me a little bit about where you were born and raised, and if you have lived aboard before?
        i. If so, where and how many years?
    b. What is your current occupation?
        i. Do you work for a Singaporean company or an international company?
    c. How long have you been in workforce?
    d. What is your current resident status in the country (e.g., citizen/PR/employment pass status)?
        i. If citizen, was it at birth or through naturalization? When did naturalization happen?

2. Personal Questions
    a. Where abouts in Singapore do you currently live?
    b. Tell me about your hobbies and what you like to do on the weekend?

3. Understanding social notions of development
    a. What are the key characteristics of Singapore's identity?
    b. How would you describe Singapore's culture?
    c. Where do you think Singapore ranks on a global scale? (as a society, or in terms of economic development)
        i. What countries are around Singapore on that scale?
    d. Would you consider Singapore a developed or developing country? Why?
        i. Have these things changed over your lifetime?
        ii. Why do you think there might be **X, Y, Z** be different over time?
    e. What does a developed country look like?

4. Politics, Westernization and Immigration
    a. What do you feel are some key political issues concerning Singapore?
    b. Do you feel that there is a largely number of immigrants in Singapore than before?
        i. If yes, how can you tell?
        ii. If any, what differences have you observed in Singapore?

5. Wrapping up
    a. Generally, how do you feel about Singapore's growth over time?
        i. Why do you feel that way?

Appendix B: Interview Guide for Non-Singaporeans Living in Singapore

1. Background
    a. Could you tell me a bit about your background?
        i. Where were you born and where did you grow up?
        ii. Have you lived in other countries before?
    b. How long have you lived in Singapore?
    c. What year did you move?
        i. What was the reason to move (e.g., overseas deployment, new job, looking for opportunities etc.)?
    d. What is your current occupation?
    e. How long have you been in the workforce?
    f. What is your current resident status in the country (e.g., citizen/PR/employment pass status)?
        i. If vias holder, have you applied for PR at any point?
        ii. If PR, have they applied for citizenship at any point?
        iii. If citizen, was it at birth or through naturalization?
        iv. If not SG citizen, what nationality are you?

2. Personal Questions
    a. Where abouts in Singapore do you currently live?
    b. Tell me about your hobbies and what you like to do on the weekend?
    c. Where do you consider home?
        i. Why?

3. Singaporean vs. origin country identity
    a. How would you describe **XYZ** country's identity?
    b. How would you describe Singapore's identity?
    c. Are there similarities or differences between Singapore's culture or identity and those your origin country, or other places you have lived in?
    d. What do you think are the driving factors for these differences/changes?
    e. Why did you choose to move to Singapore?
        i. What made you come *here* instead of stay home, or consider other places?
            1. Do you feel like other Asian cities are equally comparable?
            2. If not Singapore, what other cities might you consider living in? Why?
    f. When you think about Singapore's culture, what do you think of?

4. Understanding social notions of development
    a. Would you consider Singapore a developed or developing country? Why?
        i. If relevant, has this view changed since you first moved?
    b. How does Singapore's development compare to your origin country or other countries you've lived in?
    c. What do you think is the difference between developed and developing countries?

5. Wrapping up
    a. What do you think about Singapore's future growth trajectory?