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'Hinduism' and 'Taoism' in Singapore: Seeing points of convergence

Vineeta Sinha

The paper begins by documenting the meanings the labels 'Hinduism' and 'Taoism' carry locally and highlights the complexities and ambiguities in discussions that invoke them. I then present data which demonstrate significant points of convergence between these two religious traditions, viewed as 'ethnic religions' and asserted to be 'different' in the Singaporean context. The turn to the organisational domain is instructive in revealing how 'Hindu' and 'Taoist' institutions have talked about their respective religions in the public sphere. This focus allows me to highlight overlaps in the two sets of discourses, to ask why these affinities should exist and to reflect on the sociological implications of such a phenomenon.

Introduction

In Singapore today, the labels 'Hinduism' and 'Taoism' are official, administrative census categories denoting named and differentiated religions as well as markers of individual religious affiliation. Yet, these terms also have complicated histories that take them beyond the local context, and connect them to the development of religious thought and practice in India and China, respectively. In the history of colonial British Malaya, racial and religious categories had served to classify and profile a plural and segmented population, facilitating the task of governance and administration. The label 'Hinduism' was used in colonial discourse in such a manner, both in India and in British Malaya. However, the label 'Taoism' is a relative latecomer, having being introduced into local religious discourse only in the 1980s. By now, in the multi-religious yet secular context of the Singapore nation-state, they are firmly embedded in everyday discourse and consciousness as two religious options that Singaporeans use to signal their religious identities. The local multicultural, multireligious and multiethnic scene is still defined by attention to racial and religious differences, important as primordial attachment and as a policy of governance.

The argument of this paper unfolds thus: I begin by documenting the meanings the labels 'Hinduism' and 'Taoism' carry locally and highlight the complexities and ambiguities in discussions that invoke them. I then turn to the organisational domain

Vineeta Sinha is an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology at the National University of Singapore. Correspondence in connection with this paper should be addressed to: socvs@nus.edu.sg.
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to document how 'Hindu' and 'Taoist' institutions have talked about their respective religions in the public sphere; how they both face pressures to modernise in order to be relevant, tracking the routes the two communities have taken to achieve their goals. Such a focus allows me to demonstrate overlaps in the articulations and efforts with respect to the future of these two religious traditions and to reflect on the sociological implications of the noted parallels and convergences.

Contextualising the labels 'Taoism' and 'Hinduism'

The first census of independent Singapore was held in 1970, when the sociocultural dimension of the population was captured via data on ethnic groups, dialect groups and languages spoken, but with no data on religious affiliation. The next census of 1980 is historically important for a first-time religious profiling of Singaporeans.[1] Data on the size and strength of religious communities, including rejection of religion and thus shifts in religiosity have become a regular feature in population censuses since then. The 1980 census is further marked by its boldness in providing a set of concepts and definitions of 'religion' and seven religious options under this category. 'Religion' is defined as the faith or spiritual belief as stated by the person regardless of how faithfully he practises it.[2]

The seven choices for respondents aged 10 years or more are listed as: Christianity, Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, Islam, Other Religions and No Religion.[3] For present purposes, I refer only to the offered definitions of 'Taoism' and 'Hinduism'. The former is defined thus: 'This refers to persons who state that they believe in the philosophy of Confucius, Mencius or Lao Zi. Those believing in ancestor worship and in various Chinese deities are also included in this category.'

The 1980 definition of religion continued in the 1990 and 2000 censuses and the seven options remained; interestingly, the reports no longer carried their definitions. In 1990, a notable change is that the description 'Chinese Traditional Beliefs' is pegged to the category 'Taoism'. The timing of this double-barrelling exercise merits notice, given that it coincides with a strong wave of reform Buddhism signalling its presence on the island. The expanded category of 'Chinese Traditional Beliefs' / Taoism is an effort to delimit its boundaries and, more importantly, differentiate it from a new kind of 'Buddhism' which distances itself from such elements as ancestor worship, aspects of Mahayana Buddhism, Chinese folk beliefs, worship of spirits and deities, spirit-medium cults, mystical, superstitious and ritualised practices – all of which would constitute a syncretic mix of 'traditional Chinese religion'.[4]

1 Eddie Kuo and Tong Chee Kiong, 'Religion in Singapore', in *Census of population, 1990, Monograph No. 2* (Singapore: Singapore National Printers, 1990), p. 11.
2 Chian Kim Khoo, Superintendent of Census, *Census of population, Singapore*: *Administrative report* (Singapore: Department of Statistics, 1980), National University of Singapore, p. 169.
3 See *Census of population, Singapore: Administrative report, 1980*, pp. 169–70, for a complete listing of definitions of the seven-religions option. It seems unnecessary to state that many limitations can be identified in the definitions provided, some in being highly abstract and overgeneralised and others in being too limited.
4 Tong Chee Kiong, 'Trends in traditional Chinese religion in Singapore' (Report prepared for the Ministry of Community Development, Singapore, 1988), p. 3.

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Although the label 'Taoism' was introduced in the 1980 Census, today it is firmly entrenched in descriptions of the religious life of a sector of Singapore's Chinese population, even though questions continue to regularly surface about its meaning. It is interesting that from the available possibilities, 'Taoism' should have been the final choice to denote the traditional religious beliefs and practices of the Chinese. A quick historical survey reveals that many other possibilities existed, although scholars, experts and local Taoist leadership have not always been able to agree on the most apt denotation. Going back to the 1921 Census of Malaya, we read:

> As at the 1911 Census, a large number of Chinese described themselves as 'Confucians', but Confucianism is more properly a system of philosophy than a religion. To quote Mr A. M. Pountney, 'The only worship which could be properly entitled the national religion of China is "ancestral worship," which is common to all sections of the community throughout the empire of China.' No attempt has been made in this report to differentiate between the religions of those Chinese who are neither Christian nor Muhammadan.[5]

But in contemporary discussions neither 'ancestral worship'[6] nor 'Confucianism' are considered suitable options. For instance, Vivienne Wee[7] and John Clammer[8] have suggested the label 'Chinese Religion' as one that comprehensively encompasses the syncretic mix of elements now captured in the label 'Taoism.' Others have disagreed with this for a variety of reasons. The most memorable of these debates occurred in 1987, when sociologists, anthropologists and political scientists pondered over the question of whether census categories denoting religion were relevant and appropriate. Opinion was divided over this. Sociologists, such as Vivienne Wee and Chua Beng Huat, supported the use of Chinese religion, arguing that this was indeed a term used by practitioners themselves, while Trevor Ling cautioned against the adoption of this term to denote what is found in local Buddhist or Taoist temples, saying this 'should be considered very carefully'.[9] Interestingly, the director of the Institute of East Asian Philosophy (IEAP), Wu Teh Yao, differed, saying that this was the 'first time' he had heard of a 'Chinese religion' and 'he had strong reactions to it'.[10] Professor Wu cited his consultations with a group of experts from China, all of whom – he reported – confirmed that in China, there was no such thing as 'Chinese religion.' Another alternative label proposed was *bai shen* (Chinese spiritualism), which others felt was not specific enough to distinguish it from say, Chinese Christians, who might use the same term to describe their religiosity. Through the 1980s and 1990s, in the literature,

5 J. E. Nathan, *The census of British Malaya* (London: Waterlow and Sons Ltd., 1921), p. 102.
6 Leon Comber, *Chinese ancestor worship in Malaya* (Singapore: Donald Moore, 1957).
7 Vivienne Wee, '"Buddhism" in Singapore', in *Singapore: Society in transition*, ed. Riaz Hassan (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1976).
8 John Clammer, 'Religious pluralism and Chinese beliefs in Singapore', in *Chinese beliefs and practices in Southeast Asia: Studies on the Chinese religion in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia*, ed. Hock Tong Cheu (Petaling Jaya, Selangor: Pelanduk Publications, 1993).
9 All quoted in *The Straits Times* (hereafter *ST*), 12 Oct. 1987, 'Definition of Chinese religion in census sparks off a debate'.
10 Ibid.

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shenism[11] and 'Buddhism'[12] have also been suggested as adequate means of encapsulating what is meant by 'Chinese religion'.

In these deliberations, one important manoeuvre has been the careful teasing out and separating of 'Buddhist' from 'Taoist' elements such that the two are now defined and perceived as 'different' religions. This is a move away from the earlier position of acknowledging some measure and degree of integration and overlap between the two. For example, in the mid-1970s, Wee argues that the label 'Buddhism', as it operated in the Singapore context, is a label within which a variety of religious systems (including 'non-Buddhistic' ones)[13] are encapsulated and is thus a rather loosely bounded entity.[14] But the later self-conscious act of delimitation has involved the 'Buddhist' and 'Taoist' communities in Singapore, concerned with redefining and repackaging their respective religious traditions to suit the exigencies of a modern, urban Singapore society, populated by rational, educated, literate and 'modern' individuals. Consequently, over the last two decades, efforts have been made to circumscribe and bound both 'Buddhism' and 'Taoism' locally. It is interesting that these earlier discussions about what name should be assigned to popular religious practices amongst the ethnic Chinese seems to have abated. 'Taoism' has clearly emerged as a legitimate descriptor although its content is still being debated.

Attempts to theorise religions amongst ethnic Chinese in mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and overseas Chinese communities have expectedly generated a rich and nuanced academic discourse. Historical and ethnographic data alike have produced conceptual vocabularies and schemata, which have been in turn debated and challenged. Questions have surfaced about what might be the most appropriate constructs, categories and models to denote the complex and multifaceted religious life of Chinese communities. A dominant strand in the literature is the reliance on the schema of the 'three religions/teachings' (*Sanjiao*) – Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism – to describe the religious scenario amongst Chinese groups.[15] These three

11 *Shenism* is inextricably linked with Chinese religion and comes from the root word *shen*, which is usually translated as 'god, spirit, divine' but can also be viewed as compassionate beings, who are embodied and can be represented via images. It does not have a canonical tradition but its theology is rooted in ideas of fate and predetermination, and the religious practice concerns appealing to a variety of *shen* to optimise one's quota of good luck and minimise the store of bad luck (Wee, '"Buddhism" in Singapore', pp 155–88, 171–3); *A dictionary of comparative religion*, ed. S. G. F. Brandon (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970).

12 Clammer, 'Religious pluralism and Chinese beliefs in Singapore'; Wee, '"Buddhism" in Singapore'.

13 The range of religious traditions 'hidden' in the label 'Buddhism' include features of Chinese religion, such as *shenist* spirit-mediumship, belief in divination, magic and sorcery and faith healing, ancestor worship, approaching Boddhisattva (such as Kuan Yin), venerating the Taoist pantheon with its array of deities, spirits and heroes, engaging canonical forms of Mahayana or Theravada Buddhism, veneration of *keramat*, participating in folk Hindu rituals and festivals (such as *Taipucam* and *Timiti*), reaching out to Roman Catholicism in attending to Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary, but not connecting either with Protestantism or Islam, see Wee, '"Buddhism" in Singapore', p. 173.

14 Ibid., pp. 167–9.

15 Stephan Feuchtwang, 'Chinese religions', in *Religions of the modern world: Traditions and transformations*, ed. Linda Woodhead (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 86–107; Daniel Overmyer, 'Chinese religion', in *The religious traditions of Asia: Religion, history and culture*, ed. Joseph M. Kitagawa (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 257–304; Chee Kiong Tong and Cheuk-Yin Lee, 'Taoism', in *Encyclopaedia of Sociology*, ed. George Ritzer (New York: Blackwell, 2006, forthcoming); Xinzhong Yao, 'Chinese religion', in *The Cambridge illustrated history of religions*, ed. John Bowker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 112–43.

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labels have by now become entrenched in the literature and inevitably provide points of entry into further inquiries. Some have, however, asked 'why begin with the tired old category of three teachings'.[16] Others, such as Kirkland, have raised questions about what each of the three descriptions, such as 'Taoism' mean at the level of everyday lived reality.[17] In addition, the label 'Chinese religion' also pervades the literature, often used in the plural,[18] with the recognition that this is a complex, internally differentiated category and far from unitary and leading at least one scholar to note 'there are many forms of Chinese religion today'.[19] Another label that has emerged in these discussions is 'popular religion', what this is, how this dimension of religiosity is positioned *vis-à-vis* other identified religious traditions and how it interacts with them,[20] are core themes therein. Anthropologists, in particular, focusing on ritual behaviour have highlighted the domain of popular religious practices[21] which include amongst others, the realm of ancestor worship, exorcism and divination, annual festivals, cult of household gods, rituals at shrines and local temples, funeral rituals and geomancy. Recently, scholars have problematised the category 'popular religion' as well as addressing two regnant approaches to theorising this realm: the view that 'popular religion' is diffused throughout the system (an idea popularised by C. K. Yang in 1961) and the position that it refers to religiosity of the ordinary folks and masses as opposed to that of elite sectors of society, and that popular religion relates to identity politics, raising questions about its connection to 'Chineseness'.[22]

Scholarship on the history, philosophy and sociology of 'Taoism' and 'Chinese religion' is vast and rich.[23] To date, research on Taoism amongst Chinese communities in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Japan and China has generated serious scholarship.[24] I select for discussion one central theme that characterises this

16 Stephen F. Teiser, 'Religions of China in practice', in *Asian religions in practice: An introduction*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Jr (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 88–9.

17 Russell Kirkland, *Taoism: The enduring tradition* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), p. 17.

18 Teiser, 'Religions of China in practice'; Steven Sangren, 'Anthropology and identity politics in Taiwan: The relevance of local religion', in *Religion and the formation of Taiwanese identities*, ed. Paul R. Katz and Murray A. Rubinstein (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 253–88; C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961); Yao, 'Chinese religion', pp. 112–43.

19 Feuchtwang, 'Chinese religions', p. 100.

20 Teiser, 'Religions of China in practice', p. 95.

21 Daniel Overmyer, 'Chinese religion', pp. 257–304; Paul Katz, 'Identity politics and the study of popular religion in postwar Taiwan', in *Religion and the formation of Taiwanese identities*, ed. Paul R. Katz and Murray A. Rubinstein (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 157–80; Kirkland, *Taoism*, pp. 88–122; Sangren, 'Anthropology and identity politics in Taiwan', pp. 253–89.

22 Katz, 'Identity politics and the study of popular religion in postwar Taiwan'; Holmes Welch, *Parting of the way: Lao Tzu and the Taoist movement* (London: Methuen, 1958).

23 Henri Maspero, *Taoism and Chinese religion*, trans. Frank A. Kierman Jr (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981 [1950]); Welch, *Parting of the way*; Robert P. Weller, *Unities and diversities in Chinese religion* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987).

24 Emily Ahern, *The cult of the dead in a Chinese village* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1973); Emily Ahern, *Chinese rituals and politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); *Chinese beliefs and practices in Southeast Asia: Studies on the Chinese religion in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia*, ed. Hock Tong Cheu (Petaling Jaya, Selangor: Pelanduk Publications, 1993); Comber, 'Chinese ancestor worship'; John Clammer, 'Introduction', Studies in Chinese folk religion in Singapore and Malaysia in *Contributions to Southeast Asian ethnography*, 2 (1983); Clammer, 'Religious pluralism'; Feuchtwang, 'Chinese religions'; Katz, 'Identity politics'; Overmyer, 'Chinese religions'; Sangren, 'Anthropology and

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material, resting on the question of what is meant by the label 'Taoism'[25] – the concern with conceptualising the term, something that is crucial to local discussions of Taoism. In the absence of overriding consensus about the characterisation of 'Taoism', the distinction between 'philosophical Taoism' (*Tao Chia* [26] – School of Tao, deemed to be the earlier, originary strand – *c.* 500 BCE to CE 100) and 'religious Taoism' (*Tao Chiao*[27] – Taoist religion, attributed to the second century CE) has emerged.[28] 'Taoism' is first and foremost viewed as a tradition indigenous to China and intimately tied up with issues of Chinese cultural identity and ethnicity.[29] Particularly at the level of practice, it is noted that Taoism is defined by internal religious diversity and syncretism of a range of traditions and that there is a long historical precedent for this.[30] Despite its long history in the scholarship, its unproblematised usage has been subjected to critical scrutiny in recent years.[31] In the Singapore context, the label 'Taoism' is now accepted as a legitimate mode of denoting the religious life of a sector of the Chinese community, and is entrenched in local discourse.

Turning now to the label 'Hinduism', we see that the 1980 Census of Singapore defines it thus:'(Hinduism) refers to persons who state that they believe in the polytheistic religion originating in India.'[32]

This is clearly a bland and over-generic description, and certainly not one that practitioners of this religion find either comprehensive or meaningful. A comparative perspective reveals that in the history of Malaya the label 'Hinduism' has been viewed by colonial authorities, and subsequently the political leadership of independent Malaya and then Singapore alike, to be self-evident, non-problematic and fairly

identity politics in Taiwan'; Marjorie Topley, 'Chinese religion and religious institutions in Singapore', *Journal of the Malayan Branch Royal Asiatic Society*, 29, 1 (1956); Wee, '"Buddhism" in Singapore'; Yang, *Religion in Chinese society*; Yao, 'Chinese religion'.

25 The label 'Taoism' comes from the root/key word 'Tao', usually rendered 'The Way,' which is 'seen as the primal force of the universe, present in all things and yet greater than all things'. See Richard Kennedy, *The international dictionary of religion* (New York: Crossroad, 1984), p. 184.

26 'The term is commonly used in recent times to refer to Taoist philosophy, as represented in texts, such as the *Tao Te Ching*, the *Chuang Tzu*, the *Lieh Tzu*, and the *Huai Nan Tzu*; and in the tradition of philosophical reflection upon these works…' See *The Penguin dictionary of religions*, ed. John R. Hinnells (London: Allen Lane, 1984), p. 321.

27 A Taoist sect or religious Taoism. 'The term literally means "Teachings of the Way". It is now used to refer to established sects and movements that seek access to the Tao as the supreme reality, and consequent immortality, through meditational, liturgical and alchemical means. Religious Taoism incorporates ideas and images from philosophical Taoist texts, especially the *Tao Te Ching* as well as the theory of yin–yang … healing and exorcism, pantheons of gods and spirits…' See Hinnells, *The Penguin dictionary of religions*, p. 321.

28 *The Oxford dictionary of world religions*, ed. John Bowker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); *Dictionary of living religions*, ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981); Richard Lee, Alan K. L. Chan and Timothy Y. H. Tsu, *Taoism: Outlines of a Chinese religious tradition* (Singapore: Singapore Taoist Federation, 1994).

29 Paul Katz, 'Identity politics and the study of popular religion', in Katz and Rubenstein, *Religion*, pp. 157–80.

30 Yao, 'Chinese Religion'; Russell Kirkland, *Taoism: The enduring tradition* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004).

31 Kirkland, *Taoism*; C. K. Tong and C-Y. Lee, 'Taoism', in *Encyclopaedia of sociology*, ed. George Ritzer (New York: Blackwell, 2006).

32 *Census of population, Singapore*, 1980, p. 170.

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straightforward. In the 1921 Census of British Malaya, the administrative puzzle was how to denote and describe the religion of the Chinese, who were neither Christian nor Muhammandan. The proposed solution was quite unimaginative and simple-minded – to leave this large category of non-Christian, non-Muhammandan Chinese undifferentiated and unnamed under the category 'Other Religions'.[33] In the case of Indian residents of British Malaya, the labels 'Hinduism,' 'Muhammadanism', 'Christianity' and 'Sikhism' were easily available descriptions, already formulated and provided for in the Indian census. While Sikhism was defined,[34] Hinduism, Muhammadanism and Christianity were not, but appear in discussions and with obviously attributed meanings. With specific reference to 'Hinduism', the terms 'Hindu religion' and 'Hindu' also appear without any reservations in this census report.

Over time, no label other than 'Hinduism' has been forcefully proposed as an alternate possibility for describing the religion of non-Christian and non-Muhammadan Indians in Malaya and Singapore. For a variety of reasons, such labels as 'Sanatana Dharma', 'Vedism', 'Brahmanism', 'Tamil Hinduism', 'Saiva Siddhanta' and 'Saivism' have periodically surfaced as more specific and accurate portrayals of strands of religiosity within. But the label 'Hinduism' as an overall, all-encompassing, unitary category has not been challenged, and certainly calls have not been made to seek a more suitable substitute. In Singapore, then, the term 'Hinduism' is not only a census category denoting a religion, but also a sign of individual religious identification and an important ethnographic category. Here, it is understood (by Hindus and non-Hindus alike) as one amongst numerous religious traditions, and named alongside others. This widespread legitimacy and meaningfulness of the category, especially amongst practitioners, must be positioned against the conceptual and methodological queries that have been raised about the relevance and appropriateness of the label. I detail briefly the tenor of this critique.

In sociological and anthropological literature, the terms 'Hindu' and 'Hinduism' are often used unquestioningly and invoked as shorthand descriptions of complex religious scenarios. Scholars have highlighted the need to historicise the term 'Hinduism' and to problematise the unreflexive application of the Judeo-Christian notion of religion to make sense of the category.[35] What is striking is that this

33 Nathan, *The census of British Malaya*, p. 102.

34 'The Sikh faith is founded on the teaching of Guru Nanak. It is closely akin to Hinduism, and it is chiefly perhaps owing to the political character given to the creed by Guru Gobind that it has been recognised as a separate religion. The outward signs of a Sikh in the strictest sense of the word are that he wears his hair long and abstains from tobacco. Sikhs are believers in many of the Hindu doctrines, but have their own religious book, the Granth, containing the sayings of Guru Nanak and other great teachers' (Nathan, *The census of British Malaya*, p. 106).

35 Robert E. Frykenberg, 'Constructions of Hinduism at the nexus of history and religion', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 23, 3–4 (1993): 523–50; Klaus Klostermaier, *A survey of Hinduism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989); Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The meaning and end of religion* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1958); Gunther D. Sontheimer, 'Hinduism: The five components and their interaction', in *Hinduism reconsidered*, ed. Gunther Dietz Sontheimer and Hermann Kulke (Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2001), pp. 305–24; Romilla Thapar, 'Syndicated Hinduism', in *Hinduism reconsidered*, ed. Sontheimer and Kulke (Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2001), pp. 54–81; Simon Weightman, 'Hinduism', in *A handbook of living religions*, ed. John R. Hinnells (Hardmonsworth: Penguin, 1985).

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rethinking exercise faces a number of challenges, ironically the most serious one coming from outside the disciplined arenas. Contemporary students of Hinduism cannot escape the notice that the terms 'Hinduism' and 'Hindu', far from being rejected, have by now been embraced as labels of self-description amongst practitioners themselves, even as the meanings attributed to them continue to be constructed anew. The intellectual argumentation now has to contend with its easy adoption and acceptance by lay practitioners as well.

The choice of religious labels and deliberations over what these connote are debates about drawing boundaries and their maintenance as borne out by the case under discussion. The choice of a linguistic description may be institutionalised, but the process of delimiting its content and parameters continue to concern a number of interested parties. In my work on Hinduism in Singapore, I have spoken of the making of 'Singaporean Hinduism', which entails the processes of drawing boundaries around a named and labelled religious tradition as well as negotiating the content within, involving at the same time the invention of tradition.[36] My inquiries into the domain of Taoist practice in Singapore allow me to speak of a parallel phenomenon of the constitution of 'Singaporean Taoism'. I propose these as heuristic devices which are obvious constructions. In practice, while they may be similar to expressions of religiosity both in the diaspora and in India and China, their concrete substance is contextually and historically shaped. The process of construction sees at work the agency of a number of parties, which includes lay Hindus and Taoists as well as the leadership of administrative, bureaucratic, political and spiritual variety from within the local religious communities, and at times from 'outside'.

'Hinduism'[37] and 'Taoism' are inherited categories and imported religions in the Singapore context. Given the history of both Indian and Chinese migration to the region, it would hardly be surprising to find differences between Indian variants of Hinduism, Chinese variants of Taoism, and those now in practice locally. Yet, similarities and overlaps with the homeland would not be surprising either. Both continuities with 'tradition', as well as breaks with it can be identified for the versions of 'Hinduism' and 'Taoism' flourishing in Singapore for almost two centuries. Despite the noted 'empirical' resemblances with Hinduism and Taoism 'back home', I argue that articulations of rituals and beliefs in their Singapore counterparts must additionally be as the outcome of specific structural factors working together in the host communities. These constructions have, in turn, produced specific modes of

36 Ranger and Hobsbawm, *The invention of tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

37 According to the Singapore Census of 2000, the Hindu population in Singapore stood at 99,904 – constituting a mere 4 per cent of the total population, a percentage that has remained stable over the last four to five decades, with slight fluctuations in absolute numbers in conversions to Islam and Christianity, although this is not reflected in the percentage figures. Hindus make up about 55.4 per cent of the Indian community, followed by Muslims (25.6 per cent), Christians (12.1 per cent), those of 'Other Religions' (6.3 per cent – this would include Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists, etc.) and a small number (0.6 per cent) who claim membership in the category 'No Religion'. Of the 6.5 per cent Indian population in the 2000 Census, about 80 per cent are of south Indian Tamil ancestry from the state of Tamilnadu, with smaller representations of regional and linguistic communities from other southern and northern Indian states. Much of the diversity in contemporary varieties of Singaporean Hinduism can be traced to the caste, class, ethnolinguistic and regional variation and complexity that defined early group of migrants to the region.

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talking about Hinduism and Taoism and further established particular ways of being 'Hindu' and Taoist'. In practice, both 'Hinduism' and 'Taoism' in Singapore are contested categories and the right to define them is claimed by several groups. The meanings they carry are therefore necessarily varied and any monolithic definition or singular understanding is contradicted by ethnographic data.

Another striking feature of the local multicultural scene is that we see strong associations being made between religious and ethnic/racial identities. This logic is grounded in the ethnographic reality where a majority of Hindus are Indians,[38] while Taoists are Chinese, leading to the conclusion that 'Taoism' is a 'Chinese' religion and 'Hinduism' an 'Indian' one. This view is shared widely articulated. For instance, some define Taoism as an 'ethnic religion': It is an ethnic religion. And it doesn't have any specific requirements. You don't need to perform rituals like baptism to become a Taoist. By virtue of being a member of an ethnic community, you are entitled to membership.[39] Yet, in the case of the local Chinese community,'(w)hile religion once served as a traditional marker of ethnic identity, it has lost its homogenising influence among the Chinese in Singapore'.[40]

In my research amongst Hindus, I encountered the easy collapsing of the categories, 'Hindu' and 'Indian' as well as their interchangeable, unproblematic usage.[41] The equation of ethnicity with religion assumes importance in dealing with the issue of religious diversity within the two ethnic communities, requiring careful specifications about what aspects are 'Chinese' and 'Indian' and hence cultural and customary, rather than strictly religious.[42]

38 The Census figures only furnish an 'objective' description of the Indian and Hindu population, with no details of the divisions and complexities within this category. The intrinsic differentiation of the Indian, Hindu community on the island along linguistic, 'religious', class and caste lines shape expressions of local Hinduism. Although Tamils have been the numerically dominant group in Singapore, significant numbers of other regional groups (from South and North India) have existed on the island since the start of the twentieth century. Apart from the community-based associational networks, Hinduism is visible on the island in the public domain, through its 24 registered Hindu temples, a majority of which are built in the southern Indian style. These have been conceptualised, constructed and consecrated according to strict Agamic prescriptions and are served by a retinue of trained ritual specialists, mainly from Tamilnadu. Additionally, the island is dotted with wayside/roadside shrines, labelled 'unauthorised structures' in Singapore's urban landscape. Ritually, one finds both aspects of Sanskritic and non-Sanskritic Hinduism, with Saivism, mother goddess worship and veneration of *kaaval deivam* (guardian deities). The domestic domain is another space where the devotional stream of Hinduism flourishes, together with the regional festivals, fasts and rituals from both south and north India.

39 Alan Chan, 'Every Chinese is a Taoist, says speaker at Taoism talk', quoted in *ST*, 6 June 1994.

40 Tong and Chan, 'One face many masks: The singularity and plurality of Chinese identity', *Diaspora*, 11, 1 (2003): 361–89, cited in Tong and Lee 'Taoism'.

41 Vineeta Sinha, 'Hinduism in Singapore: A sociological and ethnographic perspective' (M.Soc.Sci. diss., Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore, 1988); Vineeta Sinha, 'Unpacking the labels "Hindu" and "Hinduism" in Singapore', *Southeast Asia Journal of Social Science*, 25, 2 (1997): 139–60.

42 'Ancestor worship' is a good illustration. There has been much debate locally about whether this is part of the 'Chinese' culture and thus a custom, or a religious ritual. It is not without significance that such questions have surfaced in the context of Chinese conversions to Christianity, which demands a rejection of previous religious attachments.

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Repackaging 'Hinduism' and 'Taoism': Organisational initiatives

While there is no official Ministry of Religion in the Singapore government, religion is deemed to be important by the state both as a matter of individual identity and in the broader social and political life of the nation. A number of government-affiliated and community-based organisations exist for the management and administration of affairs relating to the major religious communities on the island. In this section of the paper, my discussion highlights the various organisational initiatives (both private and government-based) within the Hindu and Taoist communities. My data are grounded in the discourse generated by these institutions and associations, which are either charged with (or have assumed) leadership and responsibility for managing, supervising and directing affairs of the religions in question. In the process, they also assemble a legitimate, respectable and appropriate face of the religion in constructing their 'Official' accounts. It is instructive to attend to these endeavours given that their location in the public domain, invariably (even if they do not intend to be read as such) allows them to serve as the official voice, representing their religious communities.

'Official Hinduism'

Hinduism in Singapore operates within the institutional context provided by two government-affiliated bodies – the Hindu Endowments Board[43] (HEB) and the Hindu Advisory Board (HAB), both British colonial initiatives founded at the turn of the twentieth century. Today, they continue to be pivotal in shaping local Hindu affairs, with membership consisting entirely of local professional Hindus and drawn from the civil services, the private sector and business domains.[44] By law, the HEB is charged with the administration of four Hindu temples and its finances, while the HAB serves to 'advise the government', a function that by all accounts is somewhat ambivalent. In discussions with lay Hindus, the HEB is perceived to have a pervasive reach in terms of its influence and command over all issues relating to Hinduism in Singapore. It seems now to be viewed as a 'mouthpiece' of the Hindu community, certainly from the perspective of the state, and is seen to represent it. By definition, it is well-positioned to communicate and intercede (if necessary) with other administrative bodies and institutions (such as the Traffic Police, Urban Renewal Authorities, Housing and Development Board), in matters affecting the practice of Hinduism. The HEB is viewed by other government agencies and departments as the official, legitimate organ 'in charge' of Hinduism. Recently, the HEB has been active in launching an online

43 The Hindu Endowment Board was a body that came into its own in 1969, but which existed in a previous manifestation as part of the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowment Board, a creation of the British colonial government in 1905, while the same initiative led to the formation of the Hindu Advisory Board in 1915.

44 The members of the two boards work closely together and are appointed for a term of three years by the Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS). The issue of 'representation' continues to haunt the two bodies in a different vein. Popular Hindu sentiment is that the members do not adequately represent the interests of the local community. Questions have been raised by lay Hindus about whether members of the two boards have sufficient knowledge of Hinduism to make decisions about the religion. Given the mode of nomination, selection and appointment, the boards are further viewed as highly elitist, and as being out of touch with popular, public opinion.

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newsletter for the benefit of the Hindu community. It also operates a website that serves to reach out to the community through dissemination of knowledge, with updated postings about upcoming Hindu festivals and other relevant news. The HEB also plays an educational role of sorts, both for Hindus as well as the wider Singapore community, by providing definitions and explanations of various Hindu rituals and practices, both through published material and in various organised talks, seminars, lectures, etc.

The cumulative effect of this enlarged role of the HEB carries important implications for how Hinduism is publicly presented. For instance, the HEB inadvertently ends up packaging a certain face of Hinduism for wider public consumption, and in the process, defines (perhaps unintentionally) notions of what constitutes proper 'Hinduism'. Together with other Hindu associations, these two entities do have the legitimacy and resources to construct and reproduce a version of local Hinduism that is officially sanctioned, Steven Vertovec's 'Official Hinduism'. The latter is itself a syncretic mix of elements drawn from a range of thinking and practices that are labelled 'Hindu'. Expectedly, a dominant strain here is a reformist brand of Hinduism that highlights the rational, modern, philosophical and scriptural aspects of this religious tradition, and more importantly discourages the more ritualistic, superstitious, mystical elements of the same. Notably, the widespread veneration of local, village deities, household deities and the accompanying ritual complex that sustains a popular, folk Hindu domain, are expectedly not included in constructions of 'Official Hinduism'. The former is marked by the practice of offering meat, alcohol and intoxicants to deities, the reliance on spirit-mediums, trances divination, the presentation of Hindu deities in their aggressive and malevolent manifestations constituting the domain of 'Popular Hinduism'. This latter field fascinates educated, middle-class and upper-class local Hindus, but also provokes criticism and condemnation from reform-minded members of the same category. Amongst participants in the folk Hindu domain, there is a conviction that many local educated Hindus would disapprove of their chosen religious styles, and judge this to be 'primitive', 'backward' and 'superstitious'. They are aware that their crossing over into these spheres labelled by the authorities as 'non-Hindu' is not illegal, but rather that these rituals are not officially sanctioned and deemed 'illegitimate' and 'inappropriate', revealing a strong degree of ideological clash. Hinduism in these places displays a pluralism from the outset, evident in strong attachment to devotional Hinduism, in the worship of a range of Vaisnavite, Saivite and village deities, together with the observance of such festivals as *diwali, dussehra, holi, Kali puja, onam, ponggal, timiti, tai pucam*, just to list a few. Despite specific substantive shifts and contestations in the constitution of Hinduism in these regions over time, the ritual complex surrounding the veneration of local, household and village deities – a strong feature of folk Hinduism – is one stable element that continues. The village deities, *gramadevata* – both male and female – were firmly placed and literally grounded in the religious landscape of newly adopted homelands, and shrines and temples built for them. Some of the village deities (such Muneeswaran) have grown much 'bigger' and moved into Agamic temples, experiencing upward social mobility that parallels the improved status of their devotees. This attachment to a village-based Hindu tradition demonstrates both persistence as well as innovation amongst overseas Hindus.

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The idea of reform within the local Hindu community is not a recent one but can be dated to the early decades of the twentieth century. During this period, the emergence of religious reform movements in India also had repercussions in overseas Indian communities, including those in Malaya. The Tamil Reform Association (TRA) in Singapore, a social reform organisation, was founded in June 1932, in response to similar movements based on the primacy of Dravidian identity in Tamilnadu. The founding of this association marked an awareness of social, cultural and religious reform amongst members of the Malayan Indian community. Its membership base was largely from Tamil-educated, reform-minded individuals, although in theory, it was open to all Tamils regardless of caste background, gender or religious affiliation.[45] It is crucial to note that the programme for reform proposed by this association was directed at the institution of the caste system which was perceived to be negatively affecting the social, religious, cultural and economic aspects of the Malayan Indian community. The leaders of the association appealed to the richness of Tamil culture and civilisation in prompting a call to shed caste identity, including in religious matters. The general drive was towards cleansing Malayan Hinduism of perceived superstitions and outmoded beliefs and practices such as self-mortification rites observed during the festivals of *tai pucam* and *timiti*, and animal sacrifices.[46] In addition to the presence of theistic and devotional elements and 'folk' Hindu practices, a range of 'India-derived' reform movements can also be found amongst overseas Indian communities.

Just prior to Indian independence, several nationalistic movements took root primarily in northern parts of India. These were not just political in nature but also carried a message about religious and cultural domains, couched in social reformist tones. Some of these movements found their way into Malaya and Singapore and received considerable support. The socio-political conditions that favoured the growth of movements like the Arya Samaj, the Ramakrishna Mission[47] and the Brahmo Samaj were absent from Malaya, yet they thrived initially, in fairly small numbers. In India, they represented a specific and deliberate response to negative portrayals of Hinduism by outsiders and tried to bring the 'misguided Hindu' back to the fold by educating him.[48] The 'Arya Samaj' was founded in India by Swami Dayanand Saraswati in 1875. At the turn of the twentieth century, this group started its missionary activities amongst overseas Hindu communities. While the Arya Samaj was successful in the Caribbean, it has drawn less support in places like Singapore and Malaysia, largely due

45 Vasandakumari Nair, 'Tamil Reform Association, Singapore (1932–1961)', (Academic Exercise, Department of History, University of Singapore, 1972).
46 Sinnappah Arasaratnam, *Indians in Malaysia and Singapore* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 162–76.
47 It is not without significance that in present-day Singapore, the Arya Samaj and the Ramakrishna Mission have become removed from their original religiously inspired social reformist drive and function primarily as social service, charity and educational organisations, while retaining a strong concern with spiritual matters. The crucial point to note is that they do not critique, challenge or attempt to reform the domain of caste-based, theistic, devotional practice of Hinduism on the island.
48 Yvon Ambroise, 'Hindu religious movements: A sociological perspective', *Journal of Dharma*, 7, 4 (1982): 358–73; Philip Ashby, *Modern trends in Hinduism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972); Peter Brent, *Godmen of India* (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1972).

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to the predominance of south Indian, Tamil-speaking communities. In Singapore, the movement continues to exist but its religious and spiritual 'work' is marginal to the various educational, cultural and social-service-related functions it is increasingly performing. Other India-based reform movements started to appear outside the subcontinent in the 1960s and 1970s.

Locally driven concerns about reforming Hinduism and its involvement with community service were given public expression in a series of seminars held between 1969 and 1970. These seminars were organised by an *ad hoc* committee established by individuals who also represented prominent Hindu temples and organisations in Singapore. This was motivated by the existing discourse about the role of religion in nation-building articulated by the political leadership of the day. Three important issues surfaced in these seminar deliberations: first, the need to bring together Hindu temples and organisations to enable collective discussions about the problems facing the Hindu community, with a proposal to set up a centralised body; second, the question of the 'suitability' of religion to a modern context, not least because Singapore was in the midst of rapid socio-economic changes; a third major area requiring attention was the religious education of young Hindus to instruct the latter, to ensure that future generations of Hindus did not grow up uninformed about the fundamentals of their religion.

The organisational work gained momentum in September 1978 with the founding of a central body – The Hindu Centre (HC). One of the first tasks of the centre was to launch a regular newsletter to facilitate exchange and dissemination of information within the Hindu community. Today, the activities and the role of the HC have expanded to attend to the varying demands facing the Hindu community in the present, but the primary aim is still adhered to:

> To instil into the minds of the Hindus, young and old, the ancient, and still relevant ideals of *Sathya* (truth), *Dharma* (righteousness/moral duty), *Shanti* (peace) and *Prema* (love) as embodied in the Vedas, explained in the Sastras and illustrated in the Epics. [49]

The HC was set up specifically in the hope of correcting misconceptions and stereotypes about Hinduism in Singapore and of uniting, educating and informing local Hindus. A focus on the work performed by this body illustrates its role in directly or indirectly, intentionally or otherwise, initiating change and reform within local Hinduism. Apart from the overall management committee of the HC, there is the active Youth Wing, which is further subdivided into the Pravahika (Education) Committee, Community Services Committee and the Cultural Committee. In this division of labour, we see the organisation of tuition classes, forums and seminars on subjects related to religion, visits to old folks' homes and orphanages, celebration of Hindu festivals, holding *bhajan* (devotional songs) sessions and planning of family outings and picnics etc. The HC enjoys the support of a large and loyal membership, which participates in the various activities.

Not surprisingly, the pool of members as well as the leadership of the HEB, HAB and the HC is constituted largely of educated, middle-class or upper-class Hindus.

49 First issue of *Omkara: Journal of the Hindu centre* (1978): 4.

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Collectively, they represent the view that Hinduism in Singapore is in a state of crisis[50] and in need of 'reform' to ensure its survival. The problem is portrayed thus: Hinduism is perceived by both Hindus and non-Hindus in Singapore to be complex and confusing, highly ritualistic, superstitious and lacking coherence and organisation. Most Hindus themselves are equally ignorant and mistakenly assume it to be merely ritualistic and performative. This negative image, it is argued, although pervasive, is a distortion not conveying the 'true' nature of Hinduism. A solution is also proposed – a new model of Hinduism must be constructed and presented to the public and especially to Hindus, which is visualised thus: it is imperative to lend structure to the religion rather than leave its boundaries amorphous and loose. Its boundaries must be specified and its basic dimensions and features must be clearly outlined to make it less ambiguous and more easily graspable by lay Hindus. It does include rational, philosophical, scientific and theological features – a side of the religion that most local Hindus are unfamiliar with. While acknowledging the performance of rituals, their enactment alone does not define Hinduism; instead, religious action must be accompanied by sound logic, rationale and explanation.

This reconstructed version of Hinduism is intended to achieve two ends: one, to 'correct' listed misconceptions which are rooted in an ignorance of the religion's rich historical past and philosophical foundations, and two, to make Hinduism respectable, relevant and pertinent to the Singapore context. These are to be accomplished through a process of selectively educating both the Hindu population and the wider Singapore public about what is the 'real' nature of Hinduism. This altered consciousness, it has been argued, can be achieved through formalised religious instruction as well as through encouraging greater self-interest and motivation in learning about Hinduism.

The imparting of correct knowledge about Hinduism in a formal, explicit and concrete medium, through religious lectures, talks and seminars and also through the written word, in published documents (books, brochures, articles, newsletters, etc.) is deemed to be more effective and permanent than learning through blind, unthinking imitation of religious practices. This new construction thus sees Hinduism as sombre, disciplined, philosophical and text-based, rather than overly ritualised and rooted in unthinking imitative behaviour. The history of the religion (both chronological and intellectual) is now articulated in an altered mode. This latter process is necessarily selective and entails a fair degree of abstraction, condensation and oversimplification. Problems and controversies[51] are only to be expected in this process. Other than changed thinking and increased awareness, altered practices are also deemed necessary to complete the transformation. The latter include learning of the scriptures (through religious classes), organised communal interaction (regular and consistent temple attendance, organising and participating in *bhajan* sessions) and seeking explanation

50 While there is consensus over the need for reform, there is little agreement over the shape of changes. The discourse on reform is internally diverse and divided, with a variety of voices. Refer to Sinha, 'Hinduism in Singapore'.

51 Just take the example of constructing a 'canon'. This sees the selection of specific texts from the vast array of Hindu literature. What texts should be considered central to the religion? Can there be agreement amongst all Hindus on this? What about the fact that Hindu texts exist in a variety of Indian languages? Which language texts should be chosen: Tamil, Hindi or Sanskrit? It is interesting that the *Bhagvad Gita* has become prominent as a 'must read' text in local Hindu circles today.

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and significance of ritual events from priests and other religious experts in a language that devotees can understand, that is, Tamil, Hindi or English rather than Sanskrit. Hindu temples have emerged not just as a place of worship but as community spaces with an expanded set of functions and have been redefined as multipurpose temples, not just in Singapore, but also in other diasporic spaces.

It is important to recognise that the desire to reform and repackage a Hinduism, appropriate for local conditions, is not a new one but has roots that go back at least four decades. Many of the initiatives and proposals of earlier decades have been put into practice and are now starting to pay dividends. It is crucial that a lead has been taken in this direction by the twenty-four mainstream Hindu temples scattered across the island. These temples have become rather like community centres, catering to more than just the spiritual needs of the Hindu community. As a result of these efforts over time then, the public face of Hinduism has assumed a more systematic shape, its messiness hidden, and it is organised and packaged to be more 'user-friendly'. There is another trend that the authorities find 'disturbing', the attraction of local Hindu youth to the folk, popular ritual base of Hinduism, which has clearly persisted in Singapore since being brought here in the mid-nineteenth century and in fact now shows robust signs of being regenerated. The ritual activities (animal sacrifices, spirit mediums and divination, self-mortification rituals, etc.) in this domain do not find support and legitimacy from reform-minded Hindus, who favour a more text-based, doctrinaire, philosophical approach to the Hindu religion.

Through the 1980s and particularly in the 1990s, new concerns surfaced in the discourse of reforming Hinduism. These are rooted in the broader shifts occurring in the local religious domain. I list here a few that are central and relevant for the comparison at hand: one, the fear of Hindus converting to other religions, particularly a new brand of charismatic Christianity, two, the possibility of Hindus becoming apathetic, indifferent and uncommitted to their religions thus weakening the religious community, and three, the concern that Hindus might reject religion altogether and become agnostics or atheists. All these fears are connected to the idea of a potentially diminished numerical Hindu base and the eventuality of Hinduism disappearing from Singapore. Some of this anxiety about preservation of Hinduism and concerns about its survival are grounded in Hindu conversions to Christianity and Islam. There are also concerns about the numbers of Hindu youth who are disinterested in their religion, lack religious and moral grounding and who might either switch religious identities or be led towards socially undesirable activities. In the Hindu case, little of this is brought to the fore in religious demographics carried in census data. This observation also facilitates a connection to the next segment of the paper which outlines the history, logic and motivation for constructing 'Taoism' locally.

'Official Taoism'

The alarm bells for local Taoist leadership sounded firmly in 1990, with the publication of Census data on religious switching, which revealed that the Taoist population had decreased dramatically from 30 per cent in 1980 to 22.4 per cent in 1990 and finally to 8.5 per cent in 2000. Amongst the Chinese, this was accompanied by a parallel rise in numbers of Christians, Buddhists and those declaring themselves to have 'no religion'. In the 2000 Census, Taoism was the least popular religious choice

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amongst the Chinese, compared to being the most popular religion in 1980. Also, in 2000 'Buddhism', had become the most popular religion for the Chinese with a figure of 53.6 per cent, followed by a class of 'No religion' (18.6 per cent) Christianity (16.5 per cent) and then Taoism. Yet it is important to note that at the everyday-life level, many Chinese who would label themselves 'Buddhists' continued to engage in practices that would be defined as 'Taoist' as they would not see the two labels as mutually exclusive. Already in the late 1980s, both the Taoist leadership and scholars working on religion in Singapore noted these shifts in religious affiliation, declaring that the community had moved from a situation of religious homogeneity in 1921 to one of increased religious heterogeneity[52] and fragmentation. The Taoist leadership has viewed these religious trends as 'problematic' and worrisome, necessitating prompt action to stem the tide. In a similar fashion to the Hindu response, the language of reform, relevance and progress is heard, as is the view that there is a need to rethink Taoism, and a crucial time for Taoists to regroup and reorganise to remain current and progressive. In comparison with the Hindu case, the Taoist leadership would appear to have concrete grounds for being concerned about declining membership, as seen in the large numbers who have, at least according to the Census figures, rejected the label 'Taoism'.

What has been the response of the Taoist leadership to this crisis facing the community? For a start, it has clearly articulated a greater need for formalisation and unification of the diverse and fragmented community, including 'getting organised'. The 1990s saw two Taoist organisations being established: the Taoist Federation of Singapore was registered in 1990 and the Taoist Mission in 1996. The former was the initiative of the older San Ching Taoist Association founded in 1979, which had attempted to organise the religion since its inception in order to arrest its decline. In 1989, members of the older organisation expressed frustration and disappointment in the disinterest, lack of unity, public ignorance and prejudice about Taoism. Making a case for reform, one committee member expressed his view rather critically:

> There are unfortunately quite a number of worshippers whose faith is purely functional. For instance they are hard up and so they go to a temple to ask the gods for some numbers to buy the lottery. This aspect of Taoism should be discouraged. Most other worshippers follow a folk tradition without understanding the deeper meaning behind their forms of worship. But they do have a sense of piety and what they need is education, something which almost all Taoist temples do not provide.[53]

The reformist tone was evident in a critique of Taoism in practice, and perceived as a 'hodgepodge of folk beliefs' that needed to be purged, thereby 'restoring Taoism's philosophical roots'.[54] Already at this time, the local leadership seemed to favour a 'purist orthodox approach', and had adopted an outward orientation in looking to Hong Kong and Taiwan to provide models of successful organisation and formalisation. It was clear that increased order was related to rescuing the religion

52 Tong, 'Trends in traditional Chinese religion in Singapore'; Tong and Lee, 'Taoism'; Kuo and Tong, 'Religion in Singapore'.
53 Mr Tan Cheng Hoon, quoted in *ST*, 27 May 1989.
54 Ibid.

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from a poor public image, by increasing its status and its appeal. Further support came from Taoist experts who visited Singapore and delivered high-profile talks on the subject. One such example comes to us from 1988, when Professor Liu Ts'un Yan, from the Australian National University, noted the decline of the religion in the present, and its separation from its philosophical foundations. His assessment was that 'Taoism could only flourish if there were a great philosopher among the Taoist priests who could clean up the unhealthy concepts in the religion.'[55]

There was both renewed urgency and enthusiasm in 1990 when the Taoist Federation was established. The intent was stated thus by the chairman of the federation's *pro-tem* committee, 'We hope this federation will help establish Taoism firmly in Singapore, promote better co-operation amongst the various Taoist groups and encourage understanding among believers.'[56]

This initiative was a direct response to the findings of a government-commissioned Ministry of Community Development and Sports (MCDS) study on religion in Singapore, where the 'alarming trend' of decline in the size of Taoist population was noted. The objectives of the federation were stated thus:

> Apart from promoting Taoism is Singapore, the group had the 'unpleasant' duty of weeding out cult groups which were not practicing 'true Taoism' and pseudo-Taoist priests who were only interested in making money for themselves.[57]

The second body, the Taoist Mission, was registered as a society in February 1996, sharing similar concerns with the Federation, that is, 'to propagate Taoism in Singapore'.[58] The setting up of formal Taoist organisations is a recent phenomenon for Singapore, but both entities have striven to be dynamic, progressive,[59] goal-oriented and activity-oriented[60] entities, in responding to the crisis facing the community. One

55 *ST*, 26 May 1988.
56 *ST*, 9 Nov. 1990.
57 Mr Tan Cheng Hoon, quoted in *ST*, 9 Nov. 1990.
58 A brochure of the Mission lists its objectives thus:
1. to glorify Taoism and Taoist spirit;
2. to undertake research related to traditional Taoist culture;
3. to foster relations among the followers of Taoism in Singapore;
4. to help in the community and participate in welfare services.

59 Since the early 1990s, the Taoist leadership has had a long-term vision for the future of Taoism. One idea that has been mooted is the establishment of a Taoist training school for priests which might issue 'practising certificates' to priests, the holding of a large-scale exhibition on Taoism, a one-day forum on 'Taoism and Chinese festivals'; and the production of 'a 40-page handbook recording the origins of Taoist beliefs here', *ST*, 30 Mar. 1991. In June of the same year, there was talk of drawing up a directory of Taoist priests in Singapore, a proposal of the Taoist Federation, for which there was some support. Another more recent idea is the establishment of a Taoist Institute to propagate Lao Zi's teachings and to promote religious philosophy. *ST*, 12 Mar. 2001.
60 Some important initiatives include the following: observance of Lao Zi's birthday, on the fifteenth day of the second month of the Chinese lunar calendar. In 1996, this day was declared as 'Taoist Day' and has been an annual event since, observed with grandeur and pomp. The celebrations every year draw huge crowds and are held over three or four days, with talks, exhibitions and prayer ceremonies. In 1996, only 5,000 'elderly' Taoist were present at the event, while in 2001 the crowd was estimated to be 10,000 strong, with at least 40 per cent who 'were in their teens and 20s' (*ST*, 12 Mar. 2001); launching of a bilingual (English and Mandarin) newsletter and its free distribution to Taoist temples with the aim of

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initiative was to institute 'Taoist Day' in Singapore. The unresolved theme of connections between Chinese culture and Taoism as a religion resurface in this statement from the Taoist Mission:

> When the Chinese people continue to practise the culture and custom of their ancestors, they naturally preserve this indigenous religion of Taoism. … There is no running away from this fact that Taoism and Chinese culture is one and the same. Therefore we feel we have the duty to continue with this legacy and give our best effort to the promotion of the Chinese spirit so as to prevent such a great heritage from being forgotten and to spread it far and wide so that more people can understand and know what is Taoism. At the same time, on this birthday of Lao Zi, together with Taoists in Taiwan and Hong Kong, we would like to declare this 15th day of the 2nd Lunar Month to be Taoist Day. We hope that the brightness of Chinese culture will continue to radiate and the Tao be eternal.[61]

As with the Hindu organisational efforts, explicit, public education is adopted as a medium through which understanding of the religion can be facilitated. This is accomplished via talks, seminars, public forums and exhibitions, with invited experts from China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Through exhibitions, there is a selective packaging and dissemination of knowledge about Taoism to audiences. The written word again proves to be a crutch, with publications produced in the shape of brochures, booklets and newsletters that serve the function of propagation and explanation of Taoism. The holistic package includes a syncretic mix of the following: yin–yang theory, principles of the five elements (drawn from Taoist texts), emphasis on the writings of Lao Zi, ancestor worship and the practical side of its philosophical formulations. This selection of specific traits into a new integrated package labelled 'Taoism' aimed, 'to standardise and consolidate the teachings and practices of Taoism so that the religion can move with the times'.[62]

It is as important to pay attention to what has been left out in this formulation. Given the reformist tone, what are deprioritised are the ritualistic, superstitious, mystical, magical elements of Taoism at the level of practice, while its intellectual, philosophical and textual dimensions are highlighted. Abstracting from the statements made by these associations, the following emerge as essential features in constructing 'Official Taoism': promoting and propagating the philosophical foundations of the

providing meaning behind Taoist rites and festivals, and to connect the widespread community. For instance, the publication aims to explain the purpose of ancestor worship, the role of mediums and burning of incense (*ST*, 26 Jan. 1993). The Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Associations produced a handbook in 1989, *Chinese customs and festivals in Singapore*, in order to 'help younger Singaporeans have a better understanding of Chinese festivals and rituals. A major objective of the handbook is to explain the origins and, more important, the meaning of Chinese festivals and customs. To get the modern Singaporeans to observe Chinese festivals and rituals, we have to explain their significance and importance.' *Chinese customs and festivals in Singapore*, p. 8.

61 Website, 'Taoist Mission Singapore', Singapore Taoist Day Declaration : Taoist Day Declaration, by Taoist Day Working Committee, 15 Mar. 1996, http://www.taoism.org.sg/page1.htm (last accessed on 8 Aug. 2007)

62 Choo Hui Lin, 'The ways of Taoism: Religious rationalisation and change in Singapore', B.Soc.Sci. (Hons.) Academic Exercise (Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore, 1998).

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religion, raising its profile and image and deepening understanding of Taoism amongst believers. But this task was fraught with two major difficulties that continue to plague the leadership today: one, weeding out unhealthy aspects of 'religious Taoism' and two, separating 'Buddhism' from 'Taoism'.

Interestingly, the Census data also indicate that English-educated Chinese are turning away from Taoism, hence the target population of these associations is younger English-educated and English-speaking members of the community. As a result, many of the talks and conferences are deliberately held in English to appeal to non-Mandarin speakers. Language is clearly an issue here; English-educated Chinese Singaporeans do not have the kind of command and mastery over Mandarin to access literary or philosophical texts in the original. It is the Chinese-educated who are more engaged with traditional Chinese cultural ideas and practices, and certainly more involved with and open to Taoism. This switch to English, in particular, was reported to be successful in engaging youthful members of the community in Taoism. According to Master Lee Zhiwang of the Taoist Mission, speaking of the four-day Taoist Day celebrations of 2001, 'Of the 10,000 who attended, about forty per cent were in their teens and twenties.'[63] He also revealed that the promotion of basic precepts and philosophy of the religion through English translations was a conscious decision, in order to provide information about the religion to English-educated youth.

The dichotomy of 'philosophical' and 'religious' Taoism reveals the schisms between the two dimensions of Taoism in practice, the 'religious' variety often judged to be superstitious, being rooted in magic, sorcery and faith healing, lacking cohesion and centralisation while the 'philosophical' strain is text-based, scholastic and disciplined. Tong and Lee[64] have suggested a three-way classification, adding the 'popular religious' dimension to the other two noted traditions within Taoism, which are interrelated and interact in complex ways, a model that seems very apt for theorising Taoism in Singapore. My inquiries indicate that the varied strains within sit rather uncomfortably with each other, not for practitioners as much as for the religious leadership, which has responded with explicit and concerted attempts to negotiate this unease.

Significantly, the contemporary discourse on Taoism retains and reproduces this line of thinking. Even after some twelve years of such efforts, the tussle continues. In 2001, Master Lee, the then acting president of the Taoist Mission, noted that lack of knowledge amongst young Taoist who participate in temple activities, 'but what they know are mainly rituals and "lesser" or "folk" traditions', and cited this as a reason for an institute that would introduce Taoist philosophy and scriptures to the younger generation.[65] In 1992, visiting Taoist experts made the same observations, that is, that 'Taoists here are more superstitious than religious.'[66] The problem areas were defined as overemphasis and attachment to 'outward forms' such as fortune-telling and *fengshui* and ritualistically following the faith. The alternative route suggested was to stress the theological, scholastic, spiritual aspects of the faith with an emphasis on meditation, scriptures and history. But local experts, reading the pragmatic

63 *ST*, 12 Mar. 2001.
64 Tong and Lee, 'Taoism', in *Encyclopaedia of Sociology*.
65 *ST*, 12 Mar. 2001.
66 *ST*, 17 Sept. 1992.

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Singaporeans to a tee, argued that too much theology from the outset would 'put off' Singaporean Taoists. Mr Tan Kok Hian, of the Taoist Federation argued thus: 'We want to make Taoism real and practical. Teaching theology right from the start can be quite abstract.'[67] His approach was to introduce the practical benefits of Taoism, such as introducing '*taiji*, the Chinese discipline of meditative movements, can be taught as a health exercise before the devotee is introduced to *yin* and *yang*, the two distinct forces in the *taiji* symbol'.[68]

In contemporary discussions, the 'confusion' between 'Taoism' and 'Buddhism', particularly at the level of practice in lay Taoist consciousness, continues to concern Taoist leadership, with great effort invested in educating and re-educating practising Taoists about what is 'real' Taoism. But as the involved parties admit, this effort is not only challenging, but also frustrating. This is inevitable given the long-term historical, convoluted and complex political relationship between these two religious traditions in China. What interests me in this paper is the effort of disentangling and the consequences of such endeavours. According to Professor Liu of the Australian National University (ANU), who was visiting the Singapore-based Institute of East Asian Philosophy (IEAP) in 1988, 'many Singaporeans were confused about the differences between Taoism and Buddhism because both religious traditions shared some common beliefs and practices'.[69] He also pointed out that such 'confusion' was not unique to the Singapore situation but existed in China during the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644). Clearly, as the Taoist leadership has also discovered, drawing boundaries around Taoism and Buddhism is no easy task, and proves to be a challenge. Master Lee, of the Taoist Mission, argues that there are probably more Taoists in Singapore than indicated in the 2000 Census data:

> Some people follow Taoist practices, but may not even be aware that they are doing so. Also, because the Buddhists have been very active in promoting their religion, many identify themselves as Buddhists, although they carry out Taoist rituals too.[70]

In 1995, Mr Tan of the Taoist Federation agreed that in terms of actual numbers of Taoists, the reality of the situation may be less worrisome, 'Some of those who claim they have no religion still go to the temple sometimes to burn incense and pray. So they are actually still Taoists'.[71]

The leadership admits that it was hard to distinguish between Taoists and Buddhists as some worshipped Buddha in addition to Taoist deities, given that being a Taoist did not 'preclude one from practicing other religions'.[72] Ironically, the separation of Taoism from Buddhism is precisely such an act of exclusion.

According to an MCDS report on religion in 1990, 'Taoism' is seen to suffer from a 'superstitious and antiquated image'[73] and needed a 'revamp' according to young

67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
69 *ST*, 5 May 1988.
70 *ST*, 12 Mar. 2001.
71 *ST*, 6 May 1995.
72 Ibid.
73 Ibid.

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Chinese Singaporeans interviewed in the survey. The perception of a 'crisis' within the community and the negative image of the religion, are still dominant strains in the discourse. While the Taoist leadership has not been fully successful in persuading lay Taoists to embrace the more philosophical aspects of Taoism, Buddhists, on the other hand, have easily claimed the label 'Buddhism' for a rational, scholastic, intellectual approach to spirituality and thereby distinguish themselves from the ritualistic aspects of 'popular religious Taoism' and thus from traditional Chinese folk beliefs. The Taoist Mission, rather than dismissing the ritual base of the religion, has instead attempted to explain Chinese festivals and rituals to its members. The 2003 observance of Taoist Day saw the organisation of an exhibition to explain Taoist practices, such as the burning of joss paper.[74] According to the Taoist Mission's deputy secretary, Mr Lim Aik Hwa: 'It is because we cannot explain what we do with logic that people regard Taoism as mere superstition'.[75]

The language of logic, rationality and modernisation is in fact provided by renewal efforts from the local religious communities trying to remain relevant, including Buddhism, which has presented itself as text-based, modern, relevant and meaningful for educated, rational individuals. Another issue facing the Taoist leadership is that the discourse on revamping Taoism is inextricably linked to discussions of what it means to be Chinese culturally, particularly in the enactment, participation in rituals and the observation and celebration of customs and festivals. The leadership is also attempting to reach out to the entire local Taoist community, which is admittedly complex and varied, given the dialect and localised differences within it. One such effort at building solidarity was the attempt to garner some consensus on the observance of 'Taoist Day' by the entire community, in an effort to persuade the state to grant an official, public holiday on this date for Taoists as equal citizens, in line with public holidays accorded to other religious groups on the island;[76] hence its marginalisation by the state. The emergent discussions highlighted the complexity and internal differentiation within the community. As Mr Lim Aik Hwa of the Taoist Mission admitted:

> Now, the task is to co-ordinate and get all to celebrate Lao Zi's birthday as Taoist Day. We are not saying to stop praying to the deities, but as Lao Zi is in the top-most echelon of the pantheon, it's only right that we pay him respect.[77]

74 'Why burn joss paper? Find out at Taoist Exhibition', *ST*, 9 Mar. 2003.
75 *ST*, 18 Apr. 1998.
76 An eighteen-member organising committee was formed in Mar. 2001 to work towards the goal of securing Taoist Day as a national, public holiday. A meeting was held amongst different Taoist groups and a consensus was reached ('Taoists agree on common festive day', *ST*, 30 Apr. 2001). The committee approached a group of Mandarin-speaking MPs, led by then Parliamentary Secretary (Prime Minister's Office and Health), Mr Chan Soo Sen, to present their case. The latter's response was interesting, 'Both the Taoist Federation and the Taoist Mission raised the proposal. I recorded it, but shared with them my observation that Taoists from different temples worship different deities and celebrate their respective birthdays. Not all celebrate Lao Zi's birthday with rituals. Hence, I told them it was premature to declare Lao Zi's birthday a public holiday at this point in time' (*ST*, 18 Apr. 1998.); 'Singapore Taoists seeking their own public holiday', *ST*, 29 Apr. 2001.
77 'Taoists agree on a common festive day', *ST*, 30 Apr. 2001.

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Clearly, these initiatives of the Taoist community do not occur in a vacuum in the local context, as other religious and cultural interests are simultaneously at work and have to be negotiated as well. Two brief examples illustrate this: first, the continuing efforts of the Buddhist community to upgrade its image by shaking off the 'folk' religious label, emphasising its canonical aspects rather than the ritual base, presenting itself as a universal philosophy and adopting English as the lingua franca[78]; second, continuing attempts to distinguish between Chinese cultural practices and religious rituals as seen in the view that 'We wish to clarify that the lion dance is a traditional Chinese cultural dance, unrelated to Taoism' (Dr Yeo Ker Chiang, chairman of the Singapore National Wushu Federation).[79] As the foregoing discussion elucidates, the question of what it means to 'reform' Taoism is, not surprisingly, complex and thus needs to be teased out: efforts to translate 'reform' into practice include both a standardisation and 'cleaning up' the public face of the religious tradition and a reassertion of Taoism's philosophical roots and a marginalisation of its more popular manifestations. Also, the idea of linking Chinese ancestor worship with Taoism in a reformed mode is both innovative and intriguing, given the links of the former with animistic practices rather than Taoism or Buddhism.

Significance of noted convergences

The efforts of Taoist and Hindu leadership in Singapore allow me to argue that these two religions, which pride themselves on having a rich and long history, feel somewhat insecure and threatened. They find themselves today on the back foot, and are compelled to rethink the very foundations of their inherited traditions, in order to preserve their religions by retaining their members and not 'losing' them to other more popular and appealing religious options. In the Singapore context, this conscious redefinition undertaken by organisations is motivated by a combination of factors: the effect of secular, administrative, bureaucratic, modernising, rationalising forces as well as the fact of being located in a close, multireligious environment that produces specific types of religious encounters. A comparative perspective has revealed a strikingly similar discourse in the Taoist and Hindu camps, and the following parallels are evident: similar self-characterisations as 'minority', victimised and threatened religions, which are defined by non-aggression and tolerance, and the analogous strategies devised for handling the identity crisis and negative image faced by the respective communities. These overlapping experiences are hardly surprising given that the two religions are located in the same socio-religious and political environment (of multireligiosity and hence the possibility of religious switching) and subject to the impact of similar structural forces.

Both the Hindu and the Taoist leaderships perceive Buddhism and Protestant strands of Christianity as dominant locally, not only in keeping their members but also in attracting converts. The task of repackaging these traditional religions is approached with a comparative reference to these 'successful' religions (and occasionally to Islam), and to a large extent in fashioning their stance upon them. Here are some explicit

78 'Buddhism's draw is no longer as a folk religion', *ST*, 20 May 2005.
79 'Lion dance not related to Taoism', *ST*, 1 Oct. 2004.

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examples. In criticising the outdated approach of Taoist temples and imploring them to 'move with the times', Mr Tan notes:

> Churches have activities for young people, but would a temple allow dancing or karaoke on their premises?[80] And unlike organised religions such as Islam and Christianity where religious education classes are the norm, Taoism appears to be a faith handed down by word of mouth.[81]

Another example is furnished by the remarks of a Taoist scholar, Mr Peng Song Toh, at a talk in the First National seminar on Taoism and Chinese Culture in 1991. Referring to Taoist temples he said:

> Some of them were dirty, dingy and smoke-filled – so unlike the pleasant conditions you would find in churches, mosques and Buddhist temples. It is little wonder that English-educated younger Singaporeans reject the religion.[82]

Turning to the Hindu community, many of the initiatives that were instituted in the 1980s and 1990s and which have become an accepted part of the local Hindu scene were motivated by the perceived success of churches and mosques, which successfully keep their members because, as one leader of the Hindu community phrased it, 'they are doing something right'.[83] Community leaders argued that the external forms of Christianity and Islam could be adopted (without losing the essence of Hinduism) to first increase the appeal of the religion to Hindus, while serious philosophy could be introduced at a later point. One prominent member of the Hindu community articulated this position well:

> What is the point of saying 'our religion is great, it is ancient, it has all this profound philosophy and all that'? What is the use of all this richness if you have no more Hindus? In Singapore, that is the real problem. In our time, our parents said 'do this' we said 'okay'. Today can you do that? Our young people do not listen; they are not satisfied with that. They will ask 'why?' If you cannot answer them, they will go somewhere else. It is unfortunate but we have to be like them, otherwise Hinduism will disappear.

It is interesting that Hindu temples have today expanded their role to reach out to the various needs of the Hindu community. A visit to any of the 24 Hindu temples reveals these locations to be a buzz of activity ranging from religious classes, music lessons (vocal and instrumental India music), the setting up of youth wings, regular *bhajan* sessions, <u>*Gita*</u> and <u>*Tirukkural*</u> classes for children, computer lessons, teaching of Indian languages, organising temple tours to parts of Malaysia and India, organising fun-filled, social events and activities for teenagers and young families (picnics and funfairs), dance lessons, aerobic classes, tea parties for young male and female Hindus to interact and socialise at, yoga and meditation classes, etc.

The local Taoist leadership perceives the religious tradition in Singapore to be at a cross-roads and is making sustained efforts to renew interest in Taoism, by way of

80 *ST*, 6 May 1995.
81 Ibid.
82 *ST*, 17 June 1991.
83 Personal communication with the author.

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reviving it. These following examples are illustrative. The Tua Pek Kong temple in Tuas has been conducting *Daodejing* singing classes in Mandarin; the classes span a six-month period and are held four times a week – the brain child of the Taoist Federation, whose then vice-chairman, the Taoist priest, Master Tan Kok Hian, argued that 'singing and learning the *Daodejing*[84] scripture just might forge a common bond among the various factions',[85] adding that 'we want to spread the word that there is more to being a Taoist than just burning incense or performing rituals – that it is rooted in a theology that is rich in depth and steeped in history'.[86] In another example, the Ang Chee Sia Chong temple at West Coast Drive has instituted a bilingual policy which the temple chairman, Mr Goh Cheng Lim, believes 'is the key to survival for temples in the next century …even temples have to move with the times'.[87] The temple wants to be viewed as a 'bilingual place of worship',[88] operating in both English and Mandarin in an effort to reach out to the younger crowd who are bilingual in English and in Mandarin as a result of the education system. The temple has bilingual stone carvings explaining the value of filial piety and there are plans to provide English translations for the divination lots. It has also done away with giant joss-sticks 'shedding its dusty and smoky image' and is less polluting. Most crucially, there are no mediums at the temple, in yet another effort to be modern and progressive. In a final example, the Seu Teck Sean Tong Yiang Sin Sia temple in Bedok North Avenue 3 has established a website to which 'devotees can send prayers online and even have their fortunes told',[89] prompting the media to label this as an example of e-prayers. The prayers can be submitted in English and Mandarin, are printed and given to the temple priests who conduct blessings. A committee member of the temple, Mr Helius Goh, also the executive editor of the website, explains:

> …the temple has to keep pace with trends in information technology as well as demographic trends which suggested that its devotees were getting more tech-savvy. The website allows people to send prayers from the convenience and privacy of their own homes … and I hope the features on the website will attract them to come down to the temple.[90]

The convergences I have noted in the organisational realm are recent developments and a function of common societal experiences. Yet, there is no expression of awareness from either the Hindu or Taoist camp that they share common experiences of existing as a 'minority' religion in a multireligious context, or that they might learn from each other about how to approach the 'problems' they face. It is ironic that despite close proximity and speaking a common language of crisis and the problem of negative image, the two communities function quite separately, without engaging.

84 The *Daodejing* CD was made in Singapore and the music written by Taoist music expert, Prof. Wang Zhongren, previously of the Wuhan College of Music in Hubei province, and based in Singapore since 1995 (*ST*, 3 Dec. 1998).
85 Ibid.
86 Ibid.
87 *ST*, 12 June 1998.
88 Ibid.
89 *ST*, 26 Nov. 2000.
90 Ibid.

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This coincidence in the articulated experiences of the two religious traditions is my notice as a researcher and leads to these following observations. To start with, leaders of the two communities express frustration at the 'lack of co-operation' from the wider community, both from organisations and lay individuals. My conversations with Taoists and Hindus who engage with the popular, folk domains reveal a high degree of awareness that 'organisation' and 'registration' (of temples, and certification of priests) are also about increased regulation, surveillance and control, and thus not welcome; they are in favour of autonomy. The organisational imperative has in fact culminated in streamlining, condensing and reforming 'Hinduism' and 'Taoism' to make them suitable for local, contemporary consumption. The effect of such reformist restructuring is further deep seated in instituting a fundamental shift in the predominant style of religiosity, in an intolerance for folk religious traditions, revealing contestations between 'Official' and 'Popular' versions of religiosity, where the former tends to be elite-driven while the latter concerns laypersons, something that is not unique to Singapore.

The religious domain in Singapore is highly circumscribed and the religious and political domains are carefully demarcated and separated. Additionally, the religious domain is depoliticised to the extent that specific types of activity and beliefs defined as 'political' are not permissible. While local Hindu and Taoist communities have varied interactions and encounters with India and China respectively, the sociopolitical dynamics here do not encourage the growth of politically motivated religious groups (many with a reformist agenda) from the outside to flourish in Singapore. Thus, for example, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad youth groups, which have a presence in Malaysia and the United States, are not found in Singapore. Chinese religions in China and Taiwan have faced political suppression since the turn of the twentieth century, but in recent years have witnessed a sort of resurgence and revival in both these places. It would be interesting to see what effects these processes would have on the further development of Taoism in Singapore.

It is also notable that the ties between specific religious and ethnic identities are no longer deemed to be absolutely binding, with the strong possibility of religious conversion as well as the rejection of religious identity altogether. The local multireligious context showcases a number of religious options that do coexist harmoniously; but both Taoists and Hindus are wary of pressures from evangelical and proselytising religions, such as Christianity and, increasingly, Buddhism and to a much lesser extent, Islam (which is still viewed largely as a Malay religion here). The real fear is the loss of bodies to these other religions and the reduced numerical strength of the respective communities. It is highly unlikely that adherents of these religions would disappear altogether, given the history and institutionalisation of their traditions here, but the discourse does reveal anxieties and apprehension felt by the community. This disquiet culminates in a desire for less ambiguity and uncertainty about what constitutes 'Hinduism' or 'Taoism'. As we have seen, both communities have attempted to define the latter with precision, evident in a greater push towards their explicit repackaging, but with the accompanying effect of oversimplification and codification of the religions in question – problematic outcomes that carry their own dilemmas.

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