I The Emergence of Heritage Policy: From State Amnesia to State-driven Heritage Conservation

In the immediate post-independence period and for at least two decades after, Singapore’s preoccupation with constructing a new nation-state based on a vision of modernity required the erasure of traces of the past on the urban landscape, thought to impede the work of the new order (Kwok et al., 1999: 6). During these years, landscape change was dominated by a demolish-and-rebuild ethos, where urban slums and rural kampungs were excised to make way for skyscraper office and retail complexes and high-rise apartments. Having emerged from almost 150 years of British rule as well as the traumatic interlude of the Second World War and its turbulent aftermath, ‘forgetting’, rather than ‘remembering’, was integral to projects of nation-building and the construction of national identity for the new nation-state (Devan, 1999: 22). In fact, the “unremitting narrative of survival, which became the national text of collective identity in the first decades of the nation-state’s political existence, was completely anchored in the present” (Wong, 2001: 230). In this context, this chapter first gives attention to the emergence in the mid-1980s of a State-crafted heritage policy and its subsequent development in the next two decades. This is followed by an examination of significant heritage initiatives and projects, including the conservation of historic and cultural districts, heritage centres related to World War II, and a variety of museums. Drawing primarily on a nationwide survey conducted in 2002, this paper then turns to exploring popular attitudes towards various aspects of the State’s heritage policy and heritage activities before drawing the key issues to a close in the light of post-industrialisation.

By the mid-1980s, in contrast to the systematic amnesia of the earlier decades, a growing nostalgia for the past was beginning to set in. Chua (1995) argues that such a harking back to the past during the 1980s and 1990s was rooted in a sense of loss, which, ironically, accompanied
Singapore’s phenomenal success as a newly industrialising economy. Remembering the past was in this sense a reaction to, and resistance against, the relentless drive towards economic development, the frenetic pace of life, high stress levels, the corruption of new-found materialism and the consequent ‘industrialisation of everyday life.’ At the same time, the groundswell of public opinion valorising the past coincided with State evaluation of the dangers of ‘forgetting to remember.’ From the mid-1970s, the governing elite had noted with great apprehension, the increasing Westernisation of Singapore society. While Westernisation had served Singapore well in its quest for industrialisation, it was felt that it had also created a ‘moral crisis,’ bringing in its wake values, which were perceived to be incompatible with traditional Asian values. Political leaders took pains to highlight the dangers of Singaporeans losing their Asian roots and the consequences for society. Lee Kuan Yew, then Prime Minister, warned Singaporeans of becoming ‘deculturalised’ in his National Day Rally speech of 1978 (quoted in Clammer, 1997: 502). A decade later, Lee Hsien Loong (1989: 33), then Minister for Trade and Industry and Second Minister for Defence, continued to stress the need to

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\text{retain our heritage but examine them for values which need to be modified, and scrutinise foreign traditions for ideas which can be incorporated but do so cautiously. Our roots are important. We should not be root-bound, but neither should we abandon our roots. They anchor us, and will help us grow.}
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The late 1980s also saw the development of a set of national ‘core’ or ‘shared’ values, incorporating key elements of Singapore’s cultural heritage, attitudes and values intended as a blueprint for the development of a national ideology that all Singaporeans could subscribe to and live by (Ong, 1990: 1). It is in this context that Singapore’s ‘Asian

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1. The State’s attempt to ameliorate what was seen as social ills brought about by Westernisation began with the introduction of a Moral Education programme based on ‘Asian values’ in 1979, along with the promotion of bilingualism and the use of the mother tongue. In 1984, Religious Knowledge as a compulsory subject was also introduced for upper secondary school students to reinforce the teaching of moral values. By the late 1980s, fears of religious revivalism led to the scrapping of the Religious Knowledge programme and its replacement by a secularised form of ‘civil religion’ based on shared national values. Five ‘shared values’ were ultimately distilled in the White Paper of 1991: a) Nation before community and society before self, b) Family as the basic unit of society, c) Community support and respect for the individual, d) Consensus, not conflict, and e) Racial and religious harmony.