



**African Studies Program**  
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

## Multicultural Singapore

**Item & Photo**

**Description**

**Singapore Currency: \$2 Banknote and Coins**



Singapore has four official languages: Chinese, Malay, Indian, and English. Do you see how the money uses all four? Why is this? Singapore is an ethnically diverse society. About 75% of Singaporean citizens are ethnic Chinese, 15% are ethnic Malay, 8% are ethnic Indian, and 2% represent other ethnicities. Thus, almost all Singaporeans speak at least two languages:

1) The language associated with their ethnic group (i.e., Mandarin Chinese, Malay, or Tamil) and...

2) English, which is the "unifying" language. English is the primary language in government, schools, and offices, so everyone can understand each other.

However, most Singaporeans go even further, and regularly use words from the other official languages—regardless of the speaker's ethnicity, the listener's ethnicity, or either person's primary language. If you order at an Indian restaurant, they may ask ""Makan?"" (In Malay: to eat here?), and you may respond ""Ta pau"" (in Chinese: to take away). (True story: as I wrote that previous sentence, I overheard the two Chinese Singaporeans next to me asking each other in English how well the other can speak Malay. Most Singaporeans try to respect each other by learning some of the language and customs of their fellow citizens.)

3) In fact, most Singaporeans also speak ""Singlish."" Singlish is mostly English, but with Chinese grammatical and tonal patterns and occasional

Chinese, Malay, or Indian phrases mixed in. Singaporeans are VERY proud of Singlish! You can find lots of examples and instructional videos online.

As a society, Singaporeans agree to tolerate, accommodate, and celebrate each other's customs. It helps that law integrates most Singaporean housing, so everyone has neighbors from other ethnic and religious groups. Regardless of ethnic group or religion, all Singaporeans know to bring two oranges to their Chinese friends at Chinese New Year, to eat with their right hand at Indian restaurants, and not to schedule lunch meetings during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan (when most Malays have a religious obligation to avoid food between sunrise and sunset). This teamwork and respect symbolizes the use of four languages on Singaporean money.

Finally, notice how Singaporean currency notes are made out of plastic! You can pour water on them. They will never get wet and ruined! In addition, they are very difficult to copy illegally.

### Postcards



These postcards show images of modern downtown Singapore. You may recognize some of these scenes from the popular movie *Crazy Rich Asians*. Do you see the three towers with the boat on top? Much of this land did not even exist in the year 2000. Singapore is a very tiny island, so the government "reclaims" land from the sea by building underwater walls and filling them in with sand. This creates additional land for buildings. Do you see the big Ferris wheel? It is named "The Singapore Flyer" and has great views of the city. The wheel used to turn away from the city, but traditional Chinese Feng Shui masters told the city that this direction was not lucky. It would symbolically move money and economic development away from Singapore. The city quickly decided to change the direction so the wheel would rotate toward the city, therefore bringing wealth and prosperity. Singapore is well known for merging very old-style customs with very modern ones.

### Stamp Sets



These stamp sets celebrate and remember traditional Singaporean jobs. Singapore has become a very rich country over the last 50 years, so many of these jobs are dying out. However, they were quite common for today's grandmothers and grandfathers. The Singaporean government wants to remind its citizens that the country has grown economically. Young people often work in comfortable, air-conditioned offices. For the older generation, life was much more difficult, and often involved difficult physical labor.

### Tourism Book and Newspapers: Straits Time, Chinese, Tamil, and Malay



Singapore has four major newspapers, one in each of the four major languages. What similarities and differences do you notice? If you read the English-language "Straits Times" newspaper, you will see that Singapore is a very diverse society in terms of ethnicity, religion, language, and lifestyle. What problems are discussed? Which issues seem to worry Singaporeans? What seems different compared to your local newspaper? Do you notice anything else that seems interesting or unusual?

### Malay Shirts



These Malay-style shirts are made from a prized fabric known as batik. The textile is considered a form of art and usually includes complicated patterns of leaves, flowers, butterflies, and geometric designs. Islam prohibits the depiction of humans or animals as decoration, so Islamic art relies on intricate patterns like these to attract the viewer's attention. The designs are purposefully outlandish and bright. The clashing colors and wild patterns make people look very vibrant and happy when they wear batik, especially walking together in crowds! Malay Singaporeans are very proud of the batik tradition--there are numerous batik museums and exhibits around the region, and the batik cloth was a major prize for the Western and Arab traders of the 1500s-1800s. The tradition continues strongly today.

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### Kopiah/Songkok



The kopiah is a headwear for Malay Muslim men. However, if you look around the world, you will notice that similar hats exist throughout the Muslim world. A plain black version (songkok) is very common in Indonesia. As far away as Morocco, this is commonly known as a fez. In other regions, the Arabic name is taqiyah. (Read more at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taqiyah\\_\(cap\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taqiyah_(cap))). The Malay-style kopiah tends to be very brightly patterned. Older men may wear them daily, but younger men usually save them for special holiday visits to the mosque.

### Sarong



The sarong is a common form of dress around the Indian Ocean--especially in India, Nepal, Myanmar, southern Thailand, and Malaysia. In Singapore, it is worn by BOTH ethnic Indians and Malays, but nowadays it is usually saved for worship and special occasions. This is an everyday men's sarong--usually made of simple cotton, muted patterns, and tied in front with a knot. The knot itself it sometimes used to store keys, cash, or even small cellphones. Women's sarongs tend to be much finer, usually made with silk that is more expensive, has embroidered edges, and tucked in to lie flat around the body. This video shows the many ways to properly tie a sarong in Southeast Asia:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9afvVH3ordg>.

Do not worry! A well-tied sarong will be very comfortable and secure! Try it yourself.

### Banana Leaf Plate



In restaurants, Indian Singaporean food is usually served in the traditional style: on a real banana leaf. The leaves of the banana tree make a perfect plate because they do not absorb any food or liquid. They are big enough to hold a meal of rice and curry, and when you are done, you do not even have to wash them! The leaves are environmentally friendly if you throw them out. However, in the city, sometimes it is easier to have a plastic version of the beloved banana-leaf plate in your kitchen.

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### Bamboo Dumpling Steamer Case and Cover



This is a Chinese-style dumpling steamer. The dumplings go in the bamboo basket and then over a steaming pot of hot water. The steam cooks the food. Then you cover the basket and bring it right to the table. The baskets are designed to fit on top of each other, so people will usually stack three or four baskets to make a complete meal. As you finish each batch of dumplings, you remove the top basket to reveal the next set. The design ensures that all the dumplings stay warm while you eat.

### Bamboo Wok Cleaner



A wok is a big iron bowl used for cooking noodles and other food in Chinese cooking. Because the high heat kills all the germs, you do not have to clean a wok with soap or detergent after cooking. In fact, that will harm the taste of the next meal! Instead, you should clean the wok with hot water and a bamboo cleaner like this one. The hard bamboo makes a cheap, environmentally friendly, and effective scraper.

### Flower Garland and Offering Flower



Singapore has many examples of an integrated society. There are distinct cultural groups, but at the same time, groups are constantly overlapping. Sometimes they share customs for religious and practical reasons. Sometimes they just adopt each other's customs out of respect.

These are actually Thai flowers, used in Buddhist religious practice. However, Singapore's Indian Hindu use these too. In fact, if you look at the stamps, you will see that "Garland Maker" is one of the old, traditional Indian professions in Singapore. As with many of these items, you can see how there is a lot of overlap. Different ethnic and religious groups use many of the same goods and customs, slightly adjusting them for their unique customs.

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### Hindi Gift Set



This product is usually sold as a packet. People buy them as wedding gifts for newly married Hindi women. The piece of string is tied around the wrist to symbolize marriage. The red paste is applied as a "dot" on the forehead and, also, is to show that a woman is married. The colorful cloth is used over the shoulders for decoration. The bracelets (bangles) are used to make the woman look colorful and flashy on her happy wedding day.

### Indian Incense/ Holder



Place these sticks in the incense holder and light them! You will get to experience the wonderful smells of Hindu temples in Singapore.

### Chinese Joss Paper, Chinese Fake Bank Notes, and Chinese Incense



Chinese Singaporeans typically honor their deceased ancestors by leaving food for hungry spirits, lighting candles and incense, and burning gifts for the dead. By burning fake money (and even paper houses, paper cars, and other goods), people ensure that their relatives will live comfortably in the afterlife. The practice is very common, especially on particular days of the calendar. On those days, the air fills with ash from all the people burning gifts. In residential areas, there are many special bins where Chinese Singaporeans can safely burn fake money and joss paper. This practice is also very common in places like Thailand and Vietnam. Indian Singaporean also burn large amount of incense in temples and for spiritual purification.

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