State of the Arts: Government, National Identity, and the Arts in Singapore

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Abstract
In the 1960s, countries in Southeast Asia such as Indonesia and Malaysia were wreaked by ethnic violence. Race riots broke out in Malaysia in 1969 between Chinese and Malays. In 1973 and 1974 anti-Chinese riots and pogroms erupted in Indonesia. Amidst a sea of ethnic unrest, the Singaporean government became aware that the multiethnic nature of Singapore rendered it vulnerable to riots. Memories of the 1964 race riots and the 1950 Maria Hertogh riots were still fresh. The government hoped that the creation of a cohesive national identity would reduce the risk of ethnic and racial violence. In this project I examine the development of national identity in Singapore from 1965-1990 to see how the government and civil society interacted to create a national identity.

Keywords
Singapore

Disciplines
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Comments
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STATE OF THE ARTS:

GOVERNMENT, NATIONAL IDENTITY, AND THE ARTS IN SINGAPORE

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Introduction

An ex-British colony, the city-state of Singapore became independent after a merger with Malaysia (initiated in 1963) failed after two short years. At the point of independence in 1965, the island was a mere 581.5 square kilometers in size – smaller than some lakes in the United States.\(^1\) Located off the southern tip of peninsular Malaysia, with whom relations were now tense, and with few to no natural resources of its own, the country faced immense challenges right from birth.

Singapore’s earliest leaders harbored no illusions about the difficulties of the task they faced – survival was by no means guaranteed. They had seen merger with Malaysia as the sole viable route for Singapore to survive outside colonial control, and now that that was no longer an option, the leaders felt that they had been thrown in the deep end. Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore’s first Prime Minister and respected to this day as the figure most responsible for shaping Singapore’s development, said in his memoirs that Singapore faced “tremendous odds with an improbable chance of survival. Singapore was not a natural country but man-made, a trading post the British had developed into a nodal point in their world-wide maritime empire. We inherited the island without its hinterland, a heart without a body.”\(^2\)

In the coming decades, the People’s Action Party (PAP), the dominant political party in Singapore which was co-founded by Lee and his colleagues, would lead the country in its meteoric rise – from a state whose very viability was in severe doubt, to one of the most developed and richest countries not just in the region, but globally. Not all aspects of the city appeared to have developed equally, though. Its wealth reserves swelled exponentially, skyscrapers sprouted from the ground and punctuated the night sky with glass, steel, and light to create a skyline familiar to

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\(^2\) Kuan Yew, Lee, From Third World to First (Singapore: Times Media Private Limited, 2000): 19
many around the world, and its ports linked the new metropolis to other global cities worldwide. Yet some felt that the rapid pace of economic development had come at a significant cost. In particular, Singapore was felt to have become a “cultural desert” – a term which even the PAP itself came to accept as an apt description of the state of the country in the decades after independence. How did this come to pass?

This thesis seeks to understand the development of arts and culture in modern Singapore, in particular its relationship with the government and official government policies. As will become clear, to solely describe Singapore as a “cultural desert” vastly oversimplifies a story that is far more complicated, and an arts and cultural scene that is far richer, than the phrase conveys. Due to constraints on time and space available, this thesis cannot – and does not attempt to – provide a comprehensive rundown of all the various cultural and artistic traditions and practices throughout Singapore’s history, or look at all aspects of government policy relating to or affecting those scenes. Rather, this thesis will zoom in on some particularly significant moments and events in the immediate post-independence decades (1965-1990) which may be of interest to the lay reader. This account will also place an emphasis on the personal experiences of those involved in the issues discussed here – artists, policymakers, and civil servants alike.

In order to better contextualize the study, a discussion of the conditions under which Singapore achieved independence is necessary. This, after all, was the environment in which Singapore’s political leaders effectively went through a baptism of fire. After independence, their methods of governance and approach towards governing would be heavily influenced by the events surrounding the time of independence.
Modern Singapore was originally a small fishing village, colonized by the British and turned into a major port. During World War II, the island fell quickly to the Japanese onslaught in one of the worst British defeats in history. After suffering through two years of brutal occupation, the British returned to take control of the island again after the end of the war. Unlike many other colonies, Singapore showed no interest in fighting for its independence with physical violence. Rather, political leaders worked to persuade the British to grant Singapore a merger with Malaya (Singapore’s immediate northern peninsular neighbor), also a British colony. The merger eventually happened in 1963, with Singapore merging with Malaya (along with two other territories, Sabah and Sarawak) to form the Federation of Malaysia. Despite having left direct British control, many British remained in Singapore, including elements of the British armed forces.

However, the merger turned sour within the year. Concerns had erupted over what the UMNO (United Malays National Organization) government, seated in Malaysia, saw as the potential unbalancing of the racial populations in Malaysia, which thus far had a significant majority of Malays. Singapore, as an island with a large Chinese majority, threatened to upset this balance upon its entry into the Federation of Malaysia. This was important as UMNO’s position embraced affirmative action for the Malay majority (bumiputras) whereas Singaporean politicians claimed to be in favor of an equal playing field, resulting in a heated debate over whether there should be a “Malayan Malaysia” (a Malaysia centered around Malays as a race) or a “Malaysian Malaysia” (a Malaysia centered around Malaysians, as citizens, regardless of race). Racial tensions had already been rife in the region, and severe riots erupted along racial lines in 1964 in Singapore.
After the riots, some members of the PAP attributed them to deliberate attempts to stir up grassroots sentiment by Malay extremists from Malaysia. Lee Khoon Choy, for one, stated his belief that the PAP’s electoral victory in the Singaporean constituencies of Geylang Serai, Kampong Kembangan, and the Southern Islands (despite those being Malay-dominated areas) against candidates officially backed by UMNO (and having received a visit from the Tunku himself, the leader of Malaysia and UMNO, the day before the election) contributed to the outbreak of the riots. More specifically, he identified the campaigns conducted by UMNO members as an attempt to “show that the Singapore PAP government is anti-Malay.”

Othman Wok, a Malay member of the PAP, quoted evidence which in his mind suggested that outside forces (extremist UMNO members) had instigated the riots: “I believe the riot was planned; it did not erupt spontaneously,” citing a conversation he had with an Utusan Melayu (extremist Malay newspaper) reporter who claimed to have foreknowledge of the riots happening. Lee Kuan Yew himself, in a speech on the night of 21st July, said: “All the indications show that there has been organization and planning behind this outbreak to turn it into an ugly communal clash.”

During the 1964 election, Malay members of the PAP were taunted, branded as traitors and infidels (to the Malay race), and had posters defaced with human feces – and all in Singapore.

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3 A kampong/kampung is a traditional Malay village. Here, it has become part of the name of a district (Kampong Kembangan), in the same way that the word “City” has become part of the name of the area known as “New York City.”


6 Yap et al, Men in White, 280

7 Kuan Yew, Lee “Broadcast by the Prime Minister” (Speech, Broadcast, July 21st, 1964) http://drm.a2o.nas.sg/DJVUServer/PdfStampServlet?app=stars&filepath=pdfdoc/lky19640721.pdf

8 Yap et al, Men in White, 284
Despite differing accounts of how the riots had broken out, one thing was not in doubt. Both among the leadership and the people, the riots were, at heart, about race. Indeed the statements made by leaders in the aftermath and actions taken demonstrated a racial reading of events. In his 21st July speech, Lee referred to “a few deaths both among Chinese and Malays,” showing his understanding of the clash as happening along racial lines, and the need for “harmony between our communities [to be] preserved.” In an address on 24th July, he cited an example of a Chinese and Malay group which had managed to avoid violent conflict by speaking about their fears of each other, and exhorted citizens to follow their example. For example, the government set up “goodwill committees” in twelve constituencies where “large Malay kampongs adjoin Chinese villages” where “local village elders and kampong ketuas, together with members of the Citizens Consultative Committees, with Ministers and Parliamentary Secretaries have gone round to set up Goodwill Liaison Committees to restore morals and confidence.” This was soon extended to all 51 electoral wards. In later discourse, leaders would emphasize anecdotal evidence of members of both races risking life and limb to help the other in times of pressure, further entrenching the racial element of the narrative even as they sought to overcome those differences.

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9 Ibid, 279
10 Kuan Yew, Lee “Broadcast by the Prime Minister” (Speech, Broadcast, July 21st, 1964) 
11 Kuan Yew, Lee “Broadcast talk by the Prime Minister” (Speech, Broadcast, July 24th, 1964) 
12 Ibid.
13 Men in White, 282
14 Ibid.
Amidst these concerns, Singapore was forcibly handed an independence it never really wanted. E.W. Barker, a Singaporean politician, member of the PAP and one of the key drafters of the Proclamation of Singapore, recalled in an interview the key role played by race: “I think the last straw that broke the camel’s back as it were, was a debate in Parliament in April 1965 where Lee Kuan Yew got up and spoke for the first time in that House in Malay… it was a tremendous performance… Usually, the Prime Minister spoke in English… And from then, they thought they’d better push us out.”

Speaking at a press conference on 9th August 1965, the day that Singapore became independent, Lee said:

“…when I first met the Tengku [Malaysia’s leader] at 12.30 on Saturday morning, I was still not convinced that… there was no other way. I believed then that I could still convince… Tengku that there were a number of other ways of reducing communal tensions in Malaysia, such as a looser federation… after what he told me when we were alone, I realized there was no other way than what he thought was the solution, that we had to leave Malaysia.”

During that very press conference, Lee also stated: “For me, [separation] is a moment of anguish because all my life… I have believed in Merger and the unity of these two territories…” At this moment, Lee famously broke down in an incident (and image) etched into Singaporean history, and the recording had to be stopped for him to compose himself. Those who were there recalled the fact of independence as shocking, leaving them “at a loss” – separation was “heart-rending” for Singapore’s leadership.

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17 Ibid.

18 Yap et al, Men in White, 302-303.
Ultimately, the specter of racial conflict would hang like a sword of Damocles over Singapore’s newly independent state, even as it enjoyed increasing wealth and fortune. Lee Kuan Yew says that he knew from the beginning that “it was crucial to keep united Singapore’s multilingual, multicultural, multi-religious society, and make it rugged and dynamic enough to compete in world markets.” How then are we to understand the claims of those like ex-Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, Lee’s successor? He acknowledged that “up till the early 1980s, we focused mainly on achieving economic growth and raising per capita income. So Singapore was widely mocked as a ‘cultural desert’, a ‘sterile’ place where the main preoccupations of Singaporeans were makan [eating] and making money.” Did Singapore have a national identity, or a focus on creating this identity, at the time of independence?

As mentioned earlier, Lee Kuan Yew stated that he believed that a sense of national identity was important from the outset precisely because Singapore was a “disparate collection of immigrants” – something that some scholars call an “originary identity deficit”. The fact that this would have been key is echoed by Benedict Andersen, who notes that the past is often important to any conception of national identity: “If nation-states are widely conceded to be ‘new’ and ‘historical’, the nations to which they give political expression always loom out of an immemorial past.” From this point of view, Singapore historically did not have much sense of a unique identity and community. When Singapore is discussed, it is as a geographic location where Malay and Chinese nationalists, for example, would operate, instead of a self-aware community with

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19 Lee, From Third World to First, 24


nationalists fighting for, or over, it. Historian Nicholas Tarling’s omission of any mention of “Singaporean nationalism” in a chapter on Southeast Asian nationalism in the pre-World War II period is telling.\textsuperscript{23} Singapore is unlike countries like the Philippines, which had independence movements as early as the 1930s and nationalist, anti-US imperialist movements even earlier; or Burma, where the government appealed to “popular Burman tradition” in implementing its welfare state policies. Malaysia had a “myth of indigenous origin” and Indonesia had a “history of heroic struggle for independence against colonial oppression”\textsuperscript{24} to appeal to for a sense of common purpose or national unity. Singapore, however, had “no local pre-colonial past to be excavated and recuperated for a national cultural narrative… for the newly independent state.”\textsuperscript{25}

While Lee stated that Singapore indeed had no such unifying identity or culture, what he says next – that the government had to find some way to keep the people united – has been the sentiment of many academics writing on the subject. Chang, writing as early as 1968, argued that the creation of a cohesive identity was key from the beginning, because internal racial conflict was the most serious threat to Singapore. Along with the tense relationship with Malaysia and the subversive activities of Communists, he argued, the government had to create a cohesive identity to override the animosity of the past.\textsuperscript{26} Tan proposes a candidate for this identity in the form of a “garrison mentality”, which he says has been used to guard the country’s “territorial, natural and


\textsuperscript{26} David Chang, “Nation-Building in Singapore.” \textit{Asian Survey} 8, no. 9 (1968): 766–67
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cultural resources”, and which has been effective at recruiting manpower for defense. Stratton argues that the fear of outside enemies is a common strategy among nation-states which wish to create a sense of cohesion; Singapore is unique in its invocation of the fear that it is not a “properly constituted nation-state (defined, of course, in the modern Western sense).”

However, even those academics who did argue that Singapore had a national identity confined their analysis to a state-imposed ideology. There is comparatively little analysis of the role played by civil society in helping to create a national identity and culture. Some scholars such as John Clammer, Stephen Ortmann, and so on touch on civil society and the arts only insofar as they are responded to by the government. Lily Kong’s work on moral panics and rock music in Singapore, as an additional example, similarly chooses to focus mostly on the reaction of the government to the rising tide of rock music. Generally, there is a lack of emphasis on the role played by civil society in helping to define and shape identity, with it often being reduced to a reaction to government policy. Seen only as a supporting actor in the drama of Singaporean history, the arts have not received the historical analysis which is due them.

Despite the existence of a fairly strong corpus of uniquely Singaporean literature and drama, for instance, little research has been done into how these works reflect grassroots sentiment about Singaporean identity. Despite being labelled “breakthrough[s]” and “canonical in any


history of Singapore drama,” the plays *Emily of Emerald Hill* and *The Coffin is Too Big for the Hole* are offered only 3 pages in *The Routledge Concise History of Southeast Asian Writing in English*. There is clearly space for a close reading of texts such as these and Catherine Lim’s short stories, linking them to larger debates about the history of Singaporean culture. The latter were also used as set texts for the national ‘O’ Level examinations, demonstrating their cultural significance to Singaporeans at large. There is also considerable room for analysis of how these artists and writers saw themselves as representing Singaporean society.

Current academia also neglects the personal experiences of many of these individuals, which is key to understanding how and why many of these people did what they did. Neither “government” nor “artists” can be understood as monolithic entities. Even within the artistic world, for example, artists, writers, and playwrights frequently disagreed with each other on how best to portray Singaporeans, artistic methods, or the approach they ought to take when negotiating with the government. Within the government individuals at different levels – Members of Parliament, bureaucrats, civil servants, top leaders – also often had differing understandings of the reasons why particular policies were implemented, on top of looking at issues through different lenses. New information and perspectives which have only recently become publicly available also present opportunities for analysis. For example, although the role of the press has been dealt with to some extent by academics, the recent publication of the memoirs of Cheong Yip Seng, ex-chief editor of Singapore’s main newspaper, the *Straits Times*, offers a fertile, untapped source for historical study and research. This thesis will attempt to fill in this gap not only by examining some of the published recollections of individuals like Cheong, but also by examining some of the

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records at Singapore’s National Archives, focusing on the oral history interviews, to understand what life and work was like for artists, civil servants, and policymakers who had to grapple with many of these issues on a day-to-day basis. In addition, interviews have been conducted with some figures who are seminal in the history of Singaporean art and who saw themselves as having something to say about Singaporean identity, such as Catherine Lim (mentioned above). There is therefore ample room for a historical analysis of the development of the arts scene and national identity in Singapore.

In order to come to grips with the issue, we will begin with a discussion of the mindset of the government starting in the immediate post-independence years in the first chapter. Understanding the major concerns of the government will better allow us to understand the methods and mindset which it adopted as it approached civil society. The government’s dealings with artists and writers will be the focus of the second chapter. As mentioned, the focus will be placed on understanding the perspectives of various individuals involved. Through this chapter, we will see the ways in which the government attempted to regulate and control the arts scene. Taken together with the first chapter, we will examine the ways in which the government decided to address questions of identity to deal with its concern for the security of the nation. In the third and last chapter, we will see how the artists and writers reacted to government policies, and how they criticized, challenged, or changed the narratives created by the government relating to politics and national identity.
Chapter One

We begin our story at the point of Singapore’s independence in 1965. Singapore’s turbulent birth had led its leaders to conclude that survival was by no means guaranteed. Alone in the world, without a hinterland or resources, and having experienced great trauma of a kind in the past couple of years, the leaders of the newborn nation had insecurities of two particular types: first, a fear of external threats, and second, a fear of internal threats.

External threats were front and center in the imaginations of Singaporean statesmen. At the time of independence, Lee’s appraisal of the most important challenges facing Singapore was clear. He used one of his last statements at the press conference announcing separation (on 9th August 1965) to reassure Singaporeans that “the [British military] bases will be there, your protection will be there, co-operation in defence, security will be there and the water agreement is firm and solid, and guaranteed.” Referring to what would soon become common refrains in the lexicon of Singapore’s leaders as they continually reminded the population of Singapore’s unique vulnerability – Singapore’s dependence on Malaysia for water, lack of a standing army, and dependence on British military bases not just for defense but for a substantial amount of employment and revenue – this was an early and definite indicator of the issues foremost on Lee’s mind. The very first substantive chapter of Lee’s memoirs (after an introduction which serves to go over the conditions under which separation occurred) is entitled *Building an Army from Scratch*,

32 As of 2011, Lee remained convinced of the importance of the military dangers faced by Singapore. Speaking to reporters in 2011, he said of that mindset, which has informed Singapore’s policy and growth trajectory over the past half-century: “I’m concerned that Singaporeans assume that Singapore is a normal country, that we can be compared to Denmark or New Zealand… We are in a very turbulent region. We have not got neighbors who want to help us prosper… They can besiege you. You’ll be dead…” Reference: Fook Kwang, Han et al. *Lee Kuan Yew: Hard Truths to Keep Singapore Going* (Singapore: Straits Times Press, 2011), 25-30
which demonstrates Lee’s commitment to the identification of defense as the top priority. In a speech in Parliament in 1965 promoting the Singapore Army Bill, Minister of Defense Goh Keng Swee stated: “…the island [could] be over-run by any neighboring country within a radius of 1000 miles, if any of them cared to do so. And everyone… can see that at least one of them do care very much to do so (sic).”

Simultaneously, though, the threat was not seen to come solely from other countries – to some extent military threats could originate within Singaporean territory. Goh, at the Inauguration Dinner for the Board of Governors of the National Youth Leadership Training Centre in October 1965, identified as key concerns “anti-democratic and anti-national movements” which would assault the state through “political subversion or other means.” Similarly, in another speech in Parliament on the topic of the People’s Association (Amendment) Bill, he stated that Communists were using kindergarten classes (particularly in rural areas) to indoctrinate young children, comparing these efforts to subversion attempts in ancient imperial China. To solve this problem and yet avoid angering parents, he claimed that it was necessary to have kindergarten classes run by community centers. Another speech by Goh earlier in the year made clear the PAP government’s fear of the possibility that these very instruments, designed and supposed to prevent subversive activities, might themselves be compromised. Goh referred to a period in 1961 when “pro-Communist and pro-Indonesian groups” within the People’s Association staged a strike. The strike was ultimately shut down, but the lesson was learnt – the staff involved were dismissed, new

staff recruited, and future recruitment drives for similar bodies made sure to take on only those with “good educational background, and with good character.”36

It was understood that the “internal threats” did not come solely from militarized elements (such as the Communist groups) which apparently aimed to tear down the new state. The traumas of independence in particular had forced the government to recognize the severe threat posed by potential racial and ethnic strife, or even divisions within racial groups due to differences in geographical origin. One particularly overt manifestation of such differences were the cultural or clan associations which dotted Singapore’s map at the time. Lee noted that people had historically created associations or clan associations on the basis of geographical origin, “whether it be from Kwantung or Fukien in China, or from Madras or Kerala in India, or from Bawean or Sulawesi or Sumatra in Indonesia.” Significant forces within the community therefore continued to emphasize their ethnic, geographical, or racial identities over their national identities at the point of independence, creating a challenge for a government which saw this system of priorities as deeply dangerous to national unity.

In general, the circumstances under which independence was achieved and the memories of the past created a mindset among the leaders of Singapore that the state was intensely vulnerable. It was vulnerable not just to foreign powers, who might seek to take advantage of the state’s small size and lack of defensive capabilities, but also from within. It was claimed that there were “subversive elements” which wanted to overthrow the government, but leaders were also

preoccupied with the nascent tensions between races and religions, exacerbated by the conditions and events of the past few years, which, it was feared, might tear the new state apart.

a. The balancing act of race

Lee had recognized that Singaporeans came from all manner of different countries, and even within those countries often came from disparate regions with very different histories, cultures, and languages. On the whole, in the post-independence years, the PAP government approached the issue of race from two major strategic angles. First, they attempted to minimize the number of different groups which they had to acknowledge had claims to the government’s attention, often by forcibly overlooking differences between various “subsets” of the “major races” and essentially forcing a degree of homogenization on each of them. Second, they tried to ensure “harmony” (or at the very least peaceful coexistence) between the various racial groups, with the specter of racial clashes still fresh in their minds.

The experience of the “Chinese” community forms a good example of the former. Just within the “Chinese”, major groupings include (but are not limited to) the Hokkien (from southern Fujian in China), Teochew (from eastern Guangdong), and the Cantonese (from Hong Kong and southern Guangdong). Each group has its own dialect, cultural traditions and so on. “Clan associations” had formed to promote solidarity and provide for needs such as shelter, food, jobs, religious worship, and so on, especially among the large community of fresh immigrants who would feel less out of place with a ready-made community of their fellows organized and in strength in Singapore.37

The government recognized the risk that such clan organizations could promote loyalty to the clan or race above the nation, and took strong steps to ensure that this would not occur. For one, the government specifically refused to endorse, accept, or even legitimize by recognizing, any of the activities such associations had historically been deeply involved with as these activities were often targeted only at very specific groups. At the installation ceremony of the Eighth Management Committee of the Yang Clan General Association on 29th January 1966, Minister for Health, and adviser to the Clan, Yong Nyuk Lin made a speech which specifically avoided reference to any of the clan’s traditional activities in promoting solidarity among Yang clan members. Instead, the speech contained only stock government rhetoric about the importance of building up an armed forces, two sentences on education measures implemented by the government, and to exhort those listening to avoid littering.\textsuperscript{38} The very next year, Yong delivered a speech to the same clan entitled “National interest comes first.” This speech ruminated on the economic difficulties faced by the country before seguing into an interesting line with broad implications for political philosophy, whether Yong intended it to or not: after speaking about how the Government had a duty to be “righteous” and “not corrupt,” and should “have good policies and plans of action for the welfare and happiness of its peoples,” he stated: “The majority of its people must also support such governmental policies; be prepared to work hard and to make sacrifices for [the] common good.”\textsuperscript{39} This is interesting for two reasons: first, the notion that just as there are governmental duties to the citizens, so are there duties of the citizen to the “nation” or “state”; and second, the idea that among these duties are support for governmental policies. These would go on to become frequently raised

\textsuperscript{38} Nyuk Lin, Yong, “Installation Ceremony of the Eighth Management Committee” (Speech, People’s Association, January 29\textsuperscript{th}, 1966), \url{http://drm.a2o.nas.sg/DJVUSServer/PdfStampServlet?app=stars&filepath=pdfdoc/PressR19660129d.pdf}

\textsuperscript{39} Nyuk Lin, Yong, “17\textsuperscript{th} Anniversary Dinner of the Yang Clan General Association” (Speech, Chinese Chamber of Commerce, June 10\textsuperscript{th}, 1967), \url{http://drm.a2o.nas.sg/DJVUSServer/PdfStampServlet?app=stars&filepath=pdfdoc/PressR19670610a.pdf}
by Singaporean leaders in any dialogue or elaboration on their thinking about how governance ought to proceed.

The statements of Yong’s successor to the position of Minister of Health, Chua Sian Chin (at the opening of new premises of the Singapore Chee Yang Chai Clan Association in 1969) provided further direct illumination of the way in which the government perceived clan associations. The clan organization had been useful “in the days of the early immigrant settlements where there was very little law and order,” but “now that we are independent and as a nation are responsible for our own defense and security, the people have developed wider loyalties – our first and foremost loyalty now is to our nation and state which gives us protection.”40 The state had aimed to, and succeeded in, supplanting the clan organization as a superior provider of physical and economic security, and so moved to argue that it was thus more deserving of the fundamental loyalties of citizens.

Instead of wiping out clan associations by banning them or depriving them of all resources, however, the PAP government acted to co-opt them, something which Chua references, although, as Lee did with community centers earlier, he attributed it to citizen leadership rather than to governmental policy:

But this does not mean that the clan association has no place in our present day society. On the contrary… our people have adapted it to serve the needs of a changing environment… present day clan organizations have therefore been oriented to do most useful work in the field of mutual aid whereby clansmen can do their bit to help the needy, the aged and the sick among fellow clansmen besides doing other forms of charitable work. Thus our cultural heritage is not only being preserved but is being put to good use in our present day society.41

41 Ibid.
Even then, in the realm of social aid, culture and recreation, the clan associations were often ill-equipped to compete with comparatively well-funded government-run community centers, which, were deliberately located in public housing estates\textsuperscript{42} and which were, of course, designed to embrace people of different clan, ethnic, and racial backgrounds.

In the end, the dilution of the clan associations was seen as a victory by the government. Their aim of blunting the possible divisive impact of clan associations discriminating sharply on geographical or other bases had been achieved. Indeed Lee claimed that the community centers, by being forced to expand their bases beyond their original constituencies, had “played a valuable role in the social integration of our society... it represented the urge of a community to discover themselves.” This was possible because community centers, he argued, had created opportunities for interaction between those from different backgrounds. Importantly, he also noted that the “emergence of citizen leadership” in directing the community centers was a hallmark of progress\textsuperscript{43} – an approach to civil society which the government would rarely replicate in future. It is important to highlight his claim that this process of interaction with different groups was one initiated by the community, which wanted to “discover itself.” As we have already seen, there is little evidence to suggest that many of these clan associations had acted voluntarily. Rather, it was a concerted and directed government effort which, rightly or wrongly, removed the clan associations as significant actors in the Singaporean political landscape.

b. Language and inherited “culture”


\textsuperscript{43} Kuan Yew, Lee, “Opening of People’s Association Conference” (Speech, Singapore Conference Hall, January 8\textsuperscript{th}, 1966) http://drm.a2o.nas.sg/DJVUServer/PdfStampServlet?app=stars&filepath=pdfdoc/lky19660108.pdf
On the whole, the government sought to delegitimize geographical background and clan group as a means of self-identification. It quickly focused on the most important signifiers of one’s allegiance, such as language, as a signifier of race. The Constitution of the Republic of Singapore clearly demonstrated the mandatory homogenization of the languages of “racial” groups. It stated that “Malay, Mandarin, Tamil and English shall be the 4 official languages in Singapore.”

Despite the existence and common usage of dialects like Hokkien and Cantonese – arguably even more prolific than Mandarin Chinese – the government chose to make Mandarin Chinese one of the national languages, in large part because they then would not be perceived as being biased towards any particular grouping and risk inciting unhappiness. In 1978, Goh Keng Swee, who would become Minister for Education the following year, issued a hugely influential report which later came to be known as the Goh Report. A close reading of some parts of the Report reveals how deep the problems of language were, even 13 years after independence. The report lamented the bilingual (English and Mandarin, for the most part) school system as “unnatural” as “eighty-five per cent of [school children] do not speak either of these languages at home.” The report suggested, as an analogy, “children in England [being] taught Russian and Mandarin, while they continue to speak English at home.” This discrepancy led to immense problems within the education system – for instance, more than sixty per cent of school children failed one or both of their language examinations.

44 Singapore Constitution, Part XIII General Provisions, 153A (1). Retrieved 13th Sept 2013 from http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/aol/search/display/view.w3p;ident=5eb79f2-ceb1-488a-a70b-71d251cb741a;page=0;query=DocId%3Acf2412ff-fca5-4a64-a8ef-b95b987728e%20Depth%3A0%20ValidTime%3A13%2F09%2F2013%20TransactionTime%3A13%2F09%2F2013%20Status%3AInfo;rec=0
It was partly in response to this that Lee Kuan Yew, in 1979, kicked off a campaign to “Promote the Use of Mandarin.” Lee recognized in the opening speech for this campaign that “the Chinese we speak is divided up among more than twelve dialects,” and that dialect use was “widespread and dominant” throughout Chinese society in Singapore. Ultimately, he identified the problem as one of a competition between dialects and Mandarin. The speech is worth quoting at length:

The continued use of dialect, after Mandarin has already been learnt, makes a person lose his fluency in Mandarin… all Chinese parents face this choice for their children – English-Mandarin, or English-dialect… the government will take administrative action to support [the learning of Mandarin instead of dialects by children]. All government officers, including those in hospitals and clinics, and especially those in manning counters, will be instructed to speak Mandarin except to the old, those over sixty. All Chinese taxi-drivers, bus conductors, and hawkers, can and will be required to pass an oral Mandarin test, or to attend Mandarin classes to make them adequate and competent to understand and speak Mandarin to their customers… Students will hear and speak Mandarin in the streets, on the buses, in the shops, in the hawkers’ centers… This is the stark choice – English-Mandarin, or English-dialect. Logically, the decision is obvious. Emotionally, the choice is painful.46

As part of this effort, advertisements were run in *The Straits Times*, the largest newspaper in Singapore, promoting the use of Mandarin. This was just one example:47

The same advertisement was run numerous times in the paper. This statement, unattributed to any individual or organization despite being in the “Forum” section (which carries letters from readers), places the onus on each individual to use Mandarin instead of dialect. By representing the predominant obstacle to the use of Mandarin (as opposed to dialect) as one simply of communication – “the other person may know Mandarin but may also be shy” – it necessarily overlooked the other reasons why dialect use was common, for example, the cultural and traditional aspects of one’s clan background for which dialect may have been an integral part. Lee said: “We must keep the core of our value systems and social mores… our children… must be Mandarin-speaking, able to read the books, the proverbs, the parables, the stories of heroes and villains, so that they know what a good upright man should do and be… [Mandarin] must gradually take over the role of dialects as the lingua franca of Chinese Singaporeans.”

of the Chinese population became associated solely with Mandarin Chinese, and not with the dialects. One sole homogenized idea of Chinese “identity” and “heritage” became prized above all other variations, and this was reified in the policy towards dialects.

On the other hand, competition between the major languages was also understood to have been a problem. Despite being overwhelmingly Chinese in terms of demographics, the Constitution provided that Malay should be the national language, leading to unhappiness among some Chinese. A statement was issued by the Prime Minister’s Office on 1st October 1965: “The Prime Minister has noted that a few persons in the Chinese Chamber of Commerce… are today trying to assume heroic postures on behalf of the Chinese language.” The statement relates the “ignominy” of one Mr. Tan Lark Sye, a “one-time great Chinese chauvinist” who under pressure from the Malaysian government recanted his views and said that he had always been in favor of promoting Malay as the National Language, reminding “those who are thinking of glorifying their public image by position as language heroes (sic)… [that they] should consider whether they are bigger than Mr. Tan Lark Sye was when he was at the height of his power.”

As in the case with the “Don’t be Shy” advertisement, the state demanded for itself the power to identify and attribute the intentions behind the actions of citizens. In that case, the state insisted that a major reason for the use of dialect was “shyness”; in this instance, the state insisted that those seeking to promote the position of the Chinese language against the Malay language were not, in fact, doing what they thought was best for the country or their people, but simply seeking to “glorify their public

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position” and gain fame and fortune. The statement wrapped up with a cryptic warning of sorts: “They should also remember the depths to which Mr. Tan Lark Sye groveled when a country chauvinism terrorized him (sic).”

Although the literal meaning of the sentence is uncertain, it seemed that the government was warning would-be “Chinese chauvinists,” as they were called, of the potential repercussions of their actions.

As Rajah states, though, despite the government’s best efforts, conflicts over language (and more generally about race) continued to exist. In particular a significant number of Chinese were worried about “Chinese” education and the place of Chinese language and culture in the country. These issues had become incredibly politicized, in no small part due to the fact that key individuals associated with criticizing the government over its policies towards the “Chinese”-language university, Nantah (e.g. lack of recognition of Nantah degrees in the civil service), had joined with or otherwise supported the Communist Barisan Socialis Party in the 1963 elections. The PAP’s leaders, on the other hand, were English-educated, leading to the perception of divisions even if the leaders themselves were ethnically Chinese.

Lee Kuan Yew recalls in his memoirs that “a hard core of the Chinese-educated did not welcome what they saw as a move to make English the common working language, and expressed unhappiness in Chinese newspapers.” According to Lee, he was asked by members of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce to “guarantee the status of the Chinese language as one of the official languages in Singapore”, but Lee “scotched this move before it could grow into a campaign, for once the Chinese Chamber got going, every Chinese school management committee and the two Chinese teachers’ unions would surely work up the

51 Ibid.
ground.” This led to the statement of October 1\textsuperscript{st} quoted above. Lee also recalls protests by Nantah college graduates and the growing sense of besiegement by the Chinese-educated who were confronted with the increasing number of parents who chose to send their children to English schools: “They berated those who chose English schools as money-minded and short-sighted.” Curiously enough, the government would make these exact accusations of “Western” culture before very long. Lee acknowledges that while “English was the only acceptable neutral language… but it did seem to deculturalise our students and make them apathetic.”

The reason for having a National Language was elaborated on by Minister for Education at the time, Ong Pang Boon: “Malay is… common to all, understood by all, and spoken by all. The two-fold role of the National Language is firstly to strengthen the bonds between the various communities and secondly to help create a national identity of our own.” Contrary to what Ong claimed, it was not immediately obvious that the choice of Malay as the National Language would have a prompt unifying effect on the people. Indeed sources within the government were well aware of the pride which many racial groups took in their language. Ong Soo Chuan, Political Secretary to the Ministry of Culture, made a speech on “National Language Month” that same month saying

Malay is our common language for it is a language which is easier to learn. This, our decision on official language is based purely on the multi-racial society in which we live and there is no racial discrimination whatsoever. Obviously, we are different from other countries which make use of language as a political instrument and must arbitrarily fix a certain language in a multi-racial society as the only official language so that by means of language, they can perpetuate their communalist feudal rule. On the contrary, we in

\[\text{References}\]

53 Lee, \textit{From Third World to First}, 171
54 Ibid, 172
55 Ibid, 173
56 Pang Boon, Ong, “Opening of National Language Month Ceremony” (Speech, Government Youth Training Center, November 15\textsuperscript{th}, 1965) \url{http://drm.a2o.nas.sg/DJVUServer/PdfStampServlet?app=stars&filepath=pdfdoc/PressR19651115.pdf}
Singapore have adopted an enlightened, practical and appropriate policy with regard to the language problem.  

Several things stand out in this statement. First, the notion that Malay was the common language because it was easier to learn – in spite of this claim, the government went on to promote a bilingual policy which made all students learn English, making English the main common language (at least among the youth). Second, the refusal to recognize the reasoning behind alternate policies in other countries – there is Singapore’s “enlightened” way, or there is a power-hungry use of language to strengthen a “communalist feudal rule” – is part of what would become a trend of drawing sharp parallels between the good (Singapore) and the bad, with the government reserving the right to determine the intention behind others’ actions. Third, it is easy to see from this statement that the government was keenly aware of the possibility of accusations of bias in selecting the National Language (“there is no racial discrimination whatsoever”). The National Language Month, Ong said, would pull together a huge program with “more than 600 items,” including “debates, oratorical contests, dramatic performances,… national language lessons,… a National Language night, a National Language songs night and the Miss National Language contest sponsored by Malay Youth Associations… we will prove that language is no longer a political issue in this newly-emergent multi-racial country of ours by presenting the fact that the people of Singapore take an active part in launching the National Language campaign and are using the common language extensively.”

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57 Soo Chuan, Ong “Talk to The Ministry of Culture on National Language Month” (Speech, Ministry of Culture, November 11th, 1965), http://drm.a2o.nas.sg/DJVUServer/PdfStampServlet?app=stars&filepath=pdfdoc/PressR19651111a.pdf
58 Ibid.
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On the whole, despite their attempts to depoliticize language, the PAP continued to face stringent opposition from some in the Chinese community, and this would manifest itself in a battle over the press in the early 1970s.

c. The press as a threat to the nation

“Towards the end of 1970, the major Chinese paper, Nanyang Siang Pau, turned rabidly pro-Communist and pro-Chinese language and culture. It mounted an attack on the government, accusing it of trying to suppress Chinese language, education and culture,” Lee explains in his autobiography. “We had to arrest… the general manager …the editor-in-chief …and Ly Singko, the senior editorial writer, for glamorizing communism and stirring up chauvinist sentiments over Chinese language and culture.”59 Ly, when asked in an interview to speak about the issue, replied (translated): “A Chinese newspaper would naturally place importance on spreading Chinese education, since that is its lifeline... If there is no Chinese education and no one understands Chinese, who would read a Chinese paper?”60

That was not how the government saw it. As quoted in a Straits Times report on the arrests, the Nanyang had for a long time been opposed to government policies, but the straw that broke the camel’s back was one statement in particular: “Having over the weeks depicted the Government as oppressors of Chinese education and language, [the Nanyang] went one step further. It branded the Government as ‘pseudo-foreigners who forget their ancestors’. This is the battle cry that was

59 Ibid, 172
60 Original statement: “华文报纸当然注重宣扬华文教育，因为这是他们的生命线...如果没有华文教育，没有人懂华文，那还有谁看华文报?”

once used by Malay chauvinists in Singapore against their multi-racial compatriots before the island plunged into communal violence. The Government has taken action to prevent these men who, under the cover of defending Chinese language and education, are letting loose forces which will sharpen conflict along race, language and culture lines."61 This clearly demonstrates the way in which the trauma of racial conflict in the past remained extremely vivid for the government, to the point where the final push came arguably not from a substantive change in policy by the paper, but by a choice phrase which the government associated with past strife. The phrasing of the statement is also intriguing: those at the Nanyang were not participants in dialogue making statements that might happen to stir up communal feelings; they were, as portrayed by the government, deliberately unleashing racial feeling “under cover of defending Chinese language and education.”

The government’s statement accused the Nanyang of having made a “sustained effort to instill admiration for the communist system… while highlighting in the domestic news pages the more unsavoury aspects of Singapore life.” The fact that two of those arrested, including Ly, were “journalists with a Kuomintang and anti-Communist background” did not serve to exonerate them, but rather made their supposed actions “all the more sinister” – in the government’s eyes, circumstances which might once have been seen as exonerating now served only to cast further doubt on the supposed agenda of those accused. The greatest proof that this was a “deliberate and calculated” attempt at political subversion, according to the government, was a comparison between the Singaporean and Malaysian editions of the paper. The latter showed “no attempt… to play up communist achievements or to stoke communal sentiments over Chinese language and education.”

http://newspapers.nl.sg/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19710503-1.2.2.aspx
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education. On the contrary, in the Malaysian edition there is general support for that government’s education policies… In a deliberate campaign to stir up Chinese racial emotions, the paper sets the mood of tension, impending conflict and violence by persistently reminding its readers of the violence, turmoil and unrest of the turbulent 1957-59 period of Singapore’s history. “Even if the government was correct in this, the fact that the statement does not bother addressing the possibility that the differing criticism level might be attributable to less objectionable policies in Malaysia speaks volumes. To the government, there was no doubt that it was in the right, and its policies were “enlightened.” Criticism of it was thus not possible unless those criticizing it had ill intent.’

The Nanyang issue attracted a significant degree of international attention, when Lee Kuan Yew made an appearance at the General Assembly of the International Press Institute at Helsinki in June 1971. In a speech entitled “The Mass Media and New Countries”, Lee undertook a far-ranging defense of the government’s policies and attitudes towards the press. The mass media, he said, “can help to present Singapore’s problems simply and clearly and then explain how if [the people] support certain programmes and policies these problems can be solved. Most important, we want the mass media to reinforce, not to undermine, the cultural values and social attitudes being inculcated in our schools and universities.” Reverting to the question of the forces tugging at the various racial groups in Singapore and clamoring for their loyalties, Lee expressed his concern that the Chinese, for example, might be susceptible to the “archaic values and political styles of Taiwan” or even those of the “People’s Republic of China, every product dyed in Maoist red.” The Malays were vulnerable to “the mass media from peninsular Malaya and Indonesia”

62 Ibid.

which had “irredentist pulls… reinforced by visits of businessmen and tourists”, while the Indians had “Indian publications and films, primarily from South India carrying the pulls at the heartstrings of cultural and ethnic loyalties.” Lee explicitly referred back to the 1964 riots, claiming that “a sustained campaign in a Malay language newspaper, falsely alleging the suppression of the rights of the Malay and Muslim minority by the Chinese majority, led to riots in which 36 people were killed and many more injured...” It is interesting to note of this last remark that the supposed oppressor is not the PAP government, but the “Chinese majority” as a whole. The statement effectively works to cast the government almost as a disinterested and neutral third party, watching objectively from the sidelines as the conflict unfolded instead of being an active participant in the controversy, and therefore better able to analyze the crisis and its roots and solutions.

The PAP government’s approach towards the “Western” conception of the press as the fourth estate and press freedoms in general seemed to center, at least rhetorically, on two claims. The first was the argument that the press could not legitimately claim to represent the views of the public. On the first issue, Cheong Yip Seng, once editor-in-chief of The Straits Times, put it in his memoirs:

Lee Kuan Yew would have none of the Western notions of press freedom, for it meant the press had the right to be a power centre equal to the government, the judiciary, the legislature and the voting public… the question for the Singapore media was this: who voted for you that you should be entitled to speak for the voters, or tear down the government’s policies? The Singapore journalist did not go through the baptism of fire of a general election, so could only claim limited privilege in the debate on national policies… I have not heard an effective rebuttal of the PM’s position, from the opposition parties or the intellectual elite.64

Abdul Wahab Ghows, Solicitor-General from 1971-81 and Supreme Court Judge from 1981-86, recalled in an interview a Cabinet Meeting at which Lee discussed the role of the press.

According to him, Lee said: “The person who represents public opinion is me. I was elected by the public. [Millionaires who run newspapers were] not elected by anybody. [They] only [represent themselves]. And [they] have the nerve to claim to voice the public opinion and things like that.”\textsuperscript{65}

In his memoirs, Lee said: “My early experiences in Singapore and Malaya shaped my views about the claim of the press to be the defender of the truth and freedom of speech. The freedom of the press was the freedom of its owners to advance their personal and class interests.”\textsuperscript{66}

In a speech made at the Press Club Dinner in 1972, Lee elaborated on the second position himself: “The efficacy of the mass media in shaping attitudes and influencing behavior is beyond doubt… What amazes me is that this powerful instrument does not require of its practitioners special professional training nor codes of conduct to govern them.”\textsuperscript{67} He argued that the media encouraged wrongdoing by imitation, claiming that, for example, the reporting of successful hijackings led to the adoption of hijacking as a strategy by others. He informed the attendees that their “duty” was to “inform, educate and entertain… inculcate values which will make Singapore a more cohesive society, and viable nation.” Cheong recalled the difficulties of working in the media at this time, saying: “I would label this period in the 1970s the bare knuckles phase in the turbulent history of government-media relations… I recall one meeting… where [Lee Kuan Yew] railed at editors because he was exasperated with our lack of political sensitivity. That meant our coverage of a government policy had failed, in his view, to understand what was in Singapore’s


\textsuperscript{66} Lee, From Third World to First, 213

\textsuperscript{67} Kuan Yew, Lee “Speech by the Prime Minister at the Press Club Dinner” (Speech, Hilton Hotel, November 15\textsuperscript{th}, 1972) http://drm.a2o.nas.sg/DJVUSServer/PdfStampServlet?app=stars&filepath=pdfdoc/lky19721115.pdf
national interest, usually because we put too much weight on its negative effects. If we wanted a fight, he warned, he would use knuckledusters.”

The press, moreover, was also seen as a means of defense against external forces. Lee, in the Helsinki speech, said that foreign powers such as the Malayan Communist Party often tried to shape the opinions of citizens. The government had “the responsibility to neutralize their intentions. In such a situation, freedom of the press, freedom of the news media, must be subordinated to the overriding needs of the integrity of Singapore, and to the primacy of purpose of an elected government.” Tan Siow Sun, who sat on the Appeals Board of the Board of Film Censors and was later appointed Registrar of Newspapers, commented: “This was the heydays [sic] of communist-China, very self-confident China under Mao Tse-tung. So there were a lot of propaganda movies, which during those times we felt should not be shown in public cinemas.”

The traditional Western conception of the press as a fourth estate, an essential check and balance protecting the people from excesses of government, was effectively reversed by the PAP government’s rhetoric, as the government presented a world in which it was the duty of the government to protect the people from the press.

In 1974, the government passed the *Newspaper and Printing Presses Act*. Among other things, the Act demanded that all major shareholders of newspapers be approved by the state. Although arguably possible to pass off as a response to the problem of foreign ownership of the press, Rajah points out that it in fact could not be challenged in court. The only avenue of appeal possible was the state, which naturally could not be said to be an objective party. Therefore, only papers which

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68 Cheong, *OB Markers*, 127  
70 Rajah, *The Authoritarian Rule of Law*, 143
were ideologically in line with the government could be marketed. This was just one part of the government’s extremely actively interventionist role in the press, making not just “security-related” but business decisions for the press companies in Singapore. Cheong recalls an incident in the early 1980s, when the government intervened to force the Nanyang to merge with the Sin Chew Jit Poh, its main rival, in part due to the fact that the government believed that competition would be “ruinously expensive; both would be forced to invest in new printing presses, a costly prospect in a declining market [of readers of Chinese newspapers].” Later, when another English-language newspaper, the Singapore Monitor, faced troubles at launch, “the PM intervened. He had a radical idea to get the Monitor off the ground: we were to hand over our sister paper, Business Times, lock, stock and barrel.” Eventually, the PM demanded that the major newspapers merge to form Singapore Press Holdings, which “would own every significant newspaper in Singapore in all the official languages except Tamil. It was the final piece of the media architecture Lee Kuan Yew had worked hard to bring about.”

In 1986, the government amended the Act to “enable the government to cut the circulation of any publication it deemed to be ‘engaging in the politics of Singapore’. In effect, ‘engaging in politics’ meant refusal to give Singapore the right to put up its version of the news.” The new law was directed primarily against foreign publications. It was invoked against Time and the Far Eastern Economic Review when they fell afoul of the government. Time had refused to carry an unedited letter pointing out supposed “factual errors” when the magazine reported on a case involving opposition member JB Jeyeratnam in 1986. As a result, the government halved the

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71 Cheong, OB Markers, 192
72 Ibid, 195
73 Ibid, 198-199
74 Ibid, 201
magazine’s circulation to 9000, with a cut to 2000 scheduled for the following January.\textsuperscript{75} The restriction was lifted in July 1987, one year later, after \textit{Time} published the letter and appealed to have the restriction lifted.\textsuperscript{76} The \textit{Asian Wall Street Journal} was the second publication to suffer similar restrictions, after allegedly refusing to publish “a reply by the Monetary Authority of Singapore to a front-page article in its Dec 12 issue on Singapore’s second stock exchange, known as Sesdaq. The MAS letter refutes, among other allegations, the suggestions in the article that the Government will use the new exchange to ‘unload’ state-controlled and government-backed companies.”\textsuperscript{77} The \textit{Asian Wall Street Journal}’s circulation was likewise cut. Soon, \textit{Asiaweek} and the \textit{Far Eastern Economic Review} suffered similar fates. Lee recounts these episodes in detail in his memoirs, concluding with a statement from a speech made to the American Society of Newspaper Editors in Washington DC in April 1988: “We cannot allow [the foreign press] to assume a role in Singapore that the American media play in America, that is, of [examiner], adversary, and inquisitor of the administration.”\textsuperscript{78} Lee further dismissed criticism, noting that the government regularly banned Communist publications, with no objections from the West.\textsuperscript{79} Cheong said that “\textit{The Straits Times} accepted the right of reply principle, assured by the government’s concession that it was prepared to accept editing of its replies provided edits did not alter their meaning, with all their nuances. We could not see why an aggrieved party should be denied his say.”\textsuperscript{80}

\textsuperscript{75} Alan John, “Time magazine’s circulation to be cut,” \textit{The Straits Times}, October 16\textsuperscript{th}, 1986, 1. \url{http://newspapers.nl.sg/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19861016-1.2.2.aspx}

\textsuperscript{76} Swee Yin, Loong, “Govt lifts restriction on Time magazine,” \textit{The Straits Times}, June 27\textsuperscript{th}, 1987, 1. \url{http://newspapers.nl.sg/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19870627-1.2.6.aspx}

\textsuperscript{77} “Journal is the second publication to be gazette,” \textit{The Straits Times}, February 10\textsuperscript{th}, 1987, 12. \url{http://newspapers.nl.sg/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19870210-1.2.30.14.aspx}

\textsuperscript{78} Lee, \textit{From Third World to First}, 223

\textsuperscript{79} Lee, “Speech by the Prime Minister at the Press Club Dinner.”

\textsuperscript{80} Cheong, \textit{OB Markers}, 203
The threat, however, was not limited to the political accusations posed by foreign media. In fact, the government was deeply concerned with what it saw as the possible moral contamination which came along with exposure to the “West.”

d. Tensions with the “West”

The PAP government was for a long time caught in a love-hate relationship with the “West”, broadly defined. On one hand, the “West” was felt to pose an existential moral threat to the very fabric of Singaporean society. On the other, the state construed itself explicitly in terms of the accepted “Western” definition of a state, and was eager to prove its legitimacy according to the usual metrics used by Western commentators to determine the worth of a state. In particular, it was concerned with portraying itself as rational, secular, and objective. The meshing of these two seemingly contradictory approaches to the West – decrying it while to some extent adopting its standards for legitimacy – would create a unique approach towards civil society which would come to characterize the government’s relationship with the grassroots and the arts, as already seen to some degree in its workings with the press.

In the first place, the government was very concerned with the threat posed by “Western values.” Lee sharply criticized the stream of media coming from the West, arguing that it posed a danger to the moral fabric of society. “At best,” he said, “these programmes entertain without offending good taste. At worst, they can undo all that is being inculcated in the schools and universities… at a time when new nations require their peoples to work hard and be disciplined to make progress, their peoples are confused by watching and reading of the happenings in the West. They read in newspapers and see on T.V. violent demonstrations in support of peace, urban
guerrillas, drugs, free love and hippieism.” Countries like Singapore, he suggested, ought “cut out the sensational and the crude, and screen only the educational, and aesthetic, the scientific and technological triumphs of the West.” This statement, of course, contained an implicit definition of what constitutes “progress”, with only the “violent” demonstrations in the West being accorded any significance, and the more peaceful demonstrations and acts of civil society being ignored altogether. In that way the state presented “progress” as mutually exclusive with the greater freedoms accorded to citizens in the “West”, since only the negative outcomes of those freedoms were acknowledged. It is notable as well that the problems he listed were almost exclusively those associated with the actions of civil society, useful for the government’s narrative about the dangers of an unfettered civil society free to speak and act on whatever issues may seem to be of greatest importance to them. More than that, though, the West was continually portrayed not just as a security threat in the traditional sense that overexposure to Western media could cause death and suffering directly through violence, demonstrations, and disorder, but as a threat to the moral fabric of society.

In his speech to the Press Club in 1972, Lee criticized a newspaper, the New Nation, for “imitating what the Western journalists are doing. It was ostensibly respectable. First, a serious study of homosexuality. Then a protracted series of lesbianism. Then unwanted babies. How did it come to such a pass? By a gradual, insidious process of suggesting that this is all right, that there is nothing wrong with it. It has led to ‘anything and everything goes.’” In that same speech, he warned the press to avoid “salacious or blue jokes”, also recalling a night program he had seen which “had… a girl in a night dress, a married man putting his clothes on and a telephone through

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81 Lee, “Speech to the General Assembly of the International Press Institute.”
82 Lee, “Speech by the Prime Minister at the Press Club Dinner.”
which she was talking to all her other lovers.” Lee attributed this “pervasive sense of promiscuity” to Western influence, declaring that:

We have got to fight it. Twenty years ago, you would not see Singapore boys and girls walking about arms around each other’s waists. British boys and girls did that. Singaporeans did not. Their parents would frown upon it… but, gradually, through the daily exposure, they have come to accept this as normal decent behavior. But there are certain norms of public conduct which, unless maintained, must affect the whole texture of that society. It is not possible to sustain the moral fibre of your society if ‘everything goes’. Everything does not go in Singapore... Many a once scandalous conduct has been acceptable. Traditional values are being gradually eroded. There is a reason for taboos in society.

Control of the media was essential to prevent the “input of the pernicious and the vicious and prevent our people from over-exposure to what is bad.”83 In his Helsinki speech, he had also accused the West of spreading “promiscuity, venereal diseases, exhibitionism and a breakdown of the family unit”, expressing his hope that “the pill plus the traditional importance of the Asian family unit, where paternity is seldom in doubt, can prevent the excesses from imitating contemporary Western sexual mores.”84 S. Rajaratnam, at one point Foreign Minister, also accused Western Europe of suffering from social problems as a result of their values and style of government, writing in 1987: “I could enumerate the many symptoms of the sickness which today afflicts the West – drugs, sexual promiscuity, dropping out, the rash of cults of unreason, and the glorification of violence.”85 While there could be much more said about the sexual conservatism espoused by the leaders as being a necessary part of the social norms of the country, it is sufficient to note that they were very comfortable with making sweeping generalizations about the moralities present in the “West.”

83 Ibid.
84 Lee, “Speech to the General Assembly of the International Press Institute.”
The role of education was also seen as crucial, as Lee said: “I believe the safest way is cultural inoculation, steeped early in our own traditional values… when the children are young, make them understand that there are basic traditional values they should hold fast to… this is what we are trying to do in the schools through bilingualism.”\(^{86}\) This suggested that there was, to some extent, an attempt to appeal to a “usable past” to justify cultural norms. He restated this point in his memoirs, recalling how his experience of the political scene in the 1950s shaped this view:

When I acted as legal adviser for the Chinese middle school student leaders in the 1950s I was impressed by their vitality, dynamism, discipline and social and political commitment. By contrast, I was dismayed at the apathy, self-centredness and lack of self-confidence of the English-educated students… English… did seem to deculturalise our students and make them apathetic.\(^{87}\)

He commented on the Chinese school system, saying he:

wanted to preserve what was good in the Chinese schools: the discipline, self-confidence and moral and social values they instilled in their students, based on Chinese traditions, values and culture. We had to transmit these same values to students in the new bilingual schools… when we use English as the medium of instruction, Confucian values of the family could not be reinforced in schools because both teachers and students were multiracial and the textbooks were not in Chinese. In addition, the traditional moral values of our students were being eroded by increasing exposure to the Western media, interaction with foreign tourists in Singapore and their own overseas travel.

He attributed the rapid spread of “Western” values to the usage of English in Singapore.\(^{88}\) Other commenters made similar points – Cheng, an academic writing in 1990, argued for the importance of building up a “cultural ballast against the adverse impact of Westernisation”, which would be achieved through emphasizing Chinese culture in education: “the traditional core values which are manifested in the upholding of the time-tested traditions, systems, and human relationships… As

\(^{86}\) Lee, “Speech by the Prime Minister at the Press Club Dinner.”  
\(^{87}\) Lee, *From Third World to First*, 173  
\(^{88}\) Ibid, 178
cultural identity is inextricably linked to language, hence the bilingual policy since the mid-1960s by which English is a major medium of instruction in schools supplemented by a mother tongue.”

On the other, though, the government was extremely concerned with demonstrating publicly that it met, to some extent, “Western” standards of good governance. Lee’s appearances at Helsinki and Washington DC, for example, was an implicit recognition of the importance of those international press institutions and showed a desire on the part of the government to clear its name in a public forum and to be perceived as “legitimate” in the eyes of the world. To that end, the troubles of race and religion, supposedly unique to Singapore’s situation, were continually invoked and emphasized. These claims were not easily (or perhaps at all) challengeable by those present, as compared to, say, the claims of foreign subversion, for which much more substantive evidence could be demanded. Indeed, as Rajah phrases it, the state continually “engaged in a highly visible process by which it demonstrated its rational, ‘rule of law’ identity.” Examples of this include the ways in which the government confronted the Law Society publicly, with Rajah noting that the primary concern of the state (and the reason for its anger at the public criticism of policies put out by the Law Society) was the fact that it felt that it was of utmost importance that the government be “perceived and presented, in the public domain, as unquestionably and unfailingly ‘right’.” In her book, Rajah provides many more examples and conducts a much more thorough analysis of how exactly “law” became a “performance” to demonstrate the legitimacy of the government.

It is interesting, then, to note the claims of some other scholars on the relationship of national identity to government policy. Stephan Ortmann, for instance, argued that Singapore did not (and

90 Rajah, The Authoritarian Rule of Law, 133
91 Ibid, 243
92 Ibid, 200
does not) have a national identity, due to an emphasis on a “rational sense of cost benefit analysis instead of an emotional attachment to cultural values.” 93 John Clammer similarly identified an “endemic elitism” in Singapore society 94 as well as a “love of technological solutions, surveys, statistics and ‘management’… [which] is actually an indicator of… the devaluation of the human.” 95 The problem with these claims is threefold.

First, no explanation is given as to why, for example, a “rational sense of cost benefit analysis” could not constitute a type of national identity or ideology. There has, of course, been much debate over what constitutes a national identity. The work of scholars such as Brubaker is instructive in de-aggregating the multiple meanings usually associated with the word “identity” – he offers five separate ways in which the word is commonly used, among them: “a fundamental similarity between members of a certain category (either objectively or subjectively)”; “the presence of a deep and abiding condition of being as opposed to that which is superficial or fleeting, and which is to be cultivated and preserved”; and “a product of social and political action, the processual, interactive development of the kind of collective self-understanding... that can make collective action possible” 96. The implication of Ortmann’s statement, in the way in which he argues that identity does not exist because of a lack of emphasis on “cultural values,” implies that an emphasis on rationality cannot be a “deep and abiding condition” and must be “superficial and fleeting,” an assumption which is at best unjustified. Why can an emphasis on rationality, for example, not be a cultural value in itself? A false dichotomy is drawn which is not adequately substantiated. Indeed,

95 Ibid, 80
the second problem we can identify with the type of claims exemplified by the two given above is their factual inaccuracy. As just demonstrated in this past chapter, at least in the rhetoric of the government, Singapore did maintain a strong attachment to certain cultural values (importance of the traditional family unit, importance of political stability etc.) and a resentment of other values (sexual promiscuity, “hippieism” etc.).

The third, and perhaps largest, problem with the claims is the inherent assumption that an emphasis on “technological solutions, surveys, statistics, and ‘management’” must necessarily fail to be cohesive (in Brubaker’s terms, that which “makes collective action possible”). In fact, it might be that the exact opposite is true. The thrust of this chapter has been to show the main concerns plaguing the Singaporean government in the immediate post-independence years. One of the most severe, if not the most severe, threats which it was believed faced the nation was the problem of the centrifugal forces of race and religion which it was thought might tear the new nation apart if left unchecked. It is precisely those forces which a state ideology emphasizing the supposedly objective nature of government was best suited to keep in check. If the government, which was and is majority Chinese, promoted policies that ended up leading to a significant difference in the income levels of various racial groups, for instance, it would have been all too easy for members of the opposition, subversives etc. to accuse the government of bias, leading to anger and resentment – unless the government was able to use precisely that emphasis on the technical and statistical to cast itself as an objective, unbiased party. In that way it was not so much the “devaluation of the human” which occurred, but rather the sense of detachment granted by these “values” – an emphasis on the figures associated with economic growth, the apotheosis of “law” as objective and unbiased, and the championing of numbers and statistics as technical and therefore impartial – which could be seen as having played a role in preserving the cohesiveness.
of the state. Of course, this did create a nascent tension in the state, as it tried to balance its rejection of “Western” values on one hand with its appeal to metrics commonly promoted by the “West” as legitimizing a state on the other. It was in order to preserve their narrative, as touched on earlier, that the state could not abide public criticism, for such public criticism might have cast doubt on the image of the government as an objective body capable of implementing policy fairly and in an impartial manner.

Under this mindset, the government refused responsibility (real or imagined) for problems such as inequality. Instead, the responsibility was shifted to other parties, and the government cast itself as not just an objective outsider, but the best possible source of solutions to the problem. A prime example of this would be in the “government’s acceptance and promotion of the orthodox explanation of Malay economic backwardness in terms of their cultural values” when confronted with the phenomenon of economic inequality among the races.97 In 1980, for instance, the Malays (comprising about 15% of the population) had the lowest percentage of persons aged ten years and above with secondary and higher level education (13.7% as compared to the 20.8% nationally), performance in national exams was below that of non-Malay students, and in 1980 they constituted only “8 per cent of the total professional and technical work force, 2 per cent of all administrative personnel including managers, and 4 per cent of the total number of sales workers in Singapore.”98

The government, according to Brown (quoted in Hill and Lian), “promoted the acceptance among the Malays of the ‘Malay cultural-weakness orthodoxy’, whereby the Malays are persuaded to see their own internal attributes as responsible for their socio-economic problems, instead of blaming

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the Chinese or the government. It is the lack of achievement motivation, or the rural orientation of Malays, which is, in this view, the cause of their ‘predicament’. It is easy to see how a belief that the government was responsible for the undesirable reality of the low socioeconomic status of Malays could easily have lead to resentment or anger. With the promotion of the “Malay cultural weakness orthodoxy,” however, the government portrayed itself as objective, and the implementer of policies designed to rectify the problem, primarily by radically re-orienting the value systems of the Malay communities. It did this in collaboration with “Malay middle-class mediators” and the establishment of organizations like The Council on Education of Muslim Children (Mendaki) in 1981 by Malay PAP MPs who wanted to improve the poor performance of Malays in education and employment. In a 1982 address at the opening ceremony of the Congress of Mendaki, Lee Kuan Yew encouraged Mendaki to “strive to make the striving for success through scholarship universally accepted and admired as a virtue… the attitudes of Chinese and Indian parents to learning as the road to progress are the result of historical experience.” At the same time, the government worked to distance itself somewhat from the organization to maintain its image of objectivity, for example, a news article was run in March 1983 for the sole purpose of quoting Acting Social Affairs Minister Ahamd Mattar as saying that “Mendaki was not an organ of the ministry, but a voluntary effort on the part of the Muslim community. Therefore, Mendaki could not be an organ of the government.”

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100 Ibid.
102 Editors, “Mendaki is set up by willing Muslims,” *The Straits Times*, March 24th, 1983, 8. [http://newspapers.nl.sg/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19830324-1.2.32.7.aspx](http://newspapers.nl.sg/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19830324-1.2.32.7.aspx)
There is much more to the discussion of the attitude towards the “culture” of the Malay community in Singapore, but for the purposes of this thesis it is sufficient to note the salient features identified in the government’s policies: above all, the recognition that any perception of the government as biased might endanger the social fabric of the country. Hence, the government took great pains to depict itself as unbiased, objective, and technocratic, in an echo of Western conceptions of state “legitimacy.” The dichotomy was further compounded by the fact that the government’s appeals to “traditional values” as a bulwark against “Western decadence” drew almost entirely on Chinese traditions and its understanding of Confucianism. This was uncomfortable territory; the PAP was well aware that too much emphasis on Chinese values might cause racial frictions. Therefore, the Singapore government found itself walking a tightrope. On one hand it implicitly accepted many of the standards of the “West” for demonstrating the legitimacy of the government, not just to the international audience but to the electorate as well. On the other, though, it remained fearful of the possibility that, left unchecked, the influence of the West would cause moral degradation which would shred the social fabric of the new country. Naturally, the main methods through which such “values” could be spread were forms of arts – and the unique concerns and style of the government, as explored in this chapter, would come to shape the Singapore government’s approach towards the arts scene.
Chapter Two

In 1968, Lee Kuan Yew told a university audience: “Poetry is a luxury we cannot afford,” in what has become an (in)famous expression which scholars have used to point to the fact that Singapore was (and remains) a “cultural desert.”

This is a term which even the PAP itself had come to accept as an apt description of the state of Singapore’s “cultural” scene in the decades just after independence.

Was this true? Was Singapore a “cultural desert?” The English newspapers seem to provide support for this. “Unlike the Chinese dailies” (which, as mentioned in the previous chapter, were suspect because of what the government saw as their chauvinistic approach to promoting Chinese culture), “none of the [English] newspapers publishe[d] a regular literary supplement. Singaporeans seriously interested in what literature [was] being published in the East and West [had to] go to the imported international magazines and it [was] also in these that one might find special surveys of current writing in English from both Singapore and Malaysia.”

Indeed, L. Wee refers to the PAP’s “reputation for forging an uncreative society composed mainly of shopping centers by and large stemmed from a pragmatic, petit-bourgeois vision of a hard-working modern society”, and later to a “pragmatic, philistine modernity promoted by the government” which led to a “mercantile/industrial-oriented indifference to the artsy-craftsy.” All that seems to agree with the view that Singapore did suffer from a lack of “culture”.

John Clammer, however, rightly identifies the dichotomy between two definitions of “culture” used in Singapore – “high culture”, which is the “government-inspired” definition,
referred to art forms typically seen as representative of sophistication and wealth, such as ballet, orchestral music, operas, and so on. The second, “everyday or anthropological” definition is expansive enough to include things like the oral traditions, vernacular drama, traditional music etc. of various groups, often racially defined (e.g. Chinese opera, Indian music).\(^{106}\) While the first might have been lacking, the latter was not in short supply. Thirunalan Sasitharan, a well-known actor and performer in the Singapore arts scene who later went on to become a theatre and visual art critic with the Straits Times, a teacher of Philosophy at the National University of Singapore, and most recently the co-founder and director of the Intercultural Theatre Institute,\(^{107}\) said in an interview, when asked about Singapore’s “cultural deficit”:

> I think that’s completely nonsense. It’s a whole load of rubbish. It’s kind of an imperialistic perspective of what constitutes culture – culture is an auxiliary of a ruling elite, or politics, an imperium… we’ve had theatre, oral histories and so on – our understanding of our own culture, even news. Things back in China and India and so on got transmitted in writing and theatres. In the 1920s we had Cantonese opera performances and performances in Hindu temples, all of which were about harking back to the homeland, and these weren’t imperialistic cultural products. They did not have ‘literary form’. We are much more affected by the oral traditions of the past. Many people living in Singapore, e.g. the coolies [physical laborers], did not know how to write. We weren’t a literary culture.\(^{108}\)

In this view, the argument that Singapore suffered from a “cultural deficit” stemmed from, as in Clammer, a particular definition of “culture” which failed to consider the multifarious extant artforms and traditions already present in Singapore at that time.

Not all arts and culture were centered on the old and traditional, though. Sivanandan Choy, who became a major figure in the local music scene (playing rock and roll) in the 1980s, discussed


in an interview the lively and exciting performances by well-known international bands in Singapore in the 1960s: “At that time in the ‘60s the music of Cliff Richards and The Shadows was very big… the Shadows… became popular because they visited Singapore and performed, and all of us in secondary school went to see them. We were very impressed… they performed at the Gay World Stadium, and everybody wanted to play like them, and they became a very influential band.” Singapore also had a well-developed local music scene. He recalled that “in the ‘60s when we just started, music everywhere in Southeast Asia except the Philippines, musicians in Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, even Sri Lanka… would look to Singapore to set the trends. Bands from Singapore were dominating Hong Kong, Malaysia.” Soon, though, it all went wrong.

Choy continued his story: “And then the whole scene just collapsed. And today when I go back to Singapore and listen to the jazz scene, and when I go up to Kuala Lumpur [in Malaysia], theirs is so far ahead of ours… they’ve all developed this incredible thing, and we lost it.” 109 Writers themselves in the early to mid-1980s referred to a “paucity of writers in the country” and an “unenergetic, subdued, literary scene.”110 What we see, therefore, is a portrait of a country with rich and varied cultural and artistic traditions, which suddenly appeared to have lost its vitality.

How did this come to pass? How did a cultural scene with such vibrancy and life, according to some of its most famous practitioners, fall apart, and turn into a “cultural desert”? Was it simply a matter of neglect, or something more? The answer to that lies in the statement made by Lee: that poetry, and by implication other forms of the arts, were things that Singapore could not “afford”. What did he mean by that?

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There are at least two ways in which this statement could be read. On one hand, it could be read literally – that arts and culture was something that Singapore economically could not “afford”, either because it was expensive, or (more likely) because it was considered distracting from the main goals of the nation-state. Alternatively, as was discussed in the previous chapter, art could have been seen as a major potential threat to the security of Singapore. Each of these possibilities will be discussed in turn.

**a. Economics and the cost of the arts**

In his 2010 speech, ex-Prime Minister Goh said that “up till the early 1980s, we focused mainly on achieving economic growth and raising per capita income,” resulting in the characterization of Singapore as a “cultural desert”. To some extent, the stunted growth of the arts scene was due to neglect. The government conceived of economic growth and culture as mutually exclusive, at least to the extent that pursuing development of “culture” entailed an unacceptable opportunity cost.

Every year, on the occasion of National Day (9th August, marking independence), the Prime Minister would make a speech which would be broadcast through the mass media. Known first as the National Day Broadcast, then the National Day Message, and eventually as the National Day Rally Speech, the speech often discussed what leaders felt were the most significant developments of the past year, challenges ahead, and also often contained rhetoric exhorting citizens to be united and to avoid strife and conflict. It is remarkable, then, that not a single National Day speech from 1968 to 1983 contained a single mention of the arts. Instead, every message read similarly, in an almost formulaic way, focusing almost entirely on discussion of economic problems and

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111 Goh, “Singapore: Global City of Buzz, Home for Us”
opportunities. Social issues such as strikes were only discussed insofar as the clampdown on strikes, portrayed as a “willing[ness] to put in intense and sustained effort” and a desire to become “keener and more productive” among workers, was able to contribute to economic growth.\textsuperscript{112} After that would come a deluge of statistics and tables, including “estimates of gross domestic expenditure and per capita income”, “external trade statistics”, tables detailing growth (both in terms of employment and output) of specific types of industries such as construction and manufacturing, tax revenues, and so on. Occasionally, there was a statement emphasizing the importance of and pride in the military and defense forces.\textsuperscript{113} Not once, though, was there any reference to the arts.

Even at that time, this fact was recognized and criticized by many – the government was well aware of its deliberate negligence of the arts in these messages. Not only did it not change, it struck back vehemently against its critics. In a speech in the Singapore Parliament during a debate over the Budget on 5\textsuperscript{th} March 1980, the Member of Parliament for Anson, Devan Nair (who would be elected the third President of Singapore in the following year) railed against the “snooty arty-crafty types, who denounce materialism and materialists.” He singled out the critics of the style of speech-making by the PAP for attack. He quoted a “senior lecturer in the [University of Singapore’s] Department of English”, who had apparently said that Singapore “must be about the only country where the Prime Minister releases a sat (sic) of tables with his text… Every National Day speech contains productivity figures and projections of trade figures, GNP, and so on.” Nair called this “mindless gibberish”, saying:

\textsuperscript{112} Kuan Yew, Lee “The Prime Minister’s National Day Broadcast” (Speech, Broadcast, August 8\textsuperscript{th}, 1969) \hspace{1em} \textsuperscript{113} Keng Swee, Goh, “National Day Message for Secondary Schools and Junior Colleges” (Speech, August 17\textsuperscript{th}, 1981)
This is the kind of intellectual food served to our students in the arts and humanities departments. So what does this mean? We tell the Prime Minister, ‘Please, Mr. Prime Minister, in your next National Day speech, leave out facts, figures, and statistics.’ Use the expressive power of the English language, in the way some of the Presidents and Prime Ministers of broken-back societies elsewhere use their own languages, to treat their people to hock, platitudes, political chants – anything else but the truth, the hard facts about the state of the economy… and our Minister for Finance! When you present next year’s Budget don’t you dare use statistics! Present your Budget in English verse, with appropriate rhyme and metre. Otherwise, the poor chaps in the English Department would not be able to understand you… I for one would not want him to present his next Budget in poetical form. I want my facts, figures and statistics.

Defending Singapore’s focus on economic growth, he went so far as to propose:

“Singaporeans ought to know… that if we throw our Government Front benchers, our Back benchers, our top civil servants, our technocrats, systems engineers, entrepreneurs, skilled workers and managers into the ocean, there will not be any Singapore. But throw these arty-crafty reality-dodgers into the ocean, and you might get a bit more literary and spiritual realism.” The speech as a whole reads fairly shockingly, especially compared to the relatively dispassionate speech which follows (on the emphasis on “computer services” in the budget), with Nair at times describing critics of materialism as engaging in “nincompoopery”, and (some) Singaporean poets as “confidence tricksters… apes of style, barren of substance, and devoid of sincerity”, writing “depraved” and “execrable stuff.”

Nair’s speech is richly telling of the attitude taken by the government towards the arts, right or wrong. Indeed Lee’s statement about poetry being a “luxury” was made when contrasting it to “technical education”, which was seen as “more important.” Lee further reinforced this concept


that literature, in particular, was an optional thing, a “luxury” unnecessary for culture and civilisation. In 1978, at a question-and-answer session held at the Malay Teachers’ Union on “Educational Challenges in the 1980s”, Lee argued that:

> Literature and heritage or tradition are different altogether… literature is a pastime for people who have education… but what is important for pupils is not literature but a philosophy of life… this is an important matter which is concerned not with poetry or literature but with relationships – the relationship between the younger generation and the older generation, the relationship between brothers and sisters, and between friends… this is the meaning of culture.\(^{116}\)

Apart from the possibility that a significant amount of literature concerns itself with precisely the question of human relationships, and the fact that literary tradition and heritage is a significant part of most cultures, literature in particular is once again painted as a “pastime” and a “luxury” for those who can afford it, something completely separate from “culture” as a whole. The government could therefore take a stance against what it viewed as the extraneous and unnecessary, without having to confront or acknowledge accusations of de-emphasizing “culture.” Overall, the arts were often seen as (at best) a distraction from the more important job of improving the country’s economy and enhancing economic growth.

b. The arts as morally contaminating

More than that, however, the government’s attitude towards the arts was not simply one of neglect. In fact, the government actively saw the arts as a threat to the security of the state which had to be contained. The discursive elements of speeches and policies in particular demonstrate the means through which the government attempted to contain these problems. The language used by Nair exemplifies the way in which the government had placed itself in a position asserting

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\(^{116}\) Kuan Yew, Lee, “Lee on importance of teaching young a value-system of life” (Question and answer session, DBS Auditorium, June 6th, 1978) [http://newspapers.nl.sg/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19780606-1.2.67.aspx](http://newspapers.nl.sg/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19780606-1.2.67.aspx)
superior knowledge of the arts, therefore appropriating for itself the right to determine the value of artistic endeavors by Singaporean artists. Not only did he refer degradingly to the specific artistic content (or lack thereof) in these works of art, literature etc., by stating that they were “barren of substance”, “apes of style” etc., but also said:

Who in Singapore is against Western culture or English culture…? The present generation of leaders are persons reared, among other things, on English literature. Indeed, some of the values we cherish and admire are British values, which seem to be going out of fashion in Great Britain itself… Our Deputy Prime Minister, for instance, has drunk deep of Plato, Aristotle and the classics… I have heard our Prime Minister discuss the development of Shakespeare’s dramas over lunch. Our Foreign Minister, as everyone knows, is a walking library. Rumor has it that even his toilet is a mini-library! And I will take a dim view of anybody who thinks poorly of Dostoevsky, Marvell or Wordsworth. So… do not try to give the misleading impression to our students that those who sit on the Front and Back-benches of this House are a bunch of cultural and literary morons. What we do object to is not Western culture and civilization, or English culture and literature, but the yellow pop culture and the cheap literature churned out by the pulp mills of the West. Not only of the West, we also get pop mandarin and pop culture through Taipei (sic) and Hong Kong. If we were against English culture and literature, our senior lecturer in the English Department would not have a job, for there would be no English Department.117

The assertion of the superior knowledge and understanding possessed by government members was completely in line with its general approach to civil society, characterized by continuous assertion of its more in-depth knowledge and understanding of the subject at hand, and therefore that it was better placed to make decisions on these subjects. If decisions were seen as questionable by others, that was because they did not have the requisite knowledge of the issue, and if they did, they would ostensibly agree with the government’s position. For example, when the Law Society criticized the government’s handling of the press, the government rebutted the Society fiercely. Lee continuously delineated certain laws as “outside the expertise of the Law

117 Nair, C.V.D. (1980).
Society”, ensuring that “the public was not to think that the Council, as lawyers, had the requisite professional knowledge or expertise” to discuss a law pertaining to the press.\(^{118}\)

Nair’s statement also reveals the government’s confidence in its ability to distinguish Western “culture and civilization” from “yellow pop culture” and “cheap literature,” in the same vein as distinctions between “high culture” and “everyday culture” – except this time, the latter was presented not as “everyday culture,” but the very opposite of culture, being rude, dirty, and degrading. This stance, again, presupposed not only a factual distinction between Western “culture and civilization” and “yellow pop culture” – an assumption laden with implicit statements about the very nature of art itself – but that the PAP was the best candidate to distinguish between the two. It was this latter sort of art, “yellow” culture, which was seen as a moral danger to society, while that which was “old” and “accepted” was valorized and canonized into a hallowed tradition apotheosizing (apparent) sophistication and established heritage in dichotomous opposition to the new, “trashy”, or simply experimental. Among the cultural forms which were subject to this treatment were music and other forms of behavior which were seen to be representative of undesirable lifestyles and values. Ultimately the arts were seen as inseparable from the values they supposedly encouraged and advocated: traditional culture was desirable because it strengthened traditional values and morals, whereas “yellow” culture was undesirable because it led to drug abuse and other perceived social problems.

Commenting on the meaning of the term “yellow culture”, Tan Siok Sun (Appeals Board of the Board of Film Censors, later Registrar of Newspapers) said:

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In those days, yellow culture was a bit synonymous with undesirable themes coming from the west, rather than from the east. 1971 we were approaching the hippie days… you also associate with drugs, with cannabis and then LSD and later on hard drugs… and these crept into music. For example, the Beatles song ‘Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds’ is supposed to be extolling the virtues of LSD… so therefore the LP would be banned even if all the other songs are fine… ‘Yellow Submarine’ was supposed to be a capsule or something. The whole LP would be disallowed… we had to look at books, magazines [and] posters… music… television… we actually also (sic) vet the costume [of dancers], and they would perform before us…

In stark contrast to Nair’s statements, Tan posited that it was not the place of the government to determine the artistic worth of works of art or literature. Recalling a discussion with the Permanent Secretary for the Ministry about the book *The Last Tango in Paris*, when the Permanent Secretary said “there is not one iota of artistic merit in this book”, she says:

I thought that was a strange comment because we are not there to decide whether there is artistic merit or not. We are not English literature experts. It is a question of who would most likely be reading it. Would it be harmful, does it have any benefits? Is it literature [or], as opposed to our guidelines, exploitation.119

On one level, there is an obvious disagreement with Nair, who said that the government, at least at the highest levels, was indeed composed of people who (mostly) were experts in English literature and were therefore qualified to pass judgment on the works of, for instance, professors of English in the University. On another, though, the inherent assumption in Tan’s statement otherwise supports what Nair said, sometimes in ways which appear contradictory. First, she stated that it was not the job of the government to determine “artistic merit,” but then said that the government had to decide if something was “literature” or “exploitation,” an odd dichotomy to draw, and one which still placed the government in the role of the only actor with the knowledge

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and ability to decide what constituted art. By calling it “exploitation,” the people were portrayed as victims with minimal agency, instead of free agents who were rational enough to decide if they would like to read a “racy” text. The government cast itself not as a censor, but as a protector defending the innocence of citizens from those who would seek to “exploit” it. Furthermore, by opposing the terms “literature” and “exploitation,” the government removed a dilemma for itself – since the works it censored were “exploitative,” they could not be “literary,” and no one could accuse the PAP of being narrow-minded, bigoted, or biased against English “literature,” since all books banned were by definition not “literature.”

As Kong puts it, music in particular became the focus of the creation of “moral panics” by the state. As she defined them, moral panics were cases where things or people “become defined as a threat to societal values and interests”, often being depicted “in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people.”

120 In 1970, the government enacted a ban on 13 records from the Beatles and other popular artists:

As can be seen from the article which ran in the *Straits Times*, the government clamped down hard on music which they claimed “sing the praises of drugs and hippies.” Curiously enough, the last statement from the government in the above article seemed to recognize that meaning could have been “assumed” by a song (or, perhaps, art form) by the way society read and treated it; nevertheless the very first paragraph stated as a fact that these songs were made in support of this lifestyle. These were deeply contradictory claims with vast epistemological ramifications for the nature and value of art that were never reconciled.

The bans were implemented not just on import and ownership of the records, but, as the article above shows, on the broadcasting of such songs over the radio. Those working at radio stations did not see it as a simple act of “urging,” though; to them, the government’s approach was heavy-handed and opaque. Mike Ellery, who worked in the radio industry, said: “The first indication we got that something was seriously wrong was one Friday\(^{122}\) when we received a letter from the Ministry of Culture, saying: ‘On receipt of this letter, you will cease to broadcast the type

\(^{122}\) Unfortunately, Ellery did not specify the date on which this took place.
of music known as rock and roll’. That was it.” When asked about the rationale for the ban, Ellery recalled that it was:

…because it was evil, induced drug-smoking and rape and… everything else you could think of. It was mostly drugs they were worried about, actually… first thing I did of course was to go through my long box of records in the studio and quickly whip out any song that had a beat, because if it has a good beat someone’s gonna say it’s rock and roll… I got the library staff from Monday to go through every damn record in the library. We didn’t zap them… because we thought they would change the law at some time… We marked them yellow around the centerpiece. There’s a label round the center, we wrote ‘banned’…

Choy, the musician, stated:

[The government was] giving us a hard time every time we walked the streets, cops were stopping us because of our long hair. Everyone was so anti-Beatles, the Beatles weren’t allowed to come here to perform, they banned all the rock concerts after the Rolling Stones… the Rolling Stones was the last concert. There was some misbehavior, some idiots jumped on cars and misbehaved… and they just banned them. The blanket reaction to everything is ban, ban, ban… we had a big drug problem which was attributed to bands and nightclubs… this inability to see that drug problems are a social problem, not just people wanting to listen to music…

The ban was also extended to live performances of bands seen to be playing undesirable styles of music, local and international. Nightclubs in particular were associated strongly with this type of music, and with drugs and undesirable lifestyles in general. In 1971 entertainment taxes on nightclubs and restaurants with live bands were raised by between 100 to 400 per cent, depending on whether or not they had a cover charge, making it much harder to sustain live music performances.

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Unlike Nair’s excoriation of artists for creating art devoid of artistic value, this clampdown was because certain art forms were, as mentioned before, associated strongly (or even causally) with undesirable behaviors, in this case, drug-taking. Practitioners of the arts also drew a strong link between the personalities involved in government and their actions, refusing to accept the disinterested, objective self-portrait of government. The personalities of ministers and policymakers became a focus for criticism. Their actions, even those before independence, were taken as evidence of the personal bias of policymakers. Choy recalls:

I remember when, in 1959, when S. Rajaratnam became the first Minister for Culture, he was totally against rock and roll... he hated rock and roll, I think... there was a clampdown on Elvis Presley movies, they were taken off the air... They all came under the classification – his classification – of ‘yellow culture’, I don’t know why... the reason was that this was contributing to gangsters, juvenile delinquency, and a slavish imitation of the West. I recall one incident which upset me considerably, and I haven’t forgotten, was when we were asked, as schoolboys, to perform in a... cultural concert... we were schoolboys and were happy to play anywhere somebody asked us, and very honored... especially when he said the Minister of Culture would be there... as we performed, we looked into the audience. He was watching us, but there was a total blank look on his face, as if he was totally uninterested in what we were doing. Later, backstage, when he... [met] all the artistes... he shook the hands of all the Chinese, Indian, Malay artistes, but when he got to us, he looked me straight in the face, did not put out his hand, and went on. I had a distinct feeling that he thought we were slavish imitators of Western culture... it was such a snub. Years later, I remember thinking: maybe that is your attitude on culture. As a minister, you can take such a position, but you also have to remember that these are two little boys who are just singing a song, and you are their minister, no matter what, you should shake their hands and make them feel good... I think that maybe that incident really affected me considerably. I was not able to take anything he did seriously after that.  

Discussing this episode, Rajaratnam’s biographer explains that “Raja was being attacked in the Legislative Assembly by [a] PAP breakaway group [composed of Chinese conservatives] for promoting Western culture and undermining the morals of the youth... the opposition’s...
populist cries against Western influence were an undeniable constraint on Raja’s actions.” The biography also notes that Rajaratnam, after retirement, “disclosed that he was unimpressed by the demands of some Chinese-educated politicians to clamp down on ‘so-called yellow culture’… ‘I was liberal about what they considered yellow culture.’” In a 1961 report on the ‘anti-yellow culture campaign’ co-chaired by Rajaratnam, it was made clear that “what may be immoral and undesirable to one group of people may not be so to others… the test lies in the intention behind the film, book or play. We should not impose on the community the particular prejudice or feelings of prudery of individuals.”

Although the rock and roll ban was “eased off” within the next “three, four, five years,” the impression left on performers like Choy was deep. Some, like Choy and Ellery, took particular umbrage at the government’s claim to superior knowledge. For them, Rajaratnam and his colleagues could offer no possible defense of their position. Ellery commented: “Who’s to say what [rock and roll] is? Rajaratnam knows what is rock and roll? Like hell.” Choy stated at length his belief in the lack of understanding present in people like Rajaratnam who determined cultural policy:

“We failed miserably at culture, because we put people in charge of culture who didn’t understand what culture was. I would like to see somebody who paints, who is an artist, who is a writer, musician, a dancer… I would like to see somebody like that as Minister of Culture, not somebody who hasn’t written a poem, who can’t paint, who doesn’t understand music… even if you listen to classical music, that’s fine, but you don’t even do that. So what gives you the right to become Minister of Culture?”

Not only was the government’s veneer of superior knowledge in doubt, so too was its position of objectivity. While Nair had claimed that nobody was against any sort of “culture”,

129 Ibid.
Choy perceived a great deal of inequality of treatment: “I felt that the Chinese musicians didn’t have a problem. No one was saying ‘that’s decadent’, ‘this is wrong’… nothing! They could do everything. We were the ones playing Western music, and we copped it all the way.”\textsuperscript{130} The second part of the identity the government had tried to create – that of an unbiased, objective body – was therefore also at risk.

In the meantime, the government had extended its definition of the signifiers of moral decay to include other aspects of peoples’ behavior, and even appearance. In September 1970 the Member of Parliament for Tiong Bahru, Chng Jit Koon, called for the “wiping out of certain decadent aspects of Western culture”, in particular “keeping long hair, wearing strange clothes, and taking drugs”, which he claimed would harm the individuals concerned and “eventually also cause damage to our society.”\textsuperscript{131} The Parliamentary Secretary for Education reprimanded parents for being overly indulgent and allowing “hippism” in their children, blaming them for failing to prevent their children from taking up “practices such as sporting long hair, smoking marijuana, taking drugs and wearing outlandish clothes” which he claimed were “alien to the Asian way of life.”\textsuperscript{132} It is interesting to note that the phenomenon of long hair and its link to crime and hippie lifestyles was linked almost exclusively to boys and men, and also to the youth. The act of leaving one’s hair long was presented as necessarily coming into conflict with that which was established and old – tradition, heritage, culture etc. Efforts were made in the press to link long hair with

\textsuperscript{130} Choy, Sivanandan. Interview. Tape Recording. National Archives of Singapore.
\textsuperscript{131} “Wipe out ‘rotten aspects’ of Western culture, says MP,” \textit{The Straits Times}, September 27\textsuperscript{th}, 1970, 8. \texttt{http://newspapers.nl.sg/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19700927-1.2.48.aspx}
\textsuperscript{132} “Parents rapped for hippism,” \textit{The Straits Times}, September 24\textsuperscript{th}, 1970, 15. \texttt{http://newspapers.nl.sg/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19700924-1.2.65.aspx}
lifestyles of crime and with lifestyles in close contact with the music scene, as this article in the Straits Times in 1970 shows.133

The attempt to link the act of having long hair to lifestyles of music (“worked with a band”), idleness and joblessness (“saying that he was jobless for the rest of the week”), and ultimately crime (“admitted stealing a bicycle”) is clear, in large part because of the sheer randomness associated with the presence of this article. A report on such a petty crime might be considered unusual in and of itself, but the focus on the youth’s hairstyle instead of other factors which might be considered of interest to the public – such as the motivation behind the crime, the way in which the youth was caught, and the evidence provided – lends an almost absurd and comical air to the article. In 1972, the government ordered a three-night surveillance of nightspots, concluding that

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http://newspapers.nl.sg/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19701229-1.2.119.aspx
many of them were havens for young drug users. A list of characteristics of such havens and young drug takers was published in the press, including the use of “psychedelic lights, abstract art, loud ‘soul’ music” and “long hair… colored T-shirts,… bell bottoms, loose blouses and jockey-caps.”

This enterprise went further than the making of statements bemoaning the hairstyle choices of the youth. In fact, this actually extended into policy decisions made by the government, to the chagrin of the youth (and sometimes even other states!). In June 1970, TV Singapore banned male artists with long hair from appearing in any locally recorded programs. Suspicions were voiced that foreign programs which were cut had been removed because they featured actors with long hair, even if that was not the reason officially stated by the stations. Schoolboys spotted with “hippie-hairstyles… like side-burns, or mop of hair at the neck (sic)” were made to receive immediate haircuts, with daily inspections to ensure compliance. The government also issued a warning that government departments would “snub” people with “long, untidy hair,” who were, under the government’s explicit directions, likely to find themselves “ignored at the office counter or served last.” This article, too, referred directly to the apparent rise of “hippie culture” in

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134 Among other conclusions the report reached was that Singapore’s drug scene ‘resembles fairly closely those of Western societies’ and that many young girls, ‘invariably from good, middle-class families’, were now frequenting these nightspots to take drugs, after which they would be ‘picked up and “bedded down” by boys.’ The use of drugs at such places was also linked to the bands playing there; another attempt to associate drug use with music. Reference: “‘High flyers’ who make the scene in coffee houses, discos and bowling alleys,” The Straits Times, July 9th, 1972, 10. http://newspapers.nl.sg/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19720709-1.2.45.aspx

135 In one incident in 1970 which caused a diplomatic commotion, three Malaysian youths who had been detained by the Singapore police on suspicion of gang activities had their long hair cut by the police (although the Ministry of Interior and Defense and higher-ups in the police departments claimed not to have issued such instructions, and later said that the “hair-snipping operation” had been stopped).


137 “TV ban on popular Mamas and Papas pop group?” The Straits Times, August 7th, 1970, 10. http://newspapers.nl.sg/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19700807-1.2.84.aspx

Singapore as the impetus for strong action.\(^{139}\) The message was broadcast not just through the media, but directly through employers’ organizations such as the Singapore Manufacturers’ Association, playing on their fear of losing lucrative government contracts to get compliance from their members.\(^{140}\)

It would be unfair, however, to say that the government alone pushed for all these clampdowns. Indeed, it received strong support from some sections of society. Before very long, the aforementioned government policies found vocal supporters. The Singapore Teachers Union, for one, applauded directives from the Ministry of Education to forcibly cut the hair of schoolboys with “hippie hair tops” – a *Straits Times* article declared that “lads with long locks will find very few, if any at all, supporters for their cause,” with both parents and teachers rallying behind the Ministry’s efforts.\(^{141}\)

Likewise, the early 1980s saw a surge in public debate about the nature and effects of listening to rock music. One of the key drivers of this debate was one Tow Siang Hwa, a gynecologist and obstetrician who by happenstance was also the chairman of a fund-raising committee for the Singapore Symphony Orchestra, which was also falling short of its $10 million target by $4.2 million at the end of 1982. At a fund-raising concert cum dinner in December that year, he argued that listening to rock music led to “drug abuse, moral anarchy, sex perversion, social alienation, youth rebellion, rejection of established norms of common decency, anti-establishment outbursts, senseless violence and wanton vandalism.” Quoting “scientific” studies

\(^{139}\) “Govt depts. Will snub people with long, untidy hair,” *The Straits Times*, February 24th, 1971, 17. [http://newspapers.nl.sg/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19710224-1.2.85.aspx](http://newspapers.nl.sg/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19710224-1.2.85.aspx)


apparently demonstrating the destructive effects of rock music on the health of sweet corn plants and guinea pigs, he also suggested that it might be appropriate to classify rock music as “more dangerous than heroin”. Instead of allowing this degeneracy, he opined, the authorities should step in to protect the youth from such destructive forms of music, instead trying to inculcate in them a taste for the finer, or “serious”, sorts of aural entertainment. The Singapore Symphony Orchestra was a particularly outstanding example of this, he added.\textsuperscript{142} The fact that the Ministry of Culture banned rock concerts at the National Theatre just two days after this report, quoting repeated instances of vandalism and unruly behavior by rock concert-goers, served only to further enflame public opinion about the issue.\textsuperscript{143} Multiple letters were written to the press both in support of Tow and in defense of rock music, to the point where Tow felt compelled to speak up again, saying: “I’m glad that I have provoked some people to think and I’m sorry if the truth has to hurt,” also admitting that his religious sentiments probably contributed to his distaste for rock music.\textsuperscript{144}

With the rising tide of interest in and active participation in the arts scene, it was perhaps inevitable that the government was soon forced to recognize the futility of standing firm against it. Nevertheless, the conviction that an unfettered spread of “yellow” culture would place the very foundations of society in mortal peril ruled that option unthinkable. The only feasible option,

\textsuperscript{142} Tow claimed that studies conducted at Temple Buell College had shown that playing rock music at plants for three hours a day caused them to wilt. He also said that the University of Tennessee had shown that guinea pigs exposed to four hours of rock music suffered from shiveled cochlear (inner ear) cells. Ultimately, he warned that if rock music was not stopped in its tracks, the youth who listened to it might be “mesmerized into a state of physical and moral oblivion”, and have “their health and careers ruined through rock and drug-related orgies” (which he suggested had happened to innumerable rock fans).


\textsuperscript{143} “Rocking into bad times,” \textit{The Straits Times}, December 11\textsuperscript{th}, 1982, 29. http://newspapers.nl.sg/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19821211-1.2.150.43.2.aspx

\textsuperscript{144} “I’m sorry if the truth hurts, says Dr Tow,” \textit{The Straits Times}, December 19\textsuperscript{th}, 1982, 19. http://newspapers.nl.sg/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19821219-1.2.44.aspx
therefore, was to ensure that the development of the arts scene in general took place on the government’s own terms.

c. From condemnation to co-optation

By the 1980s the government realized that it could no longer adamantly refuse to allow the arts scene to grow. In 1979, Communications Minister and acting Culture Minister Ong Teng Cheong argued in a public statement that Singapore could now aim for the “total person”, as Singapore had achieved sufficient economic development to pay attention to non-economic aspects of life. He quoted lifting pressures in the immediately preceding years as having allowed the government some room, especially in terms of money and other resources, to focus on non-economic areas. Interestingly, when questioned about the development of a unique Singaporean culture, he suggested that “various ethnic groups should retain their own cultures yet at the same time expand on their vast cultural experience to develop freely a ‘new culture’. “145 This approach would continue even into the mid-1980s with economic troubles looming.146

In December 1984, Goh Chok Tong made a speech proposing a new direction at a press conference on the eve of Nomination Day for the General Elections. Entitled “Singapore, City of Excellence – A Vision for Singapore by 1999,” the speech laid out broad goals and objectives. Among others, the state wanted to equal the 1984 standard of living of Switzerland, and exceed that of America and Japan, by 1999; luxuriant images of “windsurfing and boating” and “long stretches of white sandy beach” were also given much airtime. The speech articulated two

146 In a press briefing regarding the 1986 Festival of the Arts, Minister of State (Community Development) Wong Kan Seng said: “We should rightly place priority on resolving our economic problems… (but) life must go on regardless of temporary setbacks.” Reference: “More shows, more seats and no queues,” The Straits Times, January 23rd, 1986, 13. http://newspapers.nl.sg/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19860123-1.2.19.6.aspx
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Overarching goals: to “make Singapore a developed country, and evolve a cultivated society.”

Important here is the fact that never at any point in time did the government recognize the significance of allowing art to flourish for its own sake, or for aesthetic beauty. Cultural development was not an end in itself. It was also a means to an end. As Goh put it in the same speech, “a developed country means… attributes of a mature people: cohesive, tolerant, well educated.” The following year, he exhorted Singaporeans to “find fulfilment in non-material pursuits” and to encourage a “creative, stimulating, and culturally-vibrant environment.”

Allowing the “wrong” type of culture to flourish imperiled society; encouraging the growth of the “right” type of culture would help it climb even higher. Still, the line between what was considered “wrong” and “right” continued to blur and shift.

In the mid-1980s, the government decided, for example, to reverse direction from their old stance of banning rock concerts to holding Police Force-organized rock concerts and disco nights from 1985-1987.

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148 “Chok Tong’s new goals,” The Straits Times, February 27th, 1985, http://newspapers.nl.sg/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19850227-1.2.2.aspx

Fifty thousand people, according to news reports, came to the 1985 concert, with members of the Police band performing on stage as well. Even the President and Home Affairs Minister showed up at one point.\(^{150}\) In an interview given to the press, the Commissioner of Police explained that the move was seen as necessary to reach out to the youth and improve the image of the police among them, as the police had realized that the old position of flatly denying any artistic value or place in society to rock music was no longer tenable.\(^{151}\) Commissioner of Police Goh Yong Hong called it “the greatest education in the local youth culture”, having realized that “the police force could no longer escape from the fact that rock ‘n’ roll and pop music seemed to be the energy centre of youth culture.” Quotes from performers in those articles demonstrated their appreciation for this “olive branch”.\(^{152}\) Members of the public, too, reacted favorably to the organization of the

\(\text{References:}\)


152 Patrick Lee, the vocalist of the band Speedway, said: “It’s something that we’ve hoped for so long, for the police, who can control a crowd that can get too drunk on music, are the best people to organize large rock concerts.”
concert. The police themselves said they had been heartened by the relative lack of violence or other undesirable behavior among the crowd that night.\textsuperscript{153} The Singapore Armed Forces, too, organized National Day rock concerts along the main shopping street, Orchard Road, from 1988-1990.

This practice of regulation and co-option was not implemented solely for “newer” forms of culture, though. Clammer speaks of the tendency of the Singaporean government to co-opt any burgeoning cultural tradition which it felt it could make use of, raising the example of the development of “Peranakan Place” in the late 1970s, when the government reacted to increasing interest in Peranakan culture by setting up “Peranakan Place” as a museum with guides and exhibits. This, to Clammer, resulted simply in “a rather crass commercialism… [which] has virtually no connection with the minority culture on which it was supposed to be modelled.”\textsuperscript{154} He points out, rightly, the inherent contradiction in the desire to monetize any opportunity available with the rhetoric of the importance of preserving traditional culture and values. In 1985, the government spent S$10 million setting up a commercial center Geylang Serai, modeled after the Malay village (“kampung”) which the government had eradicated in favor of modern housing projects decades earlier. The project was intended to showcase “Malay culture.”\textsuperscript{155} Likewise, Serangoon Road, which has historically hosted a concentration of immigrants and temporary

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\item \textsuperscript{153} “Rock show lifts ties with police,” \textit{The Straits Times}, September 18\textsuperscript{th}, 1985, 13. \url{http://newspapers.nl.sg/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19850918-1.2.24.20.aspx}
\item \textsuperscript{154} The government even, apparently, set up a coffee shop, restaurant and shops in a building next door which they thought was Peranakan in architecture, before having it pointed out to them by experts (consulted rather too late in the process) that it was nothing of the sort. Reference: Clammer. \textit{Race and State in Independent Singapore 1965-1990}: 64
\item \textsuperscript{155} “S’pore’s $10m ‘kampung,’” \textit{The Straits Times}, October 10\textsuperscript{th}, 1985, 40. \url{http://newspapers.nl.sg/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19851010-1.2.61.aspx}
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workers from South India, was “explicitly racialized” and specifically marketed as evidence of the racial diversity in Singapore.156

Thus, while evidence supports the idea that there was a movement towards the public recognition of the value of the arts in the late 1970s to mid-1980s, it is evident that economics had not been shelved for the moment, as might have been implied by the statements of leaders. As with Clammer’s assessment of the “crass commercialism” inherent in support for the arts, the perspective, especially among some artists, was that the state’s interest in the arts was wholly pragmatic. Alvin Tan, who co-founded The Necessary Stage in 1987 and went on to become an award-winning play director, said:

They wanted tourism. It was more for the purpose of tourism. Never [was] it for the inherent worth of the arts… the Singapore Tourism Board carried out a survey to find out how much money was activated in the economy if people went out to watch a show and they had to pay for the taxi and the transport, and then they had to go for food… in the ‘80s it was ‘cultural industries’, how the arts could influence the economic industries and make it more creative. This was started in Britain, and influenced a lot of governments in other countries, including ours… the musicals and all that… more connected to GDP, industry, the arts that are more commodified and commercial will usually find a place in the arts ecology in Singapore.157

The economic and monetary focus of the bureaucracies and red tape inherent in the processing of grant applications, applications for performance space and so on took its toll on performers, directors, musicians, and administrators alike. Christina Sergeant, an American expatriate from Massachusetts who moved to Singapore and ended up co-founding the Actors

156 Care should be taken, though, to recognize that this was not an attempt to create housing enclaves, simply to emphasize and promote what seemed to be the historical and cultural associations of particular areas with particular races or ethnicities, in turn further reifying ethnic and racial groupings, as discussed in the previous chapter. Reference: Goh, R. B H. Contours of Culture: Space and Social Difference in Singapore (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005): 90
Theatre Circle in 1989 and serving as artistic director of the Singapore Theatre Repertory Showcase (STARS), commented:

It was getting harder and harder to rehearse because [of] just the amount of work (sic) which had to be done for putting shows on. The paperwork, it was very strict in those days… you had to register everybody… if you had a foreigner, even if they weren’t getting paid, you had to get special passes… there was an entertainment tax in effect in those days, so you had to put up as a bond [of] 35% of the total possible gross of the show.¹⁵⁸

One of the major reasons why the government’s policies ended up being restrictive, even as they tried to be supportive in some ways, was the lack of alternate sources of support for the arts. Sasitharan stated:

All theatres belonged to the state. There was no way to present a play, or exhibition, without the state being involved. There were no free, independent spaces. There is no correlate to the American notion of the individual supporter of the arts – no foundation, organization to support a particular kind of aesthetic, alternative or otherwise. Everything was channeled through the state… informal performances, in temples and so on, outside normal space – clan associations, cultural organizations, were whittled away. Everything became connected to the state.

With nowhere else to go for financial support or performance spaces, theatre groups and artists etc. often had to consent to the state’s conditions in order to put on their performances. Even then, resources were extremely scarce. Sergeant recalled (emphasis added):

In those days, the only ones who were paid were the musicians, and even many of them donated their wages… it was strictly voluntary, community theatre… it was a big deal when the administrators get paid, and even then you really had to work for it. We worked five days a week, sometimes a sixth day, and then we went off to rehearse… we were getting paid pathetic amounts, nothing you could support yourself on, at least back then. You have to have a desk to be valid in the arts in Singapore. If you have a desk and a computer you are valid and you can be paid, but you can’t be paid for anything else… there was a small honorarium for administrators, but that was for daytime work. There was nothing for performers or the director.

It was clear that the bureaucratic, technocratic approach taken by the government – an image it had worked hard to cultivate – had ended up strangling the fledgling arts scene even as it tried to help it grow (albeit only in certain prescribed ways). When one was behind a desk working at a computer, even if one was employed by a theater company, it was still recognizable as “work” by the authorities and therefore deserving of wages. Payment for those on stage, though, would have seemed intuitively harder to accept as a legitimate occupation on par with office workers. The model of technocratic, bureaucratic efficiency precluded the recognition of the jobs not concerned with filing, processing, etc. as equally important and deserving of pay.

Despite this attempt, there were some things the government was unwilling to give up – most importantly, its assertion of ultimate authority over the discursive space of understanding and expertise in the various art forms. At no point in time did the government ever concede that it did not have the requisite knowledge or experience in art forms to place value judgments on the artistic and moral worth of various pieces of art, instead holding fast to the principles espoused by those like Nair.” Fong Sip Chee, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Labor and President of the Singapore Arts Council, had warned against artists studying abroad and becoming affected by foreign malaise: “When our artists and sculptors return from [studying and practicing] abroad they should remain as artists and sculptors – not as students who would carry back to their homeland the problems, the frustrations and the gloom which are found in other countries.” Ultimately, he suggested:

In Singapore, artists have been told that their works should reflect Singapore situations and surroundings. Often they react by saying that as artists they could do what they like and should not be told what to paint. This is basically correct but what is not understood is that in the works of Singapore artists and sculptors there should be something which reflect (sic) the values and emotions of the individual artist and also some of the common
values and aspirations of Singaporeans or the people with whom they live and are part of what Singapore society is.\textsuperscript{159}

We find in this statement an assertion of the proper role of the artist, with the government expressing its confidence that it knew what art should be about (promoting the “values and aspirations of Singaporeans”) better than artists did. Furthermore, in their concern for the reflection of the values of the Singaporean community, we see that the focus of the government was even narrower than merely the promotion of art with “good” artistic value. Instead, what they were searching to boost was a type of art which was uniquely Singaporean – which conveyed the essence of what it meant to be Singaporean, and helped encourage people to partake in that spirit. This was intimately bound up with questions of security – the idea being that a cohesive Singaporean identity might build on the government’s presentation of itself as objective, rational, and secular, and help overcome the centrifugal forces of race, religion, ethnicity, language and so on which might otherwise prove insurmountably divisive, as well as the negative influences from external sources.

The Singapore Youth Festival, or SYF, launched in 1967 by the Ministry of Education, was established as a festival in which schools would take part in various types of activities, including music, dance, and (in the early days) sports. It quickly became a field of intense competition between schools to produce medalists.\textsuperscript{160} By the late 1970s, the Minister for Home Affairs and Education, Chua Sian Chin, explained that the SYF was important because it helped immunize the youth against negative influences from the West, by helping them to “learn that there

\textsuperscript{159} Sip Chee, Fong, “Speech in Declaring Open the Sculpture Exhibition by Mr. Ng Eng Teng” (Speech, National Library, October 25\textsuperscript{th}, 1972) \url{http://drm.a2o.nas.sg/DJVUServer/PdfStampServlet?app=stars&filepath=pdfdoc/PressR19721025i.pdf}

are many things in [Singapore’s] cultural heritage which they can be proud of.” This was significant as Western influence could be curtailed, he opined, as long as the youth were “well rooted in their own cultural background and are conscious of their Singapore identity.”  

A spokesperson for Ministry of Culture outlined the role the Ministry saw itself playing in the arts: it wanted to “inculcate certain desired norms and values into citizens,… to instill moral principles based on our heritage, and to cultivate taste,” as well as to “upgrade the quality of cultural performances and… attract more audiences.” This last one was especially important because “third or fourth generation Singaporeans have lost some of their forefathers’ traditions and are developing a Singaporean cultural identity.”

Ironically, as we shall see, this search often led to further attempts to regulate the artistic sphere, sometimes putting them at odds with many artists who were themselves looking for a way to make art belong to Singaporeans – even if that “identity” was found to be something that displeased the government.

On one hand, the government took positive action to encourage “Singaporean” art. In 1979, the government instituted a new award called the “Cultural Medallion”, to be conferred by the Minister for Culture on people who “have attained achievement in the arts and letters,” however that was to be defined.  

The reaction from civil society was mostly positive. Many were supportive and applauded the government’s move. Among the first recipients of this award was Edwin Thumboo, a famous poet considered by many to be one of the pioneers of literature and

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particularly poetry in Singapore. In 1977, Thumboo had publicly called for Tamil and Chinese writers to work towards the formation of a “Singaporean identity”, and for them to bring the best parts of their cultures “into the notion of a Singapore identity,” placing him in substantial agreement with the government in that regard.165

Also in 1979, the government announced that it was willing to help defray the costs of publishing for local writers under a plan to “enrich the literature of Singapore.” Under this plan (suggested by Thumboo), writers who had found publishers who were interested in their work but who could not afford to publish could apply to the government for financial aid. Their application would be assessed by a panel with representatives from the government, private sector, and academics, all of whom would be “knowledgeable in that particular field of literary work” and who would submit their recommendations to the government. Furthermore, the government subsidized a half-yearly literary journal “containing creative works of local writers, to be published initially in English.”166 In 1983, the “Patron of the Arts Award” was created to recognize organizations, public or private, for supporting cultural and artistic values (the main criteria being donations of at least $100,000 a year to cultural and artistic activities for three years in a row).167 In 1985, the “Arts Housing Scheme” was introduced. Old buildings were converted for use by arts groups, with each group paying only a nominal rent and utilities bill.168

As discussed earlier, these attempts were met with a considerable amount of skepticism from many practitioners of the arts in Singapore. Many artists came to believe that the state’s attempts to aid and guide the development of the cultural and artistic scene contained inherent problems. Inherent in the notion of “encouragement” was the fact that resources were granted only to select groups, based on criteria decided by the government. There were worries that the awards and grants might be given only to “classical talent” recognized by the Ministry, instead of in other fields. Sasitharan, when asked about the impact that the government’s approach towards art had, said:

It was certainly very pragmatic. On one hand you had administrative efficiency - professionalization - that the state brought in. Infrastructural efficiencies were put in place. But there were consequences to that, because it tended to curtail diversity. It removed possibilities, it structured and restricted… with every efficiency there are limitations. When something is enabled, something is disabled.\(^{169}\)

While they accepted that the government had turned to focus more on the arts, they believed that the degree and method of government support necessarily encumbered the artistic process, especially because they believed that the government had ulterior motives, economic and political, for pursuing the arts anyway.

Moreover, even during this period the arts continued to be perceived as a threat. In an infamous episode in 1987, sixteen people were arrested, detained without trial, and accused of taking part in a Marxist conspiracy to overthrow the government. Five of the sixteen were members of a drama group established in 1983 called the Third Stage. The newspaper reports about the issue clearly show that the government remained deeply wary of the arts as a means of threatening the security of the state:

The statement by the Home Affairs Ministry above showed the thin, blurred line that artists had to tread between what could be considered “legitimate” criticism and “destructive,” “radicalizing” criticism – which, in this case, simply amounted to presenting the social and political system in a bad light.170 A subsequent report published in the papers cast the desire of artists to function as “pressure groups” and to “criticize” the government in an extremely negative light (Tan Wah Piow being the supposed mastermind behind the conspiracy).171 Other groups incriminated included the Catholic Church and the Law Society. This was part of a much longer story which there is no time or space to do justice to here. It is sufficient to note that the government continued to see the arts as a threat, even while supporting it.

Nevertheless, artists were not about to surrender all artistic license and control over their artistic projects despite facing pressure from all sides. In fact, many of them decided to discuss issues of politics and national identity through their works. The ways in which artists responded to the government through their art will be the focus of the next chapter.
Chapter Three

The tale of the arts scene in Singapore is, contrary to what some detractors might think, storied and complex. The sheer variety of art forms, falling into multiple categories – traditional or not, performing or not, vernacular or not – means that the following chapter must necessarily be summative. Rather than doing a superficial survey of the subject, it would be more informative to concentrate on a particular area and discuss it in more detail. Therefore, due solely to the constraints of time and space for this thesis, and accessibility to the author, the following chapter will examine some important and interesting works for the English arts scene in Singapore, focusing particularly on plays and short stories. It must be noted, though, that this category is in itself problematic – indeed the definition of some plays and works as “English” and others as “non-English” may work well for some plays and artworks, but becomes far less satisfactory for others which are multilingual. Some of them even directly questioned the use of language itself. It is in this light that we can begin to conceptualize how arts practitioners thought about the Singaporean voice, and tried to present a uniquely Singaporean voice in their work. Through this, we can also begin to learn about the way in which Singaporeans had started to conceive of questions of identity and nationhood.

a. Politics in the Arts

In contrast to the view that the government exerted almost total control over the arts scene, forcing artists and writers to steer away from political issues, many in fact did write works which dealt with politics, or had political implications for the way the government wanted to portray itself. In doing so, they demonstrated how the politics of the state had to a large extent become ingrained in the national identity of Singaporeans. What Singaporeans valued in government, the
type of government they expected and were prepared to support and/or tolerate, their attitude towards things like the arts – all effectively became part of the defining characteristics of Singaporeans.

One good example would be the works of Robert Yeo. Yeo, a playwright, poet, and novelist who was active from the 1970s onwards (he was also chair of the Ministry of Culture’s drama advisory group from 1977 to 1990, and was awarded a Public Service Medal in 1991 for services to drama), wrote a trilogy of plays which has come to be known as “the Singapore trilogy.” The first, *Are You There, Singapore?* was staged in 1974; the second, *One Year Back Home*, was staged in 1980, and the third, *Changi*, was staged in 1996.

In many ways, the trilogy was groundbreaking – the plays were among the first to openly discuss politics. To what extent did a play like *One Year Back Home* manage to provide an alternative political narrative to that of the government? The answer to this depends on the reading of the play itself, in particular the most overtly political characters. Chye and Hua are a pair of Singaporean siblings both studying in London. Chye, the brother, intends to join the PAP on his return to Singapore. Their friend and schoolmate, Reggie (portrayed by Sasitharan Thirunalan), evinces leftist views, and joins the Opposition on his return. A significant portion of the play is dedicated to arguments between Chye and Reggie on various topics. The arguments were so clearly political and so clearly relevant to extant debates about the nature of politics in Singapore that Yeo, recalling the run of the play in the theatre, said that he “observed some sections of the audience gripping the hand-rests of their seats in disbelief at hearing the heated exchanges between Reggie and Chye; others in the audience laughed uncomfortably.”

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between the two, which often became emotional, included the necessity (or lack thereof) for an opposition to the PAP in Parliament, or the issue of long hair (discussed in the previous chapter). All this takes place in the context of the two friends competing against each other in a by-election for a seat in Parliament, vacated by the death of the current PAP MP. At the end of One Year Back Home, Chye wins the election under the PAP banner, while Reggie is arrested for having made what Chye calls extremist statements, which apparently demonstrates subversive and criminal tendencies (this would come to seem prescient during the 1987 arrests mentioned in the previous chapter). Chye’s role in Reggie’s arrest is unclear – did he call for Reggie to be arrested, or was it his political bosses higher up in the government which demanded it? The audience was left to decide for themselves.

Based on the ending of the play, some argued that Yeo had shown his hand by having Chye come up on top. Singh says that “in 1980, many felt that Yeo was playing safe… he had loaded the dice against the Opposition.” This was by no means a foregone conclusion, as he cautioned readers that “by obviously being on the side of Chye, Robert may in fact be criticizing the system even more.” He demonstrates Chye’s hypocrisy (intentional or otherwise) at times such as when the two argue about the long hair issue. Reggie opines that the restrictions on long hair infringe on individual freedoms; Chye retorts: “Does personal liberty reside in long hair?” As Singh notes, though, Chye had just minutes earlier explained the symbolic political value of the PAP’s dress code (all white; supposed to symbolize purity): “Chye himself believes in the symbolic value of appearances. So, long hair could symbolize political liberty. But, of course, Chye would be obtuse to that!”
Indeed, hidden within *One Year Back Home* was a subtle critique of the political system in Singapore. It is perhaps because of its relevance that there Yeo encountered problems both publishing and staging it.

For the staging of the play, the government took much longer than usual to give its permit. Kirpal Singh, currently an associate professor of English at Singapore Management University, wrote that this indicated the relevance of the play, and the government’s fear that this would be politically damaging to them.\(^ {173}\) Even publishing it after it had already been staged was a hassle. As Yeo himself put it in a preface to the published edition of *One Year Back Home* (published in 1990, ten years after it was first staged):

> The play was regarded as so sensitive that it had to go through the Deputy Director, the Parliamentary Secretary, and the Acting Minister for Culture. 1980 was, it is important to remember, an election year… one company suggested that I delete all reference to the People’s Action Party and Singapore; another cautioned me against going ahead else my career should suffer… In the eighties, attempts to get the play published here and in Malaysia and UK came to nothing. The latest attempt locally to find a publisher met with the meek excuse that it was not yet the policy to publish creative writing.\(^ {174}\)

Even when the government did not clamp down on artists and civil society, the possibility of retaliation, official or otherwise, was enough to scare people into self-censorship. Yeo was not the only writer to encounter such problems. Catherine Lim said:

> That is what I saw in our society, and that is why I want to tell the government, when they say ‘we don’t censor anything.’ I say, ‘wait a minute.’ The climate of fear already induces self-censorship. So when I [wrote] a little collection of stories, one called *Oh Singapore*, satirical, fun stories about Singapore, making fun of our frequent campaigns, you know, kiasu [an extremely competitive mentality characterized by a fear of losing out] and so on – no publisher wanted to take it up. No publisher. Because they got scared. And the publisher who finally took it on, Times, had one condition: I had to eliminate one or two

\(^{173}\) Yeo, *One Year Back Home*.  
\(^{174}\) Ibid.
In other words, direct and overt opposition to the government was not necessary for artists to make politically important statements, and both the government and civil society knew it. So long as artists stayed out of the areas which were obviously “out of bounds” – race and religion in particular – the government grudgingly allowed it. Artists, playwrights and writers, too, adapted their strategies to ensure that they could continue producing. Alvin Tan said:

The aesthetic strategies we used were not confrontational... in a way where we just challenged the state. A lot of activists and artists take... an oppositional position, speak truth to power... But what The Necessary Stage did is that we looked at alternative theatre as alternative positions... we can [oppose] the government when it’s required... but sometimes we can work with the government, like arts education. No conflict there, we work hand in hand. But there are also other positions which are tangential, and they are alternative, and we also occupy these positions. They’re not directly confrontational, they’re just different... not diametrically opposed... we don’t like that kind of work, it’s counter-didactic and very tiring, because it polarizes, and a work that polarizes is not a good artwork for me... multiple perspectives for me is stronger and more inclusive and not only [to be] anti-establishment.176

While direct critique of the establishment was avoided, playwrights and writers could use more roundabout methods to call attention to what they thought were important issues. In the process of doing so they would often come into conflict with the government’s official narratives.

In the previous chapters, we saw how the government insisted on portraying itself as rational, secular, and objective, and saw that the bureaucracy and technocracy were outgrowths of this. This occurred to such an extent that it became something which Singaporeans were able to identify with easily. As Sasitharan put it, “government control became a point of criticism, parody and subversion.” The government’s presentation of itself became a particular point of parody.

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In 1985, the Third Stage put up a play entitled *Oh! Singapore*. The play was composed of a rapid series of vignettes. One such scene begins with a typical family at work and play in a kampong, when suddenly a bulldozer arrives and crushes their village, burying them beneath the rubble, and making a pointed statement about the pace of modernization and industrialization in Singapore, which itself was linked to the government’s rhetoric about the importance of unceasing economic progress. The very final scene sees a series of characters walk onto stage to the sound of marching drums in the background, while they complain about their exhaustion from the incessant pace of life in Singapore and the amount of work they are expected to do. The drumbeats lend a military air to the pseudo-parade, showing the way in which the drive for growth and progress could be seen or felt as a form of slave-driving and lead to exhaustion. Another scene makes fun of the endless series of campaigns designed by the government to promote various actions, such as cleanliness, good manners, and to quash undesirable arts:

“Actors move into two rows, in crab-like movement crossing each other at the centre.

**First Row:** No doubt there are lots of rules.

**Second Row:** Follow them like all civilized people do.

**Actor 1:** No sticking bills

**Actor 2:** No hawking

**Actor 3:** No littering

**Actor 4:** No smoking

**Actor 5:** No parking

**Actor 6:** No jaywalking

**Actor 7:** No crossing

**Actor 1:** No dialects

**Actor 2:** No break dancing

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177 Suan Tze, Chng. *Oh! Singapore* (January 1985)
Actor 3: No spitting

All: Thus everything is FINE, FINE, FINE

All: But that’s not all,

We need to keep healthy

We need to keep sane

Yes, we need campaigns and more campaigns!”

A vignette near the end makes the point very explicit:

“Scene 13: Television Broadcast

Regal music. Enter one actor in a solemn manner.

Actor: And because we are small,

Mistakes we can’t afford to make,

For we’ll lose everything, one and all

And then it’ll be too late

So have trust in what our elders say

And do what they want us to do

Just work hard, play hard, don’t think too much

Let them decide what’s best for you.”

The statements made here are strongly reminiscent of the government’s paternalistic attitude, as conveyed in speeches like Lee’s Helsinki speech in 1971, when he declared that it was the job of the government to protect people from the press, and when the government took it upon itself to differentiate “culture” from “yellow culture” in order to protect the people. The supposed superior knowledge of the government was hence laughed at in productions such as this one.

That same year, Kuo Pao Kun wrote his landmark monologue The Coffin Is Too Big for the Hole. Kuo Pao Kun was a playwright whose influence and importance to the Singapore arts scene cannot be overstated. Born in China, he moved to Singapore in his childhood. He was
detained without trial from 1976 to 1980 under suspicion of Communist activity, and had his citizenship revoked. Nevertheless, upon his release he continued to work in the drama scene, and wrote several highly important works, on top of actively supporting the community through negotiations with the government for funds, holding directing workshops etc. and becoming an important mentor to many of the younger generation of artists, such as Tan and Sharma. Sharma referred to Kuo as “the most important theatre artist. His plays stand the test of time. At the same time he was also a director, and he was a director with a vision.”\textsuperscript{178} Tan identified Kuo’s works as some of the most important local works of art, and said that his experimental style heavily affected English language practitioners.\textsuperscript{179} More than his literary style, though, Kuo’s stature was also due to his strong personality, and he came to be a leader in the arts scene, as Tan said:

…looking at him as an artist, how he… negotiated with authority in the work and in his negotiations with the National Arts Council, I was in a couple of panels that he was on when we met the NAC. I was also with him when we were doing a collaboration and he was negotiating with the Singapore Arts Festival for more money. And the way he challenged them and after that went round shaking their hands – his strategy and skills were excellent. It was very clear that he was fighting for the local artists, and he was very… uncompromising when he fights. But after that he would go round and shake their hands, just so they make sure they know there are no hard feelings, that it was his duty… He’s a leader, an intellectual, and an artist that you can see the artistry also in how he negotiates. It’s not like he’s an artist and his art is contained [only] in his artwork… We don’t have [a leader like] that anymore [after Kuo’s death in 2002].\textsuperscript{180}

Kuo’s monologue, \textit{The Coffin Is Too Big for the Hole}, is delivered by a young man who, at his grandfather’s funeral, finds that his grandfather’s coffin is quite literally too big for the hole dug for it. He confronts the man in charge of the funeral parlor, with results predictable for most

\textsuperscript{178} Haresh Sharma. Interview with Shawn Teo. Digital recording. The Necessary Stage. July 22\textsuperscript{nd}, 2013.
\textsuperscript{179} Alvin Tan. Interview with Shawn Teo. Digital recording. Parkway Parade. June 16\textsuperscript{th}, 2013
\textsuperscript{180} Ibid.
Singaporeans used to the narrative of bureaucracy and obsession with rules created by the government. After some argumentation, he finally reaches the root of the problem:

‘All right, then. Get another plot. That would solve the problem, wouldn’t it?’

Oh, I was deft! I thought. I was able to solve a nasty problem right there on the spot even in my deepest moment of grief, I could.

But I was wrong.

‘I’m afraid you can’t, sir,’ he said. ‘You see, sir, the regulation says one dead person is allotted one plot. How can you have two graves for one coffin?... It’s not allowed, sir. You look at all the other graves in the cemetery. See? All same size. No two graves for one person. Everyone standard size!... Sir, you must understand, there is no room for exceptions!’

The blind obedience to the rules and belief in the importance of following the rules was perhaps a natural outgrowth of the government’s narrative of efficiency and bureaucracy. The main character demands to see a higher-ranking officer. When confronted with this problem, the officer’s “large, intelligent eyes rolled from side to side, betraying the powerful intellect of an obviously high-IQ person.” In the end, though, he still refuses to allocate the extra plot to them:

‘No, no, no, no! That will be running against our national planning. You are well aware of the fact that we are a densely populated nation with very limited land resources. The consideration for humanity and sympathy cannot overstep the constraints of the state policy!’ he declared.

Eventually, though, after an outburst from the main character, the officer is forced to concede after consulting his own superior:

‘All right. Since you are already at the cemetery, and since the coffin has proven itself to be too big for the hole, we’ll make this case a very special exception. Because we don’t want people to misunderstand us, to read us as being disrespectful of traditions, as being hard and unaccommodating to the dead. But… there will only be this one exception and no such requests will be entertained ever again!’

\[181\] Pao Kun, Kuo. The Coffin is Too Big for the Hole (1985)
The officer’s reframing of the issue creates apparent contradictions with the earlier statement he made, that considerations of “humanity” cannot be cause to overlook state policy. This can be resolved, however, if one notes that the officer nowhere said in his second statement that he was allowing it on the grounds of sympathy for the main character. Instead, just as with the government in real life, the officer is concerned mostly with how he and his department will be perceived. The PAP could not afford to be perceived as anything less than objective, but it also had to try as far as possible to portray itself as respectful of cultures and traditions. The officer in the play concludes that the motivating factor for his decision should be the creation of the appropriate public image. Humanity and sympathy continue to stay in exile from the realm of policymaking.

The practice of bureaucracy is portrayed as dangerous in the way it, in turn, oversteps common-sense boundaries. No reason is ever given for the rule that each person may occupy only one grave; the fact that such a rule exists suffices for all characters in the play. Not even the main character questions the reasoning for this. The presumption that rules are to be obeyed based purely on the fact of their existence, and that standardization is a good thing, is implicitly believed by characters in the play. At the very end, Kuo drops in one last stinger on the dangers of standardization:

Whenever I get to the cemetery and see those graves – the row after row of standard sized graves – I cannot resist thinking about the other problem, and this is what really bothers me a lot: Now, with them all the same size and same shape, would my sons and daughters, and my grandsons and granddaughters after them, be able to find me out and recognize me?

I don’t know… I just don’t know…\(^{182}\)

\(^{182}\) Pao Kun, Kuo. *The Coffin is Too Big for the Hole* (1985)
In this way, the play also becomes a vehicle for Kuo’s worries about the fate of cultures and traditions – perhaps even the arts scene in general. We saw how artists were worried that the intrusion of the government into the arts scene, even in a supportive manner, would lead to inefficiency and bureaucratization due to the inherent nature of the way the government worked. Kuo shows his fear, through the play, that the process of standardization would remove everything interesting and unique about each culture and tradition in the government’s effort to make them fit into defined categories or boxes.

The very next year, Kuo wrote another play called *No Parking on Odd Days*. This was another monologue, delivered by a man who had been continually fined for traffic offences. In every case, he explains that he could not have known that it was an offence, or he had some other excuse, always convincing and legitimate. His young son encourages him to fight the charges. However, every time this happens the officers concerned do not bother to explain the logic behind the rules to him. They simply advise him that to lodge a complaint he will have to be prepared to go to the traffic court to talk to the magistrates. For example, on one occasion he is fined for not putting down enough parking coupons to cover the cost of parking for one hour, even though he parked for only 40 minutes and did put down enough coupons to cover that cost. He speaks to the parking kiosk attendant:

‘$1.80 per hour means you got to put three 60-cent coupons and tear them together. Identical. Otherwise how do you get $1.80? Complain to my senior officers in headquarters lah!’

…As usual there was a long queue and when it came to my turn I made myself very polite and carefully worked out the sums again about $1.80 for one hour and $1.20 for 40 minutes,

‘That is not how we calculate. If you want to complain you can write in officially. And if you want to take it further, you can wait for the summons to appear in court and present your case to the magistrate.’
Well?... You guessed right again. I paid him the compounded amount of $10.
‘Father, why don’t you go ahead and write in?’ My boy couldn’t take it anymore…
‘No use lah, son. No use, I tell you…’ Somehow I felt I couldn’t tell him… that the world was more complicated than he thought or that people were not as simple as they looked.

In order to convince his son of the futility of trying to fight his case in the courts, he relates an experience from when he was young. Having parked in a space labelled “No Parking on Odd Days” and having been fined, it was pointed out to him that another sign a significant distance away, which he had not seen, said that that parking spot was for lorries only. He felt that this was unjustified as he could not have been expected to walk fifty meters in either direction of the parking spot to check for small signs every time he parked. Thus, he decided to challenge his charge in court, giving a long explanation as to how he came to be in that situation and giving suggestions for improvement in the signage system. The magistrate said:

‘It is accepted that the sign display was somewhat inadequate,’ he began softly. ‘And it is to the credit of the relevant authorities that amends have been made to correct the situation. The court appreciates the honesty and frankness of the accused. I’m sure the authorities feel the same way about his readiness to make constructive proposals for improving the sign display in the said street. Nevertheless, the fact remains that on the said date and place the defendant was guilty of parking his vehicle in an unauthorized place. I sentence him to a fine of $30 or three days’ imprisonment.’

To minds of this sort, obsessed with rules and regulations and what is technically legal or not, Kuo argued, considerations of logic and humanity simply go out the window. Kuo also made a larger point about how an environment of this sort affects Singaporeans growing up in it, and inculcates certain mentalities in them that come to be identifiable with Singaporean-ness. The main character’s son, after hearing the story, stops asking his father to fight the charges. Instead, he too realizes that there is nothing to be gained by fighting even illogical charges, and when he grows up and receives his driving license, he promptly pays up whenever he is fined, no matter how

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183 Pao Kun, Kuo, No Parking on Odd Days (1986)
facetious the charge. A central part of the appeal of both this play and Coffin lay in their use of humor to portray the absurdity in everyday life. Perhaps one reason for the success of the plays was the way in which, by getting people to laugh at problems they typically took for granted, the plays could get people to re-examine their conceptions of what types of bureaucracy were absolutely necessary and what types were obstructionist.

We therefore see that there were significant and important works which dealt overtly with political questions. Often these political questions were tied up with issues of national identity. Not all works were so direct in their criticism, though. To some other works, politics was incidental to the larger problems of identity itself.

b. Finding a Voice

In Chapter One we saw how important the question of language was to the government. Their recognition of the power of language to exert holds on peoples’ primordial racial or religious identities had led them to try to enforce policies, such as the eradication of dialects. The problem of language and the use of language was one that playwrights and artists encountered from the early days of independence.

The name of Robert Yeo’s “Singapore trilogy” suggests that the three plays are the most representative out of all works of Singaporean drama; nevertheless, their appeal was not universal. Even though some did greatly appreciate his work and even wrote in to the papers to praise the plays, several later playwrights (for example) commented that they had problems with the plays,

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184 Robert Heath, “Let’s have more plays like this,” The Straits Times, December 9th, 1980, 17. http://newspapers.nl.sg/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19801209-1.2.90.7.aspx

in particular, in the way in which they used language. Alvin Tan, who would later go on to set up The Necessary Stage in 1987 and become an acclaimed director of Singaporean plays, commented:

I didn’t like Robert Yeo’s work… although it was significant because it captured the times, but I didn’t like [it] because the language was stilted… when I read the thing I can’t finish the play, because they don’t have the language vehicle.\textsuperscript{185}

Haresh Sharma, Tan’s frequent collaborator and a celebrated Singaporean playwright of the late 1980s (and onwards; he is still currently active) also raised the same issue in a separate interview. Without naming Yeo specifically, he criticized earlier Singaporean playwrights:

If you read some of these plays, the characters speak like they’re not Singaporean… a farmer, or something like that… [can speak] in very flowery language that is almost more eloquent than an Oxford graduate! It was very difficult to capture the voice – I think when you read it, even at the time, you think it’s not very good.\textsuperscript{186}

Tan and Sharma had both grown up watching and reading the works of Yeo and his contemporaries, and felt that they had failed to capture the voice of Singaporeans. Notably, they felt that the language had been too sophisticated, the expressions too complex, for a people who (in their view) used simpler, perhaps cruder, and less pretentious, method of expressing themselves. In One Year Back Home, for instance, Gerald, an engineer in the Singapore Armed Forces, is considering emigrating to Australia, despite the fact that many people want him to stay in Singapore. Recalling that his commanding officer had implored him to stay, Gerald comments:

‘Sure, but he wants me to stay not because of my personal need or friendship, but because the Army needs engineers. It’s good for the country, he says. It always comes down to some abstract idea, an obligation to something impersonal.’

When reminded by his girlfriend, Hua, that his parents also want him to stay, Gerald retorts:

‘Oh, God! Don’t remind me of that obligation. I suppose you are going to tell me that I should be a good son. I should honor my parents… you are like the rest. What you want

\textsuperscript{185} Alvin Tan. Interview with Shawn Teo. Digital recording. Parkway Parade. June 16\textsuperscript{th}, 2013

\textsuperscript{186} Haresh Sharma. Interview with Shawn Teo. Digital recording. The Necessary Stage. July 22\textsuperscript{nd}, 2013.
me to do is not to be loyal to my parents but to honor the idea of filial piety. Another abstraction!  

Needless to say, in an age where English had not yet gained traction to the degree it now has, when Singapore was still very much a developing economy, the idea that the average army engineer would be able to speak eloquently and with great nuance about “abstractions” could easily have seemed improbable to theatre-goers such as Tan and Sharma.

This is not to say that they felt that their countrymen were incapable of negotiating important political questions – the Singapore trilogy was, in fact, remarkable chiefly because of the way in which it dealt explicitly with questions of politics. The main problem was the language used. There are at least two aspects in which language mattered: one, the actual language used (English versus Chinese versus dialect, for instance); two, the choice of words, tone, and so on. It is interesting to note that the latter could become conflated with the content of characters’ concerns. The problem was not so much that Singaporeans were not believed to have grappled with those problems. Rather, the choice of expressions or words were taken to be indicative of a sophisticated or nuanced grasp and understanding of these problems, or level of education, which was generally felt to be inconsistent with that of the average Singaporean. The distinction is made particularly clear when contrasting the above sort of statements with the lines written by playwrights like Sharma. In his first work for The Necessary Stage, he wrote a play called Lanterns Never Go Out in 1987-88, about a female university student reading the humanities, Kah Wei, and the competing pressures in her life. When confronted with Kah Wei apparently acting rudely towards her mother, a relative berates Kah Wei’s mother:

187 Yeo, One Year Back Home.
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‘See, Ah Leng, last time when she small, you not strict. Now see, don’t know how she talk to you. Then she study Arts course some more. How to get good pay?’\(^{188}\)

Despite grappling with important issues for Singaporeans, such as those of the respect due to parents and the proper upbringing of children, issues which could also have been explored in great detail and nuance, the play prioritizes the expression of these concerns in the way an average Singaporean would – through vernacular language. In particular, it emphasizes the use of colloquial grammar structures as a crucial part of the Singaporean identity. Commenting on this, Alvin Tan said:

[Robert Yeo and his contemporaries] were looking for a local identity, but these people were Anglophiles themselves. Whereas Haresh and myself belonged to a generation where we were confident in our Singlish [Singaporean colloquial English] and we weren’t apologetic about it. We spoke different kinds of Singlish and we were rooted in the brand of it. We also knew we could code switch and we could also speak standard English… [Robert Yeo and contemporaries] want a local identity but you’re not rooted in the local. You’re in your ivory tower. So it was very painful, but that was the thing where we could learn and we were dissatisfied, but it was a springboard for us because we could think about how we could adjust it to make it work.\(^ {189}\)

Methodology became important for those like Tan and Sharma. As Tan mentioned, they became motivated by the problems they saw with earlier playwrights. Their methods were explicitly intended to fix these problems. Tan recounts:

Haresh asked an actress, he was writing a Teochew mother character, he wrote in English, and he asked the actress who is Teochew-speaking to speak the meaning in Teochew, and then asked her to translate the Teochew sentence literally into English so the syntax is of course broken English. Then he would adjust the English line to make it palatable to the listener so they could understand, but the rhythm, the syntax, would work… [a Malay mother would speak in English] but the syntax is Malay, the rhythm is Malay, but it is in English.\(^ {190}\)


\(^{190}\) Ibid.
The languages used in the play mattered immensely as well. Part of the reason why Kuo Pao Kun was influential was his negotiation of different linguistic territories – Kuo recognized that it was important to explore the tensions involved in the different languages used in Singapore. In Chapter 1, we looked at the way in which the government understood the problems posed by languages, leading to policies such as those attempting to stamp out the widespread use of dialect. Kuo’s work tackled this problem explicitly, approaching it from the angle of the social implications of such policies.

In 1988, Kuo wrote a play entitled _Mama Looking For Her Cat_. The play was multilingual, with characters speaking English, Mandarin, and dialects. In fact the whole point of the play was to think about the generation gap created when parents and grandparents spoke primarily (or even only) dialect, but their children and grandchildren were prevented from learning that dialect due to government policies emphasizing the use of English and their “Mother Tongue.” The play did this by demonstrating the inability of the children to understand their mother – failing to understand their mother’s loneliness and sadness, even failing to understand the mother’s closeness to her pet cat as a means of alleviating that loneliness. Instead, in an interesting subversion of usual stereotypes, it was the children who were superstitious and suspicious of what their mother was up to:

**Children: (in English and Mandarin)** What cat?

Ah! So that’s what’s been bothering her.

See? I told you, that cat’s a jinx.

_Alamak_ [expression of annoyance], she’s really too much now.

I’ve told her how many times: No cats in HDB [Housing Development Board] flats. And now she’s gone crazy with this black cat!

I knew there must be something to it!
I think this cat’s causing her to behave very strangely.

Yah, must get rid of the damn animal. First, it made people allergic, now it’s inviting my mother to go out at night. Too much! Too much!

*They go crazy with anger, looking everywhere for the cat which they believe is the cause of all the unhappiness… Mother is alerted. She marches over…*

**Mama:** That’s enough! Enough! I said that’s enough!… So now you’re very big already. Everyone’s got wings now. Now you don’t need me anymore, right? So I can’t even have a cat for myself, right? Why can’t I even have a cat? Is it so much to ask? Can’t I have even a cat?191

The chaos and emotional intensity of this scene was further brought out by the use of both English and Mandarin, used randomly – especially since Kuo did not specify which lines should be spoken by which children and in what language, creating overlapping voices as the children all struggle to be heard.

This jarring scene, and the clash with the mother, is made even more striking when considering the earlier demonstrated relationship between the mother and the children. The opening scene of the play has the children and the mother speaking entirely in the Hokkien dialect, as the children eagerly clamored for their mother to tell them a story, which she did in the form of the fable of the race between the rabbit and the tortoise. She exhorted the children to learn the value of hard work and perseverance from the story. However, one child decided that (s)he dislikes the story, reformulating the story so that the rabbit, in his/her words, “won by bumping the tortoise and turning him upside down like this and left him roasting in the sun.” The other children found this amusing and start to mimic the rabbit and tortoise, with disastrous consequences:

*Everyone finds this proposition very funny and they all turn to imitating the Rabbit, jumping fiercely and bumping into each other aggressively. Mother tries to stop them but fails. In the end, she herself is bumped over. She seems to have been knocked unconscious. Bumping into one another, they eventually all end on their backs. Initially finding the upside-down position good fun, they gradually begin to struggle to turn over; but when*

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they find they cannot, and as if the sun begins to shine hotter and hotter, their struggle becomes more and more anxious. Very quickly, all the fun has gone and utter desperation takes over.

One by one, as if fighting a life-and-death battle, they manage to turn over to regain their normal balance – totally cleansed of any boastfulness. Now they are all on their fours with their faces on the floor.

Mama wakes up, struggles to stand up, moves over to slump onto a low bamboo stool.

Then the children, one by one, begin to wake up, to discover Mama missing. They speak in either Mandarin or English.

Their rejection of their mother’s lesson drawn from tradition quickly gave way to disaster, not just for them, but for the mother as well. Their disorientation quickly followed with an abrupt transition to the use of English and Mandarin instead of dialect – and this was the point at which their relationship began to fracture. In fact, the mother, while looking for her lost cat, found more in common with an elderly Indian man who spoke only Tamil, and who had also lost his cat, while she spoke only Hokkien. Despite their inability to understand each other’s language, they eventually managed (after a struggle) to achieve some sort of communication. On one hand, it spoke to the universality of the experience of displacement; but on the other, the possibility of communication despite language barriers. The play culminated with the children effectively lynching the cat, blaming it for their mother’s loneliness:

They start a frantic search for the cat. They rush in all directions, going faster and faster until it becomes a crazy hunt. Finally one of them spots the cat and everyone joins the chase. Encircling it, they stalk the cat, each pounding on the animal with his or her body, piling on top of each other in a heap above the stricken cat.

Mama yells her disapproval above the horrible cries of the cat, kneeling in front of them.

**Mama:** Don’t do that! Don’t do that! Don’t do that!

But it is too late. Everything is quiet now.

Getting up, Mama goes to the pile of bodies. Pulling away the bodies one by one, she finally discovers the cat. Picking it up preciously, she begins to cuddle the animal as if it is her child.
As she walks off, she sings the ‘One Night Grow One Inch’ lullaby. And before she finally disappears into the darkness, she begins to tell the cat the story of ‘The Rabbit and the Tortoise’, reminding the animal in her lap to work hard, and to persevere on and on.

Blackout.

With the mother singing the same lullaby she had sung to her children at the start of the play to the cat, and telling the cat the same story, the play spoke volumes about the sense of loss and dislocation experienced by those whose language had been officially alienated by the state.

This is not to say that only plays using multiple languages could capture the essence of the Singaporean voice on stage. The problems created by the state’s official promotion of a dual-language policy were also brought out in plays mainly, or even solely, in the English language. In Sharma’s *Lanterns Never Go Out*, the main character, Kah Wei, is employed as a tutor for a child who is having trouble with learning Mandarin:

**Chorus:** Ring, ring. [x4]

**Kah Wei:** Hello?

**B:** Miss Low? This is Gilbert’s father.

**Kah Wei:** Yes, Mr. Tay? Is there something wrong?

**B:** Gilbert didn’t do very well for his last test. Now, Miss Low, you have been tutoring him for quite some time now and… can I be frank?... Well, I expect some results. I’m not trying to tell you how to do your job. I hope you don’t think so, but he is still very far behind in his class.

**Kah Wei:** I understand the situation, Mr. Tay, but Mandarin is a very difficult language to learn. It takes a lot of time and effort practicing.

**B:** Are you saying that Gilbert is not putting in any effort? Because if he is not, then…

**Kah Wei:** No, Mr. Tay. It is difficult for Gilbert because he is not exposed to a Chinese-speaking environment.

**B:** Of course not. I don’t want my son to hang around Chinese-speaking people. He is English-educated.

**Kah Wei:** Mr. Tay, if you want Gilbert to improve, he must speak more Mandarin.
B: I want him to do well. I want you to help him. [Pause] Can you give him extra lessons on Saturday afternoons? I will definitely pay extra.

Kah Wei: Does Gilbert want extra lessons? Doesn’t he have [extra-curricular activities]?

B: I’ve already told him to stop his band practices. So now he will have the time. [Pause] Can you start this Saturday?

Much in this segment would resonate with audiences – the creation of a chasm between the apparently lower-class, Chinese-educated, and the higher-class, more well-off, English educated; the learning of a language for the sake of fulfilling a formal requirement instead of learning it for its own sake or for its utility (why learn Chinese if Gilbert is not supposed to “hang around Chinese-speaking people”?) and nevertheless the demand for excellence in the field despite it not being of use (“I want him to do well” versus “I want him to speak better Mandarin”); the emphasis on academics and what is practical above non-academic activities and so on. All these themes and more are evoked, and Singaporeans watching the play would sympathize with the concerns brought out.

Another example would be Emily of Emerald Hill, by Stella Kon, first staged in 1985. Later referred to as a “breakthrough” which was “canonical in any history of Singapore drama,” Emily has become venerated as being among the best and most representative pieces of drama ever written in and about Singapore, written by a playwright who had already proven herself by winning first place in the Ministry of Culture’s Drama Competitions three times in the 1980s, though her work had never been produced before 1985. It was therefore an embarrassment when Kon’s work was first produced not in Singapore, but in Malaysia. Very quickly, the play was taken up for production at the Singapore Drama Festival later that year (1985). The play was extremely well
received, and was highly influential. Sharma said of the play: “Everyone still wants to stage it today… because of the timelessness of *Emily* and its relevance.”

In this predominantly English play, there is only one character, Emily. Starting out the play in the 1950s as an orphan, abandoned by her mother, she is married to a rich man at age 14, and soon becomes the matriarch of the mansion on Emerald Hill. Despite her best intentions (which manifest to some extent in an overbearing demeanor and perhaps almost tyrannical control of the lives of her family and servants), she ends up estranged from her husband, and her son commits suicide. Max Le Blond referred to:

> a crucial ambivalence in [Emily’s] character. Emily’s quest was for affirmation, emotional security, a coherent sense of identity, love; but this translates itself, within the course of her career in an oppressively patriarchal Gan household, into an insatiable hunger for power. She pursues a domestic-emotional politics in which the need for self-validation becomes compromised by a concomitant negation of the needs and individualities of others. The oppressed and marginalized figure, in finding her centre, becomes the oppressor.

The end of the play sees Emily sitting alone in a mansion once populated by her entire extended family, wistfully contemplating her life, even as the world of old Peranakan mansions and large, luxurious gardens around her steadily makes way for industrial, urban, and modern construction projects. Various commentators have identified Emily as one of the most significant dramatic inventions in Singaporean history. One scholar writes: “The assuredness of a rooted past, springing from her *peranakan* heritage, lends depth to *Emily*, easily the most convincing character who has so far appeared in Singapore English theatre.”

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194 Peranakan: Chinese settlers in Southeast Asia, particularly in Singapore, who adopted parts of Malay and Western culture.
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What about Emily made her “convincing” in a way that other characters were not? On one hand, as before, the language used by Emily mattered significantly. In particular Emily’s ability to code switch between colloquial English and formal English demonstrated a skill which many Singaporeans would have been familiar with, if not comfortable or proficient. The beginning of Act 2 provides a good example of this, as she places calls and conducts visits to multiple people, sometimes to order food and sometimes to ask friends for favors, switching the language she uses depending on who she speaks to. When she visits the fishmonger at the market, she has no problem communicating in colloquial English:

See your prawns… Cheh, all small ones! You have some good big ones hidden at the back somewhere, you bring them out for me. All right, five katis, how much? Four dollars, you crazy ah? I give you three dollars can already. Cannot lah, three-seventy too much also…

She goes on to the next stall.

Ah Soh! How are you, chiak pah boey? Ya I’m fine, family is fine, chin ho, chin ho. I want to buy sixteen cucumbers today, half a kati of long beans, half a kati of French beans. Yes, you guessed correctly, I’m making achar for the New Year…

In segments like these she moves freely between colloquial English scattered with phrases drawn from dialects (“chiak pah boey”, for instance, which means: “have you eaten?”), to more standard English when she meets an expatriate friend:

Oh, good morning Mrs Schneider, how nice to run into you! Yes indeed, I shall send you some orchids for the Church Bazaar as usual. Not at all, with my sons at the Anglo-Chinese School I’m very glad to make my little contribution. Do give the Bishop my best wishes won’t you?

We see from this that the demands for an authentic voice weren’t demands that characters speak the language of the poor, dispossessed, or uneducated – Emily is none of those things (technically she is uneducated in the sense that she left school when she was very young, but she

is extraordinarily sharp, and in her world of family politics, extremely proficient). Kah Wei, from *Lanterns*, has a university education and a decent job. Rather, language use was one key insight into the psyche of characters which helped audience members identify with (or fail to identify with) characters. It was not the only means, though.

The way in which the play itself was staged naturally lent power to the messages sent by the play. Max Le Blond, who directed the first Singaporean staging of *Emily* at the Drama Festival in 1985, spoke of how the stage was set up to enhance the impact of the lines. One example he gave was of the “imposingly-sized patriarchal chair” set up at mid-centre stage, designed and placed specifically to function literally and figuratively as the “seat of power within the Gan household.” Emily ends the play seated alone in the chair, having gained power but lost much along the way, in a scene which was sure to have left a vivid impact on theatregoers.

Furthermore, the depiction of circumstances which the audience could sympathize with was often a good way to connect with the Singaporean public. Code-switching, as in *Emily*, was one such example. As Singapore opened up to immigrants, and the government started to push campaigns to erase dialects and colloquial English, the phenomenon of having to force oneself to speak “correctly” in front of certain people would have been familiar to many. Le Blond felt that the situations in which Emily found herself, and the wider environment, were eminently identifiable to the Singaporean audience. In particular, he found that:

>[A] source of the play’s power and appeal is in its harnessing and evocation of a series of temporal motifs: history and folk belief, youth vs age; tradition vs modernization. These motifs are concretised by refracting poignantly recognizable facets of the life and times of pre-war, wartime and post-war Singapore through the loving rendered microcosm of an extended Peranakan family with Emily at its centre. The play thus establishes, in vividly
particularized detail, a whole way of life which it enacts, celebrates, critiques, and finally, elegises.\footnote{Kon, \textit{Emily of Emerald Hill}}

The scenes of Emily at the market, Emily busily making arrangements and so on would all have struck a chord with the audience. Situations, though, were not simply a result of the geographic location that characters found themselves in. Often, they could be made by the personalities of characters – Emily’s overbearing concern for her son’s well-being, and demand that he obey her in all things, would not have seemed alien to audiences. In fact the sight of a mother berating her son for choosing a course of life deemed to be impractical, demanding not just obedience but recognition of her superior wisdom, and invocation of the motto that “mother knows best” would have been very familiar to audiences. The situation here is strikingly similar to that faced by Kah Wei in Sharma’s \textit{Lanterns Never Go Out}, although the complaints in that case come more from relatives than from Kah Wei’s mother.

In fact, the role of women in society and the struggles they faced was a common theme in several productions, including \textit{Lanterns} and \textit{Emily}. Another play which discussed similar issues was \textit{No Foul Play}, put up by The Third Stage in 1983. The play centered on the life of Alice, a Chinese girl facing numerous family problems. One particular confrontation with her father, over her desire to go to university, is demonstrative of the conservative attitudes of some parents towards female children:

\begin{quote}
\textbf{Father:} How do you expect us to support you to U? I don’t have the money. I tell you, I don’t have the money.

\textbf{Alice:} I’ll work very hard and get very good results so that I can get the scholarship. I promise you, I’ll work very hard.

\textbf{Father:} Why aren’t you happy? Why must you go to the U? You’ll probably get married in a few years’ time. Why study so hard? And wasting money…
\end{quote}

\footnote{Kon, \textit{Emily of Emerald Hill}}
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**Mother:** Will you just give her a chance? I think we can manage somehow. IF the worst comes to the worst, we can borrow some money.

**Father:** Borrow money so a daughter can go to the U? What for?

The contrast is especially marked because the father had placed enormous pressure on his son, Alice’s younger brother, to study hard to go to university. His daughter, however, was accorded no such privilege. The discrimination in favor of male children was common at the time, and was something many Singaporeans would have easily related to. One of Catherine Lim’s stories, aptly entitled *Male Child*, is about a man who is depressed because of his failure to produce a male heir, wondering if it was a “punishment for sin.” He blames his wife and has an affair. Under immense emotional pressure, his wife agrees that if the next child is a girl again, the man can take his mistress as another wife, and the first wife would be “subject” to her (in the hierarchy of wives). Ironically, then, the short story ends with the man standing outside the delivery room, straining to hear the cries of the child as it is born, hoping that it is a girl. Catherine Lim commented:

It’s just part of our history that we’ve always been a patriarchal society. And when I was a little girl I think I grew up seeing a lot of abuse of women. Women terrified of their husbands, wife beating… My mother never had an education, because she was female!... I could see [discrimination], in little things, especially in Chinese culture. Always in my stories I would wonder, hey, as a little girl, why are women’s bodies dirty? Women were not allowed at certain fishing sites; a menstruating woman, if she went into a temple, she could be struck dead by the temple god. My mother used to scream at the maids if they mixed up the men’s clothes with the women’s clothes in the washtub, said it would bring bad luck. And I used to wonder, wait a minute, what is this?... you see fellow women suffering because of their gender, you have to write. I’d say it’s a moral duty to write.

The link between the plight of women and education was particularly strong, especially because of a major debate in the 1980s. In early 1984, the government introduced a new scheme
which would soon come to be known as the “Graduate Mothers Scheme.” Under this policy, a woman graduate with three children would be given highest priority in the registration exercise for pre-primary and primary schools. These exercises were (and have been) the means by which parents got their children into pre-primary and primary schools, and are highly competitive. Goh Keng Swee, Minister of Education and Deputy Prime Minister, explained that the aim was to “encourage those who are highly-educated and can afford to have larger families to do so.” In contrast, in order to keep the families of the less-educated small, “priority will continue to be given to them if they are prepared to be sterilized after one or two children.”

Mothers would have to show their certificates, and “ministry officials [would] check the mothers’ certificates against a list of recognized universities and approved professional qualifications.” The reasoning for this was that “graduate mothers produce nine times the number of gifted children than the general population.”

In the face of domestic outrage, the government defended its stance vigorously, claiming that it needed to correct the problems presented by a “lopsided birth pattern” which saw more highly-educated women having smaller families than less educated women. Ong Teng Cheong, then National Trades Union Congress Secretary-General and Minister without Portfolio, stated that the danger with the current trend was that Singapore would “eventually have a smaller pool

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202 “Graduate mothers must show proof: registration will be at ministry,” The Straits Times, January 24th, 1984, 1. http://newspapers.nl.sg/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19840124-1.2.4.aspx
204 Several examples include: “Scheme may produce snobs,” The Straits Times, March 14th, 1984, 11. http://newspapers.nl.sg/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19840314-1.2.17.29.29.aspx.
of talented people from which to draw to run the country.” Despite this, many publicly wondered why the scheme covered the education level of the mother and not of the father, and many more pointed out that the scheme was highly discriminatory and would be ineffective anyway. The issue became a hot matter of debate in the December 1984 elections. Catherine Lim called it “draconian,” saying that the scheme was “something so hideous that [the government] doesn’t want to be reminded of it.” Despite its fervent defense of the policy at the time, the following year (1985), the government announced in Parliament (to applause) that it was rescinding the policy. While Dr. Tony Tan, who had become Minister for Education, recognized that the scheme had aroused “anxiety and resentment” in many Singaporeans both graduate and non-graduate, the primary reason for the removal of the policy was the government having received responses from graduate mothers saying that the scheme would not encourage them to have more children. Given that the government refused to recognize a fundamental problem with the discriminatory nature of the policy, civil society’s victory was partial at best.

Regardless, the effects of social attitudes and of governmental policies were strongly felt by women, and it is unsurprising that plays such as Emily would have struck a chord with audiences. Indeed the question of family relations often became a metaphor, as well, for the paternalistic mindset of the government, especially with relation to the supposedly wayward youth who were, in the eyes of their parents, sometimes all too susceptible to corrupting influences, sexual or otherwise, from forces outside the family/country – such as the “West.” Interestingly,
the discrimination against and oppression of women were inextricably linked to the similar suffering of men. In *No Foul Play*, for example, Alice, thinking she is unloved and unwanted by her parents, bitterly compares her suffering with that of her brother, Kwong Meng, who she thinks is favored by their parents. It is not clear at all that Alice has it worse:

**Kwong Meng:** [Mother and Father] only use me.

**Alice:** Use you?

**Kwong Meng:** In their eyes, I’m the little boy who must one day grow up and be a successful man. So they can boast to their friends and neighbors how wonderful it is to have such a good son.

**Alice:** Maybe that’s the only thing they can boast of. I think they really love you. At least they love you more than their two daughters, so why are you complaining?

**Kwong Meng:** If they really love me, they won’t put so much pressure on me. They won’t force me to study when I can’t. They won’t force me to do things I don’t like to do. Study! Study! Study! Mother forces me to. Father forces me to.

**Alice:** But you must think of your future…

**Kwong Meng:** That’s what Father said the night he caned me. Study hard. Pass your exams. Get your certificate. Otherwise you’ll be like me. A laborer all your life…

**Alice:** Father can be harsh sometimes. That’s because… it’s his secret ambition to have his son go to the U. So he can be proud of you.

**Kwong Meng:** But I suffered. I suffered the night he caned me. It was terrible. It was painful; on my body, on my spirit. I can’t help it if I fail in some subjects that I am not good at. I’m not that smart.

By the end of this scene, it emerges that Kwong Meng is actually already dead – driven to suicide by the emotional pressure from his parents and teachers to perform well academically when he simply could not live up to their hopes.\(^{209}\) Alice, at the end of the play, takes her own life, too, a victim of competing pressures and expectations she cannot endure. The play ends with an announcement, the coroner’s findings regarding Alice’s death, ironically remarking that there was “no foul play” involved, thus raising the question of the extent to which society as a whole can be

\(^{209}\) Lim and Wong, *No Foul Play*. 
held morally culpable for the trauma suffered by both young men and women who have to live up to its expectations.

The expectations placed on men were not merely academic – one major “men’s issue” which was fertile ground for the arts scene was military service. All males in Singapore had to serve two years of National Service – essentially, conscription. Tan argues, correctly, that National Service was often seen as a “rite of passage into both adult manhood and full (voting) citizenship, when males learn to assume the role of protectors both of their families and of their nation.” In particular National Service was thought to guard against complacency and the “softness” created by affluence. At the same time, Tan argued that National Service, by “regulating male aggressiveness,” could provide men “with a common stock of experiences that can be politically controlled as powerful tools of socialization.” The fact that all Singaporean males had the experience of the army made discussion of it a particularly easy way to relate to audiences, especially since it was not only the men going through national service who were deeply affected by it, but also their mothers, sisters, girlfriends etc. who would have seen themselves in the supporting cast depicted in productions like Michael Chiang’s acclaimed *Army Daze*.

First performed in June 1987, *Army Daze* has since become a major hit in the history of Singaporean drama productions, being constantly restaged for new audiences. The play was a comedy, following the exploits of a group of new recruits and their supporting cast (officers and trainers, family members etc.) as they struggle to get through BMT (Basic Military Training). The ensemble was rife with Singaporean stereotypes, drawing on shared experiences not just of days spent in the military, but of stereotypical categories of Singaporeans. Such stock characters litter

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the cast – one example is Corporal Ong, who constantly quotes nuggets of Hokkien folk wisdom and uses clichéd lines in scolding his soldiers, which Singaporean men who had passed through the army would have been familiar with (e.g. to a recruit struggling on an obstacle course: “Recruit Krishna! Stop wasting time. My grandmother can run faster than you!”) Another such character represented a stereotype of the ah beng, a stereotype of a young Chinese man, often unrefined, crude, flashy, materialistic, uneducated, and heavily reliant on Mandarin and dialect for speech. Remarkably, the character is actually named Ah Beng. The script introduces him at the gathering point for new recruits to be escorted to their training camp:

Ah Beng, dressed in his big baggy black ensemble, walks in by himself. He’s carrying a Nam Ho Travel overnight-bag. He moves to the front of the stage, squats in a corner, observing the people around him. He takes out his sunglasses and puts them on. He pulls out his plastic hair-brush from his back pocket and combs his hair. Fluff, fluff, pat, pat. Tucks the brush back into the pocket.\(^\text{211}\)

This entire sequence drew on cultural character stereotypes – all the actions taken by Ah Beng were commonly associated with ah bengs in popular depictions. By introducing the character in such a way, the play effectively allowed the audience an immediate insight into the character by letting the audience know that he fit into a defined mold. They could thus infer things about Ah Beng’s character without being explicitly told. At the same time, a contrast is struck between characters like Ah Beng, who is considered crude and uncouth, and those like Malcolm’s mother, who have an almost comical obsession with being refined and “high class.” When the sergeant arrives to collect the boys to take them to their training camp, Mrs Png implores her son: “Quick, quick, look intelligent. Otherwise they will put you with the low IQ boys.”\(^\text{212}\) This obsession with class, wealth and refinement would not have seemed alien to Singaporean audiences, being a neat


\(^{212}\) Ibid.
parallel to the government’s emphasis on economic growth and shunning of dialects (which *ah bengs* often used). The audience was thus invited to laugh not only at their own privilege, but at their own tendency to look down on characters like Ah Beng as exemplifying the crude and undeveloped. Malcolm’s mother’s first meeting with Ah Beng plays up the interaction between the two:

**Malcolm**: Ah Beng, this is my mother.

**Ah Beng**: Oh, hello Auntie. Your son very good. Very on the ball. Never twang one. [He doesn’t slack off]


The play spends most of its time, though, on scenes of the boys undergoing training. Most of these are used as comic relief. At the same time, some would have struck a very personal note with theatregoers. In particular, Krishna, a recruit, becomes extremely worried that his girlfriend, Lathi, would break up with him during his time in the army as they spend time apart. Ironically it is Ah Beng who offers the best advice among all of Krishna’s platoon mates, albeit crudely phrased, and helps comfort Krishna. The earthy and unrefined do, after all, manage to eke out a place for themselves, providing what the classy and wealthy cannot. All in all, *Army Daze* exerted such a strong pull on the public imagination that it sold out its performances and was re-staged in August 1987.\(^{213}\)

We have thus seen a sample of the ways in which authors and playwrights tried to bring out a Singaporean voice in their productions. Whether it was through the use of language, stock characters, familiar settings, or commonly experienced conflicts, the appeal of these plays was

obvious – Singaporeans identified with them. Someone, at least, had managed to bring out the Singaporean voice, even if it wasn’t always clear how to define it.
Conclusion

To end the story here feels almost like a pity. We leave the actors and artists, directors and policymakers, writers and politicians at a cusp of a flurry of developments in the arts scene. In 1990, for example, the National Arts Council was established, a new body which liaised directly with major figures in the arts scene. Not all was flowers and ovations, though. The very real undercurrent of fear and loathing – of that which was seen to be morally corrupting – was very much alive in the city-state.

For instance, Alvin Tan and Haresh Sharma’s The Necessary Stage got into trouble with the government in the early 1990s when they were commissioned to do a play on mental illness by the Ministry of Health, which gave them substantial funding (S$40,000) for the project. They spent months doing fieldwork and research on the plight of those suffering from mental illnesses, visiting mental health institutions, care centers, speaking to sufferers and their families and so on. The result was a script for a play titled Off Centre. When the script was submitted for approval by the Ministry of Health, though, things went badly:

The script went to the board of directors at MOH, and the board of directors were not arts-trained. They freaked out… there were two co-protagonists… The boy doesn’t want medication… he’s very smart, medication numbs him so he doesn’t want to take it. He’s manic depressive, and his depression became worse because he wasn’t taking the medication. So he ended up committing suicide, but in a flashback [it was revealed that] his first breakdown was in the army. They didn’t want it to be in the army, because MOH cannot commission a play that puts another ministry in a bad light. They didn’t want… suicide, it’s too deep a thing, so they wanted us to take away the major illnesses and deal with OCD. Simpler illnesses. And they had several other things they wanted to change, which we felt would compromise the work.214

This was not something which Tan and Sharma were prepared to accept. Perhaps they had misunderstood the reasons behind the commission, but the fact remained that they had spent

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months of blood, sweat and tears learning and retelling stories which were in many ways very real indeed. When asked about their response to the Ministry, Tan laughed: “We told the Ministry to take back their fucking money… We said we didn’t want to compromise our artwork, please take back your money, we’ll go on how we are.” The Necessary Stage managed to scrape together the resources to go ahead with the production despite the government’s withdrawal of its support – in fact, the company was the subject of an investigation as the government “was wondering how come [TNS] could go on without the $40,000… they suspected that money was coming in from overseas to fund it.” The specter of a foreign power having control of Singapore’s media and arts scene had still not gone away. In the end, though, Tan and Sharma had the last laugh. Not only did the Singapore Association of Mental Illness, which was a government body, support the work as an accurate depiction of the struggles of those afflicted with mental illnesses, but 14 years after Off Centre went on stage for the first time, it became the first Singaporean play assigned as a text for the national ‘O’ Level literature examinations (to be taken by those leaving Secondary school at the ages of 16-17).

Much more could be said about the other things happening at this time – the advent of the Fringe Festival, or the government’s clamping down on performance art after one artist decided to clip his own pubic hair as part of a performance, leading to a “whole generation of performance artists having to leave the country,”\textsuperscript{215} or the growing emphasis by the government on writing patriotic songs in pop or rock styles in order to appeal to the changing population. However, all this has to be a story for a different time, and a different place. Just as Zhou Enlai is reputed to have said when asked about his opinion on the effects of the French Revolution, it may be too

early to tell, from a historical point of view, the real nature of events as recent as the late 1990s and their impacts. Events reaching much further back into history continue to have tremendous repercussions – the 1987 crackdown on the “Marxist conspiracy,” for instance, continues to occupy a central place in the imaginations of civil society activists; the government’s delicately crafted narrative of the difficulty of walking the tightrope, always running the risk of falling into communal riots and chaos, continues to receive much buy-in and support from the population.

If anything, this should caution us against accepting any of the points of view presented in this thesis at face value, especially those of the author. This paper has attempted to remain as neutral as possible on almost every conceivable debatable point. None of this should be read as expressing support for or disapproval of any particular government policy, artwork, art form, approach or philosophy of any individual artist or writer etc. As mentioned in the introduction, a good part of the thesis is concerned with trying to understand the personal experiences of many of those who were deeply involved with the controversies and events depicted herein. Where possible, opposing points of view were highlighted (e.g. the contrasting opinions of Choy and Rajaratnam on Rajaratnam’s treatment of Choy, presented in Chapter 2). At other times, one should remain vigilant when reading the accounts presented in this paper, recalling that other parties may have seen the issues very differently.

Where does this thesis leave us, then? In the author’s opinion it leaves us with a Singaporean arts scene which, as it walked into the 1990s, was gradually becoming more confident not only in its power to influence society, but in its understanding of its own form and the society it lived in. As artists, writers, and directors began to appropriate more and more specialized and varied art forms, and began to think about their own philosophies of how they wanted their art to
interact with society (e.g. Alvin Tan’s view on how The Necessary Stage did not want to directly oppose the government), their treatment of the material which they were working with seems to have become more sophisticated. At the same time this sophistication was also due to what appeared to be a general awakening of Singaporean society in general, becoming more aware of what it saw as defining characteristics of citizenship (e.g. language? Serving the military?), which allowed artists to speak to society’s views more directly, either supporting or challenging them. In its determination to carve out a place for itself it had to contend with a government which believed (and continues to believe) firmly in the potentially tremendous harms that could arise from an unregulated arts scene.

There are many roads one could take from here if one wished to explore the subject further. One could walk backwards into the past even further, looking at, for example, the roots of various traditional art styles to see how particular styles survived and adapted (or failed to survive and adapt). Lee’s work on the tradition of amateur Chinese opera in Singapore and its relation to Confucianism would be one example of a study in this vein, however, there are so many more art forms and many angles from which to approach them. 216 On the other hand, one could look forward past 1990 and take up the story where we left off. The ways in which history have been recorded and presented to the public have also not received much study. Only a small amount of work has been done in this area, most notably a recent study by Liu, Lawrence, and Ward on social

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representations of history in both Singapore and Malaysia. Little analysis has been done on national education, for example – the focus of Sim and Print’s study is post-1997. Likewise, the role of museums has not been dissected sufficiently. One particular study, although rightly choosing to analyse in close detail things such as word choice and presentation of history in the Singapore Museum, did so with specific reference only to one permanent exhibition set up in 1997.

If there is one thing which the reader should take away from this exploration, it is that the story is not quite as simple as academics and leaders would have us believe. Singapore was not and is not a ‘cultural desert,’ nor an island paradise where the arts grow unchecked and unimpeded; nor even a completely authoritarian state where everything done, said, or made by an artist or writer must go through a board of censors first. None of these portrayals do justice to the fraught and tense conflicts we have seen unfold. Still less do they help us understand the passion, drive, and fervor of many of those in the field who strove hard for what they believed in. Whether they were writers, directors, or politicians, most if not all of them were motivated by a shared love of the country (if not for all its laws and institutions, then at least its people and identity) and a sense of its importance. Their differing outlooks on how to proceed into the future were underpinned by a common determination that there be a future for the country.


By way of conclusion, we can perhaps think of the ways in which the artists tried to imagine the future. The narrative of the dangers of racial conflict offered a particularly striking vehicle through which they could articulate their view of Singapore’s future. While the government saw Singapore as perpetually running on a treadmill, with the dangers of racial clashes omnipresent and insurmountable, some chose to believe otherwise, and expressed their hopes in their art. They chose to look at Singapore’s past history – of fear, of uncertainty, of a life on the very edge – and wondered how a better world might emerge. The Necessary Stage wrote a play entitled *Gemuk Girls*, staged in 2008 to critical acclaim. Written about the effects that detention without trial (such as the 1987 arrests) had on family life, Alvin Tan said:

*Gemuk Girls* is about the ISD [Internal Security Department – responsible for detention of supposed subversives, terrorists etc. without trial] and the people that were… the grandfather who was detained. The mother was a hippie, she grew up in the hippie period, and her daughter was an NGO activist, and became an MP and 20 years from now is the first female [Malay] Prime Minister of Singapore. When she [made] her National Day speech Singapore was in perfection. The speech was very moving, because it was the ideal Singapore and she talked about how Singapore has finally come to be.\(^{220}\)

The dream was there – a Singapore where racial harmony, so to speak, no longer existed as a concept because race itself no longer mattered. Improbable? Probably. Utopian? Almost certainly. And yet it was deeply rooted in real familial ties, conflicts, and emotions which were very familiar to audiences, and which was why it was very well-received. Singaporeans watching the play recognized some deep, important truths in the work which resonated deeply with them. The work was visionary indeed, but also spoke to real, present feelings. When discussing the utopian nature of the play – and other similar works of art – Alvin Tan laughed and said:

Of course it won’t affect [Singapore now] big time, lah, but we still want to do the work. Because the work is deeper than just being anti-state,… it’s about mindset. So we don’t care if it reaches out to a smaller group of people. 40 years from now, when I die, another

group might redo our play because our play is published, then maybe it might have a bigger impact. I don’t look for results in my lifetime, I’m zen that way. ²²¹

The work was certainly just a dream, but that isn’t necessarily a reason to discount it. After all, it was the same visionary fervor that led Lee Kuan Yew and his compatriots to take on a task which seemed just as impossible to them in August 1965. From that dream and their dedication came an improbable state which not just survived, but thrived.

Who, then, could say what might come next?

²²¹ Ibid.
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