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The politics of disaster: The Great Singapore Flood of 1954

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Abstract

Singapore in the 1950s was a deeply divided society. Struggling to recover from the hardships of the Second World War and fighting an internal battle that the British government termed an 'emergency', it was a time of hardship, tension, and anxiety. In the midst of this crisis, Singapore's inhabitants continued to manage the natural elements of their climate and environment, especially the dangerous combination of heavy monsoonal rains, low-lying marshland, and tidal flooding. This article examines the circumstances surrounding a particularly severe episode of flooding that occurred in December 1954. It explores how the flood's impact was exacerbated by human exigencies, especially recent government resettlement plans and infrastructural weaknesses. In line with the themes of this special issue, it explores the notion of 'justice' during a disaster. In this case, justice was intimately related to political agency, social vulnerability and resilience. Viewed in this way, the flood story can be used as a lens into the wider socio-political contexts of the time.

Keywords

Climate change, environmental change, environmental governance, environmental justice, flood risk management

Introduction

Post-war Singapore and the climate: Putting the floods into context

Post-war Singapore was an uneasy place in which to live. It was still recovering from the mental and physical injuries of the Second World War; economic insecurity, rationing, poverty, and malnutrition were facts of everyday life. The returning British government faced a new battle: to rebuild and to win the 'hearts and minds' of an increasingly divided society (Ng, 2012; Ramakrishna, 2002). Tensions between the government and the majority Chinese population of the city were especially tense. Labour unrest, trade unionism, and strikes were increasingly common. The establishment of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) in 1946 threatened British authority and the party's aggressive tactics led the government to declare a state of emergency in 1948 (Cheah, 2003). The 'Emergency'

would last 12 years. The mid-1950s were critical years in many respects. By then, MCP tactics were shifting away from violent methods towards infiltrating legal political organisations and influencing from within. The Rendel Constitution of 1954 (commissioned in 1953) had expanded Malayan political representation, a first step towards internal self-government, albeit under British control (Constitutional Commission, 1954). The first elections under this new arrangement were held in the spring of 1955, which saw a contest between several new parties including the People's Action Party (PAP) – established November 1954 – and the Labour Front under David Marshall (Chan, 2008). It was in this politically charged context that one of the worst episodes of flooding in 20th century Singapore took place.

Singapore has two annual monsoon periods, the most severe occurring during November to January known as the northeast monsoon bringing heavy rains, storms, and flash-flooding. The city is a low-lying coastal port, with three major rivers (Singapore, Rochor, and Kallang), built across what were once large swathes of marsh and swampland. Tidal flooding, riverine flooding, and monsoonal flooding were therefore common hazards. Whilst every year saw floods, at least once in every decade or so across Singapore's history from 1819 to 1954, there occurred a particularly severe event that went down in popular memory as a 'Great Flood'. Often, these were occasions when exceptionally heavy rains (often, though not always, related to La Niña) and high tides combined. The years 1884, 1892, 1909, 1911, 1925, 1934 are good examples. However, the scale of flooding could not always be solely attributed to extreme weather. December 1954 was once such occasion.

Although there is evidence for La Niña in the 1954–55 season, it is generally considered a weak event (Gergis and Fowler, 2009).¹ There were exceptionally heavy rains in Singapore over the northeast monsoon season nonetheless, some combining with high tides, which created a series of flood events that affected the city and its surrounding hinterlands during December. Some of the worst affected areas were coastal and low lying but at least 10,000 inhabitants across Singapore were affected to some degree. Five thousand people became temporary refugees, many losing their homes and livelihood in the process. Five people died – a family – during an abortive rescue operation. Whilst some might contest how far this was a 'disaster' this article works from the premise that, as Gerrit J. Schenck has recently pointed out, a nature-induced disaster is considered such 'if it is perceived as such in human culture i.e. by harming people ...' (Schenck, 2017). For those people who lost everything in 1954 as we shall see, the floods were indeed a disaster.

History as a tool in understanding the bigger picture

The factors that led to such severe disruption in some areas of Singapore in 1954 will be explored at length during the article. Suffice to say here that it was human and structural factors that had made a bad situation disastrous. As Greg Bankoff (2017), Uwe Lübken and Christof Mauch (2011), and many others have argued, the impact of a disaster is generally uneven, disproportionately affecting society's most vulnerable. Thus, the magnitude of a disaster is intimately linked to social vulnerability, risk, and resilience (Blaikie et al., 1994; Bulkeley, 2001; Douglass, 2016; Smith, 1996). Singapore, like many other colonial port cities, had a high number of low-income residents, often recent migrants with limited support networks, who lived in cheaper areas in substandard housing. In Singapore, land was cheap where it was low lying, swampy, and flood-prone. Lacking many basic infrastructural necessities (good drainage/flood mitigation schemes) to manage the impact of tropical weather, the people who lived in these areas were at the greatest risk from, and the least resilient to, extreme weather (Lai and Tan, 2015; Rahman et al., 2016).

However, although socio-economic circumstances are important, a community's level of political agency and social marginalisation can also be a significant contributing factor to their vulnerability (Ngai, 2015). As Janku et al. (2012) highlighted, the political context of a disaster is critical to the outcome. Politics creates the localised framework for cultural and social resilience and is often at the root of a disaster's cause and impact. The concept of 'disaster justice' – the framework that links the essays in this special issue – thus becomes a useful lens by which to explore the political context of the events of December 1954. The term itself – coined by Robert Verchick in 2012 – may be recent but its encompassing philosophy is not. Justice in disaster situations is intimately connected with the social inequalities that are created in political spaces (including vulnerability, risk, and resilience at their very core) and people's agency to successfully manage a disaster situation (Verchick, 2012). When government or people fail in this task, it signals a failure in some combination of policy, management, and infrastructure (both physical and social). Disaster justice (or injustice) is only possible within a political space. In this article, which draws from historical methodology and disaster history, disaster justice will be conceptualised in two main ways. The first relates to political justice, that is the right to determine culpability for the disaster and is related to the matter of popular political agency. The second, and associated, form of disaster justice connects with the legal context, particularly the avoidance of responsibility by government by terming the disaster an 'Act of God'.

Taking as a central premise the claim that all disasters occur in political space, this paper will explore the situation of marginalised Singaporean communities during and after the major floods of December 1954. It tells the story of the floods; explores the British government's short-, medium-, and long-term plans to deal with flooding and examines the immediate political consequences. In all instances, attention should be paid to the different temporal scales of prevention and recovery, from short-term coping strategies such as sandbagging and financial handouts to longer term post-disaster recovery and rebuilding and future mitigation plans. Whilst the British government responded quickly and effectively to the disaster with charitable aid and a coordinated clean-up operation, many Singaporeans believed that it was the government's policy and actions over the preceding months that had exacerbated the scale of flooding in some areas, the rural Bedok community of southeast Singapore in particular. Central to the narrative of complaint was the government's forcible resettlement policy, moving people from established communities to new, ill-prepared sites with poor infrastructural facilities. Despite pressure from inhabitants and opposition parties to accept their culpability, government propaganda during and immediately after the event, and their control over the main press outlets, enabled them to manage the political message and evade immediate responsibility for the crisis. The floods were framed as *force majeure*, unforeseeable and extraordinary events for which nobody – especially government – could be held accountable. The affected inhabitants believed that justice had not been served in this instance, a view that was revealed most forcefully at the ballot box the following spring.

Keeping 'justice' at the forefront of the discussion then, this article will examine the reasons why the rural Bedok community were so vulnerable and the government's attitude towards the inhabitants' ongoing complaints. It will also argue that the contemporary sense of disaster justice – or, in this case, injustice – contributed towards the outcome of the next year's elections. In so doing, it explores the disaster as a window into the wider historical socio-political context of the period and shows how such events were appropriated for political means.

The article uses a range of primary sources, mainly gleaned from the National Archives of Singapore and the National Library of Singapore. Sources range from newspaper reports,

governmental press statements, letters, and communications from resident's committees, maps, opposition government statements, oral histories, radio broadcasts, and photographs. Governmental sources are well represented due to the survival of records about the event. It must also be remembered that the press was under tight control due to the ongoing state of emergency, called in response to the perceived communist threat by the MCP. It must also be noted that it was the Chinese who were suspected of following the communist cause and it was Chinese rural and squatter communities who were worst affected by the floods. This adds an additional dimension to the case study that should not be overlooked and strongly suggests that what we read in the press should be viewed with caution. Indeed, the large file of press statements released by the government propaganda department about the floods and the lack of press criticism is, in itself, telling.

The floods

1954 was an exceptionally wet year. The wettest in fact since 1934 and 1925, the only years in the early 20th century to compare.² There had been a 'violent rainstorm' in October 1954, with a heavy rainfall on the night of 22nd, causing floods on the 23rd (*The Straits Times*, October 1954: 1). Then again, in December heavy rains began to fall overnight on Wednesday 8 December and continued to fall almost unceasingly for two days. By first light on Thursday morning, the police had alerted the Social Welfare Department (SWD) to serious flooding in many of the low-lying areas of the island. The SWD were responsible for coordinating disaster recovery operations and, given the high incidence of flooding on the island, their first response was to send teams to known flood-prone areas to assess the damage. They highlighted Bedok, Potong Pasir, Geylang Serai, Lorong Tai Seng, and the Balestier and Braddell Roads as potential danger zones (Cromwell, 1954: 1). The SWD's disaster response began almost immediately. By 10:45 am, departmental officers were at each site ready to give assistance and to begin the process of converting schools, churches, and other public buildings into emergency relief centres. These 24 hour centres were staffed in the main by volunteers and members of voluntary organisations including the Salvation Army, Red Cross, Blue Cross, and St John Ambulance.

Between 7:30 am on the 9th and 7:30 am on the 10th, 8.69 inches of rain fell on Singapore, a record for one day (*The Straits Times*, 1954: 1). As was generally the case in Singapore's historic floods, the exceptional rain was not the sole cause of the inundation; its combination with a very high tide was a key factor. The rain abated at 4 pm on the 10th – 42 hours after it had started – but a further half an inch fell on the night of the 10th (*The Straits Times*, 1954: 1). Floodwaters reached four feet in depth in areas including Geylang Serai, Potong Pasir, Bedok, Bukit Timah, and the Kallang and Whampoa River areas. By the second night, operations were stepped up in order to accommodate the large numbers of people who found themselves homeless. The military provided vehicles suited to deep water to transport beds, blankets, and other supplies to the relief centres to help cope with the growing numbers of displaced inhabitants. The SWD established a flood emergency HQ at the Civil Defence Headquarters at Kolam Ayer. On the Friday, more than 3000 hot meals were served at the various relief centres, along with coffee, biscuits, and milk. Relief payments were given out to people in need, a sum totalling \$27,240 over two days to 493 families (Radio Malaya, 1954).

When the waters began to ebb on the 11th, people began to return home. Transport services suspended on the Thursday quickly returned to normal. A flight carrying American actress Ava Gardner, who had been stuck in Penang on her way to Singapore, arrived and she 'was able to resume her planned promotional tour from Raffles Hotel for the premier of her new film "The Barefoot Contessa"' (*The Straits Times*, 1954: 1; Sturgis, 2015).

A 'hard core of homeless' remained at the centres, however, with Bedok and Potong Pasir inhabitants some of the worst affected. At Bedok, 100 people stayed on, and at Potong Pasir some 300 were forced to spend the night at St Andrew's School (Cromwell, 1954: 2).

On 12 December, however, disaster struck once more. After only two days' respite, the rains began again in earnest. In the 24 hours between 7 pm on the 12th to 7 pm on the 13th, 1.40 inches of rain fell. Rescue squads were on alert for possible evacuations as water lapped into the doorways of homes in Bedok and Potong Pasir (*The Straits Times*, 1954: 1). As before, the response was immediate and involved various governmental, military, and non-governmental bodies. The SWD, Civil Defence Department, Royal Malayan Navy and Army, military reserve forces, Royal Air Force, Salvation Army, St John Ambulance Brigade, Red Cross, the Rural Board, the police, and an army of volunteers were all called up.

Schools were yet again transformed into relief centres where food, money, and other items were given out and beds provided for the homeless. The Yock Eng School catered for Malays of the Geylang Serai area and at Potong Pasir, St Andrew's School was a major distribution point and shelter (Public Relations Singapore, 1954c). These centres relied heavily on the efforts of the staff and students themselves, many of whom appeared fairly expert in handling this type of situation. Richard Tonne, a student at St Andrew's School, was interviewed by Radio Malaya. He said that before the floods, the school had been involved in helping the poorer members of that community: 'they had survey teams going out and a clinic run by the boys in the village, so when the floods came they knew the area well'. Lee Teck Ping, a junior teacher, told how 'they had four hundred people living in their school hall from villages off Potong Pasir. We had sent people out to collect them in boats'. Referring to the numbers of people still homeless from the flooding on the 8–10th, he added that although 'the St John's Ambulance look after the sick... many have been living in flooded conditions for some time' (Radio Malaya, 1954). The incidence of diseases related to the wet conditions, especially malaria and colds, was steadily increasing, and many had lost everything they owned. The relief efforts and donations were simply not enough; they were still in urgent need of clothes and money.

The floods continued into the next week. Heavy rains falling on the 16th contributed to the mire and raised concerns that further evacuations might be needed. Plans were put in place to reopen St Andrew's and Bedok Boy's School, and the Salvation Army Kindergarten at Towner Road which had only recently closed (Public Relations Singapore, 1954e). By the 17th, 500 refugees were back at Bedok Boy's School, 800 at St Andrew's, 100 at Braddell Road School, and 100 at the Salvation Army Kindergarten (Public Relations Singapore, 1954f).

In the short to medium term, the government put in place plans for rehabilitation, specifically aimed at the farming communities of Bedok, Potong Pasir, Geylang Serai, and Lorong Tai Seng. This plan relied on the findings of dedicated survey teams who were sent into the field to identify the needs of individuals and families in those areas. Twelve five-man investigative teams were put together by the SWD at their emergency HQ at Kolam Ayer. They included officers from rural, medical, and SWDs, amongst others (Public Relations Singapore, 1954g). A leaflet was drafted for distribution at the worst-affected areas entitled 'Government Comes to Assist You'. It described the planned Government Rehabilitation Survey scheme, explaining how officers would be calling on them to assess losses. It also explained that officer's report would be the only official document accepted by the government in determining how much assistance would be necessary (Public Relations Office to Colonial Secretary, 1954). Interim measures, such as the distribution of free rice, continued throughout the month (Public Relations Singapore, 1954h).

Monies for immediate relief and rehabilitation were raised through a combination of public and private funding. The scale of the disaster was such that it inspired an

overwhelming outpouring of generosity from the wider Singapore community. Local traders, small business owners, and the general public made generous donations of rice, tinned milk, clothes, and money. As early as 10 December, for example six local businesses gave bags of rice, cases of sardines, and salt fish towards the relief effort (Public Relations Singapore, 1954c). The largest coordinated fund was established by the *Straits Times*, which raised the amazing sum of \$278,000 by the end of the month. The single largest donation was from the government (\$50,000) but others contributed what they could. Two young boys aged nine and 10, for example, on hearing of the terrible plight of the victims, went around their estate collecting money. They raised the grand sum of \$102.49, which they presented to the *Straits Times*, along with a bundle of clothes (*The Straits Times*, 1954: 9). The *Nanyang Siang Pau* newspaper and the Chinese Chamber of Commerce also raised large sums, and collected gifts, including biscuits and medicines (Singapore Government, 1955; *The Straits Times*, 1954: 9). The British government spent an additional \$381,000 by the end of the year on the relief effort, some of which paid for seeds, fertilisers, and livestock for the devastated farmers. Rice was also donated by the Governments of Burma and Thailand (Singapore Government, 1955).

The situation at Bedok

One of the worst-affected areas in 1954 was Bedok (Singapore and Johore Bahru, Flood Map, 1954; Figure 1). In the early 1950s Bedok was a largely rural area with two small coastal, fishing communities and some small villages. Bedok's population expanded exponentially in 1953, when farmers then living in Paya Lebar were moved to Bedok by the government to free up land required for a new airfield (which officially opened on 20 August 1955). During the first round of resettlement, 561 houses were demolished, 4414 people were moved, and 296 families were resettled. However, more families than originally anticipated were required to be moved from out of danger zones. The result was the removal of an additional 838 people to Bedok and the demolition of another 118 houses over the course of the mid-1950s. The resettlement camp comprised of 392 plots (either shop or house plots) with small farm plots of two to three acres each. A transit camp was also established for those people who could not afford to immediately build their own accommodation at the new site.

The new site came with its own set of problems, of which the government was fully aware. In the rush to complete the airfield, residents were moved before the Bedok site was ready. Commissioner J. E. Pepper warned during 1953 that basic amenities including water standpipes and roads were still being built (*The Singapore Free Press*, 1954: 5). The low-lying area was also notorious for flooding. This fact had been noted by the villagers even before the move, some of the more vocal protesting 'against the unsuitability of Bedok' as a resettlement site, pointing out 'that the area would flood easily' (Bedok Flood Committee, 1954; Figure 2). The new community's main defence was a bund wall which, although useful during heavy rain, was not substantial enough to withstand the scale of the exceptional weather of December 1954. As early as 10 December, the bund had threatened to break. A 100 men responded by rallying to prevent floodwaters from overflowing into Bedok village, shoring up the bund wall with 4000 sandbags provided by the PWD (Goode, 1954: 1; *The Straits Times*, 1954: 1). Despite their hard work, the unceasing rains breached the wall on the 12th.

In Bedok, as elsewhere, the local authorities had been quick to react. A press release issued on the 9th reveals that teams from the SWD, PWD, Civil Defence, and the police had been on the scene within a few hours of the rains starting. The SWD provided hot meals for the victims from the very first day, distributing 500 meals at lunch and the same again in the



Figure 1. Survey showing Siglap, Ulu Bedok and Bedok, 1953. Source: National Archives of Singapore Map Collection. Provisional Issue (Siglap, Ulu Bedok, Bedok) Sheet 9, First Edition, Survey Department, Federation of Malaya No. 16-1953. Courtesy of Singapore Land Authority.

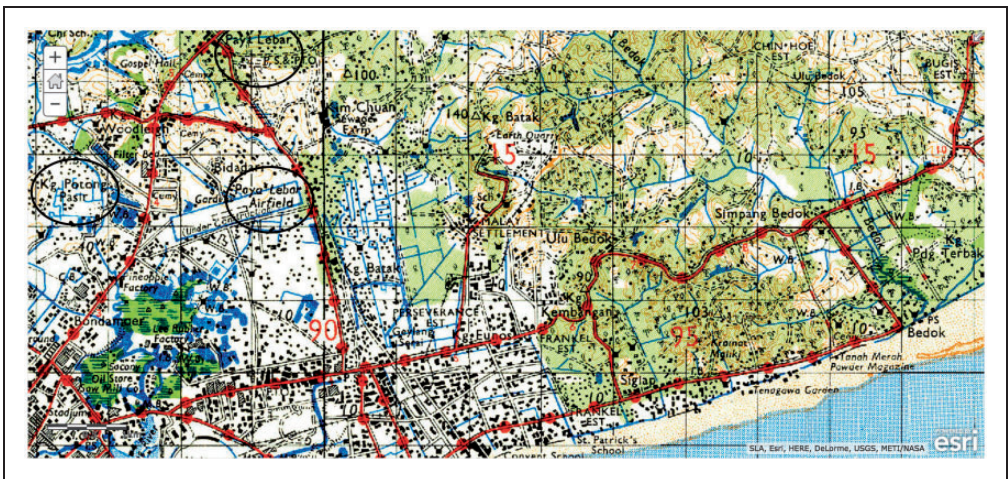


Figure 2. Map of south-east Singapore, showing Paya Lebar, the new airfield development site and pre-settlement Bedok, 1945. Source: National University of Singapore, ARCGIS Singapore Historical Maps, 1945. Courtesy of the Department of Geography, National University of Singapore and SAF Mapping Unit.

evening. The Public Relations Singapore (1954b) was also at the site, making loudspeaker announcements informing people where to obtain food and medical aid. On the 10th, 1500 meals were served at the Bedok Boy's School and the Sin Hwa school. The Bedok Boy's School was quickly utilised as a temporary shelter for the women and children, the army and the Medical Department providing 150 beds (Public Relations Singapore, 1954c; *The Straits*

Times, 1954: 1). Relief monies of \$10 per person were given out to all residents in the Bedok area by the SWD as a baseline. On the 10th alone \$9320 was given out to 171 families at Bedok to help with immediate needs (Public Relations Singapore, 1954d). The Under Secretary J. D. Higham, who had been on site that morning to view the flooded area, praised the efficiency of the response teams and volunteers (Public Relations Singapore, 1954c). On the 12th, a further \$2540 was given out to 74 families, many of whom had not been able to return home in the aftermath of the first flood.

Early on the morning of the 12th, a survey team was dispatched to begin work on assessing damages and the 'needs of the people of the Bedok area' (Public Relations Singapore, 1954d). The team comprised representatives of the Rural Board, Agricultural and Veterinary Offices, SWD, PWD, and the Rural Health Office. The team was to build on the efforts of the PWD Engineer who had been posted to the Bedok site since 23 October, when the area had last flooded. A scheme had been underway to widen and straighten the Bedok River and to raise the bunds by more than two and a half feet between Changi Road and the outlet to the sea. This scheme was virtually complete by the time of the December rains but, clearly, it was insufficient.

Speaking on the 14th of December, Colonial Secretary William Goode stated that, although at that moment in time it was impossible to estimate the extent of damage to property, at least 250 acres of Bedok had been submerged, as compared to 150 in October. The tremendous loss of livestock to this predominantly farming community was also a serious consideration (Goode, 1954). It was estimated that the Bedok farmers had lost crops and poultry to the value of \$750,000 (*The Straits Times*, 1954: 1). If we recall that this was the second flood that they had suffered in only a few months, then the combined losses must have been devastating. The inhabitants responded by forming a special committee, headed by chief members of that community as spokespersons. In communities like Bedok, local committees or associations were not uncommon. Many Chinese belonged to some form of association based on locality, name, or kinship. These associations were a traditional means of support and offered a sense of belonging. In 1950s Singapore, many of these associations became politicised and/or involved with the trade union movement. The Bedok Flood Committee was an example of a group that formed spontaneously in response to specific non-political circumstances, yet their voice reflected some of the grievances that were proving contentious at that time. These included poor living standards and working conditions, a rising cost of living, and the seeming indifference of the government. A large part of the blame for the devastation of their village, they argued, was their forcible resettlement to an unsuitable site, despite repeated warning by residents and government officials. The Committee threatened that if the government did not heed their cry for help, they would return to Paya Lebar. The angry farmers also made demands for recompense, arguing that they had been moved against their will and before the site was ready. 'Many of us are now in debt', the committee claimed in January 1955 and

many of us cannot hope to get back, at any time in the foreseeable future, to the financial position we were in at Paya Lebar... is it too much to expect compensation for such loss out of the public funds? (*The Straits Times*, 1954: 1)

The official response

The City Council, clearly under pressure, issued a formal statement on 11 December. This sought to deflect the focus away from Bedok. Drainage, the statement noted, was an ongoing problem but this was the case for the whole island. Bedok was not a special case. Moreover,

there were extenuating circumstances. The rainfall had been extraordinary, a fact backed up by the Malayan Meteorological Department (*The Straits Times*, 1954: 1). Local sawmill owners should also shoulder some blame, argued the government, as the rivers had become bloated at high tide from logs had clogging the Kallang and Whampoa Rivers (*The Straits Times*, 1954: 4). The statement went on to argue that the government had not been complacent. Referencing how since October, a full-time engineer had been working on developing a flood mitigation scheme for the Bedok area, it revealed that His Excellency the Governor (W. A. C. Goode) had personally assured government that this scheme would be accelerated, regardless of the cost. Goode had also authorised the appointment of an additional drainage engineer to work on a plan for the immediate 'drainage of the whole of Singapore Island'. This plan would incorporate flood control and prevention (Public Relations Singapore, 1954d). Three days later, Goode issued his own public statement, saying that 'in view of the very fact that the people in the Bedok area were resettled at the instance of the Government, immediate relief payments of \$10 per head... had been made. These payments total nearly \$30,000' (Goode, 1954: 2). He added that the Government was considering how best to meet the needs of those who had lost livestock in the disaster, so that farming could be resumed as soon as possible.

A more personal response to Bedok was sent from J. D. Higham, Under Secretary in the Colonial Secretary's Office, to Tan Keng Huan, Chairman of the Bedok Flood Relief Committee on 22 December. Higham offered his assurances that government would do its utmost to help Bedok residents 'to start anew and prevent a recurrence of flood disasters'. Nevertheless, Higham refused to admit governmental responsibility for the underpreparation of the new Bedok site. He iterated that the government had, in fact, spent \$120,000 on drains, bunds, and a sea gate. The problem in 1954, he argued, was the 'exceptional' weather, not the government's hydraulic management strategy. He went on to say that of course, given the circumstances, work was now under way to 'strengthen and raise the bund and... to cut a straight channel through to the sea for the Bedok River, so that surplus waters may drain away more rapidly'. Higham also made a point of highlighting that, whilst the government intended to do its utmost to help the flood victims and rehabilitate those persons whose livelihoods had been 'temporarily interrupted', the principle of compensation 'cannot be accepted'. He ended his missive on a high note, praising inhabitants' spirit in the face of disaster and, by expressing his confidence that 'the people of Bedok will show that they are determined to conquer adversity' (Higham, 1954a).

Higham's letter is an excellent example of government propaganda. The deliberate and careful use of linguistic devices presented a certain range of public 'facts'. Morally and politically obliged to render assistance, the government had to ensure that monies, material items, or assistance were given as 'aid' or as 'rehabilitation'. This cast the government in the role of benefactor: altruistic and benevolent. Whilst compensation may have amounted to the same financial or material disbursements, the refusal to use the term 'compensation' fundamentally shifted blame from the government. The flood was an 'Act of God', unpreventable despite the best-laid plans. The government had, in Higham's words, provided appropriate hydraulic works and could not be held responsible for the exceptional weather. A separate but revealing comment by Secretary for Social Welfare Thomas Cromwell divulged that the farmers should be helped because 'we need the food they produce' and 'that there was no question of paying them compensation. The accent was on rehabilitation of all genuine farmer victims' (*The Singapore Free Press*, 1954: 1). By framing aid as 'rehabilitation', the government again sidestepped any accountability for the disaster. Giving 'compensation' would have been akin to an admittance of guilt. To enhance the impact of Higham's letter to the Bedok farmers, it was not kept private but

issued as a press statement on the 23rd. The strategy was clear: to manage criticism through an illusion of public transparency. The final sentences of Higham's letter, praising the Bedok settlers for their courage in the face of adversity, cemented the tactic. Acknowledging their travails and determination, Higham's (1954a) words cast the settlers as a self-sufficient community whose industry (not reliance on others) would see them through.

Subsequent press statements followed the same line. The day after Higham's letter went public, his office released a formal statement on the Bedok Resettlement Rehabilitation Scheme. The statement emphasised the expediency of mitigation works already undertaken, in addition to expounding on the amount of money the government was investing. A sum of \$50,000 had already been expended on public works alone, with another \$300,000 earmarked for immediate to midterm solutions. This was in spite of the full plan being as yet unrealised: more would be spent in future (Higham, 1954b).

The same strategy of releasing rehabilitation expenditures was followed for Potong Pasir and Geylang Serai, although – perhaps because of more minor criticism in respect to government policy in these areas – press coverage was not as high profile. The government Public Relations Department also worked hard with the press to highlight human interest stories, rather than stories of tragedy or failure. News stories thus told of individual's heroism, from 'the Big-Hearted Heroes of St Andrews [school] who faced danger without flinching' to help flood victims, to the pictures of a woman receiving day old chicks from a relief centre so she 'can start afresh', as though this minor gesture would ameliorate all her troubles (*The Straits Times*, 1954: 7). Fast and effective governmental assistance was also stressed. On 15 December, a letter to the government from residents of Geylang Serai praising the city council and police for the 'magnificent job done during the recent floods' was made public. In particular, the letter noted the 'efforts made in replacing the bridge that spanned our road' within only 24 hours (Public Relations Singapore, 1954a).

A response came from Bedok, penned on 19 January to the Colonial Secretary. Kang Joo Hong, Acting Chairman of the Bedok Flood Committee, wrote that a general meeting had been held in the community to discuss Higham's letter and an appropriate response. The letter, though couched in suitably polite (though not deferential) language, revealed the resident's unwillingness to capitulate and reiterated many of the same concerns and issues as before. Their particular bugbear was that they had been made to move to an unsuitable site in the first place, questioning the justice of resettlement 'against their will at the Government's behest to make way for a public project'. They specifically asked that, if flooding could not be prevented, that they be moved to a 'less vulnerable part of the island' (Kang, 1955). This was crucial as the problem was not just the scale of the floods that December, but the fact that the area well known for frequent coastal flooding. Regardless of relief and rehabilitation efforts by the government, they argued, the residents would never be able to establish themselves if their crops, animals, and livelihoods were wiped out during every rainy season. Moreover, they claimed that the government's aid efforts were inadequate and arbitrary, pointing out that 'families suffering heavy losses have received less relief than those suffering lighter losses'. Finally, they invoked their right to moral and fair treatment. It seems that they had consulted lawyers as to their legal right to compensation and had been told that they had no case against the government. Therefore, they appealed instead to the British sense of morality and paternalistic duty.

The Bedok residents were not entirely on their own however. The press, whilst the official mouthpiece for the government's press statements and tightly controlled, did not vocalise only one perspective. Early in December, *The Straits Times* ran a story of a Bedok family who had lost everything in the flood. Evacuated by sampan, photographs revealed a woman

weeping after her crops and her home had been destroyed (*The Straits Times*, 1954). The farmer's situation could not have been illustrated more clearly than in the experiences of Ang Kin, this 90-year-old inhabitant of Bedok, previously Paya Lebar. On 23 January, more than a month since the start of the tragedy, her story was printed. It reveals much about the hardship of resident's lives post-resettlement. 'In the past three months', the reporter claimed,

Ang Kin has had to be carried out of her house three times to escape rising floodwaters. She has been sent twice to the Bedok Boy's School and once to a shop in Changi where she was looked after until she was able to return with her granddaughter. Yesterday found Ang Kin once again at the school... asked what she thought of the floods Ang Kin just smiled sadly and shook her head without saying a word. (*The Straits Times*, 1955: 3)

Members of Singapore's Legislative Council, the local governing body, had also raised questions concerning the government's flood policy. A vocal spokesperson was Mr M. P. D Nair (founder member of the Singapore Labour Party) who had contended at that December's Council meeting that the 'citizens of Singapore are generally concerned over the effects of floods in the Colony [and] that they are dissatisfied over the slow progress made by the Authorities concerned in alleviating [them]' (Goode, 1954: 1). A year later, a damning report written by Francis Thomas, Minister for Communications and Works in the new Labour Front government elected in spring 1955, critiqued the previous government's schemes. In his opinion, the flooding at Bedok was caused by the fact that 'the site in general resembles a large bottle with a very small neck, through which all the floodwaters must escape' and that the

resettlement area with its protective bund effectively blocks more than three-quarters of the path available for the floodwaters to run off to the sea... In short, Bedok's troubles arise from the mistake of the previous government in horridly moving the Paya Lebar farmers to Bedok without taking steps to control flooding.

He went further, claiming that 'all the floods of Singapore arise from past errors in development and from lack of planning'. His government inherited these mistakes and 'a great deal of work and time and money will be needed before these errors can be corrected' (Thomas, 1956).

Placing the flood into context

Whilst there is a clear argument against the government for executing the Bedok resettlement without proper attention to the community's wishes and needs, this story is not so simply explained. The 1950s were a time of immense political change for Singapore. By the end of the Second World War, nationalism in Britain's Asian colonies had undergone a transformation. The concept of 'Empire' was considered increasingly anachronistic by British Asians and by many Britons themselves (Bayley and Harper, 2008: 16, 26). Leftist politics and socialist movements, including the Labour movement, had gained widespread popular support. Singapore was no exception. As noted earlier, the government had declared a state of emergency in June 1948, following an armed insurgency by the MCP. It has been argued that 1953–1954 were critical years in expanding leftist support in Singapore, in large part due to the 'levels of economic exploitation and social injustice and the liberalisation that accompanied moves towards self-government and democracy' (Chin, 2008: 58). Certainly, the 1950s provided a combination of circumstances to increase political consciousness amongst the labouring

classes, including the rise of a strong labour movement, especially in Chinese communities. The 1950s also witnessed an expansion in Malay political activism, especially in connection to the call for independence and, after 1951, the use of English as the primary medium of education in Malay schools (Gillis, 2008: 154).

In February 1954, the report of the Rendel Constitutional Commission (appointed by Governor John Nicoll in 1953 to investigate and review Singapore's constitution) was a significant step towards encouraging and enabling greater political participation. It recommended expansion of the electorate and the formation of a larger 32-member Legislative Assembly, with 25 seats up for election. This directly encouraged the formation of new parties, including the PAP and the Labour Front (Ng, 2009). These were also very active years for the MCP via trade unions and rural residents associations (Chin, 2008: 3). Recurrent flooding was appropriated as a political weapon by government opponents as yet one more example of the failures of the extant administration. The 1954 floods were used by both the PAP and the Singapore Farmer's Association as a means to hit back against the British Government, accusing them of exacerbating the problems caused by heavy rains by failing to maintain rural drains and for the Bedok fiasco (Loh, 2013).

As Sikko Visscher (2008) is at pains to point out, the story of the 1955 legislative election has paled in significance to the 1959: the year the PAP came into power. This neglect has negated the importance of the 1955 election as a lens into contemporary social politics. In the lead-up to the April 1955 election, mass rallies were held island-wide to raise awareness and grassroots support for the opposition parties. These were largely aimed at the Chinese population and focused on rural, as well as urban, areas. Held between January and March, these rallies would have been watched by the beleaguered inhabitants of recently devastated flood zones. The mid-1950s political shift can be seen quite clearly in the composition of candidates in the 1951 and 1955 elections. In 1951, only four Chinese candidates had run, as compared to 56 in 1955 (Visscher, 2008: 87). The shift also holds true in the flood areas. At Geylang, the Labour Front candidate Mak Pak Shee won an overwhelming majority. In Paya Lebar, there was a 50% turnout, with only two candidates: Lim Koon Teck as an independent and Tan Eng Joo for the Democratic Party (DP). Lim won by a slim majority.³ It is significant that Lim had been very active in post-flood rehabilitation in the Paya Lebar area since 1953, whilst Tan had kept a low profile (Ong, 1982: reel 32).

Ong Chye Hock, independent candidate in the 1959 Legislative Assembly elections and active member of various farming and community organisations in the Paya Lebar area during the 1950s and 1960s, offers a unique perspective on the floods and the politics of the mid-1950s. His story, recorded as an oral history of Singapore, offers insight into the influence of the flood on the elections. Ong had been at the centre of the 1955 Paya Lebar election and knew both Lim Koon Teck and Tan Eng Joo well. During the run-up to the election, Lim had approached Ong when the latter was forming the flood relief committee. Ong, aware of the potential for raising his community profile, had helped Lim to form the committee. Ong, Lim, and a few others carried out a door-to-door post-flood campaign to register household loss and damage. Lim had also approached the Salvation Army for rice and clothes, especially for the surviving members of the family who had died at Potong Pasir in December 1954. Both the registration exercise and Lim's intervention with the Salvation Army were covered by the press. Ong firmly believed that Lim's involvement with the local community and the broad media coverage were what helped him defeat the DP candidate Tan Eng Joo. Lim had been active in the area between 1953 and 1955 and had visited the victim's families, while Tan had never 'showed face' (Ong, 1982: reel 32).⁴

Ong's recollections also reveal more about the fate of the farmers who had been moved from Paya Lebar to Bedok. It is through his account that we can get a handle on how the farmers had an established community support network in Paya Lebar, which they lost after the relocation. This of course directly affected their level of vulnerability and ability to rebuild after the floods. Life for the Bedok farmers when they had still been living in Paya Lebar in 1953 was quite different. Ong recalled his experience of the annual monsoonal floods in Paya Lebar. In 1953 as well as 1954 they had been quite severe. He attributed this, not to the rains, but to the new airport development which had caused debris to block localised drainage systems in Potong Pasir and Tai Seng. In Paya Lebar the local community had responded by forming a relief committee for the victims. Ong, as a village head, was a founding member. The committee was financially supported by the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, in addition to the Red Cross and Salvation Army who contributed with trucks of clothes and rice. He makes no mention of government assistance, but much of the community's own self-help mechanisms.

In 1953, Ong suggested that the aid response had been so overwhelming that the farmers collected a lot of money, new clothes, rice, and livestock. In addition, the local farmers had savings. Since before the war, Paya Lebar and the surrounding area had been one of Singapore's major vegetable farming areas. The farmers had adapted well to the low-lying swampland, growing crops which flourished in marshy soils and, of course, there was good irrigation. Yields were good and most of the farmers and their families were well supported by established community networks and savings. Thus, if disaster struck they had the resources at hand to rebuild their houses and farms with limited long-term impact. Moreover, Ong (1982: reel 14) stated that the relief aid in 1953 – garnered through exaggerated press reports – had so exceeded their need, that the farmers ended up using the committee office and its funds for gambling and, to trade and buy gold.

The story that Ong portrays reveals how, in Paya Lebar, the Chinese farming community was self-supporting with external help derived largely from embedded Chinese organisations, as opposed to the government. This appeared to have been both a choice and a cultural norm. The forcible removal of the residents from the more affluent and robust Paya Lebar had directly contributed to a worsening of their standard of living. It had also distanced them from their established community support network, making them in turn more reliant on government and less resilient to disaster.

Conclusions

The floods of December 1954 can be considered a case study of different forms of disaster justice, as well as a lens into the wider socio-political contexts of the time. Exploring justice in this instance as intimately connected to social vulnerability and resilience in a disaster, the situation of the Bedok farmers can be considered an exemplar of disaster (in)justice. Although the government reacted quickly to the immediate crisis and laid down longer term strategies for improved flood mitigation schemes, it was the forced resettlement of the Paya Lebar farming community to an only partially developed site that had arguably exacerbated the scale and cascading impacts of the disaster. Unable to access the mutuality of the generations-old community they had known in Paya Lebar, the Bedok residents had diminished resilience. Their sense of injustice was generated less from the official response to the crisis but from an underlying sense of political powerlessness, and their inability to lay claim to the same degree of agency they had enjoyed in Paya Lebar post-resettlement. So, although the government's immediate disaster response can be viewed as adequate – even above typical when viewed against the standards of the day – the fact remains that

it was an essentially paternalistic, top-down approach that did not factor in the issues then dividing Singaporean society. The framing of the disaster as an Act of God was a linguistic and legalistic way of avoiding culpability.

Nevertheless, justice, in this instance, is conceptualised as political, that is the agency to affect change to a situation, then the Bedok inhabitants were not entirely impotent. Although their demands and complaints did not ultimately lead to the government accepting culpability for the severity of the flood, nor indeed, did it enable the farmers to settle elsewhere, their righteous anger was felt at the ballot box in spring 1955. In this sense, Bedok had become a fundamentally politicised space and the sense of disaster (in)justice contributed to the growing discourse of anti-colonialism apparent during the 1950s.

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Notes

1. <https://www.esrl.noaa.gov/psd/enso/climaterisks/years/top24enso.html>; <http://ggweather.com/enso/oni.htm>.
2. Daily rainfall data courtesy of Singapore Public Utilities Board for MacRitchie Reservoir.
3. http://www.eld.gov.sg/elections_past_parliamentary1955.html.
4. Politically, the situation was an interesting one. In his retelling of event, Ong stated that the whole affair was politically very embarrassing for him. Although Ong was working closely with Lim, he was actually an active member of the DP. In fact, Ong had been asked to be the DP candidate in 1955 but had refused. During the mid-1950s, he was being courted by both Lim and Tan because he was the de facto Paya Lebar community leader. In the lead-up to the election Ong actually acted as Tan’s representative (election rules asked for each candidate to have two representatives, Ong was one, the other was Tan’s uncle). The short DP election campaign was fully funded by the Chinese Chamber of Commerce but Tans lack of interest meant the campaign was lost. Ong stood in 1959 as an independent candidate against the DP.

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