DEALING WITH DISSENT: ELEMENTS OF STATE POWER AND RESISTANCE IN CONTEMPORARY SINGAPORE

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Contents

Abstract

Given that Singapore is considered as a semi-authoritarian country, it is chosen as a case study to identify the pattern of the state's dealings with resistance and to seek answers to questions such as, "In what ways are resistance classified or recognized by the state?" "What are the recurring patterns of dealing with resistance?" "What is the discernible logic of domination behind and nuances amongst repressive methods?"

This thesis argues that in dealing with dissent, the state uses a combination of symbolic measures and punitive methods which include "systemic regulations," "making a case out of selected examples," "influencing the public's opinion," "safety valve," and "exalting change." Through the exposition of such methods, the author seeks to explore the patterns of dealing with dissent and the logic of the state's ways in countering and co-opting resistance.

Chapter One: Introduction

Much ink has been spilled on the analysis of power within the context of Singapore politics. In doing so, many of these scholars have made the understanding of the political power centre - the ruling People's Action Party (PAP), its governing institutions, ideology, and agencies - their fundamental research quest. These seminal works include Chan Heng Chee's *The Dynamics of One Party Dominance: The PAP at the Grassroots*, Chua Beng Huat's *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore*, Ross Worthington's *Governance in Singapore*, and Hussin Mutalib's *Parties and Politics: A Study of Opposition Parties and the PAP in Singapore*. These analyses have significantly contributed to the building up of our knowledge of Singapore politics – identifying the locations of preponderant power, and the ramifications, expressions, or manifestations of power.

Not all of the titles of these works are couched in synonyms of power or the language of power- whether it is "authority," "domination," "influence," "hegemony," "power elite," or "political clout." Nor did the authors, in any way, manifestly express that their research topics are related to power. However, a close reading of these works disclose that their theses revolve around answering or explaining key questions – How does the PAP acquire and maintain the ability to become a central political institution in Singapore? How does government work? How does the government shape the requisite cultural values and attitudes of the population to bring them in line with the norms of industrialization? Why does the political opposition still perform a miniscule role in Singapore despite their abilities to garner significant electoral support since the 1980s – which could not be satisfyingly explained without a detailed or systematic investigation into the workings or dynamics of power.

Chan's research, *The Dynamics of One Party Dominance*, attempts to comprehend the structure and dynamics of the Party's dominance and the means through which it maintains and institutionalizes political power.[1] Instead of looking into macro-level politics - the roles of central elites or governing institutions at the national level – for an answer to the Party's continual political hold, she forays into micro-level politics - the workings of the party and Government at the grassroots. Amongst her findings was the observation that the Party has with the passage of time established "an extensive organizational network at the grass-roots level to enable it to mobilize and control the population."[2] Significantly, this power network has been established through leveraging on governmental grass-roots institutions (community centres, Management Committees, Citizens' Consultative Committees) instead of party organizations. Chan observes that this stratagem has enabled the Party to become synonymous with the state, allowing the former to derive political advantages from the association and to further entrench its dominant position.[3]

Worthington's work, *Governance in Singapore*, focuses on explicating the dynamics of power amongst the government and executive agencies in Singapore and how these institutions, which the author believes lie at the centre of the Singapore story, work. The public sector, according to the author, has been instrumental in laying the cornerstones of economic and social success in Singapore.[4] Worthington uses an institutional analysis to focus on key questions such as: "Who is at the centre of government and policy making?" "What are the roles of institutions?"[5] The main aim of his research was to examine the power bases of Singapore politics. In his

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[1] Chan Heng Chee, *The Dynamics of One-Party Dominance: The PAP at the Grass-roots* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1976), 185.
[2] Ibid, 225.
[3] Ibid, 226
[4] Ross Worthington, *Governance in Singapore* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 3
[5] Ibid, 4.

conclusion, he writes that "The *realpolitik* of Singaporean institutional arrangements is this: the cabinet controls the government, the legislature, the party and approximately 60 per cent of the nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) through the Government Linked Companies (GLCs). There are no alternative sources of power; civil society remains shallow, the media and telecommunications systems are government controlled, almost all political discourses are mediated through government controlled or linked mechanisms…"[6] His observation implies that the significant scene of political life rests in the institutions of government, in particular the cabinet.

Mutalib's work, *Parties and Politics: A Study of Opposition Parties and the PAP in Singapore*, seeks to examine the anomaly of why the Opposition parties in Singapore were unable to exert to a greater political influence in society despite the substantial electoral support.[7] To account for this peculiarity, Mutalib adopts a systemic and structural approach to identifying the contributing factors. Apart from the internal weaknesses of the Opposition, such as intra-party bickering and strife, inter-party disunity, the lack of quality candidates and policy alternatives, the author looks at how Singapore's unitary state structure, simple plurality system, and the regulation of key institutions and the changes in constitutional and electoral laws by the incumbent have stifled the Opposition.[8] The simple plurality or first-past-the-post system, for example, enables the candidate who wins "the plurality (i.e. the most votes), not a majority"[9] to be declared a winner. In this system, the proportion of votes won does not matter. As a result, despite the Opposition's ability to garner 39 per cent

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[6] Ibid., 226.
[7] Hussin Mutalib, *Parties and Politics: A Study of Opposition Parties and the PAP in Singapore* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2003), vi.
[8] Ibid, 152-6, 271-323, 324-51.
[9] Iain McLean and Alistair McMillan, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 201.

of the popular vote in the 1991 General Election, it has not been translated into actual political power.[10]

Chua's research, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore*, looks at how the dominant party maintains its power position through ideological hegemony. It postulates that the PAP's electoral win since 1959 has enabled it to possess "the means to push forward [its] hegemony to the fullest possible extension."[11] It further argues that "The success of PAP's authoritarianism is thus itself to be explained by its acceptability to or at least toleration by the population through the presence of an ideological hegemony or consensus."[12] The concepts used in the ideological making include "pragmatism" and "communitarianism" whereby the latter refers to the prioritization of community in political life.[13]

What Does These Works Tell Me About Power?

A basic underlying commonality in these studies is that they provide an account of power relations which is asymmetrical and one-sided in Singapore. The emphasis is on the hegemonic exercise of state power either through ideological structure or centralized and distributed political structures.[14] Power is assumed to be exerted unilaterally by a single dominant entity.

At the heart of these analyses lies a top-down perception of power. Power is seen as being localized in certain core entities. Within this scholarship, the multitude is relegated to a shadowy figure in that there is a denial of their "voice" (with the

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[10] Ibid, 284.

[11] Anne Showstack Sassoon, *Gramsci's Politics* (London: Croom Helm, 1980), 129, quoted in Chua Beng Huat, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore* (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), 13.

[12] Chua, *Communitarian Ideology*, 10.

[13] Ibid., 17-23 and 31-35.

[14] Ibid., 2.

emphasis on their advocates, the intellectuals), and thus a vague notion of their attitudes and experiences. The main focus was on the unfolding of elite politics and institutional view of society.

The investigative questions or foci of inquiry, from these perspectives, become "Where is power centralized?" or "Where are the power bases?" or "How is power shared amongst structures or elites?" or "How is power exercised?" or "What is the relationship amongst different agencies?" or "How do institutions work to achieve social and political goals?" or "Who makes the decisions?" While these questions have enabled us to understand the structure of power within an institution and examine the expressions of power, they nonetheless lead us to a lopsided view of politics and power in our society.

The works written by Chan, Mutalib, and Worthington adopt a structural – functional approach to political life which leads us to an analysis of the separate constituents of the political system which make up a coherent whole. It analyses the interactions and interdependency amongst agencies. The approach aims to examine the coordination and exchanges amongst the agencies and find out the self-equilibrating and stabilizing nature of the system.

While this approach enables us to infer how political power is organised and distributed within a highly interdependent political system and analyse how the institutions and administrative organs manipulate power, this view however forecloses certain aspects of power and insights which we can garner from analysing power relations. When power is assumed to be localized, it assumes that power resides in some groups or institutions but is absent in some groups or institutions. The exertion of power is assumed to be unilateral and stable in this self-balancing system.

The results of such analyses are that the field of investigation either becomes a closed system where power is seen as uncontested and uninterrupted or a state where a hegemonic ideology restrains resistance. Certain fundamental questions however remain, "Do the masses resist power and how do they resist given the confines of power?" or "Are the people really complaint or quiescent or is the abidance a tactical strategy?" or "Are all forms of demands on the political system, whether it is demands for financial support, goods or implementation of certain public policies captured in the system?"

This thesis does not attempt to use the conventional treatment of power that concentrates on powerful individuals and repressive institutions. Instead, it seeks to adopt Foucault's understanding or notion of power relations as a "coexistence of power and resistance, a strategy of struggles."[15] Foucault points out that any analysis of struggle should have "no built-in tendency to show power as being at once anonymous an always victorious."[16] Instead, we should bear in mind that "in the relations of power, there is necessarily the possibility of resistance."[17] He went on to elaborate that "if there was no possibility of resistance – of violent resistance, of escape, of ruse, of strategies that reverse the situation – there would be no relations of power."[18]

The analysis of power relations thus involves understanding how power is negotiated with by individuals or other agencies. It examines the struggles created by competing strategies and discourses. The underlying assumption to this approach lies

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[15] Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, *Vol. 3,* ed. James D. Faubion (London: Penguin Books), 346.

[16] Michel Focault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, trans. Colin Gordon et al. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 163.

[17] James William Bernauer and David M. Rasmussen, *The Final Foucault* (Cambridge, Massachusetts : MIT Press, 1988), 12.

[18] Ibid.

in a Foucauldian understanding that "Power is everywhere, as is resistance to it."[19] As Derek Layder asserts, power "is not simply the province of privileged or 'legitimate' authorities. It is a feature of those who resist forms of domination as much as those who enforce or apply it."[20]

Depoliticization or Otherwise?

A reading of Singapore's politics at face value would provide one with the impression that Singaporeans are quiescent, apathetic and disinterested with politics. This belief is so ingrained that numerous works have been written on the hegemonic state − A paper written by Chan Heng Chee, *Politics in an Administrative State: Where Has the Politics Gone?*, in 1975 posits that the *meaningful* political arena has shifted to the bureaucracy.[21] Taking politics to refer to the mobilizing and organising of resources, or campaigning to achieve political outcomes and influence public policy, she observed the conspicuous absence of such activities and thereby concluded that one of the most salient trends in Singapore politics is the "steady and systematic depoliticization of a politically active and aggressive citizenry."[22] Instead, what has become noteworthy was the emergence of the phenomenon of the "administrative state," which she describes as possessing three distinct features.[23] Firstly, it is a state in which the power of the administrative and bureaucratic sector is greatly enhanced with the increasing complexity of governance and the extension of the state in non-traditional roles in the private sector. Secondly, the skills of a mobilizer is far less admired and valued than a technocrat, whose skills and knowledge become more

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[19] Derek Layder, *Understanding Social Theory* (London: Sage, 2006), 125.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Chan Heng Chee, "Politics in an Administrative State: Where Has the Politics Gone?" in *Understanding Singapore Society*, ed. Ong Jin Hui, Tong Chee Kiong, Tan Ern Ser (Singapore: Time Academic Press), 294.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid., 295.

relevant to the state's purposes. Thirdly, in terms of governance, the removal of politics is sought after. Instead, trust in the ruling elites' abilities to rule with the mandate and confidence in the officials' capabilities in policy-making and implementation is favoured as compared to conciliatory politics.[24]

Given the contrast between the turbulent politics of the 1960s and the increasingly placid political scene in the 1970s, her analyses incisively captured, to a certain extent, the dominant political dynamics of the day. The administrative state phenomenon seems to be occurring with the increased intervention of the State in all spheres of the citizen's life. Thio Li-ann pointed out that there had been an agglomeration of functions and powers being entrusted to the State as a result of the phenomena of industrialization and modernization.[25] This was the result of the dominant elites' thinking that the panacea to societal ills was found in "big state" intervention as opposed to having a minimalist state.[26]

Yet, to assume that Singaporeans are depoliticized as a result of the harsh political measures implemented by the ruling party obscures a significant aspect of the political realm – the common people. The citizenry is reduced to faceless masses within the system. Essentially, the assertion provides a much simplistic view of politics in the country, which we will further explore. Moreover, this assumption carries weighty implications. Firstly, it suggests that the issues which are significant or meaningful lie within the confines of the state whereas the common people are considered less noteworthy because the citizens do not engage in politically significant activities.

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[24] Ibid., 295-6.
[25] Thio Li Ann, "Law and the Administrative State," in *The Singapore Legal System*, ed. Kevin Y. L. Tan (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1999), 161.
[26] Ibid.

Yet, the notion of significant activities seems to be circumscribed or limited in Chan's writings and thus needs to be examined further. In *Politics in an Administrative State*, Chan observed that given the Government's heavy-handed approach towards resistance, the climate for opposition parties since the 1972 general election has grown increasingly hostile. She noted that as a result, "few participants are prepared to venture into the arena for the costs are very high."[27] She added that "Grievances and dissatisfaction in the political system cannot find an alternative leadership which can aggregate and articulate their views effectively. Over time, a pattern of compliance sets in for want of a leadership to focus dissent."[28] These statements imply that in order for grievances and dissatisfaction to be effectively known and acted upon by the ruling elites, a leader is required. Without someone spearheading this discontentment, the people resign and settle into compliance. However, the central questions that emerge are "Does all resistance require a leader or focal point?" or "Does the absence of a leader representing their interest entails that people resign themselves to a state of submission?"

Furthermore, the bulk of resistance and public displeasure found in Chan's *The Dynamics of One-Party Dominance* stem from individuals or groups who have utilized the official channels for feedback in the political system – the Member of Parliament's Meet-the-People Session (a weekly evening session where the Member of Parliament (MP) of the constituency would listen to the complaints and grievances of his people and provide solutions) and the Citizens' Consultative Committees

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[27] Chan, "Politics in an Administrative State," 297.
[28] Ibid.

(CCCs) (the essential functions of this institution include giving quick information of the people and relaying their needs to the Government).[29]

Chan's analysis of politics is however influenced by David Easton's systems analysis approach – a perspective of political life that views the political system as a system of interrelated activities, roles, and units which operates in an environment where demands on the ruling elites (inputs) are converted to policies (outputs). This approach however emphasizes only demands that actually pass through the gatekeepers (MPs and CCCs) and make their way into the governmental process.[30] What about those demands which have not been heard as a result of the disinclination by such powerless individuals to use these official channels of feedback, plausibly due to a perceived futility of efforts? Are these voices not important to the stability of the system? As Bernard Susser notes, "Politically ineffective groups, however, are not necessarily politically unimportant groups."[31] He explained that:

> The frustration of groups whose demands are consistently defeated cannot be calibrated with the machinery of Easton's system. Similarly, the erosion of their support will not register because the support of the politically "relevant" groups is all the system is geared to monitor. Although their frustrations may be potentially critical for the system's stability and survival – even in the short run – they nevertheless go unrecorded. But demands that are rejected or ignored over time do not, of course, go away. They may both intensify and seek other avenues of expression. Groups having poor access to the political forum may take their needs elsewhere, outside the system, perhaps in a revolutionary manner. A revolutionary situation may, in fact, be in the offing without showing up in the demands the system processes. Although such systems may be deeply divided and tenuous, they will give an illusory impression of stability.[32]

The notion of depoliticization of the citizenry moreover carries connotations that the values and the beliefs of the ruling government are uncontested; suggesting that the

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[29] Chan, *The Dynamics of One Party Dominance*, 164-85.
[30] Bernard Susser, *Approaches to the Study of Politics* (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 187.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid., 187-88.

citizenry are satisfied with the status quo and they subscribe to the dominant ideology. Whilst the author has only claimed that coercive power, in the forms of detention, use of legislation acts, and deregistration, has been used to depoliticize the citizenry,[33] the process of depoliticization often entails an ideological aspect beyond coerciveness. Ideological hegemony claims however rest on circumstantial evidence based on electoral victories gained by the ruling party. The analyses of these electoral victories however have not been based on a deeper understanding or consideration of the number of walkover constituencies and the actual percentage of eligible voters.[34] According to Ernest Z. Bower and Ai Ghee Ong, "For the past four elections – in 1991, 1997, 2001, and 2006 – the percentage of eligible voters who live in walkover constituencies were 49.9 percent, 59.3 percent, 66.8 percent, and 43.4 percent respectively."

Moreover, if grassroots organizations are institutional machineries which carry or disseminate the dominant beliefs and values of the elites, it is uncertain how effective these mechanisms are. Except for Chan's work on the grassroots organizations[35], most works have dealt with the *purposes* of these organizations instead of their *effectiveness*.[36]

In a 1996 survey conducted by Peggy Teo and Shirlena Huang, a random selection of residents in the Pasir Ris estate were chosen to participate in a research which sought to discover residents' sense of belonging to their estate. Amongst the questions used to elicit the findings, there was one which tested the residents' knowledge of

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[33] Chan, "Politics in an Administrative State," 295.
[34] Ernest Z. Bower and Ai Ghee Ong, "Singapore's May 7 Elections," Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 22, 2011, accessed June 10, 2011, http://csis.org/publication/singapores-may-7-elections.
[35] Chan, *The Dynamics of One Party Dominance*.
[36] Scholarly works on grassroots organizations have been largely focused on evaluating their purposes rather than their effectiveness. See for instance Kenneth Paul Tan, "Democracy and the Grassroots Sector in Singapore," *Space and Polity*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2003): 3-20.

who runs their estate. This question was used as an indirect measure to find out residents' concerns of their estate. Out of the 199 residents who participated, only 26.6 % could name at least one of the four MPs representing their estate.[37] The weak knowledge of the MPs who represents their estate interestingly implies a weak connection between the officials and people. This revelation casts doubts on the effectiveness of the grassroots organizations as ideological conduits.

Moreover, the term "depoliticization" is problematic by its very nature. While it is undeniable that Singaporeans have noticeably detached themselves from the prominent aspects of politics –collective bargaining, campaigning, and political organizing – it is questionable whether the political aspect of human beings can be removed entirely. Given the ability of speech amongst human beings and their natural tendency to interact amongst themselves or to discuss, engage, or take part in the affairs of the state,[38] is it conceivable for human beings to be completely depoliticized or disengaged from the affairs of the state?

Rethinking Resistance and Politics

Our understanding of political activities and resistance should be redefined to better examine power relations in Singapore. A spate of works has questioned our conventional understandings of political life and resistance.[39] Whilst earlier works on resistance have focused on the open, collective and organized aspects of politics, more current works since the 1980s have concentrated on leaderless and impromptu acts of

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[37] Peggy Teo and Shirlena Huang, "A Sense of Place in Public Housing: a Case Study of Pasir Ris, Singapore," *Habitat International*, Vol. 20, No. 2: 322.

[38] Jonathan Lear, *Aristotle: The Desire to Understand* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 201.

[39] In addition to James Scott's *Weapons of the Weak* and *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, a list of works has questioned our assumptions of resistance as necessarily being confrontational and collective. See, for instance, Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) Michael Adas, "From Footdragging to Flight: The Evasive History of Peasant Avoidance in South and Southeast Asia," *Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (1981): 64-86.

resistance. [40] In his seminal work, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, James C. Scott offers a penetrating discussion of how scholars' analyses of politics and power relations could be misguided by overlooking the "hidden transcript," which is the "discourse that takes place 'offstage,' beyond direct observation by powerholders."[41]

Scott argues that our understandings of politics have often relied on analyses of official transcripts – open interactions between subordinates and the dominant – which belie the tensions within power relations and hidden contraventions adopted by the subordinates.[42] Analyses of the hidden transcripts in the forms of "rumor, gossip, folktales, jokes, songs, rituals, codes, and euphemisms" would however reveal a world of "nonhegemonic, contrapuntal, dissident, subversive discourse"[43] which dispels any notion of the subordinates fully adopting the dominant ideology. In contrast with earlier Marxist influenced studies on class relations which pinpoint the reason for the apparent quiescence of the masses to be the incorporation of a dominant ideology, Scott argues that one of the significant aspects of domination was to yield an official transcript in which power appears to be naturalized and where the subordinated appears to be compliant.[44]

Any analysis of power relations should thus take into account "the 'micro' pushing and shoving involved" in dominant-subordinate relations which, Scott argues, "makes

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[40] Earlier works on resistance have focused on trade union movements or leader-led and collective movements. See Beatrice and Sidney Webb, *The History of Trade Unionism, 1666-1920* (London: Printed by the authors for the students of the Workers' Education Association, 1919); E. P. Thompson, "The Making of the English Working Class," in Dorothy Thompson (ed.), *The Essential E. P. Thompson* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001) and Harvey J. Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians: An Introductory Analysis* (New York: Polity Press, 1984), 138.
[41] James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 4.
[42] Ibid., 2 and 19.
[43] Ibid., 25.
[44] Ibid., 87.

any static view of naturalization and legitimation untenable."[45] His analysis reveals that a more accurate assessment of power relations will take into account the less obtrusive but disruptive forms of resistance. Some examples of everyday forms of resistance adopted by the subaltern classes, given by Scott, are "footdragging, dissimulation, desertion, pilfering, slander, arson, sabotage."[46]

A refreshed understanding of politics and resistance would therefore not be confined only to open and blatant forms of resistance but include an assessment of the everyday struggles or weapons employed by the weaker classes. While these acts of resistance are leaderless, anonymous, and informal, they remain realistic forms of resistance undertaken within the existing power relations.

Literature Review

As aforementioned, most studies on Singapore politics have approached power relations within the society as zero-sum relations –if one group holds power, there is an absence of power in the others. There are few works which have touched on power relations from a balanced perspective. One significant work is Brenda Yeoh's *Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore: Power Relations and the Urban Built Environment*.[47] In elucidating, on one hand, the colonial process of domination and its spatial planning of the colonized city, Yeoh attempts to do so primarily from a Foucauldian perspective which emphasizes the pastoral modality of power (which focuses on salvation, in terms of the reform of a people's health or habits, and the use of individualizing techniques in spatial ordering) exercised by the colonial state. On

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[45] Ibid., 197.
[46] James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), xvi.

[47] Brenda S. A. Yeoh, *Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore: Power Relations and the Urban Built Environment* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003)

the other hand, her emphasis is also on giving equivalent attention to the underside, where the colonized engage in daily routines of perceiving, utilizing, contesting and reconstituting the urban landscape on their own.

These everyday resistances are manifested in the struggles over the naming process of streets, the use of public space, and the control of burial grounds. The municipal authorities' attempt to impose a well-ordered system of street- and place- names to enhance legibility and surveillance[48] was often complicated and frustrated by the Asian communities' idiosyncratic ways of naming the streets. For example, Yeoh found out that a street which was dedicated to British royalty, Albert Street, was better known as 'Mang Ku Lu Seng Ong Kong' (Bencoolen street district joss house) or 'Bo Moan Koi' ('the street where sesame oil is pressed') amongst the Chinese and amongst the Tamil-speaking Indians, it was known as 'Thimiri Thirdal ('place where people tread fire' referring to the fire-walking ceremony organized on the street during the Thaipusam festival).[49] Contestation was also seen in the verandahs or 'five-foot-ways' where municipal authorities' attempts to ensure a free-flowing passage so that the public 'right of way' is assured were frustrated by the ways the Asian communities appropriate these spaces for private purposes such as stacking of boxes, displaying of signboards, hawking, begging, socializing, or for holding street-*wayang*. Such tensions, in its most violent form, were manifested in the 1888 'verandah riots.'[50]

Whilst novel attempt power relations, the time frame of her research work is from 1880 to 1930. A major question which ensues after reading her work is: What are the forms of everyday resistance adopted by the people in contemporary Singapore? A

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[48] Ibid., 219.
[49] Ibid., 231.
[50] Ibid., 250-53.

second issue is that while her research provides an in-depth analysis into the contestations over space, it obscures the struggles in other arenas.

Justification and Aims of Research

Like Yeoh's work, this research seeks to uncover the forms of resistance in Singapore. Yet, this research seeks to further explore how resistance can tell us more about the workings of power. Lila Abu-Lughod aptly draws attention to our tendency to romanticize resistance and points out that "We could continue to look for and consider nontrivial all sorts of resistance, but instead of taking these as signs of human freedom we will use them strategically to tell us more about forms of power and how people are caught up in them."[51]

As aforementioned, whilst much has been written about state power, its structures, agencies, and ideology in Singapore, much less has been talked about the interactions of power and resistance. In a review of four works which either touched on power bottom up or top down, Charles Tilly wrote that what has been missing has however been a systemic analysis on the interplay between top-down and bottom-up exertions of power. [52] Significantly, how does power morphs in relation to the different forms of resistance? Within a society, are all forms of resistance dealt with similarly? Is there a consistent manner through which resistance is curbed or controlled? What is the logic behind these actions? Which forms of resistance are tactically deemed as more "subversive," and potentially dangerous to the government?

As a tightly politically controlled society and a strictly disciplined society, Singapore is a good case study of the varieties and extent of government's control of dissent. While acts of organized and manifest dissent may not be prevalent in a

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[51] Lila Abu-Lughod, "The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power Through Bedouin Women," in *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Feb., 1990): 42.
[52] Charles Tilly, "Survey Article: Power-Top Down and Bottom Up," The Journal of Political Philosophy, Vol. 7, No. 3, 1999: 344.

manifestly quiescent society like Singapore, this does not entail the shortage of grievances expressed in more elusive and individualistic manners. Overt political silence does not entail seamless consensus. [53]

Even as it is impossible to get inside the heads of politicians to understand why they do what they do, it is plausible to read the meaning and intent of government's policies and actions as they are expressed as a set of symbols to society. As Yanow notes, "policy implementation could be appreciated as a process through which policy and agency meanings were communicated."[54] In essence, this work is interested in looking at the "symbols, cues and routines" the government uses in dealing with resistance.[55]

In the next chapter, this paper will outline the methodology to discern the forms of resistance within the Singapore society. In Chapter 3, the typologies of resistance will be outlined and described. In Chapter 4, there will be an analysis of the forms of power used to deal with differing kinds of resistance. In Chapter 5, an analysis of research findings will be made.

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[53] John Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 7.

[54] Dvora Yanow, "Thinking Interpretively: Philosophical Presuppositions and the Human Sciences," in *Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretive Turn*, ed. Dvora Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea (New York: M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 2006), 5.

[55] Gaventa, 9.

Chapter Two: Methodology

An essential purpose of this research is to explore the everyday forms of resistances towards government's policies, decisions, and actions which occur within the urban city. It seeks to explore how people feel, think, and act in the event of felt grievances towards government practices and the ways through which they make their claims either implicitly or explicitly known to the government. In capturing the phenomenon of interest aforementioned, this study adopts a qualitative inquiry, that is, the use of purposive sampling methods and semi-structured interviews. The rationales for doing so are that the objectives of this study are designed to elicit deep information from the respondent, with an emphasis on "detail, vividness, and nuance"[56] on the subject matter. Beyond acquiring a deeper account of the phenomenon, Kahn and Cannell have maintained that "the open question appears to be more appropriate…when our objective is…to learn something about his [the respondent] level of information, the structure or basis on which he has formed his opinion, the frame of reference within which he answers the question, and the intensity of his feelings on the topic."[57]

The ability to formulate an opinion depends fundamentally on the extent of relevant information of the subject matter which the interviewee possesses. Yet, the variability amongst respondents' knowledge and its influence on his answer had been one consequential *effect* commonly glossed over by researchers. The first concern lies in the use of insufficiently elaborated concepts which were multivocal and had ambiguous meaning.

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[56] Herbert J. Rubin and Irene S. Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data* (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 1995), 76.

[57] Robert L. Kahn and Charles F. Cannell, *The Dynamics of Interviewing: Theory, Technique and Cases* (New York: J. Wiley, 1957), 135.

Stanley L. Payne, for example, argues that we questioners tend to take for granted "that people know what we are talking about" in our wording of questions.[58] He asserts that such assumptions could be unwarranted and inimical to the respondents' "means for forming judgments," given the possibly "vague ideas" and confusion of meanings on the unspecified terms.[59] Such concerns have often been raised by critics of improperly worded questionnaires who assert that regardless of the reliability of the survey results, properly worded and sufficiently elaborated questions had a significant influence on the validity of the results.[60] Indeed, to assume that many of the contested concepts i.e. democracy, resistance, politics in social science would find universality in meaning amongst interviewees is unwarranted.

Beyond question wordings, a second key consideration has been whether the respondent was "opinionated" enough to make a judgment on the issue. Leo Bogart in his article "No opinion, Don't Know, And Maybe No Answer," critically assesses that the "interview acts as a catalyst" which "forces the crystallization and expression of opinions where there were no more than chaotic swirls of thought. A question asked by an interview changes an abstract and perhaps irrelevant matter into a genuine subject of action. The conventional poll forces expression into predetermined channels, by presenting clear-cut and mutually exclusive choices.[61] Nonetheless, an interview generally enables the interviewer to make an inquiry into the respondent's degree of knowledge and certainty of feelings which the fixed responses of a survey question disenables.[62]

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[58] Stanley L. Payne, *The Art of Asking Questions* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press), 16.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid
[61] Leo Bogart, "No Opinion, Don't Know, and Maybe No Answer," *The Public Opinion Quarterly*. Vol. 31, No. 3 (Autumn 1967): 335.
[62] Kahn and Cannell, 136.

The third justification for a semi-structured interview approach is that we cannot assume the interviewee had prior to being asked, deliberated through such issues coherently and formulated their opinions clearly. As much as possible, the interview seeks to aid the interviewee to make sense of their experiences and articulate their own opinions and judgments about these issues.

Fourthly, the open question enables the interviewer to explore the respondent's frame of reference-the framework or context through which a message is communicated. The frame of reference, which is often shaped by the experiences of the respondent and his standpoints, enable us to make light of his replies, and the particular viewpoint through which he is looking at the issue from.[63] As an example, when a person is asked on whether he thinks that the government is doing a good or bad job governing the country, a simple "good" or "bad" answer will not tell us more about the frame of reference through which the judgment is made. An open question will enable the interviewer to understand the particular context or frame of reference through which the respondent has used to judge the "goodness" or "badness" of the government? Was it the ways that the government handled the economy that it was judged or was it the ways that the government dealt with political dissidents which the respondent had placed more priority on? Were there an amalgam of factors which led to the respondent's decisions and what were they?

In all, a qualitative interview approach with the use of semi-structured questions will enable us to have a deepened understanding of political discontent and grievances and how such dissents are manifested. On the whole, researchers who conduct in-depth interviews are "looking for patterns that emerge from the "thick descriptions" of

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[63] Ibid, 113.

social life recounted by their participants."[64] As Clifford Geertz has aphoristically stated "small facts speak to large issues"; listening to, asking, and probing about the lived concerns of the common man, will enable us to further grasp the central themes and reference points of the dissenters' problems and concerns.

Possible Risks and Discomforts to Interviewees

As these interviews involve eliciting respondents' descriptions of activities that could possibly be seen as being illegal, sensitive or anti-government, there could be conceivable discomforts on the part of interviewees, whom may be concerned of being identified and losing their anonymity.

The sensitivity of research, perhaps most aptly described by Raymond M. Lee, is a "highly contextual matter," as the kind and level of threat posed by the research was to be found less apparent in the subject but more in "the relationship between that topic and the social context" surrounding it. It is in this relationship where the contextual features, i.e., customs, social norms, rules, cultural, religious, ideological and political conditions would highly elucidate what considers as prohibited, taboos, and "non-discussables" within a society. It is through such a process that we realize what is rendered socially inhibited lies not in any "built-in," essential" or "necessary features in a topic but rather in the peculiarities of a society and its socially constructed boundaries of thought and speech.

In the context of Singapore, such artificial constraints in speech and behavior have been built through the implementation of Out-of-Bound (OB) markers. These undefined markers have limited the bounds of acceptable public debate and the terrain of political practices. The PAP has largely determined the bounds of acceptable public debate and the terrain of formal political practices through a gamut of punitive

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[64] Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Patricia Levy, *The Practice of Qualitative Research* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2006), 119.

measures and the state-enforced Out-of-Bound (OB) markers. Through the deployment of these vaguely defined strictures of public discourse, the everyman reasonably *learns* to slip into oblivion over socially polemical issues, talks publicly about "safe topics" and tacitly "holds his tongue" for fear of "tripping over an unwritten boundary on what can or cannot be publicly expressed."[65]

Given the sensitivity of the research topic, all efforts will be made to ensure the identity of the respondent remains anonymous and is not linked to the information provided in the interview. To do so, the names of respondents will be represented by initials in transcripts and replaced by pseudonyms in the actual write-ups. The key code linking your name with the initials will be kept in a locked cupboard in a locked office. The transcripts will be kept safely by the researcher in a locked computer. All audiotapes and consent forms will be kept in a latched cupboard inside a locked room.

Sampling Strategy

Due to the unfeasibility and impracticality of acquiring a sampling frame of "disgruntled" or "dissatisfied" individuals, a representative sample of the population of concern in this research will be gathered through snowball sampling, whereby a few members of the population are first identified and asked to later recommend other potential participants who shared the characteristics of interest in the research. There are a few advantages in this approach. Firstly, this enables us to yield information-rich cases. The approach is also practical and cost-effective as we are able to specify in advance the characteristics of interest in a respondent and also use lesser time assessing the suitability of the respondent.[66] With this approach, it will also facilitate the researcher's gain of credibility in ensuring confidentiality of the identity of the respondent.

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[65]Jason Szep, "Singapore in Awkward Embrace with the Arts," *Reuters News*, October 1, 2004.

[66] Denise F. Polit and Cheryl Tatano Beck, *Nursing Research: Generating and Assessing Evidence for Nursing Practice* (Philadelphia: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, 2008), 355.

A snowball sampling approach, however, admittedly holds certain weaknesses. Where the population of concern is relatively small and the members within are inter-connected through established patterns of association, the gathering of contacts is made with relative ease.[67]

However, a preliminary observation of how "disgruntled" or "dissatisfied" individuals associate together in Singapore is that they carve out informal spaces to deliberate about politics, voice their grievances and share their claims. The ties within these small, informal groups are often loose, in that the patterns of association are not confined by a formal structure and that participation is entirely voluntary. Amongst these groups, there appears to be no connections. This implies that when applying snowball sampling for such a population, contacts will "run dry" rapidly and the researcher will have to forge new reference points.

Another significant issue in snowball sampling is the bias that occurs with the tendency to limit our selected sample to only a small group of people with homogeneous characteristics. Such biasness occurs when our snowballing approach restricts us to a "small network of acquaintances."[68] In order to increase the sample variability, Biernacki and Waldorf suggest that more attention and discretion should be paid to chains of referral and there should be the use multiple beginning points, representing as wide a range as possible. This would enable the accrual of a more representative sample of the target population. Another approach which should be used simultaneously to mitigate biasness is to sample in accordance to the social structure[69] so as to ensure overall heterogeneity in sample, garner multiple perspectives, and congruity between actual target population and sample.

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[67] Raymond M. Lee, 66.
[68] Polit and Beck, 355.
[69] Raymond M. Lee, 66.

Potential for Biasness in Interview Process and the Steps to Minimize Them

There is the potential for biasness to be introduced through the "interviewer effect," the "potent source of bias," which occurs when the interviewer's beliefs and perceptions about the respondent and his own expectations "guide the interviewer at various points and affect his decisions on probing, recording, and classification of answers, etc."[70]

To avoid these errors of bias, there should be a careful avoidance of leading questions and any suggestions to respondents that answering in a certain manner is more favorable. This is achieved through a vigilant assessment on the design of questions and probes. Interview questions should not be posed in a manner which makes it easy for respondent to answer in the affirmative[71] i.e. Do you disagree with this particular government policy? Instead, neutrality should be maintained by asking "Do you happen to agree or disagree with this government policy?"

There should also be the practice of integrity in the recording and write-ups of interview materials. Kahn and Cannell observed that many of the eventual "articulations" of respondents in finished notes are usually more comprehensive and devoid of gaps in thoughts. They wrote, "To the extent that this has been accomplished by careful probe questions and accurate recording, we have gained; to the extent that is accomplished by the interviewer's own filling in and "improving," we are likely to have a biased report."[72]

As the aim of the research is to explore the forms of resistances, the initial questions posed should be adequately general to allow the respondent to talk about the issues salient to him and to establish his frame of reference. This will allow the interview to

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[70] Herbert H. Hyman, William J. Cobb, Jacob J. Feldman, Clyde W. Hart, Charles Herbert Stember, Interviewing in Social Research (Chicago: Chicago University Press), 58.
[71] Kahn and Cannell, 127.
[72] Kahn and Cannell, 191

be conducted in a way which will capture the claims which are most important to the interviewee and enable him certain autonomy in defining the content of discussion to be covered and to shed light on the variations of resistance.

One other key form of bias occurs when the respondent deliberately blots out certain information which he deems to be potentially discrediting and contrary to accepted conduct. A way to avert this problem is through the use of indirect questions where the question is asked of how he felt others would behave in a particular situation instead of focusing on the respondent.[73] The rationale is that the interviewee would first feel more comfortable discussing about the interview topic when the focus was not exclusively on him.

It is the researcher's responsibility in such a situation to be nonjudgmental towards the behavior of the interviewee.[74] To encourage the respondent to speak freely and openly, the researcher must respect the commitment to confidentiality and assure the respondent every effort is made to ensure that his identity is not linked to the information they have provided.

Sampling Procedures

This study adopted face-to-face, confidential, and in-depth interviews. The recruitment process involves first selecting respondents on the basis of personal knowledge. From these initial contacts, the respondents were asked to provide potential referrals. Given the sensitivity of the research topic, relying on personal contacts enables the researcher to establish the trust essential to elicit genuine and honest answers during the interview. Generally, the respondents who were recommended by contacts were more apprehensive about the research agenda and it

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[73] Ibid, 147-8.
[74] Robert S. Weiss, Learning From Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies (New York: Maxwell Macmillan International, 131.

was only after giving them assurances of anonymity, providing details of my research, and my identity that their participation were assured.

The number of respondents who participated in the interviews is 20. Out of these 20 interviewees, 18 are men and two are women. In general, amongst the people whom I approached, more men showed an awareness of political issues and were more willing to articulate their opinions on these issues. Out of the 20 interviewees, only one is Malay while the rest is Chinese. Respondents were employed in a range of occupations, such as teacher, salesman, occupational therapy, human resource officer, banking operations officer, and self-employed workers. Their ages ranged from 27 to 65.

Generalizability

Due to the use of snowball sampling approach, this study does not claim the generalizability of results to the population of interest. Nonetheless, it seeks to present the experiences of the people I interview in "compelling enough detail and in sufficient depth that those who can read the study can connect to that experience, learn how it is constituted, and deepen their understanding of the issues it reflects."[75]

Moreover, this study understands that whilst the individual lives of these respondents are relatively different, insofar that their lives are influenced by common social and structural forces, there would be the emergence of certain patterns in these experiences.[76] As Weiss notes, "In so far as the dynamics of the group we study and the constraints to which they are subjected decide their behavior, we can expect the same behavior from any other group with the same dynamics and the same constraints."[77]

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[75] Irving Seidman, 53.
[76] Ibid, 52.
[77] Robert S. Weiss, 27.

The forms of resistance identified in this study will be "illustrative but not exhaustive of the range of variations present in the population whose experience the researcher might want to try to understand."[78]

While the narratives of the respondents provide "voices" for those dissenting people, the researcher seeks to place these accounts in the wider social context to make better and more valid inferences. The interview as a form of information garnering does have its limitations. It is unable to elicit memories and emotions at the subconscious level. Different respondents may have differing levels of articulation and thinking. Moreover, the respondent may hold a few attitudes towards an issue or event. Kahn and Cannell note that it is only through further probing and deeper questioning that the "deeper-lying attitude" is elicited.[79]

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[78] Irving Seidman, 53.
[79] Kahn and Cannell, 174.

Chapter Three: Forms of Political Resistance in Urban Singapore

In this research, resistance refers to people's actions (speech or deeds) that criticize or oppose the governing system, the authorities, their actions, or policies. The notion of human intentionality has been described by Scott and Benedict Kerkvliet as significant in our inference of acts that can be named as resistance. This means that there should be an intentional contestation of ruler's claims or advancing of claims that are contrary to what the superiors want.[80] While at times such aims are publicly acknowledged, there will be instances where such intentionality, will be to the best of the writer, inferred primarily because some actors may choose to remain silent about their intentions or seek to downplay the significance of their actions. The inference will then be based on their nature of acts and the social context in which they are placed in. Yet, it is arguable that there are times in which intentions are subliminally known but the overall consequences serve to constitute the act as one of resistance.[81] This chapter seeks to explore the forms, sites, and methods of resistance in Singapore.

Public Advocacy

There are fundamentally a few forms of resistance in Singapore. The most confrontational form of resistance in Singapore is civil disobedience which is manifested in the form of peaceful protest. Civil disobedience is a peaceful and active form of refusal to obey or comply with oppressive laws and demands of the government. For example, during the 1960s, the black people were denied the equal rights of citizenship in America. In one situation, black students were denied the rights to be served at a café selling coffee, and had to drink while standing as the

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[80] Benedict J. Kerkvliet, "Everyday politics in peasant societies (and ours)," *Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol. 36, Issue 1, January 2009: 231.

[81] Don Mitchell, *Cultural Geography: A Critical Introduction* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 159.

counter served only white Americans. The black students protested by organizing a peaceful sit-in.[82]

The key elements of such resistance are its overt, direct and concerted efforts to criticize the governing system, its policies, and its programs.[83] It is usually public in nature and usually involves minimal violence. It is however rarely deployed by the discontented in Singapore as the law prohibits any unauthorized assembly of five or more people.[84] Chee Soon Juan, the leader of Singapore Democratic Party (SDP), has often used civil disobedience as a method to highlight unjust policies and laws to the public and pressure the government to instill political change.

Prior to the 2006 General Elections, Chee deliberately flouted the Public Entertainments and Meetings Act, which restricts freedom of expression and assembly, by holding campaign speeches in public spaces and selling the party's newspaper, The New Democrat, without a permit, to gain political support and votes. While he was trialed in court for violating the civil law, he expressed his discontentment towards the "blanket ban on public speaking and assembly," which he felt violated the constitutional rights of free speech. He argued that the legal requisition to apply for a police permit prior to conducting any speeches or assemblage in public stifles democracy and places obstacles for the opposition to be heard.[85]

Whilst in court in September 2009, he pointed out that even if he had applied for a permit, he would not have been granted one given the government's disapproval of

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[82] Prabhakar Pillai, "1960s Civil Rights Movements in America," Buzzle.com, accessed February 27, 2010, http://www.buzzle.com/articles/1960s-civil-rights-movement-in-america.html

[83] Kerkvliet, 230.

[84] Teo Xuan Wei, "Acquittal Overturned for Singapore Democratic Party Five," *Today Online*, April 2, 2010, accessed April 29, 2010, http://www.todayonline.com/Singapore/EDC100402-0000047/Acquittal-overturned-for-Singapore-Democratic-Party-five.

[85] "Chee Says Persecuted For Free Speech," *Reuters*, Feb 22, 1999, accessed February 28, 2010 http://www.singapore-window.org/sw99/90222re1.htm.

protests and demonstrations. As such, he argued that "the idea of applying for a permit" was "a red herring." He further cited the United Kingdom's House of Lords' ruling "that a man commits no crime if he infringes an invalid [policy or administrative act] and has the right to challenge the validity of the [policy] before any court in which he is being tried."[86]

This was followed with another protest in 2008 against the rising cost of living which affected ordinary Singaporean. On 15 March 2008, Chee and 18 other activists participated in the "Tak Boleh Tahan" street protest from the Parliament House to the Funan Centre. Translated from colloquial Malay as "unable to tolerate," the campaign was in reference to the rising costs of living as a result of the policies which the government had enacted-the raising of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) to 7 per cent, the setting up of additional Electronic Road Pricing (ERP) gantries around Singapore, the perceived low pay and unfair working contracts of the lower-income workers, and the rising salaries of ministers.[87]

Beyond violating the laws for assemblage, Chee also flouted public speaking rules on religious discourse. On 15 February 2002, Chee delivered the speech, "Tudung Issue: Are We Missing the Point," at the Speaker' Corner in Hong Lim Park. In the speech, Chee criticized the government's "no-tudung policy,"[88] which bans Muslim girls from donning the hijab (headscarf) to school by arguing that this violates the rights and interests of the minority race.[89] He questioned that if the government has

[86] Singapore Democrats, "Judge Fines Chee Soon Juan $10, 000 For Speaking In Public," Singapore Democrats, Sept 6, 2009, accessed February 28, 2010, http://yoursdp.org/index.php/news/singapore/2759-judge-fines-chee-soon-juan-10000-for-speaking-in-public.
[87] Singapore Democrats, "A Peaceful Protest Abruptly Stopped," Singapore Democrats, accessed February 27, 2010, http://www.singaporedemocrat.org/articleWCRDprotest13.html.
[88] Lily Zubaidah Rahim, Governing Islam and Regulating Muslims in Singapore's Secular Authoritarian State, Working Paper No. 156, July 2009 (paper presented at the Murdoch University, July 2009), accessed February 27, 2010, http://wwwarc.murdoch.edu.au/wp/wp156.pdf.
[89] Chee Soon Juan, "Tudung Issue: Are We Missing the Point," Singapore Democrats, accessed February 27, 2010, http://www.sgdemocrat.org/classic/media_releases_display.php?id=36.

allowed Sikh boys to wear the turbans to school without creating any social disharmony, there was no reason that similar rights should be granted to Muslim female students. In contrast to the government's reasoning that allowing Muslim girls to wear the headscarves will undermine ethnic integration and uniformity in school, Chee argued that "allowing students to wear their headscarves to school will expose schoolchildren to diverse cultural practices at a young age" and facilitate the removal of "prejudices and racial bigotry."[90] He further critiques that it is foolish for Singaporeans to ignore this problem and not to address the concerns of the minority Muslim race. Instead, he exhorts Singaporeans to create a "fish-net," "strong" social fabric instead of the "Kleenex type of so-called racial harmony" to which he accuses the PAP of paying lip service to.[91]

One of the strategies employed by Chee was to leverage on foreign media support to publicize his cause and to gain political support from overseas. This can be observed during the September 2006 International Monetary Funds (IMF)-World Bank meetings, when Chee and a group of activists capitalized on the event, which drew droves of journalists, financial heads, and foreign leaders, to hold the "Empower Singaporeans Rally and March," to publicize the lack of democratic rights in the and widening income gap in the country.[92]

Published Defamation and Unconcealed Criticisms

The next most confrontational forms of resistance in Singapore are the verbal attacks or published criticisms against public institutions or politicians in the traditional news medium (newspapers, magazines, radio, and television). It is transgressive language and serves to promote political opinions. As John C. Hartsock notes, critical editorial

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[90] Ibid.
[91] Ibid.
[92] Singapore Democrats, "The Power of the Powerless: Dissent Growing in Singapore," Singapore Democrats, accessed February 26, 2010, http://www.singaporedemocrat.org/articledissents.html.

is a form of "resistance to objectified news" and mainstream journalism. It is a "challenge to or resistance against mainstream "factual" or "objective" news"[93] and a site to promote counter-hegemonic discourse. Like resistance in the form of advocacy politics, it can openly violate public laws, particularly those that guard against defamation.

In June 2008, the Wall Street Journal published an article titled, "Democracy in Singapore," which analyzed the state of democratic progress in the country. It published the courtroom's dialogue exchange between Chee Soon Juan and Lee Kuan Yew in a hearing to assess damages for the SDP newsletter article which alleges parallels between the non-transparency of NKF and the government. It described the courtroom exchange, between Chee Soon Juan and Lee Kuan Yew, as a "David and Goliath" exchange, a biblical account of the fight between the invincible giant and the smaller sized, brave, and ill-equipped shepherd boy David. In the article, it noted that "Mr Lee has never lost a libel suit" and that given the law suits against political dissenters like Chee and Gopalan Nair (who had wrote in his blog that the High Court Judge had been "prostituting herself" throughout the hearing of a lawsuit brought against Chee by Lee, implying the biasness of the judgment) and yet to be determined price of defamation of the Chee case, readers can now understand "the price of political dissent in Lee Kuan Yew's Singapore."[94] This article was followed up by another titled "Judging Singapore's Judiciary" in July 2008, which highlighted some of the findings in an International Bar Association's (IBA) report assessing the judiciary in Singapore.[95] It noted that the IBA had concerns about the impartiality and independence of the judiciary regarding cases involving the political incumbent and

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[93] John C. Hartsock, *A History of American Literary Journalism: The Emergence of a Modern Narrative Form* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 2000), 41.

[94] "Democracy in Singapore," *The Wall Street Journal Asia*, 26 June 2008.

[95] "Judging Singapore's Judiciary," *The Wall Street Journal Asia*, July 15, 2008, accessed March 1, 2010, http://online.wsj.com/article/SB121605724442851527.html.

the opposition. It highlights that the IBA's report is a "good primer" on the government's use of defamation suits against critics and also published some of the IBA's recommendations including the criminalization of defamation and free speech, and the abolishment of the contractual system for judges.[96] The magazine was subsequently sued by the attorney general due to its negative insinuations of the judiciary.

Another example of open criticism in the traditional news medium was in the case involving local novelist, Catherine Lim. On September 3, 1994, her article, "The PAP and the people-A Great Affective Divide," was published in The Straits Times. In this article, her message was that there remains a stoic estrangement between the government and the people. According to Lim, the estrangement however "creates a schizoid society where head is divorced from heart, where there is double agenda and double book-keeping with people agreeing with the Government in public but saying something else in private."[97] She points out that many of the negative portrayals of the government being "dictatorial," "arrogant," "impatient," "unforgiving," and "vindictive," reveals the public's impression of unfeeling government officials. In her final sentence, Lim chose to champion the voice of the people by noting that the state-of-affairs has become "a definite thorn in the side of the body politic."[98]

This was followed by her second published commentary, "One Government, Two Styles," on November 20, 1994. The author became more forthright in her analysis of domestic politics and touched on the controversial ministerial salaries in Singapore and the government's renegation of its earlier promise to be more consultative.[99] On the policy to raise ministerial pay, she noted that the value of leadership is

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[96] Ibid.
[97] Catherine Lim, "The PAP and the People-A Great Affective Divide," *Straits Times*, Sept 3, 1994.
[98] Ibid.
[99] Catherine Lim, "One Government, Two Styles," *Straits Times*, November 20, 1994.

increasingly placed on its monetary worth, covering the more altruistic and noble values of its vocation and that such a decision "smacked of a certain flagrancy," given that it benefits Singaporeans while making "its own ministers millionaires in the short run."[100] Further, she wrote that Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's open and tolerant style of governance has given way to the more authoritarian and top-down decision-making style of the former leader, Lee Kuan Yew, as the older statesman continual influence linger on in the cabinet and the younger Goh remains deferent to him. Catherine Lim also writes, like a political insider, of the internal tensions between the two leaders, where Lee had on a few occasions gave his views of Goh's leadership, whose performance was perceived as mediocre, and had once publicly acknowledged that Dr Tony Tan had been his choice of preference for the leadership position. She noted that the overbearing style of governance being copied by the younger officials, who lack the immense stature and influence of the elder leader, creates bitterness and discontentment amongst the people.

Art as Resistance

The less confrontational forms of resistance are through art as they disguise socio-political messages through entertainment. As transgressive sites, they subvert mainstream propaganda and officialised images of government and society. Filmmaker Jack Neo, for example, uses his films as a site to interject Singlish (colloquial English used frequently by Singaporeans) even as the government seeks to eradicate this seemingly broken English). Films, commentaries, and political art spur political consciousness and create sites of debates and discussion over polemic issues. Political consciousness is fundamental in fuelling actual political action. As Murray

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[100] Ibid.

Edelman notes, "Art is therefore an essential and fundamental element in the shaping of political ideas and political action."[101]

Films

Film watching in Singapore involves a passive audience. It is a public site where audience gather to view a movie that partially satirizes the government or its policies. As Wedeen observes, this enables "people to recognize the shared circumstances of unbelief" and "counteracts the atomizing conditions" of a repressive regime.[102]

Movies with political messages help to raise political consciousness. The role that film plays in influencing our political thoughts and conceptualizations is salient as they are often the medium through which scrip writers and directors highlight political themes, and reflect the political climate of the time.

Figure 1: I Not Stupid

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[101] Murray J. Edelman, *From Art to Politics: How Artistic Creations Shape Political Conceptions* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995), 6.
[102] Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination*, 90.

The film *I Not Stupid* can be read as an allegory for Singapore society and a critique of Singapore's "pressure-cooker education system."[103] The director, Jack Neo, uses three main student characters in the film to tell of their trials and tribulations, and the extent of social labelling and judgment due to the education system.

To project his political and social messages in this film, Neo used characterizations such as Terry, the pampered, overweight, and coddled son of a domineering mother and wealthy father, who does not know how to protect himself as he has always been spoon-fed. As the protagonist, Terry represents the average Singaporean who has lost initiative and become deferent and spoilt under the overprotective and domineering mother. Mrs Khoo, Terry's mother, dressed in white, represents the Singapore government, whose "mother-know-best" mentality is well-meaning, but strips her children of their freedom.[104] She is made to say standard tag lines, reminiscent of the government rhetoric, such as "Do you know how lucky you are to have a good and responsible mother?" and "This is all for your own good,"[105] representing the government's efforts to convince the populace that the government's policies and actions is in the best interests of the nation.[106]

Terry's teenage sister, Selena Khoo, portrays a more defiant image, representing the opposition or perhaps Singaporeans who yearn for greater freedom. In one scene, the daughter argues with her mother over the bedroom décor in which she fought to have her preference made known to her mother. In rebuke, her mother said, "This is your room, but this is my house! I will make the final decision."[107]

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[103] Yao Souchou, *Singapore: The State and the Culture of Excess* (Oxon: Routledge, 2007), 141.
[104] "I Not Stupid" Review, Love HK Film.com, accessed February 20, 2010, http://www.lovehkfilm. com/panasia/i_not_stupid.htm.
[105] *I Not Stupid*, directed by Jack Neo (Singapore/ United International Pictures, 2002).
[106] Funn Lim,"I Not Stupid" Review, SPCNETTV.com, accessed February 20, 2010, http://www.spcnet.tv/Movies/I-Not-Stupid-review-r463.htm.
[107] *I Not Stupid*

Figure 2: Money No Enough

The film, *Money No Enough*, also produced by Jack Neo, was released in cinemas in 1998. The storyline of the film is centred on the financial woes of three friends, Chew Wah Keong (a white collar worker), Ong (a contractor) and Hui (a coffee shop waitor) in the Singapore society. Numerous digs at government policies and the norms and values of average Singaporeans could be found in this entire film. For example, the Goods and Service Tax (GST) was termed by Keong as "Go squeeze them (the people)", a dig at the rising GST rates in Singapore.[108] In another scene, Keong pronounces the Certificate of Entitlement (COE) for cars as the similar sounding "*si hor ee*" which means "die for them [the authorities]" in Hokkien, putting a dig at the alarmingly high prices for owning a car in Singapore.[109] In a conversation between Keong and Ong, Keong noted that "Actually buying cars in Singapore is illegal", to which Ong queried, "What do you mean?" Keong replied, "Don't you see that we have to pay a big sum of fine (COE) before we actually buy the car."[110]

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[108] *Money No Enough*, directed by Jack Neo (Singapore/ Shaw Organisation, 1998).
[109] Ibid.
[110] Ibid.

Cartoons

The series of cartoons are part of the drawings by a Singapore political blogger and freelance illustrator.[111]

Figure 3[112]

THE ART OF NUMBERS....

Figure 3 shows how the public is overwhelmed by the statistics offered by the government. The title "The Art of Numbers" pokes fun at the technocratic government's over-reliance on statistics to convince the people that the economy is faring well and that the economic legitimacy of the government is strong. This cartoon however indicates that the rosiness of the scenario painted by these statistics are often little comprehended by the public, who are more often overwhelmed by these numbers and who continue in the realities of their daily toil and struggle.

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[111] Sei-Ji Rakugaki, "My Sketchbook," *My Sketchbook*, accessed March 1, 2008, http://seijieiga.blogspot.com/2006_07_01_archive.html.

[112] Sei-Ji Rakugaki, "The Art of Numbers," Cartoon, *My Sketchbook*, July 31, 2006, accessed March 1, 2008, http://seijieiga.blogspot.com/2006_07_01_archive.html.

Figure 4

UNIQUELY SINGAPORE PROTEST

'WE RECOGNISE THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PARTICIPATION OF CSOS IN THE EVENT AND HAVE MADE THE MAXIMUM EFFORT TO FACILITATE THEIR INVOLVEMENT, WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF OUR LAWS.'

Figure 4[113] shows the cartoon of a small group of protestors standing within a tiny boxed-up area, with gagged mouths, supervised by a policeman during the annual International Monetary Fund and World Bank Meeting held in September 2006. The expression on the surprised foreign expatriate in the cartoon who happened to pass by and witnessed the scene revealed a sense of absurdity and ludicrousness of the situation. The title "Uniquely Singapore Protest" pokes fun and scorns at the idea of protest permitted by the state to showcase its political tolerance in the presence of international observers but nonetheless reveal the state's distrust and cautious regulation of civil society groups. Protestors were only conceded to have a 14-by-

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[113] Sei-Ji Rakugaki, "Uniquely Singapore Protest," Cartoon, *My Sketchbook*, July 30, 2006, accessed March 1, 2008, http://seijieiga.blogspot.com/2006_07_01_archive.html.

eight-metre space near the meetings venue and they were only allowed to hold

placards to prevent any ruckus.[114]

Figure 5

Figure 5[115] shows the cartoon of a bespectacled, stony faced and primly dressed man,

representing the government, who throws away the numerous suggestions and ideas

from the people as he mutters "We know best!"; a representation of the all-knowing

character often portrayed by the government. The cartoon conveys a sense of

cynicism and skepticism towards the utility of the increasing number of feedback

channels which the government has established. The cartoon suggests that, at the end

of the day, the "We know best" approach of the government means that most of the

suggestions by the people are often ignored.

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[114] Connie Levett, "Strategic Retreat New Tactic in Singapore Protest," *The Age*, Sept 14, 2006, accessed March 2, 2010, http://www.theage.com.au/news/business/strategic-retreat-new-tactic-in-singapore-protest/2006/09/13/1157827018373.html

[115] Sei-Ji Rakugaki, "Ideas/ Suggestions," Cartoon, *My Sketchbook*, July 23, 2006, accessed March 1, 2008, http://seijieiga.blogspot.com/2006_07_01_archive.html.

Figure 6

THE REHEARSAL...STARRING SMRT

Figure 6[116] shows a man, a spokesperson for the transport authority, rehearsing nervously in front of the mirror prior to his press conference. He attempts to rehearse the reasons for the rise in transport cost. The repetitive rehearsing and the different reasons cited reveal a suspicious nervousness of the man who then appears speechless on the actual press conference day.

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[116] Sei-Ji Rakugaki, "The Rehearsal…Starring SMRT," Cartoon, *My Sketchbook*, July 24, 2006, accessed March 1, 2008, http://seijieiga.blogspot.com/2006_07_01_archive.html.

Figure 7

Figure 7[117] pokes fun at the ceaseless monitoring and surveillance of the state on the individual. In the cartoon, the officer in charge of monitoring the activities of the citizens report to his boss, the state, that "Sir, we have tracked down the following, seditious blogger, gay couple here…partisan journalist…Lim Ah Huat refused to buy the national flag from the Residents Council (RC) members."

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[117] Sei-Ji Rakugaki, "Tracking System," Cartoon, *My Sketchbook*, July 19, 2006, accessed March 1, 2008, http://seijieiga.blogspot.com/2006_07_01_archive.html.

Figure 8

Errr...my views are....m...y
views...er...rrrr...my ..my.
views ..ar...are...
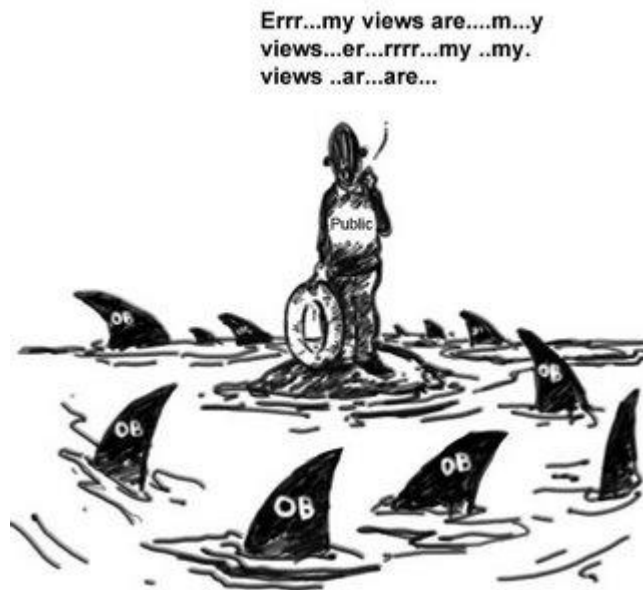
Figure 8[118] shows a man standing on an island surrounded by dangerous sharks. The cartoon depicts the ordinary Singaporean's fear to speak up in the presence of the Out-of-Bound (OB) markers introduced by the state which regulates that certain political issues are off limits and should not be touched on.

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[118] Sei-Ji Rakugaki, "OB Markers…Now You See It..Now You Don't." Cartoon, *My Sketchbook*, July 15, 2006, accessed March 1, 2008, http://seijieiga.blogspot.com/2006_07_01_archive.html.

Figure 9

Opposition...   PAP Upgraded
                 flat...

Figure 9[119] shows the difference between the block of flats under the opposition, which is constrained in its resources and spending, and the PAP upgraded flat, which was clearly newer and well-kept.

I love to work at the food court so much...
clearing up the mess of dirty plates and cups,
throwing away all the rubbish and litter,
I love to spend my time in this way, rather than
spend time with my grandchildren,
take a little stroll or have a cup of coffee with my friends.
And why do I work.?.Because i wish to?....My foot!

Figure 10

[119] Sei-Ji Rakugaki, "Opposition Versus PAP Upgraded Flat," Cartoon, *My Sketchbook*, July 8, 2006, accessed March 1, 2008, http://seijieiga.blogspot.com/2006_07_01_archive.html.

Figure 10 puts a dig at the state's non-welfare approach. Senior workers are encouraged to work as long as they wish by the government.

How many civil servants to fix a light bulb?

Figure 11

Figure 11[120] takes a dig at the sheep-like mentality and apathetic stereotype of local civil servants. The caption "How many civil servants to fix a light bulb?" questions the inherent initiative of local civil servants in resolving even simple issues of society. Their bulging bellies show signs of apathy, indolence in thinking and creativity while their bespectacled, stony and technocratic look reveals a lack of genuine human concern, a tendency to follow the book, and ambitious or self-centred career concerns. Their procrastination and passivity are shown in their dialogues, "Why don't we pretend we did not see it?" "Hurry up, we are late for lunch," "I think we should fix it when the director see us doing it," and "Should we even try to fix it? The public is not complaining."

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[120] Sei-Ji Rakugaki, "How Many Civil Servants to Fix a Lightbulb," *My Sketchbook*, March 13, 2010, accessed March 28, 2010, http://seijieiga.blogspot.com/2010_03_01_archive.html.

SM Goh on Productivity

Figure 12[121]

This cartoon reveals the disjuncture between the statesman's vision or high-flown talk and the actual implementation of accomplishing this aim in reality. In this comic, Senior Minister Goh initially confidently suggests that workers in Singapore should increase their productivity.[122] The rat-race, fierce, and competitive culture of Singapore is also ridiculed as SM Goh compares foreign countries' labour productivity with his own. Yet, as the message spreads down the queue of staff, it becomes rhetorical in nature, resulting in a trite and often repeated remark amongst the subordinate officials but amounting to little tangible results.

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[121] Sei-Ji Rakugaki, "SM Goh on Productivity," Cartoon, *My Sketchbook*, January 26, 2010, accessed February 27, 2010, http://seijieiga.blogspot.com/2010_01_01_archive.html.

[122] Rachel Chan, "Up Productivity to Reduce Reliance on Foreign Labour, Says SM Goh," *My Paper*, Jan 25, 2010, accessed March 2, 2010, http://www.asiaone.com/Business/News/Office/Story/A1Story 20100125-194171.html.

Making of the Singapore's economics strategies

Figure 13[123]

Economic Strategies Committee orgy

Figure 14[124]

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[123] Sei-Ji Rakugaki, "Making of the Singapore's Economics Strategies," *My Sketchbook*, February 6, 2010, accessed February 27, 2010, http://seijieiga.blogspot.com/2010_02_01_archive.html.

In the midst of the recent economic depression, a high-level Economic Strategies Committee (ESC) was formed in May 2009, to look into fresh ways for growing the Singapore economy over the long term. Despite the fanfare, there has been criticism that the report which the committee came up with amounts to nothing new. One critic, for example, asked if the committee's proposal was about "real change or just words?" and questioned if it was just a "big public relations exercise, full of headlines, plenty of talk, but with little achieved."[125] The eventual scarecrow, after much brainstorming, in figure 13, reflects the criticism that the entire events remains a tactic to scare or divert attention away from the real and substantial issues concerning the livelihoods of the majority of Singaporeans, including the poor and needy. In the subsequent cartoon, figure 19, it shows the caricatures of the Finance Minister sleeping together with the foreign expatriates, government officials, labour union and business leaders as they leisurely talk about how to put up a good show to the journalists and people.
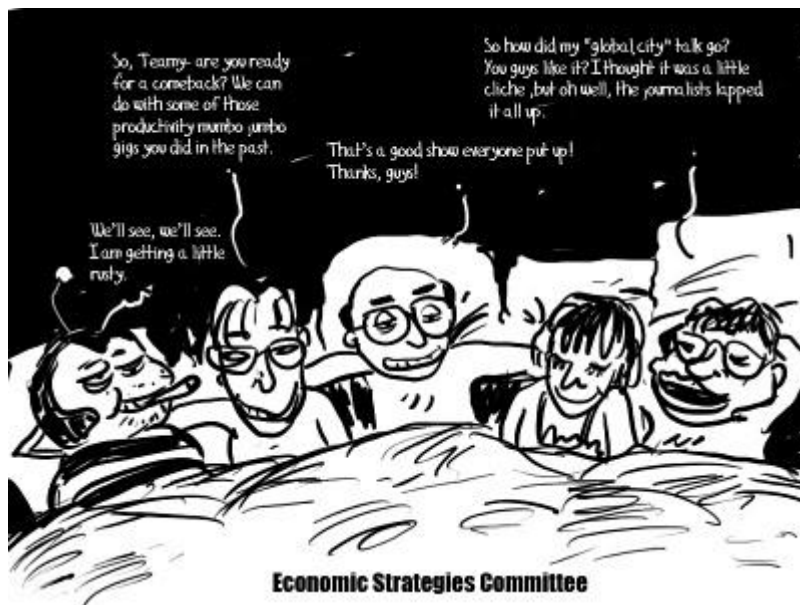
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[124] Sei-Ji Rakugaki, "Making of the Singapore's Economics Strategies," *My Sketchbook*, February 2, 2010, accessed February 27, 2010, http://seijieiga.blogspot.com/2010_02_01_archive.html.

[125] Dr Wong Wee, comment on "Economic Strategies Committee: Real Change or Just Words?" Sgpolitics.net, comment posted Feb 15, 2010 (accessed March 10, 2010).

The elite scholar monologue

Figure 15[126]

The "elite scholar monologue" cartoon above shows a self-righteous scholar walking with inflated pride, purpose and egotism. His sense of self-importance has been built on the facts that he was brought up with the right credentials-scored "A"s for all his subjects in school, was fluent in four languages, and had seen much of the world (criteria that the "paper-chase" state had actively sought after). As he grows up, he becomes arrogant as his credentials allow him to rise up the ranks ahead of more senior civil servants. He, who have acquired everything deemed "ideal" by the state and is set to rule Singapore, however lacks the emotional intelligence which is so necessary to lead and connect with the masses but has nonetheless been severely undervalued by the pragmatic state.

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[126] Sei-Ji Rakugaki, "The Elite Scholar Monologue," Cartoon, *My Sketchbook*, November 5, 2009, accessed February 27, 2010, http://seijieiga.blogspot.com/2009_11_01_archive.html.

No bonus for civil servants…right

We're JUST getting the REGULAR
13th month wage supplement and a small
one-off pay,ment. Did I mention that is on top
of my big fat paycheck?

Top Civil Servants

Figure 15[127]

This cartoon reveals a plump-looking, top civil servant explaining to a thin-looking
young man why there is an increment in his already fat paycheck. It pokes fun at the
widening income gap in Singapore, in particular the high salaries earned by the top
civil servants in Singapore in contrast to the meager salaries of the lowest income
groups in Singapore.

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[127] Sei-Ji Rakugaki, "No Bonus for Civil Servants…Right," Cartoon, *My Sketchbook*, November 26,
2009, accessed February 27, 2010, http://seijieiga.blogspot.com/2009_11_01_archive.html.

Poems

The series of poems below are written by local poet, Gilbert Koh.[128] The range of poems which he composed includes political issues and the more mundane aspects of life.

10 August 2005

In Our Schools

Some are *Special*,

or *Express*. A few are

Gifted. The others

are merely *Normal*

(a polite lie).

All are classifiable,

like chemical compounds,

lists of Chinese

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[128] "The Reader's Eye," accessed March 3, 2008, http://readerseye.blogspot.com/. (accessed March 3, 2008)

proverbs,

or lab specimens of

dead insects -

preserved, labelled,

pinned by a cold

needle

through the

unfeeling thorax.

20 January 2006

National Leadership

In this country,

a fine young leader

is no accident.

He wins the right

scholarships,

thinks the right

thoughts,

is selected for

rapid promotion

giving him

adequate altitude

to practise his

helicopter vision.

His confidence

is carefully cultivated

through the years,

to achieve the

arrogance of the

truly great.

Yes sir, we are always

who we are,

simple honest people,

but sometimes

we still long too hard

for heroes.

11 June 2006
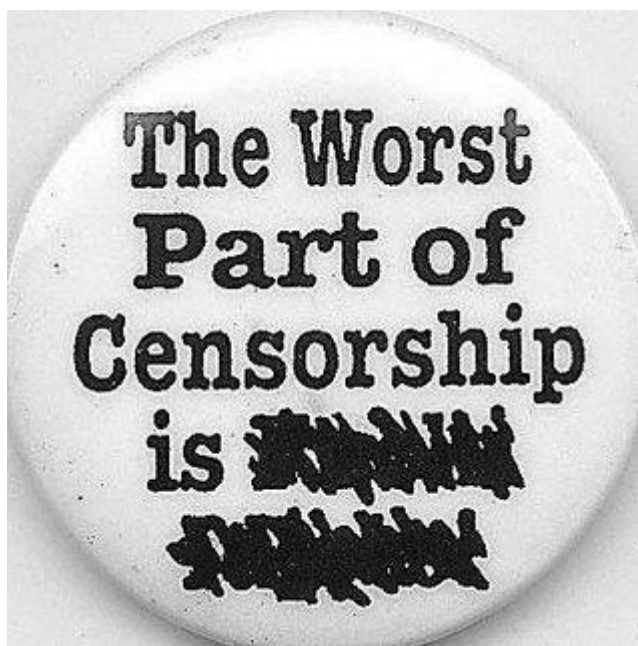
Hong Lim Park

a fat man stands

announces an opinion

as if it mattered

in the hot sun

the trees yawn and

almost sigh

the retirees wish

they had their

park back

Garden City

Let there be trees, the man said, and lo and behold,

there were trees – rain trees, angsanas, flames of the forest,

causarinas, traveller's palms and more – springing up against

the steel and concrete of the expanding city.

Even as the true towers of the city climbed higher

and higher for the heavens, the trees were planted, replanted,

transplanted, watered, fertilised, and groomed to grow

and grow. They appeared overnight, abandoned the

chaos of jungle, bent to the will of man, grew in straight lines,

in squares and rectangles, in allocated corners,

in car parks, along highways, outside banks and buildings,

faithful to the commandments of urban developers.

The hard lines of architecture were softened,

the rain did fall, the green did gently, gently grow,

and in his seventieth year, the man was pleased,

as he rested, as he viewed his work, as he felt the weight

of a nation's soil run slowly through his old green hands.

Interpretations

The first poem critiques the education system in Singapore where the process of streaming categorizes and labels students in the country. While the Gifted denotes a group of students who is particularly talented, the categorization of Normal, bracketed by the author as a 'polite lie', denotes the negative connotations of stupidity, laziness and "slow learners" attached to this lowest stratum of academic achievers.

The author writes "All are classifiable like chemical compounds…labelled, pinned by a cold needle through the unfeeling thorax." The "unfeeling thorax" is a guised reference to the state and the phrase "all are classifiable like chemical compounds" is a criticism of the state's elitist policy of classifying students to sift out the "best" and "brightest" amongst them.

The next poem, "National Leadership" is again a thinly guised criticism of the elitist policy of the state. The poet starts off with the sentence, "In this country, a fine young leader is no accident. He wins the right scholarships, thinks the right thoughts, is selected for rapid promotion giving him adequate altitude to practice his helicopter vision." The phrase indicates that the man who is chosen to be a leader of the state is often the one who possesses the "right thoughts", as determined by the state. As high ranking civil servants in Singapore must be judged to possess the HAIR qualities- Helicopter Vision, Power of Analysis, Imagination and Innovation and Sense of Reality, the author puts a play on this set of qualities in his poem. The sentence "His confidence is carefully cultivated through the years to achieve the arrogance of the truly great," reflects the author's criticism of how such leaders become arrogant and detached from his people as time goes by.

The poem, "The Worst Part of Censorship," ridicules the current state of the Speaker's Corner in Hong Lim Park. The lack of participation and interests in the

corner, partly a result of the strict regulations of the authorities, has relegated it to become more of a recreational place frequented by retirees. The phrase, "A fat man stands, announces an opinion, as if it mattered in the hot sun, the trees yawn and almost sign," shows the disinterest and perceived insignificance of the speech of the man amongst the people who were around, who were in the knowing that his speech would not change matters in the tightly regulated state.

The poem, Garden City, allegorizes the bible's Seven Days of Creation-the account of how the universe was mindfully created and purposefully planned by God.[129] The Creator or God-like character is used to symbolize the current Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew. This is read from the context in which the Garden City was the brainchild of Lee and he was in "his seventieth year", at the time of poet's writing. [130] The character representation portrays the god-like status and powers accorded to this one man. The omnipresent and all-rounder roles of God are played upon in the poem. Widely known as the statesman, the architect, the social engineer, and the founding father of developing Singapore, Koh uses the poem to take a dig at the overwhelming influence of "the man," who had taken on multiple roles, including one which extends beyond his political and administrative capabilities of government, which is the aesthetic creation of the cityscape of Singapore.

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[129] Gilbert Koh, "Garden City," *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore (QLRS)* Vol. 1, No.1, Oct. 2001, accessed February 26, 2010, http://www.qlrs.com/poetry.asp.
[130] Koh Kheng Lian, "Singapore: Garden City to Model Green City," Integrating Environmental Considerations into Economic Policy Making Processes (ESCAP) Virtual Conference, accessed February 26, 2010, http://www.unescap.org/DRPAD/VC/conference/ex_sg_14_gcm.htm.

Theatre

The theatre is often the platform to the parodying of life, accentuating of political and social issues, and the exposing of human weaknesses. It can also be the wellspring of critical ideas. It offers a public space for artists to work away from the fringes of political power and also a realm for audience and actors to deliberate the consequences of social and political action. Forum theatre, or the Theatre of the Oppressed, was introduced by Augusto Boal in Berlin during the politically volatile period of the 1960s where it becomes a discursive public site to empower the audience and incite social change.[131] As observed by Oliver Marchart, "It became a public space in which the fourth wall between "actors" and "spectators" was torn down. Instead, everybody was allowed to speak freely."[132]

The *Lady of Soul and the Ultimate 'S' Machine* is a political play written by playwright, Tan Tarn How. The satirical play revolves around the bureaucracy's search to define the nation's soul, its unique culture. In its search for this identity, numerous committees were formed and mindless buzzwords were created in the bureaucracy. When the soliciting of ideas was opened to the public, the idea of an 'S' machine, a rubber doll which provides sexual satisfaction, was proposed to the judges while another participant proposed that freedom of thinking was essential to create the soul and culture of Singapore. Inclined towards the latter idea, a gay civil servant attempted to make the proposal known to the higher echelons of decision-makers, even though his gay friend, another civil servant, argued that what their leaders wanted was a trite and banal proposal that is conservative, and safeguards the social

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[131] Nisha Sajnani, *Fostering Democracy Through Theatre*, accessed March 10, 2010, http://www.canadacouncil.ca/NR/rdonlyres/E6820E90-0DF6-4C78-B13E7A9D6A1C069C/0/21_creative_alternativeen.pdf

[132] Oliver Marchart, comment on "Staging the Political (Counter-) Publics and the Theatricality of Acting," Republic Art, comment posted June 2004, accessed March 11, 2010, http://www.republicart.net/disc/publicum/marchart03_en.htm

order. The play exposes taboo topics such as sex and homosexuality in Singapore. It takes a dig at the flatulence of bureaucracy, its love for mindless acronyms, and the overall conservativeness of the political power, which is resistant to change and liberal reforms.

The *Coffin Is Too Big For The Hole* is a play written by local playwright, Kuo Pao Kun, in 1984. The play uses a storyline of grandson who finds himself in a bureaucratic hassle as his attempts to bury his grandfather's oversized coffin, without compromise, in the cemetery. The standardized plot of grave, given equivalently to each individual corpse, proved to be too small for the grand coffin. The play developed into an account of how the grandson stood against the bureaucracy's emotionless, and pragmatic treatment of human beings, even at the point of death, as production units, equal and standardized, and devoid of respect and integrity. (Examples) Scurrying for his grandfather to be buried with honour, the grandson ran afoul the standard rule of one man one coffin, and petitioned for the availability of two plots of land to accommodate the size of his grandpa's majestic coffin. However, his righteous anger and fervour was initially dampened by the official's oft-repeated, familiarized, and deadpan reply that "there is no room for exception."[133] On the surface, the play talks about the clash between the modernity of bureaucratic efficiency and traditional values. At a deeper level, this play can be read as a metaphor of state-society relations or a political allegory between the powerful, impersonal, and rule-bound state bureaucracy, represented by the cemetery caretakers and officials, and the insubordinate and resistant citizen, represented by the grandson, who refuses to be absorbed into the system and submit to seemingly unjustified rules.

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[133] Daniel Teo, review on "The Coffin Is Too Big for the Hole and No Parking on Odd Days by Wild Rice," The FlyingInk Pot Theatre, review posted Feb 7, 2001, accessed March 12, 2010, http://inkpot.com/theatre/01reviews/01revcofftoobigholenoparkodddays.html.

I particularly like Tan Wei Qi's reading of this play in which she notes that while on the surface, the play has often been read as "the triumph of resistance of the individual over authority," the state has instead used the exception as a public gimmick to represent their humane and understanding side, and stifle off any rebellion.[134] This insight was derived from her careful reading of the political context of the time of writing of the play, in which the 1980s was a time when the government sought to arrest the wave of discontentment towards the overbearing and authoritarian government, as indicated in the declining votes, with more friendly and consultative measures.

Policy Resistance by Establishment Figures

There is another form of resistance which, to use Barrington Moore's phrase, "leaves the basic functions of the dominant stratum inviolate," implying that even as existing flaws in the system and public policies are criticized, the prevailing social order or the establishment is still accepted.[135] Such resistance, Moore asserts, is one of the least rebellious along the gradient of opposition as the general principles of rule are still undisputed.[136]

Ngiam Tong Dow, a former high-level civil servant, has offered such criticisms. He noted that "the elite in the administrative service have been likened to "a priesthood" by some of the early senior civil servants…This analogy of a priesthood suggests vows of confidentiality and silence."[137] In his book, *A Mandarin and the Making of Public Policy: Reflections of Ngiam Tong Dow*, he wrote several views that went

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[134] Tan Wei Qi, "The Advantages of Making Exceptions: Why the State Triumphs in The Coffin Is Too Big for the Hole," *folio* Vol. 7, 2008, accessed March 12, 2010,http://www.usp.nus.edu.sg/writing/folio/vol7/wenqi.html.

[135] Barrington Moore, *Injustice: The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt* (White Plains, N.Y.: Pantheon Books, 1978), 84. Cited by Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 91.

[136] Ibid. Cited by Wedeen, 91.

[137] Ngiam Tong Dow, *A Mandarin and the Making of Public Policy: Reflections of Ngiam Tong Dow*, ed. Simon S. C. Tay (Singapore: NUS Press, 2006), 3.

against the grain of conventional wisdom on the state of civil service and political culture in Singapore. Arguing that a repressive political culture that does not entertain alternative sources of credible power is unbeneficial for the development of the political party, he notes that:

> It is the law of nature that all things must atrophy. The steady state does not exist in nature. And unless SM [Lee Kuan Yew] allows serious political challenges to emerge from the alternative elite out there, the incumbent elite will just coast along. At the first sign of a grassroots revolt, they will probably collapse just like the Incumbent Progressive Party to the left-wing onslaught in the late '50s. […] I think our leaders have to accept that Singapore is larger than the PAP.

He also argues that maintaining the "Out-of-Bound (OB) markers"[138] beyond the issue of race and religion "is to put a cap on thinking…Only a free contest of ideas can give rise to the effervescence of creativity. Singapore needs creativity to survive and prosper. Without creative thinking, Singapore would have lost the competition between cities, even before we start. It is a farce to consider bar top dancing as a manifestation of the freedom to think."[139]

Another high-level statesman, Dr Tony Tan Keng Yam, and former Deputy Prime Minister, has also been a vocal advocate of the need for reform in the government. In response to the widespread public criticism over the perceived elite favouritism in the 1984 Graduate Mother Scheme, which prioritized graduate mothers with three or more children in the Primary 1 registration, he

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[138] OB markers refer to the unspecified boundaries of restricted speech in Singapore.
[139] Ngiam, 195-6.

recommended the scrapping away of this policy to the Cabinet in May 1985.[140]

While the civil service in Singapore has been prided as being one of the most efficient in the world,[141] Tan had articulated the need for increased "flexibility and resilience" in the bureaucracy through wider collaboration amongst government agencies. He illustrated that problems such as declining birth rates involve looking not only into policies ensuring work-life balance but also those that govern the education system in Singapore. As such, to face the impending challenges in a complex environment, a more holistic attitude has to be taken. Tan however argued that this cooperative attitude amongst agencies is currently not yet established as a culture within the civil service in Singapore.

Other establishment figures who have spoken up against government policies include Haji Yaacob Mohamad, former Minister of State, who had opposed the government's plan to abolish the practice, since independence, in granting free tuition to Malay tertiary students. The government had decided to do away with granting free tuition to Malay students but instead allow Mendaki, the Malay based self-help group, to grant tuition subsidies to needy Malay students based on means testing.[142] S. Rajaratnam, former Deputy Prime Minister, had also opposed policies such as the establishment of ethnic based self-help groups as he felt that this was contrary to his hopes of greater racial integration and the vision of a common Singaporean identity, where differences of race, religion and language are irrelevant.[143]

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[140] Jon S. T. Quah and Stella R. Quah, "The Limits of Government Intervention," in *Management of Success: The Moulding of Modern Singapore*, eds.Kernial Singh Sandhu and Paul Wheatley (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1989), 114.

[141] Janet Tay, Public Service Reforms in Singapore, accessed April 8, 2010, http://mirror.undp.org/magnet/Docs/psreform/civil_service_reform_in_singapore.htm.

[142] Hussin Mutalib, *Parties and Politics: A Study of Opposition Parties and the PAP in Singapore* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Academic, 2004), 204, 231.

[143] Jeroen de Koning and Wil Kolen, "Sinnathamby Rajaratnam," *ADB Magazine*, Vol. 16, No. 3, April 2006.

A few establishment figures had also spoke about the need for greater questioning of policies amongst civil servants. In 1981, Dr Goh Keng Swee had pointed out the distressing "cult of obedience" in the Education Ministry and in December 1985, Dr Tony Tan had "called on civil servants to speak the truth" and to "stop being sycophants." [144]

This form of resistance aims not to overthrow the existing system but to revise and amend the loopholes in it. While not confined to former establishment figures, their views however often carry extra weight amongst the public and government given their insiders' understandings of the intricate workings of the political system.

Everyday Forms of Resistance

This section seeks to deal with the everyday forms of resistance in Singapore. As noted the term "everyday resistance" was popularized by James C Scott in his seminal work, *Weapons of the Weak*, to underscore the forms of mundane transgressions "widely practiced" by the subaltern classes. Such acts are not meant to topple the existing political system but to protect the material interests of the subordinated. As such, resistors seek to carry these acts out in "relative safety," by insuring that such acts are carried out quietly and on a small scale manner, to avoid detection by the authorities.[145]

Through the use of interviews and analysis of the internet sites (see Appendix A for interview questions), this thesis seeks to examine the everyday resistance of Singaporeans. While this thesis does not profess knowledge of the full range of resisting acts, it seeks to unravel and provide a tentative account in this aspect. By

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[144] Margaret Thomas, "How to Break the Cult of Obedience," *Straits Times*, 14 February 1986.
[145] James C. Scott, "Everyday Forms of Resistance," *Copenhagen Papers* 4 (1989): 34-5, accessed June 17, 2010, http://cjas.dk/index.php/cjas/article/viewFile/1765/1785.

relying on only one form of political communication-the sanctioned news sources, authorized books or government channels of information-one may gain a biased portrayal of a homogeneous society with non-divisive views.[146] It is hoped that through the interviews with dissenters, one would gain a better sense of the range, the intensity and subject matter of resistance in Singapore.

When asked about the policies or actions that they are dissatisfied with, most responded that policies like the Central Provident Fund (CPF), the Goods and Services Tax (GST), Certificate of Entitlement (COE), Electronic Road Pricing (ERP), the intake of foreign talent and workers, national service, the high ministerial salaries, and the collation of feedback, are areas in which they feel directly affect their lives and where they experience disgruntlement.

Bread and butter issues-the costs of living, welfare to the people, job competition as a result of influx of foreigners, transport and housing costs-are the main sources of unhappiness with the government for the older groups of Singaporeans, those between 40 and 70 years of age. One respondent, for example, noted with indignation, "Why must we pay for COE?" and "Why can't we take out our CPF after retirement?"[147] They gripe about the lack of welfare for the least well-to-do and senior citizens in Singapore. They speak about issues of accountability by citing the losses of billions of dollars in the reserves of the state-owned investment company, Temasek Holdings, under the leadership of CEO, Ho Ching and the escape of terrorist leader, Mas Selamat Kastari. The main gripe is the lack of responsibility attributed to the leaders in the higher echelons of the respective managements. They also call for a stronger opposition to voice their grievances and to provide a greater diversity of views in parliament. The Group Representation Constituency (GRC) election order, which

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[146] Benedict R. O'G Anderson, "Notes on Contemporary Indonesian Political Communication," *Indonesia*, Vol. 16 (Oct., 1973): 40.
[147] Interview with facilitator, 19 June 2010.

groups three to six MPs together in one constituency and requires that at least one of its MP must belong to a minority community, has also been a feature and target for verbal criticisms.

One respondent voices that "First time MPs hide behind the Ministers…It's very unfair…As a whole, people vote for the leader of the pack…It's unfair to the electors…Not all the five MPs are running the grassroots work…they may not connect…They don't really fight and have real battle experiences."[148] Another respondent argued that "The GRC is a tool to prevent opposition from entering…It allows "back-door" MPs that have not gone through the baptism of fire to enter. They cannot defend policies."[149]

Amongst the younger group of Singaporeans who articulates discontentment, those between 20 to 40 years of age, a similar pattern of issues are brought up. However, there appears to be a greater emphasis on the failings of feedback and the need to enhance public consultation. Touching on the competitiveness of society and the consistent rat race, one respondent muses that, "They have not really asked Singaporeans "Do they really want to be no. 1?"" He further argues that "The Meet-the-People Sessions (MPS) are not enough…These are for people who go to you with certain problems and needs. While the current online feedback is quite good, it is still a reactive step…it should be more proactive… It should be something like we want your feedback…we will come over door-to-door to reach out to the people."[150] Another respondent seems to be more sceptical. He notes that, "It is part of playing a game. They cannot outrightly say that they do not care…It is part of the public image…These are token channels to tell the foreign media and other country what the

[148] Interview with businessman, 24 June, 2010.
[149] Interview with self-employed worker, 28 February, 2010.
[150] Interview with human resources officer, 21 February, 2010.

people feel."[151] Another interviewee brushed off the Speakers' Corner at Hong Lim Park as a political "gesture" of the government.[152]

The scepticism towards the government's public consultation processes were also shared by a few in their forties. One respondent noted that "It's a top-down management. The policy is implemented after being rubber stamped…even though they affect masses quickly."[153] Another, referring to the government, pointed out "Once they intend to do something, they will make it as a law in parliament. They never say something and will not do it. When they decide to implement, the trial consultation is for show…the budget is already inside."[154]

In articulating their image of the government, dissenters share a common scepticism that the authorities do not care. When asked about their impression of the government, one respondent voiced that "They are to me, a superior, a boss. They will not come close to touch your problems and solve difficult to handle issues." Another noted "They do not care. The opinions of the middle class…they brush them off…these are not important enough. They are a pragmatic government…They won't listen." One respondent reckoned that the government "can't be bothered," that feedback is just "for show," and that most government officials are "yes man."[155]

The most common manifestations of grievances and disgruntlement towards the government are "Keep my mouth shut, talk to friends or colleagues, vote against the government, I will migrate." Fewer noted that they will post their disagreements on the internet without revealing their real identity, write in to the press, and call the radio station to feedback. One respondent, for example, explained that if there are any disagreements with government's actions or policies, he will be "numb" or engage in

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[151] Interview with banking operations worker, 21 February, 2010.
[152] Interview with businessman, 24 June, 2010.
[153] Interview with self-employed worker, 28 February, 2010.
[154] Interview with facilitator, 19 June, 2010.
[155] Interview with banking operations, 21 Feb 2010.

"coffeeshop talk."[156] Another respondent replied, "I won't say anything…Give up…They think they are very smart…Millions of dollars to peanut ministers for ministers who are not worth the sum."[157]

A pattern of powerlessness becomes apparent in the speeches of the interviewees. One respondent replied to the question of how he would react in situations of disagreements with government's actions or policies by saying that, "There is no point to resist, just follow what the government impose."[158] Other responses such as "There is nothing much one can do," "Have to go along with the flow," "Numb," "bo chap (meaning don't care in Singlish)" reveal the common sentiment.

Silent majority

Yet, there is a question pertaining to whether these actions of passivity and quiescence do culminate in any form of resistance. Don Mitchell in his work, Cultural Geography, quotes Tim Cresswell in writing that "resistance seems to imply intention–purposeful action directed against some disliked entity with the intention of changing it or lessening its effect…"[159] However, Mitchell argues that "Whatever the intentionality of a particular act, it may have all manner of unintended consequences that, defacto, make the act one of resistance."[160] Significantly, Mitchell points out that some actions may culminate to be acts of resistance even though the intention to do so may not be apparent. Notably, when dissenters choose to "bo chap," be "numb," or be disinterested in affairs of the state, they are opting the path of least resistance. There is thus a plausibility that this attitude carries over even to state activities where the government seeks to garner the support and enthusiasm of the citizens, such as the

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[156] Interview with facilitator, 19 June 2010.
[157] Interview with self-employed worker, 28 Feb, 2010.
[158] Ibid.
[159] Tim Cresswell, *In Place/ Out of Place: Geography, Ideology, and Transgression* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 22. First cited, Don Mitchell, *Cultural Geography: A Critical Introduction* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 159.
[160] Mitchell, 159.

calls for active citizenship. Their apathy, foot-dragging, apparent deafness or disregard to these calls may best be described as accommodations which do not seriously challenge the authorities,[161] and in Scott's words as, "performances that are not bad enough to provoke punishment but not good enough to allow the enterprise to succeed."[162] Moreover, as one respondent pointed out "Singaporeans will not say anything except during elections…They will vote against the government."[163]

The respondent's statement has been proven in previous elections. In the 1991 election, former President Ong Teng Cheong described the Chinese educated populace which was unhappy with government policies as a "silent majority" that showed a "strong signal" to the government by casting protest votes.[164]

Talking as resistance

As noted by Don Mitchell, ""politics" are acts that transgress, acts that throws into question the "taken-for-granteds" of social life." Hannah Arendt, in her book, The Promise of Politics, writes that the meaning of politics "is that men in their freedom can interact with one another without compulsion, force, and rule over one another, as equals among equals, commanding and obeying one another only in emergencies-that is, in times of war-but otherwise managing all their affairs by speaking with and persuading one another."[165] Politics, is thus for Arendt, the freedom and right to speak, to persuade, or to "have the same claim to political activity, and in the polis this activity primarily took the form of speaking with one another,"[166] and to be rid of prejudices by being opened to multiple perspectives. Perceived in such a sense,

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[161] Tilly: 343.
[162] Scott 1990, 192.
[163] Interview with self-employed worker, 28 Feb, 2010.
[164] Edwin Lee, *Singapore: The Unexpected Nation* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2008), 488-9.
[165] Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 117
[166] Ibid, 118.

talking politics is as much a resisting activity given its ability to contest meanings and counter established ways of viewing things.

Clearly, the respondents are clear of the different contexts in which they could voice their genuine opinions and the consequences of not doing so. One interviewee described why discontented Singaporeans do not voice out in public by explaining, "They think that they may be marked, singled out, get into political trouble. It is not a free country in Singapore. Anything you want to voice out in public, you have to go to Hong Lim and submit your application…too much trouble."[167]

The act of expressing different views or portraying alternate conduct in distinct contexts is reminiscent of Scott's public and hidden transcripts. The public transcript, according to Scott, describes the official realm of interactions between the rulers and ruled and the hidden transcript refers to "discourse that takes place "offstage," beyond direct observation by powerholders…those offstage speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript."[168]

In Nina Eliasoph's work, *"Close to Home": The Work of Avoiding Politics*, she describes how citizens worked hard to appear apathetic and selfish as they made "distinctions between what was sayable in one context and another."[169] In sum, her findings led her to the conclusion that in order to be reassured of the workings of democracy, citizens sought to appear to be less public-minded and more self-interested in public contexts, while in actuality, their conversations were more public spirited in intimate context, given their "low valuation of public speech" and perceived powerlessness to change things at the national level. [170] One respondent of the interview, when asked whom would he discuss political issues with and where do

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[167] Interview with facilitator, 19 June, 2010.
[168] Scott 1990, 2-4.
[169] Nina Eliasoph, " "Close to Home": The Work of Avoiding Politics," *Theory and Society*, Vol. 26, No. 5, Oct. 1997: 612.
[170] Ibid, 612 and 634

he feel most comfortable doing so, responded that it depends on the "audience" and whether it was the "right environment." When probed further on who the audience was, he replied that he had to "know the person."

Beyond talking to friends, colleagues, and family on alternative meanings of political events,[171] another form of resisting act, according to a few respondents, is to "read between the lines" when reading the national newspapers. "To read between the lines" is to detect any unspoken, inexplicit or hidden meanings of an article or speech.[172] The refusal to accept wholesale government established truths or to be consumed by such propaganda is also a subtle act of resistance and act of guarding one's autonomy of thinking and thoughts.

Everyday resistance in Singapore is by and large found to be related to protest votes, social and political apathy, and verbal or written transgressions in "safe" or less controlled contexts. In some situations, citizens have sought to silently resist by using government related services or products as much as possible (such as refusing to subscribe to the nation's newspapers, Straits Times, and going online for alternative news). Some citizens seek to "read between the lines" of the mainstream news to retain a modicum of autonomy in thinking. The extent of surveillance implies that unlike the peasantry in Malaysia, one is given less leeway to take advantage of loopholes in the system to gain material interests or advantages. Most of the everyday resistance is directed towards safeguarding an arena of independent thinking that is less overwhelmed by state propaganda.

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[171] Some respondents have however pointed out that they would keep the opinions to themselves, as there is nobody which they feel comfortable sharing these perspectives with.
[172] The Free Dictionary.com, s.v. "Read between the lines," accessed 1 July, 2010, http://www.thefreedictionary.com/read+between+the+lines.

Analysis of resistance

The forms of resistance present in a society are often a reflection of its times-the circumscription of state's repression and political oppression, the spaces of relative independence fought and carved by dissenters, the myriad of grievances amongst the people, and the taboos and proscribed topics of every society. The forms of resisting acts reveal the sites and spaces which dissenters utilize to act, speak, or think. The unravelling of the myriad of resistance here suggests that the ideological hegemony of the PAP is not as impregnable as assumed to be.[173] The resisting acts that have been outlined here have been classified according to their forms. Nonetheless, these forms of resistance can be further categorized along the spectrum of two types of resistance: active or confrontational resistance and passive resistance or non-cooperation.[174] At one extreme, activists stage acts of civil disobedience, in the forms of marches, protests, or candlelight vigils, to challenge legal orders. The intentions of these activities can be ideological or political in nature. While some activists seek to stand up to the norms and imposed beliefs of society, political players attempt to use these methods to highlight causes to campaign for a society which includes more power-sharing.

The next most confrontational forms of resistance are the direct or undisguised verbal attacks or written publications which allege the government of wrongdoings, impugns the character of government, and erode public trust. Such criticisms and transgressive language can easily run afoul of the law, depending on their readership and influence on the political opinion. As a direct written or verbalized attack of the

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[173] Don Nonini, "Everyday Forms of Popular Resistance," *CBS*, Nov, 1998 issue, accessed June 14, 2010, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1132/is_n6_v40/ai_6794882/.

[174] Robert Gargarella, "The Right of Resistance in Situations of Severe Deprivations," in *Freedom from Poverty As a Human Right: Who Owes What to the Very Poor?*, ed. Thomas Pogge (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 370.

government, such resistance forms a substantial threat to the authorities' public image.

Amongst the less confrontational forms of resistance, is the use of art as resistance. Subversive and critical messages are expressed through art forms such as films, cartoons, theatre, and poems. They offer a more oblique means of mixing entertainment with political or social messages to subvert dominant or hegemonic codes of society. The topics of resistance often involve the oppressive power structure and its interfering presence in the lives of its citizenry, the ill effects of policies formed by arrogant officials, and the conformist pressures of society.

Political art, as a whole, raise awareness of political or social issues and voice the grievances of the marginalized and disadvantaged groups in society. One of the most tangible effects of such resistance has been witnessed in Neo's *I Not Stupid* movie which helped intensified debate over the streaming system and its ill effects on primary students in Singapore. This led to its ultimate abolishment of the EM3 stream, the lowest cohort, for primary students in 2008.[175] This group of resistance is often the more subliminal and indirect form of resistance that are sometimes able to elude the government's firm repression and provide a medium for transgressive activities to poke holes in the hegemonic ideology.

Policy resistance by establishment figures is one of the least rebellious amongst the gradient of resistance found in Singapore. Relying on their political expertise, they utilize officialised or legal channels such as publishing a book or highlighting issues in a public speech to make known their views. The government has been relatively welcoming of such policy resistance as it is relatively benign to the overall long-term

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[175] "Primary Schools to do away with EM3 Stream from 2008," Getforme Singapore, Sept 29, 2006, accessed March 18, 2010, http://www.getforme.com/previous2006/290906_primaryschoolstodoaway withem3from2008.htm.

stability of the status quo and can be critically viewed as efforts to stabilize the system. Even amongst the public, the government has sought to collate such views through the official feedback channel, Reaching Everyone for Active Citizenry (REACH), and the Meet-the-People sessions.

The least confrontational form of resistance is the everyday forms of resistance manifested in casting protest votes, spreading rumours, being apathetic, complaining to friends or family, and writing or calling in to internet sites or public forums to voice their opinions or migrating. An even subtler form of resistance is to read between the lines of the mainstream news. Such resistance are usually carried out individually and are non-confrontational. These forms of resistance are however not entirely futile. They constitute the bedrock of sentiments where civil society or political activists can leverage on to support their cause. In one of the few victories of civil society, where the plan to reclaim Chek Jawa was deferred, conservationists mobilized public feedback to conserve the natural environment and leveraged on public opinion to petition the government.[176]

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[176] Chua Lee Hoong, "Chek Jawa: Anatomy of a U-Turn," *Straits Times*, 2 Jan 2002.

Chapter Four: Dealing With Dissent in Singapore

This chapter seeks to explore the rationale and types of state responses towards forms of political resistance in Singapore. A government can rely upon any modality of power within its means that can encompass coercive power or rhetoric and symbols. As David Easton notes in "A Systems Analysis of Political Life," a political system's goal is to identify the source of stresses, and regulate the tensions and threats that pose a challenge to the stability and maintenance of the system.[177] The tendency for politicians is to nip the problem in the bud once internal threats and tensions are identified. Yet what forms of dissent are deemed as threats to the state?

Significantly, even as the government faces the technological and globalizing impetuses to open up politically and the internal pressures amongst its public for a greater say in policymaking, it actively retains an interventionist role in separating the wheat from the chaff in dealing with the range of dissent. The desire to continuously manage this liberalization is encapsulated in the metaphor, "judicious pruning," articulated by then Acting Minister for Information and the Arts, George Yeo, in 1991. The term describes the state's selective withdrawal and lessened role in areas deemed politically unthreatening such that selective civic organizations may grow.[178]

It is impossible to get into policymaker's heads and know exactly why they do what they do.[179] Most of the public policies in Singapore are formulated at the cabinet level and the details of their conceptualization process are usually undisclosed to the public.[180] Nonetheless, policy language and legislative acts have symbolic effects

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[177] Jagdish Chandra Johari, *Comparative Politics* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1972), 115; David Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life* (New York: Wiley, 1965)
[178] "The Changing Shape Of Civil Society," *Straits Times*, 25 March 2000.
[179] Wedeen, 6.
[180] Jon S. T. Quah, "The Public Policy-Making Process in Singapore," *Asian Journal of Public Administration*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (December 1984): 113

which communicate societal values, norms, and the rules that should not be transgressed (the "forbidden fruits" or verboten acts of society). They are what Dvora Yanow's calls "statements of meaning."[181]

As Senior Minister of State for Information, Communication and the Arts, Radm (NS) Lui Tuck Yew, notes, "Furthermore, regulatory legislation is not just about enforcement. It is also about making a statement about what our society recognises as the acceptable norms and the fundamental standards for what is considered the proper conduct of political debate and electioneering in our country."[182]

Essentially, discernible patterns do emerge with repetitive government rhetoric and actions that are used to deal with dissent. This leads us to have a better understanding of the regime's values, beliefs, and to a certain extent, their intent in dealing with dissent. Significantly, the enactment of policies and the deeds of authorities form a "text" which reveals the state's logic of dealing with dissent.

Systemic Regulations

Systemic regulations are deemed here as the legal "borders" of a society. They are the state imposed boundaries of conduct, or the rules and regulations, for the people to abide by. It demarcates the safety zone of political activities and the individual's rights. In essence, it is the state's means of drawing the margins of proper behaviour to prevent uncontrollable dissent.

The right of an individual to carry out overt dissent is seriously undermined under the Miscellaneous Offences (Public Order and Nuisance) Act (MOA) and Internal Security Act (ISA). Under the MOA, a permit is required for any assembly or

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[181] Dvora Yanow, "The Communication of Policy Meanings: Implementation as Interpretation and Text," *Policy Sciences*, Vol. 26, No.1 (February 1993): 17
[182] Speech by Radm (NS) Lui Tuck Yew, Senior Minister of State for Information, Communications and the Arts at Second Reading of Films (Amendment) Bill in Parliament, 23 March 2009, 3:00 pm, MICA, accessed May , 2010, http://app.mica.gov.sg/Default.aspx?tabid=36&ctl=Details&mid=539&ItemID=958.

procession of five or more persons in any public road, public place or place of public resort intended to a) demonstrate support for or opposition to the views or actions of any person; b) to publicise a cause or campaign; or c) to mark or commemorate any event. The Minister is also granted the powers under the ISA to order the detention of a person that is deemed to be a threat to public order and security.[183]

Strict rules also govern the mediums of communication and entertainment in Singapore. The Newspaper and Printing Presses Act, first introduced in 1974, forbids the publishing of any newspaper in Singapore without a permit granted by the Minister. The permit is to be renewed periodically every 12 months.[184] The power of prohibiting the printing, sale, or circulation of publications or subjecting the publications to conditions is granted to the Minister whenever the publications-

(a) contains any incitement to violence;

(b) counsels disobedience to the law or to any lawful order;

(c) is calculated or likely to lead to a breach of peace, or to promote feelings of hostility between different races or classes of the population; or

(d) is prejudicial to the national interest, public order or security of Singapore.[185]

Under the laws of the Act, the printer is liable to be sued as well for printing any defamatory articles. As noted by Garry Rodan, "The idea is to exert as much pressure as possible to foster self-censorship and caution in trying to avoid objectionable

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[183] "General Provisions Relating to Internal Security," *Singapore Statutes Online,* accessed May 2, 2010, http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/non_version/cgi-bin/cgi_getdata.pl?actno=1963-REVED-143&doctitle=INTERNAL%20SECURITY%20ACT%0A&date=latest&method=part&segid=888373124-000120

[184] "Newspaper and Printing Presses Act," *Singapore Statutes Online*, accessed May 2, 2010, http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/non_version/cgi-bin/cgi_retrieve.pl?actno=REVED-206&doctitle=NEWSPAPER%20AND%20PRINTING%20PRESSES%20ACT%0A&date=latest&method=part.

[185] "General Provisions Relating to Internal Security"

content."[186] According to the Ministry of Information, Communication, and the Arts, "it is a privilege and not a right for foreign newspapers to circulate in Singapore."[187] The Minister may evoke the power to declare any newspaper published outside from Singapore to be "engaging in the domestic politics of Singapore."[188] He may, on his discretion, decline to grant or revoke the approval to distribute any foreign newspapers in Singapore without stating a reason. He may also limit the circulation of the foreign newspapers to the number of copies he deems fit. The government retains tight regulation over the media through the management of shareholdings. Any person who seeks to hold a substantial share of a newspaper company would have to first obtain the approval of the minister.[189]

According to the rules of Media Development Authority (MDA), all Internet Service Providers have to register for a license to operate in Singapore. They shall also assist the government in ensuring that prohibited material is not broadcasted to internet users in Singapore. This includes any material which is deemed by the authorities to threaten the public interest, public morality, public order, public security, and national harmony.[190] Individuals, groups, and organizations that are involved in propagating, promoting, or discussing political or religious issues on Singapore through the internet are also subjected to the requirement of applying for license in order to operate.[191]

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[186] Gary Rodan, "The Internet and Political Control in Singapore," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 113, No. 1, Spring 1998: 81.

[187] MICA, "Singapore Withdraws Circulation Approval for Far Eastern Economic Review," MICA, accessed May 3, 2010, http://www.getforme.com/previous2006/300906_singaporewithdrawscirculation approvalforfeer.htm

[188] "Newspaper and Printing Presses Act"

[189] Ibid.

[190] MDA, "Internet Code of Practice," MDA online, http://www.mda.gov.sg/Documents/PDF/licences/mobj.981.Internet_Code_of_Practice.pdf (accessed May 3, 2010)

[191] MDA, "Internet Service and Content Provider Class License," MDA, accessed May 5, 2010 http://www.mda.gov.sg/Licences/Pages/IntSCPCLicence.aspx

Prior to its amendment in March 2009, Section 33 of the 1998 Films Act imposed a blanket ban on all party political films through prohibiting their making, distribution, and exhibition. A "party political film", according to the statutes, implies a film 1) which is an advertisement made by or behalf of any political party in Singapore or any body whose objects relate wholly or mainly to politics in Singapore, or any branch of such party or body; or 2) which is made by any person and directed toward any political end in Singapore.

Under the Films Act, the Board of Film Censors (BFC), consisting of members appointed by the Minister, are conferred absolute powers to ban a film or censor portions of it at their discretion. Since 1 July 1991, the BFC has also been tasked to classify all films exhibited and distributed in Singapore. The films are classified into four ratings: G (General), PG (Parental Guidance), NC16 (No children below 16 years old) and R(A) (Restricted (Artistic) for persons above 21 years old; film should be shown in city areas and not the heartland areas).[192]

The amendment of the films act in March 2009 enabled certain films to be excluded from being considered as political films. Such films include:

(1) Live recordings of events held in accordance with the law;

(2) Anniversary and commemorative videos of political parties;

(3) Factual documentaries, biographies or autobiographies;

(4) Manifestoes of political parties produced by or on behalf of a political party; and

(5) Candidate's declaration of policies or ideology produced by or on behalf of the candidate. [193]

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[192] Media Development Authority, "Film Classification" Media Development Authority (MDA) online, accessed May 5, 2010, http://www.fsf.de/fsf2/international/bild/ecofc03/singapore_long.pdf
[193] Lui.

Despite the amendments, it is clear that the government seeks to retain tight control over these traditional mediums of control. There is always an element of human perspective and interpretation in all films. A film is, in essence, a telling of a story from particular viewpoint. The story-telling within films, as Brian Dunnigan argues, "inspire, heal, inform and empower: forms of consciousness, ways of thinking that help us to deal with the unexpected, to imagine other possibilities."[194] As the film is a powerful medium of communication with the ability to impact on the audience's political conscience and advocacy, political authorities are mindful that certain controls have to be put in place.

When former Minister of Information and Arts, BG George Yeo, first tabled the ban on party political films through amending the Films Act in 1998, he highlighted "the undesirability of the film medium as a platform to conduct political discourse. This was because party political films can be employed to sensationalise or present serious issues in a biased and emotional manner. We should keep politics objective and rational rather than allow emotions to be whipped up in place of rational responses."[195]

Even though internet users may bypass the law by watching the prohibited film online Senior Minister of State for Information, Communications and the Arts, RADM (NS) Lui argues that the ban on party political films remains valid today. He noted that, "There are good reasons to make a distinction between what happens in the virtual world and the real world. First, while we recognise that there are practical limitations to prevent all undesirable films from circulation on the Internet, it is sensible and practical not to allow copies of such films from circulating widely and taking root outside of cyberspace. It is still a large and significant audience in the real

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[194] Brian Dunnigan, "Storytelling and Film. Fairytales, Myths and Happy Endings," P.O.V. online, accessed May 6, 2010, http://pov.imv.au.dk/Issue_18/section_1/artc1A.html.
[195] Lui.

world. Second, there is a distinct difference in the effect and impact of watching a film alone through a computer terminal off the Internet and having a group of people watch it together. Unlike an excited individual, an excited group of people can easily fuel and exacerbate the emotions."[196]

The speeches by both ministers reflect the government's view on politics-its boundaries, its nature, and its proper way of conduct. Political discourse is to be kept rational and logical and as much as possible kept free from emotions.

RADM (NS) Lui's speech reveals the differing impact of the internet from the traditional media. Unlike the traditional media, such as the newspapers, which delivers information to the people, news and information on the internet requires an active search. There is a fear that these main channels of information are manipulated to expose the public to anti-government propaganda and used by religious or political activists and dissenters to produce a groundswell of discontentment. Given the impact of the traditional media to influence the views of the everyman, the government attempts to retain and exert their authority over the conventional areas of information sources through films, television, newspapers and radio.

While internet viewing is a private experience, authorities are also concerned about how the collective experience in the cinema can lead to the audience's emotions being amplified and fuelled through the awareness that others feel the same.[197] The fear of a stirred up audience who may be used for mileage or gain by social activists was perhaps part of the reason why Forum Theatre was initially refused funding by the National Arts Council (NAC) from 1994 to 2003. This form of theatre was one which encourages audience interaction with the plot by enabling them to take the stage and suggest solutions to the social or political problem discussed. Actors are also planted

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[196] Ibid.
[197] Eric Patton, " 'Black Dynamite' and the Collective Experience," The Film Crusade Online, (accessed May 9, 2010), http://www.filmcrusade.com/black-dynamite-and-the-collective-experience/

amongst the audience to evoke their responses.[198] Perhaps due to its empowering effect, the government had initially viewed upon this form of performance with suspicion. Yet due to the small and selected audience which are attracted to theatre and the relatively unthreatening social issues which they revolve their play around, the withdrawal of funding was eventually lifted.

Beyond rules and regulations, the public arts agency, NAC, may also withdraw government funding to art groups or theatre companies which run "contrary to mainstream societal values and which were critical of the Government."[199] According to the funding guidelines of the NAC, there will be a withdrawal of funding from artistic projects that:

a) Erode the core moral values of society, including but not limited to the promotion of permissive lifestyles and depictions of obscenity or graphic sexual conduct;

b) Denigrate or debase a person, group or class of individuals on the basis of race or religion, or serve to create conflict or misunderstanding in our multicultural or multi-religious society;

c) Disparage or demean government bodies, public institutions or national leaders, and/ or subvert the nation's security or stability.[200]

Noting that not everything may be legislated in advance to keep certain issues and topics off the official discourse, the government has also put in place the "out-of-bound" (OB) markers. These markers however are not defined in advance and shift in accordance to the government's discretion.

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[198] Felix Soh, "Two Pioneers of Forum Theatre Trained At Marxist Workshops," *Straits Times*, February 5, 1994.
[199] Teo Xuan Wei, "NAC Cuts Funding for Wild Rice: But Local Theatre Company Will Still Receive $170, 000 In Government Funding," *Today*, May 6, 2010,
[200] NAC, "Grant Application Guidelines," NAC online, accessed May 9, 2010,
https://www.nac.gov.sg/static/doc/p_p.pdf

Making a Case Out of Selected Examples

Enforce Those Boundaries

In the beginning of Michel Foucault's work, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, opens his argument of the changes in the techniques of punishment with the "great spectacles of physical punishment."[201] He argues that public execution was part of "a whole series of great rituals in which power is eclipsed and restored"[202] and was thus instrumental in reactivating power.[203] Power was consistently demonstrated as the executions were often "a manifestation of force."[204]

The ritual was meant to instil terror and fear into the minds of witnesses such that the crime served as a deterrent example or lesson to the spectators who gather. The citizens are taught to relate a particular crime with a particular form of punishment and to grasp the symbolizing effect of the punishment. As Foucault notes, "It is no longer the terrifying restoration of sovereignty that will sustain the ceremony of punishment. In the penalty, rather than seeing the presence of the sovereign, one will read the laws themselves. The laws associated a particular crime with a particular punishment. As soon as the crime is committed, the punishment will follow at once, enacting the discourse of the law and showing that the code, which links ideas, also links realities."[205]

One of the most decisive enforcement of the law on activists in Singapore was observed in 1987 when the state accused a group of 22 men and women, comprising of mostly English educated social workers and church members, aged between 18 and

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[201] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 14
[202] Ibid, 48
[203] Ibid, 49
[204] Ibid, 50
[205] Ibid, 110

40, of planning a "Marxist Conspiracy" to undermine the government.[206] The 22 men and women were arrested, detained without trial under the ISA, and were accused of being influenced by the ideology of "liberation theology," which, according to the Straits Times, "was nothing other than a form of Marxism operating under the cover of religion."[207] Liberation theology was a twisted and extremist strand of Christian theology which made the achievement of social change and the freedom from oppression the main focus of the religion.

According to state reports, a church worker named Vincent Cheng was the key organizer of this subversion. Having being influenced and directed by Tan Wah Piow, a former student union leader who was then living in exile, Cheng was accused to have used bible study meetings to spread anti-establishment ideas. The detainees were asked to confess on national television and Cheng confessed his readiness to use illegal means to achieve his goal of achieving a "classless society" if peaceful means failed, and that the church was a "ready cover" for his exploits.[208] After their release from detainment, a number of the accused retracted their confessions, accused the government of torture during interrogations, and claimed that they had used legal means to secure rightful civil rights.[209] As much of the investigations were conducted in secrecy by the Internal Security Department (ISD), much of the public information that was made available was derived from the state controlled newspapers.

The incident had a significant impact on the dynamics of religious and political activism in Singapore. The Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act was passed in parliament in November 1990 which enabled the creation of a Presidential Council for Religious Harmony to advise the Minister on matters relating to religious harmony.

[206] Lydia Lim and Li Xueying, "The Legacy of 1987," *Straits Times*, July 7, 2007.
[207] "'Marxist Plot' Revisited," Singapore Window, accessed April 9, 2010, http://www.singapore-window.org/sw01/010521m2.htm.
[208] Lim and Li.
[209] Ibid.

The Minister is given the power to issue a restraining order on any religious authorities if they are suspected of using religion for political ends, inciting inter-religious hostility, or carrying our subversive activities.[210] The restraining order includes the ability to restrain him from speaking to a congregation on any topic, publishing or editing any publications of a religious group, and holding office in an editorial board or committee of publication without first obtaining permission from the Minister.[211]

The underlying message of the act was clear-religion should not to be intertwined with politics and religious groups should steer clear from the political space. As Jothie Rajah notes, "Implicit in the MRHA is the understanding that it is the role of the State to police 'religion' so as to manage society."[212] Teh Tsun Hang notes that "The Act brings the regulation of religious harmony behind closed doors, given that the public is not privy to the instances in which the Minister has issued a warning to desist" and "The Act removes religious influence from political contestation. It curbs organised political competition through outlawing engagement in politics by groups with religious links that are not specifically and officially designated as political."[213]

Many saw the punitive effects that the state can bring to bear on activism which, in its opinion, is of a threat. It also reflects the government's fear of ideological or concerted activism which ideals run contrary to the state's interests.

Beyond the detention of activists, the state has also showcased its punitive powers through other means. In another example of dissent, the state has shown punishment

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[210] "Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act," Singapore Statutes Online, accessed April 14, 2010 http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/non_version/cgi-bin/cgi_retrieve.pl?&actno=Reved-167A&date=latest &method=part
[211] Ibid.
[212] Jothie Rajah, "Policing Religion: Singapore and the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act," Staff Seminar Series 2006/2007, accessed April 14, 2010,http://law.nus.edu.sg/cle/seminars/rajah_prsmrha .htm
[213] Tey Tsun Hang, "Excluding Religion from Politics and Enforcing Religious Harmony," Singapore Journal of Legal Studies, July 2008: 120.

commensurate with the crime with the rituals of public apology and defamation suits. In February 2006, SDP published an article in their party newsletter, New Democrat, indicting the government's role in the NKF scandal. It writes that "Ministers went out of their way to defend NKF even as people were unhappy over the organisation's operations."[214] It further alleges that "Such a scandal is inevitable given the kind of secretive and non-accountable system, bred by the PAP."[215] It writes that "The Government now tries to exonerate itself by playing the innocent and gullible party duped by greedy NKF officials" and surmises that "The NKF fiasco is not about bad practices. It is not even about negligence on the Government's party. It is about greed and power."[216]

Given the libellous nature of the article and its allusive attacks of political corruptness and avarice, such statements could undermine the government's integrity and moral soundness. On April 21, 2006, Prime Minister Lee and Minister Mentor Lee demanded an apology from twelve SDP committee members for their accusatory remarks in which a failure to comply would lead them to sue the involved parties. The public apology was to be published in two major newspapers, The Straits Times and the Lianhe Zaobao, on April 27.[217]

SDP was not amongst the first to articulate such bitter and acerbic remarks related to this issue. In the Young PAP forum, a blogger voiced online his disappointment with the Singapore system. He surmised, "From what I can observe, the NKF saga is not a one off thing. The NKF debacle is a sign of a deeper systemic malaise. People

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[214] Pseudonymity, "Govt's Role in the NKF Scandal," Pseudonymity Blog, comment post June 9, 2006, accessed April 15, 2009, http://udhr19.blogspot.com/2006/06/judiciary-has-not-moved-to-check_09.html.

[215] Ibid.

[216] Ibid.

[217] PM Lee, MM Lee Demand Apology from SDP for NKF Remarks," *Channel NewsAsia*, April 22, 2006, accessed April 14, 2010, http://www.singapore-window.org/sw06/060422cn.htm.

are not held accountable for their actions and power is assumed to be absolute." [218]

He further gathers that, "This is the reason why Durai felt so confident in doing his dirty deeds. To safeguard their own interests, everyone strives to build his own private fiefdom and be a little prince in his own right."[219] The acrimony of the blogger was reflective of the public mood as emotions of anger ran high amongst the public.

Yet, the government had chosen to make a public example of the SDP's remarks and met out a punishment to the magnitude of offense in the eyes of the establishment politicians. Significantly, the SDP had gone beyond the pale of ordinary criticism by attacking the integrity of the government[220] through accusing the party of being greedy and power-hungry.[221] Moreover, the SDP had chosen to take political gain or mileage out of the issue by publicizing these comments in a party newsletter prior to the elections. The government had to respond firmly to correct the inflammatory rhetoric, distinguish between "hearsay" and facts, restore public trust, and mete out a punishment that would deter further offenders.

The public ritual of apology had its calculated effects on the disciplinarian's intended audiences, the potential inciters, people who had been swayed by the rabble-rousing and those who were of uncertain opinion. The public apology, published in both local dailies that drew the majority of the English and Mandarin speaking publics, was not so much an act of contrition but a public confession of the responsibility for wrongdoings and attests to the falsehoods propagated by the SDP. It was a restoration of the respect and dignity of establishment politicians. Those who exhibit repentance were to pay for damages and costs to the reputations of the

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[218] "Singapore's Institutions: How Strong Are They?" Little Speck, comment posted Oct 14, 2004, accessed April 14, 2010, http://www.littlespeck.com/informed/2006/CInformed-061014.htm
[219] Ibid.
[220] Seth Mydans, "Power and Tenacity Collide in a Singapore Courtroom," *The New York Times*, accessed April 15, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/30/world/asia/30singapore.html
[221] Pseudonymity

accused[222] while those who refuse, Chee Soon Juan and his sister, Chee Siok Chin, had to face legal proceedings. By bringing to court those who remained stubborn and who fail to exhibit repentance, it is to establish the truth and to restore public trust.

The use of legal action has been applied as well to foreign publications which have used words to undermine public confidence in government institutions and leaders. In September 2008, for example, the Wall Street Journal was sued by the Attorney General (AG) in Singapore over three articles "allegedly casting doubt on the judiciary's integrity."[223] The articles were "Democracy in Singapore," published on 26 June 2008,[224] "Response: Letter from Chee Soon Juan," published on 5 July 2008,[225] and "Judging Singapore's judiciary," published on 15 July 2008.[226] According to AG Walter Woon, "Together, the articles imply that the courts do not dispense justice fairly in cases involving critics of senior political figures, and that they play a part in suppressing dissent through the award of damages in libel suits."[227] He proposed that there should be a "substantial fine" on the publisher of the foreign magazine to deter further criticisms of contempt of court.[228]

Subtler published criticisms of the government have also received lesser punishments. In comparison to the calumnious remarks made by the opposition politicians in the earlier case, Lim's comments in her published article, "One Government, Two Styles," are apparently less denigrative. Unlike Chee, Lim did not

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[222] Zakir Hussain, "Defamation Suit Against SDP and its Leaders: PM, MM Lee Get $950K damages," *Straits Times*, Oct 14, 2008, accessed March 2, 2010, http://app.mfa.gov.sg/pr/read_content.asp?View,11251.

[223] "Singapore Attorney General Sues Wall Street Journal," Agence France-Presse, Sept 11, 2008, accessed April 14, 2010, http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5iJTWdvzdcU2LqSHDHS36Db2e8JYA

[224] "Democracy in Singapore," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 26, 2008.

[225] "Response: Letter from Chee Soon Juan-"Let the Court Produce the Transcript, Show the Truth," *The Wall Street Journal*, July 5, 2008, accessed April 15, 2010, http://online.wsj.com/article/SB121522047871629771.html

[226] "Judging Singapore's Judiciary," *The Wall Street Journal*, July 15, 2008, accessed March 2, 2010, http://online.wsj.com/article/SB121605724442851527.html

[227] Zakir Hussain, "AG asks for Deterrent Fine for Newspaper," *Straits Times*, Nov 5, 2008,

[228] Ibid.

speculate on any misdeeds on the part of the government but instead questions the rationale of higher ministerial salaries policy and whether the administration has reneged on its initial promise of a more consultative government. However, Lim's decision to champion a sensitive policy that has already been explicated in the government's White Paper and speeches, and to position herself as a voice of moral authority for the people, clearly infuriated the government. Seemingly, Lim's article could have subtly portrayed an "us" against "them" mentality by representing her thoughts as belonging to many Singaporeans, and using epithets such as "arrogant" and "high handed" to describe the prevailing perception of government.[229] Another point which could have irritated the government is her allusion that Goh has only paid lip service to a more open and tolerant government.

On December 3, 1994, Prime Minister's Press Secretary, Chan Heng Wing countered Lim's claims, in a letter published in the press, by affirming that the PM "remains committed to consultation and consensus politics," and even as he seeks to rope in opinions from all segments, his decision will not be dictated "by a vocal minority who disagree with a proposal."[230] Chan's letter clarified the government's stance on governing and served as a strict admonishment to the writer, whose views were not reflective of the masses. This was followed by the Prime Minister's explanation of why his firm response to Lim. On December 5, the Prime Minister explained to reporters that "When my authority is being commented on or undermined by wrong observations, I have to correct them, or the view will prevail that I am indeed not in charge of Singapore."[231] He argues that "If a person wants to set the

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[229] Lim, "One Government, Two Styles."

[230] Chan Heng Wing, "PM Goh Remains Committed to Consultation and Consensus Politics," *Straits Times*, Dec 4, 1994.

[231] Chua Mui Hoong, "PM: No Erosion of My Authority Allowed," *Straits Times*, Dec 5, 1994.

agenda for Singapore by commenting regularly on politics, our view has been, and it is my view too, that the person should do this in the political arena."[232]

Goh's response to Lim reveals that politics in Singapore remain a largely circumscribed arena solely for politicians. Intellectuals, and what he calls "writers on the fringe,"[233] should not seek to canvass for a particular view towards politics given their lack of answerability to the public. Moreover, this case reminds the public of the state imposed OB markers of society.

In a similar response in July 2006, Mr Brown's column was taken off from the Today's newspaper as a result of his article, "S'poreans are fed, up with progress!" Mr Brown has been posting political parodies on the internet but has been by and large ignored till his opinion piece appeared on the local newspaper. As a result of his sarcastic remarks the price increases in Singapore and the government's intentions, the Press Secretary to the Ministry of Information, Communication and Arts, Krishnasamy Bhavani, rebutted him in a follow up article, arguing that his views "distort the truth."[234] She noted that "They are polemics dressed up as analysis, blaming the government for all that he is unhappy with. He offers no alternatives or solutions. His piece is calculated to encourage cynicism and despondency, which can only make things worse, not better, for those he professes to sympathize with."[235] She argues that "It is not the role of journalists or newspapers in Singapore to champion issues, or campaign for or against the Government. If a columnist presents himself as a non-political observer, while exploiting his access to the mass media to undermine

[232] Ibid.
[233] Ibid.
[234] "Letter from MICA: Distorting the Truth, Mr Brown?," Mr Brown Blog, July 3, 2006, accessed April 14, 2010, http://www.mrbrown.com/blog/2006/07/letter_from_mic.html
[235] "Singapore: Today Paper Suspends Blogger's Column," Straits Times, July 7, 2006.

the government's standing with the electorate, then he is no longer a constructive critic, but a partisan player in politics."[236]

The above case studies demarcate the lines on freedom of speech and civil rights. In particular, they communicate to the public the government's view of proper political discourse and conduct. Even though the OB markers have never been clearly defined, the responses of the government to the acts of transgression reveal to the public where the "off-limit" topics are.[237] In essence, the way in which the dissenters were made an example of served as a warning to others.

The pattern of government's response reveals how the crime is related to the punishment. Ideological forms of resistance, concerted attempts to dissent, and civil disobedience are most severely dealt with by the state. Words that undermine public trust and confidence are also firmly dealt with. It is observable that the state keeps a strict control of the traditional mediums of communication (television, newspaper, radio and films). It is notable that the state seeks to keep its control over the political discourse through these mediums to ensure public trust and confidence.

Public trust remains an important aspect of governance. As Margaret Levi notes, "It affects both the level of citizens' tolerance of the regime and their degree of compliance with governmental demands and regulations. Destruction of trust may lead to widespread antagonism to government policy and even active resistance, and it may be one source of increased social distrust."[238] When there is public trust in the government, citizenry are more willing to go along with the regulations as they are assured that their interests will be protected. It also enables the government to broaden its scope of state action and policies given the mandate entrusted to them. As William

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[236] Ibid.

[237] Michael Barr and Carl A. Trocki, *Paths Not Taken: Political Pluralism in Post-War Pluralism* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008), 256.

[238] Margaret Levi, "A State of Trust," in *Trust and Governance*, ed. Valerie Braithwaite and Margaret Levi (New York: Russell Stage Foundation), 88.

Gamson writes on public trust, "When the supply in the reservoir is high, leaders are able to make new commitments on the basis of it and, if successful, increase support even more. When it is low and declining, authorities may find it difficult to meet existing commitments and to govern effectively."[239]

Influencing their Opinions

As Murray Edelman observes, politics is more than what Harold D. Lasswell defines as "who gets what, when, and how," but is fundamentally about the construction of beliefs.[240] Framing and influencing the people's opinions and beliefs about things have become a substantial part of politics. Peter Hall writes that "Power, the control of others is accomplished by controlling, influencing, and sustaining your definition of the situation, since if you can get others to share your reality, you can get them to act in the manner you prescribe."[241]

A significant way of dealing with dissent is influencing the people's needs and wants and their perspectives on dissenters. Political labelling frames the public's perspectives on dissenters' characteristics and acts. Through labelling, certain elements of dissenters are highlighted and imbibed to be true to some audience. Authorities can also frame dissenters' acts in ways that amplifies their severity to raise alarm amongst the citizens and to justify their punitive acts.

Boundary markers are also used by politicians to distinguish themselves and their adversaries. These forms of distinguishment can occur in the form of dress, attachment of character traits, and style. Establishment politicians often seek to

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[239] William A. Gamson, *Power and Disconten*t (Homework, Ill: Dorsey, 1968), 45-6. First cited in Joel D. Aberbach and Jack L. Walker, "Political Trust and Racial Ideology," *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 64, No. 4 (Dec. 1970): 1199-1200.

[240] Murray Edelman, *The Politics of Misinformation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 33.

[241] Peter Hall, "A Symbolic Interactionist Analysis of Politics," *Sociological Inquiry*, 42 (1972), 51. First cited David Green, *Shaping Political Consciousness: The Language of Politics in America from McKinley to Reagan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 15.

affiliate themselves with a "good" label, defined for example by character traits of rationality, acumen, strength, efficiency, such that this positive accentuation will enable their policies to be better advanced and justified.[242]

In a court exchange, for example, MM Lee attacked the character of Chee, who had alleged the government of being corrupt and for initially covering up the NKF wrongdoings, by claiming that "He's a liar, a cheat, and altogether an unscrupulous man." "I could also add that I've had several of my own doctors who are familiar with such conduct," he continued, "tell me that he is near psychopath."[243] Attacking Chee's political tactics, Lee noted that "You may believe that being bankrupt does not mean anything, but then, you are a political juvenile."[244]

A label associates an individual with certain behaviour and values. As opposed to the weak portrayal of the opposition, the incumbent is often associated with being sane, rational, discerning, morally robust and trustworthy. In a statement absolving himself from plotting towards the ouster of former SDP's Secretary-General, Chiam See Tong, Chee claims that he has "been demonised by the PAP and its media for long enough."[245] He argued that the local papers, Straits Times Lianhe Zaobao, and My Paper, carried articles with comments made by Mr Chiam See Tong's wife that "made a host of personal attacks" against him by claiming his involvement in ousting Mr Chiam from the SDP and making other untrue remarks about him.[246]

The negative image of the opposition carried by the mainstream media is compounded by their lack of access to the state owned media in elucidating their part

[242] Green, 4.
[243] Mydans.
[244] Sue-Ann Chia, "Chee a Political Juvenile and Near-Psychopath: MM Lee," *Straits Times*, May 28, 2008.
[245] "Chee Soon Juan: I Have Been Demonised by the PAP and its Media for Long Enough," Jacob69er, March 30, 2010, accessed April 20, 2010, http://jacob69.wordpress.com/2010/03/30/chee-soon-juan-i-have-been-demonised-by-the-pap-and-its-media-for-long-enough/.
[246] Chee Soon Juan, "An Open Letter to All Opposition Supporters," SDP online, March 29, 2010, accessed April 20, 2010, http://yoursdp.org/index.php/news/singapore/3550-an-open-letter-to-all-opposition-supporters.

of the story. Placing a dissenter under negative portrayal has a significant impact in undermining his credibility, speech and actions.

Through imageries and rhetoric on the media, people may acquire and instil stereotypical portrayals of politicians that can influence their attitude towards them.[247] One of the motivating reasons behind Martyn See's documentary film on the opposition figure, Singapore Rebel, was when he noted how "Chee Soon Juan got hammered very badly," as a result of his claims that the establishment provided a massive loan to former Indonesian president Suharto.[248] He said "I wondered, is this guy as bad as the media made him out to be? So I decided to check him out myself.[249]

As David Green notes, "Labelling implies judgment and that stops judgment and that stops analysis. To perpetuate social and intellectual passivity through the constant renewal of labels is to keep public analysis of politics, and public political consciousness itself, at a perpetually superficial level."[250]

While the truth of an opinion has yet to be established, an observation by a figure of authority may hold such significant weight that it is taken to be the actuality. The power of labelling lays in its ability to evoke certain dominant imageries or connotations which lead the people to conveniently pigeon hole others into categories.

There have been other indications of the government's attempts to influence the public's opinions of dissenters such as during the exchange observed in the Catherine Lim case. It is observed that establishment politicians often seek to establish themselves as the dominant voice in the public sphere such that their authority to define issues and public matters will not be wrest away by other sources. In rebutting against Lim's comments on the eclipsing of the promise of a more open government

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[247] Rasha Allam, "Countering the Negative Image of Arab Women in the Arab Media: Toward a "Pan Arab Eye" Media Watch Project," *The Middle East Institute Policy Brief*, No. 15, June 2008: 1.
[248] Sue-Ann Chia, "Film Makers on the Fringe," *The Straits Times*, Sept 7, 2008.
[249] Ibid.
[250] Green, 12.

with the older top-down and authoritarian approach, former PM Goh notes that he will not let his authority be undermined by "writers on the fringes."[251] By noting that those are views of intellectuals at the fringe, it is put across that they are inconsonant with mainstream official culture and thus cannot serve as a voice of authority. Similarly, when the PM's Press Secretary, Chan, countered in a letter to the press that Lim "confuses real life with fiction, and shows poor understanding of what leaders in government have to do," he alludes that writers like Lim "need to make bridges between the ideas in the university and their enactment on the public landscape."[252]

Edelman observes that "Perspectives that challenge the status quo are not accorded the legitimacy that would make them subjects of serious discussion."[253] This could be the case here as the government reinforces the view that Lim remains as a novice in the political arena. In the Singapore society, intellectuals are not given as much credence as political authorities in opinion formation. Moreover, they do not play a significant role in the formulation of public policies.[254] As Chan Heng Chee wrote in 1977, "In Singapore today the views of an independent intellectual receive no favour and if his views are critical of government power his function is not recognised as legitimate. Such an intellectual is vilified on the grounds that his claim to the right of criticism is an alien tradition borne of Western liberal thought; that new states need more power not less, more stability not instability."[255]

Politicians are eager to frame the needs of the people and to establish what is beneficial to them and the society. The Western notion of individual rights,

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[251] Chan Heng Wing, "PM Goh Remains Committed to Consultation and Consensus Politics," *The Straits Times*, Dec 4, 1994.

[252] Frank Proschan, "On Advocacy and Advocates," *Journal of Folklore Research*, Vol. 41, No. 2, May-August 2004: 270.

[253] Murray Edelman, *Political Language: Words that Succeed and Policies that Fail* (New York: Academic Press, 1977), xvii.

[254] Jon S. T. Quah, 117.

[255] Chan Heng Chee, "The Role of Intellectuals in Singapore Politics," in *The Future of Singapore- the Global City,* ed. Wee Teong-Boo (Singapore: University Education Press, 1977), 41.

unencumbered liberality and rightful dissent is thought to be alien to the Asian tradition. In an interview with Fareed Zakaria for the Foreign Affairs magazine, Lee Kuan Yew noted the downsides of a liberal society. He pointed out, "The expansion of the right of the individual to behave or misbehave as he pleases has come at the expense of orderly society. In the East the main object is to have a well-ordered society so that everybody can have maximum enjoyment of his freedoms. This freedom can only exist in an ordered state and not in a natural state of contention and anarchy."[256]

The notion of order and stability is prized to be superior to the granting of individual rights to the people in Singapore society. MM Lee argues that, "The idea of the inviolability of the individual has been turned into dogma," [257] noting that dogmatic intransigence can override pragmatism in ensuring the stability of society.

Acknowledging that political systems have to evolve to accommodate a populace with a greater interest in having their voice heard in policy-making, including dissenting ones, PM Lee Hsien Loong however noted in the recent Asian-European Editors' Forum that the Western model of liberal democracy cannot serve as a hallmark of political system or model for all societies.[258] Noting how political differences have undermined the Thai society where the democratic institutions and culture are not firmly entrenched, he argues that "each Asian country must take its own route and strike its own "point of balance" to evolve its political system and media model."[259] He also emphasizes that the Western model of "rambunctious press" without legal constraints is not well suited for his country. As observed, there is a frequent defence of the Asian mode of governance, its use of repressive laws (ISA,

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[256] Fareed Zakaria, "A Conversation with Lee Kuan Yew," *Foreign Affairs*, March/ April 1994, 111.
[257] Ibid, 112.
[258] Peh Shing Huei "Asian Nations Must Find Own Political, Media Models: PM Lee," *Straits Times*, Oct 7, 2006.
[259] Ibid.

Sedition Act), the tight control of the media, and the limitations of human rights for the sake of societal stability.

Safety Valve

The relieving of tensions through safety valves that release pent-up frustrations is as much part of the stratagem of dealing with resistance as countering dissent. Mikhail Bakhtin describes how the carnival was a "celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order," marking "the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions," during the Middle Ages.[260] Scholars have noted how the carnival operated as a safety valve for the temporary relief of tensions that would enable those who participate to return with renewed obedience.[261] Terry Eagleton notes that carnival "is a licensed affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony, a contained popular blow-off as disturbing and relatively ineffectual as a revolutionary work of art."[262]

In essence, political authorities may have allowed a certain modicum of space for its people to release frustrations that can arise from their everyday domination for a few reasons. Firstly, by allowing sanctioned channels for the public display of acts of transgression, it enables authorities to be mindful of the forms of criticisms and complaints. It enables authorities to make known guidelines and boundaries of state tolerance and punish those who have stepped out of line.[263] Finally, it provides an avenue for dissenters to "let off steam."

While the government is uptight about resistance, over-suppression can lead to a greater backlash. In Singapore, a light touch regulatory approach has been applied to the

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[260] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 10.
[261] Stephen Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture* (London: Routledge, 1990), 66.
[262] Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin or, Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London: New Left Books), 148.
[263] Chris Humphrey, *The Politics of Carnival* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2001), 28.

internet to partially allow room for releasing negative emotions or energy towards the government. The satirical website, TalkingCock.com, has been casually noted by PM Lee in his 2006 National Day Rally speech as a site for political humour, to which he pointed out that "Some of the jokes are not bad. Not all of them."[264] Yet while the government has allowed a venue for the airing of grievances, it has not allowed it to be a totally uncontrolled arena. Highlighting that the cyberspace is an arena of "half-truths and untruths,"[265] the PM has adopted relatively subtler approaches to regulate this "safety valve" as compared to the more totalitarian approach of content control through internet filtering that is practiced in various countries like Cuba. For example, since 2001, political websites have been required to register with the present MDA, previously known as the Singapore Broadcasting Authority (SBA) to attain licenses. Content providers are requested to take responsibility for their views, and in the event that permissible boundaries are crossed, defamation lawsuits are filed by the authorities.

In many ways, the role of blogs and websites like the Mr Brown Show and Talking Cock resemble that of the carnival in medieval Europe. Viewers may enjoy a temporary respite from the rigid and rule-bound society by being entertained by the jokes and parodies on these sites which brings about "a temporary suspension of the entire official system with all its prohibitions and hierarchic barriers."[266] The appeals of these sites lie in their blatant abrogation of political, social, and moral values and a comical and abundant use of vulgar and familiar language. As the editors of Talking Cock website explain, "TalkingCock.com is a satirical feature site for Singaporeans, i.e. we write articles which poke fun at local events and happenings. However, it doesn't mean we write just nonsense (funny though that may be). Satire is always rooted in reality. Which is why

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[264] Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's National Day Rally 2006 Speech, 20 August 2006, accessed April 26, 2010, http://www.pmo.gov.sg/NR/rdonlyres/D389248A-A7D8-4087-9A1E-685B880CE694/0/2006NDR_English.doc
[265] Peh.
[266] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* , 89. First cited Robert Cunliffe, "Charmed Snakes and Little Oedipuses: The Architectonics of Carnival and Drama in Bakhtin, Artaud, and Brecht," in *Bakhtin: Carnival and Other Subjects*, ed. David G. Shepherd (Amsterdam: Rodopi B.V., 1993), 49.

even though we are a humorous site, we try to adhere to professional journalistic principles. This helps us avoid or lessen the impact of defamation suits from people with thin skins. (Believe it or not, they are a lot of them in kiasu Singapore.) Ultimately what we want to do is build a community of Singaporeans with a sense of humour and who enjoy life in all its complexity."[267]

As observed in the podcasts by Mr Brown, government policies, attitudes, and responses are made a travesty of. A strong appeal of these sites is that they leverage on a common understanding of citizens' complaints and submissive attitude. As such, Singaporeans can identify with many of the stereotypical figures which are found within these podcasts.

The Bak Chor Mee episode (see Appendix B for transcript) is a humorous parody of the disagreement that ensued between James Gomez, a member of the Workers Party (WP), and the Elections Department, when he arrived at the department to collect the certificate of his minority candidate form.[268] The department claimed that they had not received the application form. Subsequent revelation of footage from a closed circuit camera revealed that Mr Gomez had placed the form in his briefcase and walked away with it.[269] The issue was subsequently blown out of proportion as the government pursued the matter. For a week, this issue dominated the headlines with one headline screaming with the exchange between the government and Mr Gomez, "PM: come clean. Gomez: I'm sorry."[270] PM Lee later told the media: "Let's put this aside, let's focus on the elections. The big issues

[267] "Talking Cock FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions)," accessed April 27, 2010 http://www.talkingcock.com/html/faq.php?myfaq=yes&id_cat=1&categories=About+TalkingCock.com
[268] "Browncast: The Persistently Non-Political Podcast No. 6," Mr Brown blog, May 1, 2006, accessed April 27, 2010, http://www.mrbrown.com/blog/2006/05/browncast_the_p.html.
[269] Yeoh En-Lai, "Singapore Opposition Politician Arrested for Allegedly Threatening Election Officials," *Associated Press Writer*, May 7, 2006, accessed April 27, 2010, http://www.asiaone.com/specials/ge2006/news/20060507_story7_1.html
[270] "James Gomez and Political Intimidation in Singapore," Torned and Frayed in Manila blog, comment posted on May 10, 2006, accessed April 28, 2010, http://tornandfrayed.typepad.com/tornandfrayed/

for the elections are even bigger than James Gomez. After the election, there will be time and opportunity for a proper public resolution."[271]

While Gomez actions were perceived by authorities to be an attack on the public trust and integrity of the system[272], some citizens saw it as the government harping on a trivial incident.[273] The podcast by Mr Brown parodies the government's response with an uptight hawker, symbolizing the government, insisting on an explanation to the false claims of Jeff Lopez, the customer.

This Bak Chor Mee Man 2 podcast episode (see Appendix C for transcript) parodies the recent price hike in the country and the government's incessant justification of it. In the dialogue, the hawker, which represents the government, justifies his pegging of salaries to the top eight richest bosses around the estate. Noting that he is the monopoly in the area, he reasons that his price is justifiable given that he provides top quality "bak chor mee" unlike the other estates which sells inferior quality noodles. Travestying how the party whip leads the Members of Parliament (MP) to toe the party line in the parliament vote, the podcast shows that even when the staff employed by the boss were willing to speak up (like how the MPs speak up in parliament), they ultimately retreated when they were asked to vote.

Safety valves such as these allow a space for political humor to exist. Humphrey writes that "The idea is that misrule could act as an outlet for the expression of resentment about one's marginalized status, but with the consequence that these frustrations had no lasting effects, due to the temporary nature of the occasion.

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[271] "PM: Never Mind James Gomez, the future should be on our minds," New Paper, May 9, 2006, accessed April 28, 2010, http://sgfreedom.blogspot.com/2006/05/newpaper-pm-never-mind-james-gomez.html.
[272] Ibid.
[273] "James Gomez and Political Intimidation in Singapore."

Misrule is therefore seen as being complicit with authority, in the very act of defying that authority."[274]

Exalting Change

Dealing with dissent involves not only the elimination and containment of dissent but also the means to co-opt them. Dissent often involves the demands for change and there is a likelihood of governments' decisions to co-opt the processes of social change.

In an article which ponders on the advertising strategy of giant commercial brand, Nike, Alicia Rebensdorf looks at how corporations seek to co-opt dissent. "Anarchy is so in," writes Rebensdorf as she ponders on the branding strategies of athletic brand, Nike, that seeks to co-opt criticisms of its unfair labour practices.[275] With its image severely undermined by revelations of its poor factory outlets' conditions and use of child labor, one of Nike's strategies to counter the media offensive is to launch a witty campaign to invert the bad image drawn by criticisms by using slogans such as "The Most Offensive Boots We've Ever Made" to "Not Fair Mr. Technology," and to associate the badness with an absence of any guiding principles in life, an egocentric or conceited image. The central tenet behind the media counter-offensive is to invert social norms and morality. It leverages on the young's inclination towards change and rebelliousness and links its image with that of being cool, anti-status quo, and anti conservative.

Notions of anarchy and change strike a chord with the young who are restless with the prevailing order of things. As such, it has become fashionable for politicians to leverage on the theme of change to appeal to the young. Yet, as Edelman notes, the

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[274] Humphrey, 18.
[275] Alicia Rebensdorf, "US: Nike Capitalizes on the Anti-Capitalists," AlterNet, August 7, 2001, accessed May 9, 2010, http://corpwatch.org/article.php?id=42

notion of "change" is always ambiguous and it can mean more than it actually reflects in reality.[276]

The rhetoric to implement change may indicate the progressiveness of the government to the public and appeal to those who are dissatisfied with the status quo. Prior to the United Kingdom General Election 2010 and amidst the parliamentarians' expenses scandal, for example, then PM Gordon Brown delivered a speech titled *The Power to Change Our Politics for Good Will Be in Your Hands.* He started his speech by noting that "It is time to see an end to the old politics and to change our politics for good." He admitted that "all politicians, of every party and every level, must acknowledge that there has been a fundamental rupture in the bond of trust between those who serve, and those who they are sworn to serve. And I believe that we cannot truly master the other big challenges facing our country-economic recovery, public service reform, climate change, social care-unless the legitimacy of our democracy is fully restored."[277] His speech reflects a campaign promise to bring about change and assurance to the people that the old ways of conducting politics which detriment public trust will no longer be observed under his watch.

Essentially, the promise of change by politicians is an appeal to the public which may be dissatisfied with the status quo and would like to see progressiveness in the conduct of politics. Rather than leaving it to dissenters to define the agenda, establishment authorities have leveraged on the rhetoric of change as well to fill up the political discourse.

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[276] Edelman, *The Politics of Misinformation*, 18.
[277] Gordon Brown, "The Power to Change our Politics for Good Will Be in Your Hands," The Labour Party, April 7, 2010, accessed May 10, 2010, http://www.labourmatters.com/the-labour-party/the-power-to-change-our-politics-for-good-will-be-in-your-hands/

An elected government seeks to remain "relevant" to the people. As such, not all forms of dissent are invaluable to the government as in many ways they serve as a "valuable mode of political communication."[278]

The political attitudes amongst the citizenry have changed as the social demographics of society alter. The views of more liberal minded politicians within the administration, such as those of Raymond Lim Siang Keat, current Minister for Transport and Second Minister for Foreign Affairs, had acknowledged that the roping in of dissenting opinions through public consultation can guard against "a certain "house style" or orthodoxy" that "brings with it a risk, that of obsolescence."[279]

In a circular issued in November 2004 from the Public Service Division and Finance Ministry to all government agencies, it noted that it was "timely and useful" to include public consultation in the Instruction Manual of the civil service, a list of rules and guidelines for the bureaucracy, given its "growing importance."[280] This growing importance stems from pragmatic reasons beyond the quest for public opinions. Significantly, the hope for a more cooperative public serves as a powerful incentive to bring in citizen opinions in public policy-making.

The quest to define the form of changes which the citizens can be engaged in and the form of good dissent encouraged by the state had begun since 1999 when the government introduced the "active citizenship" concept in its Singapore 21 vision.[281] Noting the citizenry's apathy and lack of community participation in Singapore, the

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[278] Anneli Botha, "Political Dissent and Terrorism in Political Africa," Institute for Security Studies, Occasional Paper 90, August 2004, accessed May 11, 2010, http://www.iss.co.za/pubs/papers/90/Paper90.htm.
[279] Raymond Lim, "Feedback Groups and Processes: What's Their Value?" *Straits Times*, January 13, 2004.
[280] Sue-Ann Chia, "Public Views Now a Must for All Policies," *Straits Times*, November 13, 2004.
[281] "Our Singapore Our Best Home," Speech by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong at the Launch of the Singapore 21 Vision on Saturday, April 24, 1999, at Ngee Ann City Civic Plaza, 6pm, accessed May 11, 2010, http://www.singapore21.org.sg/speeches_240499.html

government emphasizes the need for the people to go beyond "coffee shop talk" and to be more involved and active in nation-building. The notion of an active citizen, defined by is one who goes beyond his own selfish concerns and as Peter Dwyer states "give his private time and resources to others on a charitable basis."[282] It does not contradict the values of the state as the state establishes that "Active citizenship must be enlightened by commitment to the values and principles that underpin Singapore society."[283] Some examples of active citizenship are noted by Gillian Koh are "citizen-led advocacy towards government and fellow citizens through past decades in Singapore, from nature and heritage conservation, to wheelchair accessibility of public areas, to online petitions on casinos and compensation on Lehman mini-bonds."[284]

An example of how good dissent was publicized by the government was when the Straits Times ran a report on how "Patient's idea sparks change in hospital." A lady, whom after a minor operation wanted a cup of hot drink without bothering the nurses for a simple task that she could have done alone, suggested to the hospital later to place a hot-and-cold water dispenser in each ward for patients to grab a drink themselves. She was awarded $1000 at the Excellence in Public Suggestions awards ceremony in March 2002.[285]

Exalting change deals with dissent in a more indirect way and a more preemptive way. Instead of nipping the flower bud before it blooms, the government seeks to

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[282] Peter Dwyer, Welfare Rights and Responsibilities: Contesting Social Citizenship (Great Britain: The Polity Press, 2000), 69.

[283] "Active Citizens: Making A Difference To Society," Singapore 21 online, accessed May 11, 2010, http://www.singapore21.org.sg/chapter6.pdf

[284] Dr Gillian Koh, "The Heart and the Politics of Active Citizenship in Singapore," Panel Discussion on Active Citizenry, Moot Parliament Programme, Gifted Education Branch, Ministry of Education, Anglo-Chinese School (Independent) Auditorium, February 13, 2009, accessed May 13, 2010, http://www.spp.nus.edu.sg/ips/docs/pub/GK_Moot%20Parliament_130209.pdf

[285] Alicia Yeo, "Patient's Idea Sparks Change in Hospital," *Straits Times*, March 2, 2002.

destroy the bud of negative dissent even before it blooms. In essence, the government seeks to nurture the kinds of dissent to grow in the ways it wants it to.

Conclusion

This chapter analyses the forms of strategies which the state employs in dealing with resistance. A combination of methods, labelled here as "systemic regulations," "making a case out of selected examples," "influencing the public's opinion," "safety valve," and "exalting change" are used by the government to deal with dissent.

Systemic regulations are the borders or boundaries of legality. These laws set up boundaries of legality, demarcate the things that we are permitted to do, the rights that we are entitled to, and distinguish between legitimate demands on the government and unauthorized dissent. These rules set the standards and norms of behaviour and reinforce the taboo topics of society. Fundamentally, what is significant about these legislations lay not only in its execution but its purpose as statements. They tell us about the rules and norms of society and the legal statutes that we should conform to. These laws enable us to distinguish between "meaningful dissent" and dissent which is not condoned by the state.

To deal with dissent, there should not only be borders but effective border controls. This means that beyond effective surveillance supported by the network of state institutions, there should be overt punishments for transgressors or wrongdoers. Punishment is mete out according to the crime and paraded to the public to make an example of the adverse consequences of illegitimate or unacceptable dissent. For those who transgress these laws, they are labelled by the state as criminals. Their examples serve as deterrent lessons for the public.

Through qualifying dissenters as enemy or labelling them, the government frames our perspective of the dissenters and the credibility of their speech. Values and norms which are guided by the government shape the people's opinions towards advocacy and the interests of society. The state does not extinguish all forms of dissent but through safety valves enable public grievances to be aired and in a sense, they serve as a forewarning mechanism to the government.[286]

Even as the government seeks to ensure the status quo in the distribution of political power, this does not imply that there is a lack of incentives for politicians to carry out reforms. Instead of allowing dissent to haphazardly proliferate and let the opposition frame the agenda, the government can take an active role in encouraging the kinds of dissent it deems beneficial.

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[286] Michael Barker, "The Ford Foundation and the Co-option of Dissent," Swans Commentary, January 25, 2010, accessed May 14, 2010, http://www.swans.com/library/art16/barker41.html

Chapter Five: Conclusion

In this thesis, I have initiated work by looking into the past literature on resistance and analyzing its conceptual development. In the beginning, resistance, for the large part of the 1960s, has been associated primarily with labour based movements as a result of the economically deterministic and class focused view of history and conflicts. New knowledge pioneered by social scientists have contributed a good deal into the changing perceptions of the phenomenon of resistance as theorists sought to veer from Marxism's economic reductionism and determinism to a recovering and reconstitution of the rational human agency in history. Its consciousness and strategy-making ability meant that human agents are also able to take advantage of changes in the political opportunity structure and change their repertoires of contention-the means through which they assert their claims-in accordance to political regimes.

A significant milestone in "conceptual stretching," adopting the terminology of David Collier and Giovanni Sartori,[287] was achieved with the work of James Scott's *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (1985).[288] In contrast to the collective, organized, and overt forms of resistance previously highlighted, Scott gave credence to the hitherto veiled and underemphasized aspects of political action, the covert, petty, informal and individual acts of resistance. Along with resistance studies by Allen and Barbara Isaacman, Benjamin Kerkvliet, and Jeffrey Herbst, these scholars have aided in the proliferation of empirical cases of resistant acts by the subaltern class.[289] Cumulatively, these works have the overall impact of a loosening

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[287] David Collier and James E. Mahon, "Conceptual Stretching" Revisited: Adapting Categories in Comparative Analysis," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 87, No. 4 December 1993: 845-55.
[288] James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak.*
[289] See Allen F. Isaacman and Barbara Isaacman, *The Tradition of Resistance in Mozambique: The Zambesi Valley 1850-1921* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976); Benjamin Kerkvliet, *The Power of Everyday Politics: How Vietnamese Peasants Transformed National Policy* (Ithaca:

the concept to areas beyond its traditional realm of academic usage.[290] The excitement

and flurry over such clandestine forms of resistance have however been tempered by

remarks by Lila Abu-Lughod, a prominent America professor in anthropology and

gender studies, that there is a optimistic tendency amongst scholars to "romanticize

resistance", implying the academic inclination to identify naively all acts of resistance

as either reflecting loopholes within the power structures or the free-spirited and

autonomous human agency, unencumbered by structures of domination. Similar

comments on such optimism of a free, calculating and autonomous agency have also

been made by Timothy Mitchell and Rosalind O' Hanlon within their respective

works, *Everyday Metaphors of Power*, and *Recovering the Subject: Subaltern Studies

and Histories of Resistance in Colonial South Asia*.[291] Abu-Lughod, in particular,

emphasized that resistance should be used as a "diagnostic of power"-using acts of

resistance to identify evidences of the forms of power and its influence. Inverting the

initial part of Foucault's quote, "Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or

rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to

power,"[292] she argued that the existence of resistance similarly displays the workings

of power and by paying attention to this actuality, will directly enhance our

understandings of the study of power.

The scholarly pathway or pursuits illuminated here have thus led this thesis to seek

to identify the modes of power through which different forms of resistance are dealt

with and the logic of a regime's domination.[293] In the second chapter, I have written

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Cornell University Press, 2005); Jeffrey Herbst, "How the Weak Succeed: Tactics, Political Goods, and Institutions in the Struggle over Land in Zimbabwe, *Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, ed. Forrest D. Colburn (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1989), 198-212.

[290] Lila Abu-Lughod, 41-55.

[291] Timothy Mitchell, "Everyday Metaphors of Power," in *Theory and Society* 19, 1990: 545-77; O' Hanlon, 72-115.

[292] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975), 95-6.

[293] Wedeen, 133.

the methodology through which I will attempt to attain this quest. This thesis seeks to rely on primary sources such as government gazettes, archives, speeches and newspapers, such as the official newspaper, Straits Times, and journal articles, from AsiaTimes and Asiaweek, which reports new reports and findings. In addition, I seek to interview a broad cross section of 30 Singaporeans from various gender, age, and occupation for an understanding of their means of expressing discontentment and their issues of grievances and conflict towards the government. Whilst quantitative analysis has been aptly described by Warren Miller, as seeking to find out "How many of them are there?",[294] qualitative methods as expressed by Todd Landman seeks to "identify and understand the attributes, characteristics, and traits of the objects of inquiry"[295] and provide a "thick description"[296] of the phenomenon in question. Scholars like William A. Gamson and Katherine C. Walsh, in their respective works, *Talking Politics* and *Talking About Politics: Informal Groups and Social Identity in American Life*, who had been keen on understanding the content and dynamics of political dialogue amongst the people had relied on research methods such as gathering findings from focus groups, fieldwork or participant observation and open-ended interview questions to analyze the dynamics of political conversations, and informal group discussions.[297]

In essence, the thesis has sought to consolidate information on the forms of resistance in Singapore, using information from the fieldwork data and other sources, and analyzed the modes of power or disciplinary methods or mechanisms mete out to

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[294] Warren Miller, *Theories and Methods in Political Science* (London: Macmillan, 1995), 154.
[295] Todd Landman, *Issues and Methods in Comparative Politics: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2003), 19.
[296] Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3-30.
[297] William A. Gamson, *Talking Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Katherine Walsh *Talking About Politics: Informal Groups and Social Identity in American Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

various resistors. Fundamentally, it seeks answers to questions like: In what ways are resistance classified or recognized by the state? What are the recurring patterns of dealing with resistance? What is the discernible logic of domination behind and nuances amongst repressive methods? What are the implications for cross-comparison of countries dealing with resistance?

The findings of the research reveal that the forms of resistance in Singapore include civil disobedience, direct and undisguised verbal or written publications which allege the government of wrongdoings or impugn its character, art as resistance, policy resistance by establishment figures and the everyday forms of resistance (complaining, being apathetic, casting protest votes, taking flight through migration, and writing in to internet or public forums.)

In dealing with dissent, the state uses a combination of methods including "systemic regulations," "making a case out of selected examples," "influencing the public's opinion," "safety valve," and "exalting change." Systemic regulations are used by the state to demarcate the borders of permissible politics. They distinguish between meaningful and non-meaningful dissent perceived by the state. These are the legal boundaries which state enforces through the police, judiciary, and other law enforcement agencies. Towards active resistance, or the more confrontational forms of resistance, the state "makes a case out of selected examples," and reinforces the boundaries of permissible politics. This can be observed from the 1987 Marxist Uprising, and the Catherine Lim case where the public was reminded that politics and religion should be separated and that politics should be a sphere where politicians debate and provide policy alternatives.

Public trust is significant to the governance in Singapore and where there are attempts by dissenters to undermine public confidence, the government vindicates

itself by filing legal suits, using public rebuttals to discredit the dissenters' speech, or means of sabotaging the dissenters' means of communicating with the public. Potential dissenters are kept in check through the staging of public examples. Through the government's response to the testing of the limits of official discourse by dissenters, out-of-bound (OB) markers are also put in force.

Towards the more passive forms of resistance, the state allows channels of "safety valves" such as the internet to relieve discontentment and grievances. It also spearheads calls in "exalting change" to outline the scope of good dissent. In his speech in June 2005, titled *Collective Wisdom: The Power of Public Consultation*, Dr Vivian Balakrishnan gave an example of how this active citizenship can be manifested by pointing out the collaborative action taken by youths in organizing a festival, SHINE, to celebrate youth talents.[298]

William Hachten once describes that "there is no place for dissent or criticism" in Singapore as human rights are not secured and the course of power movement are largely top-down.[299] Further, Cherian George writes that Singapore is a country where social dissent and "contentious politics" are kept at bay.[300] Given that Singapore can be considered to lie on the extreme end of the spectrum ordering the state's extent of control of dissent, it serves as a good case study in analyzing its ways of dealing with dissent.

These measures are however not unique and comparatively, states leverage on such methods in differing degree or extent. For countries which are weaker in their

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[298] "Collective Wisdom: The Power of Public Consultation," Speech by Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, Ministry for Community Development, Youth and Sports and 2nd Minister for Trade and Industry, accessed May 10, 2010, http://app.mcys.gov.sg/web/corp_speech_story.asp?szMod=corp&szSubMod=speech&qid=1942

[299] William A. Hachten, *The World News Prism: Changing Media, Clashing Ideologies* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1981), 73. First cited Wendy Bokhorst-Heng, "Newspapers in Singapore: A Mass Ceremony in the Imagining of the Nation," *Media, Culture & Society*, Vol. 24 (London: Sage Publications, 2002), 566.

[300] Cherian George, The Internet's Political Impact and the Penetration/ Participation Paradox in Malaysia and Singapore, Working Paper Series No. 14, Singapore: Asia Research Institute, NUS, 12.

infrastructure support for surveillance, such as Vietnam, they may step in with occasional mass arrests and public trials to instil fear in the public minds. The Vietnam government has, for example, launched public campaigns to crackdown on dissidents and held public trials to denounce their actions. In 2007, Nguyen Van Dai, an activist who had organized seminars for democracy, was hauled up by the police to be present in his local people's committee and denounced for his alleged crimes. The public trial was broadcasted on national television, serving as a public lesson to potential dissenters. In authoritarian countries like Syria, the regime may leverage less on costly surveillance and punitive measures and more on symbolic stratagems. Wedeen's book, Ambiguities of Domination, is a finely researched work on the effects of political symbols and rhetoric as a "mechanism of social control."[301]

While different countries rely on different stratagems in dealing with dissent or resistance, this thesis has sought to identify the logic of the state's strategies in this aspect. In essence, the author hopes that the research serves as a platform into further comparative discussion of state's stratagems in dealing with dissent in the field of political science.

(29, 968) words

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[301] Daniel Pipes, Review of Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric and Symbols in Contemporary Syria, by Lisa Wedeen, *Middle East Quarterly*, June 2001.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Age

Occupation

Female/ Male

Main Questions

1. On the whole, have you been satisfied or dissatisfied with the government actions and policies?

2. What are some of the actions or policies which you disagree with?

3. How do you think Singaporeans have reacted when they disagree with certain government actions and policies?

4. How would you react when there is a disagreement with certain government's actions or policies?

5. Do you see your action as a form of resistance?

6. To whom, would you usually discuss political issues with and where do you feel most comfortable doing so?

Appendix B

Hawker: Hello uncle, jiak si mi?

Customer: Errm, you got noodles?

Hawker: Of course got noodles la. I am the bak chor mee stall.

Customer: Ok, very well. One bak chor mee please. Mee pok ta, mai hiam,

Hawker (repeats the order of customer): Mee pok ta, dry ah, dun want chilli ah.

Customer: Yes.

Hawker: Anything else?

Customer: Ah, no thank you.

Hawker: Ok

Hawker: Nah, mee pok ta mai hiam

Customer: Thank you…Err, wait wait hang on…this has te gua in it.

Hawker: Ya la, it's got te gua liver one wat

Customer: But I said I didn't want te gua

Hawker: No, you didn't

Customer: Yes I did

Hawker: No you didn't

Customer: Yes I did

Hawker: No you didn't

Customer: Yes I did

Hawker: No you didn't and I can prove it to you ah

Customer: Okie very well, prove it

Hawker: Ah ok, you come over here…I show you the cctv camera of my stall. Nah, you see, you point to the mee pok then you said dry, then you point to the chilli, then you shake your head. You never say you don't want to have te gua

Customer: Oh okie, how much is this then?

Hawker: Can see a not huh? Can see you never say you don't want to have te gua?…Huh?Huh? Huh?

Customer: It's okie. I really don't want to pursue the matter. How much is my bak chor mee?

Hawker: You agree a not that you never say don't want te gua. Can you tell me why you say you don't want te gua when you didn't, huh?

Customer: Look, can we move along now and let me eat.

Hawker: No, no, no. You explain to me first.

Customer: Explain what?

Hawker: Explain why you say you don't want te gua when you didn't say you don't want te gua.

Customer: What the… okie I am sorry okie.

Hawker: Sorry not enough, you must explain why.

Customer: Explain why what

Hawker: Explain why you tell me you don't want te gua when you didn't say you don't want te gua.

Customer: Okie fine, I am sorry okie. Please accept my sincere apologies if my actions cause distress or confusion to you the bak chor mee man. Look it is only a few pieces of liver, let's move on.

Hawker: Move on? Move on your si lang tao ah! Move on. My shop always here okie, but sorry also must explain.

Customer: Very well, I am so sorry that I confused you alright.

Hawker: Sorry also must explain why…

Appendix C

Customer (Girl): Eh Uncle ah Bak Chor Mee one bowl, kuay tiao soup one bowl.

Hawker: Sit, Sit, Sit.

Hawker: Nah, twelve dollars please. Six dollar one bowl.

Customer (Girl): Huh? Six dollars? How come the price jump so high? It was three dollars last week what!

Customer (Boy): Eh! Just because you are the only hawker in this estate, you just suka suka increase price ah!

Hawker: I never increase price since 1994 ok. My price is already very very below the benchmark.

Customer (Girl): Eh uncle, what benchmark you using? You are already the most expensive hawker in the world!

Hawker: Cannot like this compare. I peg my prices to the eight riches bosses that do business around my estate since I am the only hawker here.

Customer (Boy): Eh! Other place still two dollars leh!

Hawker: We deserve to charge top hawker price ok! We turn this place from nothing into a bak chor mee stall not like those other place.

Customer (Girl): You are able to charge whatever you like just because you are the only hawker in this estate.

Hawker: Eh, actually I don't have to sell bak chor mee one leh! If I go and sell chicken rice I can earn much much more! But because this estate need bak chor mee, I sacrifice for you people.

Customer (Girl): This is bad timing. Everyone has to pay more due to GST already.

Hawker: (Interrupting) There is no good time to raise my price one. Now economy still good, might as well lor.

Customer (Boy): Eh, uncle economy good, not everybody good okie.

Hawker: It's ok! Even though you pay me more for the bak chor mee, I actually will give the extra to charity because I don't really need it.

Customer (Girl): But I thought you are increasing your price because you need it.

Hawker: No, no, no. It's not for me. I am not greedy. It's the principle of the whole thing plus my other workers, I am thinking of them and all the future bak chor mee sellers.

Staff A: Boss, I also think timing is bad leh.

Customer (Boy): Neh, you see even your worker also say that the timing is bad.

Staff B: Yah boss, timing quite bad to raise price leh.

Hawker: Ok, ok. Since even you my stall workers also think I should do this, I will let them vote.

Hawker: Ah tee, ah gao I ask you now, should I raise my price? (in a threatening tone)

Staff A: Er yes! (Affirmative)

Staff B: Er Yes!

Hawker: You see! All my helper vote al vote yes!

Customer (Girl): Why did you guys vote yes? I thought that all of you said that the timing is bad.

Staff A: Err sorry, we have to go back to work.

Staff B: Err ya, ya, ya.

Customer (Boy): Hey, where is my other chopstick? How come only got one?

Hawker: You want two chopsticks must pay chopsticks surcharge ok. Two dollars.

Customer (Girl): You up your price so much, then you charge us for chopsticks.

Hawker: Don't confuse the issue of higher price with charging you extra for chopsticks. Cannot like this link. I don't want you to develop a price mentality with the free mentality with the free chopstick. This linkage is mischievous. I give one chopstick so that you can work hard to get your other chopstick. If I give you two free chopsticks, you will have no incentive to work for it.

Customer (Boy): You are going to raise price any way what!

Hawker: Whether I like it or not, it's better I raise the price at one go. In fact, I were the customer, I will prefer it.

Customer (Boy): Aiya, eh stop trying to justify your price hike ah!

Hawker: You people! Only know how to complain. If you don't pay a lot for your bak chor mee wait you get inferior bak chor mee then you know.

Customer (Girl): Ok la, ok la, you win la!

Hawker: Bak chor mee, other estates are bad one! That's why they can charge less.

Customer (Girl): Eh beng, you want my te gua er not?

Hawker: Wait you eat bad te gua. The cheap bak chor mee you eat already stomach ache.

Customer (Boy): Eh, uncle, got spoon er not?

Hawker: And you eat the cheap bak chor mee and then you die then you know.

Customer (Boy): Eh, can you just let us eat? Frustrated

Hawker: The cure for this is a good dose of bad bak chor mee

Customer (Girl): Let's eat your expensive noodles lah.

Hawker: Wait your mother's sisters all have to become maids.