

Autumn
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Berita

Malaysia/Singapore/Brunei Studies Group Association for Asian Studies

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The Supreme Court Auditorium—site of the Singapore Law Society's extraordinary meeting, 24th September 2012, seeking clarification of the society council's handling of the M Ravi case.



Chair's Address

I am happy to report that at our business meeting at the Association for Asian Studies (AAS) conference in Toronto on 15 March 2012, the Malaysia/Singapore/Brunei Studies Group (MSB) awarded the John A. Lent Prize for Best Paper on Malaysia, Singapore, or Brunei presented at the previous annual meeting to Cheong Soon Gan, a recent graduate of the University of California-Berkeley. His paper, "Propaganda, the Chinese 'Problem,' and the National Imagining of Malaysia, 1957-1969," was selected to be the best of the fourteen fine papers read. I also announced at the meeting that this year, the John A. Lent Committee awarded two honorable mentions to the following papers-- "Accumulating 'Cosmopolitan Capital': PRC Children Studying in Singapore" by Shirlena Huang and Brenda S. Yeoh, and "Development and Limitations of Ethnic Economy: Institutional Analysis of Chinese Banks in Sarawak" by Chen Tsung-Yuan. The prize committee was chaired by Patricia Sloane-White of the University of Delaware, and included Eric C. Thompson of the National University of Singapore and Claudia Derichs of the University of Marburg.

At the business meeting we elected Eric C. Thompson as Vice-Chair and Chair-Elect of the studies group, and Patricia Sloane-White offered to continue her fine work as chair of the John A. Lent Award Committee. She will be joined by this year's winner, Cheong Soon Gan, and Sharon Carstens. We also discussed how to utilize some MSB funds. We decided, after much thought and discussion, to launch a new award—the Ronald Provencher Travel Grant. It is named to honor Ronald Provencher, a distinguished cultural anthropologist of Malaysia and long-time leader of MSB and editor of *Berita*. It carries with it a \$750 award for a graduate student from Malaysia, Singapore, or Brunei traveling to present a paper at the annual AAS meetings. It will be awarded for the first time at the meetings in San Diego, 21-24 March 2013.

Thanks to everyone who contributed to making this year's AAS and MSB meetings a success! Finally, I would like to urge all members to actively participate in discussions, postings, and to share information on our list-serve as well as on our newly established MSB Studies Group on Facebook.

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Editor's Foreword

It is with great pleasure that we at the Malaysia/Singapore/Brunei Studies Group (MSB) present the Autumn 2012 issue of *Berita*. Many thanks to everyone who has contributed to the contents of this newsletter, which is becoming a staple amongst the Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei studies scholarly, policy and advocacy communities.

This issue, reflecting the theme that dominated the panels and papers presented at the Association for Asian Studies Annual Meeting (AAS) at Toronto, is focused on politics and society in Malaysia and Singapore. Bridget Welsh's report on the Hougang by-election in Singapore, which was held in May 2012 after several months of contention, including legal action on the part of an Hougang resident against the Prime Minister of Singapore, provides insight into the changing nature of Singapore's post-election discourse. This report is complemented by Lim Chee Han's piece on the semantics of the statements articulated by politicians during the 2011 general elections. He discusses how the internet and other electronic social media platforms had perpetuated the impact of certain overtones that would not have been possible in the pre-internet era.

Two review articles have also been included in this issue of *Berita*. Coming out of the MSB-sponsored panel at the AAS Meeting (Toronto), Vincent Chua's piece provide an important summary of the current debates pertaining to the developmental state as an analytical framework for understanding politics and society in Malaysia, Singapore and Taiwan, countries that share significant demographic, geo-political and economic characteristics and challenges. Surain Subramaniam's critique of Meredith Weiss' monograph positions the key arguments in that work in light of the undercurrents of student and racial demographics in the second-half of the twentieth century.

On a final note, *Berita* will feature two new sections in future issues of the newsletter. Firstly, we will begin to feature book reviews as a regular part of the newsletter. To that effect, we would like to encourage all scholars with recently published monographs and edited volumes to encourage your publishers to submit a copy of the work to *Berita* to be reviewed. Secondly, we will start to feature the titles and abstracts of current PhD projects undertaken in Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei-related topics. We therefore would like to request for submissions of current PhD and MA project titles and abstracts for the spring 2013 issue of the newsletter. *Berita* is presently circulated in four continents, and the inclusions of book reviews and the abstracts of PhD project would provide valuable affirmation and information on new scholarship on the region in question.

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Members' Updates

Yeow-Tong Chia (Lecturer in History Curriculum Education, Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Sydney) recently published a journal article on Singapore's history education in the journal *Citizenship Teaching and Learning*, as well as a book chapter on 'National Education' in Jason Tan (ed.), *Education in Singapore: Taking Stock, Looking Forward* (Singapore: Pearson, 2012). He is currently collaborating with Vincent Chua (National University of Singapore) and Su-Mei Ooi (Butler University) on an edited book arising from their AAS 2012 panel entitled *Re-Examining the Singapore Developmental State: Historical, Theoretical, and Comparative Perspectives*.

Kikue Hamayotsu (Assistant Professor of Political Science, Faculty Associate at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Northern Illinois University) recently published "Once a Muslim, always a Muslim: the politics of state enforcement of *Syariah* in contemporary Malaysia", *South East Asia Research*, 20(3): 399-421 (<http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/ip/sea>).

Derek Heng was recently appointed as a tenured Associate Professor of Humanities (History) at Yale-NUS College (a new liberal arts college established by Yale and National University of Singapore). He is responsible for facilitating the development of the historical immersion courses in the core course structure of the new curriculum. His forthcoming publications include "Socio-Political Structure, Membership and Mobility in the Pre-Modern Malay Coastal Port-Polity: The Case of Singapore in the Fourteenth Century", in Ulbe

Bosma, Gijs Kessler & Leo Lucassen (eds.), *Migration and Membership Regimes in Global and Historical Perspective* (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2012).

Amarjit Kaur (Professor of Economic History, University of New England in Armidale). Her research centres on Malaysia—international labour migration in Malaysia and Southeast Asia, labour and health, domestic workers, the Indian Diaspora, and governance of migration. She has written six books and edited/co-edited four volumes, and is presently co-editing a volume entitled *Proletarian And Gendered Mass Migrations* (with Dirk Hoerder). Her work has received funding from the Australian Research Council, Wellcome Trust UK, Fulbright Foundation, American Council of Learned Societies, AusAID, and the Toyota and Japan Foundations. She is a Fellow of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia.

Lim Chee Han (Post-Doctoral Fellow, Division of Sociology, Nanyang Technological University). He received his Ph.D. in anthropology from the Australian National University, and was a visiting scholar in medical anthropology to the University of Oxford. He specializes in the cultural studies of the body and medicine, specifically Chinese bodily-techniques like martial arts and qigong, and their relations to political order. His other research interests include religion, science and technology, and media as a state apparatus.

Hussin Mutalib (Associate Professor of Political Science, National University of Singapore) recently published *Singapore Malays: Being Ethnic Minority and Muslim in a Global City-State* (Routledge, 2012). The book was recently launched at the National University of



Singapore, and featured a panel that included Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied (Assistant Professor of Malay Studies, National University of Singapore), Eugene Tan (Nominated Member of Parliament and Assistant Professor, Singapore Management University) and Mukhlis Abu Bakar (Assistant Professor of Asian Languages and Cultures, National Institute of Education).

Eric C. Thompson (Associate Professor and Chair of Graduate Studies, Dept of Sociology, National University of Singapore) was awarded two research grants—"Circular Migration and Rural Gentrification," involving work at

kampung field sites both in Malaysia and Northeast Thailand; and "Urban Aspirations". His recent publications include "The World Beyond the Nation in Southeast Asian Museums," in *Sojourn* 27(1): 54-83 and a forthcoming volume with co-editors Tim Bunnell and D. Parthasarathy, entitled *Cleavage, Connection and Conflict in Rural, Urban and Contemporary Asia* (Springer Publishing), in which two chapters entitled "Urban Cosmopolitan Chauvinism and the Politics of Rural Identity" and "Place, Society and Politics across Rural and Urban Asia" (co-authored) are included.

Prizes

John A. Lent Prize (2012, Toronto)

Prof. John A. Lent founded Berita in 1975, editing it for twenty-six years, and founded the Malaysia/Singapore/Brunei Studies Group in 1976, serving as chair for eight years. He has been a university faculty member since 1960, in Malaysia, the Philippines, China, and various U.S. universities. From 1972-74, Prof. Lent was founding director of Malaysia's first university-level mass communications program at Universiti Sains Malaysia, and has been professor at Temple University since 1974.

Over the years, Prof. Lent has written monographs and many articles on Malaysian mass media, animation, and cartooning. He is the author and editor of seventy-one books and monographs, and hundreds of articles and book chapters. Since 1994, he has chaired the Asian Cinema Society and has been the editor of the journal Asian Cinema. He publishes and edits International Journal of Comic Art, which he started in 1999, and is chair of

Asian Research Center on Animation and Comic Art and Asian-Pacific Association of Comic Art, both of which he established, and are located in China.

The Committee for the John A. Lent Prize for the best paper on Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei presented during the 2011 AAS (Hawaii) has chosen as its winner Cheong Soon Gan, for his paper "Propaganda, the Chinese 'problem' and the national imagining in Malaysia, 1957-1969." Among many excellent submissions, the three committee members all agreed that Soon Gan's paper deserved especial recognition for its innovative and persuasive argument and the high quality of its research and writing.

Cheong Soon Gan's paper approaches nation-building and the forming of a national identity from an unconventional angle. His analysis emanates, as do most studies of nation-building in Malaysia, from situating the country's ethnic composition and the role of government and state in the process of national



identity formation. Yet he applies a different and fresh viewpoint on this history by concentrating on the role of the media and the phenomenon of Radio (and later Television) Malaya within the governing Alliance's propaganda apparatus.

Through the use of previously little-examined archival materials, Soon Gan shows how a medium meant to foster national integration ended up supporting the nation's fragmentation. In his detailed description of the work of Radio Malaya's Field Officers, many of whom were ethnic Chinese, we learn of their "unenviable task of explaining and defending"—in Chinese dialects—to other ethnic Chinese the government's intention to establish Malay as the sole national language. Such compelling examples of real-life experiences in a crucial period of Malaysian history make Soon Gan's paper especially rich. Moreover, his argument builds to a striking conclusion: that once the Chinese Field Officers switched in 1960 to the use of standardized bureaucratic forms for their field reports, no longer supplementing them with detailed on-the-ground reportage, the state lost touch with its ethnic Chinese citizens—a key factor, Soon Gan argues, in the significant setback suffered by the governing coalitions in the 1969 elections.

It gives the John A. Lent Prize Committee particular pleasure to note that Soon Gan's paper addresses the relationship between the technologies and practices of propaganda and the transformations of the Malaysian bureaucratic state, a topic that resonates so fully with John Lent's own research interests.

The Committee awarded two papers the designation of Honorable Mention. These two papers impressed the Committee with their originality and their contribution to knowledge

of timely yet understudied topics. The two papers are:

"Accumulating 'Cosmopolitan Capital': PRC Children Studying in Singapore" by Shirlena Huang and Brenda S.A. Yeoh,

and

"Development and Limitations of Ethnic Economy: Institutional Analysis of Chinese Banks in Sarawak" by Chen Tsung-Yuan.

According to Huang and Yeoh, the situation of PRC children sent with "study mothers" to school in Singapore deserves close examination. Both scholars look carefully at the motivations of PRC parents who choose Singapore for its "East/West cosmopolitanism" and at the PRC children's own perception of study abroad, demonstrating that there are highly diverse social and economic factors at play, both pragmatic and idealistic, which take us far beyond the stereotypes about PRC citizens' mobility.

Chen Tsung-Yuan's study of Chinese banks in Sarawak lays out a compelling argument concerning the historical background and social evolution of Chinese economic life in a region of Malaysia that appears rarely in studies of the banking sector. Tsung-Yuan not only provides an elegant refutation of stereotyped perceptions of "Chinese networks" and the "Chinese ethnic economy"; he also captures, in particularly revealing terms, the effects on Chinese banks of post-1970s economic policy and the changing nature of commerce in Sarawak.

The Malaysia/Singapore/Brunei Studies Group congratulates all four scholars on their award and honorable mention.



Special Report

Breaking from the Past? The 2012 Hougang By-Elections (by Bridget Welsh)

In May 2012, one year after the watershed eleventh general elections, Singapore held its first by-election in nineteen years in the single-member constituency of Hougang. The contest was in the opposition heartland held by the Worker's Party (WP) since 1991. The catalyst was the unprecedented February 15th expulsion of Yaw Shin Leong, the Member of Parliament elected in 2011, on the grounds of moral infidelity. The WP did not feel he was upfront in his alleged extramarital affairs. After waiting over three months to hold the by-election, the ruling party—People's Action Party (PAP)—slated its previous candidate, Desmond Choo, and in return the WP fielded party loyalist and businessman, Png Eng Huat. The WP won handily, picking up 62.1% of the vote, 2.7% less than in 2011. For all its efforts in the campaign, however, the PAP only managed to win an additional one hundred and forty-five votes.

What does this election tell us about Singaporean politics? Are there lessons that shed light on underlying trends? Were there developments that will shape politics in the future? Three months have passed since this by-election, but the resilient debate over the scope of change in Singaporean politics persists. Did this election reflect a break from the past, or was it a continuation of current trends? Evaluating the Hougang by-election suggests that neither side had moved substantially from conditions last year, where a larger number of voters opposed the incumbent party. In fact,

the Hougang by-election was more about continuity than change. It is post-Hougang, however, that has become the test for the leading political parties in Singapore, as they face the hard reality that an unwillingness to respond to the evolution of more competitive politics in Singapore will result in less promising electoral fortunes.

The 'Local' and 'National': 'Special' Hougang

From the onset, Hougang was described as 'special.' And to a certain degree this label is correct. The constituency was among the first to temporarily buck the trend in the heyday of PAP dominance in politics. For four elections they had put WP's leader Low Thia Khian into parliament. In a fifth in 2011 they voted in Low's chosen successor when he moved out to contest in Aljunied. Hougang has paid a price, with less investment in infrastructure, comparatively poorer services, notably transportation, and limited economic development. Consistently, Hougang had been left out of HDB upgrading, which took its toll on the constituency's older residents who did not have lifts on many of the floors.

The WP harnesses this history in its campaign, capitalizing on what it called the 'Hougang spirit.' This constituency is comprised of eighty-three percent Chinese voters, mostly working class, disproportionately older voters. The campaigns adopted the variety of Chinese dialects to carefully appeal to older voters and positioned Hougang voters as national vanguards in standing up to the PAP in the face of personal sacrifice. On many levels the WP relied on Hougang's distinctiveness for its victory.

Yet, on another level, Hougang was illustrative of a national phenomenon in



Singapore – the core opposition support among a share of older Chinese residents who had long opposed PAP rule for a variety of issues, from the adoption of Mandarin to the weakening of the labor movement. The large share of older Chinese from the working class made Hougang more representative of this anti-PAP cohort that has its roots in the first decades of PAP governance, and, while dying off, still forms a share of the core opposition to the incumbent party.

It is this melding of local with national that makes the Hougang by-election important. Like all by-elections, it was also a bell weather of national trends. The PAP attempted to ratchet down expectations and acknowledge this was a ‘safe’ constituency for the WP, as it began its campaigning centering on local conditions. As much as possible, they hoped to minimize the repeat of national grousers that had resonated in 2011. Timing and underlying conditions were not in their favor. The campaign became a sounding board for frustrations – train service, high cost of living, rising housing costs and more. The by-election was also overshadowed by the tragic accident of a Ferrari driven car by Chinese national Ma Chi, whose recklessness had led to the death of a taxi driver and Japanese passenger in the week before the campaign. This emotively brought to the fore concerns with immigration, inequality, and excesses of the elite. In public rallies, as crowds swelled into the multiple thousands, the WP broached these issues directly, bringing national issues into the campaign. The distinction between local and national in a small place like Singapore was always moot.

Repertoires of the Past: Character, Carrots and Criticism

This became even clearer as the campaign evolved, when national leaders began to play more prominent roles in setting the agenda and tone of the campaign. When the campaign started PAP candidate Desmond Choo consciously aimed to differentiate himself from the PAP. He was touted as his own man, an independent voice for residents. This pattern of PAP candidates distancing themselves from their party set in last year in the presidential polls when it became clear that the PAP brand was not as strong as it once was. Choo’s goal was to woo the middle ground; the small number of swing voters who he hoped will secure him a larger share of the vote. At thirty-four, Choo was showcased to appeal to the young, with campaign posters featuring his boyish looks. The other group that was targeted was women, with the local media describing Choo as an ‘auntie killer’. His affability and helpfulness were featured prominently.

Yet, days into the campaign, the momentum of the campaign moved away from Choo’s character to the opponent, Png. Initially he was described as ‘opportunistic’ in his business dealings and later it emerged that he had been in the list of possible contenders for the WP’s Non-Elected Constituency Member of Parliament (NCMP) position as a result of its strong performance in vote share. It was alleged that Png was not the ‘best candidate’ as another person was chosen from within the WP. Png’s response suggesting that he was not on the list was in fact contended to be incorrect after the revelations from internal party documents (forwarded by the informant ‘Secret Squirrel’). This led to a more concerted PAP attack on Png’s integrity, led by senior leaders in the party. This character assassination repeats practices in past campaigns, and arguably backfired this time round. Rather than win the middle ground, the



old style attack mode consolidated support for the WP, with voters more angry with the attack rather than the allegation of misrepresentation of events in the party selection process.

The character assassinations reflected a new age of scandal in Singapore politics. In the last year underage sex, infidelity, abuse of power, sexual favors, and corruption have become part of the political fabric. The first six months of the year were indeed a period of scandal as the underside of power came to the fore. This extended into the Hougang campaign through Yaw Shin Leong, and later in the attack on Png. The aim was to show that the WP was not 'wise' in its choice of candidates for the constituency, to suggest that WP lacked moral integrity. This issue did have traction for Yaw, as the evidence on infidelity was overwhelming. It was, however, not the infidelity that was at issue – as this crosses political divisions. Rather, it was the failure to come clean, apologize and face the public. To parallel Png's candidacy with Yaw's was a miscalculation, especially in a climate when public revelations suggested that all was not kosher within one's own camp.

It was not only character that was the repeated refrain in the campaign. Both sides relied on their traditional campaign messages. The PAP used development carrots – a new market and building upgrades. The tied these financial rewards to a projection of economic success.

The WP used 'first world parliament' and bread-and-butter issues of the cost of housing, health care, rising prices, and displacement through immigration. The only new element was a more concerted focus on the quality of services, notably the MRT delays. This issue, however, had considerable national play and was already old. These messages were predictable, and, in many ways, preaching to

the already converted. The decisive factor for the middle ground proved to be the negative campaigning on the part of the PAP, which failed to win over new supporters.

Post-Hougang PAP Challenges

Much of this story of Hougang is widely known. The campaign replicated established political narratives in Singapore politics. It is in the wake of the Hougang that politics have begun to change, or at least appear to. The impact of Hougang will be the aftereffects, not the contest itself.

Hougang brought home the reality of the difficulties of winning back support for the PAP. With all the resources at their disposal, the gains were minimal. It is thus not a surprise that since the by-election, there has been an open effort at public engagement. The National Rally Day Speech in August attempted to showcase a more future-oriented, caring, party, honing on the theme of 'Hope, Heart and Home.' A National Conversation in which the PAP has begun to discuss openly the path to move the country forward followed. Many see this exercise as political maneuvering, and clearly this would not even be on the cards without the loss of electoral support in the past two years. How much of this will lead to genuine reform remains unknown, particularly the controversial policies involving immigration and the intractable problem of inequality. It is too early to assess.

In this move toward engagement the PAP will grapple with three deep-seated challenges. First of all there is a tension between elitism and representation. The mode of the PAP has been to appoint the "best and brightest" to be above society and insulated in their policy-making. Yet, political pressures in Singapore



are forcing the PAP to become more representative, to connect and understand the changing society they are leading. Since the 1960s the PAP has moved further away from representing their society, and it will be difficult to move out of the mindset of elitism towards a leveling with ordinary people.

Part of this transformation involves regeneration. The PAP cannot move forward without bringing new ideas into its ranks. This happened in 1991, when the PAP brought in leaders from academia and civil society. This helped the PAP recharge. Since then, however, the PAP has practiced mirror selection, choosing candidates based on personal connections and loyalty, those that reflect themselves rather than the society as a whole. Hougang brought the issue of finding new talent and strengthening the fourth generation of leaders to the fore. It is not, however, just about talent. Regeneration involves accepting difference, allowing dissent and appreciating dialogue not just for the process but for its substance.

Even harder for the PAP is the challenge of moving its mindset from the past to the present. The tie to the familiar, the established modes of campaigning, was evident in Hougang. There is a deep nostalgia for the 'good old days' when politicians could go about their work in insulation and expect accolades. Singaporeans have found their voice in politics and are speaking out. While there is pride in where Singapore is, there is also considerable anger. The vitriol in cyberspace has left its imprint, fostering a defensiveness and 'with us or against us' mentality. The elections over the last year have shown that there is a deep distrust of the PAP in a large share of Singaporean society. Addressing this trust deficit with repeated practices of old only hardens positions. Each time the PAP adopts

'old politics' it is harder for the party to convince the electorate it is changing.

Worker's Party's Choices Ahead

The WP too has to adjust to the new post-Hougang reality. With its dominant position in the opposition, it now will face the brunt of PAP political arsenal. The state-linked media reporting during the by-election – so criticized after the polls by the WP's leadership – will be par for the course as the WP has moved into the opposition frontline. The level of scrutiny it will receive on its own affairs – even revealed from inside sources – is only to increase. In this more competitive climate, the WP has three major choices ahead.

The first is to move toward a more openness. Questions have been raised about candidate selection and cadre membership. The WP under Low has adopted a conservative approach, vetting members and carefully preparing speeches, to win over the middle ground. This approach had its roots in the experience the party and its leadership faced under J.B. Jeyaretnam, who was bankrupted. Will this be a viable approach for the future, in the more open context with the prominence of social media?

The WP – as all political leaders are today – will be asked to respond more spontaneously, rather than after discussion and reflection. The element of openness links to the challenge the PAP faces as well, that of maintaining diversity. Cadre parties are inherently exclusive, especially those in the opposition. Openness involves outreach to sections of the population not adequately reached through existing networks.

The second choice involves its messaging. The image that the WP uses is of a co-driver.



It is for the WP the task ahead is not just to draw attention to problems, to slap the driver awake, but to navigate the path ahead. Problem recognition is the easy part of opposition politics, but if the WP is to win more than the frustrated and angry it has to move more into an agenda-setting role in parliament and propose more policy options for problem-solution.

The final issue is one of inter-opposition accommodation. The opposition support in the elections over the last year was not just won by the WP, but a range of parties. There are different approaches within the opposition toward campaigning and issues. The WP will have to decide whether it will be accommodate others, or have a “winner take all” approach replicating the PAP. The successes of the opposition in 2011 – and even in Hougang – were partly a product of the opposition collaborating rather than fighting itself. The scope and nature of inter-opposition accommodation remains very much on the cards ahead.

Hougang’s by-election was historic not for the results or even its campaign. It was historic because it brought to the fore whether the leading political parties in Singapore are willing to move away from the past towards a different political future.

Bridget Welsh is an Associate Professor in Political Science at Singapore Management University where she teaches courses on comparative politics, parties, political participation gender and international relations. She received her doctorate from the Department of Political Science at Columbia University, her MA from Columbia University, language training (FALCON) from Cornell University and BA from Colgate

University. She has edited Reflections: The Mahathir Years (2004); Legacy of Engagement in Southeast Asia (2008); Impressions of the Goh Chok Tong Years in Singapore; Transformations: Abdullah Badawi's Years in Malaysia and Democracy Takeoff: Reflections on the BJ Habibie Period. She has also written numerous articles on a range of issues from democracy in Southeast Asia, Islamic Parties and Democracy to US-Southeast Asia relations and gender. She is the Malaysia Director of the Asia Barometer Survey. She is a contributor to Malaysiakini, the leading news website in Malaysia, and a consultant to Freedom House and the UNDP. She is a member of the International Research Council of the National Endowment for Democracy.



Book Review

Student Activism in Malaysia (by Surain Subramaniam)

Meredith L. Weiss, *Student Activism in Malaysia: Crucible, Mirror, Sideshow* (Ithaca & Singapore: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Cornell University & National University of Singapore Press, 2011) ISBN: hb 9780877277842; pb 9780877277545; 302 pp.

In *Student Activism in Malaysia: Crucible, Mirror, Sideshow* (Cornell/NUS, 2011), State University of New York at Albany political scientist Meredith L. Weiss provides a detailed, well-researched, and theoretically informed study of student activism in Malaysia. In seven chapters, this book traces student activism (defined as students' "collective mobilization vis-à-vis state, economic, societal, and campus power holders", p. 1) from the pre-independence period to the current post 1998 political environment. The author lays out two objectives in her book: "to explore student activism as a distinctive genre of social movements" and "to examine the political impacts and externalities of student activism in Malaysia" (p. 3). Tying student activism to social movements theory, the author juxtaposes the role of student activism with that of civil society organizations and opposition political parties, partly to understand the long arc of student activism in the political development of Malaysia, but also to explain its relative absence among change agents seeking political liberalization in a one-party dominant political system.

The book is organized chronologically, with each chapter delineating a specific time period

and the corresponding role played by student activism in the overall political history of Malaysia. The categorizations of these periods are useful. They provide broad themes around which to characterize the modes of student activism but also the socio-political context critical in shaping this activism. For example, in her discussion of student activism during the pre-independence period, she notes that while debates over "ethnicity, language, the pacing of the political and economic transition, and distribution of power and resources dominated the agenda" (p. 25), there was also a sense of ambivalence among students "over what their specific political role as undergraduates should be – whether it was appropriate for them to be political or partisan, whether they should risk upsetting a quite comfortable status quo, whether they could afford to take time away from their studies, and whether they could legitimately identify with the masses they might claim to represent" (p. 84).

Despite these apparently conflicting motivations on the part of individual students during this pre-independence period, "a collective student identity" was forged among "students from all communities", argues Weiss, which cut across "lines of language and ethnicity" (p. 88). Further along in the narrative, readers are given an opportunity to observe some of the "fault lines" that emerged among undergraduates during the early years of independence (1957 – 1966), "particularly between those seeking a more Malay-oriented campus and society and those preferring otherwise – most apparent in struggles over language" (p. 91). The author notes that during this period, students "not only sought to define and preserve their niche within the polity, but struggled increasingly stridently to defend specific positions on campus as nationalist-era unity and relative homogeneity faded" (p. 91).



Continuing along this arc, as nascent political identities were being forged, the period between 1967 and 1974 is identified by the author as being “the heydays of protest” (pp. 127 – 185). The broad contours of this “post-nationalist” (p. 128) period when student activism “reached its apex in Malaysia” (p. 127) include the growth of “a distinctly Malay nationalism”, and “the first seeds of the soon-massive Islamic revival” (p. 129). The author writes, “student activism in 1967 – 74 was significant not only for its scale and exuberance, but because dynamics on campus so strongly reflected and furthered shifts in Malaysian political alignments, confirming the triumph of communalism over class and the institutionalization of a strong, resolute state” (p. 129).

The next phase of student activism covered in the book is characterized by the “curbing” of “politics and intellectuals”, and runs from 1975 to 1998 (pp. 187 – 227). Here, the author chronicles the steps taken by the state to “normalize” or “depoliticize” the campus climate, beginning with the “newly reinforced” Universities and University Colleges Act (UUCA) of 1975 (p. 188). This period also coincided with the changing demographics on university campuses in favor of Malays, with major implications for Islamist activism.

The period between 1998 and 2010, the penultimate chapter in this work, sets the stage for an examination of the role of student activism in the present political climate. Beginning with the events following the Asian Financial Crisis and the sacking of Anwar Ibrahim, this chapter seeks to situate student activism within the milieu of the politically energized period of *Reformasi* and active civil society organizations, and yet, within the

perimeters of university campuses, the effects of “intellectual containment” had curtailed student activism.

One of the main strengths of the work is the impressive amount of primary and secondary sources that the author has managed to unearth and compile into a coherent account of student activism in Malaysia. In this sense, it accomplishes one of author’s aims, and that is to “resuscitate and illuminate a political and historical narrative little known even to most Malaysians and Singaporeans, a narrative that traces the extent of activism among local students, the state’s actions in cracking down on that engagement, and the ways academe has become entangled in and made a scapegoat for broader political struggles (p. 23).”

So, with the benefit of this historically rich study of student activism in Malaysia, what are the factors that explain its relative absence in Malaysia compared to other cases in the region? The author notes three underlying factors that have influenced student activism in Malaysia: “the deep and intransigent social cleavages dividing students, the relative lack of elite privilege and pride now attached to student status, and the availability of more ‘tame’ channels for participation” (p. 19) have all contributed to the scope and intensity of student activism in Malaysia, when compared to other cases in the region.

In an all around strong and solid work, there is at least one area in which others working on this topic and on democratization in Malaysia more generally would be interested in engaging more directly, and that is with the thesis of “intellectual containment”. It is defined by the author as the project “by which a cautious and defensive postcolonial state suppresses student mobilization both physically and normatively,



simultaneously curbing future protest, erasing a legacy of past protest, and stemming the production of potentially subversive new ideas” (pp. 3 – 4). In other words, Weiss argues that “the dynamics of students’ subjugation” (p. 26) involves a conscious strategy by the state of “disrupting the intellectual legacy and the empowering ideas that are so critical to mobilization in the first place (p. 281).”

This is clearly an intriguing explanation for the comparative lack of student activism in Malaysia, especially with regard to the lack of historical memory among the present cohort of students, and its debilitating effects on agency. And the book provides ample evidence of the many ways in which the repeated institutional barriers put up by the state in its effort to micromanage and control the public university system have led to the lack of agency associated with student activism.

In this review, it would be equally interesting to discuss the limits of this thesis, particularly when it is juxtaposed against the complex dynamics that have shaped the “collective identity” of students in their role as activists vis-à-vis the state. The question that lurks in the background is to what extent have racial/ethnic/religious identities influenced the “collective identity” formation of students in Malaysia? The author concedes that by virtue of its unique demographics, political history, and political/economic development, student bodies in Malaysia also reflect “ethnoreligious and partisan loyalties that inhibit concerted student ideology and action, fostering instead more narrow, potent collective identities” (p. 4). When faced with these daunting challenges to forming a collective identity, it would seem reasonable to also attribute the lack of student activism and the diminished role it has played in the politics of contention (especially against the

state) to these intrinsic differences among the students. As the author recognizes throughout the book, the “same major rifts that divided students divided the broader citizenry, then and since...” (p. 18). Against this background, it could also be argued that the lack of student activism, at least in some measure, has been shaped by the “paternalistic” role played by the state in reiterating to students their equally compelling role as agents of (economic) development, especially in line with the country’s attempts to reach developed status. In this sense, for much of the period throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the period characterized by the author as the “muting of the campus” (p. 26), one could argue that students were politically co-opted by the state through a complex set of institutional and discursive tools, the effects of which have clearly resulted in a circumscribed role for student activism in the political process.

Additionally, the political landscape has and continues to undergo major transformation so that in the current political climate, the state’s ability to politically contain student activism is increasingly tied to perceptions among students of the legitimacy (or diminishing legitimacy) of the government (and some would argue of the entire political system upon which the one-party dominant rule has been perpetuated). In this sense, there appears to be some ambiguity at the root of student political activism, one that has characterized the long history of student activism in Malaya/Malaysia, and that is between the students’ role of being a critic of the state (challenging the state), on the one hand, and of being an agent of nation-building (broadly defined), on the other. Note that the latter, in a sense, could be seen as bridging both the “moral” and the “material”, further problematizing the inclination among students for the former.



There is clearly an implicit tension between the role of universities as potential sites of contention that provide the necessary formative experiences upon which “self-actualized, good citizens” (p. 2) are created, on the one hand, and instruments of post-colonial political, economic, and social development tasked with producing “workers” (p. 2), on the other. The author raises this tension at the beginning of her work, and in many ways, this tension runs through the narrative of student activism in Malaysia. As this narrative weaves its way chronologically through the time periods delineated by the author, this work informs the reader of the many ways in which this implicit tension is *mirrored* in the larger political canvas, at times providing a *crucible* for political action among students, catalyzing and shaping political developments either directly or indirectly. But for the most of Malaysia’s post-independence history, this work offers a painful reminder of the circumscribed nature of student activism. When politically and intellectually contained by the state, the processes through which student social/political actors are formed become attenuated, thereby relegating student activism to a *sideshow* (or *wayang*).

In summary, this is an excellent piece of scholarship, a well-written and much needed addition to the corpus of works that seek to examine the political, economic, and socio-cultural development of Malaysia. This is a book that should to garner a wide-readership, especially among scholars interested and engaged in these areas, and one that will be discussed for years to come.

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Feature Article

Reframing the Singaporean Political Discourse (By Lim Chee Han)

The Singapore general election (GE) of 2011 was historic because almost all seats in parliament were contested and that the People's Action Party (PAP) received the lowest percentage of votes since 1963. It would also be remembered as 'an internet election' that was fought on blogs, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. The loudness of anti-establishment voices in cyberspace during the GE took the PAP by surprise (see George 2011), to the extent that within a matter of weeks from the announcement of the date of the GE, the party scrambled to 'engage' voters through Twitter, blogs and Facebook.

After the GE, the Institute of Policy Studies in Singapore conducted a series of surveys on online politics, one of which shows that even though the internet had a certain 'soft' impact on voters, it had little influence on voting behaviors (Tan, Mahiznan *et al.* 2011). Whether the internet would bring about fundamental changes in governance in Singapore remains to be seen, but the role it played during the 2011 GE demonstrated that the PAP no longer has monopoly over Singaporean political discourse.

Contending Frames

The most significant transformation in the way the PAP 'talks to' the electorate was not in the new channels employed, but in how it framed its relationships to Singaporeans. The strongest evidence came in the form of a public

apology from the Prime Minister, delivered during the campaign period:

"I hope you will understand that when these problems vex you or disturb you or upset your lives, please bear with us, we are trying our best on your behalf. And if we didn't quite get it right, I'm sorry, but we will try and do better the next time... But good as we are, we and the PAP in particular must never become self-satisfied. The PAP – you may wear white, but that does not give you an automatic right to become the government...never forget that we are here to serve the voters, to serve Singaporeans, and not to lord it over people..."

The apology was significant not only because it was unprecedented but because it contains phrases that signal a shift from what George Lakoff calls a 'strict father' frame towards one of 'nurturant parents'. Lakoff argues that human thought processes are largely framed by metaphors. In other words, we habitually 'understand one kind of thing in terms of another' (Lakoff & Johnson 1980: 6). Metaphors are implicit within the words we use, and thus certain words are able to evoke certain frames. For instance, the statement, "how did you *spend* your afternoon?" evokes an economic way of thinking about time. Politics is also thought about in metaphorical manners, primarily in terms of familial relations between politicians and voters. The choices that voters make are thus shaped by the kinship frames that are evoked in their minds by political rhetoric (Lakoff 1996).

The strict father and nurturant parents frame construct the relationships between politicians and voters in different manners. The strict father frame treats the world as a dangerous *competitor* to the family, and only the



experienced, competent, and rational father could *protect* and *lead* his *impulsive* children against it. In order to do so, the father must be strict in disciplining his children, who are expected to obey the father's instructions – because he knows best. The nurturant parents frame, in comparison, contains two *humble* and *emphatic* parents working together to provide for their children's unique *needs* and *aspirations*. In order to achieve that, the parents must be able to *listen* to and *communicate* with the children as *equals*, and not to 'lord it over them'.

Lakoff's theory of 'conceptual metaphor' reveals that the PAP's longevity is not merely a consequence of its ability to provide material goods to Singaporeans, but also to ensure that Singaporeans continue to relate to the party as would children to an infallible father.

The speeches of PAP politicians and political commentaries often contain words that evoke such a relation. Examples include:

"In Singapore, we are *small*, we are *vulnerable*. We've got China, we've got India *breathing down our necks*. If we don't move fast, we'll starve, so we change." – Lee Kuan Yew, 2004

"With a *mediocre* government, other countries may *muddle* through and have to muddle through, but Singapore *will fail*." – Lee Hsien Loong, 2011

"The world outside of Singapore is quite *turbulent* but we in Singapore don't always feel the *shocks* because we're like a *well-engineered* aircraft that is *steered* by *competent* pilots...the question we need to ask is the *quality of leadership*, who's **in charge**, who could help us through these *tough times*." – Josephine Teo, 2011

"But I did not think Chee Soon Juan *was that credible*. So we proceeded *calmly*. Then, Chee Soon Juan *heckled* Mr Goh Chok Tong. He *shot himself* in the foot. In both battles, it paid to *stay cool, focus on* what matters to the people." – Lim Boon Heng, 2011

"If Singaporeans are that *fickle*, they will have to pay a price, the hard way...If Aljunied decides to go that way, well Aljunied has five years to live and *repent*." – Lee Kuan Yew, 2011

The PAP's regulation of traditional media (see George 2005; 2006) has made the internet the default battlefield for contending frames. One of the major talking points in cyberspace during the 2011 GE was the explicit metaphors used by candidates. The result was the creation of a YouTube clip titled 'Singapore Elections – Analogy gone mad – Drivers, Slaps & Mushroom boy'. As implied by the title, two metaphors stole the limelight: the Worker's Party (WP) 'Co-Driver' and the PAP's 'Tall Trees and Wild Mushrooms'. The latter, uttered by Minister Lui Tuck Yew, contains several words that evoke the strict father frame:

"This tiny village is *safe, prosperous, secure*...The village has been surrounded by tall trees, the residents and these trees have developed a special relationship. One day, the villagers...found that there were many *wild* mushrooms that have sprouted *overnight* in the fields... [A] wise old man told them, 'some of these wild mushrooms may *look pretty*, but some of them are *poisonous*, and if you associate too closely with them, these wild mushrooms will *weaken* us, it will *stunt our growth*, it will *retard our development*. Leave them alone, protect the trees, these trees are special



trees. These trees *shelter* us from the heat, *protects* us from the storm....”

In contrast to Lui’s speech, the manifestoes and speeches of other parties all contain references to the nurturant parents frame. The WP’s ‘Co-Driver’ metaphor, for instance, proposes that a bus should have two drivers instead of one, but it was the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) that express most quintessentially, what the nurturant parents frame looks like:

Our vision is to create a Singapore that *takes care* of all her sons and daughters, young and old. Our nation must be one where the people are *free and bold*, with a strong sense of achievement tempered by an equally fierce regard for *compassion* and *justice*. As a nation, we must not only show *tolerance* but also *acceptance* of our fellow citizens regardless of...Discrimination of *our fellow human beings* has been one human frailty that has wreaked much *destruction* and *misery*. – SDP manifesto, 2011

We want good government – a government that *listens*, a government that *cares* for us the people. – Vincent Wijeyasingha, 2011

PAP Nurturant Parent Frame

In a matter of two weeks, during the campaign period, the PAP started churning out statements, uncharacteristic of its usual style, that could easily be mistaken as that from other parties. These include:

“The latest three new candidates unveiled by the People’s Action Party on Monday are *diverse*, come from *humble* backgrounds...candidates have to be committed, capable, *able to*

communicate, and *connect on the ground*’ – Wong Kan Seng, 2011

“...*listen, listen* hard, feed up and help shape policies...But we must not make light of *feelings*.” – George Yeo, 2011

“And it was not just a question of policies, it was not just the minds we were addressing; we had to address the *hearts* too. PM *listened* very hard.” – George Yeo, 2011

“I walked the *ground*. I met residents that support me. I **listened** to them. I met residents that don’t support me. *I listened* to them” – Ong Ye Kung, 2011

Finally, the strongest indicator of a fundamental shift towards the nurturant parents frame can be found in the PAP’s manifesto:

“We need to look over the horizon, anticipate and prepare for problems and build for the future, but we must also *be in touch* with people’s *sentiments* and *worries* and *address* their day-to-day, bread-and-butter concerns.

Never forget we’re *servants* of the people, *not their masters*. Always maintain a sense of *humility* and *service*. *Never lord it* over the people we’re *looking after* and serving. Be as *strict with ourselves as we are with others*, because that is the way for us to win respect and support....”

More than a year after the 2011 GE, it is clear that the internet has not ushered in a ‘Singapore Spring’. What it has achieved, however, was to make the nurturant parent frame a permanent fixture in Singaporean political discourse, as can be seen in the 2012



National Day Rally speech of the Education Minister:

“The national *conversation* that we will have will be as inclusive as possible. We will *engage* Singaporeans from *all walks of life* through multiple channels. We will *seek out the views* of as many people as possible, including those who *normally stay silent...please speak up...*” – Heng Swee Keat, 2012

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Feature Article

Limits of the Developmental State (by Vincent Chua)

Report: MSB-Sponsored Panel (Toronto 2012)

Vincent Chua (National University of Singapore)
 Su-Mei Ooi (Butler University)
 Surain Subramaniam (University of North Carolina, Asheville)
 Yeow Tong Chia (University of Sidney)

Theorizing the developmental state as having risen above the clamour of society (and thus attained considerable autonomy), imbues it with too much power, and thus exaggerates its transformative role. This panel, convened at the Association of Asian Studies Conference in March 2012, is fielded by Vincent Chua (National University of Singapore), Su-Mei Ooi (Butler University), Surain Subramaniam (University of North Carolina, Asheville) and Yeow Tong Chia (University of Sydney), interrogates the power and limits of the developmental state, drawing upon four pieces of original analyses in the East Asian context.

Using the analytical lens of Joel Migdal's (2001) *State in Society*, we began the panel with Yeow Tong Chia, who, in his analysis of education in Singapore, demonstrates the *total transformative power* of the state. Charting the evolution of curriculum change, Chia shows how a technocratic state suppressed the teaching of history in favour of such pragmatic subjects as mathematics and science.

There are limits to the totality of this transformative power, however. The other three papers proceeded to deal with various aspects of state limits, invoking Migdal's (2001) ideas as relevant frames. There are at least three ways in which the transformative power of developmental states may be curtailed:

First, the state is not absolutely free to pursue its elite-constructed agenda, as it must compete with *other social actors* to derive a mutually constituted version of state-society relations. Su-Mei Ooi's work draws attention to the role of transnational agents who played an instrumental role in democratic breakthrough in Taiwan. Her study is noteworthy for the fact that whereas Migdal (2001) focuses his discussion on multiple actors *within* societies, Ooi highlights the potential role of *external/transnational* actors in creating pressures for political change.



Panelists of the MSB-Sponsored Panel at the AAS 2012 (Toronto).
 From left: Surain Subramaniam, Vincent Chua, Yeow Tong Chia & Su-Mei Ooi.



Second, Migdal (2001) advises that we not assume that state and/or society is unitary. Even within the state itself, there exist competing interests, segregated alliances, and fragmented articulations as to what state or society should be. There is no de-facto consensus within either sector, but diversity characterizes them. Consequently, state-society relations are constituted in the intersection of *multiple meeting grounds* where there are alliances and contestations. Analyzing the cases of Singapore and Malaysia, Subramaniam discusses not only the diverse and fragmented contents of state and society, but also the coexistence of multiple interests, and conflicting agendas within society – in this instance, the desire for economic growth (i.e. a culture of developmentalism) and political pluralism. States, especially in the context of affluent societies, are expected not only to deliver on economic growth, but political liberalization *is* increasingly seen as a necessary component in the search for the good life. Successful states must deliver both, or at least a hybridized variant.

Third, Migdal (2001) argues that while people may be acted upon by a transformative state, the presence of the state itself spurs *adaptive strategies* from among the people. One adaptive strategy that Vincent Chua discusses is the rise of personal networking as a response to technocracy. Analyzing networking patterns within Singapore, he argues that pure technocracy (i.e. a sole reliance on human capital to match people to jobs) is a myth. What he finds is that social networks do constitute an important variable in the matching of workers to good jobs, even in the ‘meritocratic’ state technocracy.

Transformative Power

Chia goes beyond the conventional wisdom of seeing education as providing merely a skilled workforce for the economy (Aston et. al, 1999; Gopinathan, 2007), to mapping out cultural and ideological dimensions of the role of education and the developmental state. He does this by exploring the interconnection between changes in history, civics and social studies curricula, and the role of the transformative state in deciding on the value of each subject within the curriculum.

During the first fifteen years of Singapore’s independence, the Singapore government was chiefly concerned with the survival of the newly independent state. Rapid industrialization and the promotion of social cohesion via the principle of multiracialism became one of the primary strategies adopted by the government. The result was accelerated economic growth, which propelled Singapore to the status of one of the Four Little Asian Dragons. The developmental state arose amidst the crisis of national survival, and the government still regards the period between 1965 and 1980 as Singapore’s golden age. This is because the ruling People’s Action Party gained tremendous political mileage and legitimacy, which helped them win all Parliamentary seats in successive general elections until 1980.

However it was not a golden age as far as the teaching of certain subjects was concerned. The industrialization of the economy and the policy of bilingualism led English to become the language of government and business. Mathematics and science subjects were emphasized and taught in the English language. As a consequence, the period witnessed a steady decline in the enrolment of vernacular stream schools vis-à-vis English stream schools. In contrast to mathematics and science, the use of



the mother tongue to teach history and civics meant in practice that these subjects were deemed to be less important despite the constant mention of civic and moral values in the official rhetoric. History in primary school was a victim of the bilingual policy, as it was merged with civics to become *Education For Living*, which was regarded as a subject to teach moral and civic values (Chia, 2010).

While developmental states are borne out of crises, it is crises that imbue states with a transformative power to set the agenda in pivotal institutions such as education. Education had played a key role in the formulation of the Singapore technocracy because it devised a systematic national education system based on mathematics and science. However, this technocracy proceeded to exaggerate the value of mathematics and science, often at the expense of other important subjects such as history.

Other Social Actors

In September 1986, members of Taiwan's growing opposition movement defied decades-old martial law banning organized opposition by declaring the formation of the Democratic People's Party. The ruling Kuomintang leadership responded with unprecedented restraint, marking the beginning of Taiwan's journey toward a multiparty democracy with genuine political competition. As promising as the leadership change in Singapore during the early 1990s held for a similar breakthrough, the political opposition there remained weak and Singapore experienced no such breakthrough. What could explain such divergent outcomes at a time when the seemingly irresistible zeitgeist of democracy was sweeping through Asia and other regions of the world?

Ooi makes the case that the institutional and structural obstacles to genuine political competition in both cases can be meaningfully understood through the "logic" of the developmental state – that it dominates in both the political and economic spheres in order to direct economic development (Önis, 1991). During the early Cold War years, the growth of genuine political competition was impeded by the penetrative capacity of the state and the overdevelopment of coercive state apparatuses (Ooi, 2010). The developmental state allowed for party hegemony, and the fusion of state and party further inhibited the growth of genuine political competition. "Embedded autonomy" also meant the exclusion and repression of social sectors that did not contribute to the growth of the state, along with the co-optation of the middle classes that could have been the broad social bases of political opposition (Evans, 1995). So although the case of Singapore may seem anomalous to the international trends of democratization at the time, the failure of the political opposition to effect democratic breakthrough was, in fact, unsurprising.

Instead, what needs to be better explained is why the political opposition in Taiwan was able to overcome these obstacles to effect democratic breakthrough. Ooi argues that the overwhelming domestic obstacles to democratic breakthrough were overcome with the support of external actors enabled by the particular international normative and geopolitical environments at the time. While the received wisdom tends to favor external state agency in the form of the United States (Chu, 1992), Ooi demonstrates that transnational grassroots actors consisting of human rights activists, Christian churches, overseas diaspora communities, academics, journalists and U.S. legislators were crucial in altering the balance of power between the Kuomintang and the



political opposition. These actors, empowered by an international normative environment that legitimated human rights norms as an international concern, acted to flag political repression to the international community as morally reprehensible human rights violations. In this way, they wielded the power to shape international opinion on the Kuomintang government. Importantly, such external grassroots pressure could translate directly into high political costs for the Kuomintang precisely because of the political nature of its “war” with China by the 1970s. In the face of growing international isolation, the goodwill of the international community was vital for both national and regime survival. The immediate international geopolitical environment surrounding Taiwan therefore constrained the Kuomintang’s menu of choices when dealing with these transnational actors and the political opposition they supported was effectively protected from state repression. The existence and success of these external actors demonstrates the need to extend the notion of the “social embedded-ness” of the developmental state to the international community.

Interestingly, such transnational actors did exist in the case of Singapore, but the “protection regime” they tried to build around the political opposition was significantly constrained by an unfavorable international geopolitical environment. Indeed, with only a diffuse source of external threat to national and regime survival, and a vital ally to the West in the Pacific Cold War, similar external grassroots pressures were unable to translate into high political costs for the People’s Action Party. This allowed the PAP to weaken these transnational actors with impunity in 1987. By contrasting the cases of Taiwan and Singapore, Ooi demonstrates the international structural

conditions that make one strong centralized state better than the other in managing the parameters of its “social embeddedness” in the international community.

Multiple Meeting Grounds

Surain Subramaniam uses a comparative case-study of Singapore and Malaysia to examine the ways in which the political, economic, cultural, and social developments associated with the developmental state in both these countries have paradoxically acted as both barriers to and unintended facilitators of the institutionalization of political liberalization in the direction of gradual liberal democratic change. State-led modernization and economic growth and development in both Singapore and Malaysia (especially since the 1990s) have shaped pluralistic understandings of modernities, political and cultural identities, and democratic aspirations at the societal level in both these countries in complex ways. By problematizing some of the theoretical assumptions of the developmental state, he delineates the parameters of emerging democratic space in Singapore and Malaysia. This new and emerging democratic space transcends conventional understandings of state-society conflict. It captures the dynamic, disaggregated, and yet interrelated nature through which contestation between various political, economic, and social actors, both at the elite and non-elite levels, continues to define the changing shape and trajectories of political developments in Singapore and Malaysia as these societies reconcile economic development in a globalized economy with the normative expectations of liberal democracy.

He identifies some of the main differences between the varying roles played by the developmental state in Singapore and Malaysia,



and offers some assessment in terms of change in the direction of political liberalization. In the case of Singapore, the challenge for the developmental state appears to be one of struggling to maintain a sufficiently strong sense of “situational nationalism” (Johnson, 1982) among a population that is increasingly less enamored by the idea that the “good life” is to be defined almost exclusively in terms of a *culture of development*; it would appear that younger generations of Singaporeans (and even some among the ranks of the older generation) are interested as well in being engaged citizens in the political process, thereby building the foundation for political legitimacy based on political pluralism and liberalization as well as economic performance. In other words, the full manifestation of a stakeholder society in Singapore presumes that the state and society are seen as mutually empowering. Rather than being mutually exclusive, economic development and political pluralism are synergistically linked, invoking the idea of economic development as a common good between the state and society.

In the case of Malaysia, rather than developmental goals trumping ethnic cleavages and the political process, the former is *defined* by the overriding goals of the New Economic Policy (1971) and its successor policies, whereby state-led developmental policies are conceived as much by their ability to yield favorable outcomes for Malays, as they are in achieving general society-wide developmental goals. And yet, political trends appear to be moving in the direction of more political liberalization, precisely because the government’s record of delivering developmental goals has been checkered. Unlike the Singapore case, the “situated nationalism” in Malaysia has always been fragmented by overriding racial and communal interests.

Using Chalmers Johnson’s understanding of the concept of the developmental state, a reasonable argument could be made that the developmental state in Malaysia has always been of a hybridized variant. At this juncture in Malaysia’s political economic-development, legitimacy of the system is being sought more from the anticipated benefits of political liberalization than from the maintenance of the status-quo, thereby gradually moving away from a top-down performance legitimacy model to a bottom-up political process-driven legitimacy model.

Adaptation

Vincent Chua’s paper is an example of how people are not just acted upon by the developmental state, but that, at the subterranean level of everyday life, they rely on personal networks for getting ahead in a society that over-assumes human capital as the only (legitimate) means of social mobility.

The developmental state is a technocratic state that relies on meritocratic procedures to recruit a competent elite. It is, at the same time, a state sustained by myth (Loriaux, 1999), the myth that there is not anything that matters in the social advancement of its people but their natural abilities and sheer diligence (Young, 1958). In the discourse of meritocracy, other factors such as gender, race, age or personal connections are deemed irrelevant for the recruitment of members for the technocratic state. Yet Chua argues that there is much going on at the subterranean level of everyday life where personal networking plays a pivotal role in matching people to jobs within the state sector itself.

Analyzing quantitative data from Singapore, Chua demonstrates the persisting importance of



personal networks in status attainment. Although actively mobilizing job contacts do not help much to increase individuals' earnings, the ties that people *have but do not mobilize* retain great importance. Thus he argues that it is being *embedded* in resource-rich networks, rather than the active mobilization of job connections per se, that boost people upwards in the meritocracy. In the mythical hard-state technocracy where human capital is taken to be the sole determinant of reward, Chua argues for the importance of social networks shaping individuals' life chances in addition to (their) educational achievements.

As Johnson (1982) had noted in his work on the Japanese miracle, the developmental state relies on its education system to select the most competent members for its developmental agenda. The myth of meritocracy and thereby the perceived notion of mobility via *human capital only* is an elite construction that needs a balancing by examining, as well, the role of social networking among the people and how this may have affect their chances of finding (good) work in context of state developmentalism.

In its conventional theorizing, the developmental state is noted to co-opt the private sector (Johnson, 1982), but, it also co-opts a much broader segment of people in the sense of plugging into their social networks and extracting specific and diffused benefits. High achievers run the developmental state. They have not only their human capital to thank, but their social capital as well.

Conclusion

To the extent that developmental states are autonomous, they are potentially transformative. The purpose of our panel was to

draw attention not only to the power of the developmental state, but also to certain parameters of its limits. In the context of its transformative ambitions, such a state, whether it realizes it or not, operates in competition with other social actors. It must deal with a host of other social forces – both local and international, in addition to itself. It must meet both the economic and political expectations of the society it creates, delivering hybridized variants of economic growth and political liberalization. And it must deal with personal networking processes and other adaptation strategies by the people. In all, our panel contextualized the developmental state in the society it is embedded, relying on several of Migdal's conceptual categories in the process to pave the way for further discussions on how the developmental state might have to adapt to socio-political changes.

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The editorial team is presently seeking submissions of articles, research and field reports, book reviews and announcements (including calls for grants, workshop announcements, and calls for papers) for the next issue (scheduled for March 2013).

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