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FIRES AND THE SOCIAL POLITICS OF NATION-BUILDING IN SINGAPORE

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ABSTRACT

By the end of the 1960s, the urban landscape of the newly-independent Singapore state was dominated by high-rise blocks of modern flats clustered in planned public housing estates built by the People's Action Party (PAP) government. A decade earlier, however, the margins of Singapore City were filled with settlements of unauthorised wooden housing called kampongs (villages), home to autonomous communities of low-income families which shunned contact with officialdom and freely sublet, rented, built, and rebuilt their own wooden houses. This paper examines how states of emergency created by fires in such kampongs contributed to the making of a planned, modern nation-state in Singapore. By studying several key kampong blazes, the paper argues that the emergency responses of the British, Labour Front and PAP governments to the threat and outbreak of fires helped transform the balance of state-society relations. The PAP's efforts in the late-1950s to organise volunteer fire-fighting squads in the kampongs represented an important step towards social mobilisation. Conversely, the increasingly well-organised rehousing operations following the fires progressively integrated families en masse into the social fabric of the nation-state. Their swift relocation to emergency public housing meant that the families now could obtain their accommodation only on the terms of the state. At a strategic level, the fire site became a vital springboard for the authorities to effect the clearance of nearby kampongs. Finally, the fires left a lasting historical legacy on the collective memory of modern Singapore: they gave rise both to a persistent association of fires and kampong clearance and consequently an uneasy, ambivalent relationship between the PAP government and the population over which they have established hegemony.

FIRES AND THE SOCIAL POLITICS OF NATION-BUILDING IN SINGAPORE

Present-day Singaporeans, four-fifths of whom reside in modern flats built by the Housing and Development Board (HDB; HDB *AR* 2007: 78) do not generally worry about losing their lives, homes or belongings to an uncontrolled blaze. But while they do not fear fire, many Singaporeans still remember the infernos of the past, and – what is remarkable in a closely-managed state – often do so independently of the government's view of the fires. Admittedly, the official story of the biggest conflagration in Singapore's history, the 1961 Kampong[1] Bukit Ho Swee inferno, which tells of the HDB successfully rehousing the fire victims in emergency flats built on the fire site – akin to a modern public housing estate rising literally from the ashes – is told in school textbooks, exhibition galleries and official publications.[2] But the fire is also remembered by both elderly and younger Singaporeans in distinctly different ways in homes, coffeeshops and online forums. These opposing memories of Bukit Ho Swee are symptomatic of the contested history of kampong fires and clearance in the 1950s and 1960s.

Across space and time, fires have had a profound social and political impact on state-society relations. The outbreak of an inferno, which straddles that grey area between natural cause and deliberate human act, is nonetheless merely a 'trigger' to longer-term pressures which are demographic, social, economic, and environmental in nature (Blaikie et al. 1994). Fires are consequently political events in revealing how successfully the state had managed a deep-seated fire hazard. Conversely, blazes are indicative of a community's autonomy and dynamism, which enable ordinary people to build effective formal and informal social networks against the threat of conflagration (Pelling 2003). The tragic Triangle Fire in New York in 1911, where more than a hundred factory girls perished, galvanised the labour movement's fight for safer working conditions in garment factories (von Drehle 2003). Conversely, the population of 17th century Edo coped with the frequent occurrence of fire by building property and even entire houses which could be easily moved in such an event (Sand 2005).

Urban fires also represent moral opportunities for the authorities to permanently remove what had only been physically destroyed and to create on behalf

of the fire victims the officially-desired society. The burning down of London in 1666 enabled the English monarchy to expand its administrative reach through large-scale, planned redevelopment and housing projects (Bell 1951). The questions of whether and for whom a fire truly constitutes a crisis need to be studied closely. Closer in time and space to Singapore, a series of fires in slums of wooden housing both before and after the great Shek Kip Mei blaze in Hong Kong in 1953 decisively shaped the trajectory of the British colony's public housing programme (Smart 2006). The sheer scale of fiery destruction can also unravel hitherto invisible fault lines in society. Persistent social myths on the causes of fires frequently arise from tensions between different groups in society. There was widespread belief that the 1871 Chicago inferno was started by a cow kicking over a lamp in a barn owned by an Irish family, illustrating the prejudices and stereotypes native-born Americans towards the immigrant class (Bales 2002).

This paper examines the historic role of kampong fires in Singapore City in the making of a planned, modern nation-state. As momentous events which shatter the usual calm of social history, fires are much written about and debated, and also well-remembered. They produce both a substantial body of written literature and a rich pool of oral history reminiscences, which constitute the main sources for this paper. This paper argues that the states of emergency created by major urban fires in the 1950s and 1960s enabled both the colonial and postcolonial governments to progressively integrate the previously autonomous and physically mobile low-income families living in urban kampongs into the social fabric of the imagined nation-state. The paper first discusses how official attempts to clear the kampongs, which were depicted as dangerous 'black areas', aroused both spontaneous and organised resistance from the dwellers. It then examines how the authorities mobilised kampong dwellers and transformed them into loyal citizens of the state, by forming volunteer fire-fighting squads in the kampongs and by rehousing fire victims in emergency public housing. Although the number of fire victims was small in relation to the total number of kampong dwellers rehoused for other reasons, the alienation of the fire site for emergency flats served as a vital platform for the clearance of nearby unauthorised housing. Finally, the paper discusses how the frequent outbreaks of kampong fires have produced powerful rumours of arson which have persisted into the present, creating an uneasy, ambivalent relationship between the new citizens and the ruling government.

'LET THE VEGETABLES GROW ON ROCKS': THE POLITICS OF KAMPONG CLEARANCE

In the 1950s, over fifty urban kampongs stood in a discontinuous belt on the margins of Singapore City outside the Central Area, the colony's administrative and economic heart. The cheap wooden housing in the kampongs were home to a quarter of Singapore's urban population in 1961 (HDB *AR* 1961: 4), largely low-income Chinese nuclear or semi-extended families. Such housing, usually built without official approval, were being erected in large numbers to meet a major spurt in Singapore's population after World War Two. The high rate of population growth of 4.5% between 1947-1957 witnessed a substantial increase in nuclear family life, with men, women and children arriving from China, India and increasingly Malaya after the war to reunite with their spouses or to form new families (Singapore 1955b: 27-29).

The demographic changes resulted in a severe housing shortage in the Central Area, the traditional reception zone for immigrants. Larger families left their shophouse cubicles for bigger wooden housing built on the urban periphery; a 1956 survey revealed that the average size of the households living in wooden dwellings was 4.8 persons, compared to 3.1 for households residing in shophouses (Goh 1956: 63-66). Indeed many migrants were arriving directly in the urban kampongs (van Grunsven 1983b: 35, 95), where families could keep transport costs low by residing close to their workplace in the Central Area or in the eastern and western parts of the City (van Grunsven 1983a: 60). Throughout the 1950s, the urban kampong population grew rapidly, doubling from 127,000 in 1947 to 246,000 in the mid-1950s (Singapore 1956: 13). Long-established settlements experienced intense in-filling as private building contractors illicitly erected wooden houses en masse on previously vacant hills and disused cemeteries and over swamps on the urban fringe.

To the British authorities, the uninhibited movement of low-income families into unauthorised wooden housing was socially undesirable. The Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT), the defacto colonial housing authority, worried that '[h]uts were erected with astonishing rapidity and…it was difficult to get them demolished….The situation changed almost from day to day and was very difficult to control' (SIT 1947: 17). Added to the physical mobility of kampong dwellers was their economic fluidity. Many breadwinners engaged in irregular, part-time or daily-rated employment in the informal service sector, either as 'self-employed' workers,

such as unlicensed hawkers, trishaw riders and 'pirate' taxi-drivers (Singapore 1955a: 21; Brocklehurst 1957: 47), or as casual labour, who were 'paid daily and move at frequent intervals from one job, and one employer, to another' (Singapore 1957, 3). Such work was frequently supplemented by growing vegetables or rearing poultry or a few pigs outside one's wooden dwelling. The combination of irregular employment in the informal economy and semi-rural economic activities, much of which was illegal or socially frowned upon, meant that urban kampong dwellers lived beyond the social discipline imposed by full-time, regular work in the formal economy (Loh 2007: 21).

The British colonial government also deemed urban kampongs to be places of social danger. The 1947 Housing Committee's influential report likened the autonomous building development in postwar Singapore as a 'disease' of 'gigantism', in which a 'chaotic and unwieldy megalopolis has been created…by haphazard and unplanned growth'. This pell mell urbanisation, the Committee warned, was 'detrimental to health and morals' and could only be resolved by 'demolition and re-housing' (Singapore 1947: 11). The Committee's Chairman, C. W. A. Sennett, also viewed the kampongs as 'the nurseries of a C3 nation and schools for training youth for crime'. Someone could visit, he added, 'if he likes to risk his personal safety, such unauthorised kampongs of attap huts as have sprung up in places such as Kampong Silat or Henderson Road'.[3] Crime was perceived, consequently, not merely as the province of the professional criminals but as 'something ordinary and genuinely social' (Chevalier 1973: 77). These official views were reinforced by low-income Chinese's conception of government in starkly negative terms, for whom the 'notion of "law-abidingness" did not amount to more than 'keeping out of trouble and not interfering in matters not one's immediate concern'.[4]

The British colonial regime consequently viewed the growing belt of unauthorised housing on the urban periphery as, in Mary Douglas; a dangerously enlarging margin where official control was weakest (Douglas 2002: 150). The authorities, in seeking to restore this margin, subscribed to what James Scott termed a 'high modernist' philosophy based on a 'self-confidence about scientific and technical progress' (Scott 1998: 4). The solution, it was argued, was to replace the haphazard wooden housing with planned, modern accommodation. The 1947 Housing Committee called for the SIT to be given 'proper zoning powers and powers to plan ahead of development'.[5] In 1955, the colonial government completed a long-range

development plan, called the Master Plan. The Plan aimed to resettle two-thirds of the urban kampong population in permanent housing or planned resettlement areas over twenty years, with the remainder allowed to remain temporarily in 16 controlled kampongs designated as 'tolerated attap areas' (Singapore 1955a: 26-28, 51). The remaining kampongs, such as Tiong Bahru, Bukit Ho Swee, Kampong Soopoo, and parts of the Kallang Basin, were earmarked for complete clearance (Singapore 1955a: 26).

The PAP had its origins as an anti-colonial party which represented the interests of the low-income Chinese population. However, the Lee Kuan Yew group of Fabian socialists which eventually assumed full control of the party possessed high modernist views of housing similar to those held by the British. In an election rally in 1959, the party endorsed modernist concepts of planned neighbourhoods and satellite towns and, significantly, organised kampongs (PAP 1959: 28-31). Once elected to power in 1959, the PAP brought the HDB into existence, thereby replacing the SIT with a statutory housing authority under the government's direct control with full powers to build.[6] The Board's first 5-year building programme aimed to build low-cost housing in planned housing estates ahead of a longer-term plan to redevelop the entire City area (HDB *AR* 1960: 8-10). The HDB single-mindedly implemented the PAP's campaign against unauthorised wooden housing, believing that 'you cannot make an omelette without breaking eggs' (Interview with Tay 6 October 2006).

Throughout the 1950s, an increasingly intense social and political contest developed at the margins of the City over the control of the urban kampongs. In July 1953, the City Council began to demolish newly-erected unauthorised dwellings in the urban area (CC *AR* 1953: 18, 218). The SIT, too, attempted to clear kampong dwellers from its lands to make way for low-cost housing. However, both dishousing and clearance were hampered by the great difficulty of providing alternative accommodation, agricultural land and financial compensation for affected dwellers. Two farming families in Kim Keat, when offered accommodation in Trust flats, demanded, '[H]ow can you expect us to give up our living system by altering the country life to city life?....That is to say let the vegetables grow on rocks'.[7] Poor semi-urban dwellers, who supplemented their employment in the City by growing vegetables or rearing poultry, were hit harder by eviction, since they could not 'move into farming settlements far from their employment nor do they look with favour on the prospect of becoming a tenant of a permanent house' (Singapore 1956, 5).

The attempts to clear the kampongs evoked both spontaneous and organised resistance from the residents, described aptly by a Chinese newspaper as 'a lion's roar from the oppressed people' (*NYSP* 1 May 1954). The SIT found that 'most of the squatters have either political backing or the backing of hooligans or gangsters'.[8] In July 1953, when an SIT demolition team accompanied by two police constables faced off against two families in Geylang Lorong 27 who refused to vacate their wooden houses, the team's very presence aroused 'a hostile crowd of about forty people'.[9] Kampong dwellers were also being organised against clearance by two leftwing rural associations affiliated to the PAP left, the Singapore Farmers' Association (SFA) and the Singapore Wooden House Dwellers' Association (SWHDA), which had a membership of 5,000 each by early 1956 (Lee 1996: 94, 131). They criticised slum clearance under the Master Plan as a typically 'tragic affair', which did not adequately compensate farmers for the loss of their houses, crops and farming equipment (PAP 1956: 4-5, 7). Both associations were deregistered for their alleged roles in the country-wide anti-British riots in October 1956. However, many of their former members joined the Singapore Country People's Association (SCPA) and the Singapore Rural Residents' Association (SRRA), also affiliated to the PAP left (Lee 1996: 137). The associations were deeply involved in the social life of the urban kampongs, organising the young men into crime patrols and helping to repair wooden houses. They also ran sewing classes, kindergartens, and literacy classes (Interviews with Chin 24 November 2006; Chio 7 March 2007), activities which contained a 'strong Chinese Communist flavour'.[10]

MOBILISATION AGAINST FIRE: THE VOLUNTEER FIRE-FIGHTING SQUADS

The PAP's mobilisation of kampong dwellers against eviction represented one way to penetrate into the 'black areas'. Fire opened a second route. The closely-built wooden housing lacking adequate fire-breaks were vulnerable to fire outbreaks; serious conflagrations occurred in two zones of unauthorised wooden housing flanking the Central Area, namely, southwest of the Singapore River and north and east of the Rochor and Kallang rivers. A survey of the Fire Brigade's Annual Reports between 1949 and 1970 reveals the *ordinariness* of the causes of fires in the rhythm of everyday kampong life (SFD 1949-1970). 'Light thrown down', 'rubbish fires' and

the 'sun's rays striking broken glass' could be attributed to the discarding of or failure to remove used or unwanted items in the kampong; 'joss burning' to religious worship and celebrations within the home or nearby; 'sparks from fires and stoves' to household chores and the use of firewood for cooking; and 'fireworks' and 'children playing with matches', to festive celebrations and recreation in the kampong's open spaces.

Kampong blazes arose, to a large extent, from the social and political distance between the state and the kampong dwelling population. Admittedly, the highly-combustible wooden housing and attap roofs and the worsening traffic congestion on the City's trunk roads were important contributing factors (SFD 1951: 1; 1953: 1). But, as fire officer Arthur Lim Beng Lock explained, the colonial fire service had acquired a reputation among the Chinese for fire site pilfering, with its fire engines labelled as *pah chiu chia* ('robbery vehicles'). In the PAP era, moving pumps were closely associated with kampong clearance operations and commonly viewed as being 'on another URA (Urban Renewal Authority) job', in reference to the statutory board established by the PAP government to clear the Central Area. In the event of a fire, kampong dwellers, as Arthur Lim recalled, consequently 'tended to want to pull our hoses and try to get water to protect their own properties' (Interview with Lim 7 January 1994). The Fire Brigade in turn claimed that among kampong dwellers, 'there was practically no one in the least fire-minded' (SFD 1958: 10).

It was the PAP which sought to mobilise urban kampong dwellers against the fire hazard and, crucially, it did so from both within official circles and from the political margins of the anti-colonial movement. The party's aim, as Lee Kuan Yew declared later, was to bridge 'the gap to the Chinese-educated world – a world teeming with vitality, dynamism and revolution' (Lee 1962: 10-11). Following the PAP's victory in the 1957 City Council elections, the institution became a forum for engaging urban kampong dwellers. Ong Eng Guan, a party leader who became the first Mayor of the City, proclaimed a 'new kampong policy', in which '[t]he poorest sections of the people living in places like Chinatown, and those in the kampongs like Geylang or Kampong Silat…shall have first priority in our development programme' (CC *MP* 30 June 1958). He pledged to improve kampong roads, build more standpipes, supply electricity, and establish maternity and infant welfare clinics and mobile clinics in kampongs (CC *MP* 6 Jan 1958). A final and most ambitious measure was fire prevention. The great Kampong Koo Chye fire of April 1958 provided the

catalyst. In the following month, the City Council authorised the Fire Brigade to form and train volunteer fire-fighting squads in 36 urban kampongs to 'deal with outbreaks of fire and hold them in check pending the arrival of the Brigade' (*SFD* 1958: 1). Each squad had a minimum of twenty men and was provided basic fire-fighting equipment. In the following year, the fire-fighting squads helped to extinguish more than fifteen kampong fires (SFD 1961: 11).

Concurrently, the PAP sponsored similar volunteer squads through its rural and old boys' associations in the kampongs. Bukit Ho Swee's fire-fighting squads, according to Tay Ah Chuan, a member of one such team, recruited from the local SRRA branch and the old boys' associations of the two Chinese-medium primary schools in the kampong (Interview with Tay 21 February 2006). The primary aim of the PAP-organised squads, which distinguished them from the Fire Brigade-trained teams, was to prevent acts of arson. Chio Cheng Thun, an SRRA organiser in Lorong Tai Seng, explained, 'When kampong dwellers faced eviction, we organised fire-fighting squads for fear that the landlord would set fire to the houses. If you didn't want to move and if they burned your houses, you naturally had to move out, then they could develop the land' (Interview with Chio 7 March 2007).

The fire-fighting squads were a political success, although they were helpless once a small kampong fire had mushroomed into a raging inferno. In Kampong Tiong Bahru, before the blaze of February 1959 rendered 5,220 people homeless, volunteer squads had contained a fire in three attap houses less than two months earlier (*ST* 16 February 1959). Similarly, two cases of arson in Bukit Ho Swee were reportedly subdued by its residents in 1960, before the gigantic fire of 1961 swept through the kampong (*NYSP* 26 May 1961). Unemployed or casually-employed young men, who would have otherwise spent their free time chatting in coffeeshops or in secret society activities, enthusiastically volunteered their time and effort (Chua 1989: 1008). Tay Yan Woon, a kampong dweller, recalled that 'people said that Bukit Ho Swee was being evicted, and everybody had to guard their houses. There were people keeping watch in shifts in the middle of the night because they were afraid that someone might come along and set fire' (Interview with Tay 28 Sep 2006).

In 1965, the PAP government declared that it would clear all urban kampongs which constituted a fire hazard (HDB *AR* 1965: 23-24). By then, the fire-fighting squads which had been politically expedient in mobilising the wooden house population had become redundant. The squads disappeared when their kampongs

were either destroyed by fire or cleared for development. By 1971, only 13 squads remained of the original 38 formed in 1958.

MOBILISATION AFTER FIRE: THE DEVELOPMENT OF EMERGENCY HOUSING

Besides mobilising kampong dwellers for fire prevention, the rehousing operations in the aftermath of fires were also valuable opportunities for the state to reconstitute the structure of society. The social emergencies created by infernos, which left large numbers of low-income families without their homes and possessions, gave the state a moral authority to act on behalf of the fire victims but to rehouse them in a different type of accommodation and to redevelop the fire site into a planned, modern housing estate. As seemingly non-political events, kampong fires justified the government's efforts to swiftly relocate fire victim families en masse into regulated housing and integrate them into the social fabric of the new state (Clancey 2004: 45). There was, however, a small window of opportunity which required the state to act with political resolve and speed in order to neutralise the ability of fire victims to return to or rebuild wooden housing close to the fire site.

Throughout the 1950s, the British colonial and Labour Front governments struggled to provide permanent housing for victims of kampong fires. In the first great postwar inferno at Kampong Bugis in August 1951, which rendered three thousand people homeless, the SIT was asked to build emergency housing for the fire victims. Such semi-permanent housing, which could last only 40-50 years compared to 60-100 years for permanent housing,[11] could be constructed quickly and cheaply and rented out to low-income families. But the Trust rejected emergency housing as 'uneconomical' and 'not desirable',[12] being likely to incur high maintenance costs and that 'unless strict control is maintained they will degenerate into slums'.[13] The government, stunningly, left the rehousing responsibility to the Singapore Joint Relief Organisation (SJRO), a newly-formed body chaired by a British official but composed of representatives of leading charitable organisations. The SJRO aimed to build 300 3-room houses at Kolam Ayer Lane for the fire victims but had only completed 96 units two years later. In 1954, the Fire Superintendent, when ranking the urban kampongs by fire risk, listed a rebuilt Kampong Bugis at No. 13.[14]

However, the high building costs of the standard housing which it preferred to build forced the Trust to conduct a minor experiment in emergency housing. In 1953, 25 prototype low-cost houses were built at the Upper Aljunied resettlement area.[15] The experiment became useful for the SIT in the two kampong fires which broke out in Geylang that year – at Lorong 3 and Aljunied Road, where 2,835 and over 1,000 people respectively lost their homes. The Trust quickly built 190 2-room emergency units at the Upper Aljunied resettlement area and 136 3-room emergency units at Kolam Ayer Lane.[16] Both fire sites were also gazetted for low-rental public housing, launching the government's first attempts to carry out social transformation on the fire sites themselves. [17] However, the response to the emergency housing was disappointing: of the more than 882 families affected by the two fires, only 415 families eventually accepted the emergency housing and SIT accommodation elsewhere (SIT *AR* 1953: 54). Disappointed, the Trust scaled down its emergency housing policy in 1955 (SIT *AR* 1955: 20). In the Kampong Tiong Bahru fire of September that year, the government simply allowed the 792 fire victims to 'rebuild accommodation themselves within the fire area'.[18]

The Labour Front government, elected in 1955, took a unique step forward in the next inferno at Kampong Koo Chye in April 1958. It declared that it would acquire the fire site, use part of the public donations collected for the two thousand fire victims to build public housing on the fire site and *sell* the houses to them. Chief Minister Lim Yew Hock viewed the fire as providing a valuable opportunity to remake Singapore, warning that '[i]n these congested areas of wooden houses which are a symbol of the old Singapore, which we are striving to replace, fire, although accidentally begun, spreads quickly and destructively, and creates havoc before it can be brought under control' (Lim 6 April 1958). In a landmark decision, the Trust purchased the fire site under the Land Acquisition Ordinance. In March 1959, the Legislative Assembly instructed the SIT to construct 192 2-storey, 3-room terrace houses for the fire victims (*SLAD* 18 March 1959: 2229). But the project was again not a complete success. Of the 329 families, only 196 families applied for the new houses, which they obtained only at the end of 1960.

Lim Yew Hock had adopted a more comprehensive rehousing policy because, simply, the political climate had changed. The replacement of unauthorised wooden dwellings by modern housing had become an important issue in Singapore's progress towards nationhood. The Labour Front government, albeit elected on limited suffrage,

had partial control over the island's domestic affairs, including housing, while the more leftwing PAP was holding sway in the City Council. Within a year of the Koo Chye fire, both parties would contest the general elections in May 1959 in the hope of presiding over a self-governing state. The relief operation for the Koo Chye fire was in fact acutely politicised, leading the Social Welfare Department to ban the political parties, namely, the PAP, Labour Front and Workers' Party, from the relief centre. The Department explained that '[w]e do not want to allow a tragedy to be exploited for political propaganda purposes' (ST 8 April 1958).

The Koo Chye fire also invigorated the emergency housing programme. In 1958, the Planning Coordination Committee, which advised the government on the development of land in Singapore, concluded that 'the possibility of evolving an economic type of semi-permanent housing estates with the advantages of speedy, low-cost construction must not be denied and experiments must continue'.[19] Above all, the emergency housing programme could serve as an interim measure to accommodate low-income families, who would not want to leave their cheap wooden housing, before they could be relocated in permanent housing.[20]

When a second fire in Kampong Tiong Bahru rendered 5,220 persons homeless in February 1959, its proximity to the general elections raised the political stakes involved. The *Sin Chew Jit Poh* emphasised that the relief work for the fire victims constituted the 'first step' in the country's practice of self-government (*SCJP* 14 February 1959). In the City Council, when Ong Eng Guan turned down a motion from the Lee Bah Chee, the Liberal Socialist Councillor for Tiong Bahru, to raise the Council's contribution for the fire victims, Lee demanded that since there had been two serious fires during Ong's tenure as Mayor, he should return to his hometown in Batu Pahat (CC *MP* 3 March 1959: 18)! Worse fire politicking occurred in the Legislative Assembly, a sign that kampong blazes had attained a newfound political importance at the highest level of politics. Lee Kuan Yew accused Lim Yew Hock of seeking publicity during the calamity, referring to Lim's photograph on the front page of the *Straits Times* the day after the fire, showing him at the fire site with his shirt sleeves and trousers rolled up and holding a bucket to douse attap roofs (*ST* 14 February 1959). Lim countered that 'there was a PAP propaganda machine out there saying that the Government was responsible for the fire!' (*SLAD* 3 March 1959: 2059)

Most crucially, the Tiong Bahru fire set the government on a substantially enlarged course of rehousing. S. C. Woolmer, the SIT's Chief Architect, urged that '[t]he fire, tragic though it is for the victims, gives an opportunity to carry out clearance and redevelopment, not only of the fire area itself, but of a substantial portion of the rest of the existing slum', which would 'provide for accommodating more occupants within the area than were there before, with a far higher standard of living'.[21] With most fire victims temporarily rehoused in Kallang Estate, the disaster provided the government with a strategic foothold in Kampong Tiong Bahru to commence its emergency housing project. Lim Yew Hock declared that the government would acquire the fire site and build low-cost houses for them within three months (*SS* 18 February 1959).

The government aimed to build a combination of 2-storey terrace houses and 5- and 9-storey flats, totalling 1,015 flats and shops, at the fire site.[22] The authorities purchased under the Land Acquisition Ordinance 37 acres of land, including 13½ acres of the fire site. Unlike the Koo Chye rehousing scheme, the Tiong Bahru emergency housing was built for rent, because since 'this will, it is hoped, be the first phase of a larger kampong clearance and redevelopment, it would not appear that these properties would be suitable for sale'.[23] The authorities also acquired 16 acres of the disused Tiong Bahru cemetery nearby,[24] on which the SIT planned to erect a further 1,360 units, mainly 1-room flats.[25] The cemetery had as early as October 1956 attracted official interest as a possible site for emergency housing.[26] In fact, in January 1959, the authorities had again recommended it as suitable for multi-storey emergency housing.[27] The Tiong Bahru fire, then, provided the moral justification for the government to acquire the cemetery.

The Tiong Bahru fire site scheme was finally completed in early 1961, nearly two years since the outbreak of the inferno. The HDB, which had replaced the SIT in February 1960, charged economic rents to the fire victims, believing that 'sufficient would appear to have been done for the fire victims in rehousing them over the last 2 years'.[28] In April 1961, however, 452 out of the 1,016 fire victim families decided to remain in Kallang Estate, where the rentals were subsidised, with 397 families living in their own accommodation, presumably in unauthorised wooden housing near the fire site. Only 167 families accepted the Tiong Bahru emergency flats, mostly the larger units. All the 91 3-room terrace houses were taken up by the fire victims, but

only 72 of the 190 2-room flats and a mere five of the 280 1-room flats with communal latrines![29]

BUKIT HO SWEE: THE TURNING POINT

The Bukit Ho Swee fire of May 1961 was the biggest fire in Singapore's history, destroying 2,200 dwellings and rendering 2,833 families totalling 15,694 persons homeless. But it was the emergency rehousing which followed which distinguished it from the kampong blazes of the 1950s. The PAP's response, unlike those of the British and Labour Front governments, was characterised by political resolve and speed. On 30 May, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew promised that '[i]n nine months' time a sufficient number of units will be completed by the Housing and Development Board to house every fire victim family' (*ST* 30 May 1961). In a special Legislative Assembly session convened the following day, the PAP government passed a motion to acquire the fire site for rebuilding and an amendment to the Land Acquisition Ordinance to enable the government to acquire fire sites at one-third the value of the land if it was unencumbered (*SLAD* 31 May 1961: 1565-66). The educated public similarly understood the importance of the rehousing operation in the making of the new state. The *Nanyang Siang Pau* urged that since [t]he observance of law and regulations is the first lesson for the citizens', 'all citizens will cultivate a good civic habit and refrain from building unauthorised houses for their own convenience, thus marring the look of the city and sowing the cause for future fires' (*NYSP* 15 June 1961).

By the time of the Bukit Ho Swee fire, the HDB, unlike the SIT, had also adopted a clear policy towards emergency housing. Although the Board viewed the 2-room flat as its minimum housing standard, it accepted the necessity of building at least 10,000 1-room flats, most of them emergency units, near the Central Area as a short-term measure to house the low-income population. The Board's members recognised that 'political considerations were more pressing and that the Housing Board might have to sacrifice its ideas on what units should be constructed'.[30] In November 1960, the PAP government had instructed the Board to continue the SIT's experiment on 1-room emergency housing.[31] Within a week of the Bukit Ho Swee fire, a preliminary plan to redevelop the fire site had already been prepared,[32] while the HDB made the rebuilding of Bukit Ho Swee its top priority.[33]

In September 1961, the 904 1-room emergency flats at the Tiong Bahru cemetery site, partially-built at the time of the May fire, were completed. More than 700 of the flats were allocated to the Bukit Ho Swee fire victims. The first of the HDB's building phases on the Bukit Ho Swee fire site itself was only completed in November 1962, eighteen months after the fire, with two subsequent phases finished in early 1965. By the end of 1963, of the 2,600 families registered with the HDB for rehousing, 2,166 families had been successfully accommodated. [34] That year, the Board proudly declared that '[t]he appearance of Bukit Ho Swee Fire Site had been completely changed from one of the most congested slums in Singapore into that of a healthy housing estate with modern community services and amenities' (HDB *AR* 1963: 28). The HDB consequently had much to thank the SIT for having commenced construction on the cemetery site after the 1959 fire. The Board partially acknowledged the strategic knock-on effects of fires in removing the urban kampongs:

> Singapore has just experienced two of the worst fires in recent years, one in Kampong Tiong Bahru and the other in Bukit Ho Swee, and it is a rather ironical coincidence that the flats erected at the first fire site were completed just in time to house the victims of the second fire (HDB *AR* 1961: 22).

Bukit Ho Swee Estate was a planned, high modernist housing estate, in which formerly autonomous kampong dwellers were being moulded into disciplined citizens. The development of public housing constituted, Lim Kim San, the first Chairman of the HDB, proclaimed in 1964, 'a minor revolution in the social and living habits of a sizeable portion of the population' (PAP 1964: 228). Residents were reminded, among other things, not to keep livestock in the house, obstruct the common corridors and stairways, illegally sublet the flat, or make unauthorised alterations to the flat (HDB 1973: 5). In addition, its social amenities sought to draw former kampong dwellers firmly within the official orbit. The estate's community centre, completed in 1965, sought to transform the local youth into 'loyal and efficient young people to collectively shoulder the responsibility in nation-building' (NAS 1966a). The movement of hawkers also came under official regulation. In 1966, at the opening of a 2-storey hawker centre in the estate, a government official enthused that hawkers would no longer be a cause of traffic obstruction or a health hazard but could now 'do

their business in sheltered comfort', while the residents could 'enjoy the many varieties of cooked food in clean, sanitary surroundings' (NAS 1966b).

Crucially, the Bukit Ho Swee flats served as a springboard for the government's kampong clearance operations and, subsequently, its urban renewal programme to clear the shophouse dwellings in the Central Area. Out of such a social transformation of the urban margins, followed by the urban core, the HDB envisaged that 'a planned new city will be built'.[35] The key to urban renewal was to first resettle the families from the Central Area in flats built on the urban periphery. As Teh Cheang Wan, the HDB's Chief Architect, later remarked, the Board's 'building programme would have run into difficulties if not for the God-sent opportunity of the Bukit Ho Swee fire in 1961 where a site was made available for 10,000 units of flats'.[36] Consequently, two-thirds of the people who eventually moved into Bukit Ho Swee Estate were not victims of the 1961 fire. In September 1962, a number of 2- and 3-room flats in the estate were reserved for kampong families affected by the clearance of nearby Redhill for industrial and housing development.[37] From July the following year, another cluster of flats were allocated, in order of priority, to evicted families from the clearance areas; victims of the Bukit Ho Swee and Bukit Ban Kee fires and; finally, applicants on the housing register.[38] In the 1963 Bukit Ban Kee blaze, the HDB temporarily rehoused 206 of the 230 fire victim families in Bukit Ho Swee. In October 1964, the Board opened more vacant flats in the estate to applicants evicted from nearby South Precinct 1 due to the urban renewal programme.[39] By 1970, there were more than 12,000 flats in the estate housing 45,066 persons, an increase of 25,000 over the number residing in the kampong in 1957 (Arumainathan 1973: 238).

The emergency flats, as an expedient rehousing measure, had accomplished what they were meant to do: shatter the vicious cycle of proliferating unauthorised wooden housing, the migration of low-income Chinese families into the urban periphery and the outbreak of kampong infernos. They were also deeply unpopular with even low-income families. Numerous fire victim families allocated 1-room emergency flats in Bukit Ho Swee soon asked for transfers to bigger flats.[40] The HDB quickly realised that 'the general opinion of the public is that there is no marked improvement from moving out of a one-room cubicle in the slum area to a one-room Housing Board unit other than cleanliness'.[41] In 1966, the government decided to build less 1-room emergency units and to restrict them to areas further away from the Central Area.[42] By this time, modern HDB estates had steadily replaced the kampongs

in Singapore City. By 1965, the Board had built 54,430 units of housing, compared to only about 500 wooden dwellings being built yearly (Singapore 1965: 33-34). In the new urban periphery within a five-mile radius of the Central Area stood more than 50,000 units of public housing, accommodating 430,000 people or 23% of the population (Teh 1961: 7-9). The social and political margin which the British colonial regime had sought to erase had been restored by the PAP government in the form of high modernist public housing. The result was a marked reduction in the autonomy of families which hitherto had the freedom to move houses and sublet, rent, build or rebuild their accommodation on their own terms.

UNDYING RUMOURS

In the final consideration, however, the success of the PAP's fire emergency rehousing came at a social and political price. What happened in the aftermath of kampong fires left a lasting imprint on the social memory of Singapore up to the present. As development projects increasingly encroached onto areas of unauthorised wooden housing in the 1950s, kampong dwellers commonly considered fire as an act of arson committed by hostile landlords, the government, hired secret society hands, or simply a spiteful neighbour. 'It was always like that', they ventured years later, 'There was eviction and people did not want to move. After a while, fire broke out' (Interview with Chong 13 February 2007). One kampong dweller claimed to have 'seen a piece of cloth tied up with a metal wire and thrown onto the attap' (Interview with Goh 24 May 2007), while another 'knew a friend who belonged to this type of gang, they would set fire to attap houses because when the landowner bought over the land, there were people who refused to be evicted, so they played dirty tricks' (Interview with Ang 30 June 2007). In the logic of arson, fire was always accompanied by suspicious circumstances: the scale of destruction, in marked contrast to the minimum loss of lives, appeared to establish the existence of a well-crafted plan, that 'whenever there was resettlement, there was arson and no one got hurt' (Interview with Chin 21 November 2006).

The enormity of the 1961 Bukit Ho Swee fire and the speed of the emergency rehousing intensified such beliefs. The inferno was reported to have started at a wooden house, No. 174-A, in Kampong Tiong Bahru. The *Nanyang Siang Pau* carried interviews with fire victims claiming to be residents in the vicinity who recounted how 'the fire was caused not by Heaven but by scoundrels more evil than

wild beasts' (28 May 1961). A middle-aged man apparently saw two men throwing burning torches onto the roof of 174-A before fleeing (ibid.), while an elderly man, relating how his neighbour had also witnessed the same thing, lamented that 'some heartless person(s) started the fire!' (*NYSP* 26 May 1961). In June, the *Nanyang Siang Pau* reported that the police had questioned more than ten self-proclaimed witnesses of the alleged act of arson, which, the newspaper remarked, was sufficient reason to establish the case for arson, but only that concrete evidence was lacking (10 June 1961). Subsequent reports of arson at Kampong Henderson in late May and early June fanned the flames, leading the *Sin Chew Jit Poh* to conclude that 'there is every possibility that the recent biggest fire was [also] caused by some wicked elements' (14 June 1961). On 9 June, the police detained a suspect but released him due to a lack of evidence (*NYSP* 28 May 1961). A fortnight later, two attempts of arson were reported on wooden housing at Carey Road which had survived the Bukit Ho Swee fire (*ST* 14 July 1961).

The PAP government tried to suppress the rumours as baseless and contradictory and attributing them to malicious 'outsiders', 'opportunists' and 'agitators' (NAS 1961). But such responses were not completely successful, indicative of how 'there was nothing more powerful…than those exchanges of words between neighbours' (Farge 1993: 13). The rumours possessed an inner logic which could not readily be disproved and which linked the local circumstances both before and after the fire into part of a powerful web of conspiracy, a theory supported seemingly by evidence and history. The rumours also reinforced the psychology of calamity among the fire victims, explaining how families were rendered homeless in an instant. In the absence of a convincing official report on the cause of the Bukit Ho Swee inferno, the rumours were entirely consistent with the world-view and everyday experience of former kampong dwellers. From the standpoint of urban social history, the rumours, regardless of their validity, are important social facts.

In the view of many fire victims, the first possible indication of arson was that the Bukit Ho Swee fire occurred on a public holiday. This meant that the kampong children were not at school, but the men were fortunately at home to take care of their families and consequently only four lives were lost (Interview with Mok 8 January 2007). Moreover, the fire managed to jump two roads and was burning in different places at the same time. It was not possible, some people reasoned, that even with the strong wind, for the flames rolling down the hill to leapfrog a 3-storey shophouse,

leave it untouched and then cross the main road. Such a 'curious' path of destruction suggested that a plane, visible in the air that day, had separately set various areas ablaze (Interviews with Soh 10 September 2007; Low 25 April 2007). The government's culpability, it was argued, was also established by its execution of a coherent plan of rebuilding and rehousing: how the fire site was quickly redeveloped, while the fire victims were promptly rehoused in the completed flats at the Tiong Bahru fire site and the partially-completed flats at the cemetery site (Interviews with Wee 27 April 2007; Lee 31 December 2006; Ong Bin 26 June 2007).

In March 1963, when two thousand people were rendered homeless by a massive fire at Bukit Ban Kee, most of them were swiftly rehoused in the emergency flats of nearby Bukit Ho Swee. What was perceived to have happened in 1961 had by then become part of Singapore's collective memory. A fire victim observed that 'it was just like the Bukit Ho Swee fire. There were many rumours but there was no evidence' (Interview with Lim Kok Peng 16 May 2005). The opposition party in the Legislative Assembly, the Barisan Sosialis, declared that '[w]henever a fire breaks out in any part of Singapore, the Minister will go there and grab the land for building houses' (*SLAD* 10 December 1963: 251). A subsequent fire at Pulau Minyak in November 1964 destroyed the homes of 1,657 people, who were allocated HDB flats 'barely 26 hours after the fire had broken out' (Social Welfare Department 1964, 35). The Barisan charged that the fire was 'arranged by the PAP' (*SLAD* 17 November 1964: 639).

Such rumours of arson have left an indelible imprint on the relationship between the government and the population over whom they have ruled since 1959. On the surface, the PAP's political control is nothing short of hegemonic. The party has never lost more than four parliamentary seats in an election or seen its popular vote fall under 61% since 1963. In providing near-universal public housing to the electorate, the PAP has established a powerful ideological hegemony over the people (Chua 1997: 132). This political dominance, however, has not created an 'affective' relationship between the PAP and the citizenry (Lim 1994). On the contrary, the relationship has been based on a pragmatic exchange of goods – votes for the government and material rewards, including the ability to own a modern flat, for the people. In addition, particularly to the government's management of spaces and places in contemporary Singapore, there has been a mixture of 'collusion, conflict, and collision' in the citizenry's responses, albeit verbal and unorganised (Kong & Yeoh

2003, 11). There is also widespread nostalgia for the 'good kampong days' among the elderly people, which, really, is 'an intrinsic critique of the present by the ordinary people' – of the more regulated and stressful living in present-day Singapore – and which belies a desire for 'recovering control over daily life within the present zone of material comfort' (Chua 1997: 162, 166). In short, what Singaporeans want for themselves and what they want from the government is deeply conflicting.

When Lim Kim San passed away in July 2006, the occasion precipitated critical emotional responses on Internet discussion forums, particularly from elderly Singaporeans who remember the days when Lim presided over the kampong clearance campaign. The perceived anonymity provided by the Internet made it possible for Singaporeans to candidly comment on a sensitive political topic, which would not have materialised in a public forum (Rodan 1998: 75). In the popular *Sammyboy.com's Alfresco Coffee Shop*, a hotbed of anti-PAP discussions, the historical association between fires and kampong clearance was vividly recalled. A poster named e_visionary asked rhetorically, 'How many kampong was burned due to a man?', to which ÎÚÅ replied, 'Yes, I heard stories about "government people" "purplely" [purposely] burn down kampong to make way for new flats when all negotiations failed' (SB 2006).

It is not merely the elderly people who are interested in Kampong Bukit Ho Swee and the great 1961 fire which destroyed it. A general revival of interest in the country's history has led Singaporeans one or two generations younger to ask critical questions about the untold past. In 2006, the year of Lim Kim San's death, the pilot episode of a Malay-language documentary series boldly posed the question, 'What caused the fire?' The programme featured interviews of a former kampong dweller, a fire-fighter, a fire officer, a senior civil servant, a sociologist, and a history researcher (myself), none of whom supported the arson theory. While this refusal to publicly affirm the rumours highlights the sensitivity of the topic despite the intervening years, it is indicative of the mindset of younger Singaporeans that questions such as these, which impinge directly on the birth of socially-disciplined, modern Singapore, are being asked. The episode concluded, in postmodernist fashion, 'There are various versions to history. It is all up to you to make your own conclusions' (Oak3 films 2006).

CONCLUSION

Modern Singapore was born out of fire, and consequently the kampong infernos hold an ambivalent place in contemporary society. As historical events, the fires belong to the past but they remain in the present as personal and social memory. The conflagrations and the emergency public housing which followed in their wake helped to create the disciplined, modern nation-state of today, yet they are also an integral part of present-day critiques of both the PAP government and the high modernist philosophy of development which it has robustly implemented. The uncertainty with which the citizenry regard the government and the forms and consequences of the high modernity is indicative of the scale and pace of the social and economic transformation, directed from above, which took place at the birth of modern Singapore.

NOTES

[1] 'Village' in Malay.

[2] See Curriculum Planning & Development Division, Ministry of Education, *Singapore: From Settlement to Nation, Pre-1819 to 1971* (Singapore: EPB Pan Pacific, 2007), p. 207; the Singapore History Gallery at the National Museum of Singapore at Stamford Road; the Civil Defence Heritage Gallery at Hill Street; and the HDB Gallery at Toa Payoh.

[3] SIT 475/47, Notes for Discussion on Housing by Commissioner of Lands, 13 Jun 1947. 'C3' was a rating in the British classification of medical fitness for military service during World War One and referred to someone unfit for combat duty. The term was subsequently extended to populations and nations.

[4] A4231/1949/Singapore, Despatch from Australian Commissioner for Malaya to Secretary, Department of External Affairs, 16 Mar 1949.

[5] SIT 475/47, Notes for Discussion on Housing by Commissioner of Lands, 13 Jun 1947.

[6] PRO CO 1030/1597, Memo titled 'Public Housing in Singapore' by the UK Commission, 16 Apr 1963.

[7] SIT 183/52, Letter from Aung Peang & Teo Ah Beh to Lands Manager, SIT, 8 Oct 1954.

[8] HB 364/58, Memo from Lands Inspector to Acting Lands Officer, 28 May 1958.

[9] HB 659/53, Report on the Demolition of Three Timber and Attap Houses on Singapore Improvement Trust Land at Lorong 27, Geylang, on 17 Jul 1953 by Acting Lands Manager, 22 Jul 1953.

[10] RG 59, 746F.00/9-1561, Despatch from US Consul General to Department of State titled, 'Left-Wingers in Rural Areas Desert the PAP', 15 Sep 1961.

[11] HB 477/53, Supplementary report to report titled 'Housing' by the Planning Coordination Committee, undated.

[12] SIT 952/50, Notes of Meeting of Chairman, SIT, Commissioner of Lands, Manager, SIT, and George Pepler on 9 Jan 1951.

[13] SIT 617/54, Memo titled 'Housing Programmes and Policy' by Chief Architect, SIT, and Planning Adviser, SIT, 5 Jul 1954.

[14] SIT 808/50, Memo from Superintendent, SFB, to Manager, SIT, 27 Oct 1954.

[15] SIT 808/2/50, Memo from 2nd Assistant Secretary, SIT, to Secretary, SIT, 25 Jul 1953; and Minutes of Trust Meeting, 17 Jun 1953.

[16] SIT 638/53, Memo from Architect, SIT, to Chief Architect, SIT, 1 Apr 1957.

[17] HB 477/53, Revised Building Programme No. 7, 15 Feb 1954.

[18] SIT 813/55, Letter from Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Local Government, Lands and Housing, to Chairman, Kampong Tiong Bahru Fire Relief Fund Committee, 3 Nov 1955.

[19] HB 477/53, Report titled 'Housing' by the Planning Coordination Committee, undated.

[20] HB 477/53, Supplementary report to report titled 'Housing' by the Planning Coordination Committee, undated.

[21] HB 25/59 Vol. I, Memo titled 'Tiong Bahru Fire' by the Acting Manager, SIT, 16 Feb 1959.

[22] HB 25/59 Vol. I, Minutes of Trust Meeting, 10 Mar 1959.

[23] HB 25/59 Vol. I, Memo from Acting Manager, SIT, to Chairman, SIT, 24 Mar 1959.

[24] HB 1045/53, Memo from Lands Manager, HDB, 10 Aug 1960.

[25] HB 1001/52 Vol. III, Memo from Acting Manager, SIT, to Deputy Secretary, SIT, 6 Apr 1959.

[26] SIT 842/2/52, Memo from Senior Planner, Planning Division, SIT, to Chief Planner, Planning Control, SIT, 5 Oct 1956.

[27] HB 16/59, Notes of a Meeting of Officers to Consider Housing Policy, 16 January 1959.

[28] HB 25/16/59, Memo from CEO, HDB, to Permanent Secretary, MND, 30 Dec 1960.

[29] HB 25/59 Vol. II, Memo from CEO, HDB, to Permanent Secretary, MND, 19 Apr 1961.

[30] HB 871/57, Memo from CEO, HDB, to Members of the Board, 10 Oct 1960.

[31] HB 16/59 Vol. I, Memo from CEO, HDB, to Chief Architect, HDB, 28 Nov 1960; Memo from Permanent Secretary, MND, to CEO, HDB, 23 Nov 1960; and Notes of a Meeting at the MND, 6 Oct 1960.

[32] HB 99/48 Vol. II, Report of the Building Department, May 1961.

[33] HB 16/59 Vol. I, Memo from Chairman, HDB, to Minister of Finance, 20 Oct 1961.

[34] HB 147/51 Vol. V, Statement of Rehousing Scheme by Estates Department, Dec 1963.

[35] HB 141/52, Memo from CEO, HDB, to Permanent Secretary, MND, 11 Aug 1964.

[36] HB 1013/50 Vol. I, Memo from Chief Architect, HDB, to CEO, HDB, 4 Dec 1963.

[37] HB 178/59 Vol. II, Minutes of Allocations Committee Meeting on 27 Sep 1962.

[38] HB 178/59 Vol. II, Minutes of Allocations Committee Meeting on 2 Jul 1963.

[39] HB 178/59 Vol. III, Minutes of Allocations Committee Meeting on 7 Oct 1964.

[40] HB 871/57, Memo from Estates Manager, HDB, to Chief Architect, HDB, 14 Apr 1962.

[41] HB 16/59 Vol. II, Memo from Estates Manager, HDB, to Secretary, HDB, 5 Jun 1962.

[42] HB 871/57, Memo from Permanent Secretary, MND, to CEO, HDB, 29 Aug 1966.

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