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‘Black Areas’: The Urban Kampongs and Power Relations in Post-war Singapore Historiography

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ABSTRACT
This paper argues for the historiography of post-war Singapore to be taken beyond the concern with elite politics towards a broader analysis of the power relations existing between state and society. By examining a number of key texts on social history, sociology and urban and historical geography, the paper explores state-society relations in social and spatial terms. It traces a long but changing history, spanning the pre-war, post-war and independence periods, of state attempts to regulate urban space towards controlling the majority Chinese population. Against this, it charts a parallel story of resistance from the latter, in both its covert and overt forms. This paper argues that the making of modern Singapore was in large part a contestation over urban space which unfolded in the post-war years. A strategic theatre and target of this struggle were the Chinese kampong settlements which had proliferated along the urban periphery and which possessed powerful social, economic and community norms. This paper examines how a controlling official discourse, representing the urban kampongs as sites of social pollution, preceded and made possible the state’s attempts to eradicate them by relocating their dwellers in public housing.
‘上有政策, 下有对策’

- popular Chinese saying

After the September 1963 elections in Singapore, the victorious People’s Action Party (PAP) government carried out a wave of deregistration of leftwing trade unions and detentions of their leaders without trial for alleged involvement in ‘communist united front activities’ (*Straits Times* 1 November 1963). These measures effectively shattered the leftwing movement and paved the way for the government’s nation-building project. Among the organisations proscribed were the little-studied Singapore Rural Residents’ Association and the Singapore Rural Dwellers’ Association, which were charged with ‘agitation on behalf of the Communists’ and ‘recruiting and training centres for Communist cadres in the rural areas’ (*Straits Times* 4 October 1963). Their dissolution left kampong dwellers increasingly unable to resist eviction by the Housing and Development Board (HDB) and relocation to high-rise public housing (Gamer 1972: 66-82). In October 1956, two precursor rural associations, the Singapore Wooden House Dwellers’ Association and the Singapore Farmers’ Association, had been banned in a major crackdown on the left by the Singapore Labour Front government of Chief Minister Lim Yew Hock. Why these associations were able to organise rural dwellers in the defence of kampong life, and why the state had deemed it politically necessary to eliminate them, are questions this paper will address towards revising the framework of analysis for the historiography of Singapore after World War Two.

This paper will focus on the social and spatial dynamics of state-society relations in post-war Singapore, particularly on the urban kampong. The existing scholarship on the period has dwelt exclusively on an idealist struggle involving the political elites, primarily the British colonial regime and the post-colonial PAP (Yeo 1973; Turnbull 1989; Yeo & Lau 1991; Lau 1998), and in more recent work, the socialist left (Wee 1999; Harper 2001; Liew 2004). This struggle has also been represented in stark ideological terms as a conflict between nationalism and communism, and between multi-racialism and communalism.
This paper defines power relations more broadly in social and spatial terms. As Michel Foucault said, forms of social discipline which control space and define its uses could encompass the general population (Foucault 1986: 148). This paper compares state-society relations in the pre-war, post-war and independence periods and contends that the years between the end of the war and the early 1960s were exceptional in Singapore’s history. It argues that the political and ideological distance between the British colonial regime and the PAP was not as great as portrayed in most scholarship; while the PAP was far more successful than the colonial regime in implementing its policies, they shared a common vision of modern Singapore. Both governments subscribed to what James Scott termed a ‘high modernist’ philosophy, based on a ‘self-confidence about scientific and technical progress’ (Scott 1998: 4). This paper will consequently review not the usual works on Singapore’s political history but key texts on social history, sociology and historical and urban geography of the pre-war, post-war and independence periods.

The urban kampong was a key site of the post-war state-society conflict and came to be represented by the state in the stigmatising language of social pollution and transgression. Urban kampongs in Singapore were settlements of densely-built wooden housing with attap, zinc or asbestos roofs and constructed with temporary or semi-permanent building materials. These houses were either owned by a family or subdivided into smaller cubicles for a number of tenant families. The urban kampongs were mostly, but not exclusively, inhabited by the labouring class and proliferated or expanded at the periphery of the city centre (the area around the Singapore River) after the war; in 1961, 200,000-250,000 people out of a population of 1.7 million lived in such settlements spanning from Telok Blangah to the west and Kallang Basin to the east (HDB 1961: 4; Teo & Savage 1985: 58). In most literature, which inherits the stigmatising language of the colonial planning and housing authorities, they are called ‘squatter settlements’.

However, in the only substantial demographic study of their formation, Leo van Grunsven’s little-noticed but insightful urban geography work, *Patterns of Housing and Intra-urban Migration of Low-Income Groups in Singapore, with Particular Reference to Urban Kampong Dwellers* (1983), used the term ‘urban kampongs’ and treated them as ‘autonomous settlements’. Grunsven argued that until the authorities decided to evict the dwellers to make way for public housing, the dwellings of urban kampongs were often
accorded at least de facto recognition by the landlords, who commonly sublet idle land to tenants on a monthly basis, and the government, which frequently gave out Temporary Occupation Licenses for the temporary occupation of public land. In fact, urban kampongs were ‘settlements on land to which occupants have no legal title yet of which the occupancy has taken a variety of forms’, while the dweller was ‘a tenant paying a nominal rent for a piece of land on which he owns a dwelling originally erected without planning approval and which is constructed of temporary or semi-permanent materials’ (Van Grunsven 1983: 60-62). The association of urban kampong dwellers with criminality in their supposedly illegal occupation of private or state land is important, and needs to be scrutinised and dismantled. This paper will take as a case study Kampong Bukit Ho Swee, a settlement just west of the Singapore River inhabited mainly by Hokkien-speaking working class Chinese, bounded by Havelock Road to the north and Tiong Bahru Road to the south. There, a great fire (the biggest in Singapore’s history) broke out on 25 May 1961, rendering 15,694 people homeless and leading to their rehousing en masse in high-rise HDB flats. It also heralded the beginning of the social and economic transformation of Singapore under the PAP government.

STATE

The British colonial regime in Malaya and Singapore, as is well-known, was seriously affected by the debilitating psychological and financial effects of World War Two. However this weakness is not to be equated with political lethargy and withdrawal. Under pressure to decolonise from both the United States and local political movements, the British arguably had a greater and more urgent incentive to remake their colonies in what time that remained before their withdrawal so as to safeguard their economic and strategic interests in the region. Tim Harper, in his detailed historical study, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya* (1998), observes that the post-war colonial state in Malaya played an important role in ushering in the relatively liberal phase called the ‘Malayan Spring’; while the colonial state was unable to make wholesale interventions in social life, it nonetheless set about remaking key aspects of local society. Harper, who identified many such instances of social intervention in Singapore, argued that these measures
aimed at creating direct allegiances among the people to the state and were driven by powerful concerns about social disorder, criminality, youth delinquency, and the proletarisation of the working class (Harper 1998: 55-75).

Harper’s interpretation of colonial social policy in Malaya and Singapore suggests that the work of the Social Welfare Department in Singapore (established in 1946) and other social organisations which received substantial British and later, PAP support, such as the Family Planning Association (est. 1949), Children’s Society (est. 1952) and Singapore Council of Social Service (est. 1958), must be viewed as attempts to impose and extend the authority of the state. Alongside the constitutional and political developments, these policies sought to lay the foundation for a modern, planned, sanitised, disciplined, non-communist, and non-communal Singapore.

Post-war Singapore was a time of dramatic demographic change. The 1957 census shows that the total population grew at an annual rate of 4.26% between 1947 and 1957, rising from 938,000 to 1.45 million. Seventy-eight percent of the increase was by natural increase as against migration, supported by a more balanced sex ratio (1,117 males per 1,000 females). Sixty-four percent of the population were consequently locally-born. Among the Chinese, who comprised three-quarters of the population, the annual rate of increase was 3.97%, and 68% were locally-born. The Chinese population had also become younger, with the mean age falling from 25.1 years in 1947 to 23 years in 1957, among whom 43.8% were young dependents under the age of 15 and 49.1% were between the working ages of 15 and 54. Such demographic changes crystallised in the formation of the urban nuclear family, which became, in numerical terms, the dominant social unit. In 1957, the typical Chinese household was a nuclear family with an average size of 5.9 persons, in which nearly eight out of ten families lived in the city area (Chua 1964: 43-46, 50-63, 92-93).

The post-war social interventions were aimed at these demographic changes. For instance, the family planning campaign, which targeted working class Chinese women living in cramped housing, was promoted in the language of ‘emergency’. A pamphlet from the Young Women’s Christian Association supporting the campaign warned the women about ‘[w]hat a future for your grandchildren on this crowded little island!’ It highlighted the problems of rapid population growth and the allegedly widespread
abandonment of unwanted babies, particularly in Chinatown, where resided ‘the poorest class of the population and the one least able to feed, clothe and educate large families’. The planners tied the population problem to the housing crisis in a way which placed the onus of blame and solution on the women: a drawing of a Chinese house in the pamphlet, with the caption, ‘No More Houses to Let!’, was followed by the charge that ‘because many mothers have not limited their families, there are not enough houses in Singapore for so many people’ (Young Women’s Christian Association, year of publication unknown).iii

War and decolonisation gave the British government impetus to pursue stronger social policies, but they were by no means new. Similar social efforts to impose colonial rule and norms of behaviour had existed in the pre-war period. Brenda Yeoh’s invigorating work of historical geography, Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore (1996), peels away the façade of British colonial hegemony to unravel a perpetual struggle between the British and Chinese working class over the uses of urban space and provides a useful insight into a social history of pre-war colonial Singapore underpinned by power relations between the ruling elite and the subordinate classes. Yeoh views the work of the Singapore Municipal Authority on sanitary surveillance, urban planning, street naming, sewage disposal, verandah use, and the regulation of burial sites as seeking to ‘facilitate colonial rule and express colonial aspirations and ideals’, which targeted both the private spaces of working class Chinese and their public environment (Yeoh 2003: 16). Even before the war, British regulators had a strong mental image of an ‘Asian housing problem [which] was inextricably conflated with problems of overcrowding, insanitation, disease, and the “inexorable logic of Asian ignorance”’ (Yeoh 2003: 136). The Municipality and later the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT) sought to regulate the number of cubicles in the Chinese shophouse, a unique house form which served both commercial and residential functions and was at once private and public. But this policy failed because it deprived Chinese coolies of cheap housing and splintered their extended family system.

These British concerns about Chinese housing intensified after the war. Barrington Kaye’s detailed 1956 sociological study, Upper Nankin Street, of a mainly Cantonese-speaking neighbourhood in the central area, which the SIT had earmarked for
demolition, is regarded as a classic in its close-up exploration of a Chinese working class neighbourhood. Done in collaboration with the Social Welfare Department, it also provides a valuable insight into the mind of the post-war social investigator. Kaye’s research into the living conditions and family and social life of the street’s 632 households aims to support the state’s housing policy; he states in his report that it is ‘not only of academic interest, but also of practical value to the Government of Singapore trying to deal with the social problems arising from the dense overcrowding of parts of Singapore’ (Kaye 1956: vii). He documented in detail the overcrowded cubicles and the lack of adequate light, air flow, waste disposal system, and cooking facilities in the Upper Nankin Street shophouses.

The studies of Kaye and other post-war social investigators should be seen as a type of ‘emergency reform literature’, categorising Chinese housing as areas of social pollution and danger, with the goal of establishing official control over them (Singapore 1947; Social Welfare Department 1947; Browne 1954; Goh 1956; Freedman 1957). As Mary Douglas observed, ‘ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience’ (Douglas 2002: 5). Kaye’s notes about the inadequate housing of Upper Nankin Street reveal how he, as a social reformer, was contrasting the Chinese slum and the Western suburb. His research should be viewed as the poetics of social transgression, signifying the slum as ‘sewage’ (and contamination) as opposed to ‘civilisation’ (and cleanliness) (Stallybrass & White 1986: 130-132). The slum dwellers indeed were not to be pitied but feared. For a powerful example of the discourse of transgression, take the photograph below of pigs grazing in the grounds of Kampong Bukit Ho Swee in the 1983 Housing and Development Board (HDB) publication, The Emergence of Bukit Ho Swee Estate, with the caption, ‘Animals roamed freely in the same living quarters as man’ (Archives and Oral History Department et. al 1983: 17). By drawing on the common association of the pig with ‘dirt’ and moral pollution, the simple statement effectively represented Bukit Ho Swee’s dwellers as transgression beyond the human to the animal, beyond cleanliness to contamination, and beyond civilisation to barbarism.
Decades later, pigs remain a powerful mark of social and moral transgression, by which the trauma of resettlement to public housing could be rendered ‘comic’ and ‘absurd’: in his memoirs, Lee Kuan Yew, who became Prime Minister in 1959, recalled former pig farmers coaxing their pigs up the stairs of the HDB flats (Lee 2000: 120).

Kaye’s depiction of the state of ‘emergency’ prevailing in Upper Nankin Street reinforced the official representations of the city slums and urban kampongs; both were instrumental in constructing a controlling discourse of rehousing and urban renewal. Other postwar official studies of the urban kampongs concurred that since ‘[l]iving conditions in these areas are very bad, and it is considered that they can only be rendered healthy by a planned programme of clearance and rebuilding’ (Singapore 1955a: 26), ‘[t]he only solution to this problem is demolition and rehousing’ (Singapore 1947: 6). In addition to the written word, the official photograph – of dark, dilapidated slum housing, later contrasted with clean, modern HDB flats – was another instrument of urban renewal; as Susan Sontag observed, ‘photographing something became a routine part of the procedure for altering it’ (Sontag 1997: 64). Kampong Bukit Ho Swee was typecast by the HDB as ‘an insanitary, congested and dangerous squatter area’, in which resided ‘an inert community who would not think of moving from their unpleasant and dangerous
surroundings until a disaster makes the decision for them’ (HDB 1967: 39). Likewise slums in the city centre were held not so much in compassion as in dread, as ‘breeding grounds of crime and disease’, where ‘[t]he incidence of tuberculosis is higher here than anywhere else on the island, as is the incidence of crime and gangsterism’ (Choe 1969: 163).iv

Upper Nankin Street’s research methodology also had a lasting and unfortunate effect on sociological surveys of life in public housing estates in the independence era. Kaye constructed a binary classification of the lives of the Upper Nankin Street dwellers, where the ‘negative’ was the physical environment (underlined by ‘overcrowding’), and the ‘positive’, their social life (underlined by ‘neighbourliness’). This division is fundamentally problematic because it ignored the ways in which the physical and social environments converged in Chinese working class life. The darkness and stuffiness of the shophouse cubicle, which Kaye took pains to illustrate, was no serious concern to the dwellers if they had a social and economic life which took them outside it for much of their time, if ‘it was the outside, rather than the inside, which was intended to have meaning’ (Waterson 1990: 31-32). He noted that the employed residents worked an average of 8.7 hours a day but said nothing of their social and recreational activities (Kaye 1956: 200). However, Chua Beng-Huat, who lived in Kampong Bukit Ho Swee in the late 1950s, observed that, given their low standard of living, the dwellers spent considerable time on ‘collective idling’ in the village coffee-shop, on gambling, and the ‘trading of jokes, mild put-downs, boastful self-defence and aggrandising embellishments of one’s exploits’ (Chua 1989: 1008-1009).

Moreover, to focus on neighbourliness is to study the outward signs of Chinese social life without necessarily understanding its underlying dynamics and relations. Kaye concluded that neighbourliness was not strong among the Upper Nankin Street dwellers: although 70% knew everyone in the same shophouse, only 6% knew everyone in the nearby shophouses, and only 17% were members of an association. This simply equates social and community cohesion with neighbourly relations. What is telling, as he himself conceded, was that the majority of the residents were indifferent to the attitude of neighbourliness as he framed it (Kaye 1956: 264). Whether a resident knew the neighbours by name was a convenient question for a sociological survey, but it threw
little light on the cohesiveness and dynamics of the neighbourhood. As a social investigator collaborating with the urban planner, Kaye was always on the outside of Upper Nankin Street looking in.

Upper Nankin Street’s classification of neighbourhood life into distinct physical and social aspects has been retained in many later studies on the relocation of shophouse and kampong dwellers to public housing. This is notably but not only the case in the official studies led by Stephen Yeh, an honorary consultant to the Statistics and Research Department of the HDB (You & Yeh 1967; Yeh 1969; 1972; 1975; Yeh & Statistics & Research Department HDB 1969; 1970). Yeh’s 1972 influential study of low-income HDB tenants undertook to paint a positive picture of rehousing by focusing on the physical environment and housing satisfaction. Many large low-income families stayed in one- and two-room HDB emergency flats which were probably as crowded as their previous wooden houses and shophouse cubicles. Yet Yeh insisted that ‘[t]he term “overcrowding” is a subjective one and it is difficult to formulate one standard for all nations and all times’ (Yeh 1972: 19). On the increase in rent – often more than ten times as high as for an attap house – Yeh explained that ‘[t]aking into consideration that most of the households were from attap or shop-houses, the increase in rent and utilities is justifiable in terms of better physical design of the housing unit and the improvement in the amenities’. He also assured the reader that, despite the fact that 13% of the economically-active persons surveyed were unemployed, ‘[t]he financial position of the lower income groups has improved along with the economic growth of the nation’ (Yeh 1972: 23, 101-102). By concentrating on the clean living environment and modern amenities of public housing and dismissing the heavy economic burden, Yeh concluded that the tenants expressed ‘a fairly high degree of satisfaction on the whole’ (Yeh 1972: 105). Yet the usefulness of the concept of housing satisfaction is questionable in view of Robert Gamer’s study of a slum in Chinatown and Queenstown housing estate; he found that ‘[d]espite the fact that we compared one of the worst neighbourhoods in the old city with one of the best housing estates, the same percentage in the slum as in the housing estate expressed great satisfaction with their home’ (Gamer 1972: 168). From the official perspective, Gamer’s point was irrelevant; just as, first, the language of overcrowding and social pollution preceded and supported the rehousing project, the later discourse of
housing satisfaction and neighbourliness helped pave the way for the government’s attempt to make HDB ‘neighbourhoods’ work in the 1970s by focusing on the ‘qualitative’ aspects of public housing.

Many studies on housing in the independence era have accepted the twin concerns of housing satisfaction and neighbourliness, where the assessment of the latter is limited to overt forms of behaviour such as greetings, social interaction and mutual help between the neighbours. Even more independent academics who explored the social and economic repercussions of rehousing have not established an alternative framework of analysis (Buchanan 1972; Gamer 1972; Weldon, Western & Tan 1973; Chang 1975; Chen & Tai 1977; Hassan 1977; Spiro 1976; Spiro & Ngiam 1977; Tai 1988). Iain Buchanan’s book on the ‘fringe dwellers’ of the Kallang-Tanjong Rhu area painted a ‘heroic’ picture of the ‘outlaw’ quality of slum life’ and produced a damning verdict on the social dislocation of the residents brought about by resettlement, but his work is generally regarded as impressionistic (Buchanan 1972: 238). Riaz Hassan, who studied low-income families in Bukit Merah Estate, showed that many families experienced increased psychological and health problems and had less control over their children (Hassan 1977: 130-144). Peter Chen and Tai Ching Ling found in their study of three postal districts – in Queenstown-Tiong Bahru, Geylang and Toa Payoh – a high incidence of social pathology, as illustrated by the increased rates of divorce, suicide, mental illness, drug addiction, and juvenile delinquency. The authors concluded that ‘the improved man-made environment in high-rise public housing estates still cannot be as effective as the environment of kampong and rural areas in fostering community ties, close human relationship and strong attachment to the family and the community’ (Chen & Tai 1977: 9, 98). Yet this critique lacks force because it could draw from no in-depth study of the kampong environment and its family and community ties which could serve as a counterpoint. Due to the rapid relocation of urban and rural kampong dwellers to HDB housing, sociologists have usually not been able to make any rigorous investigation of the kamponds before they disappeared. Chua Beng-Huat conducted an interesting study of a semi-rural resettled Chinese village in 1982-1984, noting that the experiences of rehousing differed according to gender and whether one was village-bound (Chua 1997: 51-69). But it cannot be regarded to have captured the full impact of the earlier relocation since the
villagers had, by the 1980s, come to accept its inevitability. Social history and oral history, by recreating the urban kampong and its social dynamics, can clearly contribute towards an understanding of the full impact of rehousing.

The problem with the concept of neighbourliness is that it is ‘out of time’. It assesses the inter-personal relationship existing between neighbours at one moment in time and compares it with no others, requiring no knowledge of the relocatee’s earlier kampong life. Leo van Grunsven, who recognised this ahistorical nature of most sociological studies of rehousing, observed that ‘only casual attention has been paid to the origin of the inhabitants [of the urban kampongs]; most studies have focussed on the housing, demographic and socio-economic characteristics of “squatters”’ (Van Grunsven 1983: 2). The typical study in the independence years might, superficially, reveal a low level of neighbourliness among HDB residents and be taken to be critical of life in high-rise flats. But what is less obvious is that they unfailingly focus on the individual, the nuclear family and their relations with the immediate neighbours, ignoring the larger community to which they had previously belonged and which was now effectively dispersed. The concept of ‘neighbourliness’ supports, in effect, the governing official discourse of rehousing, which it seeks to facilitate and consolidate.

From the representations of the social pollution of shophouse and kampong life, an official policy of social engineering through the regulation of urban space could be carried out. The relocation of households en masse in post-independence Singapore has historically been rationalised in the language of ‘emergency’. But, as Greg Clancey argues, the rehousing should be understood as a spatial form of social mobilisation to break down existing kinship and community ties and create new allegiances between state and citizen (Clancey 2003). The rehousing of kampong dwellers made homeless by fires has led one critic of the PAP government to call these events ‘fires of convenience’ (George 1973: 102). The ‘emergency’, really, was not the threat of fire or inadequate housing, but rather the perceived need to remake Singapore in the image of a sanitised and disciplined showcase state; it was an ‘emergency’, albeit politically expedient, that existed first and foremost in the PAP government’s mind.

The PAP government inherited the colonial regime’s fixation with overcrowding, insanitation and social control. For instance, the 1958 colonial Master Plan, which
proposed a rationalised system of land-use through ‘zoning’, ‘laid the basis for comprehensive urban planning which, over the years and particularly after independence, came to be regarded by the authorities as relevant, even essential to the development of the country’ (Teo 1992: 168-169). Likewise the HDB has frequently emphasised its remarkable success in providing public housing for Singaporeans over the performance of the SIT, which it criticised as ‘really not up to the task’ (HDB 1970: 7). This claim ignores how both the SIT and HDB subscribed to the philosophy of high modernist housing. Indeed the HDB housing estates built from the 1960s onwards owed an important ideological debt to the pioneer SIT estate in Queenstown (which was eventually completed by the HDB): both Queenstown and the HDB estates were envisioned as planned and regulated communities (Castells, Goh & Kwok 1990: 259).

The PAP’s campaign to reorder urban space in its pursuit of social control can be seen in Stephen Dobbs’ recent social history, The Singapore River: A Social History 1819-2002 (2003). Dobbs locates the PAP’s campaign to clean up the river within ‘a much longer period of determined effort and official intervention’, beginning with the recommendations of the Singapore River Working Committee formed in 1953 (Dobbs 2003: 99-101). That this campaign was about social reordering towards the making of a modern, sanitised Singapore can be seen in how the PAP was not just content to clean up the river’s chemical pollution but also remove the Chinese lightermen whose lives had historically been bound up with it. The ‘clean up’ resulted in the mass eviction of Chinese businesses and lightermen along the riverfront in the late 1970s; the government could push through the campaign because of the reduced importance of the lighterage industry in Singapore’s industrial economy. It is also vital to note that the river’s ‘clean up’, both physically and socially, was closely tied to the work of the HDB, which in rehousing the lightermen and their families, was involved in a campaign of spatial reordering and mobilisation (Dobbs 2003: 101-115). The rehousing of shophouse and urban kampong dwellers in HDB flats, hailed officially as removing them from ‘breeding grounds of crime and disease’, should similarly be viewed, in terms of form and process, as a social and political ‘clean up’.

The ‘clean up’ of the Singapore River and breakup of the urban kampongs and shophouse communities through rehousing were two of the means of spatial regulation
with which the PAP government employed to construct a new, modern ‘nation’. In their stimulating if at times over-committed study of contemporary urban geography, *The Politics of Landscapes in Singapore* (2003), Lily Kong and Brenda Yeoh have discussed how, to this end, the authorities have regulated space use for burial sites, religious buildings and arts performances, and implemented policies on street naming, the preservation of heritage buildings, and the upgrading of HDB flats (Kong & Yeoh 2003). Compared to the colonial administrators, the PAP government has had greater success in realising its visions in the face of much weaker opposition. It also had more resources and, more importantly, greater will in effecting such a social transformation.

**SOCIETY**

Yet *The Politics of Landscapes in Singapore* also reminds us that ‘[t]he Singapore “nation” is socially and spatially constructed, reinforced, and challenged’, and that ‘at any one time there are competing centripetal and centrifugal forces shaping the formation of “nation”’ (Kong & Yeoh 2003: 1, 211). Beneath the façade of social stability established by the PAP, there remain discordant voices which from time to time challenge the hegemony of the state, not usually its over-arching philosophy of governance but specific policies. For instance, due to the official principle of meritocracy, ownership of public housing is for Singaporeans a reward based on one’s hard work and ability to pay and consequently not a legal or welfare entitlement; providing only the ‘equality of opportunity’ and not the right to own housing seems to have effectively depoliticised public housing (Chua 1997: 136-139). But as Kong and Yeoh point out, it remains a contested issue: many Singaporeans have voiced their displeasure at the PAP’s use of housing upgrading as a carrot during elections and restriction of home ownership to married couples (Kong & Yeoh 2003: 94-117). While Singaporeans have generally accepted PAP housing policies or even applauded them at times, they may also criticise state initiatives which do not serve their interests or which they think do not conform to the government’s body of ideas about the ‘nation’.

This response to state policy is non-violent and often unorganised; it does not go beyond publicising its point of view and pressurising the authorities to rethink their policies. Historically, resistance from below in much of Singapore’s past has been of this
nature; it appears the opposition is most effective and readily offered if it follows the path of least resistance. This was apparent when Barrington Kaye and his social investigators returned to Upper Nankin Street for a third and final round of surveys (on neighbourliness), when they faced resistance from many inhabitants, who felt the repeated visits were ‘absurd and a waste of their time’ and ‘a nuisance’ (Kaye 1956: 254, 292). These reactions reveal the intrusive nature of his sociological work to the residents.

Drawing from James Scott’s notion of the ‘weapons of the weak’ utilised by the subordinate classes (Scott 1985, 1990), Brenda Yeoh’s *Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore* has conceptualised the urban built environment in pre-war Singapore as a ‘contested terrain’. British policies to regulate urban space ‘provoked a range of responses amongst Asian communities which sometimes culminated in violent backlash, but was more commonly articulated through strategies of evasion, non-compliance, and adjustment, or channeled through Asian leaders’ (Yeoh 2003: 9, 67). The Chinese community, for instance, persistently subdivided the shophouse cubicles after the municipal authorities had taken the partitions down. The British also built backlanes to create space between houses and verandahs to provide shelter from the tropical sun. But the Chinese colonised the backlanes and verandahs for private purposes such as the dumping of rubbish, display of food and other goods, and social chatting. Against such passive resistance, colonial urban regulations in many cases lapsed into a ‘Sisyphean jugglery’ and were in time defeated without violent opposition (Yeoh 2003: 148). The crucial point which Yeoh makes is to reject simple assumptions of modernity to discern the power relations between two often opposing cultures. In this perspective, Chinese working class resistance against colonial spatial regulations can no longer be viewed as an irrational rejection of superior modern practices by the ‘ignorant’. This is not to say that cramped cubicle living and traditional Chinese methods of waste disposal had no negative effect on health. But under the assault of a set of colonial policies of social control, Chinese resistance should be viewed as drawing upon ‘a range of resources’, based on their ‘membership of an ethnic culture which bestowed a systematic set of values and ways of perceiving, group reinforcement of these beliefs, attitudes and social mores, and a network of institutional support’ (Yeoh 2003: 14).
This ethnic culture distinguishes the resistances of the pre-war and independence eras. It has a lingering influence in some areas of contemporary life, such as in the disagreements between Malay and Chinese uses of housing estate space for their celebrations and funerals. But although Lily Kong and Brenda Yeoh have attempted to uncover the voices which challenge the PAP’s hegemonic vision of ‘nation’, in most cases they appear to be simply that. One reason, as Chan Heng Chee has highlighted, is the PAP leadership, with its Management Committees and community centres and by co-opting local community leaders, has effectively established its ‘ears’ and ‘voice’ at the grassroots level (Chan 1976: 186-187). This was something the colonial regime could not accomplish. Demographic and economic changes, some fostered by the PAP and some longer-term in nature, have also undermined the arts of passive resistance and non-compliance in Singapore. The dissolution of the ethnic and language enclaves in the city centre and urban fringe after the PAP came to power has broken the spatial bases of social resistance. The emergence of the nuclear family as the dominant social and economic unit and its general acceptance of a subordinate role, as salaried employees in routine factory, corporate and public work, have also substantially weakened the binding force of culture. While, given the political environment, peaceful contestation remains likely the most effective form of opposition to PAP policies, it has increasingly centred around family or individual interests and less those of the community.

KAMPONG

The question remains of framing power relations in the post-war period, both of the final phase of British colonial rule and the brief but strategic early years when the PAP adjusted to the political challenges and prerogatives of being in power. This is a crucial period which needs to be historiographically mapped out on its own terms, when state-society relations were shaped by a combination of developments at the international, national and local levels. Two issues are particularly important. One, as a result of social and economic factors, the urban kampong became a key target of the state’s social intervention. Two, while considerable work has been done on British governance, much less has been studied of the relations between the PAP regime and the people in the early 1960s. It is known that this was a period of political uncertainty for the party, which was
first challenged from within by Ong Eng Guan and then the Lim Chin Siong-led left and then disastrously involved in the politics of race during the merger with Malaysia. But what is not always considered is this was also plausibly a difficult period of adjustment for the ordinary people, particularly the large Chinese-speaking population which hitherto had been the most anti-colonial. How should they, for instance, respond to regulations of urban space, which they had resisted during the colonial phase, by a party they had previously supported as an icon of anti-colonialism? This is an important area which needs to be studied and in which social and oral history would be invaluable.

The years between 1945 and the early 1960s witnessed a visibly more overt form of politics of the subordinate classes. This resistance, in its most manifest form, was the riot, as exemplified by the 1950 Maria Hertogh riots, 1954 anti-National Service riots, 1955 Hock Lee Bus riots, October 1956 student riots, and July and September 1964 race riots. At the next level of contestation, closely linked to the riots, were the strike and protest, involving students and workers organised in militant trade unions and mutual help associations. Explaining this change in the nature of the resistance has always been a problem in the work of James Scott, namely, whether long-term passive resistance taking place on a daily basis would increase or reduce the likelihood of the explosive event occurring. In Singapore, the reasons for this change are multiple: the experience of war and the failure of the British colonial power to defend Singapore, the strong mood of anti-colonialism in the regional and international arenas, the wide appeal of ideas of nationalism, socialism and Marxism, the emergence of a group of dedicated and decidedly anti-colonial politicians, intellectuals, activists, and trade unionists who were able to organise and mobilise the subordinate classes, and the desperate economic conditions of low wages, high cost of living and poor working conditions among the working class. Suffice it to say that, given the non-violent forms of resistance which had prevailed in the pre-war years, a combination of causes was necessary to transform the nature of the resistance.

The political studies of resistance are the most well-documented but the economic and social developments, which have received much less attention, had equally important political ramifications. The social history literature provides us with some useful insights. For example, in his social history of the Singapore River, Stephen Dobbs maintains that
the 1950s and early 1960s were a time of significant political and social change for the Chinese lightermen working along the river. The older kinship-based patron-client relationship between lighter owners and lightermen had weakened due to the increasing numbers of lightermen settling down and forming nuclear families. The growing assertiveness of organised labour in postwar Singapore also made the lightermen’s Transport Vessel Workers’ Association more militant. In 1961, the union went on strike over issues of pay and working conditions, an action which was also sympathetic to the Barisan Sosialis, a newly-formed party made up of leftists who had broken away from the PAP (Dobbs 2003: 75-81). The strike encapsulated the political, economic and social developments of the time.

Such social and economic processes had already contributed to the outbreak of political violence in Malaya. In his account of the 1948 Emergency in *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya*, Tim Harper downplayed the role of both the British colonial regime and the Malayan Communist Party (MCP), arguing instead that the conflict was ‘a guerilla war that drew sustenance from a panoply of endemic disorder on the rural periphery’ (Harper 1998: 95). In his view, the MCP uprising was the outcome of a contestation for resources between the state and the Chinese squatters who had migrated to the forest frontier during the Japanese Occupation. Another factor he points to is how the rural-urban divide in Malaya was relatively fluid, since Chinese squatters frequently moved to the urban centres to find work. Having agriculture and farming as a safety net, they could be drawn into trade unions and participate in strikes without the fear of dismissal, resulting in the widespread collapse of industrial discipline in the cities (Harper 1998: 107).

In Singapore, migration patterns had similar political effects and contributed to the emergence of the urban kampong as a site where colonial spatial control was contested. It is misleading to assume that, because of official immigration controls and how the island’s post-war population had become more settled, migration was no longer an important social force. The population of Singapore had expanded significantly during the Japanese occupation due to the influx of refugees from the Malay peninsula, many of whom remained behind on the island. After the war, it was further swelled by large numbers of wives and their families from China rejoining their husbands in Singapore
(possibly because the Chinese Communist Party’s triumph in 1949 made the men’s return to the mainland difficult) and by the migration of Chinese from the Malay peninsula due to the outbreak of the Emergency, the recession in Malaya’s tin and rubber industries and rural-urban migration (Singapore 1955b: 20, 27-28). In Patterns of Housing and Intra-urban Migration of Low-Income Groups in Singapore, Leo van Grunsven has also shown that, from the end of the war, the influx of Chinese migrants into Singapore was chiefly into the kampongs located at the periphery of the city centre. Many of them were from the Malay peninsula, often single women seeking employment or married women with children rejoining their husbands (Van Grunsven 1983: 82-109). With whole nuclear families moving directly into the urban fringe or indirectly from the city centre where the housing was inadequate, the urban kampongs became important centres of social life for working class Chinese in post-war Singapore. Pragmatism and opportunism dictated where these migrants looked to rent, build or buy a house. The area southwest of the Singapore River, which encompasses Bukit Ho Swee, was economically attractive because ‘the unused hilly land was available here close to the urban core, to the harbour-docks, to middle- and upper class residential areas and close to a large British Military Base (in the Ayer Rajah area), another important source of employment’ (Van Grunsven 1983: 60).

The urban kampongs were sites of political and social contestation. Kampong Bukit Ho Swee, to a former dweller, was ‘one of Singapore’s well-known “black areas”’, controlled by the ‘24’ Chinese secret society, which was rivaled by the ‘08’ secret society in adjacent Kampong Tiong Bahru (Tay Ah Chuan 21 February 2006). In direct contrast to their representation as ‘inert’ by the authorities, the urban kampongs possessed their own powerful community norms. They contained dwellings built without planning approval and were policed by Chinese secret societies and serviced by itinerant hawkers operating at the edge of the law. Because it was common to be partially or under-employed, which was characteristic of informal work in the local economy, young men and women in the kampongs were often recruited into the secret societies, where they obtained mutual help, financial assistance and a sense of identity. Chua Beng-Huat explained that the kampong’s young men were ‘indispensable’ for policing the kampong and for fire prevention, for ‘[t]here was no contradiction at all between their life of petty
crime and gangsterism on the one hand and crime prevention on the other because the two activities were spatially separated’ (Chua 1989: 1008).

Compared with HDB estates, which were a high modernist form of housing ‘designed to make a powerful visual impact as a form’ (Scott 1998: 104), the urban kampongs possessed a deep functional order beneath the untidy exterior which underpinned its social life and which no amount of official planning could easily replicate (Jacobs 1961: 386-405; Scott 1998: 132-146). A rare study of one such Chinese settlement in the Kallang Basin in the mid-1960s found that, contrary to the oft-seen official photographs of unsightly and rundown slums, most of the houses were well-swept and tidy, showing the pride their dwellers took in maintaining their living environment. Even though the old houses which were subdivided into smaller cubicles were cramped and poorly-kept, ‘their condition is in many cases a combined result of age, poor materials, and extremely cramped living conditions, rather than simple tenant carelessness’. The residents almost unanimously preferred to live in the kampong than other kampongs, with its temple serving as a strong unifying point. For them, the prospect of resettlement to high-rise flats was something they could not fully comprehend (Economic Research Centre, University of Singapore, year unknown: 28, 31-32, 42-45).vi More importantly, family ties, of the nuclear but also more extended forms, were vital in the social fabric of the urban kampongs. While Barrington Kaye, Goh Keng Swee and the census-takers had accurately mapped out an increase in the number of nuclear families in postwar Singapore, their emphasis on the ‘household’ residing in a specific dwelling has tended to obscure the fact that many nuclear families lived close to their relations and often in the same kampong. This was poignantly illustrated in the 1961 Bukit Ho Swee fire by the cases of men who, sometimes at their wives’ behest, went to help their relatives staying in the area to save their belongings from the flames, only to return and find their own homes burned down (Zhou Lian Che 21 February 2006; Tay Ah Chuan 21 February 2006).vi Indeed, living close to one’s kin was not only a social choice but an economic necessity, in the light of which the involuntary rehousing of kampong dwellers to HDB flats in the 1960s and 1970s should be viewed.
To add to the social consequences of migration, economic factors also influenced how urban kampong dwellers became politically aware and organised. W. G. Huff’s study of Singapore’s economic growth showed that the island’s pre-war colonial economy persisted after the war till 1959, with the colony remaining essentially an entrepot port re-engaging in the trade of staples, particularly rubber, while the PAP’s industrialisation programme took off only after 1965 (Huff 1994: 273-298). This means that the structure of employment for the working class remained unchanged, with social and political implications. The employment situation was far more complex than the official documents suggest, with the binary notions of ‘gainful employment’ and ‘unemployment’ obscuring the diverse economic activities of the working class (Scott 1998: 81). Many of the urban kampong’s breadwinners, while ‘under-employed’ in their formal occupation, were also involved in semi-rural activities such as growing vegetables and rearing pigs and poultry, or had other family members engaged in part-time work such as hawking and bringing home some income (Van Grunsven 1983: 54, 57; Economic Research Centre: 14-16). As in Malaya, this economic fluidity enabled them to join trade unions and other mass associations and challenge hostile employers, landlords and the state under the risk of dismissal or retribution. Their overt and collective resistance, in defense of their direct social and economic interests, should be framed beyond the tired themes of ‘communist manipulation’ and ‘Chinese chauvinism’. When organised as a ‘revolutionary crowd’, the urban kampong community, ‘far from being mere passive instruments, absorbed and adapted the slogans and ideas of the political groups contending for power’ (Rude 1979: 196), in the interests of ‘not being taken for a fool’ (Farge 1993: 32, 281). In the early 1950s, a Chinese newspaper hailed the resistance of kampong dwellers to the SIT’s eviction attempts as akin to “a lion’s roar” from the oppressed people’ (Nanyang Siang Pau 1 May 1954).vii

It was precisely the migration of these largely working class, young and under-employed Chinese to the urban kampong and the emergence of an autonomous way of life therein which resulted in its being powerfully represented as a place of social pollution and danger. Already, these Chinese who were the casual labour of the informal economy lived beyond the pale of the social discipline of full-time employment. Such a person, to the authorities, was akin to a vagrant, a perception which reflects
the confusion of work with employment in the official and public mind; it is official opinion that the vagrant does not like work, whereas all we truly know is that he does not like employment, of which work is only one part.

Consequently the Chinese casual labour were, like the vagrants, ‘the most helpless, and therefore the most illuminating, of a large army of those outside the Establishment, among whom we may include the very poor generally, the criminals, the lunatics’ (O’Connor 1963: 61-62). A great official fear of this class was their sheer elusiveness: the Social Welfare Department’s survey of low-income families in the central area led by Goh Keng Swee in 1953-1954 admitted that

even with the best system of documentation, attap dwellings can sometimes be the most difficult to locate….The postal address of attap dwellings do not run in serial order….it is a common practice for unauthorised attap dwellings to borrow addresses belonging to other unauthorised houses in the neighbourhood (Goh 1956: 7).

To have these Chinese congregate in Chinatown and along Singapore River – overcrowded but long-established and regulated areas of residence, and with which Barrington Kaye and the family planning social literature had targeted – was one thing. But to have them move out and disperse into spaces beyond the reach of the state, with no fixed addresses and permanent homes and engaged in irregular work, was another. The migrating Chinese casual labour of the entrepot became, as Louis Chevalier put it, the ‘dangerous classes’ (Chevalier 1973, Stedman Jones 1971).

The urban kampongs came to constitute, to use Mary Douglas’ term, a critical social and political ‘margin’ in post-war Singapore society. As demarcating the social boundary between civilisation and barbarism, the margin is held to be critical in determining a society’s ‘shape of fundamental experience’ (Douglas 2002: 150). The rapid growth of densely-built wooden housing in kampongs at the edges of the urban core, with their own community and social norms, constituted to the British and PAP governments an encroaching physical and social margin, contaminating, dangerous and which needed to be pushed back and restored. Unlike the neatly-organised ‘modern’ housing block, the closely-built wooden houses of urban kampongs, constructed almost
literally on top of or joined to each other, were, in the minds of Singapore’s post-war social planners, a growing formless menace. The official classification of the urban kampong dweller as an illegal squatter was only one of the many marks of criminality stamped upon them; it was part of a larger endeavour to show how crime was ‘not something exceptional, but something ordinary and genuinely social’ (Chevalier 1973: 77).

The phase of overt resistance in Singapore’s history was, of course, short-lived. The PAP, having successfully elevated itself from an opposition party to the ruling government in 1959, was determined to transform the thrust of Singapore politics from anti-colonialism to nation-building and social discipline. The anti-colonial movement which had played a key role in the PAP’s success became, in the government’s view, politically obsolete and indeed dangerous, now that its aim was to establish new loyalties to the state, rather than have the subordinate classes challenge them. The leaders of the leftwing movement were demonised as ‘Reds’ (as united front members of the MCP), detained for long periods without trial, exiled to the peninsula, or banished to China and India.

The ‘black areas’ were similarly subjected to political discipline in the 1960s and 1970s; their inhabitants were relocated, frequently against their will, to regulated housing estates, a process which has historically been rationalised in the language of provision of public housing for the low-income groups. After the dissolution of the two rural associations in 1963, both the Chinese and Malay kampong dwellers increasingly unable to resist eviction in the subsequent years. It is significant that it was the majority group, the Chinese, not the minority groups, which was most adversely affected by rehousing (Tai 1988: 154-158, 166-167), although no study has examined the Chinese-speaking, largely working class population, at which the project was chiefly targeted. New laws implemented by the PAP in its first decade in power allowed the state to acquire private land at low prices for public housing, and narrowly defined social and commercial life in the HDB estates and the roles of the labour movement, mass media and educational system in the emerging political economy of industrialisation (Rodan 1989). Living in HDB flats, working class Chinese were in time transformed from a mobile class to one fixed in space and economy, where, increasingly deprived of subsidiary forms of work,
they came to accept their role as worker-citizens in the new economy. The island’s economic growth in the 1970s, buoyed by investment from multi-national corporations and government-linked companies, reduced the scope for discontent among Singaporeans and weakened the forms which it could take. By the end of the 1970s, the PAP leadership had largely been successful in employing a combination of coercive and co-optive measures against potential dissent in Singapore. Although its vision of ‘nation’ and its regulation of space have yet to fully gain hegemonic consent among Singaporeans, the expressions of social dissent had once again, as they did in the pre-war era, gone underground.

CONCLUSION

The removal of the urban slums and kampons was integral to the self-belief of the PAP government. In facing its first major crisis since its formation, the HDB built 12,000 units of low-cost flats in nine months to rehouse the victims of the Bukit Ho Swee fire. This substantially built up the conviction, characteristic of the Singapore government, that any manner of crisis could be scientifically predicted, managed and resolved. Of this success, the 1961 inferno serves as an important defining moment. Six years after the disaster, it was depicted as a ‘blessing in disguise’, in which is told of how ‘[t]he Bukit Ho Swee story is that of a low-cost housing estate which was literally born out of fire’, like the phoenix rising from the ashes (HDB 1967: 3, 39). The Board went on to build thousands of units of high-rise flats in the 1960s for rental and, from 1964, for sale. In 1970, it acknowledged its ‘debt’ to the disaster which wiped out one of the biggest ‘black areas’ in post-war Singapore:

This achievement was dramatically underscored on the hot windy afternoon of May 25, 1961, when a fire broke out in a squatter settlement in Bukit Ho Swee. Long after dusk, the raging flames had ravaged everything in its path, leaving behind a scene of utter destruction and 16,000 people homeless. It was the biggest fire on the island and came barely two years after the Board had been set up. Yet in a little over a week, 6,000 of these homeless had been rehoused in new flats at subsidised rates (HDB 1970: 8).
The mythology which has emerged from the HDB’s eradication of the urban kampongs is so powerful that when Lim Kim San, chairman of the HDB between 1960-1963, passed away on 20 July 2006, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong repeated in his eulogy almost verbatim that ‘most Singaporeans [had] lived in overcrowded slums and squatter colonies, breeding grounds for crime and gangsterism’ (Straits Times 24 July 2006).

This paper has argued that our understanding of Singapore history will be deepened by a consideration of the power relations which existed between state and society at a given moment in time. The period between the war’s end and the early 1960s is exceptional in the overt forms of resistance from below which emerged and which were eventually disciplined and transformed in the formation of a new nation-state. To write such an account of the period is to move beyond the emphasis on political leaders and the themes of counter-insurgency and communalism which have hitherto dominated the historiography of post-war Singapore. It entails examining the social and economic processes, particularly demographic changes and migration, economic developments, and employment and housing patterns. Where these processes converge are the urban kampongs and other ‘black areas’ which, besides being construed socially and economically as beyond the law, were also places where authority was directly and overtly contested. In other words, an alternative historiography of post-war Singapore is one which takes into account, in spatial terms, the impact of political, economic and social changes on the power relations between the state and the subordinate classes.
NOTES

i In English: “The government has its policies, but the people have their responses”.

ii In some literature, the Singapore Rural Dwellers’ Association is called the Singapore Country People’s Association. The association was formed in 1956 and the Singapore Rural Residents’ Association in 1957 by members of the Singapore Labour Front but both soon came under leftwing influence following the October 1956 crackdown on the left. See Lee 1996.

iii The pamphlet referred to the formation of the Family Planning Association in 1949. No pagination is given. Similar blame was placed on the Chinese women for the problems of inadequate jobs and schools.

iv Alan F. C. Choe was Head of the Urban Renewal Department in the 1960s.

v The report referred to events in 1966.

vi Zhou’s parents and elder sister and Tay’s uncle stayed near them.

vii The 1947 Rent Control Ordinance, by placing limits on rents, discouraged the maintenance of dilapidated buildings and caused them to further deteriorate.

viii The planned relocation of Malay kampong dwellers contributed to the outbreak of race riots in 1964, an event which is still officially attributed to the political machinations of the Singapore United Malays National Organisation.
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