



Centre for Asia Pacific  
Social Transformation Studies

# **SINGAPORE STUDIES WORKSHOP**

## ***Handing over the rei(g)ns: Civil society under Lee Hsien Loong***

Friday 22nd October 2004

Centre for Asia-Pacific Social Transformation Studies (CAPSTRANS)  
University of Wollongong

**BOOK OF ABSTRACTS**

# SINGAPORE STUDIES WORKSHOP

## Program

10.00	Welcome and introductory remarks	
10.15-11.45	<b>Panel One: Civil Society in ‘New’ Singapore</b>	
	Chair: Eric Loo	
	<b>Terrence Lee (Murdoch)</b>	Gestural Politics: Civil Society in ‘New’ Singapore
	<b>Lenore Lyons (UoW)</b>	Transient Workers Count Too? Trans/national activist practices in Singapore
	<b>Kersty Hobson (ANU)</b>	Considering ‘Green’ Practices: NGOs and the Emergent Environmental-Political Landscape in Singapore
11.45	<b>Lunch</b>	
12.30-2.00	<b>Panel Two: Security and Censorship</b>	
	Chair: Lenore Lyons	
	 <b>James Gomez (Monash)</b>	The Control and Censorship of Oppositional Political Content in the Singapore Media
	<b>Marc Rerceretrnam (Sydney)</b>	Beyond the Clutches: Political Dissent among Singaporeans Abroad
	<b>Damien Cheong (Monash)</b>	The Internal Security Act and the ‘War on Terrorism’: Old Wine in New Bottles
2.00	<b>Afternoon Tea</b>	
2.30-4.00	<b>Panel Three: Social Issues and Self Identity</b>	
	Chair: Claire Lowrie	
	 <b>Yasuko Kobayashi (ANU)</b>	Incorporating, Differentiating, and Managing Maids in Singapore
	<b>Puvaneswari Arumugam (Deakin)</b>	Losing Ethnic Identity: Cultural Hybridity in Singaporean Malays
	<b>Victoria Yew (Monash)</b>	Making Sense of Singapore: A Postmodern Dilemma

# **Losing Ethnic Identity: Cultural hybridity in Singaporean Malays**

**Puvaneswari Arumugam**

## *Abstract*

It would not be an understatement to say that Singaporeans have adopted a hybridised national identity based on the practices and value systems of the four main races. This is mainly owing to nation building strategies implemented by the one party Singapore government, People's Action Party (PAP). Generally classified as 'social engineering', hybridisation has taken form in all shapes and sizes, ranging from food to daily habitus in the lives of Singaporeans. While hybridised food may sound palatable, hybridised cultural and ethnic identity does not have a palatable effect when it can impact greatly on an ethnic group's socio-cultural and economic development. My PhD thesis explores the extent of hybridisation among Singapore Malay theatre practitioners over the last forty years. The study pays attention to contemporary theatre productions which exemplify signs of cultural hybridity and further explores what the Malays have lost in terms of ethnic identity in order to function effectively in multicultural Singapore. The paper will also discuss issues of social displacement and examine the extent of shifts in cultural paradigm among the Malays in Singapore.

## *Bio-note*

Puvaneswari Arumugam is currently a PhD candidate in Deakin University. Her research concentrates on identifying processes of cultural hybridity within the paradigm of social and cultural habitus of the Malays in Singapore.

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# **The Internal Security Act and the ‘War on Terrorism’: Old Wine in New Bottles**

**Damien Cheong**

## *Abstract*

Singapore’s Internal Security Act (ISA) had in the past, gained international notoriety as a draconian legislation that contravened fundamental civil liberties and human rights. However in the wake of September 11, similar legislation espousing preventive detention were enacted in several western democracies. With the arrests of the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) operatives in 2002, the ISA was reconfigured as a legislative weapon to deal with the threat of global terrorism. The ISA’s new role was accepted by a majority of Singaporeans without much ado. And although the new security environment seems to have eclipsed civil rights considerations, the misuse or illegitimate use of the ISA continues to remain a paramount concern. Notwithstanding, existing institutional safeguards coupled with civil safeguards can help minimise, if not prevent the Act from being misused. Furthermore, Singapore’s heartlanders are vested with the capacity to act as the ISA’s ultimate safeguard.

## *Bio-note*

Damien Cheong is a PhD candidate in the School of Political and Social Inquiry at Monash University. He is currently undertaking research on Armed Struggle and its relation to the political legitimacy of the Palestinian Authority.

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# **The Control and Censorship of Oppositional Political Content in the Singapore Media**

**James Gomez**

## *Abstract*

This presentation is based on a baseline study of the Singapore media prepared for Article 19 (London) by James Gomez who is principal researcher. The study based on a review of academic literature, NGO reports and interviews that shows that the PAP government has over the years managed to control oppositional political content in the local media. However, the control over the foreign media and the Internet has been problematic and these two “sites” have been where much of legal action takes place. Additionally, libel actions, harassment and a culture of self-censorship and compliance ensure control is almost complete. The presentation will list some areas of policy change and advocacy options.

## *Bio-note*

James Gomez is a PhD Candidate in the Monash Asia Institute at Monash University. His research interests include new media and political parties in Asia, where he has been publishing actively in the last years. His most recent publication is a co-edited volume entitled *Asian Cyberactivism: Freedom of Expression & Media Censorship* (2004).

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# **Considering ‘Green’ Practices: NGOs and the Emergent Environmental-Political Landscape in Singapore**

**Kersty Hobson**

## *Abstract*

Academic analyses of Singaporean ‘green’ groups have in the past taken government policy and broad national governance trends as their entry points into debates about the extent, meaning and direction of national environmental concerns. Whilst useful, such an approach can present an overly simplistic picture of the increasingly diverse environmental-political landscape within Singapore. Drawing on qualitative fieldwork with various environmental NGOs, this paper focuses on the ways in which NGO workers’ practices are subtly reconstituting and reshaping the Singaporean polity, and the environmental-political challenges that lie ahead.

## *Bio-note*

Kersty Hobson has an interest in the human dimension of multi-scale environmental issues. Her doctoral work was on the politics and practices of sustainable consumption in post-industrial nations. Her current work focuses on the processes and constructions of environmental governance in mainland Southeast Asia, with a particular interest in urban contexts. She was a Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Research School of Social Sciences, ANU (2001–2002); and a Lecturer in Human Geography, Department of Geography, Earth and Environmental Science, Birmingham University, UK (2002-2003).

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# **Incorporating, Differentiating, and Managing Maids in Singapore**

**Yasuko Kobayashi**

## *Abstract*

Discriminative treatment of foreign domestic workers, from physical abuse as the most extreme case to verbal abuse, continues to be reported by the media in Singapore. It is appropriate to raise the question why some Singaporeans, residents of the first world, treat foreign domestic workers in such an uncivilized manner. This study employs the notion of neoliberalism to explore these phenomena of social injustice. Under neoliberal style of governance, it is not punishment or discipline which governs the society. On the contrary, it is the society's self-control which gives it positive motivation to participate in certain activities. This study will first examine the state's policies on foreign domestic workers and clarify the pros and cons of these policies. Second, it will examine how Singaporeans participate in the control of foreign domestic workers according to these state policies. In this way, a system for incorporating, differentiating and managing foreign domestic workers is jointly constructed and operated by the state and the society.

## *Bio-note*

Yasuko Kobayashi is a PhD candidate in the Faculty of Asian Studies at the Australian National University. Her PhD dissertation is on the formation of minority identity, focusing on Malays in Singapore.

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# **Gestural Politics: Civil Society in ‘New’ Singapore**

**Terence Lee**

## *Abstract*

The theme and concept of civil society as the sphere opposed to the state has made a global comeback in recent years, becoming one of the most employed terms in contemporary politics. The notion of civil society in Singapore, however, comes in various contours, forms and content, and as such is as ambiguous as it is popular. This paper traces the invocation of the term and discourse of civil society in Singapore: from its promulgation by then-Minister of Information and the Arts (MITA) George Yeo as ‘civic’ society (1991); to its reassertion as a government vision statement calling for “active citizenship” and citizens’ “feedback” (*Singapore 21*, 1999; and, Remaking Singapore Committee, 2003); to its current – and arguably, future – place in a supposedly ‘new’ Singapore, creatively captured by the theme of an ‘open and inclusive Singapore’, first articulated by the city-state’s third Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in January 2004 (as Prime-Minister-Designate) and followed up in his brief ‘swearing-in’ speech on 12<sup>th</sup> August 2004. In essence, this paper considers how civil society contributes to the operation of what I term ‘gestural politics’ in Singapore. I argue that while to some extent, engagement with the concept of civil society is a political necessity, ‘new’ rhetoric about politics and civil society in Singapore – both by the new Lee government as well as civil society players – remains by and large gestural.

## *Bio-note*

Terence Lee is Chair Lecturer in Mass Communication and Chair of International Programs at the School of Media, Communication & Culture, Murdoch University, Perth, Western Australia. He is also a Research Fellow of the Asia Research Centre based at Murdoch University.

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# **Transient Workers Count Too?**

## **The intersection of citizenship and gender in Singapore**

**Lenore Lyons**

### *Abstract*

In November 2002, a group of Singaporean activists established a group called The Working Committee 2 (TWC2) to advocate for the rights of foreign domestic workers (FDWs) working in Singapore. By limiting both its lifespan and the scope of its activities the TWC2 avoided the requirement that all NGOs formally register with the Singapore Registrar of Societies. At the end of its year-long campaign, however, the group signalled its intention to set up a Home Help Resource Centre for maids and their employers. The new TWC2 (now called Transient Workers Count Too) was registered in August 2004. For some commentators, the TWC2 represents a new phase in the People's Action Party's (PAP) engagement with Singapore's 'civil society experiment' and a loosening up of the 'OB markers' (boundaries marking politically acceptable activism). An examination of the TWC2's experience, however, shows that the opportunities for Singaporean activists to address the politically fraught issues of citizenship and gender remain little changed. Nonetheless, the TWC2's success in raising the profile of FDWs has brought about some significant improvements in the regulatory regime governing the conditions of maid employment.

### *Bio-note*

Lenore Lyons is Deputy Director of the Centre for Asia-Pacific Social Transformation Studies (CAPSTRANS) at the University of Wollongong, Australia. She is currently working on a study of gender, the state and civil society in Singapore. She has published widely on the women's movement in Singapore, and cross-cultural feminist methodology. Her most recent publication is *A State of Ambivalence: The Feminist Movement in Singapore* by Brill Academic Publishers, Leiden, 2004.

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# **Beyond the Clutches: Political Dissent among Singaporeans Abroad**

**Marc Rerceretnam**

## *Abstract*

The penalising of prominent opposition figures via the Singaporean legal system has made many weary of confronting the PAP government on their own turf. Unwilling to take up this challenge, some Singaporeans appear more willing to push for change from overseas - outside the clutches of the PAP government. While it is undeniable that a considerable number of Singaporeans opposed to the PAP government, continue to work for a more open and democratic society from inside Singapore, just as many, if not more, are only prepared to take this course of action from overseas. There have been many prominent personalities within various expatriate Singaporean communities who have become involved in campaigns because they already had first hand experience of PAP government's crackdown on dissenters. Those who fled or left Singapore preferred to carry on the fight from abroad. This article examines the conditions surrounding the controversial 'Operation Spectrum' beginning in 1987, showing how this event played a major role in arousing suppressed feelings of justice among a new generation of Singaporeans, many of whom were living outside Singapore at the time.

## *Bio-note*

Dr Marc Rerceretnam recently completed his PhD at the University of Sydney. He is currently the president of the Australian Malaysian and Singapore Association (AMSA). Dr Rerceretnam was also elected as a Local Government Councillor in the Sydney municipality of Ashfield, in recent NSW Local Government elections held in March 2004.

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# **Making Sense of Singapore: A Postmodern Dilemma**

**Victoria Yew**

## *Abstract*

Contemporary Singapore is open to the ongoing dialectics of both local and global processes. Coming to grips with these forces has prompted Singapore to adopt numerous policy changes to keep abreast with the latest developments. Indeed, the impact is often immediate particularly given its diminutive population size, an approximate of a mere 4 million in 2003. Others, such as Singaporean sociologist Beng-Huat Chua, have compared the ongoing monitoring to deliberate socio-engineering. To date, we witness a growing discourse about Singapore to make better sense of this tiny champion of modernity. In fact, to use a fancy sociological catch phrase, Singapore is under siege of post modernity and its discontents. As a result, the meanings of transversing contemporary Singapore is anything, but predictable. This discussion challenges common assumptions and proposes an alternative view of Singapore as a post modern and multifarious society that far eludes rigid categorisations. This is not to suppose Singapore as a society far from the discontents of modernity. On the contrary, being Singaporean is only a point of departure.

## *Bio-note*

Victoria Yew is a PhD candidate in the Department of Sociology at Monash University. Her research interests include the sociology of self, religion and society. Along with her colleagues, James Gomez and Maya Ranganathan, Victoria is also currently editing a collection of essays about civil society in Singapore.

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