

Part I (De)-Constructing Master Narratives of the City

# Singapore Songlines Revisited: The World Class Complex and the Multiple Deaths of Context

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I turned eight in the harbour of Singapore. We did not go ashore, but I remember the smell—sweetness and rot, both overwhelming.

Last year I went again. The smell was gone. In fact, Singapore was gone, scraped, rebuilt. There was a completely new town there. (Koolhaas 1995: 1008?)

So begins Rem Koolhaas's classic meditation on Singapore as a *tabula rasa*, an architectural blank slate wiped clean and inscribed upon by new buildings, and then wiped clean again. It is a depiction of the city that resonates with me. In 1982, at the age of nine, I spent a delirious week with my family in that Singapore of "sweetness and rot". My siblings and I ate croissants for the first time at the luxurious Oberoi Imperial Hotel on Jalan Rumbia near River Valley Road. We watched our parents haggle in the markets of Chinatown, where I first encountered *cha kuay teow* and found the bitter taste of the cockles more unsettling than the rat that ran past our table and out onto the street. We afterwards wandered wide-eyed through old Bugis Street. The entire trip was a reverie, a slice of pure and other exotica. For the next decade and more I yearned to get back.

When I returned to conduct field research for my PhD in late-1999, I experienced that same feeling of punctured nostalgia and sensory grief that Koolhaas captures. The "smell was gone"; my childhood love was unrecognisable. To limit this sense of loss, I kept to a narrow circuit made up of a few appealing waypoints. All of these have now been erased or scraped clean and repurposed: the cheap although slightly cockroach-infested Chinese hotel on Armenian Street where I slept; the old National Library where I conducted most of my research; the Hock Hiap Leong *kopitiam* (opposite the old Tao Nan school) where I ate lunch; and the S11 food court near the library where, late at night, I watched Chinese girls and Indian guys drink together, and thereafter falsely

assumed (until I moved to the city-state) that the whole island heaved with a similarly illicit flirtation. On a few occasions, I ventured down to The Substation, today the last survivor of this earlier era, to listen to a battle of the bands being fought out in the garden. The contest was ultimately won by Hokkien-singing punk rockers.



Figure 1.1. Hock Hiap Leong on Armenian Street in 1980s prior to its redevelopment.

*Source:* Singapore Tourism Promotion Board (STPB).



Figure 1.2. 36 and 38 Armenian Street, Singapore. *Source:* Jacklee (2012).

Koolhaas attempts to make sense of Singapore's erasure of its spatial heritage, to the point where it has become, as he puts it, "uncontaminated by surviving contextual

remnants”. He sees the city—almost of all of which he claims to be “less than 30 years old” at the time of his return in 1990—as representing “the ideological production of the past three decades in its pure form”:

It is managed by a regime that has excluded accident and randomness: even its nature is entirely remade. It is pure intention: if there is chaos, it is *authored* chaos; if it is ugly, it is *designed* ugliness; if it is absurd, it is *willed* absurdity. Singapore represents a unique *ecology of the contemporary*. (Ibid.: 1011; original emphasis)

To explain this state of being, Koolhaas engages in what he calls “reverse alchemy”. Via the travel writer Bruce Chatwin (1998), he borrows the notion of “songlines”, the dreaming tracks that Australia’s aboriginal peoples believe “creator-beings” long ago wove across the landscape, conjuring it into existence. The songlines which Koolhaas explores combine to form a powerful narrative of transformation dating back to the United Nations urban renewal report for Singapore of 1963. Koolhaas particularly places the erasure of the old city in the context of worldwide fears about urban decay and population explosions during the 1960s. In addition, drawing heavily on the writings of sociologist Chua Beng Huat (1985), he presents independent Singapore as a product of the developmentalist-survivalist discourse of the island’s political elite. Ostensibly his account is non-judgemental, yet it becomes clear he deems the changes he has witnessed perturbing. Occasionally, his lens moves beyond Singapore’s ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) to examine other players in the city’s urban transformation: the Metabolist school of Asian architecture, for example, or the local architects and planners from SPUR (Singapore Planning and Urban Research Group). For the most part, however, this is tale of a very hard and largely uncontested state willing a new urban formation into being (Koolhaas 1995, Chua 1985).

Koolhaas’ storytelling is powerful and visceral, and even if his conclusions are sometimes questionable, I find it hard not to sympathise with the sentiments behind them. Yet, as a historian interested in Singapore, I feel that further exploration of the ideological

production of the modern city as realised in its physical space is necessary, as well as some further analysis of the government's erasure of contextual remnants. The aim of this essay is to pull back, to bring forward and to expand on Koolhaas's original Singapore songlines to examine other historical antecedents that set the stage for the new Singapore dreaming that commenced from the early-1960s, to thereby widen our understanding of the ideological forces which shaped this official dreaming, and finally, to further our appreciation of the creative voices that have come to contest it.

In doing so, I hope that several points emerge. The first is the extent to which the ideological production of Singapore has been the consequence of a struggle between powerful and influential figures in the city and their immediate local contexts, by which I mean those particular and idiosyncratic characteristics (be they historical, cultural, ecological or topographical) which define the spaces through which such elites move and give meaning to their thoughts and actions. Secondly, these powerful and influential figures, in their struggle with their immediate contexts—in their effort to build what Koolhaas would refer to as new and “uncontaminated” alternatives—have been propelled forward, while seeking validation from, their imaginative conceptions of the global. Indeed, one theme that runs right through this essay is the haunting of Singapore's urban imaginative field by elite constructions of the global, whether expressed through official arts policy or officially-guided urban development.

Lastly, following Koolhaas, this essay strives to reinstate the official imagination as a creative as well as destructive force in Singapore's post-war history. It argues that Singapore's PAP government, far from acting as a philistine state concerned only with technocratic pragmatism, has long been imbued with an aesthetic vision. The technocracy, in other words, has long indulged in its own poetics. These official poetics are critical elements that need to be considered in any discussion of the island's urban imaginative field because they have proved so often so hegemonic. Whether through the state's vision of Singapore as a concrete civilisation or a garden city or a global city, the official eye has shaped and continued to shape the island's urban aesthetics. As we shall

see, official visions of the city remain a challenge to arts practitioners in Singapore who seek to impress their individual sensibilities upon it.

In pursuing this argument, this essay diverges from certain seminal studies that have deployed the notion of political pragmatism to explain Singapore's PAP and its post-independence policies. The key work in this respect is that of the aforementioned sociologist Chua Beng Huat from the mid-1980s which has more recently been extended and refined by the political scientist Kenneth Paul Tan. To broadly summarise, Chua argues that the political philosophy of the PAP, since Singapore's independence in 1965, has contained both *operant* and *utopian* elements. The "umbrella" utopian element is the promised (although seemingly still far off) goal of Singapore becoming a mature and stable democratic society; the operant element is pragmatism. The PAP government's day-to-day operations are ruled by adopted solutions that are identified as "natural", "necessary" and "realistic", and that are consistent with a technically-efficient approach to using scarce resources optimally. Technological rationality rules over moral-political and aesthetic modes of thought; soft, qualitative evidence, principled arguments and concerns are dismissed in favour of so-called hard evidence of a statistical type. The *raison d'être* for such pragmatism is *continuous economic growth*, which is the singular criterion by which all government activities are evaluated (Chua 1985).<sup>1</sup>

To this picture, Kenneth Paul Tan adds two additional observations: (i) that pragmatism is often deployed strategically by the PAP to undermine alternative political philosophies, not to mention the PAP's own early idealism<sup>2</sup>; and (ii) that PAP pragmatism is not merely driven by the overarching goal of continuous economic growth, but "is intimately associated with—and, in some instances, even subordinate to—a more fundamental though much less publicly-expressed goal of the PAP government, which is to maintain the one-party dominant state with the PAP solidly in power" (Tan 2012: 80).

Yet as the remainder of this essay will suggest, there has long been something more than political pragmatism behind Singapore's physical transformation: a historical need to be seen to be modern and to display one's modernity internationally (at the

expense of what makes Singapore Singaporean)—a preoccupation, one might say, with both the colonial and then postcolonial global gaze. At key historical moments, the utopian element of the PAP’s political philosophy has done more than provide a post-hoc gloss to ad hoc materialist-driven pragmatism; it has, instead, shaped and determined the party’s operant elements, particularly through the imposition of a state-driven self-consciously modernist and a-historical architectural, and even ecological, aesthetic.

## <h2> Colonial Dreaming: The Global Imaginings of Dr Lim Boon Keng

During my return to Singapore as a doctoral student, the figure I spent most of my time researching at the old National Library was the Straits Chinese doctor Lim Boon Keng (1868–1957). The simplistic portrayal I was trying to contest (one that is now shifting thanks to the efforts of several scholars) was of Lim and his reformist circle of fellow Straits Chinese (also known as Baba or Peranakan Chinese) as simply “King’s Chinese”—that is to say, deracinated British Empire loyalists. China and being authentically Chinese mattered to the local-born, English-educated, Lim—which explains one of the pivotal moments in his early life-story. As a student of medicine in Edinburgh in his early twenties, Lim was approached by a professor to translate a Chinese scroll and proved unable. Meanwhile, China-born students who attended the same institution spurned him because of his inability to speak Mandarin (Rudolph 1998).

Lim’s desire to overcome his personal sense of inauthenticity, exposed internationally while he was a young man far away from home, appeared to have inspired the reform movement which he led on his return to Singapore in 1893. Its purpose was to transform and modernise the identities of his fellow Straits Chinese, and then those of the wider Chinese population in general. Lim dreamt of a future generation of Straits Chinese who spoke English and Mandarin fluently, who journeyed to China, as he himself did, and who took their fair share as “Sons of Han” by acting as intermediaries for European and Straits-based commercial enterprises. For Lim, the Straits Chinese were to form a class of global middlemen between the Middle Kingdom and the West, tasked with

reconciling these two great civilisations.<sup>3</sup>



Figure 1.3. Portrait of Dr Lim Boon Keng (1890s). *Source:* National Archives of Singapore (NAS).

Crucial to the articulation of this vision was Lim's discovery of the works of the exiled late-Qing Confucian reformer Kang Youwei, who arrived in Singapore in 1900. Kang inspired Lim to present Confucianism as a modern, rational and scientific religion that did not meddle in primitive supernaturalism, and that, in contrast to Christianity, was well equipped to deal with the theories of Darwin (Frost 2003; 2005). At the same time, however, Lim's radical Neo-Confucianism was a product of his effort to keep pace with developments in the wider regional-cum-global context through which he moved and expected himself to influence. Western missionaries he debated with in Singapore dismissed his movement as an imitation of the Indian Hindu reformist Brahmo Samaj that had arisen in Calcutta, and of the reformist Buddhist modernism then spreading from Ceylon across Asia from its base in Colombo. Lim, in reply, admitted his knowledge of

these other port-city movements and that he had, indeed, studied them. He was, in effect, in competition with them (*The Straits Times* 1899a; 1899b; 1899c; 1899d).

Already, the journalist and educationalist Tan Teck Soon, Lim's close ally in his Confucian revival activities, had interviewed Anagarika Dharmapala, the leader of Ceylon's Buddhist modernist revival, at the offices of Singapore's *Daily Advertiser* newspaper (1894). Their meeting occurred early in 1894 as Dharmapala made his way back to his homeland from the Chicago Parliament of Religions. In Chicago, the Sinhalese leader had presented Buddhism to the world as a modern scientific religion in harmony with the theory of evolution, in much the same way Lim would later do in the case of Confucianism. Lim's subsequent Neo-Confucian endeavours, which included a failed attempt to build a Confucian temple academy in Singapore, were intended for consumption by a similarly pan-Asian and international audience, one Lim reached out to via the same port-city literati networks that kept him in touch with the rest of the region and world. Besides Singapore journals, Lim wrote for the periodicals of India's Western-educated literati. Later, he would become a literary associate and friend of the famous Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore (*The Straits Times* 1902).<sup>4</sup> In the early 1900s, he intended his radical neo-Confucianism to put Singapore on these Asian progressives' global map.<sup>5</sup>

His efforts in this regard were constructive: they produced new journals (in Chinese and English) and new associations, and eventually new schools which taught Mandarin. They were also destructive, although perhaps not as much as Lim would have liked them to have been. His reform movement took aim at many of the local cultural contexts—and the rites of belonging enacted through them—which Lim had been born into as a Baba, and which he had probably not, until his international exposure in Edinburgh, questioned. He and his self-styled “progressive” young Baba party denounced ancestral worship, *feng shui*, food offerings and prayers to the gods, as well as Buddhist- Daoist wedding and funeral customs.<sup>6</sup> They succeeded in getting the management of the Thian Hock Keng, Singapore's principal Chinese temple, to end its involvement in the

Chingay and Hungry Ghosts' festivals—annual commemorations they claimed embarrassed local Chinese in the eyes of the world's nations. At the temple meeting where Lim and his supporters pushed for this reform, they expressed their belief that Chinese temples should no longer be places of prayer and petitioning, but of rational remembrance and reflection upon the deeds of past heroes. Henceforth, the Chinese temple was to be what we might today think of as merely a meditative heritage site (*The Straits Chinese Magazine* 1906).

Yet it was local Malay-influenced Peranakan Chinese customs that most consumed Lim and his circle's initial reformist energies. The hairstyles and dress of Nonya (Straits Chinese women) were attacked, as was the speaking of Baba Malay. In 1899, Lim and his associate Song Ong Siang established the Straits Chinese Girls School to educate future Nonya out of their Nonya-ness by teaching them domestic science, English and, initially, while Lim's first wife was alive, Mandarin. The idea was that once cleansed of their Malay-influenced habits these girls would as mothers commence the education from home of Lim's future generation of globe-trotting Anglo-Chinese Baba (Frost 2003).

Two years before the school opened, Lim published a lecture entitled "Our Enemies" in which he described the Malayan Peninsula as home to "wild and restless tribes antagonistic at once to the routine work of civilised society and to the nobler demands of literature". His pioneering Chinese ancestors, he claimed, had managed to cultivate Chinese literature "in spite of their Malay surroundings" (Lim 1897). Yet the darkest side of Lim's quest for cultural ethnic cleansing was revealed a decade later, in an article he contributed to a fund-raising publication in aid of the Straits Chinese Girl School. In this essay, entitled "Race Deterioration in the Tropics", Lim placed the blame for the "decay" of local-born Indians and Arabs in the Straits Settlements and Malaya on the "constant influx of Malay blood", an influx which rendered both races "indistinguishable from the Malays, except in certain anthropological characters". In a similar vein, he attributed the decline of the local Eurasian community on "Malay wives",

who “often returned to the barbarous ways of their people” so that “the children imbibed with their milk the instincts of the Malay rather than those of their European fathers”. To arrest what Lim perceived to be the Baba’s own racial deterioration, he recommended their “removal from the Tropics”: “The social atmosphere must be purified. A proper system of moral education for the home must be instituted, and everyone must be instilled with the highest ideals of the race” (Lim 1909: ?).

The unease of influential and self-styled ‘progressive’ Singaporean elites with their immediate local contexts thus appears to have a long history. Does Singapore therefore owe something of its later urban transformation to this earlier colonial songline? How far did Lim’s battle to reform local Chinese identities and avert tropical race “deterioration” leave remnants of ideas that were later resuscitated in the independent city state ruled by the PAP? Lee Kuan Yew was, after all, born into the Peranakan Chinese community which Lim Boon Keng, intellectually at least, once lorded it over in Singapore. In the 1950s, most of Lee’s “Oxley Rise set”, he later admitted, were colonial bourgeoisie, educated in Western universities abroad, as Lim and many of his circle had been. Lee and his government promoted English education and then subsequently, from the late-1970s, a speak Mandarin campaign in their effort to position the whole island of Singapore in the same role as Lim had dreamt of for the Baba: as the ultimate Europe-Asia intermediary.

At various moments in its history, the PAP legitimised its urban engineering through what Koolhaas refers to as the “ideological umbrella” of Neo-Confucianism (Koolhaas 1995: 1019). In addition, Lee, like Lim, appears to have similarly viewed Singapore’s natural tropical environs as an enervating obstacle to civilisation and progress. In 1967, Lee lectured an assembly of foreign journalists in Tokyo on his personal belief in the “cultural pattern”, determined by “many things, including climatic conditions”, through which it was possible to demarcate nations in various parts of the Asia region, and to explain the “different tempo” in each which explained why East Asian nations were more industrious (National Archives of Singapore [NAS] 1967: 5-7). Two

years earlier, in a speech Lee gave in New Zealand, earlier in the same year that Singapore separated from the Federation of Malaysia, he claimed of Southeast Asia as a whole:

[I]f you look at the region you will not find cultures which created societies capable of intense discipline, concentrated effort, over sustained periods. Climate, the effects of relatively abundant society and the tropical conditions produced a people largely extrovert, easy going and leisurely. They've got their wars, they have their periods of greatness when the Hindus came in the seventh and again in the 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, in the Majapahit and Srivijaya empires. But in between the ruins of Borobudur and what you have of Indonesia today, you see a people primarily self-indulgent. (NAS 1965a: 14)

Asked in a 2009-10 interview to what Singapore owed its success (in addition to its history of racial tolerance), Lee replied:

Air conditioning. Air conditioning was the most important invention for us, perhaps one of the signal inventions of history. It changed the nature of civilization by making development possible in the tropics. (quoted in Chang and Winter 2015: 101)

In sum, there appear multiple examples of ideological continuity, and even more so if we include Lee's discussions of race during the latter part of his political career.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, the way this particular songline mutated is as important to recognise as its origins. During the party's first two decades, Lee and his PAP lieutenants, such as the Tamil Indian S. Rajaratnam and the Eurasian E. W. Barker, were hardly susceptible to Victorian racial discourse to the extent that Lim was. Rather it could be argued that they were far more at home in Singapore's everyday cosmopolitan context than Lim, with his public concerns about racial and cultural purity, was ever likely to have been. As we shall discuss further shortly, Lee and his Oxley Rise set were to become committed to a vision

of Singapore as a harmonious and multi-ethnic utopia built around the banishment of prejudice based on race, language or religion.

In any case, Lim's influence over the way Chinese elites imagined the city of Singapore and its inhabitants waned after World War One. Frustrated at his failure to gain equal rights as a British imperial citizen, he departed Singapore in 1921 to work in China for the next two decades, whereupon new voices emerged in the city that challenged his earlier thinking regarding tropically-induced degradation. One of the ironies of the generation of China-born literati who arrived in Singapore after 1918 to transform its Chinese-language intellectual scene was their eventual embrace of their new environment. Filled with the ideals and patriotism of the New Culture and May Fourth movements these newcomers may have been. Nevertheless, their editors insisted that they acclimatise themselves to local reading tastes, which meant embracing the Nanyang (the Southern Ocean) and its distinct ecology (Yeo 1993). From 1937, the loose collection of China-born artists that became known as Singapore's Nanyang School did likewise. As (relatively speaking) new arrivals, these writers and painters were hardly less globally-savvy than the local-born Lim and his reformist circle. In hindsight, however, they appear far more appreciative of Singapore's immediate tropical context.

## <h2> The PAP as Creator-destroyers: Post-war Arts and the Cosmopolitan Vision of Singapore

The post-war era in which these China-born artists came to public notice was a period not only of political turbulence but of great creative excitement and optimism. From 1945, up until the early 1960s, the Singaporean arts scene flourished. Along with the Nanyang School of painters, a group of leftist Chinese social-realist artists established the Equator Art Society in 1956, their stark, black and white woodcut prints of everyday political and social struggles contrasting with the Bali-inspired Tropicabilia of Liu Kang, Cheong Soo Pieng and the like. Literary life in Singapore was energised by cosmopolitan Anglophone poets who studied at the University of Malaya (founded in 1949), and by

ASAS 50 (Angkatan Sasterawan, founded in 1950), a gathering of Malay and Indonesian leftist writers that included the renowned Singapore-born poet S. N. Masuri. Singapore's architectural scene soon arose from the wartime wreckage reinvigorated, while its burgeoning film industry would in the 1950s bring together audiences of Chinese, Malays, Indians and others through the pan-ethnic appeal of P. Ramlee. Ramlee's portrayals of local ethnic archetypes, and his scenic representations of the rural and urban essences of Singapore and Malaya, became the imprint on celluloid of a nation-in-waiting. Meanwhile, at Singapore's "world" amusement parks, a mixed audience of Chinese, Malays, Indians and Europeans shopped, danced and watched performances of *bangsawan* (Malay language musical theatre) and *gewutuan* (Chinese cabaret) (Frost and Balasingamchow 2009: 340–3).

A key point here is that Singapore developed into a regional cultural hub minus state intervention and policy-making. The city drew writers, film directors and artists to it from China, India, the Philippines and Indonesia, not because it possessed a world-class creative infrastructure and the promise of government subsidies, but because it allowed for a relatively open trade in ideas. Colonial restrictions notwithstanding (especially during the Malayan Emergency of 1948-60), this trade remained free enough to allow for artistic experimentation, emulation and competition. To those who believed they shared in a common struggle against colonialism and inequality—and, of course, for those who believed their role as artists was to capture and document this struggle's essence—Singapore became a magnet because it contained that essential duality: both the "sweetness and the rot".

The PAP's nascent utopianism belonged to this wider cultural efflorescence and exchange. Not only did the party's leaders look to create a cosmopolitan civic identity in Singapore, they began to imagine a broader cosmopolitan Malaya which belonged to all "Malayans"—be they Malay, Chinese, Indian or Eurasian. Having attained self-government from the British in 1959, the PAP, led by its Minister for Culture S. Rajaratnam, campaigned to see Malay (not English) emerge as the common language of

Singapore's diverse populace. Rajaratnam dreamt of a "Malayan" culture that encompassed elements from each of the island's different ethnic groups. Initially, this official dream manifest itself through state-sponsored Aneka Ragam Rakyat (People's Cultural Concerts), the PAP's politically-correct version of a cultural eclecticism that had long been available at Singapore's "Worlds" (Ibid.: 389–91).

Most significantly, Singapore's ideological production as a profoundly modernist material space—the architectural songline whose origins Koolhaas locates in both the global and local urban anxieties of the mid- to late 1960s—commenced earlier in the same decade, when the PAP began to imagine the city as the gleaming progressive metropolis of a young Malayan nation. The party's social revolution in housing, health, education and industry, which it launched so quickly after it swept Singapore's first general elections in 1959, was intended to be the blueprint for a second stage: the export of this revolution to the Malayan Peninsula with which Singapore merged in 1963 to form the new Federation of Malaysia. Urban renewal in Singapore, which in Koolhaas's essay, becomes a euphemism for the razing of the old city by bulldozer, in fact began with this utopian dream of Malaysia in mind. As an oft-quoted official booklet on Singapore's housing revolution put it in 1965 (a work composed before Singapore's departure from the Federation of Malaysia later that year):

What is urban renewal? Urban renewal means no less than the gradual demolition of virtually the whole 1,500 acres of the old city and its replacement by an integrated modern city centre worthy of Singapore's future role as the New York of Malaysia. (Housing and Development Board [HDB] 1965: 84)

Lee Kuan Yew, in the same publication, expressed his view that the more than 50,000 Singapore's Housing Development Board (HDB) flats which had by this time sprung up in various parts of the island were more than merely a social necessity. They were, as importantly, a political and cultural symbol; the beginning, even, of a new social contract:

All great civilizations have this hallmark in common—imposing public buildings and good private dwellings...Singapore has always had imposing public buildings—thanks to the British—intended to awe the people into obedience BUT not the private dwellings, which its elected government has erected...Singapore is a proud city. It is acquiring the one hallmark of a great civilized community, magnificent buildings plus comparable workers housing. (Ibid.: 1)

In Lee's vision, Singapore would achieve the hallmarks of "a great civilised community" through steel girders and concrete. Its imposing concretised civilisation would reveal what could be achieved in Southeast Asia notwithstanding, in his eyes, the deleterious impact of "climate, the effects of relatively abundant society and the tropical conditions". Furthermore, this new urban solidity would serve as an example to the rest of the Malayan Peninsula of the "winds of change" the PAP would bring if voted for in Malaysia's 1964 general elections.



Figure 1.4. Chief Architect of HDB Teh Cheang Wan (fourth from right) looked on as Minister for National Development Lim Kim San (third from right) and Malaysian Minister for Local Government and Housing Khaw Khai Boh (second from right) listened

to a briefing by a Housing and Development Board (HDB) official during the Malaysian Minister's visit to HDB (1965). *Source*: MITA.

To help realise this dream, three United Nations inspectors—a German, an American and a Japanese—had earlier visited Singapore to produce for the government their infamous “Growth and Urban Renewal” report of 1963. Over time, this document has attained a folkloric status for having provided the original sanction for the thirty years of demolition that followed. As early as 1964, Lee Kuan Yew used it to justify the demolition of Malay homes in the Singapore neighbourhoods of Crawford, Rochor and Kampong Glam (Frost and Balasingamchow 2009: 417–8). Koolhaas reads this document in much the same fashion: as an international warrant for future mass urban destruction. He notes that the report breaks down urban renewal into three key elements: “(1) conservation (2) rehabilitation and (3) rebuilding”. Nevertheless, he sees its recommendation that “*a commitment be made to identify the values of some of Singapore’s existing areas as well as their shortcomings and build and strengthen these values while planning to remove some of their shortcomings*” as no more than a “pondering of preservation”, one that in retrospect can be taken either as merely as “lip service” or as a or as these experts’ belated self-realisation that their overall recommendations “will seal the island’s fate with the transformations they are about to set in motion” (Koolhaas 1995: 1025–6).

Koolhaas might not be the only person guilty of misreading this critical document, but he remains one of the more influential. In terms of our overall discussion, it is illuminating what the UN experts’ report actually wrote. At this critical juncture in Singapore history, urban renewal was not to be, as the island’s authorities later defined it, “no less than the gradual demolition of virtually the whole 1,500 acres of the old city”—on this point the inspectors were explicit. Rather in “framing objectives”, they wrote, “it is important to know the purpose of urban renewal. It is more than simply tearing down

sections and rebuilding them”. The full quotation which Koolhaas selectively pillages reads:

With all its confrontations, the question that an urban renewal program must face and resolve is whether to make a commitment to the retention of its areas or to raze them and create something different in their place. We recommend that a commitment be made to identify the values of some of Singapore’s existing areas as well as their shortcomings and build and strengthen these values while planning to remove some of their shortcomings. A city of predominantly Chinese people for example, without a Chinatown would be an anachronism. The Chinatowns of cities are among their most attractive features and they have evolved out of their own travail rather than out of planned models. Too many people derive their livelihood from such areas to be uprooted en masse. Many prefer to continue living in them rather than in the housing projects... Chinatown can also become a main focus of tourism and a locus of better restaurants and shops as well as provide *a contrast in a big city that needs divergencies between old and new, between the superimposed and the spontaneous. Every big city needs escape hatches from sameness and order and areas like Chinatown can emerge into important examples—if they are treated with something more subtle than the steam-shovel.*

(Abrams, Jobe and Koenigsberger 1963: 121–2, my emphasis)

In 1963, the UN experts hired to advise the PAP government wanted key urban contextual remnants in Singapore to be preserved. They were acutely aware, given that Singapore was the first city in Asia to undergo major urban renewal, of the need to maintain internal “divergencies”, those “spontaneous” architectural elements which allowed for an escape from the “sameness and order” of the abstract and rationalised urban space they proposed elsewhere. What is more, two decades before the Singapore government would awake to such possibilities, the UN experts provided a clear pragmatic

justification for conservation and preservation in terms of growing the island's tourism and leisure sectors.

And more than merely “pondering” preservation, the UN experts provided explicit guidelines as to how it was to be achieved. Areas of the city would first be publicly declared as designated for urban renewal through “rehabilitation and selective not wholesale demolition”. Rehabilitation would consist of five stages which would include: (i) a survey of every block to determine which areas were to be conserved, which rehabilitated and which demolished and rebuilt; (ii) the re-planning and rebuilding of blocks where better parking and traffic flows were required—“in line with a regard for their composition and flavour”; and (iii) a “code enforcement programme to compel the repair and preservation of buildings” which were “sound and salvageable”. The UN experts understood Singapore's central business district would pose a challenge. Nonetheless, they concluded that, “Here too, conservations coupled with selective improvements are the keys” (Ibid.: 120–3).

But the government of Singapore, keen to transform the city into a modern “New York of Malaysia”, was at that time working to a different timetable and with a different set of priorities. It therefore took from the report only those “pragmatic” recommendations which then suited it. Eventually, in the 1980s, the authorities declared patches of the city as heritage districts: namely Chinatown, Kampong Glam, Little India, Emerald Hill, the Singapore River and key parts of the old colonial town. In the mid-1960s, however, ignoring the UN experts' full recommendations, they pursued the old town of Singapore's “gradual demolition” as part of their vision of a modernist urban utopia, and subsequently justified such demolition over the following three decades as a pragmatic necessity and inevitability.<sup>8</sup>

## <h2>A Liberating Separation? Building, Flattening and Greening

Such a vision of Singapore's exemplar place in the Federation of Malaysia would be short lived. But during his announcement of this dream's death in August 1965, did

Lee Kuan Yew cry on television tears of relief as well as regret? Did Separation mark the demise of a wider context that had been eating away at Lee's personal vision of a modernist Singaporean utopia? Had Merger, in fact, been turning Singapore more Malaysian rather than, as Lee had hoped, Malaysia more Singaporean? Was the failure of Merger, the cutting of those bonds of kin and geography that Lee wept over, a liberation for the PAP leadership from previous constraints—from the ties and obligations of historical and geographical belonging?<sup>9</sup>

According to Koolhaas, Lee was an admirer of the works of the futurologists Herman Kahn and Alvin Toffler, and in aftermath of Separation a markedly futurologist language became a feature of PAP utopian discourse. In an address to a gathering of local teachers, Lee made clear his view that Singapore did not possess any common historical context from which a modern national identity could be formed. The Singaporean, he argued, was not someone like the American—who could tell you “all about George Washington or Abraham Lincoln... For he has history, and he can say, ‘These are the great events in the life of my people’... We are not in the same position” (Koolhaas 1995: 1019). Rajaratnam, in a speech in 1968, went further:

We do not lay undue stress on the past. We do not see nation-building and modernisation as primarily an exercise in reuniting present generations with a past generation and its values and glories... A generation encouraged to bask in the values of the past and hold on to a static future will never be equipped to meet a future predicated on jet travel, atomic power, satellite communication, electronics and computers. For us the task is not one of linking past generations with the present generation, but the present generation with future generations. (quoted in Frost and Balasingamchow 2009: 430–1)

Nor was this official attack on history simply an elite one. As the historian Mary Turnbull has noted, a popular slogan for young PAP supporters at the time of Separation was

“SINGAPORE HAS NO HISTORY. SINGAPORE’S HISTORY BEGINS NOW”

(Turnbull 2009: 1, original emphasis).

The post-Separation myth of Singapore as a “sleepy fishing village” before 1819, possessing little of significance in the wider world or state of things, might similarly be construed as part of this official effort to escape historical context. In an interview with a British journalist just two days after independence, Lee described Singapore as just such a space back in the days before Sir Stamford Raffles landed: “I am here because over 100 years ago, the British came to Singapore, a little fishing village, and decided to develop the place” (NAS 1965b: 3). Interestingly, Raffles’ vision of Singapore was never to render the island historically context-less. Rather, he dreamt of a Singapore rooted in the region and its past, an island whose colonial development would restore it to its ancient role as a centre of Malay (in its broadest sense) civilisation (Frost and Balasingamchow 2009: 49–58).

This official concern to present Singapore as history-less following independence adds a new dimension to our understanding of the intensified urban destruction that followed. Over the next three decades, the government demolished buildings and removed and relocated whole villages, thus ending for some, the rituals and rites they had periodically inscribed onto the island. In their place, the state built new edifices of its own, or permitted the construction of those, once land was open to private investors from the 1970s, which reflected the capitalist prosperity the state had orchestrated. Across the island, an imposing concrete “heartland” of HDB blocks, the solid walls of which (eventually pasted with official messages) served to remind the people to whom they ought to feel gratitude. The state relocated temples, and in so doing completely reordered Singapore’s sacred geography—as did its ban, imposed from 1964 (following the Chinese-Malay riots of that year) on all religious foot processions for these two communities, whether their members were Christian, Daoist, Buddhist or Muslim. The state built multi-ethnic community centres which drew people away from clan and other

communal associations. It flattened hills, filled in swamps and added land to the island where once there had been sea.

As Koolhaas observes, the state also “remade” nature. Driving Lee Kuan Yew’s “greening” of Singapore policy (which commenced in 1963, was renewed in 1967, and then took off as a public movement in the 1970s with the inauguration of officially led tree-planting drives) was the desire to cover up the bare concrete structures of his exemplar modern Asian capital. In addition, Lee hoped that Singapore, as a comfortable garden city, would become more attractive to international visitors and investors. Yet the green “oasis” he set about making was hardly a throwback to the ecological context celebrated by an earlier generation of local China-born writers and artists. The greening of Singapore, at least during the first twenty years, was in its own way largely context-less. Tree and plant species were chosen because of their ability to grow fast and provide shade rather than because they were indigenous. Singapore’s tree-growing technicians, having discovered that varieties native to tropical Southeast Asia could not survive in the newly concretised metropolis, were forced to resort to species imported from drier climates (Koolhaas 1995; Auger 2013; Lee 2000).

Politicians in Singapore have reminisced about this era of transformation as one in which the young Singaporean nation overcame the odds. It might equally be understood as a period in which the state made subservient or completely erased numerous other contexts that gave meaning to the physical space Singaporeans inhabited: sacred, ecological, topographical and historical. Nation-building was *other-context erasing*, and after 1965 the rites of Singaporean belonging increasingly belonged to the state. Singaporeans became united by the sameness and order of officially regulated and defined experiences—in their HDBs, at their schools, during (for men) National Service, and even through government-led tree planting drives. For some years, the only foot procession that gave ritual meaning and a sense of temporal continuity in the modernised metropolis was the August 9th National Day Parade—until 1973, when the Singapore

Tourism Board realised that more was needed in a city that aspired to be “Instant Asia” and reinstated (after a 67 year absence) the city’s annual Chingay parade.

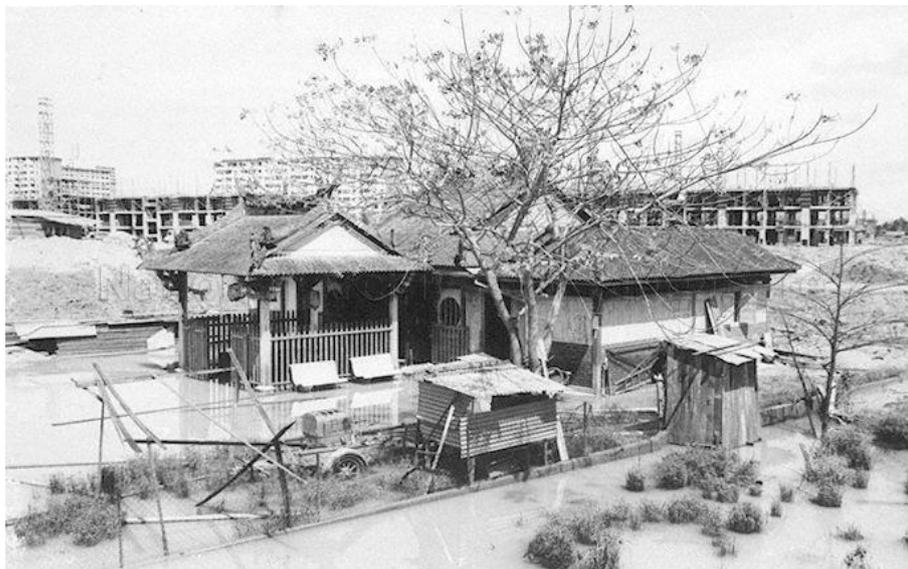


Figure 1.5. Poh Tiong Keng at Kim Keat estate of Toa Payoh, visible from Toa Payoh Lorong 6. In the background were HDB flats being constructed. This temple was also known as the “sunken temple”, as the ground it was built on was on low or former swampy ground and its surrounding would often be flooded. The Poh Tiong Keng temple was eventually demolished in 1977. *Source:* Ministry of Information and the Arts (MITA).

Today, there are signs Singapore has come through this period of creative yet destructive urban development. A new generation of politicians, planners, curators and architects, not to mention heritage and environmental activists, have imbued the city state with a reawakened sense of history, sacred geography and place. The struggle to preserve a sense of local context is ongoing yet some gains have been made. For Tony Tan Keng Joo, the former Chief Architect of HDB responsible for Singapore’s entire public housing programme from 1983 to 2003, a watershed moment in urban planning came in the late 1990s, during the early stages of the Punggol New Town development. In a 2012 interview, Tan recalled that up until this development the pressure to build housing as fast and as cheaply as possible through the destruction of existing landscapes had become “engrained in the psyche of our planners, architects and engineers. In the initial stages of

Punggol New Town, they just followed the same approach, putting down a grid and sending in the bulldozers to flatten everything”. Nevertheless, as the “buildings started to rise in Punggol”, Tan and his team “began to rethink the design strategy” in order “to preserve what was left of the existing natural landscape”:

Yes, Punggol New Town was the starting point for a change in mindset.

As professionals, designing and building for others, planners must understand that the idiosyncrasies of a site are in fact its main asset. Only by preserving the memories of that location, and creating an identity, can a new town then have a character of its own, connecting residents with where they live. (Fleetwood and Meijia 2012: 150)

## <h2>Bye-Bye Hinterland: The Birth and Legacy of Rajaratnam’s Global Dreaming

Though it might not represent an unbroken continuity, when seeking to understand the interplay between Singapore’s spatial and imaginative environments, it is also worth noting one further post-independence development harking back to an earlier period: the official dream that arose to fill the void left by Singapore’s failure to become the “New York of Malaysia”. In 1972, Foreign minister S. Rajaratnam, a good two decades before academics picked up on the idea, informed a gathering of international journalists that Singapore had recently acquired a new status as a “global city”. For Rajaratnam (NAS 1972: 3), this metamorphosis into what he described as “a new kind of city... a new form of human organisation and settlement that has... no precedent”, made explicable Singapore’s “inexplicable” success following Separation, and its avoidance of the “gradual relapse into economic decay” that some had predicted. Before 1965, he admitted the PAP assumed Singapore needed a natural hinterland to provide it with its raw materials and domestic market. The years of progress that followed Separation had disabused the party of their former mistaken belief.<sup>10</sup>

The “Global City, now in its infancy”, Rajaratnam claimed, was “the child of modern technology”—namely, electronic communications, giant tankers and supersonic

planes—and of “industrial organization”. It was also the future. “Agrarian romantics” who waxed lyrical about “the countryside surrounding the cities” were simply expressing the “defiant cry” of those who looked on while the countryside was “swallowed up relentlessly by the cities”. Thanks to the population boom across Asia, the old context they were desperately trying to hold onto was fast disappearing. Rajaratnam, in addition, argued that global cities such as Singapore were unprecedented because “unlike earlier cities”, they were:

Linked intimately with one another. Because they are more alike they reach out to one another through the tentacles of technology. Linked together they form a chain of cities which today shape and direct, in varying degrees of importance, a world-wide system of economics.

(Ibid.: 5)

Singapore had evolved into a global “more than a regional city”, he continued, because the economic benefits of being merely the latter—as the city’s entrepôt trade declined—were not sufficient to sustain it. Instead, Singapore’s future now lay with the worldwide club of other global cities and “the international economic system” that this club shared in common (Ibid.: 3–8).



Figure 1.6. Television Singapura broadcasting Minister for Culture giving a speech when he launched Television Singapura commercial service (1964). *Source*: MITA.

In a diatribe against the field of urban history and its obsession with generic types, Raj Chandavarkar, the social historian of India, proclaimed the city as a “relational category constituted by and dependent upon its wider political economy” (Chandavarkar 2009: 218–9). In essence, Chandavarkar argued, cities are made by their hinterlands, just as they in turn make their hinterlands; one cannot therefore be thought of or studied independently of the other. Such a perspective is clearly applicable to Chandavarkar’s hometown of Bombay, with its deep connections to the Indian countryside which fed it and provided it with labour. It would also appear applicable to the Italian Renaissance city republics and their *contados*. However, Rajaratnam’s vision of Singapore in the early 1970s flies in the face of any such presumption that a rural hinterland alone constitutes a city’s wider political economy. As he told his journalist audience, “Once you see Singapore as a Global City, the problem of hinterland becomes unimportant because for a global city the world is its hinterland” (NAS 1972: 8).

Rajaratnam does not appear to have included the arts in his imagining of Singapore as a global city. At the time, he was more concerned to emphasise the electronic communications and supersonic air travel that made Singapore’s contact with other cities in the global cities club so regular and rapid. However, the way his official dreaming of Singapore has impacted on its government’s arts policy in the decades since has been significant. By the start of the new millennium, a new generation of PAP planners recognised that though Singapore’s First World status had been achieved economically, the city lagged behind in its cultural life. In the year 2000, the then Ministry of Information and the Arts produced its *Renaissance City Report* which articulated “a vision of Singapore as a world-class city supported by a vibrant cultural scene...one of the top cities in the world to live, work and play in” (MITA 2000: 4). The report employed comparative data from what it labelled “benchmarking cities” to “obtain

a clearer picture of where Singapore stands in terms of cultural development” and set down a five to ten-year plan whereby Singapore could “reach a level of development that would be comparable to cities like Hong Kong, Glasgow and Melbourne” (Ibid.). In the longer term, the objective was “to join London and New York in the top rung of cultural cities” (Ibid.). Just as Lim Boon Keng had once looked sideways to other modernizing cities in his competitive quest for an internationally-recognized Singaporean cultural modernity, so too did the island’s architects of global progress a century later.

For these planners, the global city club now provided a new context when making their assessments of Singapore’s arts scene and when recommending policies to “improve” it. What this comparative data consisted of, and exactly where Singapore stood in the global city club in cultural terms, was evident a decade later in the 2010 *Report of the Economic Strategies Committee*. In one sense, this document indicates a maturation of the official urban vision: “Singapore’s future must rest on being a global city. New York and London are what they are, not because of their specific economic activities, but because people want to be there” (Economic Strategies Committee [ESC] 2010: 9). In what was possibly a tacit acknowledgement that decades-long urban destruction had robbed Singapore of its distinctiveness, the report emphasised the need to add “character” to the city in order to make it a “distinctive global city”. To this end, it concluded, arts and artists ought to be given considerable state support as they strove to give Singapore a unique flavour.

Nonetheless, when it came to the how and the why of such state-led creativity-making, it was clear the ghost of Rajaratnam’s original global city vision still haunted Singapore’s planners:

To be a leading global city is to be part of an elite community of world cultural capitals. Singapore ranks highly in various business and liveability indices for our first world business and city infrastructure and networks. While we have obtained first-world standards in business and liveability, we are still lagging global city standards for culture. (The

footnote reads: “In a recent Global Cities report, Singapore ranked seventh overall and within the top ten in terms of business activity and human capital but it ranked 37th in cultural experience.”) Our cultural sector falls behind that of global cities like London, Paris, New York and Tokyo in terms of scale, diversity and demand. On the other hand there has been a major shift in focus in the global cultural landscape towards Asia, as evidenced by the booming Asian contemporary art market and massive investment in cultural infrastructure by competing Asian cities. (The footnote then lists Hong Kong, Seoul and Abu Dhabi as major global city competitors in this regard). To be a player in the league of top global cities, we need to make significant investments in our cultural capital and landscape.... (Ibid.: 70–1)

The report was able to then list, through the efforts of its subcommittee, where such investment should be directed in order to make Singapore a “hub for the arts” and “an influential innovator of distinctive cultural experiences with global appeal”:

We must develop thriving creative and arts clusters—distinguished for both their development of Asian content and appeal to an international audience. We should also aim to host more pinnacle global events, building on the new vibrancy of the city and Marina Bay. (Ibid.: 9)

How was the ranking that had so bothered these planners—37th in the global cities club for “cultural experience”—been arrived at? The league table of global cities in question was produced by the international consultancy firm A. T. Kearney. According to its website, A. T. Kearney’s specialist expertise includes: aerospace and defence, automotive, chemicals, communications media and technology, consumer products and retail, financial institutions, healthcare, metals and mining, oil and gas, private equity, public sector, transportation, infrastructure and utilities. It does not, it appears, include the arts or cultural resource management. What importance did these international consultants assign “cultural experience” in the making of leading global cities? The

answer was “15 per cent”. How did they assign this grade in their assessments? By awarding cities points based on the access they provided “to major sporting events, museums and other expos” (A.T. Kearney 2016: 7). In sum, the global arts complex that Singapore’s planners imagined in 2010 was one that looked to project the city on an international stage, in which cultural excellence was achieved through diverting funds to international exhibitions, mega-museums, Formula One and 50,000-seater stadia.

## <h2>Art as Resistance to the State’s Global Dreaming?

The chief aim of this discussion has been to explore the elite and official dreams that have dominated the urban imaginative field in Singapore, whether such dreams have manifest themselves for Singaporeans through the spatial environment which envelops them, or through the cultural policies which direct and sometimes circumscribe them. Our emphasis, when discussing a present-day society in which freedom of expression is permitted only so far as what is expressed falls within quite restrictive state-determined parameters, has perhaps inevitably been on the “hard state” rather than the “soft city”. But what, then, of this “soft city”, which invites you, so Jonathan Raban (1976: 9) claims, “to remake it, to consolidate it into a shape you can live in” as it bends to the individual imagination?

We have stressed the fact that individual imaginations in Singapore have repeatedly had to compete with and against the urban visions of the city’s official dreamers. That these official imaginative constructs — most recently the “smart city”, and before that the “Renaissance city”, the “global city league”, the “garden city” and the “New York of Malaysia” — need to be dissected goes without saying, especially when the state seeks to enlist local creatives to assist in their propagation. It likewise goes without saying that the continuing hardness of the Singapore state in its attitude to censorship means that the relationship between local creatives and their government will probably continue to be fraught and periodically oppositional.

At the same time, it needs to be recognized that this relationship has become, as a result of the increasing funding and infrastructure the state now offers local creatives, an increasingly interdependent one, a development that raises a whole set of new questions regarding Singapore's urban imaginative field. For one thing, what sort of creativity does the government, as it strives to make the city more globally distinctive, conjure into existence? What sort of aesthetic expression does an officialdom that yearns to create a global arts hub organise and configure? As importantly, will creatives working within this configuration become influential enough to change the way the ruling party imagines the city it continues to govern?

Some months before the *Renaissance City Report* of the year 2000 appeared in Singapore, I wandered off my daily circuit between Armenian Street and the old National Library to explore the recently opened Singapore Art Museum. Here, I caught the cultural medallion winner Lee Wen's satirical mixed media installation *World Class Society*. In it, the visitor looks down a long cloth funnel at the artist on a video screen intoning, ad infinitum, lines such as: "We have world class food in world class restaurants and world class hotels. Because we are world class... a world class airport, a world class government, world class artists and a world class museum".



Figure 1.7. Lee Wen's "World Class Society" (1999). Installation, video, soft sculptures, survey, etc... dimensions variable. *Source*: Singapore Art Museum (SAM).

I found this work consoling. It was not just an outsider such as myself who responded in this way to Singapore's "world class" complex. Somewhere in the hard state someone had permitted this artistic act of subversion to take place within a national arts institution. Having subsequently worked with government heritage and media agencies across Singapore, I came to realise that the city's hard state is nevertheless, like all states, an assemblage. The planners and politicians who dream up futurist urban visions form one part of this assemblage. They might, and they do, find their visions mediated, remoulded, subtly un-dreamt or even subverted by other parts of this assemblage.<sup>11</sup> In spite of dipping, for the purposes of the present discussion, into the roots and iterations of Singapore's global city benchmarking fixation, I am aware of the striking contrast presented by the city's National Art Gallery. Although this institution was established to cement Singapore's status as a global cultural hub, it has done so, thus far, through a curatorial focus on Southeast Asia. In this case, an older Singapore songline, dating back to the city's post-1945 cultural efflorescence and even before, appears to have been re-invigorated.

Of course, Singapore's tabula rasa syndrome, which its official planners have until recently accepted as inevitable—and which, as the video artist Ho Tzu Nyen has noted, at some point in the 1990s transitioned from the "bull-dozing stage" to the "perpetual makeover" in which "nothing can be left alone", whereby the "lifespans of things and buildings are abridged" and "everything comes with an expiry date"—this syndrome certainly remains a challenge for those seeking to leave their creative imprint on the city. Juan Foo, quoted in a 2008 study by the political scientist Kenneth Paul Tan, speaks of it being "increasingly difficult to have a continuity and consistency of the cinematic landscapes that are depicted in Singapore film"—the recognisable locales, "the elusive essence of the city" that are the key to narrative in film-making (Tan 2008: 222). Royston Tan, another Singaporean filmmaker quoted in the same study, admits to feeling "a great sense of loss in Singapore because it's constantly changing".

Nevertheless, in the words of the study's author, Tan's sense of loss propels him through his work to try "to immortalize as many things as [he] can in film". The director's "earlier works are set in pockets of 'old world' Singapore, in places that seem to represent for him an intimate but temporary refuge from the relentless and inflexible logic of modernization, and in particular the indiscriminate forces of urbanization":

Tan's mission is to preserve through art those places in Singapore that have deep meaning for him. As Singapore transforms into a global city clone, indiscriminate urbanization threatens to demolish these places and replace them with context-less buildings that lack character and historical depth. (Ibid.: ?)

*Hock Hiap Leong*, Tan's short film about the kopitiam on Armenian Street (the one which, in 1999, I myself fell in love with) is one such example. Works by the video artist Ho Tzu Nyen, by the playwrights such as Alfian Sa'at, Huzir Sulaiman, Paul Rae and Kaylene Tan, and by the photographer Daren Soh, the graphic novelist Sonny Liew and the film director Boo Junfeng, provide further examples of the way the imprint of individual creators can be superimposed on Singapore's seemingly ever-changing context-less present. These artists reject the myth that Singapore has no history. They mine the island's past for all its creative worth, restoring formerly lost songlines to a city that has long seemed bent on the erasure of its contextual remnants, to the point where all that remains is a scraped-clean and politically-safe past of sometimes stupefying nostalgia.

This recovery of, to varying degrees, unsanctioned histories is thus one way in which creatives in Singapore negotiate the hard state. Yet how do they respond to its ongoing world-class city "complex", a fixation that shows no signs of abating and that now extends to the official effort to make Singapore into a globally-recognized city of culture?

Certain creatives (including those from outside the city who have now made it their home) have in recent years greeted the global arts hub policies of the government,

especially as they refer to the visual arts, as a good tonic for a local scene that has been far too inward-looking and parochial (Lyn-Tan 2015; Oates 2015). Others have been more circumspect. The thoughts of the abstract painter Ian Woo are instructive. Woo, in a 2015 interview, accepts the vital importance of visual artists from Singapore exhibiting abroad and being seen “in the context of the world”. Nevertheless, he concludes:

I never thought of the arts hub. I don't understand what it's all about. I don't want to make work to service a system that is positioned by the government. I fear I may end up making work that caters to a certain assumption. So, to Singapore artists, you make the best work you can make. The most original, the most individualistic that's unique to you; you just have to be excited about your work. If you make good work, the hub is going to happen anyway. (Lyn-Tan 2015)

In a city that has for so long been afflicted by the global benchmarking fixations of its ruling elites, often to the detriment of what makes it distinctive and unique, Woo's resistance is understandable and commendable. Perhaps too, other local creatives, by resisting Singapore's official fascination with global recognition and attainment, will continue to recover their island's lost contexts—contexts which are more than nostalgia, more than merely traditions, contexts which lend themselves to being borrowed and bent, and reinvented, and contexts which are never truly killed off while there is still someone with the imagination to conjure them back into existence.

## <h2>Notes

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<sup>1</sup> See also Chua (1995), 57-78.

<sup>2</sup> In 2009, during a notable debate in Singapore's parliament, former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew described an exhortation to the PAP that it abide by its founding ideals in policy-making as dangerously "high-falutin". See *The Straits Times* (2015).

<sup>3</sup> For Lim's own description of this global mission, see Lim (1903).

<sup>4</sup> In 1902, for example, Lim penned an article on the Anglo-Japanese agreement for the Madras-published *Indian Review*. See the editorial note in *The Straits Times* (1902).

<sup>5</sup> See the full debate in *The Straits Times* (1899a; 1899b; 1899c; 1899d) between "Amicus" and Lim, writing as "Historicus". On Dharmapala's interview with Tan Teck Soon, see *The Daily Advertiser* (1894).

<sup>6</sup> See the following articles in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*: Lin (1899) and Lee (1901). See also Lim Boon Keng's (1899; 1900a; 1900b) articles in the same publication.

<sup>7</sup> For a dissection of these thoughts, see Barr (1999).

<sup>8</sup> Kenneth Paul Tan (2012) observes that heritage-making had to be given a pragmatic rationale before the PAP government embraced this policy from the 1980s. But the interesting point here is such a pragmatic rationale was wilfully ignored by policy makers back in the early 1960s when it was first stated.

<sup>9</sup> On Lee Kuan Yew's uneasiness regarding the changes in Singapore during the Merger period, see Lee (1998).

<sup>10</sup> Also reprinted in Christie (1998: 286-91).

<sup>11</sup> On the state as assemblage, see Frost (2016) and Delanda (2006).

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