Singapore and the Asian Revolutions (Macau, 2008)

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INTRODUCTION

Looking back at the recent past in Singapore, even the casual observer could be excused from sensing a chronic sense of crisis in the tropical island nation. Threats to social order in the official narrative spring from communism, Marxism, Christian liberation ideology, unbridled Western liberalism, radical Islam, ethnic chauvinism, and, more recently, global terror. But, as this book argues, emerging out of British colonialism, the newly independent state in Singapore was forged in response to the "Asian revolutions," shorthand for the pull of homeland politics on the part of immigrant Chinese, Indians and Malays. Although interrupted by the Japanese wartime invasion and occupation, from its foundation in 1819 down until full independence in 1965, the city-state also served as a bulwark for European empire in the Southeast Asian region. Nowhere was this better exemplified than in servicing the postwar Dutch restoration in Indonesia, in neutralizing the communist insurgency in Malaya and the Borneo territories and, in one of the last classic imperial interventions, forcing the creation of a "greater Malaysia" out of disparate peoples and territories, including, until its expulsion in 1965, Singapore. Even today, a city-state of some 3.3 million permanent residents, Singapore cannot forget its history or neighbourhood. The arrest and detention in 2002 of alleged members of the al-Queda-linked Jemaah Islamiyah terrorist group under controversial colonial-era legislation is just one case in point where transnational loyalties refuse to die.

As such, this is not a book that takes the rescue of a "fallen" Singapore theme as axiomatic. Nor does it celebrate the "Singapore story" a standard narrative of stability, security, and economic prosperity upon which the island state rests its fame. Rather, it looks at the other side of the sovereignty coin, namely the active contestations and negotiations on part of the major immigrant

communities, 76.8 per cent Chinese; 13.9 per cent Malay; 7.9 per cent Indian (census of 2000); percentages broadly consistent with late colonial era enumerations. At issue, then, is the pull of global Islam on the part of all the Muslim communities, the identification with homeland on the part of Chinese *huaqiao* or sojourners, and as one with the ideals of homeland on the part of the communities originating from the Indian subcontinent. The complex engagements of local and Indonesia-born Malays with pan-Malay and Indonesian Republican ideals and struggles is also an important part of this narrative. But this would be to tell half the story as immigrant peoples especially from China, as well as from former British India, also made strident political claims on the basis of labour solidarity, anti-colonialism, communism, internationalism or, in more complex ways, responded to the call of patriotism in their respective homelands.

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As this book argues, the prewar rise of the Chinese left-wing, on the one hand, and local Malay echoes of Islamic reformism and anti-colonialism, on the other, represented significant political preludes to the massively dislocating Japanese occupation. Simply stated, the colonial authorities faced down subversive activities from a variety of quarters, Indonesian and Chinese nationalists and communists included. One of the ironies of local history is that, in the moment of crisis, it was the Chinese segment of the community, including the communists, who rallied to the armed resistance to the Japanese invader. Post-war, however, the marriage of convenience soon unravelled. But, equally, with the defeat of Japan, the open port city played a major role in succouring the full-blown Indonesian nationalist revolution. As a haven and hot-house for radicals and nationalists, early post-war Singapore emerged as a transmission centre for ideas, money, and weapons in great demand across the region.

It is a well-established verity of Southeast Asian history that the Japanese invasion and occupation of European colonial possessions irrevocably changed the balance of relations between

colonial subjects and masters. While colonial power returned to post-surrender Southeast Asia, the major dilemma for the West was to avoid pro-communist outcomes such as in North Vietnam in August 1945. The other side of the coin was to pass the baton of self-rule and, eventually, independence, to pro-Western elites and allies. Independence for India in 1947 was for its time a model for disengagement. But resource rich Malaya – a jewel in the crown of the British empire – posed a dilemma for British defence planners, especially as the force of example of the Indonesian revolution of 1945-1949 swept Malay public opinion. Just as the armed Chinese communist threat in urban Singapore quickly receded, the rise of communist China appeared to inspire rural insurgency in Malaya. Not only were the British obliged to wage a counter-insurgency war against armed guerrilla challenge in Malaya, but had to face down a rising tide of pro-China nationalism and anti-colonial pan-Malay chauvinism in urban Singapore, sometimes explosively.

While the British conceded independence in Malaya in 1957 in a formula whereby political power gravitated to the conservative pro-business-pro-British Malay establishment, preparation for self-rule and eventually independence in Singapore was less fluid. This was seen in the determination of the colonial government through the first decade of the postwar period to steer power away from the left wing, then including the People's Action Party (PAP). As British power understood, a too soft approach on Chinese chauvinism risked fanning the challenge of communism such as manifested in labour strikes and pro-China schools. Too hard, then it risked alienating the moderates around the Labour Front-(Malay) Alliance. But if the moderate leadership of the PAP, namely Lee Kuan Yew, could be trusted, and if the trust of the Malay leadership across the causeway could be maintained, then British power could meet its defence obligations while devolving power.

The rise of PAP is not the central concern of this book, although the challenges posed by British plans to merge Singapore into a greater Malaysia also including the Borneo territories come to the heart of the communal debate as it played out in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur. In a word,

Indonesian opposition to the British plan for merger and its realization with Singapore's entry in 1963 over Brunei's demurral, reignited intense debates over political identity and nation across the archipelago. In the face of low intensity war waged by Indonesian commandos and political acrimony between Chinese-dominant Singapore and Malay-majority Malaysia, Singapore withdrew, or rather, was expelled in 1965 facing a very uncertain future.

It is important then to understand how, with British imperial power still in the driving seat, negotiation over the island state's sovereign future was also crucial to how the Malay world – the future core of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) – would identify themselves, whether as Republics, Sultanates, or Federations, but also how these units and their peoples would relate, politically and economically. Accordingly, this book takes the long view, tracing the complex social, economic, and religious demography of the British colony, while registering the rise of capital – the creation of a Singapore bourgeoisie – and the transformation of labour from the point of Singapore's foundation down to the disaggregation of the labour movement in the early 1960s by the colonial successor government.

Singapore's post-independence success in attracting multinational capital investment stands upon a striking infrastructural legacy of colonial capitalist creation. From its origins, and by definition, this creation was the making of European venture capital and paternal colonial administration, Chinese entrepreneurial skill, and Chinese, Indian and Malay immigrant labour. Singapore, the key political link in the British crown colony of the Straits Settlements – along with Penang, Malacca (Melaka), and Labuan – also stood at the juncture of three colonialisms, British, Dutch and French and therefore served a sub-regional metropole in its own right.

At the maelstrom of the independence struggles in postwar Southeast Asia, Malaya and the fledgling Indonesian Republic included, the imperial outpost function of the island took on new meaning, especially when the French war in Vietnam turned to an American crusade to defend the "free world." But just as the communist guerrilla threat in Malaya simmered on beyond

independence in 1957, so it flared in the Borneo territories of Sarawak, Brunei and Sabah. Armed Indonesian opposition to British plans of merger of Singapore, Malaya, and the Borneo territories, not only delayed British withdrawal but played into the hands of Singapore radicals. The British decision to back the PAP in the elimination of the Singapore left is well travelled history but, as this book relates, the struggle was also played out upon a larger canvas, a reference to the British rescue of the Brunei Sultanate from the Indonesian-backed rebellion of 1962, the politics of merger climaxing in 1963, and the eventual roll back of militant left-wing Sukarnoism in Indonesia in the right-wing Suharto coup and bloodbath of 1965. With Singapore's separation from Malaysia and "unanticipated" independence in 1965, the British could beat their retreat having successfully laid the foundation of a model developmentalist security state system in the heart of Southeast Asia. A corollary of this study is that constitutional struggle and parliamentarianism in late colonial Singapore was actively shaped and guided by the colonial power to determine a favourable post-colonial outcome. The domestication of *huaqiao* radicals, Malay chauvinists, and global Islamists could be safely entrusted to the colonial successor state dominated by PAP.

Historiography

Official history may be taken as axiomatic. For example, in 1988, Brigadier General Lee Hsien Loong (Prime Minister from 2004), opined that every year a new batch of Singaporeans grew up and had to be educated on Singapore's painful history of "racial riots." Specifically, he sought to answer a public statement by the then single tolerated opposition parliamentarian, Chiam See Tong, that the Maria Hertogh riots [see chapter 8] were not really racial but involved people fighting for "political and social rights" and a "better livelihood." This is no small matter, as the racial or religious interpretation of threats to national unity or "nation building" has been fundamental over the years as justifications by the state for the maintenance of such controversial legislation as the colonial-era Internal Security Act (ISA). "When foolish politicians rewrite history," Lee asserted,

"some may believe them, which would be tragic" (*Straits Times*, 26 February, 1988). Clearly, by making this statement, Lee wishes Singaporeans to remember the ruling party's developmentalist record. Too much remembering, too much critical research and too much independent intellectualism, so it goes, could be divisive.

More or less since independence a master narrative on Singapore history has been set down in the city-state's schools and institutions, in national-day speeches, through television programming, and via the tightly-controlled print media. The National Heritage Board's illustrated *Singapore: Journey into Nationhood* (1998) is exemplary in this sense. PAP, voted into government for over four decades, is represented as building a nation out of racially separated immigrant communities, providing law and order, corrupt free government, and material benefits. Otherwise, the "management of success" in Singapore has called down a small adulatory literature. After all, it is Singapore which provides a safe haven for foreign capital and its regional and international role is much lauded among those who pay attention to economics ratings and political risk assessments. Such is the unimpeachable image cultivated by the PAP-state, that few heartlanders in Singapore would now even contemplate trusting the nation's considerable reserves in the hands of an alternative government.

"*The Singapore Story*," actually the telling title of two autobiographical works by Lee Kuan Yew (1998, 2000), reaching international as well as domestic audiences, have set the tone for the officialized narrative. The destruction of the "communist tiger," such as described in chapter 9, remains a foundation myth of the PAP-state in Singapore. Even so, as Singapore historian Lysa Hong (2007, 13) has written, while anti-communism remains central to the PAP "autobiography," today it is successful capitalism as shaped by the ruling party which is seen to vindicate its record.

Alongside some other Southeast Asian countries, Singapore has attracted a disproportionate volume of academic writing in English, just as we can identify a fragmentation of studies away from such "standard" histories as identified below. How then has the political history of Singapore

been studied? First, I will identify a number of broad political science approaches, second, I will broach significant studies relevant to my history of the left-wing in Singapore, and third I will track recent trends in Singapore historiography.

Traditionally, political science approaches to the study of Singapore have focused upon the categories of elite formation, political coalition building from above, economic policy making, stability, order, and economically-derived legitimacy. Chronologically, such studies include the political development-administrative state approach (Bellows 1973; Chan 1971; Yeo 1973); the implied "skilful leadership" approach (Lee 1998); hagiography (Josey 1968, 1980); the "coping with vulnerability" approach (Leifer 2000); and the politics of electoral opposition approach (Hussin Mutalib 2003). The rise of civil society in the city-state has also attracted attention, notably the longitudinal "associational activity" approach adopted by E. Kay Gills (2005). In line with scholarly trends, the 1980s witnessed the first serious scholarly challenges to neo-liberal assumptions underpinning the often triumphalist literature relating to the rise of such Asian "miracle" economies as Singapore, and a concern with the role of the state. Singapore-relevant texts broaching broad political economy analysis include, Rodan (1988; 2004); Goodman, et.al. (1998); Zhang (2002); and Trocki (2006). In the new century, definitions of state, as much theorizing on the role of the state have also entered the concern of a number of Singapore scholars (Sim 2006; Chong 2006; Tan 2007). By bringing the state back into the analysis, the development-state critique applied to contemporary Singapore advances our understanding of how the PAP-state (now conventionally linked) intrudes upon and neutralizes civil society.

Undoubtedly over the years a number of image-forming texts laying stress to the threat of the left in Singapore (and Malaysia) beyond 1954 have been forthcoming. Reaching back to the "Malayan Emergency," these include such "Cold War" texts as Pye (1958); Drysdale (1984); Bloodworth (1986, 2005); and Clutterbuck (1985). Standard academic histories such as Turnbull (1977; 1989) are not immune from this bias. Alongside the much-studied Emergency, much less

has been written on the rise of communism in colonial Malay and Singapore as well as the impact of the Indonesian revolution. C.F. Yong (1997) has gone far in filling this lacunae. Although shy on Singapore, we should also heed Cheah Boon Kheng's classic *Red Star over Malaya* (1987). Also relevant to the present study is Suryono Darusman's *Singapore and the Indonesian Revolution 1945-50* (1992), a memoir by an Indonesian participant in the early post-war strugglers, along with Yong Man Cheong's, *The Indonesian Revolution and the Singapore Connection* (2004). Periodic declassifications and compilations of colonial documentation (Stockwell 1995) have also provided major source material for a new generation of scholars entering this broad field (Hack 2001; Harper, 1999, 2001).

While such texts are mutually reinforcing, alternative narratives are also beginning to join the list, namely the account of a leading PAP defector and former Attorney-General Patrick Seow (1994), the political memoir of Singapore Malay journalist Said Zahari (2001) and, more sensationally, the biography of communist guerrilla leader Chin Peng (2003); along with articles and reproduction of speeches by left-wing PAP recruit turned political prisoner, the late Lim Chin Siong (2001).

Third, just as global trends in history in the 1980s and 1990s increasingly came under the influence of subaltern studies or more general cultural studies approaches, so a new fertile scholarship on the underclass in Singapore emerged bringing in the working class, the Malays and, in general, an approach which also began to question elite-centered politics. Chua Beng-Huat's (1995) prognosis for "communitarian democracy" in Singapore was one such signpost. New scholarship on the Malays in Singapore, notably Tania Li (1989), drew attention to the heterogeneity of this ethnonym. Lily Zubaidah Rahim (1998) has gone further in debunking the "righteously assured" PAP "cultural deficit thesis" on the Malays of Singapore, themes also addressed in the eclectic edited collection by Khoo Kay Kim, Elinah Abdullah, Wan Meng Hao (2006). The new century has also witnessed the first public questioning of the "Singapore Story."

This not only relates to new theorizing on the state, but also stems from a vein of thinking around "alternative paths" or other possible outcomes in Singapore underneath the master narrative. Seminal in this sense is Lam Peng Er and Kevin Y.L Tan, *Lee's Lieutenants: Singapore's Old Guard* (1999), a work which interrogates the role of those PAP personalities who have either fallen, been by-passed, or been found dispensable in the rise of the dominant party and the emasculation of the Left.

Method and Approach

This is not a study of the political independence movement in Singapore. It is concerned, however, with what Yeo Kim Wah (1973) terms the mass politics of the Chinese educated activists in the anti-colonial movement. It is also concerned with the tug of war for the loyalties of the overseas Chinese immigrants in the colonial port city before the outbreak of war. Equally, it does seek to capture the rise of China as a world power and the appeal for overseas Chinese patriotism. Neither does it neglect the primary loci of the anti-colonial and then anti-Japanese imperialism and militarism struggle, namely the working classes and their primary organizational forms; unions, party cells, front organizations and schools. But neither can the role of such patriot or "red capitalist" figures as Tan Kah-Kee in galvanizing overseas Chinese support for a patriotic and a left-wing cause be ignored. The rise of parliamentarianism, the banning of the local communist party – the spearhead of the wartime struggle against the Japanese occupier – operationally spelled the demise of organized communism in Singapore. Only in the labour and school milieu did the left-wing spirit endure. It is also important, as Yeo has explained, that 1955 was the year that electoral and mass politics merged in Singapore. In that year PAP emerged victorious at the polls. By 1962-63, when PAP purged itself of genuine left wing support, effective opposition to a single dominant party ceased.

The question remains as to whether it is actually possible to understand working class consciousness in an urban setting such as colonial Singapore. A pioneering social history in this respect is Warren's *Rickshaw Coolie* (1986). While seeking to reconstruct the rickshaw coolie "experience" of work place and work within a total cultural setting – behaviour, values and feelings, Warren nevertheless skirts the fundamental issues of class and capital. Warren's coolie workers are invariably victims but seldom actors. This is surprising given the well documented mass actions on the part of the underclass of colonial Singapore – rickshaw coolie, waterfront coolie, pineapple cannery worker, traction company employer, peon, seaman – and its sometime patrician bourgeois and oft-times proletarian leaders. This is not to belittle Warren's fertile use of sources and micro reconstruction – a small triumph – after all it is from micro studies that the macro picture is assembled, but it is also import to convey the agency of victims as well, even if, as Cheah Boon Kheng (1992, 5) cautions, police and other colonial reports tended to dehumanize their subjects as enemies.

A history of political and social protest in the colonial periphery should lay down the stages by which a working class develops a consciousness of itself as class qua class. It should, inter alia, attend to questions of organization, working class conditions, health, housing, gender, the role of wage labour and broad economic parameters. As well, the role of the state in the imposition of monopolies, taxes, regulating labour, immigration, police and social controls and legal superstructure should all be included. But also the barriers to labour unity should be discerned, whether language, clan, race, the role of secret societies, and other elements of false conscientization; opium use and abuse, gambling, prostitution and criminal activities. We should also have a firm understanding of the nexus between class, race, and state especially as it played out in a colonial capitalist setting borne out of intra-Asian immigration.

Not all struggles in colonial Singapore were concerned with labour or class issues. Not all demonstrations of labour took on a violent form or riotous form, although such acts filled the pages

of colonial reports and dossiers. Far from it, indeed more likely than not, anger manifested itself in the form of nonviolent actions such as slowdowns, strikes, and work desertions. Protest also took more prosaic forms and, necessarily, harder to capture on paper – analogous to what Scott (1985) found to be the case in rural Malaysia in the early 1980s – petitions, slogans, graffiti, ridicule, sarcasm, cynicism, social deviance. Also at issue was the appropriation of symbols. Such a study should not ignore the question of hegemony in a colonial or even post colonial setting. Notoriously, as discussed in chapter 3, the Hainanese turned to alternative schools and press in the 1930s, an experiment repeated in the red schools of the 1950s. Malays also turned to literature as a political weapon in the 1950s, just as theatre would emerge as a medium for veiled political expression in the 1990s (cf. Peterson 2001).

The importance of this study is that the lessons derived from the empirical study of the working class in one colonial city offer clear insights into parallel studies in other regional cities of colonial capitalist creation. In Asia, Jakarta, Surabaya, Saigon, Manila, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Calcutta, Bombay all come to mind. The specific mix of migrant labour and domestic and foreign capital, the role of women and cultural factors alongside the hegemonic role of the colonial and post-colonial state may have differed in emphasis and detail across these situations but, as process, the extraction of surplus, the reproduction and crystallization of class relations and the subordination and transformation of labour were common features. How these social relations were mediated – labour strikes, class actions, protests, boycotts – are of no less interest, and doubtless helped determine political outcomes, even nationally. In this respect, an emphasis upon the urban labour scene appears a no less worthy focus of study than rural protest. Stated another way, and the idea is not original, cities were crucibles in the forging of new ideas, crossroads through which men passed forever transformed. It was not just a case of tradition giving away to modernity in the cities, although this was also involved but that the cash nexus, the commoditization of labour to which all were reduced, was so much more advanced in the colonial urban setting than in the rural hinterland.

Taking a broad socio-historical approach to the theme, this book seeks to document particular actions, events, processes, as well as mental and ideological changes, not mechanistically but, over long time, by revealing qualitative interactions through key historical junctures. In this approach the book is also concerned to establish; What were the economic and social foundations of Singapore? (chapter 1) What role did immigration play in creating a communal setting of such evidently diverse ethnic-national and religious loyalties? (chapter 2) In seeking to understand the attraction of Singapore Chinese to the Chinese revolutions, What were the political models in the creation of trade guilds, modern trade unions and political parties and who were the actors? How did these concerns enmesh with the actions of internationalist agents? (chapter 3) Locally, what political forms did working class concerns take? Did class take precedence over love of country of origin? (chapter 5) How did the Japanese interregnum change communal relations? (chapter 6) What was the role of the colonial state in mediating developmentalist decisions and in arbitrating political demands? (chapter 7) In the broad ranging discussion on Malay nationalism, support for the Indonesian revolution, debates over merger with a greater Malaysia, and, especially the role of Islam in society (chapters 6, 8, 9), the book seeks to answer the question. What is the role of consciousness and false consciousness in religious, communal and national actions?