ASIAN CITIES

Edited by Simone Shu-Yeng Chung & Mike Douglass

The Hard State, Soft City of Singapore

Amsterdam University Press

Amsterdam University Press

International Institute for Asian Studies

The Hard State, Soft City of Singapore

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Cover illustration: The Singapore Really Really Free Market 60 on Telok Ayer Street, 31 March 2019
Photograph by Mary Ann Ng

Cover design: Coördesign, Leiden
Lay-out: Crius Group, Hulshout

ISBN 978 94 6372 950 5
e-ISBN 978 90 4854 400 4 (pdf)
DOI 10.5117/9789463729505
NUR 740

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Acknowledgements

This edited book project would not have been possible without funding support from the Asia Research Institute (ARI), National University of Singapore. We wish to extend our gratitude to each and every one of our contributors for gallantly engaging with the two eponymous themes, to present a wide yet cohesive range of work that testifies to the interdisciplinary spirit of this volume. All but two of the chapters in the book were developed out of selected papers from an academic workshop convened by Simone Shu-Yeng Chung and Mike Douglass at ARI in collaboration with NUS Museum in March 2016. Our sincere appreciation goes to Valerie Yeo for administrative assistance, the ARI events team for ground support and the museum's team for facilitating the coordination. We would also like to acknowledge the advice given by Chua Beng Huat, which was invaluable for helping us refine our proposal in the early stages of this project.

A special 'thank you' goes to Grace Chan Yee Bei, Nika Tay Hui Min, and Mary Ann Ng for editorial assistance in preparing the manuscript, and the two anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback. For steering us through the publication process, we are indebted to the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS), in particular, the Publications Officer, Paul van der Velde, Paul Rabé, in his role as Series Editor, and the Assistant Publications Officer, Mary Lynn van Dijk; and to the Amsterdam University Press, in particular, Saskia Gieling, Commissioning Editor for Asian Studies, and the Production Editor, Jaap Wagenaar.

Introduction

The Master Narrative and the Lived City – Half a Century of Imagining Singapore

Simone Shu-Yeng Chung and Mike Douglass

Abstract
This chapter outlines how imaginative representations of the city, told through the images they convey or evoke, form collective expressions of human agency in placemaking and the (re)shaping of urban space. Of equal importance are polemical developments that play integral roles in influencing conditions for artistic and social (re)production in Singapore. In foregrounding society-space relations and the city, we argue that physical spaces are subject to a multitude of social imaginings, which are then projected back into urban space to convey individual and shared meanings, identities and purposes. Such diverse ways of conceptualising space, which can sometimes be born out of resistance, present another mode of understanding and experiencing the lived city.

Keywords: master narrative, the lived city, civil society, creativity, conviviality, SG50

> The city as we imagine it, the soft city of illusion, myth, aspiration, nightmare, is as real, maybe more real, than the hard city.
> – *Raban 1974: 10*

Igniting the *Terra Imagina* of a Terraformed City

Singapore's accomplishments in city-building over half a century has propelled this 'little red dot'[1] to become a top-ranked global city and one

1 Indeed, this offhand remark about the diminutive size of Singapore's sovereign territory, made by a former neighbouring state leader, has since been adopted as both an emblem of pride as well as a symbolic reminder of its vulnerability (MITA 2003).

Chung, Simone Shu-Yeng & Mike Douglass (eds), *The Hard State, Soft City of Singapore*. Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press 2020
DOI: 10.5117/9789463729505_INTRO

of the richest countries in the world, having ranked third in 2015 (*ATKearney* 2016).[2] What has been stylized by the state and designated actors as the Singapore Model is construed by its advocates as a template for urban planning under state capitalism (Shatkin 2014). So persuasive is Singapore's success story and so ripe is its planning formula for exportation that overseas private developers, hoping to emulate its achievements, actively seek local government support to create clone cities abroad. Defining this is Singapore's meticulously constituted long-term master plan overseen by the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) aimed at ensuring sustainable development, coupled with a successful Housing and Development Board (HDB) public housing programme directed towards home ownership for its citizens. These powerful agencies of a state that directly owns over three-quarters of the land in the country, along with tight regulations limiting public assembly and other uses of space, present the crucially indisputable fact that the government exercises substantial control over how Singapore's material space is shaped and used.

The foundations of the Singapore Model are deeply intertwined with the state-generated narrative of the country's rise from third-world status to first.[3] The Singapore story revolves around survival and subsequent triumph over daunting adversities – regional hostility, ideological threats, natural resource scarcity, and an uncertain future with the loss of its hinterland following Singapore's acrimonious divorce from the Federation of Malaysia in 1965. Under the stewardship of a capable and committed government that its citizens implicitly trust, together with the efforts of its small yet robust population, hard-line pragmatics-based policies were implemented to improve the well-being of its people and the economy – initially through industrialization, then through expansion into the tertiary sector and more recently, toward research and development for innovation in advanced technologies.

While the country has economically and materially flourished under a stable government, Singapore's global and domestic achievements have consistently been employed to legitimize the unbroken rule of the People's Action Party since national independence. Being a small country under the 'management' (echoing a technocratic disposition) of an authoritarian government, pathways to implementing national

2 Measured as the per capita gross domestic product (GDP), adjusted for purchasing power.

3 The phrases are intended allusions to Lee Kuan Yew's two-volume memoirs, *Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew* (1998) and *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story, 1965-2000* (2000).

policies and programmes are direct and largely unhindered, as central government is spared from having to go through multiple levels of subnational approvals – an advantage Singapore possesses as an 'island-nation', a crucial point made by the sociologist Chua Beng Huat (2011). By the same token, its compactness and relatively unlayered structure of governance assume elected leaders are in sync with the people they serve. This inferred perspicaciousness means that they should also be better placed to identify broader trends and respond to potential issues before they manifest into genuine problems. It also adds to the belief that the government knows best when questions of city planning and regulation are raised.

For many who live in Singapore, the contemporary image of this world-class global city in the tropics is characterized by its distinctive concentration of vertiginous architectural icons in the downtown area bounded by the swathes of verdure increasingly integrating with expansive residential estates infilled with uniform public housing blocks. It is, without a doubt, well-ordered, highly structured and fastidiously maintained. Yet, running counter to this constructed stable image, the constructed ground on which this city stands is constantly shifting, both metaphorically and literally. Metaphorically, Singapore is seen by some observers as *tabula rasa* – the term is used by the architect cum urbanist Rem Koolhaas in his critical summation of Singapore's modern urban development into the 1990s in 'Singapore Songlines: Portrait of a Potemkin Metropolis [...] or Thirty Years of Tabula Rasa' (Koolhaas 1995: 1009-1089). His impression of Singapore at the time was that of a prototype modern Asian city and, being 'incredibly "Western"', was an anachronism among Asian cities.[4] Desiring recognition, its leaders forcefully carved a presence in the region through sheer determination and a forward-looking attitude that left room for neither nostalgia nor attachment to place.

In practice, urban renewal was pursued 'through the new' at the expense of the old, with ceaseless cycles of land recalibrations typically carried out at an immense scale that meant 'no version is ever definitive' (Ibid.: 1035). In Singapore's defence, this deliberate decontextualization can be seen as a radical but necessary move on the government's part to rid the city state of

4 Koolhaas's essay is employed here to substantiate the basis for cultivating an urban imaginative field in Singapore and stimulate discussions on how the presence of the latter inextricably persists in the material city. However, William Lim (2004) and C.J. Wee Wan-ling (2007) have critically commented on how the Anglo-American positioning and ergo 'Western gaze' adopted by Koolhaas in his reading of Singapore has inevitably reinforced the outmoded idea that modernity and globalization are exclusively the domain of the West.

classical Western vestiges of modernity in favour of a global identity (Wee 2007). Koolhaas's asseveration that '(Singapore's) territory – its ground – is its most malleable material' (Koolhaas 1995: 1031) suggests this was a justified compromise in exchange for concretising a national ideology and vision. The outcome of this comprehensive investment in the contemporary is ultimately pastiche modernity, registered in Singapore's skyline and the urban fabric.

Such impressive, if disconcerting, reliance on state planned transformations, already underway during the colonial period, rapidly intensified after Singapore became an independent republic in 1965. The degree of entrenchment that has become an associative feature of this island can be seen in itself as the current administration's legacy. Far exceeding mere landscaping, the strategic deployment of wholescale land shaping and land forming is geared towards expanding land area seawards and increasing water catchment capacity from a topological-ecological perspective, but the deeper implication is the direct manipulation of all aspects of social and economic life, practice and production by the state (De Koninck, Drolet and Girard 2008; De Koninck, this volume).

This perpetual state of *tabula rasa*, opines the architect William Lim (2004) – one of Singapore's leading public intellectuals – leaves the city continuously dispossessed of its past.[5] While acknowledging this reality, Lim steadfastly defends against claims that Singapore is homogeneous: although homogenized, it is far from homogeneous. Looking beneath the cutaneous built environment to uncover details of urban life veins is essential for explaining the social substance and people's own understood realities of the lived city. This prospect entices us to submit to Jonathan Raban's (1974) beckoning – that the material city, even while it imposes limits and pushes back, can nonetheless be transcended by residents' daily practices of placemaking. The soft city he so eloquently describes exists in dynamic tension with the hard city that is moulded to a specified form. In the Singapore experience, this hard city is indistinguishable from the strong powers afforded to government to master plan the city through legislation as well as in urban space.

Conceptually, the soft city aligns with one of the three spatial spheres conceived by the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre. Termed 'representational space', it is, in Lefebvre's lexicon:

5 In reality, the colonial historic core remains relatively intact, as with selective and superficial preservation applied to pockets of ethnically themed areas (Chinatown, Little India, Kampong Glam and Emerald Hill) under the 1986 Conservation Master Plan for tourism development.

> [T]he space directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of "inhabitants" and "users", but also of some artists and perhaps a few of those, such as writers and philosophers, who *describe* and aspire to do no more than describe. This is the dominated – and hence passively experienced – space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate. (1991: 39, original emphasis)

Thus, alongside the physical structures and associated practices that make up our lived environment and the conceptualized space engineered into material form by bureaucrats, experts and commercial interests, there exists a perceptual layer conjured out of people's everyday life experiences. In some instances, the 'people's city' has material expressions, such as planting home gardens, decorating hallways of HDB flats and organising the 'really really free market' where people share goods and memorabilia with others. While many imaginative projections into urban spaces might not be as tangible as the functional designations assigned to these spaces by the government, they are nonetheless equally vital and palpable representations of the city.

Perhaps the more widely known articulations of the lived city of Singapore, by virtue of their reproducibility and ease of circulation, are the enduring celluloid images constructed by local filmmakers following the local film industry's rebirth in the late 1990s.[6] Technological capabilities for producing limitless copies, along with the mass audience's ability to relate to filmic simulacra of the real, have made film a universally popular medium – to the extent that it has redefined the relationship between art and the masses (Benjamin 2010). In this new era, the moving image is actively employed by filmmakers, artists and the lay public alike to help them confront the speed with which their surroundings are being transformed and digest the reality of their situation post hoc. The unglamorous snippets of the everyday in quotidian spaces of the city that have become the hallmark of documentarian Tan Pin Pin (whose domestically banned film is the subject of Olivia Khoo's chapter in this volume) can be interpreted as an impulse to snatch audiovisual fragments of Singapore's continuously refashioned urban landscape. Lilian Chee's argument that 'space is not the point of Tan Pin Pin's film' (2015: 17) confirms the filmmaker's true intent – that is, to capture the social milieu.

6 Singapore's film industry, which was tied to Malaya's until their separation, went through a period of decline as a result of post-independence focus on developmental economics. In 1998, the Singapore Film Commission was strategically set up to direct the growth of the local film industry and has been instrumental to its revival (Millet 2006).

The commemorations of Singapore's urban spaces – most of which were in the process of disappearing or facing redevelopment – in the elegiac film projects spearheaded by Royston Tan, *Old Places* (2010) and its sequel *Old Romances* (2012), are likewise focused on documenting the soft city. In these films, visual documentations of the sites in their present condition are layered with extra-diegetic audio narrations. Imbued with emotional gravitas, the verbal recollections extending as far back as people's living memory evoke the meaning and significance of each locality and establish a tangible link between memory and place. Cinematic recordings of human life taken in real locations offer highly nuanced sociological information and can be used to produce a focused anthropological study of people's characteristics and behaviour. Increasingly more valued, they contribute to polemical discourse through their capacity to communicate, in this instance, the effects of unfettered command planning of urban space on the social fabric of life in a pellucid format.

Although these are just a couple of examples testifying to the richness of Singapore's inhabitants' memories, experiences and their meaningful interpretations of the lived environment, such thoughtfully conceived representations of the city potently contradict Koolhaas's assignation of Singapore as the Generic City. The topographical remoulding for the greater good of the nation, compounded by the hegemonic disciplining of its population, has affected a desire among residents of the city to construct mental reproductions of the quotidian as a means of affixing a genius locus that can allow them to make sense of the dislocating changes around them. This centring is not only crucial for affirming a person's lived reality but also constitutes a source of creative stimulation: 'Artists and writers have found inspiration in local character and have "explained" the phenomena of everyday life as well as art, referring to landscapes and urban milieu' (Norberg-Schulz 1984: 18). Nostalgia, aspirations and meanings are ignited to furnish the interstitial realm of imagination that is subsequently reinserted into real space.

Drawing on insights from diverse sources, this edited volume, for our purposes, is less concerned with representations of the city per se than by what they contribute to our understanding and experience of the lived city. In other words, our overarching interest is in their affects rather than the tangible outcomes of these representations. Such articulations have profound impacts on the city's inhabitants, as illustrated in their enunciation of qualitative aspects of the city and urban life.

Following from the observations above, the noun 'state', as it pertains to our disquisition, is significant for the double meaning it carries. The first

meaning acknowledges the existence of a modest but thriving creative and intellectual urban culture in Singapore that is invested in exploring and deciphering the particular conditions of the city state in which this culture emerges. It constitutes a concerted attempt to reassert people's right to the city, insofar as it addresses their right to be the protagonists of urban life, with priority given to those who inhabit and use its spaces (Lefebvre 1996). As rephrased by Harvey (2008), the ultimate expression of the right to the city is the production of spaces and changing them to follow 'our heart's desire' (Park 1967: 3).

The other invocation of 'state' invites us to address the challenges of nurturing or even preserving the autonomy of the *terra imagina* under the gaze of state authority. One proven measure for countering the encroaching sense of alienation resulting from all-encompassing state planning is through placemaking, including the recovery of place (Chang and Huang 2008; Ho 2009). Rather than simply being a fixed material entity, place can only be grasped in its totality by understanding the qualitative aspects that connote its meanings and ambience to those who interact with it (Norberg-Schulz 1984). Brenda Yeoh's (2003) study on toponyms in colonial Singapore illustrates their coexistence: the enterprise of naming streets and places by British administrators, vital for organising information about the built environment for management and planning, did not impact the significance of place for social reproduction by everyday users in the community. In other words, meanings people attach to places can differ from those intended and instituted by the state-driven production of space. However, placemaking in such circumstances must be agile to move in the shadows of master planning.

By taking the urban imaginative field as the point of departure, we can begin to probe the resilience of cities through the images they convey or identities evoked, not just as nostalgia or fantasy, but equally as a means for collective expressions of human agency in placemaking and (re)shaping urban space. Simultaneous to this endeavour and of equal importance is a consideration of the components that play integral roles in influencing conditions for artistic and social (re)production in Singapore.

The New 'Three "C"S': Creativity, Community and Conviviality

The 2010s signal a watershed in Singapore's history, both internally and in relation to the world. Among the new dynamics is an escalation of shifts in its demographic structure. In 2012, the first cohort of the baby

boomer generation entered the '65 and over' age group, officially marking the emergence of the Pioneer Generation (Yap and Gee 2015).[7] With longer life expectancies tied to better standards of living and care, as well as the majority intent on retaining their independent lifestyle, silver citizens in Singapore – especially those from the middle class and above – are pursuing avenues of active aging. These include self-enrichment or seeking out worthwhile causes aimed at achieving better quality of life, equality or improving the liveability of their environment. In his National Day Rally speech that year, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong adjured the nation to practise 'mutual responsibility amongst (themselves) and especially on the part of those who are more successful than others' (PMO 2012) – a sentiment clearly couched in the notion of 'kampong spirit'. Having already attained comparative economic advantage, enviable financial wealth and efficient governance, the conservation of communal solidarity is now officially recognized as *sine qua non* to the future of first-world Singapore.

Reference to a 'kampong spirit' highlights how state narratives are also prone to imaginaries that impute the continuity of a romanticized past into the present. In 1960, three-quarters of the population lived in *kampongs*, but from 1966 almost all such settlements were systematically eliminated in waves under the Land Acquisition Act, with their residents rehoused in new towns planned by HDB. In this context, whether the 'kampong spirit' continues to exist in Singapore has become a subject of continuing inquiry (see Ho 2009). For example, recent research shows that only 10 percent of HDB residents have shared memories and a sense of community (Lokajaya 2016).

In response to the loss of community identity, which is requisite for generating social and cultural vitality, an alternative three 'Cs' – creativity, conviviality and community – is proposed here as ingredients for cultivating an inclusive and progressive society that can contribute to improving the liveability of the city and building a resilient economy. This presents an antidote to the rapacious qualities inhered in the 'Five Cs' that have hitherto encapsulated the materialistic aspirations of Singaporeans: cash, car, credit card, condominium and country club membership.

Political leaders have reinscribed the ethos of 'self-reliance' and 'mutual support' into the Singapore story to highlight the shared attributes that have enabled the country to achieve the milestones it has along the journey to its

7 The Pioneers are Singapore nationals aged 65 and over in 2015, so named in recognition of their contribution to the country's economic development in the post-independence era. Their special status entitles them to healthcare concessions and social welfare support.

golden anniversary of national independence in 2015, otherwise known as SG50.[8] If we were to superimpose a conceptual framework that appropriates the aforementioned qualities to produce socially responsible and proactive citizens, it would infer the 'tools for conviviality' for collective use outlined by the social critic Ivan Illich (1984). The adjective 'convivial' is appended to describe tools that promote autonomy and creative relationships among people and with their environment, crucially differentiating them from those used in Taylorist forms of rote industrial production that use human beings as tools rather than creators of what they make.

Freedom to create and use tools rather than become one is not an individual action, but is instead a condition realized through 'social arrangements that guarantee each member the most ample and free access to the tools of the community' (Ibid.: 12). As such, tools for conviviality are not only within each person's grasp, but they are also meant to encourage inclusivity and egalitarianism through sharing. The primary goal of this project of self-empowerment is for citizens to regain a degree of autonomy from bureaucrats and technical experts, and recast the relationship between the people and the state, and among one another, for the better. At the level of the individual and at least the everyday, progress – to paraphrase Illich – should be measured as increasing competence, rather than increasing dependence. In Lisa Peattie's interpretation of Illich's idea of conviviality, for human happiness, 'creative activity and a sense of community count for at least as much and maybe more than material standard of living' (Peattie 1998: 249). In terms of the city, she invokes the idea of 'community' by referencing 'third places' beyond home and work, to add a crucial spatial dimension to conviviality by underscoring the space-forming, space-contingent interplay of human creativity through associational life.

Five decades ago, the now defunct independent think-tank Singapore Planning and Urban Research Group (SPUR, 1965-1975) had already highlighted the need for citizen involvement in discussions concerning city-planning and policy decisions (SPUR 1967). Civil society participation was promoted as civic virtue, for dialogues generated out of what the collective termed 'democratic "grassroot" planning' were a valuable opportunity to demonstrate its citizens' pride and stakeholding in the future of their city.

8 In his 2015 National Day Rally speech, PM Lee Hsien Loong credited 'this culture of self-reliance and mutual support' as one of three factors behind Singapore's success. It was indispensable in the past for creating a 'rugged society' that, while small, was strong as a unit (PMO 2015).

But in order for all parties to contribute effectively, government authorities needed to ensure that relevant information was made available to genuinely interested members of the public. This example underscores the importance of maintaining common resources in the public domain to be tapped. While a great deal of data and information gathered by the government on Singapore and its citizens and residents are available, access to much of them, such as the national census, remains at the discretion of the state, which defends its careful oversight as a way to maintain social stability, given Singapore's always precarious position in remaining competitive in the global economy (Khoo 2012).

Encouraging a convivial society also requires an openness to people making choices, rather than simply setting goals that must be achieved by everyone in unison. In the process of improving the liveability of personal living environments, social cohesion inevitably becomes a part of the equation. However, such objectives are also contingent on identifying and developing a suitable set of apparatuses and platforms for sharing. Tan Tarn How (2015) notes how digital technology, especially the Internet, has been utilized as an organising tool with relative success in Singapore due to its ubiquity and public accessibility. It brings together likeminded individuals to share knowledge, skills and ideas on a virtual platform, as well as to publicize workshops and events that take place in real locations. As such, it functions as a conduit for connecting people and raising awareness of common concerns.

The enabling role of cities as 'theatres of social action' (Mumford 1961) can never be overstated. Edward Soja's (2003: 275) oft-quoted phrase, 'things take place IN cities […] cities in themselves have a causal impact on social life', underscores the spatiality of human settlement density and intensity that defines city living: people are always in close proximity to one another, whether or not they want to be. For this reason, the power of affects must be recognized. Broadly understood as encompassing the intractably visceral or vital forces that go beyond emotions and compel us towards either movement or inertia (Seigworth and Gregg 2010), Ben Anderson (2014) interprets affects as being transpersonal, in the sense that they exceed the body enacting or experiencing them, spilling over into social life and physical space. Powerful sentiments or a dominant mood circulating in the atmosphere can give rise to a collective mood with the capacity to infect receptive individuals as it diffuses across the human landscape.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, certain key moments can be described by a single, nameable emotion. Such 'public feelings' are themselves elements within the larger social sphere and are directly shaped by people's

sentiments (Anderson 2014). To illustrate, the historic events that transpired in 2015 took the nation on a rollercoaster ride of emotions. The initial excitement for SG50 was shadowed by a deep sense of loss with the passing of Singapore's founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew in March that year. On the whole, the population was united in their sorrow (and censures were meted out to criticizers). The revived euphoria leading up to National Day celebrations that followed carried over into the general elections, but by the end of year the atmosphere across the island had tempered into a reflective mode, due in part to 'SG50 fatigue'. The persistence of affects throughout the year can be directly attributed to the combination of prevailing domestic conditions as well as unifying events that occurred slightly before and during that period.

With access to better education than their predecessors, and being more globally connected and attuned to current affairs, Singaporeans have over time developed greater public consciousness and the motivation to affect change. In the last two decades, non-government organizations advocating for gender and racial equality as well as minority rights have gained more visibility in Singapore. The gradual easing of restrictions on civil society activity is generally viewed as the state's accommodation of people's demands, but, as noted by scholars (Chua 2003; Douglass 2010; Shatkin 2014), steering civic activism along directions that are favourable to the government is a strategic manoeuvre to redirect discontents in support of rather than antagonistic to those in power.

Civil society, which can be defined broadly as the voluntarily organized face of society, exists in the contemporary world in a diversity of relations with the state and the market economy (Friedmann 1998; Schak and Hudson 2003; Koh and Soon 2015). From the 1960s to 1980s, Asia's 'tiger economies' – Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan – were led by authoritarian 'developmental states' that suppressed the participation of civil society in the public sphere in exchange for rapid economic growth and increases in material welfare (Douglass 1994; Evans 1995). Civil society nonetheless engaged in activities for itself, particularly in the realm of art and the conviviality of cultural and social life. As developmentalism melded into neoliberalism from the 1980s, a neo-developmental state emerged, in which national governments remained strong but shifted from leading to facilitating the use of corporate capital in their economies and the production of urban space.

By the 2000s, cities in higher-income economies had been recast as ultra-competitive engines of economic growth whose fate depended on capturing global flows of capital for advanced services and the consumption of global

consumer goods. Cities that still had (pre-)colonial landscapes up to the 1980s found them swiftly supplanted by a new era of corporate mega-projects in the form of shopping malls, world business hubs, entertainment complexes, franchises and chain stores, and vast gated housing projects. Public spaces were rapidly privatized, and the 'urban tissue' of spaces 'previously accessible to the public' was being lost (Sassen 2015: 1).

Over this same period, the rise of civil society resulted in fundamental democratic reforms in several countries in Asia, including South Korea and Taiwan. In contrast, Singapore has remained an electoral democracy with tight controls limiting public assembly and protests of any kind. For example, under the Public Order Act (revised in 2012), group protests and processions of more than two people in public spaces are still not permitted unless they are state-initiated or pre-approved. Such efforts by the government are further exemplified by the rule that each public housing estate must have a racial mix that mirrors the nation's composition, which means that each should have about 70 percent ethnically Chinese residents, to avoid forming large ethnic enclaves. More broadly, landscaping is employed across the island to dictate directions and patterns of pedestrian movement as well as how public spaces are to be used.

All of these controls are defended in the master narrative as being essential for a small country to show the high level of social stability needed to attract and sustain high levels of globally footloose investment. Controlling and organising the production of urban space is an active dimension for the maintenance of social stability; master planning by the Government of Singapore, enshrined as law, is used not only to produce sites to accommodate global investment, but also to control the use of space by civil society.

The government's use of law-making powers and production of space can also be seen as a means of directing social identities toward the state. As explained by Koh and Soon, civil society forms associations that are held together 'by shared values, interests and purposes' (2015: 209). Based on his observations on how such relationships are constituted in practice, Manuel Castells (2010) differentiates three types of identity formation – namely, those that support and legitimize the status quo; those that express resistance to it; and those that promote new identities through alternative identity projects – that are useful for explicating the production of urban space in Singapore. First, state powers have been extensively used to promote identity with the state while limiting the formation of resistance identities. The 50th anniversary of the nation in 2015, SG50, which was celebrated with events throughout the year, is a particularly vivid example of state promotion of national identity. Secondly, as explained above, the possibility

for resistance identities to form is severely dampened not only by laws but also by the production and regulation of urban space. Whereas peaceful protest marches are common in South Korea, Taiwan and even Hong Kong, they are still not allowed in Singapore.

The third type of identity formation, which is the pursuit of projects that open possibilities for new identities that redefine positions in society and, 'by doing so, seek the transformation of overall social structure' (Castells 2010: 8), is also highly constrained when seen by the government as political action. However, in many, if not most, instances these projects represent civil society for itself and are not necessarily either for or against the state or status quo. Whether they are directed at urban farming, LGBT rights, or saving a public cemetery, they arise from associational life; when not expressed physically, they are inscribed in space through memories and imaginaries of what could be. In various ways, people are continuously engaged in such identity projects – some of which are actually supported by government (such as ethnic and religious festivals)[9] – and many continue to occur in smaller, out-of-the-way spaces or are highly ephemeral, appearing and disappearing quickly.

Although fundamental social issues remain at the forefront, people are also beginning to think more about minute everyday concerns that directly affect their quality of life and personal wellbeing, and proactively engage in debates about them. This visible trend also suggests that emerging grassroots movements are not necessarily rooted to the 'heartland'[10] or tied to localities, as seen in earlier iterations.[11] With digital connectivity providing reliable support, collective actions are no longer bound to local neighbourhoods, as the younger generation and more cosmopolitan enthusiasts take on the role of local actors in grassroots initiatives. Leonie Sandercock's (2006) concept of cosmopolitan urbanism offers a way to understand this formulation, of which one principal element is to overlook differences and emphasize flexible membership. Its practitioners embrace an empowered form of

9 At a forum discussion at the 2016 Art Stage, Chua Beng Huat described Singapore as 'liberalising (with respect to cultural development)', but doubts that it will ever be liberal. 'The Spirit of Cities: Why the Identity of a City Matters in a Global Age', SEA Forum talk with David A. Bell and Chua Beng Huat, 24 January 2016 at the Marina Bay Sands Expo and Convention Centre.

10 A term used in Singapore to cover neighbourhoods of HDB flats, especially the original ones on the outskirts of the central business district.

11 Serene Tan and Brenda Yeoh (2006) make the distinction between heartlanders, who are considered 'rooted', and cosmopolitans, who choose to remain 'rootless'. The former, who reside in suburban hubs where HDB housing estates are located, exhibit attachment, familiarity and a concern for (their) place.

citizenry with confidence in their capacity to imagine and initiate change. Thus, group identity is solidified by common values and shared aspirations, which in an active society is always an ongoing process of negotiated identity formation.

The fluidity of the city as an idea suggests that the production of space is necessarily implicated in the collective imaginations of communities and their solidarities. Limitations are almost always tied to practical constraints – how long these projects can run, the availability of space, time commitments and passion of the group to sustain momentum. Perhaps the way forward is to think of community as ephemera in this context and exploit its latent potential. This is not an innovation, but simply a reversion to how communities were historically constituted according to its Latin etymology *communitas*. First and foremost, community is a property belonging to subjects who join one another to form social relationships and simultaneously, a quality such as a sense of solidarity borne out of attachments – typically emotional ones – that further binds this collective (Esposito 2010). It is only when the community consolidates into an identifiable entity and becomes settled to the extent it lays claim to a territory that it develops a sense of belonging tied to a finite place (Ibid.). Thus, as its original meaning implies, a community is always incomplete, impermanent and fluid in its formation – much like this contemporary version. As such, it can be highly flexible and adaptable. The larger question remains: how can the impact generated by the pursuits and presence of different communities be maximized? Whether or not they are propinquitous, communities require the production of space to flourish.

If instances of organic human flourishing can only occur in locations categorized by Lim (2004) as 'spaces of indeterminacy' – urban pockets that have evaded state-planned redevelopment and programmatic use – or find moments of incidental political climates when moderated public expression is briefly encouraged, such as when campaign rallies are held across the island during the Singapore parliamentary general elections' cycle, then the prospect of scaling up is limited. The fact remains that mobilized actions arising from the social aspirations of everyday residents and public intellectual instigators can only scale up by either joining forces with like communities to generate greater public voice on shared issues, or changing political institutions to allow greater scope for participatory governance – or both.

Given the appropriate outlet and support, the liminal spaces where imagination thrives can leave an imprint on the wider public sphere. For one, they can become egalitarian spaces from which groups excluded from

Singapore society are able to project their voices. The clutch of poems in *Me Migrant* by Md Mukul Hossine (2016), translated from Bangla to English, form a deeply personal account of a foreign labour worker's experience that exemplifies this possibility. 'Eid Abroad' (Ibid.: 15) conveys the lonely existence and necessary sacrifices made by an economic migrant living far from his loved ones. This literary project takes a different route to revising people's assumptions of foreign workers in Singapore (Ho 2016). Readers gain a clarity from the confessional verses that conventional formats of public education and dissemination of information – such as official facts and published research studies – are rarely able to capture and enunciate effectively.

Perhaps the true societal contributions to and by the people are those located in smaller spaces of the city that comprise the spatial tissue of urban life which are not discernible in state-managed design. A key objective of this edited volume is therefore to identify the many types and forms of people's imaginaries of their realities that are in distinct contrast to those envisioned by the state. We undertake this with the aim of illustrating how a city's *raison d'être* is more crucially defined by its users than by the functional ensembles orchestrated from above. The different permutations of human agency and collective action detailed in these chapters underscore the autonomy that people in Singapore actually have in shaping alternative futures for themselves. By this, we mean futures that are considerably more open-ended, with other enticing and as-yet-undiscovered possibilities, besides the largely predetermined and technology-dependent trajectory painstakingly mapped out in the sensorial *The Future of Us* exhibition.[12]

Chapters in the Book

With Singapore serving as the subject of exploration, the purview of this edited volume is to expose imaginative representations of the city by foregrounding various forms and modes of intellectual and creative articulations of its urban condition. For this purpose, the imperative is to bring together diverse perspectives from scholars and practitioners alike to offer a multifaceted view on this subject. The scope is similarly wide, ranging from thoughtful deliberations on the viability of an urban imaginative field in Singapore to in-depth studies on specific projects and topics that address

12 Organized as a capstone event to conclude the year-long celebration of SG50, this major budget exhibition in Gardens by the Bay ran for just over three months.

the construction of narratives, acts of censorship, local activism, notions of placemaking and identity. With the ascent of Singapore in the world system, a considerable interest in the Singapore experience is to be expected. By showcasing the heterogeneity of people's views, both within Singapore and from the outside, these multidisciplinary contributions offer counterpoints to the neat official master narrative. Merging theory with practice, they directly address current issues on the ground and, in several cases, extend to include emerging formulations in the post-SG50 era.

What coheres in what might otherwise be construed as an eclectic collection of chapters is the contributors' concerted attention to the themes of 'hard state' and 'soft city' posed by this edited volume. Rather than forming separate lines of inquiry, the relations and tensions between the two themes provide intersecting storylines that appear in varying ways in the individual chapters. On one level, they highlight the challenges of preserving the domain of *terra imagina* of lived spaces vis-à-vis the more functional perspectives of state authority in Singapore. The intention is not to provide a critique of an authoritarian state. While state dominance in the production of urban space is important in its reflexive relationship to residents' access to and uses of space, negation of state control in this context is neither conceivable nor sufficient to elucidate how people see their own life spaces. Instead, we choose to illuminate the spirit of innovation and resourcefulness of people through the different forms and practices adopted by inhabitants of this city, who deftly negotiate the given conditions of their lived environment under the state panopticon.

Instances of creative placemaking and meaningful interpretations of lived spaces, initiated by individuals or through collective action, are most evident at key moments of Singapore's internal developments, or in response to controversial issues that threaten the future of an established locality and individuals' stakeholding of their lived environment. The malleability of space that allows creative practices and self-expression to thrive in organic, non-interventionist processes is echoed by Raban, 'For at moments like this, the city goes soft; it awaits the imprint of an identity. For better or worse, it invites you to remake it, to consolidate it into a shape you can live in' (1974: 9). By foregrounding socio-spatial relations and the city, we argue that physical spaces are subject to a multitude of social imaginings, which are then projected back into urban space to convey individual and shared meanings, identities and purposes.

The first section, '(De)-Constructing Master Narratives of the City', begins with Mark Frost's critical engagement with Koolhaas's meditation on Singapore. Frost traces how initiatives to construct a modern global

image for Singapore predate its post-independence history. A century before, Singapore's intelligentsia, being mostly Western-educated and multilingual, were already enveloped in a transnational dynamic to consolidate a cosmopolitan identity. Linking this examination of the careful cultivation of Singapore's image throughout its initial decades of nation-building to more recent developments is the controversy surrounding the Media Development Authority's refusal to issue Tan Pin Pin's documentary *To Singapore, With Love* (2013) with a rating for domestic screening and distribution. Olivia Khoo's chapter effectively opens up broader discussions into the issue of censorship in relation to Singapore's promotion of itself as a global creative city – an image that is predicated on a perception of openness, to attract foreign capital investments and talent. But what has been crucially overlooked in this polemic, as pointed out by Khoo (and in the filmmaker's public statement), is the film's poignant glimpse of Singapore from the outside by Singaporeans living in exile and the longing they continue to harbour for their homeland.

Rodolphe De Koninck, on the other hand, remains adamant that the soft city is far from being able to challenge the hard state. By mapping the island nation's landscape transformations across different periods, he illustrates the extent of state penetration in a visual format. In this chapter, the stipulation of where all sectors of society are 'housed', from the transitory foreign worker population to local residents, both living and the dead, is foregrounded. It compellingly supports his argument that the relentless overhaul of Singapore's living space is nearly always considered a *fait accompli* in state development and employed as a tool for political control. The power wielded by the state is demonstrated most visibly in its ambitious plans to redevelop the vast Bukit Brown Cemetery – the subject of the chapter by Natalie Pang and Liew Kai Khiun.

The second section, 'The Arts as Prisms of the Urban Imaginative', reveals how novel use of spaces in the city – sanctioned or otherwise tolerated – and creative interpretations of it are instrumental to the formation of another perceptual layer of space. We set out to do this in the hope of illuminating the truth of lived space, through how mental space – which is informed by an abstract structural logic that is responsible for conceptualising representations of space – conjoins with the social component articulated in spatial practice (Lefebvre 1991), to reveal the nuances residing in them. Complications arise when we consider how Singapore seems to define itself more by its anxieties than its aspirations. In its bid to become a world-class global city, anxieties about performance inadvertently lead to an anxiety of place because the primary outcome

of this pursuit is often, as we have discussed, the erasure of place. Weng Choy Lee poses the valid question of whether artists who happen to be located in Singapore are able to have a local address that is fundamental for exploring 'otherness' in relation to other scales of reference amid the shifting ground in which they operate.

The photo essay by Gideon Kong and Jamie Yeo, distilled from their ongoing project 'Forming Cityscapes', offers a witty and whimsical view into the ways in which everyday objects and spaces around Singapore are appropriated for use or unintended (and perhaps, even intentional) misuse in the public realm. They focus on how 'tactics', following Michel de Certeau's (1984) framework, are deployed as creative interventions or a form of resistance by the city's inhabitants. Although mostly minor and unnoticeable at first glance, the duo's carefully catalogued inventory of interventions visually evidence how city spaces are defined by their users and do not necessarily adhere to the functions prescribed by state authority.

Applying close readings and intertextual comparisons to poetry texts, Chow Teck Seng demonstrates how poetics is an amalgamation of imagined spaces and the overlapping of narratives. He argues that the different combinations of national, aesthetic, cultural and linguistic identities in poetry are integral to the canonization of new poetry texts and emergence of subgenres in the field. Intertextual poetry performances, upgraded from poetry readings, are shown here as having the capacity to induct audiences into an exclusive contact sphere and make them active participants in the experience. The potential of live performances to induce solidarity, albeit momentarily, is likewise underscored in Steve Ferzacca's ethnographic account. In an obscure basement corner of an old shopping centre in Singapore, a small community of musicians and their supporters spontaneously come together to actualize the objective of representational space and test the limits of authorized use of communal areas. It critically contravenes the notion that Singaporeans are generally risk adverse and compliant participants in government and commercial enterprises.

The final section, 'The City Possible in Action', highlights instances of human flourishing, which might be instigated by an individual but are always mobilized through collective efforts, and how they create a space for dialogue and exchange in the public realm. Hoe Su Fern's chapter focuses on the efforts of state-driven initiatives, local arts practitioners and organizations to infuse urban vitality in the city by activating latent or under-utilized spaces. Conceptual distinction is made between

place management – a top-down approach prioritising the delivery of results – and the community-driven process of placemaking to facilitate discussions on spatial interventions in Singapore executed through the former. The rigid framework applied to all art projects and constraints to what is permissible by government authorities reveal the need for policies that can ensure sufficient flexibility to accommodate diverse activities. Meanwhile, Goh Wei Leong supplies an insider's view of how 'heartlanders' have creatively taken advantage of perceived distance from state monitoring to pursue individual interests alongside convivial interactions in their public housing environment. The 'flowering' of local social life in his neighbourhood in Clementi New Town is hosted in neutral shared spaces – common corridors and void decks of residential blocks, neighbourhood stores, hawker centres and coffee shops – while established local public characters play a vital role in fostering conviviality, acting as informal points of contact for the local community or providers of space for social interactions.

Alongside the transecting histories of specific individuals or events that either complement or contradict the master narrative are also those that sit external to it, which was the case for Bukit Brown Cemetery, one of the largest Chinese burial grounds outside China, until 2011. Announcement of a highway project across the site that year not only ignited conservation discourse on mainstream media but also mobilized civil society heritage activism that transcended spatial dimensions. Natalie Pang and Liew Kai Khiun specifically discuss how media-based applications can be enfolded in cemetery visitor activities in ways that take advantage of the pervasiveness of mobile devices and digital connectivity in Singapore. Augmented experience can enrich in situ heritage appreciation as well as enhance post-visit learning. Collaboration between the state, NGOs, the academic community and grassroots volunteers to realize the iBBC app marks an altruistic effort at utilising digital technology strategically to encourage wider visitor engagement with the site's grave artefacts and natural environment, even as the eventual fate of the cemetery remains undecided.

Optimism continues to abound with the increased visibility of civil society and citizen engagement highlighted respectively in Huiying Ng's comparative case study on the Growell Pop-up, Babel and Foodscape Collective, and Emily Chua's incisive reading of GE2015 – the parliamentary general elections held after main celebrations for SG50 had concluded. Ng offers a fresh, millennial's perspective of a young eco-consumer immersed in the growing ecological and social consciousness through consumerist

activities. The projects tabled in her chapter demonstrate the use of tools for conviviality through workshops and gatherings conducted in real space and, equally, the efforts involved to publicize and maintain the networks that are formed. These practices and social imaginaries become the means for Singaporeans to exercise their autonomy and share their experiences by optimising transient networks, organically constituted opportunities and digitally supported platforms like crowdsourcing. Chua's chapter rounds up the volume with her nuanced reading of what transpired on the ground during Singapore's General Election in 2015 (GE2015), which coincided with the peak of year-round events celebrating SG50. The unexpected outcome of GE2015, which earned even more votes for the ruling People's Action Party than the previous election in 2011, can be partly attributed to residual euphoria from the golden jubilee. However, the stronger show of support for political opposition parties on the ground and the atmosphere during campaign rallies reveal a disjuncture between the map of electoral administration and campaign terrain, which is not confined to voting wards but extends across the country as a space lived in and reflected on by its citizens. Although the political hegemony of the PAP will unlikely be substantially challenged, this new practice of popular political engagement has engendered a political dualism – referred by Chua as 'two futures' – that compels voters and Singaporeans alike to think about their own future and their nation's more laterally.

In closing, the urban imaginative field can always be read as a repository akin to the songlines of the Indigenous Australians (eponymously Koolhaas's essay title), which contain the stories of the people and ancestral spirits of the land. Time is composed of connective threads that stitch together the patchwork of individual and collective tales so that they are 'not merely a collection of fragmentary moments on a calendar but the continuum of past and present' (Daley 2016), in both this realm and in reality. Paths leading to the creation of the respective projects and pieces – however large or small, impactful or insignificant, enduring or ephemeral, inspirational or detrimental – that form the gamut of the urban imaginative field in Singapore illuminate the navigation that is essential to decoding each songline. The interdisciplinary spirit of this edited volume supports the deepening of extant scholarship on Singapore by concurrently repositioning issues that may already be familiar to some readers in a different light and incorporating recent developments that have emerged at this critical juncture in Singapore's history.

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