Common Ground: The Study of Singapore’s Ground and the Production of Myths

Thesis

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COMMON GROUND
The Study of Singapore’s Ground and the Production of Myths

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Abstract
In Singapore, land is scarce and a resource to be maximised. The result is a creation of land policies, which includes housing policies and burial policies to control and regulate land use. These are inextricably linked and the majority of Singaporeans live and are buried in the same land that is owned and controlled by the state, and burial policies are primarily designed to create space for housing. The question of land appears to be one of judicial administration. It is, however, imbued with histories, symbolisms, and power relationships.

The purpose of this thesis is to graft a link between the complex condition of ground and the ways in which policy, planning, and design, become operative in the construction of national and social myths. As Singapore is made up of different ethnic, religious, and social groups, myths of equality are critical in creating its national identity. And in order to trace the process of creating this cohesive identity, the complexity of the condition of the ground needs to be understood and examined. The first part of the thesis attempts to construct a history of the ground by following a chronological order, from colonial history to the establishment of independence. This demonstrates that, while land policies are necessary for the newly formed government to manage land use, they are more than just pragmatic solutions; they reflect the state’s power and authority over the scarce resource. The thesis is then organised around three broader myths: the myth of socioeconomic equality, the myth of racial harmony, and the myth of progress and family.

Myths, when perpetuated by policies, aim to create forms of life, the norms for how individuals and families should function. Each myth is discussed through different types of evidence and different scales. At each time, the thesis interrogates how policies and the design of environments are complicit in the formation of myths, highlighting inherent contradictions in the myths as well as their implications.

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Introduction

A person’s performance depends on nature and nurture. There is increasing evidence that nature, or what is inherited, is the greater determinant of a person’s performance than nurture. The 1980 Census disclosed that whilst we have brought down the birth rate, we have reduced it most unequally. The better educated the woman is, the less children she has. Ironically, she has the greater resources to provide her children with a better environment, nurturing and care… If we continue to reproduce ourselves in this lop-sided way, we will be unable to maintain our present standards. Levels of competence will decline. Our economy will falter, the administration will suffer, and society will decline.¹

Founding Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew at the National Day Rally (August 1983)

Land is a limited resource in Singapore that must be maximised. To manage and regulate land use, housing and burial policies have been developed. Land policy and design had helped to foster a set of social beliefs that shaped the country’s identity. By tracing the process of myth making, this thesis investigates how the ground in contemporary Singapore has retained its prominence in the construction of the Singaporean identity. Several materials I have come across, as well as current issues such as the global pandemic, have culminated to the writing in this thesis. Firstly, there’s an excerpt from the 1983 National Day Rally speech (presented above) made by then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. My interest in housing policies was piqued when I discovered that the entire speech has been removed from the National Archives of Singapore and that segments of the speech has been omitted from a compilation book of National Day Rally speeches.² ³

To put the thesis abstract into context, in his speech, the founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew was introducing new housing policies and family policies to encourage more families to have children in order to sustain Singapore’s population and alleviate any economic and social pressures of an ageing population. Singapore’s family policies significantly leverage on the national public housing programme under the Housing Development Board (HDB). The nation’s housing policies favoured young “productive” families and gave

¹ This excerpt of the National Day Rally speech can be found in Saw Swee-Hock, Population Policies and Programmes in Singapore. 2nd ed. (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2016), 265.
priority to newly married couples. The leadership’s suggestion that university graduates should marry other university graduates to produce supposedly smarter children with more resources was so controversial that it sparked what the press called the “Great Marriage Debate”. The family policies, despite their jarring political incorrectness, were still passed in 1983. This reflected the eugenic ideals of the government that were bestowed or imposed on its citizens’ concepts of the nucleus family—what we had assumed to be a private and personal choice is muddled with national aspirations.²

As the sociologist Teo You Yenn points out, this speech reveals an elitist government that ironically situates itself within the ideas of equal opportunity and meritocracy.⁵ This also communicates the intricacies of the relationship between private and national ideals and how they get entangled. In this case, the Singaporean state structures domestic and social relations in such a way that enables workforce regeneration, and by persuading Singaporeans that it is their responsibility as citizens to participate in nation building itself through biological reproduction.⁶ This speech, and its omittance from the archives at the National Library, form part of the evidence that has raised some questions about narratives and housing policies in Singapore. Other than the observable connection between housing policies and the family, this speech also surfaces the issues surrounding the disparity and inequalities of resource distribution. In this case, “resources” would refer mainly to a family’s financial resources, which may or may not allow them to afford to have more children. Naturally, issues of class and race also arise when discussing the economic disparity between families. The entanglement of family policies, economic equality, and race are all at play in these poignant and revealing few sentences from a speech that was broadcasted to the public in 1983.

Teo You Yenn’s body of research in the field of sociology and human geography have also built the foundation of my research. Her work has made me more aware of the societal issues that, despite having resided in Singapore for most of my life, was blind to. In her latest book, This Is What Inequality Looks Like, she exposes the inequalities in Singapore by showing readers her personal experiences while conducting her research on low-income families.⁷ Although the stories from her experiences of interviewing these families and persons who live in poorer conditions can be discomforting in the way that they force us to acknowledge the hidden inequalities, the book has been very influential to this thesis. Beyond just empirical data, Teo shares conversations she has had with people from lower-income families and brings humanity into her approach to a discussion that others would dismiss as merely a statistical inquiry. She also explores narratives that have emerged as a result of the housing situation in Singapore, as well as the issues surrounding a seemingly

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⁵ Teo, "No Economy, No Singapore”.

⁶ Teo, "No Economy, No Singapore”.

⁷ Teo Yeo Yenn, This is What Inequality Looks Like (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2019).
meritocratic system in which some families find themselves unable to afford the opportunities that come easily to others. My thesis investigates narratives similar to Teo’s explorations, but from a spatial and architectural standpoint, and it will broaden the research to include other related land policies.

Another influence for this thesis is a book I came across titled *Living with Myths in Singapore.* This book examines the myths in Singapore that have the ability to explain or gloss over difficult and sensitive issues. According to Perica, “myths are the building blocks of nationhood”. And according to Storey, fiction and inaccurate histories are crucial in producing a sense of nationhood, where the blurring of myth and reality is a central process to the nationalist imagination. However, in *Living with Myths in Singapore,* myths are not limited to the telling of “inaccurate” histories in order to create nationalist narratives; rather, these narratives may also be formed by inventing national aspiration (although sometimes, to legitimise this, historical myth might be forged). In *Mythologies,* Barthes points out that it is ultimately a system of communication that has the ability to guide the individual or collective opinions in relation to a specific subject matter.

*Living with Myths in Singapore* is an anthology of essays segmented into four parts, each focusing on a different set of overarching myths—one looks at the telling of Singapore’s history, another explores how the history of nation-building is portrayed to citizens and to the world, the third part examines romantic narratives that are blind to the flaws of societal issues, and the last chapter closes with the difficult issues such as poverty and the community acceptance of minority groups. The book encompasses many aspects of societal myths, from education to international trade agreements with which Singapore is involved, and delves into the myths’ shortcomings and generalisations. Each essay in the book repeatedly demonstrates how “common sense” or “truths” are conditioned by “official” narratives and readings of history that are broadcasted on government-controlled media or printed in government-produced school textbooks. Initially, I found much difficulty in structuring my thesis because the evidence—such as policies, speeches (macro), and floor plans of public spaces and of homes (micro)—presented a challenge in discussing the varying scales simultaneously. *Living with Myths in Singapore* largely influenced the structure of this thesis, which is broken into three parts, each focusing on one of the broader social myths, much like the structure of the book. While the diverse expertise of the book’s contributors interrogated myths in Singapore through an anthropogeographic lens, this thesis would go on to present architectural and design elements as further evidence, distilling how policies and rhetoric do not

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operate alone, but are bolstered by design and architecture, which are complicit in realising and materialising these myths as realities.

The thesis also consults the book *Home + Bound*, another anthology of essays that, while initially priming the reader for discussions on architecture and domesticity, extends the discussions into the national to explore the dualities between the home and the nation. In one of the essays, “UNEARTHED: Surveys of ‘Ground’ in Singapore’s Chinese Burial Grounds” by Kenneth Koh, two very prominent and transformative connections ignited my curiosity in burial policies. The first cue was inspired by Koh’s observations of the uncanny similarities between images of government-owned columbaria and public housing flats in Singapore from the film, *Moving House*. Koh drew the link between the Chinese graves (homes of the dead) to the “space of the living”, not just visually, but also in the way reverence is given to the ground. However, in this thesis, I wanted to extend the discussion to include the policies that also govern the housing of the living and the dead. It is clear to me that, in many ways, both housing policies (living) and burial policies (dead) work in tandem in a balancing act of Singapore’s land use management strategy, and for the majority of Singaporeans, they would live and be buried (or cremated) on the same land that is owned and tightly controlled by the state.

The second was using the ground as the central subject matter in discussing Singapore’s pragmatic sensibilities that has overwritten Chinese burial traditions and rituals. Koh aligns his definition of the “ground” from Robin Dripps who differentiates the *ground* from other related terminology like site by emphasising that the *ground* is weighted with complexities and riddled with power and symbolisms. At the same time, the central role of the state in governing and controlling land demands an inquiry into the other concepts of land and territory—terms that crop up frequently when discussing Singapore’s history. The nuances between the terms, while seemingly slight, suggests different ways to look at the condition of what is typically referred to simply as the “ground”. Koh claims that the Chinese burial ground is a site is a site of tensions caused by the ground’s “conflicting identities”. This is where my thesis departs from Koh’s essay. Although I do not deny the tensions, and even violence, that exist in the ground as a result of its inevitably shifting and multiple identities, I believe that the conditions and limitations of the ground are agencies leading to the formation of Singapore’s singular national identity, extending beyond the consequential pragmatic attitudes implied by Koh at the end of his essay. My

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15 Koh, “Unearthed”.
16 In a later part of the thesis, I will also illustrate how these spaces of both the living and the dead are closely related, such as the use of the ground floor communal space of HDB estates as venues for funeral wakes.
thesis, instead, will trace the process of nation-building and show how this identity is purposefully constructed and orchestrated through policies used to govern and manage this imperative and limited resource.

The writings of Singaporean sociologist Chua Beng Huat, particularly in the publications *Political Legitimacy and Housing: Stakeholding in Singapore* and *Liberalism Disavowed: Communitarianism and State Capitalism in Singapore*, have also shaped my research greatly. Chua’s work is particularly relevant as he combines his work in comparative politics with spatial investigations. In *Political Legitimacy and Housing* published in 1995, Chua documents the disruptive violence caused by the initial resettling of people from villages into modern high-rise housing during independent Singapore’s infancy.\(^{20}\) His study included how forms of life and routines are altered, which he illustrated by comparing the diagrammatic plans of the traditional homes with the prefabricated flats built in the 1970s and 1980s. These studies laid the foundation for my own investigations into the evolution of the public housing flats that were more recently built (beyond the 1990s). Chua’s most recent book *Liberalism Disavowed* exposes the shifts and responsiveness in the government rhetoric in order to maintain the stronghold of the reigning political party in Singapore, brought about by changes in demands of a more affluent and educated citizenry.\(^{21}\) This political hegemony of the dominant ruling party cannot be accomplished without the use of myths.

**Methodology**

The purpose of the thesis is to graft a link between the condition of the ground and the ways in which policy, planning, and design, become operative in the construction of national and social myths. It was therefore critical to find evidence to substantiate these relationships. Secrecy surrounding the Singapore government was an issue – particularly in obtaining and displaying certain pieces of documents, specific plans and maps, which posed a difficulty to this thesis. As much as possible, throughout the writing of this thesis, I have consulted the National Archives Singapore (NAS) and the National Library (Lee Kong Chian Reference Library) and on occasion, my inquiry was denied and I was not able to access certain detailed plans and maps as well as information that was deemed to breach national security. In such situations, I was forced to consult secondary sources (where some maps and plans were based on inference or recollection). This brought about some limitations to the research but has also steered the research into looking at alternative sources. Plans of the housing flats were typically made from references from an archived personal database of HDB flat brochures and purchaser drawings from Teo, Alida but were re-drawn to support arguments in the thesis. While other times, primary resources were obtained through fieldwork where I had visited the homes of people with their verbal permission. Special access was also granted to me by the National Environment Agency (NEA), a


government agency that operates Mandai Crematorium. Although I was not granted to display any photographs or share any plans of the Mandai Crematorium complex, and instead, I made personal notes and sketches in order to illustrate and critically discuss the architecture (Part 3). The illustrations that I have presented in this thesis are not just representations of the original drawings but selectively taken apart to further illustrate the arguments so they can be read along with the text. Other than making the drawings more instrumental to the thesis, the process of creating sketches and illustrations was also constructive in the analysis of the plans. Hence the drawings presented as part of the thesis are no longer just historical evidence but also part of the argument that validates it.

Online forums, social media, and oral histories were also valuable tools in accessing public sentiments and candid behaviour towards specific policies. In these cases, forums and social media provided a platform of anonymity, resulting in non-biased reactions compared to formal interviews or surveys, which might present higher response biases, particularly with more sensitive topics like sentiments towards foreigners in Singapore (Part 3). Social media as evidence, although it has allowed us to be cognizant of some public sentiments, it is prudent to recognise that it may not be considered representative of the entire population. On the contrary, these findings are unfiltered and provide the thesis with the basis for inferences. The use of different mechanisms of evidence – not just archival - official and non-official documents is a deliberate attempt to weave in microhistories within the thesis.

**Thesis Outline**

The title of the thesis *Common Ground* - refers to the shared surface of the earth or the *commons*. The “commons” is a cultural practice where all members of society have equal access to. In the case of “common ground”, it can be read as - the ground as the material surface of the earth, as a resource where there is no claimed ownership and is accessible by all the members of society equally. But as a figure of speech, it also refers to a nation’s shared opinion or interest. This double entendre was deliberate in capturing the multiple meanings of *ground*. The term “ground” in this thesis does not only refer to the material surface of the earth and its metaphors but rather is imbued with many more nuances and engages with meanings of territory that include the complexities of human relationships to it as the thesis will further discuss in Part 1. The ground is also a system of values and constructed identities that those residing above are meant to share. *Common

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COMMON GROUND: The Study of Singapore’s Ground and the Production of Myths

Introduction

*Ground* merges two similar meanings\(^\text{25}\) – one is the linguistic meaning of “common ground” and the other, the sociological and psychological understanding of Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*\(^\text{26}\). The linguistic meaning reflects the nature of the ground being a finite resource while also revealing the element of ownership and use, which will also be discussed further in the thesis in Part 2.

On the other hand, according to Anderson, national identity is a shared identity with an entire nation. The spread of national myths affirms or naturalises a set of national values. *Common Ground* alludes to the collective national ideology which survives because of these myths. According to Barthes, myth is not an object or concept; instead, it is a mode of signification or a system of communication\(^\text{27}\). In Barthes *Mythologies*, each object chapter in the book, such as wrestling and soap and cookery, are objects that retain signification tied to capitalistic cultures\(^\text{28}\). Likewise, in the thesis, each piece of evidence (whether plan drawing, policy documents, social media posts, television commercials or song lyrics) retains some form of signification tied to the state’s agenda to create a cohesive national identity. But instead, each chapter is dedicated to each myth rather than the object or evidence examined. Narratives can be seen simplistically as a recount of a story, and while western literary scholars may classify myth as a genre of narratives, the narratives referred to in this thesis are the accounts or stories that can be inferred from the evidence. Evidence and accounts – or narratives are the mediums by which myths are constructed and in turn, myths are the cultural power of narratives. Therefore, both narrative and myth are irreplaceable and coincide with serving the construction of national identity.

To understand the formation of myths, a reading of historical contexts is necessary to understand the conditions of the “ground”. The first part of the thesis begins with a curated history of the land, progressing chronologically from colonial history to the establishment of relatively recent independence. These conditions are not only caused by the native and migrant population, but also compounded by external forces from the British colonial rulers thousands of miles away, and neighbouring countries in the South China Sea. For example, with limited space, land reclamation has become the main solution for artificially expanding the land towards Singapore’s territorial boundaries. Unfortunately, the industrial magnitude of dredging and land reclamation in Singapore has been taking place at such a large scale that the production of land has set off legal and political contestation with other nations.\(^\text{29}\) And when dealing with a scarce resource, land inevitably transforms into a commodity that is nationalised and strictly regulated, resulting in the creation of a series of

\(^{25}\) I had first come across the term “Common Ground” and its relation to Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* from an online podcast by Daniel Pontillo (doctoral candidate at the University of Rochester) and Chris Gratien (doctoral candidate at Georgetown University), titled Ottoman History Podcast, episode no. 149, released on 16 March 2014 at [http://www.ottomanhistorypodcast.com/2014/03/imagined-communities-anderson-history-linguistics.html?m=1](http://www.ottomanhistorypodcast.com/2014/03/imagined-communities-anderson-history-linguistics.html?m=1)


land policies to protect and guard it.\textsuperscript{30} Housing and burial policies (which form part of land-use policies) have been used not only as pragmatic solutions, but also to reflect the extent of the state’s power and authority over the landscape.\textsuperscript{31} This part of the thesis teases out segments of Singapore’s history that have shaped these conditions, setting the context for understanding the production of myths.

Each of the three remaining parts of the thesis will focus on one of the three broader myths that Lee alluded to directly and indirectly in his National Day Rally speech in 1983. Each myth is discussed through different types of evidence from varying sources and mediums, spanning the different scales. By dissecting field observations and plans, and by interrogating the speeches and policies, it will become clear how each myth is perpetuated in a multitude of ways. The second part of the thesis brings to the forefront the first myth—the social realities of socioeconomic inequality in Singapore. This section traces how land policies mask the different financial situations of its citizens. In *The Legal System: A Social Science Perspective*, law is analogous to Barthe’s understanding of myth, that it is also a system of communication interacting with other systems of communication. Legal acts, according to Friedman, are ‘exchanges between legal and other co-existing social systems\textsuperscript{32}’ while ‘each kind of legal system persuades through its structure and style and with its own special rhetorical force\textsuperscript{33}’—which can be understood as legal legitimacy\textsuperscript{34}. In *The Legal System*, Friedman asserts that legal systems affect social behaviours and class structure. The ‘rhetoric force’ or legal legitimacy that Friedman is referring to, is analogous to Barthe’s myth, while the policy itself is the narrative that is what the thesis examines. In Part 2 of the thesis, the examination is focused on the Land Acquisitions Act which was established shortly after Singapore’s independence and gave the state the power to acquire private land which was to serve the “greater good” of the majority of its citizens\textsuperscript{35 \ 36} with terminology in the bill with “public purpose”. It is suggested in the bill that the primary goal of the Land Acquisitions Act was to provide citizens with public housing, especially for the population affected by poor living conditions brought about by the devastation of World War II and a widespread fire in 1961. In order to create social security, founding Prime Minister Lee was adamant about establishing a largely horizontal social structure of two basic classes: people who owned property and those who did not.\textsuperscript{37} Through a national public housing programme that now houses

\textsuperscript{30} Chua, *Liberalism Disavowed*, 76–82.


\textsuperscript{36} Chua, *Liberalism Disavowed*, 76–82.

\textsuperscript{37} Chua Beng Huat, “Eliminating Class-Based Politics” in *Political Legitimacy and Housing: Stakeholding in Singapore* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 137–139.
more than 80% of its population, homeownership was achieved for the majority of its citizens. Although this form of ownership under the public housing programme is limited and restrictive in comparison to private ownership; it meant that most people could be considered “homeowners”, creating a majority in the national census in terms of the population who owned property, even if the property was on state-owned land. In addition, through architecture and policy, income disparities and poverty are largely hidden from view, allowing many to feed off the narrative that poverty does not exist in Singapore. This part of the thesis will expose financial disparities among citizens through the design of public housing flats, and trace the evolution of the design to show how newer flats attempt to emulate the designs of the private apartments. Beyond the HDB flats, the thesis will also examine burial policies in Singapore. Because of the space constraints, new burial policies favour cremation over burying the dead. By providing two main state-owned crematoriums, the state has also taken over the act of grieving. This part of the thesis will examine the tomb designs in Bukit Brown cemetery, a privately owned Chinese cemetery, and compare it to the architecture of government-run columbaria. When we examine architecture throughout the thesis, the study of the drawing plans allows us to examine and speculate the interaction between architecture and users/inhabitants - like policy, architecture is the narrative that feeds the larger myth. If we employ the same semiotic strategy and methodology in examining objects as Barthes uses in Mythologies, we can study how cultural objects like architecture as architecture informs us of everyday practices and rituals and how architecture affects forms of life through its design and its evolution. As cultural objects, architecture is imbued with implicit signs which also can be ‘read’ – these signs, which are very much like language, are what shape the lived experience and perception of its users.

Although race was never explicitly mentioned in the 1983 National Day Rally speech, it was implied and an unspoken presumption. Other than referring to the socio-economic situation of each family, there are racial implications that are intertwined when discussing the financial resources of each family. The third part of the thesis discusses how the conditions of the ground in Singapore contributed to the construction of the myth of racial harmony. With a migrant population of different ethnicities, religions, and cultural backgrounds, it is easy to deduce that, in order to maintain social security, the newly elected government desperately needed to find a way to differentiate and identify its citizens as unique and singular identity. Since Singapore’s independence, the government has prioritised the undoing of colonial city planning that segregated people based on race and

39 Teo, This is What Inequality Looks Like (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2019).
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Introduction

has implemented new planning strategies and policies that aimed at breaking up racial enclaves. This part of the thesis also focuses on the Ethnic Integration Policy (EIP) which was created to ensure an even mix of races living together. The EIP prescribes the maximum limits of each racial group purchasing units in each block of flats and in each neighbourhood. These limits although solves the issue of ensuring a good mix of racial groups, is problematic and conceals any underlying racial tensions. To provide housing efficiently, prefabricated construction was used for HDB buildings, flats, and common spaces – this meant that neighbourhoods are largely homogeneous in design and people of differing faiths, traditions, and rituals adapt to the spaces they live in. The thesis also looks at how rituals and traditions are watered down due to spatial constraints by examining how people have adapted their homes and communal spaces. Burial policies enforced by the state have also compromised traditional burial rituals as government-run crematoriums and columbaria replace traditional cemeteries. With cremation encouraged over burials in order to conserve land—which is prioritised for housing, commercial, and industry—the specific rituals associated with mourning the dead also become adulterated. Religions lose their specificity, and the mythology of racial harmony is constructed through the removal of boundaries between ethnicities.

The final part of the thesis focuses on family policies and how they impact the peoples’ perception of progress and success. This part of the thesis breaks down the instruments that assist the state in constructing the aspirations of the people. Firstly, the thesis looks into the state’s pro-family manifesto. The public housing programme prioritises young married couples in order to encourage Singaporeans to perform their national duty and reproduce. Secondly, the home yet again takes on another form when it is used by the state as an asset of exchange and to finance other government expenditure. By virtue of the state’s positioning of the home as a “valuable asset”, the HDB flat has transformed the home into commodity, creating a working class driven by the perceived importance of personal wealth accumulation in order to provide for their families.

The ground works indirectly through land policies to create myths that mould the larger national identity. It would be naive to assume that these myths are solely constructed by a single policy or through design alone—the process of myth-making involves a combination of policies, government rhetoric, the media, as well as environmental design and architecture. While other scholars have focused purely on the political theory, social sciences, and economic aspects of Singapore’s controversial land ownership, housing, and family policies, this thesis will attempt to integrate different fields of study with a close examination of Singapore’s urban planning policies and designs. This, hopefully, will demonstrate how the association of public housing with home

46 Chua, Liberalism Disavowed, 84–85.
ownership is used to conjure up a narrative that attempts to sustain the public’s confidence in the local government, even if it comes at the expense of personal choice and freedom.48

Part 1

The Foundations

The one-dollar Singapore currency coin came into circulation around the time that the nation’s first phase of the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) underground public train system was constructed. Several speculations have circulated online linking the shape of certain government-issued items, such as the one-dollar coin, to Singapore’s first Prime Minister, the late Lee Kuan Yew’s possible belief in Feng Shui, and these theories have even been brought up by local taxi drivers over casual conversations. The rumour has it that Lee was a deeply superstitious man who was very particular about Chinese geomancy. It was also rumoured that when Lee was debating whether or not to go ahead with the underground tunnelling works for the train system, he had consulted with a Chinese Geomancy Master who warned him that proceeding with the works would cause the “shifting earth” to become destabilised, thereby bringing bad luck to the country and particularly affecting its economy because the island would not have the proper foundation to metaphorically prop its financial growth.

Many Chinese superstitions and beliefs are based on allegory, homonyms and symbols. The ground, in this case, is synonymous with stability and foundation. According to the story, Lee knew that the MRT project was necessary for Singapore’s progress and allegedly consulted the Geomancy Master to see if there was a way to mitigate the negative effects if the project was to go ahead. He was then told that the only way to protect the nation from the “negative chi” caused by the tunnelling works was to ensure that there was a “pa kua”—a round mirror with an octagonal border—in every home in Singapore to protect the people. This cultural ‘artifact’ is still widely prevalent among the Chinese community in Singapore, especially those who follow the Buddhist and Taoist religions, and the “pa kua” is said to be a powerful tool used in feng shui to protect people against bad luck and evil or negative energies.

According to the story, Lee knew that the only way for him to have implemented the “pa kua” would be to do it inconspicuously, since Singapore’s society is built on a population from diverse religious backgrounds, and forcing people to adopt Buddhist and Taoist symbols in their homes would be unthinkable. Moreover, if people knew about his superstitions, his credibility as a Prime Minister would be questioned. The solution to this was to incorporate the symbol of the “pa kua” onto the surface of the one-dollar coins in circulation (refer to Image 1.1a and 1.1b), of which release would also coincide with the construction of the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) system. Both sides of Singapore’s one-dollar coin have an octagonal border, which is reminiscent of the “pa kua” in feng

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1 The eight-sided “pa kua” symbol represents the eight symbols used in Taoist cosmology to represent the eight principles and concepts of reality. These concepts are heaven, lake, fire, thunder, wind, water, mountain and ground. The middle of the symbol is the yin-yang symbol, which in Ancient Chinese philosophy, represents the concept of dualism. The symbol is used particularly in Feng Shui (Chinese geomancy), which is a pseudoscientific traditional practice that claims to harmonise energy forces in the environment.
shui symbolism, and if ascribed to the Geomancy Master’s belief, it meant that it would protect the citizens against bad luck. The one-dollar coin is an inconspicuous object that can be continuously circulated among the citizens without offending people with other religious beliefs; and yet, every household was going to be protected as long as it is in possession of at least a one-dollar coin.²

This theory was obviously refuted by the late Lee himself. Nevertheless, as an urban legend, it illustrates that the ground is interwoven with the traditions, culture, and even religious beliefs of Singaporeans. Despite this rumour just being speculation, there are people who still believe that the one-dollar coin is a symbol of protection and that the actual physical ground of the nation is something that should not be disturbed.

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² This anecdotal story was first told to me by a local taxi driver.
Kenneth Koh’s discussion of the “ground” and its importance in the context of cemeteries (specifically the Chinese burial ground) in “Unearthed” has brought this intrinsic connection to my attention. Koh aligns his understanding and definitions of the ground largely with Robin Dripps in his essay *Groundwork*, where Dripps focuses on the meanings and overtones between “ground” and “site”. According to Dripps, the ground possesses and is charged with several metaphorical layers, which are formed by “political, cultural and intellectual forces”.

The “destabilisation of the ground” being a metaphor for financial or foundational instability reflects how the ground is treated as a sacred entity that should be revered and not agitated. The value of the ground is therefore a substantial part of a larger cultural proposition, similar to that of the Native American traditions as described in *Groundwork* by Dripps.

In Native American culture, the ground connects all the members together in a physical and understandable way, making the ground an intrinsic part of the human condition and their cultural identity. The ground forms an integral part of beliefs and superstitions. For the Chinese, the ground is also anthropomorphised. The Chinese believe that there is a deity of the ground, the *Tudigong* (*土地公*, “the lord of the soil and ground”), from which *土地* can be translated as the soil, earth, or ground. Typically, a small altar for the *Tudigong* is erected in cemeteries to protect the ground, as well as to honour the deity. In order to not upset the *Tudigong*, many architects or people working in construction who still believe that the one-dollar coin was designed to be a form of protection will drop a coin into the ground when a new construction project commences, after the ground has been excavated for the initial foundations to be laid.

The reverence for the ground is aligned with Dripps’ valuing of the ground to be the cultural product of human relationships with the land. For example, when the ground in engaged in human relationships, it sometimes becomes part of a larger cultural proposition and vernacular history. However, the consideration of the ground this thesis suggest, goes beyond the Dripps’ description. It is worth clarifying at this point the related terms that overlap in definition of what we refer to broadly as space. Dripps discusses the ground in terms of the complexity of transcendental meanings and nuances—such as when ground is valued as a metaphor or takes on anthropomorphic qualities—it assumes these meanings. The ground and its conditions here however, are primarily examined as affected by political technologies. In these terms, Elden’s paper, “Land, Terrain, Territory” provides a starting point. In his paper, Elden explains that definitions of “territory” are not as easily described because it goes beyond the summation of both “land” and “terrain”. In their study, Elden cites *Man in the Primitive World*, where Hoebel demonstrates that land is an important resource because most sustenance is

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5 Dripps, “Groundwork,” 66.
6 Based on an urban legend that I have heard repeatedly from first and second generations of Chinese Singaporeans.
7 Dripps, “Groundwork,” 66.
8 Dripps, “Groundwork,” 59.
COMMON GROUND: The Study of Singapore’s Ground and the Production of Myths

The Foundations

derived from the earth—either directly or indirectly. In *The Political Organization of Space*, Edward Soja explains that land is a limited resource over which there is competition over distribution and allocation. As a resource, land is hence typically commodified and is closely related to the discussions of property and ownership. On the other hand, Elden differentiates terrain from land in that it occupies the fields of political strategy and defence. Although Elden has avoided the implications that comes with the impossible task of defining the difficulties of the term “territory”, he notes that territory cannot be simply passed off as “bounded space” or “spatial containers” but rather, is exposed to other relationships beyond the boundaries of the ground.

This thesis seeks to contribute to the discussion through the exploration of other political and strategic relations that involve the state and the ground, and the role they play in identity politics. In the case of Singapore, its colonial history as well as its land reclamation strategy opens up the meanings of ground to include the exterior forces such as the nation’s relations to other territories and with its citizens. As Anssi Paasi argues, land is referred to as the material component associated with control, yet it becomes the site where the social, cultural and political operate. As a result, there are emotional manifestations of social relations when events and myths aid in the process of creating attachments to the land – these are required to construct a sense of belonging as people tend to identify with territories. The ground is the structure that engaged both Elden’s reflections on territory and it is also imbued with the complexities of the Dripps’ notion of ground. Ground is weighted with the entanglement of all these terms in addition to being a cultural product. It refers to the human relations to the ground as Dripps explains, but it also involves relations such as those between nations and the relationship between the state and its people – all of which, affects its condition. As Storey explains in *Territories: The Claiming of Space*, human behaviour and territories form a closed loop where the creation of territory is the result of human behaviour, the process by which territories are produced, impact in their turn the ways of life in a myriad of ways. The conditions of the ground in the discussion of identity politics, in particular, are shaped by nation’s exterior and interior power relations – similarly but not symmetrically, the ground in turn, affects the relationship between the state and its people, and the relationship of the state with other nations. In Singapore, these conditions are endlessly changing – not just to meet the demands of the nation but also as a result of economic, political, (which includes both interior - the state and its citizens, but also the exterior - outside the sovereignty protected by boundaries) and cultural consequences. The ground is thus not ahistorical and therefore it is crucial to understand the history of the land that has contributed to its condition.

Rise of the Colonial City (~1945)

In its efforts to remove the last vestiges of colonialism from independent Singapore, the PAP government made a conscious ideological decision that the official history of independent Singapore would consign the island’s past glory as a notable trading post in archipelagic Southeast Asia and its place as an island in the Malay world to prehistory. The official history would begin with the arrival of Stamford Raffles in 1819 and its founding as a free port of the East India Company to avoid foregrounding the long, politically complex histories of contemporary Singapore’s Chinese, Indian and Islamic peoples which would complicate the anticipated national-building process.

Chua Beng Huat

Singapore is strategically located with the geographical advantage of being the gateway to its immediate regional and international economic trade system. With the death of the Sultan of Johor in 1812, the Johor-Riau Sultanate (which Singapore was a part of) was left without any direction and a contested leadership. Stamford Raffles used the opportunity to proclaim the late Sultan’s eldest son as the heir to the throne. An agreement was then signed, which gave the East India Company control over the Port of Singapore. In order to make it the most competitive port in the region, Singapore was made into a free port—no trading taxes were imposed, revenue was derived from business licenses and property taxes instead, and taxes were only imposed on alcohol, petroleum and opium. For the British colonial powers, mapping their overseas possessions was about identifying resources and routes of access to these goods; it was also about making territory visible, as well as governable, by placing a cultural stamp on it. Storey points out in Territories, The Claiming of Space that colonialism is a political project where the coloniser is engaged in a process of territorial accretion beyond their regional confines by acquiring colonies. This process represented a territorial expression of power. With the dominance over the trade routes, the British had more control over the people in Malaysia and Singapore, and this power extended beyond the

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16 Kwa Chong Guan, Derek Heng, and Tan Tai Yong, Singapore: A 700 years history: From Emporium to World City (Singapore: National Archives of Singapore, 2009).
18 Lysa Hong and Huang Jianli, The Scripting of a National History: Singapore and its Past (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press 2008), 8–15.
20 Chua, Liberalism Disavowed, 24.
21 Sir Stamford Raffles (1781–1826) was a British statesman and lieutenant-Governor of the Dutch East Indies. He was best known for being the founder of modern Singapore and the Straits Settlements.
23 Chua, Liberalism Disavowed, 25.
control of economic activity in Singapore to include the import and implementation of urban design strategies, as well as sanitation and agricultural science.

As Singapore became a popular port to trade, it began to attract migrants across Asia who were in search of employment and trade opportunities, and it became a convenient base that attracted Indian traders and Chinese merchants and labourers. When Singapore was transferred from the East India Company to the British Empire in 1897, it was governed by the Colonial Office in India from then on. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 had increased Singapore’s importance as a trading post for the Chinese. In addition, the loosening of China’s regulations on emigration had allowed more of the Chinese population, especially women, to migrate to Singapore, and by the early twentieth century, the Chinese constituted seventy per cent of the population, with an increasing number of Singapore-born Chinese. The city’s expansion was the result of its success as a port. Between 1873 and 1913, the port in Singapore saw an eight-fold increase in the volume of trade that passed through its gates.

According to Brenda S.A. Yeoh, the colonial city represents an urban type with three features that are intrinsic to the process of colonisation itself—the diversity of people, social stratification based on the colonial power, and lastly, the coloniser’s concentration of social, economic, and political power. Singapore had, by World War II, a diverse population that included immigrants, colonialists, and the indigenous people all living together but within a social structure, which established new power relations of dependence and dominance between collectives. Each of the ethnic groups that arrived in Singapore comprised different social groups but also brought with them vastly different cultural backgrounds and practices. This mix of ethnic, cultural, and social identities would complicate the process of formation of a national identity upon Singapore’s independence. The condition of being multi-cultural and the unevenly distributed racial demographics meant that the British struggled to maintain full dominance over the people.

26 The Malays, particularly the Bugis, had already established a deep network of trading connection, and moved to Singapore to seek more trading opportunities. Others also moved to Singapore because due to the social disorder in the Malay states, such as disputes on successions in chiefdoms, lawlessness of the Chinese coolies’ secret societies, and the threat of Siamese attack on the Northern states. Mentioned by Chua, from Jim Baker, Crossroads: A Popular History of Malaysia & Singapore (Singapore: Times Books International, 1999).
28 Kwa, Heng, and Tan, Singapore: A 700 years history: From Emporium to World City.
29 Lee, Singapore: The Unexpected Nation, 28.
30 Lee, Singapore: The Unexpected Nation, 30.
To further the discussion on power, the term “territory” has to be defined. However, “territory” and other related terminology, such as “terrain” and “land”, are difficult to clearly delineate. Although “territory” may be simply defined as bounded space, delving deeper, “territory” must be approached politically in its historical, geographical, and conceptual specificity (this requires historical and philosophical analysis). Robert David Sack also contributes to the definition of “territory” by highlighting how territories require constant effort to establish and maintain in order to affect, influence, and control people, phenomena, and relationships within the bounded space. The British claimed Singapore as part of its territory and used its power to set up its own municipal government to bring order to its colony. So I propose that, like “territory”, the ground is similarly riddled with implications of history and policy, as well as economic strategy.

For the purpose of this discussion on the impact of colonial power, I have only covered two of a multitude of examples of how the ground was an instrument of power for pre-independent Singapore. One example that illustrates how the ground is situated in policy is shown by how sanitation was enforced in colonised Singapore. In the third chapter in *Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore*, Yeoh illustrates how power was negotiated through sanitation laws by the British. This is particularly appropriate, given the strong correlation between sanitation and the materiality of the ground. According to Yeoh, medical science advancements from Britain had proven to triumph over infectious diseases like smallpox. Thanks to advances in the western sciences, new studies in bacteriology gave medical professionals working in colonial settings confidence that epidemic diseases could be controlled using western scientific knowledge and technology. For the colonialist in Singapore, health was no longer a personal issue but a public one, and their health was dependent on the sanitation of the shared environment (including the entire population that lived and moved through Singapore). Disease was a condition with much interdependence, and most importantly, Singapore’s economy could be easily affected by an epidemic. Officers were appointed by The Sanitary Department to police hawkers and homes, and summonses were imposed on occupants or operators for filthy premises, illegal over-crowding, and the non-removal or improper disposal of “night-soil” in drains. For the colonised, their environments were intruded upon by imposition of sanitary laws. According to Yeoh:

In their daily conflicts with the municipal authorities over the sanitary condition of the environment, the Asian plebeian classes were neither powerless not inert. Whilst they lack formal power, the strength of their own systems of health and medicine rendered them less accessible to hegemonic practice. They

37 Yeoh, *Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore*. Yeoh’s book has been such an important part of this research and understanding of the ground in colonial Singapore.
38 Yeoh, *Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore*.
41 “Night soil” was a term used by the Sanitation Department to refer to human waste.
also possessed a “power” contained in the anonymity of each individual, the opaqueness of Asian society to municipal understanding, and specific strategies of evading, countering, and inflecting municipal control.\textsuperscript{43}

Despite the efforts of the municipal government to control the further spread of infectious diseases, the Chinese in their larger numbers passively resisted the control of the foreign administration. The resistance of the local enclaves led to failed attempts to impose sanitation laws.\textsuperscript{44} This shows that, despite the colonisers having formal power over the land, power did not lie in a single group of people but was constantly changing hands. This resistance and struggle for power is a testament to the migrant population of Singapore gaining its own foothold in their new land—it was not without struggle, making the ground a site of continuous negotiation and struggle.\textsuperscript{45}

The ground also played another vital role in the British Empire’s economic strategies. Since its founding by the British colonialists in the mid-nineteenth century, the Singapore Botanic Gardens occupied a plot in the central area of the island, and it still exists today.\textsuperscript{46} The garden was essentially intended as a site of research to expand the knowledge on botany, which contributed to the expansion of imperial control over the region.\textsuperscript{47} In particular, the gardens featured experimental grounds where rubber extraction techniques were refined, while other profitable plants were tested for their ability to acclimatise to new environments.\textsuperscript{48} At its peak in the 1920s, the Malayan peninsula, which was also part of the British colony, dominated half of the global latex market.\textsuperscript{49} The knowledge created by imperial botany in the Singapore Botanic Gardens was a tool for expanding and dominating trade in these materials. According to Barnard, the power of the British Empire in Southeast Asia was largely dependent on the ability of their scientists, merchants, and agriculturalists to harness nature to serve the economic needs of the British.\textsuperscript{50} During the period of colonial Singapore, the gardens represented a larger extension of the British Empire. The study of botany (acquired from the Singapore Botanic Gardens) allowed the British to successfully produce palm oil and latex with plantations all over the Straits Settlement. As the British colonialists tried to tame its acquired territory and manipulate it for economic gains, the ground was yet again transformed into an apparatus through which economic and political power was exercised. These aspects of colonial history must not be overlooked because they leave behind a territorial legacy that will always be connected to a spectrum of political, economic and cultural consequences.\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{43} Yeoh, \textit{Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore}, 123.
\textsuperscript{44} Yeoh, \textit{Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore}, 119.
\textsuperscript{50} Barnard, \textit{Nature’s Colony}, 9.
\textsuperscript{51} Storey, \textit{Territories}, 3.


Singapore & Malaysia

The relationship between Singapore and its larger immediate neighbouring nations is critical in understanding the conditions of the ground as well as Singapore’s motivations to protect its territory. After World War II and the Japanese Occupation of Singapore, the British withdrew from the East Indies—this marks the start of decolonisation of Malaya. Apart from leaving a territorial legacy—as history has shown with the majority of colonies that have attained independence—colonialism also impacted the colonies’ economy, politics, and culture. The British decided that, while Penang and Malacca would merge with the former Federated Malay States and the Unfederated Malay States to form the Malayan Union, Singapore would be administered as a separate crown colony. By the early 1950s, as political parties in Singapore sought to progress towards eventual self-government for the colony, the question of merger with Malaya resurfaced. All major political parties agreed that Singapore would be unlikely to achieve sovereignty and that it would be necessary to work with Malaya to establish self-rule and independence, or at least a semblance of it. It was only in the 1959 General Election in Singapore that the Singapore’s People’s Action Party (PAP), led by Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, won by a landslide and pushed to form a merger with the Federation of Malaya as a way to achieve political independence from colonial rule. It was accepted by the PAP and Singaporeans that independence for a small island without natural resources (even without usable water for its people) was not a viable option.

Meanwhile, in 1957, the Federation of Malaya became independent from Britain. When the PAP sought the merger with the Federation of Malaya, it required the consent of the Malayan Government, the UMNO (United Malays National Organisation). Unfortunately, both UMNO and PAP had their own self-interests and intentions entering the merger discussions, and these differences would plague and jeopardise the merger from the start. According to a publication released in 1961, the PAP government highlighted:

The most important interest that will be protected in a merger based on the principle of partnership is that Singapore citizens will keep their present citizenship rights and in addition acquire national rights as nationals of the new Federation—nobody will lose any rights. On the other hand, every new citizen will gain new national status as a member of an independent and larger political unit.

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52 Storey, Territories, 3.
53 Tan Tai Yong, Creating “Greater Malaysia”: Decolonization and the Politics of Merger (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008), 32–33.
54 The People’s Action Party (PAP) is a centre-right political party in Singapore led by the former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. Having been the country’s ruling party since 1959, it is Singapore’s longest and only ever ruling party. Since the 1959 general elections, the PAP has dominated Singapore’s parliamentary democracy and has been central to the city-state’s rapid political, social, and economic development.
56 Ministry of Culture, A Year of Decision (Singapore: Ministry of Culture, 1961), 8.
The Malayan Government, on the other hand, viewed the merger as not giving Singapore any special autonomy. UMNO was also reluctant to accept the idea of incorporating Singapore into the Malayan Federation because Singapore had a large Chinese population that would have outnumbered the Malays along the peninsula. Moreover, many of the Chinese in Singapore were also supportive of the Malayan Communist Party, which was a threat to the Malayan Government at that time. Several issues remained unresolved prior to reaching the merger agreement. Prime Minister Lee assured Singaporeans that they would not lose any rights after the merger. However, critical questions remained about the two distinct citizenships within the Federation of Malaya; without full political and voting rights in the Federation, Singapore citizens would be of a lower standing than the citizens of the Federation of Malaya. Even after much negotiation and strain, this was never truly resolved and the terms of citizenship was always in question before and after the merger. In other words, there was always a tussle between policies of inclusion and exclusion based on race. The Malayan Government was prepared to integrate the territories of Malaya and Singapore, but was reluctant to unite people of the two territories out of concern that the incorporation of the Singapore Chinese population would jeopardise or undermine the primacy of the Malays (the indigenous people). The constant difficult negotiation of the procedures of the merger was a battle attributed mainly from the differences in priorities and intentions of each party.

Unfortunately, and inevitably so, Singapore only lasted less than two years in the Federation. The union was built on discord and it was never solidified with clear terms and agreements. According to Tan and Thio, the problems between Singapore and Kuala Lumpur stemmed from inconsistent expectations and perceptions about the nature of the new Malaysian state and PAP’s degree of political engagement and participation. While the separation agreement was being drafted, the British High Commission was left in the dark. Without much time for reaction or preparation, the division was sounded and Singapore became independent as a sovereign state. The circumstances of Malaysia’s origins and formations inevitably placed tensions on the relationship between Malaysia and Singapore. Power, in this case, is displayed in the manner in which Singapore defends its territory. Creating territory (or bound space) is a violent act of inclusion and exclusion, and maintaining it requires “constant vigilance and the mobilisation of threat”—in this case, the separation was a violent act of exclusion. According to Lefebvre, every state is born of violence, and state power endures only by virtue of violence directed towards a space. The separation of Singapore and Malaysia, and the tensions between these independent nations, are displayed as forms of violence between the two closely situated neighbours. According to Storey, the creation of states and the contingent drawing of boundaries between neighbouring states represents the most obvious political

57 Tan and Thio, *Singapore: 50 Constitutional Moments that’s Defined a Nation*, 33.
58 Tan, *Creating “Greater Malaysia”:*, 99.
60 The Tunku secured the Borneo Territories as part of Malaysia while Brunei remained outside Malaya.
61 According to Tan and Thio in Singapore: 50 Constitutional Moments that Defined a Nation, the Tunku and his Alliance comrades considered Singapore’s inclusion as nothing more than the admission of a new entity on the Federation Government’s terms. It expected the status quo in its terms and privileges, such as its special welfare privileges for Malays and primacy of UMNO. On the other hand, the PAP viewed the merger as an inauguration of a new state altogether where all races and ethnicities had equal standing and fair game in political and economic stakes.
expression of territoriality. The long territorial disputes between Singapore and Malaysia demonstrate how territories are defined—not only on land, but also in the sea.

A large extent of the Malaysia-Singapore border is defined by the agreement between the Government of the Republic of Singapore to precisely delimit the territorial water boundary in accordance with the Straits Settlement and Johor Territorial Waters Agreement 1927. The peculiar nature of territory, as Elden argues, is that it is also dependent on the developments of the technologies of measurement and cartography, which gives us a way of conceiving geographic space and an awareness of what is considered ownership to one state or the other. The boundary is drawn up in Malaysia using the cartographic technology that was only available in 1927—by connecting straight lines, and joining a series of 72 geographical coordinates. By virtue, the straight lines between points do not correspond exactly with the deepest channel of the Straits of Johor, as described in the 1927 agreement. In 1979, Malaysia independently published a map charting their territorial boundaries—this map was drawn up by Malaysia’s Directorate of Mapping and it includes Malaysia’s claim on Pedra Branca, which Singapore never accepted (refer to Image 1.2). This was resolved in 1995 when Singapore and Malaysia agreed on a demarcation of the territorial waters. The Johor Port Limits (JPL) at the time was within the 1979 and 1995 boundaries. In the 1995 agreement, it was finalised that the border will not be influenced by any variations in the depth or alignment of the deepest channel of the Straits of Johor—this clause is particularly important considering the frequent reclamation activities by both Singapore and Malaysia in the Straits of Johor, as the process of reclamation unavoidably alters the depth of the waterway.

There have been several territorial disputes and disagreements that have put the relationship between Singapore and Malaysia to the test, such as when, in May 2008, the International Court of Justice ruled in Singapore’s favour on which side of the territorial boundary Pedra Branca sits on. This dispute was a result of land reclamation projects in Singapore, which led to an ongoing case of territorial dispute because Malaysia claimed the reclamation

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64 Storey, Territories, 23.
65 The 1927 agreement states that “…an imaginary line following the centre of the deep-water channel in Johore Strait, between the mainland of the State and Territory of Johore on the one side, and the northern shores of the islands of Singapore, Pulau Ubin, Pular Tekong Kechil, and Pulau Tekong Besar on the other side. Where, if at all, the channel divides into two portions of equal depth running side by side, the boundary shall run midway between these two portions. At the western entrance of Johore Strait, the boundary, after passing through the centre of the deep-water channel eastward of Pulau Merambong, shall proceed seaward, in the general direction of the axis of this channel produced, until it intersects the 3-mile limit drawn from the low water mark of the mainland of Johore in a position bearing 192 degrees from Tanjong Sitapa. (Taken from the agreement which appears as a schedule in the Singapore’s Straits Settlements and Johore Territorial Waters Act 1928).
67 The “Agreement between the Government of Malaysia and the Government of the Republic of Singapore to delimit precisely the territorial waters boundary in accordance with the Straits Settlement and Johor Territorial Waters Agreement 1927” was signed on 7 August 1995.
69 Pedra Branca (as the island is known in Singapore), or Pulau Batu Puteh (as the island is known in Malaysia), is an island at the eastern entrance to the Singapore Straits and to the southeast of the most southeastern tip of Johor, Malaysia. Along with Middle Rocks and South Ledge (two other marine features), they have been the subject of a sovereignty dispute between Singapore and Malaysia.
works had encroached into its territorial waters in an area called the “Point 20 Silver”. The “Silver” was an anomaly that arose as a result of the unilateral declaration of Malaysia’s territorial water boundaries, as defined in the 1979 boundary map, which Singapore did not acknowledge as under Malaysian sovereignty. Territory here, is not only dependent on cartography and mapping but also dependent on the law. In this case, Singapore views its territory as differentiated from the outside (Malaysia in particular) and has exerted force and pressure against its neighbour. This ongoing dispute resulted in Singapore adopting a strong rhetoric against Malaysia, for the critical reasons of water security and protection over its own territory.

Image 1.2
Pedra Branca is an outlying island located 45km off the east of mainland Singapore. In the 19th century, the British built a lighthouse on the small island. Since then, a helipad, living quarters, and a radio station have been added by the Port of Singapore Authority for vessel traffic and naval communications. (Image of Pedra Branca taken from the Straits Times, published on 30 May 2018).

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71 CNA/jt(gs), “Singapore lodges strong protest over extension of Johor Bahru port limits.”
72 Ongoing dispute over maritime territory is still ongoing as I am writing this.
The relationship between Singapore and Malaysia has been turbulent since the merger and separation. Singapore’s underlying motivation for prioritising national defence is that it is a small state surrounded by larger neighbours. Singapore has built up a strong rhetoric about the need to protect its sovereignty as it might be violated or challenged by its larger neighbours. Currently, the tension between Singapore and Malaysia has been de-escalated in the short term. There are wider disputes related to the price of water, food security, and more territorial claims that would appear to be recurring issues that, if unsolved, will continue to hinder the Singapore-Malaysia bilateral relations.74 75 76 Singapore’s defence and response to Malaysia’s threats to raise prices of water and to confront maritime territorial boundaries demonstrates Singapore’s protective stance (necessarily so) over its territories.

Territory and Security

Security is a constant need so that we can ensure our sovereignty and way of life.77

Dr. Eng En Hen, Minister for Defence (2005–2011)

The colonial history of Singapore, as well as its brief merger with Malaysia, are critical factors in how Singapore views territory as a nation. With Singapore’s new-found independence after its separation from Malaysia, however, Singapore needed a government and a political system. For the survival of such a small country, there is an inextricable link between domestic policy and foreign policy.78 In the First Parliament, then Prime Minister Lee could not emphasise enough that his government wanted to establish Singapore as a multiracial, multilingual, and multicultural society and nation—one in which all races, languages, and religions would be treated equally

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74 Based on the 1962 Water Agreement with Malaysia, which was agreed upon by both Malaysia and Singapore during the separation agreement in 1965. Singapore is allowed to draw up to 250 million gallons of raw water from Johor at 3 sen per 1000 gallons (3 sen is equivalent to 0.0057 British Pounds as of February 2019). Malaysia is threatening to raise prices, but according to the agreement in 1962, “any breach of the 1962 Water Agreement would call into question the Separation Agreement, which is the basis of Singapore’s very existence as an independent sovereign state.” Please see Yasmine Yahya, “Parliament: Singapore will honour 1962 Water Agreement and expects Malaysia to do the same, says Vivian Balakrishnan,” The Straits Times, July 9, 2018.

75 According to this recent newspaper report, only 1% of the land in Singapore is suitable for food production, and more than 90% of food consumed by the nation is imported, mainly from Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam. Please see Lim Kok Thai, “Ensuring Singapore’s food security despite the odds,” TODAY, February 5, 2021, https://www.todayonline.com/commentary/how-singapore-ensures-food-security-despite-odds.

76 Yahya, “Parliament: Singapore will honour 1962 Water Agreement and expects Malaysia to do the same, says Vivian Balakrishnan.”


and all advancements would be based strictly on merit, with no discrimination against any community. In the Singapore Parliamentary Debates in 1965, Prime Minister Lee said:

We have vested interest in multiracialism and a secular State, for the antithesis of multiracialism and the antithesis of secularism hold perils of enormous magnitude, not just for the people living in Southeast Asia, but dangers of involvement by bigger powers who see in such a conflict fertile ground for exploitation of either ideological or power interests.

I believe this statement was directed at Malaysia. The late Prime Minister Lee highlighted two ways in which the territory of Singapore needs to be maintained. The obvious one being the threats from external aggressors such as that from its neighbouring nations. But at the same time, he also highlighted that, with a multi-racial and diverse population who call themselves Singaporeans, the threat is internal as well. Formalised boundaries drawn by nations are not the only boundaries where territorial behaviour can be displayed, it can also happen at a smaller spatial scale. Informal and unmapped boundaries within a nation are just as threatening to a nation as external aggressors—the mix of ethnicities and cultural differences may inevitably cause divides and create enclaves and territorial divisions. The solution to which, is for the state to declare its equal treatment to all citizens. Part 3 of the thesis will go into urban strategies and land policies taken by the state in attempts to eradicate such possibilities. Lee was also adamant about the type of foreign policy that Singapore must adopt. In 1966, he said:

A foreign policy for Singapore must be one as to encourage first, the major powers in this world to find it, if not in their interest to help us, at least in their interest not to have us go worse… we must always offer the rest of the world a continuing interest in the type of society we project… always have overwhelming power on our side.

Prime Minister Lee knew that maintaining Singapore’s freedom as a sovereign and independent nation was, ironically, dependent on its positive relations with other larger nations. The vulnerabilities of Singapore’s size post-independence, and especially its dependence on Malaysia for food and water, was glaring. Geographically, Singapore’s “fertile ground” is situated in rough regional waters with a strong undercurrent. Because its own tiny territorial sea is hemmed in by the territorial seas of its two neighbours, Singapore’s position is vulnerable, and

82 Chua, Liberalism Disavowed, 123–134.
safeguarding its independence from external threats is crucial.84 While this is a common goal for all nations, it is especially critical for newly independent small states. Following independence, Singapore needed to secure itself and protect its own land, since it could no longer depend on the British or Malaysia, especially not after the separation. As a reaction to the separation, Singapore had to find a way to build up its own defence force.

At the time of independence, Singapore’s army and police force—which was built up by the British—were primarily made up of men of the Malay race, even though Chinese constituted approximately seventy-five per cent of the nation’s population.85 This could be explained by cultural beliefs: Malay police liked soldiering, whereas the Chinese detested it because soldiering was traditionally associated with China’s history of rebellions and warlords.86 “好铁不打钉, 好汉不当兵” is a Chinese proverb which translates as “good iron does not make nails, a good man does not become a soldier”.87 This proverb reflects a popular attitude among Chinese that men from decent families should not be wasted on becoming soldiers. On the other hand, police officers in Singapore were often referred to as “mata-mata”, which is derived from the Malay language for eyes.88 This borrowed Malay term describes the Malay police as the “eyes” for the colonial police when they patrolled the streets. The newly formed Singapore government also questioned if the existing army and police would be as loyal to a government that was no longer British or Malay—and a government that the Malay population also perceived as Chinese.89 It became critical, therefore, to persuade the already reluctant Chinese population from their deep-seated beliefs and find a way to pressure them into enlisting in the police and armed forces, so that the mixed-race population is appropriately reflected in the demographical ratio in the forces. To achieve this, the government set up national cadet corps and national police cadet corps in all secondary schools so that Chinese parents would identify the army and police with their sons and daughters, rather than with fear and resentment of war.90

After Singapore’s separation from Malaysia, there was also the concern that Malaysia’s unrest between the Chinese and Malay racial groups91 would bleed beyond the straits into Singapore. Being a small nation without its own army, the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) had to recruit from its civilian population, who were asked to

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86 Lee, From Third World to First, 31.
87 This proverb was also cited by the Late Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew.
88 The Malay term is part of the vernacular spoken in Singapore that many assume that the word has its origins in Hokkien (Mandarin dialect). “Special: Why some Singapore Hokkien words sound so similar to Malay words,” LearnDialect.sg, accessed March 28, 2021, https://learndialect.sg/hokkien-malay-loan-words-singapore/.
89 Lee, From Third World to First, 31-34.
perform their “national duty” to protect their nation’s territory. The National Service (NS) is a national policy in Singapore mandated by statutory law that requires all male Singaporeans and second-generation permanent residents to serve a two-year period of compulsory service in the uniformed services. This law was first passed in 1967 to help build Singapore’s militant forces following its independence from Malaysia. The military forces have since expanded to include the civil defence force and police force. Biologically male civilians were required to serve from 18 to 40 years of age and they start their NS with two years of full-time training, followed by reservist training for a few weeks yearly thereafter to ensure that all civilians on reservist are kept up to date on training and are combat-ready. But even with National Service in place as a statutory law, strategies of persuasion were still needed to convince parents that it is a noble duty for young men to serve and protect their families and their nation. As such, the rhetoric of civic duty and national defence has been made part of the school curriculum and now exists in the school system in the form of youth uniformed groups to represent discipline and achievement in the police and armed forces.

According to Foucault, power and rule in modern societies can be understood as triangulated around sovereignty, discipline, and government that takes the “population” as the central object. In *Discipline and Punish*, techniques of the individual body, according to Foucault, are subjected to bio-political techniques that are aimed at the population (the collective body). The focus on population, as it is known through political economy and organised through the apparatus of security, sustained the transition to an evolved governmental rationality. In the case of Singapore, the statutory law deems it a national duty for the civilian population to protect the sovereignty and security of the nation. This statutory law is organised through its own apparatus of security. A major part of this apparatus of security is also formed through National Service (NS). During NS, enlisted men have rigid and repetitive schedules—their duties are achieved with military discipline and precision, through the rhythms of time that are punctuated by tasks and exercises. According to Prime Minister Lee:

National service has had a profound impact on Singapore society over the last 30 years. It has become a rite of passage for our young people. They learn to live and work closely with each other, regardless of race, language of religion. Food taboos of Muslims and Hindus are respected, as well as religious rites, from Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh to Christian and Zoroastrian. Whether your father is a

93 The penalty for evading National Service (NS) is a jail sentence. In 2014, a youth with medical issues was so afraid of sustaining injuries during NS training that he fled Singapore and was jailed for it. Taken from Shaffiq Alkhatib, “National Service Dodger Jailed Seven Weeks,” The New Paper, February 12, 2019, https://www.tnp.sg/news/singapore/national-service-dodger-jailed-seven-weeks.
95 Upon enlistment, male Singaporean citizens and second-generation permanent residents serve for two years in active duty (typically when they are aged 18-21 years old unless with special permission to defer).
97 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 79.
98 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 150.
minister, banker, professional, labourer, multi-functional role and was also a means of forming social cohesion and comradeship, the latter associated with building a national identity.

This is in line with Parts 2 and 3 of the theses, where myths of socioeconomic and racial harmony are brought to the forefront. The rhetoric of NS in the name of national defence would also be discussed further, especially on its translation from the protection of national territory to the protection of the individual family nucleus. Inevitably, while discussing land policies, the protection of national territory is closely related to housing and burial policies.

Land Reclamation

Building upward reproduces the condition of the ground vertically, but even with architectural and building techniques, there are limits to the vertical expansion. In Singapore, radical extensions of territory are created by importing sand, aggregate, and foreign labour. Making new land is central to its national strategy. Historically, land reclamation in Singapore dates back to the earlier part of the nineteenth century. According to Glaser and Walsh in “Land Reclamation in Singapore, Hong Kong and Macau”, the south bank of the mouth of the Singapore River was a swampy mangrove that was always prone to flooding. The British colonial government then decided to dismantle a small hill on the island and use the earth to fill up the mangrove low-lying areas. Subsequently, the British continued to reclaim land in Singapore up till World War II. To improve Singapore’s port facilities, land was reclaimed to meet the demands as Singapore’s port became increasingly important, especially after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 that created direct trade routes between Singapore and Europe.

After its independence, Singapore continued reclaiming land, particularly in the new central business district (located on the south part of the island, at the banks surrounding the Singapore River) to boost Singapore’s weakened post-war economy. In the 1970s, Singapore reclaimed land in the eastern part of the island to open its international airport to encourage air travel. Even till today, Singapore Changi Airport has continued to increase its land space for its expanding airport, which has grown into four terminals. By 1991, land-starved Singapore was already lacking the space to expand its industrial economy, and the government decided to merge seven offshore islands in the southwest of the main island of Singapore by reclaiming the land around the islands, thereby forming Jurong Island. Facilities involved in the oil industry that require a lot of space are housed on Jurong Island—this gave Singapore a significant boost, allowing Singapore to become one of the top oil trading and refining hubs in the world.

Between 2004 and 2014, 120 square kilometres was added to Singapore—an additional twenty per cent of its original size since its independence in 1965. Plans for another 100 square kilometre of new land is expected to be completed by 2030 (refer to Image 1.3). One of the larger immediate projects is the consolidation and move of the Port of Singapore to the western region of Singapore—the Tuas area. By 2040, it is projected that the construction of a port (which includes extensive land reclamation) in Tuas will be completed. The ports in Tanjong Pagar, Keppel and Pasir Panjang, and Brani in the south of the island will then move to Tuas. This consolidation is set to double the port’s capacity—a move made to ensure Singapore maintains its position as the world’s busiest trans-shipment hub. Placing the port in the west, close to Jurong island, means that efficiency would increase with the reduction in distance and complexity of transporting shipment between terminals and to the industrial area.

Most reclamation projects were decisions driven by economic reasons, rather than for housing specifically, although the relocation of the ports away from the southern ports would free up land for housing. Other future projects include the expansion of Pulau Tekong, one of the north-eastern islands off mainland Singapore. The

101 Based on a map produced by Miles A Powell, “Singapore’s Lost Coast: Land Reclamation, National Development and the Erasure of Human and Ecological Communities, 1822–Present,” in Environment and History (Cambridge: White Horse Press, 2019). My own annotations were created from the data from Google Earth.
104 “Harbouring ambition,” The Straits Times.
slated expansion will involve almost doubling the existing land area. Different from Jurong island, Pulau Tekong (or simply known as Tekong) is used by the Singapore Armed Forces for military training and is closed to the general public. This expansion reflects Singapore’s increased military ambition and reiterates its position on national defence.

To facilitate the process of expansion for its future projects that would include Tuas and Tekong, huge guarded stockpiles of imported sand are held in Seletar and Tampines districts, ready to be distributed to the next reclamation projects. By manipulating and reconstituting sand to create new ground, land reclamation changes not just the shape of the land and the sea, but also alters coastal ecologies. In Malaysia, Indonesia, Cambodia, and Vietnam, entire beaches and maritime features have simply disappeared overnight as legal and illegal miners cash in on the opportunity to sell sand in Singapore. Currently, export of sand from these countries is banned. As territory itself becomes a commodity that is tradeable and moveable, diplomats now speak of “sand wars” as local communities struggle to retain fishing and tourism industries, while environmentalists fight the devastation of coastal and aquatic ecosystems. Politicians in these countries worry that national sovereignty claims are literally being stolen as material is used to bolster the claims of wealthy states and city-states elsewhere.

Singapore imports more sand than anywhere else in the world, and currently, the Singapore government declines to disclose the sources of its sand imports. Government reports point to a diverse range of approved sources, but claim that further details are not available to the public, leaving Singaporeans in the dark about where the sand that constitutes the ground comes from. This makes the term “land reclamation” problematic and ironic, because the word “reclamation” implies that the land is simply retrieved from the ocean that has always existed as part of the nation’s territory — when, in fact, “land reclamation” is the creation and building of land where land has never existed before.

108 Graham, Vertical, 298.
112 Murdoch, “Sand wars.”
In 2003, Singapore received backlash from Malaysia over land reclamation projects at either end of the Straits of Johor. Malaysia claimed that Singapore’s plans infringed on Malaysia’s territory and were detrimental to both the environment and livelihoods of its local fishermen, and legally challenged Singapore under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea—this was later settled after arbitration.\(^{113}\) Maritime disputes between Malaysia and Singapore have been mentioned earlier and these additional issues have contributed to the tensions between them. More recently, Singapore had also brought up complaints against Malaysia regarding Malaysia’s two land reclamation projects in the straits of Johor. One project would involve linking the islands within the strait. Since Singapore’s protest in 2014, progress on the project has come to a halt but the Malaysian government reportedly approved the scaled-down version of the project and works have resumed.\(^{115}\) These issues only exacerbate the already escalating tensions over territorial and maritime rights between the neighbours.

The very act of land reclamation in itself (or the creation of land), reveals the tangible characteristics of the term “land”. Land has been defined by Elden as a finite resource whose distribution and redistribution is an important economic and political concern. The possession of land is the determinant of power and conflict over land is a key indicator of power struggles.\(^{116}\) Land, unlike ground, is viewed more as a commodity and is shaped by the concepts of property, where pieces of territory are traded, bought, or sold real estate at the market place.\(^{117}\) But for more affluent countries, land as a resource is not as finite as sand can be purchased for the purpose of land creation. While land reclamation transforms the landscape, it should be seen and understood only as a secondary process that enable the circulation and accumulation of capital.\(^{118}\) The secrecy behind the source of sand used for Singapore’s land reclamation projects is a reflection of this economic competition. Moreover, the technologies of land reclamation have changed the terms “edge”, “fringe”, and “ verge”—these are words that are used to define territory and carry semantic power, but land reclamation removes the power of these terms since their semantics are changeable with enough financial resources.\(^{119}\) With the mutability of land, it means that the edge and fringe, as well as territorial lines, become less finite and are left open to debate. Land itself is transported from poor to rich nations—in effect, capital that flows across territories is the flow of territory itself.\(^{120}\) Although physical

\(^{113}\) Graham, Vertical, 299.


\(^{115}\) “Such Quantities of Sand.”


\(^{118}\) The understanding of land reclamation as the movement and the accumulation of capital was a link made by Nashin Mahtani and Etienne Turpin, “There is no capital: Reflections on accumulation and abandonment in Indonesia,” Kerb Journal 28 (2020) (accessed on June 28, 2021); available from https://kerb-journal.com/articles/there-is-no-capital#fn-14. Mahtani and Turpin use the concept of “Potemkin Infrastructure” from Santoyo-Orozco, to understand the new proposal to reclaim land in Indonesia for the construction of the new capital to replace Jakarta. In Potemkin Infrastructure, Santoyo-Orozco develops the term in discussing her research on the privatisation of common land in Mexico and the silencing of the political voice of the indigenous peoples, in favor of capital accumulation. For more information, please see Ivonne Santoyo-Orozco, “Potemkin Infrastructure,” Avery Review 40 (May 2019); available from https://www.averyreview.com/issues/40/potemkin-infrastructure.


Common Ground: The Study of Singapore’s Ground and the Production of Myths

The Foundations

Territorial boundaries of Singapore are objectively and precisely determined through surveying and cartography remains, land reclamation is an act of appropriation that, in acquiring land also changes territory. Although land reclamation is seemingly not the same as the seizure of land through war or colonial expansion, it can be likened to absorbing surrounding territory that creates friction between Singapore and its neighbouring nations.121

Regulating Land

The People’s Action Party (PAP), led by Lee Kuan Yew, has had one-party domination of parliament since 1959.122 The PAP was founded in 1954, during which decolonisation was taking place across Southeast Asia.123 Once Singapore was separated from Malaysia and granted independence in 1965, the subject of what form of political system Singapore would adopt became an urgent. The leadership of the PAP thought it was best for Singapore to remain a democratic state with the popularly elected single-chamber Parliament and a Head of State. There was much uncertainty during PAP’s formative years but despite these uncertainties, the PAP was re-elected in 1968 after gaining the confidence of the people.124 This victory was of important political significance as it marked the beginning of the development and continuation of a single-dominant party system in Singapore.

In drawing up its policies, the PAP has always placed the collective interests above the individual and it was always of the view that social cohesion was necessary to combat the vulnerabilities of a small nation.125 126 The ideological emphasis on the “collective” is most apparent in the official policy of multiracialism. Lacking the natural conditions of an ethnically homogenous population who share the same history, language, religion, and “mythological” blood, Singapore declared itself a multiracial nation, despite the overwhelming Chinese majority in the population.127 Chua attributes the emphasis on the collective to the Asian cultural heritage of Singaporeans, but at the same time, being a small island and nation imposes upon all the most committed “liberal” Singaporeans a certain realism of the importance of the “social” and the “collective”—something which Chua believes is often alluded to, by PAP politicians and Singaporeans, as the “conservative” Singapore society. According to Troki:

In the years between 1965 and 1983, there were no opposition members in Parliament, and those opposing voices that persisted were ruthlessly marginalized, intimidated and ultimately coerced into

122 Chua, Liberalism Disavowed, 1.
125 As discussed, the vulnerabilities were mainly stemmed from Singapore’s small size, and its potential threats from countries that flanked the island - Malaysia and Indonesia.
126 Chua, Liberalism Disavowed, 6.
127 Chua, Liberalism Disavowed, 8.
silence. The formative of any alternative political organisation was hindered by patterns of legislation and enforcement that systematically crippled and ostracised these groups.128

The single-party domination also indicates a continuous control over the political ideology and economic direction of the nation. This power is translated to the control of land. According to Sassen, territories link space and society, and convey clear meanings relating to authority, power, and rights—it is through land that the power of the state is visible.129 130 This is evident in the policies by the PAP, such as the Land Acquisition Act (LAA), which is a key legislation that enables compulsory acquisitions of private land (from homes, businesses, and even cemeteries) for public purposes, such as the construction of transport infrastructure and public housing. A landowner, whose land is acquired, is paid market value compensation under the LAA.131 In 1966, the LAA was enacted by the Government to free up prime land in the city centre. From 1967 to 1979, under the Government’s Sales of Site Programme, 97 sites located in the city centre were sold for commercial development of a new financial centre. Furthermore, to clear land for the new towns, the government once again turned to the Land Acquisition Act.132 Although land was taken from private owners, the public housing programme aimed to get Singaporeans to own their own flat, over renting.

In 2015, the Ministry of Law submitted two bills for first reading in Parliament to amend the State Lands Act, which were deemed necessary to facilitate the Government’s long-term planning for the use and development of underground space in the future.133 The bills highlighted that more extensive use of underground space in land-scarce Singapore will benefit all Singaporeans as surface land may be used for other purposes. The bills also gave clarity on the current extent of underground ownership. The amendments to the Land Acquisition Act would facilitate public projects that require only a specific stratum of space.134 The amendments to the State Lands Act would clarify that surface landowners own the underground space up to 30 metres under the Singapore Height Datum, unless otherwise stated in the specific land title.135 The bills also included an amendment to the Land Acquisition Act to allow for the acquisition of a stratum of space that may not be in contact to the planar surface of the land, to facilitate the development of public projects. This particular amendment to the LAA changes the way land is viewed as a planar vector, extruding it to be viewed volumetrically.

129 Storey, Territories, 19.
135 The Singapore Height Datum is a level fixed across the whole of Singapore from which height measurements take reference. It is pegged to Singapore’s historical mean sea level. All private landowners will have 30m or more of underground space for development.
The definition of “land” can be taken from the Latin phrase, “cuius est solum, eius est usque ad coelum et ad infernos”, which translates to “he who owns land does so up to the heavens and down to the centre of the earth”. The Land Acquisition Act shows how land is to be used as something for the “common good”, which will be discussed in greater detail in the later part of the thesis. It is important, however, to distinguish here the differences between the terms “land” and “ground”. Although “land” and “state land” are recurring terminologies used in statutes and policies, the ground is never mentioned unless it involves the “underground” or a volume of space within the earth. The “land” in these policies is seen with an objective reality, where the land is a relation of property. The complexities and interests become more apparent when the “land” is looked at more subjectively, and it becomes the “ground”. Although “land” and “ground” might be sometimes used interchangeably, it must be emphasised that when policies are scrutinised in this thesis, a lens has to be placed over the word “land” to determine if the policies also affect the “ground”, and not just the vector plane of land.

Public Housing

The production of a common ground and identity is reflected through a housing programme that affects a majority of resident population. After achieving self-governance in 1959, Singapore faced the issue of housing shortage. With slow construction rates and the physical damage from World War II, the housing situation drastically worsened. In 1960, the Housing Development Board (HDB) was established by the new government to replace the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT). The SIT was previously set up in 1927 by the colonial government to improve Singapore’s infrastructure, such as roads and homes. The housing conditions at the time were in such a bad state that the British Housing Committee Report concluded in 1947 that Singapore had “one of the worst slums and was a disgrace to a civilised community”. This was substantiated by the high average person-per-building density, which was at 18.2 people per home in 1947. Lee Kuan Yew recognised the severity of the housing situation would require urgent attention. Moreover, to gain popularity among voters, it was crucial that housing became a priority.

When the PAP won the election and formed the first newly elected government, it took immediate action to solve the housing shortage. Lim Kim San was named the Minister for National Development between 1963 and 1965.
during which the home ownership scheme was set up and the first balloting exercise for flats took place.143 Because of the land shortage and the conditions of the slums in Singapore at the time, it became crucial for HDB to build high-rise homes quickly and efficiently. According to Lim in an interview with the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation ("Diary of A Nation: Homes for Our People"), standardising the design of flats was important in order to create an efficient assembly line to build structures quickly and effectively.144 At the time, the authorities found it difficult to convince people to stay in high-rise buildings because the citizens—who were used to living in ground-floor slums and villages—felt unsafe living in high-rise buildings. This was the beginning of the state-imposed regulations that may have forced its citizens into public housing.

Due to land constraints in Singapore, high-rise homes (both privately-owned and public-housing flats) have taken over the landscape of the nation. The dwelling is not in direct contact with the ground plane, and yet it has a complex relationship in which homeownership is based on the strata division of the land—not unlike the conditions added to the Land Acquisition Act for the ownership of a datum of volumetric space. According to Delaney, every place is positioned within a dense matrix of multiple, overlapping territories and territorial configurations. These territories (and the power relations) are established in relation to the other territories across the heterogeneous "levels".145 Even when referring to the planar surface of the ground, these overlapping power relations are present. With high-rise buildings, these levels become even more compounded and complex. While much of the land is state-owned and all private land ownership is tightly controlled by the state, homes built in Singapore draw attention to the power structure through property and ownership rights. The boundaries distinguishing sovereignty and property, or government and ownership, are supposedly distinct territorial regimes.146 But the state’s creation of the home ownership scheme, as we will discuss, blurs the boundaries between the regime of private property and that of the government in several situations, such as that of family policies and the control of the real estate market, including its prices and the qualifying factors for purchase.

From 1960 onwards, the government undertook the responsibilities of constructing housing for the people and relocating them out of the unhygienic and overcrowded squatter settlements. By 1977, a total of 600,000 flats were built, which meant that virtually the entire population had been re-housed in public housing flats.147 Queenstown was named after Her Majesty the Queen and became the first "New Town", while Toa Payoh followed suit and became the first satellite town after Singapore’s independence.148 HDB planned the New Towns to function like satellite towns—self-contained residential neighbourhoods, each served by community centres, schools, and recreation facilities.149 These amenities were planned around the HDB flats and these satellite towns were meant to foster a sense of community and belonging among its residents. The HDB housing scheme gave

143 Chua, Liberalism Disavowed, 76.
145 Delaney, Territory, 31.
146 Delaney, Territory, 31.
147 Wong and Yeh, Housing a Nation, 3–5.
148 Wong and Yeh, Housing a Nation, 92.
149 Urban Redevelopment Authority, Queenstown Planning Area: Planning Report 1994 (Singapore: Urban Redevelopment Authority, 1994).
owners only a 99-year lease-ownership (the leasehold status of the HDB flats would be discussed further in Part 2 of the thesis) and this actually proved to be one of the strengths of the public-housing programme: income derived from the sale, rent collected from commercial and industrial promises, and revenues from ancillary services (like car parks and markets), are combined to ensure a substantial return from public-housing and other ancillary infrastructural investments. These returns were then put back into a new cycle of housing production.

The important element in the housing programme is the de-commodification of land. In principle, this was similar to socialist nations because the state holds most, if not all of the land. Singapore’s strategy of housing provision can be viewed as a modified application of the socialist system as it is applied to form a new hybrid system of mixed-market state-and-market mechanism to resolve the housing problem. Currently, it is estimated that there are about a million HDB dwelling units in Singapore that provide housing to more than 80 per cent of the population. This is the largest percentage of population that resides in public housing (or government-subsidised housing) in the world. But unlike the rest of the world, public housing in Singapore is unique because of its ownership scheme that creates a hybrid property market that is influenced by the open market forces of demand and supply, but largely restricted and controlled by the local government.

The most important thing we (the PAP government) do for Singaporeans, of course, is to help every family own a home—the HDB flat. The house is much more than a secure roof over their heads. The house in Singapore is also a major way for us to level up the less successful and to give them a valuable asset and a retirement nest egg. We are using the HDB as a means to give every Singaporean household a stake … That’s why we are making sure that HDB flats are affordable event to lower-income-households.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong
The Straits Times, 21 October 2011

Like how the HDB 99-year lease injected revenue to create a cycle for the construction and enhancements to local infrastructure at a national level, the HDB system is also a tied to finance system at an individual level. The rapid rise of the homeownership rate has been facilitated by a mortgage system built on the compulsory social security savings of homeowners. Under the social security system established in 1955 called the Central Provident Fund (CPF), income earners are bound by statute to save a portion of their monthly wages, which is automatically

150 Chua, Liberalism Disavowed, 78–82.
151 Chua, Political Legitimacy and Housing, 26.
152 The calculated figure is around 1,225,300 flats. The figures obtained are calculated from the total number of household units given by Statistics Singapore.
deducted at the income source. The employer is also bound by statute to match the wage earner’s monthly contributions to the fund. The sum of these two contributions constitutes the wage earner’s tax-exempt social security savings for retirement and can be used to fund the purchase of public housing flats. The savings in the fund are managed by the CPF Board, which pays the citizens an annual interest on the savings. It is worth noting that a significant portion of this rapidly accumulated capital by the CPF Board is used to purchase government bonds at low interest rates for national development programmes, which includes public housing, thus enabling the government to have a healthy cash flow and to avoid dependency on other financial agencies.

A remainder of the funds is placed with the Government Investment Corporation (GIC), Singapore’s sovereign wealth fund that makes investments to garner greater returns internationally.

The Singapore government views both the CPF and HDB systems as part of a closed cycle of financial transactions over which the state has tight control, with one system feeding into the other. As explained by Chua, as wage earners save for their retirement with the CPF, a portion of the national CPF savings would provide loans to the HDB. When eligible wage earners take a HDB loan to purchase a public housing flat, with HDB holding the mortgage, the CPF then pays the monthly mortgage directly to HDB on the homeowner’s behalf. The homeownership programme is a seamless loop between the two government statutory boards and with the population—or at least the population with aspirations of owning a HDB flat with the wages they are driven to earn. The government uses the HDB and CPF as a source of cash flow for other national projects. But at the same time, Singaporeans would use public housing as a vehicle to accumulate capital, which is a result of homeownership being tied to one’s retirement savings. It seems almost unavoidable that the home and the ground is entangled in discussions of capital flow.

As the wealth of homeowners increases in their participation of homeownership, it is assumed that the proceeds of the sale of the flat should eventually be adequate to meet their retirement needs. This encourages public homeownership over home rental as a strategy to accumulate a retirement fund. Singapore’s public housing system is an asset-based social security system that shifts the reliance on government to a reliance on the

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154 The Central Provident Fund (CPF) is a compulsory savings plan for working Singaporeans and permanent residents, meant to fund their retirement, healthcare and housing. The CPF is an employment-based scheme where employers and employees contribute a certain percentage of the employees’ wage to the fund. The fund is administered by the Central Provident Fund Board operated by the Ministry of Manpower that is also responsible for investing the contributions. “CPF Overview,” About Us, Central Provident Fund Board (accessed 16 September, 2016); available from https://www.cpf.gov.sg/Members/AboutUs/about-us-info/CPF-Overview.


156 Chua, Liberalism Disavowed, 78–82.


158 Chua, Liberalism Disavowed, 78.

159 Chua, Liberalism Disavowed, 79.

160 Chua, Liberalism Disavowed, 112.
individual’s wage-earning ability and the value appreciation of their home.\textsuperscript{162} The nationalisation of the public housing system has de-commodified land, but commodified the home for its people instead. In the process of becoming a commodity, the home loses the specific uses and/or symbolic values of security, fixity, and autonomy. A different value—one of “exchange”—takes over. This process of commodification raises questions about its effects on the inextricably linked issues of home and landownership, especially when the home’s lease-definite ownership may be challenged by the Land Acquisitions Act.\textsuperscript{163}

\begin{quote}
There is no better stake in the country than a flat.
\end{quote}

Former Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong

1995 National Day Rally

Other than viewing the ground and the home as an asset with real estate value that contributes to the financial loop for the nation and the individual, the home also performs as political leverage. The idea of home transcending the need and right of a basic shelter over one’s head becomes an indispensable technology of governance. This is not only a reflection of how the government views public housing as political leverage, but also an indication of how the people have come to consider home not solely as a domestic space for the act of dwelling, but a valuable asset for capital accumulation as well.

The 1995 National Day Rally delivered by Goh Chok Tong was one of the most critical and relevant speeches as it addressed the topic of homeownership.\textsuperscript{164} When read alone, the sentence is ambiguous about for whom the stake is for—whether it is leverage for the individual, or for the country (the collective). In this case, Goh refers to the flat as a stake for the country, referring to the home as wager for citizens to defend their country.\textsuperscript{165} The state leaders presumed that if individuals own their homes, they will be more effective workers who will contribute economically to society so that the value of their homes would appreciate. At the same time, when individuals own their own homes, they will be more mindful about maintaining their interior space as well as their immediate surrounding environment.

The homeownership scheme stands out as the main distinction between Singapore’s public housing schemes and the social housing development policies of European countries such as France, which has one of the longest

\textsuperscript{162} Chua, \textit{Liberalism Disavowed}, 6–82.


\textsuperscript{164} National Archives of Singapore, “Speech by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong.”

\textsuperscript{165} National Service, which is compulsory for all Singaporeans males above 18 years of age, is an enlisted military service. This will be discussed and elaborated further in Chapter 4 of the thesis.
traditions of state intervention in the provision of public housing. The home can also serve as leverage for the state to emotionally tie homeowners to the nation. In this case, both the state and the individual are beneficiaries: while the state benefits from compliant workforce, the subjects benefit from affordable housing through state-created housing policies. When HDB was set up shortly after Singapore’s independence, its main objective was to solve the country’s prevalent housing problems by relocating residents into low-cost government housing. It is worth noting that the focus was always on homeownership. The HDB was created not only to bolster the market in order to provide a stable property market and insurance in times of unfavourable economic conditions, but also to double up as a platform to construct the citizens’ sense of rootedness to the nation.

The HDB flat is also used by political parties as a wager to dangle above voters. Chua explains in *Liberalism Disavowed* that the PAP extracts political support from Singaporeans by placing threats against voters who do not support the PAP.166 According to Chua, in 1984, residents in the Potong Pasir167 constituency elected Chiam See Tong, the founder of the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP), against the People’s Action Party.168 Immediately, the Minister for National Development at the time, Teh Cheang Wan (PAP), announced that from then on, any public housing estate within an electoral constituency that voted against the PAP would be the last to be served by the HDB.169 This meant that public housing estates inside political constituencies that elected PAP’s opposition would be excluded from the highly subsidised Estate Upgrading Programme.170 Because the upgrading programmes are crucial for maintaining the market value of existing flats, to vote against the PAP is therefore voting against one’s own material self-interest as a homeowner. Despite the threats and the outcry among residents, voters in the Potong Pasir constituency continued to elect Chiam See Tong from 1984 until 2011 (upon his retirement, the PAP won back the election for Potong Pasir).171

The Hougang constituency had also consistently elected the secretary-general of the Workers’ Party (opposition), Low Thia Khiang, since 1991.172 It continued to elect the Workers’ Party candidate in the 2011 and 2015 general elections, when Low moved out of the constituency to contest in the Aljunied Group Representative Constituency

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167 Potong Pasir is a housing estate located between Toa Payoh and Sennett Estate in the Central Region of Singapore. Potong Pasir is particularly notable for being the longest-held opposition ward in one-party dominated Singapore.
168 This will be further elaborated in the next chapter of this paper.
169 In the transcript of *Speech by Mr. Teh Cheang Wan, Minister for National Development, at Club HDB Annual Dinner and Dance 1984 at the Mandarin Ballroom, Mandarin Hotel on Saturday, 29 December 1984*, Teh laments that Potong Pasir did not appreciate what the party and the HDB were doing for them. The speech can be found in the National Archives Singapore, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/speeches/record-details/73543630-115d-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad (accessed March 19, 2019).
170 As an estate ages, the condition of its flats and the general environment of the estate will inevitably deteriorate, thus eroding the property values of the flats. In 1990, to support the property values of older flats measured against all subsequent generations of better-designed flats and estates, the government established a highly subsidised estate upgrading scheme to improve the flats, amenities, and environment of older estates. In the upgrading scheme, citizens only bear ten to twenty per cent of the cost while permanent residents have to bear the full cost of upgrading. It is important to note that the estate upgrading does not stop the devaluation of existing flats as their 99-year leases run out.
In the end, the threat of withholding the upgrading programme fell through and worked against the PAP. After losing the Aljunied GRC to the Workers’ Party in the 2011 general election, the PAP government was forced to rescind the threat. While upgrading programmes are nevertheless still offered to opposition-held constituencies, they are not carried out as promptly as they are in PAP-elected constituencies. The way in which housing was used as a vehicle for political advancement by the PAP is clearly demonstrated. In a Machiavellian-way of ruling, the government used housing—a basic human necessity—as leverage to gain advantage in elections, with the expectation that people will rethink their decision to vote against them. Public housing has always been conceived primarily as a means of providing basic shelter for the rapidly growing population. Having fulfilled their emphatic promise to house the masses, the PAP gained political legitimacy in part through the successful housing programme that began in 1960s.

The home, in this case, is used as commodity in an “exchange” for electoral power. It is an apparatus and means of coercion for the compliant citizenry to support the single-party-dominant government. Public housing has moved beyond being merely a roof over one’s head, and is increasingly re-conceived as “home”. It is evident that public housing in Singapore is inseparable from governance—in fact, it is an indispensable technology of governance. In 1984, when the Minister of National Development announced that constituencies that voted against the PAP would no longer be served by the HDB, the PAP government knew that they were forcing the residents of public housing flats in Potong Pasir and other constituencies to reconsider the value of their homes. The Public Housing Renewal Programmes—or “upgrading”, as it is known in the local vernacular—were originally a means by which the population could share some of Singapore’s economic growth by watching the value of their homes increase in material and monetary value as the nation’s economy progressed. Since 1997, however, the HDB programmes have been directly tied to support for the ruling party.

You vote for the other side, that means you reject the programmes of the PAP candidate… if you reject it, we respect your choice. [But] you’ll be left behind, [and in 20, 30 years], the whole of Singapore will be bustling away, and your estate [will be left behind through your own choice]. They become slums. That’s my message.

Former Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong

_The Straits Times_, 23 December 1996

In this context, the home is to the individual and user a monetary stake in the country’s success, and with the PAP’s threatening message, it would seem absurd for individuals to vote against their own self-interest. The fear of public housing homeowners ending up with homes with negative equity, where the cost of their flats exceeds the flats’ market value, has been used against them to reconsider the consequences of voting against the PAP.

173 The Aljunied GRC is a five-member group representation constituency in the north-east region of Singapore. The areas that constitute the GRC are Eunos, Bedok Reservoir-Punggol, Kaki Bukit, Serangoon, and Paya Lebar. After Low Thia Khiang retired from electoral politics in 2020, Pritam Singh of the Worker’s Party succeeded his leadership position. In 2020, the Workers’ Party retained the GRC with 59.95% of the votes.

174 Chua, _Liberalism Disavowed_, 86.
government. The nationalisation of land, including the land on which homes are built, is seen as necessary by the state in order to safeguard the private sphere by providing affordable housing; however, the debate then, ironically, surrounds the apparent interference of the public sphere within the private.\(^{175}\) The uneven playing field is intentionally created by the PAP to fend off any opposing electoral parties—this aggression to maintain its power can be seen as a form of violence in defending its territory. By nationalising the land, the state becomes omnipresent, permeating the lives of its citizens through various systems of regulation and control in the people’s ways of life.

**National Identity**

Cultural anthropologist Benedict Anderson defined nation as an “imagined community”, since it is not dependent on the physical or visual interaction between its members.\(^{176}\) Instead, an “imagined community” is an ideological construction as all “communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact are imagined”.\(^{177}\) Complimentary to this, Singapore’s urban context only allows for rather “imagined” interactions. The challenge of the national project to create a national identity and possibly creating symbolic meanings connected to the home that the “imagined community” would share common “memories” with. The next parts of the thesis will investigate the ties between this “imagined community” and Hobsbawn’s ideas of an “invented tradition”, and the roles that the ground plays in the invention of this tradition and the imagined community.

Hybridity is a cultural process that develops from the routines of everyday life in Singapore, and food is one of the more obvious visible evidence of cultural hybridity. Take the local dish Mee Goreng, for example. “Mee” is “noodle” in Chinese while “goreng” is the Malay word for “fried”. Chua points out that the fried noodles dish is typically served by Indian hawkers and most Singaporeans would identify it as an Indian dish, even though the dish cannot be found in India.\(^{178}\) This is a very illustrative example of the extensive relaxation of differences in the daily lives of Singaporeans. These sorts of possibilities of hybridity in everyday practices are the consequence of close contact with different cultures. The existence of hybrid erodes racial cultural boundaries to create space for the inventions of new cultural phenomenon. At the time of political independence, Singapore had approximately 75 per cent Chinese, 17 per cent Malays, and 7 per cent South Asian, we well as a small residual category of “the rest” that included local-born Eurasians.\(^{179}\) Ethnic cultural differences among the citizenry were radically simplified to four racial groups—Chinese, Malays, Indian, and Others (forming the acronym known to

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Singaporeans as CMIO). Each racial category was an administrative category in order to simplify and homogenise the complex ethnic, linguistic, and religious differences of the migrant population.

Ethnicity and nationality have also been irrevocably problematised. Singapore’s population of mixed ethnicities, languages, and races complicates its formation of nation-ness. In *Southeast Asian Identities*, Heryanto describes the problematised ethnic identity of the Chinese in Indonesia and explains that, in theory, every modern nation is anything but an affinity constituted exclusively by ethnicities, descent, or geography. As Benedict Anderson points out, “the nation was not conceived in language, not in blood, and one could be invented into the imagined community, hence the universal practice of neutralisation.” The Singapore government’s deliberate neutral and secular stance on race, language, and religion for the “greater good” would be discussed further in the section where the thesis dissects how the constructed policies of the ground affect the traditions and rituals of the different ethnic groups, and somehow deplete traditions gradually, thereby creating a new nation-ness. By formally promoting “equality” between races in instances like making it the key focus of the national pledge, the state claims for itself a “neutral” unbiased space above all racialised groups, without prejudice or preference—it is equal in the sense that it does not protect the interest and rights of each group, but always focuses on “national” interests. The government has made deliberate efforts to ensure that racial and cultural difference do pose a threat to social security—this is fulfilled by creating largely homogenous everyday life experiences shared by all Singaporeans as a consequence of being part of a disciplined income-driven workforce, who are subject to the logic of globalised capitalism.

In addition to race, Singapore is also characterised by a high degree of religious heterogeneity. According to a 2014 analysis by the Pew Research Centre, Singapore is the world’s most religiously diverse nation. The Singapore population is comprised of Buddhists (33.2%), Taoists and other Chinese traditional believers (11.0%), Christians (37.4%), Muslims (14.0%), Hindus (5.0%), and others and non-religious (18.9%). With such religious diversity, the state has maintained a secular position. Singapore is considered a secular state in the

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181 The problems described in Heryanto’s chapter on ‘Ethnic Identities and Erasure’ talks about the identity of nationhood and the Chinese community in Indonesia, which is quite different from Singapore, as the Chinese in Indonesia are the minority in the population; they are also the non-natives. In Singapore, however, although the Chinese are not native to Southeast Asia, they have some degree of power in negotiation as they make up the majority of the Singapore population.
183 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 133.
187 Christianity includes Catholicism (6.7%), Protestantism, and other non-Catholic denominations (12.0%).
sense that there is no predominant religion, unlike for Malaysia, for example, where Islam is declared as a state religion. With a variety of religions practised in Singapore, in order to cater to all types of spiritual and moral beliefs, and achieved so without any form of favouritism or discrimination, Singapore had to adopt a strictly secular stance. According to Kong and Yeoh, this meant that every person has the right to practise his or her own religion and to propagate it. Every religious group has the right to manage its own affairs—such as to establish and maintain institutions for the education of children and to provide instruction in its own religion. This idea of secularism is an insistence that all religious groups are treated with equality. For example, each of the four main religions—Buddhism/Taoism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism—each have two public holidays assigned to their main religious festivals or observances. For each calendar year, the first and second day of the Lunar New Year Day are public holidays for the Buddhists and Taoists, Good Friday and Christmas for Christians, Hari Raya Haji and Hari Raya Puasa for the Islam, and Vesak Day and Deepavali for the Hindus. The state is committed to all cultural groups, and in this instance all religious groups, without prejudice to any group in particular, whether they are majority or minority groups. Policies in the state include a general clause that protects the fundamental rights of each citizen by prohibiting any form of discrimination by race, language, or religion.

Although religion might seem ethereal, the state’s secular ideology is strongly reflected in the land distribution based on religious affiliations. The pragmatic and developmentalist approach is evident in the policies dealing with the construction, demolition, and preservation of religious buildings, which reflect the characteristics of land-use policy. For religious buildings, the state specifically sets aside parcels of land for tender by religious groups. These parcels of land are typically found in HDB’s new towns, which are built on the basis that each neighbourhood must be self-sufficient. Under this guiding principle, religious building sites are provided as an amenity in the new towns. Precise planning standards that guide the minimum provision of such sites are drawn up in the same way for other amenities. For churches, mosques, and Chinese temples, for example, these guidelines are made on a new town basis—for every 9,000 dwelling units in a new town, a Chinese temple site will be designated, while a Hindu temple site will be designated for every 90,000 dwelling units.

Progress in Singapore cannot be achieved without change. The numerous development schemes such as oil refinery, public housing, etc. have necessitated the reciting of burial grounds and religious institutions. These have affected all sections of the community. It not a deliberate policy of the

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190 Kong and Yeoh, *The Politics of Landscape in Singapore*, 76.
195 This is more of a regional basis because it takes about two or three new towns to constitute 90,000 units.
196 Information from the Housing and Development Board.
Singapore Government to demolish places of worship. The process of urban renewal has necessitated the moving of population from one area to another.

Mr. Othman Wok, Minister for Social Affairs

These figures are based on the percentages of the population that belong to particular religious groups. The state pursues its policies on the establishment of religious buildings based on “pragmatism”, “rational” planning and “efficient” use of land. To the state, land-use decisions are made by prioritising the “economic” use of scarce land. As a result, many areas in Singapore have undergone massive redevelopment and urban renewal in order to tear down the old and make space for the new. Like these places of worship (and cemeteries as it will be discussed in the later part of this thesis), many other buildings have been demolished to make way for the construction of infrastructure, such as MRT stations and new HDB projects.

The fact that the state’s conception has been presented as the only rational and pragmatic option, as Kong and Yeoh elaborated, indicates that the state is attempting to persuade people that its beliefs and actions are the only natural way of doing things and the only solution. The ground here can be viewed as an apparatus for engineering: Firstly, the state uses the land division and land-use policies to demonstrate fairness and commitment to the equality of all Singaporeans by calculating, parcelling out, and allocating land in proportion to the size of the population who identify with that religion. Secondly, the demolition of places of worship and spaces of religious rituals, such as cemeteries, serves as a physical reminder of the importance of the developmentalist approach, which prioritises economic progress over religious and moral beliefs. This removal of spaces of religious practices also lessens the emphasis on religion and makes religious differences between citizens less visible, forcing citizens to focus on a common goal and economic progress (“progress” and what it entails will be discussed more closely in Part 4).

As defined by Storey, a nation refers to a social collective, and it is not necessarily bound by physical boundaries and territories—but a nation is a territorial concept because the social collective is a group of people who share an attachment to a particular territory. For the population of a new nation that does not have a shared history

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197 Zainul Abidin bin Rasheed and Norshahril Saat, Majulah!: 50 Years of Malay/Muslim Community In Singapore (Singapore: World Scientific, 2016).
199 Kong and Yeoh, The Politics of Landscape in Singapore, 80.
202 Kong and Yeoh, The Politics of Landscape in Singapore, 82.
204 Storey, Territories, 108.
or language, however, territory then becomes a great importance, not just because territory is the only tangible evidence of a nation’s existence, but also because myth concerning territory is a key element in the national imagination. In Singapore, questions around belonging and community spirit are currently being addressed: the focus and vision of the HDB is to “build [a] HDB community where residents do not just own their own homes, but also share a collective ownership of the entire community”. Thus, the notion of home is further extended to include one’s estate and neighbourhood. Given contemporary debates about whether “a Singaporean identity” encourages a sense of attachment to the broader locale of a neighbourhood, it is hoped that the attachment would be further extended to the nation.

By definition, the boundaries of a territory are political constructs that have very real social and cultural implications, and boundaries essentially serve to distinguish what it ours and what is theirs. The notion of verticality introduces multiple levels of complexity and draws attention to the conceptual and metaphorical regulatory boundaries that separate private and public spaces. These boundaries are sometimes ambiguous, such as the ground level spaces or void decks under most public housing flats (which I will discuss in Part 3).

Having lived in this country for almost 47 years, I have constructed my identity as a Singaporean from my experiences of existing in various spaces across the country; at the same time, I have gained a sufficient maturity to decide for myself (and not be forced by external circumstances) whether or not to accept new environments as part of my evolving sense of self. As I thought more about this issue, I became more conscious than ever of how space affects one’s identity and wondered what kind of sense of self does the average Singaporean have given that he/she faces such a high degree of change from cradle to grave.

Verena Tay, *Balik Kampung*

In her essay in *Balik Kampung*, Tay talks about space shaping identity and how one’s “sense of self” is subjected to external and environmental changes—what then, forms an individual’s “sense of self” when they are exposed to rapid and constant changes “from cradle to grave”? *Balik Kampung* is an anthology of essays written by various Singaporean or Singapore-based authors, each of whom talks about their personal connection to a particular place in Singapore. Tay mentions in her introductory essay that the stories in this anthology collectively underscore the idea that one’s environment does shape one’s sense of self and outlook on life. It is worth noting that most of the stories connect the self or personal memory to a building or area, but none specifically to the ground. Likewise,

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205 Storey, *Territories*, 111.
206 Housing and Development Board Singapore, “HDB Heartware 2007: Beyond home ownership to community ownership”, in *HDB Heartware Forum* (Singapore: Forum on HDB Heartware, 2007). This report can be found in the archival section at the National Library Board, Singapore.
207 Storey, *Territories*, 45.
when Tay prefaced the book, she does not mention any connection to the ground either, but to “space”—which can be read as the dimension above the ground.

In a fast-developing city like Singapore, buildings are constantly changing and site boundaries are re-drawn as land use is regularly reviewed to meet the needs of the nation. Some of the buildings mentioned in the anthology no longer exist, and yet, the personal connection with these places or their neighbourhood remains, demonstrating that memory is linked to the ground rather than the architecture. While people and events are put into nation-building, place is also significant because they are imbued with meaning and are tied to memory. The symbolic and practical importance in territorial imagery in the construction and reproduction of the nation cannot be ignored.210

Vjekoslav Perica wrote that “inaccurate” histories are perhaps crucial, and that the blurring of myth and reality is central to the nationalist imagination: myths are building blocks of nationhood.211 Other than ground and territory, which only serve the purpose of imagery, the state exercises a monopoly of power over the people living within its borders, so that only the state is inherently centralised in a delimited territory over which it has authoritative power.212 Despite the allusions to “national soil”, the land itself may not be critical to national identity; instead, myth concerning particular places is key to the national imagination. The conditions of the ground in Singapore are constructed as a product of the state delivering policies to manage limited resources and protect its territory. Whether intentionally or unwittingly, these policies produce political and social myths that are indispensable for any social collective. The following parts of the thesis will scrutinise the land policies, architectural designs, and urban planning strategies that have contributed to the myths that are responsible for building a national identity.

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212 Storey, Territories, 39.
Part 2

The Myth of Socioeconomic Equality

All (Most) of us are Equal

We, the citizens of Singapore,
Pledge ourselves as one united people,
Regardless of race, language or religion
To build a democratic society,
Based on justice and equality
So as to achieve happiness, prosperity and progress for our nation.¹

National Pledge of Singapore²

The national pledge is a good starting point to understanding certain social and national aspirations and ideals that the government would like to instil in its citizenry. The pledge demonstrates that having a united population is dependent on the equality of treatment of its citizens regardless of their “race, language, or religion”. But other than the equal treatment of citizens of different races, it also strives to create class equality. Questions that include the meaning of happiness, prosperity, and progress appear to be common in the pledge and assume that the population is working towards the same aspirations for Singapore in the future.

To a certain extent, the myth we are discussing may not necessarily suggest falsehood or pretence, but rather a similar vision. For example, the Singapore government controls the land through policies that limit certain aspects of private ownership (particularly through the Land Acquisitions Act as explained in Part 1, and leasehold policy terms, which we will discuss further here), allowing the government greater control over land use. The effect is a limitation of wealth generated from property ownership, and that from property inherited from generation to generation, thereby minimising the gap between the rich and poor. This results in a perception of a more financially homogenous population. Furthermore, the housing system and the management of the environment, from the scale of urban planning to the scale of the design of the single

¹ This version of the national pledge was largely drafted by then Minister for Foreign Affairs S. Rajaratnam in February 1966 as a way to promote national loyalty and consciousness among Singaporeans, following Singapore’s separation from Malaysia in 1965. The first daily recitation of the pledge was based on the belief that Singaporeans could overcome the divisions caused by differences of race, language, and religion. It was carried out on August 24, 1966 in all schools. Until now, the national pledge is still being recited every day in school assemblies and at national day ceremonies. The idea of the daily pledge as part of a programme to inculcate national consciousness and patriotism was first proposed in October 1965 by William Cheng, Principal Assistant Secretary of Administration at the Ministry of Education.
dwelling unit, have also reinforced the power of the myth that the majority of Singaporeans are on similar financial footing and are given equal opportunities in terms of wealth creation.

According to Barthes, the effectiveness of myths is its “naturalness” and how it is sometimes dressed up and disguised as something that happens naturally or is passed off simply as common sense or truth. “Common sense” here does not represent a type of wisdom innate to the functioning of the brain but rather, refers to a culturally bound conventional wisdom that has been so integrated into the day-to-day practices that its unnaturalness becomes invisible. When discussing myths, it is critical to think of myths as intentional and constructed artefacts and to also see how these myths contribute to the creation of a collective identity.

As Singapore is made up of various ethnicities and cultures and kinships, myths of equality are critical in creating imagined communities of people who do not share the same skin colour and language. According to evolutionary theory, social groups typically organize into hierarchies with respect to a valued social dimension like wealth. Unlike these fundamental conceptions about social groups, creating a deceptively horizontal structure would likely decrease any chances of conflict and hence promotes comradeship. For example, the most immediate class conflict can be explained simply by a dispute between labour and management, such as a workers’ slowdown in production in protest of unfair labour practices. In political and economic philosophy (particularly Marxism), whenever there are class differences, there will be some degree of class struggle, which will result in either discontent or political and social contest. A horizontal class structure would eliminate the complexity of the possible conflict between two or more social groups by assuming that everyone is equal and belongs to the same social group, thus allowing comradeship to manifest. This part of the thesis will explore policies and uses of the ground that support the myth of equality, before problematising Singapore’s project of an almost entirely middle-class society.

The myth of socioeconomic equality can be unpacked into several smaller myths that lend themselves to the larger myth – to create the illusion of socioeconomic equality, it is critical to create a horizontal social class structure where most people belong in the majority – first, ownership titles and meanings of ownership are ambiguuated to blur the lines between government-built housing and private housing. Secondly, by housing a

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majority of Singaporeans in public housing, it creates homogenous lifestyles and neighbourhoods that would diminish any overtly visible differentiations between classes. What this part of the thesis will also explore is how these processes of policy making and design to mask economic and class differences to prevent social conflicts and tensions.

Social Housing & Levelling Out Social Classes

In order to provide social housing for the population, the PAP government aggressively acquired privately held land for national development. In the 1960s, the colonial 1920 Land Acquisitions Ordinance was amended to include a “Fire Site Provision”, which enabled the state to acquire land that had been “devastated” by fire at “no more than one-third the vacant site value” because “it would be unfair to the general public if the landlords were to benefit unduly from an appreciation of the land value now freed from encumbrances”. In addition, the government had the additional responsibility of providing housing for the affected families. This was all triggered by the large devastating fire that took place in Bukit Ho Swee in 1961.

By 1966, the 1920 Ordinance had been replaced by the 1966 Land Acquisitions Act (Appendix 1.1 to 1.4), which allowed the state to acquire any land that was deemed necessary in the interest of National Development, at the rate of compensation fixed by the statute or the market rate, whichever was lower. The Act was later amended again in 1973, allowing the state to compensate owners of the acquired land at the 1973 market value or the land’s value on the date the owner is notified of the acquisition (this was later adjusted upwards in 1986 when the government determined it had already banked sufficient land for future development). This meant that no consideration was given to the potential value of the land after the intensification of use in the future. During the implementation of the Land Acquisitions Act as well as each subsequent revision, the PAP government was acutely aware that the policy in itself violated common and fundamental laws of property ownership that were sacrosanct to liberalism and did not even attempt to deny the state’s coerciveness in land

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10 Teo You Yenn, This is What Inequality Looks Like (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2009), 25–44.
11 Aline K. Wong and Stephen H. K. Yeh, eds., Housing a Nation: 25 Years of Public Housing in Singapore (Singapore: Maruzen Asia for HDB, 1985), 40.
12 The Bukit Ho Swee Fire was a conflagration that broke out in the squatter settlement in Bukit Ho Swee, Singapore on 25th May 1961. The fire claimed 4 casualties and injured another 54 people. The fire also destroyed 2,800 houses, leaving 16,000 people homeless. The cause of the fire was never established. More information is available at http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/history/events/a67e0450-c429-49b2-b87c-fb1a26105f4b (accessed April 11, 2019).
acquisition towards any legal criticism. The HDB published a book stating in their extract and official response:

The majority of the acquired private lands comprised dilapidated properties or neglected land where squatters had mushroomed. The government saw no reason why these owners should enjoy the greatly enhanced land values over the years without any effort put in by them.

In the same publication, the former Minister for National Development, the late Tan Cheang Wan, claimed that the Land Acquisitions Act was necessary and that it was the only and most effective way to acquire land for the urgent need to house. Even though landowners were aggrieved by the position they were in, they had no other choice and had to accept the circumstances for the sake of “national interest”. It is unclear if that statement had minimised the aggrieved landowner whose land was removed from their possession. It is as though framing the reasons for the acquisition as necessary for the greater good and the betterment of national interest legitimises the Act—which obviously violates property ownership rights—and makes it dignifying and honourable to fulfil the acquisition, or to share the land with people who were less endowed. By closing the gap between the wealthy and the poor had two effects—firstly, it created barriers for the rich to amass and accumulate power by owning large masses of the land, and secondly, it evened out the financial gap between the wealthier portion of the population of land owners and those living in the lower socioeconomic ranks who did not own their own homes. The Land Acquisitions Act cemented the government’s power over by acquiring approximately 90% of the land right now, mainly through its land acquisitions programme that took place in the 1970s and 1980s (mainly for the construction of the underground public transport network in the 1980s). Land had effectively been nationalised and its reasons legitimised, giving power to the government to administer long-term planning and development of physical infrastructure.

According to Chua in Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore, the Land Acquisitions Act was a law that was “unevenly applied”. Chua criticised the Land Acquisitions Act for treating property owners from the domestic and multinational corporation sectors of the economy differently. This disparity in the acquisition treatment is politically significant as the ideology of equality and for providing the material

17 Wong and Yeh, eds., Housing a Nation, 41. Also cited by Chua in Liberalism Disavowed, 76–78.
18 Wong and Yeh, eds., Housing a Nation, 41.
19 Chua Beng Huat claims that descendants of the landowners whose land was removed from their possession made up the majority of the 30% who voted against the PAP in the 1968 elections.
21 Chua, Liberalism Disavowed, 76–78.
conditions of its citizens. As Chua highlighted, the nascent state was also careful in acquiring land tied to foreign investment as it identified foreign investments as critical and necessary for economic growth in the 1970s. Although the state legitimised its land acquisitions programme as providing equal opportunities to housing for its people, equality in this case was created violently through policy by removing property from the rich to create homes for the population through capital redistribution. In addition, land was guarded for foreign investment as opposed to the local businesses. This selective and uneven treatment of property owned by local and foreign businesses, raises questions if the “greater good for the people” was indeed to focus on putting aside land for foreign investments and removing land from local business owners.

Besides using the Land Acquisitions Act, the state also started acquiring more land by clearing private burial grounds to make room to house the living. In the 1965 Master plan, which was designed to guide strategic land-use development in Singapore, cemeteries were identified as land “considered available for development”. The state tried to sell the idea of cremation as a viable option for dealing with the exhumed bodies from these burial grounds, and for disposing people who had died.24 25 In addition, the common good and the country’s future were used to persuade the populace to accept the idea of cremation and abandon their insistence on burial traditions and the preservation of traditional burial grounds.26

In 1972, the state made it clear that it would close all cemeteries near and around the city area to “conserve land”. State power over cemeteries was considerably strengthened by an alteration in the law allowing the public commissioner to “close cemeteries without assigning reasons for doing so” (refer to image 2.1).27 In order to treat the dead, the state offered burial spaces at a state-owned public cemetery complex at Choa Chu Kang (the only cemetery now that still allow burials in Singapore). Even though an option of burial was given (especially for religions that prohibit cremation), it was limiting and the state continued to maintain its stance that cremation is the only viable long-term solution.28 As Yeoh and Kong who have studied burial sites in Singapore extensively, have pointed out, the clearance of ethnic burial grounds served more than a practical purpose of the state acquiring more parcels of land, but in addition, it signified the transferring of power from clan- and ethnic-based associations, which had previously run these burial grounds, to state institutions29. The Chinese clan associations in Singapore were particularly powerful before and during the beginning of independent Singapore’s history. In several investigations by Lee Khuay Khiang and Patrick Low, much of

26 Typically, these burial grounds that were privately owned by ethnic clan associations with members who would provide either their own land or funding to purchase land for these private cemeteries. The ethnic burial grounds would be elaborated in Chapter 3.
Singapore’s economic successes can be attributed to the Chinese clan associations. With their economic success, these associations had acquired more and more land. The Chinese viewed the act of removing the burial grounds from their clan associations as an attack on Chinese customary rituals and an erosion of Chinese control over their own sacred spaces.

On November 1, 1998, the National Environmental Agency (NEA) implemented a policy to limit the burial period of all graves to fifteen years, due to a shortage of space in the cemeteries. This means that after being buried for fifteen years, graves are exhumed and the remains removed (this may not be done immediately after 15 years, but the minimum period is for 15 years). If the religion of the deceased permits cremation, the exhumed remains are cremated and stored in government columbarium niches; otherwise, the remains are re-buried in mass burial plots. Even before the government built two main crematoriums—the Mandai Crematorium and Columbarium and Choa Chu Kang Columbarium—to replace Mount Vernon Crematorium, the only government crematorium, it had already reached its maximum capacity in the late 1970s. Mandai Crematorium was completed in 1982, but it is still undergoing construction to expand the columbarium and crematorium to accommodate the dead in Singapore.

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32 The History Channel, “In Singapore, the dead only stay in the grave for 15 years,” May 27, 2016, video, 3:48, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6lSjruCaqcE.

The Myth of Socioeconomic Equality

Burial grounds, cemeteries, columbaria, and crematoria are sites invested and riddled with the most sacred of human and religious sentiments. Since history is an important contributing factor of nationalism, it can be assumed then that burial grounds, which are part of our national history, are critical in the study of national identity and nation-building.\(^ {34,35} \) If the state intended to create a sense of socioeconomic equality in order to preserve comradeship within an otherwise potentially divided population, and see that as a means to create national identity and national belonging, it is ironic that they are clearing the very sites that contribute to the country’s historical narratives. From the perspective of economic-driven Singapore, these “homes” of the dead are often treated as unnecessary or redundant, with no real place in economic development or no real contribution to nation building. If death is the “most private, and at the same time most public, of human experiences”, it being a public experience means that the experience is not only contained by individual cultural parameters, but also lends itself to the construction of the nation.\(^ {36} \)

The clearing of the burial grounds was, most importantly, a way of wealth distribution. The laws implemented to clear them limited the rights of the families whose ancestors were buried in these private burial sites—much like the Land Acquisitions Act. These private burial grounds were mainly located in areas that had potential development value—for example, 58,000 graves were exhumed from the Bidadari Cemetery in 2001 to make space for 12,411 HDB flats as well as more private condominium developments.\(^{37}\)\(^{38}\) Initially, the main reason for acquiring land and private burial grounds through the Act was to have sufficient land to provide housing for its people. But periodically, the state also released land parcels for sale to private developers for private housing or commercial developments that have variable leases of 30 to 99 years. These “government land sale sites” sold to private owners are a significant source of state revenue; at the same time, the sites placed on sale are timed perfectly as a tool to dampen market prices for real estate when demand is too high, thereby undermining the workings of the housing market.

In 1987, then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew said in his speech that Singapore had progressed to a middle-class society in the 22 years since its independence.\(^{39}\) Instead of the 94% of the population who used to live in low-standard housing in villages with poor utilities and sanitation amenities, more than 80% of Singapore’s population now live in “sold” quality public housing (I will later discuss how ownership in this sense is part of the myth), and most of the remaining 20% live in private homes. In the same speech, the Prime Minister also talked about how different social classes in Japan and the United Kingdom have divided the country and how social classes can be determined by several ways—ownership of property, one’s educational level, spoken accent, or lifestyle. To Prime Minister Lee, Singapore was not “plagued” by social class separations and the country’s class divide was dichotomous—those who owned property and those who did not.\(^{40}\) By adopting a broad class dichotomy of homeowners and non-homeowners, it was easy to homogenise homeowners in the 91.5% majority that includes “owners” of public housing flats.\(^{41}\) This statistically reduces the visibility of the disparity between private home ownership and the ownership of public housing.

With over 90% of Singaporeans being home “owners”, global statistics rank Singapore among the top countries with the highest home ownership rates. Branding a nation as having 91.50% homeowners is part of a narrative that is deeply rooted in the myth and appearance of Singapore, and this is projected not only to Singaporeans,


\(^{38}\) From my personal experience working in the Urban Redevelopment Authority from 2011 to 2015, the discussions on Bidadari cemetery were always centered around the maximum allowable ‘dwelling units’ that would fit within the land parcel.


but also to the rest of the world. Myths are powerful precise to the extent of people’s beliefs because myths capture something about empirical realities.\textsuperscript{42} This shows how successful HDB policies and the Land Acquisitions Act are at masking the financial inequalities of the extremes in its population—at least to the outside world. On the surface, Singapore has a homogeneous population and a horizontal social class system.

The inequalities arise from the uneven application of the Land Acquisitions Act (as it was discussed earlier) as well as the prerequisites of qualification for the public housing flats, which is based on a monthly household income ceiling with subsidies for those that form the lower band of the population’s income bracket. And although home ownership and HDB ownership policies create ambiguity in the types of ownership, the truth is that the inequality persists, and the land and housing policies, as well the physical flats themselves, mask a population that is ultimately socioeconomically unequal. In the Finance Minister’s Budget Speech in 2012, Minister K. Shanmugaratnam stated:

\[\ldots\] because Singapore is a city, our income inequality will inevitably be wider than in larger countries, like in many other global cities. But we cannot leave our social compact vulnerable to market forces. We have to do all we can to contain inequality, and to sustain social mobility in each new generation.\textsuperscript{43} 44

From this extract of the speech, inequality is framed as an unavoidable and inevitable outcome of economic progress. According to Teo You Yenn, the speech reveals how the state takes credit for the economic positives of the nation, while condemning inequality as a “negative externality and an inevitable outcome of economic growth”\textsuperscript{45}. The state’s image in this case remains in a positive light, with no acknowledgement of liability for inequality, even though it is the state’s policies that are responsible for obscuring inequalities in the population. More recently, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong stated in a community dialogue session on October 14, 2018:

We must not allow social stratification to harden in Singapore … the way you dress, the way you talk, what you eat, and where you go on holiday. You compare notes then you feel, I show you a little bit (that) I am better than you. I think we have to combat that.\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{42} Teo Yeo Yenn, “Poor People Don’t Like Oats Either: How Myths about Poverty and Wealth Matter” in \textit{Living with Myths in Singapore}, eds. Loh Kah Seng, Thum Ping Tjin & Chia, Jack Meng-Tat (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2017), 240.
\textsuperscript{44} This speech was also cited in Teo, “Poor People Don’t Like Oats Either,” 244.
\textsuperscript{45} Teo, “Poor People Don’t Like Oats Either,” 244–245.
Similarly, this extract of the conversation appears to condemn society’s categorisation of its people based on socioeconomic factors. Rather than addressing the inequality that might exist, even within a single social class, Lee seems to have implied that comparing status among persons is the cause for social stratification. The state assumes that class stratifications can be avoided and is adamant that a horizontal class structure will result in the vision of “one united” people. Class is fundamentally about differences, which can potentially threaten social security and result in social diversion and conflict. By grossly simplifying all references to a “two-class model”, the state assumes it can manipulate the social classes. It is also prudent to note that the majority upper class of homeowners includes a wide and varied spectrum of “homeowners” who are disguised as a broader group that includes owners of homes on private freehold property, owners of homes on private 99-year leasehold property, and owners of 99-year leasehold public housing flats (who are in the majority). To distinguish them, we must consider how the word “ownership” operates for freehold and leasehold property.

Firstly, for the owners of homes of private freehold property, although ownership is understood to be without expiration, the ownership is still subject to the Land Acquisitions Act that allows the government to acquire land from private owners. As for the 99-year leasehold property, the land that the property occupies has to be returned to state after the lease period. The 99-year leasehold policy is synonymous with the HDB policy as all HDB flats are “owned” with a 99-year lease only, after which the flat will have to be returned to the state. It is only in the last decade that residents began to scrutinise the ownership of HDB flats with mandatory 99-year leases. This started when Singaporeans began speculating on housing prices in 2017, assuming that once the 99-year lease was up, the flat could be sold back to the state under an urban redevelopment scheme.47 The spike in demand for public housing flats with expiring leases led to the government reminding residents that, with the exception of selected flats under the Selective En-bloc Development Scheme (SERS), most of the flats will be returned to the State with no compensation at the end of the 99-year lease.48 In the following year, the local newspaper reported Minister of National Development, Lawrence Wong’s statement, saying that the value of a HDB flat sold by the government on a 99-year lease is expected to appreciate as the country prospers.49 This contradicts with the devaluing of homes at the end of the 99-years. When asked to clarify the issue of “ownership”, he further explained why residential properties, public or private, have been sold with 99-year leases by the Government since 1967:

47 There have been specific instances where older HDB flats have been bought up by the government under the Selective En-bloc Development Scheme (SERS). The SERS scheme is an urban redevelopment strategy employed by the HDB to maintain and upgrade older HDB flats and further intensify the site. Residents who have been affected by SERS are displaced to neighboring estates and offered a new flat with a new 99-year lease. Affected residents also get to select their units prior to public release besides getting financial compensation.
We are land-scarce in Singapore, we have constraints, if we give out and sell freehold land today, everyone who buys it will be very happy, and our children and whoever you pass your land to will be very happy, but eventually there will be those without land, hence the limited leasehold terms allow Singapore to recycle land for the future. The properties may be on finite leases, but they will cover housing needs of at least two generations.

Lawrence Wong, Minister for National Development

The 99-year leasehold policy on HDB flats simply allows this “recycling” to take place for future generations and for land to be intensified in the next cycle to provide the same accessibility to affordable housing. The term “recycling land” used by Wong in his response during the forum shows how land is also viewed by the government as land not being owned, even though the Singapore Land Authority refers to Land Titles as “Property Ownership”. In this case, it is important unravel the “use” of land because the use of space occupied by the body for living and working does not refer to a single act or event, but to the entire existence of an individual. The “ownership” of land, as laid out in both oral and written documents, is actually not ownership at all but instead makes reference to the term of “use”, which is ambiguated and disguised as ownership (with some dimension of autonomy and ownership). Therefore, it is critical to comprehend the distinction between the different dimensions of ownership and their levels of autonomy.

In Agamben’s discussion of highest poverty and use, the concept of “use” is introduced to characterise the Franciscan life, “property” (ownership) is defined technically as the right of the dominion, by which someone is said to be the “lord of something”. Natural law, on the other hand, prescribes that everyone has use of the things necessary to their conservation, but does not obligate them in any way to ownership. Immediately, if we challenge that area of the ground by which the individual’s body occupies, we can argue that the ground is conceptually for a person’s conservation and is presented as a paradigm of purely factual human practice and existence. However, this is distinct from ownership in and of itself, and can instead be justified as the “right to use”, as Agamben described. The right to use refers to one’s licit power and authority to use things belonging to another. In this case of Singapore’s property leasehold policies, the state, which has control over the land, is granting a lease title to the user of the land for a limited time period of use.

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52 Agamben, The Highest Poverty, 133.
Myth of Ownership

HDB ownership and private ownership have different degrees of autonomy over the home. The HDB ‘owners’ own their flats for a lease period of 99 years but do not own the land on which their dwellings and common areas are built. Land within the HDB estates has remained a state-controlled asset as HDB is the government’s statutory board for the development of public housing and is a leaseholder of the land parcels, usually for a 103-year lease period (to factor in four years of construction time). The HDB then grants 99-year leases to the public as lessees who enjoy allocated and limited rights, such as the right of exclusive possession of the dwelling unit and the resale of the unit at market price, after five years. In Singapore, as previously discussed, the state has made it imperative and a priority for all Singaporeans to have a home, and for a large majority to own homes in which they reside. Now, this “ownership” is being called into question through the sanction of policies, as the government has retained dominion, excluding the “homeowners” from being the “lord of something” in the way that Agamben defines true ownership.

Land rights in several other countries may be similar with lease and freehold options of land “ownership”, however, the terms are usually clearly distinguished. In many other countries with subsidised flats (similar to council housing in the United Kingdom and social housing in Canada or parts of North America), public housing is stated as “rented” rather than “owned” by its inhabitants. The HDB home ownership scheme, however, introduces an in-between level of ownership that is restricted to 99 years with a minimum possession period of 5 years—the eligibility requirements revealing that this form of “ownership” comes with a higher level of restrictions and a lower level of autonomy for its inhabitants. In Singapore, citizens are given the right to use their HDB flat for 99 years, and suppose they acquire this lease at the age of 20, the ownership scheme presumes the 99 years is long enough to surpass the average lifespan of any individual from the time that they own a flat. This may be seen as “ownership”, but the right to decide the future of the home or land ultimately rests with the state, and not with the supposed “homeowner” after the 99-year lease is overreaching the point of affirming the true primordiality of use with respect to the dominion.

The HDB policies claim that users own their homes and use language that refers to the purchasers of the flats as owners. This situation is clearer than it appears because the ground is a non-consumable object in which ownership cannot be clearly separated from use, with the land to be returned to the state at the end of the lease. This is analogous to the 1998 burial policy, which had set a 15-year limit on burials, after which the state reclaims the land where a body is buried, giving the state true dominion over the land.

54 Agamben, The Highest Poverty, 140.
55 Agamben, The Highest Poverty, 140.
The aforementioned policies related to the ground obscure the distinction between the “right to use” and “ownership”, thereby creating myths around which norms of use, patterns, and economies of living are established and socially accepted. According to Agamben, natural law that cannot be renounced prescribes that one has use of the things necessary to their conservation, but this does not obligate them in any way to ownership—in other words, one cannot acquire the ownership of a good if one does not have the will or desire to acquire or possess the good. Through this lens, it is deceptive of the policy to use the terminology “ownership” over “right to use”, since the word “ownership” would give the said “owner” the expectation to possess. This raises the question of whether the 80% of the population who “own” HDB flats truly belong to the classification of 90.7% of the population who are homeowners, or if the term “ownership” here is used to disguise HDB flat “users” as part of the middle-class population of homeowners, thus inflating the levels of homeownership in order to create a less divided class structure. The term “ownership” is then seen as intention to ambiguate all degrees and dimensions of “ownership”, thereby creating the illusion of a horizontal class system with a simplified two-class structure without differentiating ownership between freehold and leasehold properties. This is not solely a strategy to prevent social conflict and diversion, but it has also been employed to construct and promote the image of Singapore to the world. At a superficial level, Singapore appears to have a homogenous population and it is precisely this narrative of normalcy that brings people together and fosters unity.

Similar to the effects of the Land Acquisitions Act, inequality exists in HDB ownership through the uneven implementation of the policy. The process of acquiring an HDB flat is, to a great extent, exclusive. The eligibility to purchase a flat is accompanied by a complicated list of requirements listed by HDB. In general, applicants may apply to one of three schemes: Public Schemes, Fiancé/Fiancée Scheme, and the Orphans Scheme. Under the Public Scheme, any spouse and child/children (including single-parent families, and families with children who are under legal custody of the parents, who may not necessarily be the birth-parents), where at least one is a Singapore Citizen or Singapore Permanent Resident, may apply for a flat but they have to submit their marriage certificate within three months of collecting their keys to the new flat. And lastly, the Orphans Scheme allows orphans to apply for a flat but only if all single orphans are listed in the same application and also if at least one deceased parent is a Singapore Citizen or Singapore Permanent Resident. Most flats (depending on the project and the size of the flat) can only be purchased with an average gross monthly household income of 12,000 (9,000 U.S. dollars) or 18,000 Singapore dollars (13,500 U.S. dollars) for flats for multi-generation family. The government’s commitment to “home ownership” is evident in the periodical raising of the monthly income ceiling for eligibility to purchase public housing in tandem with general economic growth, so as to include as many households as possible. This ceiling has been readjusted

56 Agamben, The Highest Poverty, 123.
according to the rising income levels for Singaporeans, while still making it possible for 90% of the population to afford these flats. HDB has, hence, a monopoly as a producer and supplier of housing.\footnote{Chua, Liberalism Disavowed, 82.}

Apart from the income ceiling, criteria regarding the structure of the family nucleus prior to the purchase of a flat is still necessary. The social policies that most significantly leverage on the national public housing programme are family policies and as seen by qualification schemes, the state included the idea of “family as the basic unit of society”\footnote{Chua, Liberalism Disavowed, 84–85.} (The invasive family policies will be discussed in depth in the later part of the thesis.) The institution of marriage and the housing system is so synonymous that it is common for a man’s proposal to his potential wife to be cast in terms of “Will you register for an HDB flat with me?”, and betrothed couples would announce their engagement by introducing themselves as “already having registered for a flat”.\footnote{Teo, “Poor People Don’t Like Oats Either.” 241–244.}

Focusing on the formation of the family nucleus has several benefits for the state. Firstly, the family is seen as the basic unit of society that instils social responsibility in individuals through familial and emotional ties, and mutual obligations. By shifting the responsibilities of the state to the family, it is ensured that members of society are obligated to provide for their own family, thus relieving pressures on public welfare.\footnote{This has been shown to be ineffective in reversing the trends. This, however, may not be the fault of policies, but rather of other economic costs and societal and career expectations, with more people choosing to focus on their careers over starting a family.} Secondly, prioritising new families for housing is a way to encourage the population to have children and replenish the ageing population. Such pro-family policies were made to reverse the decline in marriage and childbirth rates.\footnote{Chua, Liberalism Disavowed, 85.} However, capitalising on the family means discriminating against the people who do not belong to what is dictated and defined as a conventional family nucleus (this will be expanded in Chapter 4). As the number of unmarried people increased, it became politically unavoidable to accommodate them in public housing, so the qualification criteria were changed in the early 1990s to include individuals aged 35 and over—a demographic likely considered to be past their peak marrying (and child-bearing) potential—who are now permitted to purchase smaller units of HDB flats.\footnote{Knight Frank Cheong Hock Chye Ballieu, A Survey of Buyers’ preferences – condominiums in Singapore (Singapore: KFCB (Knight Frank Cheong Ballieu), 1993).} This shows that, despite efforts to equalise Singaporeans, some are more equal than others and certain groups of people are still prioritised over others.

Based on a commercial survey in 1993 by a Singapore consulting firm, Frank, Cheong and Baillieu on buyer’s preferences of condominiums, private housing (which condominiums fall under) is generally perceived by the public as more attractive than HDB apartments.\footnote{Knight Frank Cheong Hock Chye Ballieu, A Survey of Buyers’ preferences – condominiums in Singapore (Singapore: KFCB (Knight Frank Cheong Ballieu), 1993).} Firstly, the clientele objectives differ between private developers and HDB as a developer. Serving higher income groups, private developers tend to offer lifestyle concepts that promote “ideal lifestyles” with a higher aesthetic standard, supported by marketing campaigns
which lend to an impression of prestige and exclusivity; while HDB, as a public provider, aims to house people on the basis of affordability and efficiency. Of the latter, aesthetic works are then compromised to cut costs. Secondly, as HDB housing is a subsidised commodity, it is expected that the public provider oversees the need to enforce social and cultural rules and regulations in order to manage public housing as a whole. Ultimately, the management of HDB housing is controlled by town councils headed by Members of Parliament, hence, HDB estates are directly under the surveillance of the government. In contrast, private housing enjoys more autonomy because it is managed by a corporation of which residents are members. As residents and members of the management corporation of private property, such as a condominium, they would have more control over the common areas within the estate.

Typically, HDB blocks are also built above a “void deck”, which is a term that Singaporeans have for the multi-functional space on the ground floor of a HDB block with an open floor plan. This area is a public space and does not belong to the residents of the flats above it. The void deck can be rented to hold private and social functions such as weddings, funeral rites, and celebrations; on an everyday basis, it provides a shared space for residents to mingle. The void deck is a reminder that the ground occupied and shared by the flats is state-owned land. As the state’s statutory arm that is responsible for building and providing public housing for eligible Singaporeans, HDB owns the title to the land on which public housing flats are built. This land title is therefore transferred from the state to its statutory arm (HDB), and the title or strata title is never given to the flat owners. This means that the title received by the owners of the HDB flats only represents the ownership to a volume of space that is independent of the ground itself, raising the questions as to whether it can be considered true homeownership.

The strategies that will be discussed will show how equalising Singaporeans is more about the communication of a horizontal social class rather than the equal treatment of Singaporeans. The very process of nationalising land to equalise the citizens of Singapore is exclusive. From the implications of the Land Acquisitions Act and the ways in which it was gradually implemented, to the qualification criteria for the purchase of HDB flats, it is apparent that the state’s housing policies function to integrate Singaporeans within a middle-class society of property owners. It becomes even more evident that the state is not concerned with the ideology of equal treatment, but rather with concealing inequalities and promoting middle-class ideals of living. By cloaking myths around housing policies, the state is able to exercise its power.

65 Wong Tai Chee and Xavier Guillot, A Roof Over Every Head: Singapore’s Housing Policy between State Monopoly and Privatisation (London: Sampark, 2005), 203–204.
Only Way of Life

Every public housing estate is comprehensively and extensively planned as a town with blocks of flats or varying number of floors and densities. According to the urban design guidelines and strategies used by the HDB and the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), an “optimal” town would have all the essential amenities for a high degree of self-sufficiency. Based on research, the size of a new town was set at about 12 square kilometres and projected to accommodate around 200,000 residents. Land use within a new town was generally made up of the following: residential (45%), educational (6.9%), institutional (2.1%), parks and gardens (7%), sports and recreation (1.5%), reserve sites (0.3%), transportation (13.3%), industry (8%) and utilities and others (8%). The above distribution illustrates the stringent and carefully calculated nature of the guidelines. But as the population has increased, blocks have started increasing in height and density, including new HDB flats that are planned and built as high as fifty storeys from the ground. Estates are divided into neighbourhoods, which are further divided into smaller precincts of a cluster of blocks. Each planning level is quantitative and systematic, and ensures calculated specific service provisions. For example, each precinct has to include a garden and neighbourhood shops that supply daily necessities; and each town must have a primary school, community centre, bus interchange, and a public train station.

To integrate residential blocks with the other amenities, HDB designed the estates like a “chessboard by alternating residential with amenities and services” in order to best distribute amenities. Each neighbourhood and larger town would appear indistinguishable as these rigid and repetitive guidelines offer a template for planning. The same service and amenities mapped out for each planning level homogenises the daily life experiences of the 90% majority of the population living in these HDB towns. This makes living in public housing estates the new and “only way of life”, which minimises the visibility of social and economic inequalities among its residents. The invisibility of class differences has enabled the state to claim that it has achieved its goal of making Singapore a home-owning, middle-class society living in neighbourhoods with high liveability standards.

It is the inside of each flat that is the accurate reflection of the different financial circumstances of each household. In Teo’s book, *This Is What Inequality Looks Like*, she reveals the grim truth about how single-room rental flats are scattered among these homogenised neighbourhoods. She explains that in Singapore, rental

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67 According to Liu Thai Ker, who was the Chief Planner and CEO of the Housing Development Board from 1969 to 1989 and Chief Planner of the Urban Redevelopment Authority from 1989 to 1992.


70 Referring specifically to Pinnacle@Duxton, 1G Cantonment Road. Although it is an anomaly to have such a tall HDB tower, I can only imagine that there would be more to come in the future.


73 Teo, *This is What Inequality Looks Like*, 71.
flats for low-income persons in Singapore are not separately located away from the other neighbourhoods. There are no visible slums but although access to electricity, clean water, amenities, and transport is not denied, low-income Singaporeans live in small cramped quarters, and sometimes, with whole families of five or six people living in less than 300 square feet of space with no dividing walls except for the bathroom. The homogeneity of everyday life in the public spaces of the housing estate has veiled but not erased class inequalities. In the privacy of the interiors of the flat, each household lives in its own material wealth or deprivation, according to its own financial circumstances behind the confines of the walls.

The injection of private condominiums into public housing estates is seen as another initiative to counter social stratification by equalising the value of land and distributing the different housing types. HDB has also built public housing in the central area of Singapore where land value is much higher. This is to ensure that HDB flat buyers enjoy a wider range of location choices as well as to facilitate social integration in all residential areas, including the prime locations. This shows a different type of wealth sharing, where there are opportunities available for someone with a financially lower background to be able to live in central area of Singapore where private condominiums would typically be exclusive and accessible to only 10% of the financially richest in Singapore. However, this is problematic because instead of amalgamating the different classes of private owners and public owners, locating the properties side by side may allow them to be more easily compared.

The term “condominium” is of Latin origin which means to have control (dominium) over a specific good acquired in common (con) with one or more people. In real estate terminology, the “condominium” is property that is shared by one or more—usually built with shared facilities and amenities in order to share the costs of property use and maintenance. The integration of privately-owned condominium buildings was a large step in integrating privately owned housing with public housing. But just juxtaposing clusters of public housing with privately owned condominium can be seen as a frail attempt at social integration as there are usually some distinct differences in the appearances of these buildings on an urban scale. Typically, private condominium apartment blocks are gated complexes with security and privacy walls, and gates framing the periphery that guard private amenities, such as gyms and swimming pools, which are exclusive to residents. HDB flats, on the other hand, have no comparable security devices and share public spaces on the ground floor.

By situating both housing types together, the disparities of the design between private condominiums and public housing flats become more apparent. This may not be the most apparent strategy to use to integrate people of different economic backgrounds. By locating them next to each other, it appears that this may give rise to

74 Teo, This is What Inequality Looks Like, 51.
75 Teo, This is What Inequality Looks Like, 59.
77 Wong Tai Chee and Xavier Guillot, A Roof Over Every Head (London: Sampark, 2005), 149.
78 At an urban level, the void decks are a positive feature at an urban scale that provide pedestrians with the porosity to freely circulate between amenities and flats, rather than being forced to walk around the buildings.
tension between the residents of the HDB flats and that of the private condominiums. As Teo documents through her interviews with residents, tension exists between residents of rental flats and those who own larger HDB flats. It can be assumed that similar frictions may arise between the HDB flat residents and condominium residents.

However, while there may be tension, juxtaposing the different classes can provide a benefit by acting as a heuristic device for the lower-class public housing residents to aspire to own private housing property. This aspiration to own private housing is reflected in the design changes in public housing flats, which have progressively started to resemble private condominiums on the exterior, especially the newer flats that were designed after 2010. To create the appearance of a gated compound, newer public housing flats use plant hedges, walkways, and roads to delineate the spaces without completely fencing up the compound, creating the illusion of exclusivity and security while leaving public spaces at the ground level open for public use. The grouping up of a cluster of blocks of public housing flats into compounds with hedges and landscaping also resemble that of private condominium compounds (refer to images 2.2 and 2.3).

The grouping of blocks into smaller clusters gives a general sense and appearance of exclusivity, but in addition to the planning of public spaces and landscaping to enhance the appeal of the public housing flats, HDB has also started assigning names to these clusters and building projects—something that is typically associated with private housing developments in Singapore. For example, private condominiums are usually given highly marketable names such as The Interlace or The Sail @ Marina Bay that reflect the special design features of the condominium or the location of the condominium, especially if it has a prestigious location, such as one that is closer to the Central Business District. These names for condominiums are part of the identity of the people who live in the property and have become an indication of the wealth and status of a person. HDB then started assigning names to the newly built HDB flats to elevate the image of the flats by giving it the impression of a private housing compound from the outside. Typically, public housing compounds and blocks were referred to solely by their assigned and sequenced block numbers, reducing the identifier of homes to a series of numbers—for example, Block 219 (block number), Toa Payoh (name of the neighbourhood), Lorong 2 (street or lane number) #03-05 (floor level and unit number). The series of numbers that make up the address of a public housing unit is part of a logical system of numbers used to identify residents and families. The reduction in identity also adds to the veneer of objectivity—that all are equal and are identified by sequences of digits.
The Myth of Socioeconomic Equality

Image 2.2

A “privately-owned” condominium in Toa Payoh named Gem Residences with enclosed compound and exclusive amenities like a swimming pool and tennis courts is nestled in the midst of public housing flats. (Image from Bloomberg.79)

Image 2.3

A newer generation of public housing flats in Toa Payoh, completed in 2013 named The Peak, with landscaping in the periphery of the cluster of blocks of flats. Design of these flats look indistinguishable from “privately-owned” condominiums, with the exception of the absence of a swimming pool and a hard wall fence around the compound. Rather, landscaping and the positioning of the roads and public footpaths are used to delineate the space to give the illusion of a gated community.

With uncanny similarity, a logical sequence of numbers is also used to identify and order columbarium niches. Due to land scarcity, the state is forced to exhume graves to clear cemeteries for the sake of nation building and with that, remains from the graves are cremated and stored in columbarium niches. In 1998, the state introduced the limit of burials to fifteen years and large-scale columbaria facilities were built. Choa Chu Kang Columbarium houses about 147,000 niches in 18 four-storey blocks and each of the niches is also reduced to the same logical sequence of numbers—for example, Block 3, #04-356 indicates the 3rd block on the 4th level, where niche number 356 is located. The similar system of digits is not merely for statistical control, but also to help locate the remains of loved ones in a very large facility. Again, this is a reflection of how numbering and statistics accompany an individual through his entire earthly existence and even after his death.

Chinese graves that were situated higher up the hill and generously spaced out typically belonged to the wealthy members of the Chinese community who were scholars and influential merchants. Many of these graves were omega-shaped graves built with a raised mound in the rear (refer to image 2.4). The size and design of the tombs varied—some of these tombs were extremely large and elaborate while other smaller plots reflected the inhabitants’ humbler origins. The old Chinese graves, such as the ones that remain in Bukit Brown, reflect the status and wealth of the family, but with the restrictions on burials and with cremation being more accepted by the Chinese community as a treatment of their dead, the rituals and architecture of the graves have been uniformed and reduced to the standard-sized niches—the same uniformed design of these boxes that house the dead now also perpetuate the same ideals of equality among a majority of its residents who are long gone.

Image 2.4
The grave of Teo Chin Chay at the Bukit Brown Cemetery, which has since been exhumed to make way for vehicular infrastructure, is an example of the more elaborate graves. These graves were artefacts that reflected the wealth and status of the family that the deceased belonged to. (Photo taken by Eugene Ang).

81 Ian Hacking, The Taming of Chance (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 34.
Similarly, the regular and standardised sizes and designs of HDB flats have the same effect. Another social security consideration came into play when HDB decided to prevent the emergence of segregated estates based on class and income level. Three-room, four-room, and five-room flats are juxtaposed together in the same estate so that the residents would come from different educational and financial backgrounds. Because socioeconomic gaps had to be considered, HDB went a step further to combine one- and three-room flats into the same cluster of blocks, while two- and five-room flats were mixed together. This was apparently to encourage social interaction and cohesion within the socio-economic classes. This conscious attempt to integrate people of different socio-economic background demonstrates that the state made a deliberate decision to mask the inequalities of its population — not just at the scale of the towns and neighbourhoods, but also at a more intimate scale of the housing blocks.

Blending into the neighbourhood is clearly a priority as the government had also introduced upgrading works to HDB flats and neighbourhoods to ensure that older areas are maintained to match their newer neighbours. According to the former National Development Minister S Dhanabalan, the government saw the upgrading of older public housing estates as another means of wealth distribution. As upgrading projects were mostly subsidised, what flat “owners” paid was nowhere near the actual full cost of the upgrading works. Upgraded neighbourhoods and flats made it more difficult to differentiate between the older flats and the newer flats. This prevents the value of flats from depreciating and serves as a method of wealth distribution, evening out any social class differences within the category of “homeowners”.

Designing Equality for the Living

The Housing and Development Board (HDB) has periodically changed the layout of their flats in the last 60 years and the most drastic changes took place over the last 20 years. In the 1960s, the newly established HDB prioritised constructing as many flats as fast as possible for residents who were living in areas recently ravaged by the Bukit Ho Swee fire of 1961 and others who were living in cramped city slums. It was therefore crucial for HDB to produce as many flats in the shortest possible time. Prefabrication of the flats allowed for parts of the structure to be constructed offsite and assembled quickly onsite. In 1983, HDB launched its first

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84 Liu Thai Ker was the former CEO of HDB (1979 – 1989) before becoming CEO and Chief Planner at the Urban Redevelopment Authority, Singapore (1989 – 1992).
87 The Bukit Ho Swee Fire was a conflagration that broke out in the squatter settlement in Bukit Ho Swee, Singapore on 25th May 1961. The fire claimed 4 casualties and injured another 54 people. The fire also destroyed 2,800 houses, leaving 16,000 people homeless. The cause of the fire was never established. More information can be found here: “Bukit Ho Swee Fire Occurs, 25th May 1961”, HistorySG (accessed April 11, 2019); available from http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/history/events/a67e0450-c429-49b2-b87c-fb1a26105f4b.
prefabricated flats in the town of Tampines. According to The Sunday Times, residents were excited about the 990 new flats in nine blocks that took merely 15 months to complete. Initially, residents questioned the structural integrity of the flats as it was constructed in such a short period but the launch of the flats, which included a viewing for prospective owners, assured them of the safety of the buildings. They were mostly impressed by the finishing of the flooring, the design of the sliding glass windows, and the sit-down toilets. The potential residents interviewed for the article were optimistic about the “upgrade” in facilities and amenities compared to the existing conditions that most were living in.

The design of the prefabricated blocks also meant that all the flats were provided with the same “ready-to-move-in” design features — the same toilets, the same floors and more importantly, the same windows. The blocks were designed to be utilitarian, and they had simple facades with rows of windows and an outer layer of exposed corridors. From the outside, it was difficult to distinguish where each flat ended and where their neighbour’s flat began. Although this design was a result of the need to produce flats as quickly as possible through prefabrication, it became a means of concealing any inequalities between neighbours. The monolithic form (refer to image 2.5) also became an imperative design solution when HDB introduced the policy of including the mix of different unit sizes in a single block. It was impossible to tell which windows corresponded to the smaller flats and which were the larger flats from the outside.

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88 Mathew Yap and Ng Weng Hoong, “Pre-Fabulous!” The Sunday Times, August 21, 1983.
89 The obsession with uniformity in the exterior architecture of the flats can be seen in other situations. For example, the private high-rise building complex named Golden Mile Complex is a strata-titled mixed-use development of shops, offices and residences. Completed in 1973, the building has a landmark appearance of stepped terraces that was designed to enhance natural ventilation and light. The building was inspired by high-density Japanese metabolism style and had won several architectural accolades in its time. In 2006, the then Nominated Member of Parliament Ivan Png was recorded to have called the building a ‘vertical slum’. He was criticising the way many of the residents added zinc sheets and patch boards to create personal spaces in their balconies (refer to image 2.6). Technically, these ad-hoc spaces were created by residents were in their private property for their own use. Png referred to the non-uniformed façade of terraces balconies to be an ‘eyesore’. This reaction by a representative of the state shows the obsession with keeping spaces uniformed and the importance the state places on the nation’s exterior image, sometimes without regard if the non-uniformed and organic spaces serve the residents well. From this, we see equality extended beyond creating a horizontal class system. In this situation, the ideology of equality is expanded to include uniformity, monotony, and hygiene.

An example of the monolithic facade designs of the HDB flats. This photograph was taken of a block of slab-block flats in Tampines, which was likely built in the early 1980s.

These terraced balconies are a special design feature of Golden Mile Complex. Over the years, residents have added to the architecture by personalising their balconies with boards, making them appear non-uniformed. (Image taken by Jonathan Lin via Flickr)

According to Foucault, discipline requires enclosure — a protected place of disciplinary monotony. In Discipline and Punish, disciplinary space is divided into sections to distribute people and eliminate collective dispositions. Foucault uses the factory as an example where the factory grounds are enclosed and people are

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assigned to and held in places where management can supervise and workers can be efficient in a confined and structured space. Similarly, the design of the HDB blocks creates order and discipline. The resettlement of Singaporeans from the villages to the HDB flats was, in a way, a redistribution of people across a more structured environment than the villages. Before the advent of the HDB, the villages were organic spaces where everyone knew everyone and although resettling the people from the villages to HDB estates solved the most fundamental problem of urban renewal and slum clearance, it was not without initial resistance. In terms of the comfort of the people, the vernacular and unplanned villages was a stark contrast to the new neighbourhoods that were planned and architecturally designed with overwhelming conformity. The buildings and the units themselves are evenly distributed and the exterior walls of the apartment buildings look uniformed — a reflection of the implicit basic form of construction and a modernist European style. In a more sinister sense, the HDB flats were primarily a way for the state to order and organise its new citizens post-independence. The architecture of the flats serves as a system for arranging its citizens and locating each of them in their designated place, with each family nucleus assigned a corresponding unit number.

Foucault also explains that a space of discipline consists of functional sites which are utilitarian and monotonous. This is needed for a systematic space that is productive, similar to the spatial arrangement of production machinery. Like a factory, the HDB is designed to be a productive and efficient machine. Since the 1960s, the priorities of HDB have changed from building cost-effective housing for people who were living in poor conditions to building homes for 90% of the population. By tracing the evolution of the plan of the flat, one can see the changes in HDB’s priorities, which is also a reflection of the state’s attitude towards public housing and social stratification. There are seven different HDB flat typologies ranging from a 1-room flat to a 5-room flat, studio apartments, and the largest of all are the “executive flats”. Of the seven typologies, the 3-room and 4-room flats are the most common flats. For the sake of the comparison, the most common of the 3-bedroom typologies are the most effective in tracing the evolution of the interior of the flats (Appendix 2.1 – 2.5). Currently, as of 2018, there are 240,372 3-room flats of the 1,148,936 flats in 10,645 HDB flat blocks in Singapore. The 3-room HDB flat is the average-sized flat that most new homeowners would move into. By taking a sample of HDB floor plans of the flats built from 1965 to 2018 (refer to Image 2.7), I will analyse how the plan of the flats has evolved as the priorities of HDB shift and how these changes have closed the gap between the socio-economic classes.

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94 Data provided by the HDB Annual Report 2019.
95 3-room HDB flats have two bedrooms and a living room, which make up the three rooms.
At first glance, the flats may look largely similar in layout, that is, until after 1998, when the structural design of HDB blocks changed completely from a slab block to a point block structure. This change altered not just the layouts of the flat but also how people moved between the flats and within the flats. The initial design of the flats during the time of Singapore’s independence was drawn up based on the need to create housing that was quick and economical to build, and as a result, this early design iteration had to be simple. The early long slab-block design was designed with a walkway that linked all the dwelling units on one side, and was kept open on the other side. The slab-block design was simple in construction with many components prefabricated and installed quickly to house as many Singaporeans as quickly as possible. The slab block design was also designed to suit Singapore’s climate. This traditional slab block design that had an access balcony with units only on one side, had a narrow form with a width of usually less than 14 metres. This allowed for natural ventilation to flow through the flat, which is crucial for the tropical climate. A fully interiorised walkway would have created a space without sunlight and ventilation and would have made it more undesirable, while the one-side loaded walkway meant that it would be bright and naturally ventilated (refer to Image 2.8). Another possibility the

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96 HDB floor plans are based on the sales brochures archived by Teoalida. See “HDB history and floor plan evolution 1930s – 2020,” The World of Teoalida, accessed November 20, 2017, https://www.teoalida.com/. Special thanks to Teo for her assistance and for sharing her collection generously.


98 Wong and Yeh, eds., Housing a Nation, 71–75.
slab block was preferred was that the exposed walkway that ran the length of the slab block could discourage deviant crimes and activities from taking place in the public walkways.

This slab block design was prefabricated and efficient to build, limiting the flats to a very simple repetitive design that generally mirrored each other — each flat had a narrow width of about 6 metres and a length of about 12 metres, which meant that building parts could be prefabricated somewhere else and assembled onsite. When we compare the 3-room flats built between 1965 and 1998, the interior area of the different flat designs marginally changes between 60 to 75 square metres, but at first glance, the general layout does not seem to differ much either. The minor changes and improvements made to the layout of the flats appear to improve sanitation facilities by including an additional bathroom, and improved privacy between members of the households by changing the orientation of the bedroom doors so that they do not open directly into the common spaces of the living room. The evolution of the flats inched towards the ideals of private housing. The changes in the layout of the flat from 1965 to 1998, although small, shows how the HDB designs pivoted to accommodate the new aspirations of Singaporeans. It is worth noting, however, that the most significant changes came only with the flats built after 1998.
Image 2.8
Comparing the location of the window openings for the slab block and point block flats.\footnote{HDB floor plans are based on sales brochures archived by Teoalida, “HDB history and floor plan evolution 1930s – 2020,” https://www.teoalida.com/} For the slab block flats, the windows only open out to the access balcony or to the back of the flat. This strategic placement of windows on the front and the back of the flat encourages cross ventilation. For the point block flat, the windows only open to the exterior, giving the inhabitants more privacy.

The departure of the slab-block design after 1998 is a reflection of the changing priorities of the HDB, as well as the economic progress of the nation—after the 1990s, the concern was no longer about building homes to house the urban poor and those affected by the cramped urban conditions and poor sanitation, and instead, the shift was a result of a delayed reaction to the housing market and demand. In order to continue providing housing for the masses (in this case, for about 90% of the population), HDB needed to satisfy the needs of a wider demographic of socio-economic classes as well, and not just those from the lower classes. In this case, a new market is generated—one for those who cannot afford the higher costs of private housing but belong to a middle-income group. This new bracket class primarily consists of educated Singaporeans and especially young adults who have not accumulated enough wealth for a privately-owned apartment. In this case, HDB’s focus and intention is then shifted to creating homes for these young families by bridging the design gap between a privately-owned condominium and a HDB flat. This is a segment of the population of increasingly affluent middle class who subscribe to the overarching developmental ideology of the state by fulfilling their role as productive labour in the global economy.

These newer HDB projects represent the state’s attempt to graduate its largely homogenous public housing landscape. This was a marked transformation for HDB and it meant redesigning the blocks to provide more
privacy and exclusivity for the residents. The newly designed HDB flats provided for the demand for this bracket class, giving the state a central role in ensuring that its productive citizens stay relevant and get their demands met in ways that would commensurate their aspirations for private living. With the graduated housing options, public housing now provides Singapore citizens the potential for social mobility and reflects the state’s ability to maintain the covenant with its citizens in changing socioeconomic circumstances.100

The new HDB flats built between 2012 and 2018 had point block plans that mimicked the floor plans of generic middle-of-the-range private condominiums (as seen in a sample floor plan of a private condominium project located in the East of Singapore that was completed in 1975), and both have interior layouts that are so similar that they may not be distinguishable at first glance (refer to Image 2.9). The point-block design is vastly different from its slab-block predecessor in that it does not have the same long and slender floor plan with an access corridor with flats on one side. Instead, the point blocks were more complex in form, with each floor having only four to six units as opposed to twelve or more units. This structural design change of HDB flats meant a significant shift away from the image of HDB flats as the most basic form of housing; it also closed the gap between the income groups.

A significant difference between the privately-owned condominiums and the HDB flats is the issue of privacy. Typically, private condominiums provide a higher level of privacy than the design of HDB flats. Looking at the original slab-block flats again, their visually open access balconies meant that the walkways enabled surveillance—the visual connectivity between the block’s exterior and the walkway, as well as the visual connectivity between the walkway and the interiors of the flat, provided little privacy between the walkway and block’s exterior, and between the walkway and the immediate interiors of the flats. The windows in the living room and its adjacent room open into the common walkway and the narrow access corridor that is typically less than 2 metres wide, meaning that any passer-by on these public circulation spaces would have direct visual access into the rooms of the flat, unless curtains or blinds were used to screen out any voyeuristic glances—however, this would be counterproductive to the layout design, which was meant to encourage cross-ventilation within the interior of the flat when the windows are opened. The windows are important devices for keeping the interiors of the flats cool, yet they also intrude on the privacy of the residents—for example, the location of the windows that looked out (and into) the access corridor usually compromised the privacy of the bedrooms. This does not limit the inconveniences to being visually intruded, but the sounds of people passing through the access corridor were usually also another disadvantage to the occupant of the bedroom.

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The improved HDB flats built between 2012 and 2018 has a different building structure and layout that omit windows that open into a corridor—this is to prevent human traffic along the corridor from peering into the flats (Image 2.8 shows the location of the windows on the plan). This arrangement clearly defines the inside and the outside spaces, making the different areas harder to visually penetrate. The flats benefit from privacy, as the lift lobbies now serve a smaller number of units (as compared to the slab blocks) (see image 2.10)—this reduces activities along the common spaces, and therefore, also reduces occasions where residents are casually loitering outside their flats and opportunities for unplanned encounters between neighbours. Compare this to the iconic slab-block HDB flats built before 1998 that were designed for visual openness, where residents might see activities happening along the corridors of an adjacent block even if they were inside their flats—there was no place to hide and prying eyes serve as deterrence for any unruly behaviour. While the newer units built after 1998 benefit from minimised activities along the common corridor spaces outside their flats, the intrinsic mechanism for self-policing is reduced in comparison.

The layout of the entire floor plan of the point block flats usually only accommodates about four to six units per floor. The access balconies or corridors act as bridges to connect the units to the lift lobby without abutting the walls of the flats. This design allows residents of two to four units to share a common access corridor, but it limits any chanced interactions between other residents—whereas in previous designs of the slab-block flats, the access corridors were shared across more units, and walking from corner unit to the lift lobby (or staircase lobby), one would have to walk past at least a few of the neighbours’ front doors. By referring to the floor plan of the entire floor and the vertical circulation lobbies, we can see better how each flat relate to each other (see Image 2.9).

101 HDB floor plans are based on sales brochures archived by Teoidalida, “HDB history and floor plan evolution 1930s – 2020,” https://www.teoidalida.com/.
Image 2.10). The point-block flats allow each unit to exist separately from at least most of the other units on the same floor, most of whom, do not share a dividing wall of more than 5 metres in length with their immediate neighbour, and sometimes not at all. From the plan, we can see how the point-block structure allows for more variation in the form and interior layout of the individual flats as compared to the slab-block structure, which typically only had one form or layout that was then mirrored for the neighbour. This means that each unit in a point block is seen more independently from the others, giving it a sense of exclusivity and autonomy.

Needless to say, the slab-block design was a much more effective design in terms of space efficiency and construction cost. The access walkways in the point-block design serve fewer residents and have to be structurally loaded to cantilever between the central lift lobby core and the units, such that there are voids between the units, as illustrated in the plan. This sort of addition might have seemed excessive during the period when Singapore was newly independent, and when the HDB was aiming to house as many families efficiently and effectively in a sanitary environment. Since exclusivity and aesthetic were the main differences between public housing and private housing buildings, the state is providing for the demand of the sandwich class by providing a similar kind of exclusivity and aesthetic in the newer public housing flats. The change in the building structure and layouts of HDB flats demonstrates the state’s continuing ability and willingness to meet the aspirations of its citizens.
This floor plan shows only six units on a single floor.\textsuperscript{102} The access balcony is no longer linear but now functions as a bridge to connect the flats to the Lift Lobby. The new point block plan also means that each flat has a private space outside the entrance of the flat, and this space is completely exclusive to the user of the flat or usually shared with only one other neighbour.

For the slab-block flats, the immediate neighbour is a mirror image of the flat next door and they are separated by a wall between the flat's kitchen and their neighbour's kitchen, and also separated by a wall between the bedrooms and their neighbour's bedroom. The intimate spaces of the bedrooms are, in most cases, only separated by a non-structural wall—as in the case of the flats built in 1965–1970, 1982–1989, and 1984–1998—that compromises the privacy of the inhabitants of both bedrooms. If we refer to the floor plan of the point-block flats as a whole, the newer flats do not have shared bedroom walls, but residents share a short wall of the Living/Dining area with their neighbours instead—this means that each flat is almost completely isolated from the other neighbours, providing each of the units with more privacy. The two flats on the right of the floor plan do not share any walls with other flats and would be completely isolated—this reduces any noise travelling between the units, making it feel like a standalone apartment or home, which is somewhat similar to the design of a private condominium flat. The privacy extends out to the immediate space outside the main door of the flats.

Typically, with the slab-block flats, the entryway of the flat directly opens out into the access balcony. Despite this, many residents inhabit the space outside the flat's entryway and out along the access corridor by lining it with potted plants and furniture (refer to Image 2.11). The space that is just outside of the HDB flat is, by law,

\textsuperscript{102} HDB floor plans are based on sales brochures archived by Teoalida, “HDB history and floor plan evolution 1930s – 2020,” https://www.teoalida.com/.
not the property of the flat owner, and not even belonging to the same lease, but under the ownership and maintenance of HDB. However, many residents continue to inhabit that space and use it to house shoe cabinets and benches. As the density of the blocks is high and the blocks are built close together, the access balcony is usually visible but theft is not common along these walkways, even when residents leave personal belongings in the walkway. This is perhaps also a testament to how the self-policing mechanism is effective.

Each entryway of the flats in the new point-block structure is separate or shared only with one other neighbour. This creates a private corner that is also inhabited by the owners but the design of the corner means that the entryway becomes a private space and part of the threshold, keeping the entryway more private from other neighbours or people from other blocks. This provides the privacy that was so desired by the citizens belonging to the sandwich class who are increasingly affluent.

Image 2.11
The access balconies of the slab blocks are long, narrow, and open on one side. From this photograph, the doors of the flats and the windows of the flats open out into the access balcony, which makes it easy to look out from within the flat and onto the walkway; and from the walkway, it is easy to look into the flats. It is common for residents to leave their personal items along the access balcony, such as shoe racks, bicycles, and smaller pieces of furniture. In this photograph, the resident of the flat has placed a Taoist family altar facing the front door of the flat. (Image from https://thesmartlocal.com/read/hdb-corridor-transformations/)

The long floor plan of the slab-block flats limited the location of the windows to only the two ends of the flat—one set of windows along the wall that faces the access balcony, and the other set along the back of the flat. The illustration of the slab-block flats (image 2.8) shows that the average length of the windows that is directly exposed to the exterior was limited to about 6 metres (which is the width of the flat itself). The set of windows
along this wall faced the outside, while the windows along the other side of the flat opened up to the access balcony and did not benefit from direct exterior views. The point-block flats, on the other hand, has units with more than one set of windows that face the exterior, and none that open out into the access balcony.

Based on the illustrations, the newer flats have about 19.3 metres of exposed wall to the exterior spanning two sides. We can compare this to the slab-block flats that have a shorter 12-metre exterior wall, of which only half opens to the access balcony. The older slab-block plans also meant that less sunlight entered the bedroom adjacent to the access balcony, and this was automatically considered as the “Bedroom” as opposed to the “Main Bedroom”, even though both bedrooms on plan were similar in size and only differentiated by how much more sunlight a room gets and whether it had windows that opened out to the main facade of the building (refer to Image 2.8). The larger windows in the main bedroom is the result of the flat’s design attempting to give more privacy to each flat, but as we will see in Part 4 of the thesis, the inclusion of additional windows has altered the rituals of the family in the home.

Another result of having windows on opposite sides of the slab-block units was that cross ventilation was possible. In the earlier years of its conception, the HDB flats had to be designed with passive cooling systems for the tropical heat. The cross ventilation encouraged by the windows in the front and back of the flat allowed for continuous airflow through the spaces from the living room to the kitchen. On the other hand, the new point-block flats are largely equipped with air conditioning (indicated by the air condition ledge that is included for each flat) as a modern-day amenity that most Singaporeans have been accustomed to—what was once considered a luxury is becoming more ubiquitous with housing, even for the masses. This meant that the need for passive cooling systems for cross ventilation was no longer a necessity but a bonus. For the more affluent families, air-conditioned apartments have been a staple. The addition of the air-condition ledge is another evidence of the state’s ability to make adjustments to provide and subsidise housing products for the more affluent class.

As discussed in Part 1 of the thesis, Western sanitation science was brought from the municipal authorities when Singapore was under colonial rule. Similarly, improving sanitation was an important ambition of the HDB since its inception. In this case, we can see how the bathrooms and other amenities have evolved. At the start of 1965, 2-bedroom HDB flats were all equipped with only one bathroom, with a toilet that covered only 2 square metres in a small cubicle. In all the drawings, the shower is never clearly defined or illustrated, and it can be assumed that no shower was built in or included in the construction when the buyers bought the flat, but they were mostly installed by the owners only after. The toilet and bathroom were then installed in two separate and enclosed rooms from 1966 to the late-1970s, dedicating more space and importance to sanitation. The separation of the toilet and the shower is reminiscent of council housing that was built in London in the 1940s, where shared bathrooms were separated from the toilet to allow the inhabitants to use one of the facilities while the other was being occupied (refer to Image 2.7).
The drawing shows that the toilet built in HDB flats during this period were the traditional squatting toilets rather than the then-Western-influenced seated water closet. This was later upgraded to the seated toilet from 1982 onwards. The move towards the western-influenced ideas of sanitation is a reflection of how affluent citizens look towards western technologies and science; it also shows a more well-travelled and worldly affluent population that is possibly more receptive to foreign ideas. The bathroom and toilet are shared between the inhabitants in the same flat and was always accessed through the kitchen, which enabled all the waterproofing and sanitary pipe works to be located together at the back of the flats for easier construction and maintenance works. All the flats also had their bathrooms and toilets located on one side of the building and stacked directly above one another. From 1982 onwards, flats are constructed with two bathrooms and toilets but with the shower area and toilet in the same bathroom—one is still accessed through the kitchen and the other is attached to the “Main Bedroom”. Adding the En-suite marked the first time that hierarchy between the two bedrooms was introduced, with one bedroom denoted in the plan as “Main Bedroom” for the owners (assuming the newly married couple) and the other room denoted simply as “Bedroom” for secondary use (for the young children or as a study). Sanitation did not evolve much between 1982 and 1998, except for the orientation of the bathrooms that allowed the newer flats to have the bathrooms flushed to the main exterior wall of the building, resulting in a more regular plan.

The new point block plans from 2012 show an even larger area dedicated to sanitation, as well as more space and importance for both bathrooms. In addition to the larger footprints that the bathrooms occupied, the secondary bathroom access is relocated from the kitchen and to the hallway adjacent to the two bedrooms. The bathrooms are still located close to the kitchen for ease and efficiency of construction, but the location of the access to the second bathroom has created a change in the circulation of the flat. Increasing the levels of privacy also plays a major part in making HDB flats appear more like privately-owned condominiums. Flats built between 2012 and 2018 tended to imitate the circulation plan of condominiums, with several features in the public housing flat mimicking condominium layouts, like the inclusion of hallways outside of the bedrooms and the spatial ordering, as well as how much of the space is dedicated to a specific function. The assignment of the segments of space to specific functions shows the shifting attitudes and priorities of Singaporeans.

Since 1998, more value has been placed on privacy. The addition of the hallways also helps delineate space and widen the distance between the entrances of the bedrooms. If one compares the plans of the flats built between 1984 and 1998 with that of the plans of the flats built before, the bedrooms are still located next to each other, sharing one wall that separates them. The bedrooms also have their access doors located just next to each other, but from 1984 onwards, the doors are separated with an entryway so that the doors face each other instead of being adjacent, which creates more distance between rooms and more privacy from the living room. This addition of the small entryway in the units built between 1984 and 1998 can be seen as the first precedence to the hallways that were later elongated in the flats built between 2012 and 2018 to form the circulation to the
bedrooms and bathroom. The incorporation of the hallways gave a clearer definition of the hierarchy of spaces—the Living/Dining area is less private and the bedrooms are located further in the back of the flat for more privacy. Since the kitchen is increasingly being regarded as an entertainment space or shared space of the Living/Dining area, the location of the kitchen has also changed from the back of the home to the front of the home, with its access located just next to the entrance of the flat. All in all, the traditional separation of private and public areas in the home has clearly been altered.

Since the 1990s, 7,883 older flats built in the 1960s and 1970s have been gradually demolished and cleared to make way for newer and taller HDB blocks that further intensify the use of the ground with a high quantity of units. The Selective En-Bloc Redevelopment Scheme (SERS) was introduced in 1995. Under the scheme, several 4- to 12-storey housing blocks located near the city were selected to be demolished and redeveloped into new 30- to 40-storey blocks. The few selected blocks eligible for SERS were all located near the city centre, and this was a deliberate move to increase the live-in population in the city and develop the older flats. The old slab blocks were replaced with the new point blocks, renewing the image of Singapore’s middle-class society with shiny new tall towers. In addition to the SERS programme, the HDB created other new schemes and programmes to upgrade the flats that were built between the 1960s and 1980s. 320,000 flats built before 1986 are currently undergoing an upgrading programme to have new bathrooms installed in older flats, lifts added to older slab blocks, and maintenance works carried out on the exteriors of the buildings. This constant renewing and upgrading by HDB is a measure to ensure that a standard is maintained, old flats remain looking new, and all neighbourhoods maintain the same exacting homogenous standards.

By examining the plans of a sample of HDB flats built between 1965–2018, we can see how the flats have always evolved and their designs improved, but also how the utilitarian HDB flats have evolved to appear more akin to the private condominiums. In 2005, HDB test various schemes to allow the private sector to be more involved in the design, building, and sale of the flats. These schemes produced varied designs of HDB flats—designed and built by private developers—that remained affordable that were. Typically, HDB would work with a government-owned architecture office and builder to design and manage the HDB projects. The leap from the typical slab-block flats to point block flats reflects the government’s political direction of slowly decreasing government involvement and including the private sector in the process. The blurring line between the public and private sector is also seen as an initiative to counter social stratification.

Despite the size of the flats not increasing in size, the design of the newer flats reflects a shift in priorities and aspirations as the population is becoming more affluent. The priorities of the HDB and the population have

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103 Chua, Liberalism Disavowed, 88–89.
104 The Design, Build and Sell Scheme (DBSS) was established in 2005 and was designed to bridge the gap between private and public housing. Even though the flats built under the DBSS were meant for public housing, they were developed by private developers.
shifted from cost-saving to providing more privacy to residents—privacy between neighbours as well as privacy amongst inhabitants within the same unit. By fashioning the latest HDB flat design after private condominiums, the HDB flat has lent itself to becoming an apparatus to veil the inequalities of the income disparity between the owners of subsidised public housing and private housing. On June 6, 2019, it was reported in the local newspaper that new HDB flats would be fitted with sleeker fittings, with HDB absorbing the additional costs of these fittings (refer to image 2.12). The article mentioned new fittings such as scratch resistant timber doors and larger floor tiles to improve “visual continuity”. The article also mentioned how HDB is constantly improving their designs toward greater resemblance with private condominiums.

Image 2.12

*The Straits Times, 6 June 2019 (Singapore Local Newspaper)* reporting that HDB will be providing condominium-like fittings for new flats and absorbing the additional costs for these fittings.

The trend of creating an image of a private condominium in the HDB flats reflects not only the state’s aspirations but also how the state and the personal aspirations of Singaporeans have merged. Previously, the thesis discussed how the exterior and urban planning created the illusion of an inseparable housing estate mixed with private condominium estates and HDB public housing flats that all appeared homogenous. In this case, the interior layouts and even the size of the tiles have also been modified, affecting the buyers and the residents of these flats, showing how lessening the gap between the private and public homeowners is not just about fulfilling the idea of an exterior image but to also affect the use of their homes and their everyday lives.
the home. The show flats in HDB also serve to showcase Singapore’s progress and high housing standards to foreign visitors. It shows a glimpse of the “middle income” housing that it claims a majority of 90 per cent of its population resides in, even though this might not necessarily be true. However, the idealistic show flats devoid of real inhabitants do not accurately reflect the actual circumstances of every family.

The reason for which there seems to be no homeless people in Singapore is because the state ensures that all people in need are given a one-room rental flat at below the market rate. For the 10% of the remaining Singaporeans who do not own flats, many are housed in the HDB rental flats. At the same time, homeless citizens are provided with a rental flat, are kept away from the eyes of the public in order to keep up the impression that poverty in Singapore does not exist. According to Liu Thai Ker, who was the HDB chief architect and its chief executive officer between 1979 and 1989, the government has even gone to the extent of subsidising not just the land cost of the HDB flats but also the construction cost. According to him, the cost of renting a one-room flat in 2008 was the same as it was in 1960 – which is about SGD40 a month (or GBP 22.90) – what this meant to him was that the government is totally committed to making sure that everybody has the right to shelter. The incentive of providing homes for the homeless for the state is two-fold, other than ensuring that everybody has the basic right to shelter, housing the homeless also helps to create the narrative about Singapore’s progressive historical trajectory and keep up the image of its high standings in global wealth rankings. These HDB rental flats are generally situated within regular neighbourhoods rather than located in a segregated separate neighbourhood. According to Teo Yeo Yenn, to a person just passing by, it is not obvious which are the rental flats but for the residents who live in the general area, they are aware which blocks are the rental blocks. Teo further describes that there is tension between the residents of owner-occupied blocks and the rental blocks, particularly when it comes to the use of common spaces like the neighbourhood playgrounds and basketball courts. She describes in her book how some parents of children living in owner-occupied blocks do not allow their children to use the playgrounds and interact with the children from families living in the rental blocks. Compared to the tension between private condominium apartment owners and public housing flat owners, the tension is more evident between residents who live in rental public housing (non-homeowners) and owners of public housing flats (considered homeowners) because of the close proximity between them and the sharing of public spaces and common facilities. This uneven discrimination could be attributed to the broad two-class social structure.

HDB flats are designed to conceal each family’s financial situation. The residents’ classes are only revealed and distinguishable within the singular dwelling, where each family lives according to its own financial circumstances and the true financial circumstances of the household is reflected. In Teo’s book, *This is What*
Inequality Looks Like, she includes photographs of the interiors of one-bedroom HDB rental flats.\(^\text{109}\) Although the exterior of the flats is nearly identical to any other flats, the interiors of the rental one-bedroom flats and the common corridors are filled with items that differ from regular HDB flats. According to the photographs published online by an anonymous blogger, the small spaces in the one-bedroom rental flats in Chinatown are typically cramped with a mix of old and used furniture, as seen in the photos taken from the entrance of the units and peering into the privacy of the homes.\(^\text{110}\) Inside one of the flats photographed (images 2.13 and 2.14), the walls were left unadorned except for a single Chinese character “福” (fu), which means “fortune”. This type of wall decoration is thought to bring good luck and prosperity to the household, especially when hung up for the Lunar New Year—an aspirational desire to be blessed with better fortune. In this particular flat, the tenant leaned the mattress against the wall to make more room when it was not in use, while in another flat, a single calendar is hung above the side of the bed, and although this unit has a bed frame, there is no mattress. Due to the lack of bedrooms, the living rooms double up as sleeping areas. Behind the closed doors or gates of the flats, the sparsely furnished interiors reflect the realities of the lower income household that occupies the flat. For other neighbours, some of the belongings spill into the corridors because of the lack of space (refer to image 2.15).

Although the exterior of the rental blocks is maintained regularly as well, the dirtier and stuffier interior corridors of the double-loaded cross-section of the block of rental flats show a markable difference from the corridors of regular-scheme HDB blocks, particularly the newer flats. Another photograph shows scribbling in blue marker on the wall that says “OSPS” (refer to image 2.16), short for “owe money, pay money”, which was most likely made by an illegal debt collector, usually written as a threat to a specific resident who is unable to repay their debts. Admittedly, I had made my own trip to view the flats, but lacked the courage to use my phone to take photographs as I felt apprehensive and unsafe. On hindsight, my concerns were mostly likely based on my own negative perceptions of low-income housing blocks.

\(^{109}\) Teo, This is What Inequality Looks Like, 58.
\(^{110}\) Image from https://timesofmylife.wordpress.com/2007/08/24/1-room-flat/. I was compelled by this blog because the writer, having lived in a one-bedroom rental flat in the formative years of her life, documents and recalls her own lived experiences in these flats.
One-room rental HDB flats are built for lower-income households. As there are no bedrooms, living rooms double up as bedrooms and other uses. (Image from https://timesofmylife.wordpress.com/2007/08/24/1-room-flat/)

Another one-room rental HDB flat in Chinatown with a tenant sleeping on a bed frame with no mattress. (Image from https://timesofmylife.wordpress.com/2007/08/24/1-room-flat/)
Belongings of rental flat tenants, stored outside along the common corridor. (Image from https://timesofmylife.wordpress.com/2007/08/24/1-room-flat/)

Vandalism on the walls near a stairwell, made by an illegal debt collector. (Image from https://timesofmylife.wordpress.com/2007/08/24/1-room-flat/)
Designing Equality for the Dead

With the disappearance of the burial grounds, the common areas in the public columbarium are used for ancestral offerings. This is more visible in the Chinese tradition where a ritual is performed during the annual Qing Ming Festival. Qing Ming, also known as the “Tomb-Sweeping Day”, falls on the first day of the fifth solar term on the Chinese Lunar Calendar, or the 15th day of the Spring Equinox. Some Chinese families religiously visit the graves of their ancestors during Qing Ming to pray and make offerings in the form of food, joss sticks, and joss paper. The offerings are usually placed on the ancestral graves as a mark of respect. As gravestones were typically large, with the horizontal surface of the grave also covered in stone, this surface is used as an altar to place the offerings (refer to image 2.17). This horizontal surface is then used as a makeshift dining table where the food offerings are portioned for sharing amongst family members.

Since the 1998 Burial Policy and with the columbaria replacing the traditional burial grounds, the horizontal surface of the grave has disappeared and surfaces for offerings has been replaced by communal tables in the columbarium. These communal tables are typically located at the end of a row of niches and shared by all the families who visit the niches near the tables. Traditionally, the type of food offerings and joss paper offerings were a reflection of the wealth and status of the family, and very elaborate meals such as a whole roasted suckling pig are presented on the altar. The wealthier the family, the larger the offerings placed at the grave. However, with the shift to communal tables inside the public columbaria, and the lack of a dedicated surface for each family to make offerings, the impetus to make elaborate offerings has diminished. This, in itself, is a slow erosion of tradition where the architecture and design of the columbaria does not allow for the rituals of Qing Ming to be practised meaningfully. The architecture of the columbaria is similar to the microcosm of the HDB flats in that space for activities that were previously within the private realm of the home or the grave has been removed and replaced by a shared space. While large gatherings used to be held in homes, the small interior spaces of the HDB flats now cannot accommodate for these functions—similarly, the public columbaria, with their niches and communal tables, have eliminated the important horizontal surfaces for altars, offerings, and traditional rituals.

The removal of the gravestone altar reflects the mutability of traditions that has taken place and how the spaces of the home and the sacred space of the burial ground are being encroached upon, but the removal of the grave that serves as an altar has also muted the inequalities of wealth between families who could afford lavish offerings and those who could not. The architecture of the columbaria themselves, as well as the ordering of the niches, is symbolic of the myth of equality that the state has been attempting to project and perpetuate. The individual niches have a vertical stone surface of no more than a single square foot in area, which leaves no room for individual expression. The monotonous and monochromatic surfaces of the niches are analogous to

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112 Moving House, directed by Tan Pin Pin (Objectif Films, 2001).
the expressionless exterior facades of the HDB flats, in that both structures mask the inequalities of the inhabitants inside, living or dead (refer to image 2.18).

Image 2.17
A typical Chinese gravestone with an altar in Bukit Brown Cemetery, with food offering left behind that has been disturbed by wild animals. (A film still from Moving House by Tan Pin Pin).

Image 2.18
On the left is an image taken from a HDB exterior walkway, and on the right, an image of the Mandai Columbarium, taken from its interior walkway. When placed side by side, the two spaces share an uncanny resemblance in terms of design and the multitude of units.113 (Image left: by Tom White. Image right: author’s own)

113 This resemblance of the HDB flats and the columbarium niches was also pointed out by Koh when he observed the footage from Moving House, directed by Tan Pin Pin (Objectif Films, 2001). Please see Kenneth Qibao Koh, “Unearthed: Surveys of “Ground” in Singapore’s Chinese Burial Grounds,” in Home + Bound: Narratives of Domesticity in Singapore and Beyond, eds. Lilian Chee and Melany Sun-Min Park (Singapore: Centre for Advanced Studies in Architecture, 2013.
Some Are More Equal Than Others

Although the definition of class might be archaic, it can inform us about societal aspirations and behaviours. With 90% of the population as homeowners (whether they are true property-owners or not is debatable), the adoption of the two broad classes for Singapore was able to blur any further class separation by filling the gaps between private homeowners and public homeowners. The process of equalising Singaporeans entails establishing an objective system of housing within which all citizens appear to be equal or to be in similar socioeconomic bands. This large majority of middle-class homeowners have since become the norm. This normality, in turn, has created a way to be “objective” about human beings, while also bridging the fact/value distinction, indicating that what is normal is also acceptable.\(^{114}\) According to Ian Hacking, on the one hand, normal is thought of as what is right or what is status quo, but on the other hand, there is the idea that normal is only average and something to be improved upon. The normal indifferently stands for the typical and the objective average, but it has also become an important ideological tool. Norms exercise powerful influences, and while most of us would like to think of ourselves as independent thinkers, our ideas about our sense of self and desires are heavily shaped by the society to which we belong.\(^{115}\) Because of norms, we assume that qualities and values we consider to be “good” are also universal. According to Agamben, norms also provide veritable behavioural guidelines, as they are linked to the definition of a “competency-duty”, which defines a definite conduct of life.\(^{116}\)

In this case, the myth that the state is perpetuating is the idea of equality, and the norm would refer to the average and the majority; specifically, it is the norm to “own” your home and to subscribe to the working middle class lifestyle—which is the definite conduct of life.\(^{117}\) At the same time, “normal” would indicate existing class, and normality suggests that class origin does not directly and cannot legitimately determine class destiny, making social mobility possible even for the lower classes. It carries the promise of equality, and along with it, the promise of mobility and meritocracy. The two sides to “normal” in Singapore highlight the importance of opportunities in helping Singaporeans, regardless of the class, to live the “Singapore Dream” of upward social class mobility, as well as the need to equalise opportunities to ensure that the disadvantages associated with being in the lower-class spectrum do not obstruct meritocracy.\(^{118}\) The deliberate efforts to design policies and architect homes for the living and the dead, and to blur the distinctions between socioeconomic gaps, means that the majority class of homeowners is a fluid group, making winning the mobility game appear that much easier. The material and tangible blocks of HDB flats have become powerful symbolic monuments to the state’s efficacy in creating housing for its population.\(^{119}\) The overwhelming presence of a multitude of HDB dwelling units in Singapore serves as a constant reminder to the population of

\(^{115}\) Teo, *This is What Inequality Looks Like*, 66.
the ruling government’s success in orchestrating policies and designing ways of living. The extensive public housing programme is, symbolically and ideologically, a powerful indicator of the existing regime’s ability to fulfil its promise to improve the living conditions of the entire nation. The housing programme therefore gives the government a very substantial measure of legitimacy, not just amongst its citizenry, but also to those outside of Singapore.

However, tension does exist between the different social-economic classes. The discrimination is uneven across the spectrum, which can be attributed to the inherent problem of the state-invented broad undifferentiated two-class social structure invented. If we imagine for a moment that there is no two-class social structure and instead consider the Singapore citizenry to have a more complex hierarchical class system based on homeownership, the class structure would be broken down into these levels of ownership: the lowest being non-homeowners, followed by owners of public housing flats, owners of private leasehold condominium flats, then owners of private leasehold landed housing, and finally, sitting at the top of the hierarchy would be the owners of freehold condominium apartments and single-owners of freehold land titles. While non-homeowners are at the bottom of the class system, the others are further classified based on how much autonomy each homeowner has over their home and how much control the state has over determining their home’s future.

Homeownership as an aspiration has divided the social classes based on how much autonomy their home is subjected to, or limited to, from state decisions and planning, and also because in reality, there is no land title that is entirely independent and immune to some form of state intervention, as enabled by the Land Acquisitions Act. By trying to put a blanket class over “homeowners” to include all spectrums of ownership, there is a greater emphasis on the value of homeownership as a virtue and norm, thus automatically classifying non-homeowners as the abnormal and undesirable. And, as a result of over simplification of the broad two-class dichotomy, the disparity between the larger 90 per cent of the population who are the “upper-class” and the 10 per cent of non-homeowners who are the “lower-class” is distinct, and tension between the two classes is significantly higher than that between the spectrum of the “upper-class”. With the state placing so much emphasis on homeownership, discrimination against what is abnormal is an inevitable outcome. The rhetoric and myth that has been perpetuated through policy and design that Singapore’s population is mostly made up of 90 per cent homeowners living the middle-class lifestyle has been well orchestrated on several scales, from policy to design to the ways of life of its citizens. However, in this effort to eradicate the class system and to present Singapore with a largely horizontal class structure, it has resulted in a rift and discrimination against non-homeowners, thereby widening the gap between homeowners and non-homeowners, rather than eradicating the vertical social class structure entirely.

This example has also demonstrated how myths are more powerful than design, and that design at any level, from the urban scale or more intimate architecture of the home, cannot completely integrate a divided class system—especially one that is already created through policy and branding of a population of 90 per cent.
homeowners. It has also demonstrated that this identity of homeowners is a collective one that lends itself to contribute to Singapore’s national identity. The nation-state is so dominant that it seems natural; however, it is important to emphasise that no political arrangements are natural—states are sovereign political structures, whereas nations are unified social groups. The claims of the state are obvious, consisting mainly of practical responsibilities such as housing and urban planning, as well as social security, but the claims to the nation are less clear.

Nationalism appears to be contentious because it has, in some instances, contributed to the greatest crimes in history. According to evolutionary biologists, nationalism is a product of human cognition, and this cognition is dependent on perpetuated myth and built on strong cultural markers of pseudo-kinship, making it easily destabilised. As Singapore is made up of different ethnicities and cultures, it is even more crucial that myths of equality is created to construct a national identity. Unlike fundamental notions of social groups that are hierarchical, creating a deceptively horizontal structure creates a comradeship and hence, an imagined community.

Myths, whether perpetuated by policies intentionally or not, demonstrate how standards create the form of life by deciding on the norms of how individuals and families should function. By also looking at the myth that was created through policy and design, it is evident that prior to the formation of independent Singapore, beliefs were based on tradition and superstition, which is vastly different from the myths that the state has perpetuated, the latter of has basis in practicality and security. The ground, which has scarcity of use, has driven policies to be sanctioned and hence myths of financial equality to be perpetuated—disciplining the nation into following practices and rituals that will lend to the state’s aspirations of social security. The myth of home ownership works in two ways: it gives people a sense of purpose and belonging to a common cause for the common good of society, and on the other hand, it satisfies its liberal position despite how the myth of home ownership, as has been discussed, goes deeper than just a policy that has freely interchanged the traditional meanings of ownership with other degrees and dimensions of ownership. This alternate form of ownership is temporal, but it has far-reaching consequences. The home ownership policies in Singapore comes with myths of equality and national duty. The state, in this case, shows its power through its control of the ground and the home ownership policies are the apparatus by which it does so.

120 Robert Sapolsky, “This is Your Brain on Nationalism: The Biology of Us and Them,” Foreign Affairs (March/April 2019).
121 Robert Sapolsky, “This is Your Brain on Nationalism.”
122 Robert Sapolsky, “This is Your Brain on Nationalism.”
123 Anderson, Imagined Communities, 15.
124 Agamben, The Highest Poverty, 93.
Part 3

The Myth of Racial Harmony

Racial Harmony

The “1964 Singapore Riots” refers to the series of riots that took place between the Chinese and Malays in Singapore and has been recorded to be one of the worst riots in the history of Singapore. It is worth noting that 1964 was a period just before Singapore’s independence from Malaysia and a turbulent time of conflict and tension between the two countries. The riots killed 23 people and severely injured 454 others. There are various accounts of how the riots actually began during a Muslim celebration where the organisers delivered a series of speeches that instigated racial tensions between the Chinese and the Malay population. The recounting of the riots of 1964 has become a focal point in the development of Singapore’s policies, which are centred on the principles of multiracialism and multiculturalism. The local government school syllabus regularly reminds Singaporeans of this incident and the importance of racial tolerance for national security and the stability of the country. Also implicit within the narrative is the message that, if left alone without any state presence and intervention, the harmonious co-existence of multiple ethnicities and races is unattainable. The state has thus taken a stance to manage the population’s differences through the myth of racial harmony, which aims to reconcile a population composed of multiple ethnicities, religions, and linguistic groups. As Laavanya Kathiravelu puts it, this selective importance of the 1964 riots—a single incident that happened in pre-independence Singapore over 50 years ago—created the focal and starting point of constructing the racial policies, and can be seen as an apparatus that enables the state to implement these vert policies.

Returning to Singapore’s national pledge, it has been discussed how a very high priority was given to creating a national identity for Singaporeans that is independent of a person’s origin.

We, the citizens of Singapore,

Pledge us as one united people,

Regardless of race, language of religion

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2 Albert Lau, A Moment of Anguish: Singapore in Malaysia and the politics of disengagement (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2003), 175.
4 One example is the celebration of Racial Harmony Day in schools. It is an annual event that celebrates the success of racial harmony in Singapore. It is observed by schools and students are encouraged to wear traditional costumes of other cultures while they learn about cultural holidays and beliefs, as well as cuisines associated with the Chinese, Malay, Indian and Eurasian communities.
To build a democratic society,
Based on justice and equality
So as to achieve happiness, prosperity and progress for our nation.”7

Like every established nation, myths are maintained to set the nation apart from others, and these myths can be used to define its citizens into a singular, collective identity. Singapore has a more exacting task because at the time of its independence, the majority of the citizens were the first generation to be born in the country and some were still referring to their ancestors’ birthplace as their motherland.8

If the nation refers to the social collective as opposed to territory or even citizenship, multiple racial and cultural differences can pose an obstacle to the production of nationhood.9 This part of the thesis will look at how the conditions of the ground in Singapore, through policies, urban planning and design, have lent themselves to the construction of the myth of racial harmony in order to produce this cohesive national identity.

Classification of the Living

Before the Second World War, Singapore had accumulated a diverse population, including immigrants, colonialists, and the indigenous people, and as Yeoh described, they were all intermeshed within a social matrix. This brought newly constituted power relations of dependence and dominance among groups of people and individuals.10 People arrived in Singapore from various geographical locations, resulting in social groups with vastly different cultural behaviours, traditions, and practices, forming a plural society.11 12

7 This version of the national pledge was largely drafted by the then Minister for Foreign Affairs S. Rajaratnam in February 1966 as a way to promote national loyalty and consciousness among Singaporeans following Singapore’s separation from Malaysia in 1965. Reciting the pledge was supposed to reinforce the belief that Singaporeans could overcome the divisions caused by differences in race, language, and religion. The first daily recitation of the pledge was carried out on August 24, 1966 in all schools. Till today, the national pledge has been recited in every school assembly every day, and during the National Day celebrations. The idea of including a daily pledge as part of a programme to inculcate national consciousness and patriotism was first proposed in October 1965 by William Cheng, Principal Assistant Secretary of Administration of the Ministry of Education. More information can be found at: “National Symbols of Singapore/National Pledge,” National Heritage Board, August, 2019, accessed November 13, 2019, https://www.nhb.gov.sg/what-we-do/our-work/community-engagement/education/resources/national-symbols/national-pledge
8 Kathiravelu, “Rethinking Race,” 161.
10 Brenda S. A. Yeoh, Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003); 1–27.
12 Furnivall had described a “Plural Society” as a colonial city where different sections of the community lived side by side, but separately, within the same political unit. Each group holds by its own religion, its own culture and language, its own ideas and ways. As individuals they meet, but only in the market place buying and selling. Even in the economic sphere there is a division of labour along racial lines. Natives, Chinese, Indians and Europeans all have different functions, and within each major group, subsections have particular occupations. According to Yeoh (2003), pluralistic characteristics are not exclusive to colonial city but it is contended that what distinguishes the colonial city is the degree or scale of this plurality and how it manifests. As cited in Yeoh, Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore, 1–27.
The people who had migrated to Singapore were also divided within a colonial stratification system, with a ruling elite class comprising colonial settlers who inherited authority from the colonial power of the United Kingdom for over 6000 miles abroad. In addition, there was an asymmetry of power between the colonised and the colonisers, which was the most powerful variable influencing both social processes and spatial organisation and planning. This power relationship was reflected in the built environment and the urban landscape that segregated the European colonisers’ areas from the indigenous quarters—each with its own separate location, types of economic activity, and hierarchy of land use. According to the 1822 document for town planning by the East India Company, the town plan was not only drawn up based on racial segregation, with separate areas for the different social groups. Stamford Raffles demarcated the town into plots of “kampungs” for different racial and occupational groups: the European town was allotted the area reserved for government while the Chinese, Bugis, Arabs, Chulias, and Malays were relegated to the peripheral locations in separate “kampungs”. This sort of racial and ethnic segregation would last throughout Singapore’s colonial history, and the colonialists thought that by separating the living spaces of the racial groups, it would alleviate the conflicts between them. Although Singapore had a predominantly Chinese population, McGee explained that it “remained a city planned by Europeans, and inhabited by non-Europeans whose residential distribution continued to reflect the intentions of the European rulers to an amazing degree”. The European rulers had uncontested power and carried out their own plans to construct the city of Singapore without paying any attention to any indigenous cultures or practices.

When Yeoh described her observations on the exercise of power in colonial societies like Singapore, she emphasised how the colonial urban landscape was not just a reflection of the asymmetrical power relations embedded within the colonial society, but also a display of the “terrain of discipline and resistance, a resource drawn upon by different groups and the contended object of everyday discourse in conflicts and negotiations involving both colonialists and colonized groups”. On the ground, there were obvious visual differences between the grand European bungalows and the humbler Asian settlements of Singapore. In the Jackson Plan of 1882 (refer to Image 3.1), the European Colonialists’ showed forms of power through the use of authority and the construction of racial and social categories to polarise racial distinctions, thereby objectivising the subjects.
One of the ways in which they did that was to demarcate a space for each of these categories. The Malay, Chinese, and Indian communes were positioned on the east and west of the European commune while the British positioned their municipal government offices and homes in the middle of the segregated communes. This central location was also situated along the periphery of the island, which gave the colonialists access to the mouth of the Singapore river that served as the main trade artery. Not only does this strategic location allow them to control and monitor the commercial activities associated with the trade along the river, it also gave them proximity to all the racial communes.

At first glance, it would seem intuitive to segregate ethnic groups with different cultural practices in order to maintain peace within the communes. The colonial power’s intention in segregating and classifying the ethnic groups, however, was to be able to conduct “general surveillance” across the largely immigrant population. In describing Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon, Foucault considers “generalised surveillance” as the process by which certain types of practices or disciplines order society through spatial regulation and organisation. In the case of the Panopticon, the strategy of spatially ordering space gave the guards (the state) power by enabling them to survey the prisoners in separate categories and classifications. In the case of the segregated parcels of land for each ethnic colonised group, it did not preclude the collectives who were subject to these powers from exercising counter-strategies. This was because the Chinese, for example, brought their clan or dialect associations with them from China and these clan associations retained their own unique institutional structure that were involved in the social, cultural, and religious aspects of their members’ lives. These associations offered support to the Chinese groups in their immigrant life and “provided convenient institutional focal points for the consolidation of power and the organisation of counter-strategies to confront whatever means of control imposed by the colonialists”. The clan associations could exercise their power also because they were a growing majority of the population and as a collective, they still held some power over the conduct of their everyday lives. This power of the clan associations was tested when the colonial authorities tried to clear Chinese burial grounds. During Singapore’s colonial period, Chinese burial grounds that occupied large stretches of land within the city had been a major source of contention between the authorities and the Chinese community, which made up the majority of the Singapore population. This was also around the time when western style sanitation became popular at the turn of the twentieth century. Not only did municipal authorities consider burial grounds to be hazardous to public health, they also considered burial grounds to be a threat to the economic principles of space management in urban planning.

22 Yeoh, Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore, 14.
23 Yeoh, Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore, 15.
According to Yeoh, the municipal authorities faced much resistance from the Chinese clan associations, which wielded power over the large Chinese community that was classified and grouped together by the municipal authorities (also discussed in Part 1). This is a reflection of how the planning and segregation of the ethnic groups by the colonialists did not function as they intended through disciplinary technologies, resulting in the ground as a potential "site of resistance and active struggle".26 27

Image 3.1

Image of the Jackson Plan (also known as the Raffles Town Plan) was drawn up in 1882 by Lieutenant Philip Jackson. This map shows the proposed scheme for Singapore to maintain order by segregating the different ethnic groups into separate residential areas. The map also shows the placement of the government and the European commune located in the middle and next to each other. (Image from the National Museum of Singapore)

According to Lefebvre, space should be seen as a site of on-going interactions of social relations and not as a result or product of social interaction. As Yeoh illustrates in The Control of ‘Sacred’ Space: Conflicts over the Chinese Burial Grounds in Colonial Singapore, 1880-193028, burial grounds are spaces formed by sites of constant resistance and negotiations. In the spatial and temporal ordering of places or burial, as well as the associated ritual practices, however, burial spaces become transformed into sacred landscapes; the burial site “becomes emotionally highly-charged site, not only for the families concerned, but also at times for the ethnic

27 Yeoh, Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore, 15.
28 Yeoh, “The Control of ‘Sacred’ Space.”
and cultural groups concerned.”29 There is a substantial amount of writings that has examined how burial landscapes reflect a society’s “collective representations of deeply shared attitudes and assumptions.”30 With the burial grounds being both a threat and threatened, the ground becomes the site of politics with the municipal authorities and the Chinese people at odds with each other. The act of classifying and segregating ethnic groups gave the colonial rulers a means of direction and control. However, when this order backfired and resulted in a reverse reaction, it brought the larger Chinese population together, which meant that they had the critical mass to resist the colonial powers’ control over them.31 With the contention between the Chinese and the municipal government over whether to retain or exhume the burial grounds, among other things, the ground becomes a highly politicised site, and the fear of the newly independent state would drive them to neutralise the ground and fully optimise land-use. But as it will be revealed later, the policies and procedures did not eradicate racial classification; on the contrary, they made the latter necessary.

Learning from the missteps in segregating the living areas based on ethnic groups in the late nineteenth century led to a different direction for policies in Singapore’s post-independence years to ensure that races are dispersed and evenly distributed across the island.32 Since independence in 1965, the Singapore state classifies the population into racial categories at birth and issues documents like the national identity card—not different from the classifications used in the United States’ segregation policy in the era leading up to the civil rights movement in the 1950s.33 The state identified four main categories of race: Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Others—or abbreviated as CMIO. The categorisation of race in Singapore is based on the paternal lines of descent, and in cases where the paternal race is mixed, it is simplified to fit into one of the categories. Racial labelling in Singapore is necessary to determine where a person can live and where they have access to educational resources. This becomes problematic and contradictory for a nation attempting to create a “one united people which is regardless of race, language or religion” and a singular identity for its citizens. Access to rights is clearly differentiated, which means that not all citizens have equal access to opportunities to make claims based on an equally shared belonging to the nation. The CMIO classification is the organising framework of race in Singapore that informs government policies on various issues such as census collection and, more importantly, housing. The Ethnic Integration Policy (Appendix 3.1) implemented by the Housing Development Board (HDB) sets a quota on the distribution of the races of residents in a public housing flat in a particular block of the neighbourhood.34 This policy was introduced in 1989 to prevent the formation of ethnic

31 Yeoh, Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore, 14.
enclaves and encourage a balanced racial mix within the neighbourhoods. According to the HDB, the race ratio set within a housing block and neighbourhood is based on the proportion of the population’s racial makeup (Appendix 3.2 and 3.3). The dangerous effect of racial policy has been to identify and divide citizens—even dividing every category of Singaporean into subcategories of hyphenated race profile terminologies such as Chinese-Singaporean. In a newspaper article addressing the concerns of citizens in 1989 when the Ethnic Integration Policy was introduced, a Member of Parliament asked if the new policy violates constitutional rights and the answer the then- Minister of National Development, Minister S. Dhanabalan responded “Both the Law Minister and the Attorney-General were consulted and they said no because the new measures apply to all races. Nobody is being discriminated against.” What was neglected was that the process of naming in itself fosters a climate where racial privileges exist. Any policy of racial classification systematically collects data about its citizenry and is used to ensure that segments of the ground are not dominated by any one of the ethnic groups. This sort of homogenous race distribution strategy comes about from the attempt to neutralise the ground, but in that process, it systemically creates the need for racial classification. In order for policies to ensure racial distribution, people must first be divided into respective racial groups, making racial segregation systemic in itself.

Even after powers were taken away from the individual groups that previously lived together, this distribution of population did not prevent them from associating patterns of living with racial identities. This would be indeed problematic for the myth of a racially harmonious nation and the prospects of a singular national identity. Yet, the logic of the CMIO classification model was infused into the psyche of the local population through decades and projected as an integral part of national identity. Moreover, the CMIO model, according to sociologists, has even instituted racialisation—meaning that a racial group is immediately associated with specific characteristics that are used as means to justify particular actions towards the group. This was especially evident when what was regarded as the “Malay problem” by parliamentarians and even within the Singaporean-Malay society was associated with the lower socio-economic position of the Malay people. Data from the Singapore Department of Statistics reflect that the total fertility rate for Malays is the highest at 1.80 births compared to 1.07 for Chinese and 1.04 for Indians, despite Malays having a lower average household income than the Chinese average. As Kathiravelu also highlighted, lower levels of formal education are articulated as a racial problem rather than a social one. The issue of education is better understood as a structural one. For example, students from lower-income families often lack access to resources that are available to students from more well-to-do families, showing that the issue is related to class and not to race.

36 Kathiravelu, “Rethinking Race,” 163.
Keeping ratios of residents in a single block of flats, to include all ethnicities masks the differentiation of household income and wealth across all racial groups. The aim of the ethnic distribution policy is two-fold: firstly, it aims to integrate the four main categories of ethnicities in Singapore; and secondly, it hides any racial prejudices that might exist through institutionalised racism. While the emphasis on racial integration in public housing is intended to ensure that the ground does not lend itself to a site of conflict between various groups, the social integration strategy becomes a double-edged sword. Besides institutionalised racism, it potentially becomes a site for more struggle and resistance because of the proximity of the dwelling units within the blocks resulting from land scarcity. On the policy scale, the Ethnic Integration Policy has segregated the real estate market. To maintain the ratios of the ethnic populations, the quotas (usually upper limits to the dwelling units) are placed to ensure that flats sold in the resale market remain in the same ethnic groups (for example, a family that is categorised as Malay in their official documents can only sell their flat to another family classified as Malay). According to studies, these segregated markets display price discrimination. For example, Chinese and non-Chinese buyers may pay different prices for a similar flat in the same location, which means that each race is competing in separate real estate markets. These segregated housing markets have a silver lining in that they limit any competition between ethnic groups, therefore reducing any possible tension between the different ethnic groups. In some ways, the classification process has some leverage in the construction of a singular national identity. However, its implementation defies the idea of the national collective. While the more extensive overarching land policies were intended to nationalise the ground and bring it under the public ownership of the larger collective, racial classification and separate markets eventually undermined this.

Like many cities worldwide, Singapore has been experiencing high immigration trends since 2000, and the ethnic and social landscape has fundamentally been altered. Over the past 15 years, the state has increased the population through extensive naturalisation of middle-class immigrants. As of 2018, more than a quarter of the resident population of Singapore are new citizens and permanent residents, and this does not include the population in Singapore who are temporary migrants on employment passes and work permits. These have altered the demographic in Singapore and the forms of management. Throughout the years, the policy has evolved – in 2010 (Appendix 3.4), the policy was revised and updated. Firstly, the upper limits for the “Indian” and “Others” ethnic groups were increased to 12 per cent (from the previous 10 per cent) at a neighbourhood level and 15 per cent (from the previous 13 per cent), to reflect the change in racial demographics. But more importantly, the update of the policy saw the inclusion of a quota for Singapore Permanent Residents (SPR). The rationale for the inclusion was to facilitate better integration of long-term residents in Singapore. According to the revised policy, the quota caps the proportion of non-Malaysian SPR households in HDB neighbourhoods (8 per cent) and blocks, similar to the already existing EIP for citizens. The SPR excluded

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41 Agnes Wee, “Racial limits set for HDB estates.”
42 In the HDB resale market, price is dependent on supply and demand.
44 Kathiravelu, “Rethinking Race,” 164.
Malaysian SPRs because of “close cultural and historical similarities with Singaporeans”. Even within the categories of the Ethnic Integration Policy, there were subcategories for exclusions like that made for Malaysian SPRs who were expressed in the government documentation as having more similarities with Singaporeans, compared to SPRs originating from other countries. The changes were viewed as necessary to adapt to the changes in the demographic of Singapore but also reflected the problematised and precarious nature of the policy.

A survey by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) was conducted in 2013 and 2018 to measure the level of racial integration and cohesion in Singapore which involved over 4000 Singaporeans. Both surveys used a set of ten indicators which included – minority discrimination in using public services, the presence of close inter-racial friendships and levels of inter-racial and inter-religious social trust. These indicators were used to gauge the level of inter-racial and religious harmony in Singapore. By comparing data collected in 2013 and 2018, the paper from IPS concluded that “Singapore is faring well when it comes to inter-racial and inter-religious relations”. Based on the data of the 2013 and 2018 surveys, most respondents indicated having an interest and to interact with people of other cultures. The survey results, however, also highlighted that respondents belonging to minority groups were more likely to perceive or experience workplace discrimination and that these were areas where Singapore’s EIP may have deficiencies. So while the paper may have given data-based evidence of the effectiveness of the racial policies – it has also proven that the policies might also have raised some doubts if Singaporeans are indeed racially integrated. It is also important to note that the survey sample also reflected the racial distribution of the local demographic – which means that each race was represented in the sample in proportion to the demographic, making the Chinese, the larger majority of respondents (after weighting the sample, 76.1% of the sample identified as Chinese). For questions that asked respondents they had faced discrimination before, respondents from the majority Chinese segment would not be an appropriate source of data – possibly skewing the reality of the situation since it is primarily the minority groups who are more likely to experience any form of racial discrimination. The experiments would have been made more robust if the data was accompanied by in-depth interviews (IDIs) with minority groups to properly understand any discrimination they might experience. Data collection through surveys do not capture the gravity and nuances of complex social issues like racial prejudices – limiting the experiment to providing only a fair tracker to gauge the general landscape of sentiments across time periods. The results might not completely be representative of the experiences of the people and definitely cannot be concluded of the successes or failures of Singapore’s Ethnic Integration Policy.

In August 2011, the media reported a dispute concerning a migrant family from China who lodged a complaint to the Community Mediation Centre against their Singaporean Indian neighbours who lived in the adjacent flat.

According to the reports, the Chinese migrant family was bothered by the odours whenever their neighbour cooked curry, a common staple Indian dish. Even though the Indian family, out of consideration, would close their windows to prevent the smells from escaping their flat, the Chinese family claimed that it did not help to eliminate the odours and asked their neighbour to stop cooking the dish altogether. The settlement reached by the Community Mediation Centre (CMC) was that the Indian family would cook curry when their Chinese neighbours were out. In turn, the Chinese family acceded to their Indian neighbour’s request to try the curry dish for themselves. The outcome of the mediation and settlement sparked resentment among Singaporeans across all races who assert that curry is a staple loved by all Singaporeans, prompting a group of Singaporeans to declare a “cook-a-pot-of-curry” day, which went viral on social media platforms. This isolated incident has been lauded by politicians as an important and beneficial outcome of the Ethnic Integration Policy and how it although a long-standing policy, is still necessary for confronting and mediating any potential resentment between racial groups. Although this is an isolated incident, it indicates larger underlying issues. Singapore is a nation built on migrant labour and historically, this has not been problematic. However, recorded xenophobic incidents and the rise of anti-foreigner sentiments in recent years illustrate a failure of Singapore’s multiracial narrative. The proximity of people and the congestion are urban conditions that amplify these tensions on the ground. In 2020, for example, when the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic happened, an outbreak hit the migrant workers’ dormitories in Singapore. At the peak of the outbreak in April 2020, infected migrant workers made up most of the daily infections in the nation, with more than 1000 cases detected per day. The local and international media began to shed light on the truth of the living conditions in these dormitories where over 320,000 migrant workers reside, most of whom come from India, Bangladesh, and other parts of South Asia. These purpose-built migrant dormitories typically cramped 10-20 men into a single room with shared sanitation facilities and these poor living conditions were believed to have exacerbated the rapid spread of the virus (refer to Image 3.2).

These conditions were a surprise to many Singaporeans, mostly because the dormitories were situated on the outskirts of the island and in industrial areas, hidden from everyday sight. The outbreak in the migrant worker dormitories eventually sparked xenophobic comments by Singaporean citizens on social media and surfaced the

48 Carolyn Quek, “Number of neighbor disputes hit high; Neighbours lack communication and increasingly intolerant,” TODAY, August 8, 2011, Factiva.
49 Carolyn Quek, “Number of neighbor disputes hit high.”
51 Sharon Teng, “Curry dispute.”
tensions that were already brewing beneath the veneer of harmony (refer to Image 3.3).\textsuperscript{54} During the period of a nationwide lockdown in Singapore, where everyone was restricted mainly to the confines of their homes, the situation in the migrant worker dormitories continued to escalate. The outbreak was difficult to contain because the tight living conditions made it impossible to create social distance and isolate the workers effectively.\textsuperscript{55} The local media would also begin reporting the daily confirmed number of cases by separating the statistics into “confirmed cases in the community” and “confirmed cases residing in dormitories”—community cases would include citizens, permanent residents, work pass, and work permit holders (skilled workers and expatriates), while the foreign migrant workers are excluded from the “community” and grouped into its own category of dormitory cases. Allowing Singaporean citizens to identify the migrant workers as separate from their community, may have in fact amplified the rift between the people. While the existence of the Community Mediation Centre is evidence that without the intervention of policies and state presence, racism within the country would prevail, the COVID-19 pandemic as a global crisis has revealed cracks in the narrative of racial harmony in Singapore, as well as the fragility of the state of cohesion within the population.\textsuperscript{56}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image3.2.png}
\caption{Photograph of foreign migrant workers are cramped into a room. The cramped living conditions have been blamed for the large spread of the Coronavirus within the foreign worker community in Singapore in 2020. (Photographed from REUTERS and featured in Financial Times Singapore, 8 April 2020).}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{55} Yvette Tan, “Covid-19 Singapore: A ‘pandemic of inequality’ exposed.”
\textsuperscript{56} Kathiravelu, “Rethinking Race,” 159–160.
Funeral Wakes

Land policies have also affected how each religious group performs its rituals. For many religions, and in many ways, death unites the family and the community in its rituals that serve to renew common values, affirm communal conception, and strengthen social bonds. Land policies have affected practices of burying the dead and in many cases, they have modified and simplified the rituals in order to adapt to changing conditions of the ground. Typically, each religious group would have specific and separate spaces to conduct the funeral and wakes, but with land scarcity, burial plots are limited and the space for these rituals has been greatly diminished. New spaces are created to become multifunctional spaces for different religions to perform these rituals but that also means that rituals have to adapt to the architecture of these spaces. In the following part of the thesis, I will specifically look at how rituals or burying the dead have been altered because of land policies. With a focus on Chinese practices of Taoist rituals (with evidence-based partly on Tong’s book *Chinese Death Rituals in Singapore*), this part of the thesis will examine how, through the alteration of these rituals and beliefs, the process of mourning for different religions is losing its specificity, resulting in new practices of mourning.57

In the 1960s, the Housing and Development Board’s (HDB) main priority was to provide self-sufficient public housing for the local population. As a result, many of the HDB blocks built during that period had shops on the

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ground floor right under the homes. Since the 1970s, however, HDB has been constructing its public housing on structural columns to free up ground level spaces. The objective for introducing these open spaces was to create opportunities for residents to meet, interact, and bond through the regular use of shared common spaces and to provide residents with spaces to hold social functions, celebrations, and funeral rites. It was also part of HDB’s efforts to provide “a sense of relief” in the densely built neighbourhoods. The term “void decks” was first introduced in the local newspapers around 1970. According to a report in *The Straits Times*, the oldest void deck in Singapore was built in 1963 but did not become a common feature till the 1970s. According to the state, the void decks were intended to play an important role in building community ties and promoting racial integration because they serve as venues for social and recreational activities for residents of different backgrounds and racial groups. Since the inception of the void deck in HDB design, it is commonplace for residents to hold funerals wakes in their neighbourhood HDB void decks (with the exception of Hindus and Muslims who do not practise embalming of the body). Traditionally, the Chinese believed that funeral wakes should be held inside or near the home of the deceased so that the soul can find its way home. For the Chinese communities living in HDB estates, the void decks came to be seen as an extension of the home and it became customary to hold funeral wakes in this space. Since the Chinese community make up the majority of the population, funeral wakes in HDB void decks became a common sight, and members of other religions began holding their funeral wakes in the HDB void decks too.

With funeral wakes taking place outside the domestic realm and in the newly created public space of the void deck, the death rituals of the Chinese should be viewed on at least two levels—the public or formal front (the public-facing one that is mainly performed), as well the private or informal sphere (where rituals are conducted with the belief that it would serve the deceased and the family). The rituals of a Chinese funeral are typically private and conducted for the family, so having the funeral outside the home has brought the rituals to the public domain, and in turn resulted in the creation of several new rituals in order to “protect” the public. Examples of these new rituals include the practice of placing small pieces of red paper at strategic locations along the route that leads from the home of the deceased to the site of the funeral. These red pieces of paper are believed to

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60 According to the National Heritage Board, the first void deck was built in 1963 at Block 26 in Jalan Klinik (located in the vicinity of current-day Tiong Bahru), which predates Singapore’s independence. However, it was still uncommon at the time and the ground floor of housing blocks would typically have been occupied either by more dwelling units or shops. For more information, National Heritage Board, *Community Heritage Series III: Void Decks*, 3.
63 As Tong describes, with the transition to funeral wakes outside the residence and in public view of the void decks, the process of mourning rites has been a shifted as well, with importance and focus placed on kinship of the family rather than the display of wealth and achievements of the deceased and the family. Tong Chee Kiong, *Chinese Death Rituals in Singapore* (Oxon: Routledge Curzon, 2004), 75–79.
protect people who may inadvertently come into contact with spirits, and to guard them from harm and bad luck, as many other spirits are believed to be lingering around the site of the funeral.

Traditional Chinese funerals are usually held over an odd-number of days and most void deck wakes are held over three, five, or seven days. As Tong explains, for traditional Chinese customs, nightly vigils are held to prevent evil occurrences such as spirits stealing the soul of the deceased—this means that there will always be family who are with the casket throughout the funeral wake, even in the early hours of the morning (since this usually takes place inside the home, it is easier to “watch-over” the body). A common ritual conducted during wakes is the chanting of prayers by priests on the first and last days of the wake. It is believed that although the deceased is dead, they would still require the same needs as the living, and hence, a large altar is placed in the front of a smaller altar decorated with the deceased’s favourite foods. The setup of the altar depends on the religion and the coffin area is often shielded from external view with tarp sheets, drapes, or blankets. A resting area with tables and chairs is also provided for visitors, and sometimes even mah-jong sessions are set up for family and friends. Although one can also seek out alternative funeral venues at temples, churches, and private funeral parlours such as Singapore Casket, majority of the funeral wakes still take place in HDB void decks (the exact number is not attainable, however).

Typically, most of the visitors attend the wake in the evening and upon arrival, pay their respects by bowing three times before the altar and coffin with a lit joss stick, accompanied by a member of the deceased’s immediate family. Following this brief ritual, visitors are welcome to gather at the tables in front of the coffin and chat with family members. Before leaving, visitors will also make a discreet monetary gift to the family at the reception or “treasurer’s table” as a small contribution towards the cost of the funeral. As mentioned earlier, an overnight vigil is kept at the funeral wake to protect the body from any evil influences. The final day of the wake often involves “live” music by funeral bands from various associations as well as the burning of paper offerings such as paper houses and cars. Loud music accompanied by the striking of gongs signal the start of the rituals, during which immediate family members kneel before the coffin, and the women sometimes wail audibly. Crying loudly suggests that it is obligatory for loved ones to show grief as part of a ceremonial observance made by customary laws. This is all part of the funeral performance—a display of filial piety and harmony within the family to show visitors and passers-by that the whole family is united. This is more common in Taoist funerals than that of other Chinese customs, and Taoist funerals are usually the most

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65 Sometimes other objects such as toothpaste and toothbrush are also placed either on the altar or on a chair next to the coffin. Tong, *Chinese Death Rituals in Singapore*, 31–33.
66 According to Tong, informants said that, if a black cat jumped over the coffin, the corpse of the deceased will supposedly be reanimated and become a “walking zombie.” Another reason cited for keeping an overnight watch on the body is to protect the body from evil spirits as it is believed that death attracts other spirits towards the wake. Tong, *Chinese Death Rituals in Singapore*, 36–41.
67 Taoist paper offerings would include paper money and paper sculptures and representations of different objects like mobile phone and clothes and houses and cars and maids—objects assumed to be useful in the afterlife. The paper sculptures are burned during the ceremony in an urn and it is believed by the Taoists that these objects will accompany the deceased into their afterlife.
68 Tong, *Chinese Death Rituals in Singapore*, 68.
expensive of all religious funerals due to the elaborate arrangements that require many elements such as the hiring of musicians and priests, and the ceremonial burning of joss paper.⁶⁹

During the pre-war period, this would have been done inside the compound of the deceased’s home or along Sago Lane in Chinatown (located within the Chinese Commune). Chinese Death Houses were places where people spent their last few days and prepared for their impending deaths. These were commercially run spaces that consisted of a living space on the ground floor and a funeral parlour below. The spaces inside the Death Houses were largely empty, and the dying would lay on hard beds awaiting their time.⁷⁰ According to Stone (2007), Sago Lane was known to be lined with Chinese Death Houses as well as other shops that sold paraphernalia used in funerals. The Death Houses were patronised mainly by the poor who did not have their own homes to hold the funeral wakes. The rituals, the processions with musicians, and the burning of paper and joss sticks would spill onto the streets (refer to Image 3.4). The Death Houses were banned in 1961 to make way for future developments as they were considered to have poor sanitation and were unhygienic. In the photographs by J. A. Elliot, large processions with an ornately decorated coffin are shown, along with altars decorated with food for the deceased (refer to Image 3.5). These images illustrate the elaborate processions that would involve many people, lots of food, and joss sticks that are used as offerings. Given that these funerals on Sago Lane in the 1950s were organised for the poor, even the most elaborate Taoist funeral wakes that are conducted in HDB void decks today look scaled down in comparison.

Image 3.4
Photographs taken between 1950 and 1953 of a Chinese funeral ceremony in Sago Lane, Singapore. A funeral street procession with a flat-bed truck that is decorated with cloth embroidered with Chinese characters, while mourners walk behind the vehicle. An elaborately decorated coffin sits on top of the truck. (Photographed by Dr. Elliott, Alan J. from Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge. Photo Credit: Dr. Eona M. Bell.)

⁶⁹ Based on the discussions during a webinar I attended: “Ritual and Remembrance II”, organised by the Singapore University of Social Sciences, featuring panellists Dr. Jack Chia Meng-Tat and Dr. Lye Kit Ying, March 31, 2021.
Image 3.5

Photograph taken between 1950 and 1953 of a Chinese funeral ceremony in Sago Lane, Singapore. On the street, two offering tables laden with joss sticks, candles, a bottle, and dishes of food are set up outside a temple. At the end of the table is a large floral wreath and a photograph of the deceased. (Photographed by Dr. Elliott, Alan J. from Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge. Photo Credit: Dr. Eona M. Bell.)
Interestingly, Christian funeral wakes have adapted from the Chinese Taoist and Buddhist wakes. Using the void deck, (refer to Image 3.6) the layout is very similar and is dependent largely on the spacing of the structural columns of the building—the space where the coffin is placed is also enclosed by three makeshift cloth walls, and the guest area is set up with chair and large circular tables. The only way to differentiate the different religions and traditions is are the objects and symbols that are placed around the coffin. For example, as a respectful gesture from the bereaved family, it is customary for Taoists to leave bundles of red threads around for attendees of the wake to ward off any “bad luck” that may be brought upon the visitors of the funeral wake; the red thread should be tied loosely around a finger before leaving the funeral, and allowed to slip off before arriving home.\textsuperscript{71} This red thread is also typically left at the tables of Christian funeral wakes as well—this is just one example to show how certain rituals and practices have been merged or appropriated due to the shared space in which they take place.\textsuperscript{72}


\textsuperscript{72} Another reason why Chinese superstition has influenced the Christian rituals is because European missionaries introduced Christianity to Singapore. Most immigrants from China and the East Indies who moved to Singapore came with their own religions from their homeland. Many only converted to Christianity after living in Singapore. Christian and Catholic missionaries have been in Singapore for over 170 years and have set up schools in Singapore that are still around today. This means that the first generation of immigrants brought with them their own beliefs and superstitions and some of these have remained and evolved despite these people having converted to other religions.
Funeral wakes in the void decks also mean that the rituals are visually exposed to the public and encountered by neighbours living in the same block. With the CMIO ratio policy discussed before, where the residents of each HDB block constitute a mix of races and ethnicities, it is inevitable that residents are exposed to the various religious rituals and practices of mourning. The neutralised architecture of the void deck informs how rituals are performed. Columns are evenly spaced, reflecting interior spaces of the flats. The spatial grid that forms the design of the flat (the space of the living) also informs how the wakes (rituals of the dead) are laid out and carried out. The column grid (typically about 6 metres by 6 metres) serves as the framework with which the wakes are laid out. In the past, the funeral processions and wakes were less inhibited by built structures, since they were mostly performed outside like the ones in Chinese Death Houses on Sago Lane, where caskets would be placed on the road and organically extended beyond. The grid of the void decks inevitably presents a very uniformed layout that standardises today’s funeral wakes, whether Taoist or Christian in nature, and in turn, wakes have become assimilated in many ways.

The void deck on the ground floor is a public space and the performance of rituals can also be viewed as a measure of the social status of the family. The loud music and activity attract people to gather and view. The funeral wakes, for instance, portray the public face of the family to the extended family, friends, and passers-by. According to Tong, status or mian zi is extremely important in Chinese culture, and the form of prestige and renown attached to a family is readily convertible back into economic capital. The type of funeral ritual specialists employed at the funeral is a mark of the status of the family, and the number of hired funeral musicians become quantitative indicators of the family’s wealth. The high priests engaged are also supported by a large staff of helpers and novices that all adds to the activities and complex richness of the rituals. As previously noted, a large number of objects are burned as sacrifices made to the deceased for his afterlife. Paper effigies (refer to Image 3.7) are made to be as realistic as possible and the more realistic and larger these objects are, the more expensive they cost (according to informants, larger paper models of mansions would cost something in the thousands of dollars). It is believed that by burning paper models of luxury cars, the latest mobile phone, and other cardboard symbols of luxury and wealth, it would secure a higher social ranking for the deceased in the afterlife. Before they are burned, these paper models are displayed in the open areas in full public view for several days (refer to Image 3.8)—a demonstration of the virtue of the family in offering generous and elaborate sacrifices, it demonstrates the virtue of the family that, in turn, elevates their social status. However, the space constraints of the HDB void deck and other limitations, such as being placed so close to the living and having to keep noise levels at night in check, makes it difficult for very elaborate ceremonies to take place. Policies governing the ways of the living have transcended, and now interferes with the rituals of the dead as well.

73 Tong, Chinese Death Rituals in Singapore, 61.
74 Tong, Chinese Death Rituals in Singapore, 92–96
The Myth of Racial Harmony

Image 3.7
Photograph of paper effigies (on the left) sold next to groceries in a local supermarket in a HDB estate in Hougang Ave 3.

Image 3.8
Photograph taken between 1950 and 1953 at Sago Lane. The paper sculptures of a maid and paper money chests (in the back of the truck) before they are burned as an offering to the dead. It is believed by the Taoists that when burned, these objects would continue with the spirit in its after life. (Photographed by Dr. Elliott, Alan J. from Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge. Photo Credit Dr. Eona M. Bell.)
Apart from the wakes, the void deck accommodates other social activities. It is not only the site of mourning but is also commonly used to celebrate Malay weddings (refer to Image 3.9). In a traditional Malay kampung, a wedding was an event that would involve an entire village. Today, it is still not uncommon for Malay weddings to welcome a thousand or more guests. Since HDB neighbourhoods have taken over traditional Malay villages, the void deck now becomes the venue for the large and grand Malay weddings. As we can see, the ground where one family might mourn is shared by another family who might celebrate a wedding. The rituals of funeral wakes and weddings now occur in the same shared spaces, which is unlike traditional *kampungs* where Malays, Indians, and Chinese were separated into different villages with distinct spaces for each type of ceremony. In this sense, the decks have come to serve the national agenda for “harmonious living” of the various ethnic and religious groups. This space is flexible and malleable to suit the different events that would take place inside, while also substituting the space outside the home and the communal spaces of the villages or *kampungs*. Rituals, customs, and practices blend and the constraints of the shared have influenced how different rituals have amalgamated.

Image 3.9
Example of a Malay Wedding set up in the void deck. The ceiling is covered in drapes and although the layout of round tables seems similar to the funeral wakes, the drapes create an entirely different atmosphere and the void deck appears unrecognizable. (Image from the Online Citizen)

Cremation over Burials - Mandai Crematorium

The explicit function of burial grounds is to house the dead. According to Tan and Yeoh, the spatial and temporal ordering of burial places, as well as the ritual practices associated with them, transform burial spaces

77 Xu and Ismail, “Why Malay weddings are held in void decks.”
into sacred landscapes. The burial site “becomes [an] emotionally high-charged site, not only for the families, but also for the ethnic and cultural groups concerned”. There is a substantial number of writings that have examined how burial landscapes reflect a society’s “collective representations of deeply shared attitudes and assumptions”. Although there is interest in the various ways in which cultures deal with death, burial sites have not been widely discussed in the context of political space. And since, according to Lefebvre, space is not a scientific object removed from ideology and politics but instead political and strategic, there is a need to reflect on burial spaces (in the view of politics).

In the 1965 Master Plan, which was designed to guide land-use development in Singapore, cemeteries were identified as land “considered available for development” and cremation was proposed as the only solution to deal with exhumed bodies from the existing burial grounds in Singapore. In 1972, the state announced that it would close all cemeteries located near and around the city area to “conserve land”. This alteration in the law allowing the public commissioner to close cemeteries “without assigning reasons for doing so” increased the state’s power over cemeteries. As an alternative to managing the disposal of the dead, the state offered burial space at a state-owned public cemetery complex at Choa Chu Kang, although it was made clear that cremation would be the only viable long-term option. As Tan and Yeoh have pointed out, the clearance of ethnic burial grounds served more than a practical purpose as it signified the transferring of power from clan- and ethnic-based associations, which had previously run these grounds, into the hands of state organisations. One of these cemeteries is the Bukit Brown Cemetery that was administered by the British in 1922 and was open to all Chinese burials regardless of class and clan—more will be discussed about this cemetery later in this chapter. The establishment of state administered cemeteries removed power away from the clan associations and the Chinese ethnic community as the ordering and regularising of the plots for burials were controlled by the state.

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85 Tan and Yeoh’s book, *The “Remains of the Dead”*, attempts to examine the changing constitution of Chinese landscapes of death in post-war Singapore through a close reading of these specific strategies drawn upon in the complicated process of conflict and negotiation between the nation state and the Chinese community. The book explains that Chinese burial grounds (owned and run by private Chinese associations) in Singapore were not only sacred sites but also community spaces where kinship ties and group loyalties were cemented, independently of the state. In the nation state’s attempt to regulate Chinese burial grounds as part of a post-war effort to reconfigure urban space to meet developmental needs, the state came in direct confrontation with a complexly organised Chinese community with its own communal perspectives and priorities not necessarily supportive of, or even compatible with those of the state. This precise confrontation represented a lens through which to examine the complex structure of the Chinese community and its negotiation with the state over rights and resources.
On November 1, 1998, the NEA implemented a policy to limit the burial period of all graves to 15 years due to a shortage of space. After being buried for 15 years, graves are exhumed and the remains removed. If the religion of the deceased permits cremation, the exhumed remains are cremated and stored in government columbarium niches; otherwise, the remains are re-buried in mass burial plots.\textsuperscript{86} Armed with legislative instruments, the state had been considerably successful in clearing extensive areas of private Chinese burial grounds by 1978, which was done in the name of the “economic and social good of all citizens in Singapore”– including the Chinese community.\textsuperscript{87} This success of the state’s attempts to clear burial grounds cemented the power of the new government after Singapore’s independence. Before the independence, the clan associations were a focal point for Chinese immigrants from China. Each of the clan associations served a specific family-line of people from a specific town, village, or region in China that spoke distinctively different Chinese dialects. Perhaps the clearance of the private Chinese burial grounds was not just a reflection of power of the state over these private Chinese associations, but also an attempt at building a new collective identity for the fragmented community.

The success of the state’s attempts to clear private burial grounds could not have been possible if cremation was not accepted by the public as an alternative. As the colonial authorities noted, although cremation was not entirely alien to the Chinese before 1965, only 10.2 per cent of the Chinese dead were cremated while 89.8 per cent were buried. By 1988, 68.1 per cent of the Chinese dead were cremated while only 31.9 per cent still opted to be buried.\textsuperscript{88} This contributed to the general increase in cremation instead of burial in Singapore across all ethnic groups during the period of nationhood. By the 1990s, cremation was preferred by four out of every five of those for whom burial is not required by their religion (or all communities apart from the Muslim, Ahmaddiya Jama’at, Jewish, Parsi, and Bahai populations).\textsuperscript{89} The change from burial to cremation to manage the dead among Chinese-Singaporeans is often seen as a reflection of the weakening of “traditional” ideas and beliefs concerning death and the after-life.\textsuperscript{90} What is most crucial here is that the decline of ritual practice is itself also inextricably linked to the diminished role that regional, dialect, and clan associations play in Chinese social life after independence.\textsuperscript{91}

The design of the crematorium and columbaria in Singapore presented itself as an opportunity to accommodate all religious groups, and through design, a new set of rituals that is unique to a Singapore identity. Since cremations became more widely accepted in the 1980s and with the New Burial Policy being introduced in

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{86} Exhumed remains are typically cremated in Choa Chu Kang Crematorium while bodies of the recently deceased are cremated in Mandai Crematorium.

\textsuperscript{87} As cited in Tan and Yeoh, \textit{The “Remains of the Dead”}, 3.


\textsuperscript{91} Tan and Yeoh, \textit{The “Remains of the Dead”}.
\end{footnotesize}
1998, the government built 2 main crematoriums, the Mandai Crematorium and Columbarium and Choa Chu Kang Columbarium. With Mount Vernon Crematorium being the only government crematorium reaching its maximum capacity in the late 1970s, there was a need for a second crematorium. While Mount Vernon is located among private residential developments, the government chose a plot of land at Mandai to build Singapore’s second crematorium. Completed in 1982, it consists of four big cremators (furnaces), four small cremators, and 1200 niches. Shortly after opening, it was designated to cremate exhumed remains from the cemeteries that had been cleared. In 2000, the government decided that all cremation services are to be consolidated at Mandai. As such, a new extension was built south of the original complex. Completed in mid-2004, the upgraded complex comprises four service halls, four viewing halls, twelve cremators and a waiting hall, replacing the Mount Vernon Crematorium, which closed its doors the same day that the new complex opened. In addition, the columbaria expanded to accommodate 133,000 niches in eight three-storey buildings.

The centralised Mandai Crematorium and Columbarium is designed to be devoid of any religious or ethnic affiliation and is rid of any symbolic references. Its design is intended to accommodate all religious burial ceremonies so as to serve as many ethnicities and religious beliefs as possible. Because the spaces are shared and do not favour any particular belief or culture, they become generic and clinical. What is more peculiar are the processes and rituals that appear to have been re-written and reconstructed. Before the casket enters the crematorium’s furnace, the deceased body in the casket and the mourners are both circulated along a pre-orchestrated path in what one might refer to as “a procession”. Being located in a remote part in the north of Singapore, the crematorium is mainly accessible to visitors and mourners by private vehicles or specially arranged buses that would bring families to the crematorium from the funeral location or the place of worship (like a temple or a church). Upon arrival, the buses would approach the site by traveling along the edge of the Mandai Reservoir, almost a world away from most of the built-up Singapore landscape. The crematorium itself is situated among lush foliage and to the back of the crematorium, the columbarium sits on a higher topography. The buses approach the main building of the crematorium by following a ramp that leads to the basement car park of the building. The ramp also redirects the bus away from views of the chambers of the furnace. Families of the deceased then alight from the buses at the basement level and take one of the two long escalators that lead back to the ground level. Above the escalator is a monumental triple volume height enclosed with a glass roof with a reflective pond above. In some effort to make the experience somewhat spiritual, the reflective pond perhaps makes reference to “heaven” and “light” above, with light being an allegory of goodness for many

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94 Feng, “Mandai Crematorium to expand to meet demand.”
religions and cultures, such as symbolising good over evil for the Hindus or representing wisdom and knowledge to the Buddhists.95

The escalators appear to lead visitors upwards from the basement to the ground level in a processional manner—choreographed to provoke feelings of spirituality yet deliberately non-specific. Visitors then arrive at the ground floor and find themselves outside one of the four identical service halls. Here, they wait to receive the casket that is being transferred directly from the hearse to the front of the service hall. The four service halls are tightly scheduled to accommodate all services and cremations that need to be held that day, with screens outside the hall displaying a list of the deceased's names in the order of their scheduled services. Before each ceremony, the casket is brought into the service hall with a mechanised casket trolley that enters through the downward-sloping narrow corridors located next to each service hall (refer to Image 3.10). From the entrance of the service hall, the space in the hall cascades in a series of descending steps with wooden benches on both sides of the central aisle—here, the spatial resemblance to a theatre or a chapel is uncanny. The ceremonial space is a lofty volume with an 8-metre-high ceiling clad with wood veneer. Above the area of where the casket is visible, a large skylight directs natural light on the casket—the reference to light is, again, evident here. The halls typically allow some time for a short religious service or ritual where prayers are recited and eulogies read. Depending on the religion of the deceased, the ceremonies are performed either with a religious leader or by a family member.

95 In several parts of the bible, God is referred to as “light”. For example, it was written in 1 John 1:5: “This is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness.”
Burial ceremonies for Taoist observers would traditionally involve an altar with lamps and the burning of incense that represents the refinement and purification of the soul. Guests too typically burn joss paper shaped in the fashion of a house, clothes, servants, and “ghost money”—as already explained, symbolic objects are believed to continue with the spirit in its afterlife. For observers of Hinduism, the design of the service hall has little impact on the rituals leading up to the cremation of the body because cremation, for them, must typically take place within 24 hours from the time of death. Leading up to the cremation, mantras and prayers are recited by the priest while close family and friends view the body in an open casket. The design of the service hall is confined and akin to Christian chapel, the arrangement of the wooden pews and the terraced seating becomes limiting to these rituals to take place. Concluding the ceremony and the final rites, the family and friends of the deceased will exit through a side door at the front of the room only after walking up to the casket and leaving flowers inside the casket. It is my understanding that it is common practice for all religions that fresh flowers are added to the coffin for the cremation.

96 Special thanks to the staff of the National Environmental Agency who granted me access into the areas of Mandai Crematorium which were restricted to the public. Site visit was conducted on 25th July 2018.
98 Also based on the National Environmental Agency officers who work at the Mandai Crematorium who I interviewed on July 25, 2018.
After the ceremony in the service hall, the visitors and the mourning family is then escorted to one of the corresponding Viewing Halls while the casket is transported by a mechanised trolley between the ceremonial hall and the cremation hall. Screens outside each viewing hall also verify the name of the deceased and the order of services for the rest of the day. Each of the viewing halls is cantilevered above the cremation hall and when the casket is received below the viewing hall, it is being prepped and loaded to another trolley that would bring the casket into the furnace on straight rails. The terraced platforms of the viewing hall allow loved ones to view the casket through the glassed enclosure above. As the mechanised trolley follows the rails and pulls the casket towards the furnace, the doors of the furnace open automatically and closes as soon as the casket passes. This is the last time that the family will see the casket or the remains before returning to collect the ashes 5 to 6 hours later or sometimes, the next day. The waiting areas are scattered with water features and looks out into a garden. Amenities such as water coolers, benches, and restrooms are well-provisioned in the waiting lobby. Usually, the funeral director will then signal for the buses to pick the family up and send them back to the family’s home or a more centralised location for the convenience of the visitors. The immediate family is then given a number and a time to return to the crematorium to collect the remains of the deceased. In office-type spaces, the ashes of the deceased are then collected either by the family or the assigned funeral director in white cloth bags. When collecting the ashes, the family is assigned a room, which resembles a small office meeting room where they can transfer the ashes into urns provided by the family. Outside of the rituals performed in the service halls, the urn is the only thing that provides clues of the ethnicity and religion of the deceased that are identified with symbolic engravings and design.

The process of cremation at Mandai Crematorium takes place in separate corridors from the main circulation and are hidden from visitors. The circulation design intentionally divides the experience of the visitor while concealing the circulation and preparation areas of the casket. All of the placements and movements of the casket that are seen by the visitors are mechanised, and throughout the entire process, the staff working at the crematorium are almost never seen by the visitors. This tends to create a clinical experience instead of a human one. The state-run crematorium obscures its civil servants during the process of cremation and the handling of the casket—any movement of the casket looks like it is only operated by a mechanical trolley. The multi-purpose facility, in its attempt to accommodate all religious beliefs and ethnicities, traditions and rituals, becomes a non-specific space and a typology, which accommodates a mix of different rituals and yields new practices of mourning. Apart from imposing a choreographed movement and circulation of the mourners and the casket throughout the ceremony, the design of the main crematorium regularises the aesthetic of these ceremonies. In many ways, the centralised crematorium facility can be seen as an efficient machine and a reflection of the state’s sentiments of pragmatism when dealing with the sensitivities of bereavement. Burial grounds have become contested sites as land is repossessed by the state for the construction of infrastructure and public housing.99 Hence a time limit has been placed on burial grounds with the New Burial Policy in 1998.

99 Tan and Yeoh, The “Remains of the Dead”. 

which extends the concept of leasehold property to spaces of the dead.\textsuperscript{100} This policy limits the burial period to 15 years, resulting in mass exhumation. These distinct technologies the Singaporean state has utilised to tackle the issues of land scarcity are not simply pragmatic solutions but it is also a reflection of the state’s power over the ground and its national territory.\textsuperscript{101} As a young and independent nation that is struggling to forge an identity and to inculcate a sense of rootedness and belonging in its population, it is ironic that it is also the state that is responsible for removing their ancestral remains from the ground.

Tan’s documentary, \textit{Moving House} (2001), examines Chinese funerary practice.\textsuperscript{102} Through the reading of Tan’s film, Koh identifies the various identities of the ground by examining rituals associated with the Chew family’s ancestral grave, the alterations of these rituals as an inevitable outcome of exhumation, and the relocation of the parents’ remains to a government-run columbarium (refer to Image 3.11).\textsuperscript{103} This documentary illustrates the different Chinese significances and symbolisms that problematise the meanings of burial sites. In the film, Tan juxtaposes more recent footage of the exhumation process with a 1960s government propaganda film of resettling people into government-built housing (HDB flats), thus capturing the similarities of the situation in which every citizen, dead or alive, is subject to the violence of resettling beyond their will. The documentary also shows the erosion of cultural practices.\textsuperscript{104} The most poignant part of the film is the comparison between the images of the HDB flats and the strikingly similar blocks of the columbarium, which Koh also points out. This uncanny pairing underscores government policies that impose common-shaped home for both the living and the dead. This comparison is made even more obvious when the Chew family vocalises the identification number of the niche where their parents’ and brother’s remains were placed: “Block 306, 3rd Floor, Niche 53,” which sounds exactly like the way HDB addresses are annotated, for example: “Block 306 Yishun avenue 3, Level 5, Unit 345”.\textsuperscript{105} The design of the columbaria represents itself is a reflection of the state’s desire for efficiency and regularity, like the HDB flat. The columbarium niches resemble compressed flats stacked on top of another. Previously, the dead used to be buried inside the ground but now the new “ground” of the columbarium is a vertical cemetery of shelves that stack and repeat to infinity.\textsuperscript{106} There is however, still evidence that the practice of geomancy has been modified to encompass the location of cremation urns in the columbaria. In general, it was reported in the local newspaper that people favoured the upper two rows or niches as the urns in the bottom rows were closer to the ground, and hence, “in danger of being touched by sweeping brooms as well as being exposed to dust and dirt”.\textsuperscript{107} There were also instances where people would consult geomancers to determine their preferred niches based on the serial number (serial numbers that


\textsuperscript{101} Tan and Yeoh, \textit{The “Remains of the Dead”}.

\textsuperscript{102} \textit{Moving House}, directed by Tan Pin Pin (Objectif Films, 2001).


\textsuperscript{104} Koh, “Unearthed,” 29.

\textsuperscript{105} Also highlighted by Koh in “Unearthed,” 29.

\textsuperscript{106} Koh, “Unearthed,” 46.

contain more auspicious numbers, such as the number 8, are preferred) and orientation of the niches. Exhumation seems to be as violent a process that parallels that of resettling people into modern homes. This displacement of cultural spaces forces Singaporeans to leave behind some traditions to give in to the new order, diluting rituals that contribute to the specificity of cultural practices.

Typically, in cemeteries, burials are classified into separate burial sites; for example, the Choa Chu Kang Cemetery in Singapore has a separate area for Catholics and a separate area for Buddhists. In my interviews with the staff at Mandai Crematorium, I was told that most columbaria were originally designed with separate buildings for different religions, and the urn placements were assigned based on an individual’s religion. On closer inspection, the buildings are designed with differentiated roof designs. Most are generic but a cluster of blocks have a roof structure that resemble a Chinese pagoda. The burnt red terracotta roof tiles also extend beyond the building’s main columns and exterior walls while curving upwards at the corners, resembling a Buddhist temple, implying that the Chinese and Buddhists are laid to rest here. However, the staff at the columbaria stated that the columbarium no longer assigns the niche placements strictly based on the deceased’s

108 “8” is the luckiest number in Chinese culture because the character in Mandarin “八” phonetically sounds like “發” (fa), which means “wealth” and “prosper”.
109 The Straits Times, “Families like ‘right’ niche for the dead.”
religion, but rather on what is currently available. He explained that most families are more concerned with finding a suitable niche, and that the upper rows are favoured over the niches closer to the ground. Geomancers are sometimes consulted to determine which serial number and orientation house the better niches. In general, I have observed that the majority of the niches at Mandai Columbarium are a mix of Christian, Taoist, and Buddhist, and I have also learnt that sea scattering was more popular with Hindus but is increasingly popular with Christians, Taoists and Buddhists too (refer to image 3.12).

In comparison to modern columbarium complexes, the most prominent cemetery used in the past has become the few remaining burial sites in Singapore that have yet to be completely exhumed or left undisturbed. The Bukit Brown Cemetery used to be the largest Chinese cemetery outside of China with about 100,000 bodies buried in the cemetery. The cemetery, which opened in 1922 and closed in 1973 and is also home to the remains of prominent Singapore pioneers who contributed to the founding of Singapore through their respectable businesses and their philanthropic activities. The cemetery was established as a municipal cemetery administered by the British and opened to all Chinese, regardless of dialect group and status—this departed from the traditional practice of linking the final resting places for Chinese to ties of dialect groups, region of origin in China, and clan associations.

In 2011, the government announced plans to build highway that was to cut through the Bukit Brown Cemetery. For the construction of the highway, 4000 graves were exhumed by 2013. This development changed the landscape of Bukit Brown drastically and also sparked national interest in the nearly forgotten site, which was heavily overgrown with foliage by then. Many were omega-shaped graves built with a mound at the rear (refer to Image 3.13). The less elaborate graves with smaller plots and grave stones, are at the lower ground in closer proximity to one another, usually belonging to those of humbler and more ordinary backgrounds (refer to Image 3.14). As observed in the Bukit Brown Cemetery that is located on a hill, larger tombs of wealthy and notable people were buried on higher areas of the hill while graves of the people in the middle and lower classes were buried in plots in the lower parts of the hill. The higher section of the Bukit Brown Cemetery was preferred

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110 The staff and informant from the National Environment Agency that manages both the Mandai Crematorium and Columbarium and the Choa Chu Kang Crematorium agreed to a tour and interview on July 25, 2018, but did not wish to be quoted on our conversation.
111 “Families like ‘right’ niche for the dead,” The Straits Times.
113 Although the cemetery opened in 1922, some recorded dates of death were from earlier and their bodies were transferred to Bukit Brown after it opened (based on National Archives of Singapore).
117 All of the grave descriptions and anecdotes are based on my visit to Bukit Brown Cemetery on a Heritage Singapore guided tour on September 7, 2019.
and more expensive because it was less affected by rain, since the rainwater in the soil would run off to the lower grounds. In addition, being buried on higher ground was considered more auspicious by the Chinese. The cemetery also had larger plots up higher the hill, while the plots closer to the bottom of the hill were significantly smaller. The largest plot in Bukit Brown Cemetery is 600 square metres in size and is the final resting place of Ong Sam Leong, his wife Yeo Hean Neo, and their two sons and their wives. A moat surrounds the main tombstone of Ong Sam Leong and his wife Yeo Hean Neo, which occupies the majority of the site. In comparison, the tu di gong altar (a smaller altar on the side of the graves for the Earth Deity) is larger at some of the main tombstones of the other graves. The size and the location of the graves in Bukit Brown Cemetery distinguished the wealthy Chinese from the working classes.

Image 3.12

From this photograph, we can see the exterior of the columbarium with the shelves of niches inside of the building. Each “shelf” has a block number—“221”, “222”, and so on—and is loaded with niches on both sides.
Image 3.13
An example of a Teochew omega-shaped tomb in Bukit Brown Cemetery.

Image 3.14
Simpler tombstones, such as these, could be found at the bottom of the hill at Bukit Brown Cemetery. This photograph was taken from the rear of the tombstone. Grave cleaners painted the red markings on the top of the stone to indicate which gravestones they are responsible for.
Like many East Asians, the Chinese use geomancy as guide to order and arrange spaces. At first glance, there was no clear grid or order to how the graves were laid out, the large overgrowths of the Bukit Brown seemed to have encroached on the grave and covered it with thick layers of foliage (refer to Image 3.15). During my visits, it was sometimes almost impossible to know if one was stepping on a long-forgotten grave. The wild shrubs and weeds from the ground have grown and spread over the tomb markers, protecting it. For the Chinese, geomancy can be used as a sophisticated calculation of rules to determine the placement, orientation, and the design of the graves. These rules are primarily rooted in traditional Taoist beliefs that must be followed to ensure the success of the burial and the fortune of the living generations. The geometric principles of Feng shui describe an ideal vision of how a space should be arranged. The application of these “feng shui” rules entails the calculation of the position, landscape and its elements. The proper placement of the deceased’s remains is believed to affect the worldly success or failure of the descendants who are still living, and it is possible to arrange the grave of the dead in a way that positively influences the fortune of the deceased’s descendants.118 119 Every element and ornamentation of the grave is meaningful and designed with great consideration. Each tombstone was distinct and a reflection of the wealth of the deceased and his family, as some tombstones appeared hand carved and ornate and even spanned several grave plots, whereas the simpler and smaller tombstones were devoid of ornamental elements.

The Bukit Brown cemetery was the largest Chinese cemetery outside of China and was the first that was not under the clan’s jurisdiction, so those buried came from all over China. The majority of the graves were either Teochew or Hokkien graves, and there is a lot of specificity in the design of the tomb that gives away their traditions that originated in different parts of China.120 121 According to the sketch diagrams, which are based off Lai’s diagrams (refer to Images 3.16 and 3.17), the tombs have different types of inscriptions and it was not atypical for the deceased to have designed and planned his own burial while he was alive.122 Many of the graves show their connection to China and would usually include their birthplace, reflecting the deceased’s allegiance to China. Some tombs do not indicate the date of death based on the Gregorian calendar, but rather the number of years from the formation of the Republic of China—the latter reflects the political inclination of the deceased as well as his virtues and how he wanted to be remembered. As a relic of the deceased, the tomb is usually also decorated with carvings of objects such as scrolls and peony flowers.123 124 The decorative elements are distinctive and liberties had been given to the design of the gravestone as long as it fit in the purchased plot.

118 Tan and Yeoh, The “Remains of the Dead”.
119 Tong, Chinese Death Rituals in Singapore, 126.
120 Teochew or Chaozhou are a group of people from Chaoshan in the eastern part of Guangdong, China. They speak their own Chinese dialect similarly known as Teochew. Teochew is still spoken as a Chinese dialect in some households in Singapore.
121 Hokkien are a group of people from the southeastern part of Fujian in Southeast China. Hokkien is also a Chinese dialect that is spoken widely in Southeast Asia.
122 Drawings adapted form Lai Chee Kien’s illustrations for Singapore Heritage Society in 2013.
123 Scrolls were a symbol of education and knowledge. Most of those who chose scrolls to be used in the design of their tomb were scholars and poets.
124 Peonies are known as the “king” of flowers in Chinese culture and in art, it represents royalty and wealth.
The use of decorative elements on the tombstone is a way to display the wealth of the deceased and his/her family. Some tombs in Bukit Brown, for example, were decorated with “Peranakan-style” tiles, also known as majolica tiles (refer to Image 3.18). These ceramic tiles were mainly used in homes, especially in traditional shop houses in Singapore, and were very popular among wealthy Peranakans. These tiles were expensive and generally had to be imported from Britain, Germany, or Belgium. Another way to show wealth was to have statues of Sikh guards guarding the grave (refer to Image 3.19). Several tombs in Bukit Brown are adorned with a pair of Sikh statues, indicating that the deceased had been wealthy and important enough to have servants and guards. Unlike the Western head stone, the Chinese tombstone is placed at the foot of the body and the body is buried behind in a mound. This different orientation allows mourners and family to bai/pray to the tombstone, and for an altar to be placed in front where food and offerings can be laid out (refer to Image 3.20). During my visit, I noticed that food offerings like sweets and rice are placed on the altar before the tombstone, as well as on the side for the tu di gong altar, if the grave is large enough to accommodate it.

![Image 3.15](image-url)

Overgrowth covering the tombs in Bukit Brown Cemetery.

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125 They are commonly referred to as “Peranakan tiles” because the Peranakans in Singapore took a liking to these majolica tiles in the earlier part of the twentieth century. The term “Peranakan” is Malay for “local born”. Also known as “Straits Chinese”, Peranakan refers to people of mixed Chinese and Malay/Indonesian heritage who were born in the British-controlled Straits Settlements that included Singapore, Penang, and Malacca.

126 Based on my visit to Bukit Brown Cemetery on 7 September 2019, guided by the Heritage Singapore.


128 The British brought over Sikhs who were known for their military skills, warrior qualities and loyalty. Following Singapore’s independence from the British, the Sikh guards were employed by the wealthy Chinese as personal and property guardians.

129 The Tudigong is the God of the Earth, and is respected and revered for being the God who oversees the burial ground, as mentioned in Part 1.
Image 3.16
Diagram of a Teochew Tomb. (Drawings adapted from Dr. Lai Chee Kien’s illustrations for Singapore Heritage Society, 2013)

Image 3.17
Diagram of a Hokkien Tomb. (Drawings adapted from Dr. Lai Chee Kien’s illustrations for Singapore Heritage Society, 2013)
Image 3.18

A tomb in Bukit Brown adorned with ceramic majolica tiles. These tiles, which were likely imported from Europe, were known to be expensive and a symbol of wealth.

Image 3.19

A tomb in Bukit Brown of a wealthy Hokkien man who made his fortune trading opium. His tomb is guarded by a pair of Sikh guardian statues. This is one of the most prominent tombs in Bukit Brown because it is the only one with painted stone statues of the Sikh guards. Both the faces of the guards are actually distinctively different, suggesting that they could be modeled after the actual guards of the deceased.
An example of a tomb in Bukit Brown with food offerings left on the altar. Abundant offerings can be mainly spotted during the Qing Ming Festival. (Image from Jennifer Lim.\textsuperscript{130})

The architecture of the grave has changed drastically from the graveyard to the columbaria. The Chinese graveyard is generally visited at least once a year, typically during the \textit{Qing Ming} festival, when families would offer food and joss sticks and burn paper money to their deceased ancestor.\textsuperscript{131, 132} There is typically a festive atmosphere, and sometimes the food placed by the family may include roast meats and a whole suckling pig. The family would later consume the food left on the altar after they are done with the prayer rituals. These traditions and rituals have largely changed since graveyards were removed, and more Singaporeans are opting to be cremated due to higher burial plot prices and the time limit imposed on the burial plots by the 1998 Burial Policy. Columbaria buildings have an abundance of niches but lack the horizontal surface of the altar, so the same rituals cannot be performed. The size of the niche slabs is standardised in all government columbaria. Ornamentations on columbarium niche slabs are limited by this standard, which measures about 9 inches and 9


\textsuperscript{131} The Qing Ming Festival falls on the third day of the third month of the lunar calendar.

inches, leaving very limited room to display decorative elements. Typically, the niche slabs are made from a marble tile inscribed with the deceased’s name, date of birth, date of death, and an epitaph such as: “Remembered by her family as a loving wife and doting mother.” For Christians, the inscription would sometimes include a biblical phrase. Limitations to the size of the niche slab mean that relics of the tomb are no longer avenues for showing class and wealth, let alone political or religious inclinations.

Niche sizes typically come in two sizes: single-urn niches (9 inch by 9 inch by 9 inch), or slightly wider niches that can fit up to three or four urns. The plaques that cover each niche are either made of marble or quartz in black or white, but otherwise they look completely identical from a distance. Because the plaques’ shiny surfaces have not been exposed to weathering, they do not reflect the age of the niche. In the Mandai Columbarium, the niches are grouped into “blocks” with niches facing both lengths. The niches on each side are stacked in 6 rows, with about 15 niches on each row. The linearity of the design results in the niches that are reminiscent of the individual flats of a HDB slab block—here, the way of dying is constructed to be as homogenous as the way of life. Inside the columbaria, communal tables are used to place offerings, but most of the time, the tables are located on the outside of the buildings for fire safety reasons (refer to Image 3.21 and 3.23). These restrictions have totally eliminated the need to leave food offerings or the burning of paper and joss sticks since it can’t be performed directly in front of the remains of the deceased. On the right of each of the plaques is a metal tubular vase for the placement of only artificial flowers—the only form of “offering” allowed. The government-owned columbaria in Mandai also comes with policies that only allow artificial flowers to be used (the rationale from the informant from the National Environment Agency was that allowing real flowers would require maintenance and would have to be cleared). The size of the small tubular metal vases even limits the size of the artificial flowers, resulting in a homogeneous pattern of alternate niches and artificial flowers.

Image 3.21
Niches in Mandai Crematorium and communal tables outside the columbarium have replaced individual altars in front of Chinese omega-style grave stones. Food, candles, and joss sticks are placed on the communal tables (on the right). By consolidating the communal surfaces, the space is more easily maintained and kept clean—a very different scenario from having to hire tomb cleaners for each grave, as was required in the burial grounds.
The columbaria niches appear to bear a mocking resemblance to the HDB flats, with the same standardised and monolithic exteriors of a slab block that do not allow for any expression, thereby equalising the different social and ethnic classes. In many ways, the conditions of the ground have created a homogenous architecture for burials that is devoid of any religious, ethnic, or socioeconomic status specificity. This mass-produced architecture is practical not only in the sense that it is utilitarian and fulfils its goal to reduce land use for burials. The vertical cemetery of sorts is built ahead of demand, as if morbidly sitting empty like shelves, waiting for its residents from the HDB flats.

The columbarium buildings are built with large overhanging eaves and provide cross ventilation within each of the buildings. Spaces immediately outside the buildings are landscaped with local tropical plants and for Mandai, several large ponds are located along some of the buildings. From a distance, it is not clear what type of building it is—they could almost pass off as a housing estate to the unknowing. Mandai Columbarium has rows of niches that face each other while in Choa Chu Kang Columbarium, the rows of niches are separated into rooms (refer to Images 3.23 and 3.25). The separated rooms in Choa Chu Kang columbarium are lined up with an open walkway on one end—again, strikingly similar to the slab block plans of the older HDB flats built before 2012. As discussed in the previous chapter, this layout of common spaces in HDB blocks lent itself to reducing the appearance of any socio-economic disparity between neighbours; and in the Choa Chu Kang Columbarium, despite the radial layout of the facility from the central plaza, the rooms are all identical (refer to Image 3.24). In the Mandai Columbarium on the other hand, although the buildings appear different from the outside (some have red terracotta roof tiles like Chinese Pagodas), the layout of the interior is still identical regardless (refer to Image 3.22 and 3.23). Since the religious segregation of the columbarium niches into separate buildings is no longer practised, a mix of different religions and ethnicities are now found to be located within the same building, or even within the same “slab” of niches.

When comparing the directory and diagrammatic plans of the two government-built-and-run columbaria in Mandai and in Choa Chu Kang, the layout of both buildings resembles the maps of older HDB estates with slab blocks. The only exception is that the Choa Chu Kang Columbarium is designed like a park and the crematorium is not located on the same site as the columbarium, but located nearby instead, in a separate group of buildings arranged linearly, interconnected and served by multi-storey covered link ways. For Mandai Columbarium, the buildings are more spread out with a road network between the blocks. What is strikingly similar is the naming of the individual buildings. For both locations, buildings are named after flowers to avoid any reference to any religion or ethnicity (refer to Images 3.22 and 3.24). For Choa Chu Kang Columbarium, blocks are named after flowers and are alphabetically arranged, which seems like a frail attempt to alphabetise the blocks without appearing overly sterile or inhumane. The naming of the buildings for the columbarium buildings follows in the footsteps of the naming of roads in post-independent Singapore, when roads became difficult to name in order to avoid favouring any particular language group, and the pronunciation of road names in different languages further complicates the process. It appears that using names of flora species is intended to eliminate any naming complications, thus avoiding a difficult and sensitive minefield. This could imply that
there is an obvious attempt to erase any past racial and language prejudices that might still be present. Naming places has been a struggle to maintain the impression of racial harmony in Singapore. The following section will focus on how the difficulties in officially naming places were mitigated by creating names in different official languages while also including generic English names.

Image 3.22
A plan sketch of the Mandai Crematorium and Columbarium facility.
Image 3.23
Communal tables for offerings at Mandai Columbarium

Image 3.24
A plan sketch of buildings at the Choa Chu Kang Columbarium facility.
Upon assuming political power in 1959, the PAP government instituted English as the language of public administration, commerce, and industry as it would provide the most direct and efficient path towards gaining technological and scientific knowledge that is essential to modern economy. English was also taught as the first language of instruction in all education institutions. The reason for the use of the English language was because of the government’s ideological emphasis on open competition in the economy—the success of Singapore as a new nation was dependent on its financial success. As English increasingly became the main language in school, at home, at work, and in public places, unavoidably, there was a progressive general decline in the population’s competency in the other three official “mother tongue” languages. Making English the first language in schools sparked reactions against the “Westernisation” of young Singaporeans. The process of re-naming streets in Singapore after its independence reflected a similar process, though it was not as

134 Race languages like Mandarin, Malay and Tamil languages are officially called “mother tongues”.
straightforward and linear. With English being the first language taught in schools and appointed the designated language of instruction and business, there was also a deliberate intention to selectively erase parts of Singapore’s colonial history. At the same time, it proved difficult to find an appropriate balance to retain some of the indigenous Malay language while also appeasing the other language groups.136

The naming of streets shows how the ground possesses the symbolic potential to be an apparatus to foster a sense of belonging. Kong and Yeoh explained that when Singapore was part of the British administration, most street names commemorated European military officers, public servants, and individuals they deemed as “deserving” citizens who have contributed significantly to public work.137 Post-independence, one of the projects in which the new government was invested was the fostering of a local identity and a sense of place through a rewriting of the everyday landscape. Changes in street-naming policies clearly reflected these imperatives.138 The opportunity to rename streets was also in itself an opportunity to decide which parts of history to keep and which parts to leave out of the collective Singapore memory. In 1967, policies and guidelines were laid down to guide the decisions of the Street-Naming Advisory Committee who were instructed to steer away from British names and to give priority to local Singaporean names.139 140 141 Preference was also given to using Malay names as it was the language spoken by the indigenous people of Singapore. Wherever English names were to be used, they are meant to reflect the history of that location or other points of interest in Singapore’s history.142

As Kong and Yeoh explained, that while a majority of the street names of colonial origins remained inscribed in the landscape, post-independence era produced a whole vocabulary of indigenous toponyms that not only drew inspiration from local surroundings but also substituted the words “street” and “lane” for the Malay equivalent “jalan” and “lorong”.143 Other Malay words seen most commonly are the names of places that include the word “bukit” which means “hill”. Large HDB housing estates such as Bukit Timah and Bukit Batok have Malay names, although the origins of these names are not completely known and merely speculated.144 Bukit Brown

136 According to the Constitution of Singapore, the national language of Singapore is a Malay even though majority of Singaporeans are not ethnically Malay or speak the Malay language (Bahasa Melayu). Malay being named the national language is a symbolic role as the Malay people are historically and constitutionally recognized as the indigenous peoples of Singapore and that it is the Singapore government’s duty to protect and preserve the Malay language and heritage. 137 According to Lily Kong and Brenda S. A. Yeoh, Farrer Road was named after a municipal president and Onraet Road was named after an inspector-general of police while Owen Road after the secretary of the Cricket Club. 138 Kong and Yeoh, The Politics of Landscapes in Singapore: Construction of Nation (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 118–130. 139 The Committee was appointed by the Minister of Finance in February 1967. 140 Minutes of Meeting of the Advisory Committee on the Naming of Roads and Streets, 14 March 1967. 141 As cited by Kong and Yeoh, The Politics of Landscapes in Singapore, 118–130. 142 Kong and Yeoh, The Politics of Landscapes in Singapore, 128. 143 Kong and Yeoh, The Politics of Landscapes in Singapore, 118–130. 144 According to HDB, Bukit Batok means granite hill (“Batok” being derived from the Malay word for granite – “batu”) while Bukit Timah translates to tin-bearing hill – although it is speculated that it was misinterpretation of the words “Bukit Temak” which refers to a hill of temak trees. Temak trees is the common name for Shorea roxburghii – a tree which was introduced to Singapore in the 1960s (information based on Housing Development Board and National Parks Board).
Cemetery was named after a British merchant, George Henry Brown, who was owner of the hill. As such, “Bukit Brown” merges both Malay and English into the name of the cemetery. But before the opening of Bukit Brown Cemetery in 1922, the municipal government needed more land to accommodate Chinese burials and hence acquired part of the Hokkien “Ong” clan cemetery, or Seh Ong Cemetery. The hill on which Seh Ong Cemetery was located was known to the Chinese at the time as Kopi Sua (kopi is “coffee” in Malaya and sua translates to “hill” in Hokkien). When the municipal government opened Bukit Brown Cemetery, it was simply officiated as “Bukit Brown Municipal Cemetery”. Because of this, the cemetery is now better known as “Bukit Brown Cemetery” as opposed to the lesser known Seh Ong Cemetery, revealing that the renaming of a place often affects the telling of its history.

Although the newly independent state attempted to introduce a wider vocabulary of Malay toponyms, this sentiment was not shared by the large majority of the population who were Chinese dialect-speaking inhabitants of the housing estates. They thought some of the new street names were difficult to pronounce or others sounded inauspicious. Consequently, the street names required modifications. As cited by Kong and Yeoh, according to the minutes of meeting of the committee, developers of private housing estates and residents all protested against the Malay street names that were said to be difficult to pronounce and requested for their English names to be reinstated. Because of this, a new policy was introduced in 1968, stating that street names should “reflect the multi-lingual and multi-racial” context of Singapore; these names must also be easy to pronounce and easily translated to other official languages. For example, an address of a block of public housing flats might read as: Block 154 Toa Payoh, Lorong 2—the address is written in the English alphabet but Toa Payoh is the phonetic translation from the Chinese Hokkien dialect for “large swamp”, and Lorong is Malay for “lane”.

There are multiple references to different languages and dialects within a single address and this would form the lexicon of the community. These negotiations in the process of marking the ground shows how street names are an integral part of place making; not only do they mark out a place, they also provide clues of its history (and what should be left out or forgotten from the rhetoric), and ultimately contribute to people’s engagement with their own heritage in the everyday landscape. Yeoh and Kong concluded that the naming of places is critical in constructing a nation: while the state was also altering the names of the place, they were also re-writing history. In what Porteous had termed “topocide”, changing the name of a place is as powerful as the complete obliteration of the place itself, and the memory of the place and the events that took place from the nation’s

147 It is speculated that the name was derived from the coffee plantations from a nearby site in Mount Pleasant. For more information, please see Susan Tsang, Discover Singapore: The city’s history & culture redefined (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2007), 19.
149 The official languages in Singapore are English, Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil.
This naming of places simultaneously involved the inclusion of all races and represented an opportunity to showcase multiracialism as part of the national identity.

The reason why British Colonial names were removed as street names (only a selected few remain that were deemed important to Singapore’s history) was that the state, represented by the naming committee, wanted to erase the imagery of Singapore’s colonial period. It can be debated however, that the names of indigenous flora and fauna were given by British botanists during the colonial period. During Singapore’s colonial history, the Singapore Botanic Gardens was an important node for development in Singapore.\textsuperscript{152} Situated along Napier Road and Cluny Road where many of the Colonialists resided, the garden was initially conceived to acclimatise foreign plants but it soon expanded and began to document plants that were indigenous to Singapore and the Southeast Asia region.\textsuperscript{153} Drayton argues that the knowledge of nature “would allow for the best possible use of resources” – proving that the site of the botanic gardens played a role in the experimentation of economic profits in the modern world (as discussed in Part 1).\textsuperscript{154} These colonial gardens that were scattered around the world were grounds that were critical in collecting plants for science—which was an important component of imperialism. The use of the common English names of flora and fauna, therefore, might not favour any particular racial group (Chinese, Malay or Indian) but less explicitly reverts to the previous issues of linking road names (as well as sections of the columbaria in Choa Chu Kang and Mandai) with Singapore’s colonial history.

**Myth of Racial Harmony**

Enforcing the impression of racial harmony in Singapore, as well as many other nations with populations that are racially diverse, is not only critical but also problematic. This thesis acknowledges that race and socioeconomic classes are deeply entangled issues. Not only does race ensue other factors like language and religion, it also has an impact on socioeconomic disparities associated with racial profiles. The different races are disproportionately stratified into socioeconomic classes, and racial bias in income inequality is prevalent in Singapore. Despite the fact that Malays are the indigenous people of Singapore, economic research shows Malays form the lowest societal strata in terms of income distribution.\textsuperscript{155} \textsuperscript{156} The consequence of racial

\textsuperscript{151} Kong and Yeoh, *The Politics of Landscapes in Singapore*, 129.
\textsuperscript{152} In 1830s, Thomas Oxley re-established the Singapore Botanic Gardens. The name of one of the nearby roads—Oxley Road, named after Thomas Oxley—still remains and retains the same name.
\textsuperscript{155} This is also known as the “Malay Problem”.
stratification appears to pose a threat to social harmony and stability. However, racial stratification amplified by the practice of racial labelling is problematic.

The practice of racial classification can be traced back to the first census conducted in 1824 when Singapore was still a British Colony. This was used by the British municipal authorities to assign residential districts to respective ethnic groups and to split labour along ethnic lines. This practice of labelling and grouping ethnic groups as part of colonisation gave the British municipal government more power to manage the population. At the same time, it may also appear that in order to preserve communal harmony, it was crucial to keep the ethnic groups separated. This is based on the assumption that groups of people with similar backgrounds, ethnicities, and cultural practices would lend to less conflict between neighbours. However, the classification and labelling with the CMIO model today serves to break apart any racial enclaves by distributing its residents evenly across the public estates and neighbourhoods instead. Regrettfully, the rigid CMIO model glosses over the diversity of Singapore, which has evolved over the last 195 years as a result of mixed marriages and immigration. Mainly, the Singapore-born Chinese find very little in common with the new Chinese immigrants on an identity level. There have also been concerns that being grouped under the broad category of “O”, or “Others”, is dehumanising and ignores the diverse and rich heritage of those who do not fit squarely fit into the Chinese, Malay, or Indian groups. The CMIO classification model is not only potentially constraining but also perpetuates racial stereotypes. The model creates segregation and expectations about how to live one’s identity as a member of that particular racial group. However, according to a sociology survey and study by Mathews, who defends the CMIO model as it forms important identity markers, some Singaporeans do in fact associate national identity with these core ethnic groups.

The CMIO model in itself is still problematic although its intentions are to evenly mix and distribute the racial demographic across the island. Beyond the CMIO ratios, the conditions of the ground have created opportunities for housing policies and design to perpetuate the ideals and image of racial harmony into the ways of life for its population. The design of the void deck, for instance, is critical as it replaces the space that is typically an extension of the traditional home. Traditional homes in the villages had ample space to extend activities and events, weddings and funeral wakes beyond its rooflines, and sometimes beyond property lines (i.e., onto the roads in front of the home). Under public housing policies, these events are now relegated to the void deck. This common public space not only serves as a venue for the events, but it also serves as a showcase

for spectators of all the different races. The void deck has taken very private events for the family (especially funeral wakes) and turned them into public spectacles—every Singaporean is now made aware of how other racial groups and cultures celebrate their weddings and mourn their dead. An event belonging to the private realm being shaped into a publicly performative one could also have catalysed the cross-adoption of rituals and traditions between different religions. The similar layout used in the funeral wakes of the different religions are uncanny but provide familiarity and efficiency among the void deck columns.

Due to a lack of ground space, a greater number of Singaporean burials have been exhumed and cremated, and more Singaporeans have chosen cremation over burials. This drastically impacts certain practices, particularly for the Chinese, who traditionally worship tu di gong, or the God of the Earth as the protector of the cemetery. Instead, most of these traditions have been lost with the development of the columbarium and crematorium complexes. The design of the columbarium has regularised and formalised by the layout of the place of rest. Furthermore, food and candle offerings have become so limited that they have lost significance among the Chinese. The specificity of the tombs and their designs cannot be replicated in the smaller, more simplified government-run columbarium niches. Not only are the different religions becoming increasingly homogenised in their funeral practices, the different dialect groups in the Chinese community have also lost their specificity. The consequence of the conditions of the grounds has led to this loss of complexity for each ethnic group. And, since nationalism extends the scope of ethnic community, citizens of various motherlands and ethnicities must be naturalised in order for the nation to construct a national identity.161

This process of naturalisation would include the ideas about how all ethnicities are treated equally and thus are equal. Through the design of the crematorium and columbarium complexes as well as the design of the HDB void deck, specificities of each ethnicity and religion are reduced, which also reduces the differentiation between practices and rituals. The void deck and the crematorium and columbarium complexes have become the instruments of naturalising its citizens, while also being structures that are unique to Singapore’s landscape. The naturalisation of different religions and ethnicities is essential to the myth of racial harmony, which is held together by the deliberate micromanagement of ethnic relations and carefully crafted policies. Instead of the co-existence of myriad backgrounds and ethnicities, the racial harmony sought after in Singapore is one in which the differences are removed and the lines between ethnic and religious differences are obscured. With several cultures, religions, and races coexisting on the same island and a relatively short history as a nation, fostering a unifying and identifiable Singaporean identity has proven challenging. Terence Chong claims that, “Singapore has had to forfeit much of the traditional ingredients that go into the formulation of nation and national culture.”162 This difficulty, combined with Singapore’s need to portray itself as an adaptable city that attracts economic growth, has made defining national identity more difficult. Land scarcity then becomes a double-

edged sword, allowing for the development of policies to address space constraints. Housing policies and burial policies have inevitably altered the people’s way of life on different scales, from housing units and complexes, the interior of the flats, the planning of neighbourhoods, to the design of burial policies, crematoriums, and void decks. As a result, the modes of production of the built environment have altered rituals of living and dying, creating an efficient system which is to be equated with the progress that forms part of Singapore's distinct national identity.
Part 4

The Myth of Progress

Progress and the Family

I was determined that our householders should become home owners, otherwise we would not have political stability. My other important motive was to give all parents whose sons would have to do national service a stake in Singapore their sons had to defend. ...I believe this sense of ownership was vital for our new society which had no deep roots in common historical experience.¹²

Lee Kuan Yew, Third World to First: The Singapore Story 1965-2000
Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew (2000), pp. 117

The social policies that most significantly leveraged on the national public housing programme are family policies.³ In Singapore’s Founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew’s memoir, he expressed how the parents and child relationship, for instance, is critical for the political stability of the nation. This further reflects the key role of the family in the system. Capitalising on the family as the last “natural” social institution that can hold an individual in a geographical place through a combination of emotional ties and obligations, the government made it their focus to ensure that Singaporeans would have a sense of belonging and ownership to defend the country.⁴ Returning to Singapore’s national pledge, it can be inferred that there is one singular ambition of the nation.

We, the citizens of Singapore,

Pledge ourselves as one united people,

Regardless of race, language or religion

To build a democratic society,

Based on justice and equality

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¹ National Service (NS) is the national policy in Singapore, mandating by law that all male citizens and male second-generation permanent residents have to serve a period of service in the uniformed services. NS was first instated in 1967 to help build Singapore’s military forces after its independence. The service period is usually about two years in active duty as full-time servicemen, following which, the men transition to an operationally-ready reservist state until the age of 40. During this time, servicemen will be recalled for a yearly training for about two weeks at a time. Enlistment typically begins around the age of 16 to 20.
⁴ Chua, Liberalism Disavowed, 84.
So as to achieve **happiness, prosperity and progress for our nation**.  

The self-affirming messages of “happiness, prosperity and progress” in the pledge implies a unified national ambition, but this ambition is in fact a myth in a broader sense. As Barthes points out, myths are “dressed up” to render what is historical or constructed into something that appears natural. In this chapter, we will explore the various ways in which policies sought to persuade the citizens and compel the idea of the family as a “natural” institution. According to Chua, this shift of responsibilities from the family to the state is framed within the ideology of filial piety that is based on Confucianism and is applied to most cultures across Southeast Asia. In Confucianism, filial piety is a virtue of respect for one’s parents, elders, and ancestors. This respect extends to showing love and support to elders and also to display sorrow for their sickness and death. These obligations would require families to remain close and also for children to provide financial support to elderly parents. In this context, the public housing programme becomes a foundational institutional support in the government’s family policies. We can glean from the above excerpt from Lee’s memoir that, in addition to the family’s relation to the state, service and duty are woven into the conditions of home ownership. Through design, policies, and the media, the ambitions of the nation would encroach on individual ambitions and family policies constructed by institutions would invade the space of the domestic home. Through the study of plans of the HDB flats and the examination of the state policies, the rest of the thesis will look at how the ideology of the family has been shaped; it will also problematise these methods of unifying individual and national ambitions.

This part of the thesis will go on to tie in the ideas of the “symbolic” archetypical/paradigmatic family with the concepts of national defence and security, which are much associated with the traditional home. By lining national defence and “service” with the ideal of home, there is a sense of responsibility to the nation that is similar to the sense of filialness to one’s parents or elders, and the responsibility of protecting one’s family. While National Service in itself is a tool to create the sense of belonging and rootedness, the nation has used the metaphor of home to its advantage by creating the imagery of the “nation” as “home” for the citizens to participate in its defence. This is the conflation of the domestic and the national. In the excerpt above, there is another inversion: the “stakeholder” is not the actual owner of the ground, but the homeowner bound by the restrictions of the state-created homeownership laws and conditions. Home, in this case, presents itself as stake and an asset that incentivises individuals and families to protect the nation. However, the penalty for eligible citizens who fail to complete their mandatory national duty is a jail sentence, after which they are forced into completing their National Service—this devalues the home as “stake” or leverage since one is obligated by law to serve their national duty. The ground, and the home, in this case, manifest in the system of the juridical and

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5 This version of the national pledge was largely drafted by then Minister for Foreign Affairs S. Rajaratnam in February 1966 as a way to promote national loyalty and consciousness among Singaporeans.  
8 This is based on the Confucian Classic of *Filial Piety*, a book that was written around the Qin-Han period. The book is historically the backbone to Confucian role ethics in Chinese and East Asian culture.
although there is intention to view the home as asset or stake, it sometimes proves to fail when law obligates certain actions. The condition of the ground, however, has yielded planning policies and designs, and thereby, forms and ways of life—making the rule inseparable from life. Agamben, in *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life*, examines the relationship between life and law life and obligation. He discusses, through the comprehension of monastic life, how laws and policies produce norms, which, in their turn, provide “veritable standards of behaviour”—thus defining the conduct of life. The thesis argues that in Singapore, law and policy requires people to serve their national duties to meet national ambitions—these ambitions transcend the nation, and become inseparable from individual life. Parallels can also be drawn between national duty and religious duty where liturgy calls for priests to live in service.

**Ways of Life of the Family**

The concept of the HDB system has altered ways of life for the family—social rituals and relationships have been transformed through the standardisation of the home. As discussed previously, the Bukit Ho Swee fire of 1961, which broke out in the squatter settlement that killed 4 and left 16,000 people homeless, was the catalyst that created urgency in the setting up and formalisation of the public housing programme. This history of the 1961 fire has long been used as an excuse to instigate the need for the urgent resettling of people into HDB flats. An initial obstacle that the state faced in starting the public housing programme was the clearing of slums and squatter settlements. These were deemed unhygienic and potential threats for future fires, but more importantly, the squatter settlements needed to be cleared in order for the state to gain access to land for the construction of homes and supporting infrastructures. This was typical in most urban renewal programmes around the world that saw the clearing of slums—for example, in Britain, four million people were removed from the slums between 1930 and 1939, a further 600,000 dwelling units were demolished between 1955 and 1965, and another million homes were cleared by 1976. However, gentrification of the areas were usually carried out by private developers, leaving families whose homes were cleared to be undercompensated and left with even less resources to find replacement homes. For Singapore, the state took control of the gentrification process and instead, placed the priority of housing the families and replacing homes over incentivising and making profits in the process. In the 1960s urban renewal programme, homes were not only subject to state policies imposed by the housing authorities, they were also restricted by the architectural design and urban planning of the towns and neighbourhoods. Residents were subjected to the ideologies embedded into the design of the flats, the layout of the spaces for dwelling, as well as the architecture of the estates. It was difficult to break away from the monotony of standardised housing because the structural elements of the high-rise public housing structures did not allow residents the flexibility to adapt the interior spaces to their rituals and ways of life.

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Based on unrecorded and unconfirmed sources, when people were first displaced into the new high-rise HDB flats, the older residents who had never been more than a few feet above the ground were extremely hesitant. They questioned the structural integrity of their new high-rise dwellings and worried about their homes collapsing while they were asleep. These older people were said to have spent their first few nights sleeping at the public playgrounds and open footpaths on the ground floor where they felt the safest. This already is an indication that the people were forced to move from the villages into completely foreign environments of the new HDB high-rise housing and estates. If we compare the diagrams of the traditional Chinese and Malay homes, which were typical of villages or kampungs in Singapore before the implementation of the public housing flats (refer to Image 4.1), the diagrams show variations where the bedrooms of the family members are ordered differently: the traditional Malay home shows that the bedrooms are located between the living room / reception area (serambi) and the kitchen (dapur) at the back of the house; the traditional Chinese home, on the other hand, locates the bedrooms in the front of the house, with an ancestral altar facing the entrance placed between the bedrooms (the kitchen is, likewise, located at the back of the house). Both traditional Malay and Chinese homes (making up the majority among the ethnic groups in Singapore), are vastly different from each other. Traditionally, the Malay house is elongated and its layering of spaces is a reflection of the hierarchy of the uses, with the more private spaces of the home at the back of the house; for the Chinese, houses are traditionally quite rectilinear or squarish, with bedrooms located at both ends. The other important element of the home to note is the placement of the altar in the Chinese home, typically in front of the wall and facing the same direction as the main entrance of the home (refer to Image 4.2 and 4.3).

13 Chua mentioned in his book, *Political Legitimacy and Housing* that the middle-aged and elderly initially also had to overcome the fear of using the elevators. Chua, *Political Legitimacy and Housing*, 60.
Image 4.1

Floor plans comparing the traditional Malay House, traditional Chinese house, and old HDB flats built in the 1970s (further juxtaposition with new flats built after 2015).\textsuperscript{14,15} Layout in the Chinese house is based on diagrams by Chua.\textsuperscript{16}

An image of a traditional Chinese house built in the late-1940s that belonged to my Father’s family in Kampung Payoh Lai in the north-east region of Singapore. It was demolished in the late-1960s to make way for a new HDB housing estate. (Image from Anthony Goh and Joseph Sng.)

\textsuperscript{14} For reference, “Rumah Ibu” in Malay translates to the Mother’s House and refers to the main section of the house where the bedrooms are located. “Serambi” is the front extension of the home that is used to receive guests—it translates to terrace or foyer. “Dapur” is the kitchen of the home.

\textsuperscript{15} Chua, Political Legitimacy and Housing, 103 (Figure 5.5). Showing a typical Malay house layout.

\textsuperscript{16} Chua, Political Legitimacy and Housing, 95 (Figure 5.2b). The drawing above is also made based on my father’s description of his family home in Payoh Lai, sometime between the 1950s and late-1960s. The village in Payoh Lai was predominantly occupied by Teochew families. After which, his family relocated to a terrace house in Kovan, another nearby neighbourhood in the north-east region of Singapore.
Image 4.2

Floor plan (far left) showing the placement of the Taoist/Buddhist family altar in a traditional Chinese House (based on diagrams by Chua Beng Huat).\(^{17,18}\) Compare this with the layout in old HDB flats and newer HDB flats.\(^9\)

\[\text{Typical location of the family altar in a Traditional Chinese House directly facing the main doorway.}\]

\[\text{Typical location of the family altar adapted in one of the earlier flats built in the 1970s, where the altar is also facing the main door.}\]

\[\text{Location for a family altar is problematic because the wall facing the entry way is a window therefore the altar is placed in a compromised location of the flat.}\]

\(^{17}\) Chua, *Political Legitimacy and Housing*, 95 (Figure 5.2b).

\(^{18}\) Like many Teochew’s living in Hougang, my paternal grandfather converted to Catholicism in the 1940s. Most other families living in the same village in Payoh Lai were either Taoists or Catholics. My father also described an interesting set-up of the family altar: Firstly, the altar was positioned like a Taoist altar, facing the main door. Red candles, black and white photos of deceased family, and Chinese inscriptions (similar to that of a Taoist ancestral altar) were combined with a crucifix, images of the Virgin Mary, and a bottle of Holy water (similar to that of a Catholic altar). These objects shared the space of the Goh family altar.

\(^9\) Descriptions of the locations of the altar are taken from web forums. It can be inferred that Buddhist and Taoist altars share similar geomancy (*Feng Shui*) rules. Amulet Forums, Altar Position (web forum), June 4, 2013 (accessed on September 14, 2020): available from https://amuletforum.com/threads/altar-position.34061/.
In the earlier HDB flats, the elongated plan, although resembling the layout of the traditional Malay family, did not have the same hierarchy of spaces. Interestingly, the layout does accommodate a Chinese family altar. So as seen in the earlier HDB flats, elements of both the traditional Malay and Chinese houses are reflected in the plan, indicating that families, regardless of race and ethnicity, needed to fit their different rituals and practices into the same generic interior layout of a high-rise HDB flat. As marked up in Image 4.2, in the older HDB flats, the Taoist and Buddhist altar is typically placed outside the kitchen and against the wall dividing the living room and the kitchen. However, the placement of the altar becomes problematic for newer designs of HDB flats built after 2015. As the windows spanned the length of the living/dining rooms, the usual position of the altar—typically built up against the wall and facing the same direction as the main entrance—is compromised since it no longer has a spot for proper facing. This is just one example of how practices of the families are affected due to the interior design and layout of a HDB flat. This example also illustrates the high-rise condition that standardises the interiors of the flats, showing how one standard design of the interior can never meet the varied cultural needs of the whole population. While the diversity of cultural and religious customs and forms of living is not being considered in the process of standardising the interior, the principle of social equality is used to validate the production of these HDB flats. But beyond the immediate changes experienced by the family, the following policies which were eventually introduced shaped the state’s manifesto and the ideology of the ideal family.

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The Ideal Family Nucleus

A person’s performance depends on nature and nurture. These is increasing evidence that nature, or what is inherited, is the greater determinant of a person’s performance than nurture (or education and environment) ... The 1980 Census disclosed that whilst we have brought down birth rate, we have reduced it most unequally. The better educated the woman is, the less children she has. Ironically, she has the greater resources to provide her children with a better environment, nurturing and care ... If we continue to reproduce ourselves in this lopsided way, we will be unable to maintain our present standards. Level of competence will decline. Our economy will falter, the administration will suffer, and society will decline.21

Founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, National Day Rally Speech in 1983

In the controversial 1983 National Day Rally speech, new family ideals were propagated to sustain Singapore’s population. This speech and the policy, which was passed in 1983, reveals the elitism of the government that extols equal opportunity and meritocracy, contradicting the previously discussed images of socioeconomic and racial equality. It insinuates that the more educated the parents, the more children they should have. This shows the fluidity of the relationship between individual and national ideals. In fact, it is the individual’s responsibility as a citizen to participate in nation building, as the state has prescribed. The speech was controversial in several ways: firstly, the discursive powers of the state are used to articulate ideas about the respective roles of women and men in society—this is done by drawing boundaries around how men and women behave as citizens and how they behave within the family. From that excerpt of the speech, women, especially in reference to mothers, were being described as figures in a Census or just a collective or multitude. There are subtle non-physical boundaries that separate gender roles and what the roles mean to the nation and its motives. This also defines the roles of the woman or mother in the family. For the state, the new feature would be the innate value and resource of the individual, but mainly the couple, which determines their benefits and entitlements.22 The speech suggests that the role of the woman or mother is merely a child-bearing one, a “machine” that should be producing an “x” number of children, of which number depends on the woman’s level of education. And although there is an implication and even emphasis that the educated woman in question is likely to be working, the role of the mother is pre-assigned with the functions she represents to the family nucleus.

21 The 1983 National Day Rally speech has been so controversial that it has not been published or made available in the National Library. I am grateful that Dr Teo Yeo Yenn has shared her copy of the 1983 National Day Rally Speech transcript with me.

22 Teo Yeo Yenn, "No Economy, No Singapore: Weddings, Babies and the Development Project" (Ph.D. diss., Department of Sociology, University of California at Berkeley, 2005). Special thanks to Dr Teo for providing a copy of her thesis.
Housing policies favoured young “productive” families and gave priority to newly married couples. By encoding the social as a form of the economic domain, cost-benefit calculations and market criteria are applied to the decision-making processes within the family (which is seen as human capital). Secondly, the speech is controversial because of its implicit racial bias. The same census suggests that the average family size is related to the racial and ethnic backgrounds and socio-economic classes of the household. The dependency ratio, for Malay households, is generally higher at 39.9% compared to the 35.7% average of the other races.\(^{23}\) In addition to this, the average household income in Singapore is 7,214 Singapore Dollars but the average Malay household income is SGD 4,575.\(^{24}\) This data shows how socioeconomic status and race are inherently tied to family policies. The speech insinuates that Malay families are larger while having the least resources (household income)—a trend that needs to be corrected. This is an example of how family policy is unequally applied across the different socioeconomic classes and races. The suggestion of eugenic ideals not only turns against the less-educated individuals, it also discriminates against the Malay race, and as a matter of fact, contradicts the state’s emphasis on racial equality as discussed in the previous chapter.

The policies of family planning are closely linked with Singapore’s housing policies. The housing policies are largely in line with the manifesto set out by the Singapore government, which is to tackle Singapore’s problem of an ageing population. To tackle this problem, forming a new family nucleus is part of a pre-requisite for the entitlement to apply for a HDB flat. HDB qualification is dependent on the following: the applicant must be married or is intending to marry; the applicant is widowed or divorced with children; the applicant has living parents and siblings; or the applicant is orphaned with unmarried siblings.\(^{25}\) The enforcement of the minimal family nucleus forces applicants to comply with the national policies that extend control to regulate what one would assume to be an individual choice. The concepts of gendering the home and creating certain stereotypes have surfaced from these implicit ideals in the state’s policies. The pro-family social framework that guides the qualification of public housing also reveals a bias against the single-person household, single Singaporeans, and homosexuals, as they are not given priority (until they pass the age of 35, which is what the state considers to be beyond childbearing age) or any additional subsidies for public housing.\(^{26}\)

The family nucleus is an empty template that the state has created to inform and shape the people’s perception of the domestic realm. From the family policies, it is taken that in Singapore, a productive society is one where the nation is sustained by citizens who belong in families. It is assumed that couples and families are indicators of a stable and disciplined society—however, what is less obvious is how the policies that govern such a

\(^{23}\) AMP, Data taken from *Demographic Study on Singapore Malays* (accessed on December 17, 2019); available form https://www.amp.org.sg/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/12-Section-9_Demographic-Study.pdf.

\(^{24}\) From The Singapore Department of Statistics in a census taken in 2010.

\(^{25}\) It was also only recently that the topic of single unmarried parents under the age of 35 being allowed to apply for HDB flats came up.

population also serve a larger political and economic national agenda, conditioning the population to value traditional, heterosexual romantic relationships and the conviction that marriage and partnerships are expressions of happiness, prosperity, and progress.27

Duty to Home is Duty to the Nation

As discussed in Part 1 of the thesis, the state has always maintained the narrative that it is a small nation that needs to defend its territory from larger neighbouring nations, as well as internal threats and social unrests. In Singapore, where the population is small, there is a law that requires every able-bodied male citizen and permanent resident to undertake National Service for a minimum of two years after turning 18 or upon completing his studies (whichever comes earlier), with exemptions on medical grounds or other exceptional reasons.28 After serving for a minimum period of 1.5 years, every male is considered “operationally ready”, and is liable for reservist national service, up to the age of 40 (or 50 for commissioned officers). More than 350,000 men serving as operationally ready servicemen are assigned to reservist combat units, and another 72,500 men form the full-time national service and regular corps.29 Many of the National Service publicity and awareness campaigns use the domestic home to instil a sense of national responsibility, even persuading people to have children, particularly sons, who will eventually enlist in National Service to serve in the national defence. In this way, the nation is seen as the home and the government takes on the maternal role. By linking national defence and “service” to the nation (or home), there is a sense of responsibility to the nation that is similar to having a sense of filialness to one’s parents or elders and the responsibility of protecting one’s family. In interchanging the synonyms of nation and home, it relates the issues of the nation to the more personal of the domestic home by creating a sense of urgency via the association that national issues and national defence can and does closely affect the stability and security of one’s domestic home. The objective is to show the dependence of domestic security and safety on national security.

The nation and the home seem to be easily interchangeable in the language used by the nation-state to instil personal responsibility the state in the citizens. This concept is depicted in the Singapore comedy film, *Army Daze*.30 The feature-length film portrays the lives of a diverse group of characters during their first few months

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30 *Army Daze* is a Singaporean film that was completed in 1996. The comedy was written by Michael Chiang and directed by Ong Keng Sen and it was also made into a stage production in 2006. The film and screenplay are in “Singlish”, which is an English-based creole used in Singapore, of which vocabulary consists of words originating from Standard English, Malay, Hokkien, Mandarin, Cantonese, Teochew, and Tamil—and sometimes a compound of several of these languages.
in National Service, also known as the Basic Military Training (BMT) course.\textsuperscript{31} The movie reflects the multicultural Singaporean society through the extensive use of Singlish and main characters who come from various racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. National Service, in and of itself, also acts as an apparatus to cultivate the sense of belonging and rootedness to the nation. The nation used the metaphor of the home to its advantage by creating an imagery in which the “nation” is the “home”, and then by interchanging the terms to convince young men to participate in national defence enthusiastically. This is a conflation of the domestic and the national. The reversal occurs when the national activities of these men include domestic chores, thus domesticating these National Servicemen.

This practice is brought back to the gendering of the domestic and the duties that society deems feminine. The National Service men in Army Daze live in army barracks where everyone is expected to perform domestic tasks like cleaning or washing of living areas. The rituals and drills of cleaning and washing in the army barracks, not unlike regular chores in the domestic home, have the ability to tame us and make us predictable to other fellow human beings.\textsuperscript{32,33} According to Cooperman, cleaning satisfies an inner immediate need to transform the physical world. We therefore tidy and organise our environment in order to organise and structure our thoughts. The National Servicemen are required to perform domestic tasks like cleaning and washing that are considered to be in the domain of mothers and wives (according to traditional gender role beliefs). These chores and duties that maintain hygiene within the army barracks also domesticate an institutional space. This transformation is reminiscent with the novel, The Longing of Women\textsuperscript{34}, in that it not only critically examines families and the transitions men go through after marriage, but it also shows how similar it is when men in Singapore are enlisted in the army and placed in a different environment where they no longer can rely on their mothers.

In Michel Foucault’s Discipline and Punish, the regiments of the army force its subjects to perform drills that have a disciplinary effect through repetition of mundane instructions. When the National Servicemen are first enlisted and sent to their barracks, they must learn a new routine to order their new “home”, which, despite the fact that the army barrack is an institutional space, is turned into their domestic abode. The routines also help to keep order and serve as a form of discipline. This is well-depicted in the film, Army Daze. In the case of National Service, it is not only a domestic metaphor used to compel young male citizens into fulfilling their “national duty”, but the national institutional space is also transformed to accommodate these men; this practice domesticates national space, and domestic chores are used as an instrument to discipline Singaporean men. At

\textsuperscript{31} The Basic Military Training is a rite of passage for National Service Men and focuses on physical training and basic weapon handling, but beyond soldiering skills, it is also a period for new recruits to be inducted into the military way of life and culture.
\textsuperscript{34} Marge Piercy, The Longing of Women (New York: Fawcette Columbine, 1994)
the start of Basic Military Training (BMT), parents are encouraged to see their sons off to camp. This is a familiar ritual that is synonymous with National Service. In *Army Daze*, families send their sons off in a tearful morning event because they won’t get to see their sons much until the end of the training. This practice is seen as a rite of passage for men maturing to serve their national duty. The camp is located on Pulau Tekong, an island off mainland Singapore. The see-off usually takes place in the Central Manpower Base (CPMB) facility on the mainland before young men are transported off to camp where they will stay for about 2.5 months. In the film, the overly concerned mother of the protagonist Malcolm worries about his safety and his ability to handle the rigorous training and discipline of military life. Having the family around on enlistment morning is a way to remind the newly enlisted National Servicemen that their families are the people they are defending. When the family is at the base, both the domestic and the national are present at the same time and the two entities are made to confront each other.

The National Day Parade that celebrates Singapore’s independence is also a time when the metaphors of the home are used as a recurrent theme. On August 9 each year, Singapore celebrates its National Day with the National Day Parade. The parade usually kicks off with a military parade and formal ceremonies, followed by dance formations, floats, a multimedia show, and fireworks. Every year, the military parade is a traditional staple of the parade and celebrations, involving The Singapore Armed Forces, Singapore Civil Defence Force, and Singapore Police Force. Alongside the forces, representatives and dignitaries from different unions and Ministries of the government, as well as student representatives of the different uniformed groups (like the Scouts, Red Cross, National Police Cadet Corps) march on the parade square led by the Parade Regimental Sergeant Major. The ceremony also includes the arrival of the President of Singapore with a 21-gun salute ceremony, *Marchpast* and *Flypast*. The National Day parade has always been a time when the National Armed Forces demonstrate their capabilities to a crowd of approximately 50,000 Singaporeans, an event that is also broadcasted live to the rest of the country. In addition, every National Day celebration is themed with a slogan and commissioned song that is composed and written specifically for the year’s celebrations. In 2006, the theme of the National Day Parade was “Our Global City, Our Home”. Like many other National Day celebrations, the use of the metaphor of the “home” persists. The recurring theme seeks to instil a sense of rootedness in its citizens. “Our Global City” can be seen as a contradiction in and of itself. The term “Global City” has come to mean that Singapore has achieved a global status in terms of communications, economic networking, and trade with other global cities of the world, such as London and New York. The strangeness of the outside then takes on a positive meaning when associated with the city; the ideas of globalisation come to mind. Around the period of 1995, Singapore began experiencing the urban phenomena of “Brain Drain”. By associating the outside with the home, the intention was to remind Singaporeans that the home is, in actuality,

35 The Parade Commander will command the Parade contingents to prepare for the *Marchpast*, before marching out of the Parade Grounds.

36 During the *Flypast*, the Air Force demonstrates stunts and formations in the military aircrafts and skydivers.

37 At the time of competitive economic conditions, the mass emigration of Singaporeans with technical skills and knowledge was a strain and was regarded as an economic cost to the nation.
not a single place or an entity, but rather their relationship and belonging to the nation. The meaning of home then takes on a different dimension—it is given mobility and refers to a sense of belonging rather than a geographical space.

Patriotic songs (also known as National Day songs) are another medium in which language is intentionally used to inculcate similar emotions associated with the domestic. Every year, these songs are played between programmes on national radio and television for a month leading up to Singapore’s National Day on August 9. As seen in the lyrics of the song, “Home” or “家”, written by Dick Lee in 1998 in celebration of Singapore’s 34th National Day:

This is home, truly / Where I know I must be
Where my dreams wait for me / Where that river always flows
This is home, surely / As my senses tell me
This is where I won’t be alone / For this is where I know it’s home.38

Lyrics from “Home”, written by Dick Lee and performed by Kit Chan

The use of the word “home” in the lyrics conjures up familiar associations. In this case, the term home merges the space of the domestic with the space of the nation; it represents both the domestic and the national. “Home” as a National Day song became so beloved that it was replayed yearly for 22 years until 2020. In the music video of Chan singing “Home”, she is depicted living overseas while she reminisces about her childhood in Singapore with her family.39 The video clearly implies her longing to return to Singapore. We also see images of her as a child and moving into a new family home with her parents and siblings—and while the visuals are of Chan’s domestic home, the lyrics in the background imply that Singapore is her “home, truly”. The narrative in this seemingly innocuous song is part of an attempt to counter the “Brain Drain” phenomena, reminding Singaporeans who are working overseas that Singapore is still where they belong. At one time, competitive economic conditions had led to the mass emigration of Singaporeans with technical skills and knowledge; this flow of human resources to other countries was regarded as a cost to the nation’s economy. The nation was worried that Singaporeans moving out of the country would eventually lose their sense of belonging to their nation, and that Singapore was slowly losing its citizens.

38 A rendition of Home performed by Kit Chan in 2015 (accessed on February 4, 2020); available from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3wXZYczZPsE.
In another patriotic song, “There’s No Place I’d Rather Be”, written by Jimmy Ye in 2007 and also performed by Kit Chan, the lyrics appear to be directed towards the issues of the “Brain Drain” phenomena and addresses the globalised citizens who are well-travelled to still long for their home (domestic) in Singapore. The song begins with “I’ve walked the streets of Cairo & Bombay / I’ve seen the neon signs on old Broadway” and reaches the chorus where it sings:

There’s no place I’d rather be / You’ll always be a part of me  
And even though I’ve roamed the world / It’s still my home I long to see.\(^{40}\)

Lyrics from “There’s No Place I’d Rather Be”, written by Jimmy Ye and performed by Kit Chan

In the lyrics, the context of “home” is used to compare the external/exterior (foreign) with the home/interior (domestic and local), and portrays a sentimental attachment to Singapore, similar to the attachment that one would feel towards his actual home. The other verses of the song continue to describe the writer/performer having seen the rest of the world, from the Eiffel Tower to the Thames and the River Kwai, but ultimately still longing to return “home” to the nation. These patriotic songs demonstrate the conscious and deliberate use of the term as a metaphor to inculcate an affiliation to the nation. The loosely interchangeable use of the two terms “home” and “nation” then becomes an invasion of the language of domestic home. The physical architecture of the house separates the space inside and the space outside the house; it designates separation between the space occupied by the inhabitants (the inside/interior) and the space of the outsider (the outside/exterior). The lyrics in both songs were written as if a Singaporean who is physically outside is romancing the thoughts of being on the inside, like an outsider looking into the space of the house (the nation) with a deep sense of longing. The architectural language in this case is an apparatus that the nation uses to infiltrate the people’s minds and hijack their ideas of the domestic in order to create the same longing and affiliation to the nation.\(^{41}\)

Another factor contributing to the blurring of boundaries of the metaphor is that Kit Chan’s performance of the song is consistent with the fact that the home is conceptualised primarily as a feminine domain. The nation-state is so pervasive that it has also changed the habits and rituals within the domestic. In theory and literature, domesticity and the gendered role of women are inextricably linked.\(^{42}\) The home as a space of maternal care is the founding concept of “femininity as a space which engenders, nurtures, and gives without possessing and receiving”\(^{43}\). Irigaray argues that the body of the woman has represented space that has been used by men as the

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\(^{40}\) NDPeeps, “There’s No Place I’d Rather Be,” EQ Music, lyrics by Jimmy Ye, performed by Kit Chan, July 2007, Youtube video. 3:04, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3wXZYcZPzE.


material of their temporality.\textsuperscript{44} Similarly, the subjects of the home supports the structures of space and power, just like how cities and nations are structured and governed by the masculine discourse.\textsuperscript{45} This is proof of the first signs of the domestic and nationhood having a share or mirrored relationship, where the “home” of the nation houses the actual domestic house, while the dynamics of the home simulate that of the nation at the same time.\textsuperscript{46} The nation-state is so pervasive that it has also changed the habits and rituals within the domestic.

Returning to the excerpt from Lee’s \textit{Third World to First: The Singapore Story}, the event where the parents send their son off to military service is symbolic for the coming-of-age of their son, but it also reiterates the reasons for defending the nation—that their family and home is at stake, and defending the nation is the same as defending their family as a man who is of age. The CMPB website lists enlistment instructions on the main page with the title “Preparing Our Nation’s Sons”, with the phrase suggesting that the state views sons or men of age as members of the nation and able-bodied men capable of defending the state.\textsuperscript{47} National service is an example of how the relationship between the nation and the domestic becomes very complex. It is not just an extension of one realm to another, it is a complex entanglement of the two. The language of home is used by the nation to convince its citizens to behave in a certain way in order to achieve its nationalistic objectives. Through language, the figurative space of the nation and the private space of the family are the same thing. This, however, becomes paradoxical as the nation is infiltrates the “real” home, the very home that they try to associate with security and solidarity.

\textbf{Family in the Media}

The image of the HDB flat is also been used in the media to promote and disseminate ideas of family. In 2017, before the celebration of National Day, popular American fast food chain McDonald’s released a television commercial to launch its new \textit{Nasi Lemak Burger} in Singapore.\textsuperscript{48} The commercial that aired on national television was a medium that combined ideas of home, family, security, and nation. The layout of the set resembles the interior of a larger maisonette HDB flat. The commercial begins in the living room of the flat where the family is gathered:

\begin{itemize}
\item Central Manpower Base (CPMB), “Pre-Enlistment Matters” (accessed on 11 February 2020); available from https://www.cmpb.gov.sg/web/portal/cmpb/home.
\item This 45-second McDonald’s television commercial was only aired in 2017 during the national day period (from June until the end of August 2017). McDonald’s Singapore, “McDonald’s - First Pay Check 45s,” July 13, 2017, YouTube video, 0:45, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ARYIDS3tM.
\end{itemize}
A mature woman, presumably the mother, is seated in the living room as she checks the time on her watch, anxiously waiting for her son to return while her husband is seated next to her reading the newspaper. Their young daughter is entertaining herself with a tablet device on the living room floor. The mother seems concerned when she hears someone at the door, but she opens the door to the flat and looks relieved. The person at the door is a young male clad in a camouflage green army uniform. His military-standard eyeglasses and shaved head under the army cap suggests that he has attended Basic Military Training and is returning home from National Service (NS) for the first time since, like many other 18-year-old Singaporean males.

The NS man is greeted by his sister, then his parents, and his dad initially comments that his skin has gotten tanner. The mother questions him about returning home late because she had been expecting him to arrive sooner. He explains that he wanted to buy something with his first pay cheque from National Service. His mum then reprimands him for spending his first pay cheque so quickly, telling him that he should have saved the money instead. The NS man further explains that he really wanted to get something for the family. He proceeds to pick up the McDonald’s–branded paper bags from the floor, implying that he had gone to buy meals at McDonald’s for the family before returning home.

The scene in the commercial where the mother tells the NS man to save his first pay cheque is worth further discussion. Saving for the future is also part of the state’s message to citizens. The HDB system is largely tied to a finance and mortgage system and saving money for housing and retirement is a practice that is cultivated through social security and family—this will be discussed again later when the chapter explores the social expectation of self-reliance. In the above scene, the mother looks at the son and smiles upon knowing that he wanted to buy a meal for the family, showing that she is pleased with his thoughtfulness towards his parents and family. The final part of the commercial concludes with the family of four sitting at the dining table (refer to Image 4.4), enjoying their McDonald’s meal while a voiceover reads over the silent moving image of the family eating, “The things you love are best enjoyed with the people you love,” right before the Nasi Lemak Burger appears.

This commercial was aired throughout the period of the National Day celebrations, which typically begin in July and end after August every year. The 45-second-long commercial contains images and messages that are linked closely to national defence, home, and the values of filial piety. The commercial also ends with an introduction to the new addition to the menu and the tag line “just for you Singapore”. It doesn’t seem coincidental that the commercial was launched during the National day celebrations and would feature an ideal nucleus family with two children living in a HDB flat. This clearly alludes to the emotional ties of the family and the display of filial piety in the celebration of the nation’s independence. These are virtues that are not only promoted within

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49 National Servicemen are typically given a minimal monthly wage for performing their duties during the course of their Basic Military Training.
the family but also lead to the emotional bonds that bind a person to other people and a geographical place, allowing them to relate the concept of home with their family. This rootedness and sense of belonging to the nation, in this case, is allegorised through the family. The son who is returning from BMT is also an example of performing his duty as a son of the family and a “son of the nation”. The imagery of the interior of the flat is a prevailing and familiar part of the commercial that attempts to relate to a majority of the population. The scene of the family eating the meal together at the dining room table situated adjacent to the living room also attempts to romanticise an idyllic scene of a family, showing how a family should function.

The commercial’s promotion of the nucleus family unit aligns with the state’s pro-family values, showing how individuals should behave not just as citizens but also within the family. As the protagonist is adorned in his army uniform (also known as the Singapore Armed Forces No. 4) and walks into the flat where his family lives, he is seen as having crossed the threshold from the national (where he has served his national duty) and the domestic (where his family resides). But that line is subtly blurred in the television commercial by embedding nationalistic messages in the place of the home. When we see the NS man showing up at the door in his camouflage uniform, the army uniform that is not part of the image of the domestic is overlaid in the interior of the home as he interacts with his own family (the domestic). The image of the interior space of the HDB, then, can be viewed in the commercial as an interchangeable part of the space of the nation.

Lastly, if we consider that the commissioner of the commercial is McDonald’s (a multi-national American corporation), one would question the intention of this angle to sell what is ultimately just a sandwich. In this case, McDonald’s has created a burger that features flavours of a local dish—Nasi Lemak. This dish that is widely consumed in Singapore has inspired the burger that was created to be served exclusively in McDonald’s restaurants in Singapore. The commercial, although produced to sell the Nasi Lemak Burger, uses the narrative of the family and the son to show filial piety to the family and serving national duty as part of the same virtue. The incentive for McDonald’s in aligning their marketing with the state’s message was to capitalise on an already established narrative and to use patriotism to drive their product. In the tagline “Only for you Singapore”, McDonald’s is associating the new Nasi Lemak Burger with patriotism and a national pride to Singapore, as well as to family and the idyllic values of filial piety—for example, buying McDonald’s for your family on your break from serving the nation shows both your love for your family and your national pride. The television commercial reveals many of the state’s interests and agendas with the family and nation. The image of the HDB flat is intertwined with the ideas of the family and the nation. The media, in this case, perpetuates these ideas, messages, and images through a less explicit platform that is the television commercial. However, because it is disguised as a commercial for something as unobtrusive and innocent as a new sandwich offered at

50 Nasi Lemak is a Malay rice dish that is cooked in coconut milk, served with sambal (a hot spicy sauce) and garnishes that include ikan bilis (fried anchovies), roasted peanuts, fried or hard-boiled egg, and cucumber slices. Sometimes the dish is served alongside dishes like ayam goreng (fried chicken) and rendang (beef stew). The dish is widely eaten in Malaysia and Singapore for breakfast.
a fast-food restaurant, it makes this commercial very unassuming in its ability to disseminate government messages to its population without many people ever realising it.

Image 4.4

The Nasi Lemak Burger television advertisement launched by McDonald’s to commemorate Singapore’s Independence Day in 2017. In this scene, the family sits together at the dining table inside a HDB flat.51

The Dining Room

The McDonald’s commercial depicts a family of two parents and two children, which fits the concept of the perfect nucleus family, an ideology that is largely in line with the state’s housing policies. However, on closer examination, the other key character here in the HDB flat is the commercial setting that has infiltrated the dining room. Meals, which are supposed to be warm, nourishing gatherings, also institutionalise the family group by structuring the way people and things are arranged.52 Meals are the “architects of family life”—they inform people about their place and role every day, or “[in] a sense, meals shape the life of a family”.53 54 Meals are rituals that are structured through gestures and table manners, and this daily and intimate discipline is articulated around the institution of the family as national ideal and vision.55 These rituals have now evolved into more informal habits, and yet the idea and imagery of the family remains the same despite the fact that traditional

51 The image is a still from the video. McDonald’s Singapore, “McDonald’s - First Pay Check 45s,” July 13, 2017, YouTube video, 0:45, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ARYIDS3tnM.
53 Beauchaine A. Sjögren-De (1986) “La Repas comme architecte de la vie familiale”, Dialogue 93, p. 54
family roles have become less defined and structured, and rigid customs that once surrounded the dinner table has given way. According to Kaufmann, meals are part of the architecture of family life because they engage us in conversations and interactions at the dinner table that can be about anything. Yet, increasingly, many families find it difficult to converse or share intimacy, even resorting to using the television as an external prosthetic to fill the emptiness or serve as a conductor for dinner conversations.

According to a study in France, the number of people watching television over dinner, especially in a family dinner setting, is constantly rising. On the contrary, the figures for television habits over meals eaten separately, such as breakfast, are much lower. This demonstrates that the presence of the television is not an attraction in its own right but serves the primary function of watching television when dining with the family. The television can do one of two things or both in a social setting: 1) it can get people talking; 2) but it can also have an opposite effect where it turns people into spectators, ignoring the need to make conversations with one another. The television might also serve as a tool to mask family dynamics or conflicts, serving as a distraction from deeper issues that are difficult to communicate. The family then settles into a routine that no longer has a voice of its own. Whether or not there is a television present, family meals have importance as a ritual. This potential for ritual is even incorporated into the design of the HDB flat, where the living room with an adjacent dining area (usually where a dining table is drawn in plan) is anchored as the central communal area of the flat. Meals, particularly the evening meal when the family get together at the end of the day, is predicted as the central focus of family activity. Some family meals might also look like a gathering of several generations as an extended family at the end of the week.

Traditionally, for the Malays and Chinese, the kitchen is an important and private part of the home for the preparation of food and for dining. The placement and size of the kitchen in relation to the home gives insight into the ways the space was used and its importance. If we look at the layout of the traditional Malay house—which was familiar to many Malay-Singaporeans in the villages (or vernacularly known as as kampung) before the inception of the HDB flats in the 1960s—the plan is a direct reflection of the public and private (or intimate) areas and functions (refer to Image 4.5). Even in the most modest Malay houses, there is a clear layering of spaces that are separated into three main areas: Serambi (reception/veranda), Rumah Ibu (main house), and Dapur (kitchen). The Serambi is the front of the home that is used to receive guests, like a living room or reception. Moving further into the home, the Rumah Ibu functions as a private space where the family sleeps.

59 It is also worth noting that for the Malay term Rumah Ibu (main house), the individual words are directly translated to “home of the mother”.
60 Chua, Political Legitimacy and Housing, 103.
And lastly, to the back of the house, the *Dapur* (which translates to kitchen or stove) is typically considered the most private space of the home as well as the space of the woman or women.

Image 4.5

Diagrams comparing the spatial structure between the traditional Malay House and the traditional Chinese House (based on diagrams by Chua B. H).61 62

In the traditional Chinese house, the hierarchy of spaces is also distinct. The Chinese home places the most sacred space in the middle of the home, usually with the altar. The front of the house are rooms for the younger generations while the rooms at the back are reserved for the most senior members of the family. The kitchen and stove were also located at the back of the house behind the bedrooms of the senior family members.

The role of the kitchen in both the traditional Malay and Chinese homes can be clearly observed based on its location at the back of the house, in the deepest and the most private part of the home. The layout of the earlier HDB flats seems to be scaled down versions of such traditional homes, especially when it came to the spatial ordering of hierarchy and privacy. A simple comparative study of the design evolution of HDB flats built in the 1980s and newer flats built after 2012 reveals a shift in the design of the family dining area and how it is used. When comparing the two plans (refer to Image 4.6), the 1980s flats had a larger proportion of floor space dedicated to the kitchen and dining areas, while the newer flats have a smaller area (in proportion to the overall size of the flat) allotted to the kitchen. The annotations on the plans also suggest the activities that should take place in the space—for the flats built between 1984 and 1998, the *Kitchen* and a separate *Living* space is

61 The typical Malay house layout from Figure 5.5 can be found in Chua, *Political Legitimacy and Housing*, 103.
62 Floor plans of traditional Chinese buildings in Figure 5.2b. can be found in Chua, *Political Legitimacy and Housing*, 95. Although I used the diagram as a reference, I was also guided by the descriptions of my father’s childhood home.
annotated, but there is not demarcation of the dining space. For flats built between 2012 and 2018, the Living/Dining is annotated to share the same space, while the kitchen is kept separate. The plans also reflect the decreasing significance of the kitchen and show that the dining area being been moved out of the kitchen where food is prepared (kitchens were larger in the older flats from 1984 to 1998) and into the Living room where the television is usually present. This relocation of the dining area to the living room suggests that family meal habits are so commonly coupled with the television screen. Kaufmann is adamant that the television serves as an easy means to avoid dealing with any tensions between family members when dining together, and to move conversations along at the dining table.

Image 4.6
Plans of the old and new HDB flats illustrating the change in the placement of the kitchen and the spatial relationship with the other rooms in the home.

The rearrangement of the kitchen from the back of the home to the front of the home also signals a shift in the rise of working mothers and the dual-income family. Initially, the woman’s primary social function of caretaker and nurturer in the home meant that the kitchen was her domain for preparing meals for her family.63 The modern-day ubiquity of hawker centres that sell cooked food in Singapore (typically conveniently located on the

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ground floor of the HDB flats) are also a large contributing factor to the new function of the kitchen in the Singaporean home life. These hawker centres, which are managed by the National Environmental Agency (state-managed), provide hawkers with lower-rental spaces to operate so that they can keep food prices low. This has largely influenced the function of the kitchen and relieves the need to cook every meal in the kitchen, giving families the option of buying or eating at affordably-priced hawker centres. With the production of convenience food and the affordability of pre-prepared meals, the economic function of the family changed and the character of the kitchen transformed from a place of production into a place of consumption, as more women began seeking employment outside the home. We will discuss this in the following sections. In “The Self-Reliant Family” and the “Income-Driven Family”, we look at how policies have contributed to the shift in the role of the woman or mother from homemaker to the income-earning and productive citizen outside the home.

The Self-Providing Family

When governments undertook primary responsibility for the basic duties of the head of a family, the drive in people weakened. Welfare undermined self-reliance. People did not have to work for their families’ well-being. The handout became a way of life. The downward spiral was relentless as motivation and productivity went down. People lost the drive to achieve because they paid too much in taxes. They became dependent on the state for their basic needs.


The above excerpt demonstrates how the founding Prime Minister of Singapore was certain about creating a population that would not be dependent on social welfare handouts for basic needs like housing and healthcare. Rather than giving out handouts, the Central Provident Fund scheme (CPF in short) was created as a forced savings plan for every working citizen. This compulsory savings was mainly aimed at safeguarding retirement, but it could also be used to pay medical bills, housing, and children’s education. Self-reliance is another quality that families in Singapore strive to maintain. Besides providing for the elderly in the family, it is virtuous to save and be financially self-reliant without having to depend on social welfare. The self-reliant Singaporeans family is defined around the continuous employment of the parents and the virtue of saving money.

64 Teo Yeo Yenn writes about the “Self-reliant Singaporean” in Teo Yeo Yenn, “Poor People Don’t like Oats Either: How Myths about Poverty and Wealth Matter,” in Living with Myths in Singapore, eds. Loh Kah Seng, Thum Ping Jjin and Jack Chia Meng-Tat (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2017), 241–244. Yeo discusses how Singaporeans perceive self-reliance as a virtue. In this section, she focuses on the importance the state has placed on regular employment and the public welfare (CPF) system, and how it systematically perpetuates this myth that if one is not self-reliant, they are assumed to be a failure.


66 Teo, “Poor People Don’t like Oats Either,” 241–242.
Specifically, this self-reliance is about the accumulation of money from employment to pay for important expenses like housing, healthcare, and education, in order not to depend on the state or society for these needs. Self-reliance is not merely a virtue to be inculcated through aspiration, it is also embedded. It is the origin for many policies and practices of several institutions like the Central Provident Fund (CPF), the Housing and Development Board (HDB), Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Social and Family Development. Continuous employment throughout one’s life is critical to the funding of housing, healthcare, and other ostensible public goods. Employment and self-reliance seem to be prerequisites to social membership in Singapore and falling short on being self-reliant with lifelong regular employment puts one at risk of losing out on these important benefits and social membership. The narrative upheld by these government institutions is that social welfare and social service should not create over-dependence on the state.

According to Teo, in order to qualify for permanent Public Assistance, which is aid that is meant to cover all living expenses dispersed to beneficiaries over a long-term period, one has to prove that employment is permanently impossible and that there is no family who they can rely on (if not the Parents Maintenance Act would apply). Such a decidedly “high” criteria to qualify for permanent Public Assistance means that only about 3000 households in Singapore are eligible—most of them very elderly people who do not have children or spouses. Since Public Assistance is so difficult to qualify for, the rhetoric is that one must avoid being in a position where one needs to be dependent on any form of assistance. There is also an element of shame that is tied to this insistence on self-sufficiency, and hence there is a strong will for regular and stable employment in order to evade being in this position. Having failed in this basic requirement as members of society, it renders social support as something undignified.

Because shelter is regarded as one of the basic necessities, the HDB flat is tied very closely to social welfare. The HDB flat is also tied very closely to the ideas of self-reliance—if one can pay the mortgage of their HDB flat, that’s self-reliance and an indication of positive contribution to society. The mortgage system for the purchase of a HDB flat is built on social security savings of homeowners and only marginally on government funding (which is largely accumulated from the cost of the land) – in line with the ideology of the self-reliant household. Other than encouraging employment, pro-family schemes across different generations—married couples, children, and in-laws—also have an underlying policy rationalisation: they form part of a voluntary, family-based welfare arrangement that is created to reduce the government’s share of social welfare costs and responsibilities to the elderly as the population ages. According to Chua, by having monopoly over housing

67 In recent years, the state has also placed an emphasis on lifelong learning and has been encouraging citizens to continue vocational training and skills upgrading to stay employable.
68 Teo, “Poor People Don’t like Oats Either,” 242.
70 As cited by Teo, “Poor People Don’t like Oats Either,” 243.
71 Teo, “Poor People Don’t like Oats Either,” 241–247.
provisions in Singapore, the state has used housing to promote the family as the fundamental social institution that is in accordance with Asian traditions or Confucian teachings.\textsuperscript{72}

Several other HDB policies have also been used to influence the parent-child relationships in families, and one of the more prominent ones is the Proximity Housing Grant. The Proximity Housing Grant is a relatively new policy that was only introduced in 2015 to encourage family support and family relationships by helping offset the cost of buying a resale flat for children who opt to live close to their parents’ home (or vice versa). The eligibility requirement for this grant is that applicant must live within 4 kilometres of their parents or children to qualify. Because of the policy, the state has disbursed a total of 377 million Singapore Dollars to 20,100 households.\textsuperscript{73} This structure was put in place to encourage young families to live closer to older family members to sustain a social support system. Because the size of most flats does not support a multi-generation family, and modern society tends towards a more independent married lifestyle, incentivising living in close proximity to family members is one way to encourage a support structure: while adult children can take better care of their parents and retired grandparents, in turn, parents and retired grandparents may also lend childcare support for working or busy parents. By having different generations own flats but with some distance apart, it provides the family nucleus with the independence they need and alleviates any possible tensions between parents and adult children, all while still preserving the Confucian traditions of family and filial piety.

There is a Chinese saying that if a society is prosperous, filial piety is hard to come by in poor families. The logic behind this saying is that a family struggling to make ends meet, would not have the resources to care for its elders. This saying is perhaps simplistically illustrated by the McDonald’s advertisement discussed earlier, where one with limited resources might not be able to fulfil both virtues. The Chinese saying also points to the fact that the quality of filial piety is not just culturally important, but it has an economic importance too. Many faiths and traditions, especially in the Confucian tradition, teach followers to revere and provide for their parents and their elders, however, it is policy that enforces this for economic reasons. In the McDonald’s commercial, the NS man is conflicted about being filial to his parents and saving money—to him, showing affection and care towards his parents meant spending the money to buy them a meal, but it also meant that the money was not put towards saving for the future.

The Singapore government then takes it a step further by enforcing the Maintenance of Parents Act in 1996.\textsuperscript{74} In the Act (Appendix 4), it is stated that “[a]ny person domiciled and resident in Singapore who is of or above

\textsuperscript{72} Chua, \textit{Liberalism Disavowed}, 84–85.
60 years of age and who is unable to maintain himself adequately may apply to the Tribunal for an order that one or more of his children pay him a monthly allowance or any other periodical payment or a lump sum for his maintenance."\(^{75}\) This means that an elderly parent can report their children to the state if they do not provide them with financial resources and housing. This Act was constituted to remove any potential state responsibilities of having to channel economic resources to provide for the elderly, and it does so by transferring these responsibilities to the children who were raised by them. In 2015, it was reported by the Ministry of Social and Family Development that 213 cases lodged with the Commissioner for the Maintenance of Parents.\(^{76}\) The state no longer influences behaviour through design and policy but enforces law to maintain the family values and behaviours. The creation of the Parents Maintenance Act also suggests that the Confucian ideology of filial piety alone is not enough to protect elderly parents from neglect by their children, but requires legislation to make it compulsory for capable children to provide shelter and financial resources to their elderly parents who might not be able to take care of themselves.

For self-reliance within the household to work and for the population to reproduce itself, there must be steady reproduction in order to support the older generation. The family is seen in this case as a renewing productive unit of society. In Kenneth Paul Tan’s paper, “Sexing Up Singapore”, Tan claims that the Singaporean society is described as sexually repressed and repressive. Tan elaborates that in Singapore, sex and its representations have been controlled by the PAP and have been shaped into economic, industrial, and administrative technologies that follow the prevalent logic of organised capitalism.\(^{77}\) According to Tan, the more the state attempts to directly control its citizens’ sexual behaviours through legislation and policy inducements, the less likely it will be able to achieve its economic ambitions of being competitive, innovative, creative, and entrepreneurial. The article reiterates that the government wants Singaporeans to “get sexy” and reproduce for the economy and the nation within the traditional structure of patriarchal nuclear family. This is similar to how the HDB policies prioritises home allocation to families, especially when the country has an exorbitantly priced private residential property market that is beyond the reach for most recently married young couples.

In addition to carefully crafting housing policies and giving privileges to potential families, the government spearheaded a social campaign in 2003 to encourage heterosexual couples “to be more expressive with their partners at all times, not just special occasions”.\(^{78}\) The month-long “Romancing Singapore” campaign saw eager participation from the retail, tourism, and leisure industries, which provided deals and offers (such as weekend stays in hotels and holiday travel packages for couples), with the ultimate aim of “providing a climate

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\(^{78}\) Tan, “Sexing Up Singapore,” 404.
for everyone to celebrate and cherish relationships”\textsuperscript{79}. The New York Times covered the campaign, noting that campaign was necessary for the natural replacement of the Singaporean population that has been “increasingly dependent on foreign labour and raising the spectre of an aging population and higher social welfare costs”\textsuperscript{80}. It was also highlighted that the government was overly simplistic to assume that a campaign can increase the willingness or enthusiasm of its citizens to reproduce. The plans of the HDB flats also show modifications to the layout of the bedrooms, especially to the master bedroom. Starting in 1982, flats were constructed with two bathrooms, one of which is still accessed from the kitchen as it was in older flats, and the other is attached to the “Main Bedroom”. The addition of the En-suite marked the first time a hierarchy between the two bedrooms was introduced, with one bedroom denoted in the plan as the “Main Bedroom” for the owners (assuming the newly married couple), and the other room simply denoted as a “Bedroom” that is recommended for secondary use (for the younger children or as a study). The new point block plans from 2012 show an even larger area dedicated to larger bathrooms. In addition, the “Main Bedroom” is now placed at the back of the flat, at the end of the corridor, which provided more privacy to the family and even more privacy to the newly married couple in the “Main Bedroom”, as previously discussed. This could have been an attempt to give couples more privacy to replace Singapore’s ageing population. Despite efforts to increase birth rates in Singapore, the number of babies born in Singapore still fell to the lowest in eight years in 2018, according to data released by the Immigration and Checkpoints Authority (ICA) in 2019.\textsuperscript{81}

**The Income-Driven Family**

Academics have referred to the HDB flats as the “barracks of the working class”—not in the sense that the spaces are cramped or under supplied, but rather that it was and continues to be a staple of the working class.\textsuperscript{82} When the homeownership scheme was introduced in the 1960s, the island was barely getting on its feet and had a declining economy with high rates of unemployment and underemployment. With no work and no money, most people spent their days idling about with other residents doing nothing. The tenants’ irregular employment was accommodated by rentable spaces/rooms in congested shophouses and kampungs with flexible rent payment schedules. Public housing and homeownership greatly aided the transformation of this situation, transforming the unemployed informal workforce into an industrial proletariat to fill the new jobs created by the state during Singapore’s industrialisation period. Prior to the industrial period, many Singaporeans lived in kampungs or villages and worked on an ad hoc or casual basis. Unlike flexible rent payments in informal


\textsuperscript{80} Agence France-Presse, “Singapore Classifies Romance as a National Security Issue.”


settlements, failure to make the regular monthly mortgage payments would incur more drastic and undesirable penalties such as higher interest rates on the mortgage or even repossession of the flat by the state. For the inhabitants of the HDB flats, time then became based on their monthly mortgage payments. Work hours also became part of this pattern of time—the standardised commercial work week with working up to 9 hours a day for 5 work days of the week became part of the scheduling of what a normal working person would fulfil. While this might be typical in most parts of the world, the five weekdays of Monday through Friday were not typical for the Muslim community because Friday is meant to be a sacred day. Despite this, the Muslim community in Singapore is obligated to follow the conventional five-day work week from Monday to Friday, usually using their Friday lunch break to pray and worship at a mosque. In this case, the obligation of work overrides the importance of religious obligations—the state’s decision to adopt the Monday to Friday work week to align with the commercial days of most global cities was a reflection of the state’s ideology of pragmaticism, which prioritises economic and financial needs above all. According to Chua, the housing mortgage that has to be paid on time could only be met with consistent and regular employment. Homeownership thus forced the working population to work in factories, offices, and other regular forms of employment, transforming the individuals into an “industrial proletariat”. Industrial time was naturalised, and the social virtues of efficiency, punctuality, and consistency became generalised. Parallels can be drawn between the virtue of punctuality and time dedicated to work and how Agamben discusses Christian liturgy, which prescribes time through the liturgical year and yields sanctification of life by the means of time. For example, liturgy in most religions sets the time of the day for prayer and worship. For Christians, prayers are said before the beginning of the meal, in the morning, and before bed. For Muslims, prayers are said five times throughout the day—before sunrise, after the sun passes its highest point, the late part of the afternoon, just after sunset, and finally between sunset and midnight. Traditionally, work and meals are planned around set times to pray. According to Agamben, we are perfectly accustomed to articulate our existence in terms of times and hours, and to view our lives as a linear and homogenous course of time. This control over the hours of the day and when to work establishes what is considered to be “normal”, and these norms become standards that define our days. In this case, the departure from the relaxed and organic life of the kampung (where religious prayer would have been the only structure of time) has been replaced by the rigid and regulated schedule of work to afford the monthly mortgage payments that sustain the household’s need for shelter. This has become the main focus of how most Singaporeans conduct their lives. In the same way, the

84 According to the Qur’an, Friday is a sacred day of worship. “Al-Jumah” translates to the day of congregation, which is also the word for Friday in Arabic. Friday is observed in the Middle East where the population is majority Muslim.
85 Chua, Liberalism Disavowed, 82–83.
86 Chua, Liberalism Disavowed, 83.
87 Muslims pray five times a day. The timings of the day changes day by day according to the time the sun rises and sets. Their prayers are known as Fajr (dawn), Dhuhr (after midday), Asr (afternoon), Maghrib (sunset), and Isha (nighttime), all facing a direction towards the Mecca. The mosques city-wide would announce a call to prayer from the minarets, informing worshippers that it is time to pray.
Land Acquisitions Act and Public Housing Policy govern the space and times of human life, regulating the most basic elements of human life and affecting the way people act and conduct themselves.

In order to encourage both parents to contribute economically to the state, several other policies were introduced to relieve both parents from the obligations of the home. In 1978, the state introduced the Foreign Maid Scheme to allow and regulate the hiring of domestic workers. The state also recognised that it was necessary to provide affordable childcare to families in order to attract Singaporean women to continue in the workforce. The regulating framework for the Foreign Maid Scheme requires employed foreign domestic workers to be screened and healthy, a minimum monthly wage to be set, a levy paid to the government for these workers, as well as laws that would protect foreign domestic workers from mistreatment. Since then, the framework has been altered, giving more incentives to families with children under 12 years of age and elderlies above 65, as well as special grants for low- and middle-income families—all in response to the need to help families care for the rapidly ageing population and a national shortage of nursing facilities.89 Ultimately, the Proximity Housing Grant and the special grants for hiring of foreign domestic helpers is part of the support structure put in place by the state for the ageing population. With low birth rates and increasing healthcare costs and limited availability of healthcare professionals, the government has coined the phrase “ageing in place”, which encourages living where you have lived for years, not typically in a healthcare environment or nursing home, and hence decreasing the reliance on social care and state resources.90 Despite being freed from the obligations of the home, hiring full-time help or domestic workers increased the family’s financial burden. A double-income family then became necessary in order to afford the fees for a foreign domestic helper.

As previously discussed, all policies to assist families with ageing parents are ultimately connected to one another and contribute to a larger framework. The policies are interdependent in order to be effective, but they are still underpinned by the Confucian ideology of caring for the aged in the family as part of the family’s responsibility and as a virtue—never outwardly expressed as a way to deviate from the reliance on Public Assistance and funding. This also means that the family is under more pressure to find new ways to generate more income. While people who are employed are working outside the home, there are those who perform domestic chores, such as caring for children and the elderly in the family. People who are employed outside the home are still largely dependent on unpaid domestic labour. Women are disproportionately involved in unpaid domestic labour, typically making them more dependent because their access to public goods is mediated by another employed citizen, usually their husband or adult children.91 However, the ability to outsource domestic

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91 Teo Yeo Yenn, “Not everyone has ‘maids’: class differentials in the elusive quest for work-life balance,” Gender, Place & Culture 23, no. 8 (2016): pp1164–1178. This was also mentioned in Teo, “Poor People Don’t like Oats Either,” 242.
work to foreign labour at lower costs allows the woman in the family—who is seen as the one responsible for domestic chores and child care duties—to also be employed out of the home, further contributing to the image of self-reliance through the double income family. There is, however, conflict between the myth of self-reliance and the myth that a family has to reproduce itself. Employment outside the home as well as a great deal of domestic labour are required to sustain meaningful lives and regenerate human societies, and it is easy to lose sight of the importance of other roles, such as being parents or a child to ageing parents. A similar social situation is taking place around the world but the Singapore government is unique in that it crafts family policies that are linked to so many other policies, like housing and even foreign labour policies.

The Home as an Asset

_The most important thing we (the PAP government) do for Singaporeans, of course, is to help every family own a home – the HDB flat. The house is much more than a secure roof over their heads. The house in Singapore is also a major way for us to level up the less successful and to give them a valuable asset and a retirement nest egg. We are using the HDB as a means to give every Singaporean household a stake.... That’s why we are making sure that HDB flats are affordable even to lower-income-households...”_ 

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong
Straits Times, 21 October 2011

The HDB housing system in Singapore is largely tied to a finance and mortgage system. The mortgage system for the purchase of HDB flats is built on a compulsory social security savings of homeowners and not entirely on government funding. This is in line with the ideology of the self-reliance household. The Central Provident Fund (CPF) was established in 1955 and it is a compulsory social security system where wage earners are bound by statute to put aside a portion of their monthly wages. In addition, the employer is also bound by statute to match the monthly wage contributions to the fund. The savings are managed by the CPF Board and can be used as savings for retirement and to fund the purchase of public housing flats. The CPF board also invests the funds in government bonds at low interest rates for national development programmes (including public housing) in

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92 As cited in Chua Beng Huat and Meisen Wong, “No One Left Homeless in Housing Policy, Wellbeing and Social Development,” in Asia, eds. Rebecca Lai H. C. and Seong-Kyu Ha (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2018), 17.

93 The Central Provident Fund (CPF) is a compulsory savings plan for working Singaporeans and permanent residents, meant to fund their retirement, healthcare, and housing. The CPF is an employment-based scheme where employers and employees contribute a certain percentage of the employee’s wage to the fund. The fund is administered by the Central Provident Fund Board operated by the Ministry of Manpower that is also responsible for investing the contributions.
order to have a healthy cash flow and avoid any reliance on other financial agencies.\textsuperscript{94} The remaining funds are then placed with the Government Investment Corporation (GIC), a sovereign wealth fund that invests in global investments (higher risk but higher returns than government bonds) in order to receive greater returns.\textsuperscript{95, 96} In a sense, the CPF and HDB systems create a closed loop of financial transactions: Wage earners would save for their retirement with CPF, while a portion of the national CPF savings would go towards providing loans to the HDB, so that the wage earner can buy a flat from the HDB that holds the mortgage, and the CPG would pay out the monthly mortgage directly to HDB on the homeowner's behalf. According to Chua, this ensures that the entire homeownership programme is seamless between the government funding and housing provision systems, making it seem like the HDB is equivalent to the government funding and the social security system. HDB has also sold their flats as a means of accumulating capital, as homeownership is linked to one’s CPF retirement savings, which can be used to finance the purchase of a flat. The wealth of the homeowners has thus increased, and presumably, the sale of the flats would be greater and capable of covering their retirement needs than keeping the CPF savings without purchasing a HDB flat (assuming that value of homes steadily increases).\textsuperscript{97}

By referring to the flat as “valuable asset” and as a “retirement nest egg”, the HDB flat in itself has transformed and no longer exists as shelter alone, but like everywhere else, the home is seen as an investment in the real estate market. However, when the HDB flat is referred to as a “stake” because of its financial and economic value, the home has transcended the need and right of basic shelter over one’s head and becomes an indispensable technology of governance. This reflects not only how the state views public housing as political and economic leverage, but also how citizens have come to regard the home both as a space associated with the act of dwelling, as well as an investment and asset. This investment is not only in the physical structure of the HDB flat but is also translated into the nation—homeowners would want a stable nation to protect their HDB flat assets, and as such, they have a reason to ensure the progress of the nation in order to safeguard their monetary investment. This makes it apt to have images of HDB flats printed on currency notes, serving as powerful public symbols while also being closely related to the state’s financial investments. The HDB blocks are not only synonymous with the success of Singapore’s public housing policies, but each and every HDB block of flats is representative of the government’s efficacy.\textsuperscript{98}

The HDB flats make up such a large part of the Singapore landscape, and its extensive programme serves to remind the population of the government’s reign and ability to fulfil its promise to improve living conditions for the people. However, they can also be translated as a symbol of success to the family and to the individual. It is

\textsuperscript{95} GIC Private Limited, formerly known as Government of Singapore Investment Corporation, is a sovereign wealth fund established by the Government of Singapore in 1981 to manage Singapore’s foreign reserves.
\textsuperscript{96} Chua,\textit{ Liberalism Disavowed}, 78.
\textsuperscript{97} Chua,\textit{ Liberalism Disavowed}, 78–82.
not surprising that the images of the HDB have, on multiple occasions, appeared on coins and dollar notes issued in the post-independence decades (refer to Image 4.7). In the first release of currency notes circulated in 1967, the first design of the One Singapore Dollar note featured one of the earliest-built HDB flats in Tanglin Halt (1962) on the reverse side of the note.\textsuperscript{99} The notes were circulated along with this image of the HDB flats well before the Housing Development Board had established and finetuned its complex housing policies as it has today. Even in its infancy, HDB was already the elected emblem for communicating Singapore's progress.

In addition, the symbols used in the first national currency appeared to reflect the aspirations of the young nation as well as its notable monuments such as the statue of Sir Stamford Raffles, the British statesman and founder of modern Singapore. Other denominations of currency notes released in the same “Orchid Series” included the image of the Singapore River as a symbol of its economic aspirations as a port, the Supreme Court as a symbol of the newly established justice system, and an image of four clasped hands with the map of Singapore in the background, symbolising the nation’s aspirations for its multi-cultural citizens to stand united.\textsuperscript{100} The inclusion of the image of the HDB flats in such an early part of Singapore’s infancy showed the importance of housing as part of the nation’s aspirations. In fact, the image of HDB flats appeared repeatedly in the “Bird Series”, “Ship Series”, and “Portrait Series”.

In the \textit{Bird Series} (in circulation 1976–1984), the reverse of its ten-dollar currency note features an image of an HDB estate with landscaped gardens in the foreground. These HDB flats show a larger variation in design and during this time, the state was promoting itself as a “Garden City”—a vision largely attributed to then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew who believed that lush greenery would create a better environment to live in. This vision of a green city was introduced in 1967 and has close connections to how the landscape of Singapore would look together with the HDB flats, which were slowly transforming the skyline and imagery of the neighbourhoods of Singapore. This showed the vision of the state and how it was also invested in the living environment of its citizens. In the \textit{Ship Series} (in circulation 1984–1999), the ten-dollar currency note features newer HDB flats built in the early-80s in the suburb of Toa Payoh.\textsuperscript{101} This time, the image of the newer flats shows how the design of the flats have become more complex when compared to the image of HDB flats in the previously circulated currency. In addition to the HDB buildings, the image also included the playground structure that was incorporated into the HDB estates, reflecting how the HDB has progressed to include facilities beyond the basic essentials. The image of the HDB has, however, not been included in the most recent

\textsuperscript{100}The \textit{Orchid Series} was named as such because each denomination circulated in that series included an image of a different species of orchid. The orchid is an important symbol and the Vanda Miss Joaquim (a species of orchid) was later named Singapore’s national flower in 1981.
\textsuperscript{101}The \textit{Ship Series} was named as such because the currency notes of the series feature images of the iconic vessels that used to be seen in the waters of Singapore. According to the Monetary Authority of Singapore, this series pays tribute to the merchant shipping that had contributed to the development of Singapore and turned it into one of the busiest ports in the world.
“Portrait Series” (in circulation 1999–present as of 2021), but reappeared in the third series of coins (issued in 2013 and currently being circulated as of 2021) produced by the Monetary Authority of Singapore, rather than on the note (refer to Image 4.8).

The image of the HDB has been widely used in the production of Singapore’s currency, which, aside from being a symbol of aspiration in its association to the currency, shows how the HDB has become a symbol for the nation and its national aspirations, as well as a symbol of the home and family. The currency in itself stores economic value and the printing of the image onto the currency shows the association of the flat as an economic driver, propelling the family to be gainfully employed while reinvesting their earnings back into national development.\(^{102}\) Secondly, while the image of apartment buildings is typically associated with the domestic, when the image is printed on legal tender issued by the state, it is printed on an object that is product of the nation. The circulation of the currency also means that it will reach a larger foreign market to be exchanged and traded, and therefore the inclusion of the images and symbols on the notes would broadcast the national identity and the state’s aspirations to the rest of the world, with a narrative led by images of the HDB flats that show the state’s dominance over the housing market in Singapore. Within Singapore and among Singaporeans, the image of the HDB flat follows the daily circulation of the coins and notes (and also on stamps), quietly shaping personal aspirations towards the acquisition of that one HDB flat that is so representative of the prosperity and progress made by both the nation and, by association, its citizenry.

\(^{102}\) As previously explained, the Central Provident Fund is closely linked to the saving and purchasing of an HDB flat. The fund, which is generated by wage-earning Singaporeans and their employers, is circulated back to the state to be invested globally as well as in projects linked to national development.
Image 4.7

Image 4.8
Singapore currency featuring a motif of HDB flats. (Image from the Monetary Authority of Singapore)
Incompatibilities

In Singapore, it is assumed that a productive society is one in which the nation is sustained by citizens who belong in families, and where couples and families are indicators of a stable and disciplined society. With that comes an additional assumption: the concept of “homo economicus” applies. It is assumed that members within families are motivated to give the best possible life to other family members and themselves, such as securing a good material and economic future for the family, and that they are also less likely to be involved in crime and more likely to protect their dignity and strive for economic and material achievements. Furthermore, the media has unknowingly and less evidently perpetuated the government’s pro-family messages for a larger political and economic national agenda. The home was once thought to be the private sphere of the individual, but “modernity” and nation-building have altered the state of the home and forms of life. The domestic is a cultural and political space and the Singapore government has easily penetrated its heavy-handed influence in the home and the concepts of home. The physical walls are no longer capable of keeping the home sphere intact and shielded from the outside world, nor can the walls limit the nation’s influence on the ways of life of its inhabitants. The domestic proves to be permeable since many of the ideas and laws concerning the home have always been this way since the founding of Singapore. The familiar notions of privacy and home are entwined with nationalist discourse.

This Confucian teaching goes beyond caring for and respecting one’s own parents and the elderly in the community. However, with more nursing homes being built as the country’s population ages, some Singaporeans have expressed concern that the value of their properties will fall if such a facility is planned to be built in their neighbourhoods. Another source of concern is the noise produced by dementia patients. There are some contradictions and consequences to positioning the home as a value asset appreciated over time. Policies such as the Parents Maintenance Act ensure that certain Confucian values of filial piety are preserved in society. This Confucian teaching extends beyond the care and respect for one’s own parents or the elderly in the community. However, with more nursing homes being built as the country’s population ages, some Singaporeans have expressed concerns that the value of their properties will fall if a nursing home is planned for construction in their neighbourhoods. The news media reported in 2019 that the residents in Choa Chu Kang (a residential neighbourhood Northwest of Singapore) initially had very negative reactions when they learnt that a nursing home was going to be built in their neighbourhood, with a source of concern being the noise from dementia patients. But after the home was built, the Bright Hill Evergreen Home was described as having a

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103 The term “homo economicus” refers back to the economic predictions based on the assumption that humans are rational and motivated narrowly by self-interest, meaning that they pursue, or attempt to pursue, their subjectively-defined result as optimally as possible.


slick and modern facade, appearing to resemble a low density condominium nestled among the Housing Development Board blocks in Choa Chu Kang. According to The Straits Times, who interviewed residents in the area, many said that the design of the building blended in so well that some residents forgot that the nursing home is there. The initial retaliation was an indication of the failure to integrate the elderly into housing estates alongside the rest of the population. The stigma associated with nursing homes and elderly care homes remains in the minds of many, but this example demonstrates how architecture and design can be used to mitigate and reconcile any negative reactions to living near these facilities.

This is a clash between two seemingly unrelated policies—one aimed at integrating the elderly into society, and the other at encouraging homeownership and looking at the HDB flat and the home as a financial asset. Despite using Confucian ideology, which is inherent in East Asian families, initial reactions by neighbouring residents were largely negative—while they might care for the elders in their own families, they might not be willing to live near a nursing home with residents who are elderly but not from their own families. Also, the worry about dementia patients screaming seems absurd, and this particular reaction was what the Straits Times writer referred to as “not-my-backyard-syndrome”—a selfish mentality in which Singaporeans agree that such facilities are necessary as long as they are not built near their homes. The immediate reaction of the neighbouring residents mirrors the other fear that the value of property would depreciate greatly if a columbarium would be built near it. These initial reactions indicate that certain policies have less weight in the minds of the citizens, while others are more engrained. In this case, viewing the HDB flat as an asset seems to outweigh the Confucian ideology of taking care of the aged and allowing the elderly to age in place, which is supposedly prevalent in East Asian society. Viewing a flat or home—in this case, a HDB flat—as an asset or as an investment for retirement is an inherently self-serving myth, whereas other policies, such as the Maintenance of Parents Act, are intended to mitigate negative effects.

It is inevitable that having more children would require more resources; and yet, for a self-reliant family that is motivated to produce a double income, the conditions do not provide the parents with sufficient time to care for the family because employment outside the home removes the maternal role from the household. As a result, foreign domestic helpers are hired as a bandage policy and to provide paid care for the children. As previously stated, it is naïve to believe that any architectural intervention, policy, or campaign can effectively encourage couples to have more children. Instead, the policies that prioritise the sale of the flats to young married couples over singles do not provide singles the opportunity to live alone or with their partners before marriage. This also leads one to speculate whether the first time that the majority of Singaporeans live away from their parents is also when they acquire their first HDB flats after marriage (a policy designed to encourage younger people to

106 Khalik and Mokhtar, “No Grouses About this Nursing Home.”
create families and reproduce); and whether this practise of relying on parents to run the household until marriage affects relationships and marriages of newly wedded couples at later stages.

The contradictions are not exclusive to family policies. The Singapore Armed Forces have also been criticized for racially discriminating the minority races. According to Walsh, as Singapore is a Chinese-dominated society and because of its “unique geographical and political characteristics” (implying Singapore’s geographical location to Malaysia in particular), there is “official discrimination against the Malay population remains an open secret”. 108 The public has perceived that Malay National Servicemen typically are relegated to the lower positions in the Police Force instead of higher-ranking positions like “the commandos or air defense personnel” - they are assumed to be a security risk because of their race and possible cultural and historical affiliation to neighbouring countries like Malaysia. This contradicts the national agenda of creating an equal society regardless of ethnicity. In the Singapore newspaper, the Ministry of Defense (MINDEF) responded to the academic paper109. A representative retorted and maintained that the Singapore Armed Forces is in tandem with nation-building and claimed that “Malay officers in SAF hold key appointments”. These non-cohesive narratives of identity become problematic and reflect the difficulties in maintaining myths.

In conclusion, myths created through policies and design, media, and speeches by state officials are incongruent, resulting in the use of policies created to mitigate the negative effects of one policy or several conflicting policies, and sometimes even left unresolved with contradictory policies that do not fully close the loop between the myth of what an ideal family should be and the management of that myth. Family policies created by the state generate collective values and norms. Moreover, land policies are closely intertwined with family policies, which have evolved into a site for the production of a particular form of “morality”. These morals and standards are what connect Singaporeans to one another, even though these common and seemingly familial values are choreographed by the state.

Conclusion

The formation and establishment of national identity is a project that seeks to establish a sense of belonging and rootedness within a geographical boundary.¹ This shared sense fosters solidarity and commonality between people who have never met or never will.² Storey states that, in modern theory, this sense of belonging to a nation (or nationalism) has been a mechanism through which capitalist societies are organised, and the nation emerges as a result.³ Storey also cites Gellner, who argues that with the rise of industrialisation, new social divisions of labour have emerged, necessitating the creation of a culturally homogenous population to facilitate a political infrastructure to achieve political support of the masses. This thesis has explored how a homogeneous population is created through various myths associated with the conditions of the ground. Tuan defines rootedness as an inherently geographical concept central to the notion of home, with temporal, cultural, and psychological connotations.⁴ Rootedness also suggests an established connection to the ground and the earth. As mentioned earlier, Dripps points out how the ground is valued for its multiple metaphorical meanings.⁵ The desire of the then-nascent government to establish a sense of rootedness appears contradictory at first, given the territory’s constant transformations at the time as a result of economic, political, and cultural consequences. In these terms, the notion of home is also in flux because no home is truly permanent—everyone is subject to moving or being moved, even after death. Myths, with their ability to nurture national identity, thus become essential to the establishment of rootedness. While myths can take the form of historical narratives, they are political as they validate the moral authority of the government. It is, therefore, critical to identify and name the contradictions inherent in the myth-making, as well as understand its implications and effects.

The 1964 race riots have, for most of Singapore’s history, served as the central rhetoric for the importance of cultural harmony and social cohesion within the community—as it was discussed in Part 3. This narrative reveals itself to be increasingly irrelevant with the changing demographics and the influx of foreign employment into the local workforce. In Singapore’s infancy, its founding Prime Minister recognised the importance of maintaining social cohesion to avoid a repeat of the 1964 riots. As a result, he emphasised the importance of ethnic groups sharing common communitarian values while preserving their respective cultural complexities. In an essay, Tan put together the three critical aspects of Mr Lee Kuan Yew’s ideal of multiculturalism based on Lee’s own descriptions.⁶ Firstly, he emphasised the need for every ethnic group to stay anchored in one’s own


9 In his speech on November 5, 1972, Mr Lee also said, “It is not just learning the language. With the language goes the fables and proverbs. It is the learning of a whole value system, a whole philosophy of life, that can maintain the fabric of our society intact, in spite of exposure to all current madness around the world.” Here, Lee was referring to the Western world’s contrasting value system to the Asian communitarian values. Lee Kuan Yew, “Transcript of a speech at Istana Chap Goh Mei Reception.”


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demographic of mixed races and ethnicities, the CMIO model makes blanket assumptions that each racial group is a simplified homogenous group while dividing the population into distinct groups. Using the 1964 race riot as the main rhetoric alongside essentialised cultural differences, it makes a defining statement that ethnic groups are constantly in tension with one another. According to Tan, the idea that each race has a homogenous identity can be referred to as “surface” culture, in which apparent cultural manifestations are simplified and limited to visible and superficial associations to “festivals”, “holidays”, or stereotypes. To beyond racial “tolerance”, a term that ministers frequently use in speeches, “To tolerate” suggests the allowance of existence without interference, but also leans towards a passive, not participatory role suggesting avoidance and not inclusion. Instead, an effort should be made to reach for a deeper cultural approach—one that considers the more nuanced beliefs and value systems that underpin each individual. The issue with an over-reliance on tolerance and an over-simplified understanding of cultural differences is that it may encourage Singaporeans to downplay the differences between individuals within the same racial group or overlook the similarities across different racial groups. The model of multiracial multicultural citizenship through naturalisation that emerged in the aftermath of the 1960s racial riots is unlikely to be relevant today. As Singapore has become more of a global city, the demographic has evolved to include a greater diversity of cultures resulting from the influx of new immigrants. With new immigrants and a new generation that includes an increasing population of children from mixed-race marriages, there is a significant portion of the demographic that no longer fits neatly into the CMIO categories. This signals the need to transition to a more advanced phase of multiculturalism by exploring deep culture through education and the eradication of race-policies in order to foster a generation of active citizens who are globally aware and culturally sensitive—not just tolerant of others.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020 has amplified the community’s lack of understanding in issues related to culture and race, as well as diversity in the community and the integration of immigrants. Some of these critical issues were discussed in Part 3, highlighting how, during the peak of the outbreak in Singapore, immigrants were viewed as outsiders or even intruders. There are two groups of “outsiders”: the first group mainly comprises migrant workers working in lower-paying blue-collar jobs, such as in construction or labour-intensive work in other sectors (these workers are typically from China, India, Bangladesh and Malaysia); while the second group consists of expatriates working in higher-paying jobs (typically from other Western countries or major global cities). The pandemic revealed patterns of Singaporean behaviours towards

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these groups of “outsiders”. As mentioned in Part 3 of the thesis, some xenophobic sentiments were expressed in response to the outbreak that occurred in the purpose-built migrant worker dormitories. In addition, the expatriates, also faced anti-foreigner sentiments. In May 2020, a photo of a group of expatriates gathering outside a restaurant surfaced on the internet because they were flouting government rules during the national “circuit breaker” (stay-at-home order). The photograph of them at Robertson Quay was taken by a local citizen who shared it on Facebook before the it went viral. Those involved were charged in court, during which the Deputy Public Prosecutor called their actions “audacious”, giving “the impression that our (Singapore’s) laws can be belittled with impunity”. The expatriates were fined between SG$8,000 and SG$9,000, just below the maximum fine of SG$10,000, and in addition to the fines, the expatriates had their work passes (visas) revoked, which essentially forced them to leave the country. The case drew a lot of attention and negative commentary on social media, where the people involved received online abuse from Singaporeans. As of July 2020, 140 employment passes have been revoked that are related to cases of flouting anti-COVID-19 measures. This happened on top of the tension that was already existing between the local and expat community, where expatriates form more than half of senior management roles in financial services. When the photographs of them flouting rules went viral on social media during the pandemic, it further exacerbated this contentious relationship. The attitudes of the locals reflect not just the strained sentiments towards the expat community (the outsiders) but also show that locally-born Singapore citizens saw themselves as a common people counteracting an adverse situation. Unfortunately, the Singapore identity has resulted in locally-born Singaporean citizens identifying themselves as belonging to the territory, whereas everyone else, including immigrants and foreign residents who reside amongst the community, is regarded as an outsider. Although there is understandable concern that the virus might spread and that the Singapore government will be called upon to control the situation, this should not lead to the condemnation of entire groups of people. The COVID-19 pandemic which began at the start of 2020, has exposed some fault lines and inadequacies of certain social policies. The pandemic and the General Elections also coincided in 2020. The parliamentary elections were held in July 2020, which also surfaced issues of population density in Singapore. In 2019, Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat was mentioned about the Population White Paper and planning Singapore’s land use according to a higher population projection – referring to Mr Liu Thai Ker’s plan for a population of 10 million

17 In response to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, a “circuit breaker” that is similar to a stay-at-home order was imposed. The preventative measure was implemented by the Government of Singapore to curb the rate of COVID-19 spread in the community. It began on April 7, 2020 and the measures only started to relax on May 2. From the time of this writing, measures have been relaxed further to allow dining out with a bigger maximum number of people per party, and the reopening of other entertainment and hospitality establishments.

18 Robertson Quay is a wharf situated along Singapore River. Before the nineteenth century, Robertson Quay was all swampland, and land was later reclaimed because of its close proximity to the Singapore River. Both European and Chinese merchants built warehouses and boatyards in the area to conduct trade and business along the river. Now, Robertson Quay is populated with housing and hotels, as well as food and beverage outlets, making it a popular location for expatriates and the well-heeled segment of the population.


people. This was brought up by the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) and Peoples Voice party (PV), both oppositions to the PAP, opposed to alleged plans to increase Singapore’s population to 10 million (which was later refuted by the PAP). During the elections, SDP and PV representatives spoke against the PAP’s alleged plans to increase Singapore’s population to 10 million (from 5.7 million)– citing that this was going to be done by increasing the influx of foreigners into Singapore. The hustings drew much public attention and were a point of contestation between the election parties as many citizens were not just concerned about the population density and the lack of space but also the increase in foreign residents living in Singapore – a reflection of negative sentiments and the rifts between Singaporeans and foreigners living in Singapore. This type of discriminatory behaviour undermines social cohesion in a society that relies heavily on foreigners to sustain its economy, a social cohesion that the state is still trying to nurture. In addition, the pandemic has also highlighted how the construction industry in Singapore, is dependent on foreign labour. During the lockdowns, as borders did not allow foreign labour to enter Singapore, many construction projects were either delayed or came to a halt – this delayed the completion of many residential projects, causing an inflated demand resulting in price inflations. At the moment, constructions costs have increased now due to the demand (in turn increasing prices of property in the open market) and HDB flats that were slated for completion have been delayed – meaning buyers who typically have to wait 3 years for their flats, now have to wait 5 years. These delays have caused an increase in rental markets. This reflects how external factors like a shortage of foreign labour and uncontrollable circumstances like the pandemic can change homeownership sentiments. This shows the vulnerability of leveraging social policies on land and homeownership policies when they are susceptible to external and uncontrollable forces.

Family policies in Singapore (as illustrated in Part 4 of the thesis) have humoured many western journalists. The western narrative always points out the extent to which the state interferes with individual choices “despite becoming a developed, First World” country. The family is central to the imagination and perception of contemporary Singapore, and the ideal family is promoted through policy, design, and the media. At its core, the ideal family is composed of a young heterosexual married couple with two or more children, and the couple is likely to have been educated in the local mainstream education system and formally employed with a consistent monthly income. The narrow perception of a family nucleus also lives in a comfortable flat purchased from HDB, and as previously discussed, it is through the public housing flat that the state

21 Grace Ho, “GE2020: 10 million population is not a goal but a planning parameter, says Liu Thai Ker,” in The Straits Times, 17 July 2020, accessed on 21 February 2021; available on https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/ge2020-10-million-population-not-a-goal-but-a-planning-parameter-says-liu-thai-ker
23 Tessa Oh, “Waits of 6-7 years for BTO flats ‘in minority’, most completed in 4-5 years despite delayed: Desmond Lee” in TODAY, October 2021, accessed on 15 May 2022; available on https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/waits-6-7-years-bto-flats-minority-most-completed-4-5-years-despite-delays-desmond-lee
institutionalises its vision of the ideal family nucleus most visibly. The system that the state has constructed has become a rite of passage for Singaporeans. Although conservative, pro-family policies establish familial norms and contribute to the sense of “Singaporeaness”. The institutionalisation of major aspects of the family, such as housing, marriage, and having children, invariably bonds people together. According to interviews conducted by sociologist Teo You Yenn, many Singaporeans agreed that there are important relationships between the family and the nation, building on the same connection that the state has been making between marriage, family creation, and being a productive citizen. In consistent nation-building narratives, solid and successful imagery of an ideal citizen has been modelled through policies and shared experiences. However, the imagery excludes segments of the population.

As an overarching theme throughout the thesis, and through the perpetuation of the myths that have been discussed, there is a sense that Singapore is a case where the individual is subsumed by the collective and the community is elevated to a much higher and sacred level. This ideology of collectivism is coherent with its land policies. Although the 99-year leasehold policy has been problematised as a legitimate form of ownership in this thesis, several academics have recently surfaced opposing criticisms of the privatisation of land and its consequences. Historically, the right to property was chief ally associated with man’s ability to acquire land for subsistence purposes. It was the opportunity and right to acquire land, not a right to hoard it or to resist public demands that owners act responsibly. This means that the law of the land would intend for an individual or family to possess the means to live independently, rather than grow rich from land ownership. However, in most capital neoliberal economies, land ownership and privatisation play a central role in the accumulation of individual (personal and corporate) assets. At first glance, and with a myopic perspective, privatisation of land benefits both parties: Firstly, the privatisation of land benefits the individual through capital accumulation; and secondly, the privatisation of land allows governments to stimulate economies through the sale of land. In The New Enclosure, Christophers questions whether land privatisation in Britain has been a good trade off in terms of economic stimulation, while also taking into account the fuzzier, less quantitative community benefits. Christophers concludes his assessment of land privatisation in Britain by noting the perennial tension between short-term and longer-term benefits of land privatisation. After decades of disposing of public land in the past, Britain now faces housing shortages and declining levels of affordability. And despite releasing public land to the private sector to build houses for more people, it is left with a lack of developable land to build homes in the numbers that Britons currently demand. The outcomes of land privatisation are therefore a short-term solution because it is accompanied by longer-term consequences—one must begin to question what is the true cost of land privatisation and what are its community benefits—the benefits that cannot be quantified by monetary values. The long-term cost to the community can be significant, leading to greater wealth disparities.

29 Christophers refers to the two-phase public land-for-housing program launched in 2016.
with housing for lower-income groups entirely unmet, while the land remains in the hands of the capitalist class—there is no denying that there are several benefits to Singapore’s land ownership policies.

The 99-year leasehold policy in Singapore, combined with the government’s provision of public housing and columbaria, straddles the middle ground between the public land and privatising land. The leasehold land allows the state to have the flexibility of longer-term planning while providing ownership for a short-term period, allowing for opportunities for longer-term planning for the future. While ownership gives owners a sense of pride in their homes, making them care for their homes and their immediate surroundings, such as public spaces, the state also takes on the responsibility of maintaining public housing estates, ensuring a consistent level of hygiene and cleanliness across the various estates. With the pandemic, issues concerning hygiene have risen to the fore, but an attitude towards communitarianism allows Singapore more effective control over the situation and spread of the COVID-19 virus. This, of course, is also attributed to the public’s high level of trust in the government and medical experts and the separation between poisonous political discourse and public health policies.

In the course of the coronavirus pandemic, Singapore’s public hygiene infrastructure has been widely lauded by the foreign media. However, another land-related issue that has resurfaced in light of the pandemic is the close relationship between public health and the broader environmental crisis associated with land management. Land should be viewed as part of the commons that benefit the majority of the people. When land is privatised, the interest of the public cannot be maintained or controlled. While it is not possible to completely reject the systems of ownership and privatisation, one must consider the benefits of extending state control in order to protect the long-term interest of the public. It is timely to skewer the myth of public ownership as inefficient or solely an apparatus of social control. Ownership through leasehold policies could provide the best of both worlds. In line with Christophers’ argument that public landownership is necessary and a balance needs to be attained in order to secure public goods and services, perhaps it is critical to consider that the societal myths we have discussed have leveraged far too heavily on the governance of the land. In addition, the state continues to be too heavy-handed in its top-down, managerial approach to national development strategies. With all that in mind, it is hence also time to relieve the ground of its multiple identities by re-examining how alternative methods of addressing income distribution, racial inequality, and family policies, such as through education and better mediums of open discussion, can be pushed to the forefront.

32 There is evidence that the underlying cause of climate change increases the likelihood of zoonotic diseases, particularly with deforestation and agriculture, as well as land reclamation. The loss of natural habitats forces animals to migrate closer to human settlements and cities, where infectious diseases may emerge. Please see Draw Pendergrass and Troy Vettese, “The Climate Crisis and COVID-19 Are Inseparable,” JACOBIN, May 31, 2020, accessed 31 January 2021, https://jacobinmag.com/2020/05/climate-change-crisis-covid-coronavirus-environment?fbclid=IwAR3r-uPWE_CAI4eCtAviRY2mSwoqMaOygXYTnZr4IS1kpmFq31XC8mLOs.
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Appendices
Chapter 2 Appendices

Appendix 1.1
Copy of text of speech from National Archives, Singapore
Prime Minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew, in moving the second reading of The Land Acquisition (Amendment No. 2) Bill 1964 in The Legislative Assembly on June 10, 1964

Appendix 1.2
Copy of microfilm, a newspaper article from National Library Board, Singapore
The Straits Times, April 4, 1966 “Expropriation? There is ‘no such evidence’”

Appendix 1.3
Image of the original print of Government Press Statement from National Archives, Singapore
Speech by the Minister for Law, Mr E. W. Baker, when moving the second reading of the Land Acquisition Bill in the Singapore Parliament on June 22, 1966

Appendix 1.4
Copy of microfilm, a newspaper article from National Library Board, Singapore
The Straits Times, June 17, 1967
“New land acquisition law comes into effect.”

Appendix 2.1
Copy of original plan drawings from Housing & Development Board (via Alida Teo)
3-room Housing & Development Board apartment built from 1960 to 1970

Appendix 2.2
Copy of original plan drawings from Housing & Development Board (via Alida Teo)
3-room Housing & Development Board apartment built from 1966 to 1978

Appendix 2.3
Copy of original plan drawings from Housing & Development Board (via Alida Teo)
3-room Housing & Development Board apartment built from 1976 to 1988

Appendix 2.4
Copy of original plan drawings from Housing & Development Board (via Alida Teo)
3-Room Housing & Development Board apartment built from 1982 to 1989

Appendix 2.5
Copy of original plan drawings from Housing & Development Board (via Alida Teo)
3-Room Housing & Development Board apartment at block 5A Kallang Heights, Singapore, completed in 2012
Appendix 1.1
Copy of text of speech from National Archives, Singapore
Prime Minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew, in moving the second reading of The Land Acquisition (Amendment No. 2) Bill 1964 in The Legislative Assembly on June 10, 1964

SINGAPORE GOVERNMENT PRESS STATEMENT
MC. JN.37/64(PM)

TEXT OF SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER,
MR. LEE KUAN YEW, IN MOVING THE SECOND READING OF
THE LAND ACQUISITION (AMENDMENT NO.2) BILL 1964 IN
THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ON WEDNESDAY,
JUNE 10, 1964.

At the Legislative Assembly meeting on July 24, 1963, we introduced the Land Acquisition (Temporary Provisions) Bill which sought to peg the value of land acquired for public purposes at the value prevailing on January 1, 1961. That Bill lapsed with the dissolution of the Assembly and consequent on the establishment of Malaysia, it was necessary to re-consider the entire question, having regard to the constitutional provisions applicable throughout Malaysia.

At the Legislative Assembly debate on the 1964 Development Estimates on Monday, December 16, 1963, when debating the question of increased land values and the cost of land acquisition, I enunciated two broad principles, namely, (i) no private land-owner should benefit from development at public expense and (ii) that the price paid on acquisition for public purposes should not
be higher than what the land would have been worth had the Government not contemplated development generally in the area. I said I would introduce legislation which would help to ensure that increases in land values because of public development should benefit the community and not for the land-owner. Land is becoming a scarce commodity and with the mounting pressure on land at present, we must try to control land values for public purposes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, the Land Acquisition (Amendment No. 2) Bill, being introduced today, include provisions which embody these two principles. The opportunity has been taken to make other changes in procedural matters and the manner of assessing compensation by the Collector for land acquired for public purposes.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Bill proposes substantial alterations in the law, and it is the intention to refer the Bill to Select Committee where it can be considered in greater detail and where public representations on the Bill can be heard. The Explanatory Statement attached to the Bill sets out the contents of the Bill at some length.

Section 5 of the principal Ordinance which provided for the acquisition of lands for "public purposes" has been redrafted to specifically define and enlarge the meaning of "public purposes". This redraft which is more specific follows
the Federation Land Acquisition Act and is considered desirable in view of the increasing tempo of public development and the need to acquire land for a variety of public purposes, including residential development by the Housing and Development Board, industrial development by the Economic Development Board, as well as urban renewal of the city envisaged in the next few years.

The Ordinance has also been amended to provide for a more expeditious procedure of taking possession of lands in cases of urgency. For example, in the case of areas devastated by fire, the provisions will enable immediate possession of such lands to be taken.

A major alteration envisaged is that in respect of the appeals. Under the existing Ordinance, any person dissatisfied with the award of the Collector may ask the Collector to refer the matter to Court. All the consequential administrative work devolves on the Land Office. A single judge of the High Court, sitting with two assessors decides on the compensation payable in cases where the award is not less than $5,000/. The amending Bill now provides for an Appeals Board to be presided over by a Commissioner of Appeals. The Commissioner will be assisted in certain cases by two assessors drawn from a panel. This Board would deal with appeals on acquisition awards. Appeal to the High Court against the decision of the Board will only be on points of law. These
new appeal provisions follow the trend in the United Kingdom and Australia of placing questions of this nature involving specialist evaluations before Administrative Tribunals rather than Courts of Law.

The provisions of the law in regard to the assessment of compensation have also been redrafted. The Bill provides that when the value of land has been increased by reason of development of the neighbourhood by the provision of roads, drains, electricity, water, gas, sewerage and social, educational or recreational facilities by any public or statutory authorities within five years preceding the date of the acquisition, such increase shall not be taken into account. We have put in five years, but I would like to state that it may well be that after hearing representations from interested parties and representations from the Economic Development Board and other development organisations of the Government, the preceding number of years may be increased to anywhere between five and ten years. It is also specifically provided that decreases in value due to encumbrances such as occupation by squatters, etc., shall be taken into account. Again, the Ordinance seeks to make it clear that restrictions imposed under the Planning Ordinance which go to affect the market value of the land shall be taken into account. Another major change is that a ceiling to market value has been placed to ensure that the award will not exceed the most recent value declared and accepted for the purposes of assessing tax or duty payable.
(where such declaration has been made within two years of acquisition) or in other cases, the consideration or purchase price on its last sale or transfer (if within two years of the acquisition). Another change proposed is that interest payable on the difference between the Collector's award and the award ultimately decided on by the Board would be at the rate of six percent per annum and not, as under the existing Ordinance, at eight percent per annum. This follows the rate payable under the Federation Land Acquisition Act.

A number of minor amendments considered desirable from the administrative point of view have also been made, as well as transitional provisions with regard to declarations of acquisition of land and references to Court made before the coming into operation of this Land Acquisition (Amendment No.2) Ordinance.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to move.

10th June, 1964. (Time issued: 1845 hours)
Appendix 1.2
Copy of microfilm, a newspaper article from National Library Board, Singapore

_The Straits Times_, April 4, 1966 “Expropriation? There is ‘no such evidence’”

Expropriation? There is ‘no such evidence’
Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to move "that the Bill be now read a second time."

The provisions of this Bill should come as no surprise to Members of this House. In June 1962, the Land Acquisition (Amendment No. 2) Bill, which proposed certain changes in regard to the law relating to the acquisition of private property for public purposes, was sent to Select Committee. The passage of this Bill was, however, delayed because of constitutional difficulties.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, this Bill contains (in the form of a revised consolidated act) both the provisions in the existing law, i.e. the Land Acquisition Ordinance, Chapter 248, as well as the provisions in the Land Acquisition (Amendment No. 2) Bill.

The major departures from existing legislation are:

(1) the assessment of compensation provisions have been redrafted on the basis of two principles enunciated by the Prime Minister in December 1961. Firstly, that no landowner should benefit from development which has taken place at public expense and secondly, that the price paid on the acquisition of land for public purposes should not be higher than what the land would have been worth had the Government not carried out development generally in the area; and

(2) provision has been made for the hearing of appeals by an Appeals Board instead of the Court as at present. Thus the person who is aggrieved by the Collector's award will, under the new law, have the right of appeal to the Appeals Board, consisting of a Commissioner of Appeals or a Deputy Commissioner of Appeals either sitting alone or with two assessors, depending on the quantum of the award against which an appeal is made.
There are other changes in the proposed legislation which widen the powers of acquisition to meet various situations envisaged with urban renewal, industrialisation, etc. A more expeditious procedure for taking possession of land in cases of extreme urgency has also been provided for.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, as I stated earlier, the main alterations proposed in this Bill were embodied in a previous Bill which went to Select Committee in June 1964, and only one representation—i.e., that, too, a late one, from the Real Estate Valuers Association of Singapore—was received. However, as this is an important piece of legislation, it is proposed to refer the Bill again to Select Committee in order to give members of the public an opportunity to put forward their views and representations.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I do not propose to dwell at length on the provisions of this Bill which will receive full consideration by the Select Committee. It is my hope that when representations are called for, those with positive contributions to make will come forward with their suggestions.

Mr. Speaker, Sir, I beg to move.

JUNE 26, 1966.

Time issued 1430 hours
New land acquisition law comes into effect.

TWO judges have been appointed Condoners of Appeals under the new Land Acquisition Act, which was passed by Parliament last month, and comes into operation on June 17.

**Address**

The Appeals Condoner Office, Cantonment Road, Singapore.

**Proclamation**

Union's food gift to orphans

Nasser received

Clothing is PLA
Appendix 2.1
Copy of original plan drawings from Housing & Development Board
3-room Housing & Development Board apartment built from 1960 to 1970
Appendix 2.2
Copy of original plan drawings from Housing & Development Board (via Alida Teo)
3-room Housing & Development Board apartment built from 1966 to 1978
Appendix 2.3
Copy of original plan drawings from Housing & Development Board (via Alida Teo)
3-room Housing & Development Board apartment built from 1976 to 1988
Appendix 2.4
Copy of original plan drawings from Housing & Development Board (via Alida Teo)
3-Room Housing & Development Board apartment built from 1982 to 1989

3-ROOM MODEL 'A' (CORRIDOR)
SCALE 1:100
Appendix 2.5
Copy of original plan drawings from Housing & Development Board (via Alida Teo)
3-Room Housing & Development Board apartment at block 5A Kallang Heights, Singapore, completed in 2012

3 Room Apartment
Type-3
Floor Area 67m² (inclusive of Internal Floor Area of 65m² and A/C ledge)
Internal Floor Area is computed from the centre-line of the walls of the flat
Chapter 3 Appendices

Appendix 3.1

Appendix 3.2
Image of the original print of Government Press Statement from National Archives, Singapore Speech by Mr Sidek Bin Saniff, Parliamentary Secretary (Trade & Industry) at the National Day Seminar organised by Youth Challenge at the Kallang Theatre, August 30, 1987

Appendix 3.3
Copy of microfilm, a newspaper article from National Library Board, Singapore The Straits Times, January 7, 1989
“Minister warns of a dangerous trend which must be nipped in the bud: Racial enclaves forming – Dhana.”

Appendix 3.4
Copy of Government Press Statement from Housing & Development Board Policy Changes to Support an Inclusive and Cohesive Home
MINISTERIAL STATEMENT IN PARLIAMENT BY
THE MINISTER FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

In a speech to community leaders on 6 January, I referred to the trend in some HDB housing estates where concentrations of racial groups are beginning to form. The President, in his Address at the opening of Parliament, also highlighted the gravity of this problem.

I would like to inform the House today of the measures that the Government is going to introduce to ensure that each estate will have a good racial mix.

The Government will set limits on the maximum proportions of each racial group allowed in each HDB neighbourhood. It will also set a separate limit on the maximum proportions allowed in each HDB block. These limits are set out in Table 1. They will cover both the allocation of new flats and the resale of flats. They will take effect from 1 March 89.

I would like to give the assurance that no HDB resident, whether he is Chinese, Malay or Indian will be required to move from his present flat. The measures that we are introducing to ensure a good racial mix will only affect the future allocation of new flats and the resale of flats from 1 March 89.

Let me now explain the reasons for the measures and how they will work. I have distributed to Members Annexes I and II. Annex I shows the racial distribution of applications for new flats. It shows that proportionately...
more Chinese applied for new flats in Ang Mo Kio/Hougang Zone while more Malays applied for Bedok/Tampines Zone. Annex II shows the position for resale flats. Malays bought more than half the resale flats in Bedok/Tampines Zone. In the case of Bedok, if present trends continue, the Malay proportion will reach 30 per cent by 1991, and exceed 40 per cent in 10 years’ time.

Similar trends are emerging in other estates, largely through open-market resale of HDB flats. This is illustrated by a more detailed analysis of the purchases of resale flats by race and estate, as shown in Annex III. You can see from Annex III that a high proportion of the buyers of resale flats in 1988 in Bukit Merah, Redhill and Henderson were Chinese. In Bedok, Eunos, Teban Gardens and Taman Jurong, more than half the buyers were Malays. In parts of Yishun and in Kampong Java, Indians formed a high proportion of buyers.

There are clear signs that racial congregations are re-emerging. Although the problem has not reached crisis proportions, the experience of other multi-racial societies such as the United States shows that the process begins slowly, but once a certain point is passed, racial groupings accelerate suddenly.

With the slowing down of HDB’s Building Programme, resale flats will have an increasing influence on the ethnic distribution in the HDB estates. We must therefore introduce open and clear policies early, to stop these trends.

In the late fifties and early sixties, various sections of our population were gathered in different pockets distinguishable by their racial or dialect groups. The Malays were concentrated in Geylang Serai, Eunos and a few other areas. The Indians were found in disproportionate
numbers in the Serangoon Road and Naval Base areas. The Chinese gathered in dialect groups: the Cantonese in Kreta Ayer, the Hokkiens in Telok Ayer, the Teochews in the Upper Serangoon area and in Boat Quay, and the Hainanese in the Beach Road/Middle Road area. Each group was fiercely proud of its own identity and defended its narrow interests stoutly. Each clung to its own race or dialect community for security and mutual assistance.

The Government seized the opportunity of the massive public housing programme to mix the population. We made sure that every HDB new town and estate reflected the racial mix in the general population.

With few exceptions, we have made each electoral constituency representative of the racial and social mix in Singapore. Each HDB new town has a cross-section of Singaporeans. Each has its share of talent and community leaders. Each MP is familiar with the problems of every ethnic, economic and social group in Singapore. Grassroots leaders too are familiar with such problems and can therefore play a more effective community development role among the residents.

Most importantly, each racial group has developed an understanding of the other racial groups making up our nation. This explains how we have been able to forge a consensus on social issues, and carry the population with us. Mixing the various communities in proportions that approximate the general population has given us racial tolerance and harmony for more than 20 years. To allow them to regroup will be to go back to the pre-1965 period which saw racial riots.

We will therefore, set limits on the maximum proportions of each racial group allowed in each HDB neighbourhood. These are set out in Table 1. These
proportions take into account the existing racial composition of our population, and the projected demand for HDB flats by each racial group. The projected demand is based on the rate at which new households are formed and on recent trends in applications.

We have chosen the HDB neighbourhood as our basic unit to apply the racial proportions because it is a distinct entity with a well-defined physical boundary. A neighbourhood comprises an average of 50 blocks and has about 5,000 flats. Every new town is made up of a number of neighbourhoods, each designed around a neighbourhood centre, which is a focal point for community activities.

The neighbourhood limits set out in the table will ensure that each neighbourhood has a good racial mix of residents. In addition, the limits on individual blocks will prevent any single block from developing a concentration of a single racial group. The limits on blocks are set three percentage points higher than the limits on neighbourhoods, to allow some variation in ethnic proportions from block to block. For example, Chinese can occupy 87 per cent of the flats in a block, but they may not exceed 84 per cent in the neighbourhood as a whole.

In the sale of new flats, the HDB will use the proportions as a guide to allocate the flats within its existing first-come first-served policy.

I would like now to explain how these proportions will be applied in the resale of flats. If the existing proportions are within the limits set in Table 1, there will be no restrictions. Anyone can sell his flat to any buyer, regardless of race.

Suppose, however, that Malays already occupy 22 per cent of the flats in a neighbourhood. The limit set for Malays would therefore have been reached. A Malay in this
neighbourhood may sell his flat to a buyer from any ethnic group, because by doing so, he does not further increase the percentage of Malays in the neighbourhood. A non-Malay however who intends to sell his flat will have to sell it to another non-Malay. He cannot sell to a Malay because if he does so, he would be increasing the percentage of Malays in the neighbourhood.

Similarly, suppose in a neighbourhood the Chinese occupy 90 per cent of the flats and thus exceed the neighbourhood limit for Chinese. A non-Chinese in this neighbourhood may only sell his flat to another non-Chinese. A Chinese however is free to sell his flat to a buyer from any ethnic group. If a Chinese sells to a non-Chinese, the proportion occupied by Chinese will move down. The proportion will not be allowed to go back to 90 per cent as this exceeds the neighbourhood limit for Chinese.

Now suppose the proportion of Chinese in a neighbourhood is 80 per cent, below the neighbourhood limit, but there is a block within this neighbourhood with 95 per cent Chinese, which is higher than the block limit. Then a non-Chinese owning a flat in this block will only be allowed to sell to another non-Chinese, whereas a Chinese in this block can sell to anybody.

This way we will contain the problem. Where the limits have already been exceeded our measures will prevent the situation from deteriorating. However, these measures will not force the proportions down.

Out of 125 HDB neighbourhoods in Singapore, the HDB has identified 35 which will be immediately affected by the new measures. Table 2 shows where they are located. These are the neighbourhoods where the lessees are eligible to sell their flats in the open market, and where the ethnic proportions already exceed those given in Table 1. However, not all who own and want to sell their flats in these
neighbourhoods will be affected. Resale statistics show that most such lessees who sold their flats did so to persons of their own ethnic group. Based on this trend, the HDB estimates that fewer than 1,200 lessees in these 35 neighbourhoods who want to sell their flats are likely to be affected by the new measures.

If as a result of this policy to ensure a balanced racial mix in HDB estates, anyone finds it difficult to sell his flat in the open market, the HDB is prepared, as a last resort, to buy back the flats at prevailing HDB posted price.

I would like to repeat the assurance that no one will be required to move from his present flat. In neighbourhoods which have exceeded the ethnic proportions to be introduced, we will allow time and re-development to bring about a better mix.

Our multi-racial policies must continue if we are to develop into a more cohesive, better integrated society. Singapore's racial harmony, long-term stability, and even viability as a nation depend on it.

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GS/MStmnt/Pgs.1-6
### APPLICATIONS FOR NEW FLATS BY RACE AND ZONE
**(SEP 87 TO SEP 88)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RACE</th>
<th>ANG MO KIO/ HOUgang</th>
<th>BEDOK/ TAMPERES</th>
<th>BUKIT BATOK/ CHOA CHU KANG</th>
<th>JURONG</th>
<th>YISHUN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>303 (5%)</td>
<td>1,876 (20%)</td>
<td>919 (16%)</td>
<td>444 (14%)</td>
<td>1,114 (15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>5,714 (90%)</td>
<td>7,257 (76%)</td>
<td>4,433 (79%)</td>
<td>2,476 (80%)</td>
<td>5,727 (78%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian &amp; Others</td>
<td>359 (5%)</td>
<td>393 (4%)</td>
<td>263 (5%)</td>
<td>177 (6%)</td>
<td>523 (7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>6,376 (100%)</td>
<td>9,526 (100%)</td>
<td>5,615 (100%)</td>
<td>3,097 (100%)</td>
<td>7,364 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


### PURCHASES OF RESALE FLATS BY RACE AND ESTATE IN 1988

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ESTATE</th>
<th>RACE WITH RELATIVELY HIGH PROPORTION*</th>
<th>BREAKDOWN OF PURCHASERS BY RACE</th>
<th>INDIAN &amp; OTHERS</th>
<th>TOTAL NO. OF BUYERS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>MALAY</td>
<td>CHINESE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bedok</td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>1,297</td>
<td>833</td>
<td>75 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(23%)</td>
<td>(59%)</td>
<td>(38%)</td>
<td>(3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bunus</td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>1 (1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(23%)</td>
<td>(11%)</td>
<td>(48%)</td>
<td>(1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teban Gardens</td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>11 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(26%)</td>
<td>(56%)</td>
<td>(36%)</td>
<td>(8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taman Jurong</td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>5 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(21%)</td>
<td>(68%)</td>
<td>(28%)</td>
<td>(4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hougang</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>7 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(85%)</td>
<td>(20%)</td>
<td>(76%)</td>
<td>(4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bidad Merah</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>6 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(83%)</td>
<td>(9%)</td>
<td>(87%)</td>
<td>(4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redhill</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2 (15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(88%)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(85%)</td>
<td>(15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henderson</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(37%)</td>
<td>(3%)</td>
<td>(97%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yishun</td>
<td>Indian &amp; Others</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>17 (24%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(62%)</td>
<td>(14%)</td>
<td>(14%)</td>
<td>(24%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kampung Java</td>
<td>Indian &amp; Others</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>23 (41%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(9%)</td>
<td>(50%)</td>
<td>(50%)</td>
<td>(41%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Expressed as a percentage of total number of households in the estate.
Table 1

PROPORTIONS OF FLATS PERMITTED FOR EACH RACE IN EACH NEIGHBOURHOOD AND BLOCK

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Percentage in Population*</th>
<th>Permissible Proportion of flats in each neighbourhood</th>
<th>Permissible Proportion of flats in each block</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Malays</td>
<td>15.1%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>76.0%</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indians and others</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* June 88 population estimates by Department of Statistics.
### Table 2

**Neighbourhoods Affected by Limits Specified in Table 1**

*As at 15 Feb 89*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>New Town</th>
<th>Number of Neighbourhoods Affected</th>
<th>Names of Neighbourhoods Affected</th>
<th>Total Number of Neighbourhoods</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ang Mo Kio</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>N3/7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bedok</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>N1, N3, N4, N5, N8</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bishan</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bukit Batok</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>N7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bukit Merah</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>N3, N4, N5, N7, N8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bukit Panjang</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>N2, N3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choa Chu Kang</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>N1, N5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clementi</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geylang</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>N1, N4, N7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hougang</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>N1, N3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jurong East</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>N1, N4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jurong West</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>N1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kallang/Wampoa</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>N1, N2, N7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kangkar</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lim Chu Kang</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pasir Ris</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queenstown</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sembawang</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serangoon</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tampines</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>N2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toa Payoh</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>N5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woodlands</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>N2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yishun</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>N1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Total** 35 125

**Note:** N denotes neighbourhood
THE ROLE OF MINORITIES IN A MULTI-RACIAL DEMOCRACY

Nation building in Singapore, to a large extent, means national integration of the four ethnic groups. The multi-racial element of the Singapore society has been the dominant feature of Singapore’s success since gaining independence twenty-two years ago. Multi-racialism is considered as the best political approach for Singapore as it adopts the democratic process of governing a nation. The advocacy of democracy through multi-racialism has created overriding loyalties among community groups to the claims of the nation state. A consensus on national values as well as co-operation among the communities was also developed. For this, the government must be commended for delicately balancing and harmonising conflicting demands and expectations of the minority and majority communities and galvanising them towards a common goal of excellence for Singapore. This was consciously done from the outset of the emergence of the party. Democracy implies not just rule according to the majority interest but also the protection of minority rights. Failing which it could spell disaster for the whole nation. You have only to look around and you will see this happening from far away Africa to nearer home, Sri Lanka.

In the past, the minority groups in Singapore have always worked together in cohesion. The minorities
comprising Malays, Indians, Ceylonese, Eurasians and Jews have struggled with the dominant ethnic group to build the Singapore of today. Although the minorities collectively form only twenty-five percent of the total population, their contribution to Singapore cannot be overlooked. The minorities have always played their role in the nation building of Singapore and without doubt will play an increasing role in the future of Singapore.

Thus recently, the idea of Team MPs was floated and stressed by none other than our PM at his National Day Kalky address to the nation to ensure that communities (minorities) are represented in Parliament. The first sign of "trouble" I foresee, is when there is no minority races in Parliament. If that happened we may inherit some, if not all the turbulence or crisis that ravaged many countries that are heterogeneous. As you must know, an electoral system must satisfy two needs: an accurate reflection of the popular will and the capacity for firm and effective government. Of course you may quote Disraeli: "No government can long be secure without a formidable opposition". The trouble with us is that most of the time I find that our backbenchers perform better than the opposition. The growing importance of minorities in nation building has been recognised by many nations in the world. Singapore is no different in having the same view.

To sustain minorities' integrity and well-being in a multi-racial Singapore, the IDEAL position to some, is that the minority communities must have leaders who project themselves not as communal leaders, but rather as national leaders. As a national leader he can encourage the minority communities to think of themselves as Singaporeans and not as minorities. To help such a leader succeed, he could emerge not from communal organisations but from plural organisations. The leader from plural organisations, non-communal organisations and grassroots organisations like
the Residents Committees and the Community Centres can better address issues at the national level as he has been entrusted with the wisdom of a national decision in the interest of all ethnic groups. The majority community views such a leader with confidence. This confidence is supported by the qualities of the leader who is necessarily highly educated, qualified and experienced to shoulder important responsibilities for the nation. A strongly motivated leader, committed to serve the country’s interests and not communal interests should easily win the trust of all Singaporeans. His presence at national leadership and his contribution to Singapore would promote all community groups to handhold one another as Singaporeans in pursuit of nation building. This scenario needs time. In the meantime we must be able to tap leaders, though they come from the so-called communal organisations but are broader in outlook, open-minded and the minorities should understand that they have responsibilities to the majority of the nation. As a whole, many a time the minority leaders, Malays for instance, have to reconcile between community interest and national interest. The community may have different expectations of these leaders whom they consider as theirs. Some tend to forget that we have to serve others also, not just Malays. We are also national leaders.

In our endeavour to make ourselves more Singaporean, the minorities must never allow a communal syndrome to be cultivated. Communal politics must not be permitted to take root in Singapore. Needless to say, for any minority group to think that its interests can be best safeguarded by racialism is not only foolish, but disastrous. Sociologists have concluded that political leaders who champion racial politics do not fight for the cause of the community but instead to clamour for individual political gains or self-interest. More often than not, these are the people who invite others into communal politics. It is maintained that only people who appreciate and understand their own
culture and religion tend to show respect to that of
others. If he is a Malay, he is a good Malay as well as a
good Muslim. The government has always encouraged the
retention of each ethnic group's own distinctive cultural
and spiritual heritage. The majority, as well as the
minority communities must continue to promote toleration and
mutual respect, and facilitate the growth of a culturally
and spiritually dynamic multi-racial society. Let me
elaborate by giving you one specific example. During the
Abbasid period, a Nestorian bishop wrote to his friend
confiding in him that he was worried that the Arab/Muslim
conquerors will combat their religion (Christianity). "But
on the contrary," he said, "the Muslims not only did not
combat our religion, but they also respected our elders,
priests, sages and even gave donations to our churches and
converts". I am quite sure other religions have similar
examples.

The major community constitutes about seventy-seven
per cent of the population which means that minorities will
always remain minorities in Singapore unless of course if
one were to engineer it in such a way that the number may be
comparable. Even then it may take, say, 300 years. I
suspect there will be a lot of politicking going around at
the expense of the nation's progress and interests.
According to Bertrand Russell, fanatical belief in democracy
makes a democratic institution impossible. What else,
fanatically communal. Therefore in order to provide any
meaningful contribution to Singapore, the minorities must
interact with the major community. They must spend the
greater part of their life with the major community in order
to participate in Singapore's economy and society and vice-
versa. Such participation provides the minority groups with
an equal opportunity to a stake in the economy and society.
Interaction with the major community fosters closer
co-operation between all community groups. Inevitably,
however, continued co-operation may provide sufficient
impetus for competition. The competition can be 
encouraged in Singapore as ultimately the objective is to 
upgrade the quality of life of Singaporeans. When the 
minority communities vigorously enter the mainstream of 
national activities, each community aspires to achieve the 
highest in excellence in all endeavours. However, any 
attempt to dissociate from the mainstream of economy and 
society, however small, will weaken the position of any 
minority group. The minority group will suffer economically 
and may find their cultural identity, including the 
political culture, threatened as a result of the withdrawal.

Last year when I was asked to head the Kemasa Task 
Force, a committee to appraise the resolution by the 
Singapore Malay/Muslim Economic Congress, I was privileged 
to have non-Malay committees to help us. This is indeed the 
first of its kind, especially knowing full well that it 
boils down to forming an institution which bears religious 
connotations - DANAMIS (Dana Amanah Masyarakat Melayu-Islam 
Singapura).

DANAMIS is a translation of a pillar of Islam into a 
contemporary institution which encompasses a well designed 
central savings scheme for haj and a source of special 
finance to facilitate Malay/Muslim participation in the 
economic activities.

Efforts by the government to make all sons of 
Singapore, Singaporeans, must be welcomed by the 
minorities. It is only through this common identity can the 
minority groups mobilise their roles more effectively in the 
New Society of Singapore in the 1990s. Come year 2,000, the 
21st century, this New Society of Singapore should exist. 
This could be the pinnacle of our values which we are 
inculcating through our education system, especially through 
our languages, literature, religion and moral education 
besides having to undergo National Service together, and
staying in the same blocks and socialising in the workplace. Even Mr Goh Chok Tong, the First Deputy Prime Minister, on 11 Dec 1984 in unveiling the People’s Action Party (PAP) “Agenda for Action” for the next fifteen years, disclosed that Singapore will be a nation which develops the talents of its citizens to the fullest. He reiterated that the PAP government does not only value the people’s talents but also values the Singaporeans themselves. At an NUS talk to the Democratic Socialist Club on 3 July, 1985, Brig-Gen (Reservist) Lee Hsien Loong, assured all Singaporeans that equal opportunities abound for all in the 1990s if they subscribe to the virtues of excellence and meritocracy. According to BG Lee, equal opportunity not only means fairness to all, it also means no talent will be wasted and social mobility will be enhanced for all Singaporeans.

By that time, judging by the maturity of the present level-headed leaders of ASEAN and how they handle communal and religious issues and its effect on their countries, Singapore and its regional relations will find a new dimension. ASEAN will be stronger. It will be stronger still should by that time, Vietnam’s problems subside, the Soviet troops are no more in Afghanistan and China achieves her four modernisation efforts. This means that the Pacific is actually the growth area for the 21st century while the Atlantic is the growth area in the 20th century.

The government leaders have given their assurances of participation by the minority communities in the future of Singapore. The minorities are aware that to be Singaporeans, they must identify with the aspirations and goals of the nation. As more and more minorities get into the national mainstream, they can understand why national goals must be promoted in the interest of all communities. The multi-racial approach to nation-building is still the best approach as it allows the integration of all minority and majority communities to co-exist and live in harmony.
Appendix 3.3
Copy of microfilm, a newspaper article from National Library Board, Singapore
_The Straits Times_, January 7, 1989
“Minister warns of a dangerous trend which must be nipped in the bud: Racial enclaves forming – Dhana.”
Appendix 3.4  
Copy of Government Press Statement from Housing & Development Board  
Policy Changes to Support an Inclusive and Cohesive Home (March 5, 2010)

POLICY CHANGES TO SUPPORT AN INCLUSIVE AND COHESIVE HOME

The Minister for National Development, Mr Mah Bow Tan, announced in Parliament today housing policy changes to encourage Singapore Permanent Residents (SPRs) to take up citizenship, a new quota to promote social integration of SPR households in public housing estates, and a revision to the Ethnic Integration Policy to accommodate Singapore’s changing demographics.

PART A: PROMOTING CITIZENSHIP IN HDB HOUSEHOLDS

2. With globalisation, an increasing number of SPRs are joining our community as long-term residents. SPRs contribute economically and socially to building our society, and it is in our country’s interests for them to sink their roots here permanently. Hence we would like to encourage SPRs to take up Singapore citizenship.

Reinforcing the Privileges of Citizenship

3. HDB facilitates home ownership by providing generous subsidies. Today, SPRs married to Singapore Citizens (SCs) enjoy the same subsidies as Singaporean couples. We would like to encourage the SPR family members in such SC/SPR households to take up citizenship.

4. To do this and to reinforce the privilege of citizenship, HDB will withhold $10,000 of the housing subsidies enjoyed by SC/SPR households when they buy a flat. If they buy a resale flat, a Design, Build and Sell Scheme (DBSS) flat, or an Executive Condominium (EC), their Housing Grant will be reduced by $10,000. If they buy a new flat, they will have to pay a $10,000 premium on top of HDB’s selling price. The changes are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Housing Subsidies for SC/SPR Households

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Household Type</th>
<th>Buying New Flat from HDB</th>
<th>CPF Housing Grant for Resale/DBSS flats or EC unit</th>
<th>Citizen Top-Up</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SC / SC</td>
<td>No change</td>
<td>Basic Grant: $30,000, Higher-Tier* Grant: $40,000</td>
<td>N.A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SC / SPR</td>
<td>Pay $10,000 Premium</td>
<td>Basic Grant: $20,000, Higher-Tier* Grant: $30,000</td>
<td>Receive $10,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Not applicable to EC
5 The withheld subsidy of $10,000 will be restored when an SPR family member in the SC/SPR household takes up citizenship or if the couple has an SC child while still in ownership of that flat. Eligible households can apply to HDB within 6 months of the change in household citizenship status to claim the $10,000 Citizen Top-Up via CPF.

PART B: ENCOURAGING SOCIAL INTEGRATION - QUOTA FOR SPR HOUSEHOLDS

6 SPRs are long-term residents in Singapore. It is important that they integrate well in our local communities. Social integration is a key policy objective in our public housing system. In line with this, HDB will introduce a new SPR quota for non-Malaysian SPR families buying flats, to facilitate better integration and to prevent enclaves from forming in public housing estates.

How does the SPR quota work?

7 The SPR quota will be set at 5% and 8% at the neighbourhood and block levels respectively. It will apply in addition to the existing Ethnic Integration Policy (EIP) limits. The SPR quota takes into account the composition of SCs and SPRs in Singapore, and their respective demand for public housing. Malaysian SPRs will not be subject to the SPR quota, in view of their close cultural and historical similarities with Singaporeans.

8 The SPR Quota caps the proportion of non-Malaysian SPR households in HDB neighbourhoods and blocks. Similar to EIP, any resale resulting in an increase in SPR proportion will not be allowed, if the neighbourhood/block limit is already reached. Under such circumstances, an SC seller or a Malaysian SPR seller would not be able to sell his flat to a non-Malaysian SPR household. However, a non-Malaysian SPR seller would still be able to sell to another non-Malaysian SPR as this would not increase the number of non-Malaysian SPR households.

PART C: REVISION TO THE ETHNIC INTEGRATION POLICY (EIP)

9 The EIP was implemented in 1989 to ensure a balanced ethnic mix across HDB estates and to prevent the formation of racial enclaves.

10 In response to Singapore’s changing demographics, HDB will increase the limits for the Indian/Others ethnic group by two percentage points to 12% at the neighbourhood level and 15% at the block level. The current Indian/Others limits are 10% and 13% for neighbourhood and block respectively. There is no change to the
limits for the Chinese and Malay ethnic groups as the current limits are sufficient. The revised ethnic limits are given in Table 2 below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic Group</th>
<th>Maximum Ethnic Limits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neighbourhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malays (no change)</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese (no change)</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indians &amp; Others</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Ethnic Limits for HDB Flats

Implementation Date and Enquiries

11 The above housing policy changes will be implemented with immediate effect. More details can be found in Annexes A-C.

12 For enquiries, public can contact HDB through the following channels:

(a) Sales/Resale Customer Service Line : 1800 8663 066
(b) Branch Office Service Line : 1800 2255 432
(c) SERS Enquiry Line : 1800 8663 070

Issued by : Housing and Development Board

Date : 05 March 2010
ANNEX A: PROMOTING CITIZENSHIP IN HDB HOUSEHOLDS

HDB will withhold $10,000 of the housing subsidies enjoyed by SC/SPR households when they buy a flat. The withheld subsidy will be restored when the SC/SPR household converts to an SC/SC household by (i) the SPR family member taking up citizenship or (ii) having an SC child.

(I) Definition of Household Types
   i) An SC/SC household is defined as one where the flat buyer/lessee is an SC and the other family member, whether spouse, child or parent, is also an SC.
   ii) An SC/SPR household is one where the flat buyer/lessee is SC, while the other family member(s) is/are SPR.

(II) Cut-Off Dates for Implementation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transaction Type</th>
<th>Cut-off Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purchase of New Flat from HDB</td>
<td>Sales launch of new flats on or after announcement date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SERS Replacement Flat</td>
<td>Any new SERS sites announced on or after announcement date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purchase of Resale Flat</td>
<td>Resale application received by HDB on or after announcement date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purchase of DBSS Flat / EC</td>
<td>Walk-in Selection Mode Date of booking on or after announcement date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Balloting Mode</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sales launch on or after announcement date</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(III) No impact on Additional CPF Housing Grant

There will be no changes to the eligibility conditions for the Additional CPF Housing Grant (AHG). Both SC/SC and SC/SPR households with monthly income of less than $5,000 will continue to be eligible for the AHG, if they are first-timers and have been working continuously for at least 1 year before applying.
ANNEX B: ENCOURAGING SOCIAL INTEGRATION - QUOTA FOR SPR HOUSEHOLDS

HDB will be implementing a new SPR quota on non-Malaysian SPR households buying HDB resale flats. The quota is 5% at neighbourhood level and 8% at block level. Non-Malaysian SPR households must satisfy both the Ethnic Integration Policy (EIP) and the SPR quota to buy a resale flat.

(I) Definition of Household Types
   i) An SPR Household is one where the SPR buyer/lessee and other family member(s) is/are SPR.
   ii) A non-Malaysian SPR Household is one with no SC or Malaysian-SPR buyer/lessee (i.e. where all SPR buyers/lessees are non-Malaysians).

(II) Cut-Off Dates for Implementation of SPR Quota

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transaction Type</th>
<th>Cut-Off Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purchase of Resale Flat</td>
<td>Resale application received by HDB on or after announcement date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purchase of SERS Replacement Flat</td>
<td>Any new sites announced for SERS on or after announcement date</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(III) Information on Affected Blocks

The public can check the HDB InfoWEB at www.hdb.gov.sg to find out the blocks where the EIP limits and/or the SPR Quota have reached or exceeded the allowable limits. The information is updated monthly on the first day of each month and is valid for the rest of that month.

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1 SERS flat lessees from SERS sites announced on or after the day of announcement will be subject to the SPR Quota regardless if they choose the flats in SERS replacement sites or other areas.
ANNEX C: REVISION TO THE ETHNIC INTEGRATION POLICY (EIP)

HDB will increase the EIP limits for the Indian/Others ethnic group from 10% and 13% at the neighbourhood and block level to 12% and 15% respectively.

(I) How the EIP is administered

The EIP was implemented in 1989 to ensure a balanced ethnic mix across HDB estates and to prevent the formation of racial enclaves. Under the EIP, a limit is set for Malay, Chinese and Indian/Others ethnic groups respectively. This limit is applied to the allocation of new flats and rental flats by HDB, as well as resale flat transactions in the open market. Maximum limits are set for all groups in each HDB block and neighbourhood. When these limits are reached, no further allocation of flats to the affected group will be allowed. However, a resale transaction is still allowed if the seller and the buyer belong to the same group. This is because the resale transaction will not further increase the proportion of the affected group in the neighbourhood/block.

(II) Cut-Off Dates for Implementation of Revised EIP Limits

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transaction Type</th>
<th>Cut-Off Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purchase of New Flat from HDB</td>
<td>Booking of flat on or after announcement date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purchase of Design, Build and Sell Scheme (DBSS) Flat</td>
<td>Booking of DBSS flat on or after announcement date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purchase of Resale Flat</td>
<td>Resale application received by HDB on or after announcement date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purchase of Replacement Flat under Selective En-bloc Redevelopment (SERS) Scheme</td>
<td>Booking of replacement flat by SERS flat owners at the main selection or periodic re-selection exercises on or after announcement date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allocation of Rental Flat</td>
<td>Selection exercises where applicants were shortlisted on or after announcement date</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 4 Appendices

Appendix 4
Copy of the Maintenance of Parents Act 1995 from Singapore Statutes
Appendix 4
Copy of the Maintenance of Parents Act 1995 from Singapore Statutes

MAINTENANCE OF PARENTS
ACT 1995

2020 REVISED EDITION

This revised edition incorporates all amendments up to and including 1 December 2021 and comes into operation on 31 December 2021.

An Act to make provision for the maintenance of parents by their children and for matters connected therewith.

[1 June 1996]

Short title

1. This Act is the Maintenance of Parents Act 1995.

Interpretation

2. In this Act, unless the context otherwise requires —

“applicant” includes a person in whose favour a maintenance order has been made under this Act;

“approved person or organisation” means a person or an organisation that the Minister has approved in writing for the purposes of this Act;

“child” includes an illegitimate or adopted child and a step-child;

“Commissioner” means the Commissioner for the Maintenance of Parents appointed under section 12(1) and includes a Deputy Commissioner and an Assistant Commissioner for the Maintenance of Parents;

“respondent” includes a person against whom a maintenance order has been made under this Act;

“Tribunal” means the Tribunal for the Maintenance of Parents established under section 13.

Applications for maintenance orders

3.—(1) Any person domiciled and resident in Singapore who is of or over above 60 years of age and who is unable to maintain himself or herself adequately (called in this section the parent) may apply to the Tribunal for an order that one or more of the person’s children pay him or her a monthly allowance or any other periodical payment or a lump sum for his or her maintenance.
(2) An approved person or organisation in whose care a parent resides may apply to the Tribunal for an order that one or more of the parent’s children pay the approved person or organisation a monthly allowance or any other periodical payment or a lump sum for the purpose of defraying the costs and expenses of maintaining the parent.

(3) Any person who wishes to make an application under this section, whether on the person’s own behalf or on behalf of a parent, in respect of any claim for which no application had previously been made under this section must, before making the application, refer the claim to the Commissioner for review under section 12(5).

(4) Where the parent ceases to be in the care of the approved person or organisation, any part of the monthly allowance, other periodical payment or lump sum remaining, after deducting the reasonable costs and expenses of maintaining the parent, must be held in trust for the parent.

(5) For the purposes of this section, a parent is unable to maintain himself or herself if the parent’s total or expected income and other financial resources are inadequate to provide the parent with basic amenities and basic physical needs including (but not limited to) shelter, food, medical costs and clothing.

(6) Even though a person is below the minimum age specified in subsection (1), this Act applies to that person if the Tribunal is satisfied that the person is suffering from infirmity of mind or body which prevents the person from maintaining or makes it difficult for the person to maintain himself or herself or that there is any other special reason.

(7) The president or a deputy president of the Tribunal may dismiss any application made under this section, if he or she is of the opinion that the application is frivolous or vexatious, or if the applicant has failed to comply with subsection (3), and give the reasons for the dismissal.

(8) An applicant who is aggrieved by any decision made under subsection (7) may, within 14 days of the decision, appeal in writing to the Tribunal.

(9) The president or deputy president (as the case may be) who made the decision under subsection (7) that is under appeal must not participate in the proceedings or determination of the appeal.

**Joinder of respondents**

4. A respondent may serve notice in the prescribed form on other persons liable to maintain the applicant joining them as respondents in the action.
Maintenance orders

5.—(1) The Tribunal may make a maintenance order if it considers that it is just and equitable that the respondent should maintain the applicant and that —

(a) the respondent is able to provide maintenance to the applicant after the respondent’s own requirements and those of his or her spouse and his or her children have been supplied; and

(b) the applicant is unable, in spite of efforts on his or her part, to maintain himself or herself through work or from his or her property or from any other source.

(2) When ordering maintenance for the benefit of an applicant, the Tribunal must have regard to all the circumstances of the case including (but not limited to) the following matters:

(a) the financial needs of the applicant, taking into account reasonable expenses for housing and medical costs;

(b) the income, earning capacity, property and other financial resources of the applicant, and the manner in which an applicant has spent his or her savings or dissipated his or her financial resources;

(c) any physical or mental disability of the applicant;

(d) the income, earning capacity, property and other financial resources of the respondent;

(e) the expenses incurred by the respondent in supporting his or her spouse or children;

(f) the contributions and provisions, whether financial or otherwise, which the respondent has made for the maintenance of the applicant.

(3) Without prejudice to the Tribunal’s powers under the Act, the president or a deputy president of the Tribunal may, with the consent of the applicant and the respondent, make a maintenance order reflecting the terms of any agreement reached between the parties in respect of a claim, and the order is deemed to be a maintenance order made by the Tribunal under this Act and enforceable in accordance with its terms.

(4) If the Tribunal is satisfied upon due proof that the applicant abandoned, abused or neglected the respondent, it may dismiss the application or may reduce the quantum of maintenance ordered by an amount determined by the Tribunal to be just.

(5) The onus of proving abandonment, abuse or neglect is on the respondent alleging it.
(6) Where there is more than one respondent, the Tribunal may apportion the maintenance among the various respondents in a manner determined by the Tribunal to be just.

(7) The Tribunal must, before hearing an application under this section, refer the differences between the parties to a conciliation officer for mediation between the parties.

**Power of Tribunal to order security for maintenance**

6.—(1) A maintenance order may provide for the payment of a lump sum, or a monthly allowance or periodical payment for a period determined by the Tribunal.

(2) The Tribunal may, in its discretion, when awarding maintenance, order the respondent to secure the whole or any part of the maintenance by vesting any property in trustees upon trust to pay the whole or any part of the maintenance out of the income from that property.

(3) The Tribunal may, in awarding maintenance, order the applicant to —

   (a) deposit with a bank a minimum sum determined by the Tribunal; or

   (b) purchase an annuity with an insurer with the minimum sum.

(4) The Tribunal may, in awarding maintenance, give directions as to the manner or method of payment.