

SINGAPORE PERSPECTIVES Politics

Edited by
Natalie Pang
Shamil Zainuddin
Institute of Policy Studies, Singapore

Published by

World Scientific Publishing Co. Pte. Ltd.

5 Toh Tuck Link, Singapore 596224

USA office: 27 Warren Street, Suite 401-402, Hackensack, NJ 07601

UK office: 57 Shelton Street, Covent Garden, London WC2H 9HE

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

SINGAPORE PERSPECTIVES

Politics

Copyright © 2021 by Institute of Policy Studies

All rights reserved.

ISBN 978-981-122-768-4

ISBN 978-981-122-572-7 (pbk)

For any available supplementary material, please visit

<https://www.worldscientific.com/worldscibooks/10.1142/11979#t=suppl>

Desk Editor: Sandhya Venkatesh

Printed in Singapore

Contents

Preface <i>Janadas Devan</i>	vii
Acknowledgements	ix
Introduction <i>Natalie Pang and Shamil Zainuddin</i>	1
Chapter 1 Singapore, Together <i>Heng Swee Keat</i>	7
SECTION I Paths Taken	
Introductory Remarks <i>Tan Tai Yong</i>	19
Chapter 2 The PAP: Past, Present and Future <i>Lam Peng Er</i>	21
Chapter 3 Singapore's Opposition: Surprises or More of the Same? <i>Zuraidah Ibrahim</i>	29

Chapter 4	39
Fatalism is Fatal for Small States <i>Bilabari Kausikan</i>	
SECTION II	
New Forms and Movements	
Introductory Remarks	47
<i>Farish A. Noor</i>	
Chapter 5	49
Activism in Singapore in the Digital Age: Influencer Cultures, Meme Factories, and Networked Virality <i>Crystal Abidin</i>	
Chapter 6	57
Lorongs of Wisdom <i>Cai Yinzhou</i>	
Chapter 7	63
Removing Barriers, Excavating Potential from the Underserved <i>Carrie Tan</i>	
Chapter 8	71
Creating and Uniting a Climate-Conscious Singapore <i>Nor Lastrina Hamid</i>	
Chapter 9	81
Three Hypotheses on Keeping Singapore Going, Growing and Glowing <i>Chan Chun Sing</i>	
Key Moments of Q&A	85
About the Contributors	115

Preface

JANADAS DEVAN

Some years ago, IPS Fellows decided to focus on four areas of research: diversity, aging, income inequality, and the governance of a city-state. As part of its focus on the fourth area, IPS has returned, over and over again, to the question of politics — the science or study of government and the state, to use one of the many definitions of the word in the Oxford English Dictionary. Significantly, if we examine the deep history of the word, we will find that it comes from the Greek word *politieis*, or “citizen”; and *politieis* in turn comes from another Greek word, *polis*, or city.

Fortuitously or not, we might say that politics has been a particular concern of citizens of city-states. Singapore, being about the only successor in the modern era to the Greek city-states, is naturally, concerned about politics. The topic is of course timely. The organisers of Singapore Perspectives in 2020 settled upon it for that reason.

Another reason is that 2021 will be the 10th anniversary of Prism, a scenario-planning exercise that began in 2011 on the question: “How will Singapore govern itself in 2022?” It was one of the most ambitious projects that IPS has ever embarked upon. More than 140 people from seven key sectors of society — from corporate leaders to public intellectuals, from the public service to civil societies — were asked to develop scenarios of Singapore’s possible political trajectory from 2011 to 2022. In 2012, the various scenarios imagined were presented through forum theatre and interactive exhibits put together by Drama Box and Mr Kok Heng Leun.

I will do no more than recall here the three scenarios that Prism settled upon. The first was called “SingaStore.com” — *singa* as in “lion”, and *store* as in a place where you buy things. This scenario envisioned a “pro-business,

and 1980s. Such humour was once deemed popular, but no longer. We don't find the show, with its sexist and degrading jokes, funny in any way. Why? It's not because the jokes have changed, it's because society has changed — and for the right reasons.

When these changes happen, they often involve people advocating for a different way of looking at this. Understanding that climate issues are common concerns, understanding that migrant workers are fellow human beings, understanding that underprivileged women are human beings who deserve a chance. Someone has to advocate for that. This section looks precisely at these sorts of groups that are emerging in Singapore today, symptomatic with what is happening worldwide.

A/Prof Crystal Abidin is Principal Research Fellow in the Faculty of Humanities, Curtin University, and she will discuss the emergence of newer forms of digital activism. Mr Cai Yinzhou has been working on the ground with different social groups and is Director of Citizen Adventures. Ms Carrie Tan, Founder and Strategic Advisor of Daughters of Tomorrow, has been working with and advocating for women for many years. Finally, Ms Nor Lastrina Hamid, Co-founder of Singapore Youth for Climate Action, will speak about the climate movement in Singapore. The themes of their own work as you can tell are very pertinent to the needs and concerns of the age that we live in.

CHAPTER 5

Activism in Singapore in the Digital Age: Influencer Cultures, Meme Factories, and Networked Virality

CRYSTAL ABIDIN

I'm a Principal Research Fellow of internet studies and I'm an anthropologist by training. What this means is I spend a lot of time looking at what young people — especially in Singapore but also in the Asia Pacific — do on the internet. I don't mean I just sit behind a computer and look at them online, I also spend extensive periods with these young people in different domains — where they live, where they work, in order to find out what they do online, and what it means for them.

My research typically consists of things in the Singapore context, like influencers, internet celebrities, meme cultures, viral videos, so on and so forth. I hope to also highlight a few things about social media and network cultures in Singapore in today's climate.

THE SINGAPORE CONTEXT

First off, as all good academics do, here's a bit of context. The Singapore context is a little bit different from the rest of Southeast Asia. First, we have to consider the structure. We have a normative state surveillance culture in which we believe that if the state is watching us through those scary "spiderweb-like" cameras at the MRT stations or along the streets at night,

we tend to believe that this is for our protection and for our wellbeing. There is also a very high level of tacit IT knowledge among our citizens; you look at kindergarteners, kids in primary schools — they are already learning how to use technology, IT and devices, and it's systemic throughout all levels of society.

Secondly, moving on to culture, we also have a situation of media didacticism. What this means is if you turn on a Jack Neo movie or a Channel 8 TV series at prime time, chances are every single episode or movie is going to be delivering some sort of moral message, on how to be a better Singaporean or a better person in life. But in tandem with this, we also have the culture of public shaming that is a result of an institution known as STOMP. Now, for a long time, STOMP has been a cornerstone of internet culture in Singapore, where every day ordinary citizens get to upload or display online anything that they feel is pertinent to their concerns. This can be a reckless driver on the streets, or an National Service man in uniform who's supposedly not allowed take a seat in an empty train cabin because they are meant to be vigilant and to protect their country at all times.

Finally, we also have the third pillar, looking at agency. Singapore is a relatively small country in terms of land size, but we are very dense. This lends us to feelings of anomie where it's easy to feel invisible, nameless and faceless in the crowd. Yet, at the same time, with the added factor of lateral surveillance from public cameras, the idea that at any time any citizen can come and "STOMP" you also makes citizens feel that while being faceless and nameless, they might also be watched.

What I do in this context of Singapore is to study how internet pop culture relates to everyday life and identity politics. Today, I want to surface three topics from my research, and the impact they have on Singapore society.

INFLUENCER CULTURES

Let's look at two examples of influencer culture in Singapore. Influencers in Singapore, for the most part, tend to be degraded; they tend not to be spoken of very kindly. It is not uncommon to have Singaporeans accuse them of being "attention seekers", just out here to grab your attention online and then sell you something via a "#sponsored" post. But if you were to go back to the very early beginnings of influencer culture in Singapore, from 2005, a lot of these personalities originated from grassroots groups, young people on

the fringes, or minority race, sexuality or gendered groups, who had messages that they wanted to share with young people in society.

My favourite example is the YouTube Malay and Arab duo, known as MunahHirziOfficial. Now, some of you may remember that across all their parody videos, this particular one from 2016 stood out. A Malay woman had submitted an application form in order to put up a pop-up stall in a mall in the eastern part of Singapore. But her application was denied because the mall "was trying to cater to a Chinese audience". And this Malay woman did not want to stomach this "feedback" without a fight. That story came out in a string of news articles, but it was very quickly buried. What soon happened was that influencers like MunahHirziOfficial took that incident as their inspiration, and produced parody videos to show what it's like to "reverse" this discriminatory situation. One video was about them in a Malay-dominated nightclub declining an application form from a Chinese *ab lian* wanting to hold a birthday party in the club, because they do not want to "cater" to the majority race in this parody situation.

If you were a "woke" Singaporean — as young people say these days — you will understand this context exactly. It is parody meant to push forth messages of anti-racism. But if say, you were just a regular Beyoncé, Nicki Minaj, Ariana Grande fan and you know of these "vehicles", you know of these pop songs that go viral nationally and internationally, then this may come across to you as just another local parody. The implication of the political message may be lost on you, but you still get a semblance that parody is a strong vehicle for people in the margins and in the fringes to share messages to the mainstream in a palatable way, via humour.

A more recent case in point is the Nair siblings: musician Subhas and influencer Preeti. They produced a parody video to highlight the racism that they had observed in a "brownface" incident that occurred in our country.

We also want to look at influencers who are amplifying messages to do with gender and sexuality. Again, my favourite example, MunahHirziOfficial presented trans people, intersex people, people who are fluid on the gender spectrum, unapologetically occupying space in public, in a parody music video — as resistance through pop culture. But we also have the more traditional, "old school" influencers and bloggers — as we used to call them from 2005 — who used to put up provocative content, at first to shock and scare people, but eventually to deliver a "#sponsored" message, once again.

Case in point: the lifestyle blogger, Holly Jean, who for a stretch of days went very silent on the internet after a supposed viral video of her engaging in an intimate act was posted. Shortly after that, in the days that passed, she eventually released an extended video showing that this was all part of a campaign from Durex to teach young people that even in a moment of heat, in a moment of passion, there's always time to put on a condom. So, we see influencers using very creative ways to promote conversation around issues that are difficult to talk about in mainstream society, in formats that are more palatable and interesting to the young people they have to reach.

MEME FACTORIES

The second type of research that I do looks at the idea of “meme factories”. Meme factories generally contribute to the normalisation of ideas. They make permissible what people may feel afraid to discuss openly in everyday conversation, and they also give young people a vocabulary for talking about things that may be contentious.

Back in about 2015, Member of Parliament Mr Baey Yam Keng posted a tribute in the wake of the Paris attacks. He posted a very sincere caption with a picture of himself last taken at the Eiffel Tower. On Facebook though, young citizens — or as we call them in Singapore, young netizens — took to memeing him, and photoshopping him next to many different monuments to articulate that they felt the aesthetic of his picture was not palatable. Here, memeing served as a form of critique and criticism, albeit clouded in humour. And this was an instantaneous way to get feedback from the ground, “live” as things unfolded.

These days, we also have different types of meme factories perpetuating on Instagram. Two of my favourites are Kiasu Memes for Singaporean Teens, and highnunchicken. In 2019, some memes were created to reference a series of sexual assaults cases that came to light at the National University of Singapore in that year. At first, this issue surfaced because an undergraduate, Monica Baey took to Instagram to share her experiences, before it got widely taken up by other influencers, other prominent young people who use social media, and indeed other people who run meme factories, in order to normalise the conversation. It is not that they were trying to normalise the criminal act, but they were equipping young people with vocabulary —

whether through humour, through parody, through critique, through the language of social justice — to talk about these issues openly.

NETWORKED VIRALITY

The third thread of my research looks at networked threads and virality. Groups may coagulate and congregate online, on social media pages, groups or forums. Earlier, I mentioned the Preeti and Subhas Nair satirical video, calling out the Nets e-pay brownface advertisement. That incident was initially publicised by the editor-in-chief of *Mynah* magazine, Ruby Thiagarajan in a Twitter thread. Likewise, Monica Baey who initiated a whole national conversation about sexual harassment and “#MeToo”, first sparked it off in a series of Instagram posts.

But long before social media was adopted by these very young millennials and Gen Zs, we had the good old SMRT Ltd (Feedback). For those of us who still use Facebook — probably millennials and older — and for those of us who still remember what SMRT Ltd (Feedback) used to do, we will recall that they were a network of people who were very involved in tech, who were sometimes called “online trolls”, who were sometimes called a “meme group”. At the height of their activity, a lot of people were submitting to them instances of what they felt were injustices befalling fellow citizens.

Case in point: a tourist who had been scammed and conned by people who operated mobile phone services in Sim Lim Square, despite going viral on social media, did not yet receive proper legal or police redress for their complaints. So SMRT Ltd (Feedback) and a group of very enthusiastic citizens came together to name and shame some of the people who ran the scams. But they also came together to organise relief efforts, fundraising efforts, in order to help chase down these errant shopkeepers and to help their victims.

PITFALLS

As much as this seems very optimistic, and that it feels really good to tell you about all the wonderful things that very young people are doing on the internet, there are also some pitfalls. If you were to look at influencers who primarily serve as amplification platforms, it's great that they are giving us the vocabulary and a sense of urgency to talk about race, gender, sexuality, and the like. But you must also remember that these tend to be minority

influencers, influencers from civil society who sometimes may not always be able to prioritise their rice bowls. They are engaging in such work with very little support and sustenance.

Further, if we were to look at some of the most popular YouTube channels and networks in Singapore that are predominantly run by Chinese youth, you often see that they use minority or fringe identities as a punchline. You see men who dress effeminately in skits, and who use derogatory terms about trans peoples. You see Chinese YouTubers who caricature the minority races in their skits, and play on stereotypes like “Indian men are to be feared” and “Malays are lazy”. On the surface, this may seem like comedy. These things go under the radar; we don’t discuss them, we don’t call them out to the same extent as we do many other incidents, because they feel “normal”, they feel “common”, and the jokes have been mainstreamed and normalised by everyday society. Influencers can sometimes also perpetuate these harms.

In the same way, the meme factories that have been helping to normalise difficult conversations also have pitfalls. Zuraidah had earlier mentioned [in her talk] the notion of the “internet brigade” — sometimes when we see all these consolidated and networked posts online, especially on Facebook, many of them are actually artfully architected by groups of people who push out the same message at the same time under the guise that this is an “organic” grassroots sentiment. We now know from research all throughout Southeast Asia that these are architects of misinformation, disinformation, and attention hacking. We now also know that they are for hire, whether pro-state, anti-state, or even just to sponsor or elevate sponsored products for all sorts of corporate clients. So as we celebrate meme factories and the joy they bring us on the internet from their humour, we also want to think about the sources, the agenda, and who’s channelling all of these contents to us.

Lastly, the pitfalls of networked threads: While they do a very good job in surfacing issues that normally fly under the radar, we also have to be aware of mob mentality. I work and live in Perth in Western Australia. In the last seven to eight years, many people who have been named and shamed by STOMP and by the wider internet mob in Singapore have fled to Perth. They have gone there to seek refuge, because they feel that out here on the streets in Singapore they may be hounded by Singaporeans, or risk being called out in person. This is something that we have to address, and something that

reminds us of the power, the transferability, and the online-offline “bleeding” capacity of internet culture, with consequences on everyday life.

At the same time, we don’t want to plainly discard these efforts as just “Millennials doing a woke thing online” or “Gen Z wanting to be very politically correct”. Because the last thing we want is for our young people to have “call out” fatigue, to have feelings of invisibility and abandonment, as if they are unable to participate in society, because nobody listens to them.

I want to end with two quick points. What should we make of everyday politics and internet pop culture? The first: do not belittle the format. As much as it comes across as funny, frivolous, and humorous, it is designed to be relatable and to reach audiences beyond our imagination. And finally: don’t underestimate the authority of where these sources come from. They may not always seem like the most learned or most certified people, but the networks of their power and information circuits are extremely dispersed, and when they consolidate, that’s when you really see the subversive power of them all.

Do not belittle the format. As much as it comes across as funny, frivolous, and humorous, it is designed to be relatable and to reach audiences beyond our imagination.

Don’t underestimate the authority of where these sources come from. They may not always seem like the most learned or most certified people, but the networks of their power and information circuits are extremely dispersed, and when they consolidate, that’s when you really see the subversive power of them all.