RE-EMERGENCE OF STUDENT ACTIVISM IN SINGAPORE'S "GREAT MARRIAGE DEBATE" (1983 – 1984): LIMITS AND DIVERSITY

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Abstract

This article builds on existing scholarship about the history of student activism in Singapore by arguing that student activism re-emerged briefly during the 1980s as a result of the "Great Marriage Debate". The National University of Singapore Students' Union (NUSSU) attempted to engage the government despite limits imposed on it, but its impact was relatively muted. However, through their literary works and publications, some individual students still challenged the government in the ideological terrain, reflecting the limits of its hegemony.

Introduction

This article seeks to expand existing scholarship about student activism in Singapore by exploring its brief re-emergence during the early 1980s.[1] Departing from the conventional belief that student activism was successfully suppressed by the People's Action Party (PAP) government in the mid-1970s, this article argues that it re-emerged as a result of shifting state-society relations caused by demographic and political changes from the 1980s.[2] The expanding middle class, in which university students were part of, was increasingly less tolerant of the PAP's paternalistic style of government, seen in its introduction of the controversial "Graduate Mothers Scheme". As a result, students at the National University of Singapore (NUS) seized the opportunity to mobilize, albeit briefly and differently from their predecessors, to challenge the government in what was known as the "Great Marriage Debate". Yet this article will also argue that while the students' direct political impact was relatively muted, they were able to contest the

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1   Recent works include: Edgar Liao, "Reclaiming the Ivory Tower: Student Activism in the University of Malaya and Singapore, 1949 – 1975" (Masters dissertation, National University of Singapore, 2010); Loh Kah Seng, Edgar Liao, Lim Cheng Tju and Seng Guo-Quan, *The University Socialist Club and the Contest for Malaya: Tangled Strands of Modernity* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2012); Loh Kah Seng, "Polytechnicians and Technocrats: Sources, Limits and Possibilities of Student Activism in 1970s Singapore," *Southeast Asian Studies* 7, no. 1 (April 2018): 39-63

2   Mary Turnbull, *A History of Modern Singapore* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009), 316.

government's dominance in the ideological terrain, and refused to be pigeonholed into identities prescribed by the government. Thus, the examination of this short episode of student activism in the 1980s reflected the limits of the PAP's hegemony as well as complexities in state-society relations in Singapore's past.

Impact of repression in the 1970s

The PAP government rapidly curtailed the space for expression of dissent between the late 1960s and 1970s. From its standpoint, this was necessary to maintain a docile workforce to attract foreign capital for economic growth, and to minimize disruptions to the pursuit of economic survival and social cohesion for Singapore.[3] Any form of unsanctioned social or political mobilization was perceived by the PAP as a threat to its domination, and by extension, also a menace to national interests. Thus, despite enjoying a one-party monopoly of Parliament between 1968 and 1981, the government suppressed a range of organizations which potentially undermined its ability to dictate the national agenda. For example, through the 1970s, the government accused some journalists of subversion and imprisoned them under the Internal Security Act (ISA), which permitted detention without trial. Aided by the enactment of the 1974 Newspaper and Printing Presses Act, the government tightened control over the press, therefore limiting its autonomy to express contrarian views.[4]

Similarly, the government tried to stamp out student mobilization in the universities. Student activism had flourished since the 1950s, first against colonial rule, then later against the PAP's efforts to intervene in university affairs. The peak of confrontation between the government and students came in the short-lived 1974-75 student movement. This episode reflected an irreconcilable difference between the government and students on the latter's appropriate roles and identities in the nation. While the government believed that university students should strive to fulfil their economic obligations to the nation, this vision was not accepted by all. Many students were concerned with issues of social justice, and connected with organizations outside campus to advocate for these causes, which infringed on the PAP's exclusive hold over social mobilization.[5]

Not only was the government's response to the student movement harsh, but it also transformed the basis for future student mobilization. Tan Wah Piow, the president of the University of Singapore Students' Union (USSU), was arrested and convicted of rioting in a court trial which was perceived by many students to be politically-

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3   Garry Rodan, *The Political Economy of Singapore's Industrialization: National State and International Capital* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), 109.

4   Cherian George, *Freedom from the Press: Journalism and State Power in Singapore* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2012), 30-31.

5   Liao, 75.

motivated.[6] In addition, six foreign-born student leaders were deported from Singapore. More importantly, the government passed the University of Singapore (Amendment) Act in 1975 which neutralized the capability of subsequent union leadership to mobilize students for collective action. The student union was legally barred from participating in politics – and only the university administration could define the meaning of "politics", therefore stripping a high degree of autonomy from the union.[7] Furthermore, the legislation forced the union to surrender control of its own finances to the administration, further limiting its capacity to pursue its own aims. Seen within the regional context, the government's suppression of university students was not unique. Malaysia had implemented a similar legislation in 1974 to bar students from political participation, in light of the belief that student movements were fronts for Communist and subversive forces, a concern shared by the PAP as well.[8] These legal restrictions which limited students' ability to organize around political issues were part of what Meredith Weiss terms as "intellectual containment", which sought to delegitimize student mobilization within and beyond campus.[9] Thus, the combination of hard repression and the limits imposed by the legislation on the student union led to the successful suppression of student activism, to the extent that Mary Turnbull claims it had completely ended in 1975.[10]

In addition, the forced merger between the University of Singapore and Nanyang University in 1980 marked a new era of university institutionalization as the merged university reflected how "government influence and control became the norm" in order to serve developmental imperatives.[11] At last, after decades of struggles between university student activists and the state, it seemed that a "national" university was finally established, freed from the political baggage of student activism perceived of connections to "left-wing" groups and "Chinese chauvinists".[12] Yet again another politician headed the university, and this time it was a "2nd-generation" PAP leader, Dr Tony Tan. In his welcome address to freshmen in 1980, he dismissed the role of the university in nurturing critical and independent thinkers, ridiculing it as a "wishful academic myth".[13] Instead, he reminded students that Singapore "has an insatiable demand for technological

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6   *Ibid*, 72

7   *Union News* (*UN*), vol. 1 (2), 1981, "The Union Replies".

8   Meredith Weiss, "Intellectual containment," *Critical Asian Studies* 41, no. 4 (2009): 509.

9   *Ibid*, 502.

10 Turnbull, 316.

11 S. Gopinathan, "University education in Singapore: The making of a national university," in *From Dependence to Autonomy*, eds. Ph.G. Altbach and V. Selvaratnam (Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989), 217.

12 Yao Souchou, "All Quiet on Jurong Road: Nanyang University and Radical Vision in Singapore" in *Paths Not Taken: Political Pluralism in Post-War Singapore*, eds. Michael D. Barr and Carl A Trocki (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008), 184.

13 Tony Tan, speech at welcome convention, July 2, 1980.

and professional manpower", and claimed they were in university to meet the demands of the market. His remarks represented a long line of continuity in the government's utilitarian views on university education, but they also symbolized the government's ideological ascendancy in separating students from politics.

Indeed, the level of student activism in campus became dramatically lower than that in the past, as collective contestations against the official vision for students were feeble. The NUS Students' Union (NUSSU), which was the new student union formed as a result of the merger, stuck closely to its narrowly-defined objective to promote "student welfare". This attracted criticism by some individual students, who slammed the union for limiting itself to "indulgent" activities of organizing dance balls, and demanded it to hold activities which could raise the intellectual consciousness of students in socio-political issues.[14] Small pockets of students organized their own independent groups such as the "Young Pioneers", and tried to urge the "apathetic" student population and the Union to be more politically-oriented.[15] This label of apathy recurred in student publications, as students were generally accused of being narrow-minded, lacking concern for matters beyond their studies.

However, the reality was that memories of the repression in the mid-1970s cast a shadow over both NUSSU and the university administration, resulting in their guarded attitudes towards the idea of focusing on political issues. NUSSU president Vivian Balakrishnan admitted that "Where politics is concerned, there are still a lot of bad memories…. The hypothetical possibility of abuse tends to colour their (administration's) judgment quite a lot and they would rather not have the risk of anything wrong happening".[16] Thus, backed by the legislation enacted to prevent future student mobilization, the administration kept a tight, paternalistic watch over the Union, vetoing projects which it deemed were "political" and therefore unsuitable for students, such as the "ASEAN Festival" proposed by the union.[17] However, the Union was able to organize ministerial forums in campus, on the basis that these were for educational purposes.[18]

NUSSU's weakness was also further demonstrated by its limitations in advocating for student welfare in campus. For example, the Union clashed with the administration over disrespectful faculty members and its lack of effort in tackling the shortages of space in canteens and car parks.[19] Furthermore, NUSSU frequently published its views on a range of issues which affected students' welfare, such as the withdrawal of subsidies for internal shuttle buses and the levy of additional fees on students.[20]

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14 *Singapore Undergrad* (*SU*), vol. 15, 1982, "The need for intellectual consciousness – II: A letter to the students' union".

15 *SU*, vol. 15, 1982, "The Young Pioneers and Issues Facing Singapore".

16 *SU*, vol. 16 (1), 1982, "The Union Problem – a diagnosis".

17 *UN*, vol. 1 (3), 1981, "President's Message".

18 *UN*, vol. 1 (2), 1981, "The Union Replies".

19 *UN*, vol. 1 (3), 1981, "President's Message"; vol. 2 (4), 1983, "A Balance of Rights".

20 *UN*, vol. 2 (7), 1983, "Referendum".

But in reality, as these measures by the administration were *fait accompli*, there was nothing which the Union could do to reverse them, reflecting its marginal position in the university. The Union's ability to represent the student body was also aggravated by the perennial shortage of candidates in its elections, resulting in several vacant leadership positions.[21] Activities organized by the Union were infrequently attended.[22] These not only reflected a general disinterest in the Union among undergraduates, but also hindered its collective voice.

In sum, the PAP government successfully achieved its aim of curbing potential collective action by students, at least until 1983-84. More importantly, the "bad" memories of the repression in the mid-1970s were still fresh in the minds of student leaders and the administration, creating a distinctive "mnemonic space" which influenced the former's perceptions of themselves as well as the authorities. Just as Fabio Lanza argues that student identities can be socially constructed based on their interactions with the "lived", "intellectual", "political" and "social spaces" which they traverse, the "mnemonic space" shaped the identities of the Union's leaders vis-à-vis the past and the university administration.[23] They circumscribed their own actions to the modest pursuit of student welfare, in contrast to their more vocal predecessors who forcefully contested against restrictions imposed on them. Although they were sometimes unafraid to challenge the administration, which was edged on by some students who wanted their leaders to take on a more confrontational tone, they mostly adopted a cautious approach in working with university officials, as they understood the repercussions of being seen as "political". Thus, within this context, the Union developed its idiosyncratic working style which was later clearly manifested in the Great Marriage Debate.

However, the Union was not completely devoid of idealism. Despite the external and self-imposed constraints, NUSSU did attempt to offer an expansionary vision for the identity of students that extended beyond the campus. In Balakrishnan's presidential message in 1983, he declared that "We are not little discreet islands floating in a sea of text books. As such, the Union must act as the mirror of the conscience of the students on issues that affect our nation."[24] This proclamation of moral and national obligation echoed the ideals of student activism in the past, but the boundaries for activities which NUSSU – and the administration – deemed legitimate to fulfil this duty were considerably narrow. Nor was this vision consistently pursued in the Union's daily activities. The Great Marriage Debate marked a fleeting moment in which the Union crossed these boundaries to attain this lofty aim. Their short re-entry into the public and political sphere must be explained by the shifting dynamics of state-society relations beginning from the 1980s.

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21 *UN*, vol. 1 (3), 1981, "Editorial".

22 *UN*, vol. 1 (2), 1981, "The Union Replies".

23 Fabio Lanza, *Behind the Gate: Inventing Students in Beijing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 6.

24 *UN*, vol. 2 (1), 1983, "Objectives '83: President's Message".

Mobilizing in the Great Marriage Debate

In Lee Kuan Yew's annual address to the nation in 1983, he fretted over the future shortage of talent, and expressed his fears that present standards of governance would decline due to a shrinking talent pool. He blamed this problem on the increasing trend of graduate women who chose to remain single or had fewer children, as compared to their non-graduate counterparts. Essentially, he asserted his eugenic belief by claiming that since intelligence was inherited, and not nurtured, graduate women should have more children to ensure that talent in the population was reproduced.[25] As a result, he introduced the "Graduate Mothers Scheme" in the following year, which was a package of material incentives specifically targeted at graduate mothers to encourage them to marry and have more children. In contrast, non-graduate mothers were provided with cash incentives if they had fewer than two children.[26]

This controversial policy provoked one of the most contentious public debates since independence, and the public uproar, also known as the Great Marriage Debate, was swift and massive. Lee's project of social engineering was driven by his elitist impulses, but these were masked by the rhetoric of rationalism and patriotism circulated by the government to convince Singaporeans about the policy's merits.[27] However, beginning from the 1980s, the space for dissent was gradually widening, and this permitted the intense expression of opposition to the policy. One critical reason for this development was the establishment of the affluent, educated and confident middle class due to the rapid economic development of the preceding decade.[28] Many of these middle-class individuals possessed multiple aspirations for a greater variety of lifestyle choices, more personal freedom, and additional consultation in elite-led decisions.[29] For instance, there was a marked rise in the proportion of Nature Society members from middle-class occupations in the early 1980s, demonstrating the growing participation of the middle class in civic issues.[30] In a similar vein, scholars have proposed various explanations for the strength of the opposition to the Graduate Mothers' Scheme, such as breaching of the middle class' limits of government intervention in their personal lives; the perceived betrayal of meritocratic principles; and the unfair and sexist burden which

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25 Jon S.T. Quah, "Singapore in 1983: The Continuing Search for Talent," *Asian Survey* 24, no. 2 (Feb 1984), 179.

26 Chua Beng Huat, *Communitarian ideology and democracy in Singapore* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 21.

27 Geraldine Heng and Janadas Devan, "State Fatherhood: The Politics of Nationalism, Sexuality and Race in Singapore," in *Bewitching Women, Pious Men: Gender and Politics in Southeast Asia*, eds. Aihwa Ong and Michael G. Peletz (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 199-200.

28 Carl A. Trocki, *Singapore: Wealth, power and the culture of control* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 132.

29 Chua, 174.

30 Garry Rodan, "State-society relations and political opposition in Singapore," in *Political Oppositions in Industrialising Asia*, ed. Garry Rodan (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 87.

it forced upon graduate women to shoulder.[31] One of Singapore's most famous advocacy groups for women, AWARE, arose from professional women's unhappiness with the policy, showing how it aroused the middle class to rally around broader social issues.[32]

Another crucial characteristic which the middle class shared was their "desire for greater democratization and freedom from state intervention".[33] After the shock victory of J.B. Jeyeratnam in the 1981 by-election, which broke the PAP's monopoly of Parliament, "strident political comment" flourished in the English-medium press which contested the PAP's paternalistic warnings about the dangers of the opposition.[34] At the same time as the middle class was trying to achieve its aspirations by shaping public discourses, the PAP was experiencing its first-ever leadership transition from the Old Guard to the 2nd-generation leaders that began in 1980. The newer leaders departed from Lee's authoritative leadership style by promising to be more transparent and consultative.[35] In fact, similar to the Old Guard, they expressed their reservations about Lee's policy, even though they dutifully carried out the policy, albeit with some modifications.[36] Hence, these socio-political changes resulted in greater accommodation for differing opinions in the public sphere during the first half of the 1980s. By situating Lee's policy in this context, it was no surprise it triggered resistance from the middle class, which was less tolerant of policies that treated them as immature and malleable. Subsequently, the sharp decline in electoral support for the PAP during the 1984 general elections was attributed to its alienation of the middle class.[37]

By virtue of their privileged education and access to professional occupations, university students were future members of the middle class. In 1980, only 12 percent of the total birth cohort was enrolled in higher education, which reinforced their high socio-economic status.[38] Thus, the students naturally shared the existing aspirations and

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31 See Chua, 75; Michael Hill and Lian Kwee Fee, *The Politics of Nation Building and Citizenship in Singapore* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 152; Yao Souchou, Singapore: The state and culture of excess (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 103; Lenore Lyons, "Internalized Boundaries: AWARE's Place in Singapore's Emerging Civil Society" in *Paths Not Taken: Political Pluralism in Post-War Singapore*, eds. Michael D. Barr and Carl A Trocki (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008), 253.

32 Lenore Lyons, "The Birth of AWARE, Part Two", AWARE, accessed December 10, 2018, http://www.aware.org.sg/2010/11/the-birth-of-aware-part-two.

33 Chua, 174.

34 Garry Rodan, "Singapore: Emerging tensions in the 'dictatorship of the middle class'," *The Pacific Review* 5 no. 4 (1992), 375.

35 Michael Barr, "Perpetual revisionism in Singapore: the limits of change," *The Pacific Review* 16 no. 1 (2003), 78-79.

36 *Ibid*, 88.

37 Chua, 21.

38 Meredith Weiss, Edward Aspinall and Mark R. Thompson, "Introduction: Understanding Student Activism in Asia", in *Student Activism in Asia: Between Protest and Powerlessness*, eds. Meredith Weiss and Edward Aspinall (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 7.

concerns of the middle class. Indeed, although they stood to benefit from Lee's policy, many also had similar reasons for their opposition, but some of these were specifically outgrowth of their identities as students. Ultimately, it was the changing dynamics of state-society relations and the outpouring of dissent by their middle-class counterparts which emboldened NUSSU to seize a rare opportunity to venture beyond campus. The role of university students has yet to be examined, but a closer look will reveal how the Great Marriage Debate reinvigorated student activism as well as how students tried to contribute to public discourses.

NUSSU took the lead by criticizing the policy from students' perspectives. Since university students were already beneficiaries of the meritocratic system, NUSSU felt there was no further need for preferential policies towards graduates. The Union also argued that Lee's policy was likely to entrench class divisions within society.[39] Some students criticized the policy for its divisive effects on the nation, and pointed out that the government had ignored the "dignity of its citizens" and displayed a "lack of sensitivity", since the policy assumed that the children of non-graduate women were less useful to the nation.[40] Thus, the students' criticism was anchored by their self-reflexiveness as privileged recipients of tertiary education as well as their indignation at the callous treatment of their fellow citizens. They also criticized the policy on pragmatic grounds too. The Union doubted that graduate women would respond in a "Pavlovian" manner by deciding to marry or have more children based on considerations of priority school admission, since they possessed their own lifestyle preferences.[41] Other students attacked the policy for its reliance on controversial scientific evidence, by highlighting the "acrimonious differences of opinion" on the connections between intelligence and genetics.[42] Through this expression of dissent, the students revealed their personal aspirations and critical attitudes towards the government.

While it was one thing to criticize the policy within campus, it was another for NUSSU to make a public statement on a government policy – the very first time that the student union did so since the repression of the mid-1970s. Firstly, the broader circumstances of the early 1980s, as explained earlier, certainly emboldened the Union to be more assertive. As it was not the sole voice of opposition, it was probably less costly for it to comment on the Great Marriage Debate. Moreover, precisely because of the memories of repression, the student leaders felt that they acted in a careful manner which did not directly combat the government. This was very similar to how Catholic activists in the same era believed their pursuit of social causes was innocuous and non-political, but they were later harshly repressed through Operation Spectrum in 1987.[43] However, the students did not encounter a similar fate. Yet the pushback by

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39 *UN*, vol. 2 (12), February 1984, "Council Petitions Education Ministry".

40 *SU*, vol. 18 (2), June 1984, "The Great Marriage Debacle".

41 *UN*, "Council Petitions Education Ministry".

42 *SU*, "The Great Marriage Debacle".

43 Michael Barr, "Marxists in Singapore?" *Critical Asian Studies* 42 no. 3 (2010), 340.

the authorities was inevitable, as the article will later explain. Secondly, as mentioned earlier, the Union had tried to project grand ideals for university students but faced constraints. The Great Marriage Debate was a rare opportunity for it to pursue this vision and attempt to rally undergraduates, who were often perceived as apathetic. However, the main practical problem which NUSSU faced was the ambiguous definition of "politics", since objection to the Graduate Mothers' Scheme could be constituted as political participation, which was explicitly barred by legislation. Yet NUSSU overcame this challenge easily and confidently. In an Emergency Council meeting on 27 January 1984, the Union declared that the Graduate Mothers Scheme was not a political issue. Instead, the policy was "a matter of direct social concern affecting the welfare of the students".[44] Thus, by framing the issue as one belonging to the realm of student welfare, the Union was justified to comment on it without breaking the law.

From the beginning, NUSSU did not realistically believe it was able to reverse the government's decision. Instead, it listed three objectives: to increase student interest and discussion, to present students' objections to the government and public, and to ensure that the government accepted the right of students to comment on policies.[45] Though the Union's objectives reflected the broader aspirations of the middle class, they were relatively bold, given the past antagonistic relationship between the government and student activists. Within a week, NUSSU collected 2100 signatures out of approximately 12,000 students to present a petition against the government.[46] This contradicted the prevailing belief that the student body was apathetic. NUSSU also requested to meet the junior minister for education to discuss the policy, which the government actually acceded.[47] In addition, NUSSU collaborated with student unions from Singapore Polytechnic, Nanyang Technological Institute and Ngee Ann Polytechnic to submit a "Joint Petition by 4 Tertiary Students' Unions to Delay the Implementation of the Priority Scheme" to the government. They requested the holding of a public forum with a minister and a large-scale survey to understand citizens' perceptions of the policy.[48] Within NUS, the Union also worked with one of the most socially active student groups, the Catholic Students' Society (CSS), to sell T-shirts and distribute pamphlets to raise awareness about the impact of the policy.[49] The participation of CSS was part of the broader social activism undertaken by Catholic priests and lay people in Singapore between the 1960s and 1980s. This connection between students and the Catholic Church raised alarm bells in the government, and was one of a series of events which

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44 NUSSU 4th Council Annual Report, 1983-84.

45 *UN*, vol. 3 (1), July 1984, "What it should have been – priority scheme for graduate mothers".

46 NUSSU 4th Council Annual Report.

47 "NUS Students' Union wants to meet Dr Tay", *Straits Times* (*ST*), 8 February 1984.

48 *Singapore Technocrat*, vol. 1 (1), May 1984.

49 Michael Barr, "Singapore's Catholic Social Activists: Alleged Marxist Conspirators" in *Paths Not Taken: Political Pluralism in Post-War Singapore*, eds. Michael D. Barr and Carl A Trocki (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008), 239.

finally led to the "Marxist conspiracy" crackdown in 1987.[50] However, NUSSU strictly contained itself to working with only student groups, and therefore was not tainted by any connections to other organizations which could have resulted in its suppression again.

Despite the range of objections to the Graduate Mothers' Scheme, there were some students who dismissed their peers' idealistic attitudes and chose to remain on the margins. For example, a student angrily remarked in an interview:

> "Don't bother to ask me to sign on your (petition) letter. What you hope for won't possibly materialize. First of all the students here are too apathetic to support you if you land in trouble. Secondly, despite everything, the Administration will just ignore you and carry on with what they are doing anyway. Take my advice, just study, get a good degree and leave this darn place for good."[51]

The candid remarks of this student are important on a few counts. Firstly, while the Great Marriage Debate no doubt stirred several students to action, there were many others who did not involve themselves for a variety of reasons, from actual apathy to pure cynicism as displayed by this instance. The climate of fear was still a major factor that inhibited some to speak up. Secondly, this student was neither aligned to the government nor with the Union, and in fact he represented a form of "anti-activism" which was pessimistic about the capacity of ordinary people to bring about changes in their lives. Although most studies have explicitly examined student activism as collective action directed against the government, such voices remind us about the complexities of students' political attitudes and behaviours.

Limits of NUSSU

NUSSU was careful to emphasize its moderate style of engaging the government for fear of attracting negative attention from the authorities, especially the university administration. It stressed that it was a "responsible" social actor, and this meant that student leaders desired to "make our point not in histrionics and polemics but calmly and firmly".[52] Not only was this another line of defence against a minority of students who demanded a more confrontational approach, it also underlined the belief in the superiority of their own method in delivering their messages to the government.

However, media coverage of NUSSU's engagement with the government seemed to neglect the former's reasons for *why* it made the petition, and focused more on *how* it managed its objection. The *Sunday Times* had a full-page coverage of NUSSU and its interaction with the government, but the main focus was on a comparison between past student activism and the present union, with the editorial praising the latter as

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50 *Ibid*, 242.

51 *SU*, vol. 17 (1), 1984, "Official Silence".

52 *UN*, vol. 2 (12), February 1984, "Of Primary Concern".

following a "rational and responsible course of action".[53] There were few comments on why university students were upset about the policy in the first place. Instead, the newspaper adopted the view that students were generally apathetic and fearful, using an example of an individual who expressed his initial anxiety of signing the petition.[54] In addition, after the meeting between a delegation of student leaders and the minister, the newspaper reported in its headline "We accept need for the scheme, say students".[55] While the article acknowledged that NUSSU still objected to the policy because of its principles, it conveyed the impression that the minister had "enlightened" the "idealistic" students on the practical difficulties of running the nation. The minister also approved of the Union's action in a paternalistic tone, because he claimed the union had tried to understand government policies better. Thus, the government and media successfully created a public narrative in which students' criticism of the Graduate Mothers' Scheme was down-played. In this portrayal of students, while their participation in policy issues was commendable, they were ultimately perceived as belonging to the campus, and also naïve in their thinking. They were unable to appeal to any form of moral authority when they mobilized as students, signalling the success of the government's intellectual containment. Ironically, while NUSSU had hoped that its "responsible" attitude would place its messages in the limelight, this became the centrepiece of attention instead, undercutting its aims and reasons of objection.

Besides the warped media coverage, the university administration also halted the collaboration between NUSSU and CSS to campaign against the policy.[56] While the administration was unable to intervene in the petition, it was able to stop NUSSU in this case because it controlled the access and use of Union funds. The administration declared that it was unable to approve the project because it was "an attempt by the union to influence the attitudes of students on this issue".[57] This was a puzzling response, because of the earlier petition and various attempts by NUSSU to raise the socio-political awareness of students. It was likely that the administration was uncomfortable with the participation of CSS, given its connections to institutions outside campus. Although the Union justified the project on legal and moral grounds, there was nothing it could do to reverse the administration's decision.[58]

In both the public domain and the physical spaces of the campus, NUSSU's campaign against the Graduate Mothers' Scheme did not gain much traction, and grounded to an abrupt halt. Collective action was hindered. However, if we only focus on these aspects, we may neglect a cacophony of student voices expressed through the informal channels of student publications. The agency of students in resisting the ideological web of the government was actually present and thriving.

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53 "NUSSU learns two lessons from the recent public protest", *ST*, 3 July 1984.

54 "Campus-eye view of issues", *ST*, 8 July 1984.

55 *ST*, 17 May 1984.

56 *UN*, vol. 3 (4), 1984, "Priority Scheme Project Killed…Admin to BLAME".

57 "NUS officials stop student project on priority scheme", *Singapore Monitor*, 7 November 1984.

58 *UN*, vol. 3 (5), 1984, "Priority Scheme Project: Windup and Feedback".

A Chorus of Voices

A spectrum of voices rose in reaction to NUSSU's engagement with the government. On the one end, there were students who were critical, and even radical, in their attitudes towards NUSSU. For example, one student criticized the apparent points of consensus which NUSSU shared with the minister in the joint press conference after their meeting. He highlighted that "Issues were not explained nor explored and answers given by the minister were also not questioned".[59] In his opinion, the discussion seemed inadequate, because the fundamental problems of the policy were not addressed in detail, such as the controversy over the inheritable traits of intelligence, the blaming of graduate women and the impact on inequality in society. This student was disappointed that NUSSU was insufficiently aggressive in putting forth the views of students. In addition, the cancellation of the project between NUSSU and CSS drew brickbats from students too. A recent graduate angrily slammed NUSSU for lacking a backbone.[60] He urged NUSSU not to "cop out", and to continue organizing the project despite the administration's orders.

In contrast, on the other end of the spectrum, unlike those who were unhappy with the outcome, there were others who denounced NUSSU for being too aggressive and urged a quick return to the status quo. For instance, one student felt that NUSSU had made "grossly antagonistic statements against the administration (which) served only to breach links, perusal and official, between Union and university officials".[61] He asserted that NUSSU had made a baseless accusation against the administration by labelling them as "callous", and he demanded the Union to prove it. Clearly, even as several students believed that NUSSU was not as effective as it could be, there were others such as this student who was arguably more "conservative", and urged for restraint and more cooperation between the Union and administration. In other words, he aligned himself with existing norms which kept the Union within predetermined boundaries. The importance of these individual voices should not be underestimated, because they reflected a diversity of positions on how students should behave, and therefore the type of identities which they imagined for themselves within campus and society. This range of opinions also revealed the circulation of political discourses in campus through informal mediums such as student publications. According to Lam Wai-Man, these are especially significant in depoliticized or seemingly apathetic societies, because they can be considered as "political acts" and "represent a particularly important and prevalent mode of participation".[62] Thus, besides examining NUSSU's collective action, it is also vital to scrutinize individual viewpoints for their political value, hence expanding the coverage of "student activism".

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59 *UN*, vol. 3 (1), July 1984, "Letter to the editor" by Judass.

60 *UN*, vol. 3 (5), 1984, "A Supporter: Free the Truth from Suppression".

61 *UN*, vol. 3 (5), 1984, "Letter from Wong Meng Kong".

62 Lam Wai-Man, *Understanding the Political Culture of Hong Kong: The Paradox of Activism and Depoliticization* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2004), 41.

Students also utilized a range of literary devices such as satire and humour in their publications to criticize the Graduate Mothers' Scheme. These not only represented attempts to wrest control over the ideological narrative created by the government that the policy was necessary and justified, but also asserted the students' larger aspirations for themselves vis-à-vis the government's utilitarian positioning of them in society. This article considers the literary works as "weapons of the weak" in resisting the government's ideological penetration. At first glance, this concept may not fit the context here, since it was originally derived from James Scott's study of peasantry in Southeast Asia. Weapons of the weak such as gossip, sabotage, and faked disobedience are deployed by peasants, the subordinate class, in their everyday life to resist the material exploitation of the dominant class; the hostile relationship between both classes is rooted in a material basis.[63] In contrast, the university students departed in many ways from the peasants analyzed by Scott. They were part of the middle class which benefitted from the PAP's rule. In fact, the PAP government was described as "the dictatorship of the middle class" because of its staunch elevation of their socio-economic interests; the Graduate Mothers' Scheme was one perfect example.[64] Hence, due to their existing material and symbolic stature, students were unlikely to engage in class struggle. Neither were they like the peasants who face bleak circumstances in their daily lives, which results in their everyday resistance as a form of survival strategy. Moreover, Scott highlights that the middle class has the time and resources to plot for "structural changes" while the subordinate class must deal with daily pressures to make ends meet, therefore accounting for the latter's use of weapons of the weak.[65] Thus, based on Scott's analysis, the middle class has no incentive to resist, and its means of resistance would be different as well.

Yet there are still some broad points of similarities between peasants and students which render Scott's concept useful for analysis here. Firstly, students could be seen as a distinct social group in a heterogenous middle class, with differing material as well as political interests which departed from that of the dominant class – the PAP government and its foreign capital allies, in this case. While they were expected to become professional labourers for the nation, some envisioned themselves as intellectuals or advocates who had broader obligations to the nation.[66] More importantly, university students possessed a generational identity which distinguished themselves from other social actors. Along with their development of critical thinking and sense of idealism, they often claimed to mobilize on behalf of the downtrodden.[67] Thus, their economic and political interests were based on a combination of personal aspirations and idealistic obligations to support the marginalized groups, putting them into collision

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63 James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 29.

64 Rodan, "Dictatorship of the middle class", 370.

65 Scott, 246.

66 *SU*, vol. 15, 1982, "The need for intellectual consciousness".

67 Weiss *et al.*, 11-12.

course with the dominant ideology. Furthermore, through their lived experiences, they were able to "demystify the prevailing ideology", challenge the "dominant definition of the situation" and argue for "different standards of justice and equity".[68] This is drawn from Scott's argument about the unique nature of the rural countryside. Due to the physical distance from cities and deep-rooted traditions, it is actually easy for peasants to insulate themselves from hegemonic work and to penetrate elite beliefs.[69] Although the students lived in an urban context which might make them more susceptible to hegemonic practice (and also more vulnerable to repression), they arguably had their own student culture which helped them to see past the officially-sanctioned reality. As a result, they had the motivations to forge ideological resistance to the government.

Secondly, similar to peasants, the students faced a huge risk of outright repression if they tried to push too hard for their objectives, as this had happened before in the mid-1970s.[70] Other than the petition, NUSSU's foray into the public sphere and its collaboration with CSS were hindered by the authorities. There were few outlets for the students to channel their discontents other than their own student-run publications. Thus, the use of satire and humour was a relatively safe and pragmatic tool to express their resistance at minimal costs.

One example of this ideological resistance was a literary piece titled "Social Study: The Third-Born Babies' Cries" (Figure 1) which compared children born to graduate and non-graduate parents. The sonnet sarcastically portrayed the child born to graduate parents as being endowed with "high I.Q. score" which would help him earn "praise and prizes galore". Based on his high intelligence inherited from his parents, the child would later graduate with an Honours degree from university and join the elite Administrative Service in the government, earning a "Superscale salary". However, the student poured scorn on the child's success, highlighting that it was only possible because the child's future was paved with the help of "state legislature" that gave him preferential treatment over his peers born to non-graduate parents. In contrast, the child born to non-graduates was depicted as marginalized and helpless, by no fault of his own, "Though loud as any, my cry is less heard/for some strange, cruel curse is upon me laid". It was clear the student sympathized with the child, because evocative images of pity and sadness were crafted: "My song, my verse shall be mocked; my heart torn/hardened; and they will flay my fragile soul". These lines suggest a sense of self-reflexivity, and though the student-writer's identity is unknown, perhaps he might have been born to non-graduate parents and could imagine the circumstances of the fictitious child who faced these biases. In short, this sonnet presented a poignant imagination of the Graduate Mothers' Scheme's impact on future children, and highlighted the inherent prejudices and injustice of the policy.In addition, there were also humorous satires written by students. For instance, two law students drew attention to the unconstitutional nature of the policy by satirizing the publication of a "Procreation (Encouragement) Act", which

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68   Scott, 290.

69   *Ibid*, 321.

70   *Ibid*, 246.

PRIORITY SCHEME PROJECT

Dear Editor,

Social Study: Two Third-Born Babies' Cries

A)   My bombastic cry summons the hearer,
Be it parent, nurse, whichever nearer.
You must pamper me exceedingly well,
Give me what I deserve, I'll then excel.
Thank-you graduate parents for all my genes,
The way to success you gave me the means.
For my creditably high I.Q. score,
Will earn me much praise and prizes galore.
After an Honours degree I attain,
And a Superscale scalary I gain,
Among the elite I shall take my place,
Renowned throughout the land by name and face.
For I was born to grow to great stature,
I am a child of state legislature.

B)   And I am a child of Mother Nature;
incentive for my birth none was given.
But I cry for heavier things, my future
on this stage of fools, prejudice ridden.
Though loud as any, my cry is less heard;
for some strange, cruel curse is upon me laid,
that presumes me dumb ere I learn a word
and will have me by cold equations weighed.
Because I am of simple parents born,
I'll be slotted to a stereotyped role —
for monotonous work fitted only.
My song, my verse shall be mocked; my heart torn,
hardened; and they will flay my fragile soul.
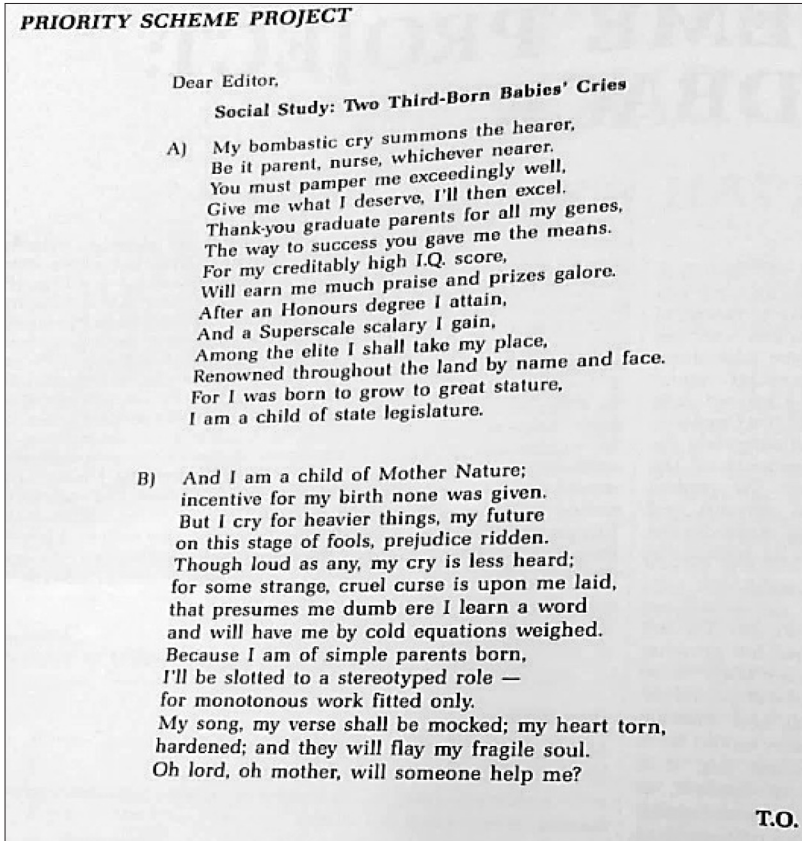Oh lord, oh mother, will someone help me?

T.O.

Figure 1: From *Union News*, vol. 3 (5), 1984.

looked similar to a government gazette.[71] This satire would have been funny then, and now, because Singaporeans were familiar with the government's propensity to resort to legislation to regulate all kinds of behaviour, such as to prevent littering or to flush public toilets after use. For example, the "Act" opened with the statement "an act to regulate and encourage procreation by graduate women", and this was followed by legalistic writing such as "The President may make rules for the marriage, or temporary union, of graduate women"; "the mode in which applications for celibacy shall be made and the terms on which sterility or other dispositions shall be issued"; and "A Procreation Encouragement Tribunal (PET) shall be established". Thus, when students imagined the use of legislation to regulate reproduction, they were criticizing the extension of the state into the most intimate domain of private lives, to show how ridiculous they were if

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71 *SU*, vol. 17 (1), 1984.

stretched to its extreme and logical limits. In this satire, the students also offered cheeky suggestions to declare Valentine's Day as a holiday for undergraduates, so they could go on their courtships. More seriously, through this satire, the students attacked the ways in which the state treated graduate women (and also men) by subjecting their bodies to the needs of the state. They also lampooned the policy because it assumed graduate mothers would conform to the policy, as if it were real legislation.

In another example, students also mocked the state's efforts to create a matchmaking agency, Social Development Unit (SDU), to encourage university graduates to marry among themselves.[72] They compared SDU to a secretive intelligence unit which had spies among students, ensuring that they would meet proper partners and have the right number of children. Absurd as it might sound, this work used humour to criticize the government's obsession that intelligence was inheritable, and that graduates ought to marry among themselves.

Thus, besides criticizing the Graduate Mothers Scheme from the perspectives of university students, these works revealed the optimism of resistance to a policy deemed unfair and prejudiced. They challenged the state and broader socio-political norms that dismissed students as apathetic and as sources of professional manpower. These literary works drew from life scenarios which students were very familiar with, such as climbing the educational ladder and SDU's publicity campaign that specifically targeted undergraduates, unveiling a part of student culture which was utilized for resistance. These weapons of the weak could be considered as part of an expanded definition of "student activism" that goes beyond examining mass movements. Faced with the limitation of collective action, individuals channelled their energies into the ideological terrain and even against one another in these publications, contributing to a diverse chorus of student voices.

Conclusion

In the first sitting of Parliament after the 1984 general elections, the government reversed course and withdrew the priority admission scheme for children of graduate women.[73] This was largely attributed to the widespread opposition by the middle class, but student activism probably did not play a major role in shifting the government's decision. In fact, student activism barely made a dent, and was not well-remembered too. From a comparative perspective with student movements in Asia during the 1980s, NUSSU's achievement was insignificant in terms of its scale and sustainability. While student activists in the Philippines and South Korea struggled for fundamental reforms to their countries' existing authoritarian structures, the aspirations and methods of NUS students were much less ambitious in scope.[74]

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72 *SU*, vol. 19 (4), December 1985.

73 Chua, 77.

74 Weiss *et al.*, 27.

Student activism faded away as rapidly as it had re-emerged between 1983 and 1984. The Great Marriage Debate created an opportunity for students to ride on the existing wave of opposition with little costs, but it did not serve as a launchpad for subsequent political participation. Due to its cautious nature, NUSSU did not defy the administration's orders to stop its campaign, and it did not collaborate with non-student groups outside campus. In the run-up to the 1984 general elections, there is no evidence, at least in the student-run publications, to suggest that student leaders aided opposition parties; unlike how ex-polytechnic student activists supported the Workers' Party in the 1981 elections.[75] Although student-run publications continued to criticize political issues such as the creation of the Feedback Unit, the NCMP and the Elected Presidency initiatives, there is also little evidence to suggest that student mobilization took off.[76] However, the Catholic student activists were not as restrained, perhaps due to their prior connections to institutions outside campus, and their activism was terminated by Operation Spectrum in 1987. But NUSSU's activism had already halted by the end of 1984, so it never caught the attention of the government. In any case, the civic space for dissent shrank again during the late 1980s, caused by the chilling effects of Operation Spectrum and the silencing of organizations such as Law Society, making student activism even less likely.[77]

If a case for the long-term impact of student activism can be made, it may be found in the career trajectories of a few student leaders, such as Simon Tay (who led the student delegation to meet the minister), a former Nominated Member of Parliament (1997-2003); and Vivian Balakrishnan, a PAP minister (2001-present). The Great Marriage Debate probably marked their first public debut. The latter has been open and proud of his involvement as a student leader, revealing that his past experiences in negotiating with the administration prepared him for his political career.[78] In a speech delivered to NUS undergraduates in 2012, Balakrishnan also shared his memories of opposing the Graduate Mothers' Scheme, citing this episode as one crucial point of his student leadership. He encouraged students to be engaged in politics, explaining that it was healthy for them, and it was not possible for them to be in university "only to study, close your eyes, close your ears, and shut your mouth".[79] This demonstrated how the government's attitude towards the role of students has evolved since Tony Tan's stifling welcome address in 1980. Yet Balakrishnan's speech also reflected a

75 Loh, 41.

76 *SU*, vol. 19 (2), 1984, "Pseudo Opposition".

77 Barr, "Marxists in Singapore?", 356.

78 David Ee, "Idealistic youth also must be pragmatic: Vivian Balakrishnan", *ST*, accessed June 10, 2019, https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/idealistic-youth-also-must-be-pragmatic-vivian-balakrishnan.

79 Vivian Balakrishnan, "Lessons from campus life: Why we need to go beyond textbooks, keep an open mind and prepare for an unpredictable future", speech at Union Forum, August 17 2012, accessed June 10, 2019, http://vivian.balakrishnan.sg/2012/08/22/lessons_from_campus_life/.

strong line of continuity in the government's paternalistic approach. He highlighted that the Union should not participate in partisan politics, and the continued existence of legal impositions on the Union actually protected students; "make it safer for you (students) to make comments and to play a part in the national conversation."[80] Given his position in the PAP leadership, it is not surprising that it was his turn now to adopt such an attitude. But in an ironic twist, the repressive purpose of the legislation has been reformulated into that of protection for the students, erasing the original context of student mobilization, and underscoring the PAP's continued maintenance on the compartmentalization of politics and students. The fact that this idea was being conveyed by a former student leader adds on to the irony.

Ultimately, the brevity of student activism should be explained by the government's successful measures of repression and intellectual containment which delegitimized students' political participation. In the minds of most students, and also among the public, they did not perceive there was any special political role for themselves, hence they were contented to remain in the confines of the campus after the initial pushbacks. The legacy of 1970s left-wing student activism, and prior to that, was seen as mostly negative rather than inspiring or empowering, hence eliminating a potent source of historical and moral symbolism which the students could drape on. Although a minority of students desired to broaden their socio-political roles, this was not supported by their peers. Moreover, the government's use of "calibrated coercion" by balancing between legal restraints on NUSSU and giving it sufficient space for independent action defused potential triggers for students' discontentment.[81] Coupled with a thriving economy which offered tangible stakes for socio-economic mobility, most students preferred the status quo instead of risking it for direct political participation. Thus, NUSSU had very few opportunities to muster mass support which could have turned it into a political force.

Yet this article has argued that the conventional understanding of "student activism" may be less helpful in depoliticized societies. While most students were deprived of opportunities to mobilize, and displayed little political consciousness, a minority of them were able to resist the dominant ideology in their individual ways, especially through "weapons of the weak". These students never fully submitted to the government's efforts in pigeonholing them into certain identities and functions in the service of the nation-state, and actually mocked these attempts. This ideological resistance suggested that the PAP's hegemony was not entirely stable, and the spaces between state and society were always in flux, dependent on specific historical circumstances. Furthermore, it is also vital to note that "conservative" or pro-status quo student voices always accompanied opposing ones, and they should be studied as legitimate political acts as well. Thus, an expanded definition of student activism which encompasses a diversity of individual acts and their use of weapons of the weak can be useful for further studies of student activism in repressed environments. The

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80 *Ibid.*

81 Cherian George, "Consolidating authoritarian rule: calibrated coercion in Singapore," *Pacific Review* 20 (2), 142.

examination of this brief episode of student activism also sheds light on the complexities of state-society relations in Singapore's past, contributing to the growing scholarship on social history in Singapore. Even at the high tide of the PAP's dominance over society, there was always an undercurrent of ideological resistance, even among those who benefited materially from its rule.

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