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# No Room to Swing a Cat? Animal Treatment and Urban Space in Singapore

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Since Singapore's independence in 1965, the People's Action Party government has launched an extensive urban planning program to transform the island into a modern metropolis. This paper discusses human-animal relations and the management of stray cats in postcolonial Singapore. In exploring the perceptions and handling of stray cats in Singapore, I argue that stray cats became an urban "problem" as a result of the government's public-health regime, urban renewal projects, and attempts to fashion itself and Singapore for international tastes, and that cat activists are the main agents of rebuilding connections between animals and everyday urban life. In particular, I analyze how cat-welfare associations and individual citizens assume functions that the government has been loath to perform unless absolutely necessary.

**Keywords:** animal geographies, human-animal relations, cats, Singapore, urban space

## Introduction

Singapore, the "Garden City," has undergone a massive program of urban reform, renewal, and resettlement since independence in 1965. The government of the People's Action Party, which has enjoyed uninterrupted rule, dispersed the population of the overcrowded central-town district to peripheral "new towns," which were built on land appropriated from old village communities. Through education, land reclamation, military conscription, and public housing, the government created a disciplined industrial workforce (now housed in flats built by the Housing Development Board, or HDB, and linked to factories and offices via highways) along Fordist lines, thus engineering tremendous changes in the human landscape of Singapore (Barr and Skrbis 2008; Chua 1997; Dobbs 2003; Loh 2007; Wee 2007). This massive control over space defined the postcolonial history of Singapore, whose modernity depended as much on facilitating motion as on

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preventing it (Netz 2004, xii).

Although historians have delineated the relationship between authoritarian rule, economic development, and social engineering in Singapore, they have been slow in integrating the work of geographers, who have addressed how landscapes, both material and immaterial, serve as cultural representations and social channels that foster and maintain the state ideologies of human progress and nation building. The government redeveloped the city center—now marked by skyscrapers and the reconstructed “racial enclaves” of Chinatown, Kampong Glam, and Little India—to showcase Singapore’s global connectedness and historical legacies. It developed Marina Promenade and the banks of the Singapore River into a tourist attraction and up-market residential zone that appealed to expatriate executives and foreign visitors. It also created new art spaces such as the Esplanade (home to Theatres on the Bay) and renovated colonial landmarks and dilapidated shophouses to present Singapore as a vibrant arts and cultural hub worthy of admiration at home and abroad (Kong and Yeoh 2003; Chang *et al.* 2013; Ho *et al.* 2014).

In recent years, historians began to recognize the impact of the natural environment, and attempts to reconfigure it, on the economic, political, and social history of Singapore. They have established that the British colonial authorities and the postcolonial People’s Action Party government were interested not only in demolishing outdated structures and flattening the landscape but also in conserving heritage and preserving monuments and parks (including the Botanical Gardens, a new addition to UNESCO’s heritage sites as a “cultural landscape”) to promote scientific research, urban redevelopment, and the construction of a modern national identity (Barnard 2014; Blackburn and Tan 2015). Educated in English-language universities, Singapore’s leaders understood that modernization and national success emerged from urban industrial growth, as in the American and European historical experiences. To maintain economic and political legitimacy, they would need to succeed by these terms (Kwak 2008, 87–88).

Nevertheless, historians studying Singapore’s past have not picked up on animal geographies, which not only inquire into relationships between nature and society and how nature shapes human cultural practices, but also define animals as “central agents in the constitution of space and place, and all that entails” (Wolch and Emel 1998, xiii). The “power of geography” is unleashed when space constitutes, constrains, and mediates social relations. As Lily Kong and Brenda S. A. Yeoh elaborate, the power relations that define and contest the specificities of the Singaporean nation are negotiated through “elements of the cultural landscape, including the landscapes and practices of everyday life” (2003, 15). Specialists on Southeast Asia have conducted a fair amount of research on animal-welfare activism and the discursive and practical uses of animals in both colo-

nial and postcolonial contexts. In particular, they have analyzed how wild animals such as tigers instilled fear that reshaped local practices and thrived in the popular imagination, and how domesticated animals such as horses and pigs were bred, constructed, and used (Boomgaard 2001; Bankoff and Swart 2007; Neo 2011). The humanlike orangutan, found only in Borneo and Sumatra, straddled the boundary between culture and nature, threatening the anthropocentric view of people who refused to define humans as animals (Cribb *et al.* 2014). In twentieth-century and modern-day Malaysia and Singapore, animal slaughter, which occurred as a result of the encroachment of residential development into animal habitats and the intervention of colonial and national laws in local cultures and trades, was revealed to be a contentious issue on moral, racial, and religious grounds (Yeo and Neo 2010; Yahaya 2015). That said, the existing scholarship on Singapore or Southeast Asia in general throws little light on human-animal relationships in specific urban settings, where human domination is absolute (animals are killed or subdued) and animals eke out a living in what is for them a “post-apocalyptic” world (Atkins 2012). As humans gain control over animals’ biological cycle (procreation, growth, and death) through culling and neutering, they also determine where (and whether) animals should live (Netz 2004, 15–16). This is especially true in cities, where humans and animals live in close proximity and have to compete for scarce living space, space that becomes “property” to which access can be limited.

By exploring the controversies surrounding human-cat relations in postcolonial Singapore, this paper examines how the People’s Action Party government, ordinary citizens, and social groups (mainly cat-welfare organizations) perceived the urban landscape, “with their own versions of reality and practice,” and perceived “conflicts over the production, definition, and use of space” (Kong and Yeoh 2003, 15). I argue that the government, which was far more interested in developing human resources than in harnessing animal ones, did not concern itself with the management of stray cats unless it received complaints or pressure from segments of the public, or unless a perceptible disease or health hazard arose from the presence of stray cats.<sup>1</sup> In lieu of the government, which played the role of arbiter, cat lovers and haters (and self-professed neutral intermediaries voicing their opinions) collaborated with one another or counteracted one another’s actions, according to what they saw as significant at the time. The public—conventionally categorized into groups constituting civil society but actually defying any facile characterization—served as the main agents reconnecting cats with everyday life

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1) A case that illuminates the government’s nonchalance toward animal resources is its eradication of pig farming in the 1980s, when it decided that Singapore, given the country’s booming economy and expanding population, would fail to achieve self-sufficiency in pork in the long run and that the land occupied by pig farms could be redeveloped for more economically productive purposes (Neo 2016).

after an intensive phase of national development that alienated citizens from their ideals of and economic dependence on nature. As stray cats reemerged in the urban landscape, ordinary citizens and social groups endowed them with different meanings and came into conflict with one another over how to perceive and manage them. By acting as a neutral mediator, the government settled the differences with purportedly altruistic intent, but dominated the opposing camps as a result. Social forces gelled into fluid coalitions, but what linked them together was their concern for cats, which spawned a variety of configurations and interpretations of human-cat relations. Material and metaphorical boundaries created mental maps by demarcating urban spaces as domains of human dominance and cat subservience, but the boundaries were highly permeable and susceptible to animal transgressions (Yeo and Neo 2010, 682). Since stray cats are ubiquitous in Singapore but are seen as “out of place,” they are particularly interesting, having perhaps the greatest potential to disrupt cultural sorting systems (Holmberg 2015, 58).

This paper consists of a concise background of cats in Singapore, followed by three episodes concerning cats as pests, national symbols, and victims of cruelty. The three disparate episodes are productive because they disclose how stray cats became a problem as human-animal relations and state-society relations became spatialized owing to the government’s nation building, urban-redevelopment projects, and public-health regime.

A word is in order on the main cat-welfare activists under discussion—members of the Cat Welfare Society (CWS). The CWS was founded in 1999 by a group of volunteers concerned about the welfare of “cats living on the streets of Singapore.” It was registered as a charity in 2004. Run by volunteers, it does not receive regular funding, and most of its funds dedicated to outreach programs and cat sterilization is raised through public fundraisers and members’ donations and subscriptions. It prefers to call stray cats “community cats,” since it believes that their home is the human environment and pledges to “care for the nation’s cats.” Its main objective is “saving [cat] lives through sterilization.” It promotes the right of cats to be “represented accurately and humanely [and] be free of pain, fear, and suffering” (CWS, <http://www.catwelfare.org/>). While some CWS members are wealthy and well-educated elite Singaporeans, membership has expanded over the years to include working-class people. It has no official patron in the government and suffers from a perennial shortage of funds (*Straits Times*, hereafter *ST* 2015). Nevertheless, by working closely with state agencies to resolve cat issues in local communities, it has considerable influence over state policies toward cats.

## Roaming Singapore, 1960–80

Singapore achieved self-rule in 1959, and the People's Action Party government perceived itself as inheriting an "environmental crisis" from the British colonial administration. Despite colonial efforts at urban planning, which were restricted to the central town, Singapore in the 1960s had one of Southeast Asia's largest urban-slum and squatter populations, characterized by dilapidation, overcrowding, and inadequate infrastructure (Yuen 1996, 959).

As People's Action Party rhetoric would have it, the *kampongs* (Malay for village) that dotted the rural landscape provided such deplorable living conditions that only a "planned programme of clearance and rebuilding" could render these settlements hospitable (Loh 2007, 8). Former Deputy Prime Minister Goh Keng Swee (1973) associated colonial Singapore with "nasty things like mosquitoes, insects, snakes, and centipedes, quite apart from the likely absence of creature comforts such as running water, modern sanitation, electric power, and air conditioning," which his government would offer to the people. A problem that Goh identified in the colonial economy was the lack of a "serious attempt to get the countryside into the grip of a dynamic modernization process," which the government remedied by a "hollowing out of the central area" and colonizing the rural hinterland (Hee and Ooi 2003). As a result, as *kampung* dwellers abandoned their gardens and pets to move into new HDB flats, gone were the old *kampung* days when children caught fish in drains, kept crickets and grasshoppers in matchboxes, and had cats and dogs in their homes without restriction (Lim 1996). The Chinese in the *kampongs* used to consume dogs and rabbits, but they did not eat cats because "it is not of the right type for food" (Chan 1995). The HDB decided that the "keeping of domestic animals and poultry is unsuitable in housing estates where families live in close proximity to each other, particularly, in compact multi-storeyed flats" (HDB 1960, 47).

However, soon after the housing estates were built, the government realized that it "could not entertain the stark vision of a landscape of concrete structures devoid of greenery." In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the ruling elite launched an "urban beautification programme" to convert Singapore into a garden city of parks, trees, and open spaces, with the aims of providing recreational space for a growing urban population and attracting foreign capital (Yuen 1996, 957–965; Koh 2000, 40). The desire to "impose a rational order upon the relations created by the new productive system" took precedence over creating an affiliation with nature (Handlin 1963, 7–9). As a result of this embellishment of its model of development, the government preserved large tracts of forests for greenery and water catchment and left stray cats and dogs alone—at least

for a while.<sup>2)</sup> In the open spaces of public parks, empty decks, and walkways of HDB flats, cats existed for human convenience and pleasure, a byproduct of an exercise of power that eliminated natural predators and threats to their survival and that created an unaesthetic landscape that called out for cats and greenery to adorn the HDB estates. Real affection for or coexistence with cats was impossible without dominance. Aggressive strays were reported, captured, and put down; only docile cats serving human aesthetics remained (Tuan 1984, 162–167).

The perception of stray cats and dogs had been negative in the central-town district. Street hawkers threatened public health with their improper disposal of food wastes, which fed strays thought to carry germs and spread disease (Yeo 1989; Kong 2007, 25–26). Throughout the 1960s, the HDB viewed hawkers as a “problem” and sought to relocate them to “modern and hygienic” hawker centers, where their activities could be monitored by officers of the Ministry of Health (HDB 1964, 49; 1965, 67; 1966, 60).

In Chinatown, residents blamed the ruckus that stray cats and dogs caused on a “thoughtless few” who turned their unwanted pets loose (*Singapore Free Press* 1960b). In the rural *kampongs*, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals collected stray cats and dogs in vans and founded a home for these “neglected animals” (*Singapore Free Press* 1960a). The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, known as the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) after 1965, also set up kennels in churches for people to place unwanted animals in for collection (*ST* 1966). Some Singaporeans accused British servicemen of causing the problem of stray cats and dogs. The servicemen, after their brief sojourn in Singapore, allegedly released their pets to roam and spread danger and disease (*ST* 1968c)—a reminder of how medical discourse was adopted to legitimize animal exclusions and executions (Yeo and Neo 2010, 690)—although British residents vehemently denied such charges (*ST* 1968a; 1968b). The issue of stray cats and dogs remained outstanding throughout the 1960s as a result of bureaucratic inefficiency and a lack of resources to remove strays from the streets: police constables refused to handle the animals, and the SPCA and the Animal Infirmary (also known as the Veterinary Centre) did not operate on weekends (*ST* 1969).

Some Singaporeans had asked the Ministry of National Development to implement a policy of requiring cats to be licensed (*ST* 1971b). The ministry refused to do so, claiming that the number of stray animals collected by the SPCA had dropped by more

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2) Race and multiculturalism eventually took their toll on stray dogs. Dogs are considered unclean by most Malays, so the government put down almost all stray dogs by the 1980s. At present, dogs roam only in Singapore’s remotest, most “pristine” regions (wastelands, as opposed to state land), and cats dominate on the island as the numerically and physically largest and most visible mammal besides humans (Stimpfl 2006, 75).



than half—from about 3,000 a month in the 1960s to about 1,250 a month as of mid-1971. The SPCA attributed the drop to the “increasing awareness of Singaporeans to the problems of health and hygiene caused by stray animals.” Nevertheless, stray cats and dogs continued to roam free in parts of Singapore as a result of the move of large groups of people into flats, since former dwellers of the *kampongs* abandoned their pets when they moved to HDB estates. The SPCA petitioned the government to provide an emergency 24-hour service to pick up any injured animal in HDB estates, but the government replied that “there was no need to provide such a service since there were private veterinarians . . . who were available on call at any time” (*New Nation* 1971b). The Ministry of National Development contended that the problem of stray cats originated in irresponsible ownership, and refused to devote its allegedly scarce resources to provide anything more than the Veterinary Centre (*ST* 1971a). Animal lovers found it “more productive” to send strays to SPCA kennels because the staff of the Animal Infirmary just “would not bother” (*New Nation* 1971a).

The SPCA suggested that eating places and markets were leading “dumping grounds” for unwanted cats and dogs because people believed that the animals could survive on leftover food in such places (*New Nation* 1973), so the SPCA instituted a spaying program—which the government encouraged by reducing licensing fees for spayed dogs from 15 to 5 Singaporean dollars per year—for stray animals captured in these areas (*ST* 1973). The requests from the public for help in spaying their cats overwhelmed the SPCA, which stated that it could not “meet the spaying fees for an unlimited number of cats” because it had insufficient funds (*ST* 1974). A “division of labor” emerged with regard to the treatment of stray cats in the open dining areas of food stalls and markets: the Ministry of Environment launched campaigns for more hygienic food to be served in those places, while the SPCA controlled the stray-cat population to prevent “cats at these stalls [from] nibbling at dirty dishes.” Stray dogs, for some reason, did not roam the eating places and wet markets (*ST* 1975). Many Singaporeans recognized that the SPCA, despite a perennial shortage of funds and volunteer helpers, had done a “commendable job caring for thousands of stray animals in Singapore” (*New Nation* 1975). Other Singaporeans believed that aside from support from the government, the SPCA required more cooperation from the public itself (*New Nation* 1976b). They perceived HDB officials as having tried their best at directing hawkers in the outdoor dining places not to feed the stray cats there, albeit to no avail (*New Nation* 1976a).

Yielding to the complaints of cat haters, the HDB issued a controversial ban on cats in flats in September 1978, on the grounds that “by nature [cats] tend to be stray and can be a nuisance to other flat dwellers” (*ST* 1978c). This soon proved to be counterproductive: cats were turned out of their homes and became stray as a result of the ban, and the



SPCA was overcrowded with cats (*ST* 1978a; 1978b; *New Nation* 1978). The SPCA continued its efforts to alleviate the longstanding problems of stray cats and the consequences of the HDB ban into the 1980s. The government never rescinded the ban and had left the public and the SPCA to assume the bulk of the responsibility of caring for stray cats and reducing their number. As if to exacerbate the problem, the government evicted the SPCA from the latter's premises for redevelopment, and the SPCA had to raise funds to build an expensive new building elsewhere (*ST* 1981). Over the next decade, until the late 1980s, Singaporeans, as one cat lover put it, hate cats so much that they break and cut the tails of cats and "force them to survive in drainpipes" (*New Paper* 1988).

### The Singapura Cat as a National Symbol

News came to Singapore on the last day of 1989 that Singapore's alley or drain cats, introduced to the West as "Singapura" in 1975, had been winning awards and gaining championship status in global cat shows since 1981. The Singapura Cat attracted the attention of foreign cat breeders, who were keen on starting breeding programs for it, since it could fetch a price of US\$1,500 in the market (*ST* 1989).

The Singapura Cat was first introduced to the United States by an expatriate couple, Hal Meadow and her husband, when they brought four stray cats home from Singapore. After several years, their program of selective inbreeding produced the Singapura. When Meadow returned to Singapore in 1987 to scour the streets for cats to replenish the gene pool in her program, she sought the help of the Singapore Cat Club (established in 1973), which had been sending her cats that fit the bill. According to the Singapore Cat Club, its aim was "to get the breed recognized worldwide and to help Singapura cat lovers breed the cat worldwide" (*ibid.*).

Within months, the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board took its cue from the news and adopted the Singapura—touted as the smallest breed of cats in the *Guinness Book of World Records*—as an icon. In its project to "liven up" the Singapore River and promote the country's image as a "City of Surprises," the board erected a series of 25 sculptures modeled after the Singapura on the banks of the Singapore River. According to the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board, the Singapura was chosen because of its "beauty and lively spirit" (*ST* 1990e). However, as soon as the news broke out, skepticism set in. Journalists asked the board how it would know whether the Singapura Cats flown in as models for the sculptures were genuine, and why it would not "pick up a couple of stray Singapura Cats off the street" instead. They also commented sarcastically that the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board was about to get writers "to pen glorious stories

about the Singapura Cat,” and questioned why the lion or *singa* (which gives Singapore its name) was not featured in its place for greater “authenticity” (ST 1990d). In light of how Singapore’s media system had been structured from its inception to “provide maximum freedom of maneuver for the [People’s Action Party] government,” these comments were bold, candid, and direct for the milieu in which they appeared (George 2012).

Journalists were not the only ones who expressed reservations. Ordinary citizens felt that “Singapore should not lay claim to the [Singapura] unless it was bred out of [Singapore’s] drain cats.” To complicate matters, the Cat Fanciers’ Association, the top cat-breeding authority in the United States, was considering revoking the status of the Singapura as a pedigree owing to lingering doubts over its origins. Meadow had not been able to explain the irregularities in her accounts of how she bred the cats, which might have originated in the United States. As one concerned respondent remarked, “What’s the point [of adopting the cat as our own]? The cat is only of significance to us if it [is] from our drain cats. Now that they are not sure of its origins, it might have nothing to do with us, except for its name” (ST 1990b). Nevertheless, the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board proceeded with its project centered on the Singapura, although amid the controversies it did put on hold the decision to adopt the cat as its mascot (ST 1991b).

Upon confirmation by the Cat Fanciers’ Association that the pedigree status of the Singapura would remain unchanged and the association’s suggestion that the board accept the breed as Singapore’s own, the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board adopted the Singapura as its mascot and called it the Kucinta (a blend of two Malay words: *kucing* for cat and *cinta* for love) in a bid to capture the “warm, affectionate nature of the cat” and “indigenize” it (ST 1990a). The Kucinta was then made into sculptured porcelain cats to be presented as gifts to foreign delegates and ministers (ST 1991a). The Singapore Tourist Promotion Board hailed the Singapura as a “National Treasure” (Helgren 2013, 257). Despite years of promotion, however, Singaporeans did not regard the Singapura as their national symbol. The main reason was that the Singapura remained a breed hardly seen in people’s everyday lives, in the drains or on the streets. For most Singaporeans, the Singapura existed only as a stiff sculpture. It became embarrassing to the Singapore Cat Club when it received requests from Europe and Japan for the cat, for Singapore did not have any Singapura, which remained an extremely rare breed based in the United States. Although the Singapore Cat Club managed to purchase a pair from an American cattery and the Singapore Tourism Board (successor to Singapore Tourist Promotion Board) continued to promote the Singapura, Singaporeans were hardly enamored by its rare status and kept a distance from it.

According to the CWS, Singapore’s drain cats are “smaller, have funny knots in their tails, and do not have the prominent ‘M’ on their foreheads, unlike the Singapura.”

Another group, the Animal Lovers League, did not see the point in bringing in the Singapura: “The Singapore cat should represent the local cats. They should be the sons of our soil, not imports, not man-made [or] cloned” (ST 2003j). A reader of *The Straits Times* backed the Animal Lovers League, requesting both the Singapore Tourism Board and the Singapore Cat Club to “get real” and remove the misleading sculptures: “In whose memory will these non-existent cats, claimed to be produced by an American breeder using three strays she had found in Singapore, live on, and why should they be represented as Singapore icons” (ST 2003i)?

The Singapore Tourism Board apparently overlooked these concerns when it decided to host four Singapura Cats (which by then survived only in the homes of pet owners in Singapore and abroad) in the Singapore Zoological Gardens to celebrate National Day in 2004. The rationale was to give all citizens a chance to see the rare, pure-bred “national symbol” (ST 2004). The Felidae family of cats was no stranger to Singapore’s national imaginings. Its members are featured in the National Coat of Arms, Singa the Courtesy Lion, and the Lionhead symbol on official documents. Although citizens had accepted these symbols, they rejected the Singapura, signaling a refusal to see matters as the state sees them and a passive resistance prompted only when asked. At best, Singaporeans identified the Singapura as another governmental initiative, albeit a futile one, to embellish the nation with a Guinness World Record. At worst, they associated the cat with bourgeois culture, as only affluent households could afford to import and keep one. Some cat breeders even called the Singapura “a money-making scheme” (Helgren 2013, 257). As with the Merlion, the Singapura’s status as a tourist attraction works against its role as an organically evolved national symbol (Kong and Yeoh 2003, 158).

Ordinary citizens and cat associations (except for the Singapore Cat Club) distinguished drain cats and Singapurans. They insisted that the cats most representative of Singapore were found in the drains and streets (“drain cats” and “stray cats” are synonymous for them), not in the tourist attractions along the Singapore River or in the Singapore Zoological Gardens. This takes on even greater symbolic significance if we consider that drain cats had hidden and taken shelter in the sewers to escape from human persecution at a time when national development was most intense in the 1970s and 1980s (Morris 1999, 185). Although it would be stretching the narrative too far to argue that Singaporeans had anthropomorphized themselves into drain cats that survived the fast pace of economic development, the allegory is too striking to dismiss. Unlike the Singapura, the origins of drain cats are not mired in controversy: most breeders and pet owners accept the drain cat as more Singaporean, against what state agencies had wanted them to believe (ST 2003j).

The Singapore Tourism (Promotion) Board (and to a lesser extent the press) sought

to construct an indigenous mascot contrary to reality. The episode of the Singapura Cat as a national symbol offers insight into how state institutions attempt to blend notions of authenticity and familiarity with universal appeal for consumption by the international community. The Kucinta saga was an “invented tradition,” whose authenticity is less in evidence than is popularly supposed, and where change is disguised or “mistakenly perceived as adaptation” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Cannadine 2008, 315). The Singapore Tourism (Promotion) Board, promoting the cat as a somewhat refined breed of local drain cats that was “uniquely Singapore” (the tagline of the Singapore Tourism Board’s destination brand from 2004 to 2009), chose to overlook the controversy of the origins of the Singapura Cat. Seeking to find features that could apply to Singapore or that only Singapore possessed, the Singapore Tourism (Promotion) Board ignored common drain cats and refused—against what the populace had chosen to believe—to acknowledge these cats as a national symbol. The official perception of stray cats as common, dirty, and hence unworthy of national recognition was challenged, and the division of urban spaces in the popular imagination reflected divergent views held by state and society.

### **SARS Kills the Cat**

In 2003 a massive culling of stray cats, known as the “SARS cat-culling incident,” took place in Singapore (Davis 2011, 183). To be sure, the Agri-Food & Veterinary Authority of Singapore (AVA) conducted annual cullings of cats to keep the stray population under control. Every year, about 10,000 to 13,000 stray cats were put down (AVA 2003b). However, after the SARS outbreak, which killed 31 people out of 206 reported cases within three months, the AVA looked set to intensify its efforts at culling stray cats. The National Environmental Agency began to disinfect and fumigate food stalls and food (or hawker) centers—the perceived hotbeds of viral infection (*Associated Press* 2003e). Although former Deputy Prime Minister Tony Tan mentioned that cats and dogs ran no risk of getting infected and that the SARS coronavirus was not known to cross species (*ST* 2003h), *The Straits Times* ignited debate when it placed a cartoon illustration on the front page captioned “Don’t leave food in the open for stray animals” next to the “Reports on SARS” header. The CWS was disappointed to see the cartoon, which depicted a cat eating a meal and excreting what looked like a virus, arguing that such cartoons would “unduly alarm the public” at a time when many animals were being abandoned by owners fearful of SARS. The CWS ended its statement by saying that the cartoon might “undermine the Government’s efforts to get people to live their lives as per [usual]” (*ST* 2003g).

True to its fear, many Singaporeans came to believe that cats and dogs spread the SARS virus.

After three cases of SARS were linked to the Pasir Panjang Wholesale Centre, the AVA put down 100 stray cats and dogs there. The AVA maintained that putting down the 100 strays was part of its annual routine practices, which had nothing to do with SARS. Yet with the benefit of hindsight, we can say that it had everything to do with SARS. Dr. Ngiam Tong Tau, Chief Executive Officer of the AVA during the SARS period, recalled that the AVA knew little about SARS and was “really afraid because [there were] a lot of stray cats in Singapore.” AVA executives, assuming that the SARS virus resides in cats, decided to cull cats at the Pasir Panjang Wholesale Centre and perform post-mortem examinations of them to isolate and find out more about the virus. The AVA set up a temporary postmortem site in Sembawang, a remote area in northern Singapore, and collected stray cats from all over Singapore to confirm whether the SARS virus had infected the cat population. The finding was negative, but the AVA did not reveal that to the public for fear that the finding was still not conclusive (Ngiam 2007). The AVA’s actions came in tandem with an increase in the number of abandoned cats and dogs, as reported by the SPCA (ST 2003f).

Animal-protection groups monitoring the number of cats and dogs in HDB estates reported that town councils had moved in to intensify the campaign to kill stray animals, “mainly cats.” The CWS entered the fray again and condemned the actions of the AVA and town councils, but the authorities continued to claim that they had intensified the culling of stray cats in housing estates, food centers, and wet markets as part of the “Singapore’s OK” program to clean up the environment and improve public hygiene. When the CWS criticized that such actions added to the public hysteria over stray cats, governmental agencies retorted that cat lovers were being paranoid about their routine (*Channel News Asia* 2003). At their wits’ end, cat lovers took the rescue of stray cats into their own hands. The Animal Lovers League gathered more than 2,000 stray cats and planned to send them to a cat shelter in Johor, Malaysia, but Malaysian officials refused to accept the cats into the Johor shelter, saying that Johor is not the place to cast off stray cats. For its part, Singaporean customs refused to issue export permits to the Animal Lovers League for stray cats (*Associated Press* 2003c; 2003d). As the episode unfolded, the Ministry of National Development intervened, declaring it a problem that all involved parties would solve “internally” “with the help of the animal welfare groups in Singapore” through consultation and reconciliation (ST 2003e).

The Animal Lovers League proposed the alternative plan of building a cat shelter next to an existing private kennel in a remote part of Singapore (*Dow Jones International News* 2003). Journalists and readers backed the plan, arguing that the government had

neither consulted nor worked closely with the public, but rather had unilaterally halted the Stray Cat Rehabilitation Scheme, in which volunteers collected stray cats for spaying before returning them to their environments, in favor of removing stray cats amid the SARS scare (AVA 2003a). Although the AVA reasoned that the scheme had not worked in several town councils, cat lovers countered that the AVA's website stated that culling by pest control companies "removes cats that are easily caught, leaving the wilder and often more prolific cats to continue to multiply . . . , [producing] immediate, short-term results but the results are temporary." Using the AVA's own logic, animal-protection groups urged that governmental agencies return to the scheme to rehabilitate rather than eradicate stray cats (ST 2003d).

As the government was deliberating on the groups' proposals, some 80 people gathered in a meeting room at a five-star hotel to mourn an estimated 700 cats exterminated by the authorities. Reports had it that "many of the lawyers, engineers, and executives present wept openly." Because all gatherings require a permit and speakers must seek police approval in Singapore, the mourners decided to hold a "private" memorial at the hotel. Animal activists said that they feared laws used for years to limit demonstrations by political opposition groups could be used against them if they make their opposition to the cat culling "too public." Meanwhile, a coalition of animal-protection groups began selling 1,000 T-shirts emblazoned with the slogan "Kill Ignorance, Not Animals," to raise funds for building a cat shelter managed by the Animal Lovers League and having capacity to accommodate 2,000 to 3,000 stray cats. Most animal lovers, however, preferred more passive forms of protest, such as signing Internet petitions and encouraging their friends to wear blue ribbons in support of stray cats. They also rescued strays by rounding them up at night and caring for them until a home could be found. Thus, by resorting to "routine channels of voicing disagreement," animal lovers circumvented strict protest laws to express their anger (*Associated Press* 2003b). These upper-middle-class, white-collar professionals, while politically acquiescing to the government, could navigate laws on public assembly by knowing the "permissible boundaries" or "gray areas" of these laws and by acting within established political perimeters so as not to offer a direct challenge to state authority (Chong 2005). They mobilized their resources to create an alternative discursive space to express their opinion.

In the face of mounting public pressure, the government relented by auctioning off land for animal shelters, hoping to appease animal lovers. The AVA announced that it would open up five one- and two-acre lots "for long-term boarding purposes" for the animals, stating that any group with "proven experience in taking care of and/or providing boarding for pet animals may bid for the land" (*Associated Press* 2003a). By mid-June, the AVA had picked up and tested the last of 140 stray cats, declaring them SARS-free

and clearing the “cloud of suspicion over cats.” This occurred after Singapore was removed from the World Health Organization’s list of areas infected with SARS on May 31 (*ST* 2003a).

To the cat lovers in Singapore, the government seemed to have confused civet cats—the alleged host of the SARS coronavirus—with “real” cats. They were frustrated that the government, in its “cleanliness” campaign, had targeted only cats caught near markets and other “neighborhood” places that served food (*Associated Press* 2003d). In essence, in the nation’s battle against SARS, the government was extending its power into the urban spaces of the commons—the food stalls, hawker centers, and wet markets—claiming that they were unhygienic. As state agencies moved in to reclaim these spaces on the pretext of health exigencies, animal-protection groups harnessed their finances and manpower to found new spaces for persecuted cats—a hotel ballroom for pseudopublic mourning, a transnational shelter for rescued cats, and private homes to house cats temporarily. When all their endeavors failed, these groups launched their own campaigns to raise public awareness of the plight of stray cats and the excesses of culling, hoping to galvanize public support to “exonerate” the cats. They succeeded. The removal of Singapore from the World Health Organization’s list was a major contributing factor to the government’s compromise. But more important to their success was that the government did not want to risk facing further challenges to its structural parameters if it appeared too unyielding, especially in light of citizens’ attempts not to flout the law or confront the state apparatus. The government associated its legitimacy with the ability of approved groups and individuals to seek redress or solutions through the “proper channels” of formal institutions. The cat-welfare groups had done everything within their means to fulfill this unspoken criterion, leaving the government little maneuver space in which to act.

Over the years the government has invoked Singapore’s victory against SARS as, in Lee Kuan Yew’s words, a display of “inner ruggedness” and national unity in adversity (*Channel News Asia* 2005). The conventional view was that the SARS crisis and the common experience of facing the crisis had strengthened political and social solidarity among Singaporeans. Yet in the eyes of cat lovers, the SARS episode was a human war against scapegoated cats, a unity abused and a ruggedness misplaced. The episode exposed the vulnerability of animal-protection groups, cat activists, and stray cats in a context of limited legal and social safeguards for them. As Frank Furedi observes, “People do not simply suffer a disaster. They interact with terror and emergencies, often adapt to it, draw lessons and meaning from it, sometimes are disoriented and confused by it but often learn to creatively reorganize their life around it” (2007, 171). As cat lovers came to terms with their vulnerability and forged their own solidarities against a



national unity that the government had appropriated to cull stray cats, they showed that trust in the government had been lost with regard to the management and regulation of stray cats, and that collective action had to be taken to provide cats with more protection and welfare.

### Speaking for Cats

The CWS, the most vocal cat lovers' group in Singapore, was established years before the SARS outbreak, in 1999, but it was from the 2003 crisis that the CWS first gained prominence. The CWS was set up by "upwardly mobile professionals" who "invest their time and energy in saving what appears to be an unimportant sector of the Singapore populace"—stray cats. Alluding to the growing incidence of animal cruelty in Singapore—burning kittens alive, throwing cats from high-rise buildings, and governmental agencies' culling 13,000 stray cats every year from 1980 to 2000—the CWS resolved to promote tolerance for and understanding of stray cats among Singaporeans in line with the government's persistent call for a more gracious society, adding that "kindness to animals could be a part of the school curriculum in Singapore." The CWS aimed to forge a strong network devoted to the rescue of distressed cats and sterilization of stray cats (*ST* 2000a).

The SPCA, inspired by similar schemes in Britain, Canada, and the United States, had been promoting sterilization as a "humane way of controlling the stray [cat] population compared with destroying them" since the 1990s. This began as a response to increasing complaints among residents of HDB estates that cats had been rummaging through rubbish bins and had left uneaten food all over the place (*ST* 1994b). Critics argued, however, that "plentiful food sources and kind cat lovers" had indulged the cats and impaired their "natural instincts" to "make themselves useful by preying on rats, pigeons, and numerous scavenging birds that equally scourge city environment." The critics also believed that stray cats "co-exist with the lot [of animal pests] to compound the vermin problem," so they urged the authorities to round up strays, put them to sleep, and ensure quick and proper disposal of their carcasses (*ST* 1994a). Although veterinarians reassured the public that most strays do not carry germs, animal-welfare groups felt enough pressure to induce them to step up controlling stray numbers with the aforementioned Stray Cat Rehabilitation Scheme. The scheme, which started in 1998, had both supporters and detractors. Food-stall owners, rather than discarding leftovers, preferred feeding them to the cats. In contrast, residents saw such practices as emboldening cats to wander into the "human spaces" of coffee shops (*kopitiam*s), food centers, and wet

markets (ST 2000b). After abandoning the scheme during the SARS period, the AVA turned to culling strays, educating pet owners not to abandon cats, and advising animal-protection groups to house cats at their own expense (ST 2014f). For its part, the CWS started approaching individual town councils and, as of August 2014, had been working closely with 16 of them to reduce the culling (*New Paper* 2014).

From 2003 to 2014, the main object of the CWS and several cat-focused organizations was to reestablish the Stray Cat Rehabilitation Scheme. Cat sterilization was never outlawed; the government might have withdrawn from the scheme, but cat-welfare groups were free to conduct it at their own expense. Owing to their limited resources, however, these groups hoped that the AVA and town councils would return to the scheme and mobilize sterilization to greater effect. Stating that sterilization remained the most effective method in controlling the stray-cat population, the CWS, in its capacity as the only registered association in Singapore for cat welfare, linked nonofficial groups together, holding true to the Singapura's name of Kucinta ("Cat-love") against the backdrop of increasing cat violence in the nation. The CWS distinguished itself from the Singapore Cat Club, which it said "organizes [only] shows and gatherings" (ST 2000a). The CWS relied on donations and worked with 28 veterinary clinics to help sterilize about 400 to 600 stray cats annually (ST 2012). The CWS also encouraged the public to adopt its sterilized cats with "value-added guidance" from affiliated cat-welfare groups. On one occasion, it stepped in to remind the public not to be enticed by a specific puppy sale coupon "with 0 percent installment plan" in the National Day Parade pack (distributed to each parade spectator), arguing that such coupons would only promote irresponsible pet ownership (ST 2014e).

### **Beach Road Cat Killings**

Here I will briefly introduce a particular episode—the serial cat abuses at Beach Road—to explore the workings of the CWS and concerned groups and individuals in the 2010s, after such groups had expanded in scale, scope, and strength since the 2000s. Beginning in late 2011, a spate of cat abuses occurred in a cluster of flats along Beach Road, with cats being lacerated, flung down to their deaths, and decapitated (Save Beach Road Cats, September 27, 2011; October 27, 2011; September 2, 2012). Some cats suffered from sling shot wounds. Others were blinded (Save Beach Road Cats, December 10, 2012). Abuses were also reported in the immediate vicinity of Kampong Glam and North Bridge Road, causing considerable distress among cat lovers (Save Beach Road Cats, January 16, 2013; February 19, 2013; February 24, 2013).

That the abuses continued for years without one person being arrested, interrogated, or investigated added to the cat lovers' frustration, particularly in a nation that prided itself on having a highly efficient police force and a low crime rate. As a result of police inactivity, cat lover Anthony Hong set up the Save Beach Road Cats website in late 2011 to raise awareness and appeal for information. Hong, who owned a sundry shop in the area, first noticed the deaths after meeting with elderly people who were feeding Beach Road's stray cats. These elders, according to Dr. Ngiam (2007), were individuals who wanted to earn good karma by feeding stray animals but did not clean up the mess after feeding, which attracted cockroaches and rats to the neighborhood and hence caused conflict between themselves and other residents. Although the elders lodged police reports about one elderly man seen "shooting stones at cats with a catapult," the police did not act on the reports. Hong hired a private detective to check on the elderly man in question, but this did not unearth any evidence; the police stated that they could arrest the man only if presented "concrete photo or video evidence" (ST 2014d). An elementary school student, motivated by Hong's efforts, offered all his savings of 2,000 Singaporean dollars as a reward for information on the cats' deaths (ST 2014c). Meanwhile, some residents on North Bridge Road sent a carcass to the AVA, requesting a post-mortem on it to determine the cause of death; the results were not forthcoming (*Xinming Ribao* 2014).

The CWS reached out to the Beach Road cat caretakers (Save Beach Road Cats, "Background"). CWS executive officer Joanne Ng shared their frustration: "Why are the authorities not doing anything about it. . . . If the person who is doing all this harm ends up murdering a small kid . . . , it would be too late" (Yahoo News 2014). Hong (Save Beach Road Cats, September 18, 2014) also lashed out at the platitudes of the authorities, maintaining that actions speak louder than words: "How . . . can the government's stance on animal abuse be taken seriously if . . . swift resolutions are only reserved for major crimes like murder and robbery, and even lesser offences like killer litter and illegal parking?" That said, in 2014 the CWS, along with other animal-welfare groups, managed to pull Law and Foreign Affairs Minister K. Shanmugam and Member of Parliament Yeo Guat Kwang to their side in recommending harsher penalties on perpetrators of animal cruelty, and Parliament went on to amend the Animals and Birds Act to impose stiffer penalties on animal abusers (*Today* 2014; ST 2014a; 2014b). To give some background, Shanmugam had been a longtime supporter of the CWS, having initiated Pilot Cat Ownership to ensure that cat owners in his ward get their cat sterilized, microchipped, and registered with the society (CWS 2012).

However, no one had yet been held accountable for the 50 cruel cat deaths along Beach Road, although the aforementioned elderly man remained the primary suspect.

In his own defense, the man confided in the Chinese press that he was now a target for harassment for a crime he had never committed (*Lianhe Wanbao* 2015a; 2015b). While the CWS could pull politicians into its fold, individual, unorganized cat lovers failed to elicit sufficient police or institutional support to nab the stray-cat killer(s) along Beach Road.

The additional legal provisions coincided with the quiet extension of the Stray Cat Rehabilitation Scheme earlier in mid-2014. In 2011 the AVA attempted to partially relaunch the scheme, but the town councils did not welcome the directive because they “did not want to clean up after the cats.” To be precise, the town councils did not want to pay to control, feed, and sterilize stray cats in their jurisdictions. After a three-year trial in four precincts, the AVA decided to reinstate the scheme in full, and this move drew praise from animal-welfare groups, which had all along maintained that culling was inhumane and ineffective. The groups cited the drop in stray-cat numbers from 80,000 to 50,000, along with the fall in culling figures, as evidence that sterilization worked. Another sign of success, they stated, was that the AVA euthanized about 1,000 strays in 2013, down from 3,300 in 2008 and 13,000 in 2001. In addition, the CWS reported that its volunteers had helped sterilize 4,479 cats in 2013 alone, showing that it was fully capable of working with the AVA and the town councils at cutting costs while dealing effectively with the issue of controlling the stray-cat population. Under the scheme, the AVA funded half of the cost of 30 to 60 Singaporean dollars to neuter a cat (trapping, neutering, and releasing cats to control the population of stray cats without killing them) and another 20 Singaporean dollars to microchip it. Now with added funding and endorsement from the AVA, the CWS felt confident of reducing the number of stray cats across Singapore and hence of silencing calls for cats to be killed (*ST* 2014f). The Stray Cat Rehabilitation Scheme was made possible by some AVA executives led by Dr. Lou Ek Hee, who, against the opinion of their “hawkish” colleagues, believed that the scheme could work in keeping a “manageable group of cats in a precinct which is also good for catching rats,” on the condition that they “do not interfere with people, do not cause nuisance, defecation, jumping on people’s cars, [and] scratching the paint work” (Ngiam 2007). The lack of consensus within the AVA may help explain the inconsistency in its policies toward the treatment of stray cats.

As the former Nominated Member of Parliament Eugene Tan suggested, the People’s Action Party looked “more humane and less fixated on bread-and-butter concerns” with its members of Parliament pushing for “non-traditional” causes in recent years. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong also observed that People’s Action Party activists were reaching out to more diverse groups, including animal-welfare groups, which had been neglected in the past. After the 2011 General Elections, in which the People’s

Action Party lost a substantial share of votes to opposition parties, People's Action Party members of Parliament seemed to have become responsive to “emerging areas” of concern such as animal welfare, and sympathetic to “less combative” and “less defiant” causes. This does not mean that the heightened support for social causes was all for show. Nevertheless, as Tan observes, some issues, unlike controversial or polarizing ones such as gay rights or migrant workers' rights, were easier to support so as to appear in touch with the people. To People's Action Party members of Parliament, lending support to certain causes could increase their popularity among voters (*ST* 2014a).

Failing to co-opt social groups can result in the expression of political dissent on social media. Vivian Balakrishnan, formerly the Minister of State for National Development overseeing the AVA during the SARS epidemic, was accused in a Facebook post during the 2015 Singapore General Elections of having conducted a “cat holocaust.” The post quickly garnered more than 2,000 “likes,” with comments condemning Balakrishnan's “act of cruelty” (Facebook 2015). Because it is “accumulative, publicly accessible, and practically permanent,” the Internet poses challenges to the authoritarian structure of the government, allowing disgruntled citizens to access information, express opinions, and share insights outside the scope of conventional media and the state's censorship regime (Tan 2015, 277). When the SARS epidemic broke out in the country in 2003, most Singaporeans remained unexposed to Internet-based social media, and expressions such as “cat holocaust” were never used against any minister in Singaporean reportage.

The physical landscape of Singapore, which is increasingly built up, also contributed to growing attention to human-cat issues. Fundamental to these issues was the question of whether stray cats should share the urban space of humans. The controversy over such issues was essentially an ideological struggle over the intrinsic value of cats, a debate over the place or role of cats in both natural and manmade landscapes (Neo 2014, 73–74). Disagreement among HDB residents required the intervention or mediation of the government and cat-welfare groups for a conciliatory resolution. Disputes over spatial arrangements—whether cats should perish for transgressing into human territory, and whether cats and humans could cohabit in HDB estates—revealed that power structures and reciprocal interactions were inherently spatialized (Pearson and Weismantel 2010, 26).

## Conclusion

Cats are a synecdoche for the complex relationships between the government, cat-

welfare groups, and HDB residents in the state project of reintegrating nature into the urban landscape. Postcolonial Singapore is a space of state intervention into private domains that parades under the universal guise of national development, with the state suppressing spaces for politically marginalized groups or individuals (King 2003, 178). Nevertheless, as cat lovers and cat-welfare groups have shown by their actions, there is always room to contest such metanarratives and offer alternatives on the basis of one's "local knowledge" (*ibid.*, 179). Human responses to stray cats varied according to perceptions of the built or cultivated environment, which render cat spaces either discrepant or acceptable features of the urban landscape and represent cats as either wild or potentially domestic (Griffiths *et al.* 2000, 68).

The government's disciplinary regime and exacting standards of urban cleanliness, health, and hygiene have led to a prevalent perception of cats as pests and carriers of germs and viruses. Stray cats have outlived their traditional purposes of curbing cockroach and rat populations, which are no longer a key concern for Singapore's urban health, and of scavenging and clearing the food waste of roadside vendors, who no longer exist save for their re-creations in tourist attractions or in such modern spaces as coffee shops, hawker centers, and wet markets. Nevertheless, for cat lovers, because humans have generated conditions that do not give space to stray cats to survive, humans have a "collective causal responsibility" to create and maintain spaces to allow displaced cats to continue to live (Palmer 2003, 68, 71). That cat lovers and cat-welfare groups of different classes could create a discourse and use their activism to address the alienation of Singaporeans from stray cats in particular and nature in general highlights government passivity. Such passivity was also on display in the lack of efforts to control the population of macaques through sterilization in the Bukit Timah Nature Reserve. On the whole, state agencies give low priority to such issues (Yeo and Neo 2010, 695).

Because the government has been passive about cats (as well as such issues as LGBT behavior and public morality) and unwilling to devote much attention, effort, and resources to managing the stray-cat population unless absolutely necessary, individual cat lovers and cat-welfare associations assumed the functions of responding to appeals and requests from the public, collecting and keeping stray or unwanted cats, neutering and spaying these cats, and at times opposing what they view as a flagrant violation of animal rights—killing stray cats—on the part of the government. In the absence of active state involvement, cat activists try to fill the gap in the government's treatment of stray cats however they deem fit, with or without civil alliances or state support.

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