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Polytechnicians and Technocrats: Sources, Limits, and Possibilities of Student Activism in 1970s Singapore

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Making a case for studying student activism outside of elite university students, this paper investigates the sources of polytechnic student activism in a tightly controlled society: 1970s Singapore. It seeks to find less obvious histories: the limits of state control, the relative openness of the city-state, and the identity and lived experiences of the polytechnicians. Through the writings and cartoons of the Singapore Polytechnic Students' Union, augmented by oral histories, the paper traces the contours of student activism as defined by everyday events as well as momentous experiences formed at the intersection between campus, national, and transnational—particularly pan-Asian—developments.

At the national level, the polytechnicians' identity responded to the state's instrumentalist view of students, which was to define the polytechnic student in a more expansive way, attacking student apathy toward social and political issues. Some student matters, such as protests against bus hikes, escalated into national issues, bringing the polytechnicians into encounters with state officials and politicians. Political surveillance caused fear and anxiety but also fostered a sense of injustice. Conversely, international contact, such as reading critical literature and participating in pan-Asian seminars, helped the polytechnicians place Singapore in an Asian context and plot themselves on a mental political spectrum. Reading was an experience: universal ideas in books enabled the students to contextualize local issues, just as everyday experiences in Singapore helped them locate the abstract. The international contact thus enabled the polytechnicians to give meaning to concepts such as "students," "education," and "Asia."

Keywords: student activism, Singapore Polytechnic, pan-Asia, Malaysian students, technocrats

Scholarship on the history of left-wing student activism in Singapore has in recent years been invigorated by new research on Chinese-stream middle school and English-stream university student activists (Huang 2006; Liao 2010; Loh *et al.* 2012). These studies have

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detached the subject from the frame of Communist subversion that dominated the earlier literature (see Lee 1996), while also questioning the long-accepted dichotomy between English- and Chinese-stream students. However, the role of student activists from polytechnics, particularly the first institution, the Singapore Polytechnic, remains to be written. Established in the late-colonial period after World War II, the Singapore Polytechnic was an instrument of British-led decolonization, aimed at shaping the city-state's postcolonial future by producing a steady stream of technicians and other blue-collar workers to supplement the administrative and professional elite being groomed at the University of Malaya (later, University of Singapore). The polytechnic's pragmatic role was subsequently enlarged by the People's Action Party (PAP) government, which came to power in 1959 and continued to seek British expertise on technical education (Loh 2015).

Polytechnic student activists—or polytechnicians, as they called themselves—comprised a unique category: unlike their university counterparts, they did not occupy a privileged position as the future leadership of an anticolonial or pro-democracy movement, or as a technocratic elite in a developmental state (Weiss *et al.* 2012). In the hierarchy of political economy in Singapore, the polytechnicians were intended to play a less prestigious middle role, as diploma-level technicians and engineers who would share more common experiences with the working class. The history of polytechnic student activism thus raises questions and approaches that differ from those of university students.

The polytechnic's pragmatic function did not prevent the emergence of bold and critical-minded student activists who looked beyond their studies to the political and social landscape of early postcolonial Singapore under an authoritarian government. In the mid-1960s, alongside fellow activists from the University of Singapore Socialist Club and Ngee Ann College Students' Union, the Singapore Polytechnic Political Society supported the Chinese-stream Nanyang University against the government's decision to reform its curriculum and medium of instruction.¹⁾ In fact, polytechnic student activism was fueled by such policies imposed from above.

Beyond the 1960s, some of the polytechnicians were connected to another dark chapter of Singapore's history. Those leaders from the Singapore Polytechnic Students' Union (SPSU) who continued their activism upon graduation were later detained without trial for their involvement in a state-alleged "Marxist conspiracy" in 1987. The reasons behind this crackdown remain unclear, though Michael Barr (2010) has done good work to trace the international roots of the Catholic activists who were detained. Nevertheless,

1) Ngee Ann College Students' Union, University Socialist Club, and Singapore Polytechnic Political Society, Memorandum on the Present Nanyang University Crisis (1965).

the voices of the detained polytechnicians remain mostly unheard. This rather mirrors the roles they played as student and social activists. As former polytechnicians recalled, they were “manpower activists” who, together with activist lawyers and Catholic Church workers, volunteered at the Geylang Catholic Center to help exploited migrant workers (mostly Malaysians). The ex-polytechnicians also supported the Workers’ Party in the 1981 elections, printing pamphlets and writing articles in the party’s organ, *The Hammer*; they comprised the publication’s “de facto editorial board.”²⁾ As Low Yit Leng remarked, they were so heavily involved in social activism, both as polytechnic students and thereafter, that when she was arrested she did not know the exact reason for her detention.³⁾

Inter-Nation-Local Singapore and Its Activist Spaces

The polytechnicians provide a glimpse into the underside of Singapore’s social and political history in the 1970s. Unlike the radical university students who formed the vanguard for Thailand’s democratization in the early 1970s (Prajak 2012), their Singapore Polytechnic counterparts had far less political impact in the city-state. The SPSU did not lead or contribute to a nationwide movement for democracy in Singapore: the PAP’s hold remained strong, and the polytechnicians’ activism was largely constrained to the campus, to writings and to conversations with international students. The members of the SPSU’s student councils were never more than a tiny elite of active students who tried but generally failed to mobilize their peers; most of his classmates, by polytechnician Tan Tee Seng’s admission, were not moved by his efforts.⁴⁾

Instead, the attempt here is to investigate the nature and sources of student activism in a tightly controlled society, so that we may better see the less obvious histories: namely, the possibilities offered by the activism as well as the limits of state control and openness of Singapore. What follows endeavors to mark out the shape of left-wing polytechnic activism as defined by a combination of international, national, and campus developments in the 1960s and 1970s.

Following recent research, the focus here is on the identity, lived experiences, and worldviews of the polytechnicians—in short, a social history. Rather than taking the terms “Left,” “student activist,” and “student” as givens, such research has demonstrated that they were constructed historically from a range of possible interpretations, and thus contested. I have used a similar approach in my co-authored work on the Uni-

2) Author’s interview with Tan Tee Seng, Pak Geok Choo, and Low Yit Leng, January 20, 2015.

3) Author’s interview with Tan Tee Seng, Pak Geok Choo, and Low Yit Leng.

4) Author’s interview with Tan Tee Seng, Pak Geok Choo, and Low Yit Leng.

versity of Malaya Socialist Club, with various student groups according competing meanings to key concepts in the postwar years, such as “student,” “socialism,” “university,” and “politics.” The university socialists made a broad and activist interpretation of the role of students, by which they themselves became an intellectual force bridging the university, the Malayan nationalist movement, and the urban and rural society of Singapore and Malaya (Loh *et al.* 2012). In the case of Malaysia, Meredith Weiss has also argued that university activists there mobilized as students rather than as Malaysians, youths, or Muslims; they were thus a unique group that advocated the interests of others rather than their own (Weiss 2011). Similarly, Indonesian students also mobilized as a moral force, untainted by politics and based on their privileged position as the modernizing elite of the nation (Aspinall 2012). By contrast, radical students in the Philippines had to subsume their student identity to become Communist cadres, whereupon they lost their identity and influence over time (Abinales 2012).

The identity of students was shaped historically by what Fabio Lanza (2010) in his study of Beijing student activists in the May-Fourth-era China calls “lived experience.” Lanza points out that it was everyday interactions with various kinds of spaces—the university, city, neighborhood, and intellectual and political spaces—that set university students “at a distance” from the state, so turning youths attending higher education into modern activist students. This approach shows that, contra previous historiography, “students” in the modern sense did not exist prior to the May Fourth and so the Beijing University students did not merely “change China.” As Lanza argues, it was through the students’ experiences and activism that they defined themselves as a distinctive group of socio-political actors, largely independent of the Chinese regime (Lanza 2010, 5). This paper seeks to build upon Lanza’s work, taking into account both spaces and temporality (events and processes), as well as to explore the international dimensions.

The paper argues that polytechnic student activism stemmed from everyday events as well as momentous experiences formed at the intersection between campus, national, and transnational—particularly pan-Asian—developments. The 1970s was a difficult time for activism of any form in Singapore, and the power of the PAP government and its intolerance of autonomous activism bred a claustrophobic atmosphere of fear—the fear of state surveillance and repression. Yet even in such a context, events at various levels—be the repeated clashes with the polytechnic bureaucracy, intimidation and arrests of fellow students in Singapore, or crackdowns against progressive movements in another part of the world—encouraged a small number of independent-minded students.

The sources used here are largely written, drawn, and orated by the protagonists themselves. Using memoirs, Khairudin Aljunied has likewise traced an ethnographic history of Malay radicals as a productive force and avant garde, sprung forth from big

historical moments and everyday experiences that defined them (including those in prison) (Aljunied 2015). This paper similarly looks to utilize the students' writings to map their worldview and responses to the social and political issues that confronted them, and the historical context in which they moved. It does so by drawing upon the numbers of the English-language organ of the SPSU, the *Singapore Technocrat*, supplemented by a small number of interviews with former polytechnicians.

There is another reason for the lack of sources. The period in question, the 1970s, renders British and other foreign sources relatively less useful, while the Singapore archives on national security issues are still closed to researchers (Loh and Liew 2010). The archives hold records from the Ministry of Education (but not, it seems, the key policy papers), but they remain under restricted access and their use for research requires the work to be vetted and approved by the ministry. Thus this paper, for positive and negative reasons, draws heavily from the vivid reports, commentaries, letters, and political cartoons found in the *Technocrat*. These are useful in unraveling the lived experiences of students and the various issues that galvanized them.

To explore the spaces for social activism in 1970s Singapore is to map out the local and international factors, in addition to the PAP's political control and policies. Admittedly the polytechnicians could not, as Beijing University students did during the May Fourth movement, stand at a distance from the state (Lanza 2010). The main political opposition to the PAP, the left-wing Barisan Sosialis—which once possessed a mass base of workers, squatters, and Chinese-stream students—had been decimated by a series of crackdowns in the early 1960s; by 1968 the PAP held all the seats in Parliament. The combination of political repression and great fires in squatter areas also destroyed the strength of left-wing rural organizations. Urban squatters and slum dwellers were thus unable to resist being moved to public housing estates, nor were the lightermen who historically toiled and lived along the Singapore River: these communities were progressively atomized and socialized into homeownership citizen-workers in order to pay for their housing (Dobbs 2003; Loh 2013). The mid- to late 1960s also witnessed Singapore's expulsion from Malaysia and the closure of British military bases on the island, with alarming economic and security implications for its survival. Although the imagined repercussions did not materialize (Loh 2011), they created a state of crisis that allowed the PAP to push through restrictive laws that weakened the power of trade unions vis-à-vis employers, namely, the public agencies and foreign multinationals.

These PAP policies mobilized Singaporeans en masse to support the state industrialization program (Rodan 1989). The program was successful at the national level and benefited many Singaporeans materially, but it was driven forward at such a pace without oversight from opposition or civil society groups that it could not fail to have deleterious

effects at the local level. The changes produced considerable social and economic dislocations for various groups of people who lived and worked in Singapore. The move to high-rise housing was a difficult experience for the elderly and low-income families that struggled to pay their rent (Chen and Tai 1977; Hassan 1977); just as crucially, the agency and dynamism of semi-autonomous squatter communities was quickly replaced by a submission to the norms of the imposed social and economic system when they were rehoused in public housing (Loh 2013). With a “tripartite” labor system in place and trade unions no longer independent of the state and capital, low-wage workers also had no power to contest unreasonable employers and poor working conditions. This was the case for migrant workers who arrived in Singapore in the 1970s, largely Malaysians. Both new and older research on the decade also points to widening social and income gaps within the Chinese population—between graduates of English- and Chinese-stream education and between employees in economic sectors differentially linked to Singapore’s industrialization (Salaff 1988; Koh 2010).

University student activism was likewise drastically curtailed by the end of the 1960s. In 1963–66 student groups across different academic institutions led a nationwide struggle for university autonomy and student rights, but this eventually failed (Loh *et al.* 2012). Between 1964 and 1978, students seeking entry into institutions of higher education, including the polytechnic, had to produce state-endorsed “suitability certificates” to support their application, which barred expressly leftist students. In 1971 the Socialist Club at the University of Singapore, which had been a leading intellectual voice for left-wing socialism since 1953, was deregistered following years of declining membership and activity. These setbacks did not spell the end of university student activism: in 1974 architecture students at the University of Singapore captured the Students’ Union (USSU) and attempted to organize exploited workers in Jurong Industrial Estate—the centerpiece of the government’s ambitious industrialization program. This effort was also criminalized and suppressed by the state, but it nevertheless had a galvanizing influence on the SPSU’s student leaders.

The international dimensions of Singapore’s political economy in the 1970s are just as significant. As Garry Rodan demonstrates, international capital investment, largely American but also Japanese and European, provided the material impetus for the PAP’s export-led industrialization program. Singapore succeeded because it joined the newly formed international division of labor, functioning as the destination for Western companies going offshore to find cheaper factory sites and workers. Indeed, Singapore began to face a labor shortage and had to import Malaysian workers (Rodan 1989).

Yet, the ties between national control and international capital also encountered countervailing international forces. The genesis of the New Left in Europe and a grow-

ing belief in the power of communities opposed the top-down planning and technical expertise that was previously dominant. In Singapore, similarly, community organization efforts emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s, led by Catholic social activists and influenced in part by liberation theology practiced in Latin American and other Asian countries (Barr 2010). The activists worked briefly in housing and industrial estates in Jurong, Toa Payoh, and Bukit Ho Swee, utilizing group-oriented techniques to help residents and migrant workers organize themselves to deal with housing and employment problems. Such activism was politically non-threatening, but its attempt at independent collective action stirred the state enough to quickly stamp it out (Loh 2013). Despite this, the Catholic activists, joined later by lawyers and former polytechnic student leaders, continued their work until they were detained in 1987.

The student activism at the Singapore Polytechnic formed another flank of this “inter-nation-local” triangle of mutual influence in the 1970s. It was precisely the intersection of such varied scales and trajectories of events that defined the activism. This qualifies the categorization of university student activism according to world-historical or pan-Asian trends in the recent edited volume by Meredith Weiss, Edward Aspinall, and Mark Thompson (2012). The editors distinguish between two overlapping periods: first, a “leftist” wave between the late 1950s and early 1970s that was partly influenced by the European New Left. This was followed by a “developmentalist” movement in the 1960s and 1970s that addressed the economic programs of the state and their social effects (Weiss *et al.* 2012). Such a clear-cut demarcation is, however, problematic. In Singapore (not included in the edited volume), polytechnic student activists straddled both waves: the time frame is the 1970s, with some New Left influences, but the polytechnicians were also critical of the social ramifications of the PAP’s industrialization program.

“Blur Blocks” Becoming Polytechnicians

In terms of identity, were the polytechnicians Communists or students? The charge of Communist subversion has long dominated scholarship on Singapore’s history (Lee 1996). However, recent research into the declassified British archives has traced the purges of the Left in the early 1960s to the desire of Singaporean and Malayan leaders to remove their political rivals rather than to deal with a real threat of subversion (Wade 2013). Another way to move beyond the subversion framework is to fully contextualize left-wing activism rather than to make a simplistic link between the activism and international or Malayan Communism. My earlier work has explored various aspects of the

history of the Left in postwar Singapore, such as trade unions and rural associations. The left-wing movements were undoubtedly attracted to the Marxist ideology, had Communists in their leadership, and were inspired by such events as the Communists coming to power in China in 1949. Yet, these movements are better understood as local and largely autonomous responses to socioeconomic issues and colonial policy in Singapore and Malaya within the frames of anticolonialism and socialism (Fernandez and Loh 2008; Loh 2013).

The polytechnicians may be likened to the University Socialist Club, which, while inspired by radical socialist and egalitarian ideas, was not a front for the Communist Party of Malaya. The club acted primarily as a student group, working on the basic premise that university students had a role to play in the political and social life of Malaya. This role entailed, on the one hand, upholding the interests of marginalized groups, such as workers, peasants, and other oppressed students, and on the other, articulating the intellectual framework of Malayan socialism that would transform the country into a nation-state (Loh *et al.* 2012). In a similar vein, albeit in a postcolonial context, the SPSU was concerned over what polytechnic students could do about social and political issues in Singapore in the 1970s.

There was still a spectrum of activism on the social role of students in the period, although the left wing was quickly diminishing. As Low Yit Leng recalled, when she was a freshman some of her seniors were very militant and ambitious, desiring to control all the student clubs in the polytechnic and opposing religion- or welfare-based societies.⁵⁾ According to Tan Tee Seng, the 15th and 16th Student Councils were extremely politicized, comprising largely mature-age and Malaysian students. By contrast, his cohort was apathetic, literally “blur blocks”: freshly graduated from secondary schools and ignorant of social and political issues. As he explained, he became a student leader—the vice-president of the 17th Council in 1976—by default when the Internal Security Department (ISD) arrested the leaders of the previous council.⁶⁾ It was common knowledge among the polytechnicians that there were polytechnic students with ties to the Communists, particularly in the Chinese Language Society. This was a cultural society that carried out clandestine activities, such as reading banned literature, and some of its members either joined the Communist underground or were detained by the ISD.⁷⁾

The polytechnicians’ identity was shaped also by their reading. They devoured what they could lay their hands on, both Communist and non-Communist progressive literature. The students obtained some of the literature from independent bookstores at Bras

5) Author’s interview with Tan Tee Seng, Pak Geok Choo, and Low Yit Leng.

6) Author’s interview with Tan Tee Seng, Pak Geok Choo, and Low Yit Leng.

7) Author’s interview with Tan Tee Seng, Pak Geok Choo, and Low Yit Leng.

Basah—a source of leftist and progressive literature. Other literature came through networks of book fairs organized periodically by the polytechnicians, who also reviewed the books and brought them to the knowledge of the general student population in the polytechnic.⁸⁾ In focusing on the everyday spaces and lived experiences of students, Lanza argues that reading in itself does not politicize them (Lanza 2010). While this is a useful primer for examining other factors, reading certainly had an impact. It was not whether reading or experiences mattered more, but the way both factors intersected and influenced each other. In other words, reading was an experience: the external ideas and situations narrated in the books enabled students to contextualize local issues, just as everyday experiences and events in Singapore helped them to locate the abstract. Polytechnician Tan Tee Seng found some of the works relatively easy to relate to, such as the *Communist Manifesto*, Soviet material on workers, the revolution against the Tsar, and Maoist texts on China's development and the Cultural Revolution. The students did not read with much self-reflexivity; they were surprised to learn later about the horrors perpetuated by the Gang of Four. However, they did not passively absorb the propaganda, finding the more stridently ideological material difficult to stomach. What moved the students were the emotional stories in the literature as much as ideological imperatives, and universal themes such as heroism, patriotism, and repression resonated strongly.⁹⁾ Pak Geok Choo of the 18th Students' Council recounted that, besides leftist material such as George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, she enjoyed reading the work of Pearl Buck and other progressive American books from the popular publisher Penguin.¹⁰⁾

The polytechnicians' identity as students was based on their response to the instrumentalist notion defined by the state: polytechnic students were seen as technicians in training who comprised the blue-collar workforce for the industrial development of Singapore. The polytechnicians, however, sought to define the polytechnic student in a more expansive and activist way, just as the critical articles in the *Technocrat* gave the term "technocrat" a wider meaning than merely someone who applies technological knowledge to practical problems. Students, an article in the *Technocrat* urged, were not "mechanical robots or digits"; neither should the "primary and even the secondary focus [of polytechnic education] are (*sic*) on science and technology."¹¹⁾ Disagreeing with a former principal of the polytechnic, the article argued that liberal studies, which was removed from the curriculum by the PAP government in 1959 (Loh 2015), was crucial for treating a person as an individual human being. The article concluded that memoriz-

8) Author's interview with Tan Tee Seng, Pak Geok Choo, and Low Yit Leng.

9) Author's interview with Tan Tee Seng, Pak Geok Choo, and Low Yit Leng.

10) Author's interview with Tan Tee Seng, Pak Geok Choo, and Low Yit Leng.

11) "The Polytechnic and the Union," *The Singapore Technocrat* 3(2) (May 1974): 4, 10.

ing engineering formulae did not prepare students for confronting or resolving social issues in the outside world:

True, we enroll in the Polytechnic primarily to study on how to make a living, but can we ignore the injustices and problems in our society, pretending that they do not exist and study conscientiously?¹²⁾

The SPSU responded to the PAP's functional view of polytechnic students by attacking what it viewed as their apathy toward social and political issues. The union called student apathy "a dark chapter" in the institution's history, "not only unrestrained, but . . . at its peak."¹³⁾ This critique of widespread disinterest was an attempt to define the identity and role of students by way of accusation. The critique made certain modes of thinking and behavior in an authoritarian state that were rational at an individual level—students accepting the national development imperative and focusing on their studies and future career—harmful for society and the nation. The charge of apathy thus constitutes a modernist discourse, where it was deemed that through activism an existing and problematic state of affairs could be improved upon (Loh *et al.* 2012). The modernism highlighted how the polytechnicians viewed students as having a bigger role in the social and political life of the nation. This was precisely what the state wanted to discourage.

Significantly, the polytechnicians' self-identity was defined not only in opposition to the state's prescription but also in relation to how they viewed non-polytechnic students, namely, secondary, pre-university, and university students. As "Polytechnician" wrote in the *Technocrat* in 1974, the polytechnic offered a new start for secondary and pre-university students who had spent years studying and then "vomiting out" facts and formulae in the examinations, and who risked becoming "educated" people "standing on a lonely pedestal" and unconcerned about social issues in the country.¹⁴⁾ Polytechnician also criticized the lesser status of polytechnic students, noting that "polytechnicians would end up producing the wealth while our counterparts in the universities would be the ruling class of the nation!" Citing the British economic historian Malcolm Caldwell and school principal (and former politician) Francis Thomas, Polytechnician asked his/her peers to be more critical minded and ready to disagree with the government, before concluding:

Instead, while in our pursuit of engineering knowledge, let us keep our faculty of critical reasoning and judgment alive. Let us be alert to the needs of society especially the poorer ones and attempt

12) "The Polytechnic and the Union": 4, 10.

13) "Union Awareness," *The Singapore Technocrat* 3(2) (May 1974): 2.

14) "Our Education System: Pausing to Examine It," *The Singapore Technocrat* 3(1) (April 1974): 1.

a constructive approach to the issues facing society.¹⁵⁾

The relationship between the SPSU and USSU was an interestingly ambivalent one. While unhappy about their subordinate position to undergraduates in the political economy of Singapore's national development, the polytechnicians clearly looked up to their university counterparts. As Tan Tee Seng explained, the USSU's efforts—under its charismatic President Tan Wah Piow—to mobilize workers in Jurong Industrial Estate in 1974 inspired the polytechnicians. By contrast, Tan Tee Seng spoke of himself and his fellow students as playing ancillary roles, such as providing manpower in flood relief efforts, or assisting in Tan Wah Piow's Retrenchment Research Center for workers in Jurong. Tellingly, Tan Tee Seng said little about polytechnicians providing the intellectual leadership in student activism.

What were the reasons for the polytechnicians' seeming sense of inferiority? While not understating the role of manpower support, their weak self-identity reflects the stigmatizing effect of PAP policy toward polytechnic education. In 1968 the government gave the University of Singapore the sole right to award degrees in engineering, accounting, and commerce. These were subjects taught at diploma level in the Singapore Polytechnic, which hitherto also had ambitions to expand into a technical university. In fact, for several years in the mid-1960s, the university and polytechnic had attempted an unwieldy arrangement to jointly offer degree courses (Loh 2015). Thereafter, however, with the degree courses hived off to the university, the polytechnic became a less prestigious and economically attractive cousin, an institution for producing mid-level technicians. The polytechnicians' weaker self-identity suggests that they had internalized the secondary role of the polytechnic.

Mastery of language was also a factor. The polytechnicians wrote and spoke in the same medium as the undergraduates: English. However, they appeared acutely aware of their less effective and eloquent command of English, although it was adequate for its purpose. In this sense, the culture of polytechnic student activism was again constrained by state policy. The Ministry of Education required secondary students enrolling in the polytechnic to obtain a pass in English; the British colonial government had required a merit grade, but this was deemed too difficult for students from vernacular secondary schools (*ibid.*). Thus, as Tan Tee Seng readily admitted, although English was the main medium of writing and communication in the polytechnic, the standard was purely functional and lower than what would be written in, say, the *Singapore Undergrad*, the organ of the USSU.¹⁶⁾

15) "Our Education System: Pausing to Examine It": 1.

16) Author's interview with Tan Tee Seng, Pak Geok Choo, and Low Yit Leng.

At times, though, the nature of polytechnic education gave the students' activist discourse a distinctive character. They could use the language of engineering and applied science to address social and political issues. A standout article in the *Technocrat* argued that the polytechnic's principal, teachers, and students all had a part to play in decision making on educational issues. The article made a vivid analogy of the authoritarian state as a malfunctioning system:

The infra-structure of our society provides, in all her organizations, the rulers at the top and the "ruled" at the bottom. From a theoretical point of view, work can be carried out smoothly. The directives flow through the so-called proper channels, from top to bottom, while there's the hope that feed-back informations would flow at the same time in the reverse. It is ideal and it should be the ultimate goal to have a proper dialogue in this respect. However, where decisions and directives, come out from one man and the feedback goes to him or is censured by him as well, its [*sic*] time some thought be given to the system.¹⁷⁾

Thus, the author could point out the flaws in Singapore's political system without recourse to ideological vocabulary such as "democracy" or "human rights" (though the polytechnicians used it on other occasions). Far from being rigid and oppressive, the applied science language was flexible enough to accommodate a logic that could assess and reinterpret political ideas. Such a language may be more persuasive to technical-stream students, but more crucially it also highlights the strong self-identity, in positive terms, of the polytechnicians.

Campus Risings

The 7,000-odd students who attended Singapore Polytechnic in the 1970s were not a unified physical community but divided in several ways. For one, they were dispersed among three campuses: at Ayer Rajah (commonly called ARC, attended by the engineering first-years); Prince Edward (PEC, the original campus built in 1958 and which the seniors attended); and the newest campus at Dover, completed in 1978. In addition, the students were divided by their courses: "the Common, ITC, and the Aero boys" (the common engineering course for first-years, industrial technician certificate course, and aeronautical engineering course), as an article in the *Technocrat* stated. There was also a linguistic and communication divide between students from English- and Chinese-stream secondary schools.¹⁸⁾ However, despite these divisions, there were formative

17) "Freshmen Orientation Convention 1974/1975," *The Singapore Technocrat* 3(3) (June 1974): 5.

18) "Ayer Rajah Campus: No Pride Only Prejudice," *The Singapore Technocrat* 3(2) (May 1974): 5.

campus experiences that gave rise to a shared identity among the polytechnicians.

A considerable number of SPSU members in the early 1970s were older students from Malaysia who had some prior working experience before joining the polytechnic. Being “foreign” itself was an advantage in fostering activism: the students spent more time on campus and were more keenly concerned about and involved in campus issues and activities.¹⁹⁾ Through Malaysian students in the SPSU and USSU, the polytechnicians became aware of social issues in Malaysia—by then a separate nation-state—such as the hunger strike by peasants in Baling, Kedah, and the eviction of squatters in Tasek Utara, Johor Bahru, in 1974.²⁰⁾

For the polytechnicians, campus study (or non-study, as was frequently the case for student activists) and life was important in germinating a shared sense of mission. They spent much of their time in discussions and planning activities at the Union House, particularly in its conference room, which sometimes served as a study room during the examination period. In 1974, the 13th Students’ Council was dragged into controversy for an allegedly excessive use of union funds to renovate the conference room.²¹⁾ This showed how important the Union House was to SPSU students.

That campus matters superseded ideology was expressed cogently in the polytechnicians’ call for student autonomy and an independent student government. The SPSU leadership viewed itself as a form of student government with its authority and powers, analogous to a national government and deserving of respect and cooperation by the polytechnic administration. As Tan Tee Seng pointed out, the SPSU’s constitution—as a formal document for student governance—was invigorating for student activism and a contrast to the secondary school experience, where student leaders were appointed by the administration.

The polytechnicians believed that their authority was not respected by the polytechnic’s administrators in many ways. A sore point between the 17th Students’ Council and the polytechnic’s board of governors was the latter’s attempt to withhold funds the union needed to organize campus activities.²²⁾ Such obstruction prompted the council to cite the constitution to obtain the funds, for instance to organize buses that would service the three campuses.²³⁾ Pak also distinguished between the successful work camp organized by the union, which had freshmen volunteering in the farms of Singapore as a way of reflecting on their social role, and the industrial orientation program organized by the

19) Author’s interview with Tan Tee Seng, Pak Geok Choo, and Low Yit Leng.

20) Author’s interview with Tan Tee Seng, Pak Geok Choo, and Low Yit Leng.

21) “A Lesson to Learn,” *The Singapore Technocrat* 3(1) (April 1974).

22) Author’s interview with Tan Tee Seng, Pak Geok Choo, and Low Yit Leng.

23) Author’s interview with Tan Tee Seng, Pak Geok Choo, and Low Yit Leng.

administration, which she deemed a failure.²⁴⁾ Low Yit Leng of the 17th Council also recalled an instance of student militancy: a banner hung outside the Union House condemning the polytechnic administration.²⁵⁾

The pages of the *Technocrat* were unsurprisingly filled with “curses” about inept, unconcerned, and high-handed campus officials.²⁶⁾ During the 1974 freshmen orientation, about 40 seniors, including several SPSU exco members, were accused of ragging freshmen. The assistant registrar responded by refusing to allow the students to enter the Ayer Rajah campus. This prompted a sit-in protest outside his office, since the denial of entry prevented the student leaders from carrying out the orientation program. The official refused to leave his office to meet the students, and the stalemate was resolved only when the principal drove down from Prince Edward to speak with the students. Judging the assistant registrar as lacking “initiative and foresight,” the SPSU applied another cutting engineering metaphor to the incident:

As if [*sic*] in a highly mechanized system, only a loose screw or nut is enough to send the whole system, be it a computer or compressor unit, running into shambles which only the programmer or operator can put right.²⁷⁾

The yearly orientation for freshmen was a regular event by which the polytechnicians sought to attack the issue of student apathy. The SPSU’s Freshmen Orientation Committee, which organized the program, approached it as a formative event in socializing secondary school students into a full range of polytechnic student life in addition to the academic aspects. The SPSU portrayed itself as the “missing link” between the student population and Singapore society.²⁸⁾ The union was keen to raise awareness of its work among the “freshies”; the theme for the 1974 orientation program was “Union Awareness through Active Participation.”²⁹⁾

Orientation was, however, a contested experience that meant different things to different people. There was a dark side to it: the ragging of freshmen. Despite their efforts, the polytechnicians could not eradicate the problem (or rumors of ragging), and it was uncertain where orientation ended and ragging began. In principle, ragging was no longer tolerated. In the immediate post-World War II years, progressive students at the University of Malaya, including the leaders of the USSU and Socialist Club, had

24) Author’s interview with Tan Tee Seng, Pak Geok Choo, and Low Yit Leng.

25) Author’s interview with Tan Tee Seng, Pak Geok Choo, and Low Yit Leng.

26) “Diplomatic Alienation,” *The Singapore Technocrat* 3(3) (June 1974): 4.

27) “Diplomatic Alienation”: 4.

28) “The Polytechnic and the Union”: 10.

29) “Union Awareness”: 2.

decried ragging as a humiliating experience for freshmen that had no place in a country that was attempting to resolve far greater issues such as colonial rule and exploitation of the masses (Loh *et al.* 2012). The polytechnicians were aware of the implications of ragging: a lead article in the *Technocrat* in 1974 declared it a thing of the past, while the Freshmen Orientation Committee, made up of SPSU members, purportedly conducted the program on a “very large and responsible scale.”³⁰⁾ Tan Tee Seng also joined the union partly because he wanted the Freshmen Orientation Committee to stop ragging new students.³¹⁾ At an abstract level, the polytechnicians were able to distinguish between orientation and ragging: the former was to push the freshman out from the ivory tower to involvement in the wider community, while the latter merely dehumanized the individual.

Yet, contributors to the *Technocrat* regularly observed that ragging remained a common experience for freshmen; at times even SPSU leaders themselves were accused of doing it. At the 1974 orientation there was an alleged incident committed by senior students, where a freshman was forced to remove his shirt, shoes, and socks and gallop around the basketball court.³²⁾ Other students felt that the union’s zeal to socialize freshmen was not very different from ragging practices. A cartoon in the same year showed a reluctant, bewildered freshman in the grasp of two students, one representing the Freshmen Orientation Committee and the other a senior student, both seeking robustly to introduce him to polytechnic life (insert).³³⁾ Another writer felt that the activities organized by the Freshmen Orientation Committee were not interesting and ineffective in the long term, so it was important for the seniors to assist and communicate with the freshmen throughout their stay at the polytechnic.³⁴⁾

Seemingly trivial events at the polytechnic were also formative experiences for student activism, for they encouraged subversive interpretations. Canteen fare and prices was one such factor. The ARC canteen, opened in 1972 and run by the polytechnic administration, was a frequent target of student criticism. A survey two years later found the canteen food to be unhygienic, poor in quality, and overpriced—ostensibly 25 cents for an egg and 10 cents for bread.³⁵⁾ While the quality of food subsequently improved, the canteen remained a focal point for student criticism in another way: during lunch, polytechnic staff were seen to “steal away from the school compound in their automobiles

30) “Orientation and the Single Freshman,” *The Singapore Technocrat* 3(3) (June 1974): 1.

31) Author’s interview with Tan Tee Seng, Pak Geok Choo, and Low Yit Leng.

32) Letter by S. A. Tan, *The Singapore Technocrat* 3(3) (June 1974).

33) “Freshmen Orientation Convention 1974/1975”: 5.

34) “Orientation and the Single Freshman.”

35) “Unhygienic Practices at PEC Canteen,” *The Singapore Technocrat* 3(1) (April 1974); Letter by Simon Lim to the Editor, *The Singapore Technocrat* 3(2) (May 1974): 8.

towards much greater culinary skill”—there being no food stalls within walking distance of the campus.³⁶ A letter in the *Technocrat* alleged other grievances: the yong tau foo stall owner beating up three army boys, and the canteen assistants gambling in the open. The author emphasized that s/he brought both incidents to the registrar’s attention, but he did nothing.³⁷ Everyday events and places such as lunch break and the canteen fostered a social divide between students on the one hand and canteen operators, teachers, and administrators on the other. Such experiences affected the general student population, but it was the polytechnicians who linked them to themes about inequality and student activism.

The 1974 survey also found that students at the ARC were unhappy with early starting times for lectures (8 am). Many first-years were displeased about being taught by students from the University of Singapore, which meant that the lessons had to accommodate the undergraduates’ schedules at the university (or that the undergraduates sometimes came late for class).³⁸ Furthermore, social and recreational facilities at the polytechnic were lacking. The male toilet was considered too small and poorly ventilated. There were also inadequate sports and recreational facilities, which were limited to table tennis and board games such as carrom; the lack of a billiards table was frequently grumbled about.³⁹ The *Technocrat* joked about students being able to play table tennis if they could find the long-missing ball, or checkers if they used the bottle caps from soft drinks.⁴⁰

Speaking Truth to Power

Some campus and student matters transcended the physical boundaries of the polytechnic and could escalate into national issues. One example was the hike in bus fares in 1974. The SPSU supported a nationwide student protest against a proposed hike of 10 cents by the Singapore Bus Services (SBS), the monopoly service provider in Singapore, an increase that was supported by the PAP government. The protest ultimately failed, with the SPSU accusing the authorities of ignoring their requests for information.⁴¹ Despite the failure, the protest revealed that the polytechnicians did not merely advocate for other groups (in this case, bus riders), but from their own interests and experiences

36) “Ayer Rajah Campus: No Pride Only Prejudice”: 5.

37) Letter by Simon Lim to the Editor: 8.

38) “Life at Ayer Rajah Campus,” *The Singapore Technocrat* 3(1) (April 1974).

39) “Life at Ayer Rajah Campus.”

40) “Ayer Rajah Campus: No Pride Only Prejudice.”

41) “Student Suppression,” *The Singapore Technocrat* 3(3) (June 1974).

as students using public transport. The polytechnic students commonly endured long, exhausting trips on crowded buses or were simply unable to board them. The polytechnic administration chartered two buses for students, but this token gesture was seen to be inadequate.⁴²⁾ Weiss *et al.* (2012) have framed students as being unique in acting on behalf of others, but in this case the polytechnicians were combining their own needs with those of other groups.

The protest against the bus hike was an inter-student union affair. Working closely with other student groups, the SPSU espoused the importance of student unity. The *Technocrat* carried an article on the hike by the Students' Christian Movement in Singapore. Sympathetic toward the daily toil of bus drivers and conductors, the article highlighted the crux of the issue: the government's abandoning its role in providing public transport for the lower-income group and endorsing the profit-seeking behavior of the bus company. This policy stance of the PAP, the article emphasized, stemmed from the government's pursuit of foreign capital investment for the development of Singapore, which now penetrated the public services. The article concluded that the solution lay in recovering state control of public transport to ensure affordable and adequate bus services for the general population. The article was accompanied by a cartoon (insert) of an SBS bus driving off a cliff students' unions from the four institutions of higher learning—the University of Singapore, Nanyang University, Ngee Ann Technical College, and Singapore Polytechnic—that had organized a petition against the bus hike.⁴³⁾

Bus hikes were vital learning experiences that brought polytechnicians into encounters with state officials and PAP leaders. In a protest against a subsequent bus hike, Tan Tee Seng recounted that the minister for transport refused to meet him and other student leaders who had collected signatures for a petition against the hike. The students also argued the issue with the polytechnic's registrar; Low Guan Onn, deputy chairman of the polytechnic board of governors; and Ahmad Mattar, parliamentary secretary for education. In Tan Tee Seng's view, the polytechnicians were remarkably bold and "militant," carrying wooden sticks around the campus to prevent the security guards from removing their posters against the hike (although no violence was actually used).⁴⁴⁾

More worryingly, bus hikes also made the students aware of surveillance and harassment by state security forces, which caused much fear and anxiety. Pak remembered with some amusement her consternation when she and fellow polytechnicians were taken away by the police for handing out cyclostyled pamphlets in Jurong against a bus hike. Worried about her parents finding out about her activism, she did not inform them but

42) "Ayer Rajah Campus: No Pride Only Prejudice."

43) "Who Benefits from the Bus Hike?" *The Singapore Technocrat* 3(1) (April 1974): 5.

44) Author's interview with Tan Tee Seng, Pak Geok Choo, and Low Yit Leng.

was eventually released from police custody without being charged.⁴⁵⁾ Such fear and paranoia of the state permeated the experience of student activism in the 1970s. Pak insisted that what she called the “White Terror” was real, derived from both firsthand knowledge and stories of militant seniors being arrested.⁴⁶⁾ Tan Tee Seng and his fellow students often talked about the “professional students” who had been planted among the student population by the ISD.⁴⁷⁾ Following the arrests of the leaders of the 16th Students’ Council, Tan Tee Seng was sufficiently spooked to heed the warnings of students from the USSU and “went into hiding” to avoid arrest (no one came for him).⁴⁸⁾

But besides fear, awareness of the repressive power of the state also bred anger and a sense of injustice. Of the 1974 bus hike protest, one student angrily recounted his/her harrowing experience with ISD officials:

It is regrettable that the Government has not acknowledged students’ sincerity in the campaign. This deliberate air of arrogant indifference has sadly turned into repression as exhibited by the perverse and pervasive presence of the Internal Security Department (I.S.D.).

Students’ actions during the campaign were closely watched and several active ones were constantly harassed by the I.S.D. Four of our students have already been “invited out.” As in each “interview,” which takes place in a coffee-house, the student was reminded of his well-being and the consequences of dissentment. Even the welfare of the members of his family was brought up. He was also prompted to co-operate with the authorities and was “bribed” with mere privileges and benefits like an easy stay in the Polytechnic, into selling his conscience, by going into a state of inaction or betraying the Union by being an informant. These statements are not exaggerated! They are the truth—the threats we received are real!⁴⁹⁾

The comment reveals the making of the polytechnicians’ self-identity: they saw themselves as an important activist group, but also persecuted and vulnerable. They faced a dilemma, being concerned about the country’s issues but having their enthusiasm met with surveillance and intimidation.

The encounters with the ISD over the bus hike led one writer in the *Technocrat* to point to a larger issue: the “alienation within our society that manifested itself through lack of grass-roots contact between the governors and the governed.”⁵⁰⁾ To the students, Toh Chin Chye, the longtime chairman of the polytechnic’s board of governors (since 1959) and senior PAP leader, was a blatant symbol of political control. Toh’s unpopularity among students was at least a decade old. In 1964, to bar young subversives, the PAP

45) Author’s interview with Tan Tee Seng, Pak Geok Choo, and Low Yit Leng.

46) Author’s interview with Tan Tee Seng, Pak Geok Choo, and Low Yit Leng.

47) Author’s interview with Tan Tee Seng, Pak Geok Choo, and Low Yit Leng.

48) Author’s interview with Tan Tee Seng, Pak Geok Choo, and Low Yit Leng.

49) “Student Suppression”: 2.

50) “Diplomatic Alienation”: 4.

required applicants to institutions of higher learning, including the Singapore Polytechnic, to produce state-approved “suitability certificates.” A decade later, a lesser but still significant issue provoked the polytechnicians’ anger: Toh refusing to attend the Freshmen Orientation Convention held at the Shangri-La Hotel, organized by the SPSU.⁵¹⁾ Toh claimed that he and other polytechnic administrators had not been properly invited or consulted over the choice of venue (which was certainly an expensive one), but a student retorted in the *Technocrat* that the chairman had reached, and published, his conclusions without listening to the students’ side of the story. The writer demanded:

[H]ow much attention can we get from this man, who besides being the Chairman of the Board of Governors, is also the Chairman of the Peoples’ [sic] Action Party, Minister of Science and Technology and the Vice-Chancellor of the Singapore University?⁵²⁾

The fact that the *Straits Times*, the main English-language daily in Singapore, had duly published Toh’s remarks without editorial refrain also reveals how relations between the SPSU and the state-controlled national media were generally frosty. In 1974, a scandal broke out at the polytechnic with three students caught stealing examination papers. The SPSU acknowledged the deed (calling it a “leakage”) but attributed it to a very small number of black sheep in the student population, while pointing out the (admittedly less than convincing) mitigating factors: the lax security that had allowed the students to commit the theft, and the fixation with examinations that led them to do so. The union was also angered by reports in the *New Nation*, a small English-language newspaper, claiming the number of students involved in the theft to be 12 and that “hundreds of students” had benefited unfairly from the dishonest act.⁵³⁾ The SPSU was further incensed to discover that an upcoming episode of a television series was ostensibly “all about stealing examination papers” at the polytechnic.⁵⁴⁾

Difficulties with the PAP government arose also because many SPSU leaders were Malaysian citizens. In the 1974 ragging incident that led to a sit-in, a lecturer further angered students by asking whether they were Malaysians or Singaporeans.⁵⁵⁾ The students’ response revealed how, unlike the lecturer, they identified themselves primarily as students rather than by nationality. In another case in the same year, several Malaysian students from the USSU were interrogated by police who were checking for illegal immigrants in Queenstown New Town. The students duly produced their pass-

51) “Toh’s ‘No’ to Invitation to Attend Poly Orientation Convention,” *Straits Times*, May 19, 1974.

52) “A Vague Reputation,” *The Singapore Technocrat* 3(3) (June 1974): 2.

53) “Editorial: Examination Leakage,” *The Singapore Technocrat* 3(1) (April 1974): 3.

54) “To Condemn or Not?” *The Singapore Technocrat* 3(2) (May 1974): 9.

55) “Diplomatic Alienation”: 4.

ports to identify themselves, but the police confiscated them and instructed the students to report to the police station the following day. The *Technocrat* decried the incident as “a mass scale harassment of union officials.”⁵⁶⁾ Again, in supporting its counterparts at the University of Singapore, the SPSU highlighted its commitment to student solidarity across institutions and nationalities.

However, while the polytechnicians learned of firsthand accounts and partial rumors of repression in Singapore, there was a lack of a “genealogy” of left-wing activism. On the one hand, the students knew that surveillance and repression did not take place far away, but on the very campuses of the polytechnic. Tan Tee Seng recalled the ISD’s arrests of current and former members of the students’ council and the Chinese Language Society in September 1976. The government accused these students and polytechnic graduates, as well as other students from Ngee Ann Technical College, of working with former leftists of the 1960s to supply the Communist insurgents in Malaysia with transmitters and walkie-talkies.⁵⁷⁾ Yet, polytechnicians like Tan Tee Seng were disappointed to discover that, for some reason, the older leftists did not regard them as activists on an equal footing. Generally, though separated by only a decade, the polytechnicians lacked knowledge of the older political activism.⁵⁸⁾ As Low Yit Leng explained, they “did not have anyone to look up to” and had to find their own ways to organize.⁵⁹⁾ Thus, while polytechnic student activism forged links with other student groups, it was unable to do so with the older leftist group in Singapore.

Pan-Asian and Trans-regional Networks and Imaginings

Besides local and national developments, pan-Asian and trans-regional networks were important in shaping polytechnic student activism. The international student networks were a conduit for obtaining leftist and critical literature and thus helped raise the social awareness of students who had not read the humanities in secondary school. As Tan Tee Seng explained, it was through the SPSU’s contact with international student groups such as the Asian Students’ Association (ASA) and Federation of United Kingdom and Eire Malaysian and Singapore Students’ Organizations that the students became aware of such works.⁶⁰⁾ Low Yit Leng was so involved in these international forums that she became

56) “Diplomatic Alienation”: 4.

57) “Smashed! Red ‘Brain’ Raid,” *Straits Times*, September 7, 1976.

58) Author’s interview with Tan Tee Seng, Pak Geok Choo, and Low Yit Leng.

59) Author’s interview with Tan Tee Seng, Pak Geok Choo, and Low Yit Leng.

60) Author’s interview with Tan Tee Seng, Pak Geok Choo, and Low Yit Leng.

ASA assistant secretary-general for two years after graduating from the polytechnic.⁶¹⁾

The international contact helped the polytechnicians place Singapore in an Asian context. As Tan Tee Seng observed, ASA conferences enabled them to meet students of other countries and place themselves on the political spectrum. Students from China and Hong Kong, he surmised, were radical and “put us to shame.” On the other hand, the Japanese students from the International Students’ Association were even “more blur”—more depoliticized—than Singaporeans.⁶²⁾ For Tan Tee Seng, knowing about student activism in other countries led him to view the Lee Kuan Yew government as ruling like a “mafia,” but also to realize that repression was a sign of weakness.⁶³⁾ Conversely, as Low Yit Leng explained, the international exchange also helped students from other countries understand that social issues existed even in a prosperous city-state like Singapore, and that it was more difficult to be a student activist there than in their own countries.⁶⁴⁾

Polytechnicians also meaningfully visited or otherwise learned about the social role of other institutions of higher learning in Southeast Asia. For instance, they visited Thammasat University, a focal point for left-wing student activism and Thailand’s short-lived democratization in the early 1970s. From such contact, Pak was inspired by the knowledge that Thai student activists went to the countryside to experience the lives of peasants.⁶⁵⁾ As with the Thais, meeting students from the Philippines, then under the rule of martial law imposed by Ferdinand Marcos, enabled the polytechnicians to reflect on both inspiring efforts toward radical change and the conservative reaction from military and authoritarian forces in Southeast Asia.⁶⁶⁾

The international student seminars also brought current issues and ideas to the polytechnicians. In 1974 the Hong Kong Federation of Students organized the first Asian Students’ Seminar on Higher Education, funded by the ASA. The seminar was attended by delegates and representatives from 12 countries, including a second-year production engineering student from the Singapore Polytechnic. Covered in detail in the May 1974 issue of the *Technocrat*, the seminar raised issues of concern to the SPSU, such as academic freedom and student solidarity, the reform of higher education, and the concept of student government. On the last point, the seminar supported the formation of student governments and national unions of students in Asian countries—germane to what the

61) Author’s interview with Tan Tee Seng, Pak Geok Choo, and Low Yit Leng.

62) Author’s interview with Tan Tee Seng, Pak Geok Choo, and Low Yit Leng.

63) Author’s interview with Tan Tee Seng, Pak Geok Choo, and Low Yit Leng.

64) Author’s interview with Tan Tee Seng, Pak Geok Choo, and Low Yit Leng.

65) Author’s interview with Tan Tee Seng, Pak Geok Choo, and Low Yit Leng.

66) Author’s interview with Tan Tee Seng, Pak Geok Choo, and Low Yit Leng.

polytechnicians themselves were advocating. The seminar also backed the Singaporeans by adopting a resolution to condemn the PAP government's repression of student activism.⁶⁷⁾

Although the seminar made rather sweeping generalizations about the state of higher education in Asia, its discussions and pronouncements helped SPSU students define the meaning and boundaries of key concepts like "students," "education," and "Asia." On the reform of higher education in the region, the seminar did not confine itself to technical or administrative questions but argued that the issue ought to be considered in relation to the political, economic, and sociocultural aspects of the country. The report in the *Technocrat* adjudged education systems in Hong Kong and Singapore to be "elitist" and "colonialist," calling for the "[r]emoval of much of the western bias in curriculum irrelevant to Asian social needs and its replacement by studies of culture, language and development of Asia, Africa and Central and South America."⁶⁸⁾

The seminar had a strong focus on Asian issues but also discussed developments elsewhere in the former colonial world. The report attacked Western imperialism, citing a range of international cases, including liberation movements in Africa and the Pacific islands and US nuclear tests in the Pacific. It also demanded the immediate release of political prisoners in Asia and reinforced the activist adage of students going beyond the classroom to learn from "progressive groups" such as workers and peasants. Consistent with the emerging New Left, the seminar also condemned racism, specifically the oppression of aborigines in Australia (which sent a delegation to the seminar).⁶⁹⁾

Conclusion

Jan Myrdal (2013) called for approaching Marxism not as a "cut to measure" ideology, but historically, as shaped by contemporary perspectives and contexts and whose meanings were varied and open-ended. This paper broadly utilizes this principle to discern the sources and basis of polytechnic student activism in Singapore. Admittedly, the polytechnicians shared some notable similarities with the earlier left-wing socialist movement. One instance is the polytechnicians' attempt to contest and redefine the role of the student, just as the University Socialist Club had done earlier. The polytechnicians urged a socially relevant role for polytechnic students rather than merely graduating into technician jobs in the industrial economy. This role was socially expansive: it reached

67) "Asian Students' Seminar on Higher Education," *The Singapore Technocrat* 3(2) (May 1974): 3, 10.

68) "Asian Students' Seminar on Higher Education": 1, 3, 10.

69) "Asian Students' Seminar on Higher Education": 1, 3, 10.

out to students at other institutions of higher learning in Singapore, to Singaporean and migrant workers (such as bus users and Malaysian workers in Jurong Industrial Estate), and to international students.

Nevertheless, the activism at the polytechnic possessed a unique character, as shaped by a combination of international, national, and campus influences in the 1970s. These influences intersected with and reinforced one another. Thus, state surveillance and repression generally had a deterrent effect, but knowledge and rumors of it also encouraged the polytechnicians and imbued their worldview with a sense of vulnerability. Likewise, most polytechnic students became depoliticized under the PAP government and focused on their studies, but this state of affairs gave the polytechnicians a “crisis” (student apathy) and the weapons to attack it (orientation and petitions), while also giving them a sense of mission. Conversely, campus issues and incidents became staging points for criticizing the indifferent or repressive state: for instance, through the perceived responses of the PAP leaders and ISD to the bus hike protest, or the tension between the SPSU and the polytechnic administration over the use of union funds, orientation, and ragging. It was difficult to separate state and campus when, as polytechnicians pointed out, the chairman of the polytechnic’s board of governors was also a cabinet minister.

To add to Lanza’s research on the spaces that helped form the modern Chinese student (Lanza 2010), international spaces and events were an important part of the polytechnicians’ lived experiences in Singapore. At the international level, reading critical literature gave students the conceptual tools to comprehend politics and economics in Singapore, while also clarifying and localizing the ideas and situations expressed in the literature, most commonly themes such as heroic endeavor, radical socialism, and political repression. The conferences that allowed the polytechnicians to meet their Asian and non-Asian peers also helped them plot themselves—and Singapore’s place—on a transnational mental map of student activism. Likewise, international networks of students gave Singaporeans a larger identity and collective support beyond the boundaries of the polytechnic and the nation-state.

A case can then be made for investigating student activism outside of the “leaders” or “elite.” If, as Weiss *et al.* (2012) argue, one of the central questions is the identity or self-identity of students, then polytechnic students deserve a place in the wider scholarship on student activism, which has tended to focus on Anglophone university students or, in the case of Singapore, Chinese-stream students from middle schools and Nanyang University. The polytechnicians were not simply “manpower activists.” While generally aligned with the efforts of English- and Chinese-stream university student activists, the polytechnicians distinguished themselves from both undergraduates and school students,

sometimes positively but at other times in more self-stigmatizing ways. One striking difference was how the polytechnicians adapted the logic of applied science and engineering—which they learned in their classes—into a critique of an authoritarian regime.

What does a study of polytechnic student activism bring to Singapore historiography? Important research is being done to reinterpret the political history of the immediate postwar years beyond the frame of Communist subversion. If there is a criticism to be made of this scholarship, it is that it still focuses on big events (particularly the transition to a nation-state) and movements (portions of the Singapore and Malayan Left). The subject of polytechnic students, however, looks at smaller and less dramatic histories. It provides a glimpse into the dynamics and tensions that lay beneath the political economy of Singapore. In concrete terms, the polytechnicians' efforts were weak and largely ineffective, but they highlight how the PAP did not enjoy absolute hegemonic dominance in Singapore, as some scholars have suggested (Barr 2014; Chua 1997). The PAP's power circumscribed student activism in the 1970s but also fostered it in other ways. In some important ways, too, Singapore remained a politically open and active city-state: the spaces and events at campus and international levels that influenced the activism connected students from different institutions and other countries, provided access to critical literature, brought awareness of larger issues outside the polytechnic, and encouraged advocacy on behalf of others. The polytechnicians may thus help us to throw light on this largely unwritten history of Singapore.

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