Politics, Governmentality
&
Cultural Regulation in Singapore

Terence Theng-Boon Lee

Thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the
Discipline of Politics
The University of Adelaide
July 2004
Whoever speaks of culture speaks of administration as well, whether this is his intention or not.

# Table of Contents

Table of Contents ........................................................................................................ ii
Abstract ........................................................................................................................... iv
Declaration ....................................................................................................................... v
Acknowledgements .......................................................................................................... vi

## CHAPTER ONE: The Politics of Culture: An Introduction to Singapore
- Introduction: Singapore Culture and Politics .......................................................... 1
- Elucidating Culture, Understanding Singapore ...................................................... 10
- Institutionalising Contemporary Culture ................................................................. 22
- The Chapters ............................................................................................................. 31
- Final Introductory Note .......................................................................................... 38

## CHAPTER TWO: Governmentality and Culture
- Introduction ............................................................................................................. 41
- Effecting Foucault’s Governmentality ................................................................. 48
- Technologies of Self-Government ......................................................................... 59
- Advancing Cultural Citizenship ............................................................................ 67
- Conclusion .............................................................................................................. 73

## CHAPTER THREE: Cultural Thought and Policy
- Introduction: Culture, Policy and the Public .......................................................... 77
- Maintaining Cultural Symbolisms ......................................................................... 83
- (Re)conceptualising Cultural Policy ................................................................. 93
- Re(de)fining Cultural Policy in Singapore .......................................................... 99
- The ‘Renaissance Singaporean’ ........................................................................ 112
- Creativity as Cultural Policy ............................................................................... 118
- Conclusion .............................................................................................................. 127

## CHAPTER FOUR: Gestural Politics and Civil(ising) Society
- Introduction ............................................................................................................. 132
- The Idea(l) of Singapore ...................................................................................... 136
- Civil Society: Theories and meanings .................................................................. 140
- Civilising Singapore: Courtesy as Civil Society ............................................... 150
- The Politics of Civil Society ............................................................................... 155
- Active Citizenship as Civil Society ..................................................................... 163
- ‘Not Playing Golf’: OB-markers and Gestural Politics ...................................... 173
- Conclusion .............................................................................................................. 182
CHAPTER FIVE: Technological Auto-Regulation ......................................................... 186
  Introduction: Perfecting the Internet ................................................................. 186
  The ‘Intelligent’ Island ....................................................................................... 192
  Governing and Regulating the Internet .............................................................. 200
  Internet Policy via Auto-regulation .................................................................... 204
  Media and Political Gate-keeping ...................................................................... 215
  E-Governing the Future ..................................................................................... 227
  Conclusion ........................................................................................................... 235

CHAPTER SIX: Popularising Policy: The Nation in Parade and Songs ..................... 239
  Introduction ......................................................................................................... 239
  Mass Celebration of The Nation ......................................................................... 245
  National Day 2000: Parading and Politicising Culture ....................................... 250
  Popularising Policy ............................................................................................. 258
  National Songs: Governmentality and Cultural Policy Performed ...................... 264
  Conclusion: Onward Singapore! .......................................................................... 276

Conclusion ............................................................................................................ 281
  The ‘New’ Singapore: Cultural Contradictions and Political Consistencies ........ 281

Bibliography ......................................................................................................... 291
Abstract

Singapore’s importance as an economic powerhouse in the Asia-Pacific region should not be underestimated. As a polity, Singapore espouses many democratic ideals, though these are typically applied with deep communitarian, authoritarian and/or illiberal leanings. The aim of this thesis is to explore this inherent contradiction present in most facets of Singaporean cultural and political discourses, and to identify the key regulatory strategies and technologies that the ruling People Action Party (PAP) government employ to regulate culture, and thus govern the conduct of Singaporeans.

This thesis begins by introducing contemporary Singapore culture and politics through a survey of scholarly literature, mostly from the humanities and social sciences. As the theoretical foundation of this thesis, Michel Foucault’s (1978) liberal discourse of governmentality, understood as the conduct of conduct, will be elucidated in Chapter Two to help make sense of Singapore’s illiberal approach towards the governing and regulation of culture. The thesis will then establish conceptual links between governmentality and the study of cultural policy, arguing that contemporary cultural policy in Singapore is designed to shape citizens into accepting and participating in the rationales of government. In Chapter Three, the historical development of cultural policy in the city-state will be examined vis-à-vis Raymond Williams’ (1984) warning that culture and the state would become inextricably linked. The thesis contends that cultural policy is an useful ideological tool, practicable for the conduct of Singaporeans’ conduct.

Chapter Four looks at attempts by Singaporean authorities to engage with the global discourse of civil society by its deliberate de-politicisation into ‘civic society’, and by the sagacious and subtle reduction of physical and metaphorical spaces for feedback and political participation. Chapter Five examines the Internet and its regulatory framework in Singapore, one of the most networked societies in the world. It introduces the notion of ‘technological auto-regulation’ – a concept derived from Foucault’s (1977) embodiment of Bentham’s Panopticon structure which represents the automatic functioning of power through concurrently ‘visible’/‘unverifiable’ surveillance – to explicate the extensiveness of governmental control in Singapore. The final chapter, Chapter Six, looks at the subject of nationhood and examines how government policies are being popularised in Singapore at National Day parades and through the commissioning of national songs. As these songs provide a ‘soft’ approach towards the propagation of politically endorsed messages, they are seen as powerful mediatory tools for the conduct of governmentality.

In summary, this thesis offers a strategic and original approach towards the rethinking of culture and politics in the modern, technologically sophisticated and hybrid city-state of Singapore. It proposes, in conclusion, that the many contradictory discourses in and about Singapore will begin to make sense once the politics and governmentality of cultural regulation in Singapore are understood.
Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, where deposited in the University library, being made available for photocopying and loan.

Signed

/ 

Terence Theng-Boon Lee

Date: 30 July 2004
Acknowledgements

Research for this thesis was undertaken mostly during my enjoyable three-year residence at the Discipline of Politics, School of History and Politics, The University of Adelaide. I would like to thank, first and foremost, my principal supervisor Dr Greg McCarthy for his excellent academic guidance and collegial friendship from the beginning of my candidature in 1999. I am also grateful to Associate Professor Carol Johnson, my co-supervisor from 2002, for her academic support and encouragement.

My research was made financially possible with the award of the following scholarships:

- International Postgraduate Research Scholarship, University of Adelaide (1999-2001)
- Research Abroad Scholarship (University of Adelaide, 2000)
- Visiting Scholarship at the Australian National University (ANU) (2000)

I am grateful to the following institutions/organisations for granting me special access to their respective facilities:

- The Institute of South-East Asian Studies (ISEAS) Library, Singapore (2000).
- Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies (RSPAS), ANU, Canberra (2000).

My heartfelt thanks go to my extended family for their moral and prayer support: Eric and Wee Keow Lee (my parents); Valerie and David Ong (my sister and brother-in-law); and, Tiek Kwee and Agnes Tan (my parents-in-law). Above all, this thesis is dedicated to the two most important women in my life: Evelyn, my wife, for making tremendous sacrifices and having the courage to embark on this long and winding academic journey with me, knowing full well that the demands have only just begun; and to our dearest daughter, Lauretta, born on 28th February 2004 and caught immediately in the midst of it all! Last but not least, I would like to echo the words of the old Christian Doxology: “Praise God, from whom all blessings flow” (by Thomas Ken, 1683-1711).

Early versions of the following chapters were published in the following journals: