Research article


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Abstract
Singapore’s political struggles of the 1950s and 1960s, between a Chinese-educated, working-class left wing and a middle-class, English-educated faction, have not been completely eradicated but continue to cast a shadow over modern political developments. The moderate, English-educated faction achieved an important victory when it took over control of the People’s Action Party (PAP) in the early 1960s. However, the surprise ascendance of the Workers’ Party (WP), under Low Thia Khiang, has seen a long-marginalized section of the Chinese-educated galvanize around a district, Hougang and Aljunied, and a Teochew-speaking charismatic but low-key individual in Mr Low. The WP’s ability to develop an enduring ‘brand’ over the 2006–2013 period surprised many commentators. By 2013 it had become Singapore’s second-strongest political force.

Keywords
Singapore Chinese, Singapore opposition, Singapore political history, Workers’ Party of Singapore

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**Introduction and historical context**

If we look at the 1998–2013 period, James (2019), who studied the period 1996–2013, a period chosen so that it did not incorporate the opposition reversal and PAP resurgence at the 2015 General Election, due in part to the death of Lee Kuan Yew (Ortmann and Thompson, 2016: 39; Ramdas, 2015: 108), describes it as ‘stagnation, fall and rise’ for the opposition. Overall, and most obviously, the opposition, during this time interval, had two main parties, with competing strategies, the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) and the Workers’ Party of Singapore (WP). Both these parties competed for hegemony amongst the non-PAP demographic and the less-committed swinging voters. At the 1991 General Election (hereafter GE), the SDP became the most successful opposition party, winning two new seats to add to its one existing seat, Potong Pasir SMC, which was held by Mr Chiam See Tong. The SDP then had no firm ideology but was essentially a working-class Chinese party. After the takeover of the party leadership by the former National University of Singapore (NUS) lecturer, Dr Chee Soon Juan, in 1993, the SDP adopted a Western- or Hong Kong-style liberal-democratic approach with a focus on human rights. This tended to attract a new multicultural and younger supporter base while alienating some of its existing supporters. The SDP in 1997 lost all of its seats. Just before the 1997GE, Chiam joined the extant Singapore People’s Party (SPP) as its new chief.

The move towards the pro-human rights, liberal-democratic approach by the SDP gave the WP a gap it could move into and exploit, potentially even beyond Low’s strategic fortress in Hougang SMC, which he had won for the first time at the 1991GE. Some of the Chinese-educated, working-class left wing perceived, agreeing with the PAP in this regard, that Chee’s approach was not culturally suitable for a Chinese-majority city-state such as Singapore. Strategic civil disobedience was one area which the Chinese-educated demographic in particular, especially the older ones, could not accept.1 This left Low a gap which he could fill. He was also the type of generally non-confrontational MP whom the PAP leadership could tolerate and co-operate with. He did not deny that the PAP deserved plaudits for Singapore’s economic achievements since independence. His complaints avoided ‘abstract’ liberal-democratic concerns, such as freedom of speech and human rights. Instead, he focused on cost-of-living issues and issues around Chinese culture and language preservation, within *an assumed premise and context* that the basic direction and institutional structure of Singapore was not going to change.

Whilst, in the beginning, Low’s success was based upon his ‘personal brand’, in more recent times the party has broadened its appeal beyond the older Chinese-educated working-class demographic. It was this later shift which allowed it to win Aljunied GRC in 2011 and Sengkang GRC in 2020.2 Similarly, Nathan F Batto (2019: 88) explains that, in Taiwanese politics, ‘[w]hen the DPP [Democratic Progressive Party] stressed identity in the early 1990s, its support was driven down to the small group of Taiwan nationalists; [but] when it pivoted towards democratization, it was able to expand its support base’. Christopher D Raymond (2017: 315) provides some theoretical explanation as follows:

> [E]thnically exclusive parties [pure Chinese-educated, working-class parties, for example] are not viable in majoritarian multimember districts: owing to their size, ethnic groups constituting a small share of the population are unable to propel ethnically exclusive parties to victory, and thus must co-operate with other ethnic groups.
A crucial point in regards to Singapore is that ‘[d]espite moderate levels of ethnic diversity, each of the major ethnic groups…votes overwhelmingly for the PAP’ (Raymond, 2017: 315). However, the statistics cited by Raymond (2017: 316, Table 1) do not divide the ethnic Chinese into Chinese-educated and English-educated.

This article is structured as follows. After stating the article’s purpose, I introduce the Chinese-versus-English-educated ‘fault line’ in Singapore politics. After this I discuss the ‘Facebook generation’, associated originally with the SDP Youth in the 2009–2012 period. This is followed by a theory section explaining Asian Values-versus-Liberalism and then I explain the research approach. Following this are two sections where I present results for and discuss the 2006 and 2011GEs. After this I attempt to answer the question about why Low Thia Khiang has succeeded, whereas others have failed, in entering the political mainstream. Lastly, I return to a discussion of Asian Values-versus-Liberalism, and then conclude.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this article is to explore and understand the history of Singapore’s opposition (1998–2013), as experienced by participants in the drama, and to explore living links to the Chinese-educated, socialist left wing of the 1960s. I also look at the PAP government’s policies, including those which have impacted upon Chinese language and culture. One main contribution of the article is to highlight the achievements of Low Thia Khiang and possibly to distinguish him from other opposition parties and individuals past and present.

**The Chinese-educated versus English-educated ‘fault line’**

Although some might contest this proposition, I argue that the old English-educated-versus-Chinese-educated ‘fault line’ (Dunning, 1999: 158) or ‘social cleavage’ (Batto, 2019: 84; Lipset and Rokkan, 1967; Smith, 2010) remains in place in Singapore politics, much like the Protestant–Catholic divide does in the west of Scotland. It casts a shadow upon actions, attitudes and allegiances, although the language of discourse and the state of economic development (Welzel and Dalton, 2017: 112–113) have both changed beyond measure. Chinese language and culture, and their marginalization by the English-language and Western culture, since independence, remain key areas of contestation even though the class basis of the dispute has lessened. The old Chinese left wing was pro the Chinese Communist Party of Mao Zedong, which the PAP opposed right up until the time of Mao’s death and the economic liberalization of China’s economy which happened shortly thereafter. This identification has blurred or disappeared, with PAP supporters generally favouring economic partnerships with Chinese companies in order to exploit wealth-creation opportunities. Lee Kuan Yew’s Speak Mandarin Campaign, introduced in 1979, was mostly for economic reasons, under the guise of culture, but would not have been a policy which he would have explored back in the 1950s and 1960s.

In this article, I frame the discussion within the context of the Chinese-educated working-class left wing (Buchanan, 1972: 215; Hua, 1983: 76; Matijasevich, 2020: 201; Trocki, 2006: 142), which was an important force in Singapore in the key years of the 1950s and 1960s until it was defeated by the moderate or ‘conservative-technocrat’ (Rahim, 2010: 11; Trocki, 2006: 130) faction of the ruling PAP, under the prime-ministership of Lee Kuan Yew, in the 1960s (Trocki, 2006: 186; Visscher, 2007: 105, 112, 142–143, 152–156). After it lost political power inside the PAP, the *Barisan Sosialis* / Socialist Front was ‘narrow, weak, vulnerable and disunited’ (Chin,
2008: 72), and never as powerful as in the ‘united front’ days within the PAP. Significantly, the left wing held the feeling, which still exists today, that it had lost something of importance because of the PAP’s appeasement of Western interests and the PAP’s challenging of traditional Chinese institutions, including Chinese-medium Nanyang University, which the PAP felt was a front for left-wing elements. The old Chinese-educated political force never really went away, although its political power was weakened and decentralized. As Carl A. Trocki (2006: 109) concludes: ‘This division, seen perhaps as one between the Chinese-educated and the English-educated, lies at the heart of Singapore’s social fabric and has been one of the dynamic themes that binds the nineteenth-century history of the place to the twentieth’. In other words, as mentioned, we cannot assume that it has no ongoing relevance for contemporary Singapore politics.

**Introducing the ‘Facebook generation’ aka the SDP Youth**

The era 1998–2013 also saw the PAP wrong-footed by the emergence of the ‘Facebook generation’, a largely pro-opposition group of young people who took politics in Singapore into the internet era and provided younger Singaporeans, who might have felt alienated from the PAP, with a lively forum where they could forge bonds, express frustrations, and communicate ideas (George, 2008: 276; James, 2019). The PAP had established hegemony and near total control over all the organizations and vehicles of the old society, such as the traditional print media and television (George, 2008: 274–276). By contrast, initially, it found the new internet world difficult to control, in the same way (Soon and Cho, 2014: 542), and its use of old-world surveillance and intimidation tactics began to look increasingly clumsy and out of date. PAP-oriented online activists also lagged behind pro-opposition elements in the initial years, although the balance shifted again in the lead-up to the 2015GE when PAP supporters became an important, conservative online force which rallied ‘netizens’ behind the government. (‘Conservative’ may be the wrong word here as the PAP has always tried to balance social conservatism and economic dynamism, with conservatism in the social realm matched with permissiveness in the economic realm, at least so far as MNCs are concerned.)

In the five years leading up to the 2011GE, the SDP was, without a doubt, the most internet active of all the opposition parties, and this allowed it to generate online momentum and enthusiasm around its human rights agenda, which forcefully took on the PAP, in direct ways associated with the Westminster tradition of parliamentary democracy. In a September 2009 interview with the author, Dr John L Tan (the SDP’s Assistant Secretary-General) contrasted the gentle and collaborative approach of opposition MPs Chiam and Low with the robust and sometimes hostile and rancorous debates seen in Westminster (John L Tan, interview with author, 22 September 2009, Upper Thomson, Singapore, notes in possession of author). However, the youthful SDP supporters, under the ‘SDP Youth’ banner, whilst identifying with the perspective of the SDP, failed to ‘convert’ a large enough youth cohort across the island to win any seats for the party at the 2011GE. This was partly due to the first-past-the-post voting system (KP Tan, 2013: 30; N Tan, 2013: 637). Because of this disappointment, the ‘original’ SDP Youth had fragmented and dispersed by April 2012.

During the 2009–2011 period, the SDP’s approach towards its youth was highly innovative and intelligent. There was a room with four or five computers at the party’s headquarters, and SDP Youth people could come and go as they wished and use the computers for online activism and argumentation. I visited the party headquarters several times over this 2009–2011 period, and the creative, energetic, youthful, modern atmosphere resembled an NGO or even a church, given the
quasi-parental roles played by Dr and Dr Chee. The quasi-parental aspect might be seen as an exaggeration, but they adopted these roles in part due to the fact that some SDP Youth members felt alienated by mainstream society due to their anti- or non-PAP views. Some might even have been alienated from (or perceived that they were alienated from) their own parents. Two were as young as 14 and attended SDP functions with older friends or acquaintances. Also innovative was the SDP policy that the SDP Youth people did not need to sign up as SDP members before becoming actively involved in party work (Jaslyn Go, interview with author, 22 September 2009, Upper Thomson, Singapore, notes in possession of author). This policy was designed to overcome young people’s potential fears that becoming an opposition-party member would lead to marginalization or stigmatization by pro-PAP groups in the broader society. Hence, while the SDP was a formal organization, the SDP Youth had aspects of informality in daily operations, but enclosed within a formal party structure (Buechler, 1995; Soon and Cho, 2014: 539).

Management jargon has become commonplace and widespread in Singapore society. Around 2009–2011, the SDP Youth was perceived by many to have the potential to overcome the ‘tainted brand’ factor associated with Chee as an individual. There was enthusiasm and an expectation that the SDP, largely due to the potential of the SDP Youth, could win one or more seats at the 2011GE. The new SDP Youth people (e.g. Jarrod Luo, Seelan Palay, Martyn See and Rachel Zeng) were dynamic, multicultural, English-educated, sophisticated, liberal-democratic, and socially progressive. In line with these values, they supported the LGBT lobby and other progressive causes both locally and overseas. They did not see politics as being locally bounded in any meaningful sense.

The ‘tainted brand’ factor began affecting Dr Chee at the 2001GE when he confronted PAP Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong assertively when the two met by chance whilst campaigning at a Jurong West market (Roderick Chia, former WP volunteer, interview with author, 4 March 2010, Downtown Core, Singapore, notes in possession of author). Chee later thought that the negative publicity surrounding this event was pure political posturing because he felt that he had the right to directly confront even a senior and highly respected PAP figure such as Mr Goh. By contrast, many people in the electorate, especially those in the older demographic and those with more of a Chinese-cultural foundation, felt that how you approach a senior leader is at least as important as the matter under debate – it should be with politeness and decorum. Unfortunately, for Chee and his supporters, many opposition supporters also found his style, as well as his liberal-democratic orientation, unsettling, if not unacceptable. As such, it would be difficult for the SDP in the coming election unless the SDP Youth could win over a substantial youth cohort.

Consistent with my view about the lack of appetite among voters for Chee’s liberal-democratic vision, Shin and Kim (2017: 133) analysed the third wave of the Asian Barometer Survey (ABS), conducted in 12 democratic and nondemocratic countries, and concluded that ‘a hybrid system, not liberal democracy, is the most preferred system even among the culturally liberalized and socio-economically modernized segments of the East Asian population’ (East Asia here includes Singapore). Only 20% of Singaporeans agreed with all three concepts of democracy: by the people, of the people and for the people (Shin and Kim, 2017). This translates to the SDP’s hardcore support. By contrast, Welzel and Dalton (2017) claim that the assertive citizen approach to politics has been expanding around the world, including Singapore and the rest of Asia, in line with more material affluence. Meanwhile, the traditional allegiant citizen approach has been stagnant. Since assertive values are strongly associated with effective and accountable governments, whereas allegiant values show only a modest correlation with government effectiveness, these authors claim that a more assertive citizenship is not something to be feared (contrary to the PAP’s views on the subject). It is difficult to compare Singapore data across these two studies – the Welzel and Dalton
Asian values versus liberalism

In the late 1990s, Dr Mahathir of Malaysia and Lee Kuan Yew and Goh Chok Tong of Singapore attracted much attention with their ‘Asian Values’ campaign, even though it was at least 20 years old by then (Barr, 2009: 33–34, 38, 220, 248; Heywood, 2014: 201–202, 324–325; Rahim, 2010: 4; Tremewan, 1994: 90–91; Trocki, 2006: 133–134, 136; Welzel and Dalton, 2017: 113, 114). The aim was to provide a rival moral high ground to the West’s liberal-democratic discourse and to reassure domestic voters, who may have felt anxiety as forces of globalization impacted upon traditional values and hierarchies.

Whilst the sincerity of those pushing Asian Values was always regarded as suspect, and Rahim (2010: 4) claims that the whole concept has been ‘discredited’, the movement did have some impact in challenging prevailing Western discourses. Singapore’s PAP was cautious here, in that the party was willing to give a nod to forces of Chinese nationalism in the city-state whereas previously such forces were viewed with suspicion due to their association with the Chinese left wing which was perceived to be too sympathetic towards the Mao regime in China. This is despite the fact that the Singapore Chinese-educated left wing has always been, and especially since 1960, largely socialist or trade unionist rather than communist or Marxist-Leninist. Lee Kuan Yew said in 1961 that the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) could only count on ‘a few hundred active cadres’ (Lee, 1961: 21) in Singapore, while Tremewan (1994: 19) remarks that the Chinese-educated left wing circa 1950 ‘saw the impossibility of an extra-legal bid for power [i.e. communist revolution] in an island garrison and, thus, the necessity of being represented in the political formalities of transition’. This is why the left wing at first gravitated towards Lee Kuan Yew’s PAP which was formed on 21 November 1954 (N Tan, 2013: 633; Tremewan, 1994: 20). Even at England’s Cambridge University, he was known for his political views, which were typically anti-colonial but, more generally, moderate Labour Party, reformist and social Reconstructionist (Yao, 2008: 181). Only in the early 1960s did Mr Lee actively seek to decimate the PAP’s left-wing faction (Trocki, 2006: 5). Sadly, for many, by 1975 ‘the dismantling of civil society was complete’ (Gillis, 2008: 160).

The PAP’s five key values, whatever the other three might have been, have always included meritocracy and multiracialism (Hill and Lian, 1995: 4–5; Matijasevich, 2020: 205; Rahim, 2010: 4; Trocki, 2006: 129, 130, 138, 152; Yeoh and Huang, 1995: 446, 448). The party has walked a fine line by pursuing economic growth and social stability at the same time whilst never, at least theoretically, giving one priority over the other. Multiracialism has been seen as consistent with cultural conservatism, since the three main ethnic groups, Chinese (74%), Malay (13%) and Indian
Asian peoples and have strong links to ancient religious and cultural traditions. The party perceives culture in essentialist terms and there is assumed to be a direct one-on-one correlation between all three of biological race, culture and language (Tremewan, 1994: 140). Therefore, the three main ethnic groups are assumed to be binaries where you either have the associated essentialized culture in full or you do not have it at all. This policy, and the worldview which informs it, is known as the C-M-I-O or CMIO Model, where O refers to the ‘Others’, who are the minorities within the minority. The CMIO model has generally been viewed favourably by the electorate (Mathews, 2016). Although there have been some recent efforts to better handle mixed-race individuals, the basic ideology behind the model still applies.

Asian Values were added to the PAP’s CMIO Model in the 1990s (although it can be traced back as far as 1977, according to Michael Barr (2009: 220)), as Goh Chok Tong and Lee Kuan Yew invoked the essentialized concept of ‘Confucian gentlemen’ (Chew, 2001: 732) in order to justify their behaviours and policies, as well as their own right to live the luxurious and elite lifestyles of such historical personages. Chinese values were then put within the context of Confucian hierarchies (the same Confucian hierarchies which Mao had attempted to demolish and subvert in the interests of communist unity and a classless society) rather than the generalized Chinese working-class nationalism of the 1960s which was seen, by some, as a front for communist ideas (which it never really was for the vast majority, in the Singapore context, even in the peak years of Mao’s ascendency). The White Paper on Shared Values, produced by the government and featured in the Straits Times on 16 January 1991, outlined five presumed shared national values, which are clearly Confucian based (Barr, 2009: 220), and allegedly more Asian than Western, as follows: (1) Nation before community and society above self; (2) Family as the basic unit of society; (3) Community support and respect for the individual; (4) Consensus not conflict; and (5) Racial and religious harmony (cited in Tremewan, 1994: 146).

The middle-class, English-educated, ethnic-Chinese heartland, in areas such as Bishan, Bukit Timah, Thomson and Upper Thomson, now felt that their lifestyles were under no threat from the PAP while, at the subconscious level, the Asian Values campaign allowed them to feel at least a symbolic or notional connection to their ancestral roots. Mainland China beckoned as a land of economic opportunities (Tremewan, 1994: 139; Trocki, 2006: 153, 175), and the PAP believed that ethnic Chinese, with their strong English and Mandarin skills, were well placed to succeed in this new environment and to act as go-betweens between Western and Mainland Chinese firms (as the Straits Chinese, including the family of Lee Kuan Yew, had done during the colonial era in Malaya). The attitudes inherent in the Stop-at-Two policy (1966) were now cast aside in favour of the less threatening Asian Values approach. (The late Singapore Democratic Alliance (SDA) candidate in Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC at the 2011GE, Patrick Lee Song Juan, claimed that the Stop-at-Two policy ran contrary to Chinese culture because Chinese culture encourages and revels in large families.) Chineseness was now being enforced, rather than repressed, by the PAP (Barr, 2009: 33, 248), as the Mother Tongue Policy required ethnic Chinese to learn Mandarin at school, as a second language at English-medium schools (Trocki, 2006: 152).

The PAP’s late embrace of Chinese culture and Mandarin language (but never of Chinese dialects) around 1979 can be traced to the death of Mao in 1976 and the opening up of China to market forces, under Deng Xiaoping, which followed (Trocki, 2006: 153, 175). The PAP then saw China as a land of economic opportunities for ethnic-Chinese people rather than as a nation controlled by communist ideologues. Being pragmatic (Hill and Lian, 1995: 8; Ong, 2015: 378; Ramdas, 2015: 110; Tremewan, 1994: 186), in its essence the PAP was not much concerned that it was the Chinese Communist Party which still held the reins in China.
Research approach

I had long held a special interest in the unique and idiosyncratic nature of Singapore politics and the relationship between state, political parties, institutions, culture and society. The research project began formally in mid-2009 when I wrote to the SDP, via its website, asking whether I could meet its leaders to interview them for a new project on Singapore politics. After receiving ethics clearance, I first met the SDP’s Assistant Secretary-General, John L Tan, on 22 September 2009 at the party’s former headquarters in the Upper Thomson district. On that date I also did a group interview with SDP activists Jaslyn Go, Jarrod Luo and Seelan Palay. In March 2010, I interviewed six other opposition people after introductions were made at the SDP’s 30th anniversary function. I continued interviewing people for the broader project up until May 2019. However, the vast majority (27) of the 31 interviews with 26 different people were conducted between September 2009 and December 2013. Interview lengths ranged from 70 minutes to 180 minutes. Jarrod Luo (ex-SDP) and the late Patrick Lee Song Juan (Singapore Democratic Alliance) were both interviewed three times, whilst John Tan was interviewed twice. All interviews were conducted in Singapore, other than my interview with Dr James Gomez which was conducted in Melbourne. Participant observation included my attendance at the SDP’s 30th and 31st anniversary functions and its election night 2011 function held at Quality Hotel Balestier Road.

Interviewees were obtained through snowball sampling and referrals. I met some interviewees at the SDP’s 30th anniversary function held in February 2010. I aimed to get a good mix of ages, genders and party affiliations, and I aimed to be as neutral as possible between the opposition parties. Ages of interviewees ranged from 14 years to 66 years. However, only three (11.54%) interviewees were women whereas 23 (88.46%) were men. These statistics reflect the relatively low number of women politicians in Singapore, across all parties, a point which has been critiqued extensively by Phyllis Chew (2001) and Netina Tan (2014, 2015). Information was clarified via online communication after the interviews. Information was also checked against newspaper sources and www.Singapore-elections.com.

Each participant was given the option to respond anonymously, but only three took up this option. Two of these three activists use only their aliases in public discourses. One other person requested that the typed interview transcript not be published online, and I adhered to this request. He is not quoted in the present article.

The article is primarily focused on the Singapore opposition and I had hoped that it would not only be a political science project but would also constitute a sociological study of the collective opposition, i.e. I wanted to study them as a community from a sociological perspective. I perceived that, as at September 2009, this had never been done before and references to the opposition were usually just a few pages or paragraphs buried within books or articles about the PAP. In a way, that was understandable for the time period.

Figure 1 shows the relationship between key political parties, subgroups within each party and individuals referred to in this article.

The 2006 general election

Between the 2001 and 2006GEs, the opposition held only two seats in Parliament (and was generally seen in the wider society as being at a low ebb for that reason) – (1) Potong Pasir SMC, held by Chiam See Tong (SPP); and (2) Hougang SMC, held by Low Thia Khiang (WP). By contrast, the ‘hegemonic’ (N Tan, 2015: 200) PAP machine held 21 seats (14 out of 14 GRCs and
seven out of nine SMCs) and had 82 MPs during this time period. Significantly, and much to its dismay, the opposition had failed to win a single GRC since the government had introduced the GRC system ostensibly to ensure minority ethnic-group representation in Parliament (Raymond, 2017: 315) back in 1988.

In sharp contrast to the SDP, which went into a period of relative decline after losing its three seats in 1997, the WP, after contesting only a handful of seats in the 1990s, raised its profile considerably at the 2006GE by contesting many seats and polling consistently well (without adding to its one elected seat) (Lam, 2006). At the 2006GE, WP contested seven constituencies, up from contesting only two SMCs in 2001.

At the 2006GE, the WP polled very well in a number of seats, including 33.9% against PM Lee’s team in Ang Mo Kio GRC (Lee, 2011). Significantly, Low’s share of the vote increased more than marginally in Hougang from 54.98% to 62.74%. Overall, WP’s performances at the 2006GE were as follows: Aljunied GRC 43.91%, Ang Mo Kio GRC 33.86%, East Coast GRC 36.14%, Nee Soon East SMC 31.28%, Nee Soon Central SMC 34.63%, Joo Chiat SMC 34.99% and Hougang SMC 62.74%. The consistency of these figures (by the standards of the day) reflected very well on the resurgent WP and showed that the party had built itself a hardcore supporter base of around 30–35% (rather than the historic 20% of ‘donkey’ hardcore opposition voters referred to by the 60-year-old SDP supporter Dr SK Leong in interview) (SK Leong, interview with author, 2 March 2010, Tiong Bahru, Singapore, notes in possession of author). As the next section will show, the WP was able to build upon these results at the 2011GE.

Eric Tan stood for the WP in East Coast GRC at the 2006 and 2011GEs and served for a number of years as WP’s Treasurer. During his time, WP made major gains each election in the East Coast and would have won it at the 2015GE if voting swings had continued at the same pace. Tan was previously a member of WP’s CEC.

Figure 1. Singapore political parties, 2011.
Tan points out that the WP always gets a strong showing in the polls, relatively speaking, because it is perceived as the last remaining living ‘link’ (Tremewan, 1994: 163) to the 1960s Chinese-educated left wing and because one of its members, the late Joshua Benjamin Jeyaretnam aka JBJ, was the first opposition member in the House after the period 1968–1981 when the PAP had complete control of Parliament (source: Eric Tan, interview with author, 3 March 2010, Tiong Bahru, Singapore, notes in possession of author).8

Tan makes it clear that the link to the old Chinese left wing should not be understood only in social class terms (Trocki, 2006: 108–109), since this group (the majority of the population at independence and for a significant time thereafter) has seen its language and institutions progressively eroded and discriminated against by the PAP’s English-educated faction since the first days of independence (Eric Tan, interview).

The 2011 General Election and the 2012–2013 by-elections

The 2011GE saw some, ultimately failed, attempts at leadership succession and party reinvigoration and renewal from the opposition camp. (At least the SPP’s moves can be viewed as failures while the WP’s moves are a little bit harder to evaluate.)

The opposition’s collective confidence was high in the run-up to the 2011GE, and there was a feeling that the time had to come for it to secure at least one GRC. However, the ‘law of large numbers’ was at work (Da Cunha, 1997: 15) – the larger the constituency, the more difficult it is to win because the opposition percentage vote will tend to gravitate towards the nationwide opposition percentage as smaller pro-opposition areas become statistically less important. Chiam installed his wife, Madam Lina Low, to ‘man the fort’ in Potong Pasir (a strange kind of succession plan as she had no experience in politics and, whilst younger than Chiam, was still over 60). Meanwhile, he formed an SPP team to contest the PAP in the tough Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC. Low built a WP team to contest in Aljunied GRC, which made sound strategic sense as it bordered his existing seat of Hougang. In the battle for Hougang, Low installed his designated successor, Mr Yaw Shin Leong.

As the results came in, it became apparent that the WP had won in Aljunied (Kor and Ong, 2011; Matijasevich, 2020: 203; N Tan, 2013: 639; N Tan, 2015: 202), whilst also holding on to Hougang (Kor and Chong, 2011). It had been a successful campaign for the party. This demonstrated the first serious emergence of the WP brand as a significant second force in Singapore politics (James, 2019). Less successful was the SPP which narrowly failed to retain Potong Pasir whilst failing in its bid to secure Bishan-Toa Payoh (Au Yong and Durai, 2011; Hussain, 2011; Singapore Elections, n.d.a). Chiam was now 76 years old and the appointment of his wife as designated successor was not well received.

Low’s designated successor, Yaw Shin Leong, recaptured Hougang for the WP, with a 2.06 percentage-point swing in his party’s favour (Kor and Chong, 2011).

The young and charismatic Yaw (34 years old at the election date) had impressed people on the ground in Hougang due to his ability and willingness to speak Teochew with the residents and his Chinese-language political book Towards Political Vibrancy and Development (迈向政治发展与繁荣), published in December 2010 (Yaw, 2010). His not inconsiderable personal charm had also allowed him to make quick inroads into an area with a high percentage of ethnic Chinese and dialect-speaking voters. Given Hougang’s Teochew population, it was absolutely to his advantage that Yaw was a Teochew clansman of the Nanyang Pho Leng Hui Kuan and a member of the Singapore Teochew Poit Ip Huay Kuan. The fact that his father died when he was 13 and his single
mother had struggled to support him and his younger sister through their university education reinforced the impression that Yaw had the desired humble background and rags-to-riches story expected of a party called the Workers’ Party. Yaw being the designated successor shows that the working-class, Chinese-educated style went beyond simply being the ‘personal brand’ of Low – Yaw was carefully chosen and he made a flying start in Hougang, bonding remarkably well with the residents in the initial months and years. Later events involving Yaw make it somewhat difficult to recall, in hindsight, how important the choice of Yaw was in 2011, as well as the high hopes which were pinned on him.

At the 2011GE, WP scored 46.58% of valid votes in contested constituencies (the swing towards WP was a very impressive 8.15 percentage points). The SDP and SPP were both relative failures at the polls, with neither party winning a single seat. The mood at the SDP’s election-night function at the Quality Hotel in Balestier Road was somewhat sombre, although there was joy at the opposition winning a GRC for the first time. The WP’s strategy of focusing on its stronghold in the eastern part of the city-state had proven wise (N Tan, 2013: 642).

Eric Tan resigned from the WP shortly after the 2011GE, to the complete shock of informed pundits, because his party decided not to award him the Non-Constituency Member of Parliament (NCMP) (KP Tan, 2013: 36–37) position (for ‘best losing opposition effort’). Although he led the best-performing opposition losing team (in East Coast GRC), the party chose renewal by selecting the much younger Gerald Giam, who at the time was aged 34. Tan’s exit was a serious loss for the WP because he was a reliable veteran campaigner and one of the few older people who had contested for the WP at both the 2006 and 2011GEs. Furthermore, his banking industry experience had given him the technical skills and expertise necessary to operate proficiently as a finance minister in government / shadow finance minister in opposition. These were rare talents. As Kenneth Paul Tan (2013: 28) writes: ‘To be an effective government, MPs and those among them who are appointed to executive positions should also possess a good mix of the necessary skills, expertise, qualifications, experience, charisma, and resources’. Despite being such a major loss, Tan’s departure was shrugged off by the party and ignored by most commentators.

Unfortunately for the WP, Yaw was fired by the party on 14 February 2012 for failing to clarify allegations about his alleged personal indiscretions. Because of this, Hougang was subjected to a by-election on 26 May 2012 (Singapore Elections, n.d.b). At this by-election, Mr Png Eng Huat (ex-East Coast GRC candidate) won the seat for the WP with 62.08% of the valid votes. The swing towards PAP was 2.72 percentage points, which suggests some mild dissatisfaction with the Yaw situation, but the saga was not fatal – the WP brand name was strong enough to survive this setback. Low took a calculated risk by forcing Yaw to resign, and with the benefit of hindsight we can say that the gamble paid off.

There was another by-election, for Punggol East SMC, on 26 January 2013 and this was really a high point for WP support (when viewed with hindsight at a seven-year remove). The remarkable swing towards WP was 13.49 percentage points (vote share = 54.50%), even though WP’s Ms Lee Li Lian was a lesser-known candidate. The size of the swing shows the newfound strength of the WP brand (N Tan, 2015: 203), and especially in the eastern part of the island (N Tan, 2013: 638).

**How can we explain the continued success of Low Thia Khiang in Hougang?**

The long-term and committed grassroots support that Chiam has received in Potong Pasir and that Low has received in Hougang (and now in Aljunied) is legendary, but it has so far proved
impossible for the opposition to replicate this in other parts of the island. This fact remains the enduring mystery of Singapore politics not only for the author but also for SK Leong and Eric Tan (SK Leong, interview; Eric Tan, interview). Whilst Leong appears content to live with this enigma, Tan is happy to speculate about it. When pressed about the reasons for the success of Low in Hougang, Tan points to Low, firstly, getting into the system before the system had turned further against the opposition due to the increase in the number of GRCs relative to SMCs. Secondly, Tan refers to the Teochew (as in dialect group) Low attending 90% of funerals in Hougang SMC. According to Tan, Low’s largely Teochew electorate is deeply impressed by these acts since, in traditional Chinese culture, attending funerals is seen as inviting bad luck.9 Thirdly, Tan suggests that Low is seen by his supporters as being the last link in a left-wing lineage which goes back to Lim Chin Siong, Tan Lark Sye, the Barisan Sosialis and the Chinese-medium Nanyang University, which was forced into merger by the government in 1980 (Eric Tan, interview).10

The three main parties and Chinese cultural issues

If we look at the two highest-profile opposition parties, the SDP under Chee places a Western- or Hong Kong-style emphasis upon the literal primacy of freedom of speech, freedom of association, freedom of the press and human rights (Chee, 2005: 34–35, 49–50). It aligns itself with international bodies with liberal-democratic humanitarian agendas to the extent that PAP supporters frequently accuse it of ‘betraying the country overseas’.

By contrast, the WP aims to tap into the legacy of the pro-China, Chinese-educated left wing of the 1960s. It aims to work within the existing system and to avoid open direct confrontation. Its leader up until 2018, Low has been able to connect with and win majority support from the largely Chinese-Teochew electorate of Hougang (and in more recent times the somewhat similar but larger neighbouring electorate of Aljunied too). Since he is a Teochew speaker himself, he is seen as the embodiment of traditional Chinese, rather than Western, or even universal, values. He has been careful to operate within the accepted cultural norms of a working-class, Chinese-educated community whilst still adhering to the PAP’s set of ‘out-of-bounds markers’ (Trocki, 2006: 159; Trocki and Barr, 2008: 11). The ethnic Chinese voters of Hougang and Aljunied have appreciated the fact that Low attends 90% of funerals within his constituency. Since in Chinese culture attending funerals is associated with bad luck, Low is seen as putting compassion for the deceased’s relatives, as well as his desire to honour the deceased person, above his own personal interests. Singapore civil society activist Jeanne Ten comments as follows about Low:

For example, he attended funerals, etc. He also spoke in a more folksy style. He was an MOE [Ministry of Education] Chinese teacher (my father’s colleague) so his Chinese is superb, but his accent is very local, not polished like mainland Chinese or Taiwanese….LTK can banter and argue very fluently in Mandarin, with a very local Mandarin accent. This endears him to Chinese heartlanders. (Jeanne Tan, online conversations with author, 11 and 12 June 2019)

Low is a Nanyang University (‘Nantah’) graduate and continues to support the concept of Chinese-medium education. The PAP merged Nantah with another institution, the University of Singapore, in 1980 (Tremewan, 1994: 89), as it was perceived that Nantah was too closely connected to Chinese-educated left-wing radicalism and pro-China individuals. As a result, since 1980, Singapore, despite having an ethnic-Chinese majority, has had no Chinese-medium university. Low himself was told that his English-language skills were not good enough to allow him to
successfully pursue a major in political science at an English-medium institution (Khoo, 2017). Therefore, fuelled by a sense of grievance (Tremewan, 1994: 77), Low later embarked upon a political career. (The attacks on Chinese language and culture, in effect, amount to destruction of a cultural tradition, different in degree but not in kind to Suharto’s efforts to suppress Chinese culture in Indonesia.)

The PAP has abandoned the Graduate Mothers’ Scheme, although Barr (2009) and Barr and Skrbis (2008) argue that Lee Kuan Yew’s ‘eugenics’ beliefs (Ramdas, 2015: 109) still underpin the ideology of meritocracy in modern-day Singapore. It persists with the CMIO Model, although the presence of new ethnic groups on the scene plus more mixed-race individuals has meant that the classification schema’s limitations have become more apparent. Mandarin is still strongly encouraged and dialect-speaking discouraged, within the overall context of English as a unifying language and the hegemonic language of business, education and government. Distaste towards groups which do not fit neatly into the CMIO Model, such as Bangladeshis, Filipinos, Vietnamese and even the culturally distinct Mainland Chinese, suggests that even opposition supporters have internalized the ideology of CMIO. The ethnic mix at independence is reified as an ideal state rather than simply viewed as an historical event. There is also a class basis behind the distaste since many of the members of ‘new’ ethnic groups work in low-status occupations, e.g. as construction, bar or domestic workers. Also, Muslim immigrants and temporary workers, such as Bangladeshis, have sometimes been targeted under anti-terrorism legislation. Meanwhile, people of European heritage are viewed automatically as ‘expatriates’ rather than as a stable community in their own right.

Consistent with his liberal-democratic worldview and human rights approach, racial and cultural preservation issues tend to take a backseat in Chee’s books. For example, in his 2012 book Democratically Speaking, racial and cultural issues are referred to on two pages out of 395 (see book index) (Chee, 2012). There are no references to racial and cultural issues in the 161 pages of A Nation Cheated (Chee, 2008). Two pages out of 222 refer to these issues in Your Future, My Faith, Our Freedom (Chee, 2001). Even when Chee spoke at Speakers’ Corner on 15 February 2002, against the government suspending four Muslim schoolgirls for wearing tudungs (headscarves), he was coming at the issue from the viewpoint of universal human rights rather than multiracialism or religion preservation.11

The SDP does not fit neatly into Gilley’s (2020) thesis that there is a positive law-like relationship between capitalism and democracy, given that SDP people generally prefer more restraints on capitalism (to serve the interests of accountability, social justice and the poor) than do the PAP (Gilley, 2020: 17–18, 51, 63–64, 321, 389, 391). As Chee (2012: 51) says, ‘we need an alternative economic paradigm where the wealth divide is narrowed’. However, he does criticize the extent of GLC (Government-linked Corporation) and MNC involvement in the economy because it stifles local entrepreneurship (Chee, 2012: 18, 363). Therefore, anti-capitalist is not a valid descriptor of Chee’s views.

Conclusion

I have discussed some major issues and trends in Singapore politics regarding language, culture and identity, covering the period 1998–2013, which James (2019) has rightly characterized as a period of ‘stagnation, fall, and rise’ for the opposition.12

The WP’s energetic rise from nothingness to become Singapore’s second-strongest political force during the 2006–2013 period surprised many experts (James, 2019). However, it has
experienced some setbacks since then (none of which proved fatal over the longer term). Contributing factors appear to be the losses of Yaw Shin Leong, Eric Tan, Chia Ti Lik, Goh Meng Seng and James Gomez. The WP’s ability to secure strong results and win seats based on ‘brand name’ alone was an extremely important new development in Singapore politics over the 1998–2013 period, given Singapore’s traditional pattern of ‘strongman’ politics. Low has extended the WP influence and brand beyond his own ‘personal branding’, and, by so doing, he has extended the party’s support base beyond the older sections of the ethnic Chinese working class. Whether this was always the plan is hard to say because we do not know what the party’s future would have been had Yaw stayed within the party and later assumed the leadership.

Lastly, let us spend some time reflecting on David Matijasevich’s (2020) thesis that the PAP is anti-populist; has increased its hegemony since the ‘watershed’ (N Tan, 2013: 640) 2011GE; and is not going to be replicable in other countries due to Singapore’s small size (see also Ortmann and Thompson, 2016: 44 on this last point). I believe that a few comments are in order. Firstly, the PAP indeed had populist roots in its early days in that the colonial regime failed to meet many unmet needs such as the lack of a philosophical or ideological underpinning of state, nation and citizenship; the lack of material support; and the feelings of alienation caused by the lack of self-governance.

Secondly, the 2020GE saw the WP win another GRC and reflects something of a movement away from PAP hegemony. The 2015GE is the real outlier (Ortmann and Thompson, 2016: 40–41), since the swing to the PAP then was partly due to the death of the nation’s founding father, Lee Kuan Yew, which produced a sentimental response from voters (Ortmann and Thompson, 2016: 45). The 9.7 percentage-point swing to the PAP in 2015 was nearly completely cancelled out by the 8.63 percentage-point swing against it five years later.

Thirdly, the PAP is a role model for the Fiji First government in the Fiji Islands, which has won two elections since it secured power via a military coup in 2006. It has followed many of the PAP’s ideological tenets and policies. The Frank Bainimarama regime found itself ostracized by the Australian and New Zealand governments, after the coup, and was forced to seek out new alliances and sources of capital, expertise and legitimacy. As such, it turned towards countries such as China, India and Singapore. It shares with Singapore such values and practices as multiracialism, meritocracy, anti-corruption and media censorship; and mimics the PAP’s discourse about being ruled by logic, reason and developmental imperatives in the name of ‘progress’, rather than what they both see as outmoded feudal traditions. Having a small (land) area and population, just like Singapore, the Fiji First regime is able to maintain power through a ruling-class clique while objectors either stay silent or emigrate. Also, as in Singapore (Gomez, 2000, 2002), ‘voluntary’ self-censorship by ordinary citizens has now become an important feature of national life.

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Notes

1. Chee (2005: 24) sets out his views on civil disobedience as follows: ‘When [oppressive] laws are directed towards unjust ends, it is the duty of citizens to refuse to obey them’.
2. A Group Representative Constituency (GRC) is a large electoral area where teams of four, five or six opposition people compete against the same number of PAP people (KP Tan, 2013: 34–35; Tremewan, 1994: 167–169). The winning team in a contest gets all of the MP positions whilst the losing team gets none (Ong, 2015: 385; N Tan, 2013: 635; N Tan, 2014: 28, 32). The GRC system, introduced in 1988, was ostensibly designed to allow for minority ethnic-group representation in Parliament, as each GRC team had to comprise at least one member of Singapore’s ethnic-minority communities (Malay or Indian/Other) (N Tan, 2014: 28, 30). Other electorates are Single Member Constituencies (SMCs).
3. Empirically, using a multi-country database, Raymond (2017: 322) shows, in his Figure 4, that ‘the use of majoritarian multimember districts is associated with lower levels of party system fragmentation than both multimember districts in PR [proportional representation] systems and majoritarian single-member district systems’. In other words, the PAP was smart, from a self-interested perspective, in introducing the GRC system.
5. The working class was 80.2% of the population in 1976 (Tremewan, 1994: 56).
6. On 21 July 1961, all 13 left-wing PAP MPs, a faction led by the trade-unionist Lim Chin Siong, were expelled from the party by a majority vote of the PAP’s Central Executive Committee (Chin, 2008: 71; Singh, 2012: 25; Tremewan, 1994: 27). These 13 individuals then straight away formed the Barisan Sosialis (Tremewan, 1994: 27; Trocki, 2006: 123).
7. Low handed over the Secretary-Generalship of the WP to Pritam Singh on 8 April 2018. In this article I refer to Low as Secretary-General (present tense) for simplicity’s sake.
10. Tan Lark Sye was a Hokkien-speaking businessman whose citizenship was revoked in September 1963 because he was felt to be too close to the People’s Republic of China (Tremewan, 1994: 83; Trocki, 2006: 51, 110, 113, 142, 151; Visscher, 2007: 154–156).
11. Chee says this directly in an email attributed to him and posted in the Talk section of his Wikipedia page.
12. The ‘fall’ is represented by the poor opposition voting performance at the 2001GE.
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