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Publisher Routledge

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Asian Studies Review

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713613499>

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Online Publication Date: 01 March 2009

To cite this Article Tan, Kenneth Paul(2009)'Who's Afraid of Catherine Lim? The State in Patriarchal Singapore',Asian Studies Review,33:1,43 – 62

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/10357820802706290

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10357820802706290>

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Who's Afraid of Catherine Lim? The State in Patriarchal Singapore

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Catherine Lim, born in 1942, is an award-winning Singaporean novelist, short-story writer and poet, with 18 books to her name, published in France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Israel, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, the UK and the US. Her literary works are often witty and at times supernatural portrayals of women, culture and love in traditional Chinese society. But this petite lady, often dressed in elegant *cheongsams*, is also famous – many would say infamous – as a political commentator and strong advocate of political liberalisation in patriarchal and paternalistic Singapore. In 1994, Lim wrote two political commentary pieces for the state-directed local broadsheet *The Straits Times*. Her intervention in the public sphere produced a new public vocabulary for thinking about Singapore's political condition, and continues to inform how prospects for political liberalisation are described today. The two pieces were widely discussed among Singaporeans in 1994, and the second in particular drew a strong reaction from the state that foreign journalist Kieran Cooke (24 February 1995) described as more appropriate to “a government teetering on the edge of collapse than . . . one of the world's most enduring political machines”. The state's grossly disproportionate reaction was, this article will argue, vividly illustrative of how Lim's actions had touched a nerve in state-society relations in Singapore, revealing how such relations were, and continue to be, structured in terms of gender and the unconscious.

This article will begin by discussing how images of the Singapore woman are constructed and legitimised in the public sphere. It will then demonstrate how these gender images have corresponded to the Singapore state's “masculine” image and society's “emasculated”, “infantilised”, and “feminised” images. Through a close reading of the spectacular interactions in 1994 between Catherine Lim and the state, this article will identify a strategy for political engagement that can be radically transformative without provoking the full violence of the state. Such a

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strategy may offer civil activism a way out of the dilemma it has faced since Singapore's independence, between being crushed by an antagonised strong state and labouring passively within the terms and boundaries set by an all-defining state.

The relationship between Catherine Lim and the state in 1994 is, in this article, carefully reconstructed and analysed using close reading techniques. This analysis is set within an account of Singapore's recent political history, specifically in the context of critical moments when ideological work was at its busiest. By drawing on psychoanalytical perspectives, some of the more significant political actions and behaviours during this moment of crisis will be explained as symptoms of repressed anxieties and insecurities. Insights into the gendered nature of the relationship between the state and Catherine Lim – and more generally between the state and civil society – will be drawn from contemporary feminist theory, especially the ideas of Luce Irigaray.

The Singapore Woman, Constructed By/In Phallogocentric Ideology

In an article in Singapore's *Today* newspaper that profiled female junior minister Lim Hwee Hua (no relation to Catherine Lim), the mother-of-three and former managing director of government investment company Temasek Holdings was described as a “tough no-nonsense figure [who also] projects warmth and understanding, although in a cool-headed style ... often seen in black pantsuits, [but nevertheless] a woman's woman”. As one of 17 women in a parliament of 84 members, Lim – who is also among a very select few in the inner sanctum of the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) – is quoted as saying that the “women of Singapore today have it so good – with access to education and employment opportunities – compared to their counterparts in the region”. In the article, Lim is positioned as model of and spokesperson for the ideal Singapore woman: urging other women to follow her example of balancing the demands of family, career, and even public service. When she became leader of the PAP's women's wing, she chose the title “chairman” over “chairperson” or “chairwoman”, but agreed after much deliberation to “*madam* deputy speaker” when she was appointed to the parliamentary post (*Today*, 18 December 2006).

Even though Singapore's constitution does not protect against gender discrimination, which can be widely observed in job advertising practices and immigration policies (Lyons, 2004, p. 27), the mainstream Singapore woman has not been overtly oppressed by a culture of physical violence or a system that denies her national resources for self-development and personal advancement. High-profile women such as Lim are held up as evidence of Singapore's gender-neutral meritocracy: if Lim and other “barrier-breaking” women (Siu, 2000) can do it, there is no reason other Singapore women cannot; and Lim is even described in the article as being unsympathetic to women who complain about the problems of balancing family and career. And yet, it is precisely this method of showcasing success that conceals the gravely different experiences and life chances of women of other classes, ethnicities, sexual identities, and age groups, putting the blame for their “under-achievement” squarely on their own shoulders.

This showcasing of successful women also conceals the way in which these women, in order to be taken seriously, may have had outwardly to disavow their “femininity” and to demonstrate “manly” attributes in order to succeed in fields traditionally dominated and designed by men. Women entering the public sphere have to “exchange their role as not-men for that of like-men” (Deutscher, 2002, p. 11). And yet, women – even in their advanced status – have had to provide an unthreatening reassurance of their femininity as defined by patriarchy. *Today* assures its readers that although the idealised Lim can be serious, rational, and resilient like men (and therefore should be admired and imitated by other women), they should not worry because she is also warm, understanding, and a “woman’s woman”. In politics and the workplace, women like Lim Hwee Hua must negotiate an ambivalent space between behaving like a man in order to be taken seriously and masquerading as feminine to avoid provoking the castration anxieties of their male peers. However, this ambivalence is unsatisfactory as it forces women to enter a man’s world with slightly bowed heads, speaking with enough of a male voice to be admitted but not so deeply as to be regarded as a threat to male egos.

Institutionally, differences in salary, benefits and entitlements, and promotion prospects – although apparently marginal in Singapore – do serve at least symbolically to put women in their place, attenuating any masculine anxieties. However, the media often manufactures news by capitalising on these anxieties: erecting a resurgent male chauvinism as a response to the changing socio-economic circumstances that have enabled some women to “outperform” their male counterparts, making them “lose face” as it were. The media regularly features stereotypes of selfish, materialistic, frivolous, demanding, and overly-westernised Singapore women, and of Singapore men who respond by looking for brides from China, Vietnam and Indonesia, where women are thought to be more subservient and domesticated according to the Asian stereotype (Yap, 14 March 2005). In the early 1980s, then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew (1983) publicly wondered about the wisdom of giving women opportunities in the workplace, noting how more educated women were not getting married and having children, and how Singapore men were only willing to marry women of lower status. Influenced by vulgarised and pseudo-scientific ideas about eugenics, Lee’s government attempted to address the problem of optimising the gene pool through “antenatal streaming” policies that materially rewarded graduate mothers who bore more children and less educated mothers who opted to be sterilised (Tremewan, 1994, pp. 114–17).

These policies have evolved over the decades into more politically correct pro-family incentives, the idea of the family officially enshrined as one of Singapore’s five “shared values”. But the *Today* article also reveals how Singapore women are still being viewed as primarily responsible for reproducing the nation, their bodies seen as machines for producing the future workforce that is so vital to an island-state with 4.6 million people, a seriously declining birth rate, an ageing population and no natural resources. And yet, women’s concerns do not seem to merit serious national attention: when PAP MP Lily Neo asked if Singaporeans could be allowed to use their own compulsory savings fund to pay for breast cancer screening, the health minister refused, trivialising the proposal with the suggestion to women that they

“save on one hairdo and use the money for breast screening”. This remark, some women’s groups felt, suggested “that women were frivolous with money and did not make rational choices” (Wong, 19 August 2001). Compulsory military service, on the other hand, is restricted to male Singaporeans, who are then honoured and compensated for their sacrifice for the nation. To raise the quality of family life, efforts have been made in the civil service – Singapore’s largest employer – to strike a healthier work-life balance for its employees; and yet the provision of an eight-week maternity leave period is hardly matched by three days of paternity leave. After all, even Singapore women such as Lim seem to have low expectations of husbands and fathers. By commending Singapore men for being increasingly willing to “help out with the chores at home . . . push strollers and . . . feed babies as a matter of course”, Lim unfortunately reinforces the patriarchal view of fathering as simply a “helping-out-with-the-family” role.

Modern patriarchal societies such as Singapore are the main objects of critique for radical feminist theorists who often identify, in order to discredit, a phallogocentric culture or ideology that sustains and at the same time obscures and embeds institutions and practices of domination. One such feminist theorist is Luce Irigaray, whose earlier works (especially 1985a, 1985b, and 1993) attempt to theorise phallogocentrism as a “monosexual imaginary” (Whitford, 1991b, p. 72) centred on masculinity as the singular model that defines and constructs all other subjectivities, the feminine in particular. Immanent to phallogocentrism, woman is reduced to being the “negative elaboration of the masculine subject” (Butler, 1990, p. 140), serving as “negative mirrors sustaining masculine identity” (Deutscher, 2002, p. 11) and the “material support of male narcissism” (Whitford, 1991b, p. 72). In this binary operation in which woman’s otherness is a product of man’s “self-amplifying desire” (Butler, 1990, p. 16), “*man* is the Universal, while *woman* is contingent, particular, and deficient” (Hansen, 2000, p. 202). Man is rational and disciplined; woman, viewed as “an atrophy or lack of masculine qualities”, is therefore none of these (Deutscher, 2002, p. 11). Singapore’s patriarchal society has, through its phallogocentric ideology, constructed a basic image of its women as selfish, materialistic, frivolous, demanding and excessive, an image that is simply the negative elaboration of the masculine subject, constructed in support of male narcissism.

Counterposed against this would seem to be the mass-mediated “manly” image of Lim Hwee Hua; but it is also constructed by and within this same phallogocentric ideology that, in this case, uses Lim to reaffirm the desirability of manly attributes without allowing her to be a female threat to male dominance, by presenting her as only a partial embodiment of these attributes. In similar ways, the basic image of society – or civil society, its organised form – has been constructed as selfish, materialistic, frivolous, demanding, and excessive, an image that is simply the negative elaboration of the masculine state, constructed in support of the state’s narcissism. This phallogocentric ideology “legitimises” civil society by constructing its image – like the image of Lim Hwee Hua in *Today* – to reaffirm the manly attributes of the state (disciplined, serious, rational, technical, universalistic and so on) without being a threat to its dominance, since it is only a partial embodiment of the state’s attributes. Once again, this ambivalence is unsatisfactory as it forces civil society to speak enough of the state’s voice to be admitted

legitimately into the public sphere, but not so deeply as to be regarded as a threat to the state's ego.

State-Society Relations: Emasculation, Infantilisation, Feminisation

Singapore's authoritarian state, perpetuated by the PAP since 1959, rules pervasively by maintaining a skilful Gramscian equilibrium of coercion and ideological control, the latter increasingly important for sustaining its political legitimacy. The use of state coercion is bound up with Singapore's culture of fear, which can be traced to its traumatic historical experiences as a newly independent nation in 1965. Official accounts of history provide a cautionary record of race riots and radical demonstrations in the 1950s to 1970s that the state was able to quell successfully through tough measures that continue to be available even if they are not so frequently used.

The Internal Security Act (Cap. 143) enables the government to detain without trial anyone suspected of threatening Singapore's security, public order or essential services. The two-year detention period is renewable indefinitely and detainees have no recourse to judicial review. The Sedition Act (Cap. 290) enables the government to charge anyone who intends to stir up hatred, contempt, discontent or disaffection among Singapore citizens and residents against the government and the justice system, or to promote ill-will and hostility among the different races and classes. The Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (Cap. 167A) enables the government to impose a restraining order on religious authorities who create "enmity, hatred, ill-will or hostility" among the various religious groups, promote political causes, carry out subversive activities, or foster disaffection against the government, under the guise of practising or propagating religious beliefs. The Societies' Act (Cap. 311) enables the government to refuse to register societies – especially political associations with foreign affiliations – that it deems to be contrary to the national interest or a threat to "public peace, welfare or good order in Singapore". Through these and other coercive instruments, the state has effectively castrated political opposition and alternatives in civil society, preventing them from mounting effective political challenges to the state – challenges that established liberal democracies would regard as necessary for democratic accountability, responsibility and responsiveness (Tan, 2001).

A spectacular example of political emasculation happened in 1987 – two years after a serious economic recession – when the state accused 22 people of a Marxist conspiracy and detained them under the Internal Security Act. The group – consisting of Catholic social workers, lawyers, members of the opposition Workers' Party, amateur artists belonging to socially-conscious theatre group The Third Stage, and some members of the newly established Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) – had been advocating on behalf of low-waged foreign workers (including female domestic workers) for better terms and conditions. It could be argued that the government's high-growth "miracle economy" policies of the 1980s required an elastic supply of cheap foreign labour, unencumbered by the language of rights and welfare. The Marxist label, itself resonant with Singapore's historical traumas, was useful in justifying the punishment of these leftist citizens who dared to "turn against the Father"; and although

the state's actions have, by many accounts, "seriously tarnished" its reputation, the word "Marxist" continues to be "an epithet with dark and sinister tones in Singapore" (Peterson, 2001, p. 39; p. 50) today.

The politically emasculating state assumes the superior status and controlling position of the patriarch – originating, elaborating and defending the "law of the Father" that has taken the form of an official national discourse that defines the conditions of possibility for what can be legitimately thought, expressed and communicated in Singapore. As Catherine Lim observed, "Singapore is often seen as the creation of the PAP, made to its image and likeness" (Lim, 3 September 1994). The fundamental principles of Singapore's survival, success, meritocracy, multiracialism, Asian values and pragmatism – in spite of their inherent contradictions (for example, Tan, 2008b) – are enshrined and grandly narrativised in what has come to be known as The Singapore Story, which is at the same time the title of founding Father Lee Kuan Yew's memoirs (Lee, 1998). Men, as Irigaray observes, "live within the closed universe of the first-person pronoun; their messages are often self-affirmations which leave little place for co-creation with an *other sex*" (Whitford, 1991b, p. 78). Similarly, the founding Father – who engenders and animates the state – writes himself as the sole protagonist in the national narrative, casts his allies in supporting roles and his enemies as antagonists, and interpellates Singaporean readers/citizens into infantile subjects paranoid about threats of race riots, Marxist conspiracies, hostile neighbouring countries, terrorism, disease, economic crisis, and the ceaseless challenges of striving to be number one in the world. Society, in all its lack, is the "negative mirror" that makes possible the state's heroic self-definitions. In contrast to a "masculine" state that possesses universal vision, the people are presented as selfish, ignorant, deficient, dangerous and "feminine", and thus cannot be trusted with matters of public significance unless tightly supervised by state-approved committees (Woo and Goh, 2007). Society, in this "monosexual imaginary", is the "negative elaboration" of the state which, in fact, actively subdues any rebellious ground energies by providing the people with "playgrounds" that simulate democratic participation. Widely publicised national consultation exercises such as the National Agenda in the late 1980s, Singapore 21 and Remaking Singapore at the turn of the millennium are highly controlled spaces for citizen committees to discuss questions scheduled by the state.

Singapore's official history and model of development record the nation's "paternal genealogy", but erase the "maternal genealogy" that could narrate society's organic, hidden or potential roles in the life of the nation. The Singapore state's refusal to acknowledge a national debt to civil society's "maternity" perpetuates the phantasm of a primal (pre-modern) mass that threatens to madden, kill and devour the modern and prosperous Singapore that rational and disciplined policy-makers have constructed, and that the founding Father literally promised/threatened to watch over even from the afterlife. This phantasm of a dangerous civil society is continually constructed and circulated using the vivid imagery of racial riots, radical movements, Marxist conspiracies, and political instability in modern Singapore's recent past and Third-World Asia's present – the more extreme this vision, the more able is the paternal state to define and justify its powers.

The 1990s witnessed something of a change. In November 1990, Lee Kuan Yew handed the prime ministership to his named successor Goh Chok Tong, who promised in his inaugural speech to

use the collective talents of my colleagues, and the combined energies of all citizens, to help the Singapore team stay ahead . . . Singapore can do well only if her good sons and daughters are prepared to dedicate themselves to help others. I shall rally them to serve the country. For if they do not come forward, what future will we have? (Goh, 28 November 1990)

A few months later, Minister George Yeo, at the helm of a new arts ministry, made his landmark “Banyan Tree” speech, arguing that the imposing state should be “pruned” to enable civic society to grow.

The problem now is that under a banyan tree very little else can grow. When state institutions are too pervasive, civic institutions cannot thrive. Therefore it is necessary to prune the banyan tree so that other plants can also grow . . . we cannot do without the banyan tree. Singapore will always need a strong centre to react quickly to a changing competitive environment. We need some pluralism but not too much because too much will also destroy us. In other words, we prune judiciously (Yeo, 20 June 1991).

Both speeches marked a shift in emphasis from emasculation and infantilisation of civil society to its feminisation. In this seemingly new partnership, the state – in a “masculine” and “husbandly” voice of reason and control – began to urge civil society to be more active, but this would be limited to the “feminine” roles of providing care (through voluntary welfare organisations), producing consensus through communication (in national-level consultation exercises), and being delightfully, but not antagonistically, expressive (to enable the industrialisation of culture and the arts in a global city [Tan, 2008a]). The jealous state’s husbandly voice also forbade civil society to forge partnerships with foreign organisations, insisting that foreign interests should never meddle with domestic politics. In this still patriarchal partnership, civil society actors who exceed the limits of their usefulness to the state or challenge its authority – as a wife might challenge her husband’s authority – will still be derogatorily described as hysterical, and treated with condescension, ridicule, reproach or even punishment.

Civil society is defined in terms of what the state is not: its lack, other, and extended phallus that commands obedience. In Singapore, “civic society” is the term used by the state to differentiate it from the more antagonistic caricature of “civil society” envisioned in liberal thought. Civic society – conceived as a depoliticised civil society – is encouraged by the state as a “free space”: not free in the sense of maximal liberty, but in terms of the unpaid labour extracted from voluntarism to help the state shoulder the welfare burden in an ageing society facing a widening income gap and higher living costs. Like the mass mediated image of Lim Hwee Hua, civil society is legitimised as civic society when it can demonstrate some of the qualities of the state – controlled, rational and technically proficient – but not to the

extent that it presents a competitive threat to state dominance. Otherwise, it will have to endure the state's emasculating violence.

In 2002, TWC2 was formed as an informal single-issue group advocating for the rights and welfare of migrant workers. Many Singaporean women cope with their "dual career" – paid less than men at work and nothing at all for their housework – by employing female domestic workers from less developed countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar and India. Employers pay a government levy and maid agents' fees in addition to the very low salaries of these more than 150,000 foreign domestic workers whom they often smugly describe as "very fortunate" for being given this opportunity to escape the poverty of their countries and come to Singapore where they can do a job that no Singaporean wants to do (Gee and Ho, 2006, pp. 8–9). Commercial maid agencies have taken to the dehumanising practice of "window displaying" their products – newly-arrived young women in their "boy haircuts" undergoing maid-training – for prospective employers to inspect. As a desired mark of middle-class arrival, these domestic workers help to restore the castrated egos of basically working-class Singapore men and provide an outlet for many Singapore women to deal with their frustrations in the workplace by physically and psychologically abusing their maids. Many migrant domestic workers remain helpless in the complex power dynamics that have come to shape relations between men and women, and between First World and Third World, in Singapore.

Still in the long shadow of the "Marxist conspiracy" almost two decades earlier, TWC2 has had to protect itself from a potentially violent state by masquerading as a *civic* society organisation, de-politicised and care-oriented. By not openly competing with the state, seeking to be its equal, or confronting it directly and publicly, TWC2 has so far been able to avoid the state's wrath and the reproduction of a phallogocentric culture that is a fundamental part of the problem. How might TWC2 – and indeed other civil society actors – engage the state in ways that can transform the conditions of possibility to allow for alternative identity formations in civil society that are free of the phallogocentric logic of the state? While a safe compromise might be found in the "Lim Hwee Hua model" whereby civil society presents itself like the state to gain its acceptance but only to the extent that it remains unthreatening to the state to avoid its violence, this essay will explore the possibility of adopting a more active and provocative mode of engaging the state, a mode that is reflected clearly in the "Catherine Lim affair" of 1994.

The "Catherine Lim Affair"

In the first of her two political commentary pieces in 1994, Lim (3 September 1994) argued that a "great affective divide" had grown between Singaporeans and their government, with the people feeling increasingly alienated from their leaders, whose style had come to be regarded as "deficient in human sensitivity and feeling – 'dictatorial', 'arrogant', 'impatient', 'unforgiving', 'vindictive'". Strategically, Lim began her article by stroking the state's ego – specifying in a markedly feminine voice the phallogocentric qualities that were vital to the state's self-definition, she praised the PAP government for its "amazing effectiveness".

Clearly, such a purposeful, uncompromising commitment to the economic imperative calls for special qualities of mind and temperament. The PAP leaders are distinguished for their intelligence, single-mindedness, sternness of purpose and cool detachment. Their methods are logic, precision, meticulous analysis and hard-nosed calculation and quantification. Their style is impersonal, brisk, business-like, no-nonsense, pre-emptive.

Lim then deliberately held up a negative mirror – constructed out of feminine lack and otherness – to the government’s narcissistic male ego, as she described the PAP leaders’ “pet aversion [to] noisy, protracted debate that leads nowhere, emotional indulgence, frothy promises, theatrics and polemics in place of pragmatics”. In this seductive move, her feminine words came, in a Lacanian sense, to *be* the government’s extended phallus. Having affirmed the state’s manliness, Lim then gently introduced her criticism, explaining how a new generation of Singaporeans – more highly educated, affluent and exposed to western values – has come to be more concerned about “matters of the heart, soul and spirit. While idealism, charisma and image have a special appeal for the young, feeling in general is an essential element in everybody’s life, occurring at the deepest and most basic level of human need”. Lim suggested that, for this new generation, the government would need to learn that “lecturing and hectoring are sometimes less effective than a pat on the back, that mistakes may be just as instructive as success and are therefore forgivable, that efficiency and generosity of spirit are not mutually exclusive, that compassion is not necessarily a sign of effiteness”. Lim deliberately allowed herself to play up her role as “admiring wife” to the manly state; and then, in this role, articulated claims that the state would not appreciate but needed to hear, constructing a skilful argument that would make any assertions about hysterical women seem quite ridiculous.

Clearly deflated by Lim’s critique, PAP MP Khoo Tsai Kee (6 September 1994) wrote a defensive letter to *The Straits Times* dismissing Lim’s conclusion “that the PAP is unloved by the people”. To refute her argument, he pointed proudly to the party’s consistent ability to win more than 60 per cent of the popular vote – “the only test that counts”. He then accused Lim, a prominent socialite, of basing her analysis on the chatter of “people [who] gather in coffeehouses and cocktail parties to relax, joke and have fun, not to pass judgment on serious issues”. More than a week later, Lim (17 September 1994) wrote a seemingly unrelated piece for *The Straits Times*, a short fictional account of a gentleman-scholar writing an academic thesis on the practice in Singapore of women serving men a cup of coffee, a practice that had apparently generated much public interest. In the story, the scholar eventually concluded that

At some deep subconscious level, males fear females most when they receive that nice cup of coffee from those delicate hands. / For a proffered drink, as history has shown, has always been woman’s deadliest weapon against man. / ... She can put into it some secret potion ... that is guaranteed to put her husband or lover under her spell forever. / Or she can administer a strong drug that will make him fall into a deep sleep, so

that like Delilah or Lorena Bobbitt, she can denude him of his manhood forever.

Suspicious of Lim's feminine ability to charm and perhaps even to castrate, the government ungraciously refused her cup of coffee.

A week later, Lim was interviewed by Sumiko Tan (24 September 1994), a female journalist from *The Straits Times*. Invited to respond to Khoo's letter, Lim clarified that she "had defined popularity in the broader, non-statistical sense of affinity and regard". After providing the usual assurances of the "tremendous admiration and respect" that she had for the PAP and "gratitude for the good life" that she enjoyed under it, Lim admitted she was not sure if she felt "anything like a warm bonding" with the government. On the question of critics fearing to speak out in Singapore, Lim pointed to a general impression that the "risks are too great". In an ironic and prescient gesture, she identified as a source of this impression the "discomfiture of seeing a formidable PAP juggernaut ranged against a lone, helpless individual who then excites sympathy as the pitiable underdog". The interview concluded with a self-deprecating Lim wondering to herself if she was "an ingrate to suggest to this very competent Government that, on top of all the good things they are providing for the people, would they behave nicely to the people, please?" In the same self-deprecating tone, she admitted to having "neither the interest nor the ability for politics. I would make a very poor politician!" More than a week later, Sumiko Tan (2 October 1994) wrote a commentary piece that weighed in on the government's side, describing Lim as "too idealistic" and "asking too much", and asserting that "the relationship, in a democracy, between the Government and the governed is based on unsentimental, hard-headed calculations". While Lim assumed the role of respectful wife who gently (sometimes cheekily) criticises her husband and then checks herself to allow him to "save face", Tan's actions were closer to the more conservative "Lim Hwee Hua model", exchanging her "role as not-men for that of like-men" in order to be taken seriously as a journalist. Lim's self-effacing ways were a deliberate and excessive performance of a pre-given feminine role; but this strategy that called attention to patriarchal structures by parodying them has greater potential to radically transform the "pre-given-ness" of feminine "natures".

Lim's second political commentary was published shortly after parliament agreed to pay Singapore ministers the highest salaries in the world in order to address the problem of attracting talent – the prime minister, for example, would in effect get four times what the United States president received. In efficient Singapore, where laws and policies are passed scarcely moderated by real democratic checks and balances, the ministerial salaries were the type of extreme measure that Singaporeans have come to expect, but not necessarily welcome, of their technocratic government always intent on "nipping the problem in the bud". In her second commentary, Lim (20 November 1994) further elaborated on the "great affective divide" but introduced a second related thesis: that then-Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's promise of a more open, consultative, kinder, and gentler style of government was being "subsumed under" his colossal predecessor Lee Kuan Yew's authoritarian style. "The gentler, wiser voice," Lim observed, "is seldom heard now, is indeed receding into total silence". For instance, she identified as particularly "lacking in

sensitivity and caring” the policy of denying public housing rights to single mothers so as not to “encourage immorality”. Comparing the new and old styles, Lim observed how

The huge respect that Mr Lee has built up, both at home and internationally, means that not only the substance of his advice but also the very tones and textures of his style will be attended to.

Given his fierce commitment to the nation he built up, shaped and protected over three decades (who can forget that touching promise he once made about springing up from his coffin, if necessary, to intervene on Singapore’s behalf?) and given Mr Goh’s natural respect for and deference to age and authority, it is not surprising that into its fifth year, the Goh Government is still unable to assume fully the distinctive identity it had set out as its goal. / A framework that tries to accommodate two different styles must soon suffer internal stresses and strains.

Lim, in a deliberately naïve (even cheeky) gesture, described the horror (and high camp) of Lee’s grave promise as “touching”; yet her words did not fail to affirm the leader’s great stature. But in refusing “death”, this eternal Father – consciously or unconsciously – made it difficult for Goh, his successor, to self-actualize as the nation’s leader. This infantilisation has, in fact, been palpable: for instance, Lee publicly revealed that Goh was not his first choice for prime minister and regularly made public appraisals that pointed out the imperfections of Goh’s government, including its lack of “boldness and creativity”. Lim noted that

It was precisely to correct this defect of leadership that Mr Lee had suggested the increase in ministers’ salaries, in order to attract the more dynamic minds from the private sector, to build up a corps of the “political entrepreneurs” Singapore so sorely needs. / On his part, Mr Goh lets drop a gentle reminder occasionally that although he continues to consult Mr Lee, he is the man in charge.

A week later, Zuraidah Ibrahim (27 November 1994), a female journalist from *The Straits Times*, wrote a commentary that described Lim as having “overstated her case” and as being “unrealistic” for expecting a “new era that would let every political flower bloom”. Ibrahim then contrasted this portrait of an excessive and fantasy-prone woman with a depiction of the prime minister as sitting “through their criticisms [in parliament], cool and collected. The comeback, as is his style, has always been measured, sometimes subtle”. Once again, a woman had stepped up in the public sphere to speak in phallogocentric terms (“like-men”) that consigned other women to a position of lack, thereby reinforcing the centrality of male subjectivity and elevating her own position relative to other women but still within the same male dominance. Zuraidah’s intervention, however, merely prepared the ground for a remarkable reaction from the state.

The prime minister’s press secretary, Chan Heng Wing (4 December 1994), wrote a letter to *The Straits Times* the following week. His tone, in stark contrast

to Lim's, was defensive, mocking, harsh and foreboding. His *ad hominem* arguments belittled her analysis by suggesting that the novelist could not tell the difference between "real life" and "fiction" and that she demonstrated a "poor understanding of what leaders in government have to do". Remarkably, Chan dismissed "public consultation" as useless for making the entire range of public policies and decisions; but he maintained that the prime minister welcomed "alternative viewpoints" only if they were correct ones: "mistaken views" and "fallacious propositions" would be refuted "sharply" and "robustly" so as not to "take hold and confuse Singaporeans, leading to unfortunate results". Chan assumed that tough prime ministerial action against unacceptable viewpoints would earn him the respect of the people. This position completely misunderstood the significance of consultation as a means of pooling a broad range of resources for a more rounded and multi-perspectived practice of collective decision-making, particularly important as more complex societies enter into uncertain times. Instead, Chan assumed that there were already correct arguments and that the government knew what they were; thus, public consultation was not meant to serve as a *process* of decision-making, but as a propaganda tool for getting people to buy into what had already been decided by the state. Remarkable also was Chan's assertion that Lim – and in fact "journalists, novelists, short-story writers or theatre groups" – should not "set the political agenda from outside the political arena", but should join a political party and run for election if they had strong political views.

At a PAP grassroots event, Goh himself reiterated these points, stating that Lim's second political commentary had "gone beyond the pale". Goh asserted again that he was in charge, not Lee, and certainly not unaccountable "armchair critics . . . snapping away making our job more difficult" (Chua, 5 December 1994). Other than Goh's own justifications for this, what could account for the mild-mannered prime minister's rather disproportionate response to the respectfully written and constructively critical arguments of Catherine Lim? For one thing, there was wide speculation at the time of impending general elections (which did not eventuate until 1997). A political observer noted that Goh "has got an election coming up, we all presume. Does he want to be seen as being a tough guy?" (Reuters News, 21 December 1994). When Lee handed the prime ministership to Goh in 1990, the new premier decided to call for general elections in 1991 in order to secure the people's mandate and support for his more open and consultative style of government. The results – a loss of four seats to the opposition – were the worst since Singapore gained independence, and constituted a source of embarrassment and disillusionment for the new prime minister. In the shadow of his acutely judgmental predecessor and castrating Father figure Lee Kuan Yew, Goh – perhaps deeply sensitive about having his "weaknesses" pointed out by Lee and then repeated by a woman – reconsidered his "soft" approach, over-compensating by not only disavowing the "maternal" influences of Lim but even harshly dismissing her in order to resist the allures of her possibly poisonous "cup of coffee". Lim's masculine arguments conveyed in an overtly feminine voice evoked the prime minister's primal instinct to fear and resist the *vagina dentata*. In fact, 1994 was a particularly repressive year, in which two other academics were reprimanded (one actually fled the country) and two art forms – "performance

art” and “forum theatre” – were proscribed. The new administration needed to remasculate itself to replace its “softer” image with a strongman quality that it assumed the people felt more comfortable with.

Lim, presenting herself as a helpless individual against a “formidable PAP juggernaut”, immediately apologised in a short handwritten note to the prime minister, dated 5 December: “I am sorry if I have caused you distress as a result of my articles. I have the greatest respect and regard for your Government, and wrote both articles in that spirit” (quoted in *The Straits Times*, 17 December 1994). In a letter to *The Straits Times*, Lim (7 December 1994) explained:

I wrote the two articles purely as a concerned Singaporean who wanted to share what I had perceived as a problem, with fellow Singaporeans through the public forum of *The Straits Times*. / I had hoped, by presenting the problem clearly and calmly, to engage equally interested and concerned Singaporeans in debate that was informed, principled and certainly free from rancour and stridency. / At no time was there the slightest intention to belittle or upset anyone. / Having no intention whatsoever to enter politics for which I have neither the inclination nor the ability, I continue to value the opportunity afforded by the local media for putting forward my views on social and political issues, in the full awareness that these views could be flawed and therefore open to rebuttal and disagreement.

The Straits Times then published a number of letters from Singaporeans who came to Lim’s defence, including the leader of an opposition party who argued that:

The PAP’s attitude towards criticism is wrong. It should realise that someone may criticise its policy or ministers without political intention, that is, to weaken the Government. The Government should accept criticism as a form of feedback. / The PAP has not changed. Its leaders still believe that if you are not with them, you are against them. How should ordinary people criticise the Government then? / Should they whisper their complaints quietly to the Feedback Unit? This is not the way to build a Great Society. This is not democracy (Jimmy Tan, 7 December 1994).

Another letter writer, clearly frustrated, asked:

Can this be the more participatory, consultative or open society that Mr Goh is talking about? / Let us have the true answer to the question for the sake of knowing the direction our nation is taking so that citizens may not have to do too much guesswork, leading only to unnecessary confusion, argument and more misunderstanding among various parties (Chia, 7 December 1994).

In his letter, Russell Heng (7 December 1994) defended Lim as someone who had merely taken seriously the prime minister’s promise of more openness. Acknowledging the challenges that Goh faced in his efforts to manage a transition to “more freedom of expression”, Heng reaffirmed his faith in the prime minister’s leadership

and hoped that “history will honour” his contribution. At the time, Heng was part of a group of gay activists that was building up a community of support in a homophobic climate. The organisation People Like Us continues today to be a gay community and advocacy group that the state simply refuses to register under the Societies’ Act.

In his reply to Lim’s apology, the prime minister explained that his response was aimed at getting Singaporeans to “know where the limits of open and consultative government lie” (quoted in *The Straits Times*, 17 December 1994), introducing a golfing metaphor – “Out-of-Bound” (OB) markers – to signify these political limits, a metaphor that has come to dominate contemporary discourse on Singapore’s public sphere. On the pretext of bringing clarity to the debates, *The Straits Times*’ Han Fook Kwang (17 December 1994) wrote a commentary that praised the PAP leadership as “comprising men with integrity, ability and commitment who have a mandate to govern this place. They do so firmly and with a determination and conviction unmatched by any other collection of individuals in Singapore”. His article shifted the focus of attention away from the question of making OB markers explicit and towards a different issue altogether: that Lim’s “tone and approach in the article were at odds with the respect traditionally accorded leaders in an Asian society”. This “Asian values” argument that was being advanced by PAP parliamentarian Goh Choon Kang, though spurious when used to describe a society such as Singapore’s, nevertheless appealed to popular chauvinism. “We shouldn’t be aping the Western style of confrontational and destructive commentary on political leaders. Our society is different,” asserted the MP.

The prime minister’s press secretary then added new levels of hyperbole to this “western decadence vs Asian values” approach, describing Lim’s commentaries as “destroy[ing] the respect accorded to the Prime Minister by denigration and contempt ... [leading not] to more freedom but confusion, conflict and decline” (quoted in *The Straits Times*, 29 December 1994). In the same letter, he cited homosexuality, single motherhood, and the “rampant and overbearing hubris” of the media as examples of western practices that “would be disastrous for Singapore” (quoted in *The Business Times Singapore*, 29 December 1994). In this bizarre sleight of hand, Lim, the writer of English-language love stories, was transformed – through a phallogocentric postcolonial ideology that disparages feminine qualities as degenerate and a threat to national discipline and control – into an uncouth, insolent, insubordinate, immoral, traitorous and dangerous woman who dared to overstep her boundaries in traditional Asian (read patriarchal) society. Unable to deal with Lim’s suspicious offer of a cup of coffee, the state resorted to a crude, hyperbolic and even monstrous characterisation of Lim that was much easier to discipline and control. This is a Freudian disavowal of the maternal-feminine that “perpetuates the most atrocious and primitive phantasies – woman as devouring monster threatening madness and death” (Whitford, 1991b, pp. 25–26), just as a vocal Catherine Lim was presented as a westernised monster threatening to devour the values of Asian civilisation.

Several weeks later, Lim (21 January 1995) wrote another ironic and prescient piece of social commentary on the practice in Singapore of concluding media reports of suicides with the statement that “No foul play is suspected”. In the piece, she

related the story of an English language teacher who was utterly frustrated by a student who made terrible grammatical errors in her writing:

My favourite ambition is I must strive very hard and make hard afford to be a teacher. If I have no ambition to help my mother and brothers and sisters they is sure to suffer for my father he don't care at all. / Everytime come back from selling cakes only he must drink and spend all money on drinks and sometimes he beats my mother.

The girl jumped to her death, and when her teacher learnt about this, she remarked: "If only she had told me of her problems". Lim's point was that such an event would have been reported with the line "No foul play is suspected", but behind suicides like these were a whole range of tensions and cruelties that society is simply blind to. When critics who are genuinely interested in Singapore's well-being are demolished by an intolerant state or forced to live overseas, should "foul play" be suspected? But the piece also seemed to suggest that the state had missed the point of Lim's two political commentaries entirely, choosing to be obsessed about her "grammar", as it were, instead of her message. The state, perhaps, did not want to have to deal with Lim's inconvenient message, or it chose to focus not on a woman's substance but on her manner and tone.

A few days later, the structural violence referred to in Lim's "foul play" commentary exploded into a remarkably brutal display of phallic physicality and strength through the use of violent metaphors. In parliament, the prime minister described Lim's political commentaries and criticism from other Singaporeans as an "attack" that the government would have to reciprocate: "If you land a blow on our jaw, you must expect a counter-blow on your solar plexus" (quoted in *The Straits Times*, 24 January 1995). Lim's (20 November 1994) second political commentary noted how the "hectoring style fits in with the special personality and authoritative stature of Mr Lee, but when it is copied by the young leaders, it is immediately seen as presumptuous and provokes resentment". But Goh was reported to have delivered his machismo-loaded speech amidst affirmative laughter in the house. Soon after, Lee – the castrating Father – expressed his approval of Goh's tough action in an interview with local tabloid *The New Paper*. Outdoing his successor yet again, the "formidable PAP juggernaut" raged against Lim, employing a battery of metaphoric weapons to reinforce his point:

Everybody now knows that if you take on the PM, he will have to take you on. . . If he didn't, then more people will throw darts, put a little poison on the tip and throw them at him. And he'll have darts sticking all over him.

[. . .]

everybody knows if I say that we are going in a certain direction and that we're going to achieve this objective, if you set out to block me, I will take a bulldozer and clear the obstruction.

[. . .]

The PM has to carry his own big stick, or have someone carry it, because now it's his policy and his responsibility to see his policy through (quoted in Ng, 3 February 1995).

I would isolate the leaders, the troublemakers, get them exposed, cut them down to size, ridicule them, so that everybody understands that it's not such a clever thing to do. Governing does not mean just being pleasant.

[...]

You will not write an article – and that's it. One-to-one on TV. You make your point and I'll refute you. . . Or if you like, take a sharp knife, metaphorically, and I'll take a sharp knife of similar size; let's meet. Once this is understood, it's amazing how reasonable the argument can become (quoted in Wraga, 22 December 1995).

In a bizarre manoeuvre to humanise the man after conveying his litany of terrifying metaphors, *The Straits Times* described how

[w]hen he spoke about his roles as father and grandfather, he adopted an avuncular air, and often flashed a warm smile and a kindly eye. / But when he dwelt on Dr Lim's article and issues on governing, he showed the force of his personality, the strength of his intellect and the wealth of his 41-year political experience (Ng, 3 February 1995).

Some years later, in an interview with reporters from *The Straits Times* who were compiling a book on the man and his ideas, Lee continued to display this violent streak:

Supposing Catherine Lim was writing about me and not the prime minister . . . she would not dare, right? Because my posture, my response has been such that nobody doubts that if you take me on, I will put on knuckle-dusters and catch you in a cul de sac. . . Anybody who decides to take me on needs to put on knuckle-dusters. If you think you can hurt me more than I can hurt you, try. There is no other way you can govern a Chinese society (Han, Fernandez and Tan, 1998, p. 126).

Minister George Yeo – a mild-mannered intellectual – also joined the fray in 1995, uncharacteristically instructing Singaporeans not to treat those in authority as their “equals”, especially in debate which should not “degenerate into a free-for-all” (quoted in *The Straits Times*, 20 February 1995). At a grassroots event, he uttered a phrase in Hokkien dialect “*boh tua, boh suay*” [no big, no small] in a populist gesture to emphasise the importance of hierarchy and respect for authority; and, in so doing, positioned Catherine Lim, once again, as an excessive westernised woman who betrayed her Asian values and threatened to “tear the social fabric” through a tone that “showed disrespect for authority”.

Conclusion

Writing about Lee's eternal/paternal dominance over the nation's history and contemporary self-understandings, Souchou Yao argues that the Father's refusal to die – in his promise to rise from the grave – will stunt the growth of an already immature citizenry, preventing the “coming of a new epoch . . . the end of history”

by preserving the overcompensating logic of economic competition (Yao, 2007, p. 168). On the one hand, Singaporeans are holding on to the nanny state's apron strings to continue enjoying life in an efficient, crime-free, clean-and-green country with high standards of public housing, transportation, education and recreation. On the other, they cower before a stern Father who threatens to destroy any challenge to his authority by resorting to his "bulldozer", "big stick", "sharp knife", and "knuckle-dusters", and who consistently infantilises Singaporeans by insisting that they are not yet ready for liberalisation and democratisation, especially when they threaten to de-centre the PAP from its position of power. The state's disproportionate – and, in some cases, uncharacteristic – response to Lim's public interventions indicates the painful significance of her rationally and articulately argued message, which she delivered not in a politically antagonistic and "macho" way – which would almost surely have incurred the state's use of its coercive apparatuses – but through a delicate strategy of performing to excess her feminine role, which unsettled the state but limited its violence to metaphors, not allowing the verbal abuse to become physical. No one, after all, would want to be seen beating up a lady! Nevertheless, these almost hysterical pronouncements – monumentally ironic – put the state in an embarrassingly negative light: the gender stereotypes were reversed! And in this moment of reversal, perhaps, lies the potential for transforming the patriarchal culture and phallogocentric ideology that are primarily responsible for the state's insecurities and the subordination of a feminised society.

The "Catherine Lim affair" – as it has come to be known – lasted for only half a year, but its legacy has been substantial. It produced a framework for reassessing the PAP government and foregrounding its internal politics that had merely been the subject of vague popular speculation. It launched the concept of OB markers to inform the limits and contours of public debates. It forced a clarification of the possibilities of openness and liberalisation promised by Goh's administration. And it brought out one of the worst sides of an extreme government that Ezra Vogel (1989, p. 1053) has described as a "macho-meritocracy" that emits an "aura of special awe for the top leaders [which] ... provides a basis for discrediting less meritocratic opposition almost regardless of the content of its arguments". This article has highlighted the strongly patriarchal complexion of state-society relations in Singapore, providing a close reading of the Catherine Lim affair to point out the potential of a strategy of assuming the pre-given feminine role deliberately and even excessively, and in that role proactively criticising the state in a gently "spousal" way to make a strongly argued point without incurring the state's full-blown violence. There is an interesting resonance here between Lim's approach and Irigaray's famously argued strategy that

One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus begin to thwart it. . . . To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to locate the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself – inasmuch as she is on the side of the "perceptible", of "matter" – to "ideas", in particular to ideas about herself that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make "visible" by an

effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: recovering a possible operation of the feminine in language (Irigaray, 1985b, p. 76).

Catherine Lim was able to expose the unconscionable violence of a patriarchal state without being destroyed by it, raise sympathy for the underdog, and mobilise forces of resistance against an authoritarianism through which such high-handed threats of violence were possible. Her potentially castrating actions also set the stage for a state that defined itself in the hyper-masculine terms of rationality and self-control to behave – ironically – in a melodramatic, overly-emotional and even hysterical fashion that would have readily been associated with a debased femininity.

In a speech given more than a decade later at the ASEAN Young Leaders' Forum in October 2005, Lim described how the “issue of openness [in Singapore] will be worked out in this three-steps forward, two-steps-back dance with the Government, exasperating some while giving hope to others” (quoted in George, 26 October 1995). Like Lim, agents of civil society can also invite the state to dance – or offer it a cup of coffee – and through a creative masquerade of femininity, seduce the state and Singaporeans in general to come to a more critical understanding of the phallogocentrism that limits the identities of both society and state, and the quality of the relationship between the two. For TWC2, the “Lim Hwee Hua model” may allow it to do its good work under the safe cover of civic society, where it might at best transcend the culture of fear by developing modes of “creative activism” (Chng, 2007); but the “Catherine Lim approach” could provoke a more complex and radical moment of change when the relationship between state and society itself may be subject to reconfiguration outside phallogocentric discourse. This strategy requires sensitivity, skill and artistry; may yield very gradual results; and is not without serious risks. Catherine Lim’s affair with the state in 1994 was a “three-steps forward, two-steps-back dance” – but the net movement was still forward.

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This article was downloaded by: [2007-2008-2009 National University Of Singapore]

On: 14 March 2009

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 779896407]

Publisher Routledge

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Asian Studies Review

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713613499>

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Online Publication Date: 01 March 2009

To cite this Article (2009)'Contributors',Asian Studies Review,33:1,v — vi

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/10357820902721454

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10357820902721454>

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