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“I am Limpeh (your father)!” Parodying hegemony, anti-nostalgic cultural insurgency, and the visual amplification of Lee Kuan Yew in Late-Authoritarian Singapore

Abstract: The soft-authoritarian and severe image of contemporary Singapore has often been associated with the imposing and paternalistic presence of Lee Kuan Yew who has overseen the city-state as Prime Minister and subsequently, senior statesman since 1959. Unlike the statues and street-names dedicated to other founding leaders in newly decolonized countries, Lee has consciously discouraged any public portraiture of himself in Singapore. However as his presence fades with ailing health in the recent years, his images are beginning to surface in figurines, coffee table books and even street art. Over in the social and alternative media, there is an increasingly more irreverent use of the Hokkien/Minan term “limpeh” or “your father” as parodies of Lee’s unyielding paternalism. As a masculinitic self-assertion of one’s authority, “limpeh” is often crudely associated with the Hokkien/Minan speaking ethnic Singaporean Chinese working class. Singaporeans have also recognized the characteristics of “limpeh” with the authoritarian legacy of Lee who had displayed little mercy in crushing his political rivals and pushing his social vision to society. In this respect, these popular communications can be seen as the cacophony of emerging voices of the city-state in a late-authoritarian phase.

Keywords: Singapore, anti-nostalgic, limpeh, Lee Kuan Yew, Late Authoritarian, memes

Introduction: Turning iconic

Figure 1: Poster of "Limpeh" identified on the streets of Singapore
(Source: Mr Brown’s Blog, 28 May 2012. <http://www.mrbrown.com/blog/2012/05/>)

On 8 May 2013, a 27 year old Street Artiste Samantha Lo aka “Sticker Lady” or “SKLO” was sentenced to 240 hours of community work by the Singapore court for “seven counts of mischief” in pasting a series of design stickers with subtly subversive captions on public

property in Singapore (Yahoo! Singapore 8 May 2013). Along with messages taken from colloquial expressions pasted on buttons of traffic lights and stenciled on roads, was a design with a word “Limpeh” or “Your father”. In the Chinese Hokkien/Minan provincial language, limpeh is usually a profane-ized linguistic posturing of masculinity and paternal authority. Placed against the background of a silhouette of a portrait that resembles recognizably the stern unsmiling image of Singapore’s nonagenarian statesman Lee Kuan Yew (Figure 1), the word Limpeh becomes indexical to his political legacy in postcolonial Singapore. Dominating the country’s political landscape since it gained self-government in 1959 and independence in 1965, the People’s Action Party (PAP) government under the premiership of Lee Kuan Yew has been associated with soft-authoritarian governmentality (Tan 2012; George 2007).

Lo’s unsanctioned artistic installations mirrored and parodied Lee’s interventionist legacy as well as the humourless persona of the elder statesman. Pasted discreetly resembling other commercial stickers on public walls that would have been otherwise unnoticed by an undiscerning eye these posters of Lee may suggest his pervasive presence. From this episode, and related satires and parodies on both the material and mediascapes, this article explores the emerging trends of the irreverent and playing parodying of Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew. In this respect, taking the perspective of visual amplification that explores political undercurrents and movements through visual cultures (Morrison & Issac 2012) it intends to coin the flurry of these artistic and amateur works as the cultural expressions within Singapore within a possible transitory frame of “Late Authoritarian” political culture in the republic as the representation of Lee changes from the interventionist to the symbolic. From formal artworks and installation lineups of musical and films, commemorative publications and exhibitions to that of the more irreverent caricatures, the attention to Lee has taken a

more iconic tone. Even as they constitute a “collection of memories”, according to Fernando, by cementing and memorializing a guided version of Lee, becomes acts of archiving him (2013). Amidst this memorialization has also been the emergence of the counter- memories from not only Lo’s artworks, but also the irreverent collage of digital memes centering around the word limpeh that positions more anti-nostalgic discourses in what would be Singapore in Late Authoritarian conditions.

Imaging Lee Kuan Yew

Singapore’s modern history of about close to two hundred years since the establishment of the British colony in 1819 and its subsequent creation an independent nation-state from 1965 can be considered to be relatively short. Nonetheless, the political presence of its statesman, Lee Kuan Yew has dominated the island’s history for more than five decades. Born in 1923 into the British Empire, Lee led the country as Prime Minister from 1959 to 1989. Subsequently stepping down but not bowing out completely, the elderly statesman has overseen the development of Singapore across generations. As he grows into his advance years celebrating his 90th birthday on 16 September 2013, a whole range of books, memorabilia and photo-illustrations of his career, ideas and life have been rolled out to commemorate his legacy in bringing Singapore to what his first set of memoirs published in 2000, “From Third World to First: The Singapore Story”. Not only identified with the book, the name Lee Kuan Yew can be used interchangeably with the “Singapore Story” as well as the broader culturalistic notions of “Asian Values” and “soft authoritarianism” that seems so intimately associated with his premiership (Chong 2004; Langguth, 2003; Tan, 2002; Barr, 2000; Chua 1997). Buttressing the authoritarian structures was a heavy dose of masculinistic display of toughness and discipline against what Lee particularly fears the dangerous

unknowns of geo-politics, infantilism of internal communalism, and the apparent softness of the younger generations (Holden 2001, Kong & Chan 2000).

As evident from the ruling party's worst showing in the General and Presidential Elections of 2011, the supposed shine of this soft authoritarian model seems to be fading from a combination of social and cultural strains arising from the cracks from the policy of rapid economic growth and Lee's increasingly frail health. If online polls were the reflection of the sentiments of the younger generations towards Lee, the results have not been encouraging with 53% in a Yahoo poll who wanted him to leave politics (Seah, 11 July 2009). In the immediate aftermath of the 2011 General Elections, Lee Kuan Yew relinquished his exceptional position as Minister Mentor and remained a backbencher Member of Parliament. His health condition seemed to further deteriorate as his public appearances and comments from have been significantly reduced since 2012. With public dissatisfaction surfacing, particularly projected by the social media, the formative decades of nationhood before the 2000s, particularly under the older Lee, becomes seen in increasing nostalgia. Increasingly distanced from the routines of politics, Lee's persona gets appropriated as symbolic in not just the official, but also the popular realm.

The iconic turn for Singapore here presents an opportunity to enlarge the process of political communication from the visual angle whereby a greater degree of cultural polysemy can be read from the otherwise more coded and amorphous spectacles (Gerritsen 2013; Schill 2012; Labuschagne 2011). As such, the focus should be turned from what is considered as the politics of order to the search for ruptures however small they are in the "noises" in public that is commonly assumed to be politically subservient (Kallio, 2012: 288). Here, even as they may not directly affect electoral politics and organizational frameworks, the study of the

creative appropriation of Lee's images can be part of the undercurrent rupturing process from an increasingly irreverent citizenry. Frustrated by the strains in the public infrastructure and social fabric arising from an unprecedented intensity in the influx of migrants as part of the state's growth strategy, the social contract of political deference in exchange for administrative efficiency began to weaken. Whereas once censored by the state-control traditional print and broadcast media, their voices have been magnified by the multiplying platforms from the new media. From the carefully scripted official publications to the more irregular but irreverent internet memes, the proliferation of images of Lee in his twilight years presents a more dynamic appropriation of the elder statesman. One can see from the multifaceted cultural interplays of what was once considered as politically reified hegemonic images of Lee as evidence of the juncture of Singapore's development.

“Not your average granddad”: The commodification of Lee Kuan Yew

In this respect, I am interested to look at the reification and symbolization of Lee in what I would describe as the era of late-authoritarian Singapore. With leaders grappling with the appropriation of the imageries and legacies of the strongmen they succeed, this topic that may perhaps be relevant to study cultural politics and political cultures of authoritarian governments in transition. Ever since Lee had consolidated his political position by the late 1970s, one sees the change in the persona from a Western educated solicitor to an East Asian Confucian junzi, or gentlemen.

The earlier milestones in mobilizing the female population into the schools and workplaces through the Women's Charter of the 1960s became superseded by Lee's attraction to the pseudo-scientific notions of polygamy, eugenics and domesticity as he regrets publicly about facilitating the changes in “lifestyle” (Barr, 1999). As his stature grows from a Prime

Minister to a statesman and finally a historical figure, Lee's tone becomes more paternalistic as he assumed the role of a "Minister Mentor" when Lee HsienLoong became Prime Minister in 2004. As the age gap between the senior Lee and Singaporeans widens, the elder statesman begins to project a more sagely rather than political persona towards what he frequently terms as the educated but naïve younger generation. Responding to the observation by a journalist in a televised dialogue in 2006 of what he sees as the government being responsible for the climate of fear in Singapore, Lee stated: "From time to time, I allow my grandchildren to speak back to me, but when they are out of bounds, I put them down" (a7aa7, 2013). In what can probably be his last active dialogue session with undergraduates, when asked about immigration policies by a female doctoral candidate, Lee personalized the issue by returning to question the questioner about "whether she has a boyfriend" and ponders aloud whether she would have children by the time she completes her PhD (Koh 2011).

The shifting portrayals is seen evidently in the interviews conducted with Lee by the senior journalists of the state controlled *Straits Times* in preparation for what was one of his final thoughts, *Lee Kuan Yew: Hard truths to keep Singapore going*. Opening one of the chapters titled, "Not your average Granddad", one of the authors recalled: "I was directly opposite that chair. And I was going to ask Singapore's founding father and global statesman what his favourite movie was. Lee's Press Secretary sensed my nervousness. "Talk to him like you would talk to your granddad," she said. "With respect, but no need to be too stiff." (Han et al, 2011: 356). Here, the relationship between Lee and the younger population of Singapore became one of a more mellowed but generally paternalistic with the assumption of an experienced and wise patriarch reminding his grandchildren of their rightful place.

What distinguished Lee as a politician in Singapore has been the bluntness in his use of words in facing off with what he sees as political opponents, be they candidates from the opposition party, trade unions and even an occasional novelist, Catherine Lim. Alluding engagements to street brawls, Lee have metaphorically deployed phrases like “knuckle dusters”, “hatchets and”, “broken heads.” (Singapore Rebel: 29 August 2010). Even in a more advance age, he has not seem to have mellowed as reflected in his 2011 interview where: “I would not have been so robust or tough had I not had communists to contend with. I have met people who are utterly ruthless. I say, all right, it’s a street fight, either you lose or I lose and that’s that.” (Han et al. 2011: 83). Although Lee Kuan Yew comes from an established gentile Straits Chinese family in Singapore, the bluntness of some of his statements has created a stern and combative image in the eyes of the populace. I would like here to draw a connection between the political and the popular here in how such forms of muscular paternalism for the past several decades becomes reimaged in the vernacular sphere.

At a parallel level, the semblance of the patriarch in Singapore politics would remind the popular vernacular imagination of the Hokkien/Minan expression of limpeh or “your father”. According to the satirical “Coxford Dictionary for Singlish” limpeh in Hokkien connotes: Let your father tell you...” or "Listen to your father". Used even when the speaker is not the addressee's father. It's a phrase which is designed to put you in your placenaturally.” (Talkingcock.com). Crudely implying the assertion of patriarchal hierarchy in demanding the listener to respect one’s authority, the term limpeh carries semiotically the masculinstic projection of speech that is linguistically associated with the lowly educated, dialect speaking ethnic Chinese males in Singapore. To Goh (2013) this expression has been placed on scholarly discussions as part of the evolution of Singlish as the authentic voice of

Singaporeans in contradistinction with “other linguistic-cultural positions in addition to serving as a satirical version of the government’s linguistic pragmatism (136).” For Liew (2011), it is also part of the broader tensions between written literacies and the oral/aural modes of communications whereby such multi-literal *performance writings* are potently evocative, relational, embodied and consequential utterances that conjures multiple voices and contradictions (138-9).

Here, I juxtapose the expression of limpeh between the political and linguistic cultures to explore the possibilities of the beginnings of the creative sprouting of articulations that reflect, parody and subvert the hegemonic framework in the decade of late-authoritarian Singapore. At this juncture, while the patriarch is still alive, his presence is progressively fading away from the public limelight in what Eugene Tan (2012) has already announced the beginning of the “New Normal” in “post Lee Kuan Yew era”. Another aspect of the conditions of the late-authoritarian decade is the multilayered abstraction, reification, commodification and parodying of paternal political authority of Lee Kuan Yew. As Prime Minister, he was largely intolerant of political cartoons and visual caricatures, resulting in the suppression of such literature, bringing an end to an otherwise buoyant scene (Lim, 2014; Mauzy& Milne, 2002: 139). Differing from his counterparts in the region, he has been determined not to allow the personality cult to be built around him with statues and street names in public places. Nonetheless, the image of contemporary Singapore has become so synonymous with him that according to S. Rajaratham who was Lee’s first Foreign Minister, saw no need to erect statues of his former colleague as “Singapore is his statue” (Erlanger, 29 November 1990). In the past decade, he seemed to have relented and what ensued was not just the symbolic naming of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, and a day long conference about his

legacy as he reached his 90th birthday (Economist 2013), but a proliferation of audio-visual materials in a range of commemorative projects.

The appropriative process can be segmented to several levels ranging from the more formal official commemorative book publications by writers and columnists from the mainstream newspapers to increasingly rare but photographed public appearances with foreign dignitaries. This includes an exhibition and book publication his radio speeches on *The Battle for Merger* (2014) publication of a photo-illustration with previously unreleased pictures of his youthful days in *Lee Kuan Yew: A Life in Pictures* (Yeow 2014) as well as another memoir, *One man's view of the world* (Lee 2013). With excerpts being generously splashed across the broadsheets of the newspapers in different languages, these books were also prominently stacked in visible numbers in bookshops in Singapore. Although the actual celebrations of his birthday became a more private occasion with family members on 16 September 2013, the climax for the public came a month earlier with his efforts to attend the annual National Day Parade on the evening of 9 August. Assisted physically by his bodyguard, Lee emerged onto the podium to a cheering crowd and managed to take his seat eventually. This anticipation was repeated again in the National Day Parade in 2014 where Lee was seen to be surrounded by younger politicians posing for selfies.

Unlike the politically charged tones of his speeches and memoirs, the photo-illustration serves more as a nostalgic and personalized trip back to a ciphered past of Lee's youthful ascendancy to politics and his direct involvement in the exercise of nation-building through the decades. Even though he has stepped down from all ministerial and official positions except his post as a member of parliament, Lee continues to maintain a secretariat that would occasionally relay letters of appreciation for public tributes as in the case of a Youtube video

done by a young man in appreciation of the former Minister Mentor (Lee, 2014). A more reflexive touch has been added whereby the public catches his final hurdle with his own mortality instead of that of the nation's survival. In contrast to his imposing speeches of the early years, a now barely audible former prime minister wishes death to come as quickly and painlessly as possible (YahooNews Singapore, 2013). With more glimpses of his private and family life made available to the public through footages of his morning exercises and recently released photographs of their leisurely moments at home, the scolding patriarch of the 1980s has now been replaced by the image of a more personable nonagenarian grappling with ageing. The personable portrayals of Lee have however not impressed the more dissenting segments of the citizenry that regards Lee as the personification of the oppressive legacy of the PAP government. In contrast to the nostalgic sentimentalism of the mainstream, such combative language is continuously remembered by the anti-nostalgic elements of the citizenry looking at Lee with less rose-tinted glasses.

Table 1: Dimensions of Representing Lee Kuan Yew

Official	Transgressive
Commemoration	Commentary
Reminiscence	Ossification
Personable	Imposing
Chronological	Unchanging
Archives	Screenshots
Iconic	Metonymic
Gazed	Gazer

Table 1 seeks to condense the contrasting directions in the shifting public representation and interpretation of Lee Kuan Yew in his post-retirement years. To some extent, the directions of these activities can be categorized along the official platform of formal state and corporate initiative against the more anarchic and unpredictable organic digital and material mutations by less reverent citizens.

Centering on the entire economy of memoirs, books, documentaries, photo and album collection is a process of official commemoration of Lee's political legacy. Based not only on infrastructural milestones and financial indicators that characterized much of the PAP government's presentation of its political score sheet, the more recent projects seems designed more towards humanizing the former premier by putting on soft touches to what was considered a soft-authoritarian leader. Once disallowed by the state and even Lee himself, canvas portraitures, installation artworks, and even musicals and feature films of him have begun to appear (Tan 2014, Kolesnikov, 2013, Tan 2012, Aftertherain, 2010). Even as artistes have displayed some degree of abstraction and caricaturization of his portrayals, the treatment of Lee's image has remained largely solemn, reverent and "non-judgmental (Shetty, 2014) in the realm of the formal arts.

Aside from the incessantly repeated televisual footages of his teary moment in the separation of Singapore from Malaysia in 1965, a more ciphered and reminiscing mood begin to shape the portrayal of Lee from photographs of more leisurely and younger times. Adding to the access to a range of private and public archival sources, the re-moulding of Lee into a personable character requires the constant reminding of the presence of an individually distinct chronology or life story that is supported by a meticulously selected and curated collection of public and private archives. For a Prime Minister reputed for having his

surveying gaze at the functionality of the surroundings around him, he has now turned into the source of attention.

At the other spectrum in the Transgressive section of Table 1 are caricature and memes that are meant as personifications of critiques and commentaries of the state apparatus and legacy. Refusing the ciphered and fluid reminiscences and chronologies, these articulations are often ossifications of usually the white haired and unsmiling elderly Lee whose politics and personality has remained unchanging. Differing from the meticulous use of official archival materials, dissenters have often drawn on screenshots of usually the more recent television appearances of the elderly politician whereby unlike the carefully photographed moments, it is easier to capture the less choreographed moments that allows for the convenient typecasting of Lee. As such with the insertion of captions ranging from witty remarks to profanities as well as crude admonishments that are characteristic of street fights in Singapore, the otherwise iconic image of Lee becomes more metonymic as his persona gets appropriated by netizens as the instrumental of the unyielding and authoritarian gaze. Underlying these contrasting portrayals is the psycho-social extent of which the decades of Lee's overarching political presence has impacted upon the populace. Like the many political strongmen of his generation, as Lee moves from the realm of government to that of the totemic, the proliferation of his images becomes both a project of memorialization as well as the Oedipal collective urge to not just identify, but to appropriate and displace the father's position as the symbolic figure of power and rationality (Freeman, 2008; Oliver 2006). Within these projections lies the question in the degree in which the Adorno's various components of authoritarianism, particularly with regards to "power and toughness" that entails with the identifications with the "power figures" and the "exaggerated emphasis of strength and toughness" (Roiser&Willig, 2002:74) are both critiqued as much as internalized.

The contrasts in Table 1 are most evident on the cyberspace in the tensions between the nostalgic and the anti-nostalgic elements. Associated significantly with the accelerated integration and dissemination of multimedia materials from various sources to achieve more radical recontextualization and reinterpretation (Meng, 2011: 36), cyber spoofing has become a ubiquitous part of the online media. Drawing from Dawkin's analogies of the propagation of genetic material in his 1976 publication, *The Selfish Gene*, memes have assumed heightened significance on the internet as part of the reproduction, replication and remixing and re-dissemination of cultural information (Marwick, 2013) and in the process, facilitating both the public performance and movements of cultural objects through social networks (Goriunova, 2013: 224). Acknowledged as a parodying and satirical tool for transcending and transgressing social boundaries and creating new emotional literacies (Vickery 2014), memes nevertheless seems to fall short as an emancipatory process. As Bratich observes, "the ecology of memes is seen as a virtuality and a tendency, rather than a full-fledged movement" (Bratich, 2014: 68). Even the elder former statesman is not known for personally engaging the online community, his persona has taken on new permutations as part of the local staple of diet of memes, both celebratory and transgressive.

The two images in Figure 2 reflect the memes and other forms of digital expressions inspired by the admirers of Lee from netizens. Appearing mainly in the Facebook pages of either politicians of the ruling PAP party or pro-government Facebook sites like "Fabrications about the PAP", these images conjure collectively the wisdom as well as the strengths of a self-sacrificing Lee who have led Singapore from poverty to prosperity. Underpinning the politics of gratitude, the celebratory and commemorative memes are usually meant to remind the usually more cynical cyberspace on the legacy of Lee and the party-state in Singapore.

Figure 2: Any Warhol inspired image of Lee Kuan Yew's appearance on 9 August 2014 (Teo 2014) and excerpt of Lee's talk on a pro-government Facebook Page (Fabrications about the PAP, 1 August 2014). <https://www.facebook.com/FabricationsAboutThePAP/timeline> (16 February 2015)

Memes and other irreverent art forms are however more prevalent on the other spectrum of the caricature of Lee in the realm of the transgressive. Among the most striking articulations were the drawings of CartoonPress, an anonymous group of graphic artistes who post their political cartoons on Facebook. Alone with suspicious eyes peering from a pair of sunken eyebags and shrunken body, in the world of Cartoon Press, the elderly Lee remains an icon of soft authoritarianism in Singapore. Burdened by paranoia and vindictiveness, in Figure 3, the ageing patriarch is shown to have been able to cheat the angel of death, but shackled from his former political opponents who have departed, and who are blissfully looking at him from a distance (Cartoon Press: 3 May 2014). Differing radically from the mainstream version of a retired and reflexive former statesman with an exceptional political career, the artistes of CartoonPress continue put Lee within a more cynical spotlight as the ever controlling and increasingly out of touch patriarch that refuses to fade away.

Figure 3: Cartoon Press, 3 May 2014. <https://www.facebook.com/thecartoonpress?fref=ts> (18 February 2015)

Between the carefully crafted official and dissenting portrayals of an ageing Lee are the innumerable memes on social media forums that have been generated by the ease made by digital technology in altering images. As the new political emoticons, commentators wishing to reinforce their sentiments would impose their own messages as captions onto photographs of public personalities and politicians in various facial expressions and bodily postures. For

the case of Singapore, the most prominent politician would have been that of the more elderly Lee Kuan Yew, an image that netizens, mostly of the younger generation would be more familiar with. The more popular images appropriated would include stills of usually sterner and unsmiling expressions of Lee in the process of lecturing someone in a public discussion usually with an outward pointing finger and a clenched fist. These images would include those of him in the process of banging his fist on the table, pointing his finger outwards as a warning, waving his hand across, covering his ears at the sound of roaring fighter jets in the 2013 National Day Parade. With both English and colloquial Hokkien inserted as captions into these illustrations, as memes, new connotations emerge, to underscore and add punch to the conversation. Here, Lee's blunt tones in his speeches and dialogues get linked to the coarser street expressions that are often articulated in Romanized Hokkien as seen in some of the illustrations in Figure 3. Captioned with colloquial Hokkien vulgarities (“Kanina”: Fuck your mother”, “Chibai”: Cunt), the image of Lee in these internet memes become indices of naked warnings in online exchanges and expressions in topics concerning Singapore politics and society that is understandable mainly to the local audiences.

Figure 4: Memes of Posturing images of Lee Kuan Yew from www.mustsharenews.com/sdp-ge-promises/ (18 February 2015)

Figure 5: Martyn See's Facebook Post: 20 June 2014. <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10202126333815603&set=pcb.10202126334735626&type=1&theatre> (18 February 2015)

The photographic postures of Lee have also been appropriated by the more strident political commentators to expose what they see as the fangs and hypocrisy of state power and policies.

In Figure 5, with the image of a stern lee with a pointed figure fronting a caption on his racist views of eugenics buttressed by the Bell Curve, Singaporean political activist and independent filmmaker, Martyn See reminds his readers of the former Prime Minister's stance in light of a cabinet minister's comments against racism. But it is in the use of the term *limpeh* that is significantly associated with Lee Kuan Yew on the new mediascapes that the following section would draw the article towards in framing the interactions between patriarchy and parody in the contest over the representation of Lee.

“Let Limpeh tell you”

Here, I would like to address this question by focusing on the emerging use of the term “Limpeh” as one such surfacing vernacular Hokkien/Minan metonymic expressions that has been systematically de-legitimized under Lee's ‘Speak Mandarin Campaign’ in 1979. Other than the schools, these languages were also disallowed from being used in the public media, hence severely restricting the spaces for the evolution of these vernacular cultures under Lee's premiership. Even as English and Mandarin became significantly more predominant over the various ‘dialects’, the latter had refused complete linguistic erasure. On the contrary, even as it became further peripheralized, the languages became amalgamated substantially into the mainstreamed English language as the emerging creolized ‘Singlish.’ (Fong, Lim & Wee 2014; Chua, 2011). Among such popular pidgin expressions derived from Hokkien is the word ‘limpeh’ that became part of the subcultural signifier of masculinistic paternalism that gained popularly in both the popular and artistic circles.

Beginning from a trickle by filmmakers in the late 1990s to a proliferation in the social media for the past five years through particularly amateurish performances in video sharing sites,

Chinese dialects are beginning to resurface in spite of official restrictions. Ironically, the recent push has not come from the pre-“Speak Mandarin Campaign”, but those born into one of Lee’s most significant paternalistic policy of homogenization. The positioning of these suppressed ‘dialects’ has been critical in the emphasis on more autonomous identity formation over that of the official scripting and categorization of the ethnic Chinese in Singapore under the meta-narrative of Chinese-ness defined by the use of Mandarin and the subscription to neo-Confucianist discourses. While those in the areas of media and the arts have been most active in pushing for the liberalization of the restrictions, the internet social media has been instrumental in giving the critical space for more spontaneous amateur and ubiquitous expressions of such identities, particularly for the youth or what would be seen as the digital natives. With the convenience and accessibility of popular social media portals, the otherwise isolated, informal and colloquial texts have become more broadly articulated, networked and circulated.

Among one of such popularly circulated expressions on the cyberspace has been the word *limpeh*. In a way, the new found popularity of these expressions that were supposed to be expunged by the “Speak Mandarin Campaign” can be considered as the return of what Goh has framed as the alternative vernacular Chinese identities that were part of the abjection linked to disciplining governmentality of industrialization as well political subjugation (Goh, 2012: 1051-2). In the popular media, the term was first used in the big screen by usually by the more authoritative characters within the Chinese working classes including that of businessmen, debt collectors and triad bosses in the productions of local commercial filmmaker Jack Neo. Such expressions were to the more informed local audiences expected from such portrayals. However *limpeh* would take on new significance by the internet

generation of youths in a more playfully interactive manner as well as layering with a newfound parody and critique of Singapore's political culture.

The online Romanization of Hokkien and Singlish words like limpeh in the cyberspace as well as the popularization of limpeh can be traced to the fictitious letter writer, by the pen name of "Lim Peh". Featured as a cartoon version of a grumpy elderly man, in his regular column "Limpeh Kar Li Kong (Your father tells you), the fictitious elderly man regularly highlights the grouses of the cost of living in Singapore that is mixed with his sexual adventures and advices, creating a caricature of the disaffected ageing population in the republic. The gist of this column lies in Lim Peh's attempts to mimic Lee Kuan Yew's authority as he tries to admonish the young who have no respect for seniors (Talkingcock, 2001). In the social media, the expression of limpeh gained a new currency from the viral Youtube video of what started from an otherwise innocuous monologue of a teenager Aaron Tan making threats on his webcam that went viral. With his loose grammatical expressions mixed with a disorderly array of short English phrases in his Mandarin monologue that is punctuated with Hokkien profanities, Tan's video reflected on his delinquent background. But, what captured the imagination of Singaporean netizens were his admonishments to the alleged rival with the phrase "Limpehwong [warn] 你先" [you first]." As an eighteen year old threatening a fourteen year old, by addressing himself as limpeh, to the amusement of his viewers, Tan tries to position himself like a father figure. (Botohkia channel 2011). Spurring many youtube responses from as far as the United States, the phrase was also wittingly deployed by the local satirist "MistaBrown" (Lee Kee Mun) who parodied Tan's video to indirectly highlight the inadequacies of the state public transport infrastructure and mock the actions of government ministers (Mr Brown Show 2011). In every exchange online, it is

probable that netizens are reminded in the use of limpeh of the continued presence of Lee Kuan Yew in Singapore.

Figure 6: SGAG 20 January 2014 (<https://www.facebook.com/sgag.sg?fref=ts>) 17 February 2015)

Netizens have also been quick to detect possible analogies from otherwise routine formal public events. In Figure 5 the local satire site, SGAG inverted the images of Prime Minister Lee HsienLoong's official visit to the Lucas studio in Singapore to parody the cinematic moment in Star Wars where Darth Vader reveals his relationship as Luke Skywalker's father. Here, Vader's assertion of "I am your father" becomes turned into the Romanized Hokkien "Wa Si Limpeh" as the elder Lee's face gets superimposed on the character's mask.

It is in what can be considered as the guerrilla artwork from a previously obscure street artiste, it was Samantha Lo who brought the vernacularity of limpeh back to the streets. Reflecting on the "clean and green" controlled vision of Lee Kuan Yew, the urban landscape of Singapore has been carefully manicured and maintained through an active and micro-intervention into both the physical infrastructure alongside with the disciplining of social and cultural patterns around it. As such, the scripting of the urban space becomes an intensively planned undertaking with minimal tolerance for any unauthorized appropriation of the functionalistic spaces whether they are unauthorized street demonstrations, unlicensed hawkers or even unregulated art. Singapore's strictness with the maintenance of the streetscapes was brought to the worldstage when acts of vandalism, be it the juvenile defacement and destruction of public property by American teenager Michael Fay in 1995 or

the more artistically inclined graffiti artworks of a Swiss national on a subway carriage, were met with caning sentences (Weiss & Bae, 1995).

Until she was caught for her unauthorized street art, appearing usually in what can be construed as menswear of shirts and pants, the cropped haired androgynous looking Lo was probably a new face to the state apparatus accustomed to dealing with “vandals” whose profiles have been predominantly male. Effectively, Lo’s appearance in the public limelight had been significant in not just challenging the hegemonic planned spaces, but that of the gendered nature of graffiti art in the republic. Seeking to seamlessly blend her messages that are often labeled in Singlish into the otherwise mechanized instruments like traffic lights and road markings, Lo’s works stand in contrast to the explosively loud alluring of colours spraypainted onto walls with more explicit messages and imposing contents that are typical of much street art. Among such includes buttons of traffic lights where she would paste stickers with messages like “press until shiok” (creole expression for satisfied”) and carefully stenciled statements “Your Grandfather’s Road” on roads that rendered them indistinguishable from other authorized markers.

What stood her works out however were posters of a partially shadowed black and white image of what can be recognized as the elderly version of Lee Kuan Yew with the white font words ‘limpeh’ spread across the drawing. The juxtaposition of the text and the shadowy image draws immediate reference to the overbearing sense of state paternalism associated with the presence of Lee himself. Seen as being half mocking and haunting that exposes the crudity of the expression of power and authority in the term limpeh as well as the reminders of the watchful eye of the state through the unblinking stare of Lee, the poster puts a face to

the narrative of soft-authoritarianism in Singapore. Lo's street art can in some ways be seen as in what Brighenti (2010: 323) and Lu (2014) describe the tactical interventions to re-themeticize and re-historicize walls that have been otherwise functionalized as oppressive untouchable boundaries in urban Singapore. Like any graffiti artist that "disturbs, deterritorializes and rejuvenate" the parts of the city unclaimed by capital (Halsey & Pederick, 2010), Lo's "sticker bombs" of posters had compelled pedestrians to engage with the presence of the space. Even in its subtlety, the 'limpeh' posters becomes part of the unsanctioned text and uninvited writings (Carrington, 2009) both an inscription of Lo's guerrilla efforts to reclaim the territoriality of the streets dominated by corporate and state markers, as well as a stern reminder for witnesses to the poster of the stern legacy of Lee Kuan Yew. Apparently unimpressed, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong describes Lo's installation as uninvited "freelance, extra" that would result in investigations instead of the "invitations to perform on designed walls with permission" (Yahoo newsroom, 13 July 2012). The younger Lee's opinions were however not shared by many of his fellow countrymen as online sentiments painted a more supportive and sympathetic impression of the 'Sticker Lady' (Tong, 6 June 2013). Subsequently, Lo was spared jail with a lighter sentence of 240 hours of community service (Yahoo Singapore 8 May 2013), a sentence that may have reflected the tacit acknowledgement of the artistic value and integrity of her works.

First turned by local film into a sociolinguistic label and subsequently by the social media into a ubiquitous whimsical parody, the expression of limpeh has become linked to the charged politics of patriarchy and paternalism as caricaturized in Lo's image of Lee Kuan Yew. After the media limelight over her trial faded away, she went on to expand on the concept with three installation portraits of the poster of Lee along the themes of "Power", "Money", "Surveillance", "Progress", and "Influence". With the texture of the face of the

canvas of Lee subtly patterned with icons of either CCTV cameras, newspaper cuttings of political detentions and bank notes, Lo highlights the pervasiveness of state capitalism and political intervention in the city-state. It is in the themes of “progress” and “influence” that she articulates more eloquently the overarching reach of the Singapore state from Lee’s visions: ‘Progress’ : Spray paint on collage “Taking over public spaces and remaking them into something that you’d deem beautiful- looks like we are not that different, more than you’d like to feel. So I tag your name in spray paint on my work, like how I tagged mine on yours. For we are both striving ...”(SKLO, 2013.)

Deliberately choosing the portrayal of Lee in the image of the elderly patriarch she has probably grown up in the decades of an older Lee Kuan Yew that still remained active in politics even after stepping down as Prime Minister. Serving as the visual critique of the positioning of Lee as “the Singapore Story”, in Limpeh, Lo’s works resists attempts to embellish the singularity of the Singapore Story. As stated in her reflections: “Influence’ : “Spray paint on mirror Whether we like it or not, we have become products of this utopia/dystopia, the long arms of the system have found their way to us and manifests itself in us- our behaviour is a reaction to the system. We dissociate ourselves from behaviour we do not condone, but ...” (SKLO, 2013).

Even as they were subsequently removed from the streets, Lo’s artworks had inspired not only imitations. More importantly, she has reframed ‘limpeh’ from a crass expression to that a more formal cultural critique especially for younger Singaporeans. Shortly after her trial ended, the local rapper, Shigga Shay who had popularized his predominately English language rap songs on Youtube, came out with a track titled ‘Limpeh’ (Shigga Shay 2013).

Becoming rapidly the number one itunes download in Singapore, the song (Rasul& Tan 2013), co-sung by another vlogger, Tosh Zhang can be considered the first song sung predominately in Hokkien and a mixture of Mandarin and English by the generation of the ‘Speak Mandarin Campaign’.

Figure 7: Figure 7: From Street to Street: The mutation of limpeh in Singapore

From the colloquial expressions of the migrant Chinese ancestry in Singapore to the traditional arenas of films and subsequently the social media, and returning to the “street” in Lo’s artistic posters, Figure 7 shows the visual-linguistic mutation of the expression of limpeh. Although unintended, in many respects, what is considered as the soft-authoritarian legacy of the elderly patriarch becomes a critical pretext for the playfully critical parodying of his style of governance with the gestural expressions of limpeh. From the table, pictographic internet memes and videographic excerpts form the most ubiquitous segment of the mutation followed by the more structured Shigga Shay Music Video Production as well as websites like Talkingcock.com. Outside cyberspace, it is Samantha Lo’s (SKLO) unsanctioned artistic installations in both her street art as well as commissioned portraits that have stood out more tellingly against the commemorative productions of the mainstream media as well as artistes on Lee Kuan Yew. In this respect, Chart 1 illustrates is what Morris (1993) would describe as the carnivalization of image of politicians from figures of authority to that of mockery that pits official culture of sacredness against the profanities of popular culture (203). In the same light, the carnivalisquestreet and cyber cultures comes into form from the overlaying of Lee’s public persona with the colloquial Hokkien-linguistic culture that the former Prime Minister had placed with contempt. As he fades from the limelight, the

proliferation of such memes could be the mark of new beginnings in Late-Authoritarian Singapore.

Conclusion

Held as an economically successful model of soft-authoritarianism characterized by the paternalistic state overseeing a deferential multiracial populace, the narrative of Singapore's progress has often been associated with the image of Lee Kuan Yew. Nonetheless, during his premiership spanning about three decades, the Cambridge educated barrister has showed his disdain for any political caricature of himself and has the same time avoided the showcasing of his icons and portraits in the public arena. His aversion to tributary politics seems to be reversed in his advance years when a mixture of both commemorative and adversarial productions of him started to surface both in the mainstream and social media as well as other artistic platforms.

Seeking to focus on the organically evolved unsanctioned imaging of the former statesman, this article has illustrated the growth of a memetic culture in the public appropriation of the gestural images of Lee as the “knuckleduster” Prime Minister into playful caricature and more critical cultural critique of his legacy. An ageing Lee is being seen as a stern grandfather to younger Singaporeans, enlightening and reminding them of the “hard truths” of Singapore. However, like a naughty child amusingly mimicking the gestures and postures of his grandfather behind his back, the recent spate of materials caricaturing Lee's persona have been associated with crafting a more aggressive image as an un-Anglicized working class dominant male that would commence a dialogue with the word ‘limpeh’. Underlying the playful interlocking of limpeh with Lee is a growing form of cultural resistance to

Singapore's state-formation as personified by his image. Disinclined to embrace a more ciphered and romantic government led narratives, the memetic creators as well as Samantha Lo's art presented a more fossilized image of an unmoving and paranoid patriarch with his seemingly pervasive and watchful presence. Underlying the proliferation of such images can be seen to represent the subversive nature of artistes, activists as well as netizens in the refusal to acknowledge the nostalgic and ciphered portrayal of Lee in art in the Late Authoritarian Singapore.

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