

DEPAUL UNIVERSITY

THE COMPLEXITIES OF SINGAPORE: INVESTIGATING THE LEE THESIS

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The actions of the People's Action Party (PAP), the dominating political party in Singapore's government since 1965, has stirred international debate on the role of government in helping its citizens pursue a good life. Since Singapore's independence, the PAP has strictly regulated Singaporeans, such as prohibiting men from growing their hair long. Punishment of criminal offenses range from caning for graffiti to capital punishment for drug trafficking. The PAP government believes the price of excessive government power at the expense of Singaporean freedom is not only necessary for economic growth, but also represents the Asian conception of "good life", consensus and order. An alternative conception of the good life that values individual freedoms is regarded as a Western idea. The PAP's claim may seem absurd given that many countries, through signing the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, believe human rights are universal. But it is difficult to dismiss the PAP's claims since Singapore is an economic success. Among third world nations, Singapore has experienced unrivaled economic development in the last several decades and is now one of the richest countries in the world.¹

The PAP's arguments provoke some discomfort for those who are proponents of a liberal democracy, such as Harvard Professor and Nobel Prize in Economics winner Amartya Sen. Sen believes that freedom is not only necessary for an individual to choose a life he or she values, but is also necessary component for a nation to be fully developed.² Current reports detailing Singaporean happiness challenge Sen's theory that individual freedoms are necessary for the good life. In fact, Singaporeans have been cited in various reports as being not only happy, but arguably one of the happiest peoples in the

¹ The Economist, "Welfare in Singapore: the stingy nanny," *The Economist Online*, February 13, 2010, http://www.economist.com/world/asia/displaystory.cfm?story_id=15524092 (accessed February 13, 2010).

² Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Anchor Books, 2000).

world.³ Singapore also ranks seven in world cities based on economic activity, political power, knowledge and influence, and quality of life.⁴

Therefore, the authoritarian methods identified as the cause of Singapore's success have been encapsulated in a short phrase known as the Lee Thesis. The Lee Thesis, named after Singapore's first Prime Minister, former Minister Mentor, and current Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew, asserts that governments must use authoritarian methods in order to ensure economic development is successful, especially in undeveloped nations. As a result, civil liberties, such as freedom of speech, must be curtailed in order for a government to properly promote economic growth. Permitting political freedoms may inhibit or disrupt economic growth. Contrary to Sen's theory, the PAP government argues the lack of political freedoms helped contribute to Singapore's success.

Although it appears that Sen's theory is wrong and the Lee Thesis is completely correct, it is unclear whether authoritarian methods are the only reason why Singapore is economically developed. Moreover, the success of Singapore may have risen out of more complex actions than its government may assert. There needs to be more investigation as to how Singapore came about its economic success, specifically finding out if there is a causal link between its authoritarian nature and its economic development. On the other hand, it would be unfair to claim that the PAP had a complete disregard for individual rights. The PAP promotes economic and social freedoms through providing public education and subsidized healthcare. One also needs to understand why and how

³ Bill Weir, "Has Singapore Found the Secret to Satisfaction?: Citizens Willing to Trade Civil Liberties for a Cleaner, Safer, Efficient Society," abc NEWS, <http://abcnews.go.com/2020/story?id=4097264&page=1> (accessed December 1, 2009).

⁴ Knight Frank. *The Wealth Report 2010: A Global Perspective on Prime Residential Property and Wealth* (London: Knight Frank, 2010), 37.

societies hold different conceptions of the good life. Why is it that the PAP believes Asian societies have a particular conception of the good life incompatible with individual freedoms, which they label as a “Western concept”? And finally, why specifically are Singaporeans happy when outsiders in democracies (such as Amartya Sen) believe they should be fighting for their freedom?

Both supporters and critics of the Lee Thesis appear to defend their positions by oversimplifying Singapore’s situation. For example, the PAP government defends its policies by referring to the Lee Thesis and similar arguments that claim rights are non-Asian and counterproductive to development. Additionally, critics of the Lee Thesis, such as Sen, criticize Singapore’s dark side without giving enough credit to its achievements in development and acknowledging that Singaporeans report they are happy in spite of their lack of rights. Thus, this paper seeks to clarify the complexities of Singapore by elaborating on how Singapore achieved its social and economic successes and by investigating how and why Singaporeans are complacent about the government’s authoritarian policies.

The Complexities of Singapore

The complexities of Singapore can be attributed to the way in which the PAP ruled. The PAP was essential to Singapore’s success today. Singapore was once a crime infested, poverty-stricken country. Following World War II and before Lee’s PAP took office, Singapore was in bad shape:

Food and medical supplies were dangerously low, partly because shipping was in total disarray...Electricity, gas, water, and telephone services were in serious disrepair. Severe overcrowding had resulted in thousands of squatters living in shanties, and the death rate was twice the prewar level. Gambling and

prostitution...flourished, and for many opium or alcohol served as an escape from a bleak existence.⁵

Although Singapore's economy began to recover with the demand for tin and rubber, poor conditions persisted in Singapore. When Great Britain granted Singapore sovereignty, Lee Kuan Yew and the PAP ran and won office. Lee and his PAP government prompted fears of communism causing some foreign and local businesses to move to Malaysia.⁶ Hopes of improving the economy faltered when Malaysian leader Tengku Abdul Rahman announced Singapore would be separated from Malaysia out of fears that a complete merger would spark a race riot within the city-state between the Chinese majority and Malaysian minority.

When Singapore officially seceded from Malaysia, Lee Kuan Yew and the PAP did not hesitate to completely change the way government operated. Lee designed the Singapore government as a meritocracy, filling his cabinet with the best and brightest of Singaporeans. Since attracting some big name transnational corporations (TNC), such as Hewlett-Packard and Texas Instruments, Singapore quickly experienced unrivaled economic success especially when compared to its third-world colleagues. Even more remarkable is the fact that this economic growth has sustained over several decades.

Singapore has always been a multiracial society and, in its early history, had to deal with many race riots. There are Chinese immigrants who are distinct from second or third generation Singaporean Chinese. There are also Malays and Tamil Indians who are the minorities in the country. In order to ensure peace and order, the PAP government required racial quotas in housing buildings to ensure diversity and prevent segregation.

⁵ Barbara LePoer, "The Society and its Environment," in *Singapore: a country study*, ed. Barbara LePoer (Washington, D.C.: Federal Research Division Library of Congress, 1991), 42.

⁶ LePoer, 52.

Government-mandated racially-integrated housing strategy has resulted in an ordered and harmonious multiracial society.⁷ The PAP government also gave Tamil and Malay, languages of Singapore's ethnic minorities, official language status to emphasize equality and tolerance of all Singaporeans.

Today, Singapore is a first world country. The Singapore's social policies best exemplifies this status. The PAP government focused on policies that enhanced human capital because Singaporeans were the "single most important resource...to be a foundation for economic development"⁸ and its "only natural resource" describing education as "resource development"⁹. Singapore has one of the top K-12 education systems in the world. Almost the entire Singaporean society is literate at 92% of the population.¹⁰ The math and science programs in Singapore are one of the best in the world. Singaporean students ranked among the top three countries in the International Math and Science Study (TIMSS).¹¹

Many Singaporeans eventually study abroad through government-financed scholarships in world-renowned universities. This is not to say Singaporean universities are inadequate; they are, in fact, the opposite. Singapore has a growing foreign student community already exceeding its ideal target.¹²

⁷ LePoer, 116.

⁸ Thomas Bellows, "Economic Challenges and Political Innovation: The Case of Singapore," *Asian Affairs* 34, no. 1 (2006): 232.

⁹ Donald R. DeGlopper, "The Society and its Environment," in *Singapore: a country study*, ed. Barbara LePoer (Washington, D.C.: Federal Research Division Library of Congress, 1991), 112.

¹⁰ Central Intelligence Agency, "CIA – The World Factbook – Singapore", <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sn.html> (accessed May 16, 2010).

¹¹ TIMSS. *TIMSS 2007 International Mathematics Report: Findings from IEA's Trandes in International Mathematics and Science Study at the Fourth and Eighth Grades* (Boston: TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Center, 2009), 34-35. TIMSS. *TIMSS 2007 International Science Report: Findings from IEA's Trandes in International Mathematics and Science Study at the Fourth and Eighth Grades* (Boston: TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Center, 2009), 34-35.

¹² Ho Ai Li, "Singapore on track to be 'Global Schoolhouse'; It drew 80,000 foreign students last year - past halfway mark of target of 150,000 by 2015," *The Strait Times*, March 24, 2007.

Singaporeans enjoy a well-established healthcare system. Singaporeans may pick a public healthcare provider with heavy government subsidies. They may also choose a private healthcare provider knowing that there will lower levels of government subsidies. Singaporeans have one of the longest life expectancies at an average of 82 years old, ranking fourth longest life expectancies in the world.¹³ Major causes of death include heart disease, cancer, and stroke, resembling that of a first world country.¹⁴

Despite the current world economic recession, Singapore's economy is still better than its regional neighbors. Forced savings through the Central Provident Funds allows Singapore's government to continue to provide necessary public services like education and healthcare. Additionally, their unemployment is still one of the lowest in the world, at around 2%.¹⁵ Its economy is ranked fifth among world cities.¹⁶ The economy is expected to grow 6.5% in 2010.¹⁷

Based on this review, Singaporeans appear to enjoy what philosophers term the "good life". Some argue that Singaporean good life is only possible with the strict guidance of the PAP government. This argument provokes discomfort for critics of the PAP because they believe that this government guidance is not only unnecessary but actually prevents citizens from obtaining their philosophical vision of the "good life" grounded in individual freedoms. Connotations of authoritarian governments are negative and for good reason. History shows that authoritarian governments and dictatorships tend to end with the suffering of its people, which was evident in Hitler's Germany, Stalin's

¹³ Central Intelligence Agency.

¹⁴ Barbara LePoer, "Introduction," in *Singapore: a country study*, ed. Barbara LePoer (Washington, D.C.: Federal Research Division Library of Congress, 1991), xxiii.

¹⁵ Associated Press, "Singapore economy seen growing 6.5% in 2010," *Bloomberg BusinessWeek*, March 10, 2010, <http://www.businessweek.com/ap/financialnews/D9EBIU000.htm> (accessed March 20, 2010).

¹⁶ Knight Frank.

¹⁷ Associated Press.

Soviet Union, currently in Kim Jung Il's Korea, and other examples of authoritarian governments with poor results.

There are laws that do invade Singaporean's privacy, which is a civil liberty that critics argue should be protected. Laws in Singapore not only prohibit Singaporeans from littering, but also regulate their behaviors, both public and private. As for private acts, the PAP justifies its regulation of private behavior for the purpose of encouraging decency. For example, oral sex is illegal unless it is performed for the purpose of initiating sex¹⁸, which is essential for reproduction. Additionally, the PAP justifies its regulation of private behavior for the purpose of promoting self-sufficiency (i.e.: no reliance on government handouts) and family values. For example, elders can sue their children for not providing for them financially after retirement.

Some of the petty laws, such as those against littering, are not necessarily the causes of controversy; it is the punishments that are tied to them. Some believe that the punishments do not fit the crime. Singapore is known for its harsh and cruel punishments, specifically caning. Caning is performed on criminals who commit offenses like graffiti, robbery, or on visiting foreigners who are caught on expired visas. Additionally, Singapore is one of only a few countries that issues sentences of capital punishment to offenses other than murder. Offenses punishable by the death penalty include drug-trafficking and selling of chewing gum, although the only noted executions were by murder, drug-trafficking, and unlawful discharge of fire arms. The PAP justifies its punishment as a means of deterrence and, in order to deter criminal actions, it is

¹⁸ Souchou Yao, *Singapore: The State and the Culture of Excess* (London: Routledge, 2006). Yao dedicates an entire chapter to the controversies regarding the PAP government's statutes regarding oral sex called Oral Sex, Natural Sex and National Enjoyment.

necessary that they follow through with their punishments. Capital punishment is performed through hanging.

Despite PAP's emphasis on clear, transparent government, critics of the PAP government accuse it of secrecy. Amnesty International accuses the PAP government of having unfair execution policies targeting people who need help, not death (e.g. drug addicts, poorly educated).¹⁹ Additionally, laws like the Internal Security Act allow the government to arrest without warrant when it fears security may be at risk. The PAP responds by saying these accusations are ridiculous.

The PAP argues that their control is legitimized by their successful and often uncontested elections. Singapore's government is a parliamentary republic and hold elections frequently with the PAP winning a large majority of seats as well as the positions of President and Prime Minister. Therefore, the PAP argues that their successful elections prove their policies are accepted as necessary for Singaporeans.

Critics counter that the PAP wins re-election because they are good at suppressing political dissent. When political dissenters criticize PAP members, the PAP retaliates by suing them on defamation charges, and ultimately winning in court. The high success rate of PAP defamation suits could be due to a judiciary that is not so independent of the PAP party.²⁰ Therefore, some critics argue the PAP just sues their political opponents and dissidents, forcing some into bankruptcy.

The PAP also limits the circulation of foreign newspapers because they believe foreigners have no business in Singaporean politics. Like political critics, the PAP does

¹⁹ Amnesty International. "Singapore – the Death Penalty – A hidden Toll of Executions", <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/ASA36/001/2004>, (accessed May 16, 2010).

²⁰ U.S. Department of State Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, "2009 Human Rights Report: Singapore" <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2009/eap/136008.htm> (accessed May 16, 2010).

not hesitate to sue foreign media for defamation. The local press, the Strait Times, is heavily regulated by the government.

Despite these negative realities of Singapore, many Singaporeans still consider themselves happy. For example, ABC World News labeled Singapore as the happiest country in Asia.²¹ Even one Singaporean, who had been caned repeatedly, agrees the laws are necessary for safety.²² Psychology studies also show that Singaporeans report having a high quality of life.²³ Singaporeans appear to weigh the benefits of living in Singapore as higher than the costs.

Although people are happy with their lives in Singapore, this evidence alone does not prove the PAP government's authoritarian methods appropriate or correct. Likewise, the lack of civil liberties and abundance of harsh laws are also not sufficient reason to dismiss the PAP's methods and strategies altogether. Singapore's success has been oversimplified both by critics like Sen and by proponents of the Lee Thesis. To expose this oversimplification, the next section will examine Sen's theory of development as freedom and his criticism of Singapore.

Sen's Development as Freedom

Sen's criticism of Lee Kuan Yew and the PAP government is laid out in his book Development as Freedom. There, Sen argues that development is not simply a rise in GNP, but is a matter of individual freedom. Development must remove "unfreedoms" such as "poverty as well as tyranny, poor economic opportunities as well as systematic

²¹ Weir.

²² Ibid.

²³ Kau Ah Keng and Wang Siew Hooi, "Assessing Quality of Life in Singapore: An Exploratory Study," *Social Indicators Research* 35, no. 1 (May 1995): 71-91.; Siok Kuan Tambyah, Soojiuan Tan, and Ah Keng Kau, "The Quality of Life in Singapore," *Social Indicators Research* 92 (2009): 337-376.

social deprivation, neglect of public facilities as well as intolerance or overactivity of repressive states”²⁴. In addition to providing economic opportunities and social goods, government should ensure civil liberties are protected because political freedoms are a part of development. Thus, Sen is critical of the PAP government because they disregard civil liberties and label rights as a Western concept when these rights should be promoted as a part of development.

Sen argues that, in order to achieve development as freedom, public policy must focus on enhancing the capabilities of individuals. As defined by Sen, capabilities are “substantive freedoms...to choose a life one has reason to value”²⁵. Individuals are free to choose values within society to conceive of their “good life”. Capabilities help individuals participate in economic opportunities such as the job market. Government should enhance individual capabilities through social policies such as universal education and healthcare. Only if individuals have political freedom can they voice their capabilities deprivation to the government. Individual freedoms are determined by society. Therefore, development as freedom begins and ends with individual freedoms. Once an individual’s unfreedoms are removed, he or she is able to choose and pursue a good life.

Based on this theoretical explanation of development, political freedoms are necessary because they are the means and ends of development. Although they are not directly connected to economic development, political freedoms allow individuals to participate in public policy by voicing their needs for capabilities enhancements. Government, in turn, will produce public policy addressing those concerns. In a society

²⁴ Sen, 3. Sen uses the term “unfreedom” throughout his book to denote the opposite of freedom.

²⁵ Sen, 74.

where individuals have political rights, individuals articulate their needs and identify capabilities of which they are deprived:

The exercise of political rights makes it more likely not only that there would be a policy response to economic needs, but also that the conceptualization – including comprehension – of “economic needs” itself may require the exercise of such rights. It can indeed be argued that a proper understanding of what economic needs are – their content and their force – requires discussion and exchange. Political and civil rights, especially those related to guaranteeing of open discussion, debate, criticism, and dissent, are central to the processes of generating informed and reflected choices. These processes are crucial to the formation of values and priorities, and we cannot, in general, take preferences as given independently of public discussion...²⁶

Individual freedom is essential for individuals to voice their needs to the government.

Additionally, individual freedoms are essential for the creation of values. People lacking capabilities would be able to voice their need for assistance in developing capabilities.

After voicing a need for capabilities enhancement, the government should act accordingly, thereby creating successful social policies.

Because of the importance of political freedoms to development, Sen makes two criticisms of the Lee Thesis. First, Sen criticizes the Lee Thesis’ claim that authoritarian governments are better than democracies and therefore necessary to promote economic growth. As Sen argues, policies that foster economic growth can be enacted in a democracy:

While different empirical studies have varied in emphasis, there is by now a fairly agreed general list of ‘helpful policies’ that includes openness to competition, the use of international markets, a high level of literacy and school education, successful land reforms and public provision of incentives for investment, exporting and industrialization. There is nothing whatsoever to indicate that any of these policies are inconsistent with greater democracy and actually had to be sustained by the elements of authoritarianism that happened to be present in South Korea or Singapore or China.²⁷

²⁶ Sen, 153.

²⁷ Sen, 150.

Authoritarian governments do not have special qualities that make them more conducive to economic development, economically successful authoritarian governments just happen to pass social policies that directly promote economic growth. These policies emphasize enhancing the capabilities of people through public goods which allows them substantive freedom to participate in the economy through the job market or through purchasing goods. These policies are not exclusive to authoritarian governments and are more frequently enacted in democracies.

Second, Sen argues that although leaders in successful authoritarian governments may make smart decisions, leaders are also more at risk to making poor decisions since they have unchecked power. In a liberal democracy, the power of one branch of government is checked and balanced by another branch and by society. Good public policy is made by individuals who can practice freedoms:

Furthermore, the need to discuss the valuation of diverse capabilities in terms of public priorities is, I have argued, an asset, forcing us to make clear what the value judgments are in the field where value judgments cannot be – and should not be – avoided. Indeed, public participation in these valuational debates – in explicit or implicit forms – is a crucial part of the exercise of democracy and responsible social choice... The work of public valuation cannot be replaced by some cunningly clever assumption. Some assumptions that give the appearance of working very nicely and smoothly operate through concealing the choice of values and weights in cultivated opaqueness.²⁸

Leaders of authoritarian governments make value judgments within the government, even if it is without the public's consent, and occasionally their guesswork will be right. In order to make the best public policy, Sen suggests that it is best for the public to decide those values. His criticism of policy making through assumptions is an attack on the PAP government's policies because they make policy without consulting the public. However, PAP "guesswork" is how Singapore has been run for the past several decades. It is true

²⁸ Sen, 110.

authoritarian governments are more susceptible to mistakes, but with smart leadership, such as in the PAP, it has yet to make a very big mistake resulting in an economic catastrophe or overthrow of the government.

Furthermore, when there is public backlash with certain PAP activities, such as providing incentives for single, educated women to marry educated men and procreate, the PAP have stepped back and rescinded their policies. Of course, these PAP activities, referred to as “campaigns”, are more to influence the population to act a certain way as opposed to PAP’s harsher regulations and laws which are meant to coerce the population to be a certain way.

Although Sen’s theory of development as freedom sounds ideal, Sen’s arguments do not negate the fact that Singapore is both socially and economically successful in spite of its lack of political freedoms. Singapore has social policies that are successful and has had consistent economic growth for decades. These successes were attained without the political freedoms that are available in a liberal democracy, such as freedom of the press, association, and speech. Other than criticizing the Lee Thesis for claiming its policies are exclusive to authoritarian governments, Sen does not elaborate on why a developed, wealthy nation-state, such as Singapore, should seek expanding political freedoms at this point of their development.

Investigating Development Without Freedom

Although this paper has portrayed Sen’s theory as inapplicable to Singapore, the Lee Thesis does not explain the entire picture of Singapore’s historical path towards unrivaled development. Singapore’s economic and social development successes have

arisen from more complex actions than just simply the PAP's authoritarian methods, as posited by the Lee Thesis. This section will elaborate on Singapore's economic and social policy success comparing it to Sen's theory of development as freedom. It will argue that the PAP leaders' smart and creative strategies prompted Singapore's social and economic development. In other words, the PAP government has achieved some aspects of Sen's development without consulting the public. This, however, does not prove the Lee Thesis correct in its totality, since the methods used to promote economic growth seem to stem more from the PAP's decision to form Singapore's government as a meritocracy, recruiting individuals into the government based on merit and talent, rather than its authoritarian methods.

The PAP government consistently provides its citizens with public goods that enhance their capabilities. For example, the PAP government helps produce and then redistributes income in the form of social services, education, housing, and health facilities.²⁹ The mandatory savings plan through the Central Provident Funds helps promote these social services and also provides a social safety net for Singaporeans when they are older. These public goods provide Singaporeans with necessary tools for participating in the economy.

Not only does PAP provide public goods for capability enhancement, it also attracts foreign companies, predominantly transnational corporations (TNC), to Singapore to provide job opportunities for Singaporeans. When TNCs move their manufacturing operations to Singapore, they create job opportunities for Singaporeans. Although this economic strategy appears uncommon in today's society, at the time the

²⁹ C. M. Turnbull, *A History of Singapore 1819-2005*, 3rd ed. (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2009), 275.

idea was first introduced by Dutch economist Dr. Albert Winsemius, it was a strategy avoided by other third world countries.³⁰ Thus, the PAP government increased economic freedom for Singaporeans by enhancing their capabilities in order to take advantage of the opportunities provided by TNCs.

Due to these successes, Singapore has not only overcome its historical status as an undeveloped nation, but it has also become one of the richest countries in the world.³¹ This description of Singapore appears to disprove Sen's call for individuals to have substantive freedoms. As shown previously, Sen argues that substantive freedoms are needed so individuals could inform government of the capabilities they lacked so the government could enact appropriate public policy. In Singapore, individuals have very limited freedoms and yet government continually delivered sound economic policies.

Nonetheless, Singapore's success in economic and social development does not mean that the Lee Thesis is entirely proven. If anything, Singapore's success is evidence that a meritocracy is good for social and economic development. The PAP government has successful economic development because it has addressed capability deprivations through providing education and healthcare and provided economic opportunities through attracting TNCs to Singapore without listening to the Singaporeans. This is not to say that listening to the people is unnecessary or unimportant; the PAP's success emphasized the essential ingredient of intelligent leaders for development. Singapore's development was strategically managed by the well-educated PAP leaders. These leaders were well-educated and well-experienced, focusing on fostering a strong economy for Singapore beginning with the PAP government's first cabinet:

³⁰ Turnbull, 302.

³¹ The Economist.

The new Cabinet presented an imposing display of talent... Their abilities were complementary: Toh Chin Chye a dedicated party chairman, Goh Keng Swee a practical economist, and Rajaratnam an imaginative thinker and capable journalist. All three were very able men, but they were willing to leave the limelight and the leadership to Lee Kuan Yew, the most impressive public personality among the party's English-speaking group.³²

As a result, the leaders of PAP were not individuals who were solely power-hungry and greedy; they had genuine concerns for the state of Singapore and wanted to make it a great country. Thus, authoritarian methods were utilized by smart individuals in a way that they saw could only benefit Singapore. This fact about Singapore's original leaders complicates the Lee Thesis simplicity that "authoritarian methods are necessary for economic growth" since this closer inspection of Singaporean leaders show that they were extremely intelligence and talented.

Furthermore, the success of the PAP government's ability to pass policies can be separated from its authoritarian nature. Its effectiveness lies with its ability to push its agenda, which is a characteristic of a strong government. A strong government is characterized by its majority status and stability over a given time whereas a weak government is characterized by its minority status and short-lived term; an authoritarian or democratic government could be labeled as either strong or weak depending on those factors.³³ The urgency for the need of rapid economic growth allowed the PAP to pursue its policies to attract TNCs while excluding the local business elite.³⁴ This strategy proved effective in the end and it was possible because of the PAP government's ability to push its agenda without fear of retaliation through voting polls because the PAP had

³² Turnbull, 273.

³³ Takayuki Sakamoto, "Economic performance of 'weak' governments and their interaction with central banks and labour: Deficits, economic growth, unemployment and inflation, 1961-1998," *European Journal of Political Research*. 44(2005): 801-802.

³⁴ W.G. Huff, "The Developmental State, Government, and Singapore's Economic Development Since 1960," *World Development*. 23, no.8 (1995): 1431.

the trust and confidence of its people during such a tumultuous time in the 1960's. This type of strategy is not exclusive to an authoritarian government, democracies can also be strong. Therefore, economic and social development was possible due to the characteristic of the PAP government as strong.

Finally, there are external factors unrelated to the PAP's authoritarian nature that have helped Singapore's economic and social development. For example, the PAP government correctly chose to focus on TNCs at a time when first world nations, such as the United States and Japan, were looking to compete globally by moving manufacturing to nations with cheaper labor.³⁵ Singapore was also economically in a better position than other third world countries, beginning with enough resources to allocate them according to the PAP's desire.³⁶ Additionally, the size of Singapore allows it to be manageable. Because it is both a city-state and an island, it can control immigration more efficiently to prevent overpopulation.³⁷ Its location, both regionally and globally, allows it to be a prime location for the world financial market and regional trade.³⁸ Finally, it was just as strategic for the PAP government as it was for the TNCs themselves to invest in Singapore; TNCs were willing to work with the PAP because it was profitable for them to collaborate.³⁹ These unique features contribute to the continued economic success of Singapore making it a difficult case to replicate even if a nation were to copy its authoritarian style

³⁵ Kevin Grice and David Drakakis-Smith, "The role of the state in shaping development: two decades of growth in Singapore," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*. 10.3(1985): 347-359.

³⁶ Huff, 1434.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 1422.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Alexius Pereira, "State Collaboration with Transnational Corporations: The Case of Singapore's Industrial Programmes (1965-1999)," *Competition & Change*. 4(2000): 434.

Thus, it is unclear whether the PAP's authoritarian methods were necessary for economic development. It is possible that a liberal democratic government could also provide the same public provisions, such as education and healthcare, so long as the electorate voiced their need for such goods. If the authoritarian regime was not essential to foster economic growth, perhaps other authoritarian policies are not necessary either.

The Good Life and the Cultural Complex

Although the PAP's authoritarian policies may not be as necessary to economic and social development as previously thought, Singaporeans still obey the laws. Sen believes that even if an individual does not wish to act upon his or her freedoms, it is important for that individual to have the choice for freedom.⁴⁰ In contrast, the PAP argues that individual freedoms are incompatible with an Asian model of life. In fact, Singaporeans have reported that they do not value individual choice.⁴¹ Furthermore, like the PAP, some Singaporeans even deem their civil liberties irrelevant to their happiness.⁴² This section will further investigate the PAP's claims that discipline and strict control are what constitutes an "Asian model of life". It is true that societies have different conceptions of the good life that form out of the values of that society, such as the value of individual freedoms. Again, although this claim seems to support the Lee Thesis in promoting authoritarian methods for the sake of economic growth, the support is clouded by an investigation into how involved the PAP is in managing the Singaporean "good life".

⁴⁰ Sen, 37.

⁴¹ Tambyah, et. al, 350.

⁴² Weir.

To begin this investigation, one needs to understand the ways in which individuals determine if they have the good life. Diener and Suh identify three approaches individuals use to determine if they have the good life: utilitarian, subjective, and social well-being.⁴³ From the perspective of utilitarian well-being, “the quality of life of a society is based on whether the citizens can obtain the things they desire.”⁴⁴ Individuals obtain these things through their material wealth. Subjective well-being defines “quality of life in terms of the experience of individuals...if a person experiences her life as good and desirable it is assumed to be so.”⁴⁵ Individuals have the good life if they perceive it to be good. From the perspective of social well-being, “characteristics of the good life ...are dictated by normative ideals based on a religious, philosophical, or other system.”⁴⁶ The good life is defined by society and individuals determine if they have the good life by comparing it to society’s good life.

Singaporeans’ utilitarian well-being has been made possible by the nation’s economic and social development. Utilitarian well-being is measured by economic indicators such as income. Singapore’s per capita GDP is more than \$30,000, ranking 28th in the world.⁴⁷ In terms of world cities, Singapore ranks fifth.⁴⁸ In general, Singaporeans have considerable wealth, allowing them to fulfill their utilitarian well-being.

Utilitarian well-being is important in regards to individuals’ fulfilling their desire to obtain basic needs, such as food and shelter. However, only viewing the good life as

⁴³ Ed Diener and Eunkook Suh, “Measuring Quality of Life: Economic, Social, and Subjective Indicators,” *Social Indicators Research*. 40(1997) 189-190.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 190.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 189.

⁴⁷ Anna Teo, “Singapore per capita GDP crosses \$30US,000,” *The Business Times Singapore*, February 3, 2007.

⁴⁸ Knight Frank.

the ability to make choices masks other factors equally or more important to the good life, such as security.⁴⁹ Furthermore, individuals may desire goods that may not necessarily make them happy.⁵⁰ For example, a comparative study of individuals from the U.S. and Singapore show that high materialism negatively correlated with happiness.⁵¹ Therefore, utilitarian well-being in itself should not be used as the sole indicator of happiness and should instead be evaluated alongside subjective and social well-being.

Determining subjective and social well-being is not as easy as determining utilitarian well-being because the two are frequently seen as mutually exclusive when, in fact, they share a two-way relationship, each influencing the other. To illustrate the complexities of these approaches, we can associate subjective well-being as a dominant approach in individualist societies and social well-being as a dominant approach in collectivist societies. Although there are other types of societies in other parts of the world, these two societies best reflect the debate regarding Singapore because the PAP often attacks Western societies' lack of morals as produced by individual freedoms. Additionally, the PAP government tries to associate itself more with Asian collectivist societies

Suh et al. describe individualist and collectivist societies. An individualist society emphasizes an individual's freedom to make decisions and life choices relative to his or her own goals.⁵² The society should not constrain or inhibit an individual's capacity to

⁴⁹ Diener and Suh., 190.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ William Swinyard, Ah-Keng Kau, and Hui-Yin Phua, "Happiness, Materialism, and Religious Experience in the US and Singapore," *Social Indicators Research* 2(2001): 23, 26.

⁵² Eunkook Suh, Ed Diener, Shigehiro Oishi, and Harry Triandis, "The Shifting Basis of Life Satisfaction Judgments Across Cultures: Emotions Versus Norms," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 74, no.2 (1998):482.

make choices.⁵³ On the other hand, individualist societies typically include countries from the West such as the United States. Individualist societies evaluate their good life predominantly through subjective well-being. A collectivist society emphasizes society's needs and goals. To accomplish these collectivist goals, individuals must conform to a set of norms or obligations to help society flourish as a whole.⁵⁴ An individual must place societal needs above self-interest; failure to do so could prompt the society to ostracize the individual. Collectivist societies evaluate their good life predominantly through social well-being. These countries are usually found in the East such as Singapore.

The connections of the preferred approach to judging well-being to a type of society can be misleading because subjective and social well-being are not mutually exclusive approaches. Suh et al.'s study showed that people from individualist and collectivist societies do judge their good life subjectively, albeit according to different standards.⁵⁵ When judging the good life through subjective well-being, people from individualist societies look to emotions, whereas people from collectivist societies confirm whether they have met social norms. It appears as though subjective well-being for individuals from collectivist societies is synonymous with social well-being.

Although Suh et al.'s studies show that people from collectivist societies tend to judge the good life by how well they meet social norms, it is incorrect to say that they do so more than people from individualist societies. The values in individualist societies, such as freedom, individuality, personal achievement, are themselves social norms. Ng et

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

al. call the sets of norms in a society a cultural complex.⁵⁶ Because individuals practice norms on a daily basis, it is rare that individuals overtly acknowledge the cultural complex in their respective societies. Nonetheless, a cultural complex exists in all societies and it informs individuals of their conception of the good life:

Just as people cannot live in a general way but must of necessity live in some set of culture-specific ways, a person cannot “be well” in a general way. Instead, well-being is very much a collaborative project, which requires one to participate in a *cultural complex* and attune oneself to the system of consensual understandings and shared practices in a certain cultural community.⁵⁷

Even in individualist societies, people believe their conception of the “good life” is personal because individuality is valued in their society. The cultural complex in individualist societies emphasizes freedom and individuality as the good life. Therefore, by freely making decisions and emphasizing one’s authenticity, people from individualist societies are promoting the cultural complex. In contrast, the cultural complex in collectivist societies does not value individual freedoms. Based on this information, it appears that people from both societies determine their subjective well-being in part based on how well they can meet social norms. The cultural complex explains the tensions between East and West and clarifies the two-way relationship between social and subjective well-being.

The concept of a cultural complex helps explain why Singaporeans are happy despite their lack of freedoms. A study by Keng and Hooi shows that a slight majority of Singaporean respondents report life satisfaction.⁵⁸ Singaporean respondents who reported low life satisfaction most often reported low living standards such as low income and

⁵⁶ Aik Kwang Ng, David Ho, Shyn Shin Wong, and Ian Smith, “In Search of the Good Life: A Cultural Odyssey in the East and West,” *Genetic, Social, and General Psychology Monographs* 129, no. 4 (2003).

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 324.

⁵⁸ Keng and Hooi, 80.

low-income housing, but those respondents consisted of a very low percentage of total respondents.⁵⁹ In Tambyah et al.'s study, most Singaporean respondents rate their standard of living from "average" to "relatively high".⁶⁰ Additionally, the study by Tambyah et al. shows Singaporeans do not place a high value on characteristics that are associated with individualistic freedoms.⁶¹ Thus, even though Singaporeans may have restrictions in their freedom, it appears they do not care for the individualistic freedoms. Instead, a high rating of quality of life depended on their relationships and housing.⁶² These conclusions are consistent with the cultural complex in Singapore which does not include individual freedoms, but includes harmony, order, and wealth.

The PAP and "Soul making"

The cultural complex limits the availability of norms in a society that individuals may adopt. This "adoption" process is similar to what Appiah refers to as "identification". Identification is "the process through which individuals shape their projects – including their plans for their own lives and their conceptions of the good life – by reference to available labels, available identities".⁶³ Using social well-being as a way to determine one's good life is appropriate only to the extent that one identifies with his or her society's cultural complex.

Government is involved in shaping a society's cultural complex as well as influencing an individual's identification with the cultural complex. Appiah explains that

⁵⁹ Ibid., 84

⁶⁰ Tambyah et al., 348.

⁶¹ Ibid., 350.

⁶² Ibid., 372.

⁶³ Appiah, 66.

the state does have an impact on identity formation in the way in which individuals construct their good life which he refers to as “soul making”:

By “soul making” I mean the project of intervening in the process of interpretation through which each citizen develops an identity – and doing so with the aim of increasing her chances of living an ethically successful life. My particular focus here will be on soul making as a *political* project, something done by the state, and so it will be important to distinguish between different ways in which the state may affect my ethical life.⁶⁴

The policies and rhetoric that the state promotes can be soul making if an individual’s identity is altered as a result. An example of such policy that affects one’s identity would be civil education. Courses in public education that teach children the importance of democracies or civil virtues are said to “soul make” them to value democratic rights. If an individual’s identity is not altered as a result of the policies or rhetoric, soul making has not occurred (e.g. seat belt safety laws).

There are several policies and programs that show the PAP’s attempts at “soul making” so that Singaporeans are indifferent to individual freedoms and submissive to its will. The PAP government presents the official history, or “Singapore Story,” with a predominant theme of economic freedom while actively downplaying the political freedom component in order to legitimize control over Singaporeans.⁶⁵ Even after becoming an independent nation and thereby obtaining “freedom” from control the British in 1963 and from Malaysia in 1965, the PAP government chose to deemphasize freedoms so as to continue a similar authority like their former British colonizers.⁶⁶ When Singaporeans look to their history, as presented by the PAP government, they see one that emphasizes economic progress. Singaporeans will interpret political freedoms as being an

⁶⁵ C.J.W.-L. Wee, “Mediating ‘Progress’: the National Narrative of Economic Development and Liberalism in Singapore,” *Communal/Plural* 9, vol. 2(2001): 227

⁶⁶ Ibid.

unnecessary and perhaps “un-Singaporean” part of their identity since it was not a part of their history. Additionally, Singaporeans are led to believe that it is necessary for them to negotiate their rights and accept oppression for the sake of economic growth.⁶⁷

Through regulatory laws, the PAP government actively attempts to make Singaporeans to be obedient to authority. Like other nations, Singapore has many regulatory laws instructing Singaporeans on what not to do. For example, Singaporeans are told not to chew gum, do drugs, smoke, litter, etc. Unlike some other nations, the PAP has tied extreme punishments to these laws that are constantly enforced. For example, drug trafficking is punishable by death. Although the PAP government could justify these policies by arguing these laws are necessary to shape the rational thinking of individuals, it can be seen more as training Singaporeans to be obedient to authority or suffer the consequences.⁶⁸ Thus, through their everyday behavior, Singaporeans they consciously avoid punishment by being obedient to the government in order to avoid its possible wrath.

The PAP promotes multiracialism and common values to concurrently promote social order and weaken potential opposition. Two notable campaigns are the National Ideology (1988) and the Maintenance of Religious Harmony (1990) proposals. Although created for the purpose of exposing common values, these proposals were also necessary to preempt the formation of opposition to the PAP government along ethnic or religious lines.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ B.H. Chua, “Not Depoliticized but Ideologically Successful: The Public Housing Programme in Singapore,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 15 vol. 1(1991): 29.

⁶⁸ Aik Ng, *Why Asians Are Less Creative Than Westerners* (Singapore: Prentice Hall, 2001), 156-157.

⁶⁹ David Brown, “The Corporatist Management of Ethnicity in Contemporary Singapore,” in *Singapore Changes Guard*, ed. Gary Rodan (New York: St. Martin Press, 1993), 25.

Similar to the early proposals, the PAP government has proposed a “Shared Values” doctrine which informs Singaporeans of the values they all share as a nation. However, societal values can only be conceived by society if individuals have substantive freedoms.⁷⁰ Therefore, the PAP government assumes the role of society by promoting the values. Economic progress naturally brings external social values via globalization. Thus, the PAP’s recent attempts at instilling national values could be seen as their attempts to stop foreign values, particularly Western ones, from invading Singapore.⁷¹

However, it is possible that the PAP has enough legitimacy from its unmatched economic growth that in itself it could be enough to keep Singaporeans obedient to its authority, even without its attempts to “soul make” them. The PAP government has appropriately taken credit for the maintenance and continuance of economic growth. The economic wealth has given the PAP much legitimacy in continuing to pursue a “pragmatic” strategy.⁷² As long as Singapore’s economy is good and the lives of the citizens are fine, there is no need to voice a dissenting opinion against a government that works.

This is not to say that Singaporeans agree entirely with the PAP’s policies. There are some government actions that Singaporeans dislike, although they do not submit formal complaints. For example, some Singaporeans have reported unhappiness with the government’s manipulation of local cultures for the benefit of tourism.⁷³ The PAP government’s unilateral decisions to move or demolish religious buildings has caused

⁷⁰ Sen, 110.

⁷¹ John Clammer, “Deconstruction Values: the Establishment of a National Ideology and its Implications for Singapore’s Political Future,” in *Singapore Changes Guard*, ed. Gary Rodan (New York: St. Martin Press, 1993), 48.

⁷² Chua. 28.

⁷³ T.C. Chang and Brenda Yeoh, “‘New Asia-Singapore’: communicating local cultures through global tourism,” *Geoforum* 30 vol. 2(1999): 114.

distress within religious communities, however, most end rationalize state action by looking to other religious objects or rituals.⁷⁴ If there are complaints about the PAP or the increase in foreign talent, Singaporeans keep it to themselves and their friends.⁷⁵

Although they do not agree, Singaporeans do not wish to voice their opinion because they value consensus, they are afraid of repercussions, or they do not care to voice opposition to a government that works.

Nonetheless, removing some limits on individual freedoms may only benefit the PAP's stability as the dominating party in the Singapore government, not necessarily Singaporeans. Substantive freedoms are necessary for individuals to voice their needs. Although the PAP has sufficiently addressed most Singaporeans' major concerns since obtaining independence from the Malaysian Federation, it could begin to falter in addressing current concerns. As stated previously, the PAP government's economic policies are not exclusive to authoritarian regimes. These policies could also be passed in a democracy. However, because the PAP government does not promote substantive freedoms and relies on PAP leaders to produce good economic policy making, there is more of a risk that the wrong person(s) could be in charge and ruin the economy through bad decision-making or corruption as was the case in Singapore before the PAP took office.

Additionally, the obsession with economic growth could cause the PAP to lose focus on the Singaporean population. Due to the recession, the PAP government has been trying new approaches in continuing its dominance in economic growth. It has changed

⁷⁴ Lily Kong, "Negotiating conceptions of 'sacred space': a case study of religious buildings in Singapore," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 18, vol. 3(1993): 349.

⁷⁵ Yao, 121. See Chapter 6 of Yao's book for a description of "talking cock" in Singapore as a way of releasing anger about the PAP government while eating with friends.

its stance on casinos and allowed the opening of two in order to increase tourism and create job opportunities. It has also focused its attention in the last couple of years on research and development, particularly biotechnology.⁷⁶ This strategy, too, is also focused on fostering economic growth although there is a strong emphasis on foreign talent.⁷⁷ Already, Singaporeans have shown signs of concern over foreigners taking their jobs.⁷⁸ When Singaporeans ask for help, the PAP government is quick to blame the recent influx of foreign talent on the Singaporeans' lack of competitiveness.

Although the PAP is looking to pull Singapore out of the recession, their actions with regard to welfare and Singaporeans who are struggling are the same: that it is their own fault.⁷⁹ This displacement of blame from government to the individual has been a hallmark of the PAP government, one that protects them from accusations of ineffective governing. Currently, the PAP may have insulation from anger with the welfare system since these Singaporeans are a minority, but as the recession progresses, the opposition to the PAP's methods could grow.

Conclusion

It has been shown that the values associated with Singaporean happiness are influenced by PAP government actions. Their happiness is based on consensus and material wealth which is supported by Singapore's constant success in economic growth. Despite PAP rhetoric that authoritarian rule is necessary for economic growth; the PAP's economic policy choices are not exclusive to authoritarian governments. Nonetheless,

⁷⁶ Bellows, 249-250; Peter Engardio, "Research Parks for the Knowledge Economy," *Bloomberg BusinessWeek*, June 1, 2009, http://www.businessweek.com/innovate/content/jun2009/id2009061_849934.htm (accessed June 1, 2009).

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ The Economist.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

Singaporeans for the most part have stable utilitarian well-being. They are generally happy about their conditions, even with minimal individual rights, because the value of individual rights is not included in their cultural complex.

PAP's stability in power is made possible by its continuing ability to promote economic growth. Its citizens are content with having good material well-being without substantive rights. However, it is unclear how much longer this model of stability can continue since Singaporeans are showing some reluctance to accept PAP policies in full. If the PAP leaders were to make a poor economic policy decision, it could cause a significant backlash by Singaporeans who have been obedient to the PAP because of their successes. Thus, the enhancement of substantive freedoms for Singaporeans could only be beneficial for the PAP government as they look to reverse the effects of the current recession.

Since the relation between authoritarian policies and economic growth is unclear, we need to perform more economic research to discover if there is a causal relation between the two. Additionally, we need to perform more sociological and psychological research regarding Singaporeans' feelings towards the PAP government, whether it is favorable, neutral, or unfavorable, and the reasons for their feelings. The answers to these two questions could further determine if the PAP's actions are unjust, as its critics tend to think.

Nonetheless, conceptions of the good life are a product of social values and are influenced by government actions. Governments can involve themselves in the creation of social values in order to promote a specific conception of the good life for the purpose of preserving their government power. As long as individuals enjoy utilitarian well-being,

it is unclear whether this government involvement in the construction of conceptions of the good life is wrong or right.