



# **A fun problem? The history and limits of the governance of fun in Singapore**

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## **Abstract**

This paper presents a critical review of the Singapore government’s treatment of “fun” since independence in 1965. It asks why “fun” has been such an important question for the city-state throughout its history. It argues that governmental approaches to “fun” inform a modality of spatial governance that seeks to organize the relationship between the topography of the city-state and the body of the citizen so as to ensure the security of the former while generating the well-being and productivity of the latter. By tracing the history of the governance of fun through various state-led strategies—which we organize roughly in overlapping categories of sport and wellness, redevelopment and consumption, and citizen productivity—we consider how various initiatives aim to generate fun as a bounded activity, encouraging specific behaviors that take place in specific spaces at designated times. Although these efforts to produce fun have taken a variety of forms across the last fifty years, we note that they often run counter to the heterogeneous, spontaneous, auto-poetic, and often transgressive possibilities inherent in fun, paradoxically constraining many of the funseeking impulses of many Singaporeans. Thus, the management of fun creates a friction that encourages its own transgression. We suggest that future engagements with fun require more grounded ethnographic approaches to understand the complex interrelationship between state-led notions of fun and those auto-generated by citizens themselves.

## Keywords

Fun; Singapore; governance; state-society relations, politics

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## Introduction: A Fun Problem

The creation of fun has been one of the key aims of the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) since the country separated from Malaysia and gained independence in 1965 (Zhang and Yeoh 2017). In this paper we explore the tension between the affective dimensions of fun and the long-term, deep investments the Singaporean state has made in fun in the last fifty years. We introduce three broad, often, overlapping targets of fun initiated by the PAP—sport and wellness, accumulation and consumption, and citizen productivity—to illustrate the tension between the state's vision of managed fun and fun's more unruly affective qualities, often those that are invoked as desirable by Singaporeans themselves. Across these state interventions we show how the management of space and time has been a cornerstone of these different visions of state-led fun. In short, the state production of fun aims to funnel ludic activity in particular ways, within prescribed spaces, at particular times. We argue that this work of generating fun thus finds itself in an inescapable tension with fun's more creative, emergent, and autopoietic qualities. We touch on a few examples below of how Singapore's citizenry transgresses these institutional parameters of fun with their own creative energy.

Due to its cleanliness, efficiency, and high quality of life, Singapore is consistently ranked at the top of best places in the world to live. The PAP is regularly lauded for achieving these societal benefits for its population as the city-state has become regarded as a “model city” within Asia and beyond (Chua 2011, 35). When discussing the city, superlatives and accolades pile up: the country's government is largely claimed to be responsible for its position as an “elite” city (Pow 2011), it is a top international travel destination (Bergman 2015) and it is regarded as the best city in the world for doing business (Economist 2015). Nevertheless, the city-state also carries with it a persistent international reputation for being corporate and staid. This perception disregards both the proliferation of leisure spaces in Singapore and seriousness with which the PAP has sought to address fun as a direct target of state policy (e.g. Zhang and Yeoh 2017). Our primary aim is to assess fun in a historical fashion in order to make sense of the parameters of these state conceptualizations of fun, highlighting the particularity of the shifting contours of the governance of fun and suggesting where the boundaries and limits of Singapore's fun project lie. To do this, we explore a mixture of policy initiatives, moments, narrative slogans, strategies, taglines, and spaces (both public and private) to illustrate our point.

The secondary aim of this paper lies in distinguishing between state-led fun and the diversities of fun prevalent among the population. While this paper is a review and not an empirically-led research article, we do identify some examples of localized, unstructured fun to signal future research possibilities for studying everyday fun in Singapore. We believe a serious ethnographic inquiry into localized and situated strategies of fun-seeking is long overdue because it would no doubt shatter the broad sense of Singaporeans as docile subjects of an all-powerful nanny state, revealing the ways in which citizens produce their own spaces and times of action within the complex terrains of leisure and diversion presented to them.

This paper has five sections. Reflecting our complementary disciplinary backgrounds, the next section outlines the intersection of “fun” in anthropology and geography. In particular, we build on Johan Huizinga's classic conceptual work on play (1949) and Victor Turner's notion of *communitas* (1969), bringing them into conversation with recent geographical research conducted on the political aspects of play (Teo and Neo 2017; Woodyer 2012; Moser 2010), enjoyment (Kingsbury 2005),

happiness (Ballas and Dorling 2013), and pleasure (Bell, et al. 2001). Subsequently we describe Singapore's efforts to govern leisure, recreation, and well-being. We link the government's historical focus on sport, wellness, and consumption to some contemporary aspects of Singaporean society. Although the fun problem may appear esoteric, ephemeral, and trivial to "real" problems in society, we argue in the conclusion that fun has broad and important implications for understanding current debates about democratizing Singapore as it enters something of a transitional phase in the wake of the 2015 passing of former Prime Minister and "founder" of the nation Lee Kuan Yew.<sup>1</sup>

### Geographies of fun

Anthropologist Johan Huizinga characterizes fun as "a concept that cannot be reduced to any other mental category" (1949, 3). Fun is a primary and irreducible part of life; it is the "essence of play" (*ibid*). Play, for Huizinga, is an important set of actions determined and demarcated by its independence from other categories of social being.

Fun, here, can be read as the least programmed, affective aspect of play. It is spontaneity, joy, amusement, and an intangible sense of being able to "let go." Fun is play at its most "anti-structural" (Turner 1967). So, although fun is related to play, it is not subsumed by it. Fun is both socially felt and deeply embodied. It is these embodied aspects of "fun" that drive its communal spirit linking people together in moments of *communitas* (Turner 1967). While fun can be a personalized, deeply embodied feeling it is also socially structured and embedded in broader cultural systems of meaning (e.g. Geertz 1973). Fun also draws actors together in agonistic relation, pitting them against each other in tense, but friendly competition (Edwards 2013). In simplest terms, we conceptualize fun as a socially structured but personalized sentiment that also drives interpersonal relationships and weaves people together in interesting and constructive ways.

The distinction we draw between fun and play is critical to understanding our argument. Both fun and play are often conceptualized as distinct from "ordinary life" because they are set apart in time and space from the everyday and thus subject to unique spatial and temporal logics. Indeed, there are special spaces for play and those which are ascribed as not being available for play, some of which are sanctioned, and many of which are not—playgrounds, tennis courts, ball fields, all come to mind, but so too should back alleys, bars, dance floors, and empty fields where fun and play might be configured despite existing constraints on those practices. As Huizinga puts it,

Summing up the formal characteristics of play we might call it a *free activity* standing quite consciously *outside* "ordinary" life as being "not serious", but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its *own proper boundaries of time and space* according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. ([emphasis added]1949, 13).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Mr Lee Kuan Yew was prime minister of the Republic of Singapore from before independence (1959) until he retired in 1990. His passing in early 2015 was seen by many as the death of Singapore's creator, its most famous citizen, and its most powerful political leader. His son, Mr Lee Hsien Loong, Singapore's current prime minister, regularly faces questions about his capacity to carry on the Singapore mantle through the Lee name.

<sup>2</sup> As a reader has pointed out to us, Huizinga's notion of fun also makes space for creative exploration without consequences. This reflects a close connection between freedom, fun, and creativity, which is relevant to Singapore's recent effort to rebrand itself as a creative city (see Ho 2009; Kong 2009; Luger 2016; Chang and Teo 2009).

In one sense, this definition of play points towards something very formalistic, narrow, or bounded—the playground, the ball field, and the card table all locate fun as arising within specific spaces and times apart from everyday life. Yet, Huizinga points out that play is always structured through its own logics. Caillois (1961) builds on this further, suggesting that games are “pure waste,” highlighting a kind of inherent tension between fun and productivity.

This conceptualization of the special bounded-ness of play produced significant push back within anthropology. Ehrmann, Lewis and Lewis (1968) argue that Huizinga’s view of play is both “too broad and too narrow” because it blurs distinctions between play and other forms of social activity, i.e., religion. Other criticisms have pointed out the way his theory of play is disconnected from situated contexts and therefore denies the practices roots in specific economic, social, and cultural contexts (see Malaby 2009). Indeed, Huizinga’s efforts to argue that play is distinct from profit is quite idealized; play, of course, can be subject to market logics and capital extraction. This emphasis on understanding the context of play has been central to anthropological engagements that explore the interplay between the specificity of play and its socio-cultural, economic, and political structures. Indeed, much of the anthropology of play endeavors to locate play within specific contours in specific places while also showing the broader ways in which games come to stand-in for something more serious (i.e. Jonsson 2000; Ortner 1999; Mulder 1997; Geertz 1973).

Noted “gaming” anthropologist Thomas Malaby divides anthropological approaches to play into three broader categories of emphasis: play as representing broader cultural forms, play as structured by material contingencies, and play as practiced (in the Bourdieusian sense) and thus a means of extending social structures but also opening up possibilities for resistance (2009, 201-3). These distinctions help explain why although it *seems* easy to create spaces for play as a means of promoting fun, whether such spaces prove to be fun or not is a rather different question.<sup>3</sup> Of course, structured activities like sport or dance can be fun but they are not always so. As Huizinga puts it, “Play to order is no longer play: it could at best be a forcible imitation of it” (1949, 7). The tension here is that fun and play can proceed in either parallel or orthogonal fashion. Indeed, the formalities of play can stifle fun, just as the sense of fun erupting from play can overflow, threatening the more formalistic, bounded qualities of play.

Fun, in this sense, reflects anthropologist Victor Turner’s (1969) notions of *communitas*, carrying with it profound anti-structural possibilities, remaking space and reconfiguring social actors in ways that defy established social ranks. Fun’s anti-structural tendencies manipulate dominant hierarchies, mock embedded power structures, and stretch or challenge the enactment of power (see also Stoller 1984; Handleman and Kapferer 1972). Fun, where it arises, brings with it the risks of “carnavalesque” (Bakhtin 1968) inversions and potentially dangerous unknown outcomes. Fun rescripts prescribed boundaries and produces its own unique, often, emergent topographies of practice; fun produces its own spaces and times.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> A final line of critique comes from feminist scholars of leisure and work who argue that women often work, in Hochschild and Machung (1989) words, “second shifts,” where home becomes another space of invisible labor transforming leisure time into work time. The time commitment required to work this “second shift” marks gendered distributions of time for play, leisure, and fun as particularly uneven (see Henderson 1991). Although we do not have space to explore this theme here, the kinds of close ethnographic encounters with actual funseeking we advocate for future research would no doubt offer crucial points of entry into understanding the gendered distributions of affective fun in places like Singapore and beyond.

<sup>4</sup> Consider how affective fun can transform the office or factory floor into spaces of fun.

Here, fun and politics start to reflect on one another in provocative ways (i.e. Edwards 2013): just as fun can transform workspaces into play spaces, politics can transform sites of everyday practice into spaces of political transformation. Consider, for example, how parks and greenspaces can shift from being sites of leisure and amusement into spaces of politics, as we have seen in uprisings at Gezi Park in Istanbul or Zuccotti Park in New York City.<sup>5</sup> Fun thus stands at the mercurial affective center of the ordering and disordering potential of play. Fun erupts at unexpected moments, which may or may not be formalized in “play”. Indeed, when work becomes fun, the latter often threatens to disrupt the productive aims of the former. Fun’s agonisms can quickly turn into antagonisms, revealing the danger of the anti-structural possibilities that are immanent to both fun and politics.

In contrast to the anthropological canon, the geographical handling of “fun” is haphazard and is generally exemplified through likeminded social geographical work on play (Moser 2010), happiness (Ballas and Dorling 2013), and pleasure (Bell, et al. 2001). Put simply, there is very little geographical research that engages with “fun” as a distinct category, with the possible exception of some recent research on ludic geographies and cognate psychoanalytic work on enjoyment (see Kingsbury 2011; Proudfoot 2010; Kingsbury 2005). Speaking to the latter first, Kingsbury’s work on soccer World Cup fandom in Vancouver assesses the intersection of nationalism and enjoyment through Zizek’s Lacanian inspired concept of “the national Thing”, which he describes as evoking “giddy feelings of pleasure and pain, inaccessibility and suffocation, attraction and repulsion” (2011, 718). Kingsbury follows the emotional ups and downs of fans supporting their favorite soccer/football national teams to lay claim to the production of nationhood through enjoyment. Scholarship on ludic geographies, or playful geographies, stresses that play is not the province of children nor should it be ignored in theorizing spatial politics and representations (e.g., Woodyer 2012). Instead play should be embraced because it generates “emotional, cognitive and physical development” (Woodyer 2012, 314) and because it challenges the belief that doing something that is pointless is a waste of time (*ibid.*).

In Southeast Asia, however, there is a more varied conceptual exposition of the contours of fun. Starting with Clifford Geertz’s (1973) famous examination of the Balinese cockfight, there is a history of work that explores the relationship between fun and politics. Jonsson (2001) has demonstrated the way play and fun were integral to the construction of uplands socio-political worlds in Northern Thailand. Moser’s (2010) work on the Indonesian government’s attempt to legitimize its regime through the introduction of ostensibly “fun” activities involving leisure and recreation overlaps with this paper’s focus on the state governance of fun. She frames the Indonesian government’s version of fun in terms of state-sponsored “improvements” to citizen’s bodies, specifically through local participation in activities like volleyball, badminton, and *takro*, a popular game played with one’s feet and a net in Southeast Asia (*ibid.*, 59-64). In Vietnam, the grounds surrounding a popular international tourist destination representing the destructive battles of the “American” war called the Cu Chi Tunnels are rearticulated by urban youth for billiards, food and drink, smoking, and listening to music (Schwenkel 2006, 18). While the Vietnamese state may wish to convey to tourists a sense of national unity over foreign aggression at the tunnels, Vietnamese youth claim to care less about the tunnels and instead appropriate the space for “love” and hanging out (*ibid.*, 18).

In Singapore, Terence Chong writes of the challenges presented to theatre practitioners when faced with what he calls the PAP’s “Janus-faced” embrace of “arts liberalization” and frequent censorial interventions in to the topics of performances (2011, 3). His analysis works the cultural

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<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Singapore’s own ‘Speakers Corner’ in Hong Lim Park has seen increasingly tight regulations on permitting and sponsorship of dissident events (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/12/13/singapore-laws-chill-free-speech-assembly>, accessed 20 May 2019).

capital accumulated by performers in to ongoing negotiations with the state over what is to be permitted in the final product on stage (*ibid.*). Chong writes that the fun enjoyed by audiences in Singapore is the result of a lot of work undertaken to accurately convey the topic and their creativity in realizing it. The intersection between performance energies and government managers speaks to the clashes over fun rippling through much of this manuscript.

Our engagement with fun in Singapore thus speaks to broader discussions about the relationship between affect, the production of urban space, and politics (Anderson and Holden 2008; Thrift 2004). If, as Thrift puts it, “[c]ities may be seen as rolling maelstroms of affect” (2004, 57), then understanding how modes of spatial governance understand and seek to channel affect in specific ways becomes essential to making sense of the political logics underpinning regimes of spatial management. As Michel Foucault has described, the control of space is fundamental to logics of discipline (1977) and the deployment of new regimes of governmentality (1991). By considering how the Singaporean government uses space to design, produce, and manage specific affective states (e.g., fun, productivity, excitement, well-being, efficiency, kindness) we aim to have provoke a deeper understanding of the ways affect becomes the subject of and subject to state intervention. We argue that rethinking this history of fun shows how specific affective states seem to defy governance, producing their own autonomous topographies.<sup>6</sup> Our treatment of fun is wedged between these two projects. By cleaving fun from Huizinga’s theoretical sketching of play, we follow its mercurial shadow against the backdrop of the PAP’s strategies to manage and produce fun within limits. Our aim is neither to adjudicate what others might find fun, nor is it to catalogue the varieties of fun Singaporeans (both citizen and non-citizen alike) engage in. Instead, we argue that fun is an affective force that the Singaporean government has shown a keen interest in over the last fifty years. By drawing attention here, we aim to show how fun places designs on and then often abandons space in an unpredictable and serendipitous manner that often defies fixed infrastructure and challenges logics of national management.

### **Recreation nation: Sport and wellness in Singapore**

Singapore’s identity was arguably shaped most forcefully through the arrangement and expansion of its state public housing project, the Housing Development Board (HDB), which assures housing for every Singaporean resident. As many have commented, this project came with a profound reorganization of resident lifeworlds away from the *kampong* and towards an urban life (e.g. Oswin 2010a; 2010b). In the wake of independence in 1965, the HDB became a critical node for Singapore’s modernizing aims, which were telegraphed through the demolition of these “kampong” villages and the relocation of the bulk of nation’s citizens into high-rise flats (Loh 2013; Chua 1995; Castells, Goh, and Kwok 1990). The HDB soon discovered that in respatializing the city-state in this way they were not only responsible for rehousing the vast majority of the state’s citizens but also for ensuring their health and well-being. Recreational spaces—parks, playgrounds, and sporting facilities—became central ways in which leisure and fun were imagined in the post-colony (Yuen 1995).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Kah-Wee Lee’s (2015) history of gambling and “popular illegality” in Singapore engages similar themes by focusing on the governance of vice in the city-state.

<sup>7</sup> The “Singapore story” in part reflects the broader historical links between developmentalist nation-building and recreation. Many post-colonial, developmentalist states in Southeast Asia mobilized sport to forge strong links between the nation and the body of the citizen. Thailand constructed a wide variety of sporting facilities to foster a healthy, male national subject (Chua 2012). The modernizing period in Cambodia also saw the construction of new sporting facilities in Phnom Penh (Grant Ross and Collins 2006). Due to its temperate climate, beautiful landscapes, and outdoor sporting activities, the Vietnamese government has transformed the French colonial hill station of Dalat in to the honeymoon capital

Narratives of this shift mention how the HDB system brought with it new sites of diversion. For example, a blogger narrates the shift in how he grew up playing in the kampong and how his children grew up finding diversion in the void deck:

At Bukit Ho Swee as a young boy in the kampong, my buddies and I spent most of our playtime in the wild, wild playground space...even the landlord's grandfather who died and (is) buried in the graveyard behind the house. We children were running over the old man's body buried under the ground, and he doesn't seem to be offended and did not want to frighten us as disrespectful.... When my daughter and son grew up at Clementi, they have child memories of void deck so different from the kampong where I grew up at Bukit Ho Swee...The children enjoy at the void deck to play games, group study together with the neighbours and made friends [sic].<sup>8</sup>

The shift from “wild playground” spaces to the void deck within the confines of public housing marks the significance of how the HDB system transformed the terrain of play and fun. Narrated here in terms of the close relationship between the living and the dead, the author marks a critical textural shift from the unstructured play spaces of existing forestland to the semi-structured spaces available within the HDB complex, like the void deck.<sup>9</sup>

“Wild” kampong fun stands in contrast to the creation of spaces for outdoor activities such as football (soccer), swimming, cycling, running, and walking that not only enabled citizens space for recreation but also aimed at improving their productivity and enriching the nation simultaneously. In post-independence Singapore sport was seen as especially essential to the production of self-reliant, tough citizens (Horton 2013: 1230). Because of this, the government made large investments in the development of the island’s recreational spaces. Between 1967 and 1982, for example, the total amount of open space for recreation doubled from 709 hectares to 1725 hectares (Yuen 1995, 245). These open spaces were primarily used for association football, or soccer, which remains the country’s most popular player-sport today (Horton 2001, 95). During roughly the same period the number of sporting facilities quintupled from 33 to 166 (Yuen 1995, 250). For Singapore, “sport was to be an agent of social engineering in the creation of the new nation” (Horton 2002, 246) with traditionally expatriate clubs like the Tanglin Club and the Singapore Cricket Club “now required to have a specific percentage of local members” (*ibid.*). In a newly established country, sport was thought to be a crucial piece of fabric unifying people of different religious and ethnic backgrounds together.

If the state was busy working fun in to its nation-building programme through sport and wellness in the 1960s and 1970s, older Singaporeans today often link possibilities for fun during that period with thoughts of rebellion and transgression. With more than a hint of nostalgia inflecting their comments, Singaporeans of a certain age regularly (and fondly) recall the “good old days” of relative lawlessness in the country when gangsters (*pai kia*), prostitution, gambling, and even drugs were thought to be commonplace (Ferzacca forthcoming).<sup>10</sup> Kah-Wee Lee (2017; 2015; 2012) echoes this

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of the country (Jennings 2012). The Communist leadership in Laos has generalized sport as a set of masculinized, civilized behaviors crucial to the development of the nation (Creak 2015).

<sup>8</sup> <http://blogtoexpress.blogspot.co.nz/2012/02/childhood-memories-of-void-deck.html>, accessed 11 May 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Ironically, in 2016 the openness of the void deck came under threat when as neighbourhood boards installed railings to prevent residents from playing football. <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/housing/void-deck-railings-to-stop-ball-games>, accessed 11 May 2019.

<sup>10</sup> The PAP popularizes elderly Singaporeans in contemporary society as the “pioneer generation”, venerating them with an important stake in Singapore’s growth and political legitimacy.

characterization, describing how gambling during this period was ubiquitous in Singapore.<sup>11</sup> Other longtime residents decry the country's rampant land reclamation and corresponding destruction of the beach and leisure areas where they came of age (Jamieson 2017).

The low birth rate of today's Singapore is often narrated by Singaporeans as being the result of associated shifts: overwork, the desire for material comfort (more on this below), expense (children in Singapore are often explained to be too expensive for lower-, middle-, and even upper-class Singaporeans to raise), more professional opportunities for women, and a "correction" to the early years of independence when Singaporeans were producing too many children for the country to adequately sustain (Tan 2003). Some older generations remark that there was more freewheeling attitude in the early days of Singaporean sovereignty, with clubs, bars, dance halls, "T-dances"—popular among non-drinkers and drinkers alike—as spaces where Singaporeans met friends and lovers in a more open fashion (i.e Kong 2006, 105). In 1970, Sunday afternoon T-dances were banned because they were seen as "bad for the character of teenagers," (Straits Times 4 Jan 1970, quoted in Kong 2006, 105). Kong argues that this was part of a larger "moral panic" that linked the city's music scene with immoral behavior like sex, drugs, and violence. The results of this have not been the end of music, of course, but new regimes of management which seek to control the effects of different kinds of music by regulating where they are performed and their effects on the body (Ferzacca forthcoming).

These histories reveal how the pursuit of fun in early Singapore drew upon more open forms of sociality which were subsequently targeted for moral reform not by doing away with fun, but by finding ways to manage it and its effects spatially. While the PAP and its infrastructural ambitions targeted use of space to organize fun within specific boundaries—the playing field, the playground, and the ball court—older residents highlighted the kinds of serendipitous sociality and transgressive interactions that flourished amidst a weaker and less organized state in the early days of nationhood. Of course, this nostalgia papers over significant disparities within the landscape of fun that cuts across gendered, class, and racial lines. Nevertheless, such memories are worth noting as a way of reflecting on the affective landscape of the city-state in its early days. Still in its infancy, there was considerable space between state projects aiming to produce fun and the ways in which actual citizens described their own funseeking activities. Funseeking during this early period of statehood demonstrates how the population was not merely waiting for the creation of new infrastructures, but actively engaged in the creation of fun on their own terms.

### **Developing consumer fun**

As Singapore emerged as an industrial, financial, and trade hub in the region and later the world, Singaporean leisure activities became an important topic of state sponsored social science research. For example, in 1990 two sociologists began a cross-island study to statistically assess the type, interest in, and engagement with various sorts of leisure choices, modes of recreation, and cultural activities (Ho and Chua 1995). They phrased the rationale for studying recreation in this way: "As Singapore continues to enjoy sustained economic growth, the accompanying increase in the standard of living will inevitably translate into increase in rates of active and passive participation in cultural, social and leisure activities" (Ho and Chua 1995, 4). The study reflects a complex relationship between economic growth and leisure: increased standards of living produced both a greater demand for leisure and increased leisure was understood to improve economic growth. The study explored how taste preferences and levels of engagement in different activities diverged along class, age, gender, and

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<sup>11</sup> Lee (2017) argues that despite efforts to control gambling and to channel it into new spaces, it never actually disappeared from Singapore as a popular form of leisure.

ethnic lines in the aim of making a case for a much broader state effort to expand the range of leisure possibilities and cultural enrichment across Singapore. As a historical document, the study also showed the kinds of careful attention being paid to issues of leisure and wellbeing by the PAP and its ministries as the economy expanded and the city transformed. While that study focused on the city, economic growth played out in the production of leisure at another scale: the body, very often through personal consumption. As fun emerged as part of an urban redevelopment strategy aimed at achieving “global city” status (Chang, Huang, and Savage 2004) consumption was used as a strategy aimed at supplying Singaporeans with a fun life and as a means of attracting foreign visitors.

In this section we highlight the relational nature of redevelopment and consumption where aspirations toward global city status have meant appealing to an international type of consumer while localized consumption strategies translate into the cultivation of new kinds of bodies and identities for Singaporeans. From the perspective of urban redevelopment, Singapore has been marked by the acceleration and singularity of reclaimed land to facilitate the country’s urban redevelopment plans (Jamieson 2017). In the late 1980s, the PAP gave orders to clean the Singapore River, a waterway formerly considered “polluted” and dangerous, in order to transform the area into an entertainment and leisure hub. In its aim to make Singapore more fun for wealthy people both local and foreign, this initiative included forcibly removing local residents who lived and/or worked on the river (Chang and Huang 2005; Savage, Huang, and Chang 2004).

According to research on the river’s redevelopment, the project effectively redrew the boundaries of fun along class lines. Chang, et al. write that “the drive to capture a moneyed clientele means that more pubs, restaurants, and shops are forsaking what may be described as the “heartlander Singaporean” in favor of the “cosmopolitan Singaporean”” (Chang, Huang, and Savage 2004, 425).

In Singapore, “heartlander” refers to someone with multifaceted links to the nation: a person who lives in an HDB unit, who is a “born and bred” or “true blue” Singaporean (to use local Singaporean parlance), who likely works in a small business, and, if they are ethnically Chinese, may speak “dialect” at home (typically Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, or Hakka). They are typically the kind of person who spends their public consumption time at coffee shops or hawker centres where food and drink is modestly priced, there is (only) outdoor seating, and people sit around “talking cock” (speaking a masculinized form of rubbish, embellishment, or gossiping, see Velayutham 2009). In contrast, the riverfront was remade to attract “cosmopolitan Singaporeans” whose tastes may run closer to the central business district area’s high-end gastronomic attractions. Accordingly, venues around the river are dominated by the English language, visitors and culinary options come from all over the world, there is *al fresco* and air-conditioned seating, and alcohol prices are steep. The river is developed in order to be a space for fun to be enjoyed by wealthy consumers, further marginalizing “heartlanders” to the urban fringes of the country.

Such distinctions were not lost on many Singaporeans. As one heartlander named Lee observed, “We hope the government will allocate a place to us here, that they will give us a place to sit and drink tea ... In the past, you can do anything you like [at the river]. Now, you can’t do that, they’ll [impose a] fine [on] you for everything, from smoking to spitting. Everything requires money, so it’s not so good in our eyes. The only good point is that the river is cleaner now” (quoted in Chang, et al. 2004: 426). Lee’s comments highlight the way in which expanding consumption-based leisure activities for some meant constriction for others. This constriction was not simply a result of an increase in consumption, but rather a much broader restructuring of the affective logics of space along the river. Redevelopment simultaneously opened the area to a new category of user and restricted the sorts of autopoietic possibilities of spatial production previously given over to the funseekers who had gathered there before.

This project reflected the shifting opportunities and challenges surrounding everyday practices and imaginations of fun in the 1980s and 1990s. While we are not necessarily equating the accumulation of consumer goods as a measure of fun in one's life, we do flag how material consumption became a powerful aspect of Singaporean leisure time during this period. The pursuit of the so-called "Five C's"—car, (credit) card, country club (membership), cash, and condominium—became a new ideal among the emerging middle and upper classes. These "Five C's" were not simply in demand because they made life easier or more pleasurable for people but stood out as markers of identity in the midst of a rapidly transforming society. In another sense, the "Five C's", however tongue in cheek, also reflected some desire to escape from state-led models of fun outlined in the previous section (HDB established exercise areas, usage of public parks, etc.). Access to private luxury, both provided new possibilities for leisure and also highlighted class identity. The purchase of a condominium, for example, represented a way to live outside of the HDB sphere, thereby demonstrating one's financial distinction from much of the Singaporean population and political separation from the state (Chua 2003, 10).

In this context the figures of the "ah beng" (male)/"ah lian" (female) emerged, extending the new embrace of consumer identities, while also decoupling the relationship between consumption and status. Particularly Singaporean Chinese, these twin characters epitomized a certain kind of "devil may care" attitude toward the rising wealth that contrasted with the buttoned-up outlook of mainstream Singapore (Chua 2003, 10-1). In Chua's description, the class-laden stereotypes of ah beng/ah lian emphasize their poor education and weak English, ostentatious dress, and their profligate smoking and drinking. According to these tropes, ah beng/ ah lian generally behave in ways that fly in the face of propriety and good taste. However, in doing so, they embrace the possibilities of consumer lifestyles, but tweak them, over-applying their make-up, mobilizing the wrong status symbols, and overenthusiastically displaying consumer possibilities. As stereotypes, they are in Chua's words, "loud" and "in the realm of "bad taste"" (Chua 2003, 10) and their ideas of fun appear to be developed through working class and blue-collar positions. While their goal may not be overt disobedience, the stereotypes challenge the established links between fun and consumption in ways that push against conventional norms of acceptability. Not unlike stereotypes like the "chav" in England or the "cashed-up-bogan" in Australia (see Pini, McDonald, and Mayes 2012), ah beng/ah lian reflect class anxieties surrounding the upward mobility of the working classes by highlighting the ways that prescribed forms of consumer leisure are transforming outside in ways that unseat more conventional the ideals like those embodied in the "Five C's."

Both the project to redevelop the Singapore River and the class tensions surrounding norms of consumer respectability embodied in emerging stereotypes like ah beng/ ah lian emphasize the kinds of contestations that have played out underneath the Singaporean government's efforts to use the market to expand possibilities for leisure while at the same-controlling the affective unruliness of fun. Even as the state has carefully attended to the expansion of leisure possibilities, many of these projects were bifurcated and managed in ways that paradoxically extend the city-state's reputation as strictly regulated. News about fines and corporal punishment for spitting, gum-chewing, and vandalism contributed in the 1980s and 1990s to a persistent global imagination of Singapore as, among other things, "boring".

This perception was so strong that in his 1999 Singapore national day speech, then Prime Minister Goh Chock Tong extolled PAP-created entertainment spaces as one of his administration's notable successes. With a hint of defensiveness, he suggested that the successful transformation of Singapore's reputation from boring to cool, reflects the government's intentions to produce fun:

"Time magazine, better known for criticizing Singapore for being a sterile, authoritarian nanny state that bans chewing gum and canes Michael Fay, now swoons over Singapore

being ‘funky’ London’s Financial Times in a July supplement coos over ‘cool Singapore.’ I am amused that they are surprised over the change. Had they read Vision 1999 which we outlined long ago, they would have discovered that we had every intention to make Singapore a fun place.”<sup>12</sup>

The contradictions in this statement reflect, rather precisely, our arguments in this section, showcasing the meticulousness and intention revolving around the production of new spaces for fun and consumption that directly address concerns over Singapore’s reputation as un-fun. Prime Minister Goh attributes the appearance of fun in Singapore to the state’s planning initiatives. He congratulates the government’s efforts for predicting and responding to changing global trends, including corrections to gaps in its own development plans and explicitly chides news outlets from the West for underestimating the government’s interest and ability in transforming the city-state and its reputation. Interestingly, the statement effectively erases everyday Singaporeans’ contribution to its “newfound” coolness or funkiness.

In a coda to his remarks, Prime Minister Goh continued his national day speech by stating: “Singapore should be a fun place to live. People laugh at us for promoting fun so seriously. But having fun is important. If Singapore is a dull, boring place, not only will talent not want to come here, but even Singaporeans will begin to feel restless” (Zhang and Yeoh 2017, 12). For Prime Minister Goh, Singaporean fun is, in the first place, used as a lure to attract foreign talent and, in the second, necessary to manage potential restlessness among the citizenry.

What does the reconceptualization of fun in Singapore along consumer lines mean? The shifts we describe here illustrate that while the city-state continued to offer a broad range of shared public resources for leisure, the expansion of the market economy and attendant spaces of luxury transformed regimes of fun, merging funseeking with increasingly consumption-focused activities. In doing so, fun was loosened, but not disconnected, from the strictures of the state. Although the market opened up possibilities for new forms of leisure, these practices were implicitly and explicitly divided along class lines. Moreover, the government remained a critical actor in the remaking of the cityscape for consumption practices. Although wealthier classes were afforded greater latitude to chart their own fun, less wealthy Singaporeans found themselves increasingly caught between the state’s leisure initiatives and the restricted openness afforded by spaces of consumption (like high-end shopping malls). Thus, consumer versions of fun were no less enframed in space and time from previous iterations of fun, even though topographies of luxury consumption enabled new ways to experience leisure, provided one could afford them. Within these market spaces where fun and freedom began to coincide they did so in individualized, private, and largely class-biased ways. Alternatively, there were multiple activities and sites of fun that resisted or at least challenged these prescriptions, only one of which, the project of being “ah beng”/“ah lian”. These multiplicities often either fall outside of or are framed in opposition to official versions of fun in Singapore.

### **Making fun productive for Singaporeans**

In the contemporary era, state notions of fun continue to center on the idea that the state’s overriding interest is in the creation of a productive population. Increasingly, this goal is cast via the language of creativity. Revenue generation through tourism receipts is also of paramount importance to

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<sup>12</sup> “First-World Economy, World-Class home.” Goh Chock Tong’s National Day Rally Speech, 1999: <http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/speeches/view-html?filename=1999082202.htm>. Accessed 11 May 2019.

such emerging practices. In the more Singaporean specific sites and practices, fun state discourses frame fun as a means of shaping an individualized, economically minded citizen-producer for the nation. In this section we focus on the ways contemporary discourses of fun and leisure in Singapore intersect with projects of marketing the city's ethnic enclaves as distinct sites of Singaporean identity and as modes of fostering productive creativity.

Central to emerging strategies of labeling the cityscape as fun are the various ethnic neighborhoods which have been rebranded to facilitate financial revenue through "heritage districts" clustered around the downtown area—Chinatown, Kampong Glam (Malay), and Little India. These spaces are touted as cornerstones for tourists and Singaporeans to enjoy three of the four designated ethnic groups' culinary, entertainment, and lodging pleasures.<sup>13</sup> Non-citizens often make use of these city spaces in their own divergent ways that rub up against the sensibilities of many citizens.<sup>14</sup> Crucial to these revitalizations is the sense that a multicultural Singapore can preserve unique, non-overlapping, and spatially fixed ethnic heritages yet also keep them palatable and safe enough to be consumed by people of all backgrounds (Yeoh and Huang 1996). As of today, the Singapore Tourism Board heavily promotes these three neighborhoods as quintessentially "Singaporean" sites for overseas tourists, though recent crackdowns on activities ranging from shisha smoking to alcohol consumption have colored some of the leisure-related activities available to consumers (Menon 2016; Lim 2015).<sup>15</sup>

In a related vein, in recent times the state has constructed (often through land reclamation) large scale, "iconic" spaces for fun to occur, including the Esplanade theatre complex, museums such as the National Museum and the Asian Civilizations Museum, a hotel-casino "integrated resort" called Marina Bay Sands, and a nature park called Gardens by the Bay. The government also revamped a smaller island to the southwest of Singapore's main island called Sentosa as a high-priority leisure destination for locals and foreigners alike (Zhang and Yeoh 2017). The island includes a Universal Studios complex, a second hotel-casino facility, two golf courses, multiple hotels, beaches, bars, restaurants, entertainment and theatre venues, and a set of oceanfront enclaves housing the super-rich (Pow 2016).<sup>16</sup>

Singapore's leisure calendar is also replete with festivals and arts projects across the city, taking over spaces like the decommissioned Gillman Barracks and the former Supreme Court, which was turned into the Singapore National Gallery. The renovation transformed the courthouse into a multi-purpose gallery space complete with cafes, high-end bars and restaurants, and shops. The government has even created designated spaces for permitted street art and graffiti at \*SCAPE and along the Singapore Rail Corridor green space. Once again, these spaces segment the market according to different cultural and historical values, but taken together they showcase how tourism and fun intersect in ways that enhance the Singaporean economy. Though it is not unusual for a global city like Singapore to be very competitive with its tourism offerings, it is arguable that the intensity and extent

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<sup>13</sup> Uncoincidentally, the city's final "ethnic" group is comprised of a vast mix of citizen "others" (most prominently Eurasians) living in Singapore who collectively have no spatially distinct leisure area in Singapore (Chang and Huang 2011; Chang and Teo 2009; Chang and Huang 2005).

<sup>14</sup> Public controversies surrounding the uses of plazas in front of a shopping mall frequented by Filipina domestic workers or surrounding the 2013 Little India "riots" are reflective of these tensions.

<sup>15</sup> See <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/what-you-can-or-cannot-do-under-the-new-alcohol-law>, and <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/shisha-ban-takes-its-toll-on-eateries>, accessed 11 May 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Given the cost of having fun in Sentosa, Singaporeans quip that Sentosa stands for "So Expensive Nothing to See Also".

to which the PAP has grown Singapore's leisure sector is unsurpassed in Southeast Asia and beyond. Expanding the country's tourist offerings through expensive spatial infrastructural expansion is the PAP's way of both stabilizing the city's complex ethnic politics and also marketing these identities as a means of revenue generation. In an article about the intersection of fun and casino use in Singapore, Zhang and Yeoh argue that "through Singapore's city branding efforts, fun has been actively pursued, promoted, and rigorously regulated. Singapore's transformation into a "fun city" has been a state-orchestrated development project deemed pivotal to the city-state's economic survival since the 1990s" (2017, 5). Although our analysis suggests that the history of fun in the city-state is in fact deeper than depicted by Zhang and Yeoh, we nevertheless agree that the cultivation of affects of fun is absolutely essential to contemporary state projects.

The "rigorous regulations" surrounding casino use in Singapore offers a peek in to how the PAP conceptualizes fun for its citizens in an era of intense competition over "global city" status. One of the clearest ways in which the casino regulations speak to the differences between what the PAP believes is ethically sound fun for Singaporeans as compared to foreigners is the law surrounding casino entrance fees. In both casinos foreigners are welcome to enter for free with their passports but Singaporean citizens must pay a one hundred fifty Singaporean dollar entrance fee per visit or three thousand dollars annually to use either of the casino facilities. Prior to 2019, the fees used to be one hundred dollars per visit and two thousand dollars annually.

In an interview printed in the *Straits Times*, Singapore's primary print news outlet, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong (and son of former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew) explained his rationale for penalizing Singaporeans for gambling by saying,

My father...had opposed the idea of a casino in Singapore for many years, but the world changed, so we have to change too. But we think of ways to protect our people, to prevent them from spiralling down with gambling addiction....our fundamental method is, if Singapore citizens want to enter, they will pay \$100 per day to the government. This is a tax that one has to pay even before the start of gambling. As a result, there are Singaporeans who gamble, but not many, and the number is not increasing. Hence, 80 per cent of casino visitors are foreigners, that is our goal" (Straits Times 2014).

In building two massive casinos and instituting a gambling tax for national citizens, the PAP is making a statement about where the parameters of fun are for Singaporeans. Through these regulations there are clear results demanded from the casinos that have as much to do with Singaporean identity as they do with practices associated with fun (Lee 2017; 2015). While they are not required to uphold a higher standard of self-discipline toward gambling than other people in the world, Singaporeans are special in that they are protected by their government from the possibility of falling in to problems associated with having "too much fun" at a casino. Again we note, like Zhang and Yeoh (2017), the variegated topographies of the distribution of fun at the casino, but we also emphasize that such variegation is not unique to the casino floor but endemic to the city's embrace of class-based notions of fun evident in previous eras.

Outside of the large projects examined above, in recent years the Singapore government has also encouraged a more individualized set of recreational activities as a means of producing "fun" through forms of "adventure" and "creativity" (George 2000).<sup>17</sup> For example, adventure tourism

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<sup>17</sup> State discourses of creativity are mirrored in other spatial strategies such as those described in Zane Kripe's (2018) account of the transformation of Block 71 from a "flatted factory" into a tech-focused startup incubator.

programs supported and promoted by the PAP through the country's numerous community clubs provide an avenue for young Singaporeans to become "adventurer-citizens" through risk-taking outdoor activities (often undertaken overseas) that "re-create healthy bodies and minds" in the spirit of the country's original health-related initiatives of the Lee Kuan Yew era (Ong 2005, 174). These programs are an extension of the recreational spaces and facilities dotting HDB areas that we described above. Similarly, their mission is not aimless fun, but rather to create sites in which fun can be paired with team-building exercises that ask young people to trust in one another. To an even greater extent than previous efforts to produce funspaces as sites of enrichment, these activities for "adventurer-citizens" aim to build a sense of self-reliance and individualized set of competencies and strengths. Called "neoliberal" by Minca and Ong, these strategies are the state's way of shaping young people to become adept at economic uncertainty (2015, 160). In "championing flexible and adaptable workers capable of navigating and surviving treacherous economic conditions (with minimal state welfare support)" (*ibid.*, 160), the PAP is, according to these authors, "discretely minimizing the subjects' political awareness and assertiveness" (Minca and Ong 2015, 167). These organizations channel an economic but not political consciousness through activities associated with fun.

They also reflect, what Kong Chong Ho (2009) has described as a "mismatch" between the "unruliness" of practices like fun and creativity and the managerial outcomes that such policies hope to produce (see also Kong 2009). Indeed, as Ho argues, such policies often have unanticipated consequences, like producing new unsanctioned practices in the margins. Whether the turn towards "productive fun" will have the same effect, perhaps reframing fun as an end unto itself, remains to be seen.

### **The Poetics and Politics of Fun**

On a balmy Saturday night, the Read Bridge, which spans the Singapore River, is crowded with expats still wearing their clothes from the office. Amidst bustling Clarke and Boat Quays, areas of intense state investment in fun, a group of Singaporeans in their mid-twenties sit around singing along as a friend plays the guitar. Further on, a couple shares a meal and a laugh. A group of young women gather on the plaza across the bridge taking photos of each other. The bridge not only spans these distinct areas of fun production, but also becomes an affordance itself, a space in which the boundaries of state sponsored fun can be stretched and made into something amenable to the affective desires of a variety of funseekers.

The next day, Sunday, groups gather in clusters, spreading out across the lawns at the northern entrance to the Botanic Gardens. They transform the grounds into a picnic space, socializing, playing informal games and teasing each other. Laughter breaks the stillness of the tropical heat. Impromptu games of football, Frisbee, and cricket transform the normally empty green into a game field. These scenes emphasize the autopoietic qualities of fun, showing how it transforms one type of space into another; how it stretches out time as friends gather and immerse themselves in leisure and relaxation.

These scenes are quite distinct from the scenes of organized leisure spaces that we have described above. Rather than aiming towards greater productivity, these modes of fun organize themselves towards their own ends and working on their own times. While enrichment, purpose and well-being might be on the minds of some, from the outside their meaning is, for the most part, indeterminate. Yet, in their simplicity, they reflect a kind of autonomy of will that sits right near the surface. Funseekers are not easily governable. They defy production. Their ends resist being channeled towards state goals. In short, the fun problem is, in fact, a double problem: fun is both difficult to produce and nearly impossible to govern. The typical toolkits used by states like Singapore—planning, policy, investment, and spatial governance—are often what fun aims to defy and occasionally, unseat.

Fun is transformative, mercurial, and antagonistic, even potentially combative and dangerous. Here Singapore's fun problem—how to unlock the puzzle of fun while controlling its unruly autopoietic qualities—comes into fuller view. What these unruly qualities mean is up for debate? Does fun stand in for something else?

In his provocative rethinking of Johan Huizinga's *homo ludens*, political theorist Jason Edwards (2013) points out that Huizinga's formulation of play is directly tied to the Greek notion of the *agon* or competitor. Edwards argues that this makes Huizinga's work on play important for understanding the recent turn towards agonism within theories of democracy (e.g. Mouffe 2005). Although Edwards offers a carefully rendered criticism of the overvaluation of agonism in recent political theory, for our purposes, his argument also demonstrates why fun matters so much to the Singapore government and why, increasingly for Singaporeans, its stakes may be higher than mere diversion from regular life. Indeed, taken on face value, the constraints surrounding the production of play without fun are the same as governing without *agonism*.

Recent trends in Singaporean democracy suggest profoundly mixed feelings towards democracy and its forms of agonistic politics. As Thompson (2014) has shown, the 2011 election was marked by a contest between emerging, but different visions of citizenship which center on a tension between communal and liberal frameworks. The elections were notable for a growing demand for greater political space evident in increasing interest in oppositional politics. Yet, as the 2015 election demonstrated, there was a constriction in the number of seats taken by oppositional parties. Nevertheless, oppositional rallies were very well attended and there was a great deal of discussion about the potential for an unprecedented shifts among the Singaporean electorate. Although these shifts did not ultimately reconfigure the government, we wonder whether the increasing interest in oppositional politics might reflect a restless uncertainty we see as characteristic of post-Lee Kuan Yew Singapore (Teo 2018). In this context, do yearnings for emergent opportunities for fun anticipate broader aspirations for a more contentious, more open politics?

We are not arguing that Singaporeans agree that democratic futures are desirable. Moreover, we are not saying that agonistic modalities of politics are necessarily unproblematic or inevitably lead to good outcomes. Democratic politics and their forms of fun are risky and fraught.<sup>18</sup> Yet, the proliferation of spaces of fun within Singapore gives us pause to reflect upon the way that such affective aspirations might be related to other boundaries and openings in the city-state. Although spaces of fun are opening up across Singapore, broader political openings remain well beyond the horizon at the present moment.

The history we present here does not answer these political questions. Nevertheless, as we have shown, the governance of fun has always had a political content. As spaces of fun have proliferated, so too have the modes of bounding, narrowing, and governing funseeking and funseekers. These spaces set out all the right conditions for play but also seek to organize the body and limit the player from her own creative modes of experimentation. As Huizinga notes, fun within prescribed limits can begin to feel like no fun at all; might politics within its limits begin to feel similarly hollow to many Singaporeans? Here deeper investigations into the questions posed by fun might reveal important insights into Singapore's contemporary political situation. Understanding the desires for or wariness of fun among diverse types of Singaporeans, both citizen and non-citizen, might reflect the sorts of hopes

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<sup>18</sup> As Emily Nussbaum's critical evaluation of humour in the 2016 US elections demonstrates, fun and politics can intertwine in profoundly destabilizing ways. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/01/23/how-jokes-won-the-election>, accessed 11 May 2019. .

and anxieties produced by new political possibilities as well. Developing adequate answers to these questions requires further, fine-grained ethnographic research.

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