

Spaces of autonomy, spaces of hope: the place of the university in postcolonial  
Singapore

Short title: The university in postcolonial Singapore

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*Abstract*

This article explores the background to and consequences of the resignation of B.R. Sreenivasan as the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Singapore in October 1963, after a public clash with the People's Action Party State government, led by Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. Sreenivasan's resignation has been the subject of radically different historical interpretations. It has been celebrated by some nationalist historians as part of a process of cultural decolonization, but criticized by others as precipitating a two-decade long erosion academic freedom in Singapore. Careful attention to the event and its context, however, offers a powerful heuristic concerning the place of higher education in the process of decolonization, and the manner in which colonial universities came to be symbolic repositories of nationalism with some degree of autonomy from the state. Debates on the role of the university that arose in Singapore after the resignation were plural, and diverse, and have much to teach us not only of the past, but also a future in which international research universities such as the National University of Singapore embrace contradictory roles, and yet still strive for new forms of academic autonomy.

On November 24 1966, a little over a year after Singapore's exit from Malaysia, the city-state's Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew gave a speech to a largely undergraduate audience at

the University of Singapore Historical Society. The session was being filmed, and Lee cut an impressive figure, standing in front of a blackboard and behind a solid wooden bench used for science demonstrations, and speaking into a microphone under the harsh glare of halogen lights. Looking out into a lecture theatre packed with students spilling out into the aisles, he confronted an issue which the University of Singapore (SU) students had repeatedly protested against over the last three years: his government's apparent lack of respect for university autonomy and academic freedom.

Lee had prepared for the speech by reviewing his own experience of higher education in Singapore and beyond. He talked first of the limits of academic freedom globally, and then of the situation of SU under decolonization, needing to serve national goals but still controlled by the majority of non-Singaporean international faculty on its Senate. He reviewed a series of flashpoints: the Enright Affair, in which Dennis Enright, the newly-inaugurated Johore Professor of English and a British citizen, had been represented as having made 'derogatory remarks' concerning national cultural policy, and later clashes over the government's attempts to bar or expel teaching staff and students deemed to have undesirable political views from the University. Students at the university, their fees subsidized at public expense, he insisted, should reflect on their privileges before calling for academic freedom or university autonomy. 'I wonder whether you understand,' he told his audience, 'whether you have a grasp of the realities of the society in which you are living. I have the feeling very often that because the administration is so effective, you are living like fishes in aquariums in different tanks. And in your tank, there are only angelfish, a few black mollies, some red carps and in the other tank are some tigerfish, piranhas—man-eating type of fish.'<sup>1</sup>

Lee's defence of the limitations on the freedom of staff and students at a national university continued into a robust question and answer period. Yet there was one point in his

<sup>1</sup> Lee Kuan Yew, 'University autonomy, academic freedom and social responsibility', Address at the Historical Society, University of Singapore, 24 November 1966 in *The Papers of Lee Kuan Yew: Speeches, Interviews and Dialogues*. Vol. 3: 1965-1966, Gale Asia, Singapore, 2012, p. 589.

speech, in the surviving transcript at least, where he stumbled. In discussing university autonomy, Lee referred to Baratham Ramaswamy Sreenivasan, the University's first Vice Chancellor, who had tendered his resignation on a point of academic principle in 1963. 'I do not,' Lee stated, 'want to open unpleasant memories'.<sup>2</sup> Yet such memories came unbidden. He paused once, began a new sentence, and then paused again, eventually shying away from an account of Sreenivasan's resignation, and moving instead to tensions between the government and the Academic Staff Association.

This article takes Sreenivasan's resignation as a touchstone for a reconsideration of the history of the University of Singapore in the 1960s that moves beyond the framework in which it has been commonly understood. Much historical work on English-medium higher education in Singapore sees the struggle as a simple one between residual colonial notions of autonomous elitism on the one hand, and emergent decolonizing impulses that the university should become an instrument of the developmental state on the other.<sup>3</sup> Careful attention to the historical context, however, reveals a third position, the possibility of a contractual relationship between university and the new nation-state that permits both autonomy and social engagement, giving the university an important function in civil society. Paradoxically, the debate ensuing from Sreenivasan's resignation enabled the University of Singapore to briefly play such a role, a role that it and its successor institution, the National University of Singapore, found circumscribed in later decades.

Such a realization has further consequences. First, it enables us to make use of contemporary scholarship that questions the "Singapore Story" that forms common-sense history of the developmental state. Such scholarship's problematizing of simple oppositions between local and foreign, or centrist government and pro-Communist political opposition

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 564.

<sup>3</sup> See in particular S. Gopinathan, 'University education in Singapore: the making of a national university', in *From Dependence to Autonomy*, P. G. Altbach & V. Selvaratnam (eds), Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, 1989, p. 214; E. Lee, *Singapore: The Unexpected Nation*, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 2008, pp. 381-407.

promotes a revisionary backward glance that offers a larger view of the politics of higher education in Singapore today, and, by extension, of relations between the state, market, and civil society in the city-state. Second, and more broadly, local discussions of an autonomous university with a strong commitment to the social at a particular historical moment now have a global resonance, at a time when universities in Singapore and worldwide are becoming increasingly subject to neo-liberal market forces expressed through quantitative measures of ‘excellence,’ most visibly in the various university ranking systems. Apparently peripheral histories such as Singapore’s may prove central to this discussion, offering models of governance that exemplify neither submission to the market or the state, nor a nostalgia for an imagined ivory tower removed from society, but the possibility of seeing otherwise, and of reimagining the university’s role within society.

### **Contexts**

The significance of Sreenivasan’s resignation is best understood by understood by placing it within three contexts: politics, education, and a personal history. The British returned to their colonial Empire in Southeast Asia after the surrender of Japan in September 1945, but the colonial regime that replaced the British Military Administration in Malaya in 1946 was clearly living on borrowed time. Malaya became independent in 1957. Singapore remained a Crown Colony, moving towards full self-government in 1959, merger with Malaya and the British North Borneo colonies in 1963 to form Malaysia, and then unlooked-for independence as a nation-state with a precipitate departure from the Malaysian Federation in 1965. Representative politics in Singapore evolved throughout the 1950s through growing autonomy and a widening electoral franchise, with the People’s Action Party (PAP) achieving a comprehensive electoral victory in 1959. Within two years, however, the party had split, its left wing entering opposition as the Barisan Sosialis (Socialist Front), and falling just short of controlling a majority of Legislative Assembly seats. Over the next four years,

the Barisan was eliminated as an effective political opposition by a series of political manoeuvres and detentions of political representatives and activists. The party lost a general election to the PAP in 1963 and in 1966 its remaining representatives began to resign from parliament. In the 1968 general election all seats were held by the PAP, which would maintain political dominance to superintend a half century of rapid economic growth and a transition to developed economy status.

The university went through its own complex and less even process of decolonization. Higher education institutions had existed in Singapore from the early years of the twentieth century. A Medical College had been founded in 1904, and offered a six-year course leading to diploma recognized by the General Medical Association in the United Kingdom. In the 1917, concerned that American educationalists might set up a University in the port city, the colonial authorities had resolved to ‘hasten slowly’ to found Raffles College, an institution offering three year diploma courses in the Arts and Sciences.<sup>4</sup> The College accepted its first students in 1928, and was located on a purpose-built suburban campus designed after an Empire-wide architectural competition. The Depression impacted Malaya and the Straits Settlements severely, and student numbers only began to increase substantially in the middle of the 1930s. Most graduates became teachers, with only a few continuing their studies to take University of London external degree examinations. In 1939, a Commission on Higher Education in Malaya recommended that the two colleges be merged into a university college which ‘should develop in time to a university’ and would ‘ultimately become the University

<sup>4</sup> T. H. Silcock, *A History of Economics Teaching and Graduates in Singapore*, Department of Economics & Statistics, National University of Singapore, Singapore, 1985, p. 17.

of Malaya', but this plan was still unrealized at the beginning of the Pacific War in late 1941.<sup>5</sup>

In the post-War period, the development of higher education in Singapore accelerated rapidly. Decolonization increasingly came to be seen as inevitable, and the British saw the creation of new universities and university colleges in colonies such as Singapore, the Gold Coast, and Nigeria as a means of cultivating sympathetic elites who would retain power after independence. Some historians, indeed, have labelled the actions of the Clement Atlee Labour Administration after 1945 as an attempt to constitute a 'fourth British Empire' through an upgrading of colonial institutions of governance and a retooling of them through a new language that stressed modernization, development, and partnership under the aegis of the British Commonwealth.<sup>6</sup> The 1945 report of the Asquith Commission recommended the foundation of new university colleges in strategic locations throughout the empire, including Malaya. In 1948, the Carr-Saunders Commission, after looking specifically at the situation in Singapore, recommended that the new institution to be created there should immediately be granted university status. Founded in 1949 from an amalgamated Raffles College and King Edward VII College of Medicine, the University of Malaya was thus the first, and ultimately by far the most successful of the 'Asquith universities.' In the next decade, its student population tripled to 1,923 in 1959.<sup>7</sup> The university's location outside Malaya proper was always a source of contention. A proposal to move the campus to Johor Baru on the mainland was abandoned in the 1950s, but in 1959 the university split in two autonomous divisions, with the new Kuala Lumpur branch hosted on a new campus in Malaya's federal capital. In 1962, the two campuses formally separated, with the Singapore campus becoming the

<sup>5</sup> Colonial Office, *Report of the Commission on Higher Education in the Colonies*, HMSO, London, 1945, p. 10; Draft Report of the Commission on Higher Education in Malaya, 1939, CO 273/651/9, The National Archives of the UK (TNA), Kew, p. 156.

<sup>6</sup> J. Darwin, 'Was there a fourth British empire?', in *The British Empire in the 1950s: Retreat or Revival?*, M. Lynn (ed.), Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2006, p. 24.

<sup>7</sup> A. M. Carr-Saunders, *New Universities Overseas*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1961, p. 120, p. 122.

University of Singapore, and the Kuala Lumpur branch retaining the University of Malaya name. Sreenivasan had been appointed as the principal of the Singapore division of UM in 1961, and when the institution split on January 1, 1962, he became the first vice-chancellor of the University of Singapore.

Before turning to Sreenivasan himself, we might briefly consider the status of the university in the 1950s, and its relation to society. The ‘Asquith universities’ established in Singapore, Nigeria and the Gold Coast have often been caricatured as exotic implants in foreign soil, attempts to build miniature Oxfords and Cambridges that stressed Arnoldian character-building and immersion in Western high culture that had little relation to the societies in which they were located. This description, like all caricatures, is based on a degree of truth. At the then University College of Ghana in the 1959-60 academic year, twelve undergraduates were studying Classics, but none any African languages.<sup>8</sup> Academic staff, especially those in leadership positions, were mostly expatriates; the stress on residential living in many of the institutions also cut their students off from society. Yet the modes of governance proposed for the institutions were very different from those of Oxford and Cambridge. The universities mostly drew their capital funding from the central Colonial Development and Welfare Fund, but a large proportion of their recurrent expenditure was paid by local government, and representatives from local government and society sat on their most important decision-making bodies. In this, as Sydney Caine, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Malaya, from 1952 to 1957, was to remark, they followed ‘city or provincial or redbrick’ precedents: the ‘structure of government recommended and adopted in practice followed closely the normal pattern of Manchester . . . rather than Oxford-Cambridge.’<sup>9</sup> If autonomy from the direct edicts of the colonial state was prized, there was, equally, a

<sup>8</sup> E. Ashby, *African Universities and the Western Tradition*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1964, p. 38.

<sup>9</sup> Sydney Caine to Robert Yeo, 2 March, 1968, quoted in Robert Yeo Cheng Chuan ‘Problems of university development, with reference to Malaysia & Singapore, 1947-67: A case study’, master’s thesis, University of London, 1969, p. 8.

profound sense of the need for the university to be embedded in and to serve society. The 1957 Aitken Commission report noted a number of ‘stresses and strains’ in the university.<sup>10</sup> Many of these centred on concerns related to decolonization: the continued dominance of British expatriates in the university administration, a reluctance to hire Malayan faculty, and the lack of connection between the curriculum and the society in which it was taught. Ultimately, however, the solution to these conflicts lay in governance, and in particular the role of local ‘lay’ members of the Council, the university’s supreme governing body.<sup>11</sup> The manner in which governance would reflect the university’s social role was thus contested from the moment of its foundation. Questions about its role as an Anglophone institution, indeed, became sharper after the founding of the private largely Sinophone Nanyang University, which began admitting students in 1956.<sup>12</sup>

B.R. Sreenivasan’s appointment to the role of principal and then vice-chancellor of the University was thus clearly a marker of this process of decolonization. Sreenivasan’s professional career up to this point had been marked by a struggle in opposition to colonial discrimination against Asians. As a junior doctor and General Secretary of the Medical College Alumni Association in Singapore after World War Two, he had played an important part in the abolition of a two-tier medical service that privileged expatriates, petitioning the Secretary of State for the Colonies for a unified medical service in Malaya “without distinction of race.”<sup>13</sup> He also insisted on paying his own way to study overseas and return as a Member of the Royal College of Physicians when he and other Asians were refused

<sup>10</sup> Singapore, Legislative Assembly, *Report of the Commission of Enquiry on the University of Malaya 1957*. Sessional Paper No. Cmd. 54 of 1957, November 13, 1957. Government Printing Office, Singapore, 1957, p. 19.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.

<sup>12</sup> For a comprehensive account of the development of the University up to the early 1960s, see A. J. Stockwell “‘The crucible of the Malayan nation’: the University and the making of a new Malaya, 1938–62”, *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 43, 2008, 1149-1187. Stockwell’s account is very strong on explaining British policy and its projection, but weaker on the internal politics of the university and local responses to its social role.

<sup>13</sup> Sreenivasan to G. Hall, 31 December 1945, CO953/1/1, TNA. Petition: “Alumni Association of the King Edward VII College of Medicine” Singapore.



financial support for further studies by the colonial government.<sup>14</sup> From oral history testimony, it would seem that he had close colleagues who were involved in the Malayan Democratic Union, an important site of early nationalist debate in the 1940s.<sup>15</sup> In 1955, Sreenivasan was appointed by then Chief Minister David Marshall to chair the Malayanisation Commission to ensure that the Singapore Civil Service became a national civil service in waiting, with local appointees replacing expatriates. He was close to members of the People's Action Party government who took power in 1959, especially Yong Nyuk Lin, successively Minister for Education and Minister for Health, so much so that most bystanders considered him a 'PAP man.'<sup>16</sup>

### **Prelude: higher education before the Big Split, 1959-1961**

Such an understanding of Sreenivasan thus places him in a common historical framing of struggles in the university in the 1960s as a conflict between two divergent visions: those of 'nationalists' who felt that the new legitimacy of the People's Action Party gave it the authority to superintend institutions of higher education more closely, and 'internationalists,' mainly expatriate lecturers and their supporters, who argued for the validity of universal principles of autonomy drawn from their experiences in Britain and elsewhere. This perspective does have some historical weight. When Minister of Education Yong Nyuk Lin gave a lecture at the University of Malaya (Singapore Branch) Student Union in June 1960, he chose the theme of social responsibility. The university, Yong argued, needed to serve the society of which it was part. Autonomy might be given in terms of research topic, or curriculum, but this did not mean that 'the academician is given a cheque book to spend

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Navaratnam Balachandran, Accession Number 002154/13, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore (OHC, NAS), Singapore.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Eu Chooi Yip, Accession Number 001359, OHC, NAS.

<sup>16</sup> Navaratnam Balachandran, *op. cit.*. See also Alexander Oppenheim's admittedly partial account of the introduction of Sreenivasan as one of the government's 'own men' at his inauguration as Principal. Interview with Alexander Oppenheim, September 19, 1982, Accession Number 000220, OHC, NAS.

without check or responsibility.<sup>17</sup> The differential between expatriate and local salaries also needed to be addressed, with Yong praising foreign academic staff who had acquired Singapore citizenship and thus renounced their expatriate privileges. Yong's intervention provoked a sharp retort from Arthur A. Sandosham, Sreenivasan's immediate predecessor as Principal, emphasizing the university's right to decide on its own academic direction and standards, criticizing suggestions that it might be transformed into a Malay-medium institution, and defending its offering of competitive salaries to attract 'staff of the right type' in an international marketplace.<sup>18</sup>

The struggle between nationalists and internationalists during decolonization, indeed, was enacted in Asquith universities elsewhere in a contracting Empire. Only a year later, in 1961, Ghana's Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah proposed that in the transition from the University College of Ghana to the University of Ghana all academic staff contracts would be terminated, and that academic staff should re-apply for posts in the new university. An outcry among the largely expatriate staff and an international higher education community led to negotiations, and only six members of staff were eventually dismissed.<sup>19</sup> The resulting University of Ghana Bill, however, specified that the President of the Republic of Ghana, an office that Nkrumah now occupied, should serve as Chancellor, and gave a clear majority to his appointees on Council while also giving substantial minority representation to academic staff.<sup>20</sup> In Singapore the Enright Affair of late 1960, in which the newly appointed Johore Professor of English's introductory remarks regarding the artificiality of the PAP government's attempt to build a Malayan culture, 'institute a sarong-culture, complete with pantun competitions' were reported in the *Straits Times* and received a sharp rebuke from the

<sup>17</sup> 'Yong: University cannot remain an 'Ivory Tower',' *Straits Times*, June 11, 196, p. 5.

<sup>18</sup> 'Hands off the varsity', *Straits Times*, June 12, 1960, p.1.

<sup>19</sup> Ashby, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

<sup>20</sup> Ashby: *op. cit.*, p. 90; A. Curle, 'Nationalism and higher education in Ghana', *Universities Quarterly*, vol. 16 1961-62, p. 238.

Minister of Culture, S. Rajaratnam, might be seen as part of the same binarism.<sup>21</sup> Enright pleaded for ‘Singapore and Malaya . . . to remain culturally open,’ but Rajaratnam proved an unsympathetic interlocutor, echoing Yong’s earlier language in criticizing Enright as one of a group of temporary ‘birds of passage from Europe or elsewhere’ who rode on a now-vanishing colonial sense of *noblesse oblige* to meddle in Singapore’s internal affairs.<sup>22</sup> Carr-Saunders, observing from London, unwittingly illustrated the reality of the colonial condescension that must have irritated Rajaratnam and his fellow ministers. The incident in Singapore, Carr-Saunders declared, showed how easily ‘people in new countries can be thrown into something approaching hysteria by criticism. While illuminating, the incident was more ludicrous than serious.’<sup>23</sup>

Yet to simply oppose nationalists to internationalists neglects a more complex history of the relation between state and university in Singapore, one in which there are important continuities from late colonialism to the early years of independence. Writing of the experience of universities in Africa, Ali M. Mazrui perceptively notes that the challenge newly-independent states faced was ‘how to decolonize the process of modernization without ending it.’<sup>24</sup> The new developmental states that emerged in Africa and Asia in the period of decolonization often distanced themselves from the injustices and discrimination of colonialism, yet they took on and adapted many of the features of the late colonial state. In the immediate post-War period in Singapore, the model the PAP drew on was the post-War Labour Party’s Welfare State, and indeed many of those on the right of the party, including

<sup>21</sup> D. J. Enright, ‘Robert Graves and the Decline of Modernism’, *Essays in Criticism* vol. 11.3, July 1961, p. 321.

<sup>22</sup> Enright, *Memoirs of a Mendicant Professor*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1969, p.126, p.129. While the letter was signed by Ahmad Ibrahim, in his capacity as Acting Minister for Labour and Law, Enright strongly hints that he—in all probability correctly—considers Rajaratnam the author. Summoned by Ahmad for an interview following the publication of his remarks, Enright found himself berated in Malay, the national language, which he did not understand: Rajaratnam proceeded to translate his colleague’s lecture to Enright. ‘It was’, Enright noted, ‘a case of the translation preceding the original’ (p. 127).

<sup>23</sup> Carr-Saunders, *op. cit.*, p.202.

<sup>24</sup> Ali Al’amin Mazrui, ‘The African university as a multinational corporation: problems of penetration and dependency’, *Harvard Educational Review* vol. 45.2, May 1975, p. 192.

Lee Kuan Yew himself, had been influenced by Fabian socialism.<sup>25</sup> As historian Loh Kah Seng notes, early publications of the Ministry of Culture and other agencies in the immediate post 1959 period often echoed, if without direct attribution, the language of the 1942 Beveridge Report, which provided the basis for Labour's post-1945 programme.<sup>26</sup> Many features of the Asquith universities, as Sydney Caine's early remarks regarding parallels with metropolitan 'redbrick' institutions in the United Kingdom suggest, were a reflection of domestic British processes in which the state's role became more central. In the United Kingdom after the landslide election of a Labour Government in 1945, access to higher education was expanded, and, in the words of one contemporary commentator, the state entered 'the field of university affairs with almost explosive force.'<sup>27</sup> The experience of the Asquith universities, and of the University of Malaya thus had parallels in Britain in the transition of institutions such as University College Nottingham to university status in 1948, or the founding of new University Colleges such as the University College of North Staffordshire (later Keele University) a year later.

As under decolonization, the changing role of the universities in the United Kingdom, both in terms of widened access and a new emphasis on science and technology after the War, became a flashpoint for discussions about larger social transformations. Members of elites such as Michael Oakeshott complained about the change in universities, and their substitution of a 'social purpose' for an earlier Arnoldian focus on the activity of learning itself.<sup>28</sup> Novelist Somerset Maugham went further, condemning the 'scum' who went to university not 'to acquire culture, but to get a job,' and predicting that they would 'doubtless sink back,

<sup>25</sup> M. D. Barr, *Lee Kuan Yew: The Beliefs Behind the Man*, Curzon, Richmond, 2000, pp. 56-58.

<sup>26</sup> Loh Kah Seng, *Squatters into Citizens: The 1961 Bukit Ho Swee Fire and the Making of Modern Memory in Singapore*, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, 2013, p.5.

<sup>27</sup> E. Simon, 'The universities and the government', in *The Creation of a University System* M. Shattock (ed), Blackwell, Oxford, 1996), p. 32.

<sup>28</sup> M. Oakeshott, 'The idea of a university', *The Listener*, no. 1102, March 9, 1950, p. 426.

perhaps with relief, into the modest class from which they emerged.’<sup>29</sup> Such defensive comments were given short shrift by a larger public, and yet successive British administrations, whether Labour or Conservative, acknowledged the need for both university autonomy and an awareness of their social and economic functions. Their solution in terms of funding was an enlarging of the role of the independent University Grants Committee, which mediated between the universities and the state, and made decisions on the allocation of state funds. After 1946, following recommendations from the Barlow Committee on Scientific Manpower, the UGC took on a larger role in development, and the responsibility of assisting and consulting with universities in making sure that their development plans met ‘national needs,’ a role that it played with some success into the 1960s.<sup>30</sup> This experience was also influential in the new nation states of the British Commonwealth: India, for example, formed its own University Grants Commission in 1956.

These changes were also reflected in Singapore. In 1957, a key recommendation of the Aitken Commission had been that the university’s financial autonomy be preserved through the formation of a Malayan UGC, which might dispense funds to both the University of Singapore and Nanyang University, headed by ‘a local chairman, independent of Governments and of universities, who should be a man of standing with good financial judgement.’<sup>31</sup> Predictably, this suggestion was rejected by a joint committee on finance constituted in response to the Commission’s report by the Malayan and Singapore governments. ‘The majority of us,’ the committee remarked without further explanation, ‘considered that the time is not yet ripe for the establishment of a University Grants’ Commission,’ and indeed suggested the university be brought under tighter state supervision by reducing the period of budgeting for recurrent expenditure from the current five years to

<sup>29</sup> ‘Books of the year - 1: chosen by eminent contemporaries’, *Sunday Times*, December 25, 1955, p. 4.

<sup>30</sup> M. Shattock, *The UGC and the management of British universities*, Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press, Buckingham, 1994, p. 3.

<sup>31</sup> Singapore, Legislative Assembly. *Report of the Commission of Enquiry on the University of Malaya 1957*. Sessional Paper No. Cmd. 54 of 1957, November 13, 1957. Government Printing Office, Singapore, 1957, p. 56.

three.<sup>32</sup> This majority presumably reflected the dominance of government appointees on the committee, which also featured future Minister of Education Yong Nyuk Lin as a member in his role as Chairman of the University Finance Committee. In his reply to Yong's speech at the University three years later, Sandosham again raised the issue of funding as central to autonomy, and publicly proposed the formation of a UGC, free from both 'political influences' and 'University control.'<sup>33</sup> If discussions of autonomy were given an added gloss by residual colonialism, then, decolonization was not determinate: more fundamental were the relations between university and developmental state that continued from late colonialism into the immediate post-independence period.

The absence of a UGC in Singapore thus had potential to raise conflicts over autonomy both in terms of funding and long term planning. At the same time, Sreenivasan was faced with a new development that was very particular to Singapore: the winds of political change. On July 20, 1961, ideological splits in the People's Action Party came into the open when thirteen of its left-wing assemblymen either abstained or voted against a motion of confidence in the government. They were expelled from the PAP, and proceeded to set up their own party, the Barisan Sosialis. The Barisan initially seemed to have wider support, especially from the Chinese-speaking masses, and indeed the defection of the majority of the PAP's branch offices and organising secretaries to the party indicates that many saw it, and not the surviving rump of the PAP, as that part's legitimate successor. Two events were crucial in the post-split PAP's regaining its dominance. Through political manoeuvring, and a carefully crafted ballot paper that essentially disallowed the possibility of a no vote, the PAP triumphed in a referendum on merger with Malaysia held on September 1, 1962. On February 2 1963, while negotiations still continued about the mechanisms of

<sup>32</sup> Singapore, Legislative Assembly. *Report of the Joint Committee on Finance on the University of Malaya, 1957*. Sessional Paper No. Cmd. 30 of 1958, September 27, 1958. Government Printing Office, Singapore, 1958, p. 9.

<sup>33</sup> 'Hands off the varsity', *Straits Times*, June 12, 1960, p.1.

merger, police and Special Branch officers throughout Singapore conducted raids in which they arrested over a hundred opposition party members, trade unionists, and social activists, including 24 key members of the Barisan. Operation Coldstore, as it was known, was the result of long and complex negotiations between Singapore, Malayan and British representatives on the Internal Security Council: it was presented as a security operation against a 'Communist United Front' preparing to 'depart from constitutional methods' and 'mount violence or disorder in the closing stages of the establishment of the Federation of Malaysia.'<sup>34</sup> Most recent research by historians now acknowledges that much of the motivation behind the arrests was to weaken democratic political opposition in Singapore on the eve of merger.<sup>35</sup>

For a figure such as Sreenivasan, the growing split between the PAP and the Barisan that culminated in Coldstore had two consequences. First was simply a matter of personal friendships: the Vice-Chancellor was close to people on both sides of the divide, and was placed in the difficult position of being asked to choose. Second, and more seriously, the government now became much more concerned about the university as a place of subversive politics. The teaching of individual lecturers appears to have come under greater scrutiny. The Singapore government became particularly concerned about the potential of Chinese-educated students, who had been exposed to leftist politics while studying at middle school, to radicalize the student body. From 1959 onwards the University, with the government's approval, had mounted a one-year bridging course to enable Chinese medium school graduates to enter the university. Sreenivasan fully supported this initiative as a way of

<sup>34</sup> Colonial Office Information Department, 'Internal Security Measures in Singapore', February 2, 1963, CO 1030/1573, TNA.

<sup>35</sup> See S.J. Ball, 'Selkirk in Singapore', *Twentieth Century British History*, vol. 10., 1999, pp. 162-191; M. Jones, 'Creating Malaysia: Singapore security, the Borneo territories, and the contours of British policy, 1961-63', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, vol. 28:2, 2000, pp. 85-109; various articles in Poh Soo Kai, Tan Kok Fang and Hong Lysa(eds), *The 1963 Operation Coldstore in Singapore: Commemorating 50 Years*, Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, Petaling Jaya, 2013; and Poh Soo Kai, *Living in a Time of Deception*, Function 8, Singapore, 2016. For an alternative opinion, see Kumar Ramakrishna, "*Original Sin*"? *Revising the Revisionist Critique of the 1963 Operation Coldstore in Singapore*, ISEAS, Singapore, 2015.

building bridges across language and educational cultures in Singapore: he was, a friend commented, convinced that Mandarin-speaking Chinese High School graduates ‘could be absorbed into society through English, and enter the mainstream.’<sup>36</sup> For the PAP, the Chinese-medium students threatened to reverse this process: they might absorb others into their radical politics, rather than be absorbed.

### **The Sreenivasan incident**

On January 1<sup>st</sup> 1962, the new University of Singapore was formally established, with Sreenivasan as Vice-Chancellor. The transition seemed initially to be going smoothly. The philanthropist Lee Kong Chian, it was announced, was to occupy the ceremonial position of Chancellor. In his speech to open the university, Sreenivasan pledged a large increase in student numbers, as well as a halving of student fees and a doubling of the size of the pre-university course for students from Chinese-medium schools. The university, he emphasized, was now no longer ‘a colonial university’ but rather an institution that responded to ‘the educational aspirations of the people of this country.’<sup>37</sup> Departments of Malay and Chinese Studies would be set up. At the same time, the autonomy of the university was guaranteed: only three of twenty members of the Council, the supreme governing body of the university, would be government appointees.<sup>38</sup>

Later in the same month, the Vice-Chancellor and senior colleagues met with Ministry of Education representatives, led by Permanent Secretary for Education, S.C. Thong, and the two delegations found themselves in broad agreement. University funding would continue to be made through triennial grants, with the majority of funding for university expansion coming from the Colonial Development and Welfare Fund. Sreenivasan promised to consult with his university colleagues, and to prepare estimates of projected enrolment:

<sup>36</sup> Navaratnam Balachandran, *op. cit.*

<sup>37</sup> ‘Midnight “birth” of a varsity’, *Straits Times*, January 2, 1962: p. 9.

<sup>38</sup> ‘A university of our own’, *Singapore Free Press*, January 3, 1962: p. 6.



Thong, in turn, agreed to provide figures for upper secondary enrolment to help the University estimate demand. The University and the Ministry also discussed revisions in the syllabus for the pre-University course for Chinese-educated students, which had 417 applicants but only 260 places.<sup>39</sup> Announcements followed: an exchange scheme with Nanyang University, an initiative to hire sixty new academic staff members, and plans for new departments of Music, Painting, and Sculpture.<sup>40</sup> In October, Sreenivasan went further, trailing the prospect of new faculties of Technology and Social Sciences.<sup>41</sup> In February 1963, with government and student support, the Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor announced an appeal to the public for \$40 million to fund university expansion.<sup>42</sup> Pamphlets were printed, and Sreenivasan was interviewed on Radio Singapore and wrote a series of columns on the need for funding for the *Straits Times*.<sup>43</sup>

Behind the scenes, however, a drama of growing urgency was being acted out. Sreenivasan's request for money for capital development was the result of a thorough consultation with the constituent faculties at the university: the report of the Committee on University Expansion was discussed at Senate in October 1962. Knowing that the state's budget was tight, the Vice-Chancellor explored various sources of funding: money would be requested from the Colonial Development and Welfare Fund, support for a Fisheries Biology Unit might be sought from Canada under the Colombo Plan, and the appeal would be launched. The University would, however, request a sum of \$10 million per year for capital

<sup>39</sup> Ministry of Education, Singapore 'Meeting Held in the Office of the Perm. Sec. on 29<sup>th</sup> January 1962 at 10 a.m.', Correspondence with the University of Singapore. MOE 15/55 V2 (1961-1965), National Archives of Singapore (NAS); Sreenivasan to S.Thong, January 29, 1962, Correspondence with the University of Singapore. MOE 15/55 V2 (1961-1965), NAS.

<sup>40</sup> 'Student exchange in universities', *Straits Times*, February 24, 1962, p.7; 'Varsity seeks experts for sixty vacancies', *Straits Times*, March 23, 1962, p. 4; 'Fine arts in university soon', *Straits Times*, May 8, 1962, p. 21.

<sup>41</sup> 'New faculties plan for Singapore University', *Straits Times*, October 20, 1962, p. 8.

<sup>42</sup> 'Singapore University to raise \$40 million', *Straits Times*, February 23, 1963, p. 1.

<sup>43</sup> 'Broadcast by Sreenivasan', *Straits Times*, February 28, 1963, p.6; B.R. Sreenivasan, 'How to guarantee the future', *Straits Times*, February 24, 1963, p.6; 'We must hurry or we shall lose the survival race', *Straits Times*, March 3, 1963, p. 6; 'The next 5 years...', *Straits Times*, March 17, 1963, p. 6.

development from the State of Singapore. With Senate's approval, Sreenivasan submitted the request to the Ministry of Education a month later in outline form as a four-page letter.<sup>44</sup>

At the same time, tensions were developing between the University and the Government on a different matter. In early July, 1962, Sreenivasan and Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew were drawn into a dispute about the fate of James Stothert Gregory, a lecturer in Education at the University. Gregory was an expert on the Soviet Union, and had introduced a course in the Russian language. In his academic capacity he received material from Moscow, and also may have encouraged students to go to the Soviet Union on a study trip: he was thus suspected of having Communist sympathies.<sup>45</sup> Lee indicated that despite the fact that Gregory was being considered for permanent appointment, it was unlikely that his Visit Pass would be extended beyond 31 January 1963. Sreenivasan retorted that this was *de facto* interference in the university's autonomy, and that academic staff, particularly those on similar Visit Passes, would likely view it in terms of a loss of academic freedom. If now a member of the academic staff is refused a renewal of his Visit Pass,' he wrote, 'then other members will fear that their Visit Passes too will not be renewed if they say anything of which the government does not approve.' There were, Sreenivasan noted, already a significant number of unfilled vacancies. If the situation continued, 'my dream of making Singapore the centre of South East Asian learning if not of Asian learning ... will be destroyed.'<sup>46</sup> Lee remained firm in response, emphasizing that the decision was made for security reasons, not politics.<sup>47</sup> Gregory was granted a permanent appointment by the University, but was eventually only given a two-week extension to his Visit Pass in February

<sup>44</sup> University of Singapore Senate Min 112 of 17.10.62, 'Further discussion of Report of Committee on University Expansion' p. 173, Office of the Registrar, National University of Singapore (OR). See also Appendix A to Senate Min. 123 of 17.10.62, 'Expansion Programme for the University over Five Years: Note by Vice-Chancellor.' p. 186, OR. A full copy of Sreenivasan's request is reproduced as an attachment to the correspondence between B.K. Sreenivasan, F.A.C. Oehlers and Lee Kuan Yew in a folder entitled 'With the Compliments of the Prime Minister of Singapore' in Lee Kong Chian Papers, Miscellaneous Correspondence – Education (1945-1954), NAS.

<sup>45</sup> Lee, *op. cit.*, 565-566.

<sup>46</sup> Sreenivasan to Lee Kuan Yew, July 5, 1962, Lee Kong Chian Papers, NAS.

<sup>47</sup> Lee to Sreenivasan, July 10, 1962, Lee Kong Chian Papers, NAS.

1963. An approach by F.A.C. 'Jock' Oehlers, President of the University Staff Association, which led to a ninety-minute meeting involving Lee, Sreenivasan, Oehlers and other Staff Association representatives, also reached an impasse, with Lee refusing to budge. Gregory's offence, he emphasized, had been in distributing material in the Federation, and objections to his continued status came from the central Malayan government. The burden of proof, however, rested with him to convince the Federal government otherwise.<sup>48</sup> He did, however, facilitate a meeting between Gregory and Nik Daud, Permanent Secretary to the Ministry of Internal Security in Kuala Lumpur.

More disturbing for Sreenivasan was the manner in which he felt university funding and questions of academic freedom and autonomy were now being linked. By July of the previous year, he had already begun to feel uneasy about the slowness of responses from the Ministry of Education regarding the new triennial budget for recurrent expenditure.<sup>49</sup> In his letters regarding Gregory, the Vice-Chancellor raised the matter directly. 'In my discussions with the Minister for Finance and the Minister for Education,' he wrote, 'I was left with the impression (quite wrongly I hope) that no decision on this matter will be conveyed to the University unless I am prepared to be directed by Government in the admission of students and in the appointment of academic staff.'<sup>50</sup> He hoped, of course, that he was mistaken in this. To circumvent such direct pressure in the future, Sreenivasan returned to the proposal several of his predecessors had made: the formation of a University Grants Committee to oversee both recurrent and capital expenditure. If it proved difficult to constitute such a commission, he noted, the government might call on the established UGC in the United Kingdom for assistance.

<sup>48</sup> Lee to F.A.C. Oehlers, February 15, 1963, Lee Kong Chian Papers, NAS.

<sup>49</sup> Sreenivasan to Thong, July 9, 1962, Correspondence with the University of Singapore, MOE 15/55 V2 (1961-1965), NAS.

<sup>50</sup> Sreenivasan to Lee, Feb 12, 1963 Lee Kong Chian Papers, NAS.

A series of letters between February and April show a deterioration in the relationship between the two men, and Sreenivasan's growing frustration, Lee calling for the university to issue a 'clear-cut policy on Communism and Communist activity' and Sreenivasan refusing on ethical grounds.<sup>51</sup> The two men had a conversation at an Assembly House cocktail party on 27 March in which Lee raised the issue of the large number of non-Singaporeans at the university. At the end of April, Sreenivasan decided to call Lee's bluff. He wrote to Lee, nothing that if the Prime Minister would submit the Government's views on appointing staff and admitting students thought to be security risks, and the appointment of non-Singaporeans and Malaysians to the university, then he as Vice-Chancellor would undertake to have them discussed at the Council and at Senate in May.<sup>52</sup> In a separate letter written on the same day, he noted that not only had no reply been received to the triennial grant request nor to his earlier letter requesting views on university expansion, but that the quarterly grant for recurrent expenditure for the period beginning 1 April had not yet been received: if the situation persisted, university staff would not receive their May salaries.<sup>53</sup> The two separate letters maintained the polite fiction that finances and academic autonomy were unrelated, a fiction maintained by Lee's reassurance that they were 'completely unconnected' early in his reply. Lee's response now criticized Sreenivasan for 'hurriedly and sketchily drawn up' expansion plans that conflicted with the government's overall plans for tertiary education expansion, and noted that the proposal to 'allow a committee appointed by the British Government to decide what Singapore taxpayers should pay' was a 'preposterous proposition.' At the end of the letter, he drew the issue of autonomy and finances back together again. He was willing to consider 'practical plans' for university development, but

<sup>51</sup> Lee to Sreenivasan, March 12, 1963 Lee Kong Chian Papers, NAS.

<sup>52</sup> Sreenivasan to Lee, April 29, 1963a, Lee Kong Chian Papers, NAS.

<sup>53</sup> Sreenivasan to Lee, April 29, 1963b, Lee Kong Chian Papers, NAS.

they should come from a ‘realistic appraisal of the overall position of Singapore and the University, its place, roles and responsibilities, in the context of Malaysia.’<sup>54</sup>

The deterioration in the relationship between the two men involved an element that is almost completely suppressed in surviving, heavily redacted Ministry of Education files and yet must in many ways have been central to the disagreement: Sreenivasan’s own political views, and his resultant concerns about the place of the university in society. Before the formation of the Barisan, and indeed immediately after its formation, his concern to bring Chinese-speaking undergraduates into the university had been uncontentious. Two things had changed this. With the formation of Malaysia now approaching, the Federal Government in Kuala Lumpur had become more concerned about alleged Communist subversion at the university, and there was growing pressure on the Singapore Government to restrict the activities of politicized students.<sup>55</sup> Second, after Operation Coldstore in early February 1962, British, Singapore and Federal representatives on the Internal Security Council were now united in the narrative of a quashed Communist conspiracy that attempted to ‘depart from constitutional methods,’ and in which key Barisan officer holders were held to be involved.<sup>56</sup> Sreenivasan’s Barisan connections are hinted at in a few sources. Robert Yeo’s 1969 thesis on developments at the university, which he wrote with access to the papers of Alexander Oppenheim, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur at the time of the Sreenivasan incident, mentions a 1963 objection by the Singapore Government to ‘a certain member of academic staff because he was an active member of the opposition party,’ and Sreenivasan’s defence of him.<sup>57</sup> It is likely that this staff member was Lee Ek Chong, a senior lecturer in Dentistry who became vice-chairman of the Barisan after the Coldstore detentions,

<sup>54</sup> Lee to Sreenivasan, May 7, 1963, Lee Kong Chian Papers, NAS.

<sup>55</sup> See ‘Federation’s restrictions on Singapore students,’ United Kingdom Commission Fortnightly Summary No. 20, 23 November – 6 December 1962, CO1030/1364, TNA, p. 32.

<sup>56</sup> Colonial Office Information Department, ‘Internal Security Measures in Singapore’, 2 February, 1963, CO 1030/1573, TNA.

<sup>57</sup> Yeo, *op. cit.*, 46.

and stood unsuccessfully as a candidate in Queenstown in the 1963 election, losing to PAP candidate Jek Yeun Thong. Poh Soo Kai, one of the Coldstore detainees, remembers meeting Sreenivasan after being released in 1972, and learning of his past sympathy for the Barisan and growing scepticism about Lee's premiership after Coldstore.<sup>58</sup> Finally, one of the *Straits Times* articles heavily reliant on briefings from government sources published at the height of the affair notes that the Vice-Chancellor had been warned by the government that 'a person who moved with him was the subject of security investigation.'<sup>59</sup>

At Convocation in June 1963, Sreenivasan spoke confidently of the 'legitimate pride' that Singaporeans might feel 'that the spirit of free inquiry prevails in our university.'<sup>60</sup> Behind the scenes, the struggle continued. At its September 4<sup>th</sup> meeting, the University Council decided that henceforth its minutes would be confidential, and thus not widely available to the university community. Senate, the university's academic government body, protested, but to no avail.<sup>61</sup> Later in the month, Sreenivasan wrote a final letter to the Ministry of Education, and copied it to Tay Teck Eng, Chair of the Council. He requested a capital grant of \$5 million, and an increase of the recurrent grant to \$7.13 million, the amount disbursed for the University of Malaya campus in Kuala Lumpur in 1963. He repeated his call for the formation of a University Grants Committee, and suggested a suitable 'academic man' be invited from the United Kingdom to advise on its formation. If he did not receive a favourable reply, the Vice-Chancellor indicated that he would give six months' notice of his resignation, which would take effect at the end of April, 1964.<sup>62</sup>

Lee responded in kind. On 30<sup>th</sup> September, members of Senate learned that the triennial grant had not been approved: the University was asked to submit estimates for 1964

<sup>58</sup> Poh Soo Kai, email to author, 20 July, 2015.

<sup>59</sup> 'Question of funds for university if Sreenivasan stays in office', *Straits Times*, November 1, 1963, p. 11.

<sup>60</sup> 'Free inquiry', *Straits Times*, June 16, 1963, p. 6.

<sup>61</sup> University of Singapore Senate, Minute 80 of September 18, 1963, RO, p. 71.

<sup>62</sup> Sreenivasan to Tay Teck Eng, September 25, 1963, Lee Kong Chian Papers, NAS.

immediately.<sup>63</sup> Efforts of bodies such as the Staff Association were rebuffed, Lee telling Oehlers and other delegates at a 17<sup>th</sup> October meeting that he had lost all confidence in the Vice-Chancellor. While he and his government were resigned to Sreenivasan serving out his term, Lee noted that if ‘public expenditure’ on capital projects were to be committed then ‘the Vice-Chancellor must be a person whose judgment commands my confidence and that of my colleagues.’<sup>64</sup>

On 25 October the Government launched a pre-emptive strike. The newspaper of record, the *Straits Times*, carried an article on the dispute by journalist Jackie Sam entitled ‘Shadow of \$40 Million Dispute over S’pore University’ that drew on ‘highly-placed sources’. Using passages taken almost verbatim from Lee’s correspondence with Sreenivasan and Oehlers, the article painted the vice-chancellor in a poor light. Sreenivasan’s expansion plans submitted to the Ministry of Education the previous year were condemned as ‘too sketchy’ and ‘drawn up without consultation with the Government.’ Yet in Sreenivasan’s terms, they were surely simply intended as an opening proposal in a dialogue that the Ministry, through its silence, refused to continue. The article also noted the government’s dismissal of the Vice-Chancellor’s ‘preposterous’ proposal to ‘call in the British University Grants Committee’, despite the fact that this was only one, and not the final in a series of proposals regarding funding mechanisms that Sreenivasan made. While the article was careful to attribute criticisms of Sreenivasan to government sources, the abiding impression of the Vice-Chancellor it gave was, in the words of Council and Senate members sympathetic to the government, of someone determined ‘to do what he wants’ with no sense of larger social responsibility.<sup>65</sup> A press release from the University complaining about

<sup>63</sup> University of Singapore Senate, Minute 96 of September 18, 1963, RO: p. 94.

<sup>64</sup> Sreenivasan’s resignation was first discussed in an August issue of the *Plebeian Express*, the typewritten newsletter of the Barisan Sosialis which had replaced the party’s organ, the *Plebeian*, when printers refused the party’s business after the Coldstore detentions. See ‘University Autonomy & Academic Freedom,’ *Plebeian Express* November 1963, p. 1.

<sup>65</sup> Jackie Sam, ‘Shadow of \$40 million dispute over S’pore University’, *Straits Times*, October 25, 1963, p. 1.

inaccurate and biased coverage from Tay Teck Eng, Chairman of the University Council, was dismissed by the newspaper in a caustic editorial, and prompted a further exchange of correspondence.<sup>66</sup>

Events moved swiftly to a denouement. The Council met on October 30 and, defying the urging of both Federal and Government representatives, refused to accept the Vice-Chancellor's resignation, despite being informed by the State government representatives that government funding, constituting over 80% of the University's revenue, would be cut off if Sreenivasan remained in office. They instead appointed a delegation to meet with State and Federal government representatives, consisting of Tay, academic members Gwee Ah Leng and Maurice Baker, and 'lay' members H.F.G. Leembruggen, and Yap Pheng Geck.<sup>67</sup> Two days later, a special session of Senate, chaired by the botanist and Dean of Science, H.B. Gilliland, expressed unanimous confidence in Sreenivasan's leadership and the manner he had conducted discussions with the government.<sup>68</sup> Yet Sreenivasan must have known that he was in a dispute that he could not win, and that prolonging the struggle would only damage the university further. He now asked the Council to accept his immediate resignation. Backing was forthcoming from other quarters: the Student Union, for example, held an executive committee meeting and expressed full support.<sup>69</sup> Yet the Council had no alternative but to accept his resignation. By the time the delegation from the Council met with Goh Keng Swee and Lee Kuan Yew on 6<sup>th</sup> November, it was simply to negotiate the terms of surrender. The government, a joint press statement announced, would now consider a response to the university's expansion proposals. The university in turn had made a commitment regarding Chinese medium students deemed to be a security risk. 'The question of procedures

<sup>66</sup> 'Reporting the issues', *Straits Times*, November 6, 1963, p.8. Tay Teck Eng, 'That varsity silence', *Straits Times*, November 9, 1963, p. 10.

<sup>67</sup> 'Decision on Sreenivasan put off', *Straits Times*, October 30, 1963, p.7; 'Question of funds for University if Sreenivasan stays in office', *Straits Times*, November 1, 1963, p.11.

<sup>68</sup> University of Singapore Senate, Minutes of Special Meeting of the Senate, November 1, 1963, OR: pp. 112-113.

<sup>69</sup> 'Student Union expresses support for Sreenivasan', *Straits Times*, November 4, 1963, p. 8.



regulating the admission of students,' the statement blandly announced, 'was discussed and general understanding reached.'<sup>70</sup> The nature of this understanding would become clear over the next few months, despite the ebb and flow of debate in Senate. In the short term, students would be screened at admission for potential political involvement. In the long term, admission to the university would be contingent on the issuing of a certificate of suitability by the government.<sup>71</sup>

What is perhaps most interesting in retrospect is how successfully the government, through its use of the media, was able to define the discursive terms of the debate, framing them in political terms in a manner that has influenced most historical accounts of the incident. Both historians and participants in the events leading up to Sreenivasan's resignation now emphasize the question of student admissions as a matter of principle, and mention university funding as an instrumental factor, a way in which the government might put pressure on the university. Yet a history of the university during decolonization surely establishes that funding was the crux of autonomy, a crux that the complex modes of governance devised under the Asquith university under decolonization could not fully resolve. In this light, the fact that government representatives on the Council constituted a minority was, in the final analysis, irrelevant. One might see the history of the university over the next two decades as an admission of this reality. Sreenivasan was replaced as Vice-Chancellor by the less assertive Professor of Economics Lim Tay Boh. Following Lim's unexpected death in 1967, any fiction of autonomy was stripped away, the Vice-Chancellorship now passing to one of the most senior of People's Action Party politicians, the 'Iron Chancellor' Toh Chin Chye.'<sup>72</sup> The Sreenivasan Affair, in this reading, commenced what S. Gopinathan

<sup>70</sup> Jackie Sam, 'University: 'go' for expansion', *Straits Times*, November 7, 1963, p. 9.

<sup>71</sup> See University of Singapore Senate, Minutes from the Special Meetings of December 27, 1963 and February 6, 1964, OR.

<sup>72</sup> Toh stepped down from his deputy premiership when he became Vice-Chancellor of the University, but he remained Minister for Science and Technology throughout his seven years in the academic governance post.

characterized as the 'slow erosion' of university autonomy which continued until by the 1990s the institution had become essentially an organ of the state.<sup>73</sup>

### Aftermath

Yet there is another story of autonomy to tell, of autonomy within the University itself. Decolonization, as reactions to the Sreenivasan's resignation had shown, had released other forms of energy, and encouraged other forms of organising distinct from that of the official university hierarchy. The effect of the Vice-Chancellor's stepping down was to amplify these voices, and to encourage them to engage in a vital, if temporary debate regarding the place of the university in the new postcolonial social order.

The first of these groups was students. The roles of the University of Singapore Student's Union and of organizations at the university such as the University Socialist Club and the Democratic Socialist Club, were particularly prominent, and indeed ongoing student activism precipitated the speech by Lee in 1966 with which this article began.<sup>74</sup> After the Vice-Chancellor's resignation, students voted overwhelmingly for a one-day boycott of classes, which was held on the 26<sup>th</sup> November.<sup>75</sup> At an Annual General Meeting almost a year after his resignation, the Union made the former Vice-Chancellor an honorary member, to 'commemorate his 'courageous stand ... to uphold the concepts of university autonomy and freedom.'<sup>76</sup> Successive Union presidents from 1964 to 1967 – Herbert Morais, David K.K. Tan, and Ong Leong Boon – made speeches recalling Sreenivasan's contribution to the fight for autonomy, and raised his name repeatedly in an ongoing struggle against the suitability certificates. The union attempted to organize a forum on autonomy and academic freedom, with Lee as an invited guest in 1964, but found the restrictions on audience, venue, and panel

<sup>73</sup> Gopinathan, op. cit., 220.

<sup>74</sup> See Loh Kah Seng, Edgar Liao, Lim Cheng Tju and Seng Guo-Quan, *The University Socialist Club and the Context for Malaya: Tangled Stands of Modernity* Amsterdam University Press, (Amsterdam, 2012).

<sup>75</sup> 'S'pore varsity students vote for day's boycott of classes', *Straits Times*, November 23, 1963, p.20. 1,116 students supported the boycott, with only 22 opposed. 'A day to remember...', *Malayan Undergrad*, vol. 14.7,(January 1964, p. 5.

<sup>76</sup> 'Former vice-chancellor made an honorary member,' *USSU Bulletin*, vol. 2.1, September 23, 1964, p. 6.

members the Prime Minister proposed unacceptable.<sup>77</sup> In 1965, the Union attempted to organize an Academic Freedom Day and fixed the date, but were forced to postpone it when the university, in an initiative that some Union Council members felt was something more than a coincidence, announced that the university's new Chancellor, President Yusuf Ishak, would be formally installed on the same day.<sup>78</sup>

In 1966 another group of students returned to the issue with renewed vigour, a Union delegation meeting with Lee, and negotiating a debate with the Prime Minister to be held at the Singapore Conference Hall in Shenton Way, and preceded by a protest march. While disturbed by Lee's focus on the fact that three of the five delegation members were not Singapore citizens, and by subsequent press coverage that attempted to discredit the delegation by pointing out the presence of foreigners, the delegates left the meeting with what they described as "an assurance from Mr. Lee that there would not be any interference from the police as long as students observe[d] traffic rules."<sup>79</sup> A March from City Hall was planned, with representation from students from the University of Singapore, Nanyang University, Singapore Polytechnic, and Ngee Ann College. Two effigies were to be paraded: of Lee 'brandishing a Suitability Certificate in triumph' and 'a graduate chained by fetters imposed by the authorities,' followed by a 'coffin and accompanying funeral band' representation the death of freedom and autonomy.<sup>80</sup> In the event, no police permit for the demonstration on 11<sup>th</sup> October was forthcoming, and Lee reopened negotiations about the format of the forum. Frustrated, students confined the demonstration to University grounds. The Union estimated 1,800 students turned out, and the protest culminated in speeches by USSU President Ong

<sup>77</sup> *USSU Bulletin*, vol. 2.2, December, 1964, p. 6.

<sup>78</sup> 'The Academic freedom day issue', *USSU Bulletin*, vol. 3.4, November, 1965, p. 5.

<sup>79</sup> 'University autonomy and academic freedom' *USSU Bulletin*, vol. 3.10, September, 1966, p.2. Then USSU President David K.K. Tan, who led the delegation, was particularly upset by an article in the *Straits Times* mentioning the fact that his father was a Malaysian politician. See 'Lee trying to browbeat students, Says Dr. Tan', *Straits Times*, September 2, 1966, p. 8. See also 'Meeting the P.M.', *Malayan Undergrad*, vol. 15.4, September 1966, p. 4, p. 7.

<sup>80</sup> 'The Action committee reveals the plan', *USSU Bulletin*, vol. 4.4, October 1966, p. 4, p. 5.

Leong Boon, delegation member D.P. Vijandran, and academic staff members Tommy Koh, S.Y. Chung and Robert Gamer.<sup>81</sup> Gurdial Singh Nijar, the Secretary of the Action Committee, pledged that the ‘battle’ had ‘only just started.’<sup>82</sup> Yet if it was a battle, it was an unequal one. A month later, a week before Lee delivered his speech at the University, Minister for Defence Goh Keng Swee issued a statement linking Communist subversion and student activism in Singapore, focusing on Nanyang University, but also giving a clear warning to SU students: ‘I say don’t be somebody else’s catspaw. It is a mug’s game.’<sup>83</sup> Two days later, the government named Singh as one of four SU undergraduates who received banishment orders requiring them to leave Singapore with fourteen days.<sup>84</sup> Such student activism contrasted with institutional responses from academic staff: while Senate had debated a memorandum on academic freedom and security in its December 1963 meeting, the results were inconclusive, and it soon moved on to more formal matters of governance.<sup>85</sup>

Yet it is perhaps more fruitful to see this as something more than a battle on familiar terrain, fought by forces whom we think we already know. For student activism was only the visible tip of something much larger: the presence of autonomous institutions within the university, which provided the space, for the first time, for a thoroughgoing discussion of the place of the University in national life. To the Student Union we might thus add the two independent academic staff associations. The first, the Academic Staff Association, had been founded in 1959 as the Academic Staff Association of the University of Malaya in Singapore, with membership open to all full-time teaching and research staff, administrators, and

<sup>81</sup> ‘Protest march and rally great success’, *USSU Bulletin*, vol. 4.7, October 1966, p. 2; See also ‘Campus protest’, *Straits Times*, October 12, 1966, p.20, which estimates the turnout at 1,000.

<sup>82</sup> Gurdial Singh, ‘Our fight to repeal the Suitability Certificate Bill shall continue’, *USSU Bulletin*, vol 4.9, October 1966, p.2.

<sup>83</sup> ‘Reds are behind student unrest, says Goh’, *Straits Times*, November 16, 1966, p.1.

<sup>84</sup> “‘Get out” and “Stay out” orders in Singapore for 71 students’, *Straits Times*, November 19, 1966, p. 1.

<sup>85</sup> University of Singapore Senate, ‘Memorandum Submitted by Professor L. C. Green – Academic Freedom and Security’, Minute 145 of December 18, 1963, OR, p. 134.

librarians.<sup>86</sup> In 1964 Malaysian members of staff, unhappy about the domination of the association by international faculty, founded the Kesatuan Akademis Universiti Singapura (KAUS), restricted to Malaysian staff, with Maurice Baker as President. In his opening address to members, Baker emphasized the need to ‘make our University a truly national University,’ and to distance the institution from ‘colonial traditions and convince the public that our University is indeed theirs.’<sup>87</sup> While there was tension and indeed rivalry between the associations, their relationship was much more complex than the binarism between internationalists and nationalists represented by Edwin Lee. Many Singaporean faculty were members of both organizations. The Kesatuan’s first publication quoted the Carr-Saunders Report regarding the need for the University to continually seek ‘renewal of vigour and conviction from the community to which it owes its life,’ and its founding documents vigorously promoted Malayanisation and university autonomy in the same breath.<sup>88</sup> Baker was cautious and non-confrontational in his leadership, but in September 1966, in response to pressure from the University’s Democratic Socialist Club, the KAUS executive committee drafted a resolution condemning suitability certificates as ‘objectionable in principle and ... unnecessary in a stable democracy’ that was actively debated at KAUS’s annual general meeting.<sup>89</sup>

In the year after Sreenivasan’s resignation, discussion of the nature of university autonomy gathered pace: conferences and seminars were held, to which politicians and

<sup>86</sup> University of Malaya (Singapore) Academic Staff Association, ‘Draft constitution of the Academic Staff Association of the University of Malaya in Singapore,’ UMSASA, Singapore, 1959, NUS Library.

<sup>87</sup> M. Baker, ‘President’s message’, *Suara Universiti*, vol. 1.1 ,October 1964, p. 1. At the time the two associations were often referred to as the ASA (Academic Staff Association) and the MSA (Malaysian Staff Association).

<sup>88</sup> ‘The University and the community’, *Suara Universiti*, vol. 1.1 , October 1964, p. 3. See ‘Memorandum on the founding of the University of Singapore Local Staff Association (ULSA)’, 1964, and ‘Rules’, 1964’ Kesatuan Akademis Universiti Singapura Records, National University of Singapore Library.

<sup>89</sup> See ‘University autonomy: student demand to staff’, *Straits Times*, September 14, 1966, p.7; ‘Resolution from executive committee to be put before the house for discussion’, September 16, 1966, KAUS Records, NUS Library; ‘Varsity staff take up the challenge,’ *Straits Times*, October 6, 1966, p. 4. The Annual General Meeting resolved to hold an EGM on 24 October 1966 to vote on the resolution, but this failed to attract the requisite quorum of members. Annual Report for 1966/1967, item 2d, ‘The University and The State,’ KAUS Records, NUS Library.

academics were invited. Autonomous organizations within the University played a key role here: KAUS, the Staff Association, and the Student Union organized the events, and published important discussions of the university's role in society in publications such as the Union's *Malayan Undergrad* (later the *Singapore Undergrad*), and KAUS's journal *Suara Universiti*. A full summary of these debates lies beyond the scope of this article, but one example illustrates their range and depth. In February, 1966, the University of Singapore hosted a four-day seminar on 'The Role of Universities in Economic and Social Development,' with delegates from Singapore, other ASEAN countries, and Hong Kong. Lee Kuan Yew spoke, putting forward a more inflected elaboration of ideas he had articulated over the previous few years. The university's role, he argued, had changed post-independence: it no longer needed to produce leading public intellectuals to voice the concerns of the 'dispossessed' under colonization, but rather should train 'an unending and self-generating corps of men' to serve the new nation-state as professionals – 'the teachers, the administrators, the men to fill the professions, your accountants, your architects, your lawyers, your technocrats—just the people to do jobs in a modern civilised community.'<sup>90</sup> Tommy Koh responded, avoiding an opposition between ivory tower and pragmatism by drawing on the work of German philosopher Karl Jaspers. The university, Koh argued, might better serve society than it presently did: it might be more accessible to citizens, and its curriculum might be reformed to include subjects, 'of appropriate intellectual content, which are directly related to the problems of a development society.'<sup>91</sup> Universities in developing societies should, Koh argued, be alive to issues such as manpower needs, and indeed work closely with government on commissioned research, and yet they could also 'reasonably expect the government to supply them with funds to do their work, and to respect their traditions, particularly that of

<sup>90</sup> Lee Kuan Yew: 'What I want a university to do', Speech at the Seminar on 'The Role of Universities in Economic and Social Development' at the University of Singapore, 7 February 1966, *The Papers of Lee Kuan Yew: Speeches, Interviews and Dialogues*. Volume 3: 1965–1966, p. 329, p. 334, p. 329.

<sup>91</sup> Tommy Koh Thong Bee, 'The concept of the university', *Suara Universiti*, vol. 2.1, March 1966, p. 7.

academic freedom.’<sup>92</sup> This autonomy might, Koh suggested following Eric Ashby, be achieved through the devising of a ‘covenant’ between University and State that specified ‘on the one hand the powers to be retained by the university and on the other hand the spheres of interest within the university where the State wishes to have a say – a covenant which deliberately involved the government in the university instead of keeping them at arm length, a covenant which set up machinery for continuous co-operation between the State and the University.’<sup>93</sup>

### **Spaces of hope**

Such a covenant was not realized. After Toh Chin Chye became Vice-Chancellor in 1968, both staff associations and the student union were drawn, inevitably, into greater confrontation with the state. The Union, after undergoing internal debates regarding its policies on the university’s autonomy in the late 60s and early 1970s, returned to activism under USSU presidents Juliet Chin and Tan Wah Piow in 1974. Chin was deported, and Tan arrested and put on trial for rioting. In late 1975, the passing of the University of Singapore (Amendment) Act removed much of the Student Union’s legal and financial autonomy, and also, through decentralization of its electoral structure, diminished its capacity to act politically.<sup>94</sup> In 1970, after a poll showing considerable support among the University academic staff, a University of Singapore Academic Staff Union was formed, and registered under the Trades Union Act.<sup>95</sup> For the best part of a decade this union and a similar organization founded at Nanyang University in 1973 provided an autonomous voice for faculty at the university, but both were closed down when the institutions merged as the

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, p. 8.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, p. 9.

<sup>94</sup> For a detailed account of the evolution of the student union after 1965, see Edgar Liao Bolun, ‘Reclaiming the ivory tower: student activism in the University of Malaya and Singapore, 1949-1975’, master’s thesis, National University of Singapore, 2010, pp. 58-59.

<sup>95</sup> Koh Leng Lian, ‘The University of Singapore Academic Staff Union’, *USASU Newsletter*, vol. 1, 1971, pp. 3-6.

National University of Singapore in 1980, the government forbidding academic staff to organize collectively at the successor university.<sup>96</sup>

The loss of internal spaces of autonomy took place against the backdrop of the migration of the university to the new Kent Ridge Campus over the best part of a decade from 1976 onwards. In this the university followed the rest of Singapore's development in areas such as public housing, in which massive transformations of the built environment uprooted lifeworlds and old solidarities in the quest for modernist development and pragmatic, efficient governance. The model appeared successful: by the early 1990s, S. Gopinathan could write that the university functioned as 'a valued educational institution in Singapore society' despite the fact that 'autonomy in the traditional sense' no longer existed.<sup>97</sup> The complexity of its history, indeed, was forgotten even by those who governed it. Lim Pin, the first Vice-Chancellor from a fully academic background since Lim Tay Boh, now misremembered the Enright affair as simply an example of the 'confrontational kind of attitude' characteristic of non-Singaporean 'expat' staff, fitting it into the nationalist versus internationalist binarism and forgetting the complex debate on issues of autonomy and academic freedom enacted by young Singaporean intellectuals of his own generation in the 1960s.<sup>98</sup>

Yet Gopinathan was also prescient, sensing the possibilities of change under the PAP's second generation of leadership which promised 'a more liberal attitude towards criticism of government policy' and noting that the truncation of the university's loss of a role as a 'vital instrument of societal change' had not been 'without significant cost.'<sup>99</sup> In practice, government tolerance proved limited, restricted to those areas of civil society that did not challenge its stewardship. Yet the university faced unanticipated challenges from a

<sup>96</sup> June Tan, 'Varsity union settles for quiet death', *Straits Times*, August 7, 1980, p. 32.

<sup>97</sup> Gopinathan, *op. cit.*, p. 223, p. 222.

<sup>98</sup> Interview with Lim Pin, Accession Number 001817, OHC NAS.

<sup>99</sup> Gopinathan, *op. cit.*, 223.



new direction, in the growing marketization and corporatization of the university sector on a global scale. In 2006 the National University of Singapore and Nanyang Technological University became corporatized, autonomous universities, signing individual policy and performance agreements for a five year period, and agreeing to be bound by the Ministry's Quality Assurance Framework for Universities (QAFU).<sup>100</sup> While the universities do have more funding autonomy, and QAFU offers some flexibility for individual institutions to devise their own indicators within its overall rubric, the emphasis in the university's relations to society is largely concerned with the 'organizational excellence' and 'standing' of the university nationally and internationally, rather than its specific societal role as a place for public debate.<sup>101</sup> The envisioned autonomy is thus more within a globalized educational marketplace, rather than within civil and political society. The continued absence of substantial spaces of autonomy within the university itself has meant that much debate concerning the role of the university is contained within the institution, and thus bound by rules of confidentiality. Public discussion outside the university is often unincisive and uninformed: there is nothing to compare with the complex debates of the 1960s that proceeded from Sreenivasan's resignation.

In this environment, the university as a site of remembering history differently offers potential as what David Harvey has characterized as a space of hope, a return to a 'utopianism' that 'integrates social process and spatial form'.<sup>102</sup> The history of the University in Singapore has often been thought of as subordinate to larger histories. For Carr-Saunders and others, the struggles of the 1960s represented a falling away from universal ideals to which higher education might aspire; for Lee, the institution needed to submit to the larger

<sup>100</sup> *Autonomous Universities: Towards Peaks of Excellence: Report of the Steering Committee to Review University Autonomy, Governance and Funding* Higher Education Division, Ministry of Education, Singapore, 2005.

<sup>101</sup> M. H. Lee and S. Gopinathan, 'University restructuring in Singapore: amazing or a maze?', *Policy Futures in Education* vol. 6.5, 2008, p. 577.

<sup>102</sup> D. Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2000, p. 196.

history of the postcolonial developmental state. Yet there is a sense in which Singapore's experience offers instructive lessons for a global history of higher education, not as a belated failure to arrive, but as a future which now haunts other public universities, beset by globalising competition in which measures of excellence are increasingly rigidly quantitative, and yet struggling to maintain and indeed elaborate a public social role. As universities become more like corporations – and indeed, as in Singapore's case, become corporations—this role is increasingly compromised. Internal spaces of autonomy and debate are privatized, while the public is addressed through the increasingly univocal deployment of public relations.

In this environment Harvey's meditation in *Spaces of Hope* on the possibility of 'dialectical utopianism' perhaps suggests what the postcolonial university and its history might offer. In an age of what Harvey calls 'degenerate utopias' such as the shopping mall and the theme park, which reflect a 'utopianism of process' in their unending marketization of all aspects of human life, the university still offers something different, what Harvey calls a 'utopianism of spatial form,' a space apart.<sup>103</sup> In his own utopian post-capitalist vision expressed in the last chapter of *Spaces of Hope*, Harvey looks forward to a future where 'universities ... have been disbanded,' and society freed of their 'obfuscating academicism' and their role in replicating a 'corporate/state elite.'<sup>104</sup> Yet his proposal that young people in his post-capitalist society be 'required to spend at least a year away ... [in] a place where some noted savants have gathered to study' seems to reiterate a utopian vision of what a university might be.<sup>105</sup> And Harvey's book, indeed, begins with an anecdote about how concern with the spatial possibilities of utopia began in the space of the university, through

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p. 167.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p. 274.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., p. 275.

his hosting reading groups and courses ‘in parallel with many others of its sort across American campuses at the time.’<sup>106</sup>

In 1946, after the end of the Pacific War, students and lecturers returned to the campus of Raffles College at Bukit Timah, to the institution which would become the University of Malaya and then the University of Singapore. The buildings had, the College’s first post-war annual report noted, suffered “two successive military occupations,” having first been used by the Japanese as military headquarters, and then requisitioned by returning British troops. Interiors had been ransacked, and furniture removed.<sup>107</sup> And yet the Japanese had also left two gifts: a new building in the lower quadrangle, and an extension to one of the hostels in the upper quadrangle, both constructed “in the same architectural style as the original buildings.”<sup>108</sup> The university would gain autonomy, would grow, be renamed, move to Kent Ridge, and merge, only to reclaim the Bukit Timah campus as a heritage site over thirty years later. And yet the campus, through various renovations, persisted, serving as what Harvey calls a “mediating institution,” in to which the politics of a particular moment might be brought, and either facilitated or repressed.<sup>109</sup>

In this history the rise of the late colonial university, the negotiations with the new national state that Sreenivasan’s example illustrated, and the debate that ensued in Singapore, offer a powerful heuristics for the present. As their grand, planned campuses that never develop according to the original conception indicate, universities are at heart utopian projects, projects that are alternately eroded and rebuilt by historical events that occur outside their doors. In the present, we might do well to remember and explore again the intellectual life that animated these projects, and return to the example of previous generations of intellectuals who have negotiated, often at great personal cost, their institutions’ social place.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>107</sup> Raffles College, *Annual Report 1946-1947*, Raffles College, Singapore, 1947, p. 4.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>109</sup> Harvey, *op. cit.*, p. 243.

