Sociology in Singapore: Global Discourse in Local Context

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Contemporary social science contains within itself two types of orientation that divide it into two blocs of workers: the scholars and the technicians.

—Robert Lynd, 1939

This paper reviews the development trajectory of sociology as a discipline and its practice in Singapore. Viewing sociology as a global discourse, the paper argues that there have been, at least, three waves in the development of sociological practice in Singapore. These waves mark a shift in research interests that somehow parallel the changing official interest in the findings of sociological research. Such shifts in research interest and changes in curricula reflect important dynamics not only in the relationship between academic knowledge and official need for such knowledge but with time also an increasing appreciation of critical inquiry. This paper argues that there are limitations in viewing sociology simply as a “Western social science” in a “non-Western context”. For the clarity of both conceptual and empirical understanding, it may be useful to rethink the relationship between sociological knowledge and power as a dynamic process with some universal features. This would entail going beyond the West versus non-West polarity and assessing the development of social science in terms of the global/local interface.

Introduction

It is interesting to recall that sociology has always led a double life. On the one hand it has been viewed as a liberal discipline incorporating the kernel of the Enlightenment philosophy; on the other hand it has the dubious reputation of being “a conservative response to the nineteenth century radicalism” (Martindale, 1960). C. Wright Mills (1959) informs us that at one point sociology was not favoured for research grants by the U.S. Congressmen who failed to tell it apart from socialism. Sociology, as it is well known, was proscribed in post-revolutionary China in 1952 because it was thought to be a “bourgeois discipline”. Sociologists who failed to escape the Peoples’ Republic of
China became historians or converted themselves into other more politically acceptable social scientists. It was only in 1979 that sociology regained its academic position in China (Wang Kang, 1985:81).

One can only speculate as to why sociology was adopted as an academic discipline in Singapore in the first place. The proposal for establishing the department of sociology and social work came at the same time. If the very pragmatic concern of problem solving was all that the planners of higher education had on their minds, they could have settled for only social work. Initially, the idea of establishing a department of sociology and socio-anthropology (sic) was mooted under the new social science faculty. Probably the desire to keep up with the image of international or global norms of liberal education that by then routinely included sociology and anthropology in the curriculum elsewhere also played a role. At the time of accepting sociology as an academic field in Singapore, perhaps the conservative yet functional image of sociology, which grew as an empirical, problem-focused social science in the context of the United States, might have appealed to the educational administrators in Singapore. Yet sociology as a discipline could hardly overcome its liberal underpinnings. The very idea of subjecting one’s society to an analytical understanding entailed some degree of rationalization, detachment, and reflexivity. The adoption and nurturing of this so-called “liberal discipline” did not go without turbulence. The interesting and somewhat puzzling question in the vein of sociology of knowledge is: how could sociology, a seemingly liberal discipline, survive and grow under an “illiberal” political system? Of course, the relationship between sociology and the state was not totally free from friction, but this did not prevent the growth and diversification of the field in Singapore. And on the basis of recent trends, the prognosis for the development of sociology as a reflexive and critical inquiry looks good.

Unlike a number of other places, sociology did not come to Singapore as a gift of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (Unesco), an institution that played a key role in transplanting sociology in the non-Western world. The decision to establish sociology as an academic subject was taken by the local academic elites. However, in the context of the educational institutions of Singapore in the 1950s and 1960s the distinction between local and non-local was not all that clear-cut. The teaching staff of the tertiary institutions in Singapore has remained quite cosmopolitan since the colonial period. This has implications for the type of sociology that has evolved in this island state. It can also be suggested that the task of institutionalizing sociology was closely linked to the nation-building project. By defining the scope of Singapore sociology, the boundary of
the nation of Singapore was also inscribed into the intellectual map of the new generations of students. Yet the bogey of undesirable foreign influence in the sociological curriculum was hardly raised. The sociological scene incorporated the dynamic relationship between the global and the local without abandoning one for the other. A variety of theoretical and methodological perspectives developed in the “West” were applied to carry out research on local issues with tangible and fruitful results. At the same time, the uncritical acceptance of a so-called “Western” social science revealed another instance of Singapore’s pragmatism. As long as the new discipline yielded useful research output, it did not matter whether the theoretical stances were Western or non-Western.

The notion that sociology is a “Western” discipline was developed by the so-called “Western” scholars themselves. For example, Peter Berger (1963:25) calls it a uniquely Western consciousness, “peculiarly modern and Western cogitation”, in his words. This view is problematic for, at least, two counts. First, it accepts, thus essentializes the distinction between the “West” and the “non-West” terms that are increasingly becoming redundant. Second, in this view the contributions of non-Western thinkers to the sociological thinking are simply ignored. It is also difficult to show that by transplanting the so-called “Western” sociology into non-Western settings, the imperial or neo-imperial interests were furthered. Cultural imperialism is an attractive term but it is flawed for a number of reasons, the most important of which is that it almost denies the agency even the minimum credit. We will return to these issues in the course of this paper. For the time being, for historical record let us remind ourselves that sociology was chosen as an academic field by the autonomous educators who thought that this discipline would be relevant for meeting the challenges of national development in Singapore. A certain amount of intellectual finesse was evident on the part of the first generation of Singapore sociologists in making their discipline relevant to the development-oriented government of Singapore.

Evolution of Sociology in Singapore

The year 1965 will be remembered not only because Singapore became an independent republic in August of that year, thus ending a two year confederation with Malaysia, but also because sociology as an academic department was launched at the then University of Singapore towards the end of that year. A local newspaper reported in its 4 November 1965 issue that: “The University of Singapore has set up a new Department
of Sociology. It will be headed by Professor Murray Charles Groves, who will begin work next month.” Professor Groves was educated at the University of Melbourne and received his D.Phil. in social anthropology from Oxford in 1956. He was 39 when he took up the appointment in the University of Singapore.

A committee recommended the establishment of a psychology, social work, and sociology department at the University of Singapore to strengthen the social science programme. Before the independent department was set up, sociology was taught under the social studies curricula at both English-medium Singapore University as well as the Chinese-medium Nanyang University. Since 1952, the curriculum of the professional qualification in Social Work “contained substantial amount of sociological material” (Clammer, 1985:266). In Nanyang University, anthropology courses were first introduced under the Department of Government and Public Administration in the late 1960s. A Sociology and Psychology Programme was also introduced at Nanyang University in 1976. The two universities were merged in 1980 to form the National University of Singapore, and the Department of Sociology was formed combining the Sociology and Psychology Programme of the Nanyang University and the Sociology Department of the University of Singapore (Chen, 1986:33).

It is important to recognize that probably the first sociologist of the region was not a member of the Sociology Department. Syed Hussein Alatas, a Malaysian, received his Ph.D. in sociology at the University of Amsterdam in 1963 under the famous Southeast Asianist, Professor Wim F. Wertheim. Dr. Alatas was invited to set up the Department of Malay Studies at the University of Singapore where he taught for the most part of his academic career from 1967 to 1988. Professor Alatas took up the position of Vice Chancellor, University of Malaya in 1988. The first Singaporean to earn a doctorate in sociology was Peter S.J. Chen.

The first Head of the department, Professor Murray Charles Groves was an associate professor in social anthropology in the University of Auckland, New Zealand. “Groves was succeeded by Hans-Dieter Evers, a German sociologist who had studied in the USA and done much field research in Southeast Asia. Before he returned to Germany in 1974, Evers oversaw a considerable expansion in the range of interests covered by the Department of Sociology, and did much to stimulate empirical research” (Benjamin, 1991:1–2). Geoffrey Benjamin, an anthropologist from Cambridge University, was the first full-time lecturer hired by the department in 1967. By the late 1960s, four more full-time staff were hired. They were Peter Weldon, Riaz Hassan, John McDougall and Joseph Tamney. Peter Chen, the first Singaporean staff,
joined the department in 1971. The domination of American style quantitative and problem-solving sociology was clear in the formative years. The works of Riaz Hassan, a Pakistani trained at Ohio State University, also testify to this trend. His works on suicide and housing were both empirical and in line with the concerns of the mainstream sociology in vogue at the United States at that time. The first generation of Singaporean sociologists such as Peter Chen, Ong Jin Hui, Eddie Kuo, and Aline Wong were all trained in the United States under an intellectual climate dominated by Parsonian structural-functionalism and empiricism. Benjamin (1991:2) observed that “between 1965 and 1980, the Department of Sociology was staffed almost entirely by American-trained sociologists and British-trained social anthropologists.” This continental divide between sociology and anthropology within the department had favourable consequences in the long-term. While sociological research in the formative years were being driven by policy concerns, social anthropology by virtue of its disciplinary orientation could enjoy a certain degree of independence.

From its modest beginning in 1965, the Sociology Department at the National University of Singapore has grown to be the fourth largest department in terms of the full-time faculty as entered in the 1997 Guide to the Graduate Departments in Sociology, published by the American Sociological Association. It follows University of Wisconsin (56), UCLA (43), and University of Texas at Austin (35). As of May 1998, taking the county of birth as a marker, the following countries other than Singapore are represented in its 33-member faculty: Malaysia, Hong Kong, Taiwan, People’s Republic of China, India, Bangladesh, Britain, USA, and Colombia. The background of these sociologists not only span a variety of geographical regions, they also pursue various types of sociological interests. In terms of their training, there is a heavy U.S. influence for 21 of the total 33 teaching staff were U.S.-trained, numbering among their alma maters prestigious institutions such as Harvard, Berkeley, Chicago, Yale, Cornell and Johns Hopkins. The rest are trained in Singapore, U.K., Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.¹

Partly as an attempt to keep in tune with a global network and standards, the department maintained a system of external examiners and hosted visiting professors of distinction. The department enlisted some well-known sociologists as external examiners. The list of the past external examiners included: William E. Willmott (New Zealand), Manuel Castels (USA), Gary Hamilton (USA), Neil Smelser (USA), Michael Hill (New Zealand), and James Beckford (U.K.) Some of the prominent visiting professors were: Eric Cohen, Hebrew University, Wolfgang Schluchter, 1972–73, Germany, M.N. Srinivas, India, Trevor

Peter Chen, the first Singaporean head of the department, studied his undergraduate courses at Hong Kong University. He did his graduate work in economics before moving into sociology. Both his Masters in Economics and Masters and Ph.D. degrees in sociology were from Washington University at St. Louis. Chen held the position of the head of the department in its formative years from 1974–79. Chen’s works were mainly in the areas of development and modernization. His contribution in the area of modernization studies has been significant according to Preston (1987). It is important to follow the heads of the department and their career track and their orientations because in the hierarchical academic culture in Singapore, they can play an important role in shaping the research agenda and curricula of the department. The heads enjoy a great deal of leeway in hiring and firing staff, and putting their stamp on the research orientations of the department. Table 1 shows the names and tenure of the heads and their brief backgrounds.

Table 1: Heads of Sociology Department, 1965 to 1998

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Background</th>
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<tr>
<td>1965–69</td>
<td>Professor Murray Groves, Australian, trained in Oxford</td>
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<tr>
<td>1969–71</td>
<td>Drs. J. Tamney, R. Hassan (both acting)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971–74</td>
<td>Professor Hans Dieter Evers, German, trained in USA</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1974–79</td>
<td>Dr. Peter S.J. Chen, Singaporean, trained in USA</td>
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<tr>
<td>1979–86</td>
<td>Dr. Ong Jin Hui, Singaporean, trained in USA (Indiana, Bloomington)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986–90</td>
<td>Dr. Eddie Kuo, Taiwan born Singaporean, trained in USA (Minnesota)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990–91</td>
<td>Dr. Chang Chen Tung (Acting Head) Taiwan born Singaporean, trained in USA (Chicago)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1991–97</td>
<td>Associate Professor Ong Jin Hui</td>
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<tr>
<td>1997–98</td>
<td>Dr. Ho Kong Chong, Singaporean, trained in USA (Chicago)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998–to date</td>
<td>Associate Professor Lian Kwen Fee, Malaysian born, New Zealand trained</td>
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What is Singapore sociology? In a broad sense it is the totality of sociological work accumulated over time produced by the Singaporean and non-Singaporean social scientists. Yet there is a conceptual riddle. When we look at sociology in Singapore, should we look at what is taught at the University in the Sociology Department or should we accept a broader definition of sociology to include works that
incorporated sociological imagination as well as sociological investigations that have taken place or continue to take place outside the pale of the university? Sociological reflections can be found in travelogues, fiction, and various reports of the colonial government as well as in all kinds of unorthodox sources. Sociological work result from these various sources:

1. Singaporean sociologists, based in Singapore, working on Singapore society.
2. Singaporean sociologists, based overseas, working on issues related to Singapore society.
3. Foreign sociologists, based overseas, working on Singapore.
4. Foreign sociologists, based in Singapore, working on topics related to Singapore.
5. Singaporean sociologists working in Singapore but their research interest covers either the region or beyond.
6. Foreign-born sociologists working on the region from Singapore.
7. Foreign-born sociologists working in and on Singapore who eventually became naturalized citizens.
8. Singapore-born sociologists who spent a good many years of their professional careers outside Singapore.

Given such diversity, it is difficult to point out what is Singapore sociology and who is the quintessential Singapore sociologist.

Among the early works on Singapore sociology are social historical and social anthropological studies such as Song Ong Siang’s *One Hundred Year’s History of the Chinese in Singapore* (1923); Maurice Freedman’s *Chinese Family and Marriage in Singapore* (1957); William Skinner’s *Report on the Chinese in Southeast Asia* (1951) and Victor Purcell’s *The Chinese in Southeast Asia* (1965) (Chen, 1986:37). These works precede the institutionalization of sociology in Singapore. It is interesting to note that Singaporean social scientists in the early stages of development of sociology very rarely engaged in nationalist discourse, or called for indigenization, etc. From very early days, sociology and the sociologists in Singapore wore a very cosmopolitan garb.

The favourable factors for the development of sociology in Singapore have been assessed by Frederick Deyo who was on the faculty in the late 1970s. According to Deyo (1989), Singapore, a dynamic, rapidly-industrializing society, is a veritable laboratory for the study of social change and government-induced industrialization carried out by an efficient bureaucracy. Besides, Singapore being a cosmopolitan world-city provides a favourable context for the development of sociology. One of the more important unfavourable
factors that Deyo identified was Singapore's political climate. His point about the limited research funds for sociology (and social science) based on Ong's (1977) earlier study does not reflect the present situation. The main problem in his analysis is his conclusion that the Western sociological concepts and methods have "questionable local applicability" (Deyo, 1989:34). If we accept the proposition that Singapore is a cosmopolitan, global city then why would the theories of globalization and sociological notions of cosmopolitanism be inapplicable to Singapore? This is not to deny the local cultural and societal idiosyncrasies, but unless we want to slide into an endless relativistic regression, we have to admit that sociological concepts and methods have wider use beyond the social contexts where they are produced.

The curriculum of the department has evolved over the years. A good mix of theoretical, methodological, and substantive courses and orientations are given to the students. The three-year degree programme and a fourth year honours degree provide a good offering of courses. The courses offered in the department show a great deal of continuity. In order to earn their honours degree, students are required to write an honours thesis, earlier called Academic Exercise. One gets a good idea of the evolution of intellectual and research orientations of the department with a cursory look at the topics studied in these exercises. In recent years an increasing number of honours theses have been devoted to the topics of postmodernity, political sociology, gender issues, politics of space, and more recently, cyberspace and globalization. The other source to gauge the research orientation is the research papers, especially the working papers in the department. Over the years, the focus of the working papers has moved slightly from heavily empirical orientation to a good mix of theoretical considerations.

Three phases in the development of sociology can be discerned in the last 33 years of history of the department. These entail shifts in research interests and traditions, changes in the curriculum, and changes in the interests of the students. These three phases embody different modes of relationships between the government and the academic sociological community.

The First Phase: 1965–77

This was the spring time of nation-building. The national leaders were focused on various tasks towards nation-building. Although some of the leaders were not favourably disposed towards the soft sciences and
openly criticized philosophy and political science in an address, the government tolerated sociology. Evers noted an incident in the form of an anecdote: “After Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew had urged his listeners in an election rally that students should take up useful subjects like engineering or law rather than sociology, enrolment of students in Sociology 1 (an introductory course) rose tremendously. I brought this matter to the attention of the Vice Chancellor, Dr. Toh Chin Chye (concurrently, the Minister for Science and Technology), who apparently took pleasure in mentioning it at a Cabinet meeting. In subsequent speeches of PAP leaders, sociology was struck from the list of ‘useless’ subjects” (Evers, 1991:17). It is possible that some of the leaders found it a useful tool for gathering data and carrying out social research on various important issues of the day related to national development. Housing, ethnic relations, social problems, delinquency, population, fertility control, etc. became the most important issues of the day. The first generation of sociologists were heavily involved with policy related research. A departmental publication stated: “... the research programme generally takes its focus from pressing day-to-day problems of rapidly changing societies rather than from problems posed by current sociological theory” (General Information 1979/80:11). The plethora of research output in the first 15 years of the department would put any other department to shame. Truly, the goal of the best university east of Suez was realized.

The relationship between sociology and the government was cooperative. Sociologists were involved in largely government-funded research projects or projects funded by international organizations geared to helping the new nation. Between 1972 to 1978, the department carried out thirty-three research projects, of which 19 were funded by international organizations such as ECAFE (Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East), IDRC (International Development Research Centre) UNFPA (United Nations Fund for Population Agency), ILO (International Labour Organization), WHO (World Health Organization), USNIH (United States, National Institute of Health), RIHED (Regional Institute of Higher Education and Development), Asia Foundation, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Institute of Developing Economics, Harvard-Yenching Institute, East-West Communication Institute, Bernard Van Leer Foundation, and SEAPRAP (Southeast Asia Population Research Awards Programme). The rest were funded by government departments such as Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Science and Technology, and local organizations such as NTUC (National Trades Union Congress), AMIC (Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre), the University of Singapore, ISEAS (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies), and Lee Foundation.
The cordial relationship between the Department of Sociology and the funding agencies, and the research output of the sociologists such as Peter Chen, Riaz Hassan, Ong Jin Hui, Eddie Kuo, Aline Wong, and Chan Chen Tung made sociology relevant to the government. Since the research agenda was shaped by the government and other funding agencies, the sociologists found themselves awash with research grants. They did an admirable job in fulfilling their research obligations, and earned the trust and respect of the government. This secured the status of sociology as a discipline in Singapore and the suspicions about the "liberal" image gave way to admiration. Sociology, thanks to the tireless work of the first generation of sociologists, proved itself to be relevant to the task of nation-building. The works of Riaz Hassan on suicide and housing combined both the trends of socially-useful knowledge as well as a somewhat critical understanding of the modernization processes in Singapore. Riaz Hassan left the Department in 1977 for a position in Australia. He now holds a chair at The Flinders University of South Australia, Adelaide.

During this time, the anthropologists of the department were mainly concerned with research based on their academic interests.

Although the first phase was heavily dominated by the expatriate sociologists and social anthropologists, they established a solid base for the intellectual career of sociology under a somewhat difficult political environment. In the late 1960s in view of the radical student movements in the European and the U.S. campuses, the political leaders in Singapore had expressed their disapproval of such activities. While this raised important issues of intellectual autonomy and freedom, sociology in general was off to a good start because this new discipline provided research findings that could be used for the purpose of governance. Dr. Goh Keng Swee, one of the architects of Singapore's development (who earned a Ph.D. from London School of Economics in Political Science in the 1950s), probably had a favourable view of sociology. His own study entitled *Urban Incomes and Housing: A Report on the Social Survey of Singapore 1953–54* may be regarded as a landmark sociological research on the low-income households in Singapore. S. Rajaratnam, a friend and confidant of Prime Minister Lee, once suggested that the latter's bed time reading included statistics. The pragmatic leadership in Singapore, it seems, took note of the potential of sociology as a discipline for collecting information on various facets of social and economic life of Singapore. During this first phase, sociology did a good job in producing a wealth of statistics on various aspects of social life in Singapore.
The Second Phase: 1978–88

The period 1978 to 1988 was a transitional phase. By then, Singapore had firmly consolidated itself as a nation-state. Unlike the early phase, sociologists during this period were focusing on their own research interests, which often coincided with the needs of the government. In this phase, we see a great deal of research carried out on marriage, language, religion, ethnic and national identity, etc. The General Information published by the Department of Sociology in 1979–80 outlined four broad areas of research in the department. These were:

1. Social problems of rapid industrialization, which included studies on adaptation to industrial work, the formation of an industrial work force, and the role of the trade union officials.
2. Social problems of rapid urbanization, which included the effects of the urban population, interaction of tenants in high rise buildings, social characteristics of the central area of Singapore and other S.E. Asian cities, and social disorganization. Changing occupational structures, which included studies on “hawkers” in Singapore, on the role of professionals in modernization, occupational mobility, social class formation, and other related problems.
3. Changing socio-cultural patterns, which included studies on national identity, ethnic relations, attitude towards Western medicine, and ethnographic research (Department of Sociology, 1979–80:2).

All these topics were perceived to be important by the government and the sociologists themselves were impressed by the relevance of these topics. As sociologists began to take part in a research agenda set more by the logic rather than the dictates of the system, more varieties of interpretations and angles became apparent. The agenda for social research remained only nominally in the hands of the sociologists. A quick scan of the research outputs during this period will testify the congruence of official position and the research orientation of the sociologists. Yet, as more and more sociologists became involved in the practice of social research, they began to enjoy some degree of independence and originality in the way they interpreted the issues. Social anthropologist John Clammer, known for his prolific output, worked on a variety of subjects and wrote on topics that were seemingly outside the preferred themes of the government. The department’s social anthropologists always enjoyed a measure of independence from state-funded research initiatives. Thus they pursued their own areas of interest unencumbered. Geoffrey Benjamin continued his work on the Temiar of West Malaysia, while Anthony Walker worked on the Todas of South India.
During this phase the research areas were truly diversified, yet officially-favoured projects such as the one on religion continued to be carried out by the department. The research on religion, conducted by Eddie Kuo, a sociologist (presently, Dean, School of Communication Studies at Nanyang Technological University), Tong Chee Kiong, an anthropologist (presently, Dean Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore) and Jon Quah, a political scientist, received national attention. During this phase religion remained one of the most popular subjects for honours theses. Six of the thirty-two honours theses in the academic year 1987-88 were on the theme of religion. Topics in sociology of religion, such as religious conversion, charismatic movements, etc. continue to be popular today.

The Third Phase: 1988–98

Sociology became more autonomous and diversified during this phase. This was reflected both in the research directions as well as in the introduction of new courses. The autonomy that sociology gradually began to enjoy has been more of an unintended consequence of the perceived relevance of sociology to the task of national development. After the initial years of uncertainty, sociology established itself as a socially useful discipline with the capacity to contribute to social development. With the rise in the legitimacy of sociology as a socially useful discipline, sociologists began to enjoy more leeway in their researches. Yet studies on religion and language maintained the link between academia and the government. One part of the research continued to show the relevance of sociology while the other part was setting its own intellectual agenda. However, there was no sharp divide between sociologists who were doing their own critical work and those who were working for the state-funded research projects.

In late 1980s, sociology had sufficiently matured to the extent that one of the Singaporean sociologists could take on government policy of a sensitive nature, such as class and education. Chua Beng Huat trained as a sociologist in York University, Canada, and after a teaching stint in Canada returned to Singapore in 1983. Chua not only brought Foucault and postmodernism to the department, he suggested in a critical remark that the privatization of education is biased in favour of the rich and the upper class. Subsequently, Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew, in a speech given on the occasion of the Lunar New Year, voiced his worry that the younger generation of Singaporean academics were being influenced by contemporary conventional wisdom from the West. The Senior Minister urged, "Do not just accept what the Western liberal
sociologists tell you. Ask how it has worked in Singapore" (Straits Times, 9 February 1992). In October 1993, Chua’s name was mentioned in Parliamentary debates for his remarks to the Sunday Times (3 October 1993) on the rising cost of living in Singapore. His remarks were criticized during the debates over the report of the Cost Review Committee in the Parliament. Both the Minister at the Prime Minister’s Office Lim Boon Heng (and Chairman of the Cost Review Committee) and the Minister for Trade and Industry, S. Dhanabalan, were critical of Chua. Minister Lim chided: “As a sociologist in our university, he should read the Report before he passes judgment” (Parliamentary Debates, 1993:718). Not surprisingly, opposition Member of Parliament Chiam See Tong referred to Chua in the debate approvingly.

As the younger sociologists became more prepared to take risks, the issues of democracy and civil society were openly discussed. In various panels and semi-public discussions, sociologists and other fellow social scientists became increasingly vociferous without apparent reprisals. However, this was not always the case. There were instances when young fire brand lecturers were reminded of their o.b (out of bounds) markers. Chua’s works on ideology, public housing, democracy and the political climate of Singapore can be broadly viewed as liberal. His works were written with a neo-Marxist slant and are couched in the fanciest jargons of the trade. Even the study of Singapore’s nation building by Michael Hill and Lian Kwen Fee contains reasonable amount of critical analyses and makes frank assessment of various seemingly “sensitive” policy issues. In a review of the state of sociology in Singapore (along with Hong Kong and Taiwan) in Contemporary Sociology, Stella Quah singled out Hill and Lian (1995) as the most important illustration of Singapore sociology. The book, in Quah’s words, “stands out for its thoroughness, scholarly recognition, and unbiased discussion of previous studies on the complex link between national identity, ethnicity, class and the state in Singapore” (Quah, 1997:574). One also has to take into account Chua’s Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore (1995) and the more recent Political Legitimacy and Housing (1997) as other examples of the growing interest in political sociology in Singapore. A course on Political Sociology (presently titled Politics and Society) was introduced in 1988–89, and was taught by Chua Beng Huat and later by James Jesudason.

In 1988–89 academic year, of the 28 honours theses only one was on political sociology. By 1992–93, six out of 27 theses were in the area of political sociology. The evolution of Chua’s interests illustrate the recent changes in Singapore sociology quite well. Chua, having started his career with an abiding interest in Phenomenology, Ethnomethodology, Neo-Marxism and Foucault, has increasingly
moved towards postmodernism while not abandoning his interests in neo-Marxism. Chua’s works on public housing and sociology of consumption reflect the hybridity of the sociological scene of Singapore today. The essays of Leong Wai Teng on the popular culture of Singapore are more examples of the emergence of a fairly critical sociological discourse. Interestingly, these sociologists are not carrying the banner of an indigenous sociology. They seem to be quite comfortable in using the sociological concepts and perspectives developed elsewhere to illustrate the local empirical issues with a great degree of success.

At the beginning of the third phase, the course on Modernization was also renamed as Development and Change and the course materials included a heavy emphasis on the neo-Marxist theories of development such as the dependency and world systems theories of Wallerstein. Increasingly, the works of Mann, Chirot and others on the rise of the West were incorporated in the curriculum of this course. A course on the Sociology of Gender was also introduced at the fourth year (Honours year). The growing popularity of the course resulted in its transfer to the third year level in 1991–92. Vivien Wee, one of the founders of AWARE, taught the course on gender along with Aline Wong, who is presently a member of the Singapore Cabinet. Vivien Wee is now a free-lance researcher and involved with NGO activities. The course on gender continues to be one of the most popular courses in the department.

A marked interest in the development of historical sociology in Singapore is also noticeable. The work of Mak Lau Fong (1981) on secret societies, and more recently Chan and Chiang’s (1994) work on Chinese entrepreneurs, are milestones. The introduction of a course on Social Memory presently taught by Roxana Waterson and Kwok Kian Woon manifests this interest in historical sociology. In recent years, sociology has become more diversified. It has taken a key role in promoting cooperation among social scientists in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region by organizing ASEAN inter-university conferences on social development. More inter-disciplinary research has become the norm. Over the years the in-house journal of the department, the Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science, has been an important forum for the publication of cross-disciplinary research. The journal has been in publication for the last 25 years and has gained international reputation.

On the occasion of the publication of the Department of Sociology’s one-hundredth working paper under the working paper series, the following areas were identified as common topics for working papers: (1) Social theory; (2) Development and social change;
(3) Class and stratification; (4) Ethnicity and ethnic relations; (5) Ethnology; (6) Family; (7) Language and communication; (8) Religion; (9) Social organization; (10) Urban sociology; (11) Work and professions (Chan and Ho, 1991:1). These reflect not only a diversity of research interests of the sociologists and anthropologists in the department but also an interest in areas in sociology that are not of immediate concern to the task of nation-building. Although the working papers were originally intended to be “for private circulation only” for the benefit of feedback from “interested scholars”, in reality working papers became the platform for important discussions and scholarly exchanges. For example, the working papers of Benjamin, Kuo, Tong, and Chua amongst others received wider audience.

**Conclusion**

Although sociology seems to have achieved some degree of autonomy as a discipline, the agenda for sociological research is still set in response to the concerns of social development. Sociologists exercising a good deal of pragmatism often choose topics of research on their own that somehow fit into the agenda of national development. Ong, Tong and Tan (1997:vii) observe, “While contributing useful data and analysis for policy and planning, sociologists have also been involved in providing alternative theoretical and organizational and cultural frames of reference in their analysis of and research on public policies and their social consequences”. The changes in sociology reflect changes in the broad intellectual culture in Singapore. A certain degree of openness also marked the political culture during this period. The consolidation of Singapore as a nation-state, the remarkable achievements in the economic development, and the enhancement of quality of life in Singapore have made the state elites complacent. A certain degree of openness towards public discussion of social issues is noted. It is this climate of openness that created a window of opportunity for sociology to grow out of its conventional problem-solving approach to a more candid and critical discourse.

Rather than viewing sociology as a “Western” discourse in a “non-Western” setting, in the wake of sustaining the myth of the clash of civilizations, it may be more useful to examine the relationship between sociological knowledge and political power as a dynamic process. In this regard the ideas of Robert Lynd, nearly sixty years after the publication of his book, *Knowledge for What* continue to be relevant not just in the United States but more so in Singapore. Lynd wrote
A social scientist has no place, *qua* scientist, as a party to power-politics. When he works within the constricting power curbs of a Republican or of a Communist “party line”, or when he pulls his scientific punch by pocketing more important problems and accepting a retainer as an expert for the partisan ends of a bank or an advertising agency, he is something less than a scientist. ... But, also, when the social scientist hides behind the aloof “spirit of science and scholarship” for fear of possible contamination, he is likewise something less than a scientist (1945 [1939]:178).

And surely it is not ironical. Sociology has evolved as a global discourse, though a derivative one, for sure, and as Singapore is being enmeshed in global circumstances, the concepts of rationalization or overrationalization, or disenchantment are increasingly making more and more sense. The growing diversification in sociology as reflected in the research output of the faculty speaks volumes of the maturity of this discipline in Singapore. Alongside such conventional areas as social stratification, sociology of religion, health, family, deviance, migration, and education, areas such as identity, globalization, political sociology, labour process, cultural studies, discourse analyses, popular culture, sociology of consumption, space, etc. are gaining in popularity. The other tendency that augurs well for the department is the balance between policy-focused and theory-focused research. The introduction of a Master in Social Science in Applied Sociology alongside a research-based postgraduate programme is an expression of the synergy between theory and practice. At present the department has undertaken a number of policy-focused research projects. The flagship projects are in the areas of quality of life, aging, and science and technology. In addition to the team projects, a number of individual-initiated projects covering a wide range of areas are also under way. Apart from the changes in the research foci and curricula, what is important is to be in tune with the changing openness. In the opinion of Chua, there is more space now socially and culturally than before. Sociologists must seize this opportunity. “Sociologists need to stand up and be counted.”

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Associate Professors Peter Chen, Geoffrey Benjamin and Chua Beng Huat for granting me interviews and sharing their views.
Notes

1. A list of the faculty members currently teaching in the department can be obtained from the author.
2. The list of courses offered in the department between 1979 and 1998, the list of Honours Theses topics, and the list of working papers published by the department for the same period can be obtained from the author.

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