Human Geography: Singapore Perspectives

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Geography thrives by giving young minds the freedom to identify enigmatic questions and to seek answers. To ensure that curiosity is disciplined, the paradigms that have proved useful are taught to students, but always with the encouragement to challenge and innovate.

1 Introduction

Over the years, there have been several reflections of Singapore’s Geography Department at the National University of Singapore\(^1\) as well as updates on the Department’s research output both in human geography\(^3\) and physical geography\(^4\). More recently, there has been also a gender perspective to the Department’s faculty profile, student population and module offerings\(^5\).

Keeping in mind these overviews of the Department and its research outputs, this paper will concentrate on the contributions of the Department in human geography over the last 15 years (1990 to 2005) by identifying the salient themes and research thrusts and highlighting the main contributions of faculty members. Human geography as opposed to physical geography, is a large template that covers a plethora of sub-disciplines in geography. It is defined here as the part of geography “concerned with the spatial differentiation and organization of human activity and its interrelationships with the physical environment\(^6\)”. This definition covers broadly the two conceptual themes that most human geographers anchor their work on: the human-nature relationships and the spatial organization of human activities. Given the large reservoir of publications that the faculty members have produced over the last 15 years, this review remains a personal reflection. I have also chosen to concentrate on the contributions of Singaporeans in

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the Department because they reflect over the years, over 60 percent of the faculty in human geography. While there has been a dominant presence of foreign faculty in the Department they have remained a somewhat transitory population. This partly reflects the fact that for long, non-Singaporean faculty had difficulty taking up tenured appointments; the first time tenured positions were granted to foreign faculty in the Department was as recent as the 2005 06 academic year. However, where relevant, I will include the contributions of non-Singaporean faculty members in this review.

II  NUS Geography : Explaining the Geographical Renaissance

If I were to classify the Department’s history over its 75 year history (began teaching in 1929 in Raffles College), there are three periods that define Singapore’s geography at tertiary level: i) the colonial foundations from 1929 1959; ii) independent period from 1960 to 1990; and iii) the post-colonial renaissance in geography from 1991 to the present. The colonial foundation of the Department was restricted mainly to establishing geography as a teaching subject. Only after World War II, the Department pursued a professional approach to the discipline, with the Head of Department having for the first time a Doctorate degree (Professor E. G. H. Dobby, PhD, University of London) and engaged in academic research besides teaching. The Department had mainly ‘expatriate’ faculty members and many were research active. Under Dobby’s headship for 11 years (1946–1957), human geography was focused on regional geography of Southeast Asia, Peninsular Malaya and Singapore which was generally field-work based research. The Department also inaugurated The Malayan Journal of Tropical Geography in 1953 and is still published today, continuously for the last 53 years.

The independent period of the Department approximates the beginning of self-rule (1959) from Britain and finally independence in 1963 (in Malaysia) and full independent sovereignty as a state in 1965. In 1960, the Department had its first Asian head (Professor Wikkramateleke) and this was followed subsequently by a series of Singaporean headships. This period still maintained a strong teaching tradition in the Department with research done more as a product of individual initiative than institutional encouragement. Under Ooi Jin Bee’s headship (1969–1989), the Department remained stable and conservative in research and teaching. The well subscribed motto of this period was “don’t rock the boat”. Keith Buchanan, an external examiner (1967–1970) in the Department was less complimentary: he viewed the Department’s courses as “reactionary and colonial”.

The third phase of the Department’s history, a period that this paper is concerned with, is the most dynamic period in the history of the Department in many ways: teaching, research, publications, consultancies, government and non-government organisations (NGOs) participation, international and national academic contributions. To understand why the Department has gone through a renaissance requires an analysis of a series of contingent factors all coming together.

Firstly, the government’s policies towards increasing the funding for research and development

7) op. cit., footnote 1), 3).
8) op. cit., footnote 1), 3).
greatly boosted university coffers and this had a trickle down effect on the Department both in terms of research funding and post-graduate expansion. The University according to former Deputy Prime Minister, Dr Tony Tan had moved from a teaching university to one that is research driven. This change in government policy led by the late 1990s to liberal research funds in the university. Secondly, the University underwent a major change in its overall academic system in 1994-95 switching from a British-based, year long, tutorial and examination based academic system to an American-type semester based, Continuous Assessment (CA) based grading system. The American system emphasized a ‘no-walls education’, less emphasis on examination assessments and more multi- and inter-disciplinary learning systems. Students were required to take more modules across various faculties and disciplines rather than concentrating narrowly in one major. Thirdly, the Department’s first generation of Singaporean geographers (Ooi Jin Bee, Lee Yong Leng, Chia Lin Sien, Cheng Lim Keak and Teo Siew Eng) were all retiring by the late 1980s and early 1990s and a new generation of Singaporean geographers were filing their shoes. The new generation of geographers reflected a wider variety of sub-disciplines with higher degrees from a mixture of many universities in the Anglo-American world: Chang (tourism, McGill University), Huang (urban geography, University of Toronto), Kong (socio-cultural geography, University College, London), Raguraman (transport geography, University of Washington, Seattle), Savage (cultural, UC Berkeley), Teo (population geography, University of Pennsylvania), Yeoh (historical geography, Oxford University), Yeung (economic geography, University of Manchester) and the recent addition of Pow (urban geography, UCLA). Two other current graduate students will be joining the Department: Harvey Neo (environmental, Clark University) and Karen Lai (economic geography, University of Nottingham).

And fourthly, the increasing student enrolment in geography over the years allowed the Department an expansion of faculty members. This student increase was made especially possible because the university introduced two types of modules that required students to take in order to graduate: general education modules (GE modules) and Singapore Studies modules (SS modules), which were compulsory for students across faculties. Both these modules drew large numbers of students for geography. The SS modules had an enrolment over 400 students per semester per module; and these were offered over two semesters. These increased student numbers allowed for the hiring of many other young expatriate faculty (Tim Bunnell, Neil Coe, Carl Grundy-Warr, Lisa Law, Lee Yong Sook, Kris Olds, Park Bae-Gyoon, Martin Perry and James Sidaway) over the years who have helped to fertilize the research output in the Department.

Armed with new concepts, methods and themes from their postgraduate work, the return of young faculty to the Department served as a major catalyst for the Department in the 1990s onwards. There were many areas of research interest that were unutilled by geographers and hence a flurry of research agendas ensued. In an interconnected world made possible by the information technology revolution in the 1990s or what Alvin Toffler\(^9\) calls the Third Wave, the Department’s human geographers connected amongst themselves with other faculty members in the university as well as geographers overseas.

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The vitality of human geography in the Department over the last 15 years reflects to a large extent the productive research agendas and prolific publication output of three faculty members: Lily Kong, Brenda Yeoh and Henry Yeung. They served as the academic catalysts in the Department and through their never-tiring research agendas have helped to energize the Department’s research programs. Lily Kong and Brenda Yeoh initiated their research paths with several joint publications before they engaged several other faculty members in their publications. The last five years have seen a research coupling between Brenda Yeoh and Shirlena Huang especially on migration and gender issues. Henry Yeung has done joint research with Singaporean faculty but his major research tie-ups has been with expatriate faculty members both at NUS and overseas.

Despite coming from different sub-disciplinary specializations in geography, the fecundity of joint research amongst faculty members has been made possible because of the broad interdisciplinary nature of certain research areas. In the Department, nearly all faculty members have engaged in three areas: tourism, globalization and socio-cultural geographical themes. These three themes have been the subject of Departmental organized conferences and workshops that have in turn been translated into edited books. Prime examples are Globalisation and the Asia Pacific: Contested Territories; Interconnected Worlds: Tourism in Southeast Asia and Asian Women as Transnational Domestic Workers.

These systematic themes have been overlaid by the strong regional (Southeast Asia, East Asia) emphasis and specific local (Singapore) empirical embedding. The first level of empirical unfolding which represents probably 60 percent of all the faculty members’ research output is Singapore. The state is expressed at various levels as nation-state, city-state, global city, urban landscape, circumscribed island and urban places. Each of these spatial depictions creates

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different identities, varied conceptual scalar levels of analysis, and multiple ways in understanding the way individuals and communities organize activities in space nationally and inter-relationally in the region and further away. At the intra-national level, Singapore geographers have often used ‘landscape’, ‘place’ and ‘nature’ (environment) as their defining conceptual theme for analysis. Landscape and place thus have featured as embeddings of national identity, Singaporean emotional attachments to places, ethnic identity, evocative symbols of nostalgia, expressions of home, national landmarks, tourism attractions, the existential areas of the elderly and zones for conservation. This focus on the Singapore landscape is also the binding theme of the Singapore Studies (SS) module for university students across faculties with its own home-grown textbook. At the extra-national levels, the academic interventions deal with more dynamic flows and processes arising from trade, finance, labor migrants, diasporas, industrial activities, information technology and tourism.

At a second level of empirical analysis is the Southeast Asian region. The region might be viewed holistically as a geo-political territorial entity or as the 10 states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). But by and large, most of the studies have viewed the region in functional terms that underscores Michael Leifer’s definition of functionalist activity as a “convergence of perceived interest underpinned by suitable political and economic circumstances”. As opposed to the formal regional approaches that governed regional geography in the 1950s, the Southeast Asian region has remained a functional template for all sorts of economic, social, cultural and political interactions by individuals, organizations, governments, communities and business corporations. Hence the studies of domestic maids in Southeast Asia reflects on the multiple interactions between out-sourcing places (the Philippines, Indonesia, Myanmar) and their in-source employers (Brunei, Singapore, Malaysia). In the case of Henry Yeung’s economic geographies of Hong Kong transnational corporations, the Southeast Asian

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22) Robequain, C. Malaya, Indonesia, Borneo and the Philippines: A Geographical, Economic and Political Description of Malaya, the East Indies and the Philippines, Longmans Green, 1938.

23) See, (1) op. cit., footnote 16. (2) op. cit., footnote 5.

region becomes the location for testing business entrepreneurship, Chinese business network relationships and the question of whether capitalism is culturally neutral.

Thirdly and more recently, the studies have engaged a broader spatial canvas to include the Asia-Pacific, Asia and East Asia. Given the familiarity with Singapore’s dominant Chinese population, the Department’s faculty members certainly have an advantage of dealing with the dominant Chinese national entities of China, Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan as well as the overseas Chinese Diasporas in Southeast Asia. Henry Yeung’s exposition on Chinese capitalism as “hybrid capitalism” demonstrates that capitalism is not culturally neutral. Indeed, it is this very nexus between economics and culture and economics and place embedding that has elevated economic geography discourses in mainstream economics and has given academic respectability to economic geography by peers from other disciplines. The economist, Jeffrey Sachs in his book, The End of Poverty underscores the importance of economic geography (location, place, natural resources, environmental issues) in understanding developmental processes and the reasons for poverty.

III Geographical Identity: the Geobody of Singapore’s Research

The institutionalization of an academic discipline involves creating an identity, a subject with its own niche within the academic division of labour with which individuals are affiliated.

Over the last 15 years (1990–2005), a voluminous amount of publications have emanated from the Department’s eight Singaporean human geographers (T. C. Chang, Shirlena Huang, Lily Kong, K. Raguraman, Peggy Teo, Victor Savage, Brenda Yeoh, Henry Yeung) and one physical geographer who undertakes research in coastal tourism (Wong Poh Poh). The research output in the last 15 years covers 22 self / jointly authored books, 57 single / joint / multiple edited books, 620 international referred (IR) and regional referred articles, and 189 chapters in books. The IR articles cover most of the major journals in geography (Area; Progress in Human Geography; Environment and Planning A; Geographical Review; Economic Geography) as well as in allied fields in other disciplines (Asian and Pacific Migration Journal, Cities, Woman’s Studies International Forum, Asian Studies Review, Southeast Asian Studies, Annals Of Tourism Research, Transportation Quarterly). The books (authored and edited) cover a range of publishing houses involving university presses as well as commercial publishing houses (Routledge, Edward Elgar, McGraw-Hill, Sage). But the number crunching statistics of the Department’s publication output over the years, while impressive, is certainly not a major criterion of establishing the Department’s research contributions. In an academic environment, where publications are a justification for tenure and promotions, the tragedy is that the traditional university ethos of intellectual debate and dialogue can sometimes be usurped.

Generally speaking, the competition amongst young academics has now been debased to the number of publications and books, the tiered ranking of journals published in and the quality of

25) See, (1) op. cit., footnote 16; (2) op. cit., footnote 12; (4).
the academic press one should use. But, the more important question is what about ideas? What about the debate on concepts and theories? In trying to deal with the plethora of publications of the Department, I have chosen to divide them under several themes. These themes in a way underscore the major research ideas and geographical thinking of the Department’s faculty members.

Basically four broad generalizations can be made with regard to the Department’s research work. Firstly, the main research themes revolve around each faculty member’s sub-disciplinary research interest though there is some overlap of research interest amongst faculty members. Each faculty member has tended to remain the academic anchors in specific research areas or niche areas within sub-disciplines: for example T. C. Chang on tourism, Lily Kong on the geography of religion and popular music, Henry Yeung on transnational corporations and Chinese business networks, and Peggy Teo on elderly population issues. Given the small size of the Department and the fact it represents the only academic geography department in the city-state, maintaining the diversity of systematic geographical traditions has remained a conscious policy to ensure at least the undergraduate students are exposed to a wide range of sub-disciplines in geography. However in research, the sub-disciplines have become blurred and there has been greater cross-fertilization amongst faculty members in their research agendas.

Secondly, research themes by and large reflect the nature of Singapore’s geographicity which translates to the: changing nature of government policies, city-state identity, aging demographic profile, economic impetus, and wide-ranging national identity issues. It is thus no wonder that much of the research amongst Singaporean faculty remains very Singacentric in perspective. This Singapore research bias is contingent on two other factors. One is that unlike other nation-states, with numerous universities and geography departments, the Department of Geography in NUS is the only fully fledged geography department in Singapore. Unlike other states with hundreds of geographers and social scientists, in Singapore the human geography research lies essentially with the 8 to 12 human geographers (locals and expatriates) in the Department. And their portfolio of research agendas on Singapore is rather enormous. It is for Singaporean geographers to write about their national geographies before attempting to research and understand other regional geographies. Two, is the fact Singapore’s rapid transformation as a relatively young nation (independent since 1965) from ‘Third World to Developed’ status in a matter of 40 years, provides


31) op. cit., footnote 24) (1).


in itself a plethora of research agendas. The ‘success’ of Singapore’s transformation is a ‘black box’ that elicits academic enquiry, critical reviews and simulated models for capacity-building.

Thirdly, the research themes reflect largely the changing concepts and -isms in Anglo-American geography. The unfortunate issue in publishing in the tier one, discipline-based academic journals is that contributors by and large have to follow the academic norms, concepts, nomenclature, and language of Anglo-American geography. Certainly, most of the Department’s faculty members have been caught in the maelstrom of the globalization discourses, feminist geographies, post-colonial, modern, post-modern and neo-liberal deliberations. It would seem that each academic fetish and fad tends to engender a fresh reinvestigation and reinterpretation of existing spatial flows and processes.

And fourthly, as Singapore is a very small state, intellectual concerns in the social sciences in general have been focused on Singapore and the Asian region, in particular Southeast Asia. While American or British geographers engage in research in locations around the world, Singapore geographers or social scientists rarely embark on research matters that have nothing to do with Singapore and the Southeast Asian region. This geographic specificity provides an in-built academic niche that in some ways has determined the character of Singapore’s human geography outputs. Singaporean geographers, in short, have become the authorities of the spatial and environmental relationships and ramifications within their own city-state and / or the inter-and extra-relationships in the Southeast Asian region or Asia-Pacific world.

(1) Singapore: Nation, city, and ecosystem

Singapore’s geography output over the last 15 years can be characterized by a tremendous effervescence in discovering the changing and dynamic geographies of Singapore. The studies on Singapore cover essentially three slices of the Republic’s geography. One body of work deals with the issue of Singapore finding its identity and footage as a nation-state. A second body of thought attempts to look at Singapore as a city with places of embedding community bonds, ethnic identity and nostalgic relationships. And a third body of literature looks at the dynamics of Singapore as an urban ecosystem, its urban sustainability, and its brown and green issues.

As a newly developed country (1965 independence), Singapore’s national identity is the outcome of a wide spectrum of interventions. Hence the nation-state’s identity filters through in national day parades. The most ambitious attempt to examine national identity through landscape manifestations is The Politics of Landscape in Singapore: Construction of ‘Nations’. While other studies interrogate Singapore’s urban status, this study reflects on Singapore’s national status and identity through discussion of four ‘noneconomic landscape’ themes: landscape of sentiment (places of worship, deathscapes), quotidian landscapes (housing and streets), landscapes of aesthetics (performance places) and landscapes of heritage (historic areas and symbolic icons). In analyzing these intersecting landscapes, they conclude that the Singapore “nation” is “socially and spatially

34) op. cit., footnote 17) (2).
35) op. cit., footnote 17) (2).
36) op. cit., footnote 17) (2).
constructed, reinforced and challenged. Their arguments and testimonies of a “nation” made “material, tangible” in “apparent” landscapes, provide an alternative interpretation to a sociological undertaking of constructing the Singapore ‘nation’ and ‘national identity’. Other studies tried to view national identity through Singaporean behavior overseas (Linna). Based on her study of Singaporeans in China, Kong argues that ironically transnational locations do enhance national identity and hence the ideas of territory are not a prerequisite for nationhood.

National identity and cultural identity, however, goes beyond landscape manifestations. Kong has examined the lyrics of Singaporean written songs to demonstrate varying identities of Singaporean artiste. Dick Lee, Singapore’s foremost songsmith, composes songs and musicals that reflect multiple cultural identities: local, pan-Asian pop identity and transculturation. Underscoring Singapore’s multi-cultural population, Kong argues that Lee’s music while reflecting “nationalistic pride” also demonstrates “a fusion of East and West and of local and global”. In her other body of cultural geography research Kong explores Singapore’s diverse religious beliefs and sacred landscape.

Singapore is essentially a city-state. Indeed, it is probably more difficult to compare Singapore with other developing states in the tropical world, than with making urban comparisons. As a relatively small city by global standards, its population of 4.3 million and its size of 699 sq km seem more like other cities. Yet qualitatively, the urban contextualizations have many incarnations. Singapore is defined as a city-state, and island-city, a global city, a garden city, a planned city-state, a ‘model’ city, a cosmopolitan city, a Renaissance city, a city-state of...
transnational flows and international interconnections.

At the intra-national and intra-urban level, Singapore becomes an urban landscape of places. Given its diverse religious and ethnic identities, many studies have attempted to uncover the community bonding to places. Places are examined from in humanistic geographical perspectives, as sites of history, evoking nostalgia and defining heritage. The best collection of Singapore place studies is found in Portraits of Places: History, Community and Identity in Singapore. Chinatown, Little India, Kampong Glam reflect the ethnic attachments and religious landscape symbolisms of the Chinese, Indian and Malay communities in Singapore. Besides the ethnic districts, other studies have looked at places that have evoked a character of their own: Tanjong Pagar and Joo Chiat.

Landscapes and places have not only defined the humanistic expressions in Singaporean geography, they have also revealed amongst faculty members expressions of advocacy. The studies of place attachment and place identities in Singapore have created in turn a defense for conservation and heritage. Having served as a demolition landscape agency in the 1960s and 1970s, the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) now jealously guards historic buildings, ethnic districts, heritage areas and cultural zones. On the one hand, there is the economic need and justification for conserving heritage buildings and specific ethnic or cultural places for tourism purposes. In other accounts, places and heritage awareness have wider national undercurrents in nation-building and national identity, especially for a country where rapid changes eradicate landscapes, destroy buildings and expunge roads. In the book, Toponyms, it is argued that “place- and street-names are integral landscape buoys that give us locational bearings in space and historical relationships with the sequent occupancy of past land-uses and activities. We need to conserve place- and street-names as part of our national heritage and everyday anchors to deepen national identity”.

Whether as nation or city, the ecosystem remains an integral component of Singapore’s identity, living environment and sustainability. Singaporean geographers have added to the lively debates about Singapore’s living environments at three levels. Firstly, as an urban environment, several studies have deliberated on the government’s correct ‘eco-logic’ on ‘brown issues’, its human intervention on environmental issues, its urban planning to create a garden city, its pragmatic

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54) op. cit., footnote 10) (4).
55) op. cit., footnote 10) (3).
56) op. cit., footnote 10) (2).
58) op. cit., footnote 11) (1).
61) See, (1) op. cit., footnote 11) (5). (2) op. cit., footnote 45).
62) op. cit., footnote 11) (5).
eradication of slum and squatters, its establishment of ‘sanitized’ public housing estates and its comprehensive infrastructure development of clean water, garbage and sewerage systems. To a large extent, model Singapore, in the eyes of other countries, lies in Singapore’s successful replacement of poor living environments (slums and squatters) with public hygienic, government developed Housing and Development Board (HDB) housing estates. These issues of maintaining public hygiene, creating public healthy environments were areas of immense contention between the colonial authorities and the local resident communities in Singapore.

Secondly, as a nation-state, the wider concerns of human-nature relationships have been explored in varied contexts. Savage has argued that the government has used effectively an ‘environmental ideology’ to sustain their political legitimacy that has oscillated between environmental determinism and possibility. Reflections on nature deal with a wider relationship between persons and their attachments to flora and fauna, national bonding, gender perspectives, children’s perceptions, and the wider relationships to the Mother Earth have filtered through in various studies. Maintaining environmental biodiversity and conserving Singapore’s natural wealth, has remained an issue of intense debates between the government ministries and the environmental NGO, the Nature Society, Singapore (NSS). One aspect of this on-going debate is reflected in the politics of golf courses in Singapore.

And thirdly, Savage has advocated a more pro-active policy of environmental education and eco-education in Singapore and the region, to ensure a long-term solution for environmental protection.

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challenges and problems. This application of environmental knowledge and awareness was taken to the region and most successfully translated in Myanmar. An all-NUS team of academics, led by Savage successfully ran the first environmental workshop in Yangon for senior government officials. This workshop culminated in an edited book, with the first public environmental statements on Myanmar written by their government officials.

(2) Migration, diaspora and gender issues

Singapore is the archetypical diasporic city. Indeed over 95 percent of its population is a product of the colonial induced diasporic movements in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: Chinese, Indians, Javanese, Bugis, Minangkabaus and Malays migrated to Singapore in search of work and a better life. Migrant labor, skills, ideas and community bonding created the Singapore story and they continue to do so today. The city-state continues to embrace migrants as part of its economic policy, attracting labor migrants at both ends of the economic spectrum: educated, highly skilled, global migrants and the lower end, blue collar labor. It is thus not surprising that nearly 25 percent of Singapore’s current population of 4.3 million people is made up of foreign migrants. This large reservoir of labor migrants has been a fertile source of research by several members of the Department. The Department’s faculty have been responsible for eight edited books and no less than 25 articles dealing with migrants, diaspora and labor migration in Singapore and the region.

Given that a large proportion of labor migrants in Singapore and the region are domestic female helpers (maids) who come from the Philippines, Indonesia and other Southeast Asian countries, a major sub-theme of migration literature from the Department reflects gender issues and feminist geographies. The gender issues cover a wide spectrum of concerns with regard to female workers: national identity tensions; legal coverage and issues; health related problems; the implications on civil society; political challenges; labour relationships; the impacts on family life and other economic and social impacts. Gender geographies from the above research and publication menu do demonstrate that they are wide-ranging and cover a spectrum that is equal.

74) op. cit., footnote 12) (3).
75) op. cit., footnote 71) (2).
76) op. cit., footnote 20) (3).
to the whole gamut of human geographical concern.

The Department has seen a rise in gender geographies on varied themes and topics, a product no doubt of the dramatic increase in female faculty (Shirlena Huang, Lily Kong, Peggy Teo, Brenda Yeoh) in the Department over the last 15 years, compared to the lone female faculty member (Teo Siew Eng) in the earlier years. In particular, Shirlena Huang and Brenda Yeoh have documented the feminization of geography in NUS. For example, the undergraduate student body in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences is predominantly populated by female students since the 1970–71 intake of students. The Honours class of 1972–73 was the last year where male (5 students) outnumbered female (4) students in the Department; since then females have outnumbered males in very Honours year. Despite this female student domination in the Faculty and Department, the introduction of the gender module (Geography of Gender: Women and Change) in 1994–95 seemed a rather late development. But the female presence is now being registered in the university, with the current Head (Shirlena Huang), the first female dean in the faculty from 2000 to 2003 (Lily Kong) and current Vice-Provost of the University (Lily Kong) making in-roads in university administration. It endorses what Yeoh, Huang and Wong assert that: “as women and as geographers, we have a difference to make in our teaching, research and the service we render to the university and wider community”.

(3) **Globalization: global cities, cosmopolitan populations & local dialogue**

The whole globalization discourse is a recent phenomenon that has taken the Social Sciences by storm. After Peter Dicken’s pioneering book, *Global Shifts*, geographers were among the torefront advocates of the globalization processes and issues. Despite Dicken’s lament that geography’s lead in globalization has been short-lived, in the Department it continues to provide academic resonance. This partly reflects that Henry Yeung was a PhD student under Dicken, and thus brought not only the globalization concept to the Department but became an active exponent of its manifestations in economic geography. The Department hosted the first globalization workshop at NUS in December 1997 which brought together some of the important exponents in the field. Henry Yeung’s economic geography contributions on globalization was
translating its processes, relationships and implications in non-western states (Singapore, Southeast Asia, China) and non-western institutions (Chinese businesses and Hong Kong transnational corporations — TNCs) has argued even further that capitalism is not culturally neutral and that there is in East Asia, a hybrid form of capitalism.

Yeung’s research on Hong Kong and Singapore Transnational Corporations (TNCs) and Chinese businesses underscore Peter Dicken’s recent clarification that globalization is not a universalizing agent creating a uni-directional homogenous perspective in economic geography. Just as there are “many different varieties of capitalism”, there is also no such thing as a “pure” transnational corporation, since some degree of “hybridization” is at work, and a “placeless” TNC is “unsupported by empirical evidence”. But Yeung’s most important contribution to economic geography lies in his critical examination of the ‘relational turn’ in economic geography and his deepening of theoretical constructs of the ‘nature of relationality and power relations’ (relational geometries). Using a more dynamic definition of power, Yeung applies the relational framework to regional development beyond the current “stock-taking approach” in which his “relational approach” seeks to “identify the complex relational geometry comprising local and non-local actors, tangible and intangible assets, formal and informal institutional structures, and their interactive power relations”.

Despite the plethora of studies on globalization, there is still much confusion about its definitions, its conceptual underpinnings, its manifestations, its historical contextualization and its end products. Globalization has thus been expressed as time-space compression, borderless worlds, and interconnections across scales (local, regional and global). After Kenichi Ohmae’s influential book, The Borderless World, globalization discourses tended to veer to accepting a unilateral and hegemonic force creating global economic and cultural homogenization with the demise of the state. But elsewhere, Savage and Tan-Mullins have argued that globalization is not an “inevitable process but an issue that governments court, promote or reject consciously” in the region. Brenda Yeoh’s classification of the global process under the global, non-global and the rest of the ASEAN states are globalizing.

But the mainstay of academic interventions by faculty on globalization has dealt less with the conceptual or theoretical discussions than with the manifestations and processes involved.
Globalisation has thus been applied to regional tourism, theme-park tourism, global-local relationships in tourism, cities and urban contexts, the retailing industry and environmental issues. Besides the economic ramifications of globalization, its socio-cultural processes have been most points of deliberation. One social spin-off of globalization, multiculturalism and migration is the resurrection of the cosmopolitanism theme. While no conceptualization of cosmopolitanism is "adequate" discussion on the Singapore government’s cosmopolitan vision is one outcome of globalizing realities and national exigencies. Yet while cosmopolitanism might be in keeping with the city-state’s political credo of maintaining a multi-racial, multi-cultural and multi-religious society, the grassroots reality shows resistance to ‘foreign talent’ and will the government accept a changing ‘racial arithmetic’ if more of the ‘others’ are accepted in Singapore society. Moreover with distinctions between heartlanders (public housing dwellers) and cosmopolitans in Singapore suggest new class distinctions. Given the generally positive vibes (global cities, winners, clusters) about globalization, the book by Lee and Yeoh best underscore the more negative socio-cultural issues of globalism. Addressing what they call “forgotten and marginalized places”, they argue that the forgotten “is not just confined to those depicted in terms of stasis, economic decline, slow growth, comparatively low quality of life or minimal prospects for improvement. Rather, such places are actively forged as products of the politics of inclusion and exclusion and by power struggles played out among global, national and local actors in globalization processes”.

VI REFLECTIONS

So what about Singapore’s human geography contributions? As a small Department, Singaporean geographers are very much plugged into the Anglo-American school of geography. Given that Anglo-American geography remains the major torch-bearer of contemporary geography, every young geographer worldwide that wants international recognition has to publish in Anglo-American geographical journals. The academic pressure by university administrations to publish in top notch or Tier One internationally referred journals, has boosted Anglo-American journals and marginalized regional geographical journals. To penetrate these
journals requires voices from non Anglo-American countries to use the same institutional language of these journals. How are developing countries with different economic challenges expected to engage and understand the established Anglo-American economic geography jargon of “institutional thickness”, untraded interdependencies” and “relativization of scale” without fully understanding the cultural and regional contexts of the United Kingdom and United States.\(^{109}\)

Ironically, while the distinguishing aspect of Singaporean geographical contributions lie in the regional and place specializations of Singapore and the Southeast Asia region, these ‘regional’ and place specific geographies remain marginal and peripheral to the Anglo-American world. Singaporean geographers, however, have been fortunate to have their academic voices heard in the global geographical chorus for two reasons. Firstly, despite its small size either by geographical area or population, Singapore remains an interesting case study for the developing world and development geography because it has moved from Third World to First World status in a matter of 40 years.\(^{110}\) Given Singapore’s equatorial location, her rapid development is particularly relevant and interesting to developing states in the tropical world, where environmental deterministic ideas and beliefs still remain explanations for underdevelopment.\(^{111}\) Even Jeffrey Sachs, in explaining global poverty, has accepted that geography and environment are important factors in explaining the problems of poverty in many countries and regions. In his words : “The combination of Africa’s adverse geography and its extreme poverty creates the worst poverty trap in the world”.\(^{112}\)

Secondly, Singapore’s unique achievements and challenges in many areas such as population controls, public housing, land transport systems, port management, ship repairs, urban environmental management and its global brand names in Changi Airport and Singapore Airlines has made it a ‘model’ city-state that other nation-states have keenly tried to understand and replicate.\(^{113}\) In many ways the speed, scale, and success of Singapore’s developmental progress in the last 40 years has given Singaporean geographers much gmt for the research mill. Singaporean geographers initially had less incentive to look beyond their national boundaries given the plenitude of research agendas for academic enquiry locally.


\(^{110}\) op. cit., footnote 33).


\(^{112}\) op. cit., footnote 27).

\(^{113}\) ibid., pp. 208.

\(^{114}\) ibid., pp. 98.
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Geography has been taught as a university subject for over 75 years and the Department of Geography at the National University of Singapore is the only fully fledged academic Geography Department in Singapore. Based on the last 15 years (1990-2005) this paper looks at the research contributions on human geography of mainly the Singaporean geographers in the Department. This article asserts that the Department has gone through a renaissance in the last 15 years reflecting a new influx of young geographers, the changing university system from a British to an American research-driven system, and the catalytic research impact of three faculty members in the Department: Lily Kong, Henry Yeung and Brenda Yeoh. The research output in human geography in the Department has been prodigious and reflects mainly contributions in three areas: Singapore as nation, city and urban ecosystem; diasporas, migration and gender issues; and varied operational aspects of globalization dealing with global cities, cosmopolitan populations, transnational corporations, and global-local dialogues.