

Hougang: The Origins of a “Safe” Alternative Constituency in Singapore

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Abstract

This article is a historical inquiry into the making of a safe seat in Singaporean politics. Since 1991, the Hougang Single Member Constituency (Hougang SMC) has been a Workers’ Party (WP) stranglehold. Despite the efforts of the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) to win it back in subsequent elections, the WP has managed to retain a firm hold on the constituency—a remarkable feat, given the decades-long dominance of the PAP in Singapore. The article suggests that the history of Hougang as a rural, somewhat backward Teochew enclave, as well as a fortuitous mix of personalities, provincial issues, and policy reactions, ultimately resulted in Low Thia Kiang’s electoral victory in 1991. The WP has been able to maintain its grip on Hougang primarily because it has convinced its residents to conflate local and national concerns. It has fortified its Chinese-educated, working-class constituents with a “Hougang spirit” that has become a rallying cry for democratic progress.

Key words: alternative parties, Hougang, Singaporean politics, Teochew, Workers’ Party

I. Introduction

Geographically located in the northeastern part of Singapore, Hougang is a unique configuration of culture, politics, and, most pertinent to this article, heritage. Low Thia Kiang (b. 1956), a long-sitting Workers' Party (WP) Member of Parliament (MP) for the Hougang Single Member Constituency (SMC; hereafter Hougang), arguably had one of the safest seats in Singapore. His winning of four consecutive parliamentary elections resulted in a career (1991–2011) that culminated in a historic breakthrough in the politics of Singapore: a victory in the Aljunied Group Representation Constituency (GRC), which marked the first time an alternative party had won a GRC. An effective constituency MP who led the WP to great heights, Low Thia Kiang first established his political career in Hougang, which is where the rise of the WP began.

This article seeks to examine how alternative politics in Hougang started around 1991, when Low Thia Kiang first secured his parliamentary seat. The article, at heart a historical inquiry, first explores the historical conditions that nurtured Hougang's distinctive political identity. It then describes the circumstances leading to the 1991 General Election and the WP and People's Action Party (PAP; the dominant ruling party since 1959) campaigns. The third section highlights the key concerns and grievances of Hougang constituents and analyzes the electoral outcome in Hougang. The article concludes with some explanations of why Hougang has been the WP's "safe" constituency in Singapore since 1991. The main explanation, I suggest, lies in Hougang having assumed a degree of historical significance and political heritage as a staunch alternative ward in Singaporean politics, which Hougang constituents and their compatriots elsewhere implicitly understand as imperative for the nation's long-term democratic progress.

The case of Hougang challenges conventional understandings of

political heritage, which posit the continuation of elite lineages or the perpetuation of the nation in both tangible and intangible forms (Henderson, 2015; Popov and Deak, 2015; Dolghin, 2018). While the “Hougang spirit” does embrace a historical or memorial dimension, it has assumed a heritage of the underclass supporting underdog candidates in a punitive political environment, as we shall see. The concept of heritage here takes the direction of what historians Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (1983) have called “invented traditions,” or “a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past” (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983: 1). Hobsbawm (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983: 9) has identified three types of invented traditions: (1) those establishing or symbolizing group identities and social cohesion; (2) those establishing or legitimizing hierarchies and institutions; and (3) those socializing people into value systems. The kind of heritage applicable to Hougang primarily functions as a tool of identity building, having emerged from and been directed at national politics. By qualifying such heritage as being political in nature, this article suggests that Low Thia Khiang’s win during the 1991 General Election marked the very beginning of the making of Hougang’s distinctive political identity via the creation of invented traditions, the most important of which are Hougang’s seemingly inherent “Teochew-ness” and its past as a working-class neighborhood. By voting for the WP time and again, Hougang residents have reproduced their “norms of behavior” and perpetuated the history of Hougang as an alternative constituency. By approaching formal political campaigns and elections from the angle of localized identity and political heritage, the article seeks to address the dual, dialectical construction of heritage and political identity in Singaporean history, which has been inadequately documented or grasped thus far.

II. Political Hougang: A Historical Excursion

In an insightful article, historian Bryan Goh (2018) suggested that the communal identity in Hougang, at least in the decades leading to the WP's momentous success, was characterized by a "Catholic-Teochew rhythm." The second-largest dialect group after the Hokkiens to arrive in Singapore during the colonial period, the Teochews bore an inclination toward agriculture, which led them to favor and settle in rural areas such as Hougang where they could continue to work as farmers and fishermen as they had done back in China. However, many were killed or displaced during the Japanese occupation of Singapore (1942–1945), so a considerably different community of Teochews remained in Hougang after Japan's surrender in 1945. By helping to mourn the war dead and educate the baby boomers after the war, the Catholic Church, which had already assumed a strong presence in the Teochew homeland in China (Lee, 2003), provided much-needed social services in lieu of both the colonial and postcolonial states. And by proselytizing in Teochew, the Catholic churches and schools perpetuated a mixed Catholic-Teochew identity in Hougang, such that by the mid-1960s, a distinct enclave of Catholic Teochews had become entrenched in Hougang. Many of these Catholic Teochews lived in the Hougang SMC, which was created as an electoral district in 1982.

Rather than seeing this complex, or identity, as a case of religion fusing with language, it might be more instructive to regard it as an instance of how religion helped strengthen existing clan or language affiliations. In other words, the Catholic faith in Hougang was useful inasmuch as it reinforced preexisting native ties among the Teochews there. Despite the PAP government's "Speak Mandarin" campaign, initiated in 1979, the Teochews in Hougang still considered their dialect an important aspect of their identity into the 1980s and 1990s (Seah, 2021: xx). The view that Hougang was largely populated by Teochews with a strong sense of pride in their culture and heritage was widely

shared by non-Teochews who lived there (Seah, 2021: 2). As late as the early 1980s, Teochew was the dominant language in Hougang, and non-Teochews spoke it in their everyday lives. Low Thia Kiang's victory, then, should not be surprising if placed in Hougang's historical context; in the colonial-era State Assembly elections of 1955, the newly formed PAP sent Teochew-speaking candidates to contest wards in the Hougang area with great success (Seah, 2021: 9). The historical conditions for the possibility of the development of Hougang's distinctive political identity, which continues to be mediated by both real and fictive attachments to the Teochew dialect, have thus been in place for decades. In no small measure, this contributed to Low Thia Kiang's candidacy as yet another of Hougang's Teochew-speaking MPs.

The Hougang area also had a considerable history of commercial agriculture, where farmers grew vegetables and reared livestock. However, Hougang's commercial pig farmers were relocated to Punggol (north of Hougang) during the 1970s, which impacted their fortunes. This was because, in the past, when the price of eggs fell below cost, farmers could switch to rearing more pigs to offset their losses (The Straits Times, 1978). After resettlement, this was no longer possible. During the 1980s, pig farms were gradually phased out to be replaced with high-tech, non-polluting farming, which, while making room for residential and urban projects, affected the livelihoods of many farmers and fishermen (Neo, 2016). While most affected farmers took this in their stride, some did not and were displeased with their dispossession, which translated into votes cast against the PAP by people who had been relocated to housing within the Hougang SMC (Chan, 2013: 999). As northeastern Singapore had been an undeveloped region since independence and remained so until the late 1990s, when belated plans for the Punggol and Sengkang new towns were unveiled, local, rural communities had been under de facto self-rule throughout

much of the colonial and even postcolonial periods, leading some Teochews in Hougang to develop an independent, even anti-establishment, streak. As an economically backward neighborhood, Hougang would become a key ingredient of the WP's folksy and down-to-earth image and politics, which, together with its perceived "Teochew-ness," cultivated Hougang's political heritage and encouraged a distinctive Hougang "oppositional" identity that was crucial to both the poetics and politics of the WP as an alternative political party in Singapore.

III. August 1991: A Month of Some Significance

On August 10, 1991, the Electoral Boundaries Review Committee announced that Singaporeans would be casting their votes in 15 four-member GRCs and 21 SMCs—an expansion of the original numbers. The electoral boundaries of Hougang, first created prior to the 1988 General Election and won by the PAP, remained intact (Henson and Ibrahim, 1991).

The WP announced its lineup for the general election, and Low Thia Kiang was one of the youngest—though also one of the most experienced—candidates fielded by the party. Thirty-five-year-old Low had been a member of the WP since 1981, had served as its organizing secretary for two years, and had unsuccessfully contested a seat in a GRC in the 1988 elections. A Chinese-educated graduate of the by-then-defunct Nanyang University, Low had also represented the WP in a televised Mandarin debate on the issue of presidential elections with the PAP (The Straits Times, 1991b). This time, in Hougang, he faced the PAP's Tang Guan Seng, who had won 59% of the valid votes in the 1988 elections (The Straits Times, 1991a). And this time, the alternative parties, led by the de facto Leader of the Opposition, Chiam See Tong, the only alternative MP in office, decided to adopt a by-election strategy and did not contest all the seats in order to have the

electorate vote with ease for the opposition. Concerned that candidates such as Low might benefit from this strategy and score surprising victories, the PAP told Singaporeans that they “cannot have their cake and eat it” (The Straits Times, 1991c). As Deputy Prime Minister Ong Teng Cheong put it, “The Prime Minister, being a gentleman, will still carry out his proposals even with a weak signal...but maybe half-heartedly [because he has not received the strong endorsement he] seeks” (The Straits Times, 1991c). In the same dialogue session in which Ong made his comments, Tang Guan Seng quipped that “the Opposition is not treating the general election seriously enough by playing it as a by-election” and did not see the advantage of having a few opposition MPs (The Straits Times, 1991c).

In response to the PAP’s statements, Low Thia Khiang called the GRC system “a ploy to get new PAP candidates into Parliament unopposed” (Business Times, 1991a). Speaking at a rally in Hougang, Low said that the GRCs, having expanded to comprise four MPs, made it increasingly difficult for non-PAP parties to participate in the elections. He refused to be interviewed by The Straits Times journalists, who had also asked if they could follow him on his campaign trail: “I don’t trust the press. Why should I tell you everything and you decide what to do with it? I don’t blame the reporters. It’s the editors, the system” (The Straits Times, 1991e). Citing a bad experience recently had with the state-run Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC), Low revealed that he had been interviewed for 30 minutes on Nomination Day, but nothing had come out of it: “The SBC took many shots of me. But when they had to use a picture of me, they showed the ugliest shot, like the one used in the trailer for the party broadcasts” (The Straits Times, 1991e). Hougang residents, he fumed, were surprised to see him looking so bad on national television. Low’s comments suggest that, by then, he already enjoyed a degree of electoral support in Hougang, whose residents were aware that the media coverage of alternative

parties and candidates could be biased.

Low later relented, however, and granted *The Straits Times* an exclusive interview in which he spoke passionately about his decision to enter politics in the early 1980s. As graduate of Nanyang University (he also held an honors degree in Chinese Studies from the National University of Singapore), he was angry about its closure and the introduction of streaming at secondary schools when he was still a teacher. The two events rendered him helpless, “as though he were a piece of meat on the chopping board” (*The Straits Times*, 1991e). He then revealed that he had joined the WP because he admired its party chief, J. B. Jeyaretnam (1926–2008), who, in 1981, had become the first alternative politician since independence to win a parliamentary seat. Low disclosed why he chose Hougang: “I am a Teochew, and there are many Teochews in Hougang, especially the older folks who can speak the dialect only” (*The Straits Times*, 1991e); Tang did not speak Teochew. In retrospect, Low made an excellent choice, given that the Teochews formed the dominant dialect group among the Chinese in Hougang (88%), most of whom were working class and most affected by the PAP’s recent economic and language policies that marginalized the Chinese-educated citizens in a rapidly industrializing nation. His campaign was facilitated by the 11-member WP Hougang area committee, which had built a good rapport with the residents. According to Low, their key complaints were related to the rising costs of living (*The Straits Times*, 1991e).

To be sure, Low did not enjoy a clear advantage over his opponent, Tang Guan Seng, in terms of cultural and linguistic affiliations. Like Low, Tang was a graduate of Nanyang University and had worked as deputy chief editor of the state-run Chinese-language newspaper *Lianhe zaobao* before entering politics in 1984 (which added to Low’s suspicion of the national media). Tang’s mother lived in Hougang, and he stayed with her during the campaign period. *The Straits Times*

reported that Tang “obviously is popular among the residents, although those who are at home to greet him are mostly housewives, babies and the elderly...they hardly raise any questions [and] promise the candidate their full support” (The Straits Times, 1991d). According to Tang, the complaints of his constituents were few and “mainly municipal in nature, such as cracks on the walls in their flats, calls for more table-tennis tables at void decks, difficulties in buying common areas outside their flats from the [Housing Development Board] and an application to marry a foreigner” (The Straits Times, 1991d). These complaints were different from those heard by Low. Although Tang claimed that he had been visiting his constituents twice a month, some residents preferred to see him “[even] more often” (*The Straits Times* reported this but “qualified” the comment by saying that it came from a girl who spoke in “American-accented English”) (The Straits Times, 1991d). Tang also disputed the “lament” that things were not moving as fast in Hougang as in other wards, informing residents that plans were underway for a library (The Straits Times, 1991d). In response to the PAP’s point on investing in local infrastructure, Low urged voters at a rally to reinforce the WP’s watchdog role because “the Government’s investments were made up of the country’s reserves, which were generated by Singaporeans” (The Straits Times, 1991f). Given Hougang’s context as a working-class ward, Low’s attack on Tang and the PAP struck at the heart of the PAP’s resource management and wealth distribution, which in turn struck a chord with the residents most dissatisfied with the PAP’s policies.

On August 30, 1991, the eve of the general election, Hougang was deemed a ward that might pull a surprise fight (Business Times, 1991b). Sensing a shift in public sentiment about PAP policies and acknowledging that they could be inadvertently elitist, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, in his first-ever general election since assuming his position from Lee Kuan Yew (1923–2015) in November 1990, promised

that he would focus on the “common man” and “look again at the population in total [in his policies]” if he were returned a strong mandate by the electorate (Business Times, 1991c). The stage was thus set for a day to be remembered in Hougang or even Singapore.

IV. Hougang 1991: Outcome and Analysis

In many ways, Chiam See Tong’s by-election strategy worked. Although the PAP won yet another general election, it lost four wards—all single-seat ones—in the polls: Bukit Gombak, Nee Soon Central, Potong Pasir, and Hougang. In Hougang, incumbent Tang Guan Seng received 9,487 votes and lost to Low Thia Kiang, who gained 10,621 votes. The PAP’s share of valid votes dipped to 61 percent from the 63.2 percent it secured in 1988, and Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong said after the elections that he would reflect over the outcome and decide whether and how he could continue with his “open, consultative style” (Fong, 1991).

An early analysis pointed to the lack of regular dialogue ahead of the campaign between the PAP and the people as the key reason for the PAP’s lackluster electoral performance. A correspondent for The Straits Times hoped that the PAP’s face-to-face exchanges with residents, held almost nightly across Singapore (only) during the elections, would continue (S. S. Tan, 1991a). This may explain the PAP’s performance in Hougang, where it suffered the worst swing of 11.8 percentage points (excluding Potong Pasir; see The Straits Times, 1991g). But in response to—or in retaliation against—the PAP’s poor showing, Goh Chok Tong removed the Government Parliamentary Committees in “rogue” wards, thereby shutting down a tool for post-election dialogue (Henson, 1991). Low Thia Kiang urged Goh not to interpret the results as a rejection of his style of government. For Low, Goh should see this as the “people’s endorsement of his style” (The Straits Times, 1991h). As he saw it, the election of four alternative MPs was in line with the promise

of a more open and consultative style of government made by the PAP in its manifesto. Maintaining that the rising cost of living rather than a rejection of Goh's vision of governance was the key factor that prompted voters to support the WP and other alternative parties, Low argued that the government did not have to resort to confrontational politics between the PAP and the opposition. The PAP government, he stressed, should still shoulder the responsibility of looking after all Singaporeans, whether they had voted for the PAP or not. On a more personal note, when asked what factor had contributed to his electoral success, Low suggested that language was key: "I can communicate with my constituents [in Teochew]...It shows that dialect has an important role to play in Singapore" (The Straits Times, 1991h). Early on, then, Low recognized the importance of dialogue in securing electoral success.

Indeed, the key question following the 1991 General Election was how the results should be interpreted. The PAP confessed that it found the message from voters difficult to understand, having been confident that the "ground was sweet." But no alternative contender, such as Low Thia Kiang or Chiam See Tong, had rejected Goh Chok Tong's "open and consultative" style of government. At the same time, however, the electorate had become more demanding, wanting both the new PAP style and a strong alternative presence in parliament. In this way, then, the 1991 General Election could be seen as a watershed in Singaporean politics. The PAP suffered surprise defeats in the traditional heartlands of Bukit Gombak, Nee Soon Central, and Hougang, marking the beginning of a two-party (PAP and Chiam's Singapore Democratic Party at the time) political system in Singapore. As a political analyst noted, the electoral outcome was a "useful reminder that politics is not just about governing well, but also about winning the hearts and minds of simple folk. While the PAP should continue to lead from the front, with men of vision and intellect, it also needs good ground

commanders who can cover its flanks” (The Straits Times, 1991i). In retrospect, this commentary was widely shared by Singaporeans, who believed that the PAP should return to power after every election, with alternative parties playing (only) the role of monitoring and checking its power.

Bringing the analysis back to Hougang, the unexpected loss of the PAP was attributable not to “Western-influenced first-time or ‘yuppie’ voters’ constituencies,” as depicted in state-run newspapers, but to working-class constituencies – such as Hougang – where the PAP had enjoyed strong electoral support (Chua, 1991). An obvious issue was the rising income gap. The gap between the bottom 20 percent of income earners and the remaining 80 had widened since the late 1970s, and the bottom 20 percent felt deprived in view of the PAP’s rhetoric of elitism and meritocracy; some of them were frustrated enough to register their feelings through the elections. The other issue, perhaps, was global awareness. Chinese-educated voters, such as those in Hougang, were sufficiently informed of the democratization of Taiwan, Hong Kong, and South Korea. How such awareness influenced their political outlook was unclear, but it was a possible factor in the electoral outcome. As sociologist Chua Beng Huat suggested, the overall results might be read as a success of Goh Chok Tong’s style of politics, “which has helped Singaporeans throw off whatever shackles that might have restrained them politically in the past” (Chua, 1991).

The vision of a two-party system, in line with the PAP’s declaration of its consultative style, was well articulated by Chiam See Tong, who floated the idea of merging his Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) with the WP. Believing that Singapore should have a two-party system composed of a strong ruling party and a single, united alternative party, Chiam foresaw few differences between the SDP and the WP. Both parties, he argued, were fighting for low-income Singaporeans, whom, in his opinion, the PAP had neglected. But WP chief J. B. Jeyaretnam

contended that a merger was premature: “We are...to the left of the SDP. That’s the public perception” (Osman, 1991). Moreover, the WP in Hougang had enough on its plate as Low Thia Kiang prepared to take over the town council from the PAP. As if in retaliation against Hougang voters, the government decided to suspend plans to put up landmarks, linkways, and illuminated signboards in the constituency, and Low Thia Kiang sought to resume at least some of these projects by obtaining state grants (S. S. Tan, 1991a). The government, then, had seemingly ignored the signal sent by Hougang voters—that they had been disadvantaged and left behind by its policies, even more so now, with its “retreat” from the constituency.

Indeed, an editorial in *The Straits Times* pointed out that the PAP should try to vindicate itself in precisely the constituencies that it had lost. According to this editorial, the PAP had lost the trust of those hurting from government-imposed price increases, namely the Chinese underclass, which, unlike its Indian and Malay counterparts, did not enjoy institutional support or benefit from self-help groups, and those most affected and disgruntled by high medical costs (S. S. Tan, 1991b). In a way, the editorial thus agreed with Low Thia Kiang that the PAP defeat in Hougang was more economic than political. Feedback from a layperson had it that the PAP was misled by its grassroots leaders that the “ground was sweet” when it was not (L. H. Chia, 1991), which echoed Low’s comment that the PAP had lost touch with the ground. In three years, from 1988 to 1991, the swing against the PAP and toward either the SDP or the WP had grown to a sizable 7.7 percent, which brought the overall PAP share of the votes in the 20 single-seat wards to only 59.5 percent of the valid votes. Given that alternative parties other than the SDP and the WP experienced a drop in their vote share, Singaporeans, it appeared, did not vote for the opposition for opposition’s sake. In Hougang, for instance, local grievances such as inadequate bus services and unhappiness over the incumbent’s

performance were real. Moreover, “by all accounts, Mr. Low Thia Khiong of the WP impressed many who saw and heard him speak at rallies” (Han, 1991). By walking the ground (and, as we shall know, contesting in selected constituencies where the WP had a credible chance of winning) more earnestly than his PAP opponent, Low shrewdly based his campaign on the fact that the PAP was, as an observer suggested, “talking over the heads of middle- and lower-income Singaporeans for whom bread-and-butter issues mattered more than political style...it is one thing to be unhappy about PAP policies, and it is another to cast a vote for the opposition” (Han, 1991). For Low, then, it was economics rather than binary politics that was at work, and he was able to work the rhetoric to his own advantage in the polls.

Perhaps frustrated with the prime minister’s assessment of the outcome as a personal setback, a Hougang resident wrote to *The Straits Times*, saying that picking an MP and endorsing a governing style were two different matters. According to the resident, the people of Hougang voted out the PAP incumbent because he had been ineffective in meeting their basic needs, one of which was transport. They had been given “empty promises” such as the extension of the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT, or the Singaporean subway) to Hougang and the increase of bus services to better connect the constituency to the city center. The resident claimed to have written twice to the PAP MP about the issue and had not even received an acknowledgement of his appeal. The resident also charged that the PAP MP had never spoken up for Hougang and “appeared to be a very laid-back person” (Loo, 1991). Hougang also allegedly suffered from a lack of cinemas, kindergartens, and schools (The Straits Times, 1991j). Compared with “ministerial” GRCs (i.e., those helmed by cabinet ministers), constituencies such as Hougang received fewer resources for development. In Hougang, it was reported that the PAP MP was “hardly visible,” while SDP and WP newsletters were often sold at markets and food centers there (T. S. Low,

1991). Local factors and personalities were probable causes for the PAP's defeat because, as a political observer put it, "real feedback can only be sought at traditional places for social mixing like coffee shops, hawker centres, and void decks [rather than at community centres and grassroots organisations]" (T. S. Low, 1991).

Beyond economic or practical considerations, the "Chinese backlash" was perhaps the most critical reason for the PAP's defeats in Bukit Gombak, Nee Soon Central, and Hougang, which were won by effective speakers of Mandarin and Chinese dialects (Potong Pasir's Chiam See Tong spoke English). This suggested that a new assertiveness of the non-English-speaking Chinese electorate and the fact that an overlay of the communal dimension by the PAP in Eunos GRC, where many Malays lived and supported the WP's Malay candidate Jufrie Mahmood, had backfired in the PAP's electoral strategy. Although the residents of Bukit Gombak, Nee Soon Central, and Hougang shared legitimate bread-and-butter grievances with those of other constituencies, the appearance of alternative candidates who could articulate their concerns and issues in languages with which they were familiar had contributed in no small measure to opposition success. They noticed the contradiction between Goh Chok Tong's rhetoric of consultative government and his apparent lack of appreciation, or tolerance, for an increased alternative presence in parliament (Kassim, 1991).

Specific to Hougang, the constituency "is like a five-cent coin stuck in the corner of a pocket. It is not important [to the PAP]. People forget it is there" (S. Tan, 1991). A common complaint was that development was slow and facilities were few, resulting in the "sleepy, stagnant town" that was Hougang (S. Tan, 1991). *The Straits Times* interviewed a sample of almost 30 Hougang residents, who cited factors that contributed to the swing against the PAP in their constituency. They included transport problems, high cost of living, an MP seen to be

unfriendly, opposition rallies, the by-election effect, and Low Thia Kiang's ability to speak Teochew and resonate with the residents. Built in 1982 on farms and villages, Hougang was a working-class district "with more motorcycles, pickups, vans and taxis than cars. People wear singlets, shorts and slippers, and Teochew – the dominant Chinese dialect – is spoken more often than English [or Mandarin]" (S. Tan, 1991). Most of the people living in the 98 blocks of flats were above the age of 30, and only 1 percent of residents lived in private apartments and houses; it was not an area popular with newlyweds. Apart from the activities offered by the Hougang Community Club, residents complained that their previous MP had done little for them: "There is nothing to foster a spirit among residents" (S. Tan, 1991). An interesting point noted by the Straits Times feature was that "voting in an opposition would mean that Hougang [would come] under the national spotlight, [which would] prompt the PAP [to pay] more attention to the constituency" (S. Tan, 1991). Residents who were also proprietors and shopkeepers there were also angry that rents had been raised by 25 percent despite bad business in a "backward area" (S. Tan, 1991). And both residents and proprietors seemingly agreed that the PAP MP was not the "hello-hello type of politician who can warm people's hearts" because he did not "bother to say hello or talk to the [shopkeepers]" (S. Tan, 1991). A resident recalled that he was bureaucratic with residents who approached him with problems: "His standard reply at meet-the-people sessions was that policies cannot be changed" (S. Tan, 1991).

By connecting with Hougang residents more effectively, at least from the perspective of his supporters, Low Thia Kiang appeared to be the opposite of his PAP opponent. That said, Hougang residents maintained that they did not vote for him simply because he spoke their language. "But by speaking Teochew," they qualified, "he shows that he is not ashamed of his background, and I am proud to have someone

like that to be my MP" (S. Tan, 1991). Like the PAP candidates, Low also had a university degree, but he seemed sincerer, especially when he spoke in Teochew. In contrast to his PAP opponent, who held only one poorly attended dialogue session with the residents, Low held three rallies in Hougang, where he spoke to three to four thousand "common men [and women]" (S. Tan, 1991). Four retirees in their sixties shared that they wanted to give Low a try: "If he is doing well, we will retain him. If not, Hougang will go back to the PAP next time round" (S. Tan, 1991). Little did they know that their compatriots in Hougang would return Low to power for another two decades.

The PAP MPs understood that they had an image issue to tackle, because many people saw them as elitists who did not understand the "common man's" concerns. Some of them were quick to argue that they came from humble backgrounds, and many pledged to work the ground from scratch and understand everyday concerns and issues. Seen as representatives of the government, PAP MPs paid the political price for policies that hit voters' wallets, the everyday woes leading to the vote swing against the PAP. The PAP MPs lacked control over the overall development plan for their constituencies, with many ending up as mere mouthpieces of policies rather than problem-solvers of possible inadequacies or lapses. They sought greater coordination with the ministries in meeting the demands of their constituencies and were thus against the PAP using punitive measures against those who voted for the alternatives (Henson and C. Tan, 1991). As if in response to the PAP's plausible resort to retaliatory measures, Low Thia Khiang assured Hougang residents that his town council would be nonpolitical and serve them regardless of their political affiliation (The Straits Times, 1991k). By making this reassurance, Low was also trying to broaden his appeal among residents who did not speak Teochew, thereby refuting the charge of communalism leveled by the PAP against the WP. Weeks after the general election, Lee Kuan Yew, whom Goh Chok Tong had

succeeded as prime minister, finally spoke for more attention to be paid to the Chinese silent majority. The Chinese-educated group had issued a reminder to the government that they must not be taken for granted, Lee suggested, and one of their greatest fears was the dilution of Chinese culture, identity, and language in the face of the nation's rapid Anglicization and industrialization. For Lee, the result, which saw a decline in the PAP's share of valid votes, demonstrated that clan and dialect loyalties were still strong, "especially in the opposition's victory in Hougang" (Ibrahim, 1991). Hougang residents fell in the bottom 20–30 percent of Singapore's educational ladder, and the government would have to improve their lives in order to steer them back to supporting the PAP. Lee thus disagreed with Low's view that the reason was primarily economic, thinking that "it was a sense of being squeezed out of the mainstream, that [constituencies that voted for the alternatives] were no longer getting the kind of attention that as the majority community they should have" (Ibrahim, 1991). Turning to grassroots organizations, Lee suggested that whether they had collated accurate feedback was difficult to assess, but one thing was for sure: they did not have the same effectiveness in connecting with the ground as the old clan- or dialect-based networks, which had been diluted by the resettlement policy that shifted the Singaporean population from rural villages to urban HDB estates (Ibrahim, 1991). By winning his seat in Hougang, Low Thia Khiang showed that language was still very much a salient—and potent—political issue, despite years of strong state intervention. Hougang thus revived the old binary politics of Anglophone and Sinophone Singaporeans, the latter of whom Lee believed possessed the stamina and mobilizing power that could challenge the government for years to come. It seemed, then, that "at the private level, the real feeling, [and] sense of empathy...has very much an emotional deep-seated instinct, reinforced by culture" (The Straits Times, 1991).

V. Conclusion

In his writings, Lee Kuan Yew stated that a disproportionate number of Teochew-speaking ministers had served in his cabinet, calling them hardworking, smart, resourceful, and tough (Han, Fernandez, and S. Tan, 2015: 171–173). Lee, and the PAP in general, was prone to approaching issues of ethnicity, identity, and language in a deterministic manner; in the context of the Teochew dialect and Hougang's Teochew identity, the PAP government assumed them to be a given, or an already bounded and naturalistic communal Teochew identity. Low Thia Kiang and the WP had used the Teochew dialect to gain greater access to the Hougang electorate in 1991, and Low's success in Hougang has since led to an exponential and longstanding discussion on Hougang's Teochew-ness by academics, commentators, journalists, and PAP cadres, leaders, and supporters. Political scientists quickly concluded that Low's Teochew background permitted him to engage Hougang residents, who gave him sufficient votes to win his seat (Singh, 1992: 124). And in response to the "Mandarinization" of the Chinese dialects, columnist Sumiko Tan lamented, in her 2001 article "I'm Teochew – and Proud of It," the "frightening scenario" of young Singaporeans cut off from their cultural "roots." Tan alluded to the 1991 political victory of Low Thia Kiang, which she attributed to his "melodious command of the dialect [Teochew]" (Goh, 2013: 133). The PAP has believed, since 1991, that sending a Teochew-speaking candidate to contest Hougang can boost its chances of winning it back (Ng, 2001). In short, the narrative about Hougang's distinctiveness was created in 1991 and has been furthered since then. The emergence of Hougang's distinctive political identity after 1991 was not merely the product of the efforts of the WP and its supporters alone; it bears the classic characteristics of a collective effort at creating heritage and inventing localized political traditions. The construction of Hougang's identity as a "deviant" constituency is dynamic; it is part of a creative

process of identity-making, albeit drawing from existing resources and conditions of possibility. Actual proficiency in the Teochew dialect is less consequential than the dialect's symbolic function as part of Hougang's Teochew-ness and political heritage.

A question to field, then, is why a consummate spirit did not take root in Potong Pasir and allow Chiam See Tong or his successor candidates to retain it after 2011 (Chiam's wife contested the seat that year while he led a team to campaign in a GRC; both lost the elections). The reasons are complex and beyond the scope of this article, but suffice it to say that while the historical conditions that governed everyday life in Hougang and Potong Pasir were similarly characterized by the rural "kampong spirit" (Chia, 2013), Chiam was getting old and frail, and his wife, Lina Chiam, apparently did not inspire confidence that she could succeed him as an effective MP. Although Chiam's English-speaking background seemingly afforded him an advantage in Singapore's increasingly Anglophone electorate, his role as de facto Leader of the Opposition was gradually eclipsed by Low Thia Kiang and his more influential WP. In other words, while both Hougang and Potong Pasir had been held by alternative parties through provincial issues and policy reactions, the emasculated Chiam "failed" the personality test; unlike Low, Chiam did not offer Potong Pasir voters the vision of a more democratic or politically progressive Singapore through his wife's campaign.

The latest analyses of the most recent 2020 General Election, in which the WP successfully held onto Hougang, match what may be suggested by the historical record. Increasingly referred to as "Fortress WP," Hougang was the base from which the WP expanded its influence on the surrounding electoral constituencies, such as the Aljunied (won in 2011) and Sengkang GRCs (clinched in 2020). Low Thia Kiang might have moved to Aljunied in 2011, but he remains a familiar face in Hougang, and his successors – Yaw Shin Leong, Png Eng Huat, and

the incumbent Dennis Tan—have gained the support and affection of most Hougang residents. In Png’s parting words to Tan, “one can never choose Hougang...Hougang must choose you first” (Singh, Abdullah, and F. Tan, 2021: 135). As per its strategy, the WP contested only six constituencies (two SMCs and four GRCs), where three of them—Aljunied, Sengkang, and Hougang—are conterminous. Hougang was thus able to benefit from spillover support for the WP. Notwithstanding the important call for greater political accountability and transparency in its manifesto, the WP highlighted and hoped to reinforce the “Hougang spirit,” which entailed stoic defiance and resistance to the PAP’s carrot of upgrading programs for the cause of democratic progress in Singapore. Just prior to polling day on July 10, 2020, Low Thia Kiang released a video in Mandarin and Teochew, making fond references to Hougang. Speaking in Teochew, Low often expressed a desire to return to Hougang and referred to Hougang as his second home (Singh, Abdullah, and F. Tan, 2021: 140). The “Low Thia Kiang effect” contributed not only to Dennis Tan’s win in Hougang but also to the WP’s capture of the entire northeast of Singapore. The PAP’s penchant for chiding and punishing Hougang residents for supporting the WP has largely backfired, and many Hougang residents seem to have even taken perverse pride in their constituency being withheld infrastructure improvement in order to remain the historical home of political opposition. This history is encapsulated in the rallying cry known as the “Hougang spirit” (Singh, Abdullah, and F. Tan, 2021: 142).

For the past three decades, from 1991 to 2021, Hougang has witnessed relatively few changes in terms of infrastructure and economic development. Although clinics, libraries, schools, and subway stations are now located within or near Hougang, upgrading and estate renewal projects continue to elude the constituency, reflecting the PAP’s persistent use of the carrot-and-stick approach

when dealing with recalcitrant voters. As a proud WP supporter in Hougang proclaimed, “This is where we have to salute the resilience of the Hougang Spirit—staying the course is never easy when you look around and see fellow Singaporeans enjoying better facilities and infrastructure upgrading ahead of you” (A. Low, 2020). Hougang thus occupies a central place for the WP, and Singaporeans in general, regardless of whether they support the WP. Hougang is the acknowledged spiritual “home” of the WP, a strategic base from which the WP has aimed to grow and expand in northeast Singapore and beyond.

The making of Hougang into a safe seat for the WP to maintain its parliamentary presence and even expand its electoral boundaries is complex, with a fortuitous mix of reasons. A charming and eloquent speaker of the Teochew dialect dominant in Hougang at a time of rapid industrialization and language erasure from the social lives of Chinese-educated Singaporeans, Low Thia Kiang appeared to give a face and voice to the concerns and grievances of Hougang residents, who believed that they suffered neglect from the PAP government. This translated into a historic win of the Hougang seat for Low, a phenomenon that the PAP has not been able to reverse. The key reason for this dynamic is the Hougang residents’ conflation of local and national politics. They believe that voting WP candidates into parliament can keep the ruling PAP more accountable while subjecting legislators to more public scrutiny. For them, perhaps, concerns over retirement security, the widening income gap, job prospects, and rising living costs are Hougang issues as well as national ones, so any distinction between them is fiction (Chan, 2013: 999–1000). The WP’s greatest success, then, is that it has managed to intertwine the Hougang spirit or political heritage with the party itself as well as link local issues with national politics, thereby enabling Low Thia Kiang and his protégés to stay in office for three decades—and perhaps longer.

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後港：新加坡安全席次之濫觴

陳英傑*

摘要

自 1991 年以來，新加坡工人黨一直在後港單議席選區穩若泰山。新加坡人民行動黨屢欲奪回議席，均無功而還。數十年來，人民行動黨一黨獨大，工人黨能穩守後港席次，實屬殊績。本文藉追溯後港歷史，探討此安全席次的成因。後港以往被視為潮州人聚居的鄉野之地，居民對執政黨施政多有不滿，加上天時地利人和，使劉程強於一九九一年得以勝選。此後工人黨屢屢獲勝，全憑其地方與國家兩全之策，取信於當地居民。劉程強等受中文教育的工人階級議員，皆手持「後港精神」的鐵盾，在民主路上邁進。

關鍵詞：在野黨、後港、新加坡政治、潮州話、工人黨

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