Asian Journal of Philosophy (2025) 4:132
https://doi.org/10.1007/s44204-025-00339-y

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Philosophy in Singapore until 1980

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Received: 26 January 2024 / Accepted: 30 September 2025 / Published online: 2 December 2025
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Abstract
Since at least the nineteenth century, Singapore has hosted a multicultural society and so inherited several philosophical traditions. Philosophical activity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries included discussions of the *Straits Philosophical Society* and in the *Straits Chinese Magazine*. Academic philosophy began with the founding of the University of Malaya in 1949, where the Department of Philosophy was established in 1952, under the influence of the school of ordinary language philosophy then dominant in England. It was joined in 1956 by Nanyang University, which hosted courses in Chinese philosophy, as well as some Western philosophy. During the transition to independence from Britain and Malaysia, the University of Malaya was renamed the University of Singapore. Philosophers there continued to be influenced by international trends in analytic philosophy but also pursued their own interests in Chinese philosophy and instigated a debate over liberalism culminating in the inception of the Asian-values debate in the 1970s. Philosophy in Singapore since 1980 will be taken up in a sequel to this paper.

Keywords Analytic philosophy · Asian philosophy · Chinese philosophy

1 Introduction

The *Hikayat Abdullah*, a classic of nineteenth-century Malay literature, recounts the following episode from early in Singapore's colonial history:

> It was then that they found at the point of the headland a rock lying in the bushes. The rock was smooth, about six feet wide, square in shape, and its

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face was covered with a chiselled inscription. But although it had writing this was illegible because of extensive scouring by water. Allah alone knows how many thousands of years old it may have been. After its discovery crowds of all races came to see it. The Indians declared that the writing was Hindu but they were unable to read it. The Chinese claimed that it was in Chinese characters. I went with a party of people, and also Mr. Raffles and Mr. Thomsen, and we all looked at the rock. I noticed that in shape the lettering was rather like Arabic, but I could not read it because owing to its great age the relief was partly effaced.

Many learned men came and tried to read it. Some brought flour-paste which they pressed on the inscription and took a cast, others rubbed lamp-black on it to make the lettering visible. But for all that they exhausted their ingenuity in trying to find out what language the letters represented they reached no decision. There the stone rested until recently with its inscription in relief. It was Mr. Raffles's opinion that the writing must be Hindu because the Hindus were the oldest of all immigrant races in the East, reaching Java and Bali and Siam, the inhabitants of which are all descended from them. However, not a single person in all Singapore was able to interpret the words chiselled on the rock. Allah alone knows (Hill, 1955, 147).[1]

The stone was blown up in 1843 to widen the mouth of the Singapore river. A fragment is on display in the National Museum of Singapore, and there are believed to be more in the Indian Museum in Kolkata (Miksic, 2013, 12–15).

We quote Abdullah's description of the Singapore stone for two reasons. Firstly, it illustrates that Singapore hosted a literate society in precolonial times, in which people must have spoken and written about philosophy: in particular, a combination of archaeological and documentary evidence supports the existence of a port in Singapore from the fourteenth century (Guan et al., 2019, pp. 19–49), well before Raffles and Farquhar established a British trading post on the island in 1819.[2] Nevertheless, both our archaeological and historical records of precolonial Singapore are highly fragmentary, so we can at best speculate on their philosophy from our knowledge of philosophy in the region generally. Secondly, it illustrates that in the nineteenth century, Singapore was already host to a multicultural society, to which the various constituent subcultures would all have brought their own philosophical traditions.

Today Singapore officially recognises four languages: Chinese, English, Malay and Tamil. Just confining ourselves to these four (even though many other

[1] A memoir by John Turnball Thomson records conversations with Abdullah in Melaka which must also have been typical of philosophical discussion in Singapore in the nineteenth century. For example "… Abdulla would not be long in suggesting that as we argued on polygamy yesterday we should have a talk over the Trinity today." He would continue: "There is no God but one God, is the true faith. This is consistent with reason, for it is a moral impossibility, it is an absurdity, that one can be three and three one. I buy three ducks in the bazaar, and am told that there is only one duck. Now master how do you get over this?" (Thomson, 1865, p. 329).

[2] Whereas Mary Turnbull's classic history of Singapore focuses on 1819 as a turning point, recent history emphasises continuity with previous settlement and the wider region (Barr, 2018; Guan et al., 2019; Miksic, 2013; Turnbull, 2009), as we do in this introduction.

languages and dialects have been spoken here), the antiquity of Chinese Philosophy is very well known. Philosophy in Tamil is at least as ancient as the *Tirukkural*. As Subramania Gopalan, who was later a philosopher in Singapore (as we discuss in the sequel to this paper), explains:

> The age in which Tiruvalluvar, the author of the *Tirukkural*, lived is shrouded in mystery. He was probably born during the Cankam age (coinciding with the pre-Christian and early Christian era) when Tamil civilisation was at its peak. The Tamil people then enjoyed a high degree of material prosperity, thanks to trade and commerce with many foreign countries. This period in the history of the Tamils was characterised by contentment and happiness. Such material prosperity might have provided an edge to a philosophy of good life with its this-worldly emphasis in the *Kural* (Gopalan, 1979).

Philosophy has been conducted in Malay at least since the poetry of Hamzah Fansuri (Al-Attas, 1970), probably in the sixteenth century, and the work of Shams al-Din and others who wrote in Aceh in the seventeenth century (Nasir, 2018), contemporary with early modern philosophy in English and other European vernaculars. This is not to mention anything of the subsequent history of philosophy in these languages, let alone the rich and varied traditions of philosophy represented in the many other languages and dialects spoken in Singapore.

Turning to Singapore itself, an early example is the *Straits Philosophical Society*, a discussion group founded in 1893. Henry Nicholas Ridley, a botanist who was the society's president from 1907 to 1912, explains in his introduction to a collection of the society's papers:

> The members of the Society were limited to fifteen in number, all of whom took it in turns to read an essay upon any subject selected by themselves in Literature, Science, or Art. This was followed by a criticism by another member, and a discussion on the essay and criticism succeeded, at the end of which the President summed up the discussion, and the essayist replied to any questions which had been the outcome of the criticism and discussion. It was always the custom for these meetings to be held on the second Friday or Saturday of each month, the members meeting and dining together before the paper was read. The essays and criticisms were afterwards typewritten, and copies of the volumes of essays were presented to the public libraries of Singapore and Penang, a copy also being kept as the property of the Society (Ridley, 1913).

Although the discussions included intellectual and scientific topics in general, some topics were philosophical in the narrower contemporary sense, most notably a paper against utilitarianism given by Ridley. The reply, given by missionary G E Venning Thomas, unfortunately illustrates utilitarianism's entanglement with imperialism:

> … one cannot blame the mob for any use it makes of the weapon with which we arm it, any more than one may blame the child for cutting himself with a knife. The culpable party is, in either case, the nurse. Our action in taking

> away the "kris" [a curved knife] of the Malay was not a mere matter of expediency, but one thoroughly in accord with the principle of utility; how much more necessary is it to remove the vote, that weapon of proved danger with which we have armed the mob! (Ridley & Thomas, 1913, 352).

It's not clear whether Thomas refers here to a literal ban on knives, or metaphorically to the colonisation of peninsular Malaysia in the late nineteenth century through the placement of British advisors at Malay courts.[3] In any case, the relationship between the Straits Philosophical Society and imperialism has been discussed elsewhere (Jose, 1998; T. G. Lim & Brophy, 2023; Wilson & Ashton, 2025), as has the relationship of both Mill's liberalism and utilitarianism with British imperialism in general, especially in India (Williams, 2021).

Another late nineteenth-century intellectual forum was the *Straits Chinese Magazine*, which was published in English from 1897 to 1907 and widely circulated in the region (B. Tan, 2015). The magazine was founded by Song Ong Sian and Lim Boon Keng, who was also a member of the *Straits Philosophical Society*. After returning from studying medicine in Edinburgh, Lim:

> … initiated social, cultural, and educational reforms among the Chinese community in Singapore and Malaya. Possessing a strong ethnic consciousness and communal concern, he was worried about the Straits Chinese's situation and future. Thus, he decided to reform the society and revive Chinese ethnic culture. Some of the activities led by Lim included the launching of the *Straits Chinese Magazine*, the publishing of *Jit Shin Po*, the establishing of the Singapore Chinese Girls' School, the initiating of the Confucian renaissance movement, the Mandarin campaign, an anti-opium campaign and the queue-cutting campaign, etc. (B. K. Lim, 2015).

Lim wrote ten articles on Confucianism for the *Straits Chinese Magazine* (B. K. Lim, 2015), and contributed regularly to it and the Straits Philosophical Society on various topics.[4]

Tan Teck Soon, as well as being a founding member of the Straits Philosophical Society, also contributed to the *Straits Chinese Magazine* (Doran, 2006; Wilson, 2025; Wilson & Lai, n.d.). According to *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore*, published in 1923:

> Born in 1859, Mr Tek Soon was educated at Raffles Institution, where he won the Guthrie Scholarship for Chinese boys in 1873, being its first scholar, and then proceeded to Amoy [Xiamen], to prosecute his Chinese studies. … Tan was a foundation member of the influential gentle-men's debating club known as the Straits Philosophical Society (1893–1916), and the only one of two Chinese members, the other being Dr Lim Boon Keng. Tan's most notable contribution as an intellect and writer was in reconceptualising Chinese civilisation

[3] See, for example, Andaya and Andaya (2017, pp. 165–208) for the expansion of British control over Malaysia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

[4] See especially Wilson, n.d. for a recent discussion of Lim's work.

as progressive and open to change, which challenged the prevailing Western idea that Chinese civilisation was antiquated and not progressive (Song, 2020, p. 173). 137.

Moving further into the twentieth century, Rabindranath Tagore visited Singapore in 1927:

> A great international gathering as is only possible in a cosmopolitan city like Singapore, representing practically all the civilized nations on Earth, assembled at Mr. M. A. Namazie's bungalow at Siglap on 23rd July, 1927, to "do honour to India's greatest poet and philosopher, Dr. Rabindranath Tagore." The reception was held under the auspices of the local Indian Association and several hundred guests were present (Dhar, 1961, 23).

The following night he gave a speech at the Indian Association:

> In the course of his speech, the Poet said "My work is also your work, and I appeal to you to ponder over the importance of a centre for the study of all cultures, especially in relation to that of our own, Hindu and Musselman.
> "Ladies and Gentleman, as Indians you are the inheritors of a great heritage – that of striving for the realisation of truth, of love for all beings, and of service to them. I urge upon you to remain Indians in that sense, no matter of whatever language or religion you are. You have my best wishes – the wishes of an aged countryman of yours who has loved you and sought to express through his verses and writing the best that is in you and in your culture" (Dhar, 1961, 23).

Celebrations for Tagore's centenary were held in Singapore in 1961 (S. M. Lee, 1961).

Formal higher education in the humanities in Singapore began with the opening of Raffles College in 1928, but the curriculum did not include philosophy. The college closed during the Second World War, when the campus was used first as a medical facility and then by the Japanese as their military headquarters during their occupation from 1942 to 1945. But teaching continued in the prisoner of war camps in Changi, facilitated in part by lecturers from Raffles College. In his intellectual autobiography, moral philosopher R. M. Hare recounts the following:

> I had almost no philosophical books to read, but some came into our camps later from the local Raffles College (later Singapore University) and the Red Cross. These included Whitehead's *Process and Reality* and Eddington's [sic[5]] *Space, Time and Deity*, and I also learnt indirectly a little about the early Russell. An attempt was made to start a 'Changi University' in our camps, and there were some good philosophical lectures in a nearby camp that I heard about too late, just before the lecturer was sent overseas. I did attend some on theology. At Oxford before the War I had spent two years studying classics, and done little philosophy. So, as was to be expected, the book I wrote was

[5] Hare understandably confused Samuel Alexander's *Space, Time and Deity* with Arthur Eddington's similarly titled *Space, Time and Gravitation* (Krishnan, 2023, p. 340).

> ill-informed. I kept on writing a page or two every few days throughout our imprisonment (Hare, 2002, 282).

Memorably, Hare also said "if one is going to be a prisoner of war, Singapore affords an ideal climate" (Hare, 2002, 280).[6]

Another notable incident is a brief 1950 visit of Bertrand Russell, who recounts:

> On my way home to England my plane stopped at Singapore and Karachi and Bombay and other places. Though I was not permitted to visit any of these places, beyond their airports, as the plane did not stop long enough, I was called upon to make radio speeches. Later, I saw from a cutting from *The Sydney Morning Herald* an account of my speech at Singapore. It reported my saying: 'I think that Britain should withdraw gracefully from Asia, as she did in India, and not wait to be driven out in the event of a war …' (Russell, 2014, p. 518).[7]

Tracing every such incident in Singapore's history is obviously an impossible task. To narrow the scope, we focus on philosophy in Singapore's universities (Gelfert, 2009 covers similar ground). We also exclude philosophical work in other disciplines, such as bioethics, law, and maths. Since this essay is for a collection on analytic philosophy in Asia, another way to limit the scope would have been to confine our attention to analytic philosophy. (The story below is similar to that in the Philippines (Joaquin, 2022) and Hong Kong (Lau & Chan, 2022), where analytic philosophy was inherited from a colonial power, as opposed to that in Japan (Iida & Furuta, 2022), Taiwan (Hung, 2022), and Thailand (Hongladarom & Vanichaka, 2022), where it was not.) But an interesting aspect of the story is the interplay of analytic philosophy with Asian philosophy, and this would have been missed if we had excluded it from the outset.

2 University of Malaya 1949–1962

Any plans for a full-fledged university in Singapore were naturally suspended during the war. However, the *Report of the Commission on Higher Education in the Colonies*, known as the Asquith report, while primarily directed at Africa, also covered Asia, and recommended:

> There is one other subject for the inclusion of which we should press. We should like to see in every Colonial university a lecturer or senior lecturer or professor of philosophy. Even if his work were in some cases confined to the provision of courses and discussions open to all students, we should consider

[6] Silcock, 1985 gives a first-hand account of Raffles College, the prisoner of war camp, and the early history of the university. Holden, 2018 also discusses Raffles College.

[7] Russell was returning from a trip to Australia, for which see Franklin (2003, pp. 49–52). Russell also visited Singapore on his way to China in 1920, writing to Constance Malleson "The place is full of [Joseph] Conrad. I went to Raffles Hotel for lunch, where lots of events happen in his books" (Russell, 1920).

that his presence for this purpose would be of great importance (Asquith, 1945, 17).

Following the war, a commission chaired by Alexander Carr-Saunders reopened the question of a university for Singapore and, following the recommendations of the report, the University of Malaya was founded in 1949 through the merger of Raffles College with the King Edward VII medical school. Concerning philosophy, the Carr-Saunders report had this to say:

> The Asquith Commission wished to see *in every colonial university a senior lecturer or a professor of philosophy.* We appreciate the arguments put forward in support of this view, but we think that the way in which these aims can be achieved in Malaya requires very careful consideration. We have recommended departments of Malay, Chinese and Tamil Studies and have mentioned the opportunities offered for the study of Arabic and Sanskrit. *It is not easy in Asia to dissociate philosophy from literature and religion, and it may be that philosophical studies will progress more rapidly through literary studies than through the establishment of a separate department which would be compelled to cover several different systems. Nor is it clear whether there will be much demand for western philosophy. On these grounds we advise that the matter be left in abeyance* until it can be examined in the light of the experience that will become available when the new studies have established themselves. While this is so, it is appropriate to say here that *we shall later recommend, in connection with courses in the social sciences, provision for the teaching of social philosophy* [ethics]*, since this subject, though not demanding a training in the discipline of philosophy, raises philosophic issues* (Carr-Saunders, 1948, p. 45).

In the following section, the report reiterated that an exception should be made for ethics:

> … Finally, *we do not think that the first stage of enlargement would be complete unless provision were made for the teaching of social philosophy* [ethics]; there is a very obvious gap in any scheme of teaching in the social sciences which makes no provision for the study of values and of the ends and objects of social policy (Carr-Saunders, 1948, pp. 46–47).

In accordance with this recommendation, a committee in London chaired by A. J. Ayer appointed John Hartland-Swann as lecturer in 1952, making him the university's first philosopher.[8] The following article summarizes his biography (Brown, 2006, 1390):

[8] Details of the early history of the department can be found in two files held by the National Archives of Singapore. "Applications—Lecturer in Philosophy" contains documents relating to appointments from 1951 to 1958 (reference number UM 128–51). "Miscellaneous Notes of Department of Philosophy" contains documents relating to the department's founding and expansion from 1953 to 1958 (reference number UM 9–53). The Singapore-Malaysia collection of the National University of Singapore library holds copies of exam papers from the period, and of the university calendar, which includes basic information on courses and appointments.

Hartland-Swann, Joseph John (1908–1961)
John Hartland-Swann was born in London. His father was Louis Herbert Hartland-Swann, a director of public companies. Nothing is known of John's early education, and at the time of his marriage in 1933 he was an advertising manager. He seems to have come to philosophy as a mature student. In 1946 he was awarded an external PhD by the University of London for a thesis on 'The Influence of Religious Dogma on Metaphysical Speculation in the Philosophy of Descartes'. In the late 1940 s he was at Lincoln College, Oxford and in the early 1950s he held a teaching post at the University of Birmingham … Thereafter he was Head of Philosophy at the University of Malaysia [sic] at Singapore, where he remained until his untimely death. Hartland-Swann briefly continued with the historical interests of his PhD thesis. But he was later to be much influenced and personally encouraged by Gilbert RYLE, and he developed as an analytical philosopher during his time at Oxford and Birmingham. His first and most original book, *An Analysis of Knowing* (1958), was advertised as an attempt to elucidate the 'logical behaviour' of the word 'know' and to develop the implication of this analysis for certain philosophical disputes.

The chair in philosophy was established in 1956–7, to which Hartland-Swann was eventually promoted in 1960 (E. Lee & Tan, 1996, p. 92). He gave his inaugural lecture "Morals and Moral Philosophy", a condensed version of his second book *An Analysis of Morals* (Hartland-Swann, 1960) in 1961. Also of historical interest is his lecture for a correspondence course broadcast on Radio Malaya, entitled "Using Language Correctly" (Hartland-Swann, 1958b).

On the basis of high enrolment in ethics courses, Hartland-Swann argued for the appointment of a second lecturer, Kenneth Rankin. His biography is summarized in the following entry:

Kenneth Walker Rankin … studied philosophy at Edinburgh University (1938–42, 1945–6), … He was awarded an MA with second class honours in 1946, having specialized in ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY. His studies were interrupted by the war. A conscientious objector, he was briefly jailed for refusal to submit to a medical examination. He avoided an extended prison term by working for the National Fire Service. Upon his graduation, he was appointed assistant lecturer in the Department of LOGIC and METAPHYSICS at Edinburgh but was required to continue war service as a coal miner until 1948. From 1948 to 1951 he was assistant lecturer in the Department of Moral Philosophy. He was junior research fellow in philosophy at Edinburgh from 1951 to 1953. He was awarded a PhD in 1956 for his thesis, 'An Analysis of Choice'. From 1953 to 1962 he was lecturer, then senior lecturer at the University of Malaya, teaching in both Singapore and Kuala Lumpur. From 1962 to 1969 he was senior lecturer, then associate professor at Monash University. He was appointed professor at the University of Victoria in 1969. He retired from this post in 1985 and was made professor emeritus. After his retirement he remained in Victoria, British Columbia and participated actively in that city's philosophical community (Young, 2006).

Rankin died in 2022, aged 102. Daljit Singh, a student and tutor in the philosophy department and later a public servant in the ministry of defence, recalls in his oral history interview:

> I remember Dr Rankin. He was an Englishman [sic]. He taught us logic. Although I was not too much influenced by him because he was quite abstruse in some ways. Very nice man.[9]

Rankin was a prolific writer, but the main work of his early career was his book *Choice and Chance: A Libertarian Analysis*, on determinism and free will (Rankin, 1961).

Following the appointment of Rankin, Hartland-Swann lobbied for a department. In accordance with the Carr-Saunders report's recommendation, it was argued this should be deferred until Chairs were appointed to the various departments of Asian studies. But as Thomas Silcock explains, recruitment in Asian studies was proving difficult (Silcock, 1964, pp. 190–191):

> The Carr-Saunders Report recommended a general programme of expansion, much of which, if it could have been carried out, would have strengthened the university's local standing. Perhaps the most important of the new developments were new departments in the three major local languages; but the difficulties of establishing them, within the post-war framework of universities set up by the Asquith Commission, proved much greater than had been anticipated.
>
> To begin with, the filling of the chairs raised serious difficulties and offence was given to both the Chinese and Malay communities: the regular procedure of recruitment by advertisement and selection did not attract the most promising Chinese candidates; and suitable Malay candidates were not forthcoming. Appointment of senior lecturers to head both these departments proved a serious political liability. Indian studies caused acute controversy between leaders of the local Tamil community and supporters of Hindi as the Indian national language, and this also led to delay.

Against waiting for the situation in the Asian studies departments to be resolved, it was argued that students in Singapore should not be denied opportunities available to those in London. The department was created in 1954 (E. Lee & Tan, 1996, p. 91).

With a department came more appointments: first Frank Cioffi, followed by Eugene Kamenka and Rusi Khan. From Cioffi's obituary:

> Frank Cioffi was a remarkable member of the early-1950s Oxford generation of philosophers. … Frank Cioffi's background differed from that of his Oxford contemporaries. He was born in New York in 1928 to a poor Italian family; his mother perished in childbirth and his father died soon afterwards. He was

[9] From the oral history interview of Daljit Singh (Accession No. 003462, Disc 2 of 7), Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, 2010.

> raised by his grandparents, and even after he learned his actual parentage he considered his revered uncle Lou to be his brother.
> After he dropped out of a terrible high school, he began his real education in the streets and clubs of wartime Manhattan, where he met writers such as James Baldwin, and in the New York Public Library. He served with the American army of occupation in Japan and with the war graves registration service in France, and while living in Paris he was encouraged by his friend Lionel Blue to apply to Oxford, where he studied first at Ruskin College, then at St Catherine's College, graduating in 1954 in PPP (Psychology, Philosophy and Physiology), all financed by the GI Bill of Rights. He was tutored by Friedrich Waismann and Anthony Quinton and, for a term, by Iris Murdoch.
> After two years of research in social psychology he took up a Lectureship in Philosophy at the University of Singapore, where he met and married Nalini Nair. When foreigners were forced to resign from the university [sic?[10]], he left for a Senior Lectureship at the University of Kent (Bunnin, 2012).

Cioffi was also tutored by Elizabeth Anscombe (Bunnin, 2015, 170).[11] While Cioffi moved in the same Oxford milieu as Hartland-Swann, he was chiefly influenced by Wittgenstein, rather than Ryle (Plant, 2006, 626). Daljit Singh describes him as follows:

> ... the one which was most influential on our philosophy group, including on me, was a guy called Frank Cioffi, it's an Italian name, he was an American. He had done philosophy at Cambridge UK [sic]. So he was a disciple of linguistic philosophy. He was very bright, very articulate, sort of non-conformist, eccentric. I suppose that was what appealed to us, because we came from a rather orthodox, conformist, Asian background. And this guy who was very articulate, very intelligent, who questioned everything, so he made an impact. He was a tall guy, more than six feet tall, he wore a beard, and sort of untidily dressed, always long pants. He would carry his book. He used to walk from, those days it was Bukit Timah Campus lah. So, you know Raffles Hall? Is it still called Raffles Hall? He would walk from the Bukit Timah Campus.

[10] See "The expatriate professors who resign: A clarification" *Straits Times*, 24th March 1965, p. 6. The article denies a rumour to the effect that university policy was to replace foreign heads of department with local staff, which was purported to be a catalyst for the resignation of Cioffi and several others. Roland Puccetti, who was head of philosophy in the late 1960s, says "New expatriate staff, and expatriate staff on temporary, short-term contracts (usually three years with expectation of permanent tenure thereafter) were henceforth never to be given permanent tenure, however long their service" (Puccetti, 1972, p. 227). As an existing member of staff, it's hard to see how Cioffi himself would have been directly affected by this. But Puccetti also discusses at length hostile relations between some foreign and local staff, as well as increasing concerns about academic freedom, either of which may have contributed to Cioffi's departure.

[11] Anscombe reports the following anecdote: "Conviction that *only* so is 'looks' used rightly was the cause of confusion to an overconfident ordinary-language philosophy on an occasion famous in Oxford: F. Cioffi brought in a glass vessel of water with a stick in it. 'Do you mean to say', he asked, 'That this stick does not look bent?' 'No,' said the other bravely: 'It looks like a straight stick in water.' So Cioffi took it out and it *was* bent" (Anscombe, 1965, p. 68). The ordinary language philosopher in question was probably J. L. Austin (Rowe, 2023, p. 450).

> He would walk by Nasim Road to Orchard Road. He'll walk. Always he's walking. And always carrying a book while walking and reading. Reading and then he'll walk, think and look at the book again. And even sometimes at night he'd carry the book under the light, sometimes he'd look at his book again, the street lamp. So we were very impressed by him you know? Naïve young minds, you know? So he taught linguistic philosophy in my third year. And then in my honours year he taught a number of things. Linguistic philosophy. Philosophy of art. Art and aesthetics. Philosophy of science. Even history, philosophy of history. So, he was a lasting influence. Not just me, on some of my colleagues also. Because it was a small class. There were only four of us who did philosophy honours. He, basically he did not write any book. Apparently later he did. And he was the sort of guy who believed anything that is worthwhile saying, can be said in a short article. And the fellows who write books, or get PhDs – it's just a waste of time. They're doing it to just impress. Because if you have something really worthwhile to say, you can say it an essay, in an article. So that influenced me against doing any PhD. And I thought people writing too much, everybody verbal diarrhoea, producing a book. If you have something worthwhile saying, you say it an article, otherwise you just shut up – don't write anything. So I was influenced along those lines. That's why when I wanted to go to Oxford I wanted to do a first degree again, I didn't want to do a PhD [Singh took PPE instead]. So he is one character I remember very well. He was quite iconoclastic. Questioning all the established things.[12]

Another philosophy student, Lee Geok Boi, who later became a notable food critic and writer on Singaporean culture and history, describes Cioffi in her oral history interview as follows:

> In the philosophy department we had a lecturer called Frank Cioffi. He had a habit of walking around with his nose buried in a book. And so naturally he would quite often walk into objects like … lamp posts or whatever. He was also an interesting lecturer. As were in general the philosophy lecturers. Perhaps why I decided to do it as a subject. Because the lecturers were interesting and colourful.[13]

True to these descriptions, Cioffi's main contribution before coming to Singapore was a short piece for *Analysis* responding to the question "Does it make sense to say that death is survived", very much in the ordinary language style (Ayer et al., 1954). While based in Singapore, Cioffi published 'Intention and Interpretation in Criticism' (Cioffi, 1963). He also spoke at a seminar on 'the Concept of Democracy' which was broadcast on national radio (Cioffi, 1964). Later, Cioffi became a prolific

[12] From the oral history interview of Daljit Singh (Accession No. 003462, Disc 2 of 7), Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, 2010.

[13] From the oral history interview of Lee Geok Boi (Accession No. 004019, Disc 14 of 43), Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, 2015.

publisher, noted for his application of Wittgenstein's philosophy to the critique of psychoanalysis (Cioffi, 1998), but also noted for his conversation (Ellis, 2015).

Eugene Kamenka, then a specialist on Marxism (Kamenka, 1962), lectured at the University of Malaya from 1958 to 1960. His biography describes the relevant part of his life as follows:

> … He interrupted his ANU studies to lecture in philosophy (1958-60) at the University of Malaya, Singapore. While there he met Alice Erh-Soon Tay, a lawyer. Their liaison created a scandal and they quit their posts. They travelled to London, intent on writing for a living, and developed the collaboration that would last virtually up to Kamenka's death. … From the mid-1970s Kamenka made major contributions to scholarship and intellectual conversation, both at the ANU and at numerous overseas universities. Many of his articles and monographs were written jointly with Alice, who was Challis professor of jurisprudence at the University of Sydney (1975–2001); none was devoid of some input from her. Their Canberra home was frequently a lively salon of discussion over dinners (Lovell, 2021).

Daljit Singh recollects:

> And I also remember Kamenka …. He was a philosopher, he was more like a history of ideas man. But expert on Marxism. So he knew a lot of Marx. He taught us Marxist philosophy, you know? He was a guy who was very fluent. He would keep on talking, one sentence would keep on flowing naturally from another without apparently having to think, and it was all very logical, very impressive, very impressive. … Prolific writer. So very different from Frank Cioffi. He believed in writing books. Completely opposite characters, you know? This guy would write a lot of things, would build theories you know, while Cioffi would tear down – what do you mean by this?[14]

In the middle of 1958, Kamenka recorded a radio talk about democracy for *Radio Malaya*, but the talk was not broadcast, and he was asked to speak on another topic. Kamenka published a transcript of the talk in the *Malayan Undergrad*, then the student newspaper, writing "… there may be some value in people being able to see for themselves the full text of something which it is apparently not possible to say over the air. It is worth asking whether culture or University life can every flourish under such conditions" (Kamenka, 1958).

In August 1959, the *Straits Times* reported Kamenka's first wife was granted a divorce due to his relationship with Tay, then an assistant lecturer in the law faculty.[15] In December that year, the *Malayan Undergrad* published an article with

[14] From the oral history interview of Daljit Singh (Accession No. 003462, Disc 2 of 7), Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, 2010.

[15] "Wife of university man is granted decree" *Straits Times* 1 st August 1959, p. 7.

the headline "Eugene Kamenka's contract not renewed – varsity withholds reasons – Australasian philosophers protest" (Volume 11, No. 3, December 1959), and a controversy about the academic or other basis for non-renewal ensued in both the *Malayan Undergrad* and the *Straits Times*, the national newspaper.[16]

Rusi Khan's biography until he left Singapore is provided by a newsletter entry announcing his appointment at Monash University:

> Dr. R. F. Khan – Lecturer in Philosophy – graduated B.A. in 1950 and M.A. in 1952 from the University of Bombay. In 1956 he was awarded a PhD from the University of London for a thesis on "The Concept of Voluntary Action". His particular interests are in political philosophy, the philosophy of history, and the philosophy of religion. In 1956 Dr. Khan was a Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Singapore and from 1962–1963 he was acting head of the philosophy department at that University. Dr Khan is married with one child (Bolton et al., 1965).

Daljit Singh recollects Khan as follows:

> The other philosophy lecturer who I remember quite well was an Indian. He was a Parsi, very fair, from the Parsi community in India. His name was Dr Rusi Khan. He was a very, sort-of neat, clear thinker. He used to smoke a pipe. And again, he taught us political philosophy. I remember him very well, both as a scholar and more as a man. Very different from Cioffi. Not so colourful but very systematic, very clear.[17]

Khan participated in a radio forum on overpopulation for Radio Singapura (Khan, 1964). He later published on existentialism and political philosophy (Khan, 1984, 1985, 1994).

In summary, philosophy at the University of Malaya in the 1950s was heavily influenced by ordinary language philosophy, the dominant school in England at the time, especially through the work of Hartland-Swann and Cioffi, who were influenced by Ryle and Wittgenstein, two of the school's founding figures. Kamenka, Khan and Rankin were less obviously influenced by the ordinary language school, but all of them were educated in the British Commonwealth, much as the Asquith report had envisaged. In contrast, we will see in the next section that philosophy at Nanyang University was primarily influenced by Chinese philosophy.

[16] See "Mass resignations: What is wrong at varsity? Asks Undergrad" *Straits Times*, 21st December 1959, p. 9. "Resignations at Varsity – No Cause for Alarm" *Straits Budget*, 30th December 1959, p. 15. "Principle Criticises the Undergrad" *Malayan Undergrad* 11(4), January 1960. Ten Chin Liew "Academic Freedom and the Case of Mr Kamenka" *Straits Times* 25 January 1960, p. 8. "Kamenka case: the reply – 'Facts reveal there was no real disregard of academic freedom'" *Straits Budget*, 3rd February 1960, p. 10.

[17] From the oral history interview of Daljit Singh (Accession No. 003462, Disc 2 of 7), Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, 2010.

3 Nanyang University 1956–1980

Nanyang University was founded in 1956 as a Chinese language University for the diaspora in South-East Asia. The first vice-chancellor, Lin Yutang, was a philosopher, but his appointment was ill-starred, and he resigned even before classes commenced. On returning to New York, Lin published his account of events, "How a Citadel of Freedom was Destroyed by the Reds" in *Life* magazine (Lin, 1955). In his history of the university, alumnus Tan Kok Chiang gives a less sympathetic account, calling the relevant chapter "The Lin Yutang Blemish" (K. C. Tan, 2017). Despite this inauspicious start, the university calendar for 1963 lists Introduction to Philosophy and Introduction to Logic as required courses for an Arts degree (p. 32). Logic was taught by the head of Chinese Studies, Chung Kai-Ming (p. 13). History of Chinese Philosophy, at fourth year level, was required for the Chinese Language and Literature Major (p. 33). Philosophy of History was offered as a fourth-year History elective and Mathematical Logic as a third-year mathematics elective. (The Nanyang University calendar is held in the Singapore-Malaysia collection of the National University of Singapore library.)

Likewise, according to the calendar for the academic year 1965–1966, Introduction to Philosophy, Introduction to Logic, and Philosophy of History were taught by Dr. P. Gandolfini, a part-time lecturer (p. 14). Introduction to Philosophy is described as follows:

> This course deals with the questions on the Theory of Knowledge such as Theories of Perception, Problems of Universals, Truth and Error and introduces to the student selected questions of Metaphysics such as the Problem of Matter, Mind, Space, Time, Causality, Freedom and God (p. 35).

And philosophy of history:

> This course is devised to introduce to the student the main problems of Critical Philosophy of History such as Historical Laws, the Problem of Truth and Objectivity, and values, and to refer to the different patterns of historical philosophies: St. Augustine, Vico, Voltaire, Kant, Hegel, Comte, Marx, Spengler and Toynbee (p. 53).

Leun Wai-Kit taught "Theory of Set and Logic" in mathematics (p. 21). Fu Li Pu taught History of Chinese Philosophy (p. 13), which the calendar describes as follows:

> 1. Discussion of whether the source of various schools of thought of the Pre-Chin period could be traced to a government institute respectively; 2. Reaction of other schools of thought to Confucianism; 3. Comparative study of the Confucian school; 4. New-fangled views as expressed by the School of Terminology and the School of Yin and Yang; 5. Revolutionary spirit of the Legal School and the Agrarian School; and 6. Impact of Buddhism on Chinese thought and its aftermath, since the dynasties of Han and Wei.

Two courses in Chinese classics taught by Fu Li Pu and Soo Hsueh Lin (p. 13) also covered Confucius and Mencius (p. 37). Academics at Nanyang published in the multilingual *Nanyang University Journal*; of particular interest to the themes of this paper is Hsieh Yun-Fei's "A Study of Han Fei's thought on Utilitarianism" (Hsieh, 1969).

Introduction to Philosophy, Introduction to Logic, and Philosophy of History are no longer mentioned in the calendar after 1965–1966. History of Chinese Philosophy, on the other hand, continued to be taught until the final years of Nanyang University, when it operated a "joint-campus" in Bukit Timah with the University of Singapore, before the two universities were finally merged to form the National University of Singapore in 1980. The last Nanyang Faculty of Arts Handbook for the joint-campus curriculum in 1980–1981 gives the following course description for Chinese Philosophy: "This is a general survey of Chinese philosophy from Pre-Ch'in period to the Ch'ing Dynasty with emphasis on the major schools of Chinese Philosophy". Essentially the same course description for History of Chinese Philosophy in the Chinese studies department is still in place today.

4 University of Singapore 1962–1980

The 1960s were politically tumultuous. The 1959 election was won in a landslide victory by the People's Action Party (PAP), which has won every election since. Singapore federated with Malaysia in 1963, then seceded to become an independent state in 1965 (Guan et al., 2019, pp. 246–268; Turnbull, 2009, pp. 407–469). Meanwhile, the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur, where a branch campus was opened in 1958, was separated from the University of Singapore in 1962 (as far as we are aware, no department of philosophy has since existed at the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur). At least initially, philosophy at the University of Singapore continued as it had done at the University of Malaya. In her oral history interview, Stella Kon, later noted for her play *Emily of Emily Hill*, but then a philosophy student and tutor, echoes Daljit Singh's earlier description:

> The lecturers on the campus were considered as eccentrics and unique. They talked about subjects that never crossed our little minds at that point. That was very mind-expanding. … the kind of philosophy that we were taught was the British so-called logical positivism. Extremely scientific. Not what people usually think of philosophy as deep, profound. Quite the reverse. More like, is there any basis for this profound statement? Is there any basis for saying that we know we have a soul? In fact is there any basis for saying I know that this is a chair? That kind of very rigorous logical analysis. Almost a little disappointing. No cheem [deep] profound statements. But extremely good training. … It was in fact a little narrow in that it would I think have been appropriate to give a nod to philosophical systems such as what is Buddhist philosophy … but it was not even mentioned it was all this rigorous logical analysis … not only western but this very narrow stream of the British logical positivists, no nod

> to French philosophers or German philosophers; only a little bit in the final year.[18]

Another useful source for the period is *The Kritik*, the magazine of the philosophy society. *The Kritik* was published regularly from 1960 to 1967, then again from 1972 to 1981, and finally in 1986 to 1987. Both staff and students contributed articles on philosophy and current affairs, and debates often ran over multiple issues.[19]

While the department continued to recruit from overseas, it also recruited its early students as tutors and lecturers. Malcolm Wicks, a mathematics lecturer, recalls about the department that:

> …they also had an extremely talented first year. This often happens with new departments, they're novelty values, they attract some very good students. So in this particular case, I think, three that come to mind. Ho Wing Meng … Ten Chin Liew … The other girl in philosophy, who, perhaps, was the brightest of the three … in the early hours of tomorrow morning I ought to remember her name.[20]

The first four honours students, who all subsequently taught in the department, were Ho Wing Meng, Lee Keekok, Daljit Singh, and Ten Chin Liew. Singh's experience was no doubt typical:

> I was assigned to teach logic to first-year law students. You know the first year law, they had a broader curriculum, you know, rather than just law. They had to learn some other things, including a little bit of philosophy – logic, they called it logic. You teach them deductive reasoning, inductive reasoning, and some of the logical fallacies, a bit of philosophy of science, critical thinking lah. Which was loosely called logic. So I used to teach first-year law students that. I think I taught two or three batches. In addition to that, I used to take a few tutorials now and then for first year students on other subjects: philosophy of science, linguistic philosophy. I quite enjoyed it. Because essentially what they needed was a course on critical thinking. I could do that you know.[21]

Ho Wing Meng's MA thesis, supervised by Rankin and Hartland-Swann, was on the philosophy of language (W. M. Ho, 1960), and his DPhil at Oxford, supervised by Rom Harré, was on the philosophy of biology (W. M. Ho, 1965). Lee Geok Boi describes him as follows:

> Another character was a Singaporean by the name of Ho Wing Meng. He wrote two early books on Straits Chinese culture in Singapore. One was Straits

[18] From the oral history interview of Stella Kon (Accession No. 002996, Disc 17 of 36), Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, 2006.

[19] *The Kritik* can be consulted in the Singapore-Malaysia collection of the National University of Singapore library.

[20] From the oral history interview of Malcolm Wicks (Accession No. 001683, Disc 4 of 7), Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, 2015.

[21] From the oral history interview of Daljit Singh (Accession No. 003462, Disc 2 of 7), Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, 1994.

> Chinese porcelain, the other Straits Chinese silver. He was obviously very knowledgeable about those two subjects, and must have been an avid collector.[22]

Ho became Professor and Head of Department in the 1970 s, publishing on values and education (W. M. Ho, 1975, 1989a, 1989b). We return to his work on Asian values in context below.

A biographical note in *The Kritik* summarizes Lee Keekok's early career:

> Miss Lee Kee Kok, who in her student days was on the Editorial Board of the "KRITIK" and who rejoined the Department as a Lecturer after receiving her M.A. [sic, BPhil] from Oxford, has left the Department and Singapore to settle down with a lecturer in theoretical physics in England. We wish her all the best in her new life.

Lee Geok Boi recalls in her interview:

> Another lecturer there was a woman by the name of Lee Keekok. She was a small birdlike woman who spoke at the speed of an express train. One of the subjects she did with me was philosophy of science. And you really had to listen hard to understand what she was saying. She spoke really, really, really fast. She eventually went to I think some University in England, I'm not sure where.[23]

Keekok Lee moved to the University of Manchester. In a recent interview, she recalls:

> Since I was put through the paces of a colonial education, at the University of Malaya, later called the University of Singapore, or that bit of it, the philosophy we were taught was simply Anglo-Saxon analytical philosophy based on the so-called Oxford school of philosophy of that time. So when I finished my first degree there and taught for a bit at Singapore, I got a Commonwealth scholarship to Oxford to do what is called a BPhil. … And now at that time, you can call him the program director, in today's terminology, of the BPhil program in philosophy, is the great professor Gilbert Ryle. Now to those of you who don't know about that tradition of philosophy, you wouldn't know he was great, but to someone like me who had to read his work and so on, he was certainly the great man, right, who wrote the book I don't know *The Concept of Mind* or something. And in any case, so he sent out a message the moment students got to Oxford that all BPhil philosophy students have got to go and see him – pay our respects to him. … I knocked on the door and I heard a gruff voice from the other side then "come in" he says and so I gingerly opened the door but even before I opened the door

[22] From the oral history interview of Lee Geok Boi (Accession No. 004019, Disc 14 of 43), Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, 2015.

[23] From the oral history interview of Lee Geok Boi (Accession No. 004019, Disc 14 of 43), Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, 2015.

> and he saw my face he barked out at me "there is no such thing as Chinese philosophy!" I was so gob-smacked –he hasn't seen my face! (K. Lee, 2021).

In Singapore, she published on jurisprudence (K. Lee, 1968), and later published prolifically on numerous topics, including metaethics, environmental ethics and Chinese philosophy.

Ten Chin-Liew worked on normative ethics and political philosophy. The acknowledgements in his first book, *Mill on Liberty*, provide a nice example of generational continuity:

> I was first introduced to Mill's essay *On Liberty* when, as an undergraduate at the University of Singapore, I attended Rusi Khan's lucid lectures. These lectures and Frank Cioffi's lively participation in the ensuing discussion gave me an abiding interest in the essay (Ten, 1980, vii).

After moving to Monash University in the early 1970s, where he wrote his second book *Crime, Guilt and Punishment* (Ten, 1987), he returned to Singapore as professor and head of department in the early 1990s. As he is now Emeritus Professor, his career spans the entire history of the department.

Goh Swee Tiang, another student turned lecturer, completed his BA at the University of Malaya and MA at the University of Melbourne in 1962, before returning to the University of Singapore and working on the philosophy of science (Goh, 1967, 1970a, 1970b). A former student recalls:

> Thinking that a smaller tutorial group would benefit me, I once joined a Philosophy tutorial group with two other students. We sat in front of Mr Goh Swee Tiang at his desk (and learned that drinking honey in water was the secret to his youthful appearance). I often left quaking in my boots (cheap shoes, actually). Eventually, I rejoined a tutorial group of ten students so that I could better hide my ignorance (and occasional laziness) (S. P. Lee, 2018).

The philosophy department prospectus for 1985 lists Goh's interests as "Buddhism – Theravada Buddhistic Philosophy, Mysticism – East and West, Philosophy of Religion" (p. 6).

The department also recruited more overseas staff. In 1965, Roland Puccetti joined as Professor and Head of Department. The following memorial notice summarizes his biography:

> Roland Puccetti 1924–1995
> Born in Oak Park, Illinois, Dr. Puccetti died peacefully at age 71 in Guadalajara, Mexico, of emphysema on November 2, 1995. An ex-paratrooper with the American army in World War II, holder of the Ph.D. degree from The Sorbonne (Paris), a fighter for academic freedom, Roland Puccetti was lately a professor and past chair in the Philosophy Department, Dalhousie University, Halifax, formerly Head of the Philosophy Department of the University of Singapore and a member of the department at The American

> University of Beirut. … The author of over 80 academic publications as well as several novels, Professor Puccetti's widely read work embraces all aspects of philosophy but is best known for its discussion of issues in the intersection of philosophy and cognitive science (Fox, 1996).

In her oral history interview, Lee Geok Boi describes Puccetti as follows:

> There was another American Italian by the name of Roland Puccetti. One of his hobbies was hunting. But not with a gun, with a bow and arrow. Because he said a gun gave you an unfair advantage. Obviously he didn't do this in Singapore but in the US.[24]

Another former student, Robert Liew, then a student and later a lecturer in philosophy, but subsequently director of the Singapore arts festival, describes Puccetti as follows:

> He taught us philosophy of religion. That was enlightening as we were never able to think about religion in a logical way. Only in a way that religion was thought of as a matter of faith, as a matter of religious practice … Critical thinking skills changed, almost to a point where it was a revelation, one could think in such depth and also with such clarity about politically charged subjects and even about everyday subjects using logic as a guide to reasoning.[25]

In Singapore, Puccetti worked on the philosophy of religion (Puccetti, 1965, 1967c), the philosophy of mind (Puccetti, 1966, 1967b, 1969b), and personal identity (Puccetti, 1967a, 1969a, 1970).

Another new appointment was Mark Fisher, who worked briefly at the University of Khartoum in Sudan before coming to Singapore. Stella Kon recalls:

> My lecturers were Frank Cioffi, a tall Italian with a beard, American-Italian, and Mark Fisher who was famous for wandering around the campus in baggy shorts and slippers, you know not the kind of formal dress that was expected of a lecturer.[26]

A 1965 note in *The Kritik* records:

> Mr. Fisher, who left last January, is now lecturing in Sussex University, although confined to a chair for several months as a result of a spinal disc injury.

In Singapore, Fisher published on logic (Fisher, 1963, 1964a, 1964b).

[24] From the oral history interview of Lee Geok Boi (Accession No. 004019, Disc 14 of 43), Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, 2015.

[25] From the oral history interview of Robert Liew (Accession No. 003530, Disc 1 of 4), Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, 2011.

[26] From the oral history interview of Stella Kon (Accession No. 002996, Disc 17 of 36), Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, 2006.

Colin Davies was a lecturer in the University of Singapore from 1967–1974, after completing a PhD at the Australian National University (Davies, 1967). He worked on ethics (Davies, 1975).

John James Clarke worked on the philosophy of religion (Clarke, 1971). Clarke says his *Oriental Enlightenment: the Encounter between Asian and Western Thought* was inspired by a meeting in Singapore with Thomas Merton, a monk interested in Eastern philosophy:

> While on this Asian journey Thomas Merton died accidentally of electrocution in Bangkok where he was attending a conference of abbots from Christian monasteries in Asia. I was privileged to meet him in Singapore only a few days before he died, a meeting which was one of the initial steps in the journey that has led to the writing of this book (Clarke, 2002, p. 234).

Another student turned lecturer, Lee Beng Tjie, completed his master's thesis on *The Concept of Liberal Education* under Mark Fisher, Frank Cioffi and Lee Keekok (B. T. Lee, 1965). In one of his final diary entries before his death, Thomas Merton describes visiting Lee as follows:

> December 5 [1968]/Singapore
> Lee Beng Tjie, professor [sic] of philosophy at the University of Singapore, met me at the plane with his wife. … Beng Tjie says that he has a hard time getting Chuang Tzu and Lao Tzu through to Asian students. The ones here have been formed by English linguistic analysis to some extent. He thought that what I have done in "War and the Crisis of Language" was the sort of thing that Wittgenstein was really getting at – but I am not so sure (Merton, 1975, 236-7).

Although the department appeared to thrive in the 1960 s, it was also caught up in the turbulent politics of the time. Daljit Singh recalls an incident involving Ten Chin Liew:

> When the PAP [People's Action Party] came to power, one or two years later, he wrote an article either in the students union magazine or in this newsletter the magazine of the philosophy department students called [the] *Kritik*, probably it was in the University of Malaya student union magazine, I can't remember very well. He wrote an article criticising the PAP in a very nice paper, very logical, which aroused attention. I think he was later called in for a chat with somebody, not to admonish him, but just to size up this bright fellow – what was he like?[27]

Ten wrote and spoke publicly on politics in several venues while an undergraduate in 1959 and 1960, including in the *Kritik*, *Malayan Undergrad*, and the *Straits Times* (Ten, 1959a, 1959b, 1959c, 1960a, 1960b).[28] Ten recalls he was asked

[27] From the oral history interview of Daljit Singh (Accession No. 003462, Disc 2 of 7), Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, 1994.

[28] See Liao et al., 2012 for a more general discussion of student politics in Singapore in the 1960s. Silcock, 1985 gives a first-hand account of university politics in general in this period. An often discussed example is a controversy over an English professor's speech known as the "Enright affair" (Enright, 1969), for a recent discussion of which see Holden, 2019.

whether he intended to join the public service, but that he was already committed to graduate studies overseas.[29]

After returning to the University of Singapore as a lecturer in the mid-1960s, Ten presented a paper for an academic conference on education, which he concluded by saying (Ten, 1966b, p. 8):

> You would not, I am sure, have failed to notice that my paper seems to be carelessly indifferent to any special local interests which a University in this part of the world should cater for. But it would be wrong to conclude that I am afraid of the winds of change. Whenever the winds of change have a clear message and do not blow up too much dust, I shall only be too eager to listen to them sympathetically. I am fully prepared to believe that there are courses and emphases which a University in this part of the world should give or place which Universities elsewhere should not. And I have little doubt that on many occasions in this Conference various people will give details of such courses and emphases, for these are what are needed and not just general recommendations for undefined changes. For my part, however, I have chosen to concentrate on a few values which should be of importance to all civilised men. It is salutary to remind ourselves now and again in the midst of a changing world that wherever there are universities, and whatever else they may each be seeking, they must all not fail to cultivate a concern for fundamental values – the love of knowledge, the commitment to truth and free inquiry, and critical minds.

In his opening remarks to the conference, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew singled out the opening sentences of this paragraph for special criticism, saying "… it was left to our products to have formulated a line of thought which left me gasping at the futility of this university if this in fact epitomises their values" (K. Y. Lee, 2012b, p. 330). Although the Prime Minister continued to say "This is not a rebuke and not intended to be one" (K. Y. Lee, 2012b, p. 330), his remarks were subsequently publicised in the *Straits Times* under the headline "Lee: no national varsity unless" (7th February 1966, p. 6). In a letter to the *Straits Times* a few days later, Ten defended his paper, saying that "At least some, and probably even all, of these values are values Mr. Lee himself has often stated that he believes in. Mr. Lee accused me of being "devoid of the capacity of comprehension." But if there was any failure to comprehend it was his" (Ten, 1966a). Later, Ten spoke on the radio about development and education (Ten, 1969, 1970a, 1970b).

In 1968, then Deputy Prime Minister, Toh Chin Chye stepped down to serve simultaneously as science minister and vice-chancellor. According to Puccetti, as the new vice-chancellor he:

> … exercised from the beginning his right as chairman ex officio of the senate and of virtually every committee, to control the university down to the smallest detail. Thus, for example, Dr Toh is chairman of the graduate studies commit-

[29] Personal communication, 28th January 2024.

> tee and assesses every thesis topic and every finished thesis. He is also chairman of the scholarships committee and can determine who will get research assistance for pursuit of what particular subject. A philosophy graduate made the mistake in April 1970 of illustrating the sort of question he wanted to deal with in moral philosophy with this example: "Why should my wife not commit adultery?" He was not given the research scholarship. (A Singapore citizen, he is now pursuing the M.A. on a research scholarship in Australia.) A year later another philosophy graduate, with first-class honours, wanted to do her thesis also in moral philosophy. She too (a Singapore citizen) was turned down, though she wrote a long personal letter to Dr. Toh trying to explain that "Western" moral philosophy is not inherently permissive (Puccetti, 1972, 240).

According to Lee Geok Boi, some of Toh's interventions were beneficial for philosophy:

> When Dr Toh became Vice Chancellor, he wanted students to have a broader vision. He made it mandatory that science students, so the easiest thing was for everyone to plomp and do philosophy of science, so the philosophy of science class suddenly became amazingly popular.[30]

A course on the history of philosophy and science was coordinated by Ho Peng Yoke from the physics department, a pioneer in the study of the history of Chinese science, until he left to take up a chair in Chinese studies at the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur. He recalls:

> History soon proved that I had made the correct move. Three or four years after I left Singapore the new Vice-Chancellor, my friend Dr Toh Chin Chye, ordered the closure of the course on the history and philosophy of science at his university on the grounds of a small student number. Members of the Department of Philosophy were responsible for teaching the course at that time. I did not try to find out whether student number was the main reason, although I knew that my friend had problems with the Department of Philosophy in those days. Should he be hostile to the course itself, the history of science would not have much of a future in the University of Singapore (P. Y. Ho, 2005).

Political problems for the philosophy department in the 1960s culminated in a conflict with the prime minister himself, following a speech at the university. As Puccetti reports:

> In the last week of May 1969 [actually 4th June], Mr. Lee Kuan Yew attended a "freshman orientation" meeting, at the invitation of the Students' Union, to discuss the university's role in the development of Singapore. During the question period a philosophy lecturer (A Singapore Citizen of Chinese Extraction, now a doctoral candidate at Monash University, Australia) attacked the gov-

[30] From the oral history interview of Lee Geok Boi (Accession No. 004019, Disc 14 of 43), Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore, 2015.

> ernment's recently-passed abortion bill as unethical; this so incensed the Prime Minister that at one point he pushed the Students' Union representative, who was in the chair, off the platform, saying: "If you can't chair this meeting, I will" (Puccetti, 1972, 231).

There is a transcript of the exchange with Lee Beng-Tjie in Lee Kuan Yew's collected speeches (K. Y. Lee, 2012a, 2012b, 119–23). Shortly afterwards, Lee Kuan Yew called students of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, as well as staff of the philosophy, political science and sociology departments, to a meeting at the National Theatre. Puccetti continues:

> … Mr. Lee explained that he had called the staff of these three departments to the National Theatre because these subjects – political science, sociology, philosophy – were "value-prone" subjects which could not be taught independently of what was going on in society. They invited a critical assessment of social problems, which was not the case with mathematics, for example, or engineering. Therefore, he asked the students, was it not reasonable when a lecturer made remarks critical of Singapore's government to wonder how committed that lecturer was to Singapore?
>
> The Prime Minister opened a file on the podium before him. Now just how committed to Singapore were the staff in these departments? Philosophy had three Singapore citizens out of six, the others being an American, who was departmental head [Puccetti himself], and two Englishmen. …
>
> After the students had been dismissed, all staff were invited to meet privately with the Prime Minister in a conference room behind the stage. In addition to the registrar and deputy vice-chancellor, there were now two plainclothes security agents present, and two tape-recorders which Mr. Lee flicked on as everyone took his seat.
>
> Opening another file, the Prime Minister assured staff members that he knew what "twaddle" they were teaching students about Singapore, the rupture with Malaysia in 1965, etc. Some of this teaching, he went on, was not just of poor quality but dishonest. As for philosophy, he said, his nephew (by marriage) had done philosophy and talked nothing but nonsense (Puccetti, 1972, 231-4).[31]

Puccetti continues to describe the repercussions of this event on the department as follows:

> Whether they came from the Prime Minister, or from overzealous subordinates trying to please him, orders went out from the Public Services Commission later that same month (June 1969) that first-year students on government scholarships would have to leave the philosophy, sociology and political science departments, as these were no longer "approved subjects" … Sociology and philosophy were less affected, … the latter because few

[31] A recording of this event was in the National Archives of Singapore (K. Y. Lee, 1969).

> bursary students had chosen to read philosophy (Only four students had to drop philosophy in 1969). But official disapproval became established policy from that time on, and has manifested itself in other ways since then (After the academic year 1970-71 two philosophy graduands applying for Civil Service posts were told they would have to enter at much lower grades than is usual for graduates, because their honours subject was "not an approved one") (Puccetti, 1972, 234-5).

Before continuing, it is worth noting that the interaction between politics and philosophy in Singapore in the post-colonial and cold war period is not unique: the story is similar, to varying degrees of severity, in Australia (Franklin, 2003), China (Fan, 1996), the Philippines (Joaquin, 2022), and the United States (Reisch, 2010), to give just four examples.

On 15th November 1975, there was a Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences seminar on "Asian Values and Modernisation", at which Ho Wing Meng presented a paper of the same name (W. M. Ho, 1975). This event has been cited as a beginning of the "Asian-Values" debate, which is associated politically with Lee Kuan Yew and the Malaysian prime minister Mohammed Mahathir (Barr, 2004, 31). But insofar as Ho is willing to identify particular values as Asian, which is not very far, he regards them as obstacles and not aids to economic development:

> In actual fact the social, political, cultural, and other diversities between countries in Asia are perhaps as varied as they are in Europe or elsewhere. It is therefore more appropriate to use the term "Asian Values" to denote not a particular set of attributes, beliefs and institutions which all Asian people share in common, but rather to refer to the great diversities which characterise Asian values as such, and which in the context of this discussion, pose serious difficulties to the task of modernizing Asia for social, economic and political development (Ho, 1976, 17).

The other speakers, including foreign minister Sinnathamby Rajaratnam in his closing remarks (Rajaratnam, 1975), were equally unenthusiastic (and Barr, 2000, p. 329, 2004, p. 31 speculates Lee Kuan Yew may have retreated to characterising his position more narrowly in terms of Confucian values for this reason). John James Clarke, at least, must have been more receptive. Writing with the benefit of hindsight, long after he had left the department, he says:

> The transposition of geopolitical focus from the Atlantic to the Pacific, the seemingly inexorable rise of the economies of Japan, Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan, the resurgence of China and India as world players, suggest that the great civilisations of the East are themselves in the process of a profound revitalisation, reflected, as we have already noted, in the self-conscious renewal of indigenous intellectual and spiritual traditions. The affirmation of 'Asian values' in countries such as Malaysia and Singapore, centring on the family, on national well-being, and on responsibility towards the community in contrast with Western ideals of democracy and human rights, is a potent manifestation of this transposition (Clarke, 2002, p. 223).

In 1974, Ho Wing-Meng also gave a speech criticising materialist values reported in the *Straits Times* under the headline 'Most grads are too money conscious—Don' (19th June 1974, 5). And he contributed to a panel discussion also titled 'Asian Values and Modernisation' on national television (W. M. Ho et al., 1975a, 1975b), as well as a panel on 'Human Values and Economic Change in Singapore' at the Democratic Socialist Club (W. M. Ho, Lee, et al., 1975).

The 1970 s saw at least two new appointments. Yeu Quang Wong joined after completing his MA on Locke and PhD on Moore at the University of Southern Illinois (Wong, 1969, 1971). In Singapore, he worked on Chinese Philosophy (Wong, 1992). He also taught martial arts in Singapore according to "the White-Eyebrow Shaolin System" (Wong, n.d.). He returned to the United States to teach at the University of Tennessee in 1977, before retiring to practice Chinese medicine and teach martial arts full-time. He died in 2009.

Cedric Hung-Chao Pan joined the department after completing his MA on John Dewey's ethics and PhD on Nietzsche and Buddhism at the University of Southern Illinois (Pan, 1969, 1973). Pan wrote frequently for *Commentary*, the University of Singapore Society's journal, in which he responded to Ho Wing Meng's work on values with 'A Case for Materialism' (Pan, 1976).[32] He also edited a special issue of *Commentary* on comparative philosophy (Pan, 1983), as well as books on self-interest (Pan, 1989) and democracy (Pan & Muraleenathan, 1989).

In summary, in the 1960–1970s philosophy in Singapore continued to be influenced by philosophy elsewhere in the Commonwealth, especially Britain and Australia, and now also by the United States. At the same time, a new generation of Singaporean philosophers also pursued their own direction. Nanyang University introduced Chinese philosophy to higher education in Singapore, but analytically trained philosophers at the University of Singapore also became interested in Chinese philosophy. Independence and the post-colonial political climate led to a debate over liberalism, followed by the inception of the Asian values debate which, as we shall see in the sequel to this paper, continues to the present day.

As noted in the previous section, in 1980 the University of Singapore and Nanyang University were merged to form the National University of Singapore. However, beginning in the 1990s new institutions were founded, leading to the establishment of the philosophy department at the Nanyang Technological University, as well as to the introduction of philosophy at Singapore Management University, Yale-NUS College, the Singapore University of Social Sciences, and most recently NUS College. We will take up the story of philosophy in these institutions, which continue to combine contemporary trends in analytic philosophy and widening interest in Asian traditions, in the sequel to this paper "Philosophy in Singapore since 1980".

Acknowledgements We would like to thank Neil Barton, Liz Blumson, Nathaniel Gan, John Greenwood, Jeremiah Joven Joaquin, Lee Keekok, Lilith Lee, Richard McDonough, Peter Millican, Daryl Ooi,

[32] *Commentary* has been in relatively continuous publication since 1975. Copies are held in the Singapore-Malaysia section of the National University of Singapore Library. *Commentary* is still published, but most contributions from philosophers are in the 1970 s and 1980s.

Abelard Podgorski, Saranindranath Tagore, Ten Chin Liew, Weng-Hong Tang, Daniel Waxman, Isaac Wilhelm, and Shang Long Yeo for the discussion of this paper.

Data availability We did not analyse or generate any data. All sources are listed in the footnotes or bibliography.

Declarations

Conflicts of Interest We have no competing interests associated with this paper.

Ethical Approval The research for this paper did not involve humans or animals.

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