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Citation

NGOEI, Wen-Qing.(2021). Circuits broken, remade, and newly forged: Tracing Southeast Asia's foreign relations after the Vietnam War. *Diplomatic History*, 45(3), 549-555.

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Circuits Broken, Remade, and Newly Forged: Southeast Asia's Foreign Relations After Vietnam

On April 3, 2020, Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced in a televised speech that his government's "decisive move" against the country's "escalating" Covid-19 infections would be "like a circuit breaker." He explained that for the next month the government would close all workplaces except those of key economic sectors and essential services; have all schools and universities shift to home-based, online learning; and impose tighter restrictions on individuals' freedom to interact with those outside of their household.¹ His listeners would have found the term "circuit breaker" familiar. They likely recalled that one of Lee's colleagues, Minister Lawrence Wong, had taken pains to differentiate it from other countries' "lockdown" measures. Only two weeks before, Wong had told reporters that the government was considering a "major circuit breaker that doesn't entail a lockdown." He quickly clarified that a "circuit breaker" certainly "entails school closures [and] entails workplace closures." "But," he circled back around, "it doesn't mean an entire lockdown." It meant, he insisted, "a major suspension of activities that would provide us a major circuit breaker."² If Singaporeans found Wong's explanation unsatisfying, some did whiff traces of lewd humor in their government's Covid-19 "circuit breaker," particularly if one referenced it with the acronym C.C.B., a well-known local abbreviation of a most foul curse in one of the Chinese dialects.³

Regardless of how Singaporeans felt about the "circuit breaker," most adhered to its strictures. And in the general election that Lee called in July 2020 voters returned the prime minister and his ruling party (plus Wong, who remains highly popular) to power. More to the point, while "circuit breaker" seems prosaic, a phrase only engineer-technocrats could love, I found it might

1. "PM Lee Hsien Loong on the COVID-19 situation in Singapore on 3 April 2020," *Prime Minister's Office, Singapore*, April 3, 2020, last accessed July 3, 2020, <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/PM-Lee-Hsien-Loong-on-the-COVID19-situation-in-Singapore-on-3-April-2020>.

2. "Covid-19: Singapore not planning for lockdown, says Minister Lawrence Wong," CAN (YouTube), March 17, 2020, last accessed July 3, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kxeAY6N_E14.

3. See for example, "Premium Lian CCB Talk Show," April 19, 2020, The Michelle Chong Channel (YouTube), last accessed July 3, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HBW8jp7kMPQ>.

actually illustrate the pandemic's dynamics more vividly than equivalents such as "lockdown" or "shelter in place." For when an electrical circuit is complete, it courses with current, bringing an inert machine to life. Similarly, the pandemic is powered by circuits of transmission, wide-ranging local circuits that close when infected individuals are able to make contact with the uninfected, and transnational circuits that close when individuals—infected or soon to be—cross geopolitical boundaries while jetting (or otherwise commuting) between multiple destinations. Whereas terms like "lockdown" and "shelter in place" conjure vague notions of escaping a security risk or an environmental disaster that unfolds outside of one's home, the "circuit breaker" is invasive and destructive. Its explicit purpose is to disrupt the innate human tendency to seek connections and meet with others to exchange ideas, goods, and services; it aims to fragment the naturally occurring circles of family, friends, and partners that have formed within a country as well as span the globe.

But there is scant evidence regarding how much thought Singapore's political elites dedicated to critiquing the "circuit breaker" image and its metaphorical implications before making it the name of their Covid-19 strategy. Wong's meandering statements signal that the government may have wanted to peddle the "circuit breaker" to Singapore residents as an easily reversible cessation of socio-economic activities and, thereby, stave off widespread panic in the population since the phrase did not carry the draconian connotations of a "lockdown" and implied that Singapore was not in a full blown health crisis like other nations. Given how jealously Singapore's leaders guard the content of such policy deliberations, we can never know for sure. At any rate, the seemingly broad metaphorical possibilities of the "circuit breaker" prompted me to consider how it might be applied to analyze the overlapping categories of the personal, local, and transnational in history. In turn, I thought about the different types of circuits—social and cultural, political, economic, and more besides—that could be broken by the decisions of national elites, marginal actors, or geopolitical developments. Importantly, I did not consider "circuit breakers" to be easily reversible in every situation. Some intimate connections and networks could be permanently destroyed or extremely difficult to restore. Here, I grappled with questions about the aftermath of these broken circuits: How do individuals and groups in the fragments of once active circuits understand and express their experiences? Do they try to reanimate and reinvent old circuits and/or forge new ones?

This thought process, particularly the questions concerned with the aftermath of "circuit breakers," led me to recognize that my previous work on U.S.-Southeast Asian relations between the 1940s and 1970s inherently concerned the breaking and forging of transnational political and cultural circuits. The "circuit breakers" I had studied were executed by Southeast Asia's anticommunist authoritarians and their western allies, underpinned by their Cold War fears that China would attain regional hegemony via its ten million strong diaspora

in Southeast Asia.⁴ Put another way, my earlier work shows that the cold warriors of Southeast Asia and their Anglo-American allies had imagined that China and its diaspora were linked by a mass of interconnected circuits that stretched across Asia, circuits that would enable Chinese communists to infiltrate the subregion; funnel supplies, training and propaganda to a huge fifth column; and extract funds from wealthy overseas Chinese elites. And so, to combat their ethnic Chinese populations' affiliations to Beijing (both presumed and real), Southeast Asian authoritarian leaders readily collaborated with the United States and Britain to break the transnational circuits they deemed threatening: they co-opted ethnic Chinese elites so as to politically dominate their in-country Chinese populations and hive them off from China's influence; they deported thousands of ethnic Chinese to the mainland (often, individuals whose families had resided for generations in Southeast Asia); and they closely surveilled their ethnic Chinese communities, severely curtailed their political and economic rights, and frequently resorted to violent repression. At the same time, U.S. policymakers and their regional allies attempted to forge new transnational circuits to supplant those that they were attempting to sever. Here, they labored to redirect the Chinese diaspora's cultural allegiance to pro-U.S. Taiwan and supported Taiwanese political outreach to Chinese communities in Southeast Asia. These actions, if generative like the nurturing of Southeast Asia-Taiwan relations, were largely invasive and destructive, profoundly affecting the lot of Southeast Asia's Chinese and many other communities in the region. As the anticommunist authoritarians of Southeast Asia deployed these and similar measures to eradicate local rivals, consolidate power, and deepen their ties to the United States, their efforts placed the broader region on a pro-American trajectory from the 1950s to 1970s despite U.S. failures in Vietnam.⁵

Not only did contemplating the "circuit breaker" metaphor offer different ways to view my earlier work, it prompted a rethink of my initial plans for a new research project. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, I had intended to continue studying the relationship between Southeast Asia's authoritarians and the United States, this time tracing its development as well as impact on the wider region from the late 1970s through the 1990s. Like much of the scholarship on the foreign relations of Southeast Asia as a region, this narrative would have privileged the machinations of the authoritarian leaders of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) while marginalizing those excluded from these elite

4. Wen-Qing Ngoei, "The Domino Logic of the Darkest Moment: The Fall of Singapore, the Atlantic Echo Chamber, and 'Chinese Penetration' in U.S. Policy Toward Southeast Asia," *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 21, no. 3 (2014): 215-245.

5. Wen-Qing Ngoei, *Arc of Containment: Britain, the United States, and Anticommunism in Southeast Asia* (Ithaca, NY, 2019), chapters 2, 4 and 5; "The United States and the 'Chinese Problem' of Southeast Asia," *Diplomatic History* (forthcoming 2021); Ngoei, "A Wide Anticommunist Arc: Britain, ASEAN, and Nixon's Triangular Diplomacy," *Diplomatic History* 41, no. 5 (2017): 903-932; Ngoei, "There and Back Again: What the Cold War for Southeast Asia Can Teach Us About Sino-U.S. Competition in the Region Today," *International Journal: Canada's Journal of Global Policy Analysis* 74, no. 2 (2019): 301-312.

circles.⁶ But, the abovementioned questions about the aftermath of “circuit breakers” imposed by ASEAN’s authoritarians now led me away from these decision-makers toward a deepening interest in the fates of individuals and groups who had to live in the fragments of previously active circuits. How did they respond? I wanted to learn if these historical actors, in the face of their leaders’ track record of cracking down on various transnational networks, nevertheless tried to resurrect or cultivate new political and cultural connections within and beyond Southeast Asia. Surely some must have offered their services to the ruling regime? If, as with my earlier work, the foreign relations history of Southeast Asia in the early Cold War could be revealed by analyzing how elite policymakers broke transnational circuits, then perhaps a novel transnational history of Southeast Asia might emerge from the study of non-policymakers striving to restore or forge new circuits across geopolitical boundaries in final decades of the Cold War?

Crucially, the “circuit breaker” has focused my attention on one particular category of historical actors, Southeast Asia’s culture-makers. Why? Because in our current pandemic, with many of our in-person social, economic, and cultural circuits broken or drastically inhibited, our being in the world has depended substantially on culture-makers: the content creators of the viral op-eds, photographs, cartoons, memes, and videos circulating in the virtual world; the storytellers whose tales we read and shows we stream and binge on. Transnational circuits of various types and range have arisen from our consumption of the works of such culture-makers. After all, we share—honestly, overshare—their content on social media to affirm, comfort, amuse, and stimulate conversations and debates with others; on virtual discussion boards and Facebook pages we recommend and critique television shows, op-eds, and much else with friends and family we cannot meet as well as with strangers we will never meet. Some of us may try circulating our own content, obeying a natural impulse to make connections for the exchange of ideas, even goods and services. In other words, culture-makers feature prominently in our diverse responses to the circuits broken during this pandemic, they are vital to our efforts to both sustain existing (and potentially threatened) relationships as well

6. For scholarship on this produced by political scientists, see for example Alice Ba, *(Re)Negotiating East and Southeast Asia: Region, Regionalism and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations* (Stanford, CA, 2009); Dan Slater, *Ordering Power: Contentious Politics and Authoritarian Leviathans in Southeast Asia* (New York, 2010); Joseph Liow, *Ambivalent Engagement: The United States and Regional Security in Southeast Asia after the Cold War* (Washington, DC, 2017). The few major historical studies of this period include Robert J. McMahon, *The Limits of Empire: The United States and Southeast Asia since World War II* (New York, 1999); and Ang Cheng Guan’s *Singapore, ASEAN and the Cambodian Conflict, 1978–1991* (Singapore, 2013) and *Southeast Asia’s Cold War: An Interpretative History* (Honolulu, HI, 2018).

ASEAN was formed in 1967 by five founding member states: Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. Brunei Darussalam joined ASEAN in 1984, Vietnam in 1995, Laos and Myanmar in 1997, and Cambodia in 1999.

as cultivate new networks with peoples and communities both proximate and distant.

As such, I hope to study the culture-makers of authoritarian ASEAN states from the 1970s through the 1990s, particularly the professional artists and writers of prose, poetry, and drama who may have operated as state actors, non-state actors, and vacillated between, or inhabited both, categories, depending on the context. After all, cultural production was doubtlessly important to ASEAN leaders. They fully recognized that the influence of art and literature over their populations could uphold or undermine government agendas, a mindset not unlike that of European and U.S. colonial authorities who invited artists and writers in the early twentieth century to rally domestic support for the maintenance of their overseas empires.⁷ Here, it is vital to emphasize that the ASEAN regional organization created in 1967, as well as its founding members' nation-building projects, were products of the Cold War's fateful intersection with decolonization in Southeast Asia.⁸ Thus, when ASEAN states sponsored and coopted the writers and artists they believed could help build national and ASEAN identities; suppressed the cultural products and activities of citizens they accused of promoting sedition; or imprisoned some of these culture-makers for extended periods of time, they were essentially pursuing agendas born of the Cold War. Little wonder then, that the culture-makers who escaped, suffered, or flourished due to these Cold War projects of the 1950s and 1960s went on in the ensuing decades to produce works that fueled debates about the meaning and significance of their past experiences and the ongoing nation-building and regional agendas they continued to live through.⁹

Yet only scholars of Southeast Asia's art and literature have paid close attention to the careers and works of the region's culture-makers. Those concerned with Southeast Asian art and film, for example, have produced valuable studies of the agency of a single culture-maker within their country or their field, or situated the cultural production of a few countries of the region within a global

7. Apinan Poshyananda, "Positioning Contemporary Asian Art," *Art Journal* 59, no. 1 (2000): 12; Pamela Corey, "Metaphor as Method: Curating Regionalism in Mainland Southeast Asia," *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 13, no. 2 (2014): 77–78.

8. For a discussion of nation-building and the Cold War in Southeast Asia, see Ngoei, *Art of Containment*, chapters 2 and 4.

9. For examples of ASEAN governments recruiting or suppressing cultural production, see Lek Hor Tan, "The Communist Conspirators," *Index on Censorship* 16, no. 8 (1987): 21–26; Yuhani Ibrahim and Jiyoung Yoon, "ASEAN Sculpture Garden and Typology of Space: An Evaluative Study of the Park's Failure," *Architectural Research* 16, no. 2 (2014): 37–44; Ben Abel, "Beholding a Landmark of Guilt: Pramoeodya in the Early 1960s and the Current Regime," *Indonesia* 64 (1997): 21–28; Charlene Rajendran and C.J.W.-L. Wee, "The Theatre of Krishen Jit: The Politics of Staging Difference in Multicultural Malaysia," *The Drama Review* 51, no. 2 (2007): 11–23; Nora A. Taylor, "The Southeast Asian Art Historian as Ethnographer?" *Third Text* 25, no. 4 (2011): 478; Anna-Greta Nilsson Hoadley, *Indonesian Literature vs. New Order Orthodoxy* (Copenhagen, 2005).

context.¹⁰ In fact, their ongoing concern has been to illuminate and analyze the overlapping and competing regionalisms of Southeast Asian art, attending to how the historically- and culturally-constituted linkages of Southeast Asian artists and their works transcend, resist, or reinforce the categories of nation-state and formalized associations such as ASEAN.¹¹ The study of contemporary Southeast Asian literature, while predominantly compartmentalized according to the national origin and primary residence of its authors, also entertains similar (if not as systematic or sustained) ambitions to investigate the transnational networks and interconnections of the region's prose, poetry, and drama.¹²

Historians have not yet attempted a sustained, region-wide analysis of Southeast Asian culture-makers and their products from the 1970s into the 1990s, nor examined their influence upon the region's foreign relations in these critical decades when the machinery of ASEAN coalesced; when the U.S.-Soviet Cold War wound down; when the region weathered the Asian financial crisis and its political and social shocks; and when ASEAN expanded in the 1990s beyond its anticommunist founding members to include Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam. Importantly, there is no historical examination of Southeast Asia's culture-making which parallels the rich studies of U.S. foreign relations with Southeast Asia concerned with elite and popular culture and

10. Adrian W. Vickers, *A History of Modern Indonesia* (Cambridge, 2005) tracks Indonesian history with reference to the career of Indonesian novelist, Pramoedya Ananta Tor. Kenneth M. George, *Picturing Islam: Art and Ethics in a Muslim Lifeworld* (Malden, MA, 2010) focuses on Indonesian artist Abdul Djilil Pirous. Tony Day and Maya H.T. Liem, ed., *Cultures at War: The Cold War and Cultural Expression in Southeast Asia* (Ithaca, NY, 2020) compiles insightful studies, each concerned with one or at most two countries in the region, and dwells on the 1950s and 1960s. Jennifer Lindsay and Maya H.T. Liem, ed., *Heirs to World Culture: Being Indonesian, 1950-1965* (Leiden, 2012) examines Indonesian cultural production in the world up to 1965.

11. Charles Green, "Beyond the Future: The Third Asia-Pacific Triennial," *Art Journal* 58, no. 4 (1999): 81-87; Joan Kee, "Introduction Contemporary Southeast Asian Art: The Right Kind of Trouble," *Third Text* 25, no. 4 (2011): 373-375; Ahmad Mashadi, "Framing the 1970s," *Third Text* 25, no. 4 (2011): 409-417; T.K. Sabapathy, "Developing Regionalist Perspectives in Southeast Asian Art Historiography," in *The Second Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, ed. Caroline Turner and Rhana Davenport (Queensland, 1996), 13-17; C.J. W-L. Wee, "We Asians"? Modernity, Visual Art Exhibitions, and East Asia," *Boundary 2* 37, no. 1 (2010): 115; Michelle Antoinette and Caroline Turner, ed., *Contemporary Asian Art and Exhibitions: Connectivities and World-Making* (Canberra, 2014).

12. Teri Shaffer Yamada, *Modern Short Fiction of Southeast Asia: A Literary History* (Honolulu, HI, 2009); Philip Holden, "Colonialism's Goblins: Language, Gender, and the Southeast Asian Novel in English at a Time of Nationalism," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 44, no. 2 (2008): 159-170; Brian Bernards, *Writing the South Seas: Imagining the Nanyang in Chinese and Southeast Asian Postcolonial Literature* (Seattle, WA, 2015); Catherine Diamond, *Communities of Imagination: Contemporary Southeast Asia Theatres* (Honolulu, HI, 2012); Paul Giffard-Foret, "The root of all evil?": Transnational Cosmopolitanism in the Fiction of Dewi Anggraeni, Simone Lazaroo and Merlinda Bobis," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 52, no. 5 (2016): 5-25; Philip Holden and Rajeev S. Patke, *The Routledge Concise History of Southeast Asian Literature in English* (London, 2010).

expert opinion in the production of knowledge about the region.¹³ My formative research agenda to explore the breaking, remaking and newly forged transnational cultural circuits and their implications for Southeast Asia's foreign relations attempts to fill this lacuna. It poses questions such as these: In what ways did Southeast Asian culture-makers in this period, recruited by the state or otherwise, produce works that debated their Cold War experiences of the preceding decades and the contemporaneous period? How did Southeast Asia's culture-makers create new, or reanimate older, transnational cultural circuits? Hopefully, pursuing the answers to these particular questions will reveal a new history of Southeast Asia after the Vietnam War. For, if the pandemic and Singapore's "circuit breaker" have revealed anything to us, it is the many understudied ways in which people are connected and can be disconnected from each other, an insight that points up novel ways to study the past.

Even if all the foregoing reads well in the abstract, are there primary sources to study that will address these questions? I have only just commenced some primary research at the time of this writing but the prospects appear promising. With regards to Southeast Asian literature from the 1970s to 1990s, I continue to discover many writers whose prose, poetry, and drama interrogated their countries' violent and suppressed Cold War past and present, critiqued the nation-building and modernization programs inspired and supported by the western powers, and gestured at or nurtured non-ASEAN, left-leaning connections within Southeast Asia and elsewhere in the world (predictably leading several ASEAN governments to surveil and jail some of these culture-makers for alleged sedition).¹⁴ Also, I have begun exploring research collaborations with the National Gallery of Singapore concerning the networks of Sinophone artists and the circulations of their works in East Asia after 1945. There seems a wealth of material to study for this project. Pandemic or not, finding relevant primary sources from the region does not yet seem a major obstacle for a researcher based in Singapore. The main challenges include how to select the appropriate culture-makers and works; how to bring together scholarship on art and literature so as to interpret the stories of the literary and artistic circuits broken, remade or newly forged; and above all how to write this as a history of Southeast Asia's foreign relations after the Vietnam War. That said, though I am glad for the "circuit breaker" inspiring this new research project, I sincerely hope that when this essay finally sees print, we will be in the last days of the pandemic.

13. Major works include Mark Philip Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919–1950* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2000); Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945–1961* (Berkeley, CA, 2003); and Seth Jacobs, *The Universe Unraveling: American Foreign Policy in Cold War Laos* (Ithaca, NY, 2012).

14. Selected examples include F. Sionil Jose, *Mass* (Manila, 1983); Pramoedya Ananta Tor, *Child of All Nations*, trans. Max Lane (New York, 1996); Chuah Guat Eng, *Echoes of Silence: A Malaysian Novel* (Kuala Lumpur, 1994); "The Third Stage: Theatre Company or Marxist Network," *That We May Dream Again*, May 26, 2012, last accessed July 22, 2020, <https://remembering1987.wordpress.com/2012/05/26/third-stage-theatre-company-or-marxist-network/>.