

From Tropical Jungle to Garden City: Examining State Memory and Citizen Nostalgia in
Singapore 1965 - Present Day

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The decade is the 1970s. Two teenage boys laugh while slicing pineapples on a Singapore Armed Forces pineapple farm. They casually talk while one wields a massive knife to cut the pineapple in his peers' hand. In the background, there's nothing but vast farmland; there isn't a single high-rise building in sight.



Remember Singapore, “Saf pineapple farm early 1970s,” October 31, 2013.

This black and white image is sourced from the blog *Remember Singapore*, created in 2010 to commemorate the nostalgia felt by Singaporeans for their common past. The rural scenery described in the photo is a drastic contrast to Singapore's urban environment today: a modern, high-technology island nation filled with glimmering skyscrapers and high rises. Oftentimes praised for its eye-catching greenery throughout the city, including within the airport and buildings, Singapore is universally and almost paradoxically referred to as a garden city.

This narrative of Singapore glosses over many of its historical struggles and transitions, including serving as a British maritime stopway during the 19th century, being a site of invasion by the Japanese during WWII, or even being a brief member of the Federation of Malaysia from 1963 to 1965 before being asked to leave.¹ Within this turbulent history, Singapore had never experienced independence without influence of another nation; that is, until 1965. Upon

¹ Elaine Lynn-Ee Ho et al., *Changing Landscapes of Singapore: Old Tensions, New Discoveries*, (NUS Press, 2013), 27.

independence, Singapore faced a plethora of difficulties of economic instability, stemming from limited land mass and natural resources, along with struggles in community unification. As a result, many Singaporeans were uneasy about the future of their country. However, the Singapore state was determined to not let themselves fail.² In response to these roadblocks, the Singaporean government chose to leverage their historical position as a British trading port to build their foreign capital and attractiveness to international visitors. Decades later, their transformation from an undeveloped tropical jungle to a bustling urban metropolis is viewed as nothing short of incredible by both Singapore and the international community. However, during this process, prominent traditional elements of Singaporean society have been forgotten throughout the country's rapid expansion.

Following independence in 1965, Singapore's urban development has significantly decreased the country's agricultural spaces, impacting the land and livelihoods of Singaporean citizens.³ As a result, two contrasting Singaporean identities emerged: one being a state-curated identity focused on the future; another being the outburst of citizen nostalgia for Singapore's historic connection between land and cultural heritage. I argue that this disconnect stems from the Singaporean government's authoritarian influence on what elements of Singaporean history are commemorated. Following independence, Singapore's rapid urban change enabled a newfound control over land. In an effort to survive, the Singaporean state sacrificed land in order to fulfill its goals of implementing new, modern infrastructure. The states' promotion of nature as something of the past, despite its longstanding presence in Singaporean history, has resulted in citizen nostalgia. Nature has receded from being a prominent part of Singapore's culture, creating a drastically different environment than a mere sixty years ago.

² Lim Tim Sang, "Singapore's Separation from Malaysia," *Singapore Infodepia*.

³ Liu Thai Ker et al, *Chance of a Lifetime: Lee Kuan Yew and the Physical Transformation of Singapore*, (Didier Millet, 2017), 100.

Scholars have long been interested in Singapore as a Southeast hyper-globalized and hyper-organized society, considering its small size. As Elaine Lynn-Ee Ho and her co-authors discuss in *Changing Landscapes of Singapore: Old Tensions, New Discoveries*, Singapore's first stages of urban development began with sweeping, country-wide changes. Created by Singapore's first prime minister Lee Kuan Yew, the 1971 Concept Plan paved the way for Singapore's efficient on-land and coastal reconstruction during the first thirty years post-independence.⁴ Once Singapore firmly established its economy and architecture, the plan was revised to focus specifically on "guiding Singapore's physical development into a 'tropical city of excellence'."⁵ Despite this burst onto the larger-scale global scene, it's important to note that Singapore was already well-known amongst its Asian neighbors and Western countries interested in Singapore's economic worth. During the 19th century, British colonial officer Stamford Raffles established Singapore as a duty-free port, making Singapore a popular destination within Asia.⁶ Considered one of the four Asian economic 'tigers' alongside Hong-Kong, South Korea and Taiwan, Western powers considered Singapore to be too important to fail during the 1960s.⁷

Singapore's transformation presented an opportunity to distinguish itself from other countries in Southeast Asia. During the 1960s, the general region of Southeast Asia struggled to self-determine amidst Western politics and hierarchy.⁸ As postcolonial subjects of the British and French, Southeast Asia was left to its own devices to establish itself; however, there were doubts amongst the West if bringing in the "scattered, disparate countries of the region" was

⁴ Ho et al., *Changing Landscapes of Singapore*, Table 1.

⁵ Ho et al., *Changing Landscapes of Singapore*, Table 1.

⁶ Quinn Slobodian, *Crack-Up Capitalism: Market Radicals and the Dream of World Without Democracy*, (Metropolitan Books, 2023), 65.

⁷ Ho-Fung Hung, *The China Boom: Why China Will Not Rule The World*, (Columbia University Press, 2015), 53.

⁸ Amitav Acharya, "Remaking Southeast Asian Studies: Doubt, Desire and the Promise of Comparisons," *Pacific Affairs* 87, no. 3 (2014): 464.

worthwhile.⁹ The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was established in 1967, marking the unification of Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. Despite this, Eastern and Western countries alike recognized the low potential of ASEAN success.¹⁰ Simultaneously, the Vietnam War and fear of communism contributed to Western notions of Southeast Asian incivility and barbarism.¹¹ This rhetoric can be seen in a quote from Lyndon B. Johnson's presidential campaign: "We don't want our American boys to do the fighting for the Asian boys."¹² However, at this moment in time, Singapore was both independent and an active member of the United Nations. Hence, Singapore expressed support for America by establishing themselves as a firm anti-communist state.¹³ In an effort to do so, Singapore presented an R&R destination for American soldiers and increased encouragement of international travel to Singapore.¹⁴

Advertising Singapore as an ideal place for R&R highlights two main visions Prime Minister Lee and his team had for Singaporean success: one being the capitalization of tourism as a method to build their economy; the other being the prioritization of economic stability and development. Prime Minister Lee believed these accomplishments would continue to help grow national pride and global recognition.¹⁵ Early implementations of this change included the Land Acquisition Act of 1967, which enabled government authority to convert both preexisting public or private land into public spaces. Through this, the state began converting farmland into spaces that they viewed as more desirable or important. Later in 1984, the Tourism Task Force was

⁹ *The New York Times*, "Asian Experiment in Regionalism; Two Small Disputes Point to Troubles for New Allies."

¹⁰ Kishmore Mahbubani, "ASEAN: An Unexpected Success Story," *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, 2018.

¹¹ Acharya, "Remaking Southeast Asian Studies," 466.

¹² *The New York Times* (United States), "What Price Vietnam?" May 27, 1967, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1967/05/27/90345865.html?pageNumber=23>

¹³ Ang Cheng Guan, *Singapore and the Vietnam War*, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol 2 (2009): 359.

¹⁴ *The Straits Times*, "First wave American troops due for rest cure," March 13, 1966, <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/article/straitstimes19660313-1.2.57>

¹⁵ Terrance Chong, "Heritage Activism in Singapore," in *Heritage Movements in Asia: Cultural Heritage Activism, Politics and Identity*, ed. Ali Mozaffari and Tod Jones (Berghahn Books, 2020), 112.

established with a specific focus on the expansion of Singapore's tourism sector.¹⁶ In the name of modernization, the Singaporean state accepted an interventionist role, marked by cutting edge technology and financial advancements. Historians have explained this transformation as only possible through the states' firm hand on politics and thin hand on democracy.¹⁷ This method of urbanization was far from clandestine; Lee Kuan Yew emphasized the necessity of state influence: "Years later, he said, 'I believe what a country needs to develop is discipline more than democracy.'" ¹⁸

In spite of some anti-democratic sentiment, Prime Minister Lee emphasized the strengthening of a national identity in order to survive: "Whether you are of Chinese, Indian, Malay, Eurasian or Ceylonse descent, when it comes to the survival of Singapore, you or rather we, must all be one."¹⁹ Without this unity, particularly in a multiethnic society, Lee Kuan Yew believed that Singapore would continue to operate like "a heart without a body."²⁰ Additionally, he emphasized the importance of increasing Singaporean morale and pride as the key to building a strong country and economy. To Prime Minister Lee, the basis of Singaporean morale was grounded in the physical transformation of Singapore's landscape from its rural past to an ever more hypercapitalist society. To reach this goal, the state placed immense importance on capitalizing on Singapore's small territory; however, under this rationale, farmland was deemed unnecessary and sacrificed as a result.²¹

This paper explores hyperdevelopment as the catalyst of the nostalgic imaginations of a Singapore gone, specifically regarding the erasure of agriculture and nature. I will build on the

¹⁶ Ho et. al, *Changing Landscapes of Singapore*, 28.

¹⁷ Slobidan, *Crack-Up Capitalism*, 64.

¹⁸ Slobidan, *Crack-Up Capitalism*, 50.

¹⁹ Andreas Ackermann, "'They Give Us the Categories and We Fill Ourselves In,'" *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 4, (1996): 454.

²⁰ Lee Kuan Yew, *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew*, (Didier Millet, 1999), 23.

²¹ Ho et al., *Changing Landscapes of Singapore*, 65.

existing broader understanding of Singapore's successful global capital but provide a different perspective of nature within the city. I argue that the states' methods of constant modernization have resulted in citizens' nostalgia for a loss in their natural environment, both cultivated and wild. Despite being a prominent aspect of Singapore's culture and heritage only a mere sixty years ago, agriculture has been firmly categorized as something of the past.

My research combines the topics of state narrative and nostalgia with the transition of Singapore's naturalistic spaces over the span of a sixty year period. Featured oral history interviews highlight the perspectives of three Singaporean farmers: Ivy Singh-Lim, Lynn Ee, and William Ho. All three have worked in the farming industry for several decades. Their extensive expertise has exposed critiques of the current system and its treatment of farmers. Their perspectives are crucial in order to fully comprehend Singapore's transition and how it has produced a certain form of nostalgia, and in some cases, discontent. By highlighting their voices, there is further understanding of the extent to which Singapore's climate changed throughout the past sixty years.

It isn't uncommon for nostalgia to be experienced by societies whose environments have drastically altered. Although older generations of Singaporeans witnessed firsthand change of Singapore throughout their lifetime, nostalgia is not felt only by people who physically experienced a historical event. Although nostalgia is not heavily examined by historians, sociologists and anthropologists have investigated how the production of nostalgia typically occurs within societies shifting from traditional, agricultural-based towards advanced. While urbanized cities can attempt to retain the charm of their past, the authenticity of this is often lost.²² Traditionally, there is a pattern of urban cities "view[ing] Utopia as the final solution, the

²² Elizabeth Wilson. "Looking backward: nostalgia and the city," in *Imagining Cities* (Routledge, 2003), 129.

creation of perfect cities which will never need to change any more.”²³ In terms of Singapore, the activation of nostalgia has occurred in response to the perfection of land, ultimately highlighting the historic intertwinement between Singaporeans and land. Although nostalgia is difficult to reconstruct, my combination of oral interviews and city maps attempt to get at the heart of why the past and future of Singapore is such a source of nostalgia.

Lee Kuan Yew had a very ambitious vision of Singapore’s future. In service of this, he created the Urban Renewal Authority in 1974. Tasked with land-leasing, Prime Minister Lee worked alongside the URA to transform Singapore with the belief that it would simultaneously boost morale and attract visitors. Over the span of three decades, 138 kilometers were added during the government-led “Great Reclamation.”²⁴ Although this expanded Singapore’s size, Singapore’s natural elements rapidly depleted.²⁵ By the late 1970s, 95% of the mangrove population were cleared for land development.²⁶ Artificial expansion and new infrastructure contributed to heavy depletion of coral reef life, the erasure of historic kampong villages, and population relocation.²⁷ Slowly but surely, Singapore was destroying the natural elements of its island nation in the name of modernization and survival.

Despite this, Prime Minister Lee expressed the significance of environmental sustainability. Following independence, one of his primary goals included converting Singapore into a garden city. In 1971, Tree Planting Day was first held with intent to boost national pride, and still continues today.²⁸ In 1977, the URA led the Singapore River cleanup, successfully

²³ Wilson, “Looking backward,” 132.

²⁴ Singapore National Gallery “Singapore National Gallery: What’s On,” accessed November 4, 2025.

²⁵ Miles Powell Alexander, “Singapore’s Lost Coast: Land Reclamation, National Development, and the Erasure of Human and Ecological Communities, 1822-Present,” *Environment and History* 27, no. 4 (2021): 650.

²⁶ Alexander, “Singapore’s Lost Coast,” 650.

²⁷ Kampong villages refer to traditional fishing villages, typically built on docks next to the ocean. It was historically typical in Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia.

²⁸ Ho et al., *Changing Landscapes of Singapore*, 30.

sanitizing the ‘despaired river’ through state and volunteer work within ten years.²⁹ Despite the encouragement of city-wide greenery, the drive towards Singaporean economic success was considered far more crucial for the country’s survival. Citizens were quick to note the constant change of their environment. A 1984 *Straits Times* article highlights the sentiment of a Singapore tech company: “Things are moving so quickly that when my colleagues uncover the capsule in the future, they will say that the materials we bury today are old.”³⁰ This article highlights the growing sense of replaceability of land and people amidst Singaporean citizens. Throughout the years, this feeling has only grown.

The Emergence of Nostalgia

Prime Minister Lee’s emphasis on the importance of a national identity was a key state priority. As chronicled through a variety of *Straits Times* articles, there was a clear push towards innovation and drastic change in the physical landscape, even if it sparked pushback. During this process, the Singaporean state successfully normalized a hyper-modern society, from infrastructure reorganization to a state-curated national identity. However, this section aims to emphasize how this method of state-influenced change is interpreted by its citizens through reactions of nostalgia. This response can emerge in various forms, such as pushback, longing, or concern.

The reconstruction of state narratives alongside mass societal transformations are not new. Historically, other countries such as France have undergone similar shifting regimes of representation, such as the rebuilding of Paris following the French Revolution, which ushered in a completely new form of government.³¹ In 1848, there was immense hunger, debt, and acts of

²⁹ Tan Yong Soon, et al., “Cleaning the Land and Rivers,” in *50 Years of Environment: Singapore’s Journey Towards Environmental Sustainability*, (World Scientific Publishing Company, 2015), 27-33.

³⁰ *The Straits Times*, “Burying Nostalgia at Jurong Plant,” March 20, 1984, <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/article/straitstimes19840320-1.2.67?qt=burying.%20nostalgia.%20at.%20jurong.%20plant&q=burying%20nostalgia%20at%20jurong%20plant>

³¹ David Harvey, *Paris: The Capital of Modernity*, (Routledge, 2006), 5.

political violence taking place throughout the city. It seemed as though nobody was spared of such despair, to the extent that “for four summer days Paris was tortured by the struggle.”³² However, in the wake of urban development, historically poor areas of Paris were suddenly transformed into a sanitary, romantic destination for tourists and Parisians.³³ Photographers, such as Charles Marville, were appointed by the state specifically to capture Paris pre and post modernization.³⁴ During this process, the remembrance of a pre-historic Paris was firmly placed in the past, replaced with depictions of a glamorous Paris. Author David Harvey generally summarizes this form of redefining spaces: “Tradition has to be overthrown, violently if necessary, in order to grapple with the present and create the future. But the loss of tradition wrenches away the sheet anchors of our understanding and leaves us drifting, powerless.”³⁵ Ultimately, when radical strides towards the future occur without acknowledging a country’s past, backlashes inevitably ensue. As a result, the connection to tradition and ultimately heritage are at the forefront of being sacrificed.

Although Paris had been an established city centuries before Singapore and the two are on different continents, the transformation of Paris emphasizes how tensions between modernity and tradition are universal. The backlash that Singapore currently faces is what other communities have historically experienced in response to mass urbanization. Although Parisians don’t wish to return to the days of political violence and instability, they crave the liberty that existed prior to modernization.

State-controlled land leasing enforced a lack of liberty in how land can be used. The ability for the Singaporean state to control public and private land allowed them to abandon more

³² Harvey, *Paris*, 6.

³³ Harvey, *Paris*, 24.

³⁴ Ken Johnson, “Before and After, Paris in the 1800s,” *The New York Times*, January 24, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/26/arts/design/before-and-after-paris-in-the-1800s.html>

³⁵ Harvey, *Paris*, 15.

traditional, seemingly outdated elements of society that did not align with the envisioned hyper-perfected society. Because the majority of Singapore was undeveloped land pre-independence, it was extremely susceptible to conversion when creating space for new forms of modernity. As a result of this abandonment during such a short time frame, Singaporean citizens are left with nostalgia for the days of pre-developed Singapore. Certain individuals have retrospectively expressed their lack of anticipation for the radical societal and economic shifts, as seen by Singaporean citizen Safdar Abidally Hussein: “[he] does not recall feeling as though he was ‘losing anything’ at the time, because he did not anticipate the scope of change. But looking back later, he felt nostalgia for the ‘charming scenery’ that disappeared.”³⁶ Another newspaper article titled “Remember When...” expresses nostalgia through the lens of an older Singaporean, specifically noting the disconnect in remembrance and heritage between the older generation and youth in Singapore due to the loss of historical hinterland. For instance, one line in particular says, “Some children today have never heard a cock crow or seen a cow.”³⁷ For the generations of Singaporeans historically raised around nature, the notion of not experiencing this seemed absurd. There is an apparent growing distress surrounding Singapore’s future generations and how they will be in touch with their heritage.

It’s extremely common for Singaporeans to say that things change every few years. In 1987, the Singapore Heritage Society was established with the intention to preserve historical spaces in Singapore in response to the government’s total control over Singapore’s urban planning. SHS was first created in response to general disapproval of the urban plan to destroy the Old Public Library, which had been in Singapore for generations.³⁸ As an independent voice,

³⁶ Alexander, “Singapore’s Lost Coast,” 651.

³⁷ *The Straits Times*. “Remember When...”

³⁸ Terence Chong, “Heritage Activism in Singapore,” in *Heritage Movements in Singapore*, ed. by Ali Mozaffari and Tod Jones, (Berghahn Books, 2020), 113.

their main motto revolves around ‘heritage being the living presence of the past.’³⁹ In an effort to protest, the SHS published letters in the mainstream press supporting the library’s preservation.⁴⁰ Despite this, the library was demolished and Singapore Management University was built in its place. Beginning in the 1960s, public protest and critiques of the government became increasingly discouraged and even worthy of prison time, another signifier of the government’s authoritarian leadership.⁴¹ Considering this, the creation of SHS highlights the emphasis to which Singaporean citizens sought an outlet to express their discontent. SHS has achieved moments of conservation success, including the preservation of the Bukit Brown Cemetery. The URA initially proposed building a highway through the cemetery, despite it being a longtime burial site for Chinese residents until its closure in 1973. Following SHS-led protests, the URA relented and the cemetery was placed on the 2014 World Monument Watch List.⁴²

Although the preservation of the cemetery shows success on behalf of the SHS, the destruction of the Old Public Library highlights the vulnerability of Singaporean spaces, regardless of their historical significance, due to the government’s absolute land control. Ironically enough, these protests occurred in the same year that the URA emphasized its efforts towards increasing land preservation.⁴³ There is a clear gap in the so-called mission of the URA in comparison to its actual objectives and campaigns.

Despite this tension, Singapore is universally advertised and admired for its modern and sanitized city. With this, I wish to return to Harvey’s main point in *Paris: The Capital of Modernity*— the necessity and desire to overthrow tradition in order to create a future. When applied to Singapore, the state has firmly placed the undeveloped version of Singapore into the

³⁹ “Our Member: Singapore Heritage Society.” Seacha, accessed November 4, 2025.

⁴⁰ Terence Chong, “Heritage Activism in Singapore,” 114.

⁴¹ Chong, “Heritage Activism in Singapore,” 110.

⁴² Chong, “Heritage Activism in Singapore,” 120.

⁴³ *The Straits Times*, “URA Will Now Focus on Preservation,” 17.

past, and instead focuses on celebrating the change that has occurred. By constantly promoting the good that has come out of modernization, it fails to acknowledge its negative impacts. Throughout the city, there are a plethora of public displays highlighting the extent of Singapore's change. For instance, the Singapore National Gallery's 2025 exhibit involved an interactive tour of Singapore's chronological development, advertised as "from ancient settlement to modern city."⁴⁴ The wording creates a clear shift from ancient to modern, ultimately praising Singapore's development into a modern city.

Other examples include various chronological maps presented in Singapore's MRT stations, spanning from the mid-1800s to the late 1900s. Below, maps from 1846, 1976, 1983, and 1993 are shown to highlight significant infrastructural differences within Singapore's downtown area. I have enlarged the maps from 1846 and 1993 to allow the most comparison between detail.

⁴⁴ "Singapore National Gallery: What's On," Singapore National Gallery, accessed November 5, 2025.



These maps line the walls of the MRT, allowing for passerby to examine closely while maneuvering public transit. The map from 1846 indicates an older, rustic version of Singapore, as seen with the undeveloped shoreline and difference in color. A traditional compass is featured towards the bottom of the map; Singapore looks virtually untouched aside from signs of settlement and temple establishments along the coastline. Understandably, between 1846 and 1976 there is a significant jump in distinguished streets, as marked by the black buildings and labeled streets. There are early signs of land expansion and reclamation, as seen through the development of the East Lagoon Containers Wharf.

⁴⁵ Figure 1: Land Transport Authority, *Shifting Shores: Mapping Singapore's Reclamation Journey: 1846*. This map of Singapore is representative of Singapore's infrastructure while still under British control. The Land Transport Authority is in charge of Singapore's public transportation. In general, there is limited information on the maps themselves besides the images, hence why their descriptions are included in footnotes.



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The map shifts from black and white to colored between 1976 and 1983, indicating the transition towards increased modernization. There are major coastal transformations shown through the construction of Marina South, as labeled with the note “reclaimed land.” Additionally, the map shows the development of Serapong on Sentosa Island off the shore of Singapore, which was not visible in the 1976 map. Red streaks indicate the increased construction of traffic lanes that connect throughout the city-state. Although there are some patches of green, it is quite scarce. Lastly, the map of 1993 continues this pattern of immense change, as seen through the development of parks within Marina South and the reclamation of land offshore of downtown Singapore.

⁴⁶ Figure 2: *Shifting Shores: Mapping Singapore's Reclamation Journey: 1976.*

⁴⁷ Figure 3: *Shifting Shores: Mapping Singapore's Reclamation Journey: 1983.*



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As these maps portray, change is regarded as inherently positive within Singapore. Virtually no place has been left untouched between 1976 and 1993. While these maps successfully highlight the extent to which Singapore developed its land post independence, it fails to represent the smaller communities that were impacted by this newfound modernization. As seen through the creation of the Singapore Heritage Society, this development did not occur without pushback from Singaporeans. The plaque describing this art installation explains it as a

⁴⁸ Figure 5: *Shifting Shores: Mapping Singapore's Reclamation Journey: 1993.*

method of showing “the nation’s enduring spirit of transformation,” ultimately highlighting and romanticizing the continuous modification of the country’s infrastructure.⁴⁹

Despite this encouragement to relish in Singapore’s modernity, it’s important to note that the state has not entirely abandoned promoting a nostalgia for its past. For instance, there are consistent celebrations of Singaporean cuisine. Throughout the city, traditional open air hawker centers sell vendor-style food in the same fashion used since the mid 1970s. During annual independence festivals, there are oftentimes spreads of wok hei cooking, ice cream uncles, and Hokkien dishes.⁵⁰ Other reports mention cuisine-centered activities held at National Day festivals, advertising “on the spot cooking competition. Cook a Malay or Chinese dish” or National Day Muslim or Chinese dinners.⁵¹ The government argues that through exposure to traditional cuisines, the younger generation will stay connected to Singaporean heritage.⁵²

Although this exemplifies how the Singaporean government upholds tradition, it clearly distinguishes what the state encourages nostalgia for. While the celebration of multiethnic and fusion food provides opportunities for the younger generation to stay connected to their culinary roots, there is intense irony in Singaporean food culture. A startling fact demonstrates Singapore’s reality— as of 2021, 90% of Singapore’s food comes from imports.⁵³ Without exposure to nature or agricultural farms, Singaporeans cannot fully understand where their food comes from and furthers the disconnect between citizens and land. Most importantly, it

⁴⁹ *Shifting Shores: Mapping Singapore’s Reclamation Journey: Curatorial Statement.*

⁵⁰ Tai Wei Lim, “Peripheral Land No More? Fetishisms of Space and Case Studies of the Green Rail Corridor and Clementi Forest,” in *Cultural Heritage and Peripheral Spaces in Singapore*, (Springer Nature, 2017), 49.

Ice cream uncles: a nostalgic term of intimacy used by local Singaporeans for pushcart ice cream sellers.

⁵¹ *The Straits Times*, “National Day celebrations at the community centres,” August 4, 1989, <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/article/weekendeast19890804-1.2.4?qt=traditional.%20cooking.%20at.%20national.%20celebrations&q=traditional%20cooking%20at%20national%20celebrations>

⁵² Lim, “Peripheral Land No More?” 50.

⁵³ Sarah Mineko Ichioka, *Food Security and Community Bonding in a Globalised City-State: The Case for Urban Farming in Singapore*, *CITYGREEN* 01, no. 12 (2016): 34.

undermines Singapore's history of local food production. Hence, this presents the issue of present day Singaporean farmers: how does their livelihood fit into Singapore's modern culture? More importantly, what does this imply for their legacy and the future of farming in Singapore?

The Farmer's Perspective

As of 2025, less than 1% of Singaporean land is allocated to farmland.⁵⁴ For context, 10% of land was allocated to agriculture during the 1980s.⁵⁵ The percentage has continued to decrease as more farmland is converted to current priorities of the URA, including military bases or public housing. Additionally, farm costs have increased specifically in the past five years. Following the COVID-19 pandemic and scares in food importations, the Singaporean government pushed for high-tech farming within the farming industry.⁵⁶ One motivating factor towards this shift includes competitors, such as China, who have succeeded in doing so.⁵⁷ Additionally, high-tech farming potentially maneuvers around Singapore's land limitations. However, the combination of these new regulations and the miniscule farmland percentage creates a very difficult environment for farms to thrive in. The expenses for building high-tech farm equipment, such as hydroponics and vertical farming, are hefty. Specifically for older Singaporean farmers who have only worked with traditional methods, advanced farming is foreign.

During the summer of 2025, I spent three weeks in Singapore through a Davidson Dean Rusk-funded trip. While there, I had the opportunity to interview William Ho, Lynn Ee, and Ivy

⁵⁴ "Types of Land Tenders for Food Farms," Singapore Food Agency, last modified August 18, 2025. <https://www.sfa.gov.sg/farming/farm-land-sea-space/land-tenders-for-food-farming#:~:text=Types%20of%20Land%20Tenders%20for.Fixed%20Price%20Tender>

⁵⁵ Hsin-Huang et al., *Citizens, Civil Society, and Heritage Making in Asia*, (ISEAS Publishing, 2017), 215.

⁵⁶ Singapore Food Agency, "Behind the Science of High-Tech Farming," January 28, 2022.

<https://www.sfa.gov.sg/food-for-thought/article/detail/behind-the-science-of-high-tech-farming>

⁵⁷ Luna Sun, "China opens world's tallest unmanned veggie farm as more urban agriculture advancements take root," *South China Morning Post*, December 5, 2023, <https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3243805/china-opens-worlds-tallest-unmanned-veggie-farm-more-urban-agriculture-advancements-take-root>

The South China Morning Post is a Hong-Kong based newspaper; although it has historically been credible, it's been critiqued in recent years for state censorship.

Singh-Lim and hear their experiences as farmers in Singapore. Although each individual varies in age and expertise, their farms are located in Lim Chu Kang, the outskirts of the city. The Kranji countryside has managed to maintain patches of green space, including reservoirs and marshlands. However, it is difficult to access and has been labeled as the location for military bases by the URA, making its future uncertain.⁵⁸

I first spoke to Ivy, the owner of established cultural heritage site Bollywood Farms since 2003. Bollywood Farm's explicit mission is to expose local youth to the Singaporean countryside, aiming to instill the historic connection between land and culture.⁵⁹ The farm features the Poison Ivy Bistro, serving Bollywood Farm grown produce, and offers nature walks and farm tours for individuals of all ages and ethnicities. Its' establishment has been successful, ranking #1 in the travel book Lonely Planet pre-COVID-19 pandemic.⁶⁰ A notoriously blunt and tough individual— she pulled out a knife within 5 minutes of our conversation— our discussion was short but provided a clear perspective of Ivy's distaste towards agriculture's nearly extinct role in Singapore. In Ivy's words, "Lee Kuan Yew was a piece of shit and only did two good things to develop Singapore. Firstly, there is no minimum wage in Singapore so there is a major poverty disparity. Secondly, Singapore is wasting its main natural resources."⁶¹ Additionally, she emphasized, "The government doesn't promote the land because it has to be leased by the government." Ivy provides a unique perspective, as her father moved to Singapore as a poor fourteen year old from India. He managed to amass a large amount of land, which Bollywood Farms lies on today. However, when public and private land became property of the state, large

⁵⁸ Dylan Low, *Dean Rusk Notes*, 15.

My notes include all commentary from primary and secondary sources I read while in Singapore, in addition to the transcripts from oral history interviews, noticings while at museums or galleries, and general notes that I thought were relatable to my project. This is organized in an individual Google Document with the date of each note.

⁵⁹ Bollywood Farms, "Our Story," Accessed December 9, 2025. <https://bollywoodfarms.com/our-story/>

⁶⁰ Low, *Dean Rusk Notes*, 10.

⁶¹ Ivy Singh-Lim (owner of Bollywood Farms), in discussion with author, July 2025.

chunks of Ivy's fathers' land was taken. In other articles where Ivy is interviewed, she makes the primary argument that the countryside must be brought back. She makes the specific distinction between Singaporean land in its current form in comparison to the past: "When I, as a born land owner, look at land, I see life. We've got to bring the countryside back. And when I say countryside, I don't mean prim-and-proper gardens, which people are not interested in. People like things that are natural."⁶²

My second interviewee, Lynn Ee, is the chef and longtime assistant to Ivy at Bollywood Farms. In comparison to Ivy and William, she is in her mid-30s and the youngest amongst the three. Although Lynn was more restrained than Ivy, she expressed similar sentiments. She explained the purpose of Bollywood Farm's production of kampong food.⁶³ The hope is that through the knowledge of food production and younger generations witnessing how food is grown, there is a stronger understanding of Singapore's past. However, when asked about the demographics of Bollywood Farms' customers, Lynn stated: "Singaporeans don't care about food and land connection, they just enjoy eating."⁶⁴ Throughout the years, there has been a steady decline of elderly visitors, due to the distance between Bollywood's location in Kranji and central Singapore. The dwindling numbers of elderly clientele has shifted the environment of Bollywood Farms; there seems to be less genuinity to learn about farmland and farm-to-table food. Instead, Lynn explains that many customers, specifically the younger generation, only care about the aesthetics of the locale and food for social media.⁶⁵ To end our chat, Lynn firmly stated: "Bollywood Farms advocates for the return to traditional farming; every country should have a

⁶² Jamie Nonis, "We've Got to Bring the Countryside Back," *CNA Luxury*, , May 24, 2021. <https://cna.luxury.channelnewsasia.com/people/ivy-singh-lim-singapore-bollywood-veggies-farm-179881#:~:text=Ee%2C%20who%20studied%20in%20Australia,carrots%20are%20available%20for%20takeaway>

⁶³ Kampong food refers to the traditional, rustic Singaporean food historically served in kampong villages/

⁶⁴ Lynn Ee (assistant of Ivy Singh-Lim at Bollywood Farms), in discussion with author, July 2025.

⁶⁵ Ee, discussion.

countryside. Singapore's government runs it as a business.”⁶⁶ Despite Lynn growing up in a post-developed Singapore, she expresses the same nostalgia for nature as the older generation.

My final interviewee, William Ho, faced the backlash of government-leased land firsthand. Mr. Ho inherited his quail farm from his father, who served in the farming industry for over seventy years, including when Singapore was a subject of Malaysia. After the passing of Mr. Ho's father in 2018, William publicly announced, “If society want us farmers to be around, please voice out for me that Singapore really needs the countryside.”⁶⁷ Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the quail farm closed its doors indefinitely. During our discussion, William expressed how if he had the option to do it over again, he would've chosen to not farm.⁶⁸ He expanded by explaining the lack of leasing from the government; additionally, he expressed, “Very sad, us old-timers spend so many years producing food in Singapore. Farm or no farm, it doesn't matter [to the government].”⁶⁹ William's straightforward words reflect farmers' despondence after no longer having a stable place in society, despite it being their livelihood for decades. Additionally, according to William, the Singaporean government encourages Singaporeans to go to nearby countries, such as Malaysia to see nature. William explained the correlation between the steady decline of Singaporean farms with increasing dependence on imports from nearby countries, such as Malaysia. Although Singapore has always been at a disadvantage with their natural resources, the imports and dwindling agriculture exacerbates this dilemma.⁷⁰

There is a notable similarity amongst each individuals' sentiment: outward disapproval of the Singaporean government. As previously mentioned when discussing the Singapore Heritage Society, speaking out against the Singaporean government is not encouraged. Although neither

⁶⁶ Ee, discussion.

⁶⁷ *Straits Times*, “Ho Seng Choon, pioneering poultry farmer, dies at 95,” *The Straits Times*, August 13, 2005, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/ho-seng-choon-pioneering-poultry-farmer-dies-at-95>

⁶⁸ William Ho (former owner of Lian Ha Wang Farm), in discussion with author, July 2025.

⁶⁹ Ho, discussion.

⁷⁰ Ichioka, *Food Security and Community Bonding in a Globalised City-State*, 35.

of the three would describe themselves as activists, their version of history does not align with the state narrative. The contrasting narratives exposes the tension and vulnerability of Singapore's curated national identity, which promotes the notion of universal equality and content amongst Singaporean citizens. It is clear that farmers feel cheated in the ways their livelihood has ceased to exist. It's also significant that all three individuals recognized the shortcomings of their profession and yet, they still chose to do so. Although William specifically said he would not farm again if he knew the outcome, there is a clear sense of fulfilling a duty to educate amongst the farmers. Regardless of the diminishing agricultural sphere, growing expenses, and dwindling interest, Ivy, Lynn, and William all expressed the importance of keeping the farming narrative alive and circulated.

Recent articles published by major media outlets continue to publicly acknowledge the normality of dwindling farmland numbers. One *Straits Times* article cites the closing of the mega-indoor veggie farm IFFI, advertising it "as the latest blow to local food production."⁷¹ It describes an established farm, such as William's, that had been in Singapore for years and still faced a shutdown. Following years of harvesting food for farm animals, the farm transitioned to growing vegetables in an attempt to adhere to high-tech vertical farming. Due to rising equipment expenses, the number of customers decreased as a result of higher prices. With imports being the dominant source of Singaporean food, rising prices and new regulations are escalating pressure on Singaporean farmers. This is clearly reflected in the percentages of local Singaporean consumption: "News of I.F.F.I's closure comes as local vegetable production in

⁷¹ Cheryl Tan, "Mega indoor veggie farm IFFI shuts down in latest blow to local food production," *The Straits Times*, May 26, 2024, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/mega-indoor-veggie-farm-iffi-shuts-down-in-latest-blow-to-local-food-production>.

2023 declined by around 15 per cent, accounting for only 3.2 per cent of local consumption, as opposed to 3.9 per cent in 2022.”⁷²

Following my interview with Lynn, I asked her where she believes the future of Bollywood Farms is heading. Ultimately, Bollywood Farms is destined to close at the end of 2026. What struck me most during this final moment of our conversation was her reaction; her face, instead of expressing shock or defeat, conveyed nothing but a defeated acceptance. Bollywood Farms’ closure isn’t occurring without protest. Ivy, in her typical feisty nature, had succeeded in extending the lease during the past two years. However, the URA was firm with reverting Bollywood Farms into public housing or a form of military land. Despite its historic success and educational mission, its fate is seemingly inevitable. Its closure is a reflection of how agriculture will proceed in Singapore’s future, despite voices of discontent and opposition.

My grandfather was born and raised in Singapore. In 1959, he left the life he’d always known to attend college at Trinity College in Connecticut through a Fulbright scholarship. A mere fifteen years later, he revisited Singapore for the first time since his departure. It was completely unrecognizable. As he fondly remembers, his favorite childhood pastime included boy-scout activities and trekking through the Singaporean jungle. As a little girl, I would sit and listen to his vivid stories of scaling mango trees in his neighbors’ backyards, day-long journeys across the island, and sneaking onto fish farms during the nighttime to capture dinner. Within every story, there were details of free roaming nature and a feeling of wildness. Before embarking on my own trip to Singapore this past summer, he encouraged me to visit Bollywood Farms to see a glimpse of old Singapore. To him, Bollywood Farms was one of the few places that reminded him of his version of Singapore; a place he never got to say goodbye to. Upon learning of Bollywood Farms’ closure in 2026, his disappointment was palpable.

⁷² Tan, “Mega indoor veggie farm IFFI shuts down in the latest blow to local food production.”

This perspective casts a different light on Singapore being labeled as a garden city. Although the URA does stress building public spaces for its citizens, such as reservoirs and greenery within their national Changi Airport, these spaces still represent a form of perfected, controlled nature. Without the presence of educational sites such as Bollywood Farms, farming is at even greater risk of being forgotten by the new generation. Additionally, without representation, farming will be pushed further into something of the past and potentially disappear from Singapore's history forever. As a result of tension between the state and nature, farms have become a contested site. Its presence as wildness goes against the state narrative of modernity equating to urbanism.

The rapid move away from agriculture during the past sixty years highlights the ever prominent challenges of maneuvering modernity and tradition. While any country experiences this, Singapore's exponential transformation created a society whose heritage is caught at a crossroad. While the state encourages a constant move towards the future, another part of Singaporean society yearns for a history that does not align with this narrative. Justifiably, farming isn't ideal in Singapore; there is limited land mass, few natural resources, and it's increasingly expensive. However, farming is an inherently imperfect profession; there's always a chance of crop failure or weather complications. Perhaps, this risk of imperfection and failure makes farming incompatible with the Singaporean state objectives of excellence. From the beginning of independence and Prime Minister Lee's first concept plan, efficiency has been a priority to achieving success: "A society to be successful must maintain a balance between nurturing excellence and encouraging the average to improve."⁷³

Looking to Singapore's Future

⁷³ Lee Kuan Yew, "The Wit and Wisdom of Lee Kuan Yew," (Didier Milliet, 2013), n.p.

As I walked around Singapore this summer, my grandfather's stories circulated in my head. As hard as I tried, it was difficult to imagine the version of Singapore that my grandfather craved from his childhood. The majority of my time in Singapore was spent in glass food courts and air conditioned spaces. Without knowing Singapore's history through my grandfather's stories, I would have never guessed that Singapore was anything but its current form today: a society that prides itself in producing new modernity and creating new forms of advancement.

Within this paper, I have examined Singapore's process and methods of urbanization since 1965 within the expanding region of Southeast Asia. From there, I have explained how the state prioritized efficiency and massive rebranding of the island-nation in order to change its perception on a global scale, citing specific examples of major infrastructural changes immediately following independence. However, I've also touched on historical patterns of the emergence of government-controlled narratives while redeveloping, as seen through Paris during the 1800s. I've connected this to the Singapore states' active hand in creating an artificial, hyperdeveloped society through the exclusion of historically significant elements, specifically agriculture and nature. By incorporating both new and preexisting oral history interviews, this creates a contrast to modern day conceptions of Singapore's society which fails to include nature.

In this paper, I have highlighted the tension between Singaporean state sponsored identity, which is constantly transforming its physical environment, and the citizens who experience this continuous transformation firsthand. While the state produces one kind of nostalgia intended to celebrate the shift from a traditional past to an ever more modern future, Singaporeans themselves are also experiencing nostalgia that isn't state-sanctioned; instead of expressing pride, there is a sense of loss. The expression of nostalgia production amongst Singaporean citizens only emphasizes how many societal elements have changed. As I was

continuously reminded throughout this past summer, it is normal for Singaporeans to expect drastic changes every five years. Singapore will continue to advance further from its rural past.

Ultimately, when such change occurs, memory becomes politicized. In the words of Singaporean citizen and author Youyenn Teo, “It takes a while to move beyond seeing these scenes as either those of a romantic past or an impoverished present. They are neither and both. What they represent is something that requires an alternative set of vocabularies, a separate set of lenses to view clearly.”⁷⁴ As Teo attempts to express, the examination of different perspectives allows examination beyond viewing Singaporean history through a simplified lens. The production of a cultivated state narrative has been met with a personal nostalgia that recognizes what Singapore lost in its transformation. Instead of creating an environment of tension and pushback, the state and its citizens must reassess what its priorities are to avoid the continuation of this historical contestation.

Singapore recently celebrated its sixtieth anniversary in 2025. This study of different forms of nostalgia provides a nontraditional perspective of state narratives that ultimately encourages a reexamination of Singapore’s history. Considering Singapore is oftentimes praised for its efficiency and systems of urbanization, this research offers acknowledgement of how the state has dictated a collective memory that leaves Singapore’s history as a natural island-nation behind. As seen through the voices of Singaporean farmers and citizens, the change in landscape has produced a profound sense of loss. In order to fully understand Singapore’s history, historians must tackle the complexities of its change, and the ironies exemplified by acute senses of loss as a result of state-led progress that simultaneously elevated societal standard of living and well-being. These dual truths are to be further articulated and explored; ultimately, they are crucial to comprehending modern day Singapore as it heads towards an unknown future.

⁷⁴ Youyenn Teo, *This is what inequality looks like*, (Ethos Books, 2018), 12.

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