

NATIONAL SERVICE: THE POLITICISATION OF THE BODY IN SINGAPORE

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The body has been a principle of socio-political organisation throughout the development of Western modernity. It has also been a continuing preoccupation of Asian modernities, with a range of discursive culture-specific constructions of the body emerging in certain historical junctures and in specific sites. One site of particular interest is post-colonial Singapore. Since independence in 1965, the struggle over control of the bodies of Singaporeans has been played out in a discursive field in which the female body has become a symbol of cultural crisis. Much has been written about the visions of the apocalyptic end of the family and nation arising from women's control of their own fertility that circulated in the discourses in the 1980s and 1990s. The female body was politicised as an element in the nation building process. It was also problematised as the site of threat to the social fabric and a key factor in the emergence of a politics of anxiety. Failure of individual women to reproduce at the level of the family was inscribed as a failure to reproduce the welfare of the nation. The male body is also politicised and located in the discourse of anxiety about social order, and the reproduction of the nation's security. While the body can be instrumental in the nation building process and a key site of discipline, it is also a site for conflict, contestation and resistance to embodied gender norms.

Introduction

Much has been written on the body as a site of gendered inscriptions and the subject of power relations. Many scholars have argued for the body to be understood less as a physical attribute of an individual, and more as the embodiment of social processes and power differentials (Featherstone, et al., 1992; Shilling, 1993; Turner, 2008). Michel Foucault makes the point that the individual body and the population are the two places around which the organisation of the power was deployed (Foucault, 1980). Following Foucault, Judith Butler argues that bodies reflect the materialising effects of both regulatory power and signification (Butler, 1993). The body has been a continuing preoccupation throughout Western modernity, implicated in, amongst other areas of social life, the development of nationalism (Mosse, 1985; Lutz, Pheonix & Yuval-Davis, et. al., 1995; Yuval-Davis, 1997). It has also been a continuing preoccupation of Asian modernities, with a range of discursive culture-specific constructions of the body emerging in certain historical junctures and in specific sites (Atkinson & Errington, 1990; Ong & Peletz, et al., 1995; Jolly & Ram, 2001; Yeoh, Teo & Huang, et al., 2002). If nationalism is a profoundly gendered discourse, and one with the potential to materialise effects on the body, this is no less a feature of Asian nationalisms than their Western counterparts.

One site of particular interest for the examination of this process is post-colonial Singapore. Since independence in 1965, the struggle over control of the bodies of the Singaporeans has been played out in a discursive field in which the female body has become a symbol of cultural crisis. It emerged in the public discourses of Singapore in the 1980s and 1990s as a vision of

the apocalyptic end of the family and nation arising from women's control of their own fertility (Heng & Devan, 1995; Yap, 1995; Lyons-Lee, 1998). The female body was politicised as an element in the nation building process. It was also problematised as the site of threat to the social fabric and a key factor in the emergence of a politics of anxiety. Failure of individual women to reproduce at the level of the family was also inscribed as a failure to reproduce the welfare of the nation.

What is not so well recognised, however, is the discursive and actual deployment of the male body as a metaphor for social order and the reproduction of the nation's security. The male body is also located in the discourse of anxiety and its various inscriptions deployed in a range of political strategies and moves. Singapore is a militarised society; masculinity and service to the nation is produced discursively and literally through compulsory national service (NS) for young men. While the ruling government's fixation on the female body has centred on fertility and motherhood, the male body has been hypermasculinised through the focus on the military defence of the nation. Both male and female bodies in Singapore are nationalised and the body is constituted through the discourses of nationalism and national survival.

An understanding of the material effects of power on the body in Singapore can productively be read through the framework provided by Judith Butler. In her account, "materiality" is contingently constituted through discourse, rather than as a unilateral movement from cause to effect (Butler, 1993: 259). If the sexualized or gendered body is constructed through the effects of power:

... construction is neither a single act nor a causal process initiated by a subject and culminating in a set of fixed effects. Construction not only takes place *in* time, but is itself a temporal process which operates through the reiteration of norms; sex is both produced and destabilized in the course of this reiteration ... yet it is also by virtue of this reiteration that gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities in such constructions ... this instability is the deconstituting possibility in the very process of repetition ... the possibility to put the consolidation of the norms of 'sex' into a potentially productive crisis (Butler, 1993: 10).

This paper examines the discursive construction of both male and female bodies in Singapore. While some of the materialising effects of power on the body—such as the wearing of military uniform—are manifest, most are, as Butler asserts, "contingently constituted". In examining the discourses of embodied service to the nation it will also expose the possibility of productive crisis by considering the "constitutive instabilities" in attempts to politicise the body by investigating the points where the fissures and limitations in the discourses appear. Gendered inscriptions and discourses are temporal processes, which change over time and become destabilised and contested by competing discourses. In Singapore, female fertility not only provides a discursive site for the articulation of national anxiety, but also conflicts with a militarised masculinity in an overall discourse which demands of every Singaporean a form of 'national service' and the appropriation of the body by the state. Since it does not fall easily into ontological categories, the body can be deployed as a national resource in multiple ways with multiple materialising effects on the body. It can also, however, offer multiple points of resistance and contestation. A

key focus of this paper is the narrative and discursive articulations in the public sphere. Rather than circumscribing embodied contributions to the nation along gender lines, the debate has served to unsettle the questions of national service, and to generate a productive crisis that further confounds normative gender behavior and the politicised body in Singapore.

The following section will provide a background to the management of the body in Singapore, the normative constraints placed on women, and the expectation that the female body should be utilised in the service of creating social institutions. It will also highlight the forms of resistance to this, the “gaps and fissures” that lead to constitutive instabilities (Butler, 1993: 10). The final section will examine the public sphere—in particular, the press—as the site where the conflict of gender roles and the demands for citizens to embody the agenda of the state are played out discursively. National service, in one form or another, is a contested sphere in Singapore, the location of potentially productive crises and the field where anxiety, resentment and the legitimatisation of appropriately embodied citizenship unfolds.

Nation, gender, family, body

From the outset, the national narrative of Singapore was a discourse gendered as masculine. On 13 July, 1966, not long after the final dissolution of the union of Singapore and Malaysia, Lee Kuan Yew¹ delivered a speech at the Political Study Centre in Singapore. It was reported in the weekly current affairs journal, *The Mirror*, that Mr. Lee believed Singapore’s best chance of survival as an independent nation lay in producing a tightly-organised society. The magazine quoted him as saying:

Many other small societies like ours have survived, because they are better organised ... Societies like ours have no fat to spare. They are either lean or healthy, or they die ... our best chances lie in a very tightly-organised society. There is no other way ... If you do not have an army, you will always be exposed to perils one of these days when bases are run down and many problems arise ... What is required is a rugged, resolute, highly trained, highly-disciplined community. This is the lesson which other nations have learnt, and which I hope we will learn in time (Lee, 1966).

Lee’s modernising narrative celebrates the nation state and predicates its success on the masculine qualities of ruggedness, discipline, the ability to stand up for oneself, and the commitment to a society not considered ‘soft’. The regime of signification in which ‘soft’ and its opposite ‘resolute’ were located, had clear implications for the disciplining of the masculine body. This was consistent with Lee’s well-known subscription to crude eugenics and the superiority of the Chinese in a multi-cultural society, paralleled by an instrumental rationality that imagines hegemonic control over the body.

According to Heng and Devan (1995), the national imaginary in Singapore is characterised by the state’s obsession with a “large-scale social product of *biological* reproduction” (1995: 196; emphasis in original). Lee Kuan Yew’s fixation on eugenics as “state-of-the-art biological replications: a superior technology to guarantee the efficient manufacture of superior-quality babies” (Heng & Devan, 1995: 198) is predicated on the concept of the body as a machine. In Lee’s Singapore the preferred model of control is articulated through the image of the machine:

The investment in mechanical models of human reproduction, social formations, and the body, exposes, of course, the desire for an absolute mastery, the desire that mastery be absolutely possible. Functional machines in everyday life—machines that are recognized by Lee, and used in Singapore society—are predictable and orderly, blessedly convenient: malfunctioning ones can be adjusted, faulty components replaced, and the whole made to work again with a minimum of fuss. Most pointedly, a machine presupposes—indeed, requires—an operator, since a machine commonly exists in the first place to be operated: relieving all suspicion that full supervisory control may be impossible (exorcising, that is, the specter of desire, instability, and an unconscious from human formations), the trope of the machine comfortingly suggests that what eludes, limits, or obstructs absolute knowability, management, and control, can be routinely evacuated (Heng & Devan, 1995: 199).

This is an important point for understanding the government's fixation on sexuality and fertility, and the reproduction of the desired family in an environment in which the nation and the family are discursive objects (Chua, 1995). "Singapore 21"—a government publication which appeared at the end of the last century—was designed to fortify national and societal cohesion. It uses the metaphor of the "base camp" as a place to begin the life struggle and tie the family to the nation: "Strong families are the foundation for healthy lives and wholesome communities. They give security and meaning to life, and are the 'base camp' from which our young venture forth to reach for high aspirations" (Singapore Government, n.d.[a]).

National welfare is often configured through the image of the family and the role of women as reproducers of the family. Observers such as McClintock (1993) have argued that as a social institution, the family was a ready-made structure, through which gender differentiation could be both historicised and hierarchised, and forms of exclusion naturalised. This has been noted in the case of Singapore. For Heng and Devan (1995) the Singapore polity is characterised by a "state fatherhood" in which femaleness is subordinate and citizens' relationship to the state is analogous to a father/daughter relationship (Heng & Devan, 1995: 196-7). The nation then appears as one family, and marriage and children national goals (Singapore Government, 1991).

In Singapore, it is expected that all lives follow a 'normal' life trajectory. It is a normative journey of gender destiny. The central tasks, which provide the dynamic, are to create oneself as a woman who will grow up, have children and raise them, or to produce yourself as a man who will be responsible for supporting the family financially. In this scenario, men are the natural heads of the family (PuruShotam, 1998: 135). Commonly understood ideological constructions of the normal family naturalise the roles of men and women. Women have not always, however, acquiesced to the demands of the state. The anti-natalist "Stop at Two" campaign to limit the size of families in the 1970s, when women's labour was needed for an industrialising post-colonial economy, was highly successful. When, however, in the early 1980s, it became obvious that it was too successful and the birth rate had fallen to a dangerously low level, the pro-natalist, "Have three or more if you can afford it" campaign, was not met with such enthusiasm. By the mid-1980s the Total Fertility Rate of Singapore was 1.62—below replacement levels. The low fertility rate created a discourse of anxiety, focused on the putative fragility of the national group. The source of this anxiety was "under-achievers", women who were "underperforming" in their patriotic duty to reproduce (Yap, 1995). Fertility and the life choices of women have become such a salient feature of the

continuing narrative of internal threat to the stability of the nation, and such a fixture of debates on nationalism, that Heng and Devan have dubbed it “uterine nationalism” (1995). Discursive spectacles of Mother, Dutiful Wife and Good Citizen, give enunciative power to the belief that control of women’s sexuality is the key to continued national success and that the appropriate deployment of fertility is a ‘national service’. While the masculinity of the state is an excessive fetishistic mode of representation—a “phallic Confucian narrative” according to Heng and Devan (1995)—it is by no means hegemonic. In recent years a conflict over the instrumental uses of both male and female bodies has emerged in Singapore, configured around the issue of national service. This has problematised attempts to mobilise sexualised gender difference for the national agenda.

Gender conflict and the reinscription of national duty

Women’s refusal of biological reproduction, and in many cases even marriage, while maintaining careers, has generated resentment and the charge that Singapore women are too demanding, too dismissive of Singapore men, and should not expect to have everything. It has been articulated in terms, not only of diminution of patriarchal power, but as a threat to the welfare of individual men. This emerged in the public sphere in the early 2000s, and was a frequent topic in the opinion pages of the English language press, in particular the *Straits Times*. One observer, Wong Hoong Hooi, argues:

For the last 50 years, gender equality in Singapore has been seen in terms of giving women greater rights and opportunities and getting men to gradually undertake an equal share of responsibilities which are traditionally a woman’s lot ... The tendency has also been to highlight the contributions and sacrifices of women while taking those of local men pretty much for granted ... This lopsidedness is evident in repeated calls on Singapore men to share equally of care-giving responsibilities without addressing the need for reciprocal changes in women’s expectations of men ... [Men] will end up with the aggregate burden of carrying the bigger share of responsibility for providing for our families ... and on top of that, having to undertake 50 per cent of the housework and of childcare, not to mention doing national service (Wong, 2002).

Acrimony against women among some Singapore men is a complicated terrain in which bitterness at the loss of patriarchal power is confounded by the knowledge that men rely on women’s paid labour and success outside the home for the material conditions of the middle class family. While the materialising effects of National Service (NS) are inevitable for every Singapore male, no such legal compulsion to bear children exists for women. Men cannot rely on women’s total acquiescence to familial ideology, nor their full complicity in the reproduction of gender relations. A significant contestation of the issue of women’s rights, and women’s gains at the expense of men, takes up Wong’s point that women demand too much and that men suffer injustice, and centers on National Service and the sacrifices men make in the service of the nation. NS is compulsory only for men, and it has become a site for the struggle over citizenship, and legitimacy as a national subject. It is also the site of struggle over political and cultural meanings inscribed on the surface of the body.

An anthology of stories and poems about National Service, edited by Koh and Bhatia, makes clear the transformation of the ordinary into the ideal masculine national subject through NS, and the ways in which the Others of masculine duty are excluded:

But above all, NSmen have gained a deeper appreciation of the meaning of duty and service to the nation. At times these qualities have been under-estimated by those who do not serve. Others, affected by counter-culture posturing, libertarianism or unreflective animus towards authority, proclaim that concepts of duty and honour are totalitarian or just plain 'uncool' (Koh & Bhatia, 2002: 13).

While this statement is obvious in its intention to valorise military service as the most significant form of service to the nation, its tone also has the effect of ensuring that 'service' to the nation is normalised and exalted. It describes any alternatives to service only in pejorative terms. Those who do not serve merely 'posture' from the position of an unauthorised culture and have little substance; any critique of authority is seen as unthinking. The use of the term 'uncool' juxtaposes duty and honour against the libertarian attitudes engendered by youth culture, since it is likely that only young Singaporeans would use the term 'uncool' or think of national service in terms of trends or fashions. It reiterates, also, the idea that duty and service to the nation are the preserve of men.

The following excerpt from a poem about arriving at boot camp for the first day of training also makes it clear that NS produces the ideal masculine subject on whose body adulthood is inscribed:

It is of course a ride of passage:
the purposeful stride out to the waiting trucks,
to be transported into manhood.
(from the poem "Arrival", by Koh Jee Leong, cited in Koh & Bhatia, 2002: 28).

NS creates an embodied masculine subjectivity and effects on the body that last a lifetime:

That early morning Tekong² smell has remained with me for life. The metallic smell of urine, sweat and gun oil. You smelt it in yourself, within your hot, sweaty green PT shirts. You smelt it in others. You smelt it as you rested with your night snack and you chomped your kueh³ and washed it down with dehydrating hot tea (from the short story "The Beach", by Shashi Jayekumar, in Koh & Bhatia, 2002: 58).

The eulogizing of the embodied experience of military service came in the wake of the debate about women's conscription to NS which had begun to circulate with some vigor in the public discourses around 2000. While the Ministry of Defence had stated that there are no strong imperatives for conscripting women, some public opinion was in favour of it. A range of social benefits was noted, including the possibility of finding a life partner, as well as the continuing maintenance of the social order:

There are arguments for, and against, women's enlistment, however, that fall outside the purview of operational necessities. One argument is that NS will help socialise women, as it does men today, and make them fuller participants in nation building. The shared experience of NS will bond women from a variety of ethnic and economic backgrounds, creating a more tightly-knit Singapore society. In fact a dose of regimented training might be the right medicine for the unruly and wild girls who seem to be increasingly visible these days.

Ms Leigh Pascal ... [said] 'If citizenship is based on loyalty to the nation, and national service is the teaching, inculcating and exercising of that loyalty so that the nation's people are prepared for crisis, then it is not really understandable why half of the citizenry is not involved in national service,' she says.

... Another argument is based on equality. Women, the logic goes, will gain equality with men only when they fulfil the responsibilities of equality and not merely enjoy its rights. The comments of nominated MP Gerard Ee, who suggested introducing NS for women in Parliament last year were reported in the *Straits Times Insight*: 'I feel that when both men and women are conscripted, it will provide a strong common ground for the sharing of experiences. Men will begin to see women as equals and partners. It may be more successful than any SDU programme'. He is referring to the Social Development Unit, a matchmaking agency for Singaporeans.

... Ms. Pasqual too thinks that NS for women would augment gender equality in Singapore. 'I do not believe in total equality between men and women, as this is obviously impossible and undesirable,' she says. 'I do believe, however, in equal opportunity. The opportunity, in this case, would be for women to participate in the nation's defence in times of crisis, to be called on just as men are, to act as loyal citizens'. Indeed, in an extension of the egalitarian argument, some complain that men have to do national service twice, first as the main providers in the family and then as conscripts (Latif, 2000).

Ms Dana Lam-Teo, president of the AWARE⁴ put an alternative argument:

'The question to be asked is not whether girls should be in national service to make it equitable for boys. The question is whether in our society, on the whole, is an equitable place for women and men. Women are already under pressure from multiple roles. Until this is addressed by women, and family-friendly work place and society, recruitment into NS would be an additional burden,' comments the mother of a 17-year-old son and a 15-year-old daughter (Latif, 2000).

And in another opinion which serves to reinforce a state masculinism, a feminised "uterine nationalism" (Heng & Devan, 1995), and to reduce citizens' contribution to crude biological determinism, the *Straits Times* report continued:

During an Internet debate on the same issue several years ago, a male participant argued that sexual equality is hard to define because natural differences give men and women complementary roles in society without making them comparable. Since men cannot become mothers, he said, they do the next best thing which is to protect those who can be mothers (Latif, 2000).

He pointed out the stark biological facts which keep women out of warfare. A man can produce four million sperm in half an hour, whereas a woman is born with a "lifetime supply" of only about 500 eggs. Hence, even if 999 men out of 1,000 die in battle, but women are safe, the remaining men can repopulate the country. But if 999 women in 1,000 die, the remaining women "can only get pregnant so many times" (Latif, 2000).

In an indirect way the problem of defending the nation, a normatively masculine role, also fell to women when then Brigadier General Lee Hsien Loong⁵ called the low birth rate a “danger trend”. In a statement which implicates the failure of power to fully materialise its effects on the bodies of women, he suggested a scenario calculated to be alarming for any mother: “The fewer people you have, the longer all the boys will have to serve national service because it is the only way to keep the force level up” (Lee Hsien Loong, 1987, cited in Ho, 2000: 54).

It appeared that at least part of a woman’s national duty was to use her body to restock the armed forces. Women would deliver economic advantage with their labour, and deliver a male population on demand. The notion that women have a subsidiary role in NS has moved into the quotidian imaginary of Singapore. It is now articulated in fiction, as is demonstrated by the introduction to Koh Buck Song and Umej Bhatia’s (2002) anthology of short stories of national service: “Conscription in Singapore has never included women, but women have not been entirely exempt. They have also experienced NS—as mothers, sisters, girlfriends, wives, friends, colleagues, bosses and observers of society” (Koh & Bhatia, 2002: 18).

Chia Yueh Chin’s story, in this volume, about her brother entering National Service, imagines maternity as women’s national service during Singapore’s anti-natalist period. In her piece titled *Women Do National Service Too*, she describes the role of the female body in national service, and politicises childbirth and physical pain:

My mother always said that she did her national service—after all, didn’t she get pregnant twice and give birth to both of us? If that was not a service to the nation, what is? Didn’t she follow orders and ‘stop at two’? And don’t tell her that it’s not the same, as men ran the risk of dying for their nation. ‘You think childbirth is so easy, I would like to see the men do it. It’s bloody painful, and I think I was in labour for six hours, and finally went under the knife.’

At this point my mother would flash her ‘national service’ scar, and we would gawk at it, and at the stretch marks on her tummy as well. And to clinch the argument, my mother would say: ‘And don’t tell me that I’m not prepared to kill for the nation—I stopped at two—it might have been four, you know. I’m even prepared to kill my own flesh and blood. How many men can say that?’ ... ‘I finally had enough and tied up my tubes. So, son, don’t let anyone tell you that women don’t do national service. We do it, and far longer than you men ... so don’t let me catch you saying that we don’t do national service ...’ (Koh & Bhatia, 2002: 156).

Chia notes, however, that her brother’s girlfriend was not so keen to embrace the self-sacrifice that was expected of her. Chia’s mother disparaged the attitude of the younger woman, while presupposing that women must “serve” the nation with their bodies and linking suffering to national duty: “Young girls nowadays suffer a little bit also cannot.⁶ How to serve the nation, tell me”? (Koh & Bhatia, 2002: 157). The boundaries of the deployment of the body for the national good are made clear in such a statement. It not only affirms Butler’s argument that the effect of power on bodies is contingently constituted (1993: 259), and not tenable for all time in all circumstances, but also that it is constituted by instabilities. The image of the nation as mother who must be protected reiterates the power structures of the nuclear family and repoliticises the body, but it is not universally nor uniformly received.

One frame through which this deployment of the body for the national good can be seen was the discursive field opened up by the campaign for Total Defence. The government website promoting the concept says:

Total Defence is about the different things that we can do everyday in every sector of our society to strengthen our resilience as a nation. When we take National Service seriously, participate in civil emergency exercises, upgrade ourselves and learn new skills, build strong bonds with different races and religions, and feel the pride of being Singaporean, we contribute to Total Defence (Singapore Government, n.d.[b]).

Total Defence involves more than just military defence: the five key areas of Total Defence are military defence, economic defence, civil defence, social defence and psychological defence. This idea expands the possibilities for participation to encompass other than a military contribution, thereby allowing an ideological space for women's contribution and for everybody to make sacrifices for the nation predicated on gendered uses of the body. In this way it also forecloses on any demands women might have to be allowed to undertake NS and redeploy their bodies in a way which might destabilise standard constructions of masculinity. Mathialagan M., writing to the *Straits Times* suggested:

There has been much talk about the declining numbers of national-service enlistees because of declining birth rates, which are expected to fall further ... We should also discard the narrow-mindedness of looking at national service only as service in the armed forces, police and civil-defence force. Instead it is time to embrace the concept of Total Defence in the true sense of the word ... This is not a new concept. It was practised in Spain and Switzerland in the early 1990s. Young men and women served their country together, and not only in the armed forces.

They were in hospitals and schools—fitting, given that nurses and teachers are always in short supply; they were in charitable organisations, helping out in old folks' homes and children's homes; they were in the beach services, contributing to cleanliness, safety and security of the beaches; and they were helping out in poor neighbourhoods and with youth services.

Women here could be enlisted into the forces for service, support and some combat appointments. This would free more men for service in the combat appointments and other services. Adopting these ideas here would not only be a great help to the organizations concerned, reducing worries and their costs, but it would also provide a golden opportunity for our young women to play a more active role in nation-building (Mathialagan M., 2000).

A common theme of the debates is that women should do national service and contribute to nation building, but it should be limited to the roles traditionally assigned to women, such as nursing, care-giving, child-minding and cleaning. Childbirth and the restocking of the gene pool, and ultimately the military, is also one of the domains through which women can do national service. If women performed more of these roles, it would free up more men to be produced as legitimate defenders of the nation and embodied national subjects. Yeh Siang Hui follows up on Mathialagan M's letter:

I refer to Mr. Mathialagan M.'s letter ... I agree with him that the time has come for Singaporean women to be involved in national service ... National service does not equate to service only in the armed forces, civil defence or police force; the term is broad and connotes any form of service to the country ... Thus there is no reason why women should feel inhibited about contributing to the overall security and good of the country in the fields of nursing, teaching, social work, and even in the less rigorous activities of the armed forces ... Let us not forget that 'equality' is an all-embracing term that includes not only equality of rights, but also equality of responsibilities (Yeh, 2000).

National service for women can be located within the discursive domain created by the concept of Total Defence and the government-designated arenas of nation-building which have expanded outside the military to encompass even the economic. If power can materialise effects on the body, some of these effects must remain the exclusive domain of men in order to minimise the destabilising potential of contingencies. This overlaps another prominent discourse, which demands that women 'pay' for their equality by a more responsible contribution, and by allowing men to perform their traditional role as 'providers'. For men, "the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions" (Butler, 1999: 178) in order to appear as "natural" men, is not possible without the complicity of women, without women carrying out their own circumscribed gender performance. This would not include military training. Xie Yanming in a letter to the *Straits Times* suggests that the bodies of women have already inhibited their potential roles in NS:

I read with interest the call by some readers to involve women in national service (ST, July 17 ... ST, July 20) ... Although most of the points raised are valid, we have not reached the stage where we need to resort to recruiting the fairer sex. As one reader noted, the term 'national service' is 'broad and connotes any form of service to the country'. Many of us fail to realise that women have been performing their share of 'national service' all along, when they undergo the laborious and painstaking process of child-bearing and child-rearing. In other words, they are carrying out the 'national' duty of maintaining our population (Xie, 2000).

As if to reclaim some of the gender power men feel they have lost, some writers to the *Straits Times* demand that women be made to see that it is a travesty to valorise women's contribution (Wong, 2002).

The discursive struggle over legitimacy of contribution to the nation, and forms of national service, rehearses the politicisation of women's bodies. Angie Wee argues that women's bodies have always been available for the national good:

Men and women have different roles to play in life. Men are generally the protectors and women, the nurturers. In a significant way, women in Singapore have always gone through national service, even before the government introduced it for men. They have carried their babies in their wombs, given birth to them, breastfed them and brought them up, sometimes jointly with their husbands, sometimes not. And for every baby born, this 'national service' amounts to many more days, weeks, months, and years than any man put in for compulsory NS (Wee, 2002).

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to demonstrate that the female body, as it is understood in Singapore, is a complex discursive element, as well as being a lived experience, located at the intersection where the symbolic meets the material. It is valuable to consider at this point the contrasting experiences of women and men, which might inscribe gender on their body surface and circumscribe the possibilities of male subjectivity. Men are conscripted and their bodies temporarily subsumed by state processes. Foucault discusses the methods of domination and discipline used for turning men into soldiers and the double value of docile bodies. The body disciplined by military training has had its energy harnessed and enhanced for two purposes: it is more obedient, and more amenable to exploitation in the service of the state (Foucault in Rabinow, 1991: 182). This presents a subtle problematic for Singapore: women have not been subjected to this discipline and have not had their energies reversed. Although it could be argued that commitment to the maintenance of the family and to a cycle of production and consumption in the market, are effective ways of reversing energies, for the majority of women, it has not ensured docility or afforded the state control over their bodies. If “for citizens, this land is their home, and defending it a duty, part of the social contract of Singapore” (Koh & Bhatia, 2002: 15) then those who are excluded from this part of the social contract—that is from the experience of military training—are less malleable, less disciplined and their bodies less utilisable.

The body in Singapore is constituted through the discourses of the state at their intersection with the nation, the family and individual desire. The body becomes a principle of socio-political organisation. In the instrumental rationality of modernity, the body itself is instrumentalised. However, while the body is a site for discipline, it is also a site for resistance to embodied gender norms. In light of the Singapore government’s failure to cajole women into accepting that their national obligation is to deploy their own bodies for the benefit of the nation—and the competing discourses that this has generated—Butler’s (1993: 10) assertion that fissures in the reiterative processes of discourse create not only instabilities, but also crises in the gender order, is all the more resonant.

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Notes

1. Lee Kuan Yew: Singapore's first Prime Minister (1965-1990).
2. Pulau Tekong (Tekong Island); an island off the north east coast of the main island of Singapore used for basic military training.
3. Kueh (Malay): cake
4. AWARE Association of Women of Action and Research, the premier women's group in Singapore.
5. Brigadier General Lee Hsien Loong, Lee Kuan Yew's son and current Prime Minister
6. The syntax in this sentence marks it as Singlish, rather than English. Singlish is a creole with its roots in English, but with a vocabulary comprised of Hokkien, Malay and Mandarin words as well as English.