

The Pink Dot redrawn

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by Skyler Wang

PERHAPS more than any of the iterations before, this year's Pink Dot is being afflicted by a series of peculiar developments. One after another, attempts were made by both Pink Dot detractors and the State to curtail the success of the event.

The most recent incident, concerning a Pink Dot advertisement found on an escalator in Cathy Cineisure, broke just days ago. Members belonging to the Facebook group "We are against Pinkdot in Singapore" heavily criticised Pink Dot organisers for the ad placement, as well as the shopping mall for agreeing to display it. The contention around the ad eventually found its way to the tables of The Advertising Standards Authority of Singapore (ASAS), which, upon deliberation, came to the conclusion that the ad's slogan, "Supporting the Freedom to Love", violated one of the general principles of the Singapore Code of Advertising Practice (SCAP) - those of "family values".

According to the authorities, public advertisements should not "downplay the importance of the family as a unit and foundation of society." They ultimately instructed Cathy to "amend the advertisement", adding that follow-ups will be made to ensure its compliance.

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Beyond highlighting the State's limited and inadequate definition of what constitutes a family unit, this incident exemplifies a persistent strategy the Singaporean government uses to quell public dissent - by exerting its influence in the form of policy and legality. In fact, what occupied much of the media attention on Pink Dot prior to this latest episode illuminate this exact pattern. To those unfamiliar with the issue, amendments made to the Public Order Act by the Ministry of Home Affairs in Nov last year imposed a blanket ban on foreign involvement from all future Pink Dot assemblies. There are two ways in which this policy takes shape. One, the State has limited sponsorship rights solely to domestic corporations. Since the inception of Pink Dot in 2009, the event has largely relied on the funding provided by multinational companies such as Google, Facebook and Barclays.

When juxtaposed to the collective amount traditionally pledged by foreign enterprises, local sponsorship, although not insignificant, pales by comparison. More specifically, for Pink Dot 2016, only five out of the 18 corporate sponsors were domestic entities. By circumscribing Pink Dot's fundraising process, the government created artificial barriers that hinder the execution and success of the event. Aside from restricting sponsorship rights, the new amendments also banned foreigners from showing up at the event itself. Before, a participant's citizenship status was irrelevant to his or her attendance. Immediately prior to last year's event, the government imposed sanctions on foreign involvement by prohibiting non-Singaporeans and permanent residents from participating in a demonstration, allowing them only to peacefully observe (holding up placards was still acceptable).

According to the most recent amendments, "the law no longer distinguishes between participants and observers, and regards anyone who turns up to the Speakers' Corner in support of an event to be part of an assembly." Foreigners, thus, are altogether barred from the Hong Lim Park event on July 1 this year (only Singaporeans and Permanent Residents can be physically present).

In response to media queries on these new circumstances, the Ministry of Home Affairs issued the statement below:

"The Government's general position has always been that foreign entities should not interfere in our domestic issues, especially political issues or controversial social issues with political overtones. These are political, social or moral choices for Singaporeans to decide for ourselves. LGBT issues are one such example. This is why under the rules governing the use of the Speakers' Corner, for events like Pink Dot, foreigners are not allowed to organize or speak at the events, or participate in demonstrations."

I take issue with several of the State's claims. First, note that by exclusively highlighting the need to protect political and social issues from foreign interference, the State strategically leaves out economic issues. This reflects the State's ideology when it comes to managing foreigners, where the relevance of these 'outsiders' is confined to their economic contribution. It suggests that foreign talents, labor and investment are encouraged in our country to the extent that they help with our economy, but these entities should not have any further influence beyond that. This not only assumes that the social experiences of foreigners are external to our sociopolitical and cultural makeup, but it simultaneously reinforces the falsehood that foreigners are somehow unaffected by the workings of today's inequalities. This is highly problematic because the criminalisation of same-sex acts and relationships do not exclusively affect Singaporeans - LGBTQ-identifying foreigners face similar forms of discrimination both at work and in their personal lives. Sometimes, we forget that foreigners who attend an event like Pink Dot may share some of the very same grievances as their Singaporean counterparts. Pink Dot could be as much about standing up for one's own rights as it is about advancing a particular brand of politics for these non-Singaporeans.

Furthermore, it is important to remind ourselves that social issues have economic consequences. The State likes to use terms like 'domestic' or 'social issues' to trivialise the effects of certain inequalities, disregarding the fact that these very issues lead to real crevices in one's material life. For example, and as aforementioned, the criminalisation of homosexuality (a social issue) could prevent LGBTQ individuals from gaining fair access to job opportunities (an economic issue). By failing to recognise same-sex unions (a social issue), same-sex couples are deprived of the same rights enjoyed by heterosexual couples when purchasing public housing (once again, an economic issue). For those LGBTQ-identifying foreigners who desire to naturalise in this country and settle down with their partners, their aspirations may not differ that much from other queer Singaporeans. This universal yearning to belong is what that propels both citizens and non-citizens alike to mobilise.

As sociologists love to say - humans are a product of society, and our thoughts and actions are never independently formulated. When the State claims that there are "political, social or moral choices for Singaporeans to decide for ourselves," there is an underlying assumption that Singaporeans possess an intrinsically different set of morals from foreigners, and that it is vulnerable to foreign disruption. This assumption, of course, stems from a long-held belief that homosexuality is a western-imported concept that remains incompatible with Asian values or 'true' Singaporeanhood. This assumption also situates Singaporean culture as static and ahistorical, and that it somehow contains an essence that is 'pure' and non-evolving (even though the greatest irony is that in almost all other aspects of our lives, we have wholeheartedly embraced foreign technologies, cuisines and ways of being). It further suggests that it is almost inherently wrong to be both gay and Singaporean, insofar as these are contradicting and irreconcilable qualities. This is a carefully engineered social narrative that still holds much cultural influence over Singaporean society today, oftentimes used by the older generation to denigrate young LGBTQ Singaporeans for their cosmopolitan and westernised worldviews.

This urgent need to restrict outside influences ("foreigners are not allowed to organize or speak at the events") is also an unsatisfying explanation for the new changes in law because Singaporeans are leading increasingly interconnected and transnational lives. Democratic ideals travel across the world through mainstream and social media outlets. We lived through the events that led to the Supreme Court's decision to strike down the Defence of Marriage Act in the US in 2015, just as how we witnessed the Taiwanese's high court's ruling that brought same-sex marriage to its legal fruition this May. These historic events do not exist in social vacuums; we hear about them and they have the power to shape how we understand and navigate our world. Moreover, in this day and age, websites such as Netflix and YouTube grant us instant access to content that expose us to the lives of LGBTQs and the sexual activism that is happening all around the world. This global diffusion of narratives, values and knowledge have happened, is happening and will continue to happen, whether the Singapore government likes it or not. Banning foreign speakers and participants from an LGBTQ rights event for the fear that they would transmit un-Singaporean values to its attendees should be the least of the State's concerns.

Singapore prides itself for being a diverse and multicultural nation, oftentimes flaunting its cosmopolitanism as a means to legitimise its position in the global arena. An international city puts people of all creeds and citizenship into constant social intercourse, facilitating the formation of friendships and partnerships between citizens and non-citizens. Singaporeans befriend and date folks who are non-citizens - this is a social fact that could not get anymore mundane. However, under the new Public Order Act, couples, families and friends with mixed citizenship status will be unable to attend this year's Pink Dot together. This laboured and politically-motivated effort to separate particular forms of social union poignantly points to the reality that underpins the need for Pink Dot's existence, where notions of "freedom" and "love" have yet to transcend the rigid boundaries of socially constructed categories such as gender, sexuality and incidentally, citizenship.

To sum up - queer politics in Singapore cannot and will never become a purely Singaporean affair because amidst an increasingly cosmopolitan and global world order, it is impossible to trace and defend what one might call an 'authentically Singaporean ideal'. In fact, we need to move away from the pursuit of this false sense of pureness by aspiring to become critically aware global citizens (by balancing values and morals from a wide array of cultures and traditions), rather than the static and non-evolving Singaporean our government so desperately wants us to be.

Besides, take a minute to think about what the State just tried to accomplish - by removing foreign involvements, the governing power, as I believe, ventured into slowing down the momentum of Singapore's first and only LGBTQ movement. This suggests that the State's imagination of the average Singaporean is someone who is politically apathetic and unsupportive of, or at best, neutral towards the idea of gay rights (without foreigners, the movement would fail). For galvanised Singaporeans, showing up and mobilising is one of the most powerful ways to overcome such an inadequate conception of themselves.

In addition, the idea that only someone with the right documentation can participate in a social movement is not only fundamentally undemocratic, but it sends a disturbing message to non-Singaporeans living in the nation state - that your voices do not matter, and that you do not get to mess with the status quo. Foreigners who disagree with such a treatment should also find meaningful avenues to express their discontent towards this form of exclusionary politics (e.g. voicing your concerns through both online and offline platforms). Regardless of whether this could lead to a tangible change of heart by the government, getting the conversation going is key.

Perhaps a heartening outcome that emerged amidst all of this controversy is that in just under six weeks, more than 100 Singaporean firms have stepped up and committed financial support for this year's event, a size twenty times larger than last year's five. According to The Straits Times, as of early May, Pink Dot organisers have raised a total of \$201,000 - surpassing their initial target of \$150,000. It is important to remember though, that in a country where 30 per cent of the population is made up of foreigners, most domestic firms have foreign representation. Embedded deep within the backing of Singaporean firms lies the support of their non-Singaporean constituents as well.

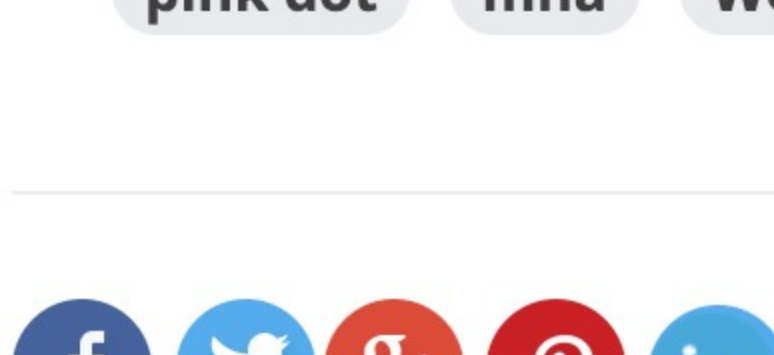
Online, many overseas Singaporeans have expressed their intentions to return home to attend this year's Pink Dot (to make up for some lost numbers). I assume that during their time abroad, many of these overseas Singaporeans would have accumulated new cultural values and understandings of democracy. Perhaps their way of navigating the world resembles more closely to the foreigners residing in our country than those who never left. In the eyes of our government, might these individuals also be unworthy of civic engagement in Singapore?

Ultimately, what matters most for us is that when faced with the State's repeated attempts at redrawing the contours of the Pink Dot, movement organisers and their allies need to fight to ensure that the integrity of the movement is not lost. How the story develops depends less on the shape or size of this one dot, but how many new ones we can inspire as new and imminent waves of activism await us.

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