

Digital Advocacy Journalism's Push for the Narrative Tipping Point of Singapore's Capital Punishment

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Abstract

A narrative tipping point leading to the abolition of capital punishment will come from specific events and broader trends that move public opinion and the accompanying legal systems away from the justification for death penalties. Through Singapore's independent digital journalist Kirsten Han's reflection on her reportage and advocacy for the abolition of capital punishment in the republic, this paper seeks to highlight the role of digital advocacy in pushing for the narrative tipping point on the death penalty online. Against global trends of abolition, retentionist cultures on capital punishment remain resilient, particularly in countries that claim strong domestic support for authoritarian populist narratives of being "tough on crime." Institutionally sustained and discursively binarized as "Asian values" against rights-based Western individualism and continuously reiterated by national leaders, Singapore's policy on capital punishment is termed *muscular retentionism*. Contending with this dominance in cyberspace is Han's affective emphasis on death row inmates facing imminent execution, particularly those condemned to death for drug trafficking. Using a partially autobiographical approach as the second author of this paper, she illustrates her experiences as a woman activist in Singapore, journeying with these inmates and documenting their experiences as part of the broader effort to move toward the narrative tipping point. Positioned against the largely impersonalized and

instrumental justification of the traditional retentionist position established in the pre-Internet decades is Han's rights-based emphasis on the sanctity of life. Receiving little attention in the republic's mainstream media, cyberspace has oxygenated this perspective. Aside from facing legal and police scrutiny for her involvement in abolitionist campaigns, Han has also been subjected to misogynist ad-hominem attacks online from supporters of retention. Kirsten Han's digital advocacy journalism poignantly sharpens the existing feminist critique in Singapore of the carceral regime with a more intersectional approach toward expanding the scope of the discussion to that of predominately male death row inmates. Her emphasis comes from the notion of difference feminism in considering the structural inequalities and power dynamics that render the more socially disadvantaged vulnerable to the regimes of punishment. Aside from being openly singled out and chastised by the state, it may remain difficult to determine the public impact of Han's journalistic work. Nonetheless, through amplifying the otherwise invisible emotional states and voices of death row inmates and their families as individuals, she exposes the human cost in the regime of capital punishment and in the process inches Singapore toward the narrative tipping point.

Keywords: capital punishment, Singapore, muscular retentionist, digital advocacy journalism, narrative tipping point

Introduction: "Do You Feel Satisfied . . . Now They Have Hanged Him?"

Yesterday afternoon in Ipoh, I walked under a merciless sun in procession behind Nagaenthran's casket. The air was full of the beating of drums, and the wails of Nagen's closest and dearest family members. His seven-year-old nephew, still too young to grasp the horror of the violence that had been visited upon his family, clasped my right hand, and complained that the firecrackers were too loud. On my left was Sangkari, the sister of Pannir Selvam Pranthaman, another Malaysian prisoner on death row in Singapore. She had intertwined her fingers with mine, and we held on to each other tightly. Sangkari took in the cries of the people around us, the family's anguish. She fixed her

eyes on Nagen's casket, adorned with flowers, carried on the shoulders of men from his family and community. Her own eyes reddened with unshed tears. "Do they feel satisfied," she said quietly, her voice a mix of sadness and rage, "now that they have hanged him?"¹

This excerpt is from independent digital journalist and capital punishment abolitionist Kirsten Han covering the execution of Malaysian national Nagaenthran K. Dharmalingam in Singapore in 2022. Capital punishment in Singapore covers not just violent acts of murder and kidnapping but, more controversially, that of drug trafficking. In 2009, then twenty-year-old Nagaenthran was caught entering Singapore in possession of around 42.72 grams of heroin and was sentenced to death a year later.² Delayed by moratoriums, COVID-19, and other judicial appeals, he was executed thirteen years later by hanging on April 27, 2022.³

As the one of the remaining retentionist countries where capital punishment is still actively enforced, Singapore is not new to international scrutiny, particularly if he was to be executed for drug trafficking. However, as a person with psychosocial disabilities and with an IQ of sixty-nine, Nagaenthran's case came under more intense scrutiny.⁴ Although the Singapore authorities insisted that he was able to exercise intellectual discretion,⁵ the case explicitly revealed the vulnerabilities of the socially marginalized with regards to capital punishment. The retentionist justification of capital

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1. Han, Kirsten, "When Will We Stop Killing 'Small People' Who Need Care?" We, the Citizens, March 28, 2022, <https://www.wethecitizens.net/when-will-we-stop-killing-small-people-who-need-care/>.
 2. "The Death Penalty, In Singapore," Ministry of Home Affairs (Singapore), November 5, 2021, <https://www.mha.gov.sg/home-team-real-deal/detail/detail/the-death-penalty-in-singapore>.
 3. "Malaysian Nagaenthran Executed on Drugs Charges in Singapore," Al Jazeera, April 27, 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/27/holdnagaenthran-hanged-at-dawn-in-singapore>.
 4. "Singapore: UN Experts Urge Halt to Execution of Drug Offender with Disabilities," United Nations, November 8, 2021, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2021/11/singapore-un-experts-urge-halt-execution-drug-offender-disabilities>.
 5. Tan, Yvette, "Singapore Executes Man on Drug Charge, Rejecting Mental Disability Plea," BBC, April 27, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-61239221>.

punishment in Singapore is predominately abstracted simultaneously as necessary “law and order” compared to the individual rights of citizens of Western societies. Reiterated by national leaders and reinforced by the traditional mainstream media, often with the backing of state-commissioned and provided opinion polls and crime statistics, this narrative remains popular in Singapore for its association with public safety, social cohesion, and national sovereignty. Entrenched over more than five decades, it is called the “muscular retentionist” position of Singapore policy on capital punishment. Within the republic’s heavily regulated media and public spaces, there have been few opportunities to air alternative abolitionist narratives.

The presence of the Internet has however opened new sites of expression for a younger generation of independent digital journalists to champion abolition and inch capital punishment toward a narrative tipping point. Serving the role as the second author here, this paper will illustrate how Han’s digital advocacy journalism presents more current and affective narratives to the debate. In addition, as a woman in a largely masculine political arena, Han’s online writing has also exposed her to ad-hominem vitriolic attacks on the Internet, revealing in turn the challenges faced by abolitionists in the republic. Han’s journalism is not an isolated individual undertaking. She sharpens the broader existing feminist critique on the heavy reliance on the carceral regime of punishment in Singapore as a politics of deterrence. In revealing the individual human toll, Han’s push for the narrative tipping point serves as a visible push toward a more rehabilitative and restorative vision of transformative justice in the republic.

Finding the Capital Punishment's Narrative Tipping Point

Referring to disruptive conditions that exceed threshold behaviors in moral equilibriums, the term *tipping point* has been used widely since the 1950s

to explain fundamental paradigm shifts in public attitudes.⁶ Once considered universal, the abolition of capital punishment has increased over close to five decades, from sixteen countries in 1977 to 112 in 2023.⁷ Similarly, the number of countries with death penalties extended to drug trafficking offences have reduced to around thirty-five countries with six, including Singapore, confirmed to be “high application states” that have actively executed drug traffickers.⁸ Fundamentally unsettling existing beliefs in the death penalty as an effective form of punishment and deterrence, the tipping point usually comes by shifting underlying societal values and public incidents of injustice.⁹ As part of the “innocence revolution,”¹⁰ skepticism of the normative moral claims of the death penalty as an effective legal and instrumental deterrent comes not just from constitutional challenges. Marred by wrongful convictions of usually the socially disadvantaged, the justification for capital punishment starts to wane.¹¹ In this respect, narratives are critical for abolitionists in anti-death penalty campaigns to evoke empathy that illustrates the

6. See Morton Grodzins, “Metropolitan Segregation,” *Scientific American* 197, no. 4 (1957): 33–41, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24941940>; Manjana Milkoreit, “Social Tipping Points Everywhere?—Patterns and Risks of Overuse,” *WIREs Climate Change* 14, no. 2 (2023): 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.813>; Nuttall Mark, “Tipping Points and the Human World: Living with Change and Thinking about the Future,” *AMBIO* 41 (2012): 96–105, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13280-011-0228-3>.

7. *Amnesty International Global Death Penalty Report* (London: Amnesty International, 2023).

8. “The Death Penalty for Drug Offences, Global Overview 2022,” International Harm Reduction, 2022,.

9. See Susyan Jou and Bill Heberton, “Support for the Death Penalty in Taiwan?: a Study of Value Conflict and Ambivalence,” *Asian Journal of Criminology* 15 (2020): 163–83, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11417-019-09305-z>; “Narrative Shift and the Death Penalty,” *Opportunity Agenda*, 2022, https://opportunityagenda.org/messaging_reports/shifting-the-narrative/case-1/.

10. See Simon Cole and Jay Aronson, “Blinded by Science on the Road to Abolition?” in *The Road to Abolition? The Future of Capital Punishment in the United States*, ed. Charles J. Ogletree and Austin Sarat (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 46–71, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qg887.6>.

11. Charles J. Ogletree and Austin Sarat, eds., *The Road to Abolition? The Future of Capital Punishment in the United States* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

human realities of capital punishment.¹² Here, the amplifications of accounts of death row inmates are critical in exposing the discursive and instrumental contours of capital punishment. Calling for both collective accountability and moral conscience, their voices and stories make them visibly human.

Although global trends are tilting toward abolition, the struggle for an end to capital punishment remains significantly daunting in retentionist countries. For these countries in the Global South, the emphasis on capital punishment is often intimately tied to both the rhetoric and instruments of political legitimacy and control.¹³ The commonly more restrictive media and social landscapes of these political environments create difficulties for abolitionists to even mount public debates and advocacy on platforms otherwise taken for granted in liberal democracies. The arrival of the Internet in the late 1990s has however offered both the economic and political affordances for anti-death penalty campaigners' greater autonomy to organize and broadcast activities crucial in moving the public toward the narrative tipping point. One such case is that of Singapore's independent digital journalist Kirsten Han, who is also known as one of the republic's more prominent anti-death penalty campaigners.

12. See Michael Burt, "The Importance of Storytelling at All Stages of a Capital Case," *UMKC Law Review* 77, no. 4 (2009): 877–910, <https://mow.fd.org/sites/mow/files/training/sessions/Theories%20and%20Storytelling/ImportanceofStoryTellingAtAllStagesCapital.pdf>; Melody Dickson, "Dismantling the Free Will Fairytale," *UMKC Law Review* 77, no. 4 (2009): 1123–46, https://heinonline.org/hol/cgi-bin/get_pdf.cgi?handle=hein.journals/umkc77§ion=46.

13. See Tim Harper, "Authoritarianism in Southeast Asia, Old and New," *European Policy Brief* (2016): 2–15; Rachel Li, "Laws as a Nation Building Process: A Case Study of Capital Punishment against Drug Offenses in Singapore" (PhD diss., University of Iowa, 2023); Lachlan McKenzie and Katharina Meissner, "Human Rights Conditionality in European Union Trade Negotiations: The Case of the EU–Singapore FTA," *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 55, no. 4 (2017): 832–49, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12522>; Michelle Miao, "Capital Punishment in China: A Populist Instrument of Social Governance," *Theoretical Criminology* 17, no. 2 (2013): 233–50, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362480613476788>; Steven Stack, "Authoritarianism and Support for the Death Penalty: A Multivariate Analysis," *Sociological Focus* 36, no. 4 (2003): 333–52, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00380237.2003.10571228>.

“One Death Is Too Kind”: Singapore's Muscular Retentionist Position

Integral to judicial systems until recently, capital punishment is considered a historical phenomenon deeply interwoven into the local political context and sociocultural fabric. As such, in terms of its narrative position, the insistence on its continued role can be considered a “muscular retentionist” approach. Underlying legal considerations are the entrenched popular cultural imaginations of overreaching Leviathans capable of imposing social stability. Manifested in the death sentence as the pinnacle of the monopoly of violence in the demonstration of state power, this discourse of capital punishment is often found in authoritarian rhetoric as a promise for deterrence and discipline.

Compared to the messiness and time-consuming emphasis on protecting individual rights that comes across as modern but also Western, the muscular application of capital punishment is contrasted as being more decisive. It also reflects cultural identification with notions of collective community that are in turn contrasted with drug-tolerant Western individualism. The instrument of capital punishment does not operate in an isolated legal environment. Rather, it is consciously part of the showcase of authoritarian governance and leadership personified in the masculinist image of the strongman associated with political decisiveness and cohesion in bringing about social order.¹⁴ It is within such characteristics that Singapore’s traditional retentionist position on its narrative on capital punishment can be modelled, demonstrated in the following examples.

The question of abolishing the death penalty in Singapore first came about during the 1950s. As the ruling party that has dominated Singapore

14. Hend Hanafy, “The Justification of Punishment in Authoritarian States” (PhD diss., Girton College, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.81813>; Wan A. Manan, “A Nation in Distress: Human Rights, Authoritarianism, and Asian Values in Malaysia,” *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 14, no. 2 (1999): 359–81, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41057001>.

politics since assuming office in 1959, Singapore's People's Action Party (PAP) has not only retained Victorian executional practices of hanging but also extended the scope of eligible offences from murder to that of kidnapping and, more contentiously, drug trafficking.¹⁵ The extension came about as part of containing the increasing volume of transnational narcotic flows from Indochina in the 1960s during the Vietnam War.¹⁶ Under the amendments to the Misuse of Drugs Act in 1973, trafficking the following amounts of illicit drugs carries the mandatory death penalty: thirty grams of morphine, fifteen grams of diamorphine (pure heroin), five hundred grams of cannabis, two hundred grams of cannabis resin, one thousand grams of cannabis mixture, thirty grams of cocaine, and two hundred and fifty grams of methamphetamine.¹⁷

While several offences have been added to the death penalty, Singapore has retained the colonial executional practice of judicial hanging of the convicted. Sentences are based on what the authorities consider the severity and frequency of the offence to victims and society at large, as well as the deterrent effect. With a judge rather than jury-based trials, the public's responsibility in determining death sentences is being completely removed at the level of sentencing. While there are no specific timelines, executions normally take place after the judicial process, after applications of stay of executions have run their course. Conducted within the premise of Changi Prison, the notices of individual executions and general

15. Betty Khoo, "All's Quiet on the Local Front," *New Nation*, May 15, 1973, 9; "The Noose and Malaya," *Straits Budget*, February 23, 1956, 14.

16. See Jakub Lonsky, Isabel Ruiz, and Carolos Vargas-Silva, "Trade Networks, Heroin Markets, and the Labor Market Outcomes of Vietnam Veterans," *Labor Economics* 78 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.labeco.2022.102189>; Robert Solomon, "Malaysia and Singapore: New Export Centers for the Southeast Asian Heroin Trade," *Journal of Psychedelic Drugs* 11, no. 4 (1979): 283–88, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02791072.1979.10471410>.

17. Sato Mai, "Singapore's Death Penalty for Drug Trafficking: What the Research Says and Doesn't," *Eleos*, October 9, 2023, <https://www.monash.edu/law/research/eleos/blog/eleos-justice-blog-posts/singapores-death-penalty-for-drug-trafficking-what-the-research-says-and-doesnt>.

statistics of the rate of executions are periodically reported in the local mainstream media.¹⁸ While deterrence is emphasized, capital punishment in Singapore is not meant to be a public spectacle. But this serves to remove the broader public from the corporeality and violence of judicial hangings.

Already regarded as excessive in relation to nonviolent offences, the imposition of capital punishment for drug trafficking has also become a significant point of diplomatic contention, especially with post-abolition countries in the European community.¹⁹ Global trends toward the abolition of capital punishment in recent decades have placed countries with retentionist policies, like Singapore, increasingly on the defensive. Simultaneously, there was also dissent from Singapore-based abolitionists arising as early as the 1960s, starting with the official decision to retain capital punishment.²⁰

18. See “The Death Penalty in Singapore,” Ministry of Home Health, November 5, <https://www.mha.gov.sg/home-team-real-deal/detail/detail/the-death-penalty-in-singapore>. The Singapore Prisons Service reported in 2023 there were eleven offenders executed in the republic, all for drug trafficking offences. This was the highest record since 2018 where all thirteen offenders were executed for the same crime. Between 2007 and 2017, the numbers were in the single digits, with no executions carried out in some years. This spike in executions was probably based on the ending of a moratorium in 2011 on the death penalty for drug trafficking offences. See “Serious Setback: Singapore Breaks Moratorium on Death Penalty,” International Commission of Jurists, 2014, <https://www.icj.org/serious-setback-singapore-breaks-moratorium-on-death-penalty/>. An additional rise in executions in 2023 could also be attributed to its resumption from the suspension of the process during the COVID-19 years. Samuel Deveraj, “11 Judicial Executions in 2022; None in Previous Two Years,” Straits Times, February 9, 2023, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/courts-crime/11-judicial-executions-in-2022-none-in-previous-two-years>.

19. See Michael Fullilove, *Capital Punishment and Australian Foreign Policy* (Sydney: Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2006); McKenzie and Meissner, “Human Rights Conditionality in European Union Trade Negotiations.”

20. See Abdullah Noorman, *Exploring Constructions of the “Drug Problem” in Historical and Contemporary Singapore* (Singapore: Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore, 2005); Stephan Ortmann, “Liberal Vestiges in an Illiberal Regime: The Case of Singapore,” *Society* 60, no. 1 (2023): 28–39, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-022-00790-0>; Priscilla Chia, Rachel Zeng, Audrey Tay, and Koh Shi Min, “Tracing the History of the Anti-Death Penalty Movements in Singapore,” in *A History of Human Rights Society in Singapore*, ed. Song Jiyoung (London: Routledge, 2017), 17–35; David

Until the advent of the Internet in the 1990s, these groups had few media platforms to amplify their perspectives. From restrictive licensing regulations to significant funding of both the main print and broadcast media, the government has maintained visible interventionist oversight, giving the state significant control over national narratives.²¹ As such, domestic public opinion seems to be continuously supportive of retention, subscribing to the notion of the effectiveness of capital punishment as a deterrent in keeping crime rates in the republic low.²²

Anchoring the retentionist narrative is also the muscular projection of the personality of Singapore's former statesman and prime minister of three decades Lee Kuan Yew (1923–2015). Beginning as an opposition parliamentarian before becoming postcolonial Singapore's first prime minister and various subsequent post-ministerial appointments before his death in 2015, Lee Kuan Yew oversaw and shaped Singapore's political discourse for around six decades. In both local platforms and interviews with the international media, the Cambridge-trained lawyer was an outspoken advocate of capital punishment with a narrative of anecdotal experiences framed along ethno-culturalist notions of the illiberal governance he believed was needed in disorderly non-Western societies.²³ At the turn of the twenty-first century,

Johnson, "The Jolly Hangman, the Jailed Journalist, and the Decline of *Journal of South-east Asian Studies* Singapore's Death Penalty," *Asian Criminology* 8 (2013): 41–59, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11417-012-9143-1>; M. Ravi, "Wanted for Mercy: Singapore and its Mandatory Death Penalty," *East Asian Law Journal* 1, no. 2 (2010): 107–14, https://www.airitilibrary.com/Common/Click_Doi?DOI=10.29432/EALJ.201009.0007;

21. Kenny Chng, "Falsehoods, Foreign Interference, and Compelled Speech in Singapore," *Asian Journal of Comparative Law* 18, no. 2 (2023): 235–52, <https://doi.org/10.1017/asjcl.2023.9>.
22. See Wing Chan, Tan Cheong, and Braema Mathi, "How Strong Is Public Support for the Death Penalty in Singapore?" *Asian Criminology* 13 (2018): 91–107, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11417-017-9260-y>; Giada Girelli, "'Alternative Facts': Public Opinion Surveys on the Death Penalty for Drug Offences in Selected Asian Countries," *International Journal of Drug Policy* 92 (2021): 103–55, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2021.103155>.
23. Sophie Pezzutto, "Confucianism and Capitalist Development: From Max Weber and Orientalism to Lee Kuan Yew and New Confucianism," *Asian Studies Review* 43, no. 2 (2019): 224–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2019.1590685>; Michael Barr, "Lee

such experiences started to be actively concretized in a series of memoirs and interviews that were both published and broadcasted.²⁴

Aside from officially promoted materials, Lee's statements from the pre-Internet decades have also surfaced within cyberspace, all seemingly spontaneously shared by netizens. Among such was an undated interview that the former prime minister had with Tim Sebastian as part of the British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC) *HARDtalk*, where public figures are unceremoniously questioned by the host. Describing candidly and unflinchingly the warnings about the severe penalties in Singapore for drug trafficking, Lee stated, "If you still come in with a few kilos of them [drugs], which will destroy hundreds, if not thousands of families, one death is too kind."²⁵ Despite Lee having passed on almost a decade ago, this video clip continues to be circulated and referenced, in particular, during protests and appeals

Kuan Yew: Race, Culture and Genes," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 29, no. 2 (1999): 145–66, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472339980000291>; Philip Holden, "A Man and an Island: Gender and Nation in Lee Kuan Yew's 'The Singapore Story,'" *Biography* 24, no. 2 (2001): 401–24, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23540153>.

24. Lysa Hong, "The Lee Kuan Yew Story as Singapore's History," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 33, no. 3 (2002): 545–57, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463402000371>. Lee dated his belief in the effectiveness of harsh laws as deterrence to that of his formative years during the Japanese military occupation whereby "the Japanese military administration governed by spreading fear. It put up with no pretense of civilised behaviour. Punishment was so severe that crime was very rare. . . . As a result, I have never believed those who advocated a soft approach to crime and punishment, claiming that punishment does not reduce crime. That was not my experience in Singapore before the war, during the Japanese occupation or subsequently. Lee Kuan Yew, *The Singapore Story* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 2001), 74. Asserting for the cynical need for brutish methods in non-Western societies, a justification not unique to Singapore in a widely quoted comment, Lee stated: "Nobody doubts that if you take me on, I will put on knuckle-dusters and catch you in a cul-de-sac. . . . If you think you can hurt me more than I can hurt you, try. . . . There is no other way to govern a Chinese society." "Lee Kuan Yew—The Best Quotes from Singapore's Founding Father," *Guardian*, March 23, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/23/lee-kuan-yew-the-best-quotes-from-singapores-founding-father>.
25. Mustsharenews, "Lee Kuan Yew Explains Death Penalty for Drug Traffickers in Singapore," YouTube, November 9, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-PXAOZwv-v04&t=114s>.

by international organizations and media on the impending executions of death row inmates convicted for drug trafficking.²⁶

His narrative continues to be sustained by his successors who reiterate the retentionist justification. Like Lee, Home Affairs and Law minister K. Shanmugan addressed the same questions in a more recent episode of *HARDtalk*. Challenging philanthropist and global campaigner for drug policy reform Richard Branson to a live debate in Singapore, Shanmugam also tried to replicate the televised debates that Lee had with news anchors of prominent Western media.²⁷ Effectively, Lee has moved the retentionist justification from merely that of a law-and-order issue of criminal deterrence to that of critiquing what is construed as Western liberalism. Reflecting the popularity of the official position is also frequent public surveys showing significant support of the death penalty from Singaporean and non-Singaporean respondents.²⁸

Emerging against this retentionist discursive framework is that of a newer generation of abolitionists, such as Kirsten Han's empathetic digital storytelling of individuals on death row. She presents, in part 1, the emerging challenges to the entrenched establishment, what Tan describes as "alternative voices in civil society mobilising around newer causes like climate justice, sexual politics, the repeal of the death penalty and support for Palestine. This new politics is driven by the energies of a younger, less fearful

26. Obbna Rajah, "Old Videos of Lee Kuan Yew on the Death Penalty Go Viral," *Independent Singapore*, April 28, 2022, <https://theindependent.sg/old-videos-of-lee-kuan-yew-on-the-death-penalty-go-viral/>.

27. "Richard Branson's Reasons for Turning Down TV Debate with Shanmugam 'Do Not Hold Water': MHA," CNA, November 5, 2022, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/mha-richard-branson-death-penalty-drugs-3045106>; "BBC Asked Shanmugam about S'pore's 'Social Controls,' 'Draconian' Drug Laws and Section 377A, Here's How He Responded," *Today*, June 29, 2022, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/bbc-hardtalk-podcast-shanmugam-gay-sex-drug-laws-1934106>.

28. "Ministerial Statement on Singapore's National Drug Control Policy—Speech by Mr K Shanmugam, Minister for Home Affairs and Minister for Law," Ministry of Home Affairs, May 8, 2024, <https://www.mha.gov.sg/mediaroom/parliamentary/ministerial-statement-on-singapore-national-drug-control-policy/>.

and globally connected generation of Singaporeans who are equipped with sophisticated repertoires of activism.”²⁹ Such repertoires have been made possible with the availability of a significantly more liberal Internet media landscape compared to the 1990s, which is part of the conscious official economic considerations facilitating the global flow of information.³⁰ Although regulatory oversight of independent digital media and scrutinization of online expression over the past decade have increased compared to the initial “light touch” of the past, cyberspace remains the paramount platform for voices from civil society.³¹

In the case of abolition, activists are mainly from more involved areas of society, such as criminal lawyers like M. Ravi, journalists like Kirsten Han, and other members of civil society who came together to form the Transformative Justice Collective (TJC) to focus on and connect issues related to criminal punishment, policing, and surveillance. It is these activities that in turn provide relevant details regarding individuals facing death row to international media and concerned global watchdogs, such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. Subtly augmenting the abolitionist cause from the cultural front are Singaporean-based arts and media groups. The more prominent and recent works included Boo Junfeng’s film *Apprentice* (2016) and the theater production *0600* by Groundz-0. In contrast to Lee’s *HARDtalk* episode, where he said, “One death is too kind,” through cyberspace Han’s narrative emphasizes the one unkind death. Her digital

29. Kenneth Paul Tan, “Politics in Action: 2024: Singapore Presented by Kenneth Tan,” Sydney Southeast Asia Centre, May 23, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LT-mZllfhhbk>.

30. S. Leong and T. Lee, “The Internet in Singapore: From ‘Intelligent Island’ to ‘Smart Nation,’” in *Global Internet Governance*, ed. Leong and Lee, (Singapore: Palgrave Pivot, 2021), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-9924-8_3.

31. M. Lim, “From Activist Media to Algorithmic Politics: The Internet, Social Media and Civil Society in Southeast Asia,” in *Routledge Handbook of Civil and Uncivil Society in Southeast Asia*, ed. E. Hansson and M. Weiss (London Routledge, 2023), 25–35.

storytelling stands in context with the cyber-counter-publics generated on the Internet in Singapore for close to three decades.³²

A Note on the Methodology: Collaborative Authorship

This paper could easily have been an exploration by Kirsten Han as a studied subject of digital contents and related activity, conveniently distancing the first author from the negative public attention that Han has been receiving. However, adding Han as the second author is based on the issues of positionality and ownership. Such is part of the practice of collaborative methodologies in coauthorship that recognizes more concretely the contribution of nonacademic social actors in the production of knowledge.³³ If autoethnography places experiences and reflections at the center, a quasi version will entail more conscious contextualization and supplementation in a multiauthored content. The first author has been following Han's activities and especially acknowledges the emotional toll that comes with interacting and writing about death row prisoners. In this respect, Han deserves some ownership of this discussion. Here, rather than being referenced as a studied subject, as the second author, Han can pen her own account and reflections. Complementing this autoethnography are the efforts of the first author in framing Han's activism along broader theoretical frameworks and political

32. V. Pak, "Lighting, Signing, Showing: The Circulability of Pink Dot's Counterpublic Discourse in Singapore," *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 27, no. 1 (2023): 24–41, <https://doi.org/10.1111/josl.12568>; Kai Khiun Liew, "Old 'Cowboy Towns': Enduring Democratic Enclaves as Singapore's Alternative Digital Histories, 1994–2011," *Internet Histories* 7, no. 4 (2023): 313–32, <https://doi.org/10.1080/24701475.2023.2236909>.

33. See Lucero Rojas, "On Conservation and Authorship: Legal Frameworks of Collaborative Methodologies," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 20, no. 1 (2021): 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406921993289>; Richa Nagar, "Storytelling and Co-Authorship in Feminist Alliance Work: Reflections from a Journey," *Gender, Place & Culture* 20, no. 1 (2013): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2012.731383>.

backdrops in which the issues are set. Han's coauthorship imparts more substantial and open activist-academia engagement and investment.

“Bui Bui Kirsten”: Advocacy within Phallogocentric Singapore

Narratives within mainstream local media are largely pro-establishment, observant of the amorphous political limits of what Singapore's former second prime minister Goh Chok Tong, whose tenure covered the 1990s, calls, in his analogy of golfing rules, the out of bounds or “OB markers” in public debates.³⁴ Often shifting, such markers have ranged from what is construed as confrontational and nondeferential, and thus “Un-Asian,” approaches with authority to public discussions on subjects like ethnic relations and religion that are deemed sensitive to Singapore's social stability. Here the topic of capital punishment seems to be placed along Singapore's political OB markers. Reports and commentaries in mainstream media are asymmetrically dominated by official responses, findings, and statements, with surveys featuring pro-retention findings, ministerial statements, and responses to criticisms and appeals from foreign governments and abolition-based organizations. Voices from local death row abolitionists, death row inmates, and even more criminologically based perspectives and genuine debates have been largely absent from the mainstream media. Although the presence of the state is still active, cyberspace is one of the few democratic enclaves for alternative voices in Singapore. It is in this space where counter-public narratives have been scripted and where an emerging generation of women activists like Kirsten Han became visible.

34. Kenneth Paul Tan, “Who's Afraid of Catherine Lim? The State in Patriarchal Singapore,” *Asian Studies Review* 33, no. 1 (2009): 43–62, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357820802706290>

As a woman activist, Han is also subjected to significantly greater public scrutiny in a country where women's political participation remains marginal. Part of this phenomenon is due to the negative imagination of women's involvement that has been cultivated by what Kenneth Paul Tan calls "phallogocentric ideology" in Singapore.³⁵ This is contrasted against the rational, disciplined, and serious ("manly" and "masculine") attributes of the patriarchal state against what are considered irrational ("feminine") opposing voices. Such populist binary frames are articulated in cyberspace by what appear to be ordinary netizens, or what Jesscia Megarry describes as individual men monitoring women who step forward, including personalities from the ruling party.³⁶ Assuming culturalist angles, women activists have been typecast as Westernized cosmopolitan liberals disrupting the fabric of harmonious conservative Singaporean society founded on traditional heteronormative Asian values.³⁷ These attitudes are found not just in random comments on social media postings related to Han's activities but also on otherwise dated Internet forums like that of Hardware Zone and Sammyboy, which are reputed for their misogynistic activities. Hence, while national leaders and mainstream politicians have been more careful articulating their political stances in recent decades, this does not reflect a more progressive political climate. Within cyberspace, phallogocentric sentiments continue to freely converge with populist nationalist appeals defending Singapore's sovereignty.

35. Tan, "Who's Afraid of Catherine Lim?"

36. Jessica Megarry, "Under the Watchful Eyes of Men: Theorising the Implications of Male Surveillance Practices for Feminist Activism on Social Media," *Feminist Media Studies* 18, no. 6 (2018): 1070–85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2017.1387584>.

37. See Yin kit Chan, "Toxic Masculinity in Singapore: National Service, Sexual Harassment, and the #MeToo Movement," *East Asia* 39 (2022): 225–38, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12140-021-09379-6>; Joel Gwynne, "Slutwalk, Feminist Activism and the Foreign Body in Singapore," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 43, no. 1 (2013): 173–85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2012.721665>; Adelyn Lim, "Confucian Masculinity: State Advocacy of Active Fatherhood in Singapore," *Men and Masculinities* 24, no. 1 (2021): 46–63, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X19867389>.

In many cases, sexually crude ad-hominem references are directed at particular individuals who do not fit idealized versions of femininity embodied in women within fully Singaporean households. Han fits this mold and quickly became a target for cyberbullying. Her Western husband triggers derogatory sexual associations about Asian women craving white men,³⁸ she is childless, keeps cats as pets, and has been labelled *Bui Bui* (Hokkien for “fat”) by her often-male haters. Nonetheless, she has persisted over the last decade in her work in independent journalism. She has covered a range of topical issues in Singapore and the larger Asian region and not pigeonholed herself into only covering “female issues.” Through spotlighting individual death row inmates and their perspective as persons facing executions, she is part of the broader collective effort in critiquing the cost of capital punishment borne predominantly by ethnic minorities in both Malaysia and Singapore. In the following sections, Han describes her approaches to digital advocacy journalism and its challenges as a woman whose activism took root in the early 2010s.

One Death Is Too (Un)kind: Kirsten Han’s Digital Narratives of Capital Punishment

There are parts of the Singapore Internet that are fixated on my appearance, specifically my weight. In these forums I am commonly referred to as “buihui Kirsten Han,”³⁹ “fatty Kirsten Han,” or, most explicitly of all, “fat fuck Kirsten

38. See Chan, “Toxic Masculinity in Singapore”; Gwynne, “*Slutwalk*, Feminist Activism and the Foreign Body in Singapore”; Lim, “Confucian Masculinity.”

39. Kumar22, “GLGT—Swee Boh? Bui Bui Kirsten Han under Investigation, Go Station for 2 Possible Leave with 4!!!” *Hardwarezone*, June 25, 2022, <https://forums.hardwarezone.com.sg/threads/gtgt-swee-boh-bui-bui-kirsten-han-under-investigation-go-station-for-2-possible-leave-with-4.6770203/>.

Han,"⁴⁰ a woman shamed for being married to a Caucasian foreigner.⁴¹ Like so many objectifying or fat-shaming comments directed at women online, these are attempts to put me in my "place," a reminder that a woman will always be reduced to her appearance regardless of her work, achievements, or expertise. It is an oily layer of sexism and misogyny that sits upon the swampy waters of other insults, adding to other attempts to cast me and my fellow activists as troublemakers, rabble-rousers, or even traitors to the nation.

Knowing what we know now about the harassment that outspoken women experience online, I suppose none of this is surprising, but it had not always been apparent to me that things would turn out this way. In hindsight, my entry into Singapore's civil society and political commentary scene came at a fortuitous time. The environment was far from free, but things were changing, and the ruling party had been forced to respond. The 2011 General Election that took place a year after I started volunteering for the independent media website the Online Citizen (popularly known as TOC) was, at that point, the most active since independence, with almost all constituencies being contested. It was also the first election that played out fully on social media. Instead of waiting for the newspaper's coverage in the next morning's edition, people were able to follow updates and see photos from political rallies in real time on platforms like Facebook. The ruling PAP returned to power as expected, but only with a national vote share of about 60 percent, considered a poor performance by a party used to

40. Johnrambo, "oh.....I finally realize kirsten han is some ugly fat fuck of a bitch" *Sammyboy Times*, July 1, 2017. <https://www.sammyboy.com/threads/oh-i-finally-realize-kirsten-han-is-some-ugly-fat-fuck-of-a-bitch.244806/>.

41. Meepokboy, "Is Fatty Kirsten Han a Joke Herself," *Sammyboy Times*, July 31, 2019, <https://www.sammyboy.com/threads/is-fatty-kirsten-han-a-joke-herself.271460/>; Kirstie Annauki Han, "Fat Fuck Kirsten Han Angry Drug trafficker was Executed on Weds and not Friday! Shanmugam better Run Road!" *Sammyboy Times*, October 24, 2018, <https://www.sammyboy.com/threads/fat-fuck-kirsten-han-angry-drug-trafficker-was-executed-on-weds-and-not-friday-shanmugam-better-run-road.260412/>.

overwhelming dominance. The result prompted hopes of a “new normal,” where the PAP would be more receptive to the opinions of a more vocal citizenry.⁴²

I slipped into that slight political opening as a twenty-something learning, for the first time, about aspects of my country that had not been adequately reflected in my school textbooks. Working with TOC, I met people and considered issues I never would have encountered in the safe confines of a middle-class cocoon: homeless Singaporean families living in tents in public parks, low-wage migrant workers exploited and abused by unsympathetic or outright hostile employers, terrified relatives of men condemned to death for nonviolent drug offences. Social media use was common in 2010, but the trend then still gravitated toward blogging, subscribing to RSS feeds, and following web pages that existed solely to aggregate noteworthy blog posts and articles related to current affairs in Singapore. I started my own free WordPress blog where I began commenting on topical issues.

I had never given much thought to the issue of capital punishment before and assumed that the death penalty was only reserved for the worst of the worst: murderers and drug lords who dealt poison that destroyed families for greed and profit. I had little sympathy for “bad people” and was happy to accept that my government could be trusted to take care of it. It was only when I came across the story of the death row inmate Yong Vui Kong that I realized how little I knew about how the death penalty is administered in Singapore and who really ends up on the receiving end. Instead of serial killers and other villains, I discovered that death row was overwhelmingly populated by people who had suffered poverty, deprivation, abuse, addiction, discrimination, and marginalization.⁴³

42. Cherian George, *Freedom from the Press: Journalism and State Power in Singapore* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2012).

43. Kirsten Han, “I Discovered the Truth about Singapore’s ‘War on Drugs,’ Now I Campaign against the Death Penalty,” openDemocracy, May 18, 2016, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/how-discovering-truth-about-singapore-s-war-on-drugs-led-me-to-campaign-to-abolish-death/>.

Yong, just half a year older than me, had been illiterate at the time of arrest in 2007 at the age of nineteen.⁴⁴ He'd turned things around behind bars, teaching himself to read and write and converting to Buddhism. I got to know his family members, brought together after years of difficulty and estrangement to campaign for his life. I learned about Singapore's Misuse of Drugs Act and how its presumption clauses meant that the odds were stacked against the accused. The system was far from foolproof and did not deliver the justice I had imagined as a child. My volunteering for TOC opened up an opportunity to join Singapore's miniscule anti-death penalty movement. I took it.

I had neither prior experience in activism nor community organizing, so I went with instinct and familiarity. Writing has always been how I process my thoughts and feelings and how I am most comfortable communicating. I decided to put these skills to use. I wrote social media posts, encouraging others to take photos of themselves holding up signs calling for Vui Kong to be spared and the mandatory death penalty abolished. I wrote articles for both TOC and my personal blog about the death penalty. With limited resources and platforms at our disposal, the events we organized—panel discussions, forums, gatherings at Speakers' Corner—could only be promoted on social media. At one point, worried by the slow response to an upcoming dialogue, I spent an entire afternoon directly messaging friends and acquaintances, inviting them to attend.

It was important to do this. When it comes to the death penalty, most Singaporeans were like how I used to be: ill-informed and indifferent. I believed—and still believe—that the first step in advocating for an end to capital punishment is to make Singaporeans aware of its process and problems, as research has found that most Singaporeans are unfamiliar with the reality of a policy they claim to support.⁴⁵ People tend to only hear of the death penalty when the mainstream media reports on the usually defensive

44. Selina Lum "Drug Courier Spared Death Now Challenges Caning Sentence," *Straits Times*, April 28, 2014, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/courts-crime/drug-courier-spared-death-now-challenges-caning-sentence>.

45. Chan, Tan, and Mathi, "How Strong Is Public Support for the Death Penalty in Singapore?"

statements by national leaders. Perspectives that complicate or refute the “death penalty is good and important for law and order” narrative do not tend to get play in the local media. The situation has improved slightly with relatively but precariously independent (and usually commercially oriented) publications like *Coconuts* or *RICE Media*. Still, activists are often left with no choice but to take matters into our own hands and become our own media outlets. In this way, my skillset and journalism experience mean that writing and storytelling have been the best ways for me to contribute to the movement.

The work that my peers and I do is not without risk. From its often strongly worded rebuttals—particularly in response to foreign media coverage—as well as its disinclination to approve public protests and vigils for death row inmates, the Singapore government is known to be very defensive on its position on capital punishment. Given the suppression of fundamental rights like freedom of expression and assembly, it is a constant struggle to get our message out while navigating a restrictive space. I have been questioned by the police three times—in 2017, 2021, and 2022. Two out of these three times had to do with actions relevant to my anti-death penalty work. The first investigation ended with a “stern warning” from the police, no further action was taken against me in the second, and I’m still waiting for an update about the third, even though it’s already been almost two years. I’ve received “correction directions” under the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) twice, both in relation to posts published online about the death penalty. In October 2022, I also received a “conditional warning” that the attorney general’s chambers told the police to issue me, because they claimed that a Facebook post I’d written in May, about the difficulty of getting lawyers to represent death row inmates post appeal, had been in contempt of court. In May 2024, K. Shanmugam, the minister for home affairs and law, made a ministerial statement on Singapore’s drug policy in Parliament—a speech that included characterizing anti-death penalty activists as “advocating for a different Singapore, where there will be more people dying, there will be more children affected, there will be more unfavourable outcomes, particularly on people of lower incomes.”

In this same speech, the minister accused me of spreading falsehoods and read my email address out in full to the House, suggesting that I had helped death row prisoners engage in “abuse of process” by filing post-appeal applications that were later dismissed by the courts.⁴⁶

Although I have so far managed to avoid arrest, imprisonment, and criminal or civil defamation suits, I have experienced more indirect forms of reprisals for my work. I have been accused, including publicly by ruling party politicians, of being involved with, or even inviting, foreign interference in Singapore’s domestic politics. Although the politicians themselves might not use words like *traitor* or *treason*, many of the online comments unleashed by their insinuations do contain such labels, alongside calls for me and my peers to be arrested, jailed, or even executed for our supposed betrayal of the nation (see figure 1).

To be sure, male dissidents and activists are also subject to smear campaigns and trolling online. But the attacks often take on a different tone when the target is a woman, and I know I’m not alone with this perception, as some male peers have made similar observations about the responses we get online to our work. I tend to get more comments that objectify, fat-shame, and slut-shame me compared to my male counterparts. The fact that I am married to a white foreigner is constantly brought up and receives much more scrutiny than the spouses of male activists or critics. It is a dilemma that I have grown familiar with over the years: social media has presented me with many opportunities, so much so that I might even say that I would not have the career I currently do without it, but it has also opened me up to trolling, harassment, and surveillance that has negatively impacted my mental health and left me constantly second-guessing myself and my instincts.

The reality is that, when it comes to speaking out in Singapore, there are not that many options. Even when I am being flamed on social media, I still turn to those platforms to respond to accusations and publish clarifications.

46. “Parliamentary Speeches: Ministerial Statement on Singapore’s National Drug Control Policy—Speech by Mr, K Shanmugam, Minister for Home Affairs and Minister for Law,” Ministry of Home Affairs (Singapore), May 8, 2024, <https://www.mha.gov.sg/media-room/parliamentary/ministerial-statement-on-singapore-national-drug-control-policy/>.

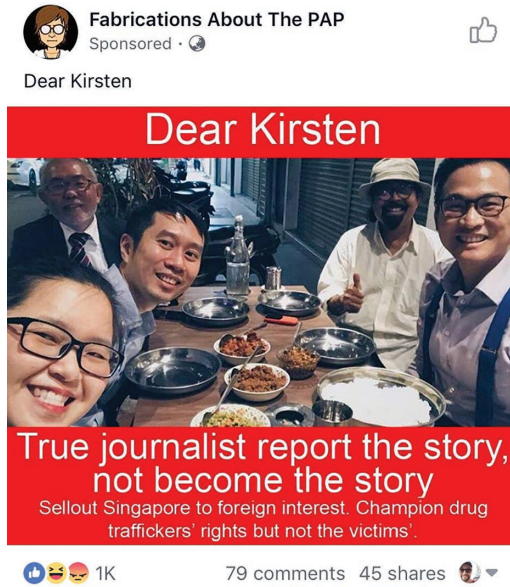


Figure 6.1 Kirsten Han (bottom left) being labelled as a “sellout” by pro-establishment social media platforms.

Source: From Han’s private collection.

At the end of the day, spaces like Facebook or Instagram continue to be where activists and journalists like me get the word out about our work and activities, hoping that they will get traction with other Singaporeans. However hard a time we might have, however problematic the companies that operate these platforms might be, we cannot easily turn away from them.

Since 2018, I have run an email newsletter—titled *We, the Citizens*—covering Singaporean politics, social issues, and civil society. It allows me to reach Singaporeans (and other people interested in Singapore) directly, without the censorship of the mainstream media or the gatekeeping and disinterest of international media outlets. I keep it small so there is very little overhead, which means that I do not need to be weighed down by financial considerations. There was a period—especially when Singapore ramped up its executions and my freelance work took a pause while I worked on

anti-death penalty campaigning—when I depended solely on my newsletter for income. In 2023, I started a secondary (and irregular) newsletter titled *Altering States*, focused on drugs and drug policy from a Singaporean perspective, to counter the “war on drugs” rhetoric from the state.

When it comes to fighting the death penalty, I’ve learned over the years that we cannot underestimate the power of human stories. In a Singapore that valorizes—even fetishizes—“pragmatism,” capital punishment is often talked about in terms of policy, cold and clinical, oriented toward a technocrat’s goals. It is all too easy to forget (or pretend to forget) that we are talking about people and human lives. But when we are forced to confront a human face, a life story, a desperate family, it becomes harder to be dismissive. And when we learn about prisoner after prisoner, the pattern becomes clear for all to see, prompting people to ask: *Why are almost all of them working-class ethnic minorities?* It forces people to ask themselves who we are fighting this “war on drugs” against.

By writing about the lives and experiences of death row prisoners and their families, my colleagues and I are trying to restore to the narrative the voices of those who are the most affected by the death penalty yet are often also the most sidelined. I do this through every space and platform I can get access to: in social media or blog posts, in interviews, on podcasts, in speeches at international conferences, during presentations in university classrooms, and, once, at a TEDx event organized by the National University of Singapore. I remember how I had stumbled upon Yong Vui Kong’s story and the issue of capital punishment almost by chance—it makes me keep in mind that every piece I write, every interview I give, every speech I deliver could be someone else’s entry point into this issue. Over the years, I’ve had multiple people tell me they’d watched my TEDx talk about the death penalty or read an article I’d written about a prisoner and that it’d made them reflect more deeply on the issue than they’d ever had before.

I am further convinced of the power and impact of these stories when I see how strongly the government reacts to this work that we do. In his May 2024 ministerial statement, Shanmugam once again accused us of

“glorifying the trafficker.” This attack was later echoed on *Petir*, the PAP’s official publication, which claimed that anti-death penalty activists were delusional virtue-signalers who are “either naïve at best or plagued by a saviour complex.”⁴⁷ This blog post ended with an especially harsh description of drug offenders on death row as “scourge of the earth and proxy murderers who do not deserve our sympathy,” making clear the ruling party’s desire for Singaporeans to forget the humanity of those on death row.

In 2021, when the world was still gripped by the COVID-19 pandemic, the family of Nagaenthran K. Dharmalingam received news that the Singapore government intended to execute him. They were told that they would be allowed to travel to Singapore to visit him and say goodbye, but they had to navigate the confusing pandemic requirements and foot the bill for the journey. On top of fundraising for the family’s travel costs, I also wrote about the administrative nightmare that they had to navigate, from arranging COVID-19 tests to buying insurance, booking flights, and finding hotels in which they could serve their quarantine periods (see figure 2).⁴⁸

For those who read that article—sent out via my newsletter and published on the website of the Transformative Justice Collective (a group in Singapore, of which I’m a member, working on issues related to the criminal punishment system)—the death penalty was no longer some abstract policy debate: it was revealed to be, as it always was, a cold, bureaucratic system geared toward delivering death.

As part of TJC, my peers and I pushed the anti-death penalty movement, bringing members of the public into the lives of Nagaenthran and his family.⁴⁹ On both TJC platforms and our personal social media pages, we wrote about his family’s prison visits (see figure 3), about their memories

47. “The Delusions of the Anti-Death Penalty Campaigners,” *Petir*, May 10, 2024, <https://petir.sg/2024/05/10/the-delusions-of-the-anti-death-penalty-activists/>.

48. Kirsten Han, “Death by Bureaucracy,” *We, the Citizens*, October 31, 2021, <https://www.wethecitizens.net/death-by-bureaucracy/>.

49. “A New Low,” Transformative Justice Collective, October 31, 2021, <https://transformativejusticecollective.org/category/campaigns/savenagaenthran/>.

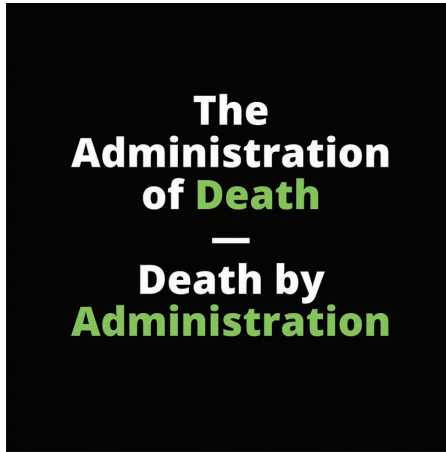


Figure 6.2 Screenshot of Han's blog update summarizing her efforts to clear administrative hurdles in order for Nagaenthran's family to pay him a last visit before his execution.

Source: Transformative Justice Collective, "A New Low," October 31, 2021.

of Nagaenthran as a child, and of the struggles that he and his family had faced. The circumstances of Nagaenthran's case—that he had psychosocial disabilities, that he had been convicted of trafficking a relatively small amount of heroin, that he had already been on death row for many years, and that there were worries of a severe deterioration in mental health—also drew the attention of the international press,⁵⁰ which in turn made the issue even more visible to Singaporeans and the international community.

This attention translated into action: Singaporeans from different walks of life wrote to their elected representatives, signed solidarity letters, and delivered petitions for clemency to the president's office at the Istana. The state's attempt to hang other death row prisoners—like Datchinamurthy

50. Shibani Mahtani, "Singapore Is Set to Execute a Mentally Disabled Man for Trafficking 1.5 Ounces of Heroin," *Washington Post*, November 4, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/singapore-death-penalty-execution/2021/11/04/78b50412-3acf-11ec-bd6f-da376f47304e_story.html.



Figure 6.3 Screenshot of Han’s Facebook update on Nagaenthran prior to his execution.

Source: Han’s personal Facebook page.

Kataiah, Roslan bin Bakar, and Rosman bin Abdulllah—continued to draw attention, particularly since TJC made a point of publicizing, with the families’ consent, these cases on social media. Building on this momentum, TJC organized two protests in April 2022.⁵¹ Each event drew about four

51. Teo, “The Details about the Death Penalty Singapore Doesn’t Want to Talk About,” Coconuts Singapore, October 6, 2022, <https://coconuts.co/singapore/features/>



Figure 6.4 Nagaenthran's post-execution funeral.

Source: Kirsten Han.

hundred participants—I do not believe such a turnout would have been possible without the storytelling we did.

In 2022, as the authorities ramped up the rate of hangings, I kept writing about the death penalty, telling the stories of death row prisoners like Abdul Kahar bin Othman and Nazeri bin Lajim,⁵² both of whom were eventually executed. Interviewing their siblings, I traced the trajectory of their lives and quickly found parallels: poverty, deprivation, a lack of adult guidance, sensitive boys who kept more suffering to themselves than their family members had realized at the time. Both men were in their sixties by the time they were executed; they had struggled with substance use and addiction since their teens and spent the majority of their adult lives in prison. Their stories complicated the simplistic narratives of “drugs = bad people” that so many Singaporeans

the-details-about-the-death-penalty-singapore-doesnt-want-to-talk-about-capital-punishment-drug-law-sentence/.

52. Kirsten Han, “WTC Long Read: ‘We Were like Strays’: A Life Marked by Drugs, Incarceration, and the Death Penalty,” *We, the Citizens*, May 30, 2022, <https://www.wethecitizens.net/wtc-long-read-a-life-marked-by-drugs-incarceration-and-the-death-penalty/>.

had been brought up on. It was important for us to know, for us to unlearn the assumptions that made the death penalty for drug offences palatable.

These are just a few examples of how I've been able to work and campaign through my writing, and through the occupation of social media and online spaces. Over the fourteen years I have been active in civil society, there have been many more examples. None of it has been easy. But they exist, and because they exist, I believe there is still hope and opportunity for a better society, a better Singapore, and a better world.

Han's Digital Advocacy Journalism within the Feminist Difference

In both her earlier publications and her segment of this paper, Han has never given her form of digital advocacy journalism any ideological label—possibly in an effort to keep her activism cause-based rather than political. Seen through the lens of critical feminism around capital punishment, her politics can be seen as a feminist approach of “different voice theories” within the muscular retentionist narrative. However intensive its presentation, Han's advocacy is perhaps on the more urgent and existential spectrum of Singapore's carceral system that also covers that of the Victorian practice of judicial caning. Consistently opposing this system is Singapore's more feminist-oriented Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE), a nongovernmental organization that has been Singapore's main women's advocacy group for more than four decades.

Contrasting instrumental “male” approaches often strips disadvantaged individuals from legal considerations for punitive and violent punishment, the difference emphasizing the role of empathy in looking at ongoing interdependencies and interrelations.⁵³ It aligns with newer and expanding notions

53. Amy Pope, “A Feminist Look at the Death Penalty,” *Law and Contemporary Problems* 65 (2002): 257–82, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1192373>.

of feminist intersectional advocacy in Singapore that transcends the conventional boundaries of sexuality and gender.⁵⁴ This approach is exhorted by the United Nations' organization UN Women, which states that "intersectional feminism centres the voices of those experiencing overlapping, concurrent forms of oppression in order to understand the depths of the inequalities and the relationships among them in any given context."⁵⁵ In the case of the accounts male death row inmates mounted by Han's digital advocacy journalism, the feminist narrative has shifted body politics beyond that of the confines of women. In other words, the difference gives greater weight to the structural disadvantages of often demographically overrepresented, marginalized social communities under the carceral regime and places emphasis on rehabilitation over punishment in the search for transformative justice.⁵⁶ Such has been Han's advocacy. Pleading against the cold logic and justifications of deterrence for drug trafficking, her online narratives call for the need empathize with death row inmates, especially those involved in drug trafficking and who come from marginalized social backgrounds. In contrast to the system, Han's account presents death row inmates as human beings with loved ones, capable of feeling fear of their impending execution and seeking second chances to move from punishment to rehabilitation. It remains to be seen if Han's abolitionist narratives have made a significant impact on the broader Singaporean public. When questions are rephrased and more nuanced, some existing surveys still indicate support of the death penalty. However, there are no surveys conducted systematically on the influence

54. Kamalini Ramdas, "Negotiating LGBTQ Rights in Singapore: The Margin as a Place of Refusal," *Urban Studies* 58, no. 7 (2021): 1448–62, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098020962936>.

55. "Intersectional Feminism: What It Means And Why It Matters Right Now," UN Women, July 1, 2020, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/6/explainer-intersectional-feminism-what-it-means-and-why-it-matters>.

56. Anna Terwiel, "What Is Carceral Feminism?" *Political Theory* 48, no. 4 (2020): 421–42, <https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/journals-permissions>; Laura Huey, "The Abolition of Capital Punishment as a Feminist Issue," *Feminist Review* 78, no. 1 (2004): 175–80, <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.fr.9400184>.

of abolitionists. Perhaps an indication of the impact of Han's efforts can be seen in the severity of the state's response to her advocacy

“Caused by Drug Traffickers Whom People Glorify”: The Muscular Retentionist Response

During a Parliamentary sitting on May 8, 2024, a detailed ministerial statement on Singapore's National Drug Control Policy was read by the minister for home affairs K. Shanmugam regarding the justification of maintaining Singapore's retentionist position as part the country's "war on drugs." Aside from singling out activists like Han in his critique on abolitionist advocacy, the minister took considerable effort to humanize the otherwise instrumentalist rationale on existing policies protecting families and children, with reference to specific families whose lives have been wrecked by members under the influence of drugs. Concluding this segment of the speech, Shanmugam reminded the House that "drug abuse is not victimless. All these [problems] are caused by the drug traffickers, whom people glorify."⁵⁷ Seemingly following Han's efforts toward humanizing the death row experience, through Shanmugam's speech, the authorities launched "Drug Victims Remembrance Day," for "our communities to rally together to remind ourselves of the harm, the hurt, and the trauma, which the families and loved ones of drug abusers suffer and have suffered."⁵⁸ Inaugurated on May 17, 2024, the first event was marked by public exhibitions with displays of digital candles commemorating the loss of victims of drug abuse as well as storyboards of families and individuals who have overcome drug addiction.

While exhibitions on narcotics are not new in Singapore, most have been focused on public warnings about the health and legal implications

57. "Parliamentary Speeches," Ministry of Home Affairs (Singapore).

58. "Parliamentary Speeches," Ministry of Home Affairs (Singapore).

of both consumption and trafficking. Drug Victim Remembrance Day has, however, assumed a more victim-centric narrative to garner greater public empathy and support for those grappling with the issue.⁵⁹ From Yellow Ribbon “second chances” campaigns to that of more institutionalized and community initiatives on rehabilitation and reintegration of ex-offenders, the emphasis on more empathetic approaches by the Singapore government is also not new.⁶⁰ However, the empathetic ideals of rehabilitation and reintegration stands in visible contrast with the continued policy of capital punishment. In some ways, this is the empathy gap abolitionists are filling. With the launch of this event, Singapore’s muscular retentionist position is now given a softer and more empathetic human narrative. In contesting abolitionist narratives, like that of Han, the Singapore state may have also realized the significance of human-centric story lines and experiential accounts like that of the drug abuser who is also simultaneously the victim. However, for now the empathy stops at that of traffickers; most of those caught and executed are only drug mules from often socially disadvantaged backgrounds.

It would be tempting to binarize the debate between Han, as a woman abolitionist from civil society, and Shanmugam, a male retentionist representing the state, as evidence of phallogocentric politics in Singapore. Under his charge as the Home Affairs and Law minister for more than a decade, the legal and policing mechanisms have been more consciously women-centric.⁶¹ Shanmugam has also engaged in more dialogues with otherwise fringe civil society groups, including that of animal welfare and LGBTQ+

59. Mohamed Yusof Zaihan “Remembering Victims of Drug Abuse at Inaugural Ceremony Held In Singapore,” *Straits Times*, May 18, 2024, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/remembering-victims-of-drug-abuse-at-inaugural-ceremony-for-their-special-day>.

60. Xiang Long Cheng, and Gabriel Ong, eds., *Correctional Rehabilitation & Psychological Interventions in Singapore: Practitioners’ Experiences In Singapore Prison Service* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2023).

61. “Keynote Speech By Minister K Shanmugam at Conference: Empowering Women through Gamechanging Legal Reforms,” Ministry of Law, July 27, 2023, <https://www.mlaw.gov.sg/news/speeches/keynote-speech-by-minister-k-shanmugam-at-conference-empowering-women-through-gamechanging-legal-reforms/>.

representatives. What is also evident, however, is that the official narratives of retention and justifications for capital punishment in Singapore remain predominately voiced by male figures of authority. Such voices often gain more masculine and misogynistic mutations on cyberspace, especially when counternarratives are mounted openly by women abolitionist activists like Han. Hence, the push for the narrative tipping point becomes an intersectional feminist cause.

Conclusion

Backed by a consistently robust domestic public opinion within a controlled local media landscape where abolition perspectives on capital punishment are given scant exposure, Singapore has actively resisted the global trends on repealing the death penalty. Aside from the arguments on deterrence founded upon the republic's record on low crime rates, the republic's muscular retentionist stance is also buttressed by the narrative of Singaporean exceptionality against the individualistic drug-tolerant West. Reflecting the emphasis is the continuous circulation over social media of former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew's referencing drug traffickers during a BBC interview in the 1990s, saying "one death is too kind" when describing the death penalty.

In the same light, cyberspace has given a new generation of Singaporean abolitionists like Kirsten Han the critical space in pushing toward a narrative tipping point on capital punishment. From the courts to the coffins in post-execution funerals, through a combination of journalistic reportage, public advocacy, and biographical storytelling, her form of digital advocacy journalism provides more intimate and personal accounts of the experiences and perspectives of otherwise invisible death row inmates. While her impact on public opinion remains to be assessed, Han's form of digital advocacy journalism has significantly sharpened the existing feminist position with new intersectional dimensions covering male death row inmates on the

abolition of capital punishment in the republic. In the process, Han's activities have been subjected to not just legal scrutiny but also cyber harassment, with often a mix of nationalist and misogynist overtones. While seemingly distant from the narrative tipping point, Han's affective labor serves to maintain and expand the abolitionist argument and presence in Singapore. In contesting her advocacy, the Singapore authorities seem to have also appropriated the human-centric approach in their retentionist stance in seeing the drug abuser as also the simultaneous victim of narcotic consumption in its recent initiatives addressing the issue. The narrative tipping point may only come when the exhortations for the same empathy for drug abusers is extended to drug mules in the future.