A City of Frenzied Shoppers? Reinterpreting Consumer Behavior in Contemporary Singapore

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Abstract: The wealthy city-state of Singapore is often depicted in both popular and scholarly literatures as an ultra materialistic country whose population is comprised largely of avid consumers whose favorite, if not only pastime is shopping, particularly at high-end stores. In this paper the author utilizes some new insights from consumer economics as well as available empirical data to analyze consumer behavior in Singapore more closely, and, in so doing, to ground such behavior more firmly into the structures informing the city-state’s economy.

No place on earth is as readily caricatured by Westerners as Singapore, the small, rich Southeast Asian island-nation just off of the southern coast of peninsular Malaysia. No chewing gum. Fines for not flushing toilets. Caning for minor offenses. Draconian penalties for drugs. Disneyland with the death penalty, as cyberpunk writer William Gibson famously put it in an article in Wired in 1993.¹

Jokes about Singapore do not begin and end with jibes about political repression. Indeed, the country’s residents are regularly skewered in the international media (and for a complex set of reasons by their own government at times) for their crass materialism, their fixation on shopping, the passion of their brand consciousness, and their seeming zeal to transform the entire country into one aggressively air-conditioned upscale shopping mall.²

Like all—or at least most—caricatures, the standard view of Singapore and Singaporeans contains elements of truth. The government is extraordinarily concerned about order, and Singaporeans do hit the malls hard. Then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong explicitly acknowledged the latter point during his National Day Rally speech in August 1996 with his blunt observation that “[l]ife for Singaporeans is not complete without shopping!” And virtually every Singaporean makes references to, and many avidly desire the so-called 5 C’s: cash, credit card, country club, car, and condo. Then, of course, there is Mr. Kiasu, the popular 1990s character created by Singaporean cartoonist Johnny Lau, whose greed, fear of losing out, and drive to keep up with the Tans, I mean Joneses, is captured in the title of the first book in the Mr. Kiasu series: *Everything Also I Want*.

The above considerations notwithstanding (admittedly a lot not to withstand), consumer culture and consumer behavior in Singapore are more complex than often depicted. These topics are certainly too complex to be explained, as they often are today, via surface impressions—“a city of frenzied shoppers, most of them young,” as Paul Theroux has recently written—or through recourse to tired (and overly broad) postmodern clichés about “self-fashioning” individuals, avidly consuming products and

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4 S.S. James et al., *Mr. Kiasu: Everything Also I Want* (Singapore, 1990).
services primarily, if not solely, as assertions of identity and to serve communicative and demonstrative roles.\footnote{Paul Theroux, \textit{Ghost Train to the Eastern Star: On the Tracks of the Great Railway Bazaar} (Boston and New York, 2008), 320.}

Drawing inspiration from some new theoretical and empirical work in consumer economics—recent work on the hedonics of taste and Jan de Vries’s 2008 book, \textit{The Industrious Revolution: Consumer Behavior and the Household Economy, 1650 to the Present} come immediately to mind in this regard—what I shall do in this paper is to look more closely at consumption patterns in Singapore, rooting them more deeply or, more accurately, given the fact that I’m talking about a densely-packed urban place, cementing them more securely in the economic, demographic, and social structures shaping life on the island state.\footnote{Jan de Vries, \textit{The Industrious Revolution: Consumer Behavior and the Household Economy, 1650 to the Present} (New York, 2008).} Attention will be paid not just to the consumption of splashy, dare I say fashionable items by certain demographic groups, but to other, less dramatic components of Singaporeans’ overall consumer expenditures and to Singapore’s population as a whole. Moreover, some attention will perforce be paid to household behavior, the allocation of time, and inter-temporal consumption patterns, considerations often neglected in cultural approaches. In so doing, I hope not only to limn a more accurate, calibrated picture of consumption patterns in Singapore, but also to help in some small way to reinvigorate an older tradition in the study of consumption, the economic analysis of consumer behavior, which tradition has been relegated to the dustbin (sale bin?) of history in recent decades by traditions privileging various and sundry cultural approaches.
Granted, it is not difficult to understand why many non-economists (and some economists) have found standard economic explanations of consumption and consumer behavior to be both unsatisfactory and unsatisfying. For one thing, but for the addition of a bit of math, the economic theory of consumer behavior did not change much for the better part of a century after the rise of marginalism and neoclassical economics in the 1870s. Neoclassical consumer theory revolved around rational individuals seeking to optimize their utility subject to budgetary and price constraints. Full stop. Tastes and preferences were considered *terrae incognitae* where economists were *personae non gratae*, families and households largely irrelevant, individual acts of consumption meaningless, context and history beside the point.

To be sure, this situation has changed considerably since the 1950s, particularly regarding the relevance of families and households to understanding consumption patterns, but the standard economic theory of consumption and consumer behavior can still be criticized with some legitimacy for being arid, overly narrow and formalistic, rigid and somewhat unrealistic. If recent developments in fields such as behavioral economics and neuroeconomics have met some of these criticisms and, in so doing, rendered economic theories of consumption more realistic and thus compelling, relatively few scholars from the other social sciences, much less the humanities look to economics for theoretical grounding when studying consumption and consumption patterns either in

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7 See, for example, Ben Fine and Ellen Leopold, *The World of Consumption* (London and New York, 1993), 46-54.
the past or the present day. This is unfortunate in my view because for all its problems, the economic approach, even in neoclassical form, usefully reminds us that acts of consumption are not autonomous, cannot be divorced from economic processes, and at the end of the day cannot be reduced completely to markers of cultural identity, to forms of fetishism, or à la Baudrillard, to coded systems of signs. Even or, maybe more accurately, especially in Singapore.

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Pound for pound, Singapore has to be one of the stranger places on earth, and its story one of the most improbable. Although the venerable British “creation myth” regarding Singapore—i.e, that it was “founded” in 1819 by Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles—isn’t exactly true (the island/island group was lightly occupied by Malays when Raffles arrived and, at earlier points in its history, had been well integrated into the greater Malay economic world), the British presence in Singapore beginning in that year fundamentally

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recast its history. Formerly known as Temasek and, later, as Singapura, the island/island group was at the time of Raffles’ arrival under the titular control of the Malay Sultanate of Johor. After the Brits succeeded in February 1819 in securing rights to establish a trading post and port there, the rest was history, as it were.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, Singapore, strategically located on the Straits of Malacca, developed into one of, if not the greatest colonial port and trade entrepôt in Southeast Asia, which status it retained and consolidated in the first four decades of the twentieth century. Occupied by the Japanese during World War II, Singapore reverted to British control with the defeat of the Axis powers and remained a British possession until 1959 when it became an autonomous part of the British Commonwealth. In September 1963 Singapore, along with Malaya, Sarawak, and Sabah united to form the Federation of Malaysia, but a variety of issues—ethnic tensions and rural/urban splits, most notably—led Singapore, heavily Chinese and completely urban, to pull out of the federation in August 1965, declare independence, and establish itself as the Republic of Singapore.

After a tentative start—it took Singaporeans a while to wean themselves from their imperial economic moorings, establish a working relationship with Malaysia, and plot out a viable development strategy—the island-nation began in the late 1960s and early 1970s to achieve robust rates of economic growth, and by and large hasn’t looked back. Indeed, few, if any places in the world can match Singapore’s economic record over the past thirty-five or forty years. Singapore’s ability to sustain high rates of growth—an average of about 8 percent annually from 1965 until very recently—for such a long period of time is due in part to geographic factors (its economically strategic location bestriding two of
the world’s most important trade routes), but also to Singapore’s ever improving (and now state-of-the-art) infrastructure, its success in establishing and maintaining a stable, honest, property-friendly political economy, its legendary courtship and retention of foreign MNCs, its economic nimbleness, its constant labor-force upgrading, and its capacity consistently to reinvent itself so as to fill needed niches in the international economy.\textsuperscript{11}

As a result of the above factors, the total population of Singapore, about 4.84 million people (2008) living on about 639 square kilometers, is today among the wealthiest in the world, particularly when ranked in terms of purchasing power parity. For example, according to the most recent comparative figures available (2006), Singapore ranked thirtieth in the world in GDP per capita ($30,040), rising to seventh overall, just ahead of the United States, after converting to PPP.\textsuperscript{12}

For our purposes, one important take away from this thumb-nail, or, better yet, pinkie-nail sketch of Singapore’s history is that its estimable economic performance since independence has been underpinned and reinforced (albeit limited in some ways as well) by an astronomically high savings rate, which, counter to seat-of-the pants expectations and standard theoretical formulations, has not fallen as Singapore and Singaporeans have ascended the international economic ladder “from third world to first,” as the


country’s founding father, Lee Kuan Yew, entitled the second volume of his autobiography. To foreground my argument, as we say in academe these days, the savings rate on the island should have given at least a bit of pause to those that view Singaporeans as little more than shopping machines.

To be sure, during early stages of development almost every economy experiences a significant jump in its gross savings rate and rate of capital formation. Such rates rise for a variety of reasons, most notably, new investment opportunities in economies growing rapidly, underdeveloped consumer markets and cultures, and inter-temporal considerations (the need to save for old age in societies often lacking well-developed pension schemes and social welfare nets). Think China today with its gross savings rate of almost 50 percent and even the now spendthrift U.S., which during its industrial will to power in the late nineteenth century also saw impressive rates of savings. U.S. gross depreciable capital formation rates alone in the 1880s and 1890s, for example, averaged between about 25-28 percent (estimates vary), the highest in our history, before slowly falling throughout the twentieth century as our economy matured, as our consumer culture developed, and as a social welfare network gradually emerged.

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14 The importance of gross savings and capital formation in early economic growth—a topic identified with pioneers such as Kuznets, Rostow, and Maddison—is a standard topic in every text in development economics. In recent decades, though, the relationship among these variables has become more complicated, particularly the direction of causation between savings/capital formation, on the one hand, and growth, on the other, as well as the overall effects of even high rates of savings/capital formation on long-term growth. On China’s high rate of gross savings, see, for example, Jonathan Anderson, “Solving China’s Rebalancing Puzzle,” Finance and Development: A Quarterly Magazine of the IMF 44 (September 2007). [http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2007/09/anderson.htm] On the high rates of savings and gross depreciable capital formation in the U.S. in the late nineteenth century, see Robert E. Gallman, “The United States Capital Stock in the Nineteenth Century,” in Long-Term Factors in American Economic Growth, ed. Stanley L. Engerman and Robert E. Gallman, NBER Conference on Income and Wealth, Studies in Income and Wealth, Vol. 51 (Chicago, 1986), 165-206, esp. 201. On the possible pitfalls of over saving and over investment in Singapore specifically, see especially Alwyn Young, “A Tale of Two Cities: Factor Accumulation and Technical Change in Hong Kong and Singapore,”
The same pattern held true in Singapore when it began its modern growth surge. At the time of independence in 1965, Singapore’s gross savings rate (gross savings as a percentage of GDP) was 10 per cent. By 1984 this rate had risen to 43 percent of GDP, the highest in the world at the time.\(^{15}\) Since 1984 Singapore has continued to develop rapidly, but, surprisingly, its savings rate has not fallen. Indeed, it has risen even higher: In 2008 the nation’s gross savings rate was an astounding 47 percent of GDP, only slightly lower than that of savings giant China, whose rate in recent years, as indicated above, has been close to 50 percent.\(^{16}\) In other words, even after achieving “developed country” status, Singapore’s savings rate continues to look like that of a less developed country during an early phase of growth rather than that of a developed country, wherein the savings rate typically drops steadily, and, in the case of the U.S., drastically over time.

At this juncture, some skeptics, particularly those with a bit of knowledge regarding social policy in Singapore, might suggest that the island-nation’s gross savings rate might be high, but only because of forced savings mandated by the government via its compulsory comprehensive social savings plan, the Central Provident Fund (CPF), which

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\(^{15}\) See Lim Chong Yah, “From High Growth Rates to Recession,” in *The Management of Success*, 201-217, esp. 204.

began in 1955, that is to say, even before independence. This point is not without merit. Obviously, it is easier to rack up high savings rates when savings is compulsory.

The general compulsory CPF contribution rate for employees in Singapore has changed over time, and the mandated rate is further calibrated according to age and income. Over the past thirty years, though, employees in Singapore have typically contributed between 16.5 and 25 percent of their wages to CPF, which is without question a lot. This said, it should also be noted that if we consider disposable household income in Singapore—that is to say, after taxes and mandated CPF contributions are subtracted—we still find robust levels of “voluntary” household savings. Because the government does not routinely compile (or at least release) such data, estimates vary widely, from a low of about 8 percent to a high of around 30 percent. No matter how you slice it, then, Singaporeans as a whole are great savers. Those that would study consumers, consumption, and consumption patterns in Singapore would do well to pay some


20 According to Tilak Abeysinghe--co-author of one of the most recent studies of the Singaporean economy--it is unlikely that the voluntary savings rate among low-income households and even “average” households is very large. Personal correspondence, May 15, 2009.
attention to this hugely important, if little appreciated fact. And this is hardly the only complicating consideration worthy of note.

One such consideration is closely related to, indeed, grows out of the implications of the Singaporean savings function. Briefly put, while political critics of Singapore and cultural critics writing on consumer behavior and culture on the island often assume they need to explain the population’s excessive materialism, and, in so doing, go on and on about Singapore as “shoppers’ paradise”—where you can “shop til you drop”—sneer about the city-state becoming one big shopping mall, and spout off about “the dry and empty lives of Singapore’s shopping-obsessed citizens” and their “materialistic and soulless urban culture,” economists are beavering away trying to understand and explain why private consumption is so abysmally low in Singapore—and what can be done about it! Talk about cultural dissonance and disciplinary divides. Indeed, even gentle cultural takes on consumers and consumption patterns in Singapore—Li Lin Wee’s 2007 film Gone Shopping, for example—play off of tired tropes about shopaholics, retail therapy, and the like. As Aaron, one of the film’s leading characters, puts it: “Singapore is one big shopping centre, all our work, leisure, culture, history, even nature are all brought together, air-conditioned and price-tagged.”

For balance, maybe we also need a film set in a cubicle at the Ministry of Finance on High Street or perhaps in the vault of a branch of DBS or its subsidiary POSBank—to capture yet another true essence of Singapore, i.e., the city-state as one gigantic savings pool.

What then do we do? How does one square the circle, as it were, and reconcile the view of Singapore as one big retail store and that of Singapore as one big savings storehouse? For starters, by problematizing consumption in Singapore, and, thus, by always keeping in mind the population’s extraordinarily savings rate and the variables affecting the same. Secondly, by trying better to capture the total Singaporean consumption “bundle” --not just the frou-frou Gucci/Pucci/Dutti/Zegna/Kenzo/LVMH elements thereof--thereby reducing the emphasis on students, Yuppies, and Orchard Road a bit, and paying greater attention to consumers with other demographics, including elderly “uncles” in singlets drinking their Tigers in *kopitiams* (traditional “coffee shops” comprised of food/drink stalls) in the “Heartland” housing estates.

Again, then, before accepting as normative yet another story about spendthrift Singaporean consumers, with their Hermes scarves and their Manolo Blahnik shoes, remember the country’s savings rate, which makes the Amish seem like drunken sailors. As stated above, some part of this high rate is clearly due to state compulsion via the CPF, but there are other reasons as well: rapid economic growth rates, sizable voluntary savings by “prime” workers (savings often used later as a form of “inter-temporal consumption” to supplement CPF defined-contribution payouts after retirement), a demographic profile conducive to saving (low fertility, small families, and a relatively low proportion of population under 15), and patterns of income and wealth inequality (considerable) similarly associated with high savings rates.22

So whatever spending Singaporeans do as private consumers, they do it after—or, in addition to—a helluva lot of saving. And in light of what we have just said, it is not

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22 See the works cited in footnote 19. On the low level of consumer spending in Singapore, especially since the early 1990s, see Rodney King, *The Singapore Miracle: Myth and Reality*, 2d ed. (Inglewood, Western Australia, Australia, 2008), 204-206.
surprising that private consumption in Singapore is paltry compared to levels in other OECD countries, particularly as measured by the ratio between private consumption expenditure (PCE) and GDP. In 2003, for example, this ratio was 71 in the U.S., 63 in the U.K., 60 in Australia, 54 in South Korea, and only 43 in Singapore. In 2007 this ratio remained above 70 in the U.S., whereas in Singapore the ratio had by 2008 fallen even further—to 38.6, the type of rate one would expect in an underdeveloped country.23 To be sure, a number of explanatory factors in addition to compulsory and voluntary saving are involved here—the large foreign participation in the Singapore economy, possible “crowding out” of private consumption by government consumption, the sharp limits the government has long placed on the use of credit cards come to mind—but whatever the case, private consumption in this nation of shopping malls is, for example, much lower as a proportion of GDP than is the case in India and Bangladesh, close to the levels seen in China, and much lower than levels in most of the developed world.24

Then there is spending itself, another subject worthy of unpacking. The Singapore Department of Statistics conducts meticulous and very detailed household expenditure surveys every half decade or so: There were eight such studies conducted between

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1956/57 and 2002/03, and another, conducted in 2007/08, is currently being completed.\(^{26}\)

Data in the 2002/03 survey, the most recent one currently available, can give us a broad sense of the Singapore private consumption bundle and, thus, of the categories of goods, products, and services expressive of Singaporeans’ consumer behavior. Broadly speaking, housing (22.4%), transport and communication (21.4%), and food (21.3%) account for about 65 percent of the total consumption bundle, with education—which includes books, magazines, and computers—constituting another 7.8 percent, and health care an additional 5.1 percent. Of the remaining 22 percent, most (17.8%) fell into the catch-all category “recreation and others,” which included “a wide range of products and services like domestic services [particularly maids], recreation and entertainment, personal care and holiday tours,” as well as cigarettes. It is interesting to note that only 3.6 percent of household expenditures were accounted for by the category “clothing and footwear,” down from 4.1 percent in the previous survey (1998).\(^{27}\)

Moreover, it should be noted that we can use the 2002/03 survey to analyze consumption patterns in Singapore with much greater levels of precision, for the survey disaggregates households by income and age, and expenditures are broken down into eight broad categories and numerous subcategories. My goal here, however, is not deeply to analyze consumption patterns in Singapore, but rather to establish the quantitative bounds of private consumption, and to highlight the existence of detailed longitudinal survey data on household expenditures on the island, the use of which


would do much to rein in some of the wilder assumptions and claims being made about
Singaporeans and their supposedly manic and obsessive consumer behavior.

Now comes the hard part—explaining the discrepancy between economic and cultural views of consumption in Singapore. Here, I readily admit, there does seem to be a lot of shopping, spending, and rather conspicuous consumption on the island. There are indoor malls galore, retail shops everywhere else, and the air in Singapore smells of commerce, just as it has since 1819. But what about the economic data just presented? Although many writers on consumption in Singapore proceed as though “data” was the plural of anecdote, surely the empirical findings discussed above cannot be considered in the same vein.

What’s the answer? How do we explain said discrepancy? For one thing, we may need a bit “thicker” description—thicker in a Geertzian sense—of consumption “acts” and “actors” in Singapore than we have typically been getting. In the remainder of this paper I’ll try to suggest some possible ways to do just that. To cut to the chase, once we allow that Singaporeans are among the world’s top savers, we can begin to position and interpret both their shopping behavior and acts of consumption, even luxury and other forms of conspicuous consumption, in different ways. For one thing, maybe some of the people flooding into the malls--the first of which in Singapore, the People’s Park Complex, opened in 1970-- aren’t buying all that much, and others, merely window shopping, and, still others, not even in the malls primarily to buy.28 Singaporean apartments are small, the malls are air-conditioned, and, after all, the country sits only about 80 miles north of the equator. The Singaporean mall likely serves some of the

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same functions of malls in the West, i.e., as gathering places, social spaces, and even as somewhat debased Habermasian public spheres. There is no better example of a Singaporean mall serving such functions than Lucky Plaza—on glitzy Orchard Road no less—which on Sundays (the day most Singaporean maids typically don’t work) turns into an urban village in the Philippines, full of Filipina maids chatting and eating with friends, and flirting with Filipino men. Among the busiest stores at Lucky Plaza on Sundays are those selling phone cards to the Philippines and sending remittances back to one or another obscure part of the archipelago. And the Golden Mile Complex on Beach Road serves some of the same functions for working-class Thais on the island.

Moreover, even if we exclude Lucky Plaza on Sundays, shopping and consumption on Orchard Road—the Singapore analogue to Fifth Avenue, Michigan Avenue, and Rodeo Drive—needs closer critical scrutiny than it generally receives, particularly from “drive-by” travel writers from the West grinding axes against Singapore for this or that. The invocation of travel writers reminds me that now is perhaps a good time to point out that many of the sales being rung up on Orchard Road and environs are due to purchases not by Singapore citizens and permanent residents but by visitors lighting upon the tourist mecca both from the West and from Malaysia, Indonesia, China, Japan, India, etc. Since over 97 percent of Singapore’s citizens and permanent residents (together comprising roughly three-quarters of the total population) hale from Chinese, Malay, or Indian stock, it is quite easy, for example, for a big-spending Indonesian or Hong Konger (often referred to locally as “Honkeys”) to be mistaken for a Singaporean Malay or Chinese.29

29 Republic of Singapore, Statistics Singapore, Population in Brief 2008, 4
Then there is consumption among Singaporeans themselves, who are often criticized and castigated, if not mocked for their over-the-top spending, obsession with electronic gizmos and gadgetry, and fixation with the new new “must-have” thing (often from the U.S., Hong Kong, or Japan). And no group of Singaporeans is more subject to such criticism than the young. Here, too, though, a little context helps. As Singaporean sociologist Chua Beng Huat, a leading Singaporean expert on consumer culture in Asia, has noted, some young Singaporeans do spend a lot, relatively speaking, on food and clothes, on electronics, and in clubs, but—a big but—that’s largely because two big-ticket items, homes and cars, are largely off of the table, as it were.\(^{30}\) Homeownership is very expensive in Singapore and single people are not allowed to buy government flats (roughly 82 percent of the citizen and permanent resident population of Singapore live in such flats) in any case, so that young people generally live with their parents until marriage.\(^{31}\) Furthermore, the price of automobiles is so high (because of government taxes and the need to acquire an expensive COE, a ten-year certificate of entitlement), that relatively few young people own one.\(^{32}\) With these two costly consumption items largely unattainable, many young Singaporeans can afford fancy cell phones, text with impunity, buy expensive threads, flip for two lattes a day at one or another of Singapore’s ubiquitous Starbuck’s franchises, afford high cover charges and expensive drinks at shopping destination among neighbors in Southeast Asia and east Asia, see, for example, Carl A. Trocki, *Singapore: Wealth, Power and the Culture of Control* (London and New York, 2006), 171.


\(^{32}\) For details on the COE, see the COE section of the website of the Singapore Land Transport Authority [http://www.lta.gov.sg/ocoe/]. For a quick sketch, see “Once You’re Here: Cost of Owning a Car,” Expat Singapore website [http://www.expatsingapore.com/content/view/1152]. Also see Chua, *Life Is Not Complete Without Shopping*, 25-30. As I wrote this essay, the current price of a COE (open category) was a little over $10,000 Singapore dollars. See Singapore *Straits Times*, May 21, 2009, B6.
trendy clubs, and still save a good bit of money. Thus, the explanation for the popularity of a libation known as the “Flaming Lamborghini,” being sold for $26 Singapore in summer 2008 at the dance club Zouk on Jiak Kim Street.

Just as consumption patterns among the young in Singapore are more complex than they appear to be on the surface, such patterns are further complicated by adding social class into the mix, something few writers on consumption in Singapore ever do.

According to the 2002/3 household expenditure survey, for example, poorer Singaporeans spend far higher proportions of their incomes on basic necessities--food and housing--and far lower proportions on transportation and communications, clothing and footwear, education, and recreation than do groups further up the economic ladder.

In that year Singaporean households with monthly incomes of less than $1000 (Singapore dollars) spent over 70 percent of their monthly incomes on food and housing, households with monthly incomes of between $1000-1499 spent almost 64 percent of their incomes on food and housing, and households with monthly incomes between $1500-1999 about 59 percent of food and housing, whereas among all Singapore households less than 44 percent of monthly income went to these basic expenses. None of this is surprising, of course--it’s textbook consumer economics—but many writers would have us believe that all Singaporeans are out there spending frivolously virtually all the time.

And then there is what might be called the economic geography of consumption in Singapore. Patterns differ even on a small island. Just as shopping is a lot different on

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33 Republic of Singapore, Ministry of Trade and Industry, Department of Statistics, HES 2002/03, Table 12B, 70-79. Note that Chua Beng Huat is one of the few “culturalists” writing on consumption patterns in Singapore who explicitly considers questions related to social class. See, for example, Chua Beng Huat, “The Attendant Consumer Society of a Developed Singapore,” in Singapore: Towards a Developed Status, ed. Linda Low (Singapore, 1999), 210-225. For a similarly nuanced “culturalist” study on consumption patterns in neighboring Malaysia, see Fischer, Proper Islamic Consumption: Shopping among the Malays in Modern Malaysia.
Fifth Avenue than it is on Fordham Road in the Bronx or Astoria in Queens, and shopping patterns on Michigan Avenue differ greatly from patterns on upper Milwaukee Avenue on the northwest side of Chicago or in the city’s second-busiest retail district, Little Village (La Villeta), located in a largely Mexican area on the west side, such patterns differ in Singapore, too: Shopping on Orchard Road is a world away from shopping in Little India (at the Tekka Mall, for example, or even the Mustafa Centre), in Geylang, or at stores in the housing estates of Boon Lay or Ang Mo Kio. Who would have thunk it? Unfortunately, not too many readers of the standard literature on consumption in the “shoppers’ paradise” known as Singapore.

In fine, what I have tried to do in this little paper is to anchor consumption and consumer behavior in Singapore in some material moorings. Life on the island may not be complete without shopping, but shopping in Singapore cannot adequately be explained primarily, much less completely in terms of codes and markers, symbols and signs. What is needed, simply put, is greater interpretive recourse to economic structures, empirical data, and to facts on the ground.

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