# Semi-archives and Interim Archives: A History of the National Wages Council in Singapore*

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The National Wages Council (NWC) was the orchestra of Singapore's wage policy in the 1970s and 1980s. Our paper explores two key episodes in its history: its formation in February 1972 and its adoption of a high wage policy between 1979 and 1981 as part of Singapore's economic restructuring. We were able to draw upon partially declassified government records held at the National Archives of Singapore. Yet these records are incomplete and lacking in certain aspects as archival sources. We complemented them with other archival and published sources, including the oral history and writings of the NWC's longtime chairman, Lim Chong Yah. Our research urged us to conceptualize a pair of ideas, "semi-archives" and "interim archives," acknowledging the partiality of both archival and published sources in Singapore. The history of the NWC suggests a rethinking of the centrality of the documentary archive in the Western academic tradition. In Asian contexts like Singapore, a multi-archival approach is necessary for the writing of recent history. Singapore historians can work both modestly and imaginatively with a wider range of available historical sources, including archival, oral, and published sources.

**Keywords:** Singapore, history, economics, archive, oral history, wages

* This article forms part of the research output of the Heritage Research Grant (HRG) Project *From Colony to Nation: Continuity and Change in the Singapore Economy, 1946–2016*. The HRG Project is supported by the Heritage Research Grant of the National Heritage Board, Singapore. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Heritage Board, Singapore.

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Our paper is a meditation on the writing of contemporary history[1] in a Southeast Asian country where government archives remain classified. We consider the case of the National Wages Council (NWC) in Singapore in the 1970s and 1980s. Though the subject is specific to the economic history of a city-state, the methodological questions it raises are pertinent to research on contemporary pasts in non-Western contexts.

Historians typically hold the documentary archive, and specifically government records, to be a central primary source. These sources are valued for opening windows into policy decisions, discussions, or developments otherwise veiled from the public eye. In Western countries, they are often declassified after political leaders and senior civil servants have left office, when policies have receded from public interest. This entails an interim of two to three decades before government records are made public. It is worth noting that some archives, such as security files, are never made public in the West, though in the United States the Freedom of Information Act allows easier access to official records. In Rankean fashion, the government archive occupies a high place in the methodologies of historians of modern politics, economics, diplomacy, and military history trained in the Western academic tradition (Tosh 2015). Likewise, political historians of colonial Singapore have often relied on the British archives at Kew or the British Library (Yeo 1973; Turnbull 1977).

The archival method is, however, less applicable to contemporary history in non-Western countries and former colonies such as Singapore. For the post-independence period, colonial records are no longer available and the government archive is usually not open to historians. A situation may arise where the scholar of late-colonial Singapore is able to utilize the colonial records but cannot apply the archival methodology when crossing a political boundary to research the postcolonial period after 1965, when the city-state became independent.

Our response to these issues is to approach history writing in context. The research method will depend on the subject, period, available sources, and circumstances that determine the availability. For contemporary history, we suggest a multi-archival approach that expands the concept of the archive to include published and non-documentary sources that are available and useful. This approach is, of course, not new. Historians of social, cultural, and public history have often gone beyond the government archive to explore other sources. In the Southeast Asian context, historians and academics in other fields have looked not only at photographs, maps, and paintings, but also at social media posts in recent years (Ha Thuc 2019; Lee and Chua 2020; Veal 2020; Loh *et al.* 2021; Zackari 2021). In our view, these alternative sources are also relevant for writing eco-

1) By contemporary history, we mean the period within living memory from the 1930s to the 1990s.

nomic, political, diplomatic, and military history when government records are not yet available.

In adapting the concept of the archive, we propose the terms "semi-archives" and "interim archives." These terms include such non-documentary sources as oral history, which is a primary source but still regarded in some circles as being tainted by bias or unreliable memory (Thompson and Bornat 2017). The terms also refer to a range of published sources—also called "gray literature"—from the government, organizations, and individuals, such as official reports, newspapers and other periodicals, biographies, and commemorative volumes. In this paper, we are especially interested in oral history and biographies.

The idea of the terms "semi-archives" and "interim archives" denotes the nature of the sources and type of historical account based on them. These sources are partial and tentative, while the historical account lacks a certain depth or nuance without the use of archival records. We may not be able to discern the making of policy decisions or debates between government leaders or departments. At the same time, we do not regard the government archive as necessarily superior or definitive. We argue that it is itself a type of semi-archive and interim archive, perhaps because not all of its holdings have been made public, or it is still to be used in conjunction with other sources. In our research, we were able to utilize official documents and deepen our understanding of the NWC but also had to use them together with oral, biographical, and newspaper sources.

A counterargument may be made that it is better to leave out the contemporary past altogether and wait till the archival records are fully open. In our view, this is not feasible because of the context of historical research in Singapore and Southeast Asia. Even without archival sources, contemporary historians can still bring their research method and skills to bear on subjects that throw new light on present-day developments. A historical dimension enriches our understanding of events that—to generalize—is usually framed in synchronic or theoretical terms by social scientists, policy analysts, and journalists. Equally, even a partial and tentative account helps clarify and deepen the public record of events and policies. In Southeast Asia, where government archives of the contemporary past are typically closed, such pragmatism enables historians to work both modestly and imaginatively—to "make do"—with a wide range of available sources (Loh 2020; Benzaquen-Gautier 2021). This allows them to fulfill their academic and social roles.

## Archives in Southeast Asia and Beyond

Debates over historical sources have long been part of Southeast Asian history. The advent of the autonomous way as a response to the colonialist and nationalist schools in the 1960s and 1970s was largely predicated on the use of what were considered to be indigenous sources. Calls by pioneers such as John Smail (1961) and J. C. van Leur (1955) to turn the historical perspective a hundred and eighty degrees from Westerners to locals entailed either reading colonial sources against the grain or using indigenous sources in creative ways. Utilizing local Catholic epics, Reynaldo Ileto (1979) made a groundbreaking interpretation of the popular roots of the Philippine Revolution. In the case of colonial Malaya and Singapore, Anthony Milner (1987) and Yeo Kim Wah (1987) engaged in a debate in the 1980s over the reliance on British colonial records. James Warren's (2003a; 2003b) discovery of coroners' inquests, which are court records that contain testimonies of the Singapore working class, suggests that the divide between colonial and indigenous sources may not be so clear-cut.

Nevertheless, these efforts and debates have in the main been limited to precolonial or colonial history before World War II. Little discussion has been made with regard to the decolonization and postcolonial periods. As we arrive in the third decade of the new millennium, it is timely to consider the research method and sources for Southeast Asia's contemporary pasts, especially from the post-independence years to the 1990s. The Southeast Asian literature highlights two key questions for this research: whether there are contemporary equivalents of indigenous sources, and how useful the archives of the postcolonial government are.

In the region and beyond, there are insightful ruminations about the nature of the government archive, especially its association with ideology and power. The government archive has variously been seen as a historical artifact of the modern state (Burns 2010), a form of governmentality aiding the creation of the nation-state and disciplining of the working class (Joyce 1999), or a technology of colonial governance (Stoler 2002). As Gyanendra Pandey observes, the creation of archives separates the sayable from the unsayable, reason from unreason, creating marginalized groups with "unarchived histories" (Pandey 2014). A government archive is a set of sources with its own political history to be read carefully. To these issues, we may add the difficulty of gaining access to government archives in non-Western contexts. While it does not fully resolve them, a multi-archival approach addresses the issues to some degree in utilizing a variety of partial and tentative sources and bringing diverse perspectives and voices to contemporary history.

These issues exist in Singapore, coupled with factors peculiar to the city-state. The

National Archives of Singapore (NAS) is the custodian of the records of the postcolonial government as well as those of defunct colonial agencies. These records are deposited at the NAS 25 years after their closure, becoming public records. However, they remain mostly classified and have restrictions on their use. Requests to read, reproduce, or cite from the records often require the approval of the creating or depositing agency—a process that takes 10 to 12 weeks for each request.[2] It often takes longer because the documents have not been reviewed and the officials tasked with the work have to do so while discharging their main responsibilities (Loh 2010).

What is unique to Singapore is the continuity of the People's Action Party (PAP) government from 1959 to the present. The government is largely responsible for the socioeconomic success of this period (Sandhu and Wheatley 1989). In the official narrative called the Singapore Story, the city-state made the remarkable leap from "Third World to First" under an enlightened and capable leadership after independence (Loh 1998; Hong and Huang 2008). The issue of historical legacy for the government is akin to that of an elderly political leader or businessman concerned about theirs. In reviewing requests for archival access, government agencies thus play the role of gatekeepers of the contemporary history of Singapore. This has led many scholars of the period's political, economic, social, and cultural histories to rely on a combination of foreign archives, gray literature, oral history, newspapers, and other non-archival sources (Loh 2010).

## The National Wages Council and Its Archives

With this review of archival access in Singapore, our paper considers an understudied case of economic history after the island's independence. This is the National Wages Council, an important tripartite institution in the 1970s and 1980s. Formed in 1972, the NWC was the orchestra of the nation's wage policy. It was a non-statutory, advisory body composed of representatives from the government, employers, and trade unions. Reconciling the interests of the three parties—in economic growth, profitability, and adequate incomes—the NWC was a major force for orderly wage rises, industrial peace, and economic restructuring. For the first 29 years, it was headed by an academic: the founding Chairman and economist Lim Chong Yah. As we will see, Lim has been prolific in writings about the NWC. Yet, there has been no proper study of its role in Singapore's economic history. There are certainly none based on archival documents.

The existing literature on the NWC falls into two camps. On the one hand, the

2) See National Archives of Singapore, *FAQs*, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/government_records/faq (accessed September 19, 2022).

official line highlighted how it facilitated Singapore's economic prowess. It was a litmus test for tripartism and the concerted application of reason by the government, employers, and unions alike (Tan 2013). Such a consensual history of the NWC is exemplified in former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's memoirs, published in 2000:

> Every year, using facts and figures available to the government, the NWC reached a wide consensus recommendation on wage increases and other terms and conditions of service for the coming year that would be affordable and would promote further economic growth. . . . From its early years, all parties agreed on the principle that wage increases must not exceed productivity increases. (Lee 2000, 88)

This official line has been reiterated and expanded by some. Rosalind Chew and Chew Soon Beng (2003) emphasize the centrality of the government's influence in the acceptance and implementation of the NWC's wage recommendations, and the large increase in the number of employees who benefited from these recommendations. Wu Ying *et al.* (2004) show how steady wage increments reinforced Singapore's exchange rate policy, strengthening its macroeconomic stability and export competitiveness. Going further, Jonathan Cheng (2017) suggests that the NWC has supported the development of Singapore's defense ecosystem by contributing toward domestic stability and attracting foreign direct investment with orderly wage increments.

On the other hand, a number of political scientists, economists, and civil servants, using published sources, have been critical of the government's optimism that planned wage increases could replace the market in propelling Singapore's economic restructuring. W. G. Huff (1994) wonders whether a policy instrument like the NWC could spur the productivity increments needed to forge a capital- and technology-intensive economy, though he acknowledges the council's role in curbing inflationary pressures in the context of full employment. Garry Rodan (1989) agrees that the accelerated industrial leap forward as a whole showed a distrust of market forces. While it had positive outcomes, many of these actually preceded the program. While recognizing the NWC's success in maintaining industrial peace, Linda Lim and Pang Eng Fong (1986) also point out the repercussions: it undermined workers' loyalty to their employers, removed the room for flexible wage increases, and did not sufficiently raise worker productivity or reduce Singapore's reliance on low-wage foreign workers. In his memoirs, former top civil servant Ngiam Tong Dow sounded a rare critical note of the NWC: that its wage hikes, coupled with an inadequate supply of labor, worsened the issue of "job-hopping" and prevented workers from staying in their jobs long enough to pick up skills required for higher-paying jobs (Zhang 2011, 5, 86).

What do the sources—archival and otherwise—tell us? We were able to conduct

research on the NWC as part of a National Heritage Board-supported project on change and continuity in Singapore's economic history after 1945. We gained access to archival documents on the NWC between the early 1970s and early 1990s that had been deposited with the former Ministry of Labour (MOL, presently the Ministry of Manpower, MOM). As part of the government, the MOL was a member of the NWC. Its files were deposited at the NAS under the 25-year rule for the transfer of public records in Singapore. Unlike the bulk of government records at the NAS, they have been declassified by the MOM for reading and reproduction. In many cases, we still had to obtain approval for quotation and publication, which we did.[3)]

Access to the MOL files was undoubtedly useful. Comprising mostly minutes of meetings, they highlight the eventful history of the NWC, going beyond the narrative arc of consensus to offer a more nuanced appreciation of the political and economic forces at play. This helped address a problem for historians researching the NWC: it had adopted the Chatham House rules of non-attribution, so deliberations among the members were not disclosed to the press or the public. With the MOL archive, we were able to gain insights into the inner workings of tripartism in Singapore. The NWC's meetings showed significant differences and debates over wage increases among the government, employers, and unions—sometimes even within each group—before agreement was brokered. The files also throw light on a wide range of related issues, including productivity, economic restructuring, immigration, automation, fringe benefits, and job-hopping. This brought the NWC into social, cultural, and psychological considerations beyond wages.

On the other hand, the MOL files are a good example of a semi-archive and interim archive. They are incomplete, with gaps in the periods covered, such as the meetings of 1981 (the final year of the high wage policy discussed below) and most of 1982. Some minutes are unconfirmed drafts. In many instances, the MOL files do not document how solutions to deadlock or compromises were reached. The NWC's own archive might contain some of this information, but we do not know whether it exists. The MOL files also do not contain political decisions from the government, except at key junctures in

3) The MOL files are labelled declassified according to the MOM's stipulation that they do not contravene Section 102 of the Employment Act. But some of them still require written approval for reproduction, citation, and in some cases access, though many have been approved for reproduction and citation. The exact wording from the NAS online catalog is: "Note from transferring agency: The following file has been declassified. MOM has checked the file, and find that the file does not contain any explicit record that MOM's powers under Part XII of the Employment Act have been invoked in obtaining the information. As such, the bar from publication or disclosure under section 102 of the Employment Act does not apply." Part XII pertains to Registers, Returns and Other Documentary Requirement, while Section 102 covers "Returns Not to Be Published or Disclosed." For instance, see https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/government_records/record-details/8854e730-259b-11e9-b76c-001a4a5ba61b (accessed September 19, 2022).

the early years. This means that the relationship between the government and the NWC was not always clear. Such documentation would be found in cabinet papers and other archival sources, including those of employers and unions. For these reasons, the MOL files are also an interim source that has to await the opening of other archival and published sources.

## Albert Winsemius and Genesis of the NWC[4]

Our paper delves into two milestones in the NWC's history. One is the convergence of factors that brought about its formation in February 1972. The other is its implementation of a high wage policy as part of the government's economic restructuring program between 1979 and 1981. This pair of episodes have been chosen because they involve policy-making decisions of the type usually well documented in government sources.

In the public record, the genesis of the NWC is linked mainly to individuals on the one hand and national interests on the other. The commissioned book *The Story of NWC* (Tan 2013) noted broad support for a tripartite wages council at the time from various persons: Minister of Finance Hon Sui Sen; S. F. T. B. Lever, the outgoing Chairman of the Singapore International Chamber of Commerce; and members of the Singapore Employers' Federation (SEF) (Tan 2013).[5] Such a council would be a force for industrial stability, reconciling the interests of employers, labor, and the government. A *Straits Times* article in April 1970 carried a call by the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) Secretary-General for the government to establish a tripartite wages council and administer wage increases, without which "industrial relations in Singapore could well degenerate into a state of disorder, if not anarchy."[6] As reported in a news article in June 1971, Hon endorsed such a council as a way for wage increases to be "coolly considered in the interest of both employers and workers, and of the public represented by the Government."[7] The commissioned book and newspaper articles emphasize national imperative and reinforce the consensual history of the NWC.

But another public source more usefully pinpoints Albert Winsemius, the government's long-time Dutch economics adviser, as the source of the idea of the NWC. In his 2014 memoirs, *Singapore's National Wages Council: An Insider's View*, Lim Chong Yah,

4) See also Sng Hui Ying, "Albert Winsemius and Wage Policy in Singapore," in *Albert Winsemius: Here, It Is Going to Happen*, edited by Euston Quah (Singapore: World Scientific, 2022).
5) "Question of Wages," *New Nation*, April 13, 1971, p. 2.
6) "Call for a Pay Rise Formula," *Straits Times*, April 12, 1970, p. 8.
7) "Bosses 'Yes' to Pay Council," *Straits Times*, June 20, 1971, p. 1.

who was not privy to discussions to form the NWC, concurred: "I was informed that it was Dr Albert Winsemius who in 1971 suggested the idea of NWC to the then Prime Minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew" (Lim 2014, 345). He merely added: "Though Dr Winsemius proposed the concept of tripartism to the Prime Minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew, he never interfered in its implementation and evolution. He never initiated any talk to me on any aspect of the NWC" (Lim 2014, 344).

While Lim's biography identifies Winsemius, questions about what he did—crucially, what data and arguments he compiled and presented—remain unanswered. For these questions, we have an oral history interview with Winsemius conducted by the Oral History Unit of the NAS in 1982. The interview is open access and has been transcribed in full. In the interview, Winsemius quipped, "NWC was established on my advice." He related how, in a lecture at the University of Singapore titled "Some Pitfalls of Rapid Economic Development," he had emphasized the need for Singapore to raise wages when it attained full employment in the early 1970s.

Winsemius's interview on the formation of the NWC and the high wage policy discussed below is an invaluable historical source. The pros and cons of oral history with political and business elites are well known. On the one hand, candid testimonies can be richly textured, providing insights into underlying power and business relations and changes that are not documented in archival sources. On the other hand, their perspective is limited to the eye of the beholder and may contain subjective interpretations or value judgments; these have to be checked against other sources (Perks 2016; Aharon 2020). Winsemius was candid about his role in the NWC. But he could not offer similarly close recollections for other historical actors and events. Other personal accounts and archival sources are needed to corroborate his interpretation and extend the scope of historical reconstruction.

Another question in the NWC's early history pertains to Lim's claim, made in his memoirs, that it was "a unique institution of Singapore," there being no other comparable institution in the world (Lim 2014, 4). But he also stated that Singapore's tripartism had a Dutch precedent (Lim 2014, 344). Likewise, a *New Nation* article in February 1972 surmised that a Singapore wages council would be part of a post-World War II trend in using such institutions to balance national development and income distribution in Western countries. As it noted, the Dutch experience was particularly worth studying for the difficulties faced and lessons learned.[8] In his oral history interview, Winsemius also recounted that the NWC was "based on Dutch experience" in the early 1950s. He called it a "*stichting voor de arbeid* [foundation for labor]," bringing together the government,

8) "Republic's Move to Set Up a Wages Council," *New Nation*, February 10, 1972, p. 6.

unions, and employer organizations to gradually raise wages. It could not work in perpetuity, as it would eventually have a freezing effect on wages, but it was what Singapore needed at the time. More generally, Winsemius had extensive firsthand knowledge and experience of industrial development and wages policy in his homeland after the war.[9)]

On these questions, the MOL files serve as a classic archive, corroborating public or personal claims and deepening our understanding of the NWC's origins. Various documents flesh out Winsemius's key role in adapting the Dutch precedent to Singapore and furnishing the economic data. In a document written in 1972, Winsemius referred to his earlier report, "Some Guidelines for an Economic Policy under Full Employment," dated February 10, 1970. This report is, unfortunately, missing from the MOL files—something we will see on a number of other occasions. It had ostensibly called for an "active wages policy" with "regular wage increases" when Singapore reached full employment. The aim would be to move workers from low-wage industries and services to the "more modern sector" of export manufacturing and hospitality.[10)] Winsemius added that when the NTUC wanted to popularize the bonus system (a practice prevalent among Chinese employers) in early 1970, he had taken "a rather strong stand" against it. He had sent a memo, dated March 5, 1970, to Finance Minister Hon warning of the adverse effect on productivity.[11)]

Sometime later in 1971, a paper titled "Wage Council" was submitted to the cabinet elaborating on Winsemius's ideas. It is, unfortunately, a draft, unattributed and undated. The draft presented the economic argument for a wage council to be formed—with some urgency, by the end of the year.[12)] It warned about the lack of a "coherent wage system" in Singapore, which could spell adverse consequences such as the loss of investments, and highlighted the need to increase the supply of skilled and semi-skilled workers.[13)] The work of this wage council, the paper stressed, would not be wage restraint but an "orderly wage increase."[14)]

Was Winsemius the author of this cabinet draft? We do not know for sure but consider it likely. The draft also addressed two non-economic issues that could have been raised by a political leader or civil servant. But this does not discount Winsemius's plausible authorship. On his first United Nations Development Programme missions to Singapore in 1960–61, Winsemius had gone beyond his economic terms of reference from

9) Singapore Oral History Unit, Interview with Albert Winsemius, August 30–September 3, 1982, Reel 16.
10) MOL 022-02-0005PT0000VOL000, "Labour Market and Wages Policy," p. 1.
11) MOL 022-02-0005PT0000VOL000, "Labour Market and Wages Policy," p. 3.
12) MMC 9-24-72, Draft Cabinet Paper, "Wage Council."
13) MMC 9-24-72, Draft Cabinet Paper, "Wage Council," p. 115.
14) MMC 9-24-72, Draft Cabinet Paper, "Wage Council," p. 116.

the UN. He had privately—and convincingly—advised Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew on political matters, including suppressing the government's leftist opponents to achieve industrial peace (Loh 2019).

The first non-economic issue raised in the draft was having to deal with political pressure the wage council might face from powerful interest groups. The draft held up the example of wage boards in small countries, namely, the Netherlands and Sweden, as having contributed to economic development, though they became less effective in later years due to political influence. The draft maintained that Singapore had a strong government that was capable of managing the management and unions.[15)]

Second, the draft spelled out the composition of the wage council. It would be an advisory body consisting of a Chairman—appointed by the Minister of Labor—three employer representatives, three representatives from the NTUC, and three representatives from the government; subsequently, the number was expanded to thirty, divided equally among the tripartite partners. The Chairman would be a neutral and independent figure.[16)] Lim's (2014) memoirs tell us that he was chosen after a long search by the government, being a development economist with management and union experience. The draft outlined the criteria. But it was more brief about the modus operandi of the council, which would conduct its discussions via a "valuable educational process."[17)]

Following the cabinet draft, a pair of important papers were tabled. On January 25, 1972 Winsemius submitted a paper, "Labour Market and Wages Policy" (another draft), to Minister Hon. This draft drew upon data compiled in a memorandum by the chief of the Business and Economic Research Division in the Economic Development Board (EDB), "Labour Market, Wages and Productivity Analysis," dated January 26, 1972. The data was based on two sources: a survey of 120-odd companies, each employing over two hundred workers, and a manpower budget for the year, which Winsemius had helped draw up.[18)]

"Labour Market and Wages Policy," jointly authored by Winsemius and the EDB, would prove decisive. Or it could have been a follow-up paper with additional statistics Winsemius said he intended to submit, but this paper is not found in the MOL files. Even without further data, "Labour Market and Wages Policy" showed Winsemius's economic logic in the creation of the NWC. The paper delved into immigration and wages policy. Using the aforementioned EDB manpower budget, Winsemius pointed out that with full employment in mid-1971, Singapore would need to recruit more Malaysian workers—

15) MMC 9-24-72, Draft Cabinet Paper, "Wage Council."
16) MMC 9-24-72, Draft Cabinet Paper, "Wage Council," p. 117.
17) MMC 9-24-72, Draft Cabinet Paper, "Wage Council," p. 117.
18) MMC 9-72, Memo No. B.1/72 "Labour Market, Wages and Productivity Analysis," p. 30.

nearly fifty thousand in 1971 and about sixty-seven thousand in 1972—especially for low-paying industries and construction.[19] This contrasted with only twenty thousand school-leavers entering the labor market between December 1972 and January 1973. The manpower shortage was especially marked in low-paying industries such as textiles and garments, and wood and cork. There was also "a severe shortage of middle and lower management personnel, technicians, and craftsmen."[20] For 1972, about twenty thousand immigrant workers were needed in the manufacturing sector, including three thousand to four thousand managerial, technical, and skilled workers.[21]

For Winsemius, the crux of the issue was wages. Drawing from statistics in the EDB memo, he noted that in the view of manufacturers, wages were rising less than productivity in the sector, even as wage rises in the low-paying sector were pulled up by those in the higher-paying sector. A large majority of firms (84 of 116) expected difficulty in recruitment, especially of skilled workers. This would require in-plant training and substantial wage increases that had not been planned for. It was worsened by high labor turnover arising from full employment, especially among new recruits.[22]

Winsemius urged that for Singapore's economic growth to continue, it was necessary to upgrade labor and develop all the economic sectors. Haste was paramount. He predicted that in five years' time (at the end of 1976), manufacturing would expand to the minimum required size. Wage increases were needed to encourage mechanization and release workers from low-paying to higher-paying industries. This would remove the need for large numbers of Malaysian workers, except for the small numbers to fill jobs unpopular with Singaporeans. Winsemius warned, "There is also a danger in the dependency of economic growth on immigration. The sooner this is over the better."[23] He proposed a national wage increase of 8–10 percent, which would likely work out to between 10–12 percent and 13–15 percent.[24] The increase would apply throughout the industry, enabling workers to move from firm to firm in search of optimal wages.[25]

Citing manufacturers' feedback, Winsemius was confident that the envisaged wage council would succeed. Singaporean workers would respond favorably to such an incentive system, which he urged should be "vigorously promoted."[26] The wage increases had to be pushed through as early as possible, establishing a balanced labor market within

19) MOL 022-02-0005PT0000VOL000, "Labour Market and Wages Policy."
20) MOL 022-02-0005PT0000VOL000, "Labour Market and Wages Policy," p. 20.
21) MOL 022-02-0005PT0000VOL000, "Labour Market and Wages Policy."
22) MOL 022-02-0005PT0000VOL000, "Labour Market and Wages Policy."
23) MOL 022-02-0005PT0000VOL000, "Labour Market and Wages Policy," p. 19.
24) MOL 022-02-0005PT0000VOL000, "Labour Market and Wages Policy," p. 23.
25) MOL 022-02-0005PT0000VOL000, "Labour Market and Wages Policy," p. 24.
26) MOL 022-02-0005PT0000VOL000, "Labour Market and Wages Policy," p. 24.

five years by the end of 1976. Otherwise, he warned, "there may not remain sufficient elbow room for the inevitable adaptation of the economic structure to the then changed conditions."[27)]

He made two recommendations for immigration policy to go hand in hand with the wage increases. First, he urged the government to set criteria for citizenship for skilled immigrants. He agreed with the Immigration Review Committee that applications for managers, supervisors, skilled technicians, and accountants from Malaysia (all in shortage) should be "treated liberally."[28)] He acknowledged that integrating skilled Malaysians as permanent residents and eventual citizens "may be a time consuming process."[29)] Subsequently, in October 1972, the Ministry of Labour announced that work permits would be given "liberally" to firms that utilized higher technology.[30)]

Second, Winsemius proposed that the government undertake a study (to be completed by early 1973) to limit immigration within five years at the end of 1976. The study would focus on a wages policy to increase productivity through mechanization and reallocation of workers to high-paying industries, and to establish a balance in the demand and supply of labor without the need for excessive immigration.[31)] The aim of the wages policy was to raise productivity. Wage increases would compel employers to regard labor as a scarce factor, raise labor productivity, and turn to automation. Winsemius stressed:

> An essential part of this policy is (1) that the employee gets what he deserves on the basis of work done, and (2) that the employer is forced to pay his employees what the capable employer can afford to pay.[32)]

On the genesis of the NWC, the MOL files largely work as an archive as intended. The Winsemius and EDB documents contain crucial economic data and arguments. They show that the Dutch adviser played a more important role than the other individuals mentioned in the public record. Specifically, by establishing the link between wage increases, immigration, and productivity, they demonstrate that economic restructuring had been in the government's mind since the beginning of the 1970s, instead of a decade later when the reform was implemented. The documents also illustrate the adaptation of Western, and particularly Dutch, wages councils to Singapore's circumstances. The NWC was not unique; what was remarkable was the willingness to modify a foreign idea

27) MOL 022-02-0005PT0000VOL000, "Labour Market and Wages Policy," p. 25.
28) MOL 022-02-0005PT0000VOL000, "Labour Market and Wages Policy," p. 21.
29) MOL 022-02-0005PT0000VOL000, "Labour Market and Wages Policy," p. 19.
30) MMC 9-72 Vol. 3, Singapore Government Press Release, Addendum to the President's Address for the Opening of Parliament, p. 1.
31) MOL 022-02-0005PT0000VOL000, "Labour Market and Wages Policy," p. 19.
32) MOL 022-02-0005PT0000VOL000, "Labour Market and Wages Policy," p. 24.

to suit national needs. Winsemius's proposal contained an element of urgency: the NWC would not only spur value-added industries but also prevent the economy's stagnation. It had the benefit of hindsight from Western experiences and knew the Singapore government's ability to manage the interests of management and labor.

Despite this, in some ways the MOL archive is also partial and tentative. It contains drafts instead of final or signed documents. The number of drafts suggests the pressure of time and urgency, and possibly the working culture in the government. The cabinet draft in particular was not attributed, requiring us to speculate on its author(s). There are also missing documents, such as Winsemius's supposed follow-up paper on labor and wages. Little is said about the NWC's methodology, for Winsemius apparently did not propose the Chatham House rules or need for consensus. We have to await a newspaper interview with Lim Chong Yah on February 11, 1972, where he emphasized the "cool, unrestricted, unhindered freedom to deliberate, to exchange views, and to argue if necessary, to arrive at recommendations based on cold solid logic, real hard facts and carefully considered judgment."[33)]

Most crucially, the MOL files lack certain key documents. We do not know whether and how the government discussed and responded to Winsemius's proposal. The most intriguing question perhaps is the role of Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. He personally backed the NWC, for it was to him that the council's yearly wage recommendations were submitted. It is only after the NWC was formed that we get a glimpse in the MOL archive of his influence on the council's early work.

As Winsemius's memos make clear, political will was central to the management of wage increases. Published sources are scanty on the matter. In 2011 Lim gave credit to Lee's role, saying, "It was impossible for the NWC to function effectively, including during the crisis years and the restructuring years without his strong support and backing" (Lim 2014, 46). At the same time, in his book on economic restructuring, Lim (1984) maintained that up to that point, the government had directed the NWC's guidelines only once—to propose an interim wage increase in 1974 at the onset of the global oil crisis.

The MOL files shed some light on Lee's considerable influence. Given his background as a lawyer, he intervened on the approach of the NWC. In a meeting with the council in May 1972, he indicated that he had received a paper and two draft bills intended to give the NWC the force of law. These documents are not found in the MOL archive. Lee said he opposed the legislation, as "it would be dangerous to approach the Council's recommendations in such a legalistic way," which would commit employers and unions to fixed wage positions and destabilize industrial relations. This had led to the collapse

33) MMC 9-72, Record of interview with Mr Joseph Yeo of the *Straits Times* and Professor Lim Chong Yah as Chairman of the National Wages Council, February 11, 1972.

of wage councils in the United States, Britain, and even Holland, where it had worked for 10–15 years before failing when the country had attained a level of growth.[34] Lee elaborated:

> Therefore relations between employers and unions should not depend on legislation. The whole idea of the National Wages Council was to find the norm which would guide all employers and employees. Common sense and goodwill were essential to make it work.[35]

At the end of Lee's speech, the NWC's tripartite members expressed their unanimous agreement. Lee's early interventions in the NWC were historically significant.

## The High Wage Policy, 1979–81

The second episode we discuss is the origins of the "high wage" policy between 1979 and 1981. As we have seen, this was the original purpose behind the NWC but had been delayed because of the global oil crisis and resulting recession in 1973–74. The policy has thus also been called the "corrective wage" policy, when postponed wage increases were finally implemented. Where the MOL files have demonstrated their utility on the genesis of the NWC, their role in the high wage policy is decidedly different and more ambivalent.

Among the published sources, Lim's memoirs provide a clue that the impetus for the policy came, quite naturally, from the government:

> When the large-scale national-wide training and re-training programme was proposed by the NWC, I remembered discussing the matter with Mr Hon Sui Sen, the then Finance Minister. He said, "I support your proposal for economic restructuring, particularly in the areas of training and re-training and mechanisation. I have independently discussed the proposal with two other economists who shared the same view as you." Although the Minister did not give any hint as to who these two economists were, I had no doubt that they were Mr Ngiam Tong Dow and Dr Albert Winsemius. (Lim 2014, 344)

In both a lecture in 2011 and our oral history interview with him in 2020, Lim elaborated on the origins of the policy. He recounted a visit to China in 1980 by Lee Kuan Yew, accompanied by Winsemius, Ngiam Tong Dow, and Devan Nair. China had just opened up to international trade and economic relations following the end of the Cultural Revolution. The Singaporeans concluded that Singapore could not hope to compete in labor-intensive,

34) MMC 9-72 Vol. 16, "Notes of Meeting at the Istana State Room," May 23, 1972, pp. 3–4.
35) MMC 9-72 Vol. 16, "Notes of Meeting at the Istana State Room," May 23, 1972, p. 4.

low-value-added manufacturing with China, which had an abundant supply of low-wage labor. Lim related that he had also visited China the previous year with a group of younger economists, reaching the same conclusion about Singapore's need to move to value-added manufacturing (Lim 2014).[36] Following the trip, Lim met with Winsemius and Ngiam. The trio agreed to phase out low-value-added and labor-intensive industries from Singapore (Lim 2014). Lim recalled that he had proposed four years of restructuring to Ngiam's two, so a compromise of three years was reached.[37] It appears that China's opening up was the catalyst for revisiting the high wage policy and economic restructuring.

Nevertheless, Lim's recollections were still somewhat speculative on the government's role. Again, Winsemius offers a detailed answer. His involvement was to be expected, as wage increases had been germane to his thinking on the NWC and economic restructuring in 1970. In his 1982 oral history interview, Winsemius recounted writing a two-page report—he called it "the shortest report I have ever written in Singapore"—at the Shangri-La Hotel on a Sunday, likely in 1978. The report advocated a "wage catch-up operation" to compensate for his mistake of having accepted lower-than-optimal wage increases after the oil crisis. Over three years, wages would rise by 20 percent in 1979, 19 percent in 1980, and 19 percent in 1981. This would lead to higher productivity growth and a balanced labor market. From 1981, Singapore could send back roughly six thousand foreign workers per year, reducing its reliance on a low-wage migrant workforce.[38] Unfortunately, Winsemius's report, which he deemed "Probably the best paper I ever wrote," is nowhere to be found in the MOL files.[39] He recounted these recollections in an interview published in the *Singapore Monitor* in 1984, following his retirement from government service.[40]

Unlike the genesis of the NWC, the MOL files do not involve Winsemius or establish how the high wage policy came about. They contain the minutes of the NWC's meetings in the middle of 1979 and are primarily concerned with the discussions of the proposed policy. This can be seen from the fact that it was only in the sixth meeting, on May 16, that the government representative Ngiam made a brief reference to a high wage policy. The previous five meetings had gone about the usual business of considering wage increases without reference to any major change of policy. In the sixth meeting, however,

36) Loh Kah Seng, Sng Hui Ying, and Jeremy Goh, Interview with Lim Chong Yah, December 4, 2020.
37) Loh Kah Seng, Sng Hui Ying, and Jeremy Goh, Interview with Lim Chong Yah, December 4, 2020.
38) Singapore Oral History Unit, Interview with Albert Winsemius, August 30–September 3, 1982, Reel 16.
39) Singapore Oral History Unit, Interview with Albert Winsemius, August 30–September 3, 1982, Reel 16.
40) "Dutchman behind Singapore Inc.," *Singapore Monitor*, February 26, 1984, p. 16.

Ngiam proposed that a high wage policy, alongside the recruitment of foreign workers, would alleviate the tight labor situation and deter locals from job-hopping.[41] As it was Ngiam's initiative, this does support the accounts of Lim and Winsemius that the government, not the NWC, was behind the policy. As in the proposal for the NWC, wage increases and immigration were the two prongs of Singapore's economic restructuring.

But the next meeting did not raise the matter again. Only in the eighth meeting, on May 30, did Ngiam submit an argument for the high wage policy: low wages would raise the demand for low-skilled immigrant labor and slow down productivity growth, leaving Singapore mired in low-value-added industries. He added that the policy would succeed in the civil service "through exogenous forces and through controls by direction," indicating that the government was wholly committed to the policy.[42] The NWC noted that "politically and socially, a large immigrant workforce was undesirable for Singapore."[43]

The meeting duly considered three recommendations for the 1979 quantum. The government (through Ngiam) proposed both a higher lump sum and higher percentage for 1979, while the employers wanted the same formula as the previous year. Lim took the middle ground, proposing a higher lump sum but the same percentage. At this stage the NTUC was hesitant, with Nair cautioning that a high wage policy should be introduced with "the greatest care" as it may precipitate negative publicity and unhappiness among labor-intensive industries.[44] He called for further studies on the proposed policy.

The lines of debate were more clearly drawn in the ninth meeting a week later, on June 6. Lim stated that he remained in favor of a high wage increase, with the public sector slated for a supporting directive from the Prime Minister and Finance Minister. This time he had the support of the government and union representatives, the latter having changed their position. Obviously, Nair had spoken separately with the government and changed his stance, which the MOL files would not document. Ngiam assured that wage increases in Taiwan, South Korea, and Hong Kong since 1976 had been much higher than in Singapore, and that increments would not lead to inflationary pressures or hurt Singapore's balance of payments.[45]

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41) MMS 3-2-1-74 Vol. 17, Confirmed Minutes of the 6th Meeting of the 8th Session of the National Wages Council, May 16, 1979, p. 131.
42) MMS 3-2-1-74 Vol. 17, Confirmed Minutes of the 8th Meeting of the 8th Session of the National Wages Council, May 30, 1979, p. 113.
43) MMS 3-2-1-74 Vol. 17, Confirmed Minutes of the 8th Meeting of the 8th Session of the National Wages Council, May 30, 1979, p. 112.
44) MMS 3-2-1-74 Vol. 17, Confirmed Minutes of the 8th Meeting of the 8th Session of the National Wages Council, May 30, 1979, p. 116.
45) MMS 3-2-1-74 Vol. 17, Confirmed Minutes of the 9th Meeting of the 8th Session of the National Wages Council, June 6, 1979.

But the employer representatives remained to be convinced. Stressing "moderation and political presentation," they objected to a very high wage policy, wanting it to be implemented in stages instead. They had conducted confidential discussions with respective groups of employers and found "generally unfavourable reactions." The meeting engaged in a lengthy debate on the quantum (unfortunately not transcribed in the minutes), before agreeing tentatively to a formula of $30 plus 6 percent for 1979.[46)]

The matter was not yet resolved. In the tenth meeting, on June 8, the members deliberated at length on the quantum. Government and union representatives stated the quantum of the national average wage to be $522 and called for an appropriately higher increase than previously agreed. The employer representatives claimed that this was a distorted figure and proposed $382. The three parties finally agreed on the midpoint figure of $450—the classic compromise. This meant a wage increase of $32 plus 7 percent with offsetting for 1979, amounting to a 20 percent hike in national wages, as Winsemius had intimated in his oral history interview.[47)] The recommendations were signed off three days later, during the 11th meeting on June 11, submitted to the Prime Minister on June 23, and accepted by the government.

The MOL minutes of meetings failed to throw light on the origins of the high wage policy. Its utility was to provide a view of tripartism at work. The employers had resisted the policy, but the Chairman, government, and unions had succeeded through persuasion and compromise. Consensus in the NWC was not a given but the result of debate and reconciliation. Lee Kuan Yew (in his memoirs) was correct that the economic interests of Singapore circumscribed the disparate interests of the tripartite members.

However, consensus was partial when it was taken beyond the council to the economy. When the high wage policy was implemented, local newspapers documented what was happening on the ground. Labor-intensive electronics and textile industries were shown to be badly hit by the higher wage increases.[48)] Some German and Japanese MNCs expressed their dismay that their competitiveness was being eroded; one German manufacturer was quoted as saying, "The EDB lured us here and then dropped us like hot potatoes."[49)]

Further, what is missing in the archival records is the personal or individual element. Why did Nair change his stance? Were there varying degrees of consent and dissent among different groups of employers? We may turn to the writings of Lim Chong Yah.

46) MMS 3-2-1-74 Vol. 17, Confirmed Minutes of the 9th Meeting of the 8th Session of the National Wages Council, June 6, 1979, p. 104.
47) MMS 3-2-1-74 Vol. 17, Unconfirmed Minutes of the 10th Meeting of the 8th Session of the National Wages Council, June 8, 1979.
48) "The NWC Hike and the Angry Bosses," *Straits Times*, July 2, 1979, p. 12.
49) "NWC and the Multinationals," *Straits Times*, July 11, 1980, p. 14.

They contain many anecdotes and stories about the NWC, emphasizing the importance of personality and interpersonal relations. Lim (2014) highlighted his excellent relations with the senior civil servant Ngiam; the senior union officials Devan Nair and Govindasamy Kandasamy; and Stephen Lee, President of the SEF. Although his writings did not broach the compromises behind the high wage policy, Lim related the methods he used to obtain agreement from hesitant members of the NWC. He applied peer pressure and made use of fine wine to work the foreigners. On one occasion, by arranging a meeting on a Sunday with representatives of the American Business Council, he was able to break the impasse (Lim 2014).[50)]

The personal resolution efforts that took place outside the NWC meetings are, of course, not documented in the MOL files. What the archive does is to provide the historical context for the stories narrated by Lim and Winsemius. On the high wage policy, it captures the initial resistance of the employers, the shift in the unions' position, the mediating role of Lim as the Chairman, and the brokering of a consensus. We are in a better position to understand how the NWC worked.

## Conclusion

Our access to the MOL files reveals the history of the NWC to be interesting, multi-vocal, and eventful. The files make a crucial contribution to understanding the economic history of Singapore in the 1970s and 1980s. As archival records, they peel away the veil that had been put in place by the Chatham House rules to highlight deep tripartite discussions on wage issues. Specifically, they affirm the roles of Winsemius in two milestone events of the NWC, and an early intervention of Lee Kuan Yew. The files also underline the diverse perspectives and means of rapprochement between the government, employers, and unions during discussions of the high wage policy.

The MOL files are also a useful case study on the pursuit of history where government archives are classified or incomplete. The files are a semi-archive, inadequate for a complete history of the NWC. In part this is because they are incomplete; important records on the genesis of the NWC and the high wage policy are missing. But more important, the MOL archive is not truly "tripartite" in the way the NWC was. It comprises the documents kept by one of the government members (albeit a key one) in the NWC. It is telling that most of the MOL documents are minutes of the NWC's meetings, which were circulated to the members. Other archival documents are needed for a more

50) Loh Kah Seng, Sng Hui Ying, and Jeremy Goh, Interview with Lim Chong Yah, December 4, 2020.

complete picture.

Many questions on the NWC cannot be answered without a tripartite set of archival documents. These will have to be obtained from the other branches of government (including, crucially, the cabinet and Ministry of Finance), the employers, and the unions. Conversely, the history of wage policy in Singapore cannot be understood without reference to bigger or related policies on economic restructuring, productivity improvements, skills training, immigration, and labor affairs. To these ends, it is important that other government agencies, with the facilitation of the NAS, continue the crucial work of declassifying their archives as the MOM has done.[51)]

In the broader field of Southeast Asian history, Lim's writings and speeches and Winsemius's 1982 oral history interview with the NAS are arguably the contemporary equivalents of indigenous sources. They are authored by locals or, in Winsemius's case, a knowledgeable foreigner with close involvement in local affairs. In the absence of (but also in conjunction with) the usual indigenous source—government records—they are useful for their personal vantage points and anecdotes. As historical sources, they are partial and incomplete. One might be wary if their authors seek to highlight their historical legacy, as biographies are known to do (Tosh 2015). But as Alessandro Portelli (2016) notes about oral history, it is the very subjectivity of such sources that makes them valuable.

As semi-archives and interim archives, the accounts of Lim and Winsemius relay not only useful historical facts but also the culture of conflict resolution in the NWC and more generally the making of economic policy in Singapore. Interestingly, they present rather countervailing perspectives: Lim used interpersonal means to broker agreements, while Winsemius offered cold economic logic in proposing the NWC and high wage policy. Rather than weakening the narrative, their accounts tell us much about the complex forces at work in Singapore's recent economic history.

Through the terms "semi-" and "interim" archives, we conceive of a history that is incrementally written and progressively mapped in non-Western contexts. In oral history, we have a source that is the joint creation of the interviewer (the historian) and interviewee, and thus one where the historian is able to actively pursue the research (Frisch 1990). Biographies, though different, are quite indispensable in countries where policy decisions are made by a select few in government or business; they have been proven to be particularly informative on the themes of motive and intention (Tosh 2015).

51) To some extent, the views of employers may be gleaned from company records maintained by the Accounting and Corporate Regulatory Authority (ACRA), a Singapore statutory board, https://www.bizfile.gov.sg/ngbbizfileinternet/faces/oracle/webcenter/portalapp/pages/BizfileHomepage.jspx (accessed September 19, 2022). It is unclear, however, how comprehensive these records are.

Government archives, when released, ought to be viewed as new and additional sources that can deepen or clarify the existing narrative rather than as the sole authoritative source. Historians of Singapore and Southeast Asia can fruitfully utilize a wide range of sources and bring their method and expertise to contemporary history.

**Accepted: April 21, 2022**

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