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## **Farmers in a city state? Collective action under adverse circumstances**

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## **Farmers in a city state? Collective action under adverse circumstances**

How can individuals with contrasting interests in a declining industry at odds with the country's identity and facing a soft authoritarian and sceptical government band together to promote collective goals? This manuscript addresses this question by examining an unlikely fraternity – Singapore's Kranji Countryside Association (KCA), one of Singapore's few civil society organizations to focus on community organizing. To KCA members, the material and time costs of organizing were high, the odds of success were low, and the material rewards of success were modest. This manuscript evaluates two competing views that purport to explain collective action: the rational choice approach that focuses on selective incentives, and the social-psychological approach that emphasizes non-excludable collective incentives and collective identity. We conclude that while selective incentives were necessary for attracting a number of non-active members to fill out the ranks of the organization, rational choice theory was inadequate to explaining the group's initial establishment, as well as why some members have been especially active. For this, social-psychological factors were more vital to both building and sustaining the organization. The results illuminate collective action in a soft authoritarian context, as well as enhance our understanding of the dilemmas of Singapore's approach to managing civil society.

Keywords: Singapore, Collective Action, Social Networks, Land

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One fateful day in August 2005, a group of farmers met to form an association. For years farmers had given up struggling against what seemed to be gradual extinction, worn down as their pleas for longer land tenures and other forms of support fell on deaf ears – or at best, resisting unsuccessfully as individuals. These neighbours decided that as a united group, they could fight as one to promote the agriculture sector, protect one another's interests, and establish new business ventures such as rural tourism ("agri-tainment"). The association started out small – but with regular meetings and by building on some early victories, the group eventually quadrupled in size. More importantly, the members remained unified in the face of both setbacks as well as attempts to co-opt or divide and conquer them.

As difficult as such collective action is, this story would not be especially remarkable – except that this group formed in twenty-first century Singapore, a rapidly industrializing and urbanizing city-state with about 5.6 million people sharing about 721 square kilometres (279 square miles) of land. Given Singapore's population density, land is understandably one of Singapore's most precious assets, a resource that the state from its origins has carefully controlled and managed as a conduit towards development (e.g., Gamer 1972, 34-52; Yeung 1973; Savage 1992, 198; Turnbull 2009, 317-319). Most importantly, Singapore is a country that prides itself on rapidly shifting from Third World squalor to First World modernity, becoming in the process a gleaming, modern city-state, the pride of Asia and a global model of development. These farmers – a remnant of what used to be one of the pillars of the Singaporean economy – faced an uphill struggle against a widely accepted vision of the nation, a national image within which they fit uncomfortably, if at all.

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How can individuals with contrasting interests in a declining industry at odds with the country's identity and facing a soft authoritarian and sceptical government cooperate together to promote collective goals? This manuscript addresses this question by examining an unlikely fraternity – Singapore's Kranji Countryside Association (KCA). The role of voluntary welfare organizations (VWOs) – non-government organizations that focus on the needs of the country's citizens and permanent residents – in Singapore has been well documented (as discussed below). However, the vast majority of these organizations are focused on delivering much-needed services, while a handful advocate, on behalf of others, to promote awareness and champion policies to address the needs of specific swaths of people, including women, the physically and mentally disabled, foreign workers, and others. Almost non-existent are a third type of interest group – self-organized community organizations whose members advocate not on behalf of others but for themselves (e.g., Twelvetrees 1991). Given the nature of the Singaporean government and its mistrust of attempts to form organizations that are independent of the state and that advocate for their own needs at odds with government priorities, the KCA's establishment in 2005 and its subsequent growth is puzzling.

That the organization advocates for the needs of farmers in a tiny city-state like Singapore deepens the puzzle. KCA members face a zero-sum struggle for access to scarce land. Although the KCA promotes a vision of maintaining one per cent of Singapore's land for capital-intensive farming and agri-tainment, these ideas face other competing notions on how the land could be best utilized – for housing, industry, commercial, or other use. At present, land tenures on 62 farms are due to expire in 2021 and return to the state for redevelopment. Even this was the result of a difficult struggle – the original leases were due to expire in 2013, but were extended several times, in

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large part due to KCA lobbying (Tan and Boh 2017; personal interviews). As dire as it sounds, the current situation is much improved compared to the pre-2005 period. Prior to the KCA's formation, farmers generally felt helpless and isolated in the face of short-term land leases and the lack of land security. Individual appeals for basic services, such as being connected to the nation's sewer system, did not achieve satisfactory results. Singapore's broadly accepted vision for its future seemed to leave little place for agriculture, leaving many farmers resigned to the prevailing perception of farming as a sunset industry. As the size of land allocated for farming shrank rapidly, farmers increasingly found themselves not only competing against farmers around the world, but also vying against each other for the remaining land that has been allocated to them. Such competitive dynamics formed the unfavourable backdrop against which the KCA was formed.

The KCA was formed under additional adverse conditions. Singapore's emphasis on urbanization and industrialization – at the expense of its countryside – has since the nation's founding served as its core development strategy and its status as a typical developmental state (Deyo 1981, 53-4; Turnbull 2009, 301). Further, the Singapore government has long adopted an ambivalent attitude towards civil society – with a careful distinction made between 'civil' and 'civic' society. Wariness towards the development of a politicised civil society that is potentially disruptive has led the state to advocate for a 'civic' society instead, with emphasis on citizen participation bounded by rigid institutional boundaries. In this way, even after the government signalled increased openness to public participation, it clearly defined the role for Singapore's civil society, not based on a liberal conception of individualism and especially not on individual rights, but on a communitist view based on mutual obligations of citizen and

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the state (Koh 2009; Devan 2016, vi). The government actively supports, encourages and generously funds organizations that deliver services of many kinds – as long as their activities remain within delineated boundaries. Those boundaries have expanded since 1965 independence. Whereas the Lee Kwan Yew administration showed little tolerance for anything resembling special interest groups, under his successor, Goh Chok Tong, the state has provided tacit and uneven acceptance for some organizations. While such organizations include a handful (e.g., AWARE, Transient Workers Count Too) that advocate for others, the state has shown little tolerance for self-organizing groups that advocate for their own interests in a way that is independent of the government's corporatist system (e.g., Koh 2009). This restrictive environment earned Singapore a score of 4 out of 12 for its associational and organizational rights from Freedom House (2017). If, as Foley and Edwards (1996) suggest, civil society has two paradoxical versions – one that habituates citizens and the other that serves as a counterweight to the state – Singapore encourages the former while strongly discouraging the latter.

This political context should have deterred the bottom-up formation of associations that lobby for farmers' interests. Indeed, the costs the KCA faced for organizing were high, its odds for success were low, and the material rewards of success were modest compared to other opportunities in Singapore. Moreover, any victories would apply to all farmers, not just those that participated in collective action. Despite facing such conditions, the KCA has not only survived but quadrupled its membership, and shown some successes in its struggles. The KCA can be considered a hard case for understanding collective action. Because it has enjoyed a degree of success, the KCA

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can help us understand how groups of individuals in a soft authoritarian context form, maintain and grow an organization amidst zero-sum conditions in a sunset industry.

### **Explaining collective action**

To understand the puzzling case of the KCA, this manuscript evaluates two schools of thought to explain collective action: the rational choice approach and the social-psychological model. The two schools are often thought to be mutually exclusive, and even based on incompatible ontological assumptions. Other scholars argue that these two approaches are more compatible. Yet attempts to reconcile the two theories have risked creating tautologies such as, "people act rationally unless they don't." Each of these theories make specific arguments regarding how collective action problems can be overcome in order to create associations such as the KCA. Examining this organization allows us not only to test which theory best explains the KCA's formation and subsequent persistence, but also to understand under what circumstances, if any, people act according to the assumptions of these theories.

#### ***The rational choice approach***

Rational choice theory, based on the assumption that individuals are self-regarding maximizers of their material interests, underscores that individual self-interest makes collective action difficult. Individuals are incentivized to free ride on the effort of others rather than bear their proportionate burden of providing for the collective good. The 'strong' variant of rational choice theory argues that the free rider problem is the most formidable barrier to collective action and can only be overcome by either: (a) coercion or (b) selective incentives that exclude non-participants (Olson 1965). The 'weak' version of rational choice theory assumes that individual actors act within existing



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social and institutional constraints (e.g., Taylor 1977; Calhoun 1988; Miller 1992).

Specifically, this variant suggests that a pre-existing community makes it rational for individuals to participate (Taylor 1988). Additionally, this variant contends that communal bonds or a collective identity actually represent pre-requisites for collective action (Calhoun 1988). Other pre-conditions include: Individuals should adopt a long-term time horizon, participate in a long-term activity where benefits of cooperation can build up, know when cooperation ceases, and be able to punish non-cooperative members of the group (Taylor 1977). Even as both variants of rational choice theory differ on the question of whether there are pre-requisites for collective action, they converge in arguing for the need for either selective incentives or external coercion to overcome the free rider problem in small groups. Thus, the rational choice theory hypothesizes that:

RC1: Either external coercion or selective incentives are necessary to initiate collective action

If RC1 explained the formation of the KCA, we would expect that one of the three following conditions applied. First, collective action could overcome the threat of free riders and rationally arise if successful coercion generated high participation rates within the community, with keenly-felt repercussions for non-participants. Second, it could rationally arise if individuals had sufficient selective incentives for them to bear the cost of providing for the collective good. Finally, it could rationally arise if non-members were excluded from the gains generated by the group. The "weak" version of rational choice theory expects a fourth condition: that collective action could rationally arise only if there are pre-existing social conditions for such action to occur, such as the presence of communal bonds between individuals.

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Regarding the separate but related question of how to sustain collective action, the strong variant of rational choice would argue that, since free riders could still defect if the risk of detection is low, external enforcement that threatens to exclude free riders would need to remain strong. In contrast, the weak variant suggests that norms of reciprocity can sustain co-operation via shame and guilt (Elster 1989; Fehr and Fischbacher 2002; Ostrom 2000). According to the weak version's line of argument, the formation of these norms requires that (a) the state recognizes the organization and provides sanctioning institutions, as well as nested levels of appropriation, provision, enforcement and governance (Wade 1989; Ostrom 1990; Agrawal 2003); (b) the group's resource system is small with well-defined boundaries, simplifying the process of obtaining accurate knowledge about shared resources and facilitating collective management (Wade 1989), and (c) the group is small, possesses clearly defined boundaries, shares norms, has experienced past successes, and possesses social capital, appropriate leadership, interdependence among group members, heterogeneity of endowments and homogeneity of identities and interests (Wade 1989; Ostrom 1990; Baland and Platteau 2000; Agrawal 2003).

Derived from this, the following hypothesis presents the conditions necessary for sustaining collective action, according to rational choice theory:

RC2: Norms of reciprocity sustain collective action

If RC2 explains our puzzle, we would expect to see norms of reciprocity sustaining collective action within the KCA. Although the strong variant suggests that selective incentives and/or external coercion alone suffice in sustaining collective action, under the weak variant, social mechanisms (e.g., social ostracism and peer pressure) should also be in place to deter uncooperative behaviour. If the weak variant holds, we would

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expect to see evidence of the above-mentioned four conditions.

### *The social-psychological approach*

In contrast to the rational choice approach, social-psychological theories contend that collective benefits or collective identity alone is sufficient for collective action.

Collective benefits and collective identity fulfil a very different kind of self-interest than that posited in the rational-choice approach, thus obviating the need to eliminate free riders by either selective incentives or coercion. More specifically, the term collective benefits refers to the expectation that participation will help to produce the collective good that brings about a valued social change. Given that individuals are often asked to participate when they do not yet know whether others will participate, their participation is contingent on: (a) a belief that a minimum number of people – a somewhat arbitrary number that is based on the (potentially flawed) judgment of the individual in question – will participate in the collective action; (b) that the individual's participation is important to contributing to the success of collective action; and (c) that collective action will be successful if many participate (e.g., Klandermans 1984). Relatedly, individuals who share a collective identity are constituted to think and act as members of the group, thereby driving participation in collective action (e.g., Kawakami and Dion 1995). Two hypotheses emerge from these arguments.

SP1.1: Collective benefits are needed to initiate collective action

If SP1.1 is valid, we would expect that collective benefits, or a belief in the social value of their organization, drives members' participation. The three conditions listed above must be present for the promise of collective benefits to drive participation in collective action, unless a cause is especially urgent.

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SP1.2: A pre-existing collective identity is necessary for initiating collective action

Evidence consistent with SP1.2 includes the existence of a strong and salient social identity among members prior to collective action. In the absence of a pre-existing collective identity, we would expect activists to frame strategically such identities as a part of their attempts to recruit participants. Activists could make use of perceived collective disadvantages that distinguish "us" from "them." Individuals who identify more with the group should also exhibit a higher level of commitment and develop an obligation to the group. To sustain collective action, the social-psychological model suggests that social networks cultivate trust, which in turn facilitates collective action (Klandermans 1984; Tarrow 1998; McAdam and Paulsen 1993). Collective rituals reinforce individuals' basic moral commitment to behave in terms of their level of group membership, which helps to maintain the group identity (Bosco 2001; Sturmer and Simon 2004). Thus, according to this logic:

SP2: Social networks sustain collective action.

If SP2 is valid, we should see evidence of formal or informal ties between members, including collective rituals. Sustained participation could be mediated by the degree to which one feels obliged to behave in accordance with one's group membership (i.e., as an active or inactive member). Social ties are also intrinsic to the rational choice explanation, in that social networks can deter free riders via social sanctions (RC2). In contrast to RC2, however, social networks in SP2 cultivate trust and solidarity, thus becoming an enabling tool for sustained participation, rather than a form of soft coercion.

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### *The role of the political environment*

How does political context affect the prospects for collective action? Contentious collective action, such as happens in social movements, arises when political opportunities and constraints change such that individuals can collectively challenge political elites (Tarrow 1998). Institutional change involves a framing contest. Opposing actors compete to frame the meanings of relevant issues to turn these into opportunities (Hargrave and Van de Ven 2006). Thus,

PC1: Changes to political opportunities and constraints are pre-requisites for contentious collective action

According to this hypothesis, social movements can initiate action – but they do not do so in a vacuum, but rather in the context of to changes in the political environment. Even authoritarian governments can signal a level of tolerance for additional participation in the public sphere (Tarrow 1998; Johnston 2015). For non-contentious collective action, minimal recognition of the right to organize by the government is crucial (Wade 1989; Ostrom 2000). Governance regimes that empower local leadership help to trigger and sustain collective action given that market and social pre-conditions are in place (Salifu, Francesconi, and Kolavalli 2010). Thus,

PC2: Minimal government support is a necessary condition for non-contentious collective action.

PC2 leads us to predict that attempts at collective action without at least minimal state support will fail. While RC2 focuses on the need for external enforcement mechanisms to be present, PC2 underscores the necessity of some form of governmental support. If PC2 is valid, we would expect institutions, laws or other mechanisms that allow

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organizations' formal recognition by the state. There should also be some sign of government support for local leaders that helps to trigger or sustain collective action.

## **Methodology**

To test these hypotheses as potential explanations for the puzzling case of the KCA, we gathered data by combining observational study with 15 semi-structured interviews. The KCA members can be segregated into three categories: (a) The Executive Committee (Exco) comprising the President, Vice-President, Honorary Secretary and Treasurer; (b) active members, as demonstrated by service as committee members; and (c) non-active members. Unlike their non-member counterparts, KCA's active and non-active members are distinct in that active members willingly provide public goods that help sustain the organization and increase its effectiveness, whereas inactive members pay membership dues but do little else. To understand the different motivations of these groups, we interviewed three of the 10 original founding members, six of 10 active members, four of 30 non-active members, and four among dozens of eligible non-members. Interviewees held similarly sized (i.e., small) plots of land located in the Kranji area, and (like most farmers in Singapore) most were ethnically Chinese. Like the KCA membership itself, interviews came from a range of age groups, genders and educational backgrounds. Interviews focused on understanding why various types of members (leaders, active members, non-active members and non-members) chose to participate (or not) in collective action at different points in time.

We applied process tracing methods to search for the causal mechanisms expected for each hypothesis (for an explanation see Bennett and George 2005). Accordingly, we identified the causal chain and intervening causal mechanisms that we believe explained the behaviours of different types of actors. To understand the

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contextual issues, such as state-society relations, we also reviewed the historical literature related to Singapore. Despite interviewing several members from different groups, most of the information we gleaned was consistent across the different interviews. These findings were used to generate the following account of the KCA's founding and continued development.

### **Phase I: The formation of the Kranji Countryside Association**

Although the KCA was formally established in 2005, efforts to form the association began in 2001 when KCA's founding president Ivy Singh-Lim established a farm, Bollywood Veggies, as part of her retirement plans. She found farmers at that time faced a number of legal and financial restrictions. In 2001, Singapore's Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) guidelines did not allow for ancillary visitor amenities, such as restaurants or visitor centres, on farms (URA 2005; personal interviews). Because banks were unwilling to make loans to farms, most farmers relied on personal savings and networks for financing. Further, as land was leased for a period of only 10 years with subsequent renewals done on a case-by-case basis, land security was tenuous. The volume of land available for agriculture was declining rapidly, with clear signs of further reduction.

Considering the existential threat that the farming industry faced, Singh-Lim by all accounts worked tirelessly for farmers to unite and form the KCA to deal with common problems faced by farmers. However, of the 260 farms, only nine other farmers (who subsequently became KCA founding members) responded, believing they had "nothing to lose." In 2004, all 10 farmers gave a regional development presentation to the then-Minister of State and National Development on their vision for farm tourism in Singapore. These efforts proved successful. The URA's 2005 regulatory changes to

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allow farms to provide ancillary visitor amenities (Lim 2009) represented a landmark moment – the KCA's quick first victory for Kranji's farmers. The farmers' early success convinced the founding members of KCA's value. The KCA was thus formed that year in 2005 with two primary objectives: to increase the bargaining power of farmers when negotiating with the government, and to promote agri-tainment to raise the profile of farming in Singapore. Subsequently, the KCA grew to 40 members.

The form that the KCA adopted has been nearly unprecedented in Singapore: a grassroots, community-based organization (CBO) independent of the government and formed by members who advocate for their own interests (for a description of CBOs, see Twelvetrees 1991). To be sure, Singapore has numerous community organizations, including residents committees, community centres, and community development councils. However, these organizations have since independence, been intentionally embedded within Singapore's corporatist tripartite system (for a nuanced discussion, see Vasoo 2008). Whether or not they serve as institutions to extend the reach of the state as some argue (e.g., Meow 1985), they are certainly not independent of the government – a vital characteristic of being a CBO. By contrast, the KCA fits the key qualities of a CBO, one of a very few of which we are aware.<sup>i</sup> Its membership and other leadership positions consist exclusively of Kranji-based farmers; the sole non-member involved in the organization is the part-time executive secretary, the organization's only paid employee. An annual membership fee, currently set at S\$600 (approximately US\$430 under current exchange rates), helps to fund KCA's activities and pay the executive secretary's salary. A core group of five people, comprising the Exco and the part-time executive secretary, proposes and manages the KCA's main activities. Active members (including Exco and committee members) attend bi-weekly meetings to discuss and



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manage KCA-related issues. These meetings are open to all members: the number of committee members is not officially limited, and all members are invited to attend. Attending and participating in these meetings is a key characteristic distinguishing active from non-active members.

Based on our reconstructed narrative, we can evaluate the extent to which the rational choice or social-psychological theories explain the initiation of the KCA and the motivation of each type of member or non-member farmer. Table 1 displays the presence or absence of each hypothesized factor for each key group in the KCA's formation.

=== PLACE TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE ===

### ***Explaining Phase I: KCA initiation and initial membership recruitment***

#### *The role of collective identity, selective incentives and/or external coercion*

Given the lack of a pre-existing community among farmers in Kranji, the facts of the case are largely inconsistent with the weak version of the rational choice approach – farmers did manage to mobilize before they created their community identity, not after. Turning then to the expectations associated with the strong version of the rational choice approach, to what extent were external coercion and/or selective incentives important to the KCA's establishment? The founding president, who mobilized her personal resources and networks, was initially the main, if not sole, driver of the KCA's initiation. However, multiple interviewees suggested that neither selective incentives nor external coercion was present for the founding president. While the founding president possesses a bold personality, by all accounts, her actions were group-oriented. Neither she nor anyone in the group possessed tools of coercion, and no one was offered

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selective incentives for joining the group. Additionally, although farming in Singapore is widely perceived as a sunset industry, no new crisis emerged in 2005 that would yield immediate substantial losses to farmers if they did not establish the KCA. The existential crisis farmers faced was more a long-term than a new phenomenon.

Moreover, the potential for the KCA to produce substantial material benefits remained uncertain. At the time of formation, the KCA's goals of reversing their situation by enhancing the bargaining power of farmers, as well as redefining the act of farming itself, seemed more aspirational than practical. Founding members also understood that the KCA would benefit the entire farming industry, and that non-members could not be excluded from these benefits. Furthermore, the founding president had even fewer incentives to bear the burden of collective action. Relatively wealthy, Singh-Lim and her husband moved to the Kranji countryside in 2001 for retirement. The survival of the farming industry was of little material concern to an independently wealthy newcomer seeking retirement as opposed to profits. Hers were not the actions of a leader motivated by material self-interest. In short, farmers were not assured that joining the KCA would yield benefits of any kind, let alone selective material benefits. It was only after the KCA was established that the group managed to offer material interests for membership. Thus, RC1 is inconsistent with the evidence, and cannot provide the rationale for why the founding president and members would initiate collective action in the absence of external coercion or selective incentives.

#### *The role of collective benefits*

By contrast, the initial hypothesis derived from social-political theories seems more promising in explaining the formation of the KCA. With reference to the three preconditions that promise a chance of collective benefits, interviewees agree that

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Singh-Lim acted consistently with her belief that a minimum number of participants were required for farmers to form an effective collective voice and that she could persuade some farmers to share her view. Moreover, she also managed to mobilize crucial resources and networks to initiate the organization. In short, the evidence is consistent with the notion that collective benefits motivated the founding president to initiate the KCA. Two out of these three indicators were also present for the founding members and subsequent active members (i.e., the Exco and committee members). Similarly, active KCA members were convinced that their contribution mattered to achieve KCA goals; if the KCA was to be successful, it would only be because of the participation of many farmers. For this reason, these members chose to join Singh-Lim by contributing actively in the formation of KCA.

Unlike the farmers who formed the KCA and the subsequent active members, non-active members that joined the KCA post-2005 typically were motivated by selective incentives. They remained passive, as they were uncertain whether the KCA could succeed even if more people participated and whether sufficient people would join the KCA. Such farmers were often consumed with other individual, higher-priority business activities. Although this type of member hoped the organization would succeed, the KCA was in their eyes merely a nice-to-have. Thus, even as they were willing to remain members and contribute their relatively modest annual dues, they saw little point in expending effort toward active pursuit of the organization's goals. Thus, selective incentives made the most difference. While they did see their importance for 'making up the numbers,' in interviews, non-active members did not attempt to even parrot the norms of the organization; joining was simply a business decision. The material benefits of joining were greater than the costs.

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The behaviour of non-members can be explained by both the rational and social-psychological camps. Non-members fall into two categories. First, the most common are those who do not join because they anticipate little benefit. Typical among their sentiments, one farmer argued that, "not much changed [for the farming industry] even after the KCA was established." The non-joiners typically had no interest or ability to participate in agri-tainment, and had already established marketing channels for their products. Thus, they perceived no added value from the KCA. They further did not believe that adding their numbers to KCA's membership rolls would enhance the organization's effectiveness in negotiating with the state. Further, they doubted that sufficient people would participate. A second group of non-members declined to join the KCA because they disagree actively with KCA goals. Some concluded that the KCA was challenging the traditional notion of farms as food-production sites, and further believed that the KCA was incapable of improving the productivity and competitiveness of their farms. A smaller number contended that traditional farming should be abandoned altogether in favour of more modern food production techniques. Such farmers would like to maintain Kranji as a base of food production, but with more mechanized and higher technology production increasing the farm output per unit of land. In this way, Kranji would more resemble other areas of Singapore that are zoned as light industry, and the area would no longer be preserved as "countryside" and suitable for attracting tourists. Irrespective of their reasons for not joining, these farmers refrained of their own volition – they were aware of the procedures for joining, and were invited to do so. As disparate as this population is in other ways, these non-member farmers are similar in that they perceived the KCA as potentially offering neither enticing selective incentives nor attractive collective benefits, and did not trust

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in the KCA's ability to secure these in any case. Neither camp would be surprised that such farmers refused to join the KCA.

### *The role of collective identity*

Viewed as an alternative to material incentives, collective identity is hypothesized to help create collective claims. Individuals intertwined with the group through friendships and informal support networks have a stake in the group's fate and are likely to contribute to collective action (Polletta and Jasper 2001). Interviews with farmers suggest that a collective identity did not exist prior to the KCA's formation. Instead, the KCA itself worked to establish a collective identity. This facilitated the KCA's expansion post-2005, but did not play a role during the establishment of the organization. Prior to the KCA's initiation, there were few substantial interactions among farmers. While generally friendly with each other, Kranji farmers (at least the ones actually producing), both then and now, perceive themselves as business entities with business interests to be protected against neighbouring competitors.

The several forms of cooperation that did exist did little to promote a sense of broader community. For instance, some farmers cooperated with other farmers on an individual basis when their business interests were closely aligned, as in the case of an alliance formed in 2002 between two vegetable farms to jointly market their produce under a single brand. Co-operation among individuals was small-scale and narrowly focused on commercial challenges, not on the larger issues facing farmers. A second form of larger-scale co-operation was exemplified by organizations like the Singapore Livestock Farmers' Association and the Singapore Aquarium Fish Exporters Association. Membership in these kinds of associations would typically contribute to a sense of collective identity among members – but not in these cases. While some

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members we talked to found these organizations useful for joint marketing and distribution, other members dismissed them as "useless." More importantly, these organizations included not just producers but distributors and others, and did not address the core issues that farmers perceived as existential threats. Substantial co-operation spanning these sub-industries was almost unheard of prior to the KCA. In other industries, such as the quail industry, fierce competition among farmers made forming friendships difficult, much less establishing meaningful networks. Thus, based on the experiences of the KCA, pre-existing collective identities were not a necessary condition for participation in collective action. Instead, collective identity developed gradually. The evidence is thus inconsistent with SP1.2; this hypothesis cannot explain how 10 farmers from diverse sub-industries first came together in 2005 to initiate the KCA. Instead, KCA farmer activists gradually developed a new collective identity to frame the farmers' collective struggles and mobilize participation.

### ***Conclusions: Explaining Phase I***

Testing the above hypotheses (RC1, SP1.1, SP1.2) against the initiation and initial growth of the KCA yields a narrative less consistent with the expectations of rational choice theory and more consistent with one strain of the social-psychological literature (see Table 1). The KCA's strong leader held insufficient power to coerce farmers or to secure the farmers' collective interests on her own. Instead, she articulated collective benefits to the farming community and succeeded in garnering the participation of other founding members. Founding and active members motivated by collective benefits shared certain characteristics. They tended to adopt long-term time horizons (many were relatively young, or had succession plans for their farms) and were deeply concerned about the future of the farming industry. In contrast to these founding

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members, the motivations of less active members fell into two categories: those motivated by reward in the form of selective incentives, and those persuaded by collective benefits. The former helped to fill the ranks of the KCA; the latter became more active in providing public goods to the organization.

## **Phase II: The persistence of the Kranji Countryside Association**

In the years since its founding, the scope of the KCA's work has included supporting individual farmers with their struggles, engaging in collective marketing, building the reputation of the KCA and of Kranji farmers as a group, strengthening the institutional base of the organization, and most importantly, working on land security. Even as the KCA focuses on existential threats to farmers, it also addresses individual concerns. As one founding member stressed, "if farmers don't benefit, [we will] close down the KCA." To this end, the KCA engages in a range of activities, large and small. During their bi-weekly meetings, active members help farmers within the association – for instance, writing to the government on behalf of members. Some farmers who cannot speak or write in English also depend on the KCA to translate or interpret letters from the government.

In addition, the KCA engages in collective marketing, planning a number of initiatives to raise awareness of Kranji farms and facilitate tourist visits. During their first year, the KCA launched the Kranji Countryside Express. While public buses do serve parts of the Kranji area, the Express is the only bus service that brings visitors from Kranji MRT station to six tourist-type farms in Kranji. Although the bus operates at a loss, it remains vital because it provides valuable access to farms for the public and farm employees, cementing the Kranji Countryside as a recreational destination. In 2013, the KCA launched its inaugural Kranji Countryside run. Then-Minister for

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Foreign Affairs and Minister for Law, K. Shanmugam, flagged off the race – highlighting the KCA's success in engaging prominent government officials. More recently, the KCA introduced quarterly farmers' markets in June 2014. KCA members pay a nominal fee of about 10-15 per cent of their profits earned during the event. Non-members approved by the KCA can also participate at a significantly higher fee of about S\$100 per day.

These activities helped to enhance the organization's reputation, something reflected in its increased media coverage. Despite its sometimes-prickly relationship with the Singapore government, the KCA started to garner significant positive coverage in the local state-linked media. Regular, if not frequent, articles emerged, highlighting Kranji both as a place for tourism and a source for locally produced food (e.g., Lin 2016; Said 2016; Kaur 2017). More importantly, the mainstream government-linked media portrayed the KCA positively (e.g., Tan 2016). These media mentions helped to attract additional visitors to tourist areas in Kranji and the now over-flowing farmers' markets; more than this, they also helped to raise awareness of the farmers' concern and to position the KCA as an effective organization. Local farming was a focus of a 2017 Jack Neo comedy, *Take 2* (Agro-Food and Veterinary Authority of Singapore 2017b). Average Singaporeans, who previously might not have known that farmers still existed on the country's tiny main island, became increasingly aware that Kranji as a countryside destination might not just be a residual and temporary condition, but a valuable part of Singapore's experience.

In addition, the KCA has also sought to raise its profile internationally. In 2016, the KCA hosted the 27<sup>th</sup> Commonwealth Agriculture Conference – the first time the conference was held in Asia – to discuss the future of farming. Lawrence Wong, at the



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time, the Minister for National Development, the Ministry that oversees the Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority of Singapore (AVA), delivered the opening address. The state's symbolic support for the conference provided the KCA with an opportunity to promote its vision. The platform allowed them to present ideas for a research and development centre, and that current farms could act as a test-bed for agricultural technology and serve as model agri-tainment sites.

Positive signs have emerged that signalled a more institutionalized organization. For instance, in 2014, the organization underwent its first major leadership transition. KCA President Singh-Lim stepped down after ten years of service in favour of then-Vice President, Kenny Eng. Though interviewees held both in high regard, they were quick to underscore the two leaders' strikingly different style: the brash, frank and confrontational Singh-Lim compared to the pragmatic and conciliatory Eng. Despite their differing leadership styles, the strong relationship between the two leaders is unquestioned. Moreover, most members suggest that the differing personalities were appropriate for the organization at each leader's particular stage: Singh-Lim's more forceful approach helped to establish the organization's track record of success while Eng's pragmatism is helpful now that the KCA seeks to build working relationships with government officials. To focus on its sustainability and groom the next generation of leaders, the KCA established an affiliated organization, the Singapore Young Farmers (SYF). Finally, the KCA has also drafted a 10-year plan for Singapore's agricultural industry. Positioning itself as a thought-leader for the farming industry, the KCA has presented itself as a constructive voice that provides the state with alternative solutions.

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While each of these agenda items was important, their urgency was dwarfed by land security. The perception that their access to quality farmland is under threat is not hysteria. Farmers throughout Singapore's post-1965 history have undergone waves of land seizures, part of agriculture's steady decline that commenced pre-independence. Agriculture had been a key component of colonial development from the nineteenth century (e.g., Ang 1972), pressures to increase employment shifted the government's focus to industrialization and urban development projects (e.g., Gamer 1972, 7). As a result, agriculture was squeezed: Land area for farms declined from 14,500 ha in 1965 to around 700 ha, or from 25 per cent to less than 1 per cent of Singapore's total land area (Ludher 2015). In 1921, agriculture alone (not including those involved in processing of agricultural products) engaged nearly 16 per cent of all workers; slightly more than were engaged in manufacturing. As late as 1957, that number stood at just under seven per cent – by comparison, nearly manufacturing employed nearly 17 per cent of all workers. By 1990, employment in agriculture plummeted to 0.3 per cent, while manufacturing absorbed some 29 per cent of workers (Huff 1997, 407-411). Thus the 2014 announcement that the land leases of 62 farmers, including 14 KCA members, would not be renewed upon expiring in 2017 only continued the historic trend of rapidly shrinking of farming in Singapore. According to this announcement, the land would be handed back to the state for redevelopment. Thirty-six newly drawn, smaller farm sites would be available for tender on 10-year leases (e.g., personal interviews; Tan and Boh 2017).

Despite the offer of new land, the farmers' view of this announcement was grave. First, relocation can be prohibitively expensive: farmers who are moving must re-invest in basic infrastructure and technology, since much of their existing

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infrastructure cannot be shifted. Second, the 10-year land lease was seen as insufficient if farmers were to invest extensively in new technology. Contrary to the prevailing view of farmers as being unwilling to accept technology, the farmers we interviewed were willing, even eager, to improve their productivity. Yet they also make a valid point that a short lease is insufficient for them to make such an investment. Whether a long enough lease is realistic is another matter - some estimated that a minimum of a 30-year lease would be required to secure a return on particular infrastructure investments (e.g., personal interviews; Tay 2016). Third, some worried about contamination on the new land, which had been used for non-farm purposes. Fourth, farmers were concerned about the divisive impact of 62 farmers bidding for 36 plots. Thus, many farmers who are facing relocation are considering closing their farms entirely rather than moving to new plots. Since relocation is unattractive and even unviable, the KCA's ability to lobby the state for greater guarantees of land security forms a core part of its mission, and is necessary for the organization's continued survival.

KCA pleas to the government to change these land-related decisions have met with some success. In 2016, the AVA announced that the 10-year leases on new agricultural land would instead be 20-year leases (Tan and Sin 2016; Tay 2016; personal interviews). In addition, to allow for additional transition time, existing tenures were extended from 2017 to 2019, and subsequently to 2021. Although these extensions did not fully resolve the farmers' land problem, they represented a small victory for the KCA in fighting for farmers' welfare. Some members suspect that the new plots are an attempt to divide the farmers, as some but not all leaders have been offered these plots. Had these farmers accepting this offer, their motivations would have been understandable. After all, most of the 62 farms affected were not KCA members, and

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the new land, though smaller, could still help ensure the viability of their farms.

However, believing that accepting these individual rewards would split the group and affect social ties among members and non-members, these farmers have turned down the offer. In addition to the lease extensions, in 2018, Minister Koh Poh Koon then the Senior Minister of State of the Ministry of National Development (which oversees the AVA), made a series of announcements, including new funding for technology adaptation, new training programs, and efforts to increase demand for locally-produced agriculture. In this he specifically noted his conversations with local farmers, and that he had "taken on board their feedback," (Ministry of National Development 2018).

These are all signs of the KCA's effectiveness in engaging the government.

The KCA's accomplishments in all of these areas were based on its foundation of organizational cohesion, especially amongst the KCA's core leadership and its more active membership. Non-active membership played an important role in growing the KCA's rank of members, and thus its strength. Garnering such coordinated support requires overcoming two types of free rider problems: first, to incentivize members to continuously take on leadership roles (such as joining the Exco or becoming a committee member) when there is an option to shirk responsibilities, and second, to encourage farmers' long-term participation in the KCA when non-members also stand to benefit (albeit less so) from the KCA's collective marketing and lobbying efforts. What can explain the KCA's persistence over the past ten years, especially in light of these free rider problems?

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### ***Explaining the KCA's persistence and growth***

#### *The role of selective incentives and norms of reciprocity*

While the weaker version of rational choice suggests that four conditions are typically present for there to exist norms of reciprocity (external enforcement of rules, state support including sanctioning rulebreakers, small and organizationally controlled resources, and a small cohesive organizational community with common norms and interests), the evidence is consistent with only two. First, rules were enforced through a degree of peer pressure. All active members were required to attend bi-weekly meetings, and had to commit to and support the KCA's activities. All ten Exco and committee members supported the first farmers' market, accounting for more than two-thirds of the 13 farms present, though the event's success drew more members to subsequent farmers' markets. Second, active members possessed shared norms, and similar identities and interests. The other two conditions did not apply in this case: the state played no role in sanctioning members who do not conform, and the relevant resource system was not under organizational control, making monitoring irrelevant. Importantly, the two conditions that do apply are less related to material incentives and more linked to social forces, and thus overlap with the factors put forth by the social-psychological camp.

Further, active members put in far more effort than their non-active counterparts, but receive scant selective benefits. Collective marketing, for instance, promotes the brands of farms belonging to all members. Active members do receive additional opportunities to network with external stakeholders, to have their brands marketed more prominently, and to enjoy an elevated status within the community. Yet these benefits are not especially large, and some are non-material, and active members stress that these

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benefits alone are too little to justify the time and resources they had dedicated to the KCA. By themselves, these benefits do not provide a satisfactory explanation for why some members choose to be active.

If inactive members share the same gains fought for by the active members and experience no real pressure to do more for the organization, non-members do even less and receive similar benefits. For instance, when the state extended the expiration of land leases from 2017 to 2019, an act that is widely perceived as being partially in response to the KCA's lobbying, 48 out of the 62 affected farms were non-members. Why would farmers pay an annual membership fee of S\$600 a year when it is possible to simply free-ride? Here, non-members respond that they are not free riders at all – even non-members that generally support the KCA's vision of Kranji tend to dismiss the KCA's lobbying attempts as unproductive, a sentiment they often share with non-active members. Indeed, the primary factor that divides non-active members from non-members is the selective incentives that come with KCA membership. First, whereas non-members do not find the farmers' markets relevant to their marketing efforts, for those who benefit from the farmers' markets, access to booths at discounted rates offsets the price of membership. Second, member farms can turn to the KCA for help when they face specific, non-collective problems, such as rent increases, lease expiration, or repairs in nearby public infrastructure. Some non-active members ponied up the membership fees only when they experienced such difficulties and needed KCA support.

Non-active members experience few costs outside the membership fee. Unlike active members however, non-active members do not generally attend the KCA's bi-weekly meetings and have a weaker sense of obligation compared to active members.

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They sometimes attend KCA events, such as the Kranji run, and occasionally pitch in for KCA events such as the commonwealth conference. While non-active members share similar interests and identities, their interests are less homogenous compared to those of the active members, as evidenced by the weaker effect collective benefits have had on them. Weak norms and reciprocity thus result in their inactivity, and do not sustain non-active members' participation. Thus, the rational choice approach suggests that norms of reciprocity contribute to active members' participation. By contrast, selective incentives sustain non-active members' participation. However, the question of why members would choose to be active remains largely unanswered.

#### *The role of social networks and collective identity*

Unlike the rational choice approach, the social-psychological model emphasizes the use of ties to cultivate trust and re-enforce members' resonance with the group identity. For active members, the lure of collective benefits and the tug of social networks outweigh the temptation to free-ride. For active members, the fact that collective benefits are not excludable is irrelevant to their efforts for the KCA. Indeed, many active members see the survival of their businesses as closely tied to the KCA's success. In fact, one active member commented that he does not distinguish time spent on KCA activities vis-à-vis his own business as he sees working for the KCA as equivalent to working for his own business. This motivation is reinforced by social ties. Increased identification with a group increases one's commitment to collective action, as individuals place more emphasis on collective rather than individual efficacy (Mummendy et al. 1999). The initial draw of collective benefits encouraged some members to become active; the bi-weekly meetings reinforce this strong belief and ensure continued active participation. Through these regular meetings, active members build mutual trust, and reinforce their

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identification with the KCA goals. Such is the case for a number of the KCA's active members. Several of the current members of the Exco and the committee were not founding members but slowly rose to their positions as they became increasingly convinced of the need for members to take on leadership positions. The collective goals gained extra resonance with these individuals as their farms gained prominence alongside the increasing awareness of and stature for the farming industry, and benefitted in parallel with the KCA's success. The evidence is thus consistent with the hypothesis that social networks, alongside collective benefits, are effective in sustaining participation among active members. Collective benefits also explain why members would choose to take on active roles when there is an option to free-ride.

Although social networks also exist between non-active members, these networks are not essential to sustaining participation. While the KCA does host ad hoc events that provide opportunities for members to network, which specific events would not be accessible outside its membership, non-active members view the overall networks forged through the KCA as likely to persist even if they were no longer to be KCA members. Thus, because the social networks that they valued were largely not contingent upon the non-active members' participation in the KCA, these networks were not a factor in explaining their KCA participation. Instead, a combination of both collective benefits and collective identity retained the participation of non-active members.

### ***Conclusions: Explaining Phase II***

Comparing RC2 and SP2 against the evidence yields three insights (see Table 2). First, factors that pushed farmers into joining the KCA (i.e., selective incentives and collective benefits) continued to sustain participation. Second, norms of reciprocity



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(RC2) and social networks (SP2) jointly sustained participation among active members.

When they were lacking, were not at stake, or failed to take root in individual members, such members remained non-active. Norms of reciprocity use guilt and shame whereas social networks rely on resonance with the group's goals to sustain participation. The use of both norms and appeals to collective goals evidently had complementary effects in sustaining active participation. For non-active members, norms of reciprocity and social networks were insufficient because such individuals held weak norms of reciprocity and different visions. Individuals also see the social networks as independent of membership status since these networks do not reinforce their commitment to the KCA. Social networks were thus ineffective in sustaining non-active members' participation. Third, collective benefits served as the main motivation for members to become more active over time.

=== PLACE TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE ===

### **The Political Context Underlying the KCA's establishment and endurance**

Contentious collective action occurs when individuals confront authorities and attain power by achieving solidarity and challenging power holders (Tarrow 1998). As a form of contentious collective action, the KCA was first initiated so authorities would respond to farmers' concerns, such as those over land leases. Over the years, the KCA has positioned itself as a thought leader in providing alternative solutions and visions for Singapore's agricultural industry. To what extent do prevailing hypotheses related to political context help to understand the KCA's emergence as an example of contentious public action?

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### ***Changes to political opportunities and constrains***

The expectations regarding political context are largely consistent with the KCA's experience. Despite engaging in contentious politics, the KCA found elements of the government to be receptive to its message. In 2005, URA changed the rules on existing farms and allowed ancillary visitor facilities to be installed in farms (Lim 2009), allowing the farmers to develop tourism in Kranji. In 2008, the URA signalled its acceptance of agri-tainment as a component of Kranji farms by launching the new Island-wide Leisure Plan. The plan included three new components of agri-tainment including farm-stays, spa treatments, and hands-on farming activities.

These changes reflected broader trends in Singapore's state-society relationship, which opened in fits and starts. First, whereas the Lee Kwan Yew administration largely perceived civil society as a confrontational force, under Goh Chiok Tong, Singapore's second prime minister (1990-2004), the latitude for public action expanded palpably (Koh 2009). In 1991, then-Acting Minister of Information and the Arts, George Yeo, suggested a need for Singaporeans to enhance civic life (Yeo 1991). Thus from the mid-1990s to 2009, the period that coincided with the KCA's establishment, the state encouraged active citizens to take ownership of community issues (Koh and Soon 2012). In 2000, Singapore established a speakers' corner ostensibly to allow the public airing of views. In 2004, then-Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong declared that Singapore must "open up further" by "promoting further civic participation" (Lee 2004). To be sure, civic participation was not given carte blanche – direct political participation remained carefully guarded territory, and citizens operated within implicitly established out-of-bounds markers (informally known in Singapore as "OB markers"), and shied away from controversy on "sensitive issues" that could threaten

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social cohesion, especially matters relating to race and religion (Koh and Soon 2012).

Second, after the 2011 watershed elections (e.g., Tan and Lee 2011; Barr 2016), latitude seemed to expand even more. Observers also noted a greater acceptance of civil society campaigns in recent years. While academics debate the causes and nature of both these waves of opening for civil society (e.g., Lee 2002, 2005; Chua 2005; Koh 2009; Thompson 2014; Soon and Koh 2016), most agree that the role for civil society has expanded in Singapore. Consistent with Tarrow's argument that changes in political opportunities are essential for the rise of groups like the KCA, the gestures towards openness and acceptance, backed by occasional shifts in policies, created space for the KCA's emergence in 2005.

Also consistent with the argument that movements create opportunities by communicating information about what they do and creating coalitions with third parties, the KCA has worked to collaborate with others. The KCA depends on a group of highly committed non-farmer volunteers attracted to the KCA's vision. The KCA also attracted a number of volunteers – passionate advocates for the preservation of Singapore's farms, drawn from the public and especially from among university students – who played a supportive role in organizing events such as the 27<sup>th</sup> Commonwealth Agriculture Conference hosted by the KCA. The KCA remains small – these volunteers increase its capacity, as well as its legitimacy, and demonstrate that the organization's appeal is broadening.

Thus, the evidence suggests that the KCA emerged during a time when the political environment allowed it some space to engage the state in a framing contest about farming and farming's role in a modernizing Singapore. These political opportunities were not a given. Additionally, KCA also sought to obtain wider public

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support by bringing in members of the public as volunteers, by organizing and participating in farmers' markets, and by engaging with the mainstream media. In doing so, new political opportunities were created as third-parties aligned themselves with KCA's goals. This is consistent with PC1 which predicts that contentious collective action takes place when there is a change in political opportunities and constraints.

### ***Extent of Government Support***

The KCA is also careful to work within state-imposed limits so as to not lose the minimal government support it enjoys. Upon formation, the KCA registered as a society in Singapore, rather than as another form of collective group. This constrains the KCA to work within specific rules. For instance, changes to the constitution are subject to Registry of Societies' approval, which also audits the society's accounts. Per the Societies Act, a society may also be dissolved under certain conditions – for example, when it is being used for unlawful purposes or for purposes deemed to be “prejudicial to public peace, welfare or good order in Singapore.” Once dissolved, activities carried out by the group within Singapore are considered unlawful. Although the Society Act works to restrict the activities of the KCA, it also provides it with legitimacy. It is no coincidence that the KCA's formation in 2005 came on the heels of the 2004 reform of the Society's Act. The reform not only loosened the requirements for registration, but granted all groups save those focusing on very taboo subjects (e.g., race, religion, civil rights, and sexual orientation) automatic registration (Soon and Koh 2016, xxii).

In addition to adhering to these formal requirements under the Societies Act, the KCA has also been careful to stay within OB markers and to gradually position itself, in the government's eyes, from a confrontational organization to a constructive voice. Although the government has not always orchestrated the growth of civil society in

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Singapore, its ability to rein in excesses remain formidable. As one academic put it, "the extent to which Singapore citizens can influence policy making depends on the extent to which the [ruling People's Action Party (PAP)] allows it to happen," (Ho 2000). Even if this statement exaggerates the power of the party to limit civil society, the KCA has shown self-restraint when faced with the risk of provoking the government. Even under Singh-Lim's leadership, her brash and straightforward attitude was muted by her and her neighbours' pragmatic recognition of their still-limited space for action. The KCA's leadership passing from Singh-Lim to Eng further cemented the group's pragmatic instincts.

This pattern of confrontation and conformity is consistent with PC2 that stresses the necessity of minimal government support for collective action to occur. While registration as a society is one way the government can control bottom-up organization, it also accords the KCA formal recognition and legitimates certain actions. In pressing its members interests, the KCA pushes some boundaries in its relationship with the government, but also respects prevailing OB markers. This pattern of behaviour in turn brought much-needed legitimacy for the KCA to approach the government, as well as maintaining it as a structure to which members can turn should disputes arise. Thus, the political context under which the KCA formed is consistent with the expectations of the literature: the KCA was formed amidst changes that offered additional political opportunities and fewer constraints, and at least a minimal level of government support governed the KCA's establishment.

Yet this mutual accommodation between the government and the KCA simply allows the KCA to operate. The issues that the organization was designed to address remain as pressing as they were on the day that the KCA was formed. KCA members

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have not so much convinced officials that its vision is viable as they have convinced them that the organization and its vision are not antithetical to the state's fundamental interests. Policy concessions the organization has enjoyed have largely come from convincing the state that for the short-term, farms in Singapore remain viable. The KCA is far from converting officialdom to the view that the long-term prospects of farming are favourable – and even less that its vision of Kranji trumps competing visions. Yet, this continuing struggle underscores the point that without the broader context – the changing relationship between state and civil society – the KCA could not have promoted its case.

Today, the KCA struggles to manoeuvre through and morph the competing visions of the future, not just for Kranji but for Singapore itself – visions that threaten the farmers' place in society, as tenuous as that already is. The KCA's is but one of several visions that exist for Kranji, and each of these visions has powerful supporters. First, the various iterations of Singapore's Concepts Map – intended for future planning of Singapore's land and development – express different ideas for Kranji's future. The 1971 Concept Plan zones the general Kranji area into two areas: one for 'open space' and the other for 'industry and harbours.' The 1991 concept plan zones a large section of Kranji for residential high density housing (DeKoninck et al. 2008, 80-81; Centre for Liveable Cities 2016, 28-29). By 2001 The 2001 map zones most of Kranji as a "reserve site," with specific uses "has not been determined," (Urban Redevelopment Authority 2018b), with smaller places for agriculture, infrastructure, and "open space/recreation" (Urban Redevelopment Authority 2018a). Thus, space in the Kranji area was reserved mainly to meet future demand for land and was only temporarily leased to

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Kranji farmers when there was still no pressing need for the government to develop the region in a different direction.

Second, as stated earlier, Singapore's Agriculture and Veterinarian Authority, as well as a number of Kranji farmers, envision high-rise, high-tech farming, a more modern form of food production that emphasizes agricultural productivity per unit of land over the region's use as a countryside/tourist destination. Indeed, Kranji already seems to be headed in this direction. In October 2017 a new competing agriculture federation was formed. This new 10 member group, the Singapore Agro-Food Enterprises (Safef), promotes the vision of a high technology 'light-industry' version of farming in Kranji. The group was apparently formed with overt government participation – Dr. Koh Poh Koon, was named honorary advisor to the new federation. While the group's leader rejects the image of a "big boys' club," current KCA leaders were reportedly not invited to join (Tan 2017).

Third, others see a future for farming – or at least food production – just not necessarily in Kranji. One such sentiment – backed by an informal collection of citizens concerned about sustainable development – favours urban farming, involving extensive gardening and even farming activities integrated with Singapore's cityscape. Another informal group proposes reducing the reliance on traditional land-based food production, in favour of bringing food production into a modern laboratory environment. These visions are not antithetical to that of the KCA – indeed the KCA actively supports urban farming. But these alternatives threaten to undermine the need for the Kranji countryside as a source of domestic food production.

While the AVA and Singapore government officials continue to work with the KVA, Singapore's vision of the future of agriculture seems to be settling on the more

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modern second and third visions. These were endorsed by the then Minister of State for National Development, Dr. Koh Poh Koon, during his 2017 budget speech to Parliament,

Realistically though, Singapore is too small to develop vast tracts of land for farming. We will never have enough land to ever grow all the food that we need... Just as we ask our SMEs in various other sectors to transform, automate, be more productive, take on automation, so we need our agricultural players to transform into one that is more productive as well. We need to adopt modern practices and embrace technology as a multiplier to do more with less. (Ministry of National Development 2017)

This more modern approach to agriculture was underscored in AVA's article based on the speech, which highlighted a several specific high-tech approaches to growing food, using practices such as vertical farms and laboratory practices (Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority of Singapore 2017a). Thus, despite the many signs that it is willing to work with the KCA, the government also continues to focus on modern food production. This is not necessarily competing against the KCA's vision – Kranji was mentioned neither in either Koh's 2017 or 2018 speeches, nor in the AVA article. So while these visions can be complementary, they would be only to the extent that aggressive modernization occurs elsewhere, outside of Kranji. Thus, the vital question for the KCA is less about Singapore's future for farming in general, and more about which vision of Kranji's future prevails.

How the KCA contends with these competing visions is vital for the organization's future. To be sure, the group continues to emphasize the cultural, social and even economic value of maintaining a countryside in Singapore (e.g., Eng 2017a). At the same time, the group, concerned with being identified with tradition and



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nostalgia, stresses the compatibility of maintaining a farm-based countryside with some of these other visions for Kranji. As noted earlier, KCA farmers maintain that they do not reject the adoption of production-enhancing technology, but that the short-term land leases preclude the investments required to adopt technology (e.g., Tan and Sin 2016; personal interviews). Moreover, the group emphasizes that while some farmers have successfully adopted productivity-enhancing technology, the light-industry style of farming remains unproven in Singapore (e.g., Eng 2017b; personal interviews). Nevertheless, the group is careful to point out that the main barrier to technology adaption is not the attitude of KCA farmers, but the short land leases that make large-scale investments in technology unviable. Moreover, they are hesitant to adopt technology that would change the countryside character of the Kranji area.

## **Conclusions**

Social scientists from Tocqueville until today have long debated what factors motivate individuals to overcome substantial costs in order to take collective action, the fruits of which may never come to pass, and are often enjoyed in equal measure by the ardent and the apathetic, by the activist and the anaemic. Theorists on both sides make assumptions about human behaviour – that we are homo economics or we are driven by identity – or even if we aren't, we can explain much behaviour by assuming that we are (Friedman 1953). These often ontologically incompatible assumptions tend to preclude attempts to fuse the two traditions. Efforts to do so also face charges of creating a tautology. More often, the two theories are seen as being mutually exclusive. Yet, intuitively, human behaviour is swayed by appeals to the rational as well as the emotional, to entreaties to self-interest as well as identity.

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Here, we attempt to attempt to create a more nuanced understanding of human behaviour. Inconsistent with the assumptions of the stronger versions of rational choice, the KCA was not created by individuals working together in order to maximize their personal self-interests. Instead, the factors that helped the farmers overcome extreme collective action problems were based more on the leaders' commitment to collective benefits and group identity. However, to survive, the organization had to grow in size and strength, meaning that the organization had to attract members from among the diverse farmers of Kranji. Two types of members added to the KCA's ranks: collective benefits and group identity helped motivate some members to become active, and while those who were motivated primarily by selective material incentives remained less active. While active members remain the lifeblood of the KCA's work, the organization would not survive without the inactive members filling out its roster.

Thus, the rational choice perspective's emphasis on selective incentives can explain the behaviour of one of the three groups. As important as these inactive members are, more puzzling are the members and central leaders who bore the material and non-material costs of establishing and maintaining the organization, despite the prospects of non-excludable collective benefits – and even these uncertain or worse. Yet, it was to fight for the collective benefits that indeed explained these key members' willingness to participate and bear individually these collective costs, an outcome that can be understood through the social-psychological lens, but is less consistent with the fundamental tenets of rational choice theory. Moreover, in terms of organizational persistence, the active members were sustained and increased in number due to the organization's demonstrated ability to deliver collective benefits. Norms of reciprocity were helpful, but they could not explain the motivations among active members and

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KCA leaders alike. Collective identity, almost completely absent when the organization was established, subsequently grew and played a part in motivating these groups, contributing to the organization's persistence.

Thus, even in a soft authoritarian environment, where one would expect only collective action with a high probability of achieving benefits that could not be gained via non-participation, it was the more social and psychological factors that proved vital for attracting the leaders and core of the organisation. To be sure, the government played a role by providing a political opportunity and structuring the interaction between itself and the organization. Civic organizations have increased in number and importance in Singapore, at least since the Goh Chok Tong administration, creating a more vibrant civil society. While most of these have been organizations that deliver services, some have also advocated for more systematic change. Equally important was the structure of registering such organizations. By registering as a society and working within OB markers, the KCA accepted boundaries of behaviour that simultaneously reassured the state while allowing the KCA space to act on behalf the organization and its vision of a vibrant countryside within the city state. All of this has given Kranji's farmers a fighting chance, but no guarantee of success. So far, the KCA refuses to be divided, yet the fight for land and recognition of farming in a tiny city state continues.

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<sup>i</sup> One other example of a CBO is described in Naqvi (2017). In seeking to understand the role of scale and autonomy of civil society, Naqvi analyzes the role of an unnamed community group that represents the interests of the residents in an areas with low-income housing. Like the KCA, the membership of this group membership consists exclusively of the people for which it advocates. Unlike the KCA, Naqvi's community group has no paid staff members and is not registered under the Society's Act.

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