

CULTURAL IDENTITY AND ECONOMIC MODERNITY IN SINGAPORE

LI HANSEN

2016



**NANYANG
TECHNOLOGICAL
UNIVERSITY**

**CULTURAL IDENTITY AND ECONOMIC
MODERNITY IN SINGAPORE**

LI HANSEN

**SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL
SCIENCES**

2016

CULTURAL IDENTITY AND ECONOMIC MODERNITY IN SINGAPORE

LI HANSEN

LI HANSEN

School of Humanities and Social Sciences

A thesis submitted to the Nanyang Technological
University in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the
degree of Master of Arts

2016

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my supervisor for both my undergraduate FYP and this postgraduate thesis, Professor C. J. W-L Wee, thank you for the brilliantly engaging seminars you conducted, and thank you for consistently encouraging me and giving me invaluable advice on my school work and life journey.

To my professors in school, Professor John Tangney, Professor Shirley Chew, Professor Andrew Yerkes, Professor Bede Scott and many other professors who have taught me, thank you for guiding me intellectually and allowing me expand and broaden the limitations of my mind with your work. Also, thank you to Professor Christopher Trigg and Professor Jane Wong for being patient and helpful with me as your TA.

To my fellow postgraduate friends, Candice, Keith, Kenneth, Leah, Long Chao, Qi Wei, Ting Ting and Xiao Ling, thank you for your wonderful companionship and accompanying me on this journey.

To my family, thank you for understanding, being supportive and allowing me the time and freedom to pursue my studies.

And lastly, to Eugenia Ling, thank you for being there for me.

ABSTRACT

As a theme of study, I am interested in not only the different ways social, economic and political inequality manifest under the pursuit and manipulation of capital in its various forms, but also the ensuing physical and psychological tensions created, both within and between the individual and the larger social groups he/she belongs to. Further, there is a complex relation that arises from these inequalities and tensions acting upon the formation of identity in the capitalistic modernity of Singapore that should be thoroughly examined.

In this thesis, I examine two main forces acting upon the formation of socio-cultural identity in Singapore; Firstly, the relentless forces of capitalistic modernity, which brings with it radical new ideas and changes in the traditional socio-economic and political spheres of any society which subscribes to it, and secondly, the soft authoritarian form of governance in Singapore which causes (self-)censorship among its artists and citizens, preventing the development of an autonomous, pluralistic cultural arts scene. These two forces are separate entities but act together on the shared symbolic and physical space of Singaporean society to bring about the central tension of socio-cultural identity fragmentation, it is the aim of this thesis to both understand and explore this fragmentation before possibly suggesting a way the arts can resist and heal this fragmentation.

CONTENTS

| | |
|---|----|
| INTRODUCTION | 1 |
| CHAPTER 1 Identifying the Fractures in Cultural Identity | 31 |
| CHAPTER 2 Tensions between Socio-cultural Identity and National Narrative | 52 |
| CHAPTER 3 Identity Castration | 76 |
| CONCLUSION | 91 |
| Works Cited | 93 |

Li Hansen

Thesis Supervisor: Professor C. J. W.-L. Wee

English: Master of Arts Thesis

18 Aug 2016

Cultural Identity and Economic Modernity in Singapore

INTRODUCTION

Freedom from the insult of dwelling in a puppet's world, where movements are started through brainless wires, repeated through mindless habits; where figures wait with patient obedience for a master of show to be stirred into a moment's mimicry of life.

(Rabindranath Tagore, "Freedom")

Since the collapse of the Soviet Bloc in the late 1980s, the economic system of free market capitalism has come to dominate the global political scene, with a scarce handful of countries clinging on to the last vestiges of communism. The ideology of free market capitalism, at its very core, celebrates equality of opportunity for everyone, and hard work is privileged over predetermined socio-economic factors such as inherited wealth and familial connections. In the spirit of free market capitalism, Singapore has accordingly placed emphasis on offering equal opportunities to her people, and indeed reaped massive economic benefits over the past 50 years.

Yet, in spite of the seemingly meritocratic stance of free market capitalism, a complex host of social, economic and political inequalities have arisen in capitalistic nations across the globe. The rise in such inequalities has also notably emerged and manifested in capitalistic

Singapore, a soft authoritarian nation-state where numerous and varied ethnicities, races, cultures, religions and traditions converge on a localised common space.

As I have mentioned in the opening paragraphs, there are a myriad of ways in which social, economic and political inequalities emerge and manifest themselves under the ideology and economic system of capitalism¹ in various countries. It would, however, be beyond the scope and field of this thesis to examine exactly how these inequalities emerge and manifest themselves within and across different countries, or even across the different socio-economic strata of society in those various countries. Instead, this thesis focuses on Singapore: through an examination of local, Singaporean plays, the thesis examines how Singapore, a modern, capitalistic society boasting equality of opportunity for her citizens, simultaneously problematises the formation of a cohesive socio-cultural or multicultural Singaporean identity – in this thesis, socio-cultural and multicultural identity may be used interchangeably to refer to the pluralistic self-consciousness of an individual derived from, and contributing to, that of a larger collective or society. To be sure, although capitalistic modernisation coupled with the socio-political stability provided by a soft authoritarian government have yielded substantial economic advantages for a relatively young nation-state, these two forces also fracture, homogenise, and prevent the formation of a cohesive socio-cultural identity in Singapore.

Culture is a complicated word to fathom, and it is necessary to break the word down into its separate meanings in order to discern the complex relationship between the socio-cultural Singaporean identity and the cultural arts scene in Singapore, both of which inform and shape the other in a dynamic, synchronous manner. The notion of culture is polysemous

¹ It should be noted that capitalism is a rather broad term, and different countries have different adaptations of capitalism; rather than a truly free market system, most capitalistic countries adopt mixed market economies with varying degrees of socialist and interventionist policies.

in nature, and, as Raymond Williams rightly notes in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, this is “mainly because it has ... come to be used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines and in several distinct and incompatible systems of thought” (87). There are three general categories of culture which he identifies:

- (i) The independent and abstract noun which describes a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development ...
- (ii) the independent noun, whether used generally or specifically, which indicates a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group or humanity in general ...
- (iii) the independent and abstract noun which describes the works and practices of intellectual and *especially artistic activity*. (Williams 90, emphasis mine)

Of these three categories, the latter two bear more importance for the purposes of this thesis. Culture, in its way-of-life meaning, refers to the particular traditions, values, preferences, languages and foods existing in a particular social group. In the artistic sense, culture refers to the production, dissemination and audience engagement of literary and artistic works, such as novels, poetry, theatre and even film. The Singaporean socio-cultural identity can be thought of as composed primarily by the multi-ethnic Asian amalgamation of Indian, Malay and Chinese ways of lives interspersed with bits of Western culture. Left on its own, unique cultural formations such as the colloquial language of Singlish², the fusion of Confucian and Enlightenment mentalities, and the diverse plethora of Singaporean cuisine arise. This heterogeneous cultural identity then gives rise to a wealth of distinct literary and artistic productions which interacts with the local population and in turn influences and re-informs

² Interestingly enough, even though the government tried to stamp out the use of Singlish by the local population in the past two decades, the use of Singlish is today becoming more accepted and making more appearances in television shows, novels and poems, even if only used within “acceptable boundaries” as suggested by *The Straits Times* (2016) article “MOE: No penalty for using Singlish appropriately”.

their cultural identity and vice versa in a perpetual, seamless flux, creating a socio-cultural or multicultural identity which can comprise of culture in both its way-of-life and artistic sense. Having established the different meanings of culture, the rest of this thesis will, through a focus on several Singaporean plays, be dedicated to exploring the significance and difficulties of how culture, in both the artistic and way-of-life sense, affects the process of an individual's "intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development" (90), or, in other words, an individual's consciousness and socio-cultural or multicultural identity.

Foremost, within the authoritarian nation-state of Singapore, there is a complex interaction and intersection between the diverse Singaporean cultural identity and the homogenising force of global capitalism; an intricate relationship which is better elucidated and represented by literature and the arts in Singapore. For instance, the Singaporean government has had to curtail the traditional Confucianist values and the generally more collectivistic mentality of Singapore's earlier multi-ethnic immigrants, in favour of the more singular, acquisitive, competitive and individualistic mentality characteristic of modern free market capitalistic societies. At the same time, the Singaporean government also sought to restrict this newfound individualistic autonomy within politically acceptable boundaries that would not destabilise or threaten its own authority.

Looking at the phenomena discussed above, this thesis argues that despite the efforts of the Singaporean government in the last couple of decades³ to develop Singapore into a cosmopolitan society with a vibrant cultural and artistic scene, the socio-cultural Singaporean identity is still fragmented by, and exists on the periphery of, the post-independence nation-state's narrative of economic development and capitalistic modernity. This thesis also

³ The 1989 Report of the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts was vital in emphasising the role of culture and arts in forming a national Singaporean cultural identity, and also recommended the construction of the largest performing arts centre in Singapore, The Esplanade.

suggests that the tensions and contradictions surrounding the formation of a recognisable national Singaporean culture are reflective and indicative of wider socio-political problems that stand in stark contrast to modern Singapore's global economic success story. In order to better understand the problematic formation of a Singaporean cultural identity, it is advantageous to look at the issue through an alternative perspective, such as that of the ground-up, organic local arts scene, rather than through a top down economico-political viewpoint.

To be sure, identity cannot be understood as an immutable construction based on a fixed loci. Rather, it is a fluid concept that evolves continuously, constantly evading the grasp of a tangible, clear-cut definition. As Frederic Jameson points out in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*:

The new political art (if it is possible at all) will have to hold to the truth of postmodernism, that is to say, to its fundamental object – the world space of multinational capital – at the same time at which it achieves a breakthrough to some as yet unimaginable new mode of representing ... in which we may again begin to grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralized by our spatial as well as our social confusion. (54)

Jameson argues that while art, in the present day socio-economic climate, is capable of representing certain facets of society, it is incapable of presenting, even in an abstract picture, the complexity of life in totality. It follows that the plays I will be exploring in this thesis are cultural representations of society, and only one of possibly innumerable perspectives from which to grasp at one's social-cultural identity.

In particular, this thesis looks at five local plays, some allegorical but all subtly politicised, from the past three decades: Kuo Pao Kun's *Kopitiam*⁴ (1986), *Mama Looking for Her Cat* (1988) and *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral* (1995), as well as Tan Tarn How's *The Lady of Soul and Her Ultimate "S" Machine* (1993) and *The First Emperor's Last Days* (1998). Examined closely, these allegorical, politicised plays direct attention to the fragmentation of the multicultural Singaporean identity; beyond directing attention to the above, and even while facing sensitive political censorship imposed by the government, these plays propose alternative constructions of a Singaporean cultural identity within the wider discourse of post-independence Singapore's capitalistic modernity. I suggest that by drawing upon shared cultural memories, and negotiating and challenging existing state narratives, these plays produce a symbolic exchange with their readers and audience, in a way that reimagines and overcomes the fragmentary forces of the nation-state's seemingly monolithic economic modernity.

THE SOCIO-POLITICO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT OF POST-INDEPENDENCE SINGAPORE

On the surface, it seems that the PAP government has been successful in creating a unique and recognisable Singaporean identity. Today, Singapore is a vibrant, cosmopolitan and modern nation-state with high standards of living, accommodating residents, immigrants and tourists in a safe and clean environment. With a relentless focus on economic (re)development since independence in 1965, Singapore is home to world class trade and transport infrastructures such as the PSA⁵ Singapore Terminals and Changi International Airport. Accordingly, the World Bank database for "GDP per capita" shows that in 2014,

⁴ Kopitiam is a Hokkien-Chinese or minnan word literally translated as coffee shop.

⁵ PSA used to be an acronym for the Port of Singapore Authority, but it has been officially changed such that the acronym PSA is now the full title of the Port of Singapore Authority.

Singapore, despite occupying a minute geographical space on the world map, had a gross domestic product (GDP) per capita ranked 7th place in the world at a staggering 56,286.8 USD, well above the international GDP per capita average, and even higher than that of many other developed countries such as the United States, Japan and Germany.

Certainly, Singapore has achieved rapid urbanisation and economic prosperity in the years following independence. Based on a measure of the degree of the nation-state's global economic competitiveness, as well as the average Singaporean individual's material wellbeing, post-independence Singapore has done well for herself in the short span of half a century. The soft authoritarian nature of the Singaporean government, coupled with the insurmountable forces of global capital and capitalism, have created a politically stable and economically successful Singaporean narrative that is recognised globally. Thus, as Singaporean sociologist Terence Chong writes in "The Role of Success in Singapore's National Identity":

The Singapore Story is often narrated as a success story. It is a story of a little island cut from its hinterland and saddled with the challenges of mass housing, high unemployment and an uncertain future. Regardless of story teller, the Singapore success story has always unfolded in a consistent manner. It begins with the "moment of anguish", a painful self-realization of an unformed nation, the existential fear for one's self, followed by the Herculean effort to overcome all the odds, and finally, the achievement of success. (Chong, "The Role of Success" 1)

In the passage quoted above, the "moment of anguish" that Chong refers to is the moment of Singapore's separation from Malaysia on the 9th of August, 1965. On that day, then Prime

Minister Lee Kuan Yew, in a press conference at Broadcasting House, proclaimed his anguish at the failed Malaysian Merger, a merger that was of “a people connected by geography, economics and ties of kinship” (Press Conference, Singapore 1965). Given the precarious conditions of the separation in 1965 – cut off from the larger Malaysian consumer market and facing violent racial riots – post-independence Singapore has observably moved on to secure for herself political stability and success in the economic sphere, a sphere on which the Singapore success story is mainly predicated.

Yet, this particular Singapore story is one dimensional and not reflective of the true costs of success. There are many complex and intangible costs that have not been considered, such as the suppression of the individual’s autonomy, the fragmentation of his/her cultural identity, and the de-rootedness of Singaporeans to the nation-state – unmeasurable costs that are often left out of this narrative of success. Some pertinent questions to ask here, and which this thesis will attempt to answer, are why “the Singapore success story has always unfolded in a consistent manner” (Chong, “The Role of Success” 1), what forms and types of success are being represented in the Singapore Story, at what expense this particular success, or economic modernity, has been achieved in a relatively short span of time and finally if there can be alternative versions of the Singapore story.

Contrary to the illustrious Singapore success story, influential Singaporean cultural critic and playwright Kuo Pao Kun presents a starker reality and asserts, in “Uprooted and Searching”, that “[f]or over one hundred and fifty years, Singaporeans have never known life other than being racial outcasts, economic marginals and cultural orphans” (167). Kuo is right in his assertion that Singaporeans are cultural orphans: first, in the sense that the majority of Singaporeans’ ancestors were diasporic immigrants who had had to leave their homes and cultures behind to work in then British-colonised Singapore; and second, because in the more

recent cultural landscape, literature and the arts, central to the formation of any society's identity and cultural consciousness, were neglected in the early decades of post-independence Singapore, in favour of a relentless economic modernisation. Latterly, especially since the 1980s, there has been more emphasis, from both the state and the individual artist, on the role of culture and the arts in the identification and formation of a multicultural Singaporean identity. In this thesis, I pay particular attention to Kuo's assertion that "[t]heater in Singapore [can] give us a context to try and understand and reflect upon the Singapore crisis, of an uprooted and searching people" (167). With Kuo's words in mind, I have specially chosen to look at Singaporean plays in this thesis, in order to derive an understanding of how the arts can contribute to the fostering of a more cohesive and comprehensive Singaporean identity.

THE NASCENCE OF SINGAPORE'S LITERARY TRADITION, AND THE IMPORTANCE OF THEATRE IN THE SINGAPORE NARRATIVE

I suggest that the Singapore success story should be sceptically viewed and regarded only as an economic reading of progress in Singapore – in particular, one that is void of considerations of the socio-cultural or political costs that individuals in society have had to pay. Since the successful consolidation of state power by the PAP in 1959, and as many cultural and literary critics have noted and established, economic development and capital accumulation were and still are central to Singapore's idea of progress. As sociologist Chua Beng Huat posits in *Communitarian Ideology* (1995):

The capitalist road was the only one open [in the early decades of post-independent Singapore], despite the PAP's early socialist rhetoric. The result was, and continues to be, an ideology that embodies a vigorous economic

development orientation that emphasises science and technology and centralised rational public administration as the fundamental basis for industrialisation within a capitalist system, financed largely by multinational capital. (59)

Prioritising economic growth through the hard sciences in schools over “less important” social sciences such as literature and art was seen as an important way to ensure the survival of the fledgling nation-state. Such a move would later prove to have dire consequences on the development of the Singaporean national and cultural identity. In a more recent essay “Culture, the Arts and the Global City” (2010), cultural critic C. J. Wee gives an overview of the consequences of this single-minded prioritising of economic growth and development in Singapore’s nation-building process. As Wee argues, the Singaporean government, “in its pursuit of economic growth and development forsook not only many of the political dimensions of democratic life but also its cultural dimensions, taken in both the ‘high culture’ and ‘way-of-life’ senses” (489). Without proper support from the polity, cultural development was stymied both in the artistic and the day-to-day living sense, and the Singaporean national and cultural identity could only revolve around crass caricatures of everyday social life and potential economic aspirations.

Further, sociologist Terence Chong, in “Fluid Nation: The Perpetual ‘Renovation’ of Nation and National Identities in Singapore” (2010), accurately identifies the complex and tense relation between culture and identity in Singapore, especially in relation to the larger and overarching ideology of global capitalism and modernity:

The political project [of the Singaporean government was, and still is,] to inscribe the nation with timeless values rendering it eternal in order to anchor

it in the ferocious stream of capitalism and modernity ... [Yet,] with economic growth so central to the idea of national survival ... the Singapore nation and modernity are collapsed into a political project designed to keep citizens entrenched in economic realism, the result of which is a fluid nation and identity that respond to the global economy. And it is because nation and identity in Singapore are premised on the shifting sands of capitalism and globalization, the state-sponsored search for identity and nationhood is destined to be a futile one. (504-5)

As Chong astutely notes in the passage above, the notions of capitalism, modernity and globalisation are relentless and constantly changing, and while subscribing to those notions ensures a socially and economically stable society, it will not create a strong or recognisable Singaporean national and cultural identity. The Singaporean cultural identity thus should not be founded upon the rapid urban development and economic growth that have dominated its consciousness and national narratives for the past 50 years.

Under the nation-state's prioritising of the economic over the cultural, culture and the arts – in particular film, theatre, and literature – have become subordinate to the narrative of the Singapore Success Story, and are largely promoted for the purpose of fulfilling the economic imperative of capitalistic Singapore. Despite the establishment of the National Arts Council (NAC) in 1991, and an overall push to remake Singapore into a global city for the arts, “an overall instrumentalist attitude predominated” (Wee, “Creating High Culture” 87). In order to become a modern, cosmopolitan society, Singapore has had to offer artistic performances, concerts, exhibitions and even integrated resorts which cater not only to the local population, but more importantly the growing community of well-heeled expatriates and international tourists who expect such cultural commodities to be available. Thus, the overall

attitude of top policy makers in Singapore latterly is that culture and the arts should be allowed and even encouraged in Singapore, but only if these are able to contribute to annual economic progress or GDP growth.

However, this thesis argues that the function of art, even and especially in Singapore, surpasses that of being a mere tool for stimulating the economy. As F.R. Leavis identifies in “Thought, Meaning and Sensibility”, “every creative writer of the greatest kind knows that in a major work he is developing thought – thought about life” (287). The arts, especially theatre, in Singapore, is not only a medium through which the artist reflects on the difficulties facing society, but it also (re)constructs and establishes an important critical space through which society recognises the said difficulties, and strives for change in the direction of progress.

As I speak of the above, I make a reference to a comment by Thomas Picketty in *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*:

Film and literature, nineteenth-century novels especially, are full of detailed information about the relative wealth and living standards of different social groups, and especially about the deep structure of inequality, the way it is justified, and its impact on individual lives ... novelists depicted the effects of inequality with a verisimilitude and evocative power that no statistical or theoretical analysis can match. (2)

In making this assertion, Picketty reveals and directs attention to the essential capacity of narrative-based art to reflect and reveal the fundamental economic structures, tensions and inequalities that underlie societies. This way, reading narrative-based art, such as novels,

poetry and plays, can be seen as a way of reading pervasive socio-cultural issues structured by the economy. Furthermore, art philosopher Noël Carroll, in *Philosophy of Art: A Contemporary Introduction*, writes that “artworks ... afford the opportunity for us to exercise our sensibilities, to recognise and to distinguish different qualities in the appearance of things” (Carroll 199). Thus, the aesthetics of artworks not only reflect the structures that underlie a society but also interplay with the psyche of its audience and grant the latter a more sensory, edifying experience of the world; art, limited as it is by economico-political constraints, contains the potential to inform and transform both individuals and society.

To be sure, Singaporean theatre and plays possess the aesthetic qualities to guide and nurture its audience into becoming more discerning, capable of reflecting upon and challenging existing socio-political tensions and boundaries. In Singapore, theatre and plays, unlike other forms of art such as poetry and novels, are unique because their performances regularly take place in the public sphere, symbolically playing out socio-cultural tensions under the stringent surveillance and censorship of the authoritative polity. As Koh Tai Ann contends in “Culture and the Arts”, “serious drama may be used to convey a message ... which renders it potentially subversive of state-sponsored values” (Koh 727). Indeed, the economic modernisation of Singapore has precluded society from reflecting upon itself, and hindered the formation of a multicultural Singaporean identity; it is theatre in Singapore that creates productions “dealing with issues of memory, ethnicity and other identity issues”; these are, in fact, productions that “were artistic reactions against the singular and sometimes strident top-down disciplinary modernization of Singapore since the mid-1960s” (“Creating High Culture” Wee 85-86). Thus, theatres and plays serve as a creative symbolic space that, through symbolic exchange between artist and audience or narrative and audience, potentially subverts and resists the eroding and homogenising forces of global capitalism.

Symbolic exchange, particularly in an age of mass production dominated by the pursuit of material affluence and capital accumulation, holds significant importance in reviving the primordial veritableness of social relations against seemingly indomitable capitalist values of production and consumption. As Jean Baudrillard posits in *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*:

The more one produces, the more clearly does one show up, amidst plenty, how irremediably far off is that final point which affluence would represent, defined as an equilibrium between human production and human goals. Since what is satisfied in a growth society, and increasingly satisfied as productivity grows, are the very needs of the order of production, not the 'needs' of man ... The basis for the confidence of primitive peoples and for the fact that, within hunger, they live a life of plenty, is ultimately the transparency and reciprocity of social relations ... There is among them no accumulation, which is always the source of power. In the economy of the gift and symbolic exchange, a small and always finite quantity of goods is sufficient to create a general wealth since those goods pass constantly from one person to the other. *Wealth has its basis not in goods, but in the concrete exchange between persons.* (67, emphasis mine)

Here, Baudrillard builds on the work of anthropologist Marshall Sahlins and argues that it is not material wealth or consumption that signifies the degree of an individual's affluence in a society bound by the logic of production. Lost is the real affluence of social interaction and exchange between individuals, in the modern marketplace of pervasive advertising and epidemic consumerism. Here, I propose that the act of watching a theatre production, and to a lesser, but still vital, extent reading a narrative of the play, constitute an ongoing process of

social, symbolic exchange; through not only the narrative exchange between different characters in the play but also the artistic exchange between the audience and the play, the audience interpret signs and create for themselves a reality external to the logic of production. This is not to say that artistic theatre and play production can exist entirely outside the logic of production as it is necessary, too, for the artist to survive from ticket sales, but it is through these artistic and aesthetic forms that the audience is elevated, through the suffocating cloud of economic greed and insatiable desire, to a critical and sensitive awareness of basic human needs and self-consciousness.

Looking at the various factors discussed thus far, this thesis shall focus its literary analysis primarily on post-independence Singaporean plays. These post-independence plays are selected in particular because they foster the necessary critical and artistic space to discuss socio-cultural and psychological tensions in an individual, tensions that have thus far been largely neglected in favour of the imperatives of economic development. Through an interpretation of the artistic signs and qualities of the plays, symbolic exchange firstly between the audience and the play, and subsequently the audience and society helps the now self-aware individual resist his homogenised economic identity and establish a more concrete notion of his/her socio-cultural identity.

DISTINCTIVENESS OF ARGUMENT

Although Singapore is a multicultural nation-state with theatre staged in numerous other languages and dialects such as Mandarin, Malay, Tamil and Hokkien, not only is the scope and depth of this thesis insufficient to do a comprehensive survey of the cultural pluralism of theatre in Singapore, but my grounding in English critical and literary analysis is more suited to an examination of English language theatre, especially with a focus on the

dramatic aspect of plays. In addition, William Peterson, in *Theater and the Politics of Culture in Contemporary Singapore*, argues:

English-language theater ... [is] the primary lens through which to view the politics of culture in Singapore ... because throughout the 1990s, theater in English showed itself to be the single most dynamic and volatile form of cultural expression ... it is English-language theater more than any other form that was the most actively and consistently engaged with and controlled by Singapore's political culture throughout the 1990s. (3)

While theatre in other forms and languages, such as Chinese opera, or Malay *Bangsawan*, have contributed to the local cultural scene, English is the language the government has adopted for dealing with bureaucracy and socio-cultural politics, and thus also the best language through which to understand and respond to these policies.

Extending Peterson's 1990s timeframe backwards a decade, the five local plays I have selected span the decades from the 1980s to the late 1990s. Although Peterson identifies the 1990s as the decade in which English-language theatre was the most responsive to Singapore's politico-cultural policies, the 1980s was the period when the government realised that the acts of rapid economic development and capital accumulation themselves were not enough to establish Singapore as a modern and developed nation-state – particularly because culture and the arts were missing. As Koh contends:

The earlier emphases of the 1960s and up to the 1970s had been political consolidation, social welfare, and economic development, with national survival as the main goal ... The official sign that the 1980s would see more

emphasis on the development of the arts as a community activity to encourage individual creativity, and as part of a growing entertainment and leisure activity, came with the establishment of a Cultural Development Committee in 1980 by the Ministry of Culture. (“Culture and the Arts”, 713)

Ironically, while the establishment of the Cultural Development Committee (CDC) meant that there would be more state-backed funding and support for the arts, it also meant that the state could further tighten their control over cultural development policies and censorship issues by deciding how to allocate these funds. Despite the politically sensitive space within which theatre practitioners have had to manoeuvre, I will argue and show through my selected plays that English-language theatre, as a lens through which to view cultural production in Singapore, was already consciously, reflectively “and consistently engaged with and controlled by Singapore’s political culture” (Peterson 3), especially since the ruling party had decided to place more “emphasis” on culture and the arts in the 1980s.

However, rather than reductively viewing English-language theatre as a lens through which socio-political tensions in society are passively reflected and played out, I also hypothesise that it is a critical and necessary artistic space. I suggest that English-language theatre, essentially functioning as an active and reflexive superstructure affected by and affecting the larger lifeless (soulless) economic base, is central to reinterpreting and renegotiating the relationship of the socio-cultural identity of the Singaporean individual, who is unable to forge a stable national cultural identity, with the politico-economic ideology of the nation-state. Further, in *The Theatre and the State in Singapore*, Terence Chong correctly points out that “unlike a ‘lens’, a ‘critical space’ suggests greater autonomy of intellectual life as well as ideological independence instead of proposing it as a stable and objective receptacle to examine the residues of national politics and culture” (*The Theatre*

and the State, Chong 7). Theatre and plays in Singapore, rather than being merely a stage on which socio-cultural tensions and political imperfections are reproduced, in fact play an active part in suggesting alternative routes to reimagining and reclaiming a multicultural Singaporean identity.

Yet, even with the advantages of viewing English-language theatre as a critical space instead of merely a lens, it is important to understand the heuristic process through which this critical space is considered and formed. Chong warns that:

One danger of the ‘critical space’ analogy is the essentializing of the theatre community. In describing a space as critical, we presume the criticality of its inhabitants. This presumption of criticality is made all the more persuasive, not to mention highly desirable, given the lack of traditional ‘critical spaces’ of liberal democracies in Singapore. This is not to mean that the criticality of local English-language theatre is imagined but rather, its criticality must itself be critically assessed. Are all the theatre practitioners equally critical of dominant interests and values? What is the impact of higher state grants on the critical faculties of theatre groups? (Chong, *The Theatre and the State* 7)

An important distinction is made here, reminding the reader or audience to be critical of the criticality of the agents involved in the theatre production, and also of the final artistic production itself. Some of these problematic theatres that come to mind are what Kuo calls “The Theatre that Governs” and “The Theatre that Consumes” (“Uprooted”, Kuo 169). In the first type of theatre, the government is able to use its massive resources and power to stage a

nationalistic political theatre on a grand scale⁶, with cultural performances and recitals that are meant more to imbue the audience with a sense of nationalistic pride and identity than to stimulate critical or artistic reflections on the subject. It is in essence national propaganda, but arguable necessary when there is a lack of organically formed cultural or artistic artefacts and traditions from which one can derive one's identity. The second type of theatre, which is one also commissioned by the government, is a theatre that cares more about ticket sales than artistic interpretation of socio-cultural and political issues. This type of consumerist theatre attracts big international performances and conveys the message that Singapore too can be vibrant, cosmopolitan and competitive with other urbanised, multicultural cities like New York, Paris or London. While international performances provide Singaporean audiences with good exposure to international cultures and sensitivities, it also "keeps them oblivious of their [own] cultural displacement, consuming their own sensibility and sensitivity" ("Uprooted", Kuo 170). While I take the two types of plays that Kuo discusses into consideration, the five plays that I have selected fall into neither of the two types of theatre mentioned above. Rather, they are plays that identify, discuss and transcend the fragmentation of a cohesive multicultural identity under a political leadership that prioritised economic growth over cultural development.

THESIS OVERVIEW

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha asserts that "identity is never a priori, nor a finished product; it is only ever the problematic process of access to an image of totality" (51). Bhabha's assertion is particularly important for the discussion of identity formation in modern society. I perceive the formation of the multicultural Singaporean identity to be an

⁶ An example which Kuo Pao Kun cites as the "ultimate example" is the 1994 National Day Parade at the National Stadium.

on-going act, not only of negotiating individual self-knowledge and identity, but equally significantly, of reconciling and situating that individual self-knowledge and identity within the larger socio-cultural framework of collective society. I argue that genuine, well-rounded social progress emerges when society is given access to self-producing its 'image of totality', that is, a strong cultural identity conscious of its own process of creation, capable of assessing and (re-)accessing its strengths and flaws in an attempt to create an 'image of totality', and not when society's self-consciousness and socio-cultural identity is fractured by the one-sided progressive imperatives of capital accumulation and the economy.

This thesis includes three chapters that discuss five plays: three by Kuo Pao Kun and two by Tan Tarn How. Both playwrights are familiar with the socio-cultural tensions and issues plaguing the economically driven soft authoritarian nation-state, Tan having been editor for *The Straits Times* for many years, and Kuo himself having been imprisoned in the 1970s for his earlier plays that were deemed too politically motivated. These selected plays, spanning the late 1980s to the 1990s, emerge at a time of change in the attitude of the state towards cultural and artistic productions; from a more authoritative political system towards a more liberal, yet stern modernity. They are reflective, not only of the socio-cultural tensions in the population stemming from globalisation and capitalism since independence, but also the tensions and complexities arising from the soft authoritarian government's increasingly liberal stance on cultural and artistic productions. The first chapter, focusing on the 1980s, includes plays by Kuo: *Kopitiam* (1986) and *Mama Looking for Her Cat* (1988). It also looks at the disjunction, in the socio-cultural identity and way of life, between different generations of Singaporeans. The second chapter, dealing with the 1990s, includes plays by Tan: *The Lady of Soul and Her Ultimate "S" Machine* (1993) and *The First Emperor's Last Days* (1998). It examines the efficacy of the government's initiatives in the 1980s to develop

culture and the arts in Singapore. The last chapter, with an examination of Kuo's *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral* (1995), tries to reimagine the fragmented cultural identity of a multicultural Singapore. The first two chapters recognise the consequences of, and try to resist, the corroding and homogenising effect of global capitalism and soft authoritarian leadership on socio-cultural diversity and symbolic exchange by examining first culture in the way-of-life sense and then the state of cultural and artistic production, while the last chapter concludes by attempting to reimagine a multicultural identity located outside the politics of the nation-state.

For the first chapter, I will be using Kuo's *Kopitiam* and *Mama Looking for Her Cat* to explore the contentions concomitant with the increasing focus on national economic development and financial capital accumulation in Singapore. These two plays have been selected and paired together because they are both concerned with the tensions that arise between different generations, albeit by just a few decades, of Singaporean citizens – the older generation, more traditional and collectivistic, and the younger generation, more modern and individualistic. Both plays are concerned with a historically shared collective cultural identity that has been fragmented in the process of building a strong economy. In fact, the idea of the nation-state's unyielding focus on economic development is strongly problematised by Kuo in these two plays, calling for an analysis of the relationship between cultural identity continuity and political decisions in nation-building.

In the first play, the setting of *Kopitiam*, as the name suggests, is that of a traditional coffee shop run by the character Grandpa, who uses the old-fashioned method of “bak[ing his] own *kopi* beans ... [and] grind[ing his] own powder ... mak[ing] every cup special” (*Kopitiam*, Kuo 36) for his customers. However, the character of Grandpa is juxtaposed with his grandson Jia Cai, who is much more modern, individualistic and economic-minded than

the former, wanting to either “modernise ... [the] *kopitiam* [or] sell it and use the money to invest in other properties” (50) before finally “emigrat[ing] to another country” (53).

Here, it is important to examine the symbolic space of the “Kopitiam” in reference to the identities and memories of both Grandpa and Jia Cai. I will show that the space of the “Kopitiam” has a significant cultural and historical value for Grandpa, and that he roots his identity within collective society through this space. Conversely, the “Kopitiam”, which has a more cultural significance for Grandpa, acquires a markedly economic significance in Jia Cai’s mind. I will argue that Jia Cai’s materialistic understanding of space is indicative of the larger mentality of citizens in Singapore, especially that of the younger generation who aren’t “very serious anymore about things like homeland, nation, residency, or even citizenship” (52).

In the second play *Mama Looking for Her Cat*, there is also a similar divergence in the socio-cultural beliefs of Mama and her children. Mama, who brings her children up in the Hokkien dialect, and with traditional games and stories like “Lom Cham Bas”, “Hawker Game” and “The Monkey King”, feels oppressed by and alienated from her children when they return from school singing the “ABC song” and demanding to be told stories from the Western tradition like Aesop’s “The Hare and the Tortoise”. Though originally a Greek fable, Mama assimilates “The Hare and the Tortoise” into her own Confucianist value system and affirms that an individual, like the tortoise, will succeed if he/she “work[s] very hard ... [and] persevere[s] on and on” (*Mama*, Kuo 84). Mama’s values are starkly contrasted against her children’s, who prefer to empathise with the hare, which they imagine won the race by violently “bumping the tortoise [symbolic of the values and identity of Mama], and turning him upside down” (*Mama*, Kuo 85).

I intend to explore the alienation that Mama, as part of the older generational collective, suffers because of her children, who form the younger modern collective. This alienation, in part, stems from the national emphasis on English, and then Mandarin, as the mainstream language of communication. I will show that this shift in language priority emerges out of a concern for economic productivity, rather than a concern for socio-cultural cohesiveness and cultural identity formation. In addition, through the aesthetic forms of different languages and dialects used the play, I will show that the cultural identity of society can be found in the individual's ability to articulate and identify with a collective idea or concept, and not merely in the sharing of a common language.

Together, these two plays, through the skilful narrative exchange between old and young, draw attention to the continuous erosion of any stable cultural identity that individuals can hold on to in the storm of modernity and global capitalism. This lack of a distinctive cultural identity anchor was and will be problematic for future generations as the ideals and beliefs of modernity are ever changing. Altogether, I intend to argue that there is an disjuncture in the socio-cultural beliefs between the younger generation and the older generation, which is brought about by a national discourse grounded in the economic sphere of progress and financial capital accumulation; this is, of course, in contrast to the socio-cultural sphere of progress, such as the production and engagement of these two very plays, where the cohesiveness and formation of individual and socio-cultural identity is scrutinised and prioritised.

In the second chapter, using Tan Tarn How's *The Lady of Soul and Her Ultimate "S" Machine* and *The First Emperor's Last Days*, I will explore the ways in which the soft authoritarian state manipulates and (mis)appropriates culture and the arts, purportedly to achieve the status of a world class cosmopolitan nation-state. Both of these plays have been

selected and paired together because they deal with (self-)censorship issues and are concerned with how human capital - the knowledge, skills and attributes that make an individual unique - is unequally treated by the nation-state and marginalised or even (mis)appropriated in the formation of the national narrative. In addition, the plays are not only artistically critical but are also especially poignant, and indicative of larger socio-political issues due to Tan's experience working in political journalism and the media.

In *The Lady of Soul*, the Ministry of Culture is worried that Singaporeans – obsessed mostly with material concerns – are lacking a recognisable cultural identity, or “soul”, and intends to increase public awareness in culture and the arts by organising a “Soul Search” to gather creative and original ways to evoke “soul”. The idea that stands out most prominently is the production and distribution of the “Ultimate “S” Machine” (77) (an electronic sex doll), proposed by Mdm Soh (a pun on the word “soul”), who runs a brothel. She suggests that soul is attained at the very moment when an individual reaches sexual orgasm⁷, when he/she feels their “body completely drained ... and ... [they] want to weep for happiness” (77), a scene that is too explicit for the Ministry to condone.

To be sure, human capital is the individual's possession of “knowledge, skills... [and] values” (Becker 16). I will show that in the Ministry of Culture's search for soul, the “knowledge” or “values” of individuals such as Mdm Soh or the artist Shaun (who “believe[s] the soul of a country is in its arts” (83)) are relegated to the margins in the creation of a “vibrant nation”. The rejection of Mdm Soh's “Ultimate “S” Machine” can also be seen as ironic, because it exemplifies the exact kind of superficial “soul” the Ministry of

⁷ This is possibly a reference towards Baudrillard's idea of an individual, from an indigenous group, who is initiated into the larger group or real world through a process of symbolic exchange, such as performing rituals, tattooing, and even through sexual performances. In this case, the individual is reconciled with his/her soul at the moment of sexual orgasm, suggesting that he/she recovers a complete identity as body is reunited with soul.

Culture desires – like a “present [wrapped] in nice, fancy paper in a big box, but inside there is really nothing” (59).

In *The First Emperor's Last Days*, four individuals are trapped in a basement with a “dumb waiter” that connects them to the outside world by providing them with the food, water and medicine they need for survival. They have been selected to write the biography of the “first emperor” of China, but are unsure if they should paint “the picture ... [of the emperor as] faultless, infallible, perfect” (240), or reveal his harsher, more oppressive side.

Here, I intend to argue that the individual's capacity to expend his/her human capital, essentially to choose freely how to contribute to certain projects, is also compromised or silenced not only due to the larger official discourse of the nation but also by him/herself due to self-censorship. In the play, the individuals are not only physically trapped in the basement, but their minds are locked in a metaphorical mental cage. Within that cage, the characters get irritated, angry and suspicious of one another as they try to figure out how they should best represent the history of the Emperor without compromising their own intellectual and moral integrity. I will highlight the complexity of emotions and contradictions that these individuals experience, in the process of forming both their own identity and a national cultural identity for society, when they are interposed between what is morally right and wrong.

Altogether, I will explore how, in both plays, the diversity and creativity of human capital has been homogenised under the economic framework of society. I will show that, under this economic framework, human capital cannot live up to its full potential, and despite the efforts of the Singapore government to form a council to instil culture into society or create an official socio-historical figure to legitimise its rule, the concretisation of a uniquely

Singaporean national and cultural identity remains elusive. Further, I will argue that although the endings of both plays might be negative - with Derek being dismissed from his job as the chairman of the committee for the search for a “Vibrant Nation” and Gordon committing suicide after being locked in the basement with the tomb of the “first emperor” - there is a redemptive quality suggested as both characters are now outside the constraints of political oppression.

In the third and final chapter, using Kuo’s *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral*, I will first examine how individual identity becomes fragmented from within as the individual negotiates his/her desires within those of larger political forces, while suggesting later on that this identity can reimagine itself by drawing upon both internal and external circumstances.

In *Descendants*, Kuo shows the contradictions inherent in Zheng He’s socio-cultural identity. In order to rise up to a position of power, Admiral Zheng He has had to be castrated, in a symbolic act that renders his body “not only [a] personal [treasure]” but a “national [treasure] as well” (43). The act of physical castration, which converts Zheng He’s body into a vessel fit for servicing his country, essentially leaves him incomplete. I intend to show that the identity and consciousness of Zheng He are split into private and public spheres. Through the dreams of the narrator - in which he dreams that he is Zheng He - I will show that the “commanding authority and firm sense of purpose” (49), with which Admiral Zheng He departs on his official mission to discover the different cultures of the world, is undermined by his fractured individual socio-cultural identity, in which he “didn’t have a clue where ... [he] was going” (50). Further, I will show that his public identity is constructed by the political authority surrounding him, as even his original name (Ma He) had had to be changed at the whim of the emperor. Lastly, I will conclude by exploring the potential of repairing the fractured socio-cultural identity of Zheng He, forebear and representative of the Singaporean

individual with a fractured socio-cultural identity, within the larger framework of the capitalist market.

FIRST THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: FORCES DRIVING INEQUALITY

Before going on to the main body of the thesis, I will first identify the two major theoretical frameworks that I have chosen to work with. First, in my thesis, I will use and build upon concepts forwarded in Thomas Picketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* to examine the nature of inequality. As an economist, Picketty is primarily concerned with the economic inequality that exists between different strata of society, and also that which exists between developed and developing countries. I propose, however, that Picketty's examination of the dynamics and manifestation of economic inequality holds significance for my discussion of the inequalities that emerge in and between individual and collective negotiations and interpretations of financial, human and political capital within the larger economic structure of Singapore's national narrative. The significance of Picketty's volume lies in his exposure of the *nature* of inequality itself - and this is a field of research that is relevant to my exploration of the above, even as I transpose his discussion of economics to an exploration of dramatic art in this paper.

To begin with, Picketty asserts that "[t]he history of inequality is shaped by the way economic, social, and political actors view what is just and what is not, as well as by the relative power of those actors and the collective choices that result. It is the joint product of all relevant actors combined" (20). In this statement, Picketty exposes the complicity of individuals (as actors) in replicating the patterns of inequality that manifest in society. He argues that "there is no natural, spontaneous process to prevent destabilising, inegalitarian

forces from prevailing permanently” (21), and suggests that one of the “main forces for [the] convergence [of spheres of inequality]” is the “diffusion of knowledge” (21).

Beyond a mere economic application, I suggest that these ideas are valuable for a literary study. While by “diffusion of knowledge” (21), Picketty refers to the spreading or sharing of information relating to more effective “modes of production” (21) among developed and developing countries, I propose that the “diffusion of knowledge”, or symbolic exchange, through the critical space of literary and artistic productions, such as drama and theatre, is equally important in combating the “destabilising” and “inegalitarian” forces that capitalism, and the manipulation and pursuit of capital, enacts upon the individuals in society themselves. As a medium for sharing knowledge and symbolic exchange – a process derived through an engagement with artistic form – politicised Singaporean drama and theatre, as my selected plays are, have the capacity to challenge the inequalities that emerge from social, economic and political ideology in Singapore. Further, by their exposure of the complicity of individuals in replicating the condition of this inequality within themselves (as I will further elaborate in a later section), the plays problematise the status quo of inequality, and evoke critical consideration of a resolution to this problem. Altogether, from a larger perspective, Picketty’s exploration of inequality in his book provides helpful grounding for my examination of the unequal socio-cultural development and treatment of the individual - and, by extension, society - within the plays.

SECOND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: ART AND THE POSTMODERN CONDITION

In addition to the economic framework derived from *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, I will also examine the selected plays through the related literary/cultural framework

of Fredric Jameson's take on postmodernism, in order to better understand the complex relationship between a capitalistic modernity and the formation of socio-cultural identity. According to Jameson in *Cultures of Globalisation*, the "becoming cultural of the economic and the becoming economic of the cultural, has often been identified as one of the features that characterizes what is now widely known as postmodernity" (60). Additionally, in *Postmodernism*, Jameson posits that postmodernism is characterised by "senses of the end of this or that (the end of ideology, art, or social class; the 'crisis' of Leninism, social democracy, or the welfare state, etc., etc.) ... taken together" (1). In consideration, Jameson argues that art in the postmodern age fundamentally collapses the boundaries between high and low culture into both consumable and consumer culture. Jameson cites the example of postmodern portraits like Andy Warhol's *Marilyn* rejecting traditional concepts of depth (as compared to a portrait like Edvard Munch's *The Scream* which exemplifies the modern experience of alienation and anxiety), and representing nothing more than the consumerist culture it stems from. The condition of postmodernity delineated by Jameson is important as it can be viewed as an effective reflection of the condition that Singapore society finds itself in, given its privileging of the economic over other aspects of culture both in the artistic and way-of-life sense.

However, I will argue that as much as the "becoming cultural of the economic and the becoming economic of the cultural" epitomises contemporary Singaporean society, there remains in Singapore drama and theatre a space of resistance against the unwitting absorption of culture under the imperatives of the economy. To be sure, the coalescing of the economic and the cultural is not a recent occurrence, and even as early as 1944, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer were aware of this. In *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception*, they posit that:

Today the culture industry has taken over the civilizing inheritance of the entrepreneurial and frontier democracy ... All are free to dance and enjoy themselves, just as they have been free, since the historical neutralization of religion, to join any of the innumerable sects. But freedom to choose an ideology – since ideology always reflects economic coercion – everywhere proves to be freedom to choose what is always the same. (166-7)

Adorno and Horkheimer are extremely wary and critical of certain forms of cultural and artistic production, such as film, music and radio, and perhaps rightly so as even and especially today, many big budget music and film productions targeted at massive global audiences seem to have hit the rock-bottom of repetitiveness and emptiness. For them, the homogenising culture industry has taken over and the production of culture and the arts, subsumed by the economic imperative, is unable to resist and critically re-engage with the minds of its audience in a meaningful manner. Contrary to Adorno and Horkheimer, I suggest that Singaporean dramatic productions (in particular, those self-aware of their status as art) ultimately still contain the modernist element of depth - that is, the hermeneutic development and reflection of society as a whole. The plays that I have selected can be considered high cultural in the modernist tradition, in that all of them seek to engage the consciousness of the audience critically. Such an engagement, in turn, pushes the audience to explore issues beyond the predominant economic narratives of Singapore society, in a way that engenders the development of their socio-cultural self-identity.

CHAPTER ONE: Identifying the Factors in Cultural Identity

In “Globalizing Capitalism and the Rise of Identity Politics”, political sociologist Frances Piven gives an overview of the impact of global capitalism on the politics of social relations, and argues rightly that:

For more than a century, the Left has been guided by the conviction that industrial capitalism would inevitably homogenize social life, and thus lay the basis for a universalizing politics. Capitalism meant the expansion of a bourgeoisie whose search for profit would steadily penetrate the social life of traditional societies, and eventually reach across the globe, in the process wiping out “all fixed relations and their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions” ... [Yet,] this model now seems shattered. Capitalism has indeed penetrated societies and spanned the globe. In this sense, it is homogenizing social life. But instead of universalizing popular politics, capitalist expansion is weakening and conceivably destroying working class politics ... Moreover, instead of wiping out ancient prejudices, a globalizing capital is prompting a rising tide of fractious racial, ethnic, religious and gender conflict. (102)

In making her assertion, Piven is essentially arguing, as Picketty does, for the recognition of “a set of forces of divergence associated with the [capitalistic] process for accumulation and concentration of wealth” (Picketty 23). Contrary to the idea that the economic model of capitalism – which advocates individual autonomy and thus private ownership of property – would help level the economic playing field and thus allow for a fair, equal and competitive society regardless of an individual’s race, gender, religion or socio-economic standing, both

authors are perceptive in pointing out the tensions and contradictions of capitalism, that it also causes disruption, divergence and fragmentation of different collective groups in society.

Capitalism is an economic model that most nations in the world today subscribe to, and Singapore is no exception. Indeed, as established earlier, economic development is a top priority of the Singaporean government, such that policies regarding social and cultural aspects of life also function under the economic imperative. Through a close reading of Kuo's *Kopitiam* and *Mama Looking for Her Cat*, I argue that one of the forces of capitalism, that is, the desire for an ever increasing "accumulation and concentration of [financial capital]" (Picketty 23), also cause a socio-cultural divergence, in the way-of-life sense, between the older and younger generation of Singaporeans.

Kuo stresses the widening dissociation between the older generation of Grandpa and Mama and the younger generation consisting of their children or grandchildren in both *Kopitiam* and *Mama*. In *Kopitiam*, readers are introduced to Grandpa, who has been running the Kopitiam all his life and wants to pass his legacy on to his grandson so that he might retire. He has "put down [his] roots here" (53) in his Kopitiam and Singapore, giving "blood and sweat ... everything ... to demand citizenship, so [that he can not only] live here forever" (53), but also that his children might have access to "a better living, better education and better jobs" (53). However, he has a hard time understanding and coming to terms with the conflicting mentality of his individualistic grandson Jia Cai, who had "stud[ied] overseas" (31), and not only wants to "sell [the Kopitiam] ... and use the money to invest in other properties" but also "emigrate ... to another country ... [because he thinks that] nobody's very serious anymore about things like homeland, nation, residency or even citizenship" (52). In the end, Grandpa feels misunderstood and alienated from his grandson, turning instead to and seeking solace in the stable and familiar faculty of his memory.

Similarly, in *Mama*, despite having raised her children based on her traditional values and home-cooked food, there is an evident disconnect and estrangement between Mama and the former. On the one hand, Mama, who “speaks [only] in Hokkien throughout” (82), is deeply rooted in her own traditions and culture, teaching her children games like O Bei Som and Lom Cham Bas⁸ when they were young, and worrying about making comfort foods for her children, like “haybee hiam or sambal belacan⁹, or anything else” (93) they might desire, while they are studying overseas in a foreign land. On the other hand, because of the implementation of English as a language of instruction for all schools in 1987, and the decision to teach one common mother tongue language in place of vernacular, her children “speak a mixture of Hokkien, Mandarin and English” (82). Increasingly, they shift away from speaking in Hokkien, and are also embarrassed when the food Mama packs “burst[s] open at the customs” (93), “becom[ing] increasingly angry with her fussing” (95). As a result, Mama is unable to communicate with her own children and suffers from the same alienation that Grandpa feels with Jia Cai, and turns to her imaginary cat instead of her actual family for comfort.

In both plays, the characters of Grandpa and Mama are representative of an older generation that has been left behind because of the multitude of social and economic policies passed by the government in order to sustain a rapidly developing economy. In *Kopitiam*, Jia Cai directly demonstrates the capitalistic mentality of constantly seeking to amass more capital, wanting Grandpa to either upgrade his Kopitiam’s facilities or liquidate it and reinvest the money, while in *Mama*, the children display a more indirect effect of the

⁸ According to the playwright’s footnotes, “O Bei Som and Lom Cham Bas are games analogous to “Paper, Scissors, Stone”. The terms are in Hokkien-Chinese, or *minnan hua* or *minnan* language, a non-Mandarin Chinese language, but do not actually mean anything” (82). They are essentially traditional games that most children in Singapore, regardless of race or ethnicity, learn and play while they are still young.

⁹ According to the playwright’s footnotes, “sambal belacan, [a Malay word, consists of] a chilli paste made with dried prawns [while] haybee hiam, [from the minnan language, consists of] dried shrimp with chilli” (93).

government's capitalistic policies. Mama's children are schooled in English – a language that is foreign and oppressive to the Hokkien-speaking Mama – because, as Lisa Lim identifies in “Migrants and “Mother Tongues”, “the economic consideration of ... a usable competence in English, the language of ... international trade and commerce, was seen as a basic need” (29). In this way, the English education of the children, which creates a socio-cultural gap between them and Mama, is an incidental effect of the government's desire to keep up with the “shifting sands of capitalism and globalization” (“Fluid Nation”, Chong 504). The capitalistic mentality of the polity manifests in the attitudes, thoughts and actions of the younger generation, whose minds, unlike those older, more experienced and deeply rooted minds of Grandpa and Mama, are formed as a *tabula rasa*. It is the younger generation who have a more malleable identity, and are able to absorb, synthesise and create a new modern identity from the mixture of traditional influences found at home and modern, Westernised and individualistic tendencies from external sources.

However, it is important to note that Kuo does not deny the polysemic nature or inevitable mutability of socio-cultural identity formation, especially for a multicultural, multiracial and multireligious nation-state like Singapore an era of globalisation. In an interview with Ronald Klein in 1999, Kuo stresses that “we are descendants of these people [locally or from China, India and Western Europe], but we are also orphans looking for a parentage, and that parentage can only be a multiple one” (*Interlogue*, Kuo 117). The multicultural identity that Kuo tries to reimagine, then, is one that is not based on any traditional, modern, racial, cultural, or religious category but one that incorporates plural qualities and transcends them all. To be sure, the sustained capitalistic development of Singapore is likely inevitable if the nation-state is to remain competitive on the global stage; however, the rapid rate at which this socio-economic evolution is progressing causes a total

disconnection in socio-cultural identities between two generations of Singaporeans still closely connected by shared physical boundaries. Through a juxtaposition of the differing socio-cultural identities and upbringing of both the younger and older generation, and an analysis of the symbolic spaces that the characters in both plays occupy as well as the shared memory and imaginary cat of Grandpa and Mama respectively, I will show that the inevitable socio-cultural tensions resulting from a polity interested in untenable economic growth causes the fragmentation of a Singaporean cultural identity that may yet be reimagined.

DIVERGING SOCIO-CULTURAL IDENTITIES

Self-identity is one of the most important concepts that affects an individual who is part of a larger collective. When an individual is still young, and dependant on his/her guardians, he/she conceives of his/her identity in relation to the latter, exhibiting their traits and preferences; but as the individual grows older, his/her identity becomes influenced and informed by forces external to the relational guardian-child domestic sphere. Eventually, the older individual accumulates a multitude of experiences and perspectives that constitute a complex, heterogeneous and mutable identity unlike that of the identity the younger individual conceived. According to Peter Burke and Donald Reitzes in “The Link between Identity and Role Performance”, an “identity provides an individual with a standpoint or frame of reference in which to interpret both the social situation and his or her own actions or potential actions” (84). Thus, the older, more experienced and more well-informed individual usually possesses a socio-cultural identity with a more nuanced “standpoint or frame of reference” (82) from which to interpret, interact and possibly empathise with other individuals in society. Further, if the frame of reference an individual identifies with deviates too much from that of the collective he/she belongs to, he/she is likely to contest or reject completely previously established socio-cultural practices and norms.

For a writer like Kuo Pao Kun, his multi-cultural life experiences grant him a unique frame of reference, sensitivity and empathy when trying to understand the socio-cultural circumstances of other individuals around him. In the Foreword to *Images at the Margins*, Kuo Pao Kun writes, “I was born in a poor village in Hebei and was later taken to classical Peiping, then to cosmopolitan Hong Kong, then to multicultural Singapore, then to the massive Down Under, then back to Singapore, and for good. As someone who has been almost permanently on the move, the journey has been more than tolerable” (*Images*, Kuo 8). For Kuo, home was not geographically stationary nor ideologically immutable. Rather, Kuo had had the advantage of various sojourns to diverse cultural spaces in several countries, and this had enabled him to develop a broad and encompassing frame of reference regarding the potential of a multicultural identity. C. J. Wee and Lee Chee Keng, in “Breaking Through Walls and Visioning Beyond”, elucidate that Kuo “asked us to see *beyond* the identity and location we might be occupying ... beyond the limits of race, language, religion, the nation-state, and even the cultural fragments created by those committed to modernisation and capitalism” (Emphasis in original, 14). Kuo is more humanistic in his view of cultural identity, and asks not that we should forget the violence that fragmented our socio-cultural identity, but that we should instead understand it, and look past it towards the possibilities in the future. Thus, equipped with this unique cross-cultural sensitivity, he creates the symbolic characters of Grandpa, Jia Cai, Mama and her children, who are unable to relate and identify with each other because they, especially the more impressionable younger generation, have allowed their fluid, mutable identities to settle and solidify into a fixed but disjointed frame of reference, no longer able “to see beyond the identity and location” (14) they presently occupy.

On the surface, it appears that the modern, individualistic identity of Jia Cai stands in direct opposition to the traditional, Confucian, and collectivistic identity of Grandpa. On the one hand, Jia Cai, relative to his father and Grandpa, was born with a silver spoon in his mouth. He never had to worry about money or war, and was even “supported ... to go study overseas” (*Kopitiam*, Kuo 31), a rare luxury that neither his father nor Grandpa enjoyed. As a result of his comfortable, privileged upbringing and his Western education, he is more individualistic in his thinking, and feels less rooted to Singapore or Grandpa and his *Kopitiam*, preferring to leave Singapore and “emigrat[e] ... to Canada ... [and even] consider[ing] investing either in North America or Australia” (51). On the other hand, Grandpa’s identity is informed by his traumatic experiences, and when Jia Cai confronts him, claiming there is no “difference” (52) in his wanting to emigrate to Canada and Grandpa who “had also forsaken [his] home-land and emigrated to a foreign land” (52), Grandpa is visibly shocked, exclaiming:

We ... we didn’t choose to leave our homeland! ... We had to leave home and come down here because we couldn’t get enough to eat. We didn’t come here to look for a more comfortable life. My Father, your Great Grandfather, he came down to work as a coolie. He was so overworked and sick [and] died within three years. Your Great Grandmother, my mother, she didn’t send me away the way we sent you off in the airport. No. The night before I left, she was still mending my clothes ... [and] soon after that year, our village suffered a very bad flood ... Her body was carried away and I never saw her again ... Jia Cai, in those days, everyone left home with sad tears in their eyes. No one wanted to leave home, do you understand? (52)

Grandpa was limited by socio-economic reasons which compelled him to leave his homeland and even his family behind to seek a better life in Singapore. His decision to leave his homeland and his mother whom he never got to see again must have been an extremely difficult and distressing choice that he could never forget. For Grandpa, settling down in Singapore and starting a new life by having children, and creating a productive business is a therapeutic process and thus something that strongly contributes to his cultural identity. Jia Cai, who has never been through the same traumatic experiences as Grandpa, is unable to empathise with Grandpa's feelings; he claims that he "can understand [Grandpa's] feelings", but immediately, in a reductive and erroneous fashion, rationalises his purported understanding through an economic example, arguing that it is normal for different generations to have "different perceptions ... [as] only a few decades ago people were still walking ... but now everybody rides a motorcar, at least a bus, and everybody wants to own a private car" (53), which is completely outside the frame of reference Grandpa had previously established regarding his own experiences in having to emigrate to a foreign land. Jia Cai does not understand Grandpa at all, and both parties are unable to communicate efficiently from vastly different viewpoints.

Further, Grandpa also identifies with a Confucian collectivist ideology that is reminiscent of home for him. From an old man he used to travel with when he was younger, Grandpa had learnt about "Confucian virtues ... [and that] the difference between man and animals ... [is] just eight [Chinese] characters: Li Yi Lian Chi Xiao Di Zhong Xin¹⁰" (35). These concepts inherently shape the socio-cultural identity of Grandpa, including the character "xiao" (孝) which indicates to Grandpa that close-knit, respectful and harmonious

¹⁰ According to the playwrights note, the eight characters "Li Yi Lian Chi Xiao Di Zhong Xin" are written in "Mandarin-Chinese" and stand for "propriety, justice, honesty, sense of shame, filial piety, brotherhood, loyalty and trust" respectively (35). These eight virtues are an integral part of Confucian-collectivist ideology, and provide a guideline for followers to conduct themselves.

family relations are one of the most important things that an individual can possibly possess; Grandpa belongs to the earlier generation of hardworking proletariat immigrants and he “slave[s] and slave[s] all [his] life ... to settle down, open a shop, make a home ... live more comfortable, and bury [his] roots. [He] want[s] to buy a house so all the family can have a home. To go on and on, generation after generation in peace and tranquillity” (43). He has a strong sense and direction of the cultural traditions and norms that delineate his identity.

Unfortunately, his hopes that his grandson Jia Cai “would one day take over [the Kopitiam business] from [his] Father” (26) are dashed as Jia Cai retorts, “[n]either Meimei¹¹ nor myself are suitable for the business” (26). Jia Cai refuses to take part in Grandpa’s hopes and expectations of him particularly because his idea of family, unlike Grandpa’s which stretches across multiple generations, is nucleated and he is content as long as his wife “Annie and [him can] emigrat[e] to Canada” (51) together. The two identities of Grandpa and Jia Cai seem irreconcilable at this point, with the former’s deeply rooted in traditional collectivistic values and the latter’s rooted in modern individualistic ideals.

Yet, as Kuo shows later in the play, Jia Cai was not always so selfish or incapable of empathy when he was a child. After some prompting, Jia Cai remembers how, in Primary 2, he won “first place in a composition contest” (56) for a composition piece titled “My Home” (56). However, try as he might, he does not remember the contents of that composition, contents which are the most significant in their depiction of the values and ideals that he had identified with as a child. It is Grandpa, although “very disappointed” (57) that Jia Cai has forgotten the composition, who “still remember[s] ... the last paragraph very clearly” (57), and dejectedly reminds Jia Cai of the words he had written as a child:

¹¹ Meimei is a Mandarin-Chinese term for younger sister.

In future, I want to build a very big house with many rooms. There will be one for Grandfather, one for Father, one for Mother, one for Meimei and one for me. And a few more rooms so I can let my friends stay when they come to visit. And then I want to have a very big room so we can all play together and drink kopi together. I want to let all my friends taste our kopi. My Father bake the beans himself and they smell very nice. (57)

At this moment, “overcome by emotions, [Grandpa] can’t continue” (57) recounting the composition and stops abruptly. Contrary to the individualistic and capitalistic mentality of the grown-up Jia Cai, young Jia Cai embodies and espouses the same Confucian collectivistic virtues of propriety and filial piety that his father and Grandpa both believe in. As a child, his frame of reference, which also informs his socio-cultural identity, overlapped with his father’s and Grandpa’s.

However, as Jia Cai grows older and goes to college, “something very serious happened after his graduation” (44) that caused him to leave his family’s sphere of cultural influence. After graduation, he “made some minor invention ... and formed a company ... [which made] very good profits” (44); then, in line with the expansionist economic structure of free-market capitalism, his small company was soon bought over by a “major customer” (44). At first Jia Cai felt “in[to] a great depression ... [and felt as though he] was selling a piece of his own flesh] ... [but] the pain gradually went away” (45). Later on, he “feel[s] a new sense of joy because [he is] trying to compete and transcend [him]self ... [and] would never be inhibited by limits [he] set before” (45). Here, Jia Cai feels a sense of freedom and joy he had never felt before when he discovers his ability to compete with and transcend himself through his innovative work. In a way, Jia Cai has discovered his own socio-cultural identity, an identity triggered at first by a traumatic event, but which he later becomes

comfortable with, similar to the way Grandpa had had to agonisingly leave his homeland behind to find work, but later manages also to settle down and sink his roots into his family and his Kopitiam. Neither of them are wrong in that they both form their socio-cultural identities with respect to the cultural fields that they have been exposed to; rather, it is the *hasty divergence* from one another's frame of reference which leaves both parties grasping only at the fragmented remnants of each other's cultural identities.

Similarly, in *Mama*, the modern, diverse identities of the children also appear to be locked in constant conflict with the traditional and domestic cultural identity of Mama. To begin with, like the earlier immigrants of Singapore, Mama is monolingual and only knows one dialect, "speaking in Hokkien throughout" (105) throughout the play. Mama had probably been raised in a Hokkien speaking community and had never had the need to learn to speak another dialect or language before changes in socio-policies enforced schooling in English and encouraged the speaking of Mandarin over dialect at home. For Mama, who traces her ancestry back to the Fujian province in China, the local Hokkien dialect is a vital part of her socio-cultural identity and frame of reference from which to interpret and negotiate her identity.

Despite Mama's monolingual nature, Kuo uses the artistic quality of Mama's symbolic exchange with the old Indian man to show that language ought not to be a limiting factor in a multicultural, multiracial society like Singapore. To be sure, early Singapore accommodated a truly multicultural, multilingual society. In *Negotiating Language, Constructing Race: Disciplining Difference in Singapore*, Nirmala Purushotam determines, based on "the 1957 census ... [that] the linguistic composition of the island was originally

made up of at least twenty languages¹² [(including dialects)] from four different language families” (33). The varied linguistic composition reflects the diverse cultural demographic of early Singapore, and yet in the scene that follows, the linguistic differences between Mama and the old Indian man do not hinder them from communicating with each other. Mama, who has lost her cat, goes in search of it but cannot find it. She bumps into an old Indian man who “also [happens to] have a cat” (90) and tries to ask him about her lost cat even though she speaks only Hokkien and he speaks only Tamil. The result is “a painfully but joyfully gruelling process” (90) in which they communicate through expressive gestures and mimes, but through which they eventually manage to understand and share in each other’s anxieties and joys, and form a strong cultural bond. The cat, which has been missing for most parts of the play, and which Mama’s children misunderstand as “the cause of all the unhappiness” (89) between them and Mama, is symbolic of the missing language link between Mama and her children; while Mama is able to communicate slowly with the old Indian man because they both share an understanding, respect and concern for the cat, the children are much more impatient, acting “fiercely ... [and] aggressively” (85) when they get tired of listening to Mama’s story, eventually “hunt[ing]” (96) down the cat to eliminate it at the end of the play.

The central factor limiting effective communication between Mama and her children is the fact that the latter have been educated in Mandarin and English, languages that are foreign to her. The fundamental disconnect between Mama and her children arises mainly from the differences in languages spoken. On this topic, Koh rightly points out:

¹² According to Purushotam, “these included Sino-Tibetan languages including Hokkien, Teochew, other Min dialects, Cantonese, Hainanese, and Hakka; Western Austronesian languages especially Malay, but also Javanese and Boyanese; Dravidian languages, mainly Tamil but also Malayalam and Telegu; Indo European languages including Punjabi, Hindustani, Gujarati, Sinhalese; and of course, English” (34).

The official policy constituting English as the lingua franca of the country has aroused fears over the supposedly “deculturizing” effect of an education acquired mainly in English. This has so alarmed the older generation of the Chinese-educated ... [and other ethnic communities] with regard to their “mother-tongues” each now called the “second language” to English. (722)

This emphasis on educating the young in English clearly disconnects them from the older generation who speak in a variety of dialects but not English. Mama’s children have effectively been deculturalised, not just losing their ability to converse with Mama in Hokkien, but also gradually subverting her traditions and culture, as I will show later in the chapter. Right at the beginning of the play, stage directions instruct “ten young people” (*Mama*, Kuo 81) to approach the stage singing “the ABC Song softly ... repeating the same song, singing louder as they walk faster ... [until] they finally form a circle enclosing the confused Mother in it ... trapping her firmly inside the circle” (81). In this scene, Kuo draws upon the dramatic effect of theatre to illustrate the oppression that Hokkien-speaking Mama feels when she is surrounded by her own children, who speak in “a mixture of Hokkien, Mandarin and [especially] English” (82). There seems to be a symbolic exchange between the children and Mama, but not one between two equal, interested parties; rather, the children, symbolic of the larger, modern and capitalistic society, act like predators, circling and trapping Mama in the middle, proving that the relationship is not truly one of symbolic exchange, where both parties impress upon and gain from the other, but one of captor and captive. Ironic as it may seem, Mama feels vulnerable and threatened by her very own children because of their vastly contrasting socio-cultural identities. Her children are products of the nation-state’s social engineering efforts.

Compared to her children, who have had the advantage of a government policy “reinforcing ... [an] education of [the English language in] the young” (Koh 715), Mama has neither the time nor resources to master a foreign language as she spends most of her time “mind[ing] the house” (*Mama*, Kuo 86) and taking care of her children. It should, instead, be her children, multilingual as they are, who make the effort to communicate with her instead of “confus[ing]” (81) her. Unfortunately, as the children have been indoctrinated since young by the colonial legacy of learning the “ABC Song”, they identify themselves more with communicating and expressing themselves in English, and even Mandarin, which has been “propagandized [by the state, in a bid to parallel the main language of China for economic reasons], as a lingua franca among dialect-speaking Chinese” (Koh 722). The alienation of Mama from her children does not merely stem from the dissimilarities in languages but also due to socio-cultural differences because her children have travelled around the world and are embarrassed by her traditional “sambal belacan and haybee hiam” (93), instead of understanding it as a sign of Mama’s concern and love for them.

Yet, as Kuo indicates in *Kopitiam*, the diverging socio-cultural identity of the younger generation from the older generation is not an inherent problem. Like Grandpa and young Jia Cai during the composition writing competition, Mama’s children identify themselves with her values and traditions when they are younger. Their younger selves play traditional games that Mama herself might have played when she was younger, like “O Bei Som”, “Lom Cham Bas” and the “Hawker Game” (81-2). Indeed, when Mama interrupts them in the middle of their game, they “encircle [her] with great enthusiasm ... [demanding] stories ... [and] songs” (82) from her. Here, they once again encircle her, as they did at the start of the play, but this time, symbolic exchange truly takes place. They listen to her tell a story about the Rabbit and the Tortoise patiently, learning from her that “it pays to work hard ... and it pays to ...

persevere on and on” (84). However, the effects of an external force, in this case state policy, have an adverse effect on the identities of the children and their relationship with Mama. The children begin by conversing with Mama “in Hokkien” (82) collectively, but as the play progresses, their language fractures as they begin “to speak in either Mandarin or English” (85) until eventually, “they fail to know the proper Hokkien rendition” (92) of certain words and phrases, effectively weakening their shared cultural identity with Mama, and estranging themselves from her.

In both *Kopitiam* and *Mama*, Kuo sets up two generations that seem to have contrasting socio-cultural identities and opposing values, but a closer reading shows that he is more concerned with how the rapid forces of globalisation and capitalism in Singapore break down the cohesive formation process of the socio-cultural identities of individuals in society. Identities, especially that of children, are particularly vulnerable to external influences like state doctrine and policies. Here, I agree that the mind of a child is, as philosopher John Locke posited, a tabula rasa, or blank slate. When they are born into the world, the mind of a child contains no ideas, and the socio-cultural identities that they form later are due to the amalgamation of inscriptions or imprints by external agents, such as but not limited to friends, parents, teachers, mass media and state ideology. In the same vein, Kuo points out clearly in *Kopitiam* and *Mama* that the younger generation, influenced by the relentless forces of modernity and capitalism, might develop identities so distinct and resolute in their own way that they completely isolate and alienate the very parents or grandparents who have brought them up. It is not modernity or capitalism that is at fault here, as Jia Cai is able to find joy in being able to “transcend” (*Kopitiam*, Kuo 45) himself at his job overseas, and Mama’s children are similarly able to find life overseas “very interesting ... [with] scenery [that] really makes [one] feel open and free” (*Mama*, Kuo 93). Rather, it is the pace at which

the younger generation develops and experiences a vastly distinct socio-cultural identity while attempting to communicate through a similar frame of reference that causes the inevitable fracturing of relationships with the older generation.

A FRACTURED PERCEPTION OF SHARED MEMORIES AND SPACES

In order to better understand the fracturing of collective cohesiveness between the older and younger generation in Singapore, the distinct consciousness, memory and identity that each individual forms in reaction to their experiences have to be understood not just through actions which have transpired in their past, but also through the accumulative duration of actions continuously being experienced in the present, as well as through the tensions resulting when these actions interact. Juxtaposed, the past and present memories of Grandpa reveal the rootedness of his identity compared to that of Jia Cai's, which is constantly "turning away and changing course ... easily" (*Kopitiam*, Kuo 37).

The underlying structure of memory and duration is seen as Henri Bergson brilliantly expounds in *An Introduction to Metaphysics*:

There is no state of mind, however simple, which does not change every moment, since there is no consciousness without memory, and no continuation of a state without the addition, to the present feeling, of the memory of past moments. It is this which constitutes duration. Inner duration is the continuous life of a memory which prolongs the past into the present, the present either containing within it in a distinct form the ceaselessly growing image of the past, or, more probably, showing by its continual change of quality the heavier and still heavier load we drag behind us as we grow older. (26)

Here, the treatment of past memories is vital to the consciousness of the present, and directly informs the identity assumed by Grandpa. Israel Rosenfield aptly summarises in “Memory and Identity” that, “our ‘identity’, our personality, is the brain’s abstraction of the totality of our ‘memories’” (202). In addition, our memory is in a state of “continuous” (Bergson, *Introduction* 26) growth and it must therefore be recognised that our identities are also in a constant state of flux.

In *Kopitiam*, Grandpa is faced with the overwhelming and improbable task of convincing Jia Cai to remain in Singapore and take over the family business of the Kopitiam after the passing of the latter’s father. Throughout the extended, unsuccessful discussion with Jia Cai, Grandpa’s “emotions [slowly] turn ... to grief ... [and he exclaims that he] do[es]n’t understand [Jia Cai’s] generation” (*Kopitiam*, Kuo 44) any longer. He is unable to cope with the inimical aspect of Jia Cai’s modern, capitalistic identity, and “enter[s] into his memory” (29) frequently to orientate and reassert his own identity.

Right from the start of the play, Grandpa sits by the “marble-topped kopitiam table” (25) lost in his own thoughts, “as if trying to capture something from way back in time” (25). The first instance of Grandpa entering his memory happens when Jia Cai mistakenly claims that “the greatest regret for Baba¹³ is that, all his life, he has never enjoyed one relaxed moment ... every day, every year, repeating the same chores again and again and again” (28-9). Contrary to the claim of Jia Cai, Grandpa understands the diligent and honest character of Yin Guan, his son-in-law and Jia Cai’s father, and remembers fondly that the latter had proudly stressed that if you “water your own soil with your own sweat ... the rice you grow would also taste nicer” (31).

¹³ Baba is the Mandarin-Chinese word for father.

Further, when Jia Cai tries to convince Grandpa to either sell or upgrade the Kopitiam, urging him to “look around ... [and] see that everything has changed ... [to realise that] no change may not be a good thing at all” (33), Grandpa once again enters his memory as “the gap [between the older and younger generation] is so wide now ... that old people can only keep [their memories] in [their] hearts” (33). To Grandpa, the Kopitiam is all that he has – it is a constant and stable focal point in the constant change around him. The sentimentality Grandpa feels towards the Kopitiam doesn’t stem from mere nostalgia, but is the result of an inextricable link “built with the sweat and blood from two generations of [his] people” (54). For “over 50 years” (51), Grandpa has worked in the Kopitiam, saving up “cup by cup, cent by cent” (51) so that his children and grandchildren might have a better life than he did; when the “Kopitiam was nearly destroyed during ... [the war, he] never gave up [on it] even then” (38). Thus, the symbolic space of the Kopitiam is where he has developed his “standpoint or frame of reference” (Burke and Reitzes 84), and essentially where his notion of identity and home is conceived. Grandpa’s memory is comparable “to a continual rolling up, like that of a thread on a ball ... swell[ing] incessantly with the present it picks up on its way” (Bergson 8); regardless of the adversities and changes that come along, the core of Grandpa’s “ball of thread” is so strongly and meticulously formed that he is constantly aware of his identity and securely anchored in the constant flux of modern society.

The skilful way in which Kuo distorts the linear flow of time and weaves fragments of memories together in a non-temporal space within the play illustrates the way in which Grandpa is able to use his memory to safeguard his identity and rootedness in his Kopitiam and Singapore. In addition, he abandons the linear chronological sequence of events used in more conventional plays and novels, and adopts a relatively non-linear structure that reflects the complex way memory functions. When faced with the aggressive, even oppressive

diverging identity of his grandson, Jia Cai, Grandpa is able to dig into the “inner duration” (Bergson 26) of his memories to inform his present consciousness of the values he identifies with. However, Jia Cai is unable draw on any specific or shared memories to truly sympathise and empathise with Grandpa, and he can only view Grandpa’s identity from the perspective of an outsider who has grown up privileged and been inculcated with a different set of values as a result of his education. Without access to the shared memories of Grandpa, Jia Cai can only “deal with [the tensions] ... in a roundabout way” (44), causing his “views to be completely beyond ... and [alien to]” (45) Grandpa.

In *Mama*, it is also important to understand the symbolic space that Mama occupies, as well as her children’s treatment of her memory; together, these two aspects reveal the disconnection between her and her children. To begin with, Mama is a fixed point in the children’s minds: constant and reliable, she “never goes anywhere ... [and is always] at home ... mind[ing] the house and ... keep[ing] it clean and tidy” (*Mama*, Kuo 86). When the children are young and unable to travel far, Mama and home are synonymous, a safe haven to which they return to be nourished and cared for. Further, she is also the repository, or a sort of living memory, of Hokkien/Confucianist culture, willing and driven to ensure future generations have a place to anchor themselves. However, as Edward Said warns in “Invention, Memory, and Place”:

The art of memory for the modern world is ... very much something to be used, misused, and exploited, rather than something that sits inertly there for each person to possess and contain ... [as] the processes of memory are frequently, if not always, manipulated and intervened in for sometimes urgent purposes in the present. (179)

Although Said is arguing against the way the Jewish people have invented and manipulated certain memories to expel the Palestinians from Israel and lay claim to the land, his idea of memory holds particular importance in *Mama*.

Mama makes use of her memory of the fable of the “Rabbit and the Tortoise” to teach her children certain values that are important to her. She tells her children of how a “rabbit who runs very, very fast ... me[e]ts a very slow-moving tortoise ... [and challenges it to] a race” (83). Confident that it can outrun the slow tortoise, the rabbit stops to “take a nap” (84), while the tortoise inches on “slowly step by step ... on and on ... until he finally, finally reache[s] the finishing line” first (84). At first, the children are “encouraged by Mama[’s story, and] ... imitate[e] the tortoise on their fours” (84), shouting to each other to “work very hard ... [and] persevere on and on” (84) repeatedly. However, “the children [soon] beg[i]n to imitate the rabbit ... jumping fiercely and bumping into each other aggressively. Mama tries to stop them but fails. In the end, she herself is “bumped over” (85). Here, the children appropriate and distort Mama’s memory of the “Rabbit and the Tortoise”, replacing the traditional slow and steady work ethic of the tortoise with the “fierce ... [and] aggressive” (85) movements of the rabbit, movements which can be read as an allusion to the characteristics of modern industrial capitalism and free market competitiveness. As if to imply that Mama’s traditional consciousness has no place within the modern collective consciousness of her children, she is eventually “knocked unconscious” (85) by their contentious behaviour.

Further, because of the language barrier and cultural dissimilarities between Mama and her children, she effectively occupies not only a metaphorically but also physically different space from them. Her children are never sure where she is, and when asked by the policeman when they had “f[oun]d her missing” (86), they reply with a myriad of

nonsequential and illogical answers such as “Last night. Two weeks ago. I think it was last X’mas. Four hours’ ago. Yesterday afternoon” (86) and so on. They are neither involved with nor concerned about Mama’s life, leaving her to her own devices instead. Both the memory and symbolic space that Mama possesses and occupies respectively are subverted and manipulated by her children. Ultimately, because they do not listen to Mama’s traumatic experiences in being estranged and disconnected from them; they are unable understand Mama’s problems, causing the gap that was already existent between them to be further pushed apart.

At the end of both plays, there seems to be no way of reconciliation between the younger and older generation, between Jia Cai and Grandpa, Mama and her children. In the last scene of *Kopitiam*, Grandpa once again returns to his memory for comfort. He remembers his mother, before he left for Singapore, telling him that “he must never throw away the old for the new, he must never forget his source” (*Kopitiam*, Kuo 59), and he struggles in deciding what to do with the “bunch of keys” (59) to his Kopitiam. In *Mama*, the last scene depicts her finally “discover[ing] her cat” (*Mama*, Kuo 97), albeit under the pile of her children’s bodies. Both plays end of in a rather grim manner, but in the ambiguity there also appears space for the audience to draw their own symbolic exchanges/conclusions with the narrative. Perhaps in the middle of the ambiguity, there remains time and space for the audience to redeem and repair their own relationships and identities among the larger forces of change.

CHAPTER 2: Tensions between Socio-Cultural Identity and National Narrative

Having established in the first chapter the capacity of Singaporean plays to not only recognise but also to resist the fragmentation of a multicultural Singaporean identity between the binaries of older and younger, traditional and modern, collectivistic and individualist generational collectives, chapter 2 will shift out of the domestic way-of-life cultural setting and focus on the developmental state of culture and the arts in the current socio-political climate of Singapore. Specifically, this chapter will study both the overt and covert (self-)censorship processes affecting the production of local culture and the arts, and the failure of the government commissioned arts council initiatives to reimagine a vibrant cultural arts scene in Singapore. This chapter studies two texts by Tan Tarn How, *The First Emperor's Last Days* and *The Lady of Soul and Her Ultimate "S" Machine*, and will examine the fragmentation of the cultural and artistic identity of Singapore when the larger political framework supporting the production of cultural and artistic works not only prevents the artist from producing an objective socio-historical depiction of society, but also severely restricts the artistic "freedom in all forms ... [necessary] for the human spirit to soar" (*The Lady*, Tan 90). At the end of this chapter, I hope to prove that the fragmentation of the Singaporean cultural identity stems from two separate but analogous issues – firstly, as shown in chapter 1, the nation-state's adoption of a capitalistic modernity which rapidly disconnects the frame of reference, or way-of-life cultural identity, of the younger collective from the older collective, and secondly, the soft authoritarian stance, on the production of local culture and arts, that (self-)censors and prevents the creation of a vibrant and creative local culture and arts scene that could potentially reimagine and reclaim the socio-cultural identities of Singaporeans against the relentless storm of capitalistic modernity.

In order to illustrate how the nation-state has been dissonant with the efforts of local culture and arts production, this chapter will first establish the importance of human capital on the formation of a socio-cultural identity, before studying the resulting tensions and contradictions that arise from the manipulation of human capital in the two plays. In particular, two interrelated aspects of human capital – which comprises an individual’s intellectual ability, cultural preferences and technical competencies – will be addressed; firstly, the influence of state hegemony on human capital in the production of national cultural narratives, and secondly, the occlusion of creative human capital in the production of culture and arts.

To begin, socio-economist Gary Becker, in “Human Capital Revisited”, gives a useful definition of the concept of human capital. He argues that:

Schooling, a computer training course, expenditures on medical care, and lectures on the virtues of punctuality and honesty are capital too in the sense that they improve health, raise earnings, or add to a person’s appreciation of literature over much of his or her lifetime ... these produce human, not physical or financial, capital because you cannot separate a person from his or her knowledge, skills, health, or values the way it is possible to move financial and physical assets. (15-6)

Although Becker’s definition of human capital has an undeniable economic component weighed in it, for the literary-critical purposes of this thesis, it is more useful to focus on the segment of his definition that describes the “appreciation of literature”. To be sure, human capital is the stock of diverse and complex information that an individual accumulates and amalgamates throughout his/her life and which directly informs the current frame of

reference or socio-cultural identity through which he/she interprets and responds to the surrounding environment. On its own, human capital or knowledge, much like technology, has a neutral undertone; it can be harnessed in a host of ways for progress in numerous spheres such as science, religion, economy and arts, but if mishandled or manipulated, it can also result in the stagnation, regression or even destruction of those spheres. As Becker asserts, it is impossible to separate an individual from his/her human capital because it is the intrinsic stock of “knowledge, skills ... [and] values” (16) that he/she amasses with time and experience. Yet, although it is impossible to separate an individual from his/her accumulated human capital, it is not as challenging, especially for the nation-state, through strategically placed policies and legislations, to influence or mould the content of human capital that an individual is exposed to in his/her socio-cultural environment.

In this chapter, I start with Tan’s *The First Emperor’s Last Days* and explore the notion of a discourse of crisis that has allowed the Emperor, a thinly veiled reference to ex-Singapore prime minister Lee Kuan Yew, unfettered physical and psychological dominance over his subjects. In *The First*, four individuals, Tang, See Yew, Aileen and Gordon, from various socio-economic backgrounds, are trapped in a basement with a contentious task at hand – a task that if left unfinished, would result in their permanent incarceration in the basement. All four of them have been brought together to write the biography of the dying Emperor, but they are unsure if they should “paint ... [a false] picture of a being ... faultless, infallible, perfect” (240) or “something more realistic ... [with] his good and bad points” (240). While Tang and Gordon are troubled by certain policies and actions that the Emperor has enforced and taken for the alleged sake of the nation, Aileen is convinced that they are all “necessary” (241) – in fact, she stresses that “if you want peace, uniformity, justice, you have to pay the price”, which is the individual’s socio-political autonomy and liberty (242).

However, regardless of their stands, the individuals are all united in their desire to create the official national historical narrative that the Emperor desires and thus secure their own freedom from the basement. To this end, they subscribe themselves to the discourse of crisis – to do what is “wrong, but ... serve[s] a bigger right” (267) and document the violence and atrocities committed by the Emperor as “necessary” (241) for the greater good and survival of the nation. In the interest of self-preservation, these individuals are forced to reject their cumulative cornucopia of knowledge and modify their socio-cultural frame of reference to accept ethically wrong circumstances as right. Altogether, here, I will explore the strained social relations and interactions that the four characters share, and the overt and covert (self-)censorship that they experience as they create a heavily biased official biography which will become the next national narrative, to be studied by future generations and then added to their own collective stock of human capital. Such actions, in turn, create a morally misguided and fractured socio-cultural identity.

Next, using Tan’s *The Lady of Soul and Her Ultimate “S” Machine*, I trace the discourse of crisis which lingers on in society as the Committee for the Creation of a Vibrant Nation (CCVN), a fictional Committee with striking similarities to the National Arts Council (NAC)¹⁴, continues its stringent censorship and policing of potential cultural and artistic productions. In *The Lady*, the Ministry of Culture establishes the CCVN and tasks it to: “The Creation of A Vibrant Nation” (63), that is, to transform a “plain ... grey ... [and] dull country” (66) into “a place with SOUL” (67). Ironically, despite voicing their desire for the nation to be “A Place With Everything” (68), when the CCVN organises a search “for the

¹⁴ The National Arts Council was set up in 1991 by the Singaporean government as part of their bid to foster an increased learning and appreciation of culture and the arts in Singapore. Produced in 1993, Tan’s *The Lady of Soul and Her Ultimate “S” Machine* can be seen as a political satire on the strict censorship laws on the production of the arts despite the establishment of the NAC. In his play, the fictional CCVN is representative of the inefficiency and ineffectiveness of the NAC then.

Soul Lady” (76) and meet with the ultimate soul lady Madame Soul¹⁵, they reject her proposal as it is too sexually explicit and not in keeping with the image of a “clean ... nice ... [and] fine nation” (66). Here too the polity is afraid that if they “let things loose, there will be anarchy” (85). On the one hand, the polity recognises the need for more diverse and creative ideas to create a vibrant nation, but on the other hand, they continue to be heavily involved in auditing the production of culture and the arts, restricting the free and creative expression of Madame Soul’s distinct human capital, thus ultimately undermining their desire to create a truly vibrant, multicultural national identity and society. This unwillingness to change can be traced back to the discourse of crisis established earlier in *The First*, as the Minister of Culture in *The Lady* justifies the state’s authoritarian stance on the autonomous production of culture and the arts as necessary for the country to be “moving in the right direction” (93). In *The Lady*, I will explore the three soul-inspiring proposals of Alban, Shaun and Madame Soul against the socio-cultural disposition of the larger political framework, proving that the fragmentation of the nation’s multicultural identity is as much due to the unrelenting barrage of globalisation and economic modernisation as it is to the anachronistic socio-political tendencies of the state.

Within the paradigm of an economic understanding of culture and the arts, human capital is manipulated and mis(appropriated), dictating and at the same time fracturing the formation of the individual’s socio-cultural identity. The reluctance of the Ministry of Culture, even in the establishment of the CCVN, to shift away from their “discourse of crisis” approach to liberal censorship, as well as their instrumentalisation of culture and the arts, are phenomena that undermine and clash with their desire for a vibrant and creative society. It is

¹⁵ Tan cleverly plays with the similar sounding words of madame “soul” and madame “soh”, the latter which is the min-nan approximation of a common Chinese surname.

interestingly and precisely against the backdrop¹⁶ of this tension that Tan writes his two critically satirical plays, *The Lady of Soul and Her Ultimate "S" Machine* and *The First Emperor's Last Days*; plays which, through the merit of being critical works of art, encourage symbolic exchange with the audience and ultimately contribute to the reimagination of a multicultural Singaporean identity.

THE DISCOURSE OF CRISIS

In *The Last*, four main protagonists, See Yew, Aileen, Gordon and Tang, are trapped in a dystopian basement, and they voice varied and desolate concerns regarding the application of their creative and critical intellectual faculties in the face of an inaccessible and seemingly omnipotent figure of authority – the Emperor. Writing this play, Tan never explicitly mentions the names of the Emperor or the nation-state the former rules, for obvious politically-sensitive reasons, but there are a number of apparent references, such as the unchallengeable authority of the ruler and the familiar ring of “National Service” (220), “civil servant ... staff grade[s]” (229) and “white horse¹⁷ report[s]” (230) which indicate the nation-state in question is likely to be Singapore, and that the allegory of the Emperor is representative of ex-prime minister Lee Kuan Yew¹⁸. In addition to avoiding potential litigation, Tan’s employment of allegory here allows his critical and artistic imagination to better explore the complex relation among authoritarian intervention and intimidation,

¹⁶ Despite recognition of and emphasis on the production of the arts in the 1980s and then the establishment of the National Arts Council (NAC) in 1991, artistes in Singapore were still severely restricted by out-of-bound (OB) markers which guided them in what was politically correct and what was too adventurous for the nation-state. Tan’s *The Lady of Soul and her Ultimate "S" Machine* was heavily censored and edited when it was first submitted to the media regulation authorities for vetting in 1992.

¹⁷ The white horse, in the Singaporean context, is an individual with strong relations to the ruling elite and who receives preferential socio-political treatment.

¹⁸ Lee Kuan Yew, who served as prime minister of Singapore from 1959 to 1990 and minister mentor later on, was known for his arguably harsh and authoritative treatment of any form of opposition to ensure the successful leadership of his government and the nation-state, especially in the earlier few decades of post-independence.

censorship, and self-censorship in the production of the arts. Specific historical settings and cultural artefacts mentioned in the play, such as the Great Wall of China, the August Records of the Kings of Shang, and terracotta warriors place the dislocated space of the time-less and space-less basement in ancient China, and indicate that the “First Emperor” is Qin Shi Huang, the historical Chinese Emperor who “gave hope to China” (241), by uniting the seven disparate warring states.

The Emperor, described by Gordon as “the Son of Heaven ... a god ... [and] the uniter of the civilised world” (241), is, by virtue of his divine authority and prolonged temporal dissociation from present day audiences, shrouded in an impermeable aura of mystery and unquestionable power that neither the protagonists nor the audience dare challenge. This unchallengeable authority that the Emperor wields is symbolic of the enforcement of certain authoritative actions in Singapore’s everyday socio-cultural life, causing both overt physical censorship – such as in 1987 when the Internal Security Department¹⁹ detained several members of a theatre group called the Third Stage without trial for producing plays critical of politics and social issues in the nation-state – and covert self-censorship which manifests in the constant state of fear²⁰ local artistes have to endure when producing socio-politically critical works of art. Both forms of censorship manipulate and impede the autonomous expression of human capital; where the artist would have used the stock of his/her human capital, or knowledge, to create a valuable artistic production, he/she instead produces a crippled or even fabricated product, resulting in the fragmentation of the nascent multicultural identity in Singapore. To be sure, the nation-state has softened its authoritative stance on cultural and artistic production in the last two decades, and the fact that plays such as *The Lady* and *The Last*, both which are satirically critical of culture and the

¹⁹ Refer to the 1987 *The Straits Times* article “Two Main Fronts in Conspiracy” for more details.

²⁰ *Fear of Writing* by Tan Tarn How is a brilliant play which examines the anxiety and fear censorship can cause in an artist.

arts in Singapore, can be produced is a good sign of that; that Tan Tarn How should see fit to comment on the processes governing the production of culture and the arts in his plays shows that further measured improvements can be made to allow culture and the arts to truly flourish locally.

The characters in *The Last* are confused as to how best employ their collective array of human capital in the construction of an official biography that would also serve as the national narrative informing the socio-cultural identity formation of future readers. They are torn between the desire to depict, in an objective manner, the numerous unethical atrocities that the Emperor has committed, especially the “burial of ... four hundred Confucian scholars ... alive” (242), and the fear that the Emperor, viewing this depiction as “a personal wrong, will have [their] entire family killed – relatives up to nine generations removed” (244). Ironically, while Gordon and Tang claim that this act is, from a charitable perspective, “excessive” (242), Aileen argues that *all* of the Emperor’s totalitarian and cruel actions are “necessary” (242), and the collateral “death[s] give forth life ... [without which civilisation] would plunge into chaos once more” (243). Aileen’s willingness to subscribe to the theory of sacrificing the lesser for the greater good is symbolic of the continued “discourse of crisis”, which, while I argue was necessary in the earlier formative and turbulent years of post-independence Singapore to ensure the nation-state’s socio-political stability, is still employed by the nation-state even in the later post-independence decades to justify strong-handed measures in dealing with any political dissent or opposition.

As David Birch, in “Staging Crises: Media and Citizenship”, argues, “within Singapore the very maintenance of the *discourse of crisis* is one of the main strategies adopted by the Singaporean government to maintain its ideology of control, anchor its people to the nation and create a climate of domestic uncertainty about the fragility of the state and

the economy” (Birch 75, emphasis mine). This discourse of crisis, through an alleged privileging of the greater good – that is, the desire for a socio-politically stable society that provides safety and wellbeing for all – asks in return the unquestioning obedience of its citizens, such that even if they were to be made to reject and contradict their cultural traditions and ancestral heritage, they should selflessly participate in the construction of the national narrative.

On the one hand, the discourse of crisis allows the Emperor to consolidate power and entrench his position of absolute power so deeply in the socio-political fabric of the nation that he has overt control over the censorship of the media and information interchange. Apart from having scholars who are even mildly politically critical of his rule buried alive and all their publications incinerated, he also has four individuals from varied socio-economic backgrounds detained in an underground basement, tasking them to write a biography reflective of his power and glory lest their loved ones be harmed. He controls all the means of communication and interaction that the four have with the outside world; there are only two forms of interaction, an unconnected telephone that registers “no dial tone” (222) but “suddenly ... rings” (264) when external socio-political forces desire to make communication with them, and a dumbwaiter through which they receive clean “laundry” (216), “meals” (217) and even “medicine” (220). Further, the Emperor has a documented propensity to execute individuals who displease or oppose him, regardless if the individual in question is “his own son” (226). The four protagonists are thus eager to write a biography pleasing to the Emperor, constantly squabbling over the best way to portray his life until the day they receive physical confirmation in a suitcase sent down the dumbwaiter. Inside the suitcase, they find a copy of “The August Records of the Kings of Shang” (252), suggesting that the Emperor wishes to be remembered in his biography as the Kings of Shang were, “faultless,

infallible [and] perfect” (240). In this instance, the overt power and censorship that the Emperor exerts over the biographers disregards the objective exercising of their knowledge and faculties in depicting and recording the former’s life; the socio-cultural identities of the biographers are thus oppressed and fragmented in the forceful, top-down construction of the national narrative that frames society.

On the other hand, the seemingly limitless authority and enigmatic ambit of the Emperor also act in a covert manner, casting a suffocating aura of fear and suspicion over his biographers and causing them to self-censor their speech, thoughts, and even moral and ethical inclinations. This covert suppression of human capital is much more complex and problematic than the overt form and manifests in two central tensions – firstly, the constant surveillance, suspicion and arguments among the four protagonists and secondly, the spatial and temporal distortion in the play. While the suspicious and argumentative qualities of the protagonists are more apparent from the reader’s viewpoint, the oppressed psychological state of their minds is less transparent and only made clearer through Tan’s creative stage direction and artistic manoeuvring of various and varied historical specificities. Altogether, the covert manner through which the Emperor manipulates the human capital of, and extends his cultural hegemony over, his subjects aggravates the fragmentation of their already fractured socio-cultural identity

SPACE-TIME DISTORTIONS

To begin, in *The First*, the linear progression of space through time is jarringly dislocated from that in reality. Not only does “the [physical space of the] room appear ... to grow smaller as the play progresses” (213), historically specific but separate events also appear to occur simultaneously. On the one hand, historical landmarks and events such as the

“Great Wall” (241) of China, the “Burial of the Scholars” (253) and anachronistic capital punishments by “disembowelment, boiling in hot oil, and quartering by horses” (241) seem to suggest the play is set in the era of ancient China. On the other hand, modern inventions and technological advances such as “a computer and other office equipment” (213), “a radio” (226) and the recent “land[ing of man] on the moon” (226) propose a 20th/21st century setting for the play. The period specificity of the play is further convoluted when interspersed with concurrent news of “a plague²¹ in Europe”, “Buddha” finding enlightenment and “Christopher Columbus” discovering America (226), three socio-historically separate events that took place in different centuries of human history.

Even though the convergence of these socio-historically separate events are perceivably implausible from the reader’s perspective, the four protagonists’ entrapment in the basement denies them of almost all contact with the outside world and causes them to lose touch with the reality of their socio-cultural identities previously formed by their own experiences. Within the internal, restrictive space of the basement, these implausible events become reality for them. Through the juxtaposition and coalescing of multiple varied spatial-historical realities onto the singular timeline shared by the four protagonists in the increasingly claustrophobic space of the basement, Tan suggests that the stock of human capital of See Yew, Aileen, Gordon and Tang have been bombarded with insignificant temporal-historical inaccuracies. The stock of their human capital, as previously established, directly informs their current frame of reference or socio-cultural identity, and becomes overloaded and overburdened from exposure to the multiple sources of conflicting information and realities. As a result, the socio-cultural identities of the four individuals are destabilised and rendered inaccurate for interpreting and negotiating future actions and

²¹ This is a reference to the Black Death, a plague which wiped out a sizeable population in Europe in the 14th century.

decisions. Here, the overloading of mental faculties of the individuals with insignificant information is indicative, and warns the reader, of the central tension of censorship – the individuals are tasked with writing a biography, which is often an objective reflection of the subject’s life, but are flooded with insignificant bits of information instead of historically accurate ones.

Further, the concept of time is blurry throughout the entire play and the protagonists are never sure if it is “morning”, “afternoon”, or “night” (215). They have been relieved of their “watch[es]” (216) before entering the basement and there are “no clocks” (216) with them, leaving them to “decide the time” (216) they want to wake up, take their meals and go to bed. The only constant against this dissolution of time is the frequent counterpoint of “music from [See Yew’s] violin” (254), which grants him a mostly calm and composed demeanour throughout the play – perhaps here Tan is subtly gesturing at the invariable quality of music, a form of art, to *potentially* provide a firm socio-cultural framework and identity to resist the erosion of external influences such as time and modernity. Regardless, the counterpoint of the violin (which only See Yew can play properly) is insufficient to create for all four protagonists a socio-cultural bulwark commensurate with the exceedingly oppressive forces of fragmentation, and the four protagonists live each day with a faltering understanding of time.

The disjointed presentation of time here is indicative of the shattering of the protagonists’ concept of socio-cultural reality and identity. Without a proper concept of time, the protagonists are relegated to structuring their lives based on the mind-numbing binary of “work, sleep, work and sleep” (217), severely narrowing and limiting the field of interaction and framework of reference that affect the formation of their socio-cultural identity. In *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Henri Bergson grants insight into the relationship of identity

formation and time as he expounds that “there is one reality, at least, which we all seize from within, by intuition and not by simple analysis. It is our own personality in its flowing through time - our self which endures” (6-7). In making his statement, Bergson anchors the validity of reality, or life, to the ability of an individual to inform his/her own personality, or socio-cultural identity, as he/she accrues human capital through the passage of time. Here, the concept of time is unadulterated and progresses in a linear manner. However, in *The First*, the concept of time is not only indeterminate, but completely dislodged from the track of spatial progression. Tan eliminates the ability of the protagonists to accurately tell time, indicating that, in addition to being lost in the myriad of historical spatial realities, the latter have been isolated from even the “one [last] reality” (6) that belonged to them. Trapped in a perpetual state of time-less unreality, the four protagonists gradually lose track of their own socio-cultural identities (at varying rates) and start to develop Stockholm Syndrome, with Gordon and Aileen leading the way to acknowledge that the violent crimes committed by the Emperor were “necessary ... for the good of the many” (253).

However, See Yew and Tang continue to resist the corrupting efforts of the Emperor to manipulate and fragment their socio-cultural identities. In the case of Tang, he is a new arrival and has spent the shortest amount of time exposing his original identity to the eroding forces of the time-less, space-less basement. Further, he has also been through the traumatic experience of losing his father who was “buried alive for his memo to the Emperor that questioned the wisdom of burning the books” (255), and this has given him a stronger conviction and moral compass to desire and try to expose the depravity of the Emperor. The short length of time Tang has spent in the basement, coupled with the traumatic experience engraved in his memory, ensures that he loses his socio-cultural identity at a slower rate than Aileen and Gordon.

Compared to Tang, or even Aileen and Gordon, See Yew has been trapped in the basement for the longest period of time. When asked by the new arrival Tang how long they have been in the basement, See Yew, Aileen and Gordon answer, “four years, give or take ... two years three months ... [and] one year, five months and seventeen days” (222) respectively. Having been trapped in the basement for about four years, See Yew is the one who has suffered the longest exposure to the time-less unreality of the basement and should theoretically be the one with the least sense of his fragmented socio-cultural identity. Yet surprisingly he is relatively calm and composed, always “playing the violin” (251), and even though he “seldom speaks ... [he commands some authority as] he is always listened to” (218). Further, it is revealed later on that he tricks Tang into writing the truth about the Emperor’s atrocious deeds instead of sugar-coating the biography. Tang, who has already “lost his father” (261) in the Emperor’s purge on dissenting intellectuals, is keen to repress his moral compass and “do [or write] anything for [the lives of] his mother ... his wife ... and his [unborn] child”, all of whom are presumably in the hands of the Emperor (262). See Yew, in a bid to motivate Tang to document the truth about the Emperor’s fallible qualities, lies that there were “unexpected complications” and that the latter’s wife and child have both “died during the delivery” (265). As a result, Tang, having lost the hope he was living for, is enraged and “tears up his printout ... [and] takes out the diskette [with the sugar-coated biography] and breaks it up” (265), instead starting to re-record a new, accurate depiction of the unethical, violent crimes committed by the Emperor.

Here, See Yew has not only managed to preserve some form of socio-cultural identity in his morally righteous endeavour to expose the true colours of the Emperor but also truly exemplified the postulate of “sacrifice[ing] a few for the good of many” (253). By deceiving Tang about the deaths of his loved ones, See Yew provides him with a catalyst to cast off the

oppressive aura of self-censorship. Even though this would ultimately lead to Tang's wife Marie being "killed" (270) to punish Tang for his straightforwardness in recording the Emperor's biography, this courageous action would potentially present future readers with a truthful version of the national narrative, enriching the reader's stock of human capital and allowing him/her to move past the disintegrating horror of the Emperor's rule to reimagine an authentic, self-informed socio-cultural identity. It is surprising that See Yew has retained enough of his morality and even been empowered to manipulate the flow of information between Tang and the outside world (in a similar fashion to the Emperor). See Yew's power and sense of righteousness, I argue, stems from his persistent habit of playing the violin. The perpetual process of music production forms a stable cultural framework upon which See Yew derives part of his socio-cultural identity, moral conviction and psychological determination to brave the duress of self-censorship.

In *The Last*, Tan brings together four individuals from varied socio-cultural backgrounds to represent the larger social fabric of society. The tensions that arise among and within the individuals in the play are indicative of similar tensions that occur in society when its collective stock of human capital is subject to the manipulation and misappropriation of a tyrannical, oppressive ruler. Under the duress of censorship, self-censorship and physical violence, the socio-cultural identity of society starts to fall apart as mutual distrust and suspicion grows. However, the redeeming quality of the violin playing stands in opposition to the fragmentary forces of the authoritarian polity. It is symbolic of the power of the production of art to resist and transform the eroding and homogenising forces of totalitarianism.

IMAGINED COMMUNITIES AND THE NATIONAL NARRATIVE

Having discussed the discourse of crisis which empowers the authoritarian mode of socio-political governance, this section will explore the state of production of culture and the arts in Singapore, through Tan's *The Lady of Soul and Her Ultimate "S" Machine*, and its impact on the development of a multicultural Singaporean identity. In *The Lady*, the formation of the Committee for the Creation of a Vibrant Nation (CCVN) mirrors the formation of the National Arts Council (NAC) in the nation-state of Singapore. Though the NAC was set up in 1991 to continue the earlier government initiatives to bolster the production of culture and the arts in Singapore, strict OB markers and (self-)censorship issues continued to exist. *The Lady* is concerned with the role of artistic and literary productions, shaped by the collective and interactive human capital of the characters in the plays, within the framework of the constructed national narrative. Derek, as the Chairman of the "Committee for the Creation of a Vibrant Nation" (62), is tasked with transforming an otherwise economically successful but drab and monotonous "dull country" (66) into a cultured and cosmopolitan "place with SOUL" (67). Similarly in Singapore, having achieved rapid industrial and economic development in the decades following independence, the government, in the 1980s, was ready to add a more creative and dynamic cultural dimension to the thus far economically biased narrative of the Singapore Success Story, by infusing the nation-state with "some poetry, some music, some verve and vim ... some life, zest and zeal, gusto and heh, presto" (67).

In *The Lady*, the artistically fantastical and vaudeville characteristics of the central characters, Derek, Shaun, Alban and Madame Soul, as well as the thoroughly ineffective CCVN, serve to satirise the actual treatment of culture and the arts in Singapore. Through an examination of the manipulation and occlusion of the human capital of the characters in the

play, I will show that the CCVN serves as a socio-cultural construct interested only in propagating the polity's economic interests instead of fostering a truly vibrant and creative socio-cultural identity. Further, exploring both cultural and artistic production within the boundaries of the national narrative, I argue that the plays problematise the treatment of human capital through the idea of the constructedness of the nation-state.

To begin, a definition of the constructedness of nation-state is necessary and Benedict Anderson, In *Imagined Communities*, postulates that:

[The] definition of the nation ... is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion ... The nation is imagined as *limited* because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations ... It is imagined as *sovereign* because the concept was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm ... Finally, it is imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep horizontal comradeship. (Emphasis in original, 6-7)

Benedict's definition of the nation as an "imagined political community" (6) is important here, and the aspects he puts forth – imagined, limited, sovereign and community – help illuminate the split between the arts and the constructed narrative of the nation-state. To be

sure, the constructed narrative, or official discourse, of the Singaporean nation-state is one that the polity actively seeks to create and re-assert through the manipulation and (mis)appropriation of human capital. Here, it is important to note the difference between the notion of Anderson's "imagined communities" and my assertion of the nation-state's "constructed narratives". On the one hand, "imagined communities" constitute a society in which individuals are able to draw upon shared historical or socio-cultural experiences and identify with them as a collective. On the other hand, the constructed narrative, or official discourse, of the nation state is the process of producing a unifying national rhetoric by including or omitting the multitude of diverse socio-cultural fragments encompassed within society to create a shared collective identity that individuals in society can "imagine" as a community.

The theme of the narrative of the nation-state as constructed recurs throughout the play, and often alludes to, and is indicative of, the actual tensions Singapore faces in reconciling the critical, diversifying and decentring potential of artistic human capital with the homogenising agenda of the modern globalised capitalistic nation-state. To begin, the Prologue of *The Lady* introduces the reader to a hyperbolised marketplace of capitalistic global modernity – "The Nations Boutique" (58). In this peculiar boutique, the customer is offered a choice of various different nations to purchase, and is "guaranteed to find a nation of [his/her] choice for any kind of budget" (58). Ultimately, as the salesgirl runs through her list of nations, she reaches "the limited edition Asian Dragon model" (58), supplied by the Father, the Son, and the Holy Goh" (58). Here, the play makes an obvious reference to the three prime ministers of Singapore – the father being Lee Kuan Yew, the son being Lee Hsien Loong, and the holy Goh being Goh Chok Tong. Further, Tan's act of grouping them together in this trinity suggests that all three prime ministers are equally important in the

economic success of Singapore, but also satirises the alleged nepotism involved in the Father passing on political succession to the Son.

While the descriptions of this particular nation appear to simply be a flashy and insignificant pitch by the salesgirl to make a sale, it holds particular significance for the politically-aware reader. The “Asian Dragon model” (58) she offers is a reference to the four “little dragons” of Asia – Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong and Singapore. Ezra Vogel, in *The Four Little Dragons*, elucidates:

In East Asia, the dragon has been a compelling symbol of power for over a millennium ... In the first decade after its defeat in World War II Japan resumed its industrialization, progressing at a pace the world had never seen. Over the next three decades four nearby little dragons – Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Singapore – modernized even more quickly. (1)

The symbol of the Asian dragon, then, is one that embodies the efficient yet relentless economic success and industrialisation of the four Asian nations, propelling them from undeveloped nations into modern, globalised ones. Further, the suppliers, or rather, the makers of the nation are identified as “the Father, the Son, and the Holy Goh” (*The First*, Tan 58). Here, Tan employs the literary device of assonance to draw the allusion of the three consecutive prime ministers of Singapore to the Christian concept of the Trinity – that is, the idea of God as comprising three different aspects, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.

Tan achieves multiple objectives through the allusion of top government officials to the Trinity. Through this allusion of the polity to God, Tan comments on the anti-liberal and authoritative state of Singaporean socio-politics; in doing so, he revives the archaic doctrine

of the Divine Right of Kings, which proclaimed that the ruler's authority, derived from the heavens, is indisputable. Moreover, he deconstructs the constructed notion of the nation-state as a "sovereign [imagined community because of its link to a] ... divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm" (Anderson 6); the absolute link of the polity, a small group of people, to unlimited power, creates a situation where the official discourse of the nation-state is implemented top down, creating tensions within a multicultural and socio-politically diverse society. Within such a society, the varied and distinct human capital of individuals in society is homogenised and "inside [their collective socio-cultural identity] there is really nothing" (*The Lady*, Tan 59).

Furthermore, the idea of the creation of culture and the arts overnight, in order to mitigate what Koh Tai Ann, in "The Singapore Experience", terms, "the effects of an exclusively and therefore coarsening materialistic ethos created by concentration on economic gain" (292), is also derided by Tan as both ineffective and inefficient. The fictitiousness and redundancy of the committee for "The Creation of a Vibrant Nation" (*The Lady*, 63) is made apparent in the play through the way Derek beats around the bush when he meets the Minister of Culture. In his meeting with the Minister of Culture, Derek presents his ludicrous proposal for dealing with the cultivation of culture and the arts, or as he calls it, "soul", in the nation state. Rather than addressing the problem in a direct manner, Derek claims, in protracted dialogue, that he "will independently and separately ... systematically investigate, delve into and otherwise consider various subquestions, sub-issues and subproblems thorny, perplexing or otherwise contradictory concerned with the whole subject of 'The Creation of a Vibrant Nation'" (63). He then circumvents the central issue by delineating a whole horde of "main committee[s]" (63) and "subcommittees" (63) to interpret each single word of the project, justifying his committees and subcommittees as an organic

and cohesive “living, glittering tree with myriad stems, branches, twigs and leaves of committees all acting in consort” (64) when in reality they are more akin to the multiple layers of thick and dead bark surrounding and obscuring the core or soul of the tree.

The roundabout way Derek handles the project to make the nation-state a more vibrant one indicates, and alludes to, not only the real world ineffectiveness of government bureaucracy in trying to enforce a top-down concept of culture and the arts on society, but the eventual futility in cultivating anything of value – essentially, for the Ministry of Culture, the “packaging is what counts” (59). Derek, “a President’s Scholar” (65) with a “Masters [in] Public Administration” (65), has undoubtedly amassed enough experience and knowledge to deal with the problem (or lack) of culture and the arts in the nation state, yet while he is trying his “utmost to predict what the government wants” (91), he is only capable of manoeuvring on the periphery of his central concern. This is unsurprising as the desire for culture and the arts in society comes about mainly out of a concern for economic progress. As such, Derek is unable to fully capitalise on the potential of his human capital to improve the socio-cultural vibrancy of society.

Further, after Derek meets with Madame Soul, Alban and Shaun, he becomes more sensitive to the concept of culture and the arts, and presents a report with socio-cultural recommendations he truly believes in to the Minister of Culture, asserting that “freedom in all forms is necessary for the human spirit to soar” (90). However, he is immediately shot down as his report is equated with “a ticket to chaos and mayhem” (90). The Ministry of Culture is not ready to allow a high level of autonomy to the production of culture and the arts. Here Derek’s call for “freedom in all forms ... for the human spirit to soar” (90) is similar to Matthew Arnold’s definition of perfection in *Culture and Anarchy* in that both assertions aim expose the individual to a form of culture and the arts that will create in themselves a

cohesive socio-cultural framework from which they can form their self-identities. To be sure, Arnold argues that “perfection, as culture conceives it, is not possible while the individual remains isolated: the individual is obliged ... to carry others along with him in his march towards perfection” (Arnold 36). It is important to note here that Arnold isn’t disparaging the strength of the individual in favour of the united whole, rather, in order for the human race to progress undivided, the individual must have first self-realised something quintessentially good and then come to a shared conclusion on the collective level. Accordingly, Derek has discovered the complexity of the concept of culture and the arts on the formation of a larger socio-cultural identity, and exclaims:

[It is] a crossroads sort of thing. I saw three people at the end of the soul search that came out with three different sets of different ideas. And they are all right to some extent. I realised that we cannot exclude one at the expense of the other. They are all different versions of ... Soul. And I saw in them deep feelings, commitment, passion, lust even. I saw soul. (*The Lady*, Tan 91)

Firstly, Alban, who is more pragmatic and socialist suggests that soul “resides in the head” (79), urging society to have “shared values ... [and to] respect your elders ... [and place] community above self” (80). Secondly, Shaun, who is more artistically-inclined and free-spirited, “believes that the soul of a country is in its arts” and that “the only way forward is to let things have a free run” (83). Lastly, Madame Soul argues that the way to a soulful nation is to encourage individuals to be more sexually active, to feel their “whole body ... tensed up rid[ing a] wave which goes higher and higher ... [until] your mind just blows away” (76-7). Derek recognises that society is comprised of a variety of individuals, each with their own unique beliefs and dreams, none are superior to the other, and all of them can exist harmoniously with each other. Here, Derek’s conception of culture and the arts is similar to

Arnold's, in that both ideas strive for progress by granting autonomy to the individual's human capital, allowing him/her to identify, reflect on, and express his/her own perception of "the moral and social passion for doing good" (Arnold 34). This in turn also contributes to a natural, "deep horizontal comradeship" (Anderson 7), or symbolic exchange, between the individuals who share and interact with each other's ideas, facilitating the creation of an "imagined nation" they can collectively identify with – a comradeship that the Minister of Culture deprives individuals, in the nation-state, of when he avows that the creation of "the Committee for the Creation of a Vibrant Nation ... is all very ill-conceived and very ill advised ... [and that any future] recommendations [shall] merely establish what already is but couched in terms which make the recommendations seem novel" (*The Lady*, Tan 92).

To be sure, the function of human capital is boundless and kaleidoscopic in nature, but in the Singaporean context it is central to the advancement of the economy, and not to the cultivation of a reflective and socio-politically aware individual or society. Thus, even when human capital in the cultural and artistic sense is recognised, it is also subjugated to the economic sphere. According to the *Renaissance City Report* (1999), a manifesto announcing the government's plans to emphasise culture and the arts in Singapore:

Apart from the direct economic benefits that accrue to arts and cultural activities, creative and artistic endeavours will also play a decisive role in the future economy. To ensure sustained growth in the long run, Singapore must forge an environment that is conducive to innovations, new discoveries and the creation of new knowledge. Knowledge workers will gravitate towards and thrive in places that are vibrant and stimulating. Building up a cultural and creative buzz will thus help us to attract both local and foreign talents to contribute to the dynamism and growth of our economy and society. (6)

Despite the attempt to expound the other advantages of culture and the arts “apart from ... direct economic benefits” (6), the government’s aspiration for a “vibrant and stimulating [nation-state] ... to attract both local and foreign talents to contribute to the dynamism and growth of [the] economy” (6) underscores a deeply ingrained economic and authoritative mentality, both of which are exposed in Tan’s two plays. Deriving its power from the discourse of crisis, the nation-state continues with its harsh censorship policies and reassigns the authoritative methodology which brought it economic success into the realm of cultural and artistic production, failing to see that this authoritative methodology actually undermines the production of culture and the arts. Despite becoming more liberal in allowing artistes to be creative in artistic productions, more can and should be done to prevent further fracturing of the individual’s socio-cultural identity.

CHAPTER 3: Identity Castration

In the earlier chapters 1 and 2, I have identified the set of separate but mutually complementary forces which fracture the socio-cultural identity of individuals in society – firstly, the unyielding eroding force of capitalistic modernity which instils its own brand of rapid, aggressive, individualistic mentality on those who subscribe to it, and secondly, the failure of the authoritarian government to foster a truly creative multicultural nation capable of producing works of art that could possibly resist the eroding forces of modernity. In the first two chapters, the formation of socio-cultural identity has been problematised by examining the complex cultural relations and interactions within larger socio-cultural structures such as the different generational collectives of Mama and her children, or the CCVN and Madame Soul. This examination of the complex interaction and relations within and among the larger socio-cultural-political structures of society has suggested that there is indeed a problematic formation of socio-cultural identity in an authoritatively-governed, capitalistically-modern Singaporean society. Having thus established that the socio-cultural identity of Singaporean society is indeed fragmented, it is in the interest of this chapter to examine closely the psychological tensions arising within the Singaporean individual possessing a fractured socio-cultural identity in order to form a more complete picture of the depth of the fragmentation. In turn, when the depth of the socio-cultural fragmentation of the individual has been uncovered, and the central psychological tensions made clear, then it is possible to search for an answer to mend, or even transcend this divisive fragmentation.

Specifically, this chapter, through Kuo's *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral*, will explore the psychological tensions within Admiral Zheng He, an individual who suffers from a fractured socio-cultural identity. In particular, the symbolism of the surgical act of castration as well as relations between the narrative of power and identity formation will be

examined; Zheng He is a powerful individual who commands an armada of “60 ships ... [and] 30,000 men” (46) on a mission to spread “the power, prestige and splendour of the Imperial Court ... to the further shores” (46). Yet despite being such an influential figure, he regularly experiences frequent bouts of “loneliness ... dreaming, hoping, searching, [and] struggling” (66). Here, there are discrepancies in the relationship of his powerful presence to his fragmented psyche and socio-cultural identity and it is evidently not a linear one; Zheng He’s powerful exterior masks an extremely fragile and fragmented interior, calling for a closer examination of the illusion of the narrative of power that he wields in the public realm. Further, through his psychological journey of constant “dreaming, hoping, searching, struggling” (66) as well as his physical expedition to explore the numerous and diverse cultures and wonders of the world, I examine the significance of the “great market-festival” (60) with its plethora of food, festivities, and “gentlemanly exchange” (59), positioned diametrically opposite²² to the capitalistic modernity of Singapore, in mending and even possibly transcending the fragmentation of his socio-cultural identity.

Altogether, in this chapter, I hope to direct and focus the broader examination of the origins and tensions surrounding socio-cultural identity fragmentation in previous chapters onto a more specific level – the psychological mental state of an individual suffering from a fragmented socio-cultural identity. Through the precise identification and understanding of the effects of this cultural fragmentation, I hope to show that socio-cultural identity, or the idea of identity itself, is an active, ongoing process of negotiation, transmission and exchange of ideas between the individual and the larger socio-cultural-political framework surrounding himself/herself. Further, the fragmentation of an individual’s socio-cultural identity creates

²² While the “great trading festival” (59) or “great market-festival” (60) is a place where trade and commerce take place, it is in no way like the economic system of free-market capitalism where supply and demand dictate the production and price of goods and services.

many smaller surfaces of socio-cultural interaction through which the individual can interact and assimilate old, new and diverse ideas in a bid to become whole again.

THE MYTH OF POWER

To begin, the theme of Singaporean individuals as “cultural orphans” (“Uprooted and Searching”, Kuo 167) is evoked once again and emphasised through the allegorical nature of Kuo’s Eunuch Admiral Zheng He. As Kuo posits, allegorical theatre is much more effective than reactionary theatre, not only because it avoids direct political confrontation and censorship but because it also has:

The capacity to transcend specific reality because it uses symbols and signs, usually from classical sources that enjoy some measure of universal understanding. The allegory extends to a cultural framework which relates it to a larger understanding. In such a context in Singapore where a number of major civilisations and cultures meet, the makers of Allegorical Theatre are likely to delve not only deeply but also broadly into world mythology, world history and world art, looking for a figurative idiom, an image which can be meaningful to a wide, if not universal audience. (173)

Here, Kuo accentuates the power of allegory to draw upon previously established cultural frameworks and empower the subject being allegorised. In particular, the fragmented state of cultural identity in Singapore is more succinctly highlighted when it is framed against and validated by older memories of customs and traditions such as the castration of boys to “fulfil ... a very important aristocratic need since many thousands of years ago” (*Descendants*, Kuo

45) or venerable networks of cultural and religious exchange such as the gathering of “Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus and Taoists” (59) at “great trading festival[s]” (59).

The character of Zheng He mirrors the Singaporean individual in that he is also a cultural orphan; at the young age of 12 he was “taken prisoner from [his] parents, [his] hometown and [his] people in Yunnan ... [forced] to love [his] master who cleansed²³ [him] and enslaved [him]” (56). Further, in addition to physically oppressing Zheng He by removing one of his most vital organs at a tender age and forcing him into servitude, it is revealed that his master also had his surname, an indicator of his socio-cultural lineage and heritage, changed from “Ma” to “Zheng” simply because of superstitions (56). Both incidents, one physical and one psychological, act upon Zheng He by violently cutting his ties to his ancestry and severely fragmenting his socio-cultural identity. The play suggests that Singaporean individuals, like Zheng He, are cultural orphans because while many Singaporeans can trace their ancestry back to larger countries like China and India, “as an ethnic Chinese, you can’t go back to China. As an ethnic Indian, you can’t go back to India. Even if you are Malay here, where do you go? ... we have borrowed so much from the European civilisation, but are we Europeans?” (“Uprooted”, Kuo 117). Both the Singaporean individual and Zheng He have been physically and culturally uprooted, forced to wander through life “searching” (66) for a pluralistic socio-cultural identity to unite the shattered fragments of their historical socio-cultural identities. Further, while it might not occur to the Singaporean individual, living amidst the material wealth of capitalistic modernity, to give much thought to his/her status as a cultural orphan, Kuo suggests, through the violent separation of Zheng He from his cultural identity, that this fragmented Singaporean cultural identity is a very real concern and should be reflected upon more actively and frequently.

²³ This is a euphemism for castration.

To be sure, the allegory of castration in *Descendants* is very effective and relevant in teasing out the relationship between the illusion of power and the formation of socio-cultural identity. The concept of power cannot exist in a vacuum; it is by definition relational and is intrinsically linked to the ability of an individual or group to either act on their own discretion in a community, or control and influence the actions of other members within that community. In turn, the act of castration is not only physically debilitating, but also symbolic of the removal of a man's source of power. The male genitalia is one half of a set that enables the process of reproduction and continuity of all living human beings. It is, on the biological level, the vessel which produces DNA containing an individual's unique genetic traits, and on the socio-cultural level, the organ which produces new life on which existing cultural preferences and socio-political ideology can be inscribed. Further, from the reductive perspective of patriarchal societies – arguably including Singapore –, the possession of male genitalia is also what categorises an individual into male and not female, entitling the male to symbolic power and superiority over his female peers. Thus, the act of castration not only strips all the above mentioned privileges from the individual, it also expels the individual from the categories of male or female, violently shattering the socio-cultural identity of the victim and leaving him “in the limbo between ... being a man and a non-man ... [constantly] searching [and] struggling” (66) to find his self-identity.

Ironically, despite having been castrated and losing his “life-giving power” (57) at a young age, Zheng He is described as “a supremely powerful grand eunuch” (43) and also a “legendary great sailor who had sailed from the China Sea to the Indian Ocean seven times ... [and] reached as far as ... Africa more than a century before Magellan saw the Philippines” (49). He has command of a vast “imperial armada” (48) and the “power [and] authority” (46) of the entire Ming Dynasty behind him, enabling him to sail far and wide,

simultaneously subverting the common euro-centric narrative of masculine Europeans being the first to navigate the globe. There is undeniable aura of power surrounding the Grand Eunuch, and in order to gain an insight into the complexity of this power, I refer to sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's definition, in *Language and Symbolic Power*, of symbolic power. He posits that it is:

The product of subjective acts of recognition and, in so far as it is credit and credibility, exists only in and through representation, in and through trust, belief and obedience. [Further] ... symbolic power is a power which the person submitting to grants to the person who exercises it, a credit with which he credits him, a *fides*²⁴, an *auctoritas*²⁵, with which he entrusts him by placing his trust in him. It is a power which exists because the person who submits to it believes that it exists. (192)

Bourdieu makes several important assertions here on the nature of symbolic power; it essentially as illusion of real power, a symbolic power that only exists because those who would be subject to the sphere of its influence firmly accept and believe, whether wholeheartedly or having been deceived, in its authority and existence. In this sense, Chief Eunuch Zheng He derives his aura of authority and (symbolic) power, which gives him an externally constructed façade of socio-political identity, from the willingness of his subordinates to believe in his superiority and influence. On the one hand, Zheng He derives this symbolic power from the very merit of his lack of genitalia; he is able to rise through the political ranks and gain the trust of the emperor by “attending to the bed-pleasures [and even personal affairs] of emperors and princes, of noblemen and noblewomen” (*Descendants*, Kuo 45)

²⁴ Latin for faith.

²⁵ Latin for authority.

without the risk of his offspring potentially usurping the throne. On the other hand, and more importantly, Zheng He is entrusted with this symbolic power and “majestic authority” (46) through the invocation of “heavenly blessings” (46), a divine, unchallengeable form of agency that must have held sway with most, if not all, of his subordinates. It is important to note here the difference between the symbolic power that Zheng He wields in front of his subordinates and the real power his master holds over him. While, as established above, Zheng He’s power is symbolic, he only knows all too well the real power²⁶ his master exercised in having him kidnapped as a child, “enslaved” (56) and painfully castrated.

Thus, the act of castration violently shatters the socio-cultural identity of Zheng He while giving him access to a divinely ordained symbolic power that forms an unstable, fictitious, ephemeral socio-political identity; on the surface, he roams the seven seas with “such commanding authority and firm sense of purpose” (49) but within his mind there is a perpetual “loneliness” (38) and “no [real] idea what [is] happening” (49). The literal act of castration is also a metaphorical one, as the castrated individual is separated from not only his genitalia, but also the stock of ancestral memories, traditions and cultures which used to, or could potentially, form the socio-cultural framework and identity from which he interprets and negotiates his present condition. To be sure, the Singaporean individual, having been removed from his traditional ancestral home and relocated to the modern multicultural, pluralistic and capitalistic nation-state is forced to come to terms with his/her symbolic castration and frantically trawls the socio-economic fabric of society for meaningful bits and pieces to assimilate into and ameliorate his/her fragmented socio-cultural identity.

²⁶ Arguably, this “real” power that the master possesses is also a form of symbolic power that his subjects grant him by believing in his divinely ordained right to rule; yet symbolic power, when unchallenged and allowed to violently interfere with the lives of those who did not grant this power (such as when a leader is able to convince him men to attack another group), it transforms into a kind of real power.

In the case of Admiral Zheng He, being bestowed a vast amount of symbolic power isn't enough to compensate for, or restore, the violent fragmentation of his socio-cultural identity; "he didn't choose ... [this,] he was summarily cut and cleansed ... because there was a need, a huge need for eunuchs" (45). The transient arbitrariness of this symbolic power, providing "wealth and status" (45) is, to Zheng He, not commensurate with his abduction and castration as a child. Yet, surprisingly, the narrator, who has been frequently "dreaming" (38) of himself "sailing across the vast ocean" (38) and eventually comes to the conclusion that "one of [his] former lives was none other than that of the great Admiral Zheng He himself (49), makes the voluntary "decision to want to become a eunuch" (44). It is not an easy decision for the narrator to make because the castration is a painful, irreversible process that he might not "survive" (45); further, through his metaphysical, out-of-body dreams, in which he ponders if Eunuch Zheng He, while "sailing across ... the eerie distance, alone at sea, [could] forget ... the moment ... [of] insanity forced upon him, [and] forget ... the pain created in him by the removal of his manhood" (38), he empathises with the "endless", "haunting" "loneliness" (38) that the "high" (49) position of an eunuch encompasses.

The narrator weighs the negative circumstances carefully before deciding that "a licence to enter the imperial palace, to hold privileged positions in the imperial household, to scale higher positions [and] to attain wealth and status" (45) are more than adequate reasons to justify his literal and metaphorical castration. Although at the very fundamental level the narrator's decision to join the ranks of the eunuchs stems from the economic rational of being "very poor" (44), his aspirations of "privileged positions" and "status" (45) transforms the basic rational into more complex socio-economic-political one. The human desire for this triumvirate of socio-economic-political advancement, as historically proven, is a timeless quality that transcends different epochs, societies and economic systems. Here, I posit that

within the economic system of capitalistic modernity, the narrator's desire for power and wealth can be transposed onto the psyche of the modern Singaporean individual. To be sure, the socio-economic objects and positions of desire in the modern capitalistic context are slightly different; instead of hankering after "fish bones, turtle shells, birds' feathers, stones ... acrobatic goats ... fighting bulls ... [and] dancing chickens" (59-60), the modern, capitalistic Singaporean is likely to covet the latest consumerist goods such as mobile phones, branded paraphernalia, cars and more, and rather than attaining a "higher" or "privileged position" within the "imperial palace" (45), he/she is likely to be climbing the corporate ladder and vying for promotions within the "organisation chart of ... companies" (40) which Kuo brilliantly satirises as "a network of pricks" (41).

Regardless of spatial and temporal setting, whether it is in the autocratic dynasties of ancient China or the capitalistic modernity of Singapore, the human desire for the triumvirate of socio-economic-political advancements manifests in the quest for contemporary material objects and socio-political positions but remains fundamentally the same. When fulfilled, this basic human desire, costing the individual a vital sacrifice of symbolic castration (and literal too in the case of the narrator), rewards him/her with a semblance of power that, as Kuo portrays through the psychological tensions within Zheng He, are not commensurate with the sacrifice demanded. Here, the narrator's act of voluntary castration can be difficult to comprehend, past the simple but seductive allure of power and wealth, but I posit that Kuo is strongly arguing against the pre-deterministic mentality of the narrator, who believes he is "a descendant of the eunuch admiral" (38). To be sure, the socio-cultural lineage of an individual should provide the individual with a frame of reference from which to he/she can decide his/her interactions and negotiations with society instead of dictating those deliberations.

Further, with the innovation of “modern and ... sophisticated method[s] of cutting and cleansing” (64), the violence of the castration process is diminished to the point whereby it starts to feel “comforting and pleasurable” (64). To this end, young victims, not knowing any better, now actually desire for this literal and metaphorical castration to be performed on themselves. This is reflective of the younger unsuspecting generation in the modern nation-state of Singapore; unaware or disinterested in their distant, easily-forgotten cultural heritage (that has arguably been repressed and then artificially reintroduced by government policies) and bombarded with constant consumerist advertisements and popular culture through the global reaches of the mass media and social media, these inexperienced individuals are completely unaware of the components comprising their socio-cultural identity, less its fragmented state, and instead desire their symbolic castration and the “pleasur[es]” that come with it (64).

On the one hand, the narrator desires his painful castration for the potential wealth and power it might bring, and on the other hand, the newer generation desires their enjoyable castration for the pleasure and satisfaction they imagine it brings. Both instances reduce the process of castration to the rigid binaries of deculturalisation and the accumulation of symbolic power, which engenders the adoption of a transient, problematic socio-cultural identity, of which neither instances are representative of the type of humanistic, transcendental multicultural identity that Kuo envisioned as “an integration of all” (“Interview”, Kuo 117) the various, scattered and fragmented instances that an individual experiences and accumulates in his/her passage through time and space. The next part of this chapter explores the relation of the symbolism of the “marketplace” (*Descendants*, Kuo 59) to this transcendental multicultural identity Kuo envisioned.

THE HEALING/RECUPERATIVE MARKETPLACE

In keeping with the theme of allegorical theatre, and the parallels between the castration of Admiral Zheng He in ancient China and his “descendants” in the economically modernised nation-state of Singapore, Kuo also draws allusions to the free-markets of capitalism through his depictions of the grand and diverse trading activities in the “marketplace” (59) and suggests that the latter market contains, if an individual looks closely enough, within its splendid and varied goods and services the potential of discovering a truly transcendental multicultural identity. As C.J. Wee and Lee Chee Keng astutely note in “Breaking Through Walls and Visioning Beyond – Kuo Pao Kun Beyond the Margins”, “ironically, the moments of transcendence beyond Zheng He’s present condition come about *only* during the voyage to realms and markets away from the ambiguous and discomfiting home that is China” (Emphasis in original, 27).

To be sure, the socio-political climate of imperial China is intimidating and oppressive towards the socio-cultural identity formation of Zheng He. As a child, Ma He²⁷ was taken from his home, castrated and forced to adopt the socio-cultural traditions of his captors; even as a powerful and influential adult later on in life, chief eunuch Zheng He, when confronted with the choice of *identifying* with either ruling emperor Yong Le or deposed emperor Jian Wen’s political camp, bursts into tears and pleads:

I belong to no party, no clique, no clan; I was not even born a member of the Han people. I am just a humble alien, a wandering slave, a worthless servant to all and sundry. Insya Allah²⁸, I am still alive ... I serve everyone ... every

²⁷ Before he was renamed Zheng He by the Emperor’s decree.

²⁸ Loosely translated from Arabic as “God willing” or “if God wills it”.

emperor and every prince, every minister and every commander ... Please spare me the pain and torture of this imperial rivalry. (*Descendants*, Kuo 53)

In making his confession, Chief Eunuch Zheng He reveals that despite his powerful and influential political position, he only views himself as a worthless servant. Having been robbed of his Muslim-Chinese identity as a boy, he does not recognise himself as part of the larger socio-political and cultural framework he serves, claiming that he is nobody, and that he is “just a humble alien, a wandering slave” (53). He does not have a solidly defined socio-cultural identity, yet fragmented bits and pieces still reveal themselves inadvertently; he still remembers part of his Muslim heritage as he utters “*Insyah Allah*” (53), praying to his God for help. Further his assertion that he “serve[s] everyone” (53) and does not wish to be involved in the “pain and torture of ... imperial rivalry” (53) reveals that he has an inherent desire for reconciliation and peace between opposing factions and ideologies.

Thus, Eunuch Zheng He is unable to find any method, personal time, or cultural space, within the oppressive, fractious political territory of China to mend the fragments of his socio-cultural identity. Instead, he finds these instances of transcendence during his travels to extend the “power, prestige and splendour of the Imperial Court ... to the farther shores” (46). There are two interrelated components to his travels that culminate in the discovery of a potentially transcendental multicultural, inclusive identity; firstly, the very difficult process of traversing the ocean and secondly the interaction he has with the healing market that he discovers. To begin, there are “vast, seemingly endless” stretches of voyage on “calm water [that] produced no tranquillity” (49); his colossal journey and adventure over the unfathomable width and depth of the ocean evokes within him intense, mixed emotions of “panic” (49), “loneliness” (38) and constant “departing and arriving ... dreaming, hoping, searching [and] struggling” (66). While the dreary and dismal depiction seems to indicate a

depressing and bleak journey on sea, I argue that it is precisely the tediousness and arduousness of the journey that strengthens his mind and enables him to locate and appreciate the diverse, vibrant and hospitable marvel of the “great market-festival” (60).

Further, it is within this marketplace that Zheng He realises the restorative, pluralistic qualities that have the potential to mend the fractures in his shattered socio-cultural identity. At the “great trading festival” (59):

There were Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus and Taoists – children of parents of a great description of people ... They brought fabrics ... metalwork ... stones and earth. All of them were priced beforehand and the gentlemanly exchange which takes place now becomes more a festival, a celebration, a meeting of friends thirsting for each other’s goods and each other’s company ... There was neither beef nor pork, and a great amount of vegetarian food – a show of mutual respect between the Muslims, Hindus and the Buddhists ... At the end of this great market-festival, Zheng He and the king exchanged gifts of gold and silver, silk and ivory, jewels and porcelain. As the setting sun displayed the most brilliant of its colours, they parted in passionate sorrow ... Grand Eunuch Zheng He, faithful servant of the Ming Emperor, was sent to the Western Ocean as an imperial emissary to blaze a trail of glory for the Middle Kingdom. Never did he expect to leave a path of amazing splendour that would seep into the lives of so many people in so many places, through so many ways over so long a time. (60)

The kind of exchange that takes place in this marketplace is reminiscent of the symbolic exchange that Baudrillard espouses, sensitive, respectful exchange in gifts and ideas between

different peoples from multiple cultures. This sort of symbolic exchange stands in contrast to the everyday monetary exchanges that take place in the economic marketplace, where signs are exchanged for signs without any real underlying meaning. In this marketplace, the symbolic exchange that takes place is better explained by the concept of heteroglossia, which Mikhail Bakhtin puts forth in *The Dialogic Imagination*:

At a time when poetry was accomplishing the task of cultural, national and political centralization of the verbal-ideological world in the higher official socio-ideological levels, on the lower levels, on the stages of local fairs and at buffoon spectacles, the heteroglossia of the clown sounded forth, ridiculing all “languages” and dialects ... there was no language-center at all ... where no language could claim to be an authentic incontestable face. (273)

Here, Bakhtin argues that languages are heteroglossic in nature, and that the reader has to be aware of any centralised language that claims power or control over others; one such place where a centralised language rules is the economic marketplace, where actions and intents are performed for the sake of economic development and advancement. The marketplace that Zheng He encounters shares heteroglossic features with the “local fairs” that Bakhtin writes about; both are home to a space where cultural identity is pluralistic and multiple, where there is no centralised language or authority jousting for control. It is here, so far away from the socio-political oppression at home, at the periphery and margins of China that he finds a wonderful and accepting multicultural, multi-ethnic, multiracial, multireligious space which is not “any one of these, but an integration of [them] all” (“Interview”, Kuo 117), a space of symbolic exchange and heteroglossia, where he can reimagine and transcend the broken fragments of his socio-cultural identity.

To be sure, the capitalistic free-markets of modern society doesn't offer the same recuperative properties as the marketplace Zheng He encounters. The "great" markets symbolic of free-market capitalism are known to be relentless, unforgiving and homogenising. As Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer argue:

Under monopoly all mass culture is identical, and the lines of its artificial framework begin to show through. The people at the top are no longer so interested in concealing monopoly: as its violence becomes more open, so its power grows. Movies and radio need no longer pretend to be art. The truth that they are just business is made into an ideology in order to justify the rubbish they deliberately produce. (*The Culture Industry*, 121)

Adorno and Horkheimer are familiar with the strong impact of economic commodification on works of culture and art. They argue that under the economic system of capitalism, culture and art become subordinated to economic imperatives and become dull, homogenised and repetitive, holding no artistic or resistant values capable of engendering a reflective audience. Here, it appears that the modern day homogenising version of the "marketplace" is unable to provide the same restorative effects on the fractures that arise in identity formation – in fact, the monopolised markets are responsible for dumbing down and preventing its customers from engaging and negotiating socio-political spaces effectively. It seems hard to imagine that the diverse, pluralistic markets of Zheng He's journeys can return in the midst of this capitalistic modernity, but as long as the artist is able to create culturally enriching imaginaries that stimulate his audience into critical thinking, all is not lost.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, my aim is to identify the complex relations and tensions that arise in the formation of the Singaporean individual's socio-cultural identity when they exist at the intersection of a capitalistic, economic modernity which brings with it radical new ideas and beliefs, and the socio-political climate of an increasingly liberal yet soft authoritarian nation-state still clinging on to the anachronistic discourse of crisis that prevents a truly vibrant, creative local production of culture and the arts which can help to mitigate or even regenerate the fragmentation of socio-cultural Singaporean identity.

An alternative approach to the treatment of culture and the arts in Singapore can be gleaned from "Between Two Worlds: A Conversation with Kuo Pao Kun". In this interview with Sanjay Krishnan and Alvin Tan in 1996, Kuo posits that:

Biculturally or multiculturally, the deeper you go you actually find that all these recesses are connected. The deeper you go, the more connected you are. The shallower you become, the more separated they are. Or to put it another way, the higher you reach into the respective cultures, the more you see all the branches and leaves touching each other. But the stalk, the stem, the trunk are very separated. This is where our level of art is – they are separated. But if you go deeper, the roots touch. You go higher, the branches touch, the leaves touch. And of course the cross-pollination is done up there. And you absorb the same nutrients, deep underneath. And this is the beauty of multiculturalism. (134-5)

In essence, Kuo hypothesises that a harmonious multicultural society is created from the interaction of different values and cultures, both traditional and modern, Eastern and Western, socialistic and capitalistic, which are born of similar “nutrients” but allowed to grow and diverge, until at the highest level, “the branches and leaves [once again] touch” (135) and re-converge. In particular, the achievement of the highest level of multicultural society is intrinsically tied to the progress and development of the Arts, such as literature, film and, especially for Kuo, theatre, in that society. As Singapore develops economically and the populace becomes “more educated ... [they naturally] become more sensitive to [their] frustrations and ... needs. And part of the way to satisfy the sensitivities and the frustration is art, partly to enhance and to fulfil oneself, partly to communicate one’s concerns” (134). Here, the function of the Arts is to encourage a critically reflective society and facilitate the “cross-pollination” of a multicultural consciousness and identity in society. It is the only way forward for society to progress and become truly modern, cosmopolitan and pluralistic.

Works Cited and Bibliography

- Adorno, Theodor & Horkheimer, Max. "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception." *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Trans. John Cumming. London: Verso, 1969. 120-167. Print.
- Adorno, Theodor. *Aesthetic Theory*. Trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor. Eds. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. Print.
- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 2006. Print.
- Arnold, Matthew. *Culture and Anarchy*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009. Print.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Austin: U of Texas, 1981. Print.
- Baudrillard, Jean. *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. London: Sage, 1998. Print.
- . *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. Los Angeles: Sage, 2007. Print.
- Becker, Gary S. "Human Capital Revisited." *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis, with Special Reference to Education*. 3rd ed. Chicago: U of Chicago, 1993. Print.
- Benjamin, Walter. *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*. Eds Michael Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Levin. Trans. Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, Howard Eiland, and Others. London: The Belknap Press, 2008. Print.
- Bell, Daniel. *A Communitarian Critique of Authoritarianism: The Case of Singapore*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1997. Print.
- . *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*. New York: Basic, 2001. Print.
- Bergson, Henri. *An Introduction to Metaphysics*. Trans. T. E. Hulme. Ed. John Mullarkey and Michael Kolkman. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. Print.

- Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.
- Birch, David. "Staging Crises: Media and Citizenship." *Singapore Changes Guard: Social, Political and Economic Directions in the 1990s*. Ed. Garry Rodan. New York: St. Martin's, 1993. 72-83. Print.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. "Political Representation: Elements for a Theory of the Political Field." *Language and Symbolic Power*. Ed. John B. Thompson. Cambridge: Polity, 1991. 171-202. Print.
- . *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Trans. Richard Nice. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984. Print.
- Burke, Peter J and Reitzes, Donald C. "The Link between Identity and Role Performance." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 44.2 (Jun. 1981): 83-92. JSTOR. Web. 24 Jan. 2016
- Carroll, Noël. *Philosophy of Art: A Contemporary Introduction*. London, Routledge, 1999. Print.
- Chong, Terence. *The Theatre and the State in Singapore: Orthodoxy and Resistance*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2011. Print.
- . "The Role of Success in Singapore's National Identity." *Management of Success: Singapore Revisited*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2010. Print.
- . "Fluid Nation: The Perpetual "Renovation" of Nation and National Identities in Singapore." *Management of Success: Singapore Revisited*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), 2010. Print.
- Chua, Beng Huat. "Theatre, Social Critique and Politics." *Ask Not: The Necessary Stage in Singapore Theatre*. Eds. Tan Chong Kee and Tisa Ng. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish International (Asia) Private Limited, 2004. 317-324. Print.
- . *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore*. London: Routledge, 1995. Print.

Florida, Richard. *The Rise of the Creative Class, Revisited*. New York: Basic Books, 2012.

Print.

George, Cherian. *Singapore the Air Conditioned Nation: Essays on the Politics of Comfort and Control 1990-2000*. Singapore: Landmark Books Pte Ltd, 2000. Print.

Hartley, John. "Creative Industries." *Creative Industries*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005. 1-40. Print.

Heng, Swee Keat. "Education for Competitiveness and Growth" Ministry of Education. Washington D.C., USA. 8 Feb. 2012. Web. 17 Dec 2015.

Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991. Print.

---. "Notes on Globalisation as a Philosophical Issue." *The Cultures of Globalisation*. Eds. Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998. 54-77. Print.

Koh, Tai Ann. "Culture and the Arts." *Management of Success: The Moulding of Modern Singapore*. Eds. Sandhu, Kernial Singh, and Wheatley, Paul. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1989. Print.

---. "The Singapore Experience: Cultural Development in the Global Village." *Southeast Asian Affairs* (1980): 292-307. JSTOR. Web. 12 Dec. 2015

Kuo, Pao Kun. "Descendents of the Eunuch Admiral." *Two Plays by Kuo Pao Kun: Descendents of the Eunuch Admiral and the Spirits Play*. Singapore: SNP Editions, 2003. 37-67. Print.

---. "Kopitiam." *The Complete Works of Kuo Pao Kun*. Eds. Quah Sy Ren and C.J.W.-L. Wee. Singapore: The Theatre Practice and Global Publishing, 2012. 25-60. Print.

- . "Mama Looking for Her Cat." *The Complete Works of Kuo Pao Kun*. Eds. Quah Sy Ren and C.J.W.-L. Wee. Singapore: The Theatre Practice and Global Publishing, 2012. 81-98. Print.
- . "Between Two Worlds: A Conversation with Kuo Pao Kun." *9 Lives: 10 Years of Singapore Theatre 1987 - 1997*. Comp. Sanjay Krishnan. Singapore: Necessary Stage, 1997. 126-42. Print.
- . *Images at the Margins: A Collection of Kuo Pao Kun's Plays*. Singapore: Times Media Private Limited, 2000. Print.
- . "Interview with Kuo Pao Kun." *Interlogue. Studies in Singapore Literature*. Ed. Ronald D. Klein. Singapore: Ethos, 2001. 105-126. Print.
- . "Uprooted and Searching." *Drama, Culture and Empowerment: The IDEA Dialogues*. Ed. John O'Toole and Kate Donelan. Brisbane, Australia: IDEA Publications, 1996. 167-174. Print.
- Kwok, Kian-Woon. "The Bonsai and the Rainforest: Reflections on Culture and Cultural Policy in Singapore." *Ask Not: The Necessary Stage in Singapore Theatre*. Eds. Tan Chong Kee and Tisa Ng. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish International (Asia) Private Limited, 2004. 1-26. Print.
- Lai, Kathy. "The Tough Balancing Act of Arts Funding." *The Straits Times* [Singapore] 7 Nov. 2015: n. pag. 7 Nov. 2015. Web. 13 Nov. 2015.
- Leavis, F. R. "Thought, Meaning and Sensibility: The Problem of Value Judgment." *Valuation in Criticism and Other Essays*. Ed. Singh, G. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986. 285-297. Print.
- Lee Kuan Yew. Press Conference at the Broadcasting House. Prime Minister's Office. Singapore. Singapore. 9 Aug. 1965. Web. 02 Jan 2016.

- Lim, Lisa. "Migrants and Mother Tongues" *English in Singapore: Modernity and Management*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP, 2010. Print.
- López, Edward. "The Legislator as Political Entrepreneur: Investment in Political Capital." *The Review of Austrian Economics* 15.2/3 (2002): 211-228. Web.
- Mandel, Ernest. *Late Capitalism*. London: New Left Books, 1975. Print.
- Milanovic, Branko. *Global Inequality: A New Approach for the Age of Globalization*. Cambridge: Belknap of Harvard UP, 2016. Print.
- Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts. *Renaissance City report: Culture and the Arts in Renaissance Singapore*. (1999). Singapore.
- "MOE: No penalty for using Singlish appropriately." *The Straits Times* 13 Jun 2016. Print.
- Nealon, Jeffrey. *Post-postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012. Print.
- Peterson, William. *Theatre and the Politics of Culture in Contemporary Singapore*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001. Print.
- Picketty, Thomas. *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Trans. Arthur Goldhammer. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014. Print.
- Piven, Frances Fox. "Globalizing Capitalism and the Rise of Identity Politics." *Socialist Register*. Ed. Leo Panitch. *Socialist Register 1995: Why Not Capitalism?* 31 (1995): 771. Web. 12 Jan. 2016.
- Purushotam, Nirmala. *Negotiating Language, Constructing Race: Disciplining Difference in Singapore*. Berlin: Mouton De Gruyter, 1998. Print.
- Quah, Sy Ren. "Form as Ideology: Representing the Multicultural in Singapore Theatre." *Ask Not: The Necessary Stage in Singapore Theatre*. Eds. Tan Chong Kee and Tisa Ng. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish International (Asia) Private Limited, 2004. 27-42. Print.

Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1993. Print.

Tagore, Rabindranath. "Freedom." *Collected Poems and Plays: The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*. Ed. Sisir Kumar Das. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1994. 320. Print.

Tan, Alvin. "Open Letter in Response to National Arts Council CEO." Facebook. 12 Nov. 2015. <<https://www.facebook.com/alvin.tan1/posts/101537700646307>>

Tan, Tarn How. *Fear of Writing: A Play*. Singapore: Epigram, 2012. Print.

---. "The Lady of Soul and Her Ultimate "S" Machine." *Tan Tarn How: Six Plays*. Singapore: Epigram, 2011. Print.

---. "The First Emperor's Last Days." *Tan Tarn How: Six Plays*. Singapore: Epigram, 2011. Print.

"Two Main Fronts in Conspiracy: Full Text of Ministry of Home Affairs Statement on the Marxist Conspiracy." *The Straits Times* 27 May 1987. Print.

Vogel, Ezra F. *The Four Little Dragons: The Spread of Industrialization in East Asia*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991. Print.

Wee, C.J.W.-L, and Chee Keng Lee. "Breaking Through Walls and Visioning Beyond – Kuo Pao Kun beyond the Margins." Introduction. *Two Plays by Kuo Pao Kun: Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral, And, the Spirits Play*. Singapore: SNP Editions, 2003. 13-30. Print.

Wee, C.J.W.-L. *The Asian Modern: Culture, Capitalist Development, Singapore*. Singapore: National University of Singapore UP, 2007. Print.

---. "Creating High Culture in the Globalized "Cultural Desert" of Singapore." *TDR/The Drama Review* 47.4 (2013): 84-97. JSTOR. Web. 21 Nov. 2014.

---. "Culture, the Arts and the Global City" *Management of Success: Singapore Revisited*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), 2010. Print.

Wee, Jason. "So the CEO of the Arts Council has Decided that her Job is Tough." Facebook.

13 Nov. 2015. <<https://www.facebook.com/greyprojects/posts/101537>>

Williams, Raymond. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. New York: Oxford

UP, 1985. Print.

World Bank. "GDP per Capita (current US\$)." Web. 3 Dec. 2015.