Cosmopolitan boundaries in Singapore : a study of Singaporean film

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**NANYANG
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**COSMOPOLITAN BOUNDARIES IN SINGAPORE:
A STUDY OF SINGAPOREAN FILM**

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SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES
2019**

Cosmopolitan Boundaries in Singapore: A Study of Singaporean Film

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A thesis submitted to the Nanyang Technological University
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Master of Arts

2019

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I certify that all work submitted for this thesis is my original work. I declare that no other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement. Except where it is clearly stated that I have used some of this material elsewhere, this work has not be presented by me for assessment in any other institution or University. I certify that the data collected for this project are authentic and the investigations were conducted in accordance with the ethics policies and integrity standards of Nanyang Technological University and that the research data presented honestly and without prejudice.

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This thesis contains material from 0 papers published in peer-reviewed journals where I was the first or corresponding author.

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Shane Lim Han Jung

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This paper began, as most papers do, out of sheer frustration. It was a fine evening in Nex, a shopping mall in Serangoon, Singapore, when my family and I realised we were hopelessly lost trying to navigate from the car park to our dinner venue. It was with annoyance that I remarked about the mall's ridiculous layout to my father. He replied that shopping malls used to be simpler. From that labyrinthine structure, a singular thought formed: What if the increasing complexity of mall layouts was a reflection of the increasing density of the city's urbanscape? I decided I would get to the bottom of this. Three years later, I am no longer lost in Nex, but I have lost my father. It is to him, first and foremost, that I dedicate this paper.

I would like to express my utmost gratitude, as well, to my family. To my mother, whose unconditional love, guidance and constant fretting spurred me to grow up and write this thesis; to my brother, whose input at a critical juncture helped develop some of the key ideas of this thesis; to Emmanuel and Seth, whose offers to sound off ideas and proofread time and again I really appreciate; and to my church family, whose encouragement and prayers reminded me to see the bigger picture, as always. To God be the glory.

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SUMMARY

The recent debut of two Singaporean films at the highly prestigious Cannes Film Festival in 2016, namely, K Rajagopal's *A Yellow Bird* and Boo Junfeng's *Apprentice*, continues an upward trend of artistic achievement for the city-state. Worryingly though, they also seem to continue the trend of anxiety in Singaporean cinema. Subsequently, it is arguable that the Singaporean auteur's vision, broadly speaking, of dealing with oppressive social reality and escape from social inequality has not changed since the 1990s, when film first emerged as a way to capture life as it were in Singapore. Even till this day, the narratives of "serious" films still revolve around anxieties concerning inequality, despite the advent of cosmopolitanism in Singapore.

While, in most cases, the discourse of cosmopolitanism is seen as a unifying step from divisive social structures, I argue in this thesis that the state's vision of cosmopolitanism instead facilitates social inequality instead, through the state's control of the urbanscape and the way space is produced. In order to do so, I examine four independent, Singaporean films, *Mee Pok Man* and *12 Storeys*, by Eric Khoo, *Eating Air*, by Kelvin Tong and Jasmine Ng, and *Gone Shopping*, by Wee Li Lin, to see how inhabitants of the city-state are entrapped, if they have recourse to escape, and ultimately, how they emulate cosmopolitanism. I thus contend that this social inequality is one that highlights the impossibility of escape for its population.

CHAPTER ONE | INTRODUCTION

The spatial practice of a society secretes that society's space; it propounds and presupposes it, in a dialectical interaction; it produces it slowly and surely as it masters and appropriates it. From the analytic standpoint, the spatial practice of a society is revealed through the deciphering of its space.

– Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (1991)

Singaporean Cinema of Anxiety: the Persistence of Inequality

The recent debut of two Singaporean films at the highly prestigious Cannes Film Festival in 2016 continued an upward trend in artistic achievement of sorts for the erstwhile philistine city-state. Since Eric Khoo's *12 Storeys* was selected for the Un Certain Regard section back in 1997, marking it as the first-ever Singaporean entry into the film festival, subsequent artistic endeavours in the film scene have yielded mixed results. The next six years, for example, were characterised by silence on the international stage. Since 2003 however, Singaporean films have steadily re-emerged in the international eye, with more Singaporean directors competing for honours at the premier film festival.¹ Both Singaporean films at the 2016 edition of the Cannes Film Festival – Boo Jun Feng's *Apprentice* and K. Rajagopal's *A Yellow Bird* – explore narratives of identity and critical self-discovery against a backdrop of social immobility. In *A Yellow Bird*, although the protagonist, Siva is released from prison, he is outcasted from society, being an ex-convict and ethnic minority. In the *Apprentice*, police officer Aiman's imprisonment is more problematic: it is his inability

¹ "List of Singapore Films Selected for the Cannes Film Festival since 1997." *IMDA*, Singapore. <https://www.imda.gov.sg/-/media/imda/files/inner/about-us/newsroom/mda/2014/annex-b--list-of-singapore-films-selected-for-cannes-film-festival-since-1997.pdf?la=en>. Accessed 12 Sep. 2018.

to break free from the sins of his father that entraps him. When it is discovered that his father had been sentenced to death by hanging, Aiman's position as hangman's assistant becomes untenable. That both films revolve around prison – Siva is an ex-convict; Aiman is transferred to Langaran Prison, the fictitious maximum-security facility, from Queenstown Remand Prison – should read as more than mere coincidence. The similar tensions between release and entrapment, individual and society, point towards the larger quest of absolution from the machinations of an interventionist, authoritarian state, with all its systemic, socially structured inequalities. Whether both protagonists succeed in their respective quests is left unresolved, due to the open-ended nature of the films.

Yet while the contemporary fascination with personal stories from the margins ensures the continued interest in these films, it is arguable that the Singaporean auteur's vision, broadly speaking, of dealing with social reality, and in fact, social inequality in the city-state through artistic representation remains unchanged since the 1990s, when film first emerged as an important way to capture vignettes of life in Singapore. It would seem that while local film techniques in narratology have gotten more sophisticated, and perhaps, local auteurs more adept in drawing out the nuances and tensions that frame the city, the problem remains that "serious" films over the past twenty years in Singapore *still* revolve around anxieties concerning inequality and the possibility of escape from one's own social circumstances and the oppressive social reality of the nation-state. This is not to say that "serious" films are problematic; rather, the fact that they have not moved beyond anxieties of identity to other issues in the national discourse. The critical self-reflexive tendencies of Singaporean film, of course, run contrary to the state's monolithic vision of progress

and its narrative of nation-building. Instead, key tenets of social unity, collective progress and national success are enshrined in important pieces of state doctrine, such as the National Anthem and the National Pledge. The National Anthem is a call to arms, urging Singaporeans *onward*,² towards happiness and success. In the National Pledge, the population's ethnic and multicultural sensibilities and practices are presented as potential stumbling blocks to national harmony and solidarity, and are to be disregarded, while the citizenry itself is homogenised into an efficient, capable workforce, in order for the successful implementation of the state's economic imperative – “one united people ... so as to achieve happiness, prosperity and progress for the nation”³ – at least in name; in name only because the state's economic imperative of prosperity and progress, as I shall explain further, depends on the persistence of inequality.

Framing Cosmopolitanism and Urban Space

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a state in possession of great fortune, must always be in want of more economic success and wealth, if only to stay ahead of the global competition. The formative years following the nation's independence from Malaysia in 1965 were crucial. Faced with the challenge of economic survival with limited resources in land-scarce Singapore, the state had to find a way to maximise its potential for economic gain, while balancing the housing needs of the island's population. This resulted in the urban reconfiguration of the

² Literally translated: *Majulah Singapura*, from “The National Anthem.” National Heritage Board. <https://www.nhb.gov.sg/what-we-do/our-work/community-engagement/education/resources/national-symbols/national-anthem>. Accessed 20 Dec. 2018.

³ “The National Pledge.” National Heritage Board. <https://www.nhb.gov.sg/what-we-do/our-work/community-engagement/education/resources/national-symbols/national-pledge>. Accessed 20 Dec. 2018.

island. The urbanscape was organised in a constellation pattern, with “a downtown in the central area, and a hierarchy of regional, sub-regional and fringe centres framing out from it” (Sumiko Tan, *home.work.play.* 41). While the development and architectural design of buildings in the central areas of Singapore had to conform to stringent controls in order to reflect the “dynamism of corporate enterprises”, the need to provide a rapidly growing population with cheap housing at low cost resulted in the development of high-rise public housing estates with a certain level of homogenisation, in terms of space and the provision of ancillary facilities (Chua Beng Huat, *Political Legitimacy and Housing* 44; 115). Other studies have since explored the effectiveness of Singapore’s urban configuration, while simultaneously lamenting a loss of culture both from a social and architectural perspective.⁴

Nevertheless, the successful narrative of Singapore’s rise from third world to first world metropolis, facilitated by tremendous economic growth is seen by many in the state and taken by the government as a mandate to continue what it is doing in the urbanscape, at the expense of all else⁵. This mandate entails the continued focus on the development and refinement of space in the central urban core of the city, even till today. Subsequently, it is arguable that fundamental theoretical bases of planning and urbanism have not changed in the past few decades,⁶ and neither has

⁴ For a detailed discussion of the loss of community culture, see Chua, *Political Legitimacy and Housing* 115–118. For a detailed critique of architectural culture in Singapore, see William Lim 30–60; see also Rem Koolhaas.

⁵ Lee, Kuan Yew. *From Third World to First: the Singapore Story: 1965-2000*. Singapore Press Holdings, 2000.

⁶ As an organ of state, the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) is meant to balance economic and social considerations with regards to the physical space and urban environment in Singapore, so as to ensure quality of life for its citizenry. However, its mission statement is largely clichéd. From creating a “tropical city of excellence” in 1991, its goal has been updated to creating a “vibrant and sustainable city of distinction” in 2014. The point here is, there is ironically no distinction between a “city of excellence” and a “city of distinction”. Meanwhile, the “tropicality” that (at least) defined our position geographically in 1991 has been replaced by vague, abstract concepts of progress, with the hope of “vibrancy” and “sustainability” in 2014.

the population's social reality. The state might even consider the social inequalities that are engendered as a result of huge economic growth, and that persist in filmic representation, a small price to pay in the larger scheme of things.

Worryingly, while the state's focus remains on the country's economic viability (and understandably so), there has been a continuous effort to rewrite the narrative of inequality within the country, through the use of cosmopolitanism. Social critic Brenda Yeoh has noted how "cosmopolitan" and its concomitant phrases such as "cosmopolitan city" and "cosmopolitan society" have gained traction in Singapore as it encounters the twenty-first century (2004). Yet, cosmopolitanism itself is not a particularly new idea. In fact, it has been generally acknowledged that notions of, and indeed discussions on cosmopolitanism have been around for centuries, dating as far back as the philosophers of ancient Greece (Hayden 2005, Appiah 2007). Initial discussions on cosmopolitanism, or *kosmopolitês*, were framed in abstract terms (as these ideas were conceived in an as-yet unconnected world). The emergence of modernity, along with the philosophies that developed during the eighteenth century Enlightenment in Europe mapped these classical concepts onto the consciousness of modern society, where it gained prominence most famously through the writings of Immanuel Kant. Here, Hayden argues that Kant's approach to cosmopolitanism is a consolidation of the moral, legal and political, which at once elevates cosmopolitanism from a "basic ethical sensibility" to a "genuinely global political project" (17).

In conversation with Hayden, Kwame Anthony Appiah notes that there are two strands that are intertwined in notions of cosmopolitanism: firstly, that each individual human being has obligations to every one else, on account of a shared humanity.

Secondly, that humans value human life, and by extension all the practices and beliefs that lend them significance (xv). Cosmopolitanism in our time has come to be a “universalism plus difference”, where each individual is a citizen of the world, with recognisable and accepted differences such as race, nationality, class and so on (Appiah 202). Returning to Yeoh, her examination of literature and narratives produced by the Singaporean state would seem to indicate that the philosophical theories of Kant, Hayden and Appiah et al, and the attendant virtues of equality and humanity are not qualities of the self-same cosmopolitanism that the Singaporean state subscribes to. Instead, Yeoh suggests that cosmopolitanism has become shorthand for a sort of high standard of living associated with concepts of cultural and economic vibrancy (2434). The Singaporean state’s iteration of cosmopolitanism would therefore be more akin to a less refined version of universalism plus difference, where a huge emphasis is placed on “difference” in a material, consumerist sense.

This is not to say that the term “cosmopolitan” has been wrongly applied in the Singaporean context. Yeoh notes that the correlation of Singapore as cosmopolis is valid, since she has observed that the term “cosmopolis” after all, is used in a sense which loosely remembers Singapore’s colonial past as an urban entrepôt centre, and so the city-state, as a legacy of its past, is already a cosmopolitan space (2434). Yet, where Singapore differs, and is indeed unique perhaps, is in its understanding of itself as cosmopolis in relation to other modern cities. Cosmopolitan metropolises such as New York, London and Paris, are regularly defined against other spaces, for example the rural countryside (or the “putative provincial”, in Appiah’s words,) where globalised “flows” of information technology and human capital cannot penetrate, and a strong sense of the cultural persists (Yeoh 2432). The transition to the city can

therefore be understood as a severance of man's organic, telluric connection with nature and the environment (Jini Kim Watson, *The New Asian City* 103). However, Singapore, being a city-state, has no geographical concept of the rural. As such, the urbanscape has to be split and an imaginary equivalent of the rural created, in the form of the "heartlands", in order to retain the cultural and social capital required to navigate transnational social space, strengthen a sense of rootedness to the nation, and "anchor" the cosmopolitan Singaporean (Yeoh 2437).

This uniquely Singaporean cosmopolitan narrative was famously projected into the Singaporean consciousness by then-Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong in his National Day Rally Speech⁷, who explained cosmopolitanism in Singapore as two parts of a delicately poised citizenry: the cosmopolitan and the heartlander. His vision of Singaporean cosmopolitans aligns with the state's ambitions of an economically dynamic, socially adept workforce, while his vision of Singaporean heartlanders is meant, essentially, as a celebration of core Singaporean values and traditions. This runs in contrary to general definitions of cosmopolitanism, which are grounded in a vision of egalitarian heterogeneity, and applicable in principle to a globalising world and civil society (Yeoh 2431), in this instance, Singaporean society.

While, in most instances, the discourse of cosmopolitanism is seen as a unifying step forward from divisive social structures of essentialism (Yeoh 2431), my contention is that the discourse of cosmopolitanism in Singapore instead facilitates social inequality through the state's control of urban space.

⁷ First-World Economy, World-Class Home." National Archives of Singapore. www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/speeches/view-html?filename=1999082202.htm. Accessed 12 Sep. 2018.

In dealing with how cosmopolitanism is seamlessly produced in urban space, I refer to Henri Lefebvre's definition of social spaces in his work, *The Production of Space*. Lefebvre notes that discussions of space have to be considered alongside the institutions and states presiding over them (85). In fact, there is no sense in which space can be considered independently from its social aspect, since space is both a product to be used but also a means of production in society. As such, the urban space of cosmopolitan Singapore "cannot be separated either from the productive forces, including technology and knowledge, or from the social division of labour which shapes it, or from the state and the superstructures of society" (85). Moreover, the spaces of the city-state "interpenetrate one another [and] superimpose themselves upon one another; they are not things, which have mutually limiting boundaries and which collide because of their contours or as a result of inertia" (86). As such, it would be over simplistic to consider Singaporean urban space as independent from the cosmopolitanism that frames it. Basically, what I am suggesting is that the cosmopolitanism which the Singaporean state tries to cultivate is rooted instinctively in its configuration of urban space, and which more specifically deals with globalisation and business. How "cosmopolitan" Singapore is, therefore, is contingent on how *cosmopolitan-looking* its urban spaces are, and the degree to which consumption (in a very blunt sense) thrives in these spaces through the interventionist machinations of the state.

Hence, through an examination of four independent films, *Mee Pok Man* and *12 Storeys*, by Eric Khoo, *Eating Air*, by Kelvin Tong and Jasmine Ng, and *Gone Shopping*, by Wee Li Lin, I contend that social inequality facilitated through the

state's control of urban space is one that is ultimately inescapable for its population, as there are no ways of escaping inequality without physically leaving the city as well.

The four films chosen in this thesis are all produced between the 1990s and the early 2000s, and consistently deal with the recurrent thematic of social inequality in urban spaces. More specifically, the films offer recourse to a more authentic representation of the cosmopolitan experience in Singapore. Where the state's official discourse is premised on disregarding social divisions in order to achieve a unified vision of cosmopolitanism and progress (understood as economic success), the films give expression to the cultures of ordinariness through characters whose social realities do not fit into the state's grand cosmopolitan narrative. Additionally, the films reveal the state-endorsed social binary of cosmopolitanism to be an inadequate measure of Singaporean social reality, unreflective of general societal trends and patterns of consumption that have resulted in the creation of a more nuanced and complex citizenry. Hence this thesis is not just an exercise in criticism of cosmopolitanism as divisive social structure, but a means of exploration through the lens of Singaporean film, to deeper understand how cosmopolitanism contributes to an authentic Singaporean identity. Before examining the films, brief definitions of the cosmopolitan and the heartlander in the context of cosmopolitan Singapore are required.

The Cosmopolitan Narrative in Singapore

To show how cosmopolitanism as ideology is understood and enacted in Singapore's context, I refer first to Goh's definition of the "cosmopolitan" (Singaporean), which he defines against the "heartlander". According to Goh,

cosmopolitans have an international outlook, high paying jobs in sophisticated industries and produce goods and services for the global market. They are comfortable working anywhere in the world, using Singapore as a base to operate in the region. Further, cosmopolitans are indispensable in generating wealth for Singapore, extending the economic reach of the city-state, and without whom Singapore cannot run as an efficient, high performance society (1999). In sum, I understand Goh's vision of cosmopolitans to be Singaporeans who enjoy high socioeconomic status (SES), but are characterised by rootlessness.

Against this, Goh describes the heartlanders, whose orientation and interests are local rather than international, working blue-collar jobs and forming the core of Singaporean society. Their key role to the city-state is in maintaining Singaporean core values and social stability, without which there will be no safe and stable Singapore, Singapore "system" or brand name (1999). In attempting to provide a frame of reference, Goh lists two popular and now-iconic sitcom characters from the nineties, Phua Chu Kang and Tan Ah Teck as stereotypical heartlanders. In the interests of clarity, the former is a nouveau-riche contractor, of lowly education, and who is also the embodiment of bad taste, with an out-dated, seventies' style perm and garish yellow boots. The latter is a mini-mart owner whose ambitions do not extend beyond his flat, and who readily dishes out irrelevant, moralistic anecdotes disguised as Confucian wisdom through an idiosyncratic catchphrase: "long before your time, in the Southern province of China..." Yet, it should be noted that both characters are well loved by the populace, considered relatable and distinctly Singaporean. In sum, I understand Goh's vision of heartlanders to be Singaporeans

of low socioeconomic status (SES) and ambition, who typify a certain disposition and way of life that can be considered essentially “Singaporean”.

Firstly, based on the above definitions, it is telling that he suggests the existence of cosmopolitans and heartlanders as two sides of an inflexible binary, with little recourse to social mobility, where, say, the goal is for either cosmopolitans or heartlanders to assimilate qualities of the other and, in so doing, create a holistic, unified Singaporean identity. Instead, his missive reads as an attempt to concretise both the cosmopolitan and the heartlander as distinct tiers of Singaporeans, and get both sides to recognise, at arm’s length, the value of the other. Secondly, while Goh advocates for parity between both sets of Singaporeans, his exposition of their proposition values connotes favouritism towards cosmopolitans, while undermining the heartlanders. The cosmopolitans’ value and contribution to Singapore are praised in lofty terms: they have skills that command good incomes, they provide for the global market, and they can work and be comfortable anywhere in the world. Conversely, the heartlanders are demeaned through caricatures of middle-class Singaporean life – Phua Chu Kang and Tan Ah Teck, as earlier mentioned, local sitcom characters that provide comic relief through their cluelessness, bumbling personalities and bad taste.

More importantly, Goh’s approach to cosmopolitans is one of preferment, projecting a powerful image of the cosmopolitan almost as a class of citizen to be actively courted, or at the very least, admired. Goh suggests that they do not need heartlanders to survive, instead appealing to their sense of duty and obligation to share their wealth with the heartlanders. On the other hand, his approach to the heartlanders is slightly patronising, praising their insularity, down-to-earth nature and

sensibility as simplicity, while also calling on them to recognise how important the cosmopolitans' contributions are to Singapore and their wellbeing. The problem with this approach – separating the citizenry into cosmopolitans and heartlanders – is that it tends to be reductive, oversimplifying what it means to be a fully-fleshed individual and citizen in the fast-paced city, with all the nuances of a globalised culture and economy.

Expanding on this thesis, then, I want to suggest that dividing up the population into cosmopolitans and heartlanders, as two de facto “broad” categories representative of Singaporeans, is largely inaccurate, and beyond reducing Singaporeans into two-dimensional caricatures, fosters instead social inequality and prejudice. That is to say, I want to problematise this definition of Singaporean identity, as set out by Goh, and suggest that this vision of cosmopolitanism, being based on a false dichotomy and control of space, creates unfair and unwholesome stereotypes of heartlanders as second-class citizens.

As such, the four films have been chosen as they represent different ways in which heartlanders can be oppressed by the state. They illustrate the extent of oppression in the case of both marginalised and considerably well-to-do heartlanders, as well as the search for meaning and escape from the state's vision of cosmopolitanism that has become unbearable. As culture critic Wee Wan Ling mentions, Khoo, among local filmmakers of his generation, does not just accept the arrival of extended public-housing cityscapes built by the Housing Development Board (HDB) as a *fait accompli* and iconic marker of Singaporean identity, but as locales where the state's utopian impulses foster, instead, dystopic places that manifest diverse cultures under suppression (Wee 985). If anything, Khoo's films, as

well as Tong and Ng's, and Wee's, suggest that the narrative of heartlander, as one half of the state's larger narrative of cosmopolitanism, is not all it is cut out to be, since it is not a narrative of social stability as Goh sees it, but rather a narrative of social inability to rise above the state's extensive, authoritarian control.

Bringing to light the unfair stereotypes of heartlanders, as they are represented through film, I will then show that the Singaporean state's vision of cosmopolitanism is oppressive to those who are marginalised in Singapore.

Four Films: Exploring Narratives of Entrapment, Escape and Emulation

Specifically, I have chosen Khoo's *Mee Pok Man* as it explores existential crisis in the heartlands, through the life of an intellectually-challenged working-class "hero". By subverting well-known clichés of the superhero genre in order to show the powerlessness of individuals in the heartlands, the film opens my argument by examining the extent of entrapment within the heartlands for society's marginalised individuals. The film follows the trajectories of the eponymous noodle seller and his love interest Bunny the prostitute, as they try to wrest control of their own lives from external forces that conspire to keep them downtrodden and escape into the promise of better lives; mee pok man from a bullying co-worker and the weight of expectation from his dead father, and Bunny from a pimp in the city's seedy red-light district, Geylang. Although they are brought together by chance through a hit-and-run accident, the film prematurely ends at the height of coition between the two characters, denying them any meaningful agency in the matter of their personal lives.

The film's concluding scenes, featuring a young Bunny narrating an excerpt from her diary, in which she is determined to try harder in the next examination

(Khoo 1995) against the backdrop of the city's cosmopolitan central areas compels a re-evaluation of the plight of heartlanders in the extreme, and questions the logic of placing the heartlander on a pedestal to be celebrated. Just as the characters represented in the film are excluded from the fruits of cosmopolitanism and remain trapped in the heartlands they unwillingly inhabit, and just as young Bunny's promise to try harder next time betrays naivety, the film suggests that celebrating heartlanders is effectively a hollow gesture when one considers that they are not heartlanders by choice, but by inescapable circumstance.

Where the previous film suggested that heartlanders are denied the possibility of agency because of the rigid dictates of a fatalistic, interventionist system that keeps them oppressed, *Eating Air* builds on this by exploring if escape is possible through subaltern means. It progresses my argument by questioning if being excluded from the state's cosmopolitan narrative, as in the lives of the film's characters, Boy and his friends, conversely allows them the freedom to operate outside the city's cosmopolitan zones, in order to enact their own visions of cosmopolitanism apart from the state. The film's subtitle – "kungfu, motorcycle love story" (Tong and Ng 1999) – provides the literary vehicles through which the protagonist, Boy, encounters and escapes (or at least attempts to escape) from the oppressive social reality and space engendered by the nation-state's cosmopolitanism. Boy rebels against normative social behaviour and instead abides by heroic codes of conduct in the convention of traditional Chinese epics, in which fraternity and loyalty are held up as virtues that can establish order from the lawless chaos of gang rivalries and meaningless fights. His gang of friends also traverse the city on motorcycles, in the style of mid-Western Hollywood classics, symbolic

vehicles of freedom and adventure from the confines of the city. Importantly, Boy's romance with Girl, and their subsequent plans to elope from the tiresome cycle of violence and neglect that frame their marginal existence reanimate the possibility of escape from a social condition of powerlessness through romance, first brought up in Khoo's *Mee Pok Man*.

In the end, the film's tragic denouement in which Boy is presumed dead, and Girl simultaneously leaving and being trapped in the tunnel, contributes to my argument by pointing out the social inability of its characters to escape from cosmopolitanism in Singapore in spite of a refusal to participate in it. Together, Khoo's *Mee Pok Man* and Tong and Ng's *Eating Air* illustrate the heartlander's experience as bleak entrapment in social inequality, with no recourse to escape, or any means to rise out of impoverished social reality.

Having looked at two films that discuss how cosmopolitanism entraps heartlanders with no recourse to escape, the next chapter in this thesis explores the tensions that inform social reality in Khoo's *12 Storeys*, with a particular focus on heartlanders who encounter and struggle with cosmopolitanism desires in different ways. A stark suicide sequence of a non-descript, everyday Singaporean man foregrounds the film's individual narratives. His death is as arbitrary and as tragic as the links between the film's main characters who, despite staying in the same block of flats, barely know each other, and whose interactions barely extend beyond the acknowledgement of each other's existence.

The characters quickly betray their cosmopolitan fantasies and desires, in spite of the oppressive heartland conditions associated with the public estate they occupy. The devout adherence to cosmopolitan state dogma despite its

incompatibility with the social reality of the heartlands plays out in the film's main narrative, centring around a middle-classed Chinese youth, tasked with holding the fort and looking after his two younger siblings while his parents are away. His attempt to enforce control over them, and especially his increasingly wayward teenage sister, Trixie, is an unsubtle critique of the larger forces of state that bear down on the populace. Yet the personal cost to Meng, and his mental breakdown, only reinforce the infallibility of the state. In its vision of cosmopolitanism, only heartlanders stand to lose, regardless of adherence to or rebellion against the city's cosmopolitan configuration. In the film's two other narratives, Ah Gu, a slovenly and simple-minded hawker, cons Lily, a Chinese national, into becoming his bride on the pretext of his alleged cosmopolitan Singaporean appeal. San San, an aging bachelorette, meanwhile, is haunted by the memory of her dead mother who despises her inferiority in looks and intellect to the daughter of her former employer, Rachel, whose jet-setting life of luxury is a cosmopolitan fantasy San San cannot even dream about.

12 Storeys elicits sympathy for the heartlanders who are denied cosmopolitan fulfilment despite their best attempts, but also provides my argument with an avenue to explore cosmopolitanism as ideology indecipherable from the very spaces that inform it. Where cosmopolitanism ideology enacted in the heartlands through Meng, Ah Gu and San San inevitably end in heartbreak and the loss of a grounded sense of self (which, I recall, is a crucial component of Goh's heartlander), the film's peripheral characters, Tee, Lily and Rachel are not subjected to the same traumas or crises of existence that Meng, Ah Gu and San San experience, because of a unifying

condition of consumerism, notably participating off-screen, at one point or another in the film, in the cosmopolitan spaces of the shopping malls.

Therefore it is with this in mind that I move into the final film to be analysed. In Wee Li Lin's *Gone Shopping*, I explore the possibility of escape from entrapment through the phenomenon of emulating heartland experiences within cosmopolitan spaces (distinctly not to be confused with cosmopolitan experiences in heartland spaces). Similar to Khoo's *12 Storeys*, *Gone Shopping* follows the stories of three protagonists, Clara, Renu and Aaron. Where it differs, however, is in its projection of its characters homely, heartlander fantasies into the spaces of three shopping malls, which I argue are representative cosmopolitan spaces in Singapore. Where the characters in *12 Storeys* fail because of the incompatibility of the cosmopolitan ideology with the heartlands and its attendant spaces, the spaces of the shopping malls are actually conducive grounds for escape from the state's vision of cosmopolitanism, albeit through different fantasies, such as cosplay, or drag. Ultimately though, while these shopping mall spaces in *Gone Shopping* become heterotopic spaces whereby characters can create and perform meaningful identities of self, they are limited by the temporality of these very spaces, amongst other reasons, confirming the impossibility of escape from the cosmopolitan state.

CHAPTER TWO | HEARTLANDS OF INEQUALITY, HEARTLANDS OF INEVITABILITY

Cosmopolitan and Heartland Space

In *The New Asian City*, Jini Kim Watson posits that urban and architectural forms operate as the contested locus of modern desires and perceptions, and that sifting through the fundamentally rearranged milieu of urban and national space offers us valuable insights into the logic and form of a city. The cities she examines in particular are from regions of postcolonial Asia, one of which is Singapore. Singapore qualifies as one of these modern societies that inherently contain structures of conflict within its city, as a result of competing processes of postcolonial production (whether cultural, social or economical) within the city that struggle to establish means of both production and control (13). Consequently, the urban and architectural forms that amass in the city's landscape (or the urbanscape) contain localised and finely-textured features that generate compelling developmental story lines, including accounts of district and community-level change which reflect both intensely local and broader, more strategic developmental effects (44).

It is with this in mind, that I begin this chapter by exploring urban space, in order to determine what constitutes “cosmopolitan” and “heartland” space in Singapore. The relation between the organisation of urban space and the way social reality is enacted is one that has been explored extensively, most notably in Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*. Lefebvre argues that space and society are connected. Although social space can be considered a product to be used and consumed, it is also a means of production. He further notes that social space, as a

means of production, is inseparable from the productive forces [of society] that shape it, or from the state and superstructures of society (Lefebvre 85). In this case, it is possible to view the Singaporean state not solely as arbiter of urban space, but also as producer of the attendant social realities that impinge on the population and their relationships.

Considering the Singaporean city, therefore, it is arguable that “cosmopolitan” and “heartland” spaces have been planned into the urbanscape, long before Goh’s National Day Rally Speech in 1999. Wee Wan Ling notes the clear distinction between the public-housing locales and overtly capitalist downtown inscribed into the geographical constitution of Singapore (Wee, “The Suppressed in the Modern Urbanscape: Cultural Difference and Film in Singapore” 985). It is also arguable, indeed, that Goh’s speech is merely the articulation of a decades-long state effort to divide up the urbanscape and redirect its efforts and resources into the construction of a highly efficient city-state, that can take its place among the other shiny metropolises of the world. Alongside the urban architectural reconfigurations, Brenda Yeoh notes the increasing use of “cosmopolitanism” as a term closely linked to and even interchangeable, in some instances, with other state-sanctioned narratives of globalisation and efforts at acculturation (Yeoh 2434).

Tellingly, the state’s focus, when it comes to envisioning a cosmopolitan city, revolves around the central urban core of Singapore. This is easily ascertained through the state-commissioned Urban Redevelopment Authority’s (URA) *Master Plan* (2014). Namely, in the *Master Plan*, the state’s purpose for urban space is clear: it is meant to “[improve] the quality of the public spaces and [strengthen] the identity and attractiveness of the Civic District as a world-class arts and cultural hub for

Singapore” (URA, 2014), in other words, to create a space in which cosmopolitan flows can flourish. Let me give you some examples of how this is accomplished.

In order to strengthen the identity and attractiveness of the Central areas of Singapore, the state has invested heavily in upgrading and building waterfront attractions in the Central area of Singapore, such as the Esplanade Theatres on the Bay (at the cost of four hundred million dollars), the Merlion Park, and the ArtScience Museum (URA 2014). In other segments of the *Master Plan* such as “Towards a Liveable City”, and “Public Spaces”, it is evident that resources are channelled into commissioning and beautifying public spaces in the Central Business District (CBD) area, in order to humanise the urban environment for habitation, making the cosmopolitan zones, and the cosmopolitan city by extension, a more attractive place to live, work and play in, simultaneously bringing along all the economic benefits of drawing in customers for nearby businesses (URA, “Key Focuses” 2014).

Understandably, the state’s disposition towards urban planning seems to be one ultimately rooted in the pragmatism of economic benefits, as I have mentioned earlier in Chapter 1. Ultimately, the bottom line for the state is economic growth, with a focus on the city’s CBD and civic and bay areas. This would account for why the state’s urban planning efforts, which are intended to ensure quality of life and sense of wellbeing, are channelled into the city’s urban core, being the primary space of contact with cosmopolitans, who guarantee economic benefits, and more importantly, economic survival.

However, it is hugely significant that the URA’s *Master Plan* – which exists with the express mission of “[creating] a vibrant and sustainable city of distinction by planning and facilitating Singapore’s physical development in partnership with the

community” (URA 2014) – should omit plans for the heartlands. After all, it is in the heartlands that the “community” truly resides. I use “community” in the same sense as Chua Beng Huat, who argues that a strong sense of community is tied to a strong sense of identity and security based on visual familiarity with social and physical environments (117). Subsequently, the absence of state literature dealing with the heartlands is glaringly compounded by the ubiquity of heartland structures in the social and physical environment of Singapore. The most important structure would be the public housing flats, provided by the Housing Development Board (HDB), and thus referred to shorthand as HDBs. The HDB is widely acknowledged as powerful symbolic monument of the ruling party’s legitimacy to govern, and accounts for ninety per cent of the population’s housing (Chua, *Political Legitimacy and Housing* 1–115). It is an inescapable component of social reality.

The films chosen in this chapter, therefore, present responses to the state’s vision of cosmopolitanism, through representations of cultures of ordinariness in the heartlands, as an attempt to account for those members of society that do not contribute to the grand narrative of economic growth and cosmopolitanism, but whose quality of life and sense of wellbeing are no less important. This representation of heartlander ordinariness in film is important as it de-mythologises the over simplistic perception the state has and propagates: of heartlanders as these quaint guardians of life in Singapore as it were, however miserable or oppressive the social reality is for some out there in the “real “world. In particular, the films look at subaltern cultures in Singapore, and offer social, critical commentary on individuals that truly do not have the means to escape the impoverished circumstances of social reality in the heartlands, and in doing so, asks if their plight – unflinchingly real

representation of heartlanders – is to be celebrated as one half of an increasingly classist, cosmopolitan divide. It is to the first film, *Mee Pok Man*, that I proceed.

Mee Pok Man: Powerlessness of the Working Class Hero

The film *Mee Pok Man*, by Eric Khoo, explores the social reality of entrapment in the heartlands, for marginalised members of the nation-state. In particular, the film explores crisis of identity for heartlanders through the life of an intellectually-challenged noodle seller, or Mee Pok Man, and his love interest, Bunny, who works as a prostitute.

Coded in society are implicit hierarchies that determine the dynamics of power between individual members of society. In order to tease out the nuances of such embedded power dynamics, the film appropriates the superhero trope of the man-on-the-street turned superhero, and its naming conventions, but not the exceptionality of greatness or power. Where Superman is all but invincible, and Spider-man the unwitting recipient of great power, the film ascribes powerlessness to Mee Pok Man. This ironic gesture not only critiques the state's celebration of heartlanders as bearers of cultural "power", it makes every painful attempt by the protagonist to exert his sense of self even more unbearable to watch, knowing full well the futility of his actions. The film's (and Bunny's) morbid climax – death during coition – ultimately denies Mee Pok Man and Bunny any meaningful agency, or indeed, any fulfillment.

More importantly, the film's resolution strongly implies elements of determinism in the way the Mee Pok Man and Bunny are revealed to be classmates from young, with the suggestion that their fates, as heartlanders, have been sealed

from young. Read against Goh's celebration of the heartlander as emblematic gatekeeper of Singaporean culture, the film further suggests that this celebration by the state is a hollow gesture, considering Mee Pok Man and the community he represents are not heartlanders by choice, but by inescapable social circumstance.

That the Mee Pok Man, as protagonist, is unnamed contributes to the sense of marginality inherent in the film's locale. In a film that raises the issue of marginalisation, it is apt that the Mee Pok Man's stall is located on the outskirts of the cosmopolitan city centre, in the city's red-light district of Geylang. His anonymity signals the simultaneous importance yet insignificance of his character; important because he provides an essential service of sustenance, insignificant because of the blue-collar nature of his job, and the fact that he leads an unglamorous and unenviable peripheral existence. He is crucial to the film's narrative yet reduced in name to a job title – the "Mee Pok" man. His state of existence provides a point of reference that expands the film's narrative into the realm of social reality: the protagonist's treatment in the film parallels the state's reification of unnamed, but no less real, working-class heartlanders into a singularly blue-collar aesthetic, to be "celebrated" as saccharine, cultural anecdote of state-endorsed cosmopolitanism, as in Goh's National Day Rally Speech.

The sense of marginality is carried through the filmic narrative through the subversion of the superhero trope in popular culture. The film appropriates the naming conventions and metropolitan locale of superhero fame, but none of its superlative hero qualities, which is superseded instead by colloquialism and mediocrity. The everyday noodle seller is re-envisioned here as a working-class hero – the "Mee Pok" Man – following in the footsteps of illustrious comic book

characters, such as Batman, Superman and Spider-man. Where the superheroes of comic book fame prowl the streets of their respective metropolises, Gotham City, Metropolis and New York City, looking for injustice and fighting crime, Khoo's film reimagines the locus of the Mee Pok Man's heroic action in the pristine cosmopolis of Singapore. All too keenly, the film is aware of the quasi-divine state's extensive control of the urbanscape, and its harsh death penalties that serve to keep criminal activity at bay. And so, no grand crime or evil plan waits to be foiled in the city. Instead Mee Pok Man's heroic jurisdiction extends only to the anticlimactic patrolling of areas he frequents: his flat and heartland locale, as well as his shop. This is just as well, since no super powers are imbued in him, only the ability to make good noodles, which Bunny mentions, and he himself readily admits (Khoo 1995). His silence, so definitive of the mysterious, brooding character-type that defines the superhero genre, is instead taken by his patrons and fellow stall owners alike as a sure sign of mental retardation. While eating at the hawker centre where he is employed, one of Bunny's friends, Sophia, lashes out at him for being "a dumb idiot", "dumb fool" and "moron", while the other questions if he has always been an "idiot", to which Bunny replies that he has been this way since the death of his father (Khoo 1995).

Taking the subversion of the superhero trope further, the film denies Mee Pok Man any meaningful encounters despite his own moments of heroism. He saves Bunny, his damsel in distress, from a hit and run accident, but is unable to fully nurture her back to health. When Bunny's employer, Mike and his gang of thugs go looking for her, he willingly, defiantly, takes a beating not because he refuses to divulge her whereabouts, but because he taunts them. He also stands up to the

coffee shop bully, a fellow hawker and friend of his father's, who borrows money from him shamelessly without any intention of returning it, yet ultimately fails to get him to return the money that is owed.

Evidently, the elevation of the protagonist to everyday superhero status is only a temporary reprieve, since he is undermined in the end by Bunny's death. Not only is he unable to save her, his inability to come to terms with her death and the subsequent scenes of necrophilia visited upon her body rewrites the protagonist's unfulfilled love into dark comedy. His sincerity and naiveté in loving Bunny turns horrific. After she dies, he draws the curtains in his apartment, a metaphorical extinguishing of the light, but refuses to lay her to rest. Instead he seems to draw more strength from her corpse, cutting a tormented figure yet opening up to her with increasing clarity. This marks his slow descent into madness. Yet the blame is not fully his. He is, after all, victimized by the meta-narrative. Despite his best efforts, Bunny is killed off inexplicably by the film's director, and at the peak of intimacy. No criminal lurks in the shadows; no super villain is the cause. This reinforces the protagonist's helplessness to save her. His tragic flaw is, perhaps, that he does not have autonomy over his circumstances.

The symbolism of Mee Pok Man as failed everyday superhero, with no real agency in social reality, is precursor to the film's larger critique of the way in which working-class heroes are celebrated in the state, despite being coerced into the state's cosmopolitan narrative of the heartlands.

The powerlessness of heartlanders to exert control over the heartland spaces they inhabit is visually channeled into the film's key locales. As an introduction to the filmic narrative, Khoo's *Mee Pok Man* initially opens with a montage of disembodied,

sexualised, female parts juxtaposed with butchered cuts of meat, and random people eating in the city's famous Newton Hawker Centre, played out against the strong beat of a rock track. The choice of hawker center here is significant, since Newton Hawker Centre is well-known for being popular with foreigners and locals alike, being generally acknowledged as a prominent gateway into the food-crazy city's street gourmet culture, serving up gustatory satisfaction through a variety of local cuisine. More importantly, it is situated near the city's Central areas, unlike the hawker centre in Geylang, that sits on the margins of the cosmopolitan city centre, and which Mee Pok Man works in. Newton Hawker Centre can therefore be considered a space aligned with the cosmopolitan.

One would be forgiven for assuming this sets up the rest of the film, as a frenetic, fast-paced insight into the city-state's street food culture. However this is not the case. The protagonist is offered no such glamour, being the unwilling proprietor of an unattractive, austere-looking noodle shop, which he has inherited as part of his father's legacy, despite admitting that he "really hates mee pok", and has "never liked it from day one" (Khoo 1995). Even in doing so, he fulfills his role as the perfect heartlander, according to Goh in his National Day Rally Speech, preferring to lead a quiet life revolving solely around his work as noodle seller and his home. He recognises his own mediocrity in no uncertain terms. He persists at his job, in spite of the lack of joy he derives from it, because he is aware that his skill set is specific, and he knows there is not a lot that he is good at besides making good noodles (Khoo 1995). Ultimately, while his "orientation and interests" are intensely "local", to use Goh's words, there is no sense of the core values and social stability that he, as

a heartlander, should offer. Instead his narrative is inflected with ennui, restlessness and powerlessness.

This ennui and restlessness that dominate each encounter with the food stall he owns are even more palpably felt in the heartlands he (as well as Bunny) inhabits. Here, the HDB estate serves an important purpose, providing a re-entry point into the film. Its importance in the filmic narrative is underscored by the fact that it serves as a second introduction to the film's main characters, and renegotiates their entrapment within social reality as one that is inextricable from the spatial dimensions that frame it (in line with Lefebvre's theory of urban space). The film's initial opening of food and female body parts, coupled with the protagonist's occupation as noodle seller and desire for a prostitute, would suggest a thematic surrounding the reified consumption of flesh. Arguably, the main thrust of the film deals with commodity fetishism and the suppressed desires of suburban life within the city-state. Yet just as the audience is getting acquainted with the main characters – the Mee Pok Man and Bunny – and the film seems ready to make a bigger statement, the dominant space of the HDB intrudes upon the film, shifting the focus and rewriting the filmic narrative into one of spatial dimensions. This is artfully done through a handheld gaming console: the Nintendo Gameboy (Figure 1):

Figure 1 A game of Tetris being played on a Nintendo Gameboy hand-held console; From *Mee Pok Man* (1995), directed by Eric Khoo.

Aptly, it is a game of Tetris that builds up social tension, while simultaneously foregrounding the spatial narrative to come; apt because the game's objective requires that odd shapes be fitted neatly into one, consolidated, monolithic block. Stating the obvious, it bears more than a passing resemblance to the way in which individual lives of working class Singaporeans are expected to fit neatly within the physical and social boundaries of the collective heartlander image Goh projects, in fulfilling the state's vision of cosmopolitanism. This is stark reminder of the larger issue at play here: the extent of control asserted by the authoritarian state in dictating the grounds on which its citizens enact their social realities.

Subsequently, unique heartlander experiences converge into a singular narrative of powerlessness and entrapment, but not in the way the audience expects. Despite Mee Pok Man and Bunny being distinct, individuals, working different jobs and staying in different heartland areas in the city, the film suggests a singularity of heartland experience through the social reality of entrapment. It is not just Mee Pok Man or Bunny who are entrapped, but all of the city's heartlanders. This is established through a synthesis of two narratives: a superficial combination of Bunny and Mee Pok Man's experiences living in the HDB, and the revelation of their relationship as former classmates in primary school.

In the first narrative, Bunny and Mee Pok Man are united in a commonality of depressing social reality, despite living in distinct HDB homes. The implications of this narrative suggest that all heartlanders are oppressed by an Orwellian state that controls social reality in heartland space. The establishing shots of the Mee Pok Man's residential locale, the (presently demolished) Outram Park Complex offer a vignette of a wholly self-sustaining yet isolated heartland locale, through the

integrated tenant mix of ground-level retail stores. The shops here are all closed. Symbolically, this can be taken as a sign that the heartlands are closed off to outsiders. No neighbours or fellow heartlanders inhabit the immense and lonely Outram Park Complex apart from the Mee Pok Man, or so it appears. The camera and viewer's frame of reference continues to narrow in on the Mee Pok Man, leading to the claustrophobic confines of his flat where he sits, smoking a cigarette. A bleak image starts to form. The presence of death literally hangs over the Mee Pok Man, oppressively, in the form of a black-and-white portrait of his deceased father, neither happy nor sad, but fixed with a cold, appraising stare. The portrait itself is hung at such an angle and position as to give off the appearance of a disapproving, figure of surveillance. The presence of this Orwellian "Big Brother" trope within the HDB serves to highlight a patriarchy that is always watching. In his spartan flat, gloomily tinged with a cold, blue hue, the film emphasises the fact that the Mee Pok Man is intensely alone in the heartlands he calls home.

In contrast, Bunny's flat is warmly lit in an orange hue and appears more homely. It is revealed that she shares the flat with her mother and brother. Even so, it is noticeable that her father is missing, and it is the collective absence of this father figure (in both Bunny and Mee Pok Man's stories) that stands out, a key figure in Singaporean (and traditional Asian) family dynamics. After all, it is the father who traditionally provides a living for the family, in addition to giving the family a collective sense of identity, through the concept of the pater familias. In this respect, Mee Pok Man and Bunny are arguably subsumed under the patriarchal jurisdiction or authority of the state. It is perhaps one of the things Khoo does best through the film, pushing the boundaries of social control to the extreme, in his portrayal of the

HDB estate as Orwellian state apparatus, in order to show the extent of suppression that plagues the city's heartland population and urban space. After all, it is the state that provides them with housing (under the HDB), and a common identity (as heartlanders). Through the depressing outlook of the protagonists' lives, we are given to understand that the heartlander's lot is inequality and poverty, since the state keeps them oppressed within the heartlands.

The idea that heartlanders are cumulatively oppressed by the state is confirmed by the melding of Mee Pok Man and Bunny's respective opening scenes into one another. Their showering scenes serve as a point of narrative convergence in the film that has barely begun, symbolic gesture that reiterates their common experience of entrapment within the HDB locale. The following short episode neatly depicts this. Following a shower, Mee Pok Man gets out of bed, restless and desiring companionship, which leads to him wandering rain-drenched through the streets. Instead of showing him returning home to bed, the scene ends instead with a wide-eyed Bunny, in bed, turning out the lights. The melding of protagonists – Mee Pok Man gets out of bed and wanders, but Bunny gets back in bed and turns off the lights – forces a reassessment of their characterisations. Thus far premised on their separate economic functions in society, there is a reducing of social reality to the lowest common denominator, in which their respective experiences of restlessness merge into one narrative, establishing the social malaise that encumbers them as one and the same, associated with living in the HDB locale. In short, what is captured through the restlessness is an entrapment of both characters, through a unifying condition of isolation in the heartlands.

That the film portrays an extremely dire outlook on life within the heartlands is not arbitrary. If anything, the film suggests that the narrative of heartlander, as one half of the state's larger narrative of cosmopolitanism, is not all it is cut out to be, since it is not a narrative of social stability as Goh sees it, but rather a narrative of social inability to rise above the state's extensive, authoritarian control.

The second narrative of the film I want to discuss centres around the revelation that Mee Pok Man and Bunny were classmates, and is my attempt to make sense of Mee Pok Man and Bunny's romantic relationship. Against the grim backdrop of the heartlands as gritty social reality for its lesser denizens – far from the merry heartlands of local sitcom's Phua Chu Kang and Tan Ah Teck that Goh indicates as the standard in his National Day Rally Speech – the film questions if heartlanders have any means to escape from the entrapment of the heartlands. An answer is attempted, albeit through romantic cliché. Mee Pok Man's attraction to Bunny can be read as an attempt to wrest some control over his own life from the interventionist state and its oppressive social reality. Him wooing Bunny can be understood as his attempt to inject meaningful agency into his life through freedom of choice.

To this end, the film pits Mee Pok Man, distinctively heartlander, against Jonathan Reese, a British photographer and representative of the cosmopolitan, as competing love interests of Bunny. Their occupations aptly describe the choice each one presents to Bunny: Jonathan Reese is quite literally the flashy option, mesmerizing Bunny with the bright lights of fame and photography, and fueling her cosmopolitan fantasy through repeatedly deferred promises to bring her to Europe with him. It is through him that Bunny naively seeks to escape from her sleazy life as

a prostitute into the supposedly more respectable profession of international model. Admittedly, the cosmopolitan dream Jonathan sells is a second rate one. His “job” as foreign photographer and talent scout is little more than a ruse to scam gullible sex workers, complimenting their beauty and looks, all the while promising more respectable jobs and life overseas, in exchange for sexual favours. This in itself opens up whole new avenues of debate as to the exploitative nature of cosmopolitanism. However that is not the focus here. Instead, the inclusion of the character allows for a comparative point of reference into the larger world at stake for Bunny.

Over and against this representation of Jonathan as the charming cosmopolitan is Mee Pok Man, whose profession and existence are dull. He is not even identified by the signature dish that he sells, which is fishball noodles,⁸ but by a specific type of noodle – “mee pok” – a traditional and flat noodle variety, which unfortunately describes his character. Although Bunny’s choice is rendered irrelevant by death, it is telling that she never quite satisfactorily finds fulfillment in either. Her relationship with Jonathan ends abruptly when she goes missing, and he quickly moves on to his next victim, while narrative sympathy places her in the hands of Mee Pok Man. Here, she does not choose the heartlands; the heartlands choose her. In the film’s horrific climax, she gives herself to Mee Pok Man willingly, but dies abruptly midway through intercourse, denying them both of the happy ending that narrative sympathy demands, and strongly implies that they deserve, for all the suffering they have been through. It is then revealed, at the very end, that they are primary school classmates, denying them meaningful agency in their own

⁸ A local cuisine.

lives. Perhaps that is the film's point: both Mee Pok Man and Bunny, as heartlanders, are not given the fairytale ending they desire, because it does not exist. There is no way out for those stuck in the heartlands. The fact that they are primary school classmates suggests that their fate has been sealed from young.

It is tempting to read this as depressing and complete hegemony of state dogma, as all-encompassing essence of social reality. After all, the film seems to point to Mee Pok Man's "heartlander"-ness as not just social condition, but totalising state of mind. One cannot help but notice that scenes from the heartlands dominate Mee Pok Man's interiority. On his off day, he stalks Bunny at her block, loitering at her void deck and waiting to catch a glimpse of her. The mood and ambience here are vastly different from the sequences leading up to this point. Instead of the dark, dystopic city he inhabits in his loneliness, Bunny's block, to him, is idyllic and bright, almost dreamlike and happy.

It is here that the film seems to journey into Mee Pok Man's state of mind, reinterpreting the city through his perspective, while simultaneously unable to move past it into any visible realm of imagination. He wanders through the city, through its empty corridor spaces with dated cartoon murals painted on the walls and the ghost of children's laughter, a palimpsest of the city and perhaps his own nostalgic past, now abandoned to various states of decay and ruin. On his way to the fortune teller's, he passes by some closed carnival rides – rides that occasionally spring up during the *pasar malams*⁹ around the heartlands – symbolic of a fun childhood that is increasingly out of his reach. He also passes by a cluster of soon-to-be finished HDB flats on his way to the fortune teller's, and it seems that in this moment the

⁹ Night markets.

past and future both combine into an all-encompassing present that sums up his life: displaced in the heartlands, not being able to identify or relate with his social reality yet totally entrapped in it.

While the fortune teller gives him some tips on how to win Bunny, appearing to give him hope of finding something – a meaningful relationship or escape from loneliness, perhaps – Mee Pok Man's interiority, mapped onto the city's urban spaces, tells a different story. As he walks back towards home, and deeper into the metaphorical recesses of his interiority, the buildings start to accrete algae, decay and other forms of ruin, before he reaches back at his own flat. Clearly, he is unable to escape from the confines of the heartlands, not even mentally.

Read alone, this is not a damning indictment of the protagonist's social reality. Yet, the film's inclusion of random cuts of the city's Central Business District (CBD) towards the film's uncomfortable conclusion shifts the grounds of understanding from one of social stability to social inability, forcing a re-evaluation of the mee pok man's interiority. Ultimately this is the film's reminder: that there is a wider world outside the heartlands. Indeed, the heartlands do not exist singularly, but in a duality, as one half of a cosmopolitan divide. The heartlander must always be measured against the cosmopolitan. As such, Mee Pok Man's interiority becomes one of entrapment, whereby it is painfully obvious that his social reality can never measure up to the cosmopolitan vision of Singapore, since he has no concept of thought or frame of reference beyond the heartlands he sees.

Thus, the entrapment of heartlanders such as Mee Pok Man within the state-defined boundaries of the heartlands is an inescapable social reality. The film asks if celebrating heartlanders, in the way Goh does, is effectively a hollow gesture since

heartlanders are not heartlanders by choice, but rather, by inescapable social circumstance. The film also obliquely suggests the possibility of rebellion through its closing scenes. In the closing scenes, a young Bunny narrates an excerpt from her diary in which she promises to try harder in the next examination (Khoo 1995). The naivety and optimism in her child-like voice starkly contrasts against the depressing social reality of her adulthood, and raises the question of whether escape from such an oppressive cycle is possible by un-participation, in which heartlanders choose not to participate in the cosmopolitan narratives of state by doing nothing, instead of “trying harder” to fit into society, as Bunny does. This is where the next film picks up.

Eating Air: The Impossibility of Escape from the Heartlands

Mee Pok Man opened my argument by suggesting that heartlanders are denied the possibility of agency, because of the rigid dictates of an oppressive state. Where *Mee Pok Man* suggests that the heartlands are inescapable in the state’s pervasive enactment of cosmopolitanism, *Eating Air*, by Kelvin Tong and Jasmine Ng, explores the possibilities of escape from cosmopolitanism altogether by subscription to value systems and codes of conduct that run parallel to the state, yet which exist outside of the state’s jurisdiction, through the subaltern. The film questions if being excluded from the state’s cosmopolitan narrative conversely provides individuals with freedom to operate outside of the city’s cosmopolitan superstructure, in order to enact independent, other social realities apart from those delineated by the state. To this end, the film, marketed as a “motorcycle kungfu love story” explores the possibilities of escape for middle-class protagonist Boy, and his group of friends through filmic narrative traditions. Meaning is created in the film

through the conventions of the Chinese epic, the Mid-Western and the Hollywood Romance, each a narrative device that provides its own outlet of escape from the claustrophobic confines of the city, be it through fraternity and systems of brotherhood, vehicles that make escape a physical possibility, or romance as escapist fantasy. Similar to Khoo's *Mee Pok Man*, the film provides an intimate look into the daily routines and activities that colour the social reality of subaltern life in the heartlands.

Where it differs however, is in its injection of youthful energy through the carefree portrayal of its winsome protagonist, Boy, in total opposition to the brooding and sullen Mee Pok Man who cuts a tortured figure in Khoo's film. Contrary also to *Mee Pok Man*'s melodramatic focus on the plight of marginalised, subaltern heartlanders, Tong and Ng's deceptively light-hearted film is an unapologetic and frank take on subaltern youth culture in Singapore. Yet the tragic conclusion of *Eating Air*, whereby Boy is beaten up and left for dead by gangsters in a tunnel fight, and Girl leaving the scene yet being trapped in the same tunnel with nowhere to go echoes the pessimistic sentiments of Khoo's *Mee Pok Man*.

For much of *Eating Air*, Boy, a school dropout, spends his time idling away, or "hanging out", with his friends at the arcades and shopping malls. Education, it seems, is unimportant when he is guaranteed a job as part-time delivery boy for his parents' cooking and catering business, which they run from home. Boy's gang of friends happens to be a group of like-minded delinquents. They are all characterised by the same fashion sensibilities and vernacular patois, and engage in all sorts of antisocial behaviour together, from breaking into the rooftop spaces of HDB blocks (which is illegal in the city state) and peeing on other people's laundry, to getting into

pointless fights with rival gangs as a way of flaunting their machismo. One of the gang members, Ah Gu, ultimately gets mixed up with the stereotypical “bad sort”, not because of dire personal circumstances, but because of a desperate need to show off. He borrows money from a prominent loan shark named *Tua Tao*¹⁰ that he is unable to pay off and in so doing, lands himself and Boy in trouble. While the portrayals of Boy and his gang of friends can be read as part satirical comedy, part tragedy, the overarching narrative of the film is one that points towards social inequality, very much like Khoo’s *Mee Pok Man*. But where Khoo’s protagonist is hindered by his mental capacity, unable to conceive a world beyond the heartlands, *Eating Air* is keenly aware of a larger world beyond the heartland – and city’s – confines. It goes further and asks if there is a way for the marginalised in the heartlands to escape not just the space, but also the unfavourable conditions that shape their social reality.

In the end, the characters in *Eating Air* are unable to escape from cosmopolitanism’s consequences despite their refusal to participate in it, and, taken together with *Mee Pok Man*, illustrates that life for the marginalised in Singapore is an undesirable entrapment in social inequality, with no recourse to escape or a means to rise out from their impoverished social realities.

In the first place, the film accepts that social reality, for heartlanders, is one of inequality. This is evident in the film’s title. The phrase “eating air” is derivative of a Hokkien phrase, the literal translation of which is used to describe the feeling of having the wind in one’s face and mouth, hence “eating” air, when going on a joyride. While the phrase is obviously meant to be taken in good humour, and mimics the

¹⁰ Literally, big boss or head honcho in Hokkien.

limited vocabulary and phrasing sensibilities of the lowly educated in Singapore, it comes across meaningfully when understood in the context of the film. “*Eating air*”, not *eat* or *ate*, suggests a perpetual state of consumption of that which is immaterial and unattainable. It is also suggestive of discontentment with one’s lot, in the act of consuming something that can never provide fullness or satisfaction. If the film’s title is effective in drawing attention to the problem of inequality, the film’s subtitle is likewise instructive in fleshing out the narrative frameworks that organise said inequality in the city-state. The incorporation of “kungfu”, “motorcycle” and “love story” is an interesting nod to competing genres, each as important, as loaded, but also as inadequately resolved, and consequently as unfulfilled as the next. Considering the film through the following genre-aspects, therefore, provides meaningful insight into the film at length, and shows how social inequality is reinforced as inescapable grand narrative.

Reading into the “kungfu” trope, *Eating Air* appropriates the storytelling conventions of Chinese *wuxia*¹¹ epics, in which Boy reimagines himself as a lone, wanderer-type hero, displaced from the comforts of home and forced to travel in search of meaning, and adventure. In the same way that such epics confront questions of identity and finding one’s place in the world, *Eating Air* can similarly be read foremost as Boy’s search for identity and belonging – as representative of the subaltern – in a rigidly cosmopolitan society. To this end, the film’s visual narrative is interspersed with stylised cartoons resembling Chinese ink paintings, and pseudo-surrealist kungfu scenes that mirror and depict Boy’s quixotic experiences of chivalry. His self-aggrandising brand of heroism is dramatically acted out as he

¹¹Traditional Chinese genre, dealing with martial arts and heroism.

confronts the sometimes seedy and chaotic world of the heartlands. Reimagining himself as pugilistic hero also provides Boy with purpose and a form of escape from his dull social reality. He fantasises about the gruesome deaths of his parents as escape from their lives as food caterers, comic justice for the banality they have inflicted on him. Most importantly, the death of his parents is an event that severs him from his social reality, enabling him to seek out a life of his own, replete with a fully fleshed value system of brotherhood that guarantees his survival and governs his code of conduct, in keeping with the pugilistic world of Chinese tradition.

Through Boy and gang's adventures, the film seems to suggest that this value system of brotherhood is not only common among youths in subaltern Singapore, but necessary as a means for the less privileged to assert their worth, or identity, in breaking with the over-simplistic definition of what it means to be a heartlander, imposed upon them by the state. According to the film, this is because being ascribed "heartlander status", according to Goh's definition of cosmopolitanism, is not only demeaning, but also unforgiving to the lower-classed. Lao Beng's continued presence around Boy and gang is an interesting case study. Lao Beng is an uneducated but fast-talking social misfit, who is always on the lookout for opportunities to make a quick buck, and talk up his own gang connections and adventures in order to gain some social currency amongst small-time gangsters. He trades in socially unacceptable activities such as drugs and blue films. He has bad taste in dressing, and his wardrobe is dated. Quite clearly, he does not fit in. Then again, he has nowhere else to go, and no one else to turn to. It is equally obvious that Boy and gang treat him as a joke, merely tolerating his harmless, if somewhat annoying presence. Ah Gu eventually tires of his antics, calling Boy a fool for

believing Lao Beng's nonsense. Despite this, Lao Beng proves his loyalty to them in the end, misleading *Tua Tao's* gangsters in order to divert attention away from Ah Gu's potential whereabouts, and standing up to *Tua Tao's* gangsters despite the real threat of physical harm to himself. After all, in a society that readily casts him aside, who else can he be loyal to? Once they have cast him aside, however, there is no way back for him, no respectability offered. His narrative arc ends in humiliation. He is slapped into silence by one of *Tua Tao's* gangsters, for mocking him, and calling him an ape. Boy and gang do not stand up for him. As he wanders off in shame, the illusion is broken. His fantastic stories of chivalry are revealed to be, precisely, fantasies, with a sales assistant (played by Kit Chan) serving as unwitting muse to his delusions all along. There is no grander narrative that he can be part of.

Yet, from the inside of this brotherhood, Boy's adherence to their social code as a way of upholding such values as personal integrity and loyalty does not end well either. He meets a more violent end shortly after appearing to avenge Ah Gu at the hands of *Tua Tao's* gangsters, which he does at the cost of running away with his love interest, Girl. All this suggests a social code that perpetuates a cycle of social inequality, since subaltern heartlanders look to such social value systems for a definitive sense of identity, having nowhere else to turn to, and are then unable to break free from the obligations and baggage that weigh them down.

Having looked at the unspoken codes that martial the world of *Eating Air* based on epic tales of kungfu lore, I now turn to the motorcycle trope. The sense of immobility hinted at, as discussed in the preceding paragraph, is aptly conveyed through the film and characters' main mode of transport: the motorcycle. Beyond its

functionality as a vehicle that takes a film's hero towards his desired object, Martinez and Sanjuan note that the motorcycle has come to represent a means of escape in the recent history of international cinema. In addition, the motorcycle has also come to be associated with purchasing power and a high standard of living, while its rider – the biker figure – often plays the role of renegade outlaw, typifying mainstream stereotypes of masculinity, youth and freedom while riding in a group (2014). All these are unmistakable characteristics of *Eating Air*'s protagonist and his gang.

However, if the point of biker films is to paint a picture of freedom, *Eating Air* does not accomplish this, instead using the same vehicle to indicate the exact opposite: entrapment. The film opens with Boy and his gang of friends going on a joyride through the city's Central Business District. Their smug demeanour and reckless driving are clearly acts of defiance against the cosmopolitan social order. This anarchic optimism is instantly quelled by their journey into a tunnel, foreshadowing their later descent deep into the underbelly of society, and their inability to rise from it. Yet while the film unfolds, the motorcycle represents the possibility of physical and social mobility, being symbol of purchasing power and higher standards of living, as observed by Martinez and Sanjuan. This is most applicable to Boy's friend, Ah Gu. When his motorcycle is repossessed because he has defaulted on one too many payments, he resorts to riding pillion with Boy on their joyrides around town. His increasing frustration at his own inability to act, as a direct result of his lack of a vehicle, causes him to lash out at Boy for not indulging his desire to live vicariously through him.

What follows is a slow but inevitable crushing of Ah Gu's vocal spirit. Ah Gu becomes the unlikely finder of a bag of white powder, and he convinces himself that

he has found a bag of drugs. Of high value on the black market, this is meant to be his entry into the big time gangster scene. Despite not securing a buyer for his drugs, or even confirming if the drugs he has are the real deal, he borrows money from the notorious loan shark, *Tua Tao* to purchase brand new motorbikes for Boy and himself, in anticipation of his newfound wealth and status. Rather than giving him the freedom and power he so desperately craves to move up through the ranks of the subaltern, the motorcycles become a symbol of powerlessness instead. He sets up a meeting to sell his bag of drugs, but cannot do so on his own terms. Instead, he and Boy are literally taken for a ride, cheated and stranded on a hill with no motorcycle available to orchestrate any valiant getaway. In the end, Ah Gu is unable to repay *Tua Tao*, and his headstrong cockiness is beaten out of him. It is interesting to note that at this point, he is beaten into silence, and has no retort ready for *Tua Tao's* repeated provocations, despite being the most vocal character from the film's start. Subsequently, Boy attempts to avenge Ah Gu, catching up to and beating *Tua Tao* viciously in a tunnel. This momentary victory is snatched from him by *Tua Tao's* reinforcements who arrive on the scene shortly. No cinematic sunset or freedom awaits Boy and gang, only endless tunnels beneath the surface of the cosmopolis, from which they enter but cannot escape.

Yet the film is not without its moments of hopefulness. While the kungfu and motorcycle threads demonstrate visual and social entrapment, the film seems to suggest the redemptive power of romance – the “love story” in the subtitle – and its ability to elevate the film's subaltern characters from their situation, similar to Khoo's *Mee Pok Man*. The disruption to Boy's life of delinquency when he meets Girl suggests romance as a valid way to escape social reality, or at least forces a

consideration of its parameters on a deeper level. Through their romance, spaces of oppression in the heartlands become spaces of possibility. In one of the film's key sequences, tedium of life in the heartlands transforms Tanjong Katong Shopping Centre, where Girl works, into a modern day version of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, in that seemingly ordinary people are reified into mechanical instruments of society. In Lang's now iconic factory sequence, workers become the reified cogs in the large factory machine, and are fed to the factory-machine-god Moloch. In *Eating Air*, the rhythm of the subaltern can be read as sobering reiteration of Lang's vision, realised in the cosmopolis that is Singapore. Here, however, no abstract god exists. Social reality is the well-oiled machine that keeps everyone functioning in place. Then Boy and his gang of friends disrupt the quiet monotony of the mall, and it is through this brief encounter that Boy and Girl fall in love.

Boy's pursuit of Girl also transforms the symbolic space of the HDB into one of romance. Girl's HDB block becomes an ivory tower, and in this iteration of the fairytale, Boy saves the damsel in distress by bringing light to her flat, where it once represented a dark space of resentment, built on the fickle affections of Girl's philandering mother. Later, when Boy brings Girl up to the rooftop of an HDB block, where she (and the audience) escapes from the claustrophobic confines of the heartlands, Girl asks what lies beyond the city. Boy replies that Johor Bahru (in Malaysia), then Thailand, then Vietnam, then China, then his grandmother's house are further north. The progression is significant, in that it reorients the boundaries of the heartlands from social divide to one that is contingent on geographical landscape. Boy's playful answer that his grandmother's house lies beyond China is obviously meant to put an end to Girl's line of questioning, refocusing her attention on the

social reality that they are in. To him, bringing her to his grandmother's house and meeting the family should carry more social significance as progress marker in how far their relationship has come, more so than the furthest landmark or idle fantasies of travel abroad. Yet as Girl's relationship with her mother deteriorates, and she grows sick of her toxic parenting, Girl is determined that only an escape from the geographical confines of the city-state can save her from the suffocating dimensions of her social reality, since it carries the promise of a new and better life overseas, a fresh start apart from the heartlands.

Unfortunately, though, Boy and Girl do not escape the city or their social reality, since Boy chooses to go to Ah Gu's aid. This perhaps serves as the film's confirmation of tragedy. The inequality and entrapment within the city-state's cosmopolitan narrative becomes a self-perpetuating cycle, in which the life choices of the city-state's lesser-perceived inhabitants are informed by strong social codes, which as I have discussed earlier, are important in giving them a sense of worth, but which then translate as paralyzing social immobility in the face of opportunistic escape. Girl arrives on the scene of the fight, but upon seeing Boy lifeless on the road, she turns and walks away. Without him and the romance he represents to sustain them, she has nowhere to go, simultaneously walking further away, and deeper into the tunnel. She cannot escape.

Mee Pok Man and *Eating Air*: a Cinema of Bleakness?

At this juncture, I repeat my argument with regards to both films that I have analysed so far. In light of the state's vision of cosmopolitanism, the stories of heartlanders through representations of the heartlands indicate the heart of

cosmopolitanism to be a sort of effectively managed social inequality, curated by the state. The articulation of this intention can be traced to Goh's National Day Rally Speech, in which he suggests that heartlanders should be celebrated for their perceived cultural power, despite their impoverished social realities, in addition to being heartlanders not by choice, but by inescapable social circumstance. My analysis of *Mee Pok Man* critiques the notion of placing the heartlander on a pedestal to be celebrated as cultural anecdote, by subverting conventions of the superhero genre to show instead, the powerlessness of heartlanders to effect change on their social realities, even on deeply personal levels, as personified by Mee Pok Man's inability to "save" Bunny. I then suggested that this powerlessness stems from the Orwellian control of the state with regards to heartland space, and that the powerlessness of Mee Pok Man is also the powerlessness of Bunny, and when extrapolated, represent the powerlessness of heartlanders in general to rise above their circumstances.

Then, I examined possibilities of unilateral escape from the system of cosmopolitanism through subaltern resistance. Through *Eating Air*, I explored filmic conventions of the Chinese *wuxia* as a means of rebellion against meritocratic, cosmopolitan society, via the provision of a system of brotherhood that governs the codes of conduct and values of Boy and his gang. I also explored the filmic conventions of the Mid-Western through the literary and metaphorical vehicle of the motorcycle as symbol of freedom and escape from the city. Lastly I looked at Romance as a means of escape from the oppressive reality of life in the heartlands, before concluding that ultimately, escape is impossible from the cosmopolitan state.

When taken together, both films read as a bleak indictment of Singaporean

society, for heartlanders in particular. They illustrate that life as a heartlander is not just characterised by oppressive social reality, but reinforced by the problem of its inescapability. However, this bleakness is qualified only because both films deal with characters that are representative of an extremely marginalised minority of Singaporeans in the heartlands. Yet while the filmic tendency of both films is to look upon individual heartlanders as representatives of the larger group of oppressed peoples, the unfortunate bearers of the cosmopolis' unjust consequences, I think to do this would be to make the same mistake as the state, in its over-simplistic consideration of its heartlanders as quaint guardians of Singaporean life. After all, the image shown through Khoo and Tong and Ng's films is one that is definitely pitiful, but a no less carefully curated image of the heartlands and heartlanders, and this is the image: an extreme representation of the "plight" of heartlanders, in which all of the characters that appear on screen are seemingly unable to escape the entrapment or rise out of the social immobility that conditions their social reality. In the case of *Mee Pok Man*, the extreme plight of being a heartlander is played up for dramatic and sympathetic effect. After all, the protagonist is doubly disadvantaged, being mentally as well as social handicapped. In *Eating Air*, the trajectories of Boy and gang seem unnecessarily fatalistic, while gang fights and gangsters are unnecessarily violent, and brook no common sense, let alone logic in their actions.

While both films do show that the state's definition of heartlanders is most definitely euphemistic, the fact remains that the films' characters represent the extreme end of a small sample size in the city-state. The point is, these characters are not representative of the majority of heartlanders in general, who despite living in the heartlands, unavoidably encounter cosmopolitan ideology. This hybrid class of

Singaporeans is what Brenda Yeoh calls cosmolandiers, defined as those Singaporeans who lead, or can afford to lead global lifestyles but prefer the values of the heartlands” (Yeoh 2435). The films in the next chapter pick up on this group of Singaporeans, and examine the ways in which heartlanders receive and respond to cosmopolitan ideology, in pursuit of happiness.

CHAPTER THREE | COSMOPOLITANISM STATE OF MIND

Thus far, I have shown how Khoo's *Mee Pok Man* and Tong and Ng's *Eating Air* present a more gritty, uncompromising take on what being a marginalised heartlander entails in the city-state, against the state's own definition of the heartlander, as set out in Goh's National Day Rally Speech. Effectively contrasting against the state's narrative of heartlanders as quaint guardians of life in the state-owned housing estates as it were, who are likened to popular local sitcom characters that caricature heartland life, I have shown that the reality of being a heartlander for filmmakers like Khoo, Tong and Ng is more oppressive and depressing, through their collective visions of entrapment. This entrapment of the heartlander, as discussed, is not limited to merely any spatial dimension of the HDB heartlands, but also manifests as totalising state of mind for heartlanders, which makes any attempt at escape impossible. In the conclusion of the preceding chapter, however, I also argued that both films, while effective, account for an extreme sample of the heartland populace, and accepting the filmmakers' curated vision of the heartlander's plight would be to make the same mistake as the state, in reducing the heartlander to a one-dimensional caricature.

Instead, a more objective analysis of the city-state's citizenry should, I think, account for the fact that the city-state's spatial density, expansive information technological networks and the ubiquity of mass media all combine in making it practically impossible for heartlanders to avoid contact with cosmopolitan spaces, and importantly, cosmopolitan ideology, contributing to a new class of citizenry in the process. While the city-state's cosmopolitans are perceived as necessary for the

economic survivability of the flourishing, Singaporean cosmopolis, the state has continued to pursue policies and urban development plans favourable to them, such as the “Global City for the Arts” and “vibrant, sustainable city of distinction” URA campaigns, to name a couple. Inevitably, however, the state’s policies and posturing are absorbed by the heartlanders as well, by simple virtue of mass propagation. The synthesis of cosmopolitan ideology, and the attendant “glamour” of cosmopolitanism, within the heartland locale creates a new hybrid class which Brenda Yeoh calls the “cosmolander”. She describes this class of citizenry as those who can afford to lead global, cosmopolitan lifestyles, but prefer heartland values (2435).

For the purpose of this thesis, and indeed this chapter, I would like to add on to Yeoh’s definition of the cosmolander by including those who in fact do not have the means to lead global cosmopolitan lifestyles, but who aspire to the lifestyle and material luxuries that have come to be associated with the cosmopolitan all the same. In short, heartlanders who subscribe to a “cosmopolitan dream”, or more crudely, the social phenomenon of “upgrading”. This element of social reality, such a huge part of the Singaporean psyche, is conspicuously missing from *Mee Pok Man* and *Eating Air*. That this social phenomenon is omitted from both films is no doubt deliberate artistic choice, meant to limit the spheres of reality to the claustrophobic confines of the heartlands, as metatextual extension of their respective film characters’ shortsightedness in the larger scheme of things, so as to showcase the starkness of oppression in the heartlands. Yet it should be noted that cosmopolitanism that oppresses the social realities for characters in *Mee Pok Man* and *Eating Air* is mainly encountered in absentia, through the space of the heartlands. This chapter therefore continues my thesis of the inescapability of cosmopolitanism through a study of Eric

Khoo's *12 Storeys* and Wee Li Lin's *Gone Shopping*, to show how heartlanders who actually come into contact with cosmopolitanism through cosmopolitan ideology or cosmopolitan persons receive and react to cosmopolitanism in their lives.

Cosmopolitanism and the Singaporean Dream

Before going into the films, it is necessary to consider the politics of cosmopolitanism ideology in the Singaporean state. It has been established many times in this thesis, that the state's vision of cosmopolitanism is ultimately predicated on economic considerations, which then take root in the collective consciousness of both cosmopolitans and heartlanders. In order to analyse what cosmopolitanism means to heartlanders as practical ideology, I would like to take Goh's remarks about cosmopolitans and heartlanders in his National Day Rally Speech further, and read them against some of the state's policies. In his speech, Goh claims both heartlanders and cosmopolitans are equally important to Singapore's well being. It is worth examining what exactly this "well being" refers to. Besides sounding politically correct, the term is problematic as it does not lend itself to objective analysis. Helpfully, a neat parallel to Goh's statement can be found in the URA's mission statement: to create a vibrant and sustainable city of distinction by planning and facilitating Singapore's physical development in partnership with the community. Here, the ambiguous "well being" Goh declaims can be objectively understood as a well-planned urbanscape, and indeed, a cosmopolitan city that is a world-class arts and cultural hub. This is to be achieved in partnership with what the URA terms the "community", which we can understand to mean both the cosmopolitans and heartlanders in Goh's speech.

Goh explains that heartlanders are important because they are the gatekeepers of Singapore's core values and social stability, without whom, there would be no Singapore "system" or brand name. Yet this is easily debunked. In 1991, the state moved to re-define, in black and white, a national culture of sorts. Following a parliamentary decision to develop a national identity, a White Paper titled "Shared Values" was published. Formally, this was the state's attempt to promote collectivism, and wrestle back a citizenry at risk of American Modern, capitalistic individualism, which was perceived as a threat to social cohesiveness and an economy heavily dependent on the conformity of its workforce-population. The five "Shared Values" are: (1) nation before community and society above self; (2) family as the basic unit of society; (3) community support and respect for the individual; (4) consensus not conflict; and (5) racial and religious harmony. In these values, there is an emphasis on the collective over the individual, which social critic Chua Beng Huat observes to be in line with the state's attempt to distil the essence of communitarian cultures in Asia, in order to achieve economic competitiveness premised on successful East Asian economies like Japan and Korea (Chua, "Culture, Multiracialism and National Identity in Singapore" 20–21). The point of the above is to note that, to the extent that a Singapore "system" or brand name can be cultivated, it is ultimately the state that functions as gatekeeper, and not the heartlanders per se.

On the other hand, cosmopolitans are indispensable in generating wealth for Singapore, and extending the city-state's economic reach. Unlike Goh's statement on heartlanders, his assessment of the importance of cosmopolitans is consistent with state policies rooted primarily in the discourse of economic growth, so central to the restructuring of the Central Business District area (Kwok and Low, "Cultural

Policy and the City State” 162). Beyond the Central Business District, part of the attractiveness of Singapore as a world-class arts and culture hub is, also, the resultant success of a world-class shopping scene that appeals to international tourists and PMETs (Professionals, Managers, Executives and Technicians) – who are the cosmopolitans Goh speaks of – for leisure. Chua contends that this is facilitated by the sophisticated and highly developed shopping infrastructures in place in the cosmopolitan city-state that are central to economic development (*Life is Not Complete Without Shopping* 20-21).

Where the economic drive for success has become absorbed as a sort of national working culture, it has been observed that acculturation in the heartlands takes the form of constant upgrading (possibly along the materialist lines of the 5 “C”s – namely, Cash, Car, Credit Card, Condominium and Country Club – that became a strange source of aspiration and measure of success in the late 1990s and early 2000s). In addition, Chua and Kuo note that some of the concomitants to economic development become the predominant qualities that characterise the everyday life-world (of which a large part revolves around the HDB) of Singaporeans. These features are a “generalised social discipline” or social order, and the inclination towards “constant upgrading and educational qualification and a constant sense of comparison with others in terms of relative advantages and deprivation in consumption” (Chua and Kuo, “Cultural Construction and National Identity in Singapore” 7). These economy-dictated values align with the government’s vision of a cosmopolitan city-state that privileges an economy-first approach, grounded in consumption, which takes root in the suburban consciousness of the people (Chua and Kuo 7). Thus, for the purpose of this chapter, and based on the evidence

presented so far, I understand cosmopolitan ideology as a vision of cosmopolitanism that Singaporeans should aspire to, as manifested in the Singaporean Dream. It is with this in mind, that I now proceed to an analysis of the films.

12 Storeys: Cosmopolitan Desires and the Possibility of Fulfilment

Unlike Khoo's *Mee Pok Man* and Tong and Ng's *Eating Air*, which discuss the plight of heartlanders who are entrapped with no recourse to escape, Khoo's *12 Storeys* considers the narratives of several cosmolandars living in the same block of flats who encounter and struggle with cosmopolitanism desires in different ways. Despite their close proximity to each other, being part of the same heartland estate, the characters' interactions with each other are limited, and do not really extend beyond the bubble of each protagonist's flat. If the crux of narrative conflict is founded on conditions of interiority, the film considers the possibility of release through its characters' pent-up cosmopolitan fantasies and desires, which are unreservedly externalised for all to see.

Arguably, the film's main narrative revolves around Meng, a young, well-educated cosmolander, who is tasked with looking after his two younger siblings while their parents are away. His attempt to enforce control over them, and particularly his increasingly delinquent teenage sister, Trixie, becomes problematic when it is conflated with his own lustful and incestuous desires. Through Meng's excessively strict approach to running his household, the film makes a larger critical point about the way Singaporeans are suppressed under the state's authoritarian, cosmopolitan methodologies. While Meng is complicit in this suppression of the heartlanders, albeit enabled by a false sense of moral superiority, his repressed

sexual desires are eventually brought to bear in the film's tense, climactic finale, where he breaks down and bitterly rails against the great injustice done to him, personally, when he realises Trixie has been sleeping around. Yet the personal costs of this revelation to Meng, which he counts in terms of the cosmopolitan opportunities lost to him, only serve to reinforce the infallibility of the state. The film suggests that in the state's vision of cosmopolitanism, those in the heartlands stand to lose, regardless of their adherence to or rebellion against the city's cosmopolitan configuration.

The film's two other stories underpin this notion of the heartlands as grounds in which oppressive social reality is fostered by the state. Ah Gu, an unfashionable simpleton, is unhappily married to his antagonistic, brash wife, Lily, who comes from Mainland China. She feels she has been cheated into marrying Ah Gu, based on an image of success he initially sold her. However, she is clearly not the antagonist of the film. In fact, the film is sympathetic of Lily, being careful to give cinematic expression to her own longings and desires that are kept locked away, while Ah Gu sleeps. Yet, in Ah Gu's inability to negotiate happiness and fulfillment through his marriage, the film suggests that it is the intersection of social reality in the heartlands and the image of cosmopolitan affluence Ah Gu initially sells Lily that is the problem. Likewise, San San's sense of self-worth and self-loathing are informed by the perceived cosmopolitan success of Rachel, the daughter of her late mother's employer, and whose jet-setting life of luxury is an unreachable cosmopolitan fantasy for San San.

Ultimately, *12 Storeys* elicit sympathy for those in the heartlands who are denied the fruits of cosmopolitanism and cosmopolitan fulfillment as a result of their

heartland social realities. Coextensively, this provides me with an avenue to further my argument with respect to cosmopolitanism, by exploring cosmopolitanism as ideology indecipherable from the spaces that inform it. Consequently, the film suggests that cosmopolitan ideology enacted in the heartlands, through its characters, Meng, Ah Gu and San San, inevitably results in further alienation from the cosmopolis, and a keenly renewed awareness of the depressing social conditions that keep them entrapped.

Similar to the previous two films, the HDB estate in *12 Storeys* serves as a proving ground of sorts for social control, entrapping its characters and depriving them of their individuality. The film's portrayal of the HDB highlights the stark difference between the buildings in the cosmopolitan Central areas of the city-state and those in the heartlands. While the expansive upgrading of buildings in the Central core represents economic success and fosters community, in line with the state's enactment of cosmopolitanism through the space of the Central areas as discussed in Chapter 1, here, Khoo interprets the housing estate as both clinical architectural success and social realist failure, synthesized and cast in a dark dystopic light, and characterised by claustrophobic dreariness. The opening sequence of the film helps to establish this: a montage of quick cuts showcase the triumph of planning: bright, unflickering, fluorescent tube lighting, pristine facades ordered into clean forms, and carefully reticulated living spaces. Yet the establishing shots of the HDB offered to the cinematic gaze are angled such that these very elements appear menacing. The fluorescent tube lighting that serves as the opening shot ironically offers no illumination (as it were), its brilliant harshness in stark

contrast with the sea of darkness that surrounds it and makes up the rest of the frame (Figure 2).

Figure 2 Opening montage of a nondescript block of flats;
From *12 Storeys* (1997), directed by Eric Khoo.

If the establishing shots of the HDB suggest claustrophobic entrapment, the proceeding shots confirm the powerlessness of its inhabitants, through conditions of oppression and isolation. The viewer encounters the HDB through a series of quick cuts that insidiously shift the locus of power between the cinematic gaze and the HDB-object of that gaze. The initial bird's-eye view of the HDB, which provides a frame of reference of the film's locale, quickly descends into a position of powerlessness. The sense of spatiality and geographical awareness is lost from view as the camera zooms in on the building's stairwell. The cinematic gaze simultaneously occupies a lower position in space, such that the HDB block appears increasingly monolithic, and its oppressive presence dominates the frame. The subsequent wide shot is also significant in isolating the individual housing units in a nondescript HDB block. Where windows would normally convey a sense of freedom

and openness, here they are indicative of entrapment, heightening the sense of overwhelming disconnection between units ironically located in close proximity, and subsequently the people of the heartlands that inhabit these units.

From its focus on the heartland space, the film zooms into scenes of everyday life in the HDBs, in order to show how the space of the heartlands critically affects its inhabitants. Unlike *Mee Pok Man* and *Eating Air*, the inhabitants here are more cosmopolitan than heartlander, in their awareness of and participation in cosmopolitan indulgences such as rock music or the Internet (Khoo, 1997). Thus, the following vignettes of the HDB's inhabitants' lives raise the possibility of an energy and vibrancy that the heartland space, itself, does not have. In contrast to the preceding sequence, the scenes of the HDB's inhabitants are warmly lit, containing moments of genuine affection and passion – whether it is in relationships, games or music. However this energy is slowly sapped out of the inhabitants, and gives way to a claustrophobic dreariness where the camera lingers, uncomfortably closer and closer, on some of the other inhabitants. Meanwhile, the mood reflected in the expressions of the inhabitants is constantly in flux, alternating between a young couple locked in a passionate embrace, a young family playing on a bed, and a youth rocking out on his guitar frenziedly, and the blank, morose gazes of a brooding man, a young Internet surfer and a family staring vacantly at a TV set (Khoo, 1997). The random approach to featuring these characters also suggests that there is no distinction between inhabitants who take up occupancy within the HDB space, where the story of one of them is pretty much the story of any and possibly all of them: they are equally entrapped.

Then, the film properly begins. For starters, the main narratives of *12 Storeys* are foregrounded by the suicide of a non-descript, unnamed, middle-aged man, credited as “Spirit”. It is arguable that this condition of anonymity is merely continuation of the naming conventions of *Mee Pok Man* and *Eating Air*, in which the protagonists are also not named, as symbolic omission of individuality. Not only does Spirit’s arbitrary and tragic death set the tone for the rest of the film that follows, it also sits uneasily with the first major action in the film, which follows the final moments of suburban life for him before he commits suicide. The scene starts out with cinematic warmth and familiarity, a generic young man bathed in yellow-orange hues and excessively surrounded by creature comforts of alcohol and cigarettes, in contrast to the cold, impersonal blue-lit scenes of the film’s opening sequence. This warmth is however immediately subverted by the fact that Spirit is depicted vomiting blood, suggesting a dire internal problem or injury. When day breaks, Spirit follows one of the film’s main protagonists, San San, who lives alone in the same block, and is constantly haunted by the memory of her domineering, nagging mother, up to the twelfth storey. Although it is San San who contemplates suicide, she backs out when she senses the presence of Spirit and quickly hurries off, while Spirit proceeds to jump to his death without hesitation, despite this not being his plan.

While Spirit’s death seems arbitrary – nobody ever gets to the root of his death and it is arguable we are never meant to find out – it is significant in making the cinematic audience complicit in the act of suppression. Spirit’s suicide is artistic parallel of the opening sequence of the film. His internal injury and the panacea of alcohol and cigarettes (seen as social ills in the conservative city state) follow a pattern that is set up in the film’s opening sequence, in the increasing dullness of the

HDB's inhabitants and the anti-social ways they try to distract themselves (through television and the Internet). The brevity and lack of any dramatic build up to Spirit's suicide mirrors the opening sequence's brief snippets of the life of the HDB inhabitants. The brevity of the suicide and the snippets of life both do not allow time for substantial emotional investment in their narratives. As such, the film's opening sequence and the suicide become desensitising. More importantly, the movement of Spirit's body in space and time, as he falls from the twelfth storey to the ground floor, mirrors the movement of the film's establishing shots, from aerial vantage point of the HDB's façade down into the imposing and ominous shadow of the stairwell, as seen in Figure 1. Therefore, the film strongly implies that the true horror, perhaps, of the state's oppression of those in the heartlands, is in the knowledge of oppression, (since the audience subconsciously knows what is going to happen,) but the inability to prevent its occurrence anyway (since the audience is powerless to stop the suicide).

Following this meaningful and eventful introduction, the film delves into the lives of individual inhabitants of the heartland estate. In a film about the extent of the state's Orwellian control over its inhabitants, it is fitting that the main character is both literal and figurative "Big Brother". Meng sees himself as arbiter of the cosmopolitan state, and keeps the heartlands under his surveillance. He is, after all, the one most in the know about the goings-on in the neighbourhood, "discovering" Spirit's suicide through his rounds and relaying the information to his siblings, and naturally appears to be the one most concerned with policing the community and ensuring the neighbourhood is impeccable: not only does he pick up a cigarette butt disdainfully along the corridor outside his flat, he wears a shirt declaring "my

neighbourhood is the cleanest” (Khoo 1997). On a familial level, he polices his siblings’ behaviour, depriving them of personal freedoms by imposing curfew,

Figure 3 Meng gazing off-screen at a clock;
From *12 Storeys* (1997), directed by Eric Khoo.

interrogating them over private matters, such as the condom found in his sister’s bag, even forcing her to give up deeply personal information about her private sex life.

More blatantly, Meng’s introduction to the film serves as an entry point into the confines of a heartland home. In the brief snippets of life depicted in the opening sequence of *12 Storeys*, Meng is actually seen staring blankly off-screen at what is revealed to be a clock (Figure 3). This action is important. In the context of the film and his own narrative arc, he alludes to waiting up for Trixie several times throughout the film, although we never actually see him waiting per se. Instead, it is this image of Meng sitting up and waiting in the dark that subliminally informs these sequences, as the Orwellian “Big Brother” figure, who is ominously, always watching.

Meng’s performance of this role as “Big Brother” in the heartlands, and as arbiter of the authoritarian state that dictates social reality, is arguably a consequence of his devout adherence to cosmopolitan state dogma and the Singaporean Dream that was discussed in the previous section of this chapter. This can be ascertained from his outburst at the end of the film, where he cries out in rage for the things that have eluded him: “a car”, “a bigger flat”, even “a private condo”

(Khoo 1997). Internally, these objects of his frustration suggest an obsession with, and anxiety over, the quest for cosmopolitan fulfilment, which he perhaps subconsciously recognises as impossibility. The perceived contentment of the other inhabitants of the heartlands, and their unfulfilling lives, could also explain Meng's disdain and genuine belief that he, alone, is above the other heartlanders of the estate. This disdain for the other characters is palpable throughout the film. While exercising after his run, he takes one look at San San and turns away, presumably because he finds her gaze creepy. He also relays Spirit's suicide to his siblings with insouciance. To him, Spirit's suicide is not viewed as tragic loss of life, but trivialised as a "stupid" act, as is "always the case" by one of the inhabitants of the housing estate (Khoo 1997).

This disdain for other heartlanders who do not share cosmopolitan aspirations extends to the familial level. Meng is very obviously disconnected from his family, in particular his siblings, whom he looks down on despite occupying the same physical space, and in fact sharing the same room. Meng's relationship with his siblings is conspicuous by its absence of closeness, and his overtly incestuous sexual desire for his sister, Trixie. On the one hand, we could read the physical lack of boundaries between Meng and his siblings – they share a room – as the cause of a relationship that degenerates into a psycho-sexual one, and leads to Meng's inability to delineate the boundaries of his sense of self as a holistic, sexually matured individual, with a role and place in his society and family. Yet, while the age gap between Meng, Trixie and Tee are all substantial – Meng is a working adult, Trixie is in her late teens and Tee is in his early teens – it is interesting to note that Trixie and Tee are closer despite the sizable age gap between them, and their relationship is a genuine

brotherly-sisterly one, with playfully sexual banter that does not turn lustful, as with Meng. The same level of intimacy and sibling solidarity is not afforded to Meng, and he is set apart by a condition of isolation. The first time we encounter Trixie and Tee in the film is in an intimate moment where they are both asleep in a shared space of close proximity, and Tee appears to be masturbating, while Trixie is either unbothered or oblivious. Tee and Trixie are also able to joke about their private sex lives, with Tee asking Trixie whether she and her boyfriend did anything “kinky”, and suggestively running his hands across her chest. Trixie clearly passes these off as Tee being playful, or “naughty” (Khoo 1997). Even when Tee goes overboard in searching through her bag and teasing her with a condom, it is possible that Trixie’s reaction is not one of anger at Tee, but rather fear that Meng will find out – which does happen.

In part, this is because Tee and Trixie’s relationship is based on their familial value as equals, under the authority of their parents. Thus, the social space they inhabit is played out in their interactions in physical space, where they are able to compartmentalise themselves – visually represented, rather simply, through the device of the double-decker bunk bed they share. They are connected in close proximity, yet each manages to develop on his or her own terms. As an interesting observation, it is in bed where they exert their individuality: Tee through masturbation, and Trixie through reading teenage magazines that give her a sense of self. On the other hand, Meng’s relationship with his siblings is more paternalistic, and he patronisingly sees them as “children” over whom he can assert his authority, rather than as younger siblings to be looked after, in line with his attempts to perfectly

embody the legalistic role of “legal guardian” while their parents are away, despite sharing the same familial and physical space as them (Khoo 1997).

However, his self-imposed role as “legal guardian” becomes an act of self-isolation from his family. This self-isolation is best exemplified by his quarrel with Trixie, in which he sarcastically tells her that he does not like being stuck in the same room as the both of them, as he deserves a space apart from them. His assertion as “legal guardian” of the family also extends to control of the familial space – or his capacity, in both senses of the word – where he sets about establishing social codes, governing the way Trixie should be dressed so as to appease the way neighbours perceive her outside the confines of their home, dictating what time she and Tee need to be back in the space of their house (and by extension under his control), and the type of people she should be fraternising with, serving to isolate him further.

Consequently, it is arguable that Meng’s familial disconnection from his siblings is a direct result of the “utopian impulses of the PAP state” that foster dystopic cultures under suppression (Wee 1985). Specifically, he is isolated because he sees the heartlanders around him, and especially his family, as hindrances to the possibility of cosmopolitan fulfilment through the Singaporean Dream. Thus, instead of treating Trixie as a sister, the film suggests that Meng disregards the familial feelings he would otherwise have towards her, and objectifies her as merely one more variable in his quest for cosmopolitan success. As it turns out, this comes out as warped, sexual deviancy instead. The denouement of his narrative arc with the discovery of his sister’s promiscuity leads to an inexplicable cry of deeply personal anguish and rage:

How could you do this to me? *How could you do this to me?! Do you know how hard I work for you [Trixie], for Tee, for the family? Do you know that now, [if not] for you all, I could have a car now you know. We could have upgraded to a bigger flat, maybe even a private condo[mini]um!* (Khoo 1997)

Arguably, the real tragedy of the film lies in Meng's arrest. That he is arrested at the playground is both highly symbolic and ironic. The fact that he simultaneously wails and crudely beats his stick on the trash cans reminds us of the extent of oppressive social reality in spatial terms, in that he has literally no room of his own as outlet for his sexual frustration and grief, having to share it with his younger siblings. That he comes to the playground to vent is also symbolic of Meng's sexual regression into child-like petulance and a belated loss of innocence. The irony of the playground comes from the fact that it is a space for children, and a particular space meant to foster interactions between its attendant community of users. Meng's lamentations are a childish cry for attention to his inexplicable grief, but he intrudes uncomfortably on the privacy of his neighbours in the apartment block. Hence the police are called in. In this manner, an area meant to foster communal bonds between inhabitants of the heartlands becomes a space of further isolation. Additionally, the injustice he feels as Trixie's brother, being held back from his cosmopolitan aspirations, can be interpreted as a feeling of injustice at being denied the fruits of cosmopolitanism, as a direct consequence of the oppressive social reality of the heartlands.

While Meng does not attain the material gains associated with the Singapore Dream despite buying into the state's vision of cosmopolitanism, because he is entrapped by heartland space and unable to escape from it, the same cannot be said for San San. Like Khoo's Mee Pok Man, she fulfils the stereotype of heartlander as

set out by Goh. Her flat is similarly sparse; her interests, local. However, where Mee Pok Man bears the silent weight of his dead father's legacy squarely, San San is constantly haunted by the memory of her dead mother, who despises her existence as a result of the successes of Rachel, her former employer's daughter. Evidently, San San is a victim of cosmopolitanism's successes.

Subsequently, the film's depiction of the relationship between Rachel and San San provides a platform for the larger discussion between how cosmopolitans and heartlanders should relate to each other. Rachel, having flown back from the United States, returns to the heartlands to visit San San, whose mother has left for her a gift. The gift itself, a jade bangle, is of sufficient importance to San San's mother, such that her nagging persists even in death. So desperate is she that Rachel should receive it as a memento of her favour and love. San San treats Rachel's visit as a significant event, putting on makeup, dressing up and going out of her way to prepare snacks for Rachel's visit, no doubt in a bid to impress her. However, the reunion of the two women is dragged out by awkward silences, punctuated by Rachel's unsuccessful attempts at small talk and filial platitudes, lamenting the death of San San's mother as a "good lady" (Khoo 1997). This could not be further from the truth. The film suggests that San San's mother is biased towards Rachel because she possesses the character traits of cosmopolitanism, being smart and socially mobile, with an international outlook. Added on to this, the film indicates Rachel's attainment of several concomitants of the Singapore Dream, since she has a maid (signifying she also has cash) and owns an expensive continental car. San San's poor attempt to impress Rachel, and Rachel's lack of empathy with San San's social reality, speaks of a mutual inability on both sides to understand and identify with the

other, and is neatly summed up in Rachel's reaction to unwrapping the gift. She is unimpressed. Unable to fully grasp the value and thought behind the traditional gift, she casts it aside. When she leaves, San San sits morosely in her flat, having nothing else to look forward to, with the realisation that she is completely and utterly alone. Thus, the film suggests that the interaction between both groups of Singaporeans leads to further isolation of heartlanders from the state's vision of cosmopolitanism.

Taken together with the first two films discussed in Chapter 1, the stories of Meng and San San imply entrapment within the heartlands with the impossibility of escape, while rebellion or adherence to cosmopolitan ideology results in further alienation from cosmopolitan society. However, Ah Gu's story in *12 Storeys* is unique, as it presents a new way of encountering cosmopolitanism and cosmopolitan ideology. Here, Ah Gu is heartlander who is familiar with cosmopolitan ideology, yet comfortable with the heartland social reality he inhabits. Instead of aspiring towards cosmopolitan fulfilment, through the pursuit of the Singapore Dream, he instead plays on a universal understanding of cosmopolitanism, using its vocabulary to trick Lily into believing he is the affluent boss of a company, the owner of an expensive Mercedes Benz, and that he lives in an area patrolled by his own security guards. The reality, as Lily later points out, is more heartlander, in that he owns a hawker stall, drives an old Mercedes Benz that is prone to breaking down, and stays in a HDB which is in close proximity with a neighbourhood police post. Lily is understandably resentful of Ah Gu, and never misses an opportunity to ridicule or mock him. Yet her antagonism is tempered by the narrative sympathy the film affords her at the end, in which her own desires and longings, which have been locked away,

are revealed. In doing so, the film seems to imply that neither character is fully at fault for their predicament. Instead, the film suggests that the unrealistic vision of cosmopolitanism that Ah Gu readily assumes as identity, and which Lily readily buys into, creates problems for the city's inhabitants.

Altogether, *12 Storeys* suggests the incompatibility of cosmopolitan ideology within the space of the heartlands. As a response to *Mee Pok Man* and *Eating Air*, it renegotiates the space of entrapment and inescapability within the heartlands to suggest that heartlanders are not only denied the fruits of cosmopolitanism, but are also unable to meaningfully engage with cosmopolitan ideology. It concludes that oppression in the heartlands occurs both because of, *and* in spite of, cosmopolitanism. Conversely, this raises the question of whether cosmopolitan spaces in the city-state can function as bearers of heartland ideology, and indeed heartlanders. In the following section, the film *Gone Shopping* answers this question by reimagining the locus of cosmopolitan and heartland action in the space of the shopping malls. It is to this that I proceed.

Gone Shopping: Emulation through Heterotopia

Mee Pok Man opened my argument in Chapter 1 by subverting Goh's celebration of heartlanders, to suggest a social reality of powerlessness and entrapment in the heartlands. In doing so, it questioned if the possibility of escape from the authoritarian state was possible. *Eating Air* answered this question by exploring various ways of escape from social reality and the city's space. It concluded that escape from the heartlands is impossible, as is an escape from the dominant structure of cosmopolitanism in the city-state. Then, *12 Storeys*

renegotiated the boundaries of entrapment, by recognizing the emergence of a third group of Singaporeans in the cosmopolitan-heartland divide, namely cosmoland,ers, who aspire to the Singapore Dream. I concluded that their failure to meaningfully engage with cosmopolitan ideology leads to a renewed awareness of the heartlands' oppressive social reality. *Gone Shopping* enters my argument at this juncture by considering if heartlanders can engage with cosmopolitanism meaningfully in cosmopolitan space through emulations of the heartlands.

Similar to Khoo's *12 Storeys*, *Gone Shopping* tracks the developments of three main characters, Clara, Renu and Aaron, through the city-state's spaces. Where it differs, however, is in the projection of its protagonists' heartlander fantasies into three different shopping malls, which are the film's representative cosmopolitan spaces. The film argues for the likelihood of escapist fantasy through the emulation of heartland routines in shopping mall spaces, as authentic respite from the state's vision of cosmopolitanism. Ultimately, though, while the film suggests that creating conditions of heterotopia in the shopping malls is possible, the chance of escape is improbable due to the temporality of these very spaces, and the fickle nature of the consumerist population.

Before I proceed, a word on shopping malls as heterotopia. Arguably, the shopping malls of Wee Li Lin's film function as heterotopias of Singaporean society. In his lecture "Of Other Spaces", Michel Foucault introduces heterotopias in relation to the concept of utopia. As Foucault explains, utopias are sites with "no real place" but rather sites that "have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of society". While they represent visions of perfected or otherwise subverted societies, utopias are "fundamentally unreal spaces". Conversely, heterotopias

function as a type of “effectively enacted utopia”, where the “real sites [...] that can be found within the culture are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (Foucault 24). The shopping malls of *Gone Shopping* meet Foucault’s criteria of being heterotopias, as they deal extensively with the shopping mall – a key concomitant of cosmopolitan Singaporean culture – representing the ordinariness of Singaporeans who shop in the malls, while also contesting and inverting the identities and relationships that play out within said films. More plainly, Aaron, one of the main characters in the film, also declares Singapore to be “one big shopping centre” in which “all work, leisure, culture, history ... [and] even nature [are] all brought together, air-conditioned and price-tagged” (Wee 2007). Distinguishing between heterotopia and utopia, Foucault goes on to list certain traits and parameters of heterotopia, of which three are of relevance to this section.

Firstly, the heterotopia “is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible” (Foucault 25). This can be directly applied to the different malls in the film. In it, Tangs shopping mall and Mustafa shopping centre are illusory spaces of cosmopolitanism that instead facilitate inequality, for instance through the racialisation of each mall’s clientele. Additionally, *Gone Shopping*’s portrayal of Marina Square also create spaces of otherness, of possibility and fantasy, which in turn reveals social reality to be something undesirable and depressing, further alienating the characters from the heartlands they inhabit.

Secondly, heterotopias “are most often linked to slices in time”, in particular time in its most fleeting, transitory, precarious aspect; heterotopias “are not oriented toward the eternal, [but] rather absolutely temporal” (Foucault 26), as I have

mentioned at the start of this section. The urbanscape of Singapore is constantly changing, constantly in flux, in line with the state's constant structural reconfiguration and upgrading to match its discourse of economic growth. In the short span of the nation state's history, there have already been a significant number of shopping malls built and destroyed and rebuilt, all of which are seen as necessary by the state in order for its shopping scene to stay updated and relevant, so as to attract ever more tourists and highly skilled, foreign PMEBs to its shores. Further, the shopping mall by its very nature is transitory, since its tenants are mostly impermanent and dependent on trends and cultural phenomena. By trends, I mean fashion trends, gaming trends, even food trends, to name a few.

Lastly, heterotopias "have a function in relation to all the space that remains. This function unfolds between two extreme poles. Either their role is to create a *space of illusion* that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory [...], or else [...] their role is to create a *space that is other*, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled" (Foucault 27, italics mine). The former is termed as a heterotopia of illusion, while the latter is termed as a heterotopia of compensation, and it is heterotopias of illusion that can be readily applied to the shopping malls as seen in the film. With Foucault's theory in mind, I now proceed to an analysis of the shopping malls as heterotopic space in *Gone Shopping*.

Gone Shopping explores Singapore from a consumerist point of view, where the insatiable lust for fabric is woven into the fabric of society. Chua Beng Huat notes that academic studies on shopping malls tend to produce, on the one hand, romanticised narratives of utopic nature in their reference to shopping centres and

department stores as “dream palaces”, “cathedrals” and “Edenic allegories of consumerism in general”. Part of this romanticism also involves the reinvention of self within the shopping mall, where people can change their appearances and identities in keeping with the fickle nature of fashion. On the other hand, academic studies also have a tendency to conflate the shopping malls with consumerism and the moral evils that that entails (Chua 2003, 42). In the Singaporean state’s practical view, however, the shopping mall is little more than one of many attractions that facilitate economic growth. Yet, I think a more critical way of looking at the shopping mall (and filmic representations of the shopping mall) is to consider how narratives of the heartlands and its social reality are enacted in the space of the shopping mall, especially in Singapore, where consumption culture is so closely tied with how embedded the state is in global capitalism, and the way it shapes how Singaporeans identify themselves. In doing so, I hope to establish how shopping mall spaces “suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect” (Foucault 24) vis-à-vis the citizenry, and in so doing, show how they are heterotopias of space. Subsequently, I intend to show how the illusory nature of these spaces (as represented in *Gone Shopping*) creates corresponding illusions of Singaporean identity. At the end of it all, and more importantly, I intend to examine how the film’s characters buy into or reject this illusion (if this is even possible).

Contrary to the cosmopolitanism that is meant to unify Singaporeans under a common banner, the film indicates cosmopolitan ideology to be illusory instead. In the face of relentless consumption, the film highlights the struggles of heartlanders in Singapore, as they go about their daily heartland routines, albeit transposed within

the cosmopolitan spaces of the shopping malls. That the characters' lives revolve around the shopping malls can be seen as simultaneous search for identity and attempted escape from oppressive social reality in the heartlands. One of the film's main protagonists, Aaron, notes at the beginning of the film in a self-reflexive moment: "do you ever feel like we spend our whole lives in shopping malls?" (Wee 2007) Aaron talks about the shopping malls as an air-conditioned and packaged alternative to reality, facilitating work, leisure, culture, history and nature. If anything, his speech sets the shopping mall up to be an integral part of life in the city-state. As the film progresses, characters begin to map their heartland routines onto the space of the shopping mall, finding companionship, falling in love, and even sleeping in the film's various shopping malls. In a sense, the film suggests that possibility of the shopping mall replacing the oppressive, claustrophobic space of the heartlands, since it is here where heartlanders and cosmolandiers alike can find fulfillment.

Yet, through the arbitrary connections that play out within the film, it is arguable that the shopping mall spaces function as heterotopias of illusion, revealing the superficial nature of Singaporean society. Let me explain. The space of the shopping mall in *Gone Shopping* literally functions as plot device, drawing together discrete character narratives, and causes them to converge through its spaces. Aaron, Clara and Renu's individual story arcs are, after all, sufficiently self-contained. The only times they converge are when Clara meets Renu in Mustafa shopping centre, and when Aaron "saves" Clara after she collapses in Marina Square. In these two instances, the encounters between the characters are cursory at best. When Clara meets Renu, they appear to bond over a meal. However, their time together is dominated by awkwardness, with Clara over-eager to relate to the younger Renu,

and Renu, generally remaining silent. Beyond a brief respite and the exchange of pleasantries, this chance encounter leaves no impact on either character, nor does it alter the trajectories of their narratives. Clara makes no real effort to help Renu find her lost parents, and Renu does not ask Clara why she happens to be in Mustafa, alone in the dead of night. They carry on with their individual lives.

Similarly, with Aaron and Clara's meeting, the audience never gets to see any lasting connection formed between the characters. While this encounter admittedly occurs towards the film's end, it is still significant that Aaron simply returns to aimlessly wandering the mall in search of more quests, while Clara continues to journey deeper into her own psyche. Ironically, there is not enough room for pleasantries. These encounters – between Clara and Renu, and Aaron and Clara – are problematic precisely because they occur within shopping malls. As heterotopic space, it offers the possibility of physical escape from the heartlands, since the characters are able to create meaning for themselves in the shopping malls, yet suggests that the condition of isolation endemic within the heartlands is ultimately inescapable: even within shopping malls, away from the heartlands, they are unable to form meaningful relationships with others. Faced with the inescapable reality of isolation, the only options left to the characters are either to bitterly rail against the state of affairs, as with Renu, or indulge in escapist fantasies through an act of imagination, as with Aaron and Clara. Thus, the film suggests a heterotopia of illusion, whereby the cosmopolitan ideology meant to unite Singaporeans – through the creation of common, cosmopolitan shopping mall spaces – creates sites in which the same cosmopolitan ideology is revealed to be illusory instead, further isolating the characters and pushing them into flights of escapist fantasy. The question at this

point, then, is whether or not these flights of escapist fantasy, as acts of imagination, are legitimate means of escape from oppressive inequality. In order to answer this, a more detailed examination of the characters' arcs is necessary. To this I proceed.

Aaron and his love interest Hui Hui are part of the younger generation of Singaporeans that embrace and indulge in escapist fantasies through influxes of cosmopolitan consumerism. In this instance, Aaron, and Hui Hui especially, are very much into cosplay culture.¹² That they buy so completely and are so invested in this escapist culture is perhaps a lamentation of the oppressive heartlands in Singapore, since it is seen as something that is necessary and essential to the state's vision of cosmopolitanism, but associated with an unglamorous and unappealing lifestyle and classist struggle. This is perhaps the reason Aaron feels trapped in the uneasy silence of home, in a lifestyle he cannot appreciate or relate to, yet is unable to break free from. While recognizing the shopping malls as a superficial and meaningless chase, he cannot help but be drawn to it despite his professed disdain for it.

His dalliance with cosmopolitanism through cosplay culture takes the form of his Dungeons and Dragons sword, and his open-minded, liberal love interest Hui Hui, in a relationship that initially proves to be burdensome rather than liberating. Instead of the escape that he thought buying the sword would bring – “what is four hundred dollars for a dream?” he exclaims (Wee 2007), – he is embarrassed by it, and sees cosplaying and taking photos with Hui Hui as an uncomfortable obligation. However, despite the initial discomfort at having to wear cosplay props around and expose himself to the judgment of society at large, he soon grows to embrace it, getting further immersed in it, when his relationship with Hui Hui unexpectedly fails.

¹² The practice of dressing up as a character from a film, book, or video game, especially one from the Japanese genres of manga or anime. (OED)

Subsequently, the film suggests his failed relationship with Hui Hui is actually indicative of Singaporean society's failure to marry contradicting impulses.

Notably, Aaron and Hui Hui's romance revolve around the shopping malls, and in particular, Marina Square. Marina Square is located on the outskirts of the Central Business District in Marina South as part of the state's plan in the early nineties to ease congestion from the Orchard shopping belt into a secondary core. Following optimism for growth fueled by a booming tourist industry, the state's plan for a secondary shopping core suffered a major setback in the shape of the Asian financial crisis of 1997, that severely weakened the spending power of tourists from developed countries from the West, and East Asia (*Consumption Culture in Singapore* 12 – 13). Yet the inclusion of Marina Square as one of the film's main locales is important. Built in 1987, its significance stems from its ambitious positioning as the largest built shopping mall in Singapore at the time, providing a one-stop retail experience for families, young adults as well as PMEBs – a “cosmopolitan” shopping mall if you will. Suitably, the controlled confines of Marina Square become the heterotopic site on which cosmopolitanism is acted out through fantasy.

In particular, the mall becomes a platform for Aaron's flight into escapist fantasy. In the first place, the mall forms a bubble around Aaron's life. Aaron's age and job status are deliberately ambiguous. He is meant to be the Singaporean everyman. It is never clear what his job is, only that his dressing implies something corporate. The point is he could be anybody. Importantly, his on-screen presence and interactions revolve solely in and around the mall. After all, it is in the mall that he initially kindles his romance with Hui Hui, his friend's eighteen year-old sister,

through a mutual anti-establishment tirade while “hanging out”, a common pastime of Singaporean youths. In effect, “hanging out” is merely a popular euphemism for idling away time at the shopping malls as a leisure activity (*Consumption Culture in Singapore* 42). Aaron’s voyeuristic peeping into Hui Hui’s dressing room does not go unnoticed by Hui Hui. However, instead of remonstrating with him, Hui Hui takes pleasure in being the object of his desires, and initiates a relationship with Aaron. Subsequently, she enables his escapist fantasy through consumerist means, convincing Aaron to buy a replica sword from a game. This moment has symbolic significance, as the sword then becomes an instrument in his quest for fulfillment.

Perhaps the climax of his narrative, though, is in the consummation of his relation with Hui Hui. This takes place in yet another shopping mall, Shaw Centre, on Orchard Road. In the director’s cut, an extra scene is added into the film, in which Aaron and Hui Hui share an intimate moment of introspection, post-coition. Hui Hui crossly tells Aaron that she does not want to go home, as she hates her parents, and throws the question back to Aaron, asking if he likes his parents. Aaron responds: “I don’t know ... I never thought about whether I like them or hate them. It’s like we live together in this silent anxiety, like waiting for a time bomb to go off” (Wee 2007). The implication here is that the space of the shopping mall is a reprieve from the confines of the heartlands, and the silent anxiety that plagues it. In fact, Aaron’s statement is revealing of the sense of oppressive anxiety faced by those in the heartlands, and recalls the social reality of isolation I have discussed in *12 Storeys* earlier in this chapter. Here, the film is also quite unsubtle in its portrayal of Aaron as deeply conservative heartlander, despite his dislike of the heartlands. While he constantly performs his escapist fantasy through the shopping mall spaces, it is significant that

he is shown returning to his family home. On the other hand, the film's portrayal of Hui Hui as existing solely in the shopping malls and refusal to go home is indicative of her total assimilation into cosmopolitan space.

More than mere reprieve however, Hui Hui suggests cosplay as source of "hope" and escape for Singaporeans living in this silent anxiety. Aaron agrees, ruminating "if [Singaporeans] cannot believe in themselves, then [they] better find hope in being someone else" (Wee 2007). Ironically, this statement proves to be the undoing of their relationship. Apparently, Hui Hui's escapist fantasy extends to their relationship, and even to their coition, where she asks Aaron to "call [her] Princess Hayumi" (Wee 2007). Subsequently, when she angrily remonstrates with Aaron for acting "like a jealous boyfriend", in response to her excitement over a street dancer, the film reveals her approach to the relationship as yet another avenue of escapism from the social reality of life in the oppressive city-state. The inevitable breakdown of Aaron and Hui Hui's relationship is confirmed when Aaron finds out through Hui Hui's camera that he is just the latest fling in a long line of lovers, and her character as Princess Hayumi, just the latest persona she performs.

Tragically, Aaron's response suggests the inescapability of individuals from cosmopolitan ideology, regardless of heartland or cosmopolitan space. Aaron draws his replica sword on one of Hui Hui's love interests just outside Marina Square in vindictive fashion. In his failed relationship with Hui Hui, the only form of escape seems to be the very one he was initially uncomfortable with, through assuming the role of a character in an escapist fantasy. His closing scene in the film confirms this. He becomes a quixotic figure, bearing the image of a knight errant or hero, who far

from being chivalrous, is merely indulging in dreams of heroism out of sync with the times, as a means of escape. It is he who “saves” Clara when she faints.

Clara is arguably the film’s chief protagonist. She is a middle-aged woman in an unhappy relationship who is addicted to shopping, seeing it as panacea for her every mood. Across the entire duration of the film, Clara wanders from shopping mall to shopping mall. Glimpses of her home do appear, but depict a dull, drab place, when compared to the shiny shopping malls. She increasingly spends more time away from home, and in the shopping malls. In particular, Clara’s narrative and sense of self is heavily tied to Tangs shopping mall. The shopping mall is renowned for its international boutiques and branded goods, curating the latest fashion trends for tourists and locals alike. Located on the iconic Orchard Road shopping belt, it stands to reason that Tangs is a symbol of affluence and gateway to cosmopolitanism.

On some level, Clara recognises possibilities of cosmopolitan fulfillment in the space of the shopping mall, and is therefore increasingly disdainful of her homely confines, which become a space of entrapment for her. The film attempts to account for her excessive obsession with the shopping malls through its introductory sequence. It opens with an unnamed narrator romantically reminiscing about life in Singapore. What follows is an acute summary of the key moments in a young girl’s life growing up, that lead to a present-day obsession with shopping: her first encounter with shopping at the neighbourhood grocery store, her father’s love for shopping and his sudden death surrounded by shopping bags, her own idleness as a teen in the shopping mall, and a chance encounter with her husband in the duty-free shopping area of the city state’s famous Changi airport. A young family carrying

shopping bags and walking through Tangs shopping mall brings the narrative back to the present day, where we finally catch a glimpse of this woman – our protagonist Clara – wistfully staring at a concept of familial bliss that is intimated to be beyond her. It is this last shot that is key to Clara's character. The cinematic gaze that follows the young family fluidly pans up to Clara's field of vision, suggesting the gaze is indeed, hers. It becomes highly significant, then, that the cinematic gaze focuses on the young family's shopping bags first before the family. It sets up how Clara will act throughout the film, conditioned by a history where shopping takes precedence over her human relationships.

Similar to Aaron and Hui Hui, Clara's narrative in the film chronicles her escape into consumerist fantasy, through the space of the shopping mall. Perhaps the most critical indictment of social reality in the Singaporean state is the way Tangs is laid out in the film. For all the spacious layouts and plush interiors of the boutiques Clara shops at, an overriding sense of claustrophobia pervades. When Clara comments that her tie to the place is so strong that somehow it is always easier for her to find a way in but impossible to find a way out, she unknowingly hits the nail on its head. No clear exit presents itself from this labyrinthine structure. But perhaps that is the point. Through the mall's layout, the film suggests a condition of entrapment through cosmopolitan spaces, as much as heartland spaces. The film therefore suggests that the shopping mall is an updated representation of the classic labyrinth of mythical fame: Clara stumbles about aimlessly, unable to extricate herself from cosmopolitanism's monster that is the Singaporean Dream, ironically blinded, in a kind of glazed and glossy-eyed stare, by the lights of the shopping mall.

As the film progresses, the draw of the shopping mall gets stronger and

stronger, and Clara begins to treat it like home. It is here that she initially rekindles her romance with a long-lost school crush, Valentine Tan. It is later revealed that their connection is nostalgic but ultimately superficial, (at least on Valentine's part,) and all he remembers of her is that she used to hang out at Centre Point, yet another shopping mall on Orchard Road. Yet, the shopping mall becomes her space of social reality, where she sleeps and socialises (with the retail assistants) and basically lives out her daily routines. The shopping mall also becomes a safe space of sorts to her, providing room for her to cry when she is attacked by her rival, Pat. In her enactment of routines and events associated with the heartlands – sleeping, socialising, romantic gestures with Valentine – the film suggests the possibility of fulfillment for heartlanders in cosmopolitan space. Then again, the film is keenly aware of the ultimately superficial fulfillment that such an arrangement could engender.

In particular, Clara and her fellow *tai tais* in the film, Pat and Suki, with their outward wealth of cosmopolitan experience (in fashion, travel and lifestyle) are juxtaposed against the retail assistants that serve them: Nat, Jenny and Mabel. Coincidentally, the retail assistants are also ethnically Chinese, which is useful in calling attention to the socio-economic gap between the wealthy Singaporean Chinese community and other countries in the peninsula. This forces a re-evaluation of “cosmopolitanism” as identifier of Singaporeanness, and the fulfillment that is derived from its spaces. On several occasions, Clara and Pat's conversations touch on ballroom dancing and ikebana flower arrangement classes as leisurely social activities. It should be noted that these are symbols of culture tied to the heritage of Western and Japanese society, and not culturally rooted in the Singaporean heartlands. The *tai tais* participation in such “cultural activities” serve as confirmation

of the rootlessness of cosmopolitans, mentioned in Goh's National Day Rally speech. In contrast, the retail assistants Nat, Jenny and Mabel roundly mock the superficiality of Clara's personality, and indeed the other *tai tais* while on a smoke break, in the refuge of a stairwell. Their conversation is aptly set against the towering skyscrapers and bright lights of the Central Business District area, pointing at a cosmopolitan Singapore that they have no desire to be a part of, yet also a reminder perhaps that it is far beyond their reach. Instead, their experiences as retail assistants are grounded by their lives beyond the pristine realm of shopping in Singapore: Johor, Ipoh and Kuala Lumpur.

However, the film makes light of their social reality, perhaps as a way of indicating that, while they are important participants of social reality in cosmopolitan space in the city-state, they are ultimately not defined by it. Their conversation in the stairwell plays out in crudely comical fashion, based on Malaysian cultural stereotypes. Jenny's naivety in wanting to please her shoppers and guarantee them a happy experience while shopping is met with cynicism by Nat and Mabel. Her naïve desire to please is sarcastically praised as befitting someone from Ipoh, a more hinterland, less developed area in Malaysia, compared to the industrialised cities of Johor and KL which Nat and Mabel hail from. Crucially, it should be noted that their sense of identity ultimately derives from spaces of authenticity outside the cosmopolis of Singapore. Subsequently, this reinforces the artificiality of the heartlands in Singapore, and is perhaps a grim reminder that the heartlands is but a construct and foil to the grander narrative of the cosmopolitan spaces in Singapore. It suggests that cosmopolitan spaces are the only spaces of authenticity and subsequently, fulfillment, within the city-state.

Yet, the shopping mall must close, and its workers be allowed to go home. Ultimately, the film implies that fulfillment in cosmopolitan spaces, and Tangs in particular, is limited by opening and closing hours – temporality being a trait of heterotopias, as outlined by Foucault. Clara should return home. However, she has no wish to return to such oppressive confines, or to accept it as her social reality. It is no wonder then, that she wanders into Little India, seeking comfort in the space of Mustafa Shopping Centre, a mall famous for being open twenty-four hours in a day. It is here that she strikes up an unlikely friendship with Renu, the last protagonist of the film.

Another mall within *Gone Shopping*, Mustafa Shopping Centre also serves as a heterotopia of illusion. Situated in Little India, Mustafa Shopping Centre caters to the ethnic minority community of Singaporean Indians. Unlike the more prestigious shopping malls in Orchard Road, such as Tangs, Mustafa Shopping Centre is known for offering sundry products, from cheap, mass-produced fast fashion knockoffs to parallel imported food items and electronics. Within this cosmopolitan space, it is interesting to note the film's portrayal of Mustafa Shopping Centre as confirmation of classist inequality, premised on racial stereotypes of the city-state's minority communities. Unlike the exclusive Tangs shopping mall, which is denoted as the domain for Singaporean Chinese socialites (Clara, Pat and Suki), Mustafa Shopping Centre functions as a contact site of ordinariness for marginalized members of society: Renu, a young Indian girl, and also Ash, a Malay transvestite. Renu, the young Indian girl, wanders around Mustafa aimlessly, after her parents abandon her following an argument. Ash, a Malay transvestite, is a conman who cross-dresses and tricks gullible middle-aged women into buying branded products for cheap. In

reality, he administers some kind of sedative and then steals their valuables while they are out cold. In the allegedly cosmopolitan state, the shoppers of Mustafa Shopping Centre in the film are only either of Malay or Indian ethnicities, as are the stereotypically Indian security guards and retail assistants that staff the mall. The one character who does not fit the racial profile is Clara, who ventures there solely because she does not wish to return home, and tellingly, her husband admonishes her along racial lines: he intimates that Clara is not safe shopping in Little India, because of the large number of Indians and migrant workers there whom he despises. Taken together with the film's portrayal of Tangs, I think this shows Singaporeans do not have access to consumerism and the concomitants of the Singapore Dream on the same grounds, which I will later discuss in my conclusion.

Subsequently, the film's portrayal of Mustafa Shopping Centre also becomes a metaphor for the quest for identity, and also, the inadequacy of cosmopolitanism and its ideology in the form of the Singaporean Dream within the heterotopic grounds of the shopping mall. The shopping mall itself is an unabashed and chaotic mess to navigate, perhaps a play on the urban jungle that is Singapore – only more jungle than urban. It is piled high and teeming with merchandise on every side. Renu, a young girl provides this perspective of the mall, grounding the viewer's navigation of the mall with her child-like wonder. Unlike Clara who is lost in an increasingly homely Tangs, in a blurry-eyed consumerist daze, Renu is a lost child, who is both abandoner of and abandoned by her parents, trying to navigate her sense of belonging and sense of self amongst ever shinier, ever more grownup toys. Like Clara, Aaron and Hui Hui, there is an element of tragedy in Renu's narrative. Following an argument in Mustafa Shopping Centre, her parents not only lose her *in*

the mall, but, the film suggests, *to* the mall. Her parents do not come to reclaim her, and we see Renu being raised by the mall, or at least by its different facets: the security guards, as well as an eccentric, transvestite shopper, Ash, who initiates her into consumerist worship, with a mannequin as god. In the end, though, Renu's experience while negotiating the shopping mall's chaotic space proves to be hollow and superficial, and she finds no fulfillment through the enactment of her daily life and heartland routines here. At the end of the film, she issues a cry for help through the mall's public announcement system, bitterly questioning why her parents abandoned her, and never came back for her. That it is announced through the public announcement system is significant, perhaps, of the larger sense of injustice done to those in the heartlands, who have been isolated or abandoned in the state's pursuit of its own vision of cosmopolitanism, at the expense of its more vulnerable and oppressed constituents.

The choice of mannequin as object of worship is therefore highly symbolic, and perhaps fitting as representative of cosmopolitanism ideology tied to the Singaporean Dream as meaningless but inescapable fantasy in Singapore. Ash's worship of this chimeric goddess of consumerism transitions into the reification of Clara into a mannequin herself. From merely being a disembodied, dissatisfied narrative voice surveying Tangs after dark, by the end of the film Clara is transformed into an unblinking, mannequin-like figure perched atop a display rack in Tangs, ultimately suggesting that the only possibility of escape from cosmopolitan ideology is believing in it to an extent that warrants unthinking and complete devotion to it, such that one loses any and all sense of self.

12 Storeys and Gone Shopping: Cosmopolitanism and the Fantasy of Escape

At this juncture, I repeat my argument for the films I have analysed in this chapter, namely, Eric Khoo's *12 Storeys* and Wee Li Lin's *Gone Shopping*. I first started out by explaining the phenomenon of the Singaporean Dream, as a consequence of cosmopolitan ideology, which in turn, is merely the consequence of the state's vision of cosmopolitanism. Against this backdrop of the Singaporean Dream as cosmopolitan ideology, I explored the possibility of fulfillment for heartlanders through cosmopolitanism despite being denied space by an oppressive state that enacts oppressive social reality in the heartlands. I defined fulfillment in the sense of assimilating the state's vision of what it means to be cosmopolitan, through the Singaporean Dream. I concluded by suggesting that although the film renegotiates the heartland spaces of entrapment and inescapability discussed in Chapter 2, it ultimately shows that heartlanders are not only denied the fruits of cosmopolitanism but are clearly unable to meaningfully engage with cosmopolitan ideology. Thus, the film concludes that the heartland space is oppressive both because of and in spite of cosmopolitanism and the ideology of the Singaporean Dream.

Then, I moved into an exploration of cosmopolitan spaces in Singapore, in particular the space of the shopping mall as they are represented in Wee's *Gone Shopping*, and explored the possibility of establishing heartland routines within cosmopolitanism as an act of imagination, and simultaneously, rebellion, but more importantly, as a means of escape from the state's vision of cosmopolitanism through the process of emulation. In particular, I argued that characters in the film emulate their daily lives and routines in the cosmopolitan space of the shopping

malls by projecting their fantasies in these very spaces. I concluded that this was ultimately untenable, as a consequence of the shopping malls' temporality. Because they are limited by opening and closing hours, characters have to return to the heartlands and confront their social reality of oppression and isolation, conditions that manifest as silent anxiety. Subsequently, I looked at the space of Mustafa Shopping Centre as a space of abandonment, considering its uniqueness among shopping malls (and therefore cosmopolitan spaces) since it never closes. I suggested it as metaphor for the abandonment of heartlanders in its perfect enactment of the state's vision of cosmopolitanism. Finally, I concluded that the film suggests cosmopolitanism and the cosmopolitan ideology of the Singaporean Dream as meaningless but inescapable fantasy. The only recourse to escape, then, is in the total and complete devotion to its ideology, at the cost of losing the self.

CHAPTER FOUR | CONCLUSION

In this last chapter, I reiterate my argument, and contend that social inequality is inescapable for the population, because of the state's vision of cosmopolitanism. This vision of cosmopolitanism divides the population into cosmopolitans and heartlanders, codified in then-Prime-Minister Goh Chok Tong's National Day Rally Speech (1999), and results in conditions of entrapment in the heartlands, from which escape is ultimately impossible. All four films are inflected with anxiety, and are, arguably, the cinematic entry points into the larger thematic of suppression in the Singaporean urbanscape, a trend which continues even today. In this thesis, I argued that all four films emphasise the entrapment of the population in oppressive social reality in the heartlands, preventing escape. Eric Khoo's *Mee Pok Man* sets up the extent of domination of the state's vision of cosmopolitanism, examining the oppressive social reality of heartlanders not just as spatial construct, but also as totalising state of mind by subverting tropes of superheroism to instead show the powerlessness of heartlanders on the fringes of society. In the light of this revelation, the film questions if Goh's celebration of heartlanders is, in essence, euphemism for the celebration of social inequality and the powerlessness of its citizenry, since heartlanders are not heartlanders by choice, but inescapable social circumstance.

The next film in my argument, *Eating Air*, directed by Kelvin Tong and Jasmine Ng, proceeded by examining the possibility of escape from such a totalising structure of state power. Through caricatures of Singaporean subaltern youth culture, the film is a celebration of youthful energy and vigor in the heartlands. Through this energy, the film considers the possibility of escape from multiple perspectives, by

framing escape from the state's vision of cosmopolitanism as a creative choice of un-participation. The film concludes that escape is impossible ultimately, and taken together, both films suggest life as heartlander is not just characterised by oppressive social reality, but reinforced by the bleakness of inescapability. However, there are possibilities of escape. After all, the bleakness encountered in *Mee Pok Man* and *Eating Air* is a direct result of the filmmakers' choice of subject matter. It should be noted that the characters in these films are representative of a small sample size of heartlanders in Singapore, who belong to a minority that are extremely marginalised, with no avenue or possibility for encounters with the cosmopolitan, despite the prevalence of the state's vision of cosmopolitanism in the city-state.

Thus *12 Storeys*, directed by Eric Khoo, examines the ways in which inhabitants of the heartlands receive and respond to cosmopolitan ideology, borrowing from social critic Brenda Yeoh's notion of the "cosmolander" as a hybrid class of Singaporeans, with cosmopolitan orientations and aspirations, in heartland locales. In particular, the film considers the possibility of cosmopolitan fulfillment despite the oppressive social reality of the heartlands, through the cosmopolitan ideology of the Singaporean Dream. Despite renegotiating entrapment and inescapability of the heartlands as desirable ideology, nonetheless, the film suggests the inability of heartlanders to meaningfully engage with it. The film thus concludes that oppression in the heartlands occurs both because of, and in spite of, cosmopolitanism and its concomitants. However, there are spaces in the city-state that are cosmopolitan by nature, and that cater to heartlanders, raising the possibility, once again, of a different kind of escape.

It is with this in mind that the film *Gone Shopping*, directed by Wee Li Lin, entered my argument, as my final point. I noted in the introduction to this chapter that shopping is part of the Singaporean makeup, and the cosmopolitan spaces of the shopping mall are as much catered to the local population, as to tourists and PMETs. In response, the film suggests the possibility of fulfillment for Singaporeans, through the emulation of heartland experiences and routines in the cosmopolitan space of the shopping mall. Thus, *Gone Shopping* suggests shopping malls as heterotopic spaces of illusion, in which the escapist fantasies of its characters take place. Consequently, the illusory nature of fulfillment is revealed in the nature of the shopping malls: they have to close eventually, and its heartlander visitors have to return to the social realities they despise. The film then suggests that escapist fantasies in cosmopolitan spaces can be a substitute for the oppressive social reality of life in the heartlands, but comes at a high cost: the loss of the self. Therefore, this suggests that escape from social inequality is ultimately impossible for its inhabitants, because the state's vision of cosmopolitanism is one that is finally inescapable.

What Next?

Now that I've shown how the discourse of cosmopolitanism in Singapore facilitates social inequality, it is prudent to ask: what comes next? And, is there recourse from social inequality for Singaporeans? If my contention is that social inequality is facilitated *through the state's control of urban space*, after all, then the most obvious solution would be to simply change the configuration of urban space, and trust that this should provide sufficient impetus for the population to re-organise itself into social equilibrium. However, this is not as straightforward as some might

presume. Over the course of my research for this thesis, I have come across numerous books and essays on the Singapore urbanscape, many of which are critical about the missteps and missed opportunities of the state, and their failure to engage with the robust architectural community in Singapore. To this I say that hindsight is 20/20, clichéd as it may sound. The reconfiguration of the urbanscape, taking into consideration the local architectural community, may indeed produce a social reality that will reduce social inequality, but who's to say it might not (just as easily) swing the other way? Furthermore, even if an ideal configuration of the urbanscape could be conceived, it is surely impossible to raze and rebuild the city-state without considerable damage to the complex networks and infrastructures, both internally and internationally, that are already in place, and that would not just affect Singapore's brand name, but its economic viability as well. This in turn, would have negative consequences for the survivability of the city-state, since its current position as a global and vibrant hub is entirely dependent on its economy. The potential for disaster is too great for an undertaking of this magnitude to be worth the risk.

Yet, to simply persist with the way the state currently envisions the urbanscape is not tenable either. The truth is, as long as the state continues to extol the cosmopolitan-heartland narrative, the anxieties that plague the films in this thesis will continue to exist. They may even get worse. In fact, evidence suggests that the income gap between the rich and the absolute poor in Singapore is widening. In 2016, Singapore was ranked second among the most unequal countries for income inequality (Teo 23). In order to solve the problem, I believe there needs to be a reconsideration of the state's approach to cosmopolitanism. In understanding the principles that shape the state's cosmopolitan ideology, we can then attempt to

unlearn the ways we instinctively respond to it. When discussing how cosmopolitanism works in Chapter 1, I defined the Singaporean state's view of cosmopolitanism as universalism plus difference, but where a huge emphasis is placed on "difference" in a material, consumerist sense. Key to understanding this, is recognising meritocracy as the value system that grants access to this material "difference" based on a false notion of deservedness.

In her book *This Is What Inequality Looks Like*, Teo You Yenn notes that the acknowledgement of and grappling with inequalities – income and wealth in particular – are slow to register in the consciousness of Singaporeans (23). A compelling reason for this is the nature of meritocracy and the way it functions in Singapore. Teo outlines the city-state's parameters of meritocracy as such: firstly, meritocracy is contingent on individuality. Upward mobility is something that individuals – regardless of cosmopolitan or heartlander – can achieve, independent of their family's circumstances or fortunes. Secondly, the same upward mobility can be achieved as long as the individual works hard within the formal education system. Thirdly, the formal education system is focused strongly on the extent of an individual's academic knowledge, by way of examinations. Lastly, while success can be attributed to hard work, it is as much about natural intelligence and talent to some extent, with the meritocratic system being the differential factor that sorts and rewards individuals accordingly (23-26).

As this discourse of meritocracy is institutionalised and prevalent enough that it is concretised at individual level, Teo continues by suggesting that individuals, whether cosmopolitan or heartlander, who succeed through the Singaporean system of meritocracy are legitimised as "deserving" of the cultural and social capital they

acquire. Conversely, people who are not successful in line with the state's meritocratic discourse are similarly legitimised as "undeserving", or rather, they deserve to have less (26). This concept of inequality is naturalised as differentiated deservedness and is played out through the wide range of services to be found within the city – from housing and healthcare to education and childcare, where citizens come to accept that they deserve different levels of service (both in type and quality) depending on their wealth.

As long as meritocracy forms the basis for accruing social and cultural capital, based on whether individuals are "deserving" enough of them, the social phenomenon of widening inequality is to be expected. As Teo notes, inequality is, in fact, a logical outcome of Singaporean meritocracy (26). And as long as the rhetoric of cosmopolitanism continues to be based on meritocracy, the population will necessarily be defined by their roles of cosmopolitans and heartlanders, with a very thin sense of mutual obligations between them.

All this is to say that perhaps there is a solution to the cosmopolitan problem in Singapore. Perhaps the best response to the state's vision of cosmopolitanism lies, ironically, in a return to the very first sentiment of cosmopolitanism, expressed all those centuries ago in ancient Greece. Hayden observes that Diogenes proudly proclaimed himself to be a "citizen of the world" in response to the question of where he came from (12). Whereas Diogenes applies to the universality of humanity as his criteria for participation in matters of humankind, Singaporeans can start smaller, by first recognising no *real* division between the cosmopolitan and heartland spaces in Singapore. After all, except for a small percentage of the population, a large number of Singaporeans live in the heartlands, but work in the city-state's cosmopolitan

spaces, whether as Chief Executive Officer of a multinational corporation, or cleaner in a shopping mall. As such, their locus of identity should not just be reduced to identifying with one or the other, since the majority of Singaporeans have a stake in both the heartland and cosmopolitan spaces. If every Singaporean were both cosmopolitan and heartlander, both shining face of Singapore and guardian of its culture, social inequality would not be solved overnight, but it would be a critical first step towards removing one barrier to equality, building relationships between members of society and achieving universalism plus difference – with a focus on the universalism for a change. Only then, can Singaporean film move beyond the boundaries that frame our anxieties of identity.

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