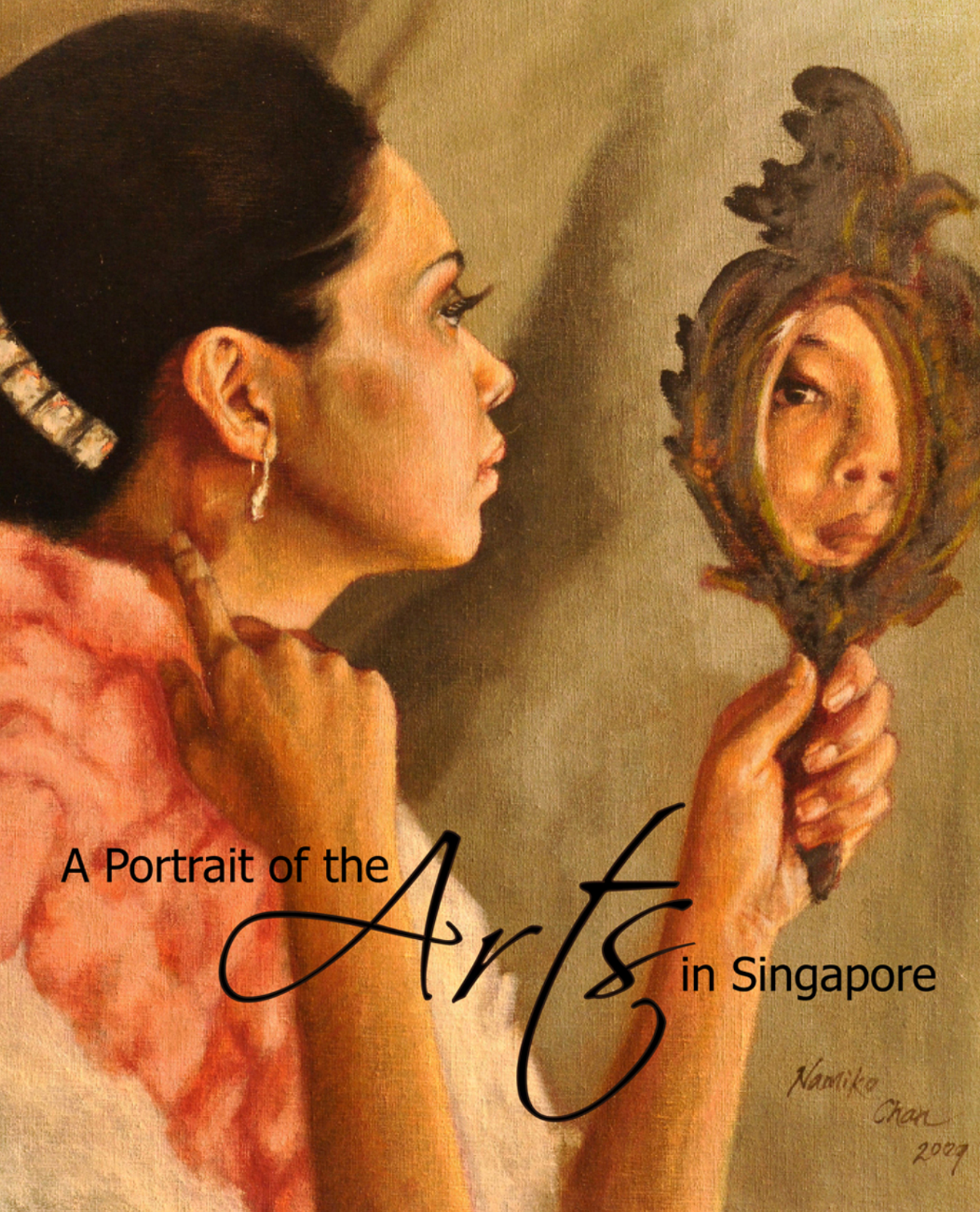


# COMMENTARY

THE NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE SOCIETY  
VOLUME 21, 2012 MICA (P) NO. 120/01/2012



A Portrait of the

# Arts

in Singapore

*Nandika  
Chan  
2009*

**Commentary:  
Volume 21, 2012  
A Portrait of the Arts in Singapore**

Editor: **Assistant Professor Angelia Poon**  
Editorial Advisor: **Professor S Gopinathan**

Published by  
**The National University of Singapore Society (NUSS)**  
Kent Ridge Guild House  
9 Kent Ridge Drive  
Singapore 119241

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Printed by Naili Printing Industry in Singapore, 2012.





# *Mission Statement*

**To foster a lifelong relationship with NUS and the wider graduate community**

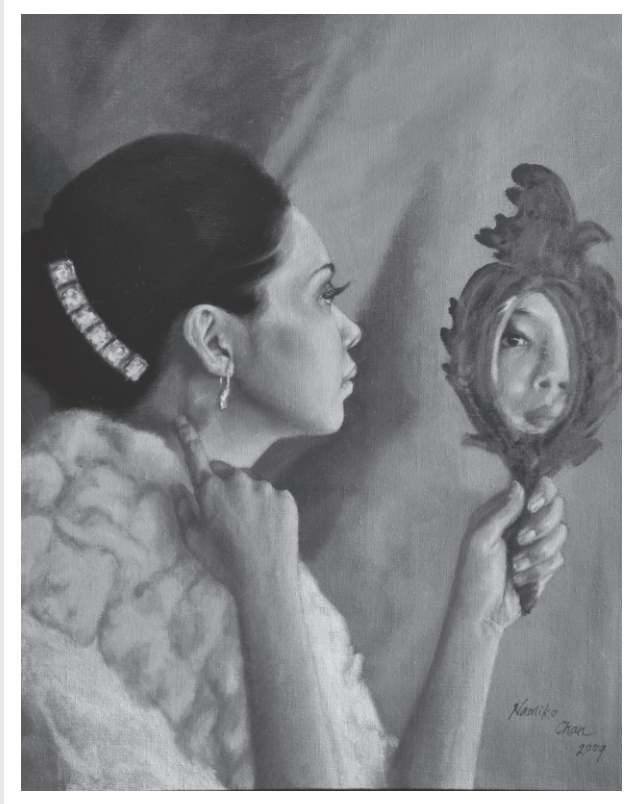
At NUSS, a lifelong relationship with NUS and the wider graduate community is achieved through two mutually reinforcing thrusts:

- promoting the interests of its members and NUS and
- contributing positively to Singapore's political and intellectual development and helping to cultivate a more gracious social and cultural environment.

As the foremost graduate society, NUSS strives to promote the interests of its stakeholders by providing appropriate platforms for all to socialise, build networks, improve connectivity and exchange ideas through a multitude of recreational, academic, political, social and cultural activities.



# On the Cover



**The** cover image, titled *sy-T*, is a key piece from Singaporean artist Namiko CHAN Takahashi's 2009 solo exhibition *Divergences*. The exhibition comprised a series of double portraits exploring the theme of parallel lives. In each pair of paintings two women face each other in a mirror-like reflection, each regarding the other almost as if peering into her life. Viewing these portraits side by side is like looking through a brief window of lucidity at women from different worlds. The companion piece to this painting, *sy-W*, can be viewed at the National Art Gallery when it opens in 2015.

Namiko CHAN Takahashi (b. 1974, Singapore) is a professional multi-disciplinary artist with a background in law and education. One of a select few Singaporeans to have been accepted to the Art Students League of New York, she studied under prominent American artists such as Mary Beth Mckenzie and Daniel Greene. Namiko was the grand prizewinner of the 25<sup>th</sup> UOB Painting of the Year Competition in 2006. Her work is collected internationally and exhibited widely, including two solo shows at FOST Gallery— *Parables* (2007) and *Divergences* (2009). She is an NUSS member.

# Contents

- 4 Foreword  
*By Professor Tommy Koh*
- 9 Editorial Note  
*By Professor S Gopinathan*
- 11 A Word from the Editor  
*By Assistant Professor Angelia Poon*
- 17 Struggling over the Arts and the Artist in Singapore  
*By Dr Terence Chong*
- 28 The Arts, Culture and Singapore as a Global City  
*By Associate Professor C. J. W.-L. Wee*
- 42 Still Building  
*By Alvin Tan*
- 51 Poems: 'Newton Discovers Gravity at 12' and 'Standing Before *David*  
at the Accademia'  
*By Aaron Lee*
- 54 Gold in Deep Space  
*By Chua Chin Leng*
- 55 Untitled (Green and Orange Waves)  
*By Arthur Yap*
- 56 Poetry  
*By Dr Ho Chee Lick*
- 57 Valuing the Value(s) of Literature  
*By Assistant Professor Warren Mark Liew*
- 72 Literature and Social Memory: The Case of Suratman Markasan  
*By Dr Azhar Ibrahim*
- 85 Poem: 'Beautiful Artistic life!'  
*By Kalaicchemmal S Varathan*
- 87 The Bilingualism of Singapore Chinese Literature  
*By Assistant Professor Tan Chee Lay*
- 98 From Where I Sit: Musings on Singapore's Classical Music Scene  
*By Dr Chang Tou Liang*
- 105 Art and the Wet End of 2011  
*By Dr Adele Tan*
- 110 Editorial Board

# Foreword

By *Professor Tommy Koh*

I wish to thank NUSS and the Editorial Advisor, Professor S Gopinathan for inviting me to contribute the Foreword to this special issue of *Commentary* on the arts in Singapore.

I have recently completed reading Koh Tai Ann's *Reviewing Singapore* and Robert Yeo's excellent memoirs, *Routes*. Both Tai Ann's volume of essays and Robert's book remind their readers of some of the mistakes which the government committed in the 1950s and 1960s, such as the attack on Professor D J Enright and the campaign against 'Yellow Culture'. Robert Yeo also reminded us that, not so long ago, playwrights like him were heavily censored. In order to obtain permission for their plays to be performed, they had to swallow their pride and integrity and excise words and sentences which, when viewed from the perspective of contemporary Singapore, were totally harmless. Although Singapore has undergone a paradigm change, the unhappy legacy of the past lives on and probably accounts for the pervasive feeling of distrust among many in the arts community towards the government. We should remember the past but we should not be imprisoned by it.

Reading Chang Tou Liang's excellent essay reminds one of the tremendous progress which classical music has made in the past 20 years. As an avid reader of Dr Chang's reviews, I must record my deep gratitude to him. I agree with his concerns: inadequate funding, uncultured behaviour of the audience, music teachers and their students who do not go to concerts, poor level of general music education and insufficient support for local composers and artists.

Alvin Tan's essay reminds me of the vibrancy of the English-language theatre and the debt we owe to a small group of people, such as Kuo Pao Kun, Lim Kay Tong, Lim Kay Siew, Ong Keng Sen, Alvin Tan, Haresh Sharma, Ivan Heng and Gaurav Kripalani. Without the dedication and sacrifices of these remarkable people, we would not have the theatre we do. The fact that The Necessary Stage has survived with its integrity intact is a remarkable achievement. I agree with Alvin that it is unwise for the government to reduce its financial support for an arts group or festival just because it stages some controversial plays. It sends a very negative signal to the arts community.

I welcome Warren Mark Liew's essay on the values of literature. The pragmatists who rule Singapore, mostly educated in engineering and the sciences, tend to have very little understanding of and appreciation for literature. They tend to see literature as a source of entertainment rather than a source of enlightenment. The disrespect for literature extends to our elite schools. I understand that some of our elite schools actively discourage their bright students from taking literature because it is harder for such students to score high marks in literature than in the sciences. In my dealings with foreign countries, I have often found literature a better guide to understanding those countries than works of non-fiction. In addition, as a diplomat, I need to understand the cultural box of my foreign interlocutors in order to gain insights into how they view the world, think and reason. Literature and history are essential to the training and success of diplomats.

Tan Chee Lay's essay introduces us to the world of Chinese literary works. The author makes a strong plea for bi-lingualism and bi-culturalism. I would welcome more translations of works written in Chinese into English, Malay and Tamil, and vice versa. Literature can help us bridge the four linguistic streams and the four communities. The differences are not just linguistic but they are also grounded on differences of values, cultures and sensibilities.

Azhar Ibrahim's essay on our esteemed writer, Suratman Markasan, reinforces the point in Tan Chee Lay's essay. Suratman's writings are in Malay. With few exceptions, they are not available in English, Chinese and Tamil. As a result, most of us are not aware of this important writer and of his quest for truth, justice and identity.

I will now deal with a number of stereotypes or myths which I have found in several of the essays.

### **Myth No 1: The State Is Our Enemy**

Terence Chong talks about the struggle for power between the artist and the state. He also writes that the history of the arts and culture in Singapore cannot be told without the state in the protagonist role. He also warned that, "the dependence of the artistic community on public funds will subject the arts to the political agenda of the State ...".

Having served as the founding chairman of the National Arts Council (NAC) from 1991 to 1996, I find the above sentiments quite astonishing. When the NAC gave money to the Singapore Symphony Orchestra, it did not tell the orchestra what music it could play and could not play. When NAC gave money to the Singapore Dance Theatre, it did not tell the dance company whether it should prioritise classical ballet over modern dance. When NAC gave money to TheatreWorks, The Necessary Stage, Action Theatre, The Theatre Practice, The Substation, etc, it was without any strings attached. When we provided affordable housing for arts groups at Waterloo Street and Cairnhill, we had no other agenda than to help them. When we provided affordable studio spaces for artists at Telok Kurau, NAC did not have any restrictions on what works the artists could create and what they could not. The agenda of the state was similar to the agenda of the artists and the artistic community. It was to help the artists succeed and for the arts to flourish in Singapore.

## **Myth No 2: The Market Is The Enemy**

Another common myth is that the market is the enemy. In his essay, C. J. W.-L Wee wrote that the “danger, ... of substituting aesthetic and cultural values subject to the market place is real, especially in Singapore, where these values are arguably still little understood”. He also wrote that the “strongest challenge to arts development in the new millennium is that it is increasingly becoming part of what might be called ‘lifestyle capitalism’, in which ‘alternative’ socio-cultural stances become co-opted into the diverse cultural mosaic of contemporary cosmopolitanism”.

Art should be appreciated even if it has no economic value. The reality is, however, that art does have economic value. The cultural industry of the world is one of the largest and most vibrant. We have to live with this reality. We, in the public sector, should always guard ourselves against the corrupting effect of money. We should however, not demonise the market. If you are an artist, are you better or worse off because of the existence of art galleries, auction houses and art fairs? I think most artists would say that they benefit from the existence of the art industry. The temptation which an artist faces in whether to paint for his own satisfaction or for the market, is a dilemma faced by everyone in every walk of life. We should all



heed the warning in one of the holy books, that the love of money is the root of all evil.

The National Heritage Board, which I chaired from 2002 to 2011, acquires many paintings and other works of arts and heritage for our museums and collections. In making our acquisitions, our criteria do not include the question of whether it is a good investment. In this way, we co-exist with the market but are not corrupted by it. However, we are not ideological about it and do not think there is anything wrong if a private collector does consider the economic value of a work as one of the criteria for his acquisition.

### **Myth No 3: The Esplanade Is Built For Foreigners**

The government made a serious mistake when it decided not to build the medium-sized theatres (400 and 800 seats) at the same time as the Concert Hall (1,600 seats) and the Theatre (2,000 seats). This mistake, which I hope the government will rectify in the near future, has given rise to the misperception that the Esplanade is not being used by the local arts groups and that it was built primarily to entice foreign investment and foreign knowledge-workers to move here.

The reality is that most of the works presented at the Esplanade is by local arts group. The reality is that most of the visitors and concert-goers are Singaporeans.

### **Conclusion**

I am happy with the current state of the arts in Singapore. Twenty years ago, I could attend every concert and visit every exhibition. Today, I will have to choose because I am spoilt for choice. Twenty years ago, our English language theatre was very boring because it was principally staging foreign plays. Today, we have many local playwrights writing for the theatre and an audience which love it. The other day, I took two foreign friends to see the exhibition, *Dreams and Reality*, at the National Museum. I was thrilled to see so many Primary Three students from St Anthony's Canossian Convent at the exhibition. I was really impressed by the dialogue between the students and their teachers about Van Gogh, Monet and the Impressionists. The report of the Arts and Culture Strategic Review Committee has just been published. It could be as important a report as

*Foreword*

the 1989 Ong Teng Cheong Report. If accepted by the government, the recommendations of the report will ensure that the arts and culture will have a very bright future in Singapore.

**Professor Tommy Koh**

*Chairman, NAC, 1991-1996*

*Chairman, Censorship Review Committee, 1992*

*Member, Steering Committee and Board of Director, the Esplanade, 2002-2007*

*Chairman, NHB, 2002-2011*

# Editorial Note

By *Professor S Gopinathan*

**The** impetus for this special issue of *Commentary* on the Arts in Singapore comes from Professor Angelia Poon's and my conviction that while economic and political developments have dominated media coverage in 2011, the position, relevance and value of the arts ought not to be ignored. This is so, not only because Singapore has aspirations to be a Renaissance/Global City, but also because in the midst of change and uncertainty, the arts can speak to us, to inspire, console, remind in ways that GDP statistics or electoral percentages cannot.

Growing up in pre- and post-independence Singapore, I was fortunate to be able to tap into what was even then a culturally diverse and active environment. I was fortunate to be able to read for an honours degree in English Literature with D J Enright and M Baker and partake in discussions about state-initiated 'national culture' building efforts. Arthur Yap was a classmate, Suratman Markasan a colleague in my teaching years and Oliver Seet, Koh Tai Ann, Robert Yeo and Kirpal Singh were colleagues at the National Institution of Education.

The National Theatre and Cultural Centre were regular haunts; I recall attending play rehearsals at Evans Road Guild House, including cutting edge plays produced by S Chandramohan, my brother. I was a member too, of the Film Society. I was also bicultural, drawn by cultural roots to get involved in the Indian Fine Arts Society.

I recount those activities and experiences to show that Singapore was not quite the cultural desert that Singapore in the 70's and 80's is often made out to be. It is good that today we have cultural policies and frameworks, and ample resourcing but it is well to remember that not all artistic and creative activity needs or occurs because of state support.

In this volume our contributors traverse a wide terrain, ranging from the teaching of literature in schools, a commentary on Suratman's place in Malay and national literature, to a consideration of the Singapore version of Chinese literature, among others. We have also sought in the design of this issue to reflect some of the visual excitement of creativity in several arts related fields. There are certainly important omissions but we trust that this effort provides a stimulating and an adequate portrait of the arts in Singapore.

*Editorial Note*

I am grateful to Professor Tommy Koh for his Foreword and to Professor Angelia Poon whose efforts are primarily responsible for this special issue.

**S Gopinathan**

*Professorial Fellow*

*National Institute of Education*

*Nanyang Technological University*



# A Word From the Editor

By Assistant Professor Angelia Poon

## The Next Act

**That** the arts has come a long way in Singapore is a fact I am certain none of the contributors in this issue of *Commentary* would dispute. Where once it would have been easy to deride Singapore as a crass, commercial cultural wasteland, now even dyed-in-the-wool opponents of the city-state would be hard pressed to make such a description stick. The next act, for there must always be one, now that the infrastructure for the arts has largely been established and now that we have come to a stage where we can assume that the arts *has* a place in Singapore, is perhaps less easily plotted. Nevertheless, it seems to me that any step forward requires the inevitable negotiation of three fundamental tensions.

The tension between the artist and the state in Singapore has traditionally precipitated its fair share of crisis and controversy. It is not difficult to understand how an artist who relies on state funding for his/her work may well chafe under specified and (equally pernicious) presumed restrictions on the content and mode of his/her expression. Terence Chong's article in this issue traces historically the political interplay between the Singapore state and the artist over such fundamental issues as artistic freedom, the ideals of art and culture in society and the very nature of artistic identity itself. That state funding and "powerful patrons", to use Chong's term, are needed for the arts is hard to overstate. A recent *Straits Times* report on the dearth of young playwrights in Singapore speaks to this very point. The article noted how in a bid to remain commercially viable, theatre companies have little choice but to be risk averse and opt to stage work by already-established writers. Grooming new talent demands time and resources that these companies can hardly afford to spare (Chia, 2011). That the writer needs a room of her own - a material as well as psychological and emotional space for contemplation and experimentation - is as true now as it was when Virginia Woolf proclaimed it more than eighty years ago. Strong state support for the arts can clearly go a long way to mitigate the deleterious consequences of a purely market-driven climate for the arts. In Singapore, public funds channeled in this direction have reaped clear rewards. The success of the NAC's Arts Creation Fund in helping some Singapore writers bring their work to fruition is ample proof that the state is in an excellent position to provide such "rooms"

(Nanda, 2011). The recently-opened Goodman Arts Centre, with its aim of providing “content creation space”, also bodes well for the future (Goodman Arts Centre).

The second tension, one that usually intersects the first, is the relationship between the artist and the marketplace. If it is not the power of the state, together with its political ideology and goals for the nation, that the artist has to contend with in striving to keep his artistic vision and work pure, it is the very real temptation and danger of selling out. Caught between the proverbial Scylla and Charybdis, the artist cannot afford however the luxury of throwing his arms up in despair. Masao Miyoshi (2010), the late cultural and literary scholar well-known for decrying the effects of economic neoliberalism on academia, art and culture and personal life, acknowledged the impracticality of refusing funding - whether public or private - for the Arts, noting that “the rejection of all possible contamination inevitably produces quietism and inaction” (p. 184). The only solution is to ensure that “distinctions must be judiciously maintained between acceptable and unacceptable subsidies” (p. 184-5). Alvin Tan’s article on the theatre scene in Singapore addresses this point and sheds light on how creatively nimble and resourceful theatre companies like The Necessary Stage have to be to keep themselves afloat so as to produce the kind of meaningful and socially incisive dramatic work that is their *raison d’être*.

The third tension informing the Arts in Singapore is that between the local and the global. More often than not, this is a particularly creative tension as artists engage in their work with two particular sets of audience in mind, and admit influences specific to immediate localities like neighbourhood, community and nation, as well as those from more far-flung spaces. The writers of contemporary Chinese literature in Singapore that Tan Chee Lay examines in this issue embody precisely the rootedness and openness that negotiating such a creative tension might call for. Tan’s adroit metaphor for the writers’ artistic orientation and disposition is the compass, an instrument anchored at a point by one foot while the other freely traces an arc as close to or far away from home as desired. From the point of view of audiences however, the tension between the local and the global tends unfortunately to morph into a dichotomy at once starker and more forbidding. Reflecting on the local classical music scene, Chang Tou Liang notes in his contribution to this issue the strides made in terms of the quality and range

of concerts on offer at any given time in Singapore's world-class performing halls and venues. But while concert attendances for internationally well-known musicians are high, local classical musicians alas, tend to receive short shrift. If Singaporeans won't support Singaporean musicians, who will? The recently announced recommendations by the Arts and Culture Strategic Review to create a more broad-based culture of support for the arts that includes local communities, hobbyists and amateur artists for example, may perhaps help to "grow" such audiences (Oon 2012).

What is at stake in interrogating the state of the arts in Singapore is nothing less than a debate over the kind of society we want to be. If our emphasis is on being a world-class city mindlessly manacled to the tenets of neoliberalism and global capitalism, then we will only have the arts of glitz and glamour, of blockbusters and spectacle, demanding nothing more than passive consumption. As Adele Tan's offbeat and quirky contribution to this issue on the need for more exciting (read less safe) public art suggests, we will have the arts we deserve unless we do something about it. In the absence of a popular groundswell of thought and feeling about the arts, blandness will surely prevail. If we aspire instead to be a more just and progressive society committed to aesthetic and ethical development rather than the merely economic and technological, then we should be asking that the arts challenge and change our lives instead of confirm us in our pat conventional wisdom and precious pieties. In this regard, Azhar Ibrahim's article here on one of Singapore's most significant writers, Suratman Markasan, is a timely reminder of the importance of the writer/ artist as a powerful conscience and gatekeeper of social memory, one who steadfastly resists a "culture of silence". We are all usually, if not secretly, by default Arnoldian in accepting that artists should aspire to create "the best that has been known and thought" but it is perhaps to Matthew Arnold's contemporary, the less often quoted William Morris, that we should turn to for a vision of everyday life inextricably intertwined with the arts. A committed socialist, artist, writer, early environmentalist, designer, and founder of the Arts and Craft Movement, Morris' aesthetic, political and social thinking were inseparable. He espoused an inclusive rather than an elitist vision of art, reacting against the brutalising effects of industrial capitalist society on late Victorian society. Thus he asserted, "I do not want art for a few, any more than education for a few, or freedom for a few" (Morris, p. 26). Morris saw creative activity and expression as central to being human. Often dismissed as

naïve, his revolutionary and utopian anti-industrialism has nevertheless a resonance for our contemporary moment which has more than enough evidence of the damaging effects on the environment, the ecology and social communities that Morris foresaw “development” would bring. If nothing else, Morris’ views about art challenge us to clarify the role of the arts in our lives.

Crucial to cultivating and growing the kind of arts and society we want is of course education. Arts education has always been about educating not only future practitioners and performers but also future audiences. Turning to classical music again, Chang Tou Liang has made the observation that despite the sheer number of young Singapore students learning to play a musical instrument and taking music examinations, this has not always led as one might expect to correspondingly higher concert attendances. Passing that music exam to further burnish one’s CV seems to have displaced learning that would inspire a genuine love for music. The sense of missed chances in education also informs the collective sigh - drawn out for well over two decades now - by writers, literature teachers and literary scholars in Singapore who view with dismay the decline in English literature study in secondary schools. Warren Liew’s article situates the problem within a global political, economic and cultural context where business, science and technology are privileged over the humanities, arguing that any solution must involve linking the pedagogy of literature to the historically specific material conditions engendered by globalisation. He advocates adopting a critical pedagogy that crucially recognises Literature’s “cultural and political role as an effective counterweight to the anti-democratic tendencies of an economically-driven, neoliberal technocratic age”. At once, intellectually and politically invigorating, such a critical pedagogy also underscores more generally the imperative to develop a challenging public discourse about the arts. This is consonant with what C. J. W.-L. Wee has written in his article discussing the development of the arts in relation to Singapore’s avowed pursuit of global city status. Wee argues that future state policies on culture and the arts in Singapore should be premised on “a marked shift in thinking from the older, entrenched form of a disciplinary, economics-oriented instrumental-rationality”. The rhetoric of economic pragmatism and instrumentalism which stresses having to make the arts into an industry that would generate revenue and income and ensure that the arts attract foreign talent is, beyond a point, impoverishing and



vitiating. We have reached that point and I strongly believe that we need to make a conscious effort to forge alternative associations and draw upon other intellectual traditions with which to discuss the arts. In particular, we need to dismantle the dichotomy between the arts as “soft”, and other areas of knowledge like the different sciences as “hard”. Employing this implicitly gendered distinction is self-defeating, to say the least, in the light of how the twenty-first century is shaping up to be a historical moment requiring greater epistemological flexibility, interdisciplinary knowledge and creative thinking across all kinds of borders.

In a recent essay, the Nobel Laureate Professor Amartya Sen (2011) urges as an antidote to political violence, a civil society which engages “democracy in the broad sense - that of ‘government by discussion’ analysed by John Stuart Mill” (p. 30) and includes freedom of information and discussion. Such a society would celebrate the multiple affiliations of human beings instead of “a solitarist approach to human identity”, which seeks to confine individuals to being “members of just one group, defined solely by their native civilisation or religion” (p. 32). While Sen does not explicitly mention the arts, it seems to me that the arts provides an ideal platform for exactly the kind of connected and connecting dialogue among individuals that promotes the acts of affiliation which he sees as ultimately central to world peace.

It is in this spirit of connecting and provocative dialogue that I hope this issue of *Commentary* will be read and debated. Professor Tommy Koh has sounded the first spirited note in such a dialogue with his Foreword but his will surely not be the last.

Finally, all that remains is the pleasant task of rendering thanks. It was my privilege to edit this issue on the arts in Singapore and to learn from the excellent commentators here who have written so eloquently about their distinct areas of expertise, interest and passion in the Arts. A heartfelt thank you to them, to the poets and artists who have generously shared their creative art here, to Professor Tommy Koh for his Foreword, Professor Gopinathan for his Editorial Note and invariably sage advice, and last but certainly not least, the team at NUS especially Almata and Lisa who helped make this issue a reality.

**References**

Chia, A. (2011, October 13). Where have the young ones gone? *The Straits Times*. p. C6-C7.

Miyoshi, M. (2010) *Trespasses: Selected Writings*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Morris, W. (1994) *Hopes and Fears for Art and Signs of Change*. Reprint of 1914 and 1915 editions. Bristol: Thoemmes Press.

Nanda, A. (2012, January 26). New Tales to Tell. *The Straits Times*. p. C5.

Oon, C. (2012, February 26). Grow the arts from the ground up: Review panel. *The Straits Times*. p. A1, A4-5.

Sen, A. (2011, Michaelmas Term) Violence and Civil Society. *CAM: Cambridge Alumni Magazine*, issue 64, p. 30-35.

**About the Editor**

.....

**Angelia Poon** is Assistant Professor of English Literature at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University. Her research interests include postcolonial studies, contemporary literature and Singapore literature. Besides other scholarly publications, she co-edited the first historical anthology of Singapore literature in English, *Writing Singapore* (NUS Press), which was published in 2009.

# Struggling over the Arts and the Artist in Singapore<sup>1</sup>

By Dr Terence Chong

In the arts, as with everything else, the struggle for power comes in a variety of forms. Of these, the one over meaning is probably the most dynamic. After all, when it comes to the control of public funds or the flexing of regulatory muscle, local arts groups have to contend with an uneven playing field where the state reigns supreme. It is, however, in the struggle for the meaning of Art and the role of the Artist that the contest becomes more open and because of this, more overt.

The tug-of-war between states and artists over the meaning of Art is endless as it is global. The more salient issue is the particular values and meanings inserted, sometimes surreptitiously, sometimes less so, into notions of Art by states and artists alike for they are sharp indications of respective interests as well as their economic and political positions in society. This article looks at the way the Singapore state has harnessed the arts and culture for a 'civilised' and 'cultured' society, an ideological site for fantasies of multi-racialism and the different roles of the Artist as championed by the state as well as artists themselves.

## The Arts for a New Society

The Singapore grand narrative is that of an island-state forced by political and geographical circumstances to hinge national survival on economic growth. Through astute leadership and hard work, the nation has overcome the odds to enjoy the trappings of a first world country. It is a narrative that does not revere the arts. A typical assessment would read something like this, "During the 1960s and 1970s, while the government focused on the country's economic development and its citizens concerned themselves with ensuring that their proverbial rice bowls remained full, Singapore was not known as a country with its own distinct national tradition in the arts" (Peterson 2001:11).

This lack of a 'distinct national tradition' however, did not mean that the People's Action Party (PAP) government was slow to grasp the opportunities that the arts and culture offered to the nation-building project. Indeed, the history of the arts and culture in Singapore cannot be told without the state in the protagonist role.

---

<sup>1</sup> Excerpts from this article are from the author's book *The Theatre and the State in Singapore: Orthodoxy and Resistance* (Routledge 2010).

And there was no one nimbler than S Rajaratnam, Singapore's first Minister of Culture, in not only *elevating* but also *exploiting* the Artist for ideological ends. In 1964, with Singapore still part of Malaysia, he noted that:

"The great artist is one who can see what is universal and permanent in what to the untrained eye is particular and transitory. Perhaps Malaysian artists can help us to see what is permanent and universal in Malaysia where ordinary people only see a diversity of races, religion, language, customs and habits. The Malaysian view, after all, is one where what we have in common is more important than our differences. The non-communal view of the Malaysian artist can do a great deal to accelerate the growth of a Malaysian consciousness"

– *Rajaratnam 1964: no page number*

The reluctant birth of the Singapore nation less than a year later made the artist's gift for the 'universal and permanent' all the more urgent in the newly formed polyglot society. The arts enjoyed a rudimentary relationship to culture in the eyes of PAP leaders. "The arts" as the production of conventional artefacts like paintings, theatre, music and literature were seen as signifiers of "culture", generally defined by the state as a prescribed set of social practices and pseudo-ethnic values. The unquestioned naturalness of these signifiers explored below, were particularly critical given the pressing need to create a new Singaporean society upon independence, as well as the PAP government's highly essentialist and ontological perspectives on "race" and its determination of an individual's "culture" and "heritage".

### **Creating 'Civilised' and 'Cultivated' Citizens**

"It is through Art, and through Art only, that we can realize our perfection; through Art and Art only that we can shield ourselves from the sordid perils of actual existence."

– *Oscar Wilde (1997)*

It is unlikely that Wilde was ever prerequisite bedtime reading for the PAP ruling elite but they certainly shared the playwright's moral aestheticism. For one, the PAP government saw traditional forms of high art as a means to ennoble the soul



and to create a society that was 'civilised' and 'cultured', with the dichotomy between "high culture" and other forms of "lower" popular culture clear and unproblematic. Good art was a vehicle for the very best that "culture" had to offer, which was said to be the "pursuit of our total perfection" and "the best which has been thought and said in the world" (Arnold 2008:5).

Just like every medicine needs a good disease, the familiar complaint that Singaporeans were dedicated solely to materialism while lacking refinement is a perennial one ripe for the arts antidote. Way back in 1964 Yusof Ishak, later to become Singapore's first President, observed that "for it used to be a common slander in the old days, that while the people of Malaysia, and in particular Singapore, are good at making money, they're indifferent to the finer graces of civilised life" (Yusof 1964:no page number). Echoing the same sentiments, Senior Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Rahim Ishak (1978:66), opined in 1977 that "Art generally can help make our domestic lives that much more pleasant and agreeable. Some of us become embarrassed when we are called "ugly Singaporeans". Lack of appreciation of the arts is a contributory factor to this phenomenon." These complaints of uncouth Singaporeans were recurring tropes in government discourse and were the precursor to Goh Chok Tong's lamentations of a "parvenu society", the solution to which, then and now, were the arts and culture.

It was thus poetic that the most morally instructive advice on how to write the Great Singapore Play came from an economist. At a PAP Bukit Merah variety show at the Victoria Theatre on 7 April 1967, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence, Dr Goh Keng Swee took time off from his busy schedule to divulge the following formula. "Firstly, the themes of the plays should be in keeping with the realistic life in Singapore and its multi-racial, multi-cultural and multi-religious spirit. Secondly, they must discard the crazy, sensual, ridiculous, boisterous and over materialistic style of the West. In the same way, the feudalistic, superstitious, ignorant and pessimistic ideas of the East are also undesirable. Thirdly, they must emphasise the spirit of patriotism, love for the people and for sciences, and cultivate diligence, courage, sense of responsibility and a positive philosophy of life. Fourthly, they must be free from crudeness in production, opportunism, monotony, vulgarity, copying and backwardness. Fifthly, they should provide noble, healthy and proper cultural entertainment for the people" (Goh 1967: no

page number). His instructions summoned the spirit of Soviet Socialist Realism which demanded that the artist produce truthful and realistic representations of life as a vehicle for the ideological transformation of society.

### **A Site for 'Multi-racial' Fantasies**

"In our society, where we place value on the pragmatic and the possible, the social soil is likely to be favourable to the growth of an art-style that is at once a reflection of the Republic's multi-racial life-style. In such a society, art for art's sake has less meaning."

– *Chan Chee Seng (1971:no page number)*

One concrete way in which the arts were exploited for ideological ends was in the state's efforts to spread the 'multi-racial' message. According to Benjamin (1976:122), "The term 'culture' is used more and more to refer only to the sort of projective fantasies that can be performed on stage or written in books, and less and less to the patterns that lie behind the contemporary everyday life of ordinary Singaporeans". Culture, as interpreted by the PAP ruling elite, was closely intertwined with notions of civilisation and ethnic traditions. This link is easily made because of the ruling party's insistence on the prevailing importance of a person's 'race' to his or her values, socio-cultural habits and world view. Or as a senior government official put it succinctly, "Thus if one is a Chinese, or a Malay, or an Indian, being a part of his society, he must live within the world of his particular culture" (Ismail 1969:no page number). And it was this close relationship between the arts and ethnic culture that allowed the government to play out its multiracial fantasies.

To this end, especially in the early years, the arts were "culturally symbolic expressions of communal identity associated with the more popular practice of the traditional arts (for example, Chinese music or opera, Indian dance, Malay drama, and Western ballet)" and this was "collectively the approved expression of an instant Singapore multicultural identity" (Koh 1989:716). This "instant Singapore multi-cultural identity" was typically performed in spaces like schools, community centres, and the annual National Day Parades. A representative multi-racial performance would comprise children or adults of the three main 'races' – Chinese, Malay and Indian – dressed in their respective traditional ethnic costumes,

meaning the *qipao* for Chinese, the *sarong kebaya* for the Malay and the *sari* for the Indian. The music of cultural performances would characteristically be from instruments popularly associated with the different 'race' such as the *erhu* (Chinese), the *kompang* (shallow Malay drum made from cow hide), or the sitar (Indian). Other symbolic expressions of 'race' also included the Chinese lion dance, the Malay Tarian Melayu or *joget* and the Indian classical *Bharatanatyam*. All of these were instantly recognisable to local audiences as neat and self-evident representations of distinct 'race' categories slowly dancing their way, in deep allegorical bliss, towards racial harmony.

Such performances were, and still are, useful in homogenising and essentialising the broad array of ethnic groups for administrative and political expediency. The Hokkiens, Teochews, Cantonese, and Hakkas were conveniently reduced to 'Chinese', while the Bugis, Minangkabaus, Boyanese, Orang Selat, Javanese, and so on were summed up as 'Malay', and the Malayalee, Sindhi and Tamil communities seen as 'Indian'. This reduction of ethnic diversity to the rather more opaque "CMIO" categories amounted to the "disciplining of race" for administrative and political expediency (Purushotam 1998).

### **State-Artist Relations: Lessons from the Renaissance**

As the arts were harnessed for state interests, the prescribed position of the Artist began to take shape in the early 1980s. Finance Minister Hon Sui Sen, at the opening of the Third Singapore Arts Festival on 10 December 1980, evoked the example of Renaissance Italy. According to Hon (1981:2):

"While it may sound romantic for artists to starve and work in their garrets, the output of such artists without patronage must be abysmally low. A Michelangelo could not have given of his best without the beneficence of a Pope Sixtus with a Sistine Chapel to be decorated: Neither could other artists of the Renaissance have done their work without the patronage of princes whose vanity must be flattered or wealth displayed."

Hon's point was that the production of the arts must be closely aligned with systems of patronage of either the private sector or state variety. Four years later in 1984, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Culture, S Dhanabalan, took up the Renaissance trope again. In contrasting the Romantic Movement against the

Renaissance, Dhanabalan (1984:32) observed that:

“There is, among some cultured circles today, a most strange conception of the artist and of the patrons of art. Since the Romantic Movement of the early nineteenth century, the notion has developed that a true artist is a free spirit, even a rebel against society, a Bohemian often with unsavoury habits, and a visionary with long hair and wild eyes, doing whatever he is inspired to do... This is considered the ideal world of art and culture.”

He went on to assert that:

“The Renaissance world was quite different. In the Renaissance world and for much of Western history, the artist was often considered a craftsman. The artist did not consider it demeaning to be working to meet the demands of his patron within the bounds set by his patron... This is not to say that he just did what he was told. But his inspiration and creativity could not run too far ahead of his patrons” (Dhanabalan 1984:32-33).

For Dhanabalan, the Singapore Artist was no different from any other worker who had to abide by the wishes of his employer. As a craftsman, the artist could and *should* work within the perimeters set by the Singapore state. Unlike Raja’s Artist, who was able to see beyond the “particular and transitory”, Dhana’s Artist found himself (invariably masculine in the eyes of the state) firmly and specifically embedded within a hierarchical order.

In 2000, the Renaissance theme was revived yet again with the publication of the *Renaissance City Report*. This time, the political relationship between state and artist was de-emphasised. Instead, the promotion of the city-state as a cultural hub and the need to dissuade mobile Singaporeans from emigrating led policy-makers to highlight the multiple talents of the “Renaissance Singaporean”. The “Renaissance Singaporean”, according to the *Renaissance Report* (2000:39) in typically gendered language, is “an individual with an open, analytical and creative mind that is capable of acquiring, sharing, applying and creating new knowledge” while “attuned to his Asian roots and heritage”. Such pronouncements were in keeping with the government’s practice of legitimising specific constructions of the

Singapore Artist by emptying universally recognised concepts of their historical significance and filling them up with state-friendly meaning and values.

### **The Singapore Artist as Deviant**

In prescribing the Artist's role, the state was also apt at exploiting archetypal artistic biographies. These biographies are usually syncretic concoctions of artistic stereotypes, a constructed life-script that submits artists to convenient objectification infused with local political interests and values. One widely recognisable biography of the Artist is that of the 'deviant'. As scripts of hedonism, self-indulgence and self-gratification, such biographies are useful in raising moral panic and consequently, justification for greater regulation.

'Deviance' is no more evident than in the "conflation of artist with the homosexual in Singapore" (Seet 2002:157). The greater tolerance of sexual minorities in the arts community has led to its crystallisation as a homogenous site of gay identities, thus underlining it as a location of "sexual deviance" (Heng 2001:88) or as "aberrant, anti-social and/or immoral" (Lo 2004:121). In 1994 Josef Ng, a performance artist, snipped off his pubic hair at a New Year show organised by The 5<sup>th</sup> Passage before a small audience in symbolic protest against police entrapment of gays. At the same show, Shannon Tham, another performance artist, vomited into a bucket as part of his performance, also in protest of gay entrapment. Ng was fined S\$1,000 for committing an obscene act. The local media had a field day, prompting the National Arts Council (NAC) to issue a public statement saying that "NAC finds the acts vulgar and completely distasteful, which deserve public condemnation. By no stretch of the imagination can such acts be construed and condoned as art. Such acts, in fact, debase art and lower the public's esteem for art and artists in general" (quoted in Lee 1996). Episodes like these reinforce the notion of the Singapore government as stern parent "'putting up' with the hyperactive, overly imaginative artist-child. If the artist-child becomes 'unmanageable', an embarrassment in public, he must be disciplined and 'sent to his room without dinner', that is, removed from the scene – naturally, it is all done for his own good" (Sasitharan 2003:137-8).

Deviant biographies are not always state imposed. In some cases, they are claimed by artists themselves. Elangovan, playwright and artistic director of Agni

Koothu (Theatre of Fire), springs to mind. Known for provocative works which “often explore the untouched realities and impotency of the Tamil minority in Singapore”, he “believes that art should conscientize [sic], confront and question accepted societal stereotypes of vision, perception, feeling and judgment to examine reality as a historical and social process” (Elangovan 1999:93). His plays are characterised by expletives and crude language, and he has even resorted to locking auditorium doors to prevent his audience from leaving, flouting safety regulations. Some have argued that “Elangovan sees the dramatist as a kind of *agent provocateur* and construes the artistic behaviour as necessarily challenging the status quo” (Seet 2002:154). Most famous for his plays *Talaq* (1999) and *Smegma* (2006), both of which address religion in a controversial manner, Elangovan and his wife, S Themoli, have an astute understanding of the local media’s relationship with local theatre, and have been highly successful in leveraging on the media and its interests for exposure and attention (ibid.).

### **The Singapore Artist as Prometheus**

Two of the most enduring ingredients of the Artist’s biography are Truth and Suffering. They legitimise each other, marking the Artist as the outsider who is willing, dedicated and altruistic. Like Prometheus who defied the gods to bring fire to enlighten the lives of mortals, only to suffer the ignominy of having birds pick at his liver for all eternity, the Artist too must embrace Truth and Suffering as one and the same. Although universal, it is amidst the landscapes of hegemony and dominant ideology in illiberal regimes where this biography stands out.

The Singapore political landscape has been fertile ground. The fate of The Third Stage, a political English-language theatre group formed in the early-1980s, is one such example. From its very first production, *Cry for a Cactus* (1983) that explored the constraints of compulsory national service, *Oh Singapore!* (1985) on the interventionist state, to *Esperanza* (1987) on the plight of exploited Filipina maids, the theatre group quickly established a reputation for unvarnished portrayals of marginal communities. Its amateurish production values lent precious authenticity to its drama at a time of strong economic growth and an expanding middle class. All this came to an abrupt end with the so-called ‘Marxist conspiracy’ in 1987. A total of 22 individuals from different walks of life were accused of plotting, behind the veil of the Catholic Church’s ‘liberation theology’, to overthrow

the government. As part of Operation Spectrum, Wong Souk Yee and Chng Suan Tze, members of The Third Stage were also detained. The 'political play' that the Third Stage was known for – guerilla-like, low in production values, politically confrontational and socially pointed, issue-driven, underlined with a clear ideological orientation – faded into oblivion.

The best known of such biographies is perhaps that of the late Kuo Pao Kun. Born in Hubei, China, moving to Hong Kong, then to Singapore and later Australia, and back again to Singapore, Kuo's life falls neatly into the narrative of the outsider-heterodox artist. Kuo's activism in left-wing Chinese-language theatre led to his detention without trial under the Internal Security Act in 1976. His release in 1980 came with restrictions on residence and travel until 1983 while his Singapore citizenship, revoked in 1977, was only restored in 1994. Indeed, Kuo's biography may be discursively read as the archetypal heterodox artist who challenged state orthodoxies over social justice and cultural ideology while never relinquishing his sense of humanity even after incarceration. Certainly, Kuo himself understood the need for the artistic *habitus* to be seen as an outsider because "I think that kind of marginality, a fringe kind of experience, allows one to compare and reflect" (Kuo 1997). Indeed, Kuo's work is often presented by his peers and admirers as deeply reflective of the Singapore postcolonial condition not because it is mainstream but for the artist's ability to produce 'images at the margins' of society (Kuo's collection of plays was compiled into a 2000 volume titled *Images at the Margins*).

Inscribed in such biographies are not only the artist's abilities and gifts but also the *right* to challenge dominant ideology and orthodoxies. It is a biography of heterodoxy, always in tension with the norms of society; and one that is well acknowledged by the state. According to Ong Keng Sen, "the official perception of the artist [is] as 'an outsider in Singapore... the other' in the face of materialism and capitalism" (quoted from Seet 2002:157).

## **Conclusion**

The biographies of artists will continue to be the object of struggle between the state and the artists themselves. On one hand, the dependence of the artistic community on public funds will subject the arts to the political agenda of the state, while on the other, the artistic community's efforts to exercise its autonomy



against institutional *de rigueur* is romantic as it is universal. How this struggle will unfold will depend on the controversies which allow such biographies to play out, as well as the personal views of political leaders who will set the tone for the state's response. Indeed, the relatively enlightened positions of individuals like S Rajaratnam and Ong Teng Cheong have encouraged the arts to flourish despite the country's single minded devotion to the economy. Because of their political standing, they have been able to raise the profile of the arts during their tenure. Singapore artists today, like their Renaissance counterparts, could do with powerful patrons.

### **References**

Arnold, Matthew. 2008 [1869]. *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism*. Middlesex: The Echo Library.

Benjamin, Geoffrey. 1976. *The Cultural Logic of Singapore's Multiculturalism*. In *Singapore: Society in Transition*, ed. Riaz Hassan. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.

Chan, Chee Seng. 1971. *Speech by Mr Chan Chee Seng, Parliamentary Secretary (Social Affairs) at the Occasion of the Opening of the "Art for Everyone" Exhibition at Maude Road Community Centre, on Friday, 9 July at 8pm*. Singapore: Ministry of Culture.

Dhanabalan, S. 1984. *Artists Have To Depend On Patronage*. In *Speeches: A Monthly Collection of Ministerial Speeches 8(1) (Jan/Feb)*. Singapore: Ministry of Culture.

Elangovan. 1999. *Talaq*. Singapore: Elangovan.

Heng, Hiang Khng Russell. 2001. *Tiptoe Out of the Closet: The Before and After of the Increasingly Visible Gay Community in Singapore*. In *Gay and Lesbian Asia*, ed. Gerard Sullivan and Peter Jackson. New York: Harrington Press.

Hon, Sui Sen. 1981. *Festival of arts must involve entire community*. In *Speeches: A Monthly Collection of Ministerial Speeches 4(7) (Jan)*. Singapore: Ministry of Culture.

Ismail, Ghazali. 1969. *A Talk on "Malay Cultural Contribution to Singapore's Tourist Industry" by Inche Ghazali Ismail, Political Secretary to the Ministry of Education at the Cultural Centre on Sunday, 7 December at 6pm*. Singapore: Ministry of Culture.

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

Kuo, Pao Kun. 1997. *Between Two Worlds: A Conversation with Kuo Pao Kun*. In *9 Lives: 10 Years of Singapore Theatre: Essays Commissioned by The Necessary Stage*. Singapore: First Printers.

Lee, Weng Choy. 1996. "Chronology of a Controversy." <http://www.biotechnics.org/Chronology%20of%20a%20controversy.htm> (accessed 20 November 2011).

Lo, Jacqueline. 2004. *Staging Nation: English Language Theatre in Malaysia and Singapore*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Peterson, William. 2001. *Theatre and the Politics of Culture in Contemporary Singapore*. Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press.

Purushotam, Nirmala. 1998. *Disciplining Difference: "Race" in Singapore*. In *Southeast Asian Identities: Culture and the Politics of Representation in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand*, ed. Joel Kahn. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Rahim Ishak. 1978. *Art and gracious living*. In *Speeches: A Monthly Collection of Ministerial Speeches 1(7) (Jan)*. Singapore: Ministry of Culture.

Rajaratnam, S, 1964. *Speech by the Minister of Culture, S. Rajaratnam at the Opening of the Art Exhibition Organised by the Joint Committee of the Singapore Malay Organisations at the National Library, 12 Nov, 5.30pm*. Singapore: Ministry of Culture.

Sasitharan, Thirunalan. 2003. *The Arts: Of Swords, Harnesses and Blinkers*. In *State-Society Relations in Singapore*, ed. Gillian Koh and Ooi Geok Ling. Singapore: Eastern Universities Press.

Seet, K. K. 2002. *Interpellation, Ideology and Identity: The Case of Talaq*. In *Theatre Research International 27 (2):153-163*.

Wilde, Oscar. 1997. *The Critic as Artist*. California: Green Integer.

Yusof, Ishak. 1964. *Speech by His Excellency the Yang Di-Pertuan Negara, Tun Yusof bin Ishak at the Opening of the Singapore Art Society's 15<sup>th</sup> Annual Exhibition at the Victoria Memorial Hall on Thursday, 23 April at 5.30pm*. Singapore: Ministry of Culture.

## About the Author

.....  
**Terence Chong** is a sociologist and Senior Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. His interests are in the sociology of culture, globalisation and religion. He has published in *Modern Asian Studies*, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* and *Critical Asian Studies*. He is the author of *The Theatre and the State in Singapore: Orthodoxy and Resistance* (Routledge 2010).

# The Arts, Culture and Singapore as Global City<sup>1</sup>

By Associate Professor C. J. W. -L. Wee

**Singapore**, with a population of over 5.1 million in 2010, including foreigners, is a distinct society which perhaps more than other post-colonial societies, in its desire to match up the advanced West, forsook not only many of the political dimensions of democratic life but also its cultural dimensions, taken in both the high-cultural and 'way-of-life' senses. An industrial and commercial understanding of culture was elevated, and manufacturing and productive institutions became the collective basis of social life. And yet, despite a puritanical modernity, experimental theatre and visual art started to flourish in the 1980s.

Such developments were noticed by the People's Action Party (PAP) state. The 19 July 1999 issue of *Time* asked on its cover: "Singapore swings: Can Asia's nanny state give up its authoritarian ways?". The magazine said, "Culturally, Singapore is permitting artists to stage a range of socially and politically controversial performances."<sup>2</sup> The year 1990 saw the naming of Goh Chok Tong as Prime Minister. This soon led to a formulation of cultural policy by the government. The National Arts Council (NAC) was set up in 1991 and the Ministry of Information and the Arts (MITA) created, a ministry that had "PAP intellectual-in-waiting [George] Yeo in charge. The new minister enthused about fostering a global renaissance city, about making Singaporeans more creative, about forging a civic society..."<sup>3</sup>

It is understood in the city-state though, that the government has not simply gone humanistically soft. In order to be a "creative economy" and a "happening" global city that can retain competitive foreign and local business and industrial talent, Singapore now cannot display only a pragmatic modernity. New public policies have been set in place that would foster artistic creativity and create an arts market, in the thinking that such creativity would in its turn encourage technological and entrepreneurial innovation. This newer circumstance poses challenges for the very innovative artistic energy that the state wants to foster. This article explores some of the tensions in the recent changes.

---

<sup>1</sup> This is a revised version of an essay that first appeared as 'Culture, the Arts and the Global City', in Terence Chong, ed., *The Management of Success: Singapore Revisited* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Terry McCarthy with Eric Ellis. "Singapore Lightens Up", *Time*, 19 July 1999, p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

### **Arts Developments in the 1990s**

The city-state of Singapore, under People's Action Party (PAP) leadership since 1959, represents a capitalist modernity that deliberately forsook autochthony in cultural development for economic success. In a fundamental way, this was the argument that literary critic Koh Tai Ann made of the Singapore state's approach to cultural matters from the early years of independence to the late 1980s, when "culture" was used for the central purpose of nation-building.<sup>4</sup> Since then though, it has been open to creating a cultural superstructure that would match its status as a major regional financial and industrial hub. "Culture", in the 20-odd years prior, had referred more to multi-ethnic cultures and values, though by the 1980s to the mid-1990s, "culture" also signified the mythicised "Asian" values that were the alleged foundation of Singapore's "East-Asian Miracle" status. Cultural policy — policy that fostered the arts and high culture — was not a priority. The PAP's reputation for forging a conventional society composed mainly of shopping centres by and large stemmed from a pragmatic, petit-bourgeois vision of a hardworking modern society.

By 1989, a recognisable cultural policy started to be articulated with the government's *Report of the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts*.<sup>5</sup> By then, there was already a burgeoning theatre scene led principally by The Theatre Practice (TTP), The Necessary Stage (TNS) and TheatreWorks (Singapore), among the first three professional theatre companies in recent times. There was also a nascent and experimental visual arts development. Before we can assess the impact of official arts policy on the contemporary arts, it is necessary to have some sense of these artistic emergences, and then their relationship to official culture.

In the theatre, TTP's Kuo Pao Kun (1939-2002) was the major enabling personality. He had been detained without trial by the state between 1976-80 for alleged communist activities. Kuo returned in the 1980s with plays that examined both the severe weakening of culture and cultural memory in the wake of a state-led

---

<sup>4</sup> Koh Tai Ann, "Culture and the Arts", in *The Management of Success: The Moulding of Modern Singapore*, edited by Kernial Sandhu and Paul Wheatley (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1989).

<sup>5</sup> Ong Teng Cheong et al., *Report of the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts* (Singapore: Singapore National Printers, 1989).

modernisation, and that held out the possibility of trans-ethnic understanding. He broke the mould of single-language theatre with plays such as the now iconic *Mama Looking for Her Cat* (1988) that used Mandarin, Hokkien, English and Tamil. Kuo was a natural institution builder able to generously support younger talent. He thus was able to harness the energy of visual artists involved with newer arts practices such as performance art — introduced to Singapore by visual artist and Fukuoka Cultural Prize winner Tang Da Wu — and helped pioneer an emerging multi-disciplinary contemporary arts scene.

The three companies created adventurous theatre productions, often formally bold, with scripts created in a workshop setting, dealing with issues of memory, ethnic and other identity issues in works like *Rosnah* (1996) and *Pillars* (1997). These were artistic reactions against the singular and top-down disciplinary modernisation of Singapore since the mid-1960s which did not really foster space for reflection on cultural or historical issues. What was notable of 1980's to mid-1990's theatre was how "difficult" theatre formed the mainstream of the theatre groups; such theatre even co-existed with indigenised Broadway-style musicals within the companies as part of the dynamic process of experimentation in theatre form in relation to Singapore identity. Gender issues were noticeable by the early 1990s in works like *Lest the Demons* (1992), *Private Parts* (1992), *Mergers and Accusations* (1995). Whatever the shortcomings were of early professionalism in the theatre, they were invigorating years.

In the visual arts, the return of Tang Da Wu from London in 1988 (after the best part of 20 years in England) led to his founding of a community called the Artists' Village in 1989, in an abandoned village in then-rural Sembawang. This ruralism was also a critique of the petit-bourgeois urban society that Singapore was becoming.<sup>6</sup> Another visual-art collective that emerged was the 5th Passage group, linked with Susie Lingham and Suzanne Victor, which functioned until 1994.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> In 1989, Tang is quoted as saying that: "The main reason for being here [in Sembawang] is the isolation." The magazine writer's response to this was: "The psychological context of the village is earthy, rudimentary, and free of the numerous and trivial distractions normally found in the city" (Chia Ming Chien, "The Artists' Village", *Man*, April-May 1989, p. 33).

<sup>7</sup> Susie Lingham, "A Quota on Expression: Visions, Vexations and Vanishings – Contemporary Art in Singapore from the Late 1980s to the Present", in Singapore Art Museum, *Negotiating Home, History and Nation: Two Decades of Contemporary Art in Southeast Asia 1881-2011*, exhibition catalogue (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2011).

The contemporary and anti-commercial art that arrived with Tang was eclectic. There were dynamic and energising experiments in conceptual art, performance, installation sculpture that used pre-existing or “found objects”, figurative painting that had German expressionist antecedents (but executed with personal rather than historical references), pop art and “happenings”. There had been earlier intimations of such artistic possibilities, but they were just that — intimations. The various ethnicities of the predominantly younger artists Tang mentored also made for a challenging experimentation with themes that implicitly or otherwise engaged the state’s wished-for bland identity and urban modernity. The environment, sexuality, gendered and other forms of identity, and feminism became areas for enquiry. The world of abstract modern art of the 1970s was largely transformed. Many artists were from less-privileged and often non-English-speaking social strata, which distinguished them from the more bourgeois background of English-language theatre practitioners, providing a distinctive edge to the visual arts. The overall creative release brought critical judgement into the aesthetic realm.

The 1980s to the early 1990s’ flourishing of the arts to some extent was possible because of the favoured pragmatic-philistine modernity. Singapore society, in its mercantile/industrial indifference to humanistic endeavour, gave space for artistic growth. Nineteen eighty-seven, though, was a hard year for theatre. A predominantly English-language group called the Third Stage that had addressed social problems — Filipina maids in the city-state, among them — was affected by government action taken against what was described as a Marxist conspiracy, one that affected not only the theatre practitioners but also Roman-Catholic social workers. The space opened up again for theatre thereafter, until another high-profile controversy at the end of 1993 — this time, unexpectedly, centred on the arts alone. The immediate causes for this were a number of performance arts events and experiments in contemporary theatre. A visual artist undertook urine-drinking as part of his performance. Soon after, a 21-year-old performance artist and Augusto Boal-style Forum Theatre practised by TNS were accused, respectively, of obscenity and having a Marxist orientation. The latter charge, with the collapse of the Berlin Wall, sounded odd to some ears.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> For more information and documentation of the events, see Sanjay Krishnan, Sharaad Kuttan, Lee Weng Choy, Leon Perera and Jimmy Yap (eds.), *Looking at Culture* (Singapore: Artres Design & Communications, 1996).

Performance art remained officially in a position of limbo and could not receive NAC funding until the ban was effectively lifted in 2003. Despite these obstacles, the desire for a commodified arts scene has since escalated.

What is curious is a sort of “backwards” arts development. There was, first, an experimental arts scene, which was *then* followed by attempts to increase the necessary infrastructure of proper arts education in the schools, major art spaces or museums (the Singapore Art Museum, for example, was opened only in 1996), and major theatre venues (the large part of the 1990s saw only “black box” venues being opened; the other options remained the inappropriately large Kallang Theatre – now closed – and the colonial-era Victoria Theatre).

In 1992, the policy came out to make the city-state not only a Global City, but indeed, a Global City for the Arts. As is often the case in Singapore, an ‘it-needs-to-transpire-tomorrow’ approach was adopted for the new cultural policy. The entrenched position of this paradigm, we will see, gives rise to the central tension between the professed wish for a dynamic creativity and an instrumental-rational mental set.

Arts funding increased and theatre, as the most visible art form, was a major beneficiary. The awkwardly entitled *Renaissance City Report: Culture and the Arts in Renaissance Singapore* (2000)<sup>9</sup> advocated more funding be made available (some S\$50 million over five years) and these funds have since made a noticeable impact on the cultural scene. In infrastructural terms, the crowning development was the October 2002 opening of the S\$600-million “Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay” arts complex. The Esplanade was criticised for not being a venue supportive of local theatre development, given that it has no medium-sized theatre space: its major theatre auditorium seats some 1,800 persons – a number that both the older and newer theatre companies would find daunting to fill.

While how the arts will develop in the new millennium depends primarily on the artists themselves, the environment set up by the state in support of their

---

<sup>9</sup> Ministry of Information and the Arts, *Renaissance City Report: Culture and the Arts in Renaissance Singapore* (Singapore: Ministry of Information and the Arts, 2000).



endeavours is important. Within the ambit of what is called “globalisation”, cultural policy worldwide increasingly recognises the economic importance of the creative arts such as film, video, new media, broadcasting and so on. The government well understands these trends. While it is possible to see aesthetic values being replaced by the commercial values of the market place, we can also see the new media as offering an expansion of creative possibilities. For these possibilities to be realised, it is imperative that a fundamental point be recognised: *that the arts lie at the core of the cultural sector, and creativity as a process is at the core of the arts*. There needs to be more of a marked shift in thinking from the older, entrenched form of a disciplinary, economics-oriented instrumental-rationality if profound artistic heights are to be reached. The relevant factor simply may be: *more autonomy*.

The late Kuo Pao Kun in 1999 argued in *The Arts Magazine* (the now-defunct magazine of The Esplanade) that the 1990s had been good for the arts – new artists and creative groups; more commercial galleries; more festivals; and, importantly, more young people “plunged into the arts profession”. However, he noted:

“Directly and indirectly, the state and its numerous agencies control the bulk of the public funding for the arts, all the major performing and exhibition venues and their year round schedule ... as well as the underpinning power to censor all public shows.

As the country enters a new millennium with a resolution to become an international arts centre, not to mention its ambition to be part of the Asian Renaissance, this arts regime ... appears totally out of date. ...”

Kuo added that:

“While it is true that such infrastructures can and do provide opportunities, state management has been generally suffocating in spirit.... Instead, the arts, as a dimension functionally distinct from politics and economics, deserves its own autonomous space above institutional politics because original and creative expressions always shoot up from the ground and are inclined to evoke longer philosophic vision, larger intellectual perspectives and more radical aesthetics venturing beyond the status quo.”<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Kuo Pao Kun, “Re-Positioning the Arts”, *The Arts Magazine*, November/December 1999, p. 19-20.

Kuo also made reference to 1993. The fundamental problem, he observes, may be that the government is concerned mainly to nurture an arts market or industry rather than the arts *per se*. If this is true, then

“Singapore is short changing itself. Controlled innovation programmes and managed innovative arts industries are useful additions to its economy... But Singaporeans deserve the full flowering of the arts, as they deserve the full spectrum of creative thinking. Not to do so is to under-rate the people’s intellectual and intuitive potentials, to deny them the opportunity to make primary contributions. Primary and Original – these are key concepts in the world of Art and Creativity.”<sup>11</sup>

In fact, one might add, “controlled innovation” may even stanch the creativity necessary for the knowledge-based industries and cultural industries that we want for our competitive, post-industrial economic future.

In many ways, though, what Kuo enunciated chimed with the findings of the Singapore 21 Committee, as published by the government in *Singapore 21: Together, We Make the Difference*. The report noted that a survey done in 1998 “found only 15% of Singaporeans willing to contribute to their community”.<sup>12</sup> Three recurring themes helped explain this lack: first, no sense of ownership over the issues the citizenry face; second, no sense of respect accorded to the citizenry; and third, no trust for the citizenry. The artistic section of Singapore’s national community, thus, are part of a representative sociological sample of opinion. In terms of an emerging and active civil society, it can be said that artists are willing to make their citizenship count through their participation in making (in Kuo’s phrase) “primary contributions” to their society.

The general solution *Singapore 21* advances is “active citizenship”, an idea “as old as the idea of democracy itself”: “We will benefit from greater responsiveness,

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>12</sup> Government of Singapore, *Singapore 21: Together, We Make the Difference* (Singapore: Singapore 21 Committee, 1999), p. 49.

more consultation and a wider range of views and ideas. The crux is how to do so without losing the efficiency, decisiveness and collective [state] action that has enabled Singaporeans to thrive.”<sup>13</sup> This is perhaps the rub. It returns us to Kuo’s claim that while the arts represent a realm “functionally distinct from politics and economics”, it nevertheless will evoke “perspectives ... venturing beyond the status quo”.

In the long term, it is best not to see more “active citizenship” as the loss of efficiency and decisive state action, but as the *means* by which the nation will be able both to survive and thrive within an era of globalisation.

### **The Arts and the Instrumentalisation of Culture**

I mentioned earlier that the formulation of cultural policy around the world increasingly takes into account the economic potential of cultural industries. The danger, however, of substituting aesthetic and cultural values with commercial values subject to the market place is real, especially in Singapore where these values are arguably still little understood. The policy changes thus far implemented may not spur the arts on effectively, for the general mental-set may still be too mired in older forms of instrumental-rationalist thinking. This must be addressed in a more thoroughgoing manner before more trenchant forms of cultural policy on cultural re-generation can result.

The Economic Development Board (EDB, the agency that has contributed so much to the city-state’s capitalist success) and MITA’s document, *Singapore – Global City for the Arts* (1992), is a representative instance of pragmatism’s limits. The document announced the impending arrival of a number of distinct national cultural institutions – mainly to potential overseas investors – such as the Singapore Art Museum and the Singapore History Museum (now the National Museum of Singapore). They are to function in a heritage district: “[The Museum Precinct’s] importance is underscored by its site in the heart of the Civic District, an area rich in history. Five museums will be housed in this precinct, linked by commercial complexes and surface and underground passages”; further, “[i]t is our hope that Singapore will be a centre of culture in East Asia”.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 51, 50.

<sup>14</sup> *Singapore – Global City for the Arts* (Singapore: EDB and MITA, 1992), p. 11, 3.

When one looks carefully at the Overview, a number of concerns can be raised: "Singapore, who draws her energies from the dynamics of her multi-cultural population, is plugged into the network of cultural capitals. She aims to be a global city for the arts by 1999."<sup>15</sup> Apart from the fact that 1999 has passed, the text erroneously suggests that high culture can be produced in the same way as a printed circuit board, and according to a timetable. What sort of qualitative performance indicators would one use, in any case, to measure the arrival of Singapore with a status as the London of Southeast Asia, save pure figures on how many art auctions were held here, given that Singapore has become a regional centre for art auctions, fairs and exhibitions?

The Overview then announces the economic assumptions behind the document: "Where the Republic once forged a reputation in trade, manufacturing, financial and service industries, she is now setting the stage for an arts industry to thrive."<sup>16</sup> Singapore's history of social engineering as the basis for nation-building is present here: we have the technology, we have the means, this history says. Then-EDB Chairman Philip Yeo is quoted: "There is now in Singapore a major opportunity to develop the arts, not only for cultural enrichment, but also in the interest of economic growth."<sup>17</sup> No one can take issue with that; but the leap from "cultural enrichment" to "economic growth" occurs in too rapid a step.

The section on "Arts Training" does announce the "software"<sup>18</sup> – more arts training, grants and scholarships – that the relevant state agencies will put in place to support this new enterprise. The present existence of new supporting institutions (such as the School of the Arts, started in 2006) and means represents an improvement from the past.

While it would be untenable to contend that the arts occupy a space free from the processes of commodification – one Japanese specialist notes, "Since the

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

arts and media make up a major part of the [Japanese] media programme, media policy will feature prominently in cultural policy development. The notion of cultural development for the sake of culture is increasingly difficult to maintain"<sup>19</sup> – it would *equally* be a misconception to think that the arts can flourish if commercial utility is to be the main driving force. While such an argument in Singapore, or anywhere else, is hardly new, it is made in relation to the city-state's current goal to be a cultural hub. Singapore may instead become an empty hub for other people's high or popular/mass culture to pass through. This will not serve former Prime Minister Goh's goal of making Singapore a "world-class home" in which "Singaporeans want to stay" rather than to emigrate.<sup>20</sup>

The major stumbling block for Singapore – simultaneously a major cause of our economic success and the retardation of cultural progress – is its own history of successful developmentalism. Singapore's post-independence experience of cultural development has been at variance with the experience not only of Western European, but also of many post-colonial Latin American, African and Asian countries. States took on the responsibility for maintaining material and immaterial historical heritage and in the process, they differentiated themselves from other nations. In many of the plural societies the colonial powers constructed, a "national" heritage was built up through the culture of their élite, which sometimes was of European origin. Modern institutions, such as museums and university departments of study engaging with the new nation's culture, were developed and historical sites maintained in order to strengthen national identity. Supporting ethnic arts and crafts were also part of these strategies as was support for the modern arts (literature, music, the plastic arts) and the mass media. Debates arose over how the urban centre and the provincial periphery, the modern and the traditional, were to be reconciled in such multi-level support of a national

---

<sup>19</sup> Michihiro Watanabe, "Cultural Policies in Japan", in UNESCO, *Culture, Creativity and Markets: World Culture Report 1998* (Paris: UNESCO, 1998), p. 174.

<sup>20</sup> Zuraidah Ibrahim, "Singapore's New Goal: Be a World-Class Home: Besides Building First-Class Economy, Excellence in Education, Arts, Sports and Culture is Also Important", *Straits Times Interactive*, 23 Aug. 1999 <<http://straitstimes.asia1.com.sg/one1/one1.html>> (accessed 24 Aug. 1999).

identity. But whatever differences were expressed, the idea of the “national culture” dominated, and the state played a leading role.

Nation-building in Singapore, and the PAP government’s management of the ethnic fissures in society, took a different route from the more established means of creating the “national” that incorporated cultural policy. “Culture” – particularly the sensitive meanings of “ethnicity” and “race” – was played down. The changes in present cultural policy do not in themselves signify a massive shift in the underpinning instrumental-rationalist mentality of nation-building, nor can one realistically expect economically pragmatic thinking that is so successful to disappear overnight. What is pressing, though, is coming to terms with this politico-cultural legacy and its consequences.

### **The Arts and the Economy in the New Millennium**

The contemporary arts scene since perhaps the mid-1990s has seen essentially a normalisation of what were once arts practices with counter-cultural dimensions. What was once unusual is now more standard, or predictable, perhaps. This normalisation in itself is not surprising — it is the pattern in the metropolitan West; what is surprising is the *speed* of the process, having taken place in only about a decade after newer arts practices emerged.

One could say that the state, in some respects, has understood that culture has to a greater or lesser degree become enmeshed with the economy.<sup>21</sup> This is so even as the state still remains true to its older comprehension of the economy as the base of all reality. The strongest challenge to arts development in the new millennium is that it is increasingly becoming part of what might be called “lifestyle capitalism”, in which “alternative” socio-cultural stances become co-opted into the diverse cultural mosaic of contemporary cosmopolitanism. Artistic creativity also becomes a part of a desired less-conformist subjectivity that could drive key sectors of local capitalism.

The state has acknowledged for a number of years that the old Fordist-Taylorised machinery of disciplinary modernisation was starting to creak. The re-shaping of

---

<sup>21</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991).

the paradigm began before the 1997 Asian economic crisis, though that hastened change; the result is a parading of the buzzwords associated with the “New Economy”. However, the entrenched utilitarian-pragmatic mentality of the protective-interventionist state, not surprisingly, plagues the *very ideas* of less-conformist subjectivities and a vibrant socio-cultural life thought to provide the “creative” intellectual and entrepreneurial support for an “Information Society”.

In November 1998, then-Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong discussed with the Committee Singapore’s Competitiveness’ recommendations. The fundamental policy recommendation was that the island-state must become an advanced knowledge economy in the next decade, with manufacturing and services being the twin engines of growth. A skilful workforce would be requisite. Traditional labour and capital become less important than what can be described as “immaterial” labour and “intellectual” capital.<sup>22</sup>

Business now has less tangible dimensions as to what makes for a remunerative dynamism. *The Straits Times* paraphrased the report thus: “Add some fizz into local entertainment by setting up an Arts Marketplace for interactive arts activities, similar to Melbourne’s Sunday Market and Montmartre in Paris. To boost tourism, build more theme parks and study the feasibility of building a new cruise centre.”<sup>23</sup> As with the best global versions of metropolitan life, we need to enhance the city-state’s stature as a transnational “hub” for the flows of capital. The “hardware”, as it is called in Singapore, needs a “software upgrade” – and not only in terms of what can be pragmatically understood like healthcare, or even the environment.

Singapore at the start of the new millennium had been transformed from a colonial city into a modern if uni-functional premier “world city” with a puritan work ethic, and into an economic centre for business in the Asia-Pacific. The question is whether it can become a multi-functional cultural metropolis, given increased regional and international competition from other aspirational world cities. The

---

<sup>22</sup> Cited in Zuraidah Ibrahim, “S’pore Focus on Key Areas for Growth”, *Straits Times Interactive*, 13 October 1998, <[http://straitstimes.asia1.com.sg/pages/sin1\\_1013.html](http://straitstimes.asia1.com.sg/pages/sin1_1013.html)> (accessed 14 Oct. 1998).

<sup>23</sup> “Staying Ahead: Business”, *Straits Times Interactive*, 13 November 1998, <[http://web3.asia1.com.sg/archive/st/4/pages/sin11\\_1112.html](http://web3.asia1.com.sg/archive/st/4/pages/sin11_1112.html)> (accessed 14 Nov. 1998).



need for more autonomy – a need already raised earlier – also applies to artistic and related cultural developments. The city-state has been working out how this freedom and autonomy can be wrought by a state known to believe in discipline.

By 2006, the then-Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts (MICA) was announcing the need for the city-state to have what is these days known as a “re-branding” exercise: “Singapore is seen as a country with a positive brand” and “[i]n tandem with the continual re-invention of the economic and social landscape ..., the Singapore ‘brand’ has shifted from a focus on ‘hard’ aspects such as costs, efficiency and technology to ‘softer’ aspects such as lifestyle, experience and innovation.”<sup>24</sup> And so, “Sacred cows of the past are being slaughtered with the development of two integrated resorts which will transform our entertainment industry.” By “integrated resorts”, the writer euphemistically refers to two casino complexes, but also with additional upmarket shopping and a possible new art museum (which has now become the ArtScience Museum at Marina Bay Sands). The arts and entertainment come in as support mechanisms for the newest re-invention of the city-state.

The article next to “Let Us Co-Create Our Nation’s Brand” informs us that Singapore will host the 2006 annual meetings of the board of governors of the IMF and the World Bank Group. All this occurs under the auspices of a larger campaign called Singapore 2006, “Global City, World of Opportunities”. The 16,000 delegates to come will get a taste of Singapore “through various programmes such as the [inaugural] Singapore Biennale 2006”.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, the visitor’s guide to the Biennale highlights it being the “anchor cultural event”<sup>26</sup> for the meeting. The Biennale, the guide also informs us, further highlights “Singapore’s prominence as an international contemporary arts centre”. Such a statement is less surprising now, but in 1993-94, during the arts controversies, this statement would have elicited outright astonishment. International visual arts biennales have become part of the global circulation of high culture. Such art events and also art exhibitions in a similar “globalised” mould have come to operate “within the

---

<sup>24</sup> Tan Chin Nam, “Let Us Co-Create Our Nation’s Brand”, *Fusion@MICA* 10 (April-June 2006).

<sup>25</sup> “Singapore 2006 Showcases Cosmopolitan Singapore”, *Fusion@MICA* 10 (April-June 2006).

<sup>26</sup> *Belief: Singapore Biennale 2006*, 4th September to 12th November 2006, visitor’s guide.

dimensions of attraction and entertainment, on the one hand, and critical reflection and subversion, on the other".<sup>27</sup>

The state's present development strategy itself is not surprising, given a now established pattern of fostering a competitive global city that will lure and retain foreign capital flows. It is the bluntness of its articulation that may catch the reader off-guard. National culture and the arts may become *only* commodities in the process of creating the suitable brand – and of that, we should be careful.

**About the Author**

.....  
**C. J. W.-L. Wee** is an Associate Professor of English in the Division of English at the Nanyang Technological University. He previously taught in the National Institute of Education in the same university and has also been a fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. Wee is the author of *Culture, Empire, and the Question of Being Modern* (2003) and *The Asian Modern: Culture, Capitalist Development, Singapore* (2007), and the editor of *Local Cultures and the 'New Asia': The State, Culture, and Capitalism in Southeast Asia* (2002). Most recently, he co-edited *Contesting Performance: Global Sites of Research* (2010).

---

<sup>27</sup> Mark W Rectanus, *Culture Incorporated: Museums, Artists, and Corporate Sponsorships* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), p. 7.

# Still Building

By Alvin Tan

## The Building of a Nation

*This country no good. People no good. When I sell food, I wear badge. Smile. I smile.  
I go Woodbridge. Got poster. Smile. I smile. I see Woodbridge doctor.  
He say how many percent become better, how many percent don't become better.  
He smile. I smile. I see social worker.  
She say how many percent must take medicine only for few months, how many percent  
must take always.  
If daughter mad, how many percent mother also mad. She smile. I smile.  
I go home, I see mirror. I smile.  
I cannot laugh. I cannot cry.  
Because I only know how to smile.  
I only know how to smile.*

**Off Centre** ~ Haresh Sharma

In the 1970s, a minister's statement about Singapore being a cultural desert on the front page of a newspaper spurred the nation to embark on a major mission to develop our arts for the future. The Singapore Arts Festival and the annual Drama Festival became regular features on our cultural events calendar. By the 1980s, there were already some fruits to be reaped. 1987 saw five new theatre groups formed. They were Action Theatre, Aksens, Arts and Acts, Just Theatre and The Necessary Stage.

Arts development was then under the Ministry of Community Development (MCD). By 1991, the National Arts Council (NAC) had evolved from MCD, signalling the government's long term vision to develop the arts. In addition to a grant scheme, a Theatre-in-Residence scheme and an Arts Housing scheme were also started and some theatre groups were encouraged to convert their status from societies to companies limited by guarantee so as to be more accountable to the larger quantum of grants received.

The Theatre-In-Residence Scheme typified the planned social change for arts development in the late 1980s to the early 1990s. Then, Singaporean practitioners tended to either stage foreign plays or adapted them. There were very few original local works. Singaporean directors were not confident enough to develop local scripts. There were few local playwrights and local directors working to develop local scripts with local playwrights were probably non-existent. The

Theatre-in-Residence Scheme stipulated that theatre rental would be waived if theatre companies staged four productions a year, two of which had to be original local works. This incentivised theatre companies to change their attitude and behaviour towards local scripts. Over time, directors and theatre companies were rewarded with media attention and a Singaporean audience hungry for local plays. Behavioural change led to an attitudinal change and soon enough, more local plays were written and staged.

Other factors responsible for a nurturing environment were the Shell-NUS Short Play competition and the availability of various lunchtime platforms, namely the NUS, DBS and Shell Lunchtime Performances. Notably, these platforms, which were followed up later by Raw Theatre Festival (The Substation) and Names Changed to Protect the Innocent (The Necessary Stage), provided incubation environments where young and emerging artists could take risks and experiment with no or little pressure.

In the 1990s, arts development was related to cultural tourism. The Singapore Tourism Board did a survey gathering data on how much people spent when they went out for a play - transport and food - benefiting other industries in the process. This survey helped to justify investing in the arts. It also made Singapore more vibrant and hopefully, less boring to the tourists and/or expatriates working here.

By the late 1990s and early noughties, cultural industries featured large on the global horizon. Singapore started looking at how creativity from the arts could inspire creativity in the other social and economic fields; how design could enhance businesses and investment; and how the arts alone, as entertainment or cutting-edge works, could bring in tourists from all around the world. The arts itself was perceived and valued as a viable industry. That was when Singapore aspired to be an arts hub. With the completion of the Esplanade, Singapore was well-placed to attract foreign artists and therefore increase the diversity in the arts landscape so more tourists would stay longer to attend to the happenings here, rather than just use Singapore to transit to other exotic Southeast Asian cities.

With arts hub status, Singapore could also attain First World status. Thus in the noughties, the arts was rationalised for nation-branding. We had Singapore Season

in cities like London, Moscow and Beijing. We also had Spotlight on Singapore in Hong Kong and other cities where Singapore wanted to improve its trade agreements. The arts served as a seat-warmer, paving the way for the business community and politicians.

These were the stages of arts development from the 1980s till today. KPIs (Key Performance Indicators), rationalised to achieve nation-building goals, helped secure sustained government funding for the arts. With that, the arts in Singapore enjoyed exponential growth. What has taken Singapore 25 years to develop would have taken another country about 60 years or more. Because of our size and top-down planned social change, Singapore grew from a cultural desert to a country with numerous arts and cultural activities on any one night. In other words, the state's continued emphasis on nation-building prompted the development of the arts in Singapore.

Very rarely is the arts supported for its inherent worth.

### **Present Imperfect**

*Once there was this man who was invited to his girlfriend's house for Christmas dinner. During dinner, he noticed that the roast turkey's head and back were both chopped off. He was curious, so after the meal, he questioned his girlfriend. But, she too didn't know why. All her life the turkey had been served that way. So, they went to ask her mother. Her mother didn't know as well. Ever since she was a child, turkey was always served that way. So, finally, they went to ask the girl's grandmother, who was old and bedridden. Her grandmother said that when she was young, her family couldn't afford a big oven. So every time they wanted turkey, they had to cut off its head and back so that it could fit into their oven. That was the reason why in that household the turkey will always be served with its head and back chopped off.*

***This Chord and Others*** ~ Haresh Sharma

In the 1980s and 1990s, censorship was under the direct purview of the police. All shows had to secure a Public Entertainment Licence before they could open. In 2003, this role was taken over by the Media Development Authority (MDA). MDA became the buffer between the artists and the police. MDA shifted the

responsibilities of regulation away from the National Arts Council by developing a rating and advisory system so a range of works could be shown enhancing the diversity in our cultural performance landscape. Yet somehow, the arts ecology continues to be shaped by these policies which testify to the government's idea of how the arts should look like in this nation state.

On the other hand, the various theatre companies have continued to explore their respective ideas of nation in their works. For *The Necessary Stage*, this has meant moving from multi-cultural theatre to intercultural theatre. Whilst multi-culturalism to me is the acknowledgement of different cultures existing in one geographical space, interculturalism would refer to the interaction of different cultures, the latter being a more sophisticated concept, to politically re-imagine how we can work and live across differences. This is an important instrument for us Singaporeans as we are not Japan, China, India, Hong Kong or Indonesia. We are not anchored in one mother culture as we have different cultures co-existing here. We may have hybridised ethnic categories such as Eurasians and Peranakans (Straits-born Chinese). Unlike Japan where one is Japanese only by birth, a highly skilled foreigner can get PR status and eventually become Singaporean. Our national identity is seen as pretty fluid, open to being constructed through marriage and so, interculturalism would be best suited for a country/nation that is a product of the global village era.

Multi-culturalism is a failed concept. A country like France can be cosmopolitan but social integration is through assimilation and not necessarily by a cross-pollination of local and foreign cultures. That would require an acceptance of an outside culture on an almost equal status. Singapore embraces the Chinese-inclined Peranakans, the Malay-inclined Peranakans, Indian Peranakans and a continuum of Eurasians, which goes to show that there is no one culture dominating another but an interaction of two or more cultural sensibilities producing plural, constructed cultural or ethnic categories. So, although the official categories are C (Chinese), I (Indians), M (Malays) and O (Others), a number of intercultural hybrids co-exist in modern Singapore.

These intercultural relationships can easily flow into cultural productions in terms of language, costume, world views and sensibilities. Since there is no censorship in these areas, their representations are not suppressed and therefore can become

subject matter and/or issues addressed in contemporary art works. Such diversity, when proliferated in the arts ecology, can then substantiate the term “Uniquely Singapore”. But very quickly this is complicated with the inflow of new immigrants and new citizens in recent years. More cultural hybrids are now made possible, destabilising what has been existing over the past decades. Having said that, whatever the case may be, Singapore is a nation, country and a space which spawns, welcomes and nurtures the interaction of diverse cultural identities. There will never be an end to producing cultural hybrids. We should revisit the historical identity of Singapore as the centre of entrepôt trade which was responsible for how we thrived in our early days. It has always been a meeting point, a strategic geographical position, a confluence for an exchange and trading of ideas and commodities.

Now if only the richness of cross-pollination can benefit the nation more effectively. There is a sense that we are not capitalising on our intercultural strengths, our capacity and capabilities. Once they appear on the government's radar and make economic sense, then there would be more research and development support. But for now, it is indeed left to the artists to continue in their mission to engender our nationhood. Our adventure to re-imagine what we are all about as a people sharing a common geographical space living within the same political, economic, socio-cultural context responding daily to a global village which becomes increasingly more borderless each day. In the mean time, we have to be thinking out of the box - contemporise tradition, break away from tradition, re-imagine new guidelines that lead us to transit from just a local mindset to one that facilitates constant mobility between local and international contexts.

### **Sustainability**

It is essential for a theatre company to be able to think out of the box and remain realistic and pragmatic when it comes to forging ways to remain sustainable whilst not falling too far behind living standards and/or not having the integrity of one's mission/vision compromised. A case in point is The Necessary Stage's (TNS) ability to secure external projects which, over the years, enabled us to remain in the black whilst pursuing our idealistic projects. 23% of TNS' operation cost is covered by the two-year grant by the National Arts Council, subject to review. The other 77%, the company has to raise on its own. Thus, we created



External Projects. This helps us secure commissioned projects which we do not publicise in the media so as to avoid branding confusion. At the same time, however, the company earns some money to make up for the loss we make staging our idealistic works.

All the pioneer theatre companies have developed their capacities with respect to the National Arts Council subsidy funding and whatever other funds they are able to secure elsewhere - external projects, school and community outreach initiatives, philanthropists, fundraising, foundations, corporate sponsorship and marketing initiatives. And as theatre became part of our landscape, with its education scaffolding developed over the years in our education system (drama programmes and modules inhabit the curriculum at schools, polytechnics, junior colleges and universities), more voluntary welfare and not-for-profit organisations started employing theatre to raise awareness of their respective missions. It became more commonplace for these groups to start looking for help from theatre companies rather than the other way around, which was the case in the 1980s and early 1990s. This shift in the landscape created a vital and growing market, paving the way for more arts projects throughout the nation, thus providing jobs for more artists over the last decade. This made it possible for parents to not be as anxious as parents of the 1980s generation as they are more assured that their children would be able to find stable careers in the arts when they graduate. Those not academically-inclined also saw more hope in developing their non-academic talent and the market grew healthily and steadily in the late 1990s into the twenty-first century.

As the arts develop in Singapore, the dominant regulatory ethos has tended to be "DO NOT BITE THE HAND THE FEEDS IT". Today, grants can be cut or an arts organisation can request that their logos not be used when a play is controversial. If a play is rated for adults and not for students, grants pertaining to their age group will not be made available to them. A theatre or arts venue is encouraged not to co-present works that are deemed controversial by MDA. Before employing the cut in grants, the authorities employed cruder approaches which attracted a great deal of local and international media attention which also meant resources spent on public relations work to clean up after censoring a theatre event.

The authorities became more careful in minimising media attention and started corporatising and administering censorship so that it became more invisible; they penalise through grants, the use of logos and even through the use of arts housing or buildings belonging to the government. For example, plays staged in buildings belonging to the government must not be against core values or offend sensibilities. This is stated in the tenancy agreement for the arts housing scheme and has recently been highlighted, thus causing arts venues to be more cautious than before. In this way, the authorities continue to shape what kind of art should be encouraged and what kind of art artists should stay away from.

Theatre companies who stage socially-engaged works continue to face obstacles. Drama Box, which creates forum theatre pieces that deal with controversial topics and play to communities at HDB estates, has faced challenges. MDA has requested, for example, that they cordon off their acting areas, create a stage under some kind of tentage (or marquee) and not play in open spaces.

Wild Rice has received funding cuts with their grants from the National Arts Council due to the types of plays they have been staging. Yes, *The Necessary Stage* has been allowed to stage plays that deal with child sexuality in a Muslim home (*Fundamentally Happy*), consumption of marijuana for palliative care and death penalty (*Good People*), political detention without trial (*Gemuk Girls*) and censorship (*Balek Kampong*) with just advisories. Perhaps it is because we discuss and negotiate with MDA, perhaps it is because we play to small audiences (we are considered niche) and in a small blackbox so what we show is very much contained and our runs are not long. Perhaps if we are allowed to exist and our plays are allowed to be staged, socially-engaged works do see the light of day in Singapore so the authorities can use them as examples, especially to foreign investors, that Singapore is liberalising.

It is anyone's guess but we remain grateful that we are able to keep our integrity intact with the idealistic works we wish to stage. In the long run, perhaps we are gradually creating an alternate reality in Singapore before its time and are sowing the seeds for a more progressive and open society. Every step matters. Every play we stage is a triumph no matter how small an audience we reach out to.

When a small space opens up, dance like mad.

*JULIANA LIM (daughter of a chinese father and malay mother) IS GIVING A SPEECH IN MANDARIN, MALAY AND ENGLISH.*

*[Mandarin]*

*My fellow Singaporeans. At today's National Day Speech,  
I am happy to declare that Singapore is progressing... and progressive!  
We are a global powerhouse. Singapore of the past was built on solid foundations.  
We weathered troubled times and sailed through with a strong economy.  
Despite one financial crisis after another, our economy never weakened.*

*[Malay]*

*Since I have become Prime Minister, I have also focused on other issues –  
issues which had not been such a priority in the past.  
Several Bills have been passed in recent months. Now our Migrant Workers – or Guest  
Workers as they're called now – enjoy the same rights as all foreign employees.  
The elderly, the poor and the underprivileged have free medical benefits.  
We have spent too much time and resource on the hardware.  
Now is a time to spare a thought for our heart-ware.*

*[English]*

*There is also greater individual freedom and right to expression.  
I am therefore proud to announce that the first Singapore Peace and Freedom Award  
will be presented, posthumously, to my grandfather... Marzuki Bin Abdul Rahman.*

*Marzuki Bin Abdul Rahman was detained in 1962. He was suspected of being involved  
in the communist faction and his failure to confess resulted in longer-term detention.  
He was never charged in court, and was never reunited with his family. Today is a day  
of change. Today we celebrate him, honour him. Today, as PM, I urge you, my fellow  
Singaporeans, to honour him.*

*This award signals a new era. No longer do we have to live in fear. No longer do we  
have to silence our thoughts, or censor our views. No longer do we need to stifle our  
voices. And I am happy to say that despite your newfound freedom, there has been no  
voice of discontent. No protests. No riots. No petitions. No letters of complaints.  
There is no opposition.*

*Today, on her 63<sup>rd</sup> birthday, this country has come of age. We are a force to be reckoned with. Today, on her 63<sup>rd</sup> birthday, Singapore has finally gained true independence. We can be proud to say, 'I am a Singaporean. I am a Singaporean'.*

*[pause]*

*LET US ALL STAND FOR OUR NATIONAL ANTHEM.*

**Gemuk Girls** [2006] ~ Haresh Sharma

**About the Author**

.....  
**Alvin Tan** is the Founder and Artistic Director of The Necessary Stage since 1987. He is also the co-Artistic Director of the annual international M1 Singapore Fringe Festival. One of the leading proponents of devising theatre in Singapore, Alvin has directed more than 60 plays which have been staged locally and at international festivals. He has been awarded a Fulbright Scholarship and served as a member of the curatorial panel for TransLab, an initiative created by the Australian Council for the Arts to promote intercultural theatre and performance. In 2010, Alvin was conferred the Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres by the French Ministry of Culture, in recognition of his significant contribution to the arts. Alvin was awarded Best Director at the 2011 Life! Theatre Awards for *Model Citizens* by The Necessary Stage.

# Poems

By Aaron Lee

## NEWTON DISCOVERS GRAVITY AT 12<sup>1</sup>

In fact at that exact moment  
he is not reclining under an apple tree  
as we are given to understand;  
he is neither serious with middle age nor  
heavy-headed with the ballast of  
a lifetime's learning.

Instead he is a budding writer  
(& although not a bad student  
here he is, in the middle of the day,  
leaning by a well a ½ mile from the village,  
having been sent home for  
falling asleep & dreaming  
of flying, as we all sometimes do.

And so, telling his troubles  
to his reflection, he drops words  
at the inky disc in which his tiny head  
is haloed by blue sky and light,  
& understands for the first time  
that saying is a metaphor for seeing,  
that sound can plumb the meaning of a life.

After this he goes home duly comforted  
(but not a little disturbed), laden  
with his books, a new-found knowledge & perhaps  
1 round apple half eaten. He remembers  
how each weighted word had arrowed  
into the well; how he looked into  
its shadowy depths & it spoke to him.  
His eyes growing wide as  
he understands for the first time  
the secret truth that takes  
us by the hand & free-falls  
us into the heart of dying.

---

<sup>1</sup> First published in "*Five Right Angles*" by Aaron Lee, Ethos Books (2007).

## Standing Before *David* at the Accademia<sup>2</sup>

Craning our necks as if supplicating heaven,  
we crowd Michelangelo's beautiful boy-man,  
the greatest giant-killer in history.  
"Look at those arms", the English lady sighs  
to her friend in the tweed jacket  
who is already jealous.  
Knowing she isn't really looking at the arms,  
he reminds her that the fellow  
is depicted somewhat larger than life  
you know, in more ways than one.  
We all laugh.

Later, we fight our way along the pavement  
with gelato cones in our hands,  
the June sun raging in our faces.  
Tourists complain about other loud tourists,  
their voices angle through my head  
like the alleyways of Florence.  
How far we have come in all these years,  
and here we are – a cowering tribe still lost,  
on the brink of extinction.  
Is it fear or devotion that keeps us stone still  
even as the last darkness drifts away?

"Stop, I don't know where we are."  
I turn to my wife. "Are we lost?"  
Bereft, we turn the corner of via Bartolini  
looking for a sign –  
a sunburnt boy shows up, whistling as  
he stumbles down the cobblestones of  
the suddenly familiar street, his piercing eyes  
and long hair blowing against  
the incredulous wind of all our disbelief.

"No we aren't," she laughs, taking my finger  
and placing it on the map.  
"Here we are, see? Here we are."

---

<sup>2</sup> First published in "*Five Right Angles*" by Aaron Lee, Ethos Books (2007).

**About the Author**

.....

**Aaron Lee** is the author of the poetry collections, *A Visitation of Sunlight* (1997), named one of the year's best books by *The Straits Times*, and *Five Right Angles* (2007), which was a finalist for the Singapore Literature Prize. He is the co-editor of Singapore's bestselling anthology of urban poetry, *No Other City*, and the award-winning Singapore-Philippines poetry anthology, *Love Gathers All*. His work has been published internationally, and he has read and spoken at literary events in countries such as Germany, Malaysia, Australia, the Philippines and the US. Aaron works as a finance lawyer but is also a well-regarded creative writing teacher and mentor. Aaron Lee is an NUSS member.



# Gold in Deep Space

By *Chua Chin Leng*



**This** image is created using the Art of RAR (the Art of Reflection and Refraction), i.e. light reflecting and refracting from the subject through and off the water. The amount of refraction on the subject will depend on the depth and movement of the water medium. The enhanced effects are achieved through the application of colour adjustment and contrast during post-processing. No photoshop technique was used and the integrity of the photo is intact.

**Chua Chin Leng** has been a photography enthusiast for more than 30 years, working with films, slides and darkroom processes, and now digital photography and light room techniques. His main interest is in photo painting which involves using the camera to create images that resemble paintings. The Art of RAR is a new technique that he has developed and is trying to perfect. More of his works can be viewed at <http://chua-chinleng.fineartamerica.com/> in the Art of RAR gallery.

# Untitled (Green and Orange Waves)

1969

Collection of NHB, image courtesy of the National Art Gallery, Singapore

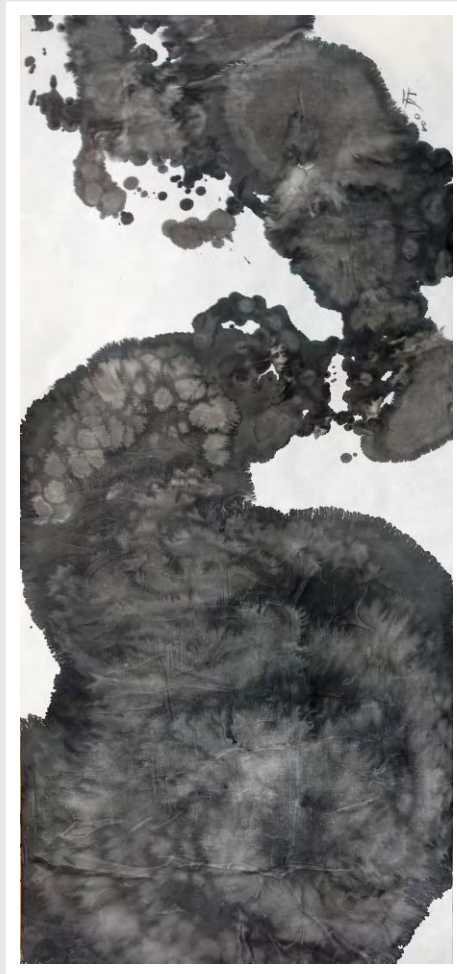
By **Arthur Yap**



Born in 1943, **Arthur Yap** is widely regarded as one of Singapore's most distinguished poets. His award-winning works include the poetry collections *Only Lines* (1971), *Commonplace* (1977), *Down the Line* (1980) and *Man Snake Apple & Other Poems* (1986). Yap received both the Cultural Medallion for Literature as well as the Southeast Asia Write Award in 1983. As well as being a poet, Yap was also an artist who held seven solo exhibitions of his abstract paintings in his lifetime. The National Art Gallery in Singapore has a total of 27 of Yap's paintings in their collection. For 19 years, Yap taught in the English Language and Literature department at the National University of Singapore. Poet and literary scholar Shirley Lim has observed that "Yap's training in English linguistics and dedication to his other art, abstract painting, influence his inventive stylistic playfulness that offers a counterpoint to the poems' original matrix of satirical and aesthetical concerns" (*Writing Singapore: An Historical Anthology of Singapore Literature*, Singapore: NUS Press, 2009, p. 175). He died in 2006.

# Poetry

By *Dr Ho Chee Lick*



**Dr Ho Chee Lick** obtained his PhD in linguistics from Kansas University, USA in 1989. He has been teaching in the National University of Singapore, first in the Department of English Language and Literature and currently, in the Department of Chinese Studies. He has contributed passionately to poetry translation in Singapore, having taken part in a number of major projects including the *Selected Poems of Pan Shou: With Translations in Modern Chinese and English by Ho Chee Lick* (Singapore: National Arts Council, 2000) and *Straight From the Heart: Poems by Pratap Nambiar—Chinese Translation and Art by Ho Chee Lick* (Singapore: Ethos Books and National Arts Council, 2008). He is also an active musician (pianist and vocalist) and an acclaimed painter whose works were showcased in two recent exhibitions in Singapore in 2011, “Sequenza: Ho Chee Lick’s New Ink Work” at Art Retreat and “Sequenza: Ho Chee Lick’s Earlier Oil Paintings and Drawings” at Soobin Art International.

# Valuing the Value(s) of Literature

By Assistant Professor Warren Mark Liew

**The** nineteenth-century British educator and poet Matthew Arnold (1882) once argued that the progress of human civilisation depended on its faithful transmission of “the best that has been thought and known in the world” (p. 226). For Arnold, this educational mission was to be found in – and founded upon – the “best” works of literature, philosophy, art, religion, and science that (western) civilisation had to offer. Charged with “sweetness and light,” these cultural artifacts had the power to humanise societies with their intimations of knowledge, beauty, and goodness.

That the literary arts – poems, novels, short stories, and plays – possess the power to educate and edify is a recurrent Arnoldian theme in the protestations of literature teachers in Singapore. The following quotations from a *Straits Times* article in 2002 (p. 43) might be seen as representative of a particular consensus view:

One can be overcome by the vulnerability of human nature and overawed by the power of the human spirit. English Literature can uplift the soul in a way no other subject matter does. (Lysia Kee)

One of my concerns for Singapore in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the strong push towards technology, computers and the importance of money. No doubt these things are important, but it would be wrong not to appreciate the non-material part of life so well-illustrated by the classics. (Arthur Lim, p. 43)

As far as I’m concerned, there is no single subject in the entire school curriculum which even approximates any real learning about life and living ... literature helps a nation, a society, a people to come to terms with its complexities, its strengths and its weaknesses. (Kirpal Singh, p. 43)

The spirit of such humanist sentiments echo, in fact, the letter of official policy documents. The Ministry of Education’s English Literature Syllabus (1999), for instance, states that pupils should be given opportunities to “enjoy the reading of literature and appreciate its contribution to aesthetic and imaginative growth” and to “explore areas of human concern, thus leading to a greater understanding of themselves and others” (p. 3). Indeed, educators here and elsewhere have long insisted on the role of Literature – and the humanities in general – in enlarging



students' social and cultural awareness, in developing their capacity for imaginative empathy and in cultivating a sense of civic duty.

It is one thing to pay tribute to the ideals of a liberal arts education, another to pay heed to the charge of skeptics: Are the Arnoldian claims of humanists supported by empirical research? Does the study of literature really make a person more humane and compassionate? Is it not also possible to live the examined life without having studied the humanities in school? To what extent have the arts and humanities turned philistines into philanthropists and activists? These questions gain significance when measured against the apparent decline of the humanities in higher education. Across the United States, the percentages of university majors in English, Philosophy and History – subjects traditionally comprising the humanities – have fallen dramatically, despite a rise in total undergraduate enrolment. The study of English, in particular, has become less popular, while undergraduate and graduate programmes in business have flourished in the nation's universities (Chace, 2009).

Similar fortunes appear to have befallen the humanities in Singapore. While university enrolment figures have increased over the last ten years, the percentage of graduates majoring in Literature and humanities has decreased. Statistics from the National University of Singapore's database suggest that the Humanities are becoming less popular than the Social Sciences, the Sciences and Engineering (Table 1).<sup>1</sup> A comparable narrative emerges in the aggregate figures across three universities.<sup>2</sup> The years from 2000 and 2010 saw a 7.5 percentage increase in the number of Humanities graduates – a staggeringly low figure compared to the percentage increases recorded for Business, Law, Sciences, Health Sciences and Engineering (Table 2).

---

<sup>1</sup> The "Humanities" in NUS include English Language, English Literature, Theatre Studies, History and Philosophy. Subjects classified under the "Social Sciences" include Economics, Geography, Communication and New Media, Political Science, Psychology, Social Work and Sociology.

<sup>2</sup> These are the three publicly funded universities, the National University of Singapore (NUS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and Singapore Management University (SMU). Notably, the most recent additions to Singapore's higher education landscape – Singapore Management University (set up in 2000) and the Singapore University of Technology and Design (established in 2009) – offer mainly programmes in Business and Management, Social Sciences, Design and Engineering.

Table 1. Graduates from the National University of Singapore (NUS, n.d.).

Faculty/ School	1995/6 Total (%)	2000/1 Total (%)	2005/6 Total (%)	2009/10 Total (%)
Humanities	1663 (32.30%)	1796 (29.50%)	1023 (17.60%)	880 (14.50%)
Social Sciences	198 (3.80%)	258 (4.20%)	424 (7.30%)	611 (10.00%)
Engineering	487 (9.50%)	1096 (18.00%)	1258 (21.60%)	1356 (22.30%)
Science	1058 (20.60%)	1175 (19.30%)	1254 (21.50%)	1196 (19.60%)
<b>Total Graduates</b>	<b>5145</b>	<b>6097</b>	<b>5821</b>	<b>6088</b>

Table 2. Graduates from University First Degree Courses by Type of Course (Department of Statistics, 2011, 19.8)

Type of Course	Total in Year 2000	Total in Year 2010	% Increase
Humanities	2026	2177	<b>7.5</b>
Business	1179	1653	<b>40.2</b>
Law	153	229	<b>49.7</b>
Sciences	1033	1659	<b>60.6</b>
Health Science	41	235	<b>473.2</b>
Engineering	2949	4137	<b>40.3</b>

It is a truth universally acknowledged that professors in English departments – and across the humanities – command lower average salaries than their peers in the “hard” sciences. In the United States job market, humanities PhDs have suffered a fall in demand relative to their counterparts in Business, Science and Engineering (Cohen, 2009). Such trends reflect, of course, the logic of market forces. Historically, the medical sciences, bio-engineering, computer engineering, and business have distinguished themselves as the most “lucrative” disciplines, insofar as they traffic in “practical” solutions to

real-world problems, particularly in the form of marketable products and patents. Concomitantly, governments around the world have tended to pump more Research-and-Development dollars into the sciences than in the humanities and social sciences. Amid budgetary cutbacks in the face of global economic instability, such mercenary facts force us to confront familiar questions: How might the study of English Literature contribute to the production and development of human capital? What is the market value of Literature in our present age?

Literature teachers have always been hard pressed to justify the economic value of their subject before the pragmatic jury of students, parents and policymakers. It is a brute fact that the majority of our students will never aspire to become poets, literary critics or English teachers in their professional careers, with or without the promise of high starting salaries and/or a government scholarship, as in the case of teaching. Literature, it seems, is just another brand of “high art” to be enjoyed by a literate/literary minority, namely, those who would pride themselves on being “cultured” and “well read.” Such views harbour the more scathing charge that literature, like opera and golf, is no more than a luxury good for those who can afford it. A ticket to the latest *Transformers* movie costs one-fifth the price of a theatre performance of *Richard III* at the Esplanade. Meanwhile, the fast-paced motions of our digital world dictate that time wasted is as good as money spent. How many would rather be entranced by four-minute music videos of Lady Gaga and Rihanna on YouTube than be engrossed for hours in the pages of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* or *Pamela*?

Facile comparisons aside, what are the opportunity costs of studying literature in schools? A popular baseline measure is the annual performance ranking and banding of schools. Bent on optimising their academic results in the high-stakes O-level and A-level examinations, schools have learned to engineer their curricula in ways that channel students into the subjects they are more likely to score in. That this has resulted in dwindling cohorts of students registering for the O-level Literature examinations should not surprise us (Poon, 2007). In a society governed by the law of economic pragmatism, is it not perfectly reasonable to weigh the “symbolic capital” (Bourdieu, 1986) of good examination results against the less tangible gains of reading



literature? One need not, of course, deny or disparage the liberal-humanist claims of Literature's Arnoldian advocates. As Mr John Keating, in the film *Dead Poets Society*, declares: "Medicine, law, business, engineering – these are noble pursuits and necessary to sustain life. But poetry, beauty, romance, love ... these are what we stay alive for!" Yet even this Keatsian belief that "Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty" ("Ode on a Grecian Urn") is shadowed by tragic irony. When a student commits suicide in a defiant bid to "seize the day", all that Mr Keating can do is to acknowledge that even the best humanistic intentions do not guarantee the best of human actions. What the film teaches us, perhaps, is that the liberal-humanist cause is itself a double-edged weapon, that the word of "dead poets" is indeed a mighty and deadly sword.

In my view, any exclusive appeal to humanist values in support of Literature in schools demonstrates a sentimental naiveté about the relationship between education, society and the economy. The challenge for teachers, then, is to examine and affirm the pedagogical value of Literature in relation to the material conditions that shape young people's lives, aspirations and career pathways – conditions that are in turn shaped by the forces of globalisation acting upon our educational systems. Such a challenge needs to recognise not only Literature's place within the disciplinary power of the market, but also its political role as an effective counterweight to the anti-democratic tendencies of a economically-driven, neoliberal technocratic age. This is the argument that I will attempt to explicate in what follows.

### **Education for New Times**

Sociologists have long recognised the role of public schooling in socialising citizens for the demands of the nation's economy. In the early years of Singapore's independence, public schooling developed in close concert with the needs of an industrial economy. The focus on vocational and technical training in the 1960 to mid-1970s reflected an emphasis on the kinds of knowledge, skills and dispositions needed to sustain a productive labour force for industrial expansion (Ho & Ge, 2011). Times have changed. The New Economy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century requires workers who can think independently, work collaboratively and act competitively. The education reform vision of "Thinking Schools, Learning Nation" (TSLN) was inaugurated in 1997 precisely to answer these social engineering demands (Goh, 1997). Its overall aim: to

prepare citizens for a fast-paced, globalised world marked by uncertainty, rapid technological advancements and increased economic competition.

A central tenet in TSLN's reform vision is the emphasis on self-directed, lifelong learning, where students are expected to be "creative problem-solvers, rather than just know vast amounts of knowledge that are passively received" (MOE, 1999a). Accordingly, a cardinal objective of Literature education is to promote critical and independent thinking. MOE's English Literature Syllabus, which provides the pedagogical blueprint for how Literature should be taught in schools, explicitly states that "The pupil's role is an active one" and that "individual pupil response must be encouraged and developed" (MOE, 1999b, p. 3). This renewed emphasis on active, critical readings has been suitably captured in the revised O-level examination format in 2001, which saw the introduction of the "unseen" in addition to the usual "set texts". Examination questions are designed to solicit students' "personal responses", while testing their ability to analyse a poem or prose passage without prior knowledge of the text's biographical and historical background. To the extent that candidates are forced to exercise higher-order thinking skills independently of any memorised answers, these exercises in "practical criticism" (a staple in A-level literature) present a clear departure from the tried-and-tested "Singaporean" learning approach of drill-and-practice.

Companion to this stress on critical thinking is the press for critical questioning. As the former Minister of Education has argued, our future leaders must be willing to ask difficult questions and face new but uncertain challenges:

We will not groom active and responsible citizens just by providing facts or knowledge. To help our youth become active citizens, we have to not only give them facts about the basic realities we face, and assiduously nurture a questioning attitude from young. You have to question things as you grow up and become a young adult. It is the only way to understand issues, and develop a genuine conviction about social and national priorities. (Tharman, 2005)

These exhortations should embolden students and teachers of Literature, for "To produce students who are truly Socratic we must encourage them to read critically; not only to empathise and experience, but also to ask critical

questions about that experience" (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 100). Heartened by the minister's challenge, I have been challenging my undergraduate classes to formulate questions based on literature texts that can be made to address real-world concerns and experiences. The following is a selection from a currently expanding list:

Would Hamlet have been a happier and braver prince without his religious beliefs? Was Satan justified in rebelling against God in *Paradise Lost*? Did Mr Rochester in *Jane Eyre* deserve punishment for adultery and polygamy? How is Shylock's fate in *The Merchant of Venice* a plea for sympathy on behalf of religious and racial minorities? Were Bassanio and Antonio gay lovers doomed to separation by the heterosexist norms of their society? What might a literary analysis of K-pop music videos tell us about our society's attitudes towards gender, sex and sexuality? Why was Kuo Pao Kun detained without trial under the Internal Security Act in 1976 but later awarded the Cultural Medallion in 1990? Should Catherine Lim have been chastised for criticising the government in her non-fictional writings rather than in her fictional works? Why are some Singaporean novels, plays and poems not included in MOE's approved Literature syllabi?

These are provocative questions, to be sure. As classroom discussion topics, their pedagogical affordances lie precisely in their power to enrage the heart and engage the mind. That these questions do not avail themselves to clear-cut "model answers" is also the point, for real-world questions are meant to generate more questions in the face of life's unquestionable complexities. Meanwhile, educational researchers have demonstrated that classroom debate and discussion around controversial issues can not only stimulate critical thinking and self-reflection, but also promote the kind of productive conflict, collaboration and social engagement needed for a participatory democracy (Ehman, 1969; Johnson, Rogers & Smith, 2000). At the heart of such pedagogical approaches is the emphasis on dialogue, for "[o]nly dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking" (Freire, 1970, p. 128). Dialogic learning, then, accords with the view that learning is most effective when it is "participatory, proactive, communal, collaborative, and given over to constructing meanings rather than receiving them" (Bruner, 1996, p. 84).

### **Creativity as Critique**

So far, I have tried to suggest that the ideal literature classroom, consistent with the spirit of education reforms in our country, ought to be democratic “contact zones” (Pratt, 1991) in which individuals are free to engage in a “deliberative democracy” of dialogue, discussion, and debate. But the skeptical realist might again object: What returns of investment are there for the practitioners of dialogic critical thinking? Critics, after all, have often argued that the educational policies and practices are ultimately underpinned by an instrumental rationality that aims to develop creativity and critical thinking in the service of intelligent productivity. For if knowledge is wealth, the creation of new knowledge is gold.

Indeed, Singapore’s technopreneurs have not been blind to the nexus of creativity and capital. The *Creative Economy Cultural Development Strategy* (2002), released by the Media Development Authority in September 2002, argued that our nation’s economic competitiveness in a global knowledge economy will depend increasingly on efforts to capitalise on the arts and the media. In 2001, the “creative industries” of the arts, culture, design, and media contributed a total of 3.2% of the nation’s Gross Domestic Product (MDA, 2002, p. 4). By 2012, it is estimated that these industries will contribute up to 6% of GDP, making Singapore comparable to “creative cities” like London, New York, San Francisco and Venice (MICA, 2010). At the same time, the cultural policies outlined by the “Renaissance City Report” in 1989 and the revised “Renaissance City 2.0” in 2002 (MITA 2002) point emphatically to the commercial value of (re)making Singapore into the “New Asia Creative Hub” (MDA, 2002, p. 8). Beyond its humanistic mission, the arts, it would appear, can contribute materially to Singapore’s nation-building and nation-branding efforts.

And yet, to exercise creativity in the interests of wealth creation is to legitimate the state’s ideology of economic pragmatism. A vibrant cultural and artistic scene, however, needs non-conformists who will not be motivated by extrinsic rewards. More trenchantly, the creative conscience is that which resolutely resists its own commodification in opposition to the rule of capital. According to Petrina Leo and Terence Lee (2004), creativity “ventures into the realms of conventions and status quos for the purpose of challenging them to discover alternatives. Upsetting the preferred status of power relations thus seems to be a prerequisite of creativity” (p. 209). The fear, of course, is that the

creative instinct for resistance might lead to rebellious uprisings; yet, the creative thrust of Singapore's creative economy strategy depends on the very creative energies it seeks to control. Such tensions are familiar to teachers who recognise and encourage creativity in their classrooms. Paul Torrance (1995) counsels, "The creative teacher is involved in discovery, risking, pushing the limits, and taking a step into the unknown. This is serious business – dangerous business. When you challenge students to be creative, you lose control" (p. 107). If tolerance for ambiguity is a *sine qua non* of creative endeavor (Sternberg, 1999), to what extent, then, are control and censorship hostile to the spirit of "Innovation and Enterprise" (Tharman, 2004)? Can creativity and control be reconciled in the interests of democracy, individual freedoms, and nation-building?

What politicians throughout history have never succeeded in controlling are the resistant powers of Art. History teaches us that the art and literature throughout the ages, from ancient Greece to Shakespeare's England to Obama's America, have served covertly and combatively to counter the official accounts of truth purveyed by those in power. Pressed to the service of social justice, art becomes an inescapably political endeavor. In the words of the educator and art critic, Harold Rosenberg (1978):

Regardless of its political effects, political consciousness is a necessity of art. The alternative is to be satisfied to make decorations for office buildings and treasures for speculators ... The artist today is closer to philosophy than to artisanship. Intrinsic to his outlook was taking part in being responsible for the character of the times. Only in this way can the artist conceive himself as a free individual, in the full range of his desires and his possibilities. As an expert in the fabrication of appearances and realities, he has the training needed to penetrate the fabrications of politics. (p. 293)

The last decade has seen a significant flourishing of the arts scene in Singapore in terms of a growing acceptance of socially and politically conscious works by local artists, painters, film-makers, novelists, playwrights and poets. Both avant-garde and commercial theatre appear to have made bolder, creative moves in engaging with the lived realities of the disenfranchised in our society, including the poor, the homeless, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered people,

female victims of domestic violence and even migrant workers. On a more agitational front, socio-political art in Singapore has sought consistently, in spite of state censors, to critique the dominant ideologies of the state, to question government policies and practices, sometimes by satirising the excesses, follies and hypocrisies of those in power.

Implicit in these artistic works is the idea that creativity can be a tool of empowerment, a means of joining personal voice and political vision in an ethical enterprise of imagining a more just, inclusive and feeling society. So how are consumers of such creative works to respond in kind? What social and political dividends can be reaped from these artistic products? What part should students and teachers play in capitalising on the potential utility of these creations?

### **Towards a Critical Pedagogy of Literature Education**

At the heart of socially and politically conscious education are the democratic tenets of what progressive educators have called “critical pedagogy” (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1983). Critical pedagogy considers how education can strengthen democracy, create a more inclusive and just society and deploy education in a process of progressive social change. Creativity sponsored by critical pedagogy seeks to stimulate “true reflection and action upon reality, thereby responding to the vocation of persons as beings who are authentic only when engaged in inquiry and creative transformation” (Freire, 1970, p. 65). Literary criticism, charged with the tenets of critical pedagogy, goes beyond the routine analysis of form and content to uncover the values, beliefs and ideologies that animate a text. Here, the extended category of “text” includes traditionally non-literary artifacts such as newspapers, advertisements, websites, movies, popular music, music videos, YouTube clips, government speeches, policy documents, journal articles, and so on. To illustrate how such a critical approach to textual analysis might proceed, one might, for instance, ask: How do the language, visuals and overall design of the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board’s trade publications work to create a “politically correct” representation of Singapore and Singaporeans?

Returning to more “fictional” matters, I would like to cite some actual examination questions based on Kuo Pao Kun’s play *The Coffin is Too Big for the Hole* (1990), a “set text” offered in some secondary schools. *How does*

*the play's central metaphor illustrate the limits and possibilities of thinking "out of the box" in a society like Singapore's? To what extent is the play a political satire on the successes and failures of "social engineering" by the state?* The aim of these questions, of course, is not to "incite public unrest" (as one student wryly put it), but to instigate socially conscious thinking based on personal response and public debate. Throughout, the principle of dialogism is key: those who wish to make a point must be able to substantiate it with persuasive reasoning and evidence. By facilitating thoughtful discussions on thought-provoking issues, literature teachers can help students learn the rules of communicative rationality on which liberal democracies are founded.

Such a politicised vision of literary studies is hardly new. Since the American civil rights movements of the 1960s and 70s, English departments in universities around the world have been affected in one way or another by the turn toward critical theory and cultural studies. One of the aims of this political turn (which combined the intellectual energies of feminism, Marxism, postcolonialism, poststructuralism, linguistic anthropology and queer theory) was to show how the traditional literary canon worked to privilege Anglo-American cultural paradigms while marginalising the identities and interests of minority groups such as non-Whites, women, homosexuals, transgendered persons, the poor, the disabled and the non-English-speaking. Concomitantly, literature teachers have been forced to ask themselves: Whose interests are served in the study of "English Literature"? In what ways might the study of literature "inadvertently" serve the interests of the dominant culture?

I want to suggest that this critical reflexivity needs to be incorporated into the English curriculum in Singapore schools at both the tertiary and pre-tertiary levels. "By now it should go without saying that there is a continuing need to think of English teaching and schooling as political interventions, struggles over the formation of ideologies and beliefs, identities and capital" (Luke, 2004, p. 86). In other words, it is no longer possible for English teachers to regard the English language as simply a tool of communication. Rather, we need to understand, and help our students understand, how the English language operates through all kinds of texts – aural, visual, verbal, and digital – as a carrier of culture, identity and ideology.



## **Conclusion**

How should literature educators respond to the charge that the humanities are irrelevant to wealth creation? In this essay, I have pointed to three kinds of educational responses: the humanist, the utilitarian and the critical.

According to the traditional humanist view, literature is intrinsically valuable, embodying not only all that is human and humane, but also “the best that has been thought and said in the world”. To read widely and deeply is to partake of the wisdom of human civilisation. As Harold Bloom (2000) urges, “Read deeply, not to believe, not to accept, not to contradict, but to learn to share in that one nature that writes and reads” (p. 29).

The utilitarian view holds that Literature should be valued chiefly for the skills that it imparts, skills that are transferable to other wealth-generating fields of endeavour. In this sense, the *use value* of a Literature education derives from its ability to develop students’ creativity, imagination, cultural sensitivities and social skills – competencies directly relevant to the demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century workplace. At the same time, Literature’s *exchange value* lies in the symbolic capital that it confers: a Bachelor of Arts degree will earn its holder a fair share of employment opportunities.

The third “critical” view sees Literature as actively shaping and mobilising social change. The humanities are not merely useful in imagining the process of social transformation; they are integral in making responsive and responsible readers into agents of change. In this essay, I have argued that literature teachers can play a vital role in this change process by enacting critical pedagogical approaches that insist on the material connections between fiction and reality, education and society, personal reflection and social action.

Recent developments in Singapore have begun to dismantle the myth of the docile Singaporean subject subservient to the dictates of a patriarchal government. As if heeding the MOE’s clarion call for independent critical thinking, our citizens, young and old, are becoming more politically engaged, more questioning of authority, and better prepared to “think outside the box.” The surge of online activism during the General Elections in May 2011, unprecedented in the electoral history of Singapore, revealed not only the democratic affordances of social media,

but also a citizenry eager to participate in the cut-and-thrust of public debates over sensitive issues. What is needed now is to prepare our students for the intellectual and ethical demands of such civic engagement. To this end, critical pedagogy through literature is a politicised and politicising process predicated on the “subversive” potential of creative and critical thinking – a process dedicated to helping our students think and act responsibly as social individuals, global citizens and human beings.

### References

Arnold, M. (1882). *Culture and anarchy: An essay in political and social criticism*. New York: Macmillan and Co.

Bloom, H. (2000). *How to read and why*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Bourdieu, P. (1986). *The forms of capital*. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241-258). Westport, CT: Greenwood.

Bruner, J. (1996). *The culture of education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Chace, W. M. (2009, September 1). *The decline of the English department*. *The American Scholar*. Retrieved 2011, July 11 from <http://www.theamericanscholar.org/the-decline-of-the-english-department/>.

Cohen, P. (2009, March 7). *Doctoral candidates anticipate hard times*. *The New York Times*, p. C1. Retrieved July 7, 2011, from <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/07/arts/07grad.html?pagewanted=all>.

Department of Statistics. (2011). *Yearbook of statistics Singapore 2011*. Singapore: Ministry of Trade and Industry.

Ehman, L. H. (1969). *An analysis of the relationships of selected educational variables with the political socialization of high school students*. *American Educational Research Journal*, 6(4), 559-80.

Freire, P. (1973). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.

Giroux, H. (1983). *Theory and resistance in education*. New York: Bergin & Garvey.

Goh, C. T. (1997). *Shaping our future: “Thinking Schools” and a “Learning Nation.”* Speech delivered at the opening of the 7<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Thinking, at the Suntec City Convention Centre Ballroom on 2 June 1997. Retrieved June 15, 2004 from <http://app.sprinter.gov.sg/data/pr/1997060209.htm>.

- Kuo P. K. (1990). *The coffin is too big for the hole*. In *The coffin is too big for the hole... and other plays* (p. 29-46) Singapore: Times Books International.
- Ho, K. C., & Ge, Y. (2011). *Education and human capital management in a world city: The case of Singapore*. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 31(3), 263-276.
- Johnson, D. W., Roger, T. J., & Smith, K. A. (2000). *Constructive controversy: The educative power of intellectual conflict*. *Change*, 32(1), 28-37.
- Leo, P., & Lee, T. (2004). *The "new" Singapore: Mediating culture and creativity*. *Continuum*, 18(2), 205-218.
- Long, S. (2002, August 23). *Is literature relevant in the new economy?* *The Straits Times*.
- Luke, A. (2004). *The trouble with English*. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 39(1), 85-95.
- Media Development Authority (MDA). (2002). *Creative Industries Development Strategy: Propelling Singapore's creative economy*. Singapore: MITA.
- Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts (MICA) (2002). *Renaissance City Report*. Singapore: Author.
- Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts (MICA) (2010, October 25). *Creative industries*. Retrieved December 18, 2011, from <http://app.www.sg/who/202/Creative-industries.aspx>.
- Ministry of Education. (1999a). *Preparing our education system for the knowledge-based economy*. *PolicyDigest*. Retrieved April 29, 2003, from [http://www.gov.sg/feedback/archives/policy\\_digest/pol\\_digest\\_1199.htm](http://www.gov.sg/feedback/archives/policy_digest/pol_digest_1199.htm).
- Ministry of Education. (1999b). *Literature in English: Secondary/Express/Normal (Academic)*. Singapore: Curriculum Planning & Development Division.
- National University of Singapore. (n.d.). *Student and graduate statistics*. Retrieved December 18, 2011, from <https://share.nus.edu.sg/registrar/info/statistics/Forms/AllItems1.aspx>.
- Nussbaum, M. (1997). *Cultivating humanity: A classical defense of reform in liberal education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Poon, A. (2007). *The politics of pragmatism: Some issues in the teaching of literature in Singapore*. *Changing English*, 14(1), 51-59.
- Pratt, M. L. (1991). *The arts of the contact zone*. *Profession*, 91, 33-40.

Rosenberg, H. (1978). *Art and other serious matters*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Singh, K. P. (2003, April 26). *No symphony of words*. *Weekend Today*, p. 18.

Tan, K. P. (2003). *Sexing up Singapore*. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 6(4), 403-423

Sternberg, R. (Ed.). (1999). *Handbook of creativity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tharman, S. (2004, February 16). *Innovation and Enterprise in our schools*. Speech by Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam, Acting Minister for Education at the Innovation and Enterprise Workshop at the Anglo Chinese School, Singapore.

Tharman, S. (2005). *Speech by the Minister for Education at the Singapore Media and Youth Conference on 26 January at the Ngee Ann Polytechnic Convention Centre*. Retrieved January 31, 2005, from <http://stars.nhb.gov.sg/public/index.html>.

Torrance, E. P. (1995). *Why fly?: A philosophy of creativity*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

#### About the Author

.....  
**Warren Mark Liew** is an Assistant Professor with the English Language and Literature Academic Group at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University. A former secondary school teacher, he earned his BA (Hons) and MA degrees in English Literature at the National University of Singapore before completing his PhD at Stanford University. His research interests lie at the intersections of English literacy studies, performance studies, and teacher education.

# Literature and Social Memory: The Case of Suratman Markasan

By *Dr Azhar Ibrahim*

*“A nation’s literature, which is a sum total of the products of many individuals in that society is then not only a reflection of that people’s collective reality, collective experience, but also embodies that community’s way of looking at the world and its place in the making of that world. It is partisan on the collective level, because that literature is setting to make us see how that community, class, race, group has defined itself historically and how it defines the world in relationship to itself.”*

– *Ngugi Wa Thiong’o*

**Singapore** Malay literature is the literature of a developing community that has to make sense of the changes and expectations of living in a relatively young multicultural nation. In fact what we witness today is a Singapore Malay literary culture evolving and developing, distinguishing itself from its counterparts in Malaysia, Brunei and Indonesia. It is a literature that documents a community experiencing the human propensity for adjustment, despair, anxiety, hope and determination. It is also a literature that has become a medium for articulating many kinds of criticism: some which illustrate reality because based on sound reflection, some which are overly pessimistic or simply lamenting, and some which are nothing but a record of angst and frustration. Since separation from Malaysia, Singapore Malay literature has developed its own identity and dynamic, although literarily and culturally speaking, it remains essentially within the same cultural orbit as Peninsular Malaysia. Nevertheless, against the background of nation building of the island republic, Singapore Malay literature showcases primarily the experience of ethnic Malays as a minority community, grappling with issues of adjustment in the process of modernisation, with various challenges affecting the community, such as housing resettlement, structural unemployment, educational opportunities, leadership vacuum, economic hardship, religious resurgence, socio-cultural anomie, and the feeling of being marginalised and displaced. These are some of the themes that have been taken up in Singapore Malay literature, especially by writers who emerged in the critical period in the 1960s right up to the 1990s.

A new generation of writers, emerging in the late 1990s until the present, is generally less inclined to deal with these themes, as the current ideological milieu and the present socio-economic structures have inevitably conditioned their style of thinking, if not, consciousness. While they may articulate the idea that literature has to serve the community’s moral and aesthetic

dimension, it is not uncommon to find that the themes they explore are those that seem more “domestic” (they may focus, for example, on relationships and personal conflict) in comparison to writers from an earlier generation like Suratman Markasan, who has consistently produced work that aims to raise consciousness and bring about reform in society.

Generally, in a literary culture where didacticism is the accepted norm, criticism of the present state of affairs becomes an expectation, and it is often equated with fulfilling the role of *sasterawan* (littérateur) that is to be distinguished from *penulis* (“mere ordinary writer”). A littérateur is generally seen as the community’s intelligentsia who takes a leading role in nurturing the conscience of society. This is a claim or commitment that is not uncommon in a literary culture that emphasises the importance of literature for society and humanity.

It is in this literary tradition that Suratman Markasan<sup>1</sup> emerged, and over time, crafted his own identity within the Malay literary circle. He is a writer critical of apathy, excessive individuality and a human life bereft of spirituality. Undoubtedly, he is today one of the leading Singapore Malay writers whose works are well received both nationally and regionally. He was awarded the prestigious SEA Write Award from Thailand in 1989 and the Cultural Medallion in 2010, as well as many other awards both locally and regionally. A prolific writer, his works include novels, short stories, poems, literary essays and research papers. He is still writing and publishing today.<sup>2</sup> His works have received wide attention throughout the region, and amongst the Indonesian and Malaysian literary establishment, he is, together with the poet Masuri S.N., one of the most respected Singapore Malay writers.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Suratman Markasan was born in 1930 in Pasir Panjang, Singapore. After completing his studies at Sultan Idris Training College in 1950, he joined the teaching service and in 1968, he enrolled in Nanyang University and graduated in 1971 in Malay and Indonesian Studies. He lectured at the Institute of Education until 1995. Before that, he was Assistant Director for Malay and Tamil studies at the Ministry of Education.

<sup>2</sup> His two novels, *Penghulu yang Hilang Segala-galanya* (1998) and *Tiga Lelaki* (1995) have been commissioned by the National Arts Council to be translated into English. His first novel *Tak Ada Jalan Keluar* (1962) has been translated into English as *Conflict* (1980).

<sup>3</sup> Read, Hadijah Rahmat et.al. (eds.) *Masuri S.N. Sasterawan Melayu di Persada Dunia*. (Singapore: National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, 2011).

### **Literary Presence**

A littérateur like Suratman, whose social concern is evident in his literary works, resists a culture of silence. To him, he must only write what he believes is truth, speaking against injustice so as to instil consciousness in society. Whether he is successful or otherwise is another matter. But making his moral-ethical *presence* in literary form is always a significant endeavour especially in a space where there is widespread cultural disinterest, including ambivalence over the dehumanised conditions of today. A dehumanised condition is one bred by a culture of silence. Suratman's literary work moves between illustration and lamentation, inasmuch as his reflection and imagination straddle moralism and a call for reform. In fact one can say that the literary presence, in a context where language use has been circumscribed over the decades, functions as the site where social memory can be nurtured and articulated. Literature becomes an instrument of memory, a witness. The significance of this cannot be underestimated as Richard Hoggart points out, "without the literary witness the student of society will be blind to the fullness of a society's life"<sup>4</sup> since "works of literature give an insight into the life of an age, a kind and intensity of insight, which no other source can give."<sup>5</sup>

### **Social Memory through Literature**

By social memory, we mean the act and will of documenting the cultural experiences which a community has undergone, especially where changing political, social and economic contexts have posed a serious challenge to such memory. It is not too far-fetched to say that the literary and cultural intelligentsia perform the role of guardians of social memory. Ngugi's reflection on this point is relevant in many developing societies: "Writers, artists, musicians, intellectuals and workers in ideas are the keepers of memory of a community. What fate awaits a community when its keepers of memory have been subjected to the West's linguistics means of production and storage of memory... we have languages, but our keepers of memory feel that they cannot store knowledge, emotions and intellectual in [their] languages."<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Richard Hoggart, *Speaking To Each Other, Vol. 2*. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1970), p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>6</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Something Torn and New*. (New York: BasicCivitas Books, 2009), p. 114.

Suratman's literary style and vision can be said to oscillate between illustration and lamentation. By illustration, I mean an attempt to explain or elaborate phenomena or facts. Illustration can be part of, or it can lead to, an analysis of a situation or problem. Lamentation is the opposite. A lamentation is the articulation and registration of sentiments, which can be emotive, evocative, or even a simple complaint. But in extreme cases, it turns into despair and hopelessness. Lamentation is a reactive response. Illustration is more proactive. Instead of elaborating or elucidating a situation, lamentation is characterised by complaint, angst and frustration, leading eventually to a sense of pessimism. The latter is a bleak outlook that immobilises the critical and creative imagination and prevents us from confronting our life situations and challenges. Pessimism is the antithesis of a sustained affirmation and determination to unravel the problems or challenges at hand. Pessimism indicates thought bereft of an analytic framework, it is the absence of determination to find a rational alternative or resolution. A bleak outlook in thought not only leads to a kind of fatalism, it also eventually allows authoritarian thinking to dominate.

This distinction between lamentation and illustration has to be made as we need to critically look at the case where pessimism has been attributed to Singapore Malay authors like Suratman and Mohamed Latiff Mohamed. As Shahrudin Maaruf noted in his critical observation of contemporary Singapore Malay literature:

The separation of Singapore from Malaysia and the consequent minority status of the Malays had great emotional impact on Singapore Malay writers. Generally the response is one of sadness, bitterness, anger and hurt of being displaced or marginalised politically... The literary writers of the times responded to Malay lag in development and minority status negatively. Instead of instilling hope and optimism through their works, inspiring the Malays to progress, prominent Malay writers mainly expressed pessimism and identity crisis through their works.<sup>7</sup>

Shahrudin may be right but it could also be added that the writers' concern for their community's predicament is not totally bereft of objective and reasonable

---

<sup>7</sup> Shahrudin Maaruf, "Singapore Malay Literature," in Budi Darma, (ed.) *Modern Literature of ASEAN*. ( Jakarta: ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information, 2000), p. 111, 115.



analysis and reflection. This is where the significance of illustration may be noted, although it is not as visible as their lamentation.<sup>8</sup> The illustration of reality is an attempt to explain a situation or condition. As lamentation leads to pessimism, it does not bring us to consciousness and empowerment. The latter can be gained via a critical illustration of the prevailing condition. An illustration conveys salient messages, highlights important episodes and events, and evaluates the significance and intensity of issues in society. An illustration aims to avoid pessimism and cynicism. In illustration too, the social theme is repeated and highlighted so that the seriousness of the subject matter is at the forefront. The writer wants his readers to realise and be conscious. Suratman, convinced that the writer serves as the eye and bearer of conscience of his society, aims his illustration to be a point of conversion for his readers. They have to gain consciousness of the predicament of their present and presence in this society.

Another dimension of illustration is engagement. Suratman often writes about themes commonly expressed by the Singapore Malay community. He attempts to engage his readers to think about the issues raised. These issues include parental neglect, spiritual emptiness, cultural alienation, language deprivation, the plight of the poor and mosque mismanagement.<sup>9</sup> His creative works, both in narrative and verse, are complemented by many of his essays on culture, religion and language. Suratman wants to engage his Malay audience to seriously problematise their situation, and the tenor of his poems and essays reflects this very well.

In the poem, "Jalan Permulaan" ["The Beginning of Journey"], echoing his famous novel *Penghulu yang Hilang Segala-galanya* [The Headman who Lost Everything], Suratman narrates the challenging conditions of the Malay community in adapting to the process of modernisation. But within a context where they have lost many

---

<sup>8</sup> By illustration here, we make use of the elaboration of the term by Paulo Freire. Illustration means, "a process of knowing reality, how reality is made. The more you understand the mechanisms of economic oppression and exploitation, the more you understand what working for wages really is, the more you illuminate, the more you put light on some obscurity necessary for domination." Read, Ira Shor and Paulo Freire, *A Pedagogy for Liberation: Dialogues on Transforming Education*. (Wesport: Bergin & Garvey, 1987), p. 45.

<sup>9</sup> Read Suratman Markasan, *Bangsa Melayu Singapura dalam Transformasi Budayanya*. (Singapore: Anuar Othman & Associates, 2005).

things, to speak of just a simple adjustment is naive. The Malays were a people neglected under colonial rule, now entering a phase as an independent nation, as citizens of a state which emphasises meritocracy, efficiency and productivity. Suratman sees this backwardness and neglect as the failure of the leadership to ensure *the rights and welfare of the people*. He describes this feeling succinctly in the poem, "Dalam Perjalanan Masa," [ "In the course of time" ] which is critical of the country's leadership but also almost ends in despair :

In school I was taught history  
That Raffles founded Singapore  
The king got wealthier and his empire expanded  
The Sultan got money and becoming fatter  
Immigrants increased in number but my life remained stagnant

When I was growing up, I was still courteous and determined  
The leader's argument leads me to confusion  
As his logic does not make me any more mature  
Ulama shows me the correct path  
But he continues to go against his nature  
That makes me tired with fellow humans.<sup>10</sup>

A committed littérateur like Suratman is aware of the depressing state of affairs of his community, but like many others, he is not able to illustrate fully the structural problems that caused the displacement of his community:

---

<sup>10</sup> Di sekolah aku diajar ilmu sejarah  
Raffles menemui Singapura  
Raja mendapat kekayaan menjadi besar empiernya  
Sultan mendapat wang menjadi gemuk tubuhnya  
Pendatang bertambah hidupku tak berubah

Ketika dewasa aku masih sopan dan tawakal  
Pemimpin berhujjah aku menjadi keliru  
Kerana logikanya tak membikin aku dewasa  
Ulama menunjukkan aku sirotul mustakin  
Tapi dia terus berlawanan dengan sifatnya  
Lalu aku menjadi bosan dengan manusia.

Refer, *Puisi Luka dan Puisi Duka*. (Singapore: Pustaka Nasional, 2004), p. 35.

the lack of resources and social capital, apart from the policy of exclusion from mainstream development that prevented the Malays from being an integral part of the development process especially from the 1970s when Singapore entered a robust phase of industrialisation and urbanisation.<sup>11</sup> Instead we see him lamenting, even questioning development, such as in the poem "Ke Mana Kita?" [Where we are Heading?]. It is not uncommon for Suratman's own experiences and discovery to be made into a collective statement about his community. Singapore is claimed as the land of "ours" ("Singapuraku/My Singapore"), but given the fast pace of modernisation on the island republic, the social environment has changed so tremendously that there is very little the Malay people can identify with in the land they have grown up in and which they call home.

The sea where I went fishing  
the hill where I searched for rambutans  
have been forested by slabs of stones  
Pak Lasim will no longer be a headman  
his island has been uprooted from his memories  
his kinsmen have been cast off  
on the hot stones and sands

I've lost my sea  
I've lost my hill  
I've lost my soul<sup>12</sup>

Suratman's message to his Malay readers is that they need to know their predicament, that they are being displaced more than ever, whether this takes

---

<sup>11</sup> On Singapore Malays' adjustment to the nation's industrialisation, read John Clammer, "Malay Society in Singapore: A Preliminary Analysis," *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science*, Vol.9, Nos.1-2, 1981, p. 19- 32 ; Tham Seong Chee, "Education, Society and Economic Mobility Among the Malays in Singapore," *Suara Universiti*, Jan 1971, p. 33-59.

<sup>12</sup> Laut tempatku menangkap ikan/ bukit tempatku mencari rambutan /sudah menghutan dilanda batu-bata /Pak Lasim tak bisa lagi menjadi penghulu /pulaunya sudah dicabut dari peta kepalanya /nak buah sudah terdampar/di batu-bata dan pasir-masir hangat /Aku kehilangan lautku/Aku kehilangan bukitku/ Aku kehilangan diriku" *From the Beginning to Two Streams of Social Critique*. (Singapore: S. Markasan, 1991), p. 5.

the form of a changing physical space, a dilution of cultural identification, or the maladjustment of youth in modern life. The theme of displacement can be described as one of his lamentations, rather than an illustration. In his poem "Hawaii", the plight of the indigenous Hawaiians echoes the predicament of his own community back home. His emphatic tone in the poem stresses the parallel experience of the Malays of Singapore:

In this beautiful island  
Authenticity has fade away  
The people speaking foreign language  
Their land has been sold off

In this island  
The skyscraper owned by others  
The pineapple sprawling wide  
Just a place biting the finger

....

The story of this beautiful island  
Is a similar one  
Like my own country  
That has changed its form.<sup>13</sup>

Singapore's modernisation led to rapid urbanisation in the earlier period of independence. By the 1970s, massive resettlement had already taken place. Malays from the Southern Islands were resettled on the mainland and housed in flats. They were poorly equipped to adjust to the urban setting.<sup>14</sup> Suratman's laments about the problems of a society in transition illustrate why a section of the community was not able to adjust fast enough to the modernisation process.

---

<sup>13</sup> Di pulau indah ini/Keaslian sudah pudar/Penduduk berbahasa asing/ Tanah milik sudah terjual/  
Di pulau ini/ Pencakar langit orang punya/ Ladang nanas begitu luas /Cuma tempat mengigit jari  
....

....

Kisah pulau indah ini /Adalah cerita ulangan/ Tanah airku bersama / Yang sudah bertukar rupa.

<sup>14</sup> Read Suriani Suratman, *The Malays of Clementi: an ethnography of flat dwellers in Singapore*. Thesis (M.A.) — Monash University, 1986.

## **Language and Memory**

Language plays an important role in the imagining and preserving of social memory.<sup>15</sup> How to maintain that social memory itself is a cultural task which the intelligentsia like Suratman are concerned with. Being a Malay educationist, Suratman saw the gradual relegation of the Malay language from an active public presence decades ago, to a more specific and limited use in the domain of mother tongue education in schools; in religious and literary circles, and in the electronic and printing media.

With the closure of Malay schools by the 1980s, and the greater use of English in Singapore, the Malay language saw a shrinking public presence, and the overall standard of the language including the fluency with which it was spoken left much to be desired. Following independence, English took over as the main language in the island. Malay, although the national language of the republic, remains largely symbolic. Amongst its own native speakers, with the intensification of modernisation, the Malay language, categorised as a Second Language in schools, is inevitably affected. English, the language of capitalistic development, encroaches beyond the market. While there has been interest in cultural appreciation and enjoyment in the community, language and literary activities were never popular: "In language and literary forum/ or in other forums/ Merely four to five [people] can be counted."<sup>16</sup> Suratman laments this state of affairs. The language has been displaced, both from within and without, as highlighted in the poem "Cerita Peribumi Singapura" ["The Story of Singapore's Indigenous People"]

I do not have anything else  
Sri Lanang and Nila Utama are merely names  
the local traders pushing aside their own language

---

<sup>15</sup> Amongst African intellectuals, this point has been made very forcefully by Ngugi wa Thiong'o "...they planted their memory on our intellect through language. Language and the culture it carries are the most crucial parts of that naming system by which Europe subjected the colonized to its memory. The more educated the colonial subjects are in the culture of the colonizer, the more severe the subjection, with devastating results for the community of subjects as a whole." *Something Torn and New*, p. 114.

<sup>16</sup> "Di forum bahasa dan sastera/ atau forum lainnya juga/ Cuma empat lima boleh dihitung." *Jalan Permulaan*. (Singapore: ASAS '50, 1986), p. 36.

pursuing English which is the symbol of success  
our verse and prose seldom being read  
or even the world literature.<sup>17</sup>

The relegation of the language from the public sphere to the domestic domain is a challenge to the identity formation of the community. Suratman, who speaks of writers as the “eye” of society (penulis sebagai mata masyarakat) calls for his audience to be reminded of their fate in the future. Otherwise they would be no different from the displaced native Hawaiians discussed above. Till today, Suratman is relentless in his criticism of the cultural and literary apathy within the community. While there are ideological and structural impediments, there is apathy, especially among Malay leaders who have not been forthcoming in their initiatives and support for literary and cultural empowerment within the community. In a way, Suratman’s laments and criticism are no different from many other thinkers and activists of many developing societies who are concerned about hegemonic cultural imperialism, which means the destruction, relegation and marginalisation of many local cultures and languages, especially those that are outside the capitalist developmental orbit. To speak up for justice is his agenda, and in many cases, he has explored this theme in various shapes, shades, and depth.<sup>18</sup>

Suratman belongs to a literary culture that strongly emphasises the commitment to reform society, as attested in the ASAS '50 slogan, “*Sastera untuk Masyarakat*” [“Literature for Society”]. ASAS 50, a literary organisation formed in August 1950 in Singapore is also a place where Suratman played an active role.<sup>19</sup> Indonesian literary scholar, Budi Darma has observed a strong tinge of didacticism in Suratman’s literary repertoire not unlike other leading Malay writers in Singapore

---

<sup>17</sup> “Aku tak punya apa lagi/Sri Lanang dan Nila Utama tinggal nama /Saudagar peribumi menolak bahasa /Mengejar Inggeris lambang kemajuan /Puisi prosaku kurang dibaca / Tak juga sastera dunia.” Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> A point he made during an interview, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VYDsMqqTVLI> accessed on 15 Dec 2011.

<sup>19</sup> Today, ASAS 50 still has a following amongst Malay teachers and literary activists in Singapore who are at the forefront of promoting Malay literary activities although it no longer has the vitality of its heyday in the fifties and sixties. It has failed to meet the increasing challenge of promoting the production, consumption and appreciation of Malay literature to a higher level.

like Mohamed Latiff Mohamed.<sup>20</sup> As Shahrudin has also noted, a kind of marked pessimism and feudal romanticism are at work amongst some prominent Singapore Malay writers. At the same time, we should also acknowledge their consistent fervent urging for greater consciousness amongst the Malays, and for Malays to be critical of their condition, even though their diagnosis of the situation leaves much to be desired.<sup>21</sup> While some lament the bygone idyllic past, Suratman seems to favour a return to religion as the way out of this present predicament. He does not romanticise the Malay feudal past but his lamentation does not end totally in complete pessimism as religion becomes the bulwark against the tide of westernising influences, moral relativism, consumerism and the like.

### **Averting Loss**

In this regard, while Suratman laments the distant past as a loss which there is no way of returning to or reclaiming, the present nevertheless becomes something that he is concerned about, for there is a way to change the present predicament. This is where, without the commitment and hope for reform, his criticisms become mere lamentation. At the same time, we note that this is where he does not explore or elaborate much, apart from giving the religious antidote to address current challenges of his community. The sense of loss grips him, or at least his imagination. But an interesting twist to this very lamentation is that he often resurrects the past experiences of the community, of their cultural identity, space and dignity. This is where literature becomes the instrument for keeping people's social memory afloat. However, if the element of lamentation predominates, it may well function as an immobilising force within the community.

In short, although Suratman's lamentations dominate his work, this is compensated by his persistence in harping on social memory, which in itself is a significant contribution. Illustrating social memory serves partly to cultivate in one a sense of rootedness to one's culture, home and human dignity. Indeed Ngugi's statement that "[a] people without memory are in danger of losing

---

<sup>20</sup> Budi Darma, "Suratman Markasan, Sastera Melayu Singapura," in Johar Buang (ed.) *70 Tahun Suratman Markasan*. (Singapore: Toko Buku Hj Hashim, 2001).

<sup>21</sup> Read Shahrudin Maaruf, "Singapore Malay Literature," in Budi Darma, (ed.) *Modern Literature of ASEAN*. (Jakarta: ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information, 2000), p. 110-118.



their soul,"<sup>22</sup> is emblematic of the socio-literary endeavour and commitment of Suratman. He may not be free of ideological bias, but his consistent call for the community to be mindful of their history, language and identity is imperative in creating and nurturing space for social memory — or at least mitigating the loss of such memory. Suratman's role as the keeper of social memory is crucial especially in averting the tragedy of the young no longer having the pride and confidence to confront and engage the present without the feeling of hopelessness. Ironically, the lines from Suratman's poem "Jalan Permulaan" ["The Beginning of a Journey"] are the dead end that we must not succumb to. It reads:

My Singapore  
I fully understand  
Here is my home  
But I do not know when  
I will regain what I have lost<sup>23</sup>

Indeed it is the sense of despair and hopelessness which is the challenge that faces social memory. Today, Suratman still makes his active presence in Malay literary discourse felt both nationally and regionally.<sup>24</sup> His works have been used in the school curriculum (namely in the teaching of Malay literature at 'O' level), while in the study of Singapore Malay literature at university, his works also often feature prominently.<sup>25</sup> He is still active in delivering seminars and workshop to younger audiences, and he is as vocal as ever when commenting on the current state of affairs, as seen in his various articles in the

---

<sup>22</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong'o, "A people without memory are in danger of losing their soul," *New African*, Dec, 2003.

<sup>23</sup> Singapuraku/aku mengerti sekali/di sini tempatku/ tapi aku tidak tahu bila/ aku akan menemui segala kehilanganku? *Puisi Luka dan Puisi Duka*, p. 16.

<sup>24</sup> Read, Mana Sikana, "Suratman Markasan: Lambang dan Lantang," in *Tokoh-tokoh Unggul dalam Sastera Melayu*. (Singapore: Pustaka Karya, 2007), p. 243-262.

<sup>25</sup> There are several academic exercises based on Suratman's literary works. In 2008, a PhD thesis written by Mawar Shafei was submitted at the Asian Languages and Cultures Academic Group, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University. See Mawar Shafei, *Novel Intertekstual Melayu*. (Bangi: Penerbit UKM, 2010).

Malay daily, *Berita Harian*. He is also still addressed as “Cikgu Suratman”, a term that indicates respect for him not only as a teacher to his many students on the island, but also as an elder *sasterawan* ( littérateur ), who speaks his mind not only on issues of literature and language, but also on ethics, family, community organisation, development and politics.

**About the Author**

.....  
**Azhar Ibrahim**, PhD, is a Visiting Fellow at the Department of Malay Studies, National University of Singapore (NUS). He obtained his PhD and MA from the same Department in 2008 and 2002 respectively. His research interests include sociology of religion, sociology of literature and critical literacy, and the Malay-Indonesian intellectual development. He pursued his post-doctoral research on social theology in Muslim Southeast Asia at the Faculty of Theology, University of Copenhagen, Denmark, and at the Abbasi Islamic Studies Program at Stanford University, USA.

# Poem

By Kalaicchemmal S Varathan

## கலைமலி கவின் வாழ்க்கை:

சொல்லில் சுவையேற்றி மகிழ்வான் கவிஞன்!  
வில்லில் நானேற்றி வித்தகம் செய்வான்  
வீரன்!  
கல்லில் கவினேற்றிச் சிலைவடிப்பான்  
கலைஞன்!  
கற்பனையில் சவாரிசெய்து சித்திரம்தருவான்  
ஓவியன்!

கலைமலி மனங்களும் கற்பனைக்  
கவிகளும்  
கவிகதை புதினம் நாடகம் நடனமென  
அறுபத்து நான்கு கலைகளைக் குவித்து  
அழகிய குவலயக் 'கம்பமா' ம்  
சிங்கையிலே  
உளம்உவக்க சிந்தனை சிறக்க  
அனுபவிப்போம்! வாரீர் அனுபவிப்போம்!

பாரம்பரியமும் புதுநவீனமுமே  
கலந்து கரைந்து நம்மில் களிப்பூட்ட  
இந்திர உலகமாம் இங்கே என்ன இல்லை?  
இருப்பதை நன்கு சீரிய நோக்கில்  
இன்றும் நாளையும் பயன்படுத்துவோம்!

இனிவரும் சந்ததிக்கே இதோ உன்  
சொத்தென

## Beautiful Artistic Life!

The Poet rejoices with his ornate  
play of words!  
The Hero unloads his various talents  
with his bow and arrow!  
And the Sculptor who harnesses the  
stones to expose an amazing  
brightness and forms  
With considerable creative goodness  
drives the Imaginative Artist to flash  
the right artwork!

Enthusiastic and expressive hearts  
and  
the magnificent poets who dream,  
discover and  
mould poetry, novels, dramas,  
dances and the like  
Sixty-four art forms under one roof  
In the global *kampong* of Singapore!  
Let's rejoice! with our hearts'  
content  
Let's rejoice! Come all! come all!

And  
This is *Indralokam*(heaven) where  
Tradition and modernity intermingle  
making our lives cheerful and  
renowned!  
Look! What is not here?  
Let's make good use of  
whatever is available  
today and the day after!  
With thoughts for the future  
growing!

And for the next generation, with  
ambition  
we will honour them by

இனிவரும் சந்ததிக்கே இதோ உன்  
சொத்தென  
இன்பமாய்ச் சேர்த்துவைப்போம்! இங்கே  
பல்லினப் பண்பாட்டுடன்  
நன்றே வாழ்வோம்!  
நம்மை நாம் உணர்ந்து நானிலமும்  
நன்கு வாழ வழிவகுப்போம்!  
கலைகளை ரசித்து வாழ்ந்து  
வாழ்வை மேம்படுத்துவோம்!  
-கலைச்செம்மல் ச வரதன்

showing what we have gathered  
in totality  
We champion well  
our multi-ethnic culture!  
We know who we are  
and  
we will devise means  
for the world to flourish too!  
The Arts we will appreciate  
and our lives' mission and quest  
will be accomplished!

- Kalaicchemmal S Varathan  
(Poem translated by SP Panneerselvam)

கம்பம்- *Kampong*

Kampong: Malay word for village

#### About the Author

.....  
**Kalaicchemmal S Varathan** was born in Singapore on 22 Feb 1934. He worked as a shipping clerk for 35 years with one company. He entered the field of drama in 1955 and is still active in that field. He has also worked as a script writer, actor, and director for radio and television dramas. A member of the management committee in Umar Pulavar Tamil Language Center, he has been an advisor to the Singapore Indian Artistes' association. In 1984, he was awarded the Cultural Medallion. He also won the Kalai Chemmal award from the Singapore Indian Artistes' Association and the Avvai award given by the Avvai drama group. S Varathan has written 15 books including three in English. In addition, he has compiled a history of Tamil drama in Singapore from 1935 to 1995. He is the recipient of a long service award and the King Chola award by the Tamil Nadu government cultural divisions and 22 drama groups in Tamil Nadu. He is married with five children.

#### About the Translator

.....  
**SP Panneerselvam** worked in broadcasting for 42 years and is now doing freelance work. He holds Bachelor's degrees from Madurai Kamarasar University and the University of Lincolnshire & Humberside now called Lincoln University. His Master's degree in Tamil Literature is from Annamalai University and his M.Phil is from Azagappa University. He also has a Higher Diploma in Mass Communications from Oklahoma City University. Whilst working at RTS, SBC and Mediacorp, he wrote and produced a number of social and historical plays. He has written short stories and poems in Tamil and English and has translated them for local and foreign magazines. He has also translated a number of essays on Sir Stamford Raffles and William Farquhar and their second wives. SePaPa, as he is also called, is at the moment working towards completing three novels and a few books on Tamils in Singapore and Southeast Asia. He speaks four languages including Malay and understands Hindi and Hokkien. He has received a number of awards including the Kala Ratna award for his services to Tamil Literature and Culture in Singapore.

# The Bilingualism of Singapore Chinese Literature

By Assistant Professor Tan Chee Lay

## Introduction

A claim that almost became commonplace towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was that writers of Singapore literature in Chinese exceeded its readers in number. This statement insinuates that these writers themselves did not even read Singapore Chinese literature.

Has Singapore Chinese literature been reduced to an adornment on local literature bookshelves?

If we were to look for an answer from history, we need not be too pessimistic. Even when general educational standards were low in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Chinese classical poetry and the succeeding vernacular and freestyle modern poetry, novels as well as essays were actively promoted by local newspapers, publishers and writers, attracting substantial interest then.

## From China's literary influence to Singapore Chinese Literature

Among the first significant influences on early Singapore Chinese literature was the "New Novel" (*Xin xiaoshuo*). From China after the 1919 May Fourth Movement, the New Novel brought themes and content about life in China. The popularity of the New Novel was expected as Chinese immigrants regarded China as home and the use of Sinocentric motifs was most prevalent among Singapore Chinese writers until the end of World War II. To many writers and readers then, Singapore Chinese literature was merely another 'marginal category' or 'offshoot' of literature from China.

Singapore Chinese literature began to find its footing after World War II, with more Chinese immigrant writers developing an increased awareness of the local context, and their growing acceptance that they might make Singapore their long term place of residence. For instance, Zhao Rong's (1920-) novella "Sea of Banana Palm" (*Bayang Shang*, 1958) was decorated with references to local flora such as "Coconut, rambutan, oil palm" and "Ah-Zai's Story" contained numerous localised dialect nouns such as "Kopi-O" (black coffee), "Roti" (bread) and "you-zha-kui" (deep-fried dough sticks). Miaoxiu (1920-1980) wrote a novel *Under the Singapore Roof* (*Xinjiapo Wuyan Xia*, 1952) that dealt with localised terms and also the subject of immigrant labourers, especially coolies and rubber plantation workers. Furthermore a linguistic characteristic of post-World War II novels was the fusion

of Chinese with Chinese dialects and Malay. Not only did such linguistic experiments distance local Chinese literary works from their linguistic origins in China, but they also helped to accelerate the detachment of local works from the cultural hegemony of their Chinese roots.

The shaping of a truly Singaporean Chinese literature became even more evident with the widespread and heightened nationalistic sentiments after Singapore's independence in 1965. Besides the prominent first-generation novelist Miao Xiu who was prolific till the late 1970s, other important representative writers who emerged during and after Singapore's independence include poet and essayist Chew Kok Chang (1934-, pen name Zhou Can); micro-novelist and critical essayist Wong Meng Voon (1937-); scholar, poet and essayist Wong Yoon Wah (1941-); micro-novelist Zhang Hui (1942-); poet, novelist, essayist and multidisciplinary artist Tan Swie Hian (1943-); novelist, essayist, poet and playwright Yeng Pway Ngon (1947-) and novelist and essayist You Jin (1950-) among many others. These writers raised the standard of Singapore Chinese literature with their remarkable techniques and exploration of subject matter with a distinctive Singapore flavour. Consequently, Singapore's Chinese literary scene enjoyed healthy growth during the 1970s and 1980s.

During this period of growth after the nation's independence, besides the significant shift and expansion in subject matter in Singapore Chinese literature, literary styles developed as well. For example, the most prominent poetic group after independence was The May Poetry Society (*Wuyue Shishe*). Formed in the 1970s, it closely followed Taiwan's Modernist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, differentiating itself from pre-independence Realist poetics by writing Modernist poetry filled with Symbolism and bold images. Some of the representative first-generation Modernist poets of this period include the abovementioned Lin Fang (1942-), Dan Ying (1943-), Nan Zi (1945-) and Wen Kai (1947-). It was in their poems that English phrases and Western Modernist literary styles first appeared in local Chinese literature. However, their poetry in this period did not entirely drift away from traditional works as many of these Modernist poets, such as Lin Fang, continued to draw inspiration from traditional art forms and intercultural sources such as traditional Chinese poetry and the Malay four-lined poetic verse form, *pantun*.

Mostly born in the 1950s, second-generation writers such as Quek Yong Siu (1951-) and Xi Ni'er (1957-) further experimented brilliantly with form and structure, while emphasising humanistic concerns in a society marked by increasing modernisation and materialism. Notably, many of these local Chinese writers excel in more than one genre as they explore different writing forms. For instance, Xi, the incumbent President of the Singapore Association of Writers, is a prominent international micro-novelist as well as an award-winning poet. Quek, the President of the Association of Composers (Singapore) and the Chinese Instrumental Music Society, is a prolific poet and a versatile songwriter.

Younger poets born around and after 1965, such as Leong Wern Fook (1964-), Chua Chim Kang (1965-), Gabriel Wu Yeow Chong (1965-) and myself, Tan Chee Lay (1973-), who were mostly educated in Singapore's bilingual educational system, stood out with their bold imagery and figurative language, some even winning overseas literary prizes. Interestingly, unlike their predecessors, most of them refrained from using pen names. Versatile in both Chinese and English, they draw inspiration from widely-varied sources – from Chinese classics, Taiwanese pop lyrics, local English plays to postmodern Western works. For instance, Liang Wern Fook, who won the Young Artist Award for literature and the Cultural Medallion for Music is an acclaimed poet, lyricist, essayist and novelist. Many of these younger writers continue to write in various genres.

The even younger post-1980 generation created online Chinese literary journals, notably <http://www.heteropoetryclub.com> (now defunct), to display their Modernist and Post-Modernist poetics and literary experiments. Some even wrote in both Chinese and English and were able to translate their own works. New immigrants, especially those from China, have further injected new blood into the local literary scene, with many of their latest creative works posted on currently the most popular Singapore Chinese literary website <http://www.sgwritings.com>. Many veteran Singaporean poets such as Huai Ying (<http://www.sgwritings.com/376>), engaged in this new mode of online literary publication enthusiastically and as a result, their creative publications saw an encouraging revival.

### **From Chinese Language literature to Multicultural Literature**

The Singapore Chinese literary scene had many more activities than its English counterpart before 2000 with active, long-standing writers' groups like the



Singapore Writers Association and Singapore Literature Society taking the lead to organise literary programmes such as talks, workshops, artist residencies, annual book compilations and overseas visits. However, with noticeably fewer emerging local young writers writing in Chinese, especially after 2000, local Chinese literature began to fall behind English literature in terms of its volume of publications, activities and resources.

That said, Singapore Chinese literature definitely still has much to offer. One of the most outstanding characteristics of Singaporean writers writing in Chinese that became apparent after Singapore's independence is their ability to blend, interpose and contrast multicultural and literary influences from the East and West, not limited to those of the ethnic groups in Singapore. As a form of divergence from Anglo-Saxon or Oriental literary dominance and hegemony, and possibly also due to the Bloomian "anxiety of influence"<sup>1</sup>, Singapore Chinese literature has long attempted over half a century to carve out its own unique path. Congruent with the multilingual and multicultural society of Singapore, the oeuvre of Singaporean writers in Chinese distinguishes itself by the bicultural<sup>2</sup> or multicultural, and more visibly, the bilingual or multilingual characteristics of its works.

Such multicultural elements include Eastern influences (such as works and schools of literary thought from China, Taiwan and Hong Kong, like the Leftist, Taiwan Modernists, folk songs, etc), Western influences (works and many schools of thought from Western countries, (post-) colonial impact, etc), and Southern or *Nanyang* influences (literary forms and content of Malay, Tamil and Chinese dialect, localised social and educational factors such as the bilingual education system, etc). Elements from these three different sources combine to engender literary

---

<sup>1</sup> See Bloom, Harold, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.

<sup>2</sup> In 2005, MOE initiated a Bicultural Studies Programme in four secondary schools to groom bicultural elites. This may have positive effect in future creative works by the Bicultural students, but has no correlation with the work discussed here. For Bicultural Studies, see C. L. Tan, "The Interdisciplinarity of Teaching Bilingualism", paper presented in Raffles International Conference on Education, Humanities & the Arts, 2008; and C. L. Tan, "The Inter-disciplinary Bilingual Education", in C. L. Tan, *The Teaching of Chinese Language and Literature in Singapore*, Nanjing University Press, 2012.

works with themes, contents, forms and linguistic styles that are unique to Singapore. This uniqueness can be understood in terms of what I call a “compass-styled biculturalism”.

### **The Compass-Styled Biculturalism of Singapore Chinese Literature**

Imagine a compass standing on two legs, with the fixed leg representing the Southern or *Nanyang* factors, and the other movable leg representing Eastern or/and Western factors. On the one hand, it is important for the compass to first stand on a firm base – the deeper the fixed leg penetrates, the more stabilised the compass is. On the other hand, the wider the movable leg extends, the larger circumference the compass can draw. Metaphorically, we can say that the depth and breadth of the compass legs, which are determined by the Southern and Eastern/Western factors respectively, will directly affect the intensity and scope of the multicultural influences embedded in the eventual work.

This metaphor can be substantiated with actual bicultural examples in Singapore Chinese literature. The Modernist poet Lin Fang once wrote a well-known preface entitled “The Dumplings Wrapped in Pandan Leaves” in the May Poetry Selection, which argued that “as part of the multicultural structure of an independent nation, contemporary Singaporean Chinese poetry has to metamorphise to wean itself off cultural overdependence on its source. Meanwhile, just as we [Singaporeans] boldly use pandan leaves to wrap dumplings, Singaporean Chinese poetry has to create its very own styles in an all-new environment.”<sup>3</sup> Just like what he advocates, Lin borrows heavily from the Malay *pantuns*, such as the famous verse which is still often recited in Malay weddings:

*Dari mana punai melayang*  
(From where do the wild pigeons fly)  
*Dari paya turun ke padi*  
(From the swamps to the paddy fields)  
*Dari mana datangnya sayang*  
(From where does my lover come)  
*Dari mata turun ke hati*  
(From the eyes down to the heart)

---

<sup>3</sup> Lin Fang, “The Dumplings Wrapped in Pandan Leaves”, in Nan Zi (Ed), *May Poetry Selection*, Singapore: May Poetry Publishing, 1989, p. 1. Translation mine.

Lin's works, such as "The Lost Traveller" (1963) below, also portray four-lined stanzas which resemble that of a *pantun*, as well as the form from the origins of Chinese poetics, *The Book of Songs* (Shijing), which has many four-lined stanzas too. Looking back at his peers, the many Modernist poets that co-started the May Poetry Club, Lin maintained that "the folk tradition of Malay poetry and its heavy reliance on symbolism really appealed to us. We are very familiar with this sort of style, for the first major Chinese poetry anthology, *The Book of Songs*, was precisely of this tradition. Many of our generation, that of the post-war baby boomers, were fluent in Malay, so it was easy for us to access each other's literary traditions."<sup>4</sup>:

被绞于生活的齿轮

(Being crushed by the wheels of life)

醒时，他把躯体安置路旁

(When awake, he places his body by the road)

右膝指向来路

(The right knee points towards the road he came)

左膝支持肩膀

(The left knee supports his shoulder)<sup>5</sup>

Besides the similarity in form with the *pantun* and early Chinese poetry, Lin's works are full of symbolism (such as the lost traveller reflecting on the road he has taken, while supporting himself amid the harsh realities of life) and contrasts (such as life versus dead body, wheels of life versus road of death, left versus right, etc). While Lin's multicultural works draw inspiration, in form and in style, from both Eastern and local literary traditions, they also remind one of the Modernist, Haiku-like works by the Modernist poet Ezra Pound. These works are manifestations of "compass-styled biculturalism" – the fixed compass leg appears to be steep in *Nanyang* flavour, and the movable leg encompasses a wealth of inspiration from traditional Chinese and Modernist sources.

---

<sup>4</sup> See Chiu Weili, "Portrait of a Modernist Poet: Lin Fang", in *S/pores*, <http://s-pores.com/2010/12/lin-fang/> (Accessed 2 Sept 2011).

<sup>5</sup> See Wen Kai, Lin Fang, etc., *Xinjiapo 15 shiren xinshiji* (Modern Poetry Collection of 15 Singaporean Poets), Singapore: May Poetry Publishing, 1970.

Wong Yoon Wah is a renowned scholar-writer who not only advocates multicultural representations in local works but also takes the lead to create highly bicultural prose and poetry. For instance, one of Wong's many *Nanyang* poems depicts durians, the King of fruits, in the form of a traditional Chinese genealogical record or family book (*jiapu*) and compares the durian with the Chinese Emperor of the past:<sup>6</sup>

加冕称帝之后，  
(After the Emperor's coronation,)  
更不能微服潜行，随处在民间游戏  
(I cannot sneak out in plain clothes, have fun amongst the people)  
不管我藏在香蕉丛里  
(Despite hiding amongst the bananas)  
或躲在旅店的密室中  
(or in the secret room in the hotel)  
我的子民  
(My subjects)  
都能从空气中探测到我的行踪  
(Can always detect my whereabouts in the air)

The distinct characteristic of durians releasing a strong odor is cleverly captured, and then compared with an Emperor who tries to sneak out of the palace, a very common plot especially in dramas involving Chinese royal families. Here, we see a combination of localised content with an Eastern-inspired imagination, which again portrays compass-styled biculturalism.

In the 1970s and 1980s, many novelists such as Dr Wong Meng Voon and Zhang Hui, wrote about the falling standards of the Chinese language among Chinese Singaporeans, as well as the rapid change of the working language in Singapore from Chinese to English. Such highly critical but accurate observations of the local context represent the fixed leg of the bicultural compass. The extendibility of the movable leg of the compass may be further determined by Eastern or Western influences. For instance, in the micro novel "Michael Yang'" (*Maike*

---

<sup>6</sup> See Wong Yoon Wah, *Wang Runhua shi jingxuanji* (Best Selected Poems by Wong Yoon Wah), Taipei: Xindi Wenhua Yishu Press, 2010.

*Yang*), Wong Meng Voon writes about a Director of a certain fictitious Singapore "Language Board", Michael Yang, who is required to deliver a Mandarin speech and, together with other Westerners, to publicly sign his own Chinese name during a book launch. Having not used the Chinese language for ages, he can only read from a script filled with *Hanyu Pinyin*. While signing his own surname "Yang", instead of the "wood" (*mu*, 木) radical, he wrongly writes a "rice" (*mi*, 米) radical, which is a commonly-known signifier of the British flag for Chinese readers.<sup>7</sup> Such a deliberate introduction of Western-inspired signifier and its signified in a local or Eastern (Chinese language and culture) context exemplifies the bicultural, even multicultural, aspects of Singapore Chinese literature.

A more obvious characteristic of the compass-styled biculturalism of some Singapore Chinese literary works is their bilingual presentation. Writers such as Yeng Pway Ngon and Xi Ni'er have utilised both Chinese and English in their works to excellent effect.

Yeng Pway Ngon is Singapore's most prominent and accomplished Singapore Chinese novelist, but he started his writing career by writing poetry. One of his more recent poems, "April" (*Siyue*, 2003), borrows from T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land", to describe a contemporary local phenomenon:

April is the cruellest month. Breeding  
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
Memory and desire, stirring  
Dull roots with spring rain.

– T.S. Eliot: The Waste Land

四月的残酷不是诗的  
*The cruelty of April is not any poetry's*  
隐喻。它具体存在于  
*metaphor. It exists in*  
你上升的体温，于咳嗽  
*your rising temperature, your cough,*  
于你急促的呼吸  
*your fast and short breath.*

---

<sup>7</sup> Wong Meng Voon, in [http://www.sgwritings.com/341/viewspace\\_1120.html](http://www.sgwritings.com/341/viewspace_1120.html) (Accessed 14 Dec 2011).

(I had not thought death had undone so many.  
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,  
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.)

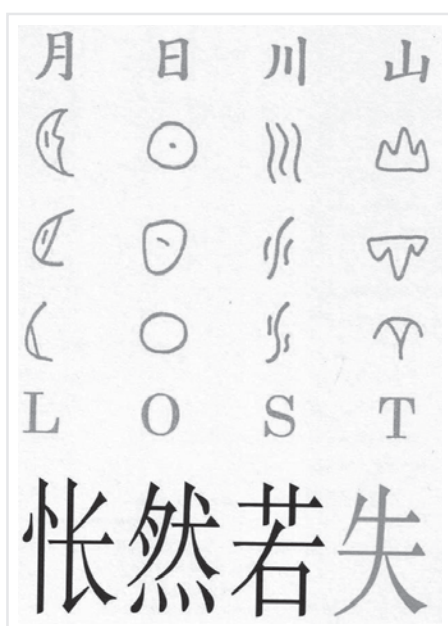
于焦虑的影像于电子  
*In the anxious image, in electronic*  
邮件，于计程车与巴士于地铁  
*mails, in taxis and in buses, in Mass Rapid Transit,*  
于荒漠的街道，于野草  
*on deserted streets, like wild grass*  
般迅速蔓延的  
*the rapidly spreading*  
谣言  
*rumours*  
人们把自己紧锁在自己的身体里  
*People lock themselves tightly in their own bodies*  
露出一双惊恐疑虑的眼睛  
*only revealing their intimidated, suspicious eyes*<sup>8</sup>

In this poem, as seen above, the Chinese language and the English language are used alternately, and images which are Eastern and Western-oriented are interposed and juxtaposed together. Elsewhere in the poem, for instance, “God”, “churches”, “Buddha”, “temple” – religious images of the East & West coexist, while traditional Chinese medicines and herbs are listed, together with Singapore’s modes of public transport, like “taxis”, “buses” and “Mass Rapid Transit”. Although the English stanzas are not written by Yeng himself, he cleverly and creatively gives new and localised meaning to Eliot’s “The Wasteland” and the month of April, when SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) hit Singapore in 2003. This piece of writing can be perceived as a bilingual and even bicultural poem in Singapore: the fixed leg of the bicultural compass can be seen as the actual historical event of SARS and its social impact in Singapore, and the movable compass leg is influenced by classic Western poetics, Modernism and Western-oriented images.

---

<sup>8</sup> Excerpt from Yeng’s “April”, see Yeng Pway Ngon, *Richang Shenghuo (Daily Life)*, Singapore: Grassroots Bookshop, 2004, p. 69-71. Written on 10 May 2003, italic texts are my translation.

Last but not least, we look at Xi Ni'er's pictorial poem, "Loss and Disheartening" (*Changran ruoshi*), which is a traditional Chinese idiom in itself.<sup>9</sup> This poem starts with the modern kai script of four simple Chinese characters, "Moon", "Sun", "River", and "Mountain". The characters are then traced philologically to their origin thousands of years ago. This script is often taught in traditional Chinese classes, simplifying the strokes along the process:



In a form of futuristic code, language and imagery mixing, we see deep influences by both Eastern and Western cultures in the poem above. Tracing the roots of the four Chinese characters symbolises the tracing of and searching for Chinese cultures, while the sudden introduction of four English letters "LOST" symbolises the dominance of western cultures and the English language in Singapore society today (and hence Chinese cultures, language and characters are "lost" in the process). Concise and visual, this poem powerfully depicts the state of the Chinese language in the local English-dominated environment, and hence is one of our best bilingual and bicultural poems.

### Conclusion

We have seen that most of the Singapore Chinese literary works discussed within the scope of this article, mainly poems and micro-novels, contain local themes and are set in Singapore. The local is a definite sign of the fixed leg of the bicultural compass, with influences from numerous other cultures extending the movable leg of the bicultural compass. Further, presenting some of these literary works in two languages, mainly but not limited to Chinese and English, not only allows readers to see them in the light of a

<sup>9</sup> Xi Ni'er, *Qingxin Moyi* (Believe Easily Without Suspicion), Singapore: Singapore Writers Association, 2001.



“bilingual literature” but more importantly allows readers to examine the different voices within our compass-styled multicultural literature and its rich linguistic and thematic hybridity.

In conclusion, while I have tried to provide a glimpse of the current state of bilingualism and biculturalism of Chinese literature in Singapore using the metaphor of a bicultural compass in the process, I am convinced that bicultural literatures in Chinese can exist in many more forms and permutations and will continue to evolve. Our many notable multilingual literary works in English, Malay and Tamil by Singapore writers educated in a bilingual educational system and living in a multilingual, multicultural society are a rich resource awaiting further discovery and research. As we move forward, let us hope that our literature can continue to anchor itself more firmly in the local context while expanding to an even larger circumference to fully embrace biculturalism and multiculturalism.

#### About the Author

.....

Born in Singapore, **Tan Chee Lay** is currently an Assistant Professor of Chinese at NTU and the Deputy Executive Director of the Singapore Centre for Chinese Language. He holds a BA in Chinese Literature from National Taiwan Normal University, an MBA from Leicester University and an MA in English Studies from the National University of Singapore. He completed his PhD in Oriental Studies at the University of Cambridge. As Chairman of Hwa Chong Junior College Alumni Literary Group, he used to publish the Hwa Chong Literary Series and he inaugurated the 1st bilingual Singapore Student Literary Award in 2000. Tan has edited and authored over 20 academic and creative books. His recent creative publications include *Prose of Tan Chee Lay* (2009), *Cambridge Poetics* (poetry, 2011), and his recent academic publications include *A Delicate Touch: Essays on Chinese Influences and Chinese Genres* (McGraw-Hill Education, 2010) and *The Pedagogy of Singapore Chinese Language and Literature* (Zhejiang University Press, 2012). He was awarded the Young Artist Award in 2004 and the Singapore Youth Award (Art and Culture) in 2006.

# From Where I Sit: Musings on Singapore's Classical Music Scene

By Dr Chang Tou Liang

I have been asked on occasion when I wrote my first classical music critique. That would have been sometime in 1997 when *The Straits Times* approached me to review a concert by the Scottish percussionist Evelyn Glennie. Soon after that, a compact disc recording of Paul McCartney's *Standing Stone*, one of his ill-advised "classical" compositions, arrived on my desk, and that became my first CD review. Now having clocked in just over a thousand reviews for the national daily, I ask myself: what has changed in the Western classical music scene in Singapore through the years? In a word, heaps. In my entry on that subject for *The Singapore Encyclopaedia*, I described it as a progression from enthusiastic amateurism to the pursuit of professional excellence.

When asked how long it took me to write my first review, my reply was eighteen years. That was the span of time between attending my first ever classical concert and that first review. For those destined to become chroniclers of musical history, your first critique takes place when you form an opinion of what you hear and see at any musical event, long before it is committed to paper (or its equivalent in cyberspace). That watershed year was 1979, when the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO), the nation's first professional orchestra came into being. Its first concerts in January generated great interest and tickets were in demand. It was only later in the year when the initial euphoria flagged that I managed to attend my first SSO event, a concert featuring the celebrated Israeli piano duo of Eden and Tamir. They performed Saint-Saëns's *Carnival of the Animals* and Poulenc's *Double Piano Concerto* under Choo Hoey's baton; as an impressionable fourteen-year-old, I was captivated and hooked for good. My second concert was at New York's Carnegie Hall but that is a story for another occasion.

Following the SSO through its seasons was an interesting experience. Its season pamphlets were eagerly awaited and each programme carefully scrutinised. What were the works being performed and who were the guest soloists? These questions were also translated into: which concerts should I attend? Charting the SSO's repertoire was like building a library of classics. The 41-member ensemble performed symphonies of Mozart, Haydn, Schubert and Beethoven and later expanded its repertoire to include Brahms, Dvorak and Schumann. It would be a few years before the orchestra "grew" into adolescence to tackle the larger and more complex works of Tchaikovsky, Richard Strauss, Shostakovich and Mahler.

Memories of concerts held at the Singapore Conference Hall and later the Victoria Concert Hall (from 1980 onwards) centred on the celebrity soloists as well as landmark performances of great repertoire works. I vividly remember the appearance of legendary violinist Ruggiero Ricci in Paganini's *Second Violin Concerto*, which was capped by no less than four encores. Also memorable was the respected German pianist Hans Richter-Haaser who performed Beethoven's *Emperor Concerto*, in possibly his last concert before his death in December 1980. The orchestra's hidden potential was realised in 1985 when the Finnish guest conductor Okko Kamu debuted with Sibelius's *Fifth Symphony*. It was the sound of an orchestra transformed that made both listeners and musicians excited, and ponder on the possibilities that a regional orchestra could achieve in such a short period of time.

With the advent of the professional orchestra, amateur musical activity receded into virtual silence in the 1980s. The once active Singapore Philharmonic Orchestra was disbanded, and the Goh Soon Tioe String Orchestra subsumed under the banner of the revitalised Singapore Youth Orchestra (SYO), now a Ministry of Education guided entity conducted by Goh's daughter, Vivien Goh. The SYO would serve as the SSO's unofficial feeder, with many of its young talented musicians turning professional upon the completion of their overseas musical studies. Amateur choral music-making received a boost with the formation of the Singapore Symphony Chorus (SSC) in 1980, which meant that works like Beethoven's *Choral Symphony*, Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana* and Verdi's *Requiem* could be heard performed with the SSO. The SSC for most of its life would be led by conductor Lim Yau, perhaps the most influential figure in the choral, opera and youth music-making scene for almost three decades.

The 1990s saw the formation of the Singapore Lyric Opera (SLO), which gave an average of three to four staged productions a year. Besides the staples of *La Bohème*, *La Traviata*, *Carmen*, *Rigoletto* and *The Merry Widow*, the young company under Lim Yau's direction successfully ventured into less familiar fare such as Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Verdi's *Macbeth*. A landmark of the SLO was the first-ever Singapore opera, *Bunga Mawar* by Leong Yoon Pin (with libretto by Edwin Thumboo), which had a brave outing despite its flaws.

On the orchestral front, the SSO progressed steadily and by the early 1990s, it had given local premieres of Mahler's *Second* and *Ninth Symphonies* (the former under Mahler über-specialist Gilbert Kaplan), Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* and Messiaen's *Turangalila*. By now the orchestra had chalked up several important international tours (including the musical capitals of London and Paris) and some internationally reviewed recordings. However it was felt by many including the SSO Board that long-time Music Director Choo Hoey's interpretations were merely competent, and the orchestra needed fresh new blood to bring it to further heights. In 1995, Okko Kamu was appointed Principal Guest Conductor and in 1997, the rising young Chinese conductor Lan Shui became the second Music Director of the SSO. I can personally attest to Shui's individual and instinctive way with music and musicians, by the way he made the Mussorgsky-Ravel *Pictures at an Exhibition* sound slick, polished and ultimately convincing in a guest appearance in 1993. The mark he left had already been keenly felt at the time.

The performance of chamber music also existed professionally, usually undertaken by musicians from the SSO such as the Jade Quartet (led by SSO Co-Leader Lynnette Seah) and Merlion Quartet (with violist Lim Soon Lee). The first chamber outfit to go "full-time" was the T'ang Quartet, formed by violinists Ang Chek Meng and Ng Yu Ying, violist Lionel Tan and cellist Leslie Tan. Perceived as young and hip, even today when its members are now in their forties, the quartet remains a force with its attitudinal approach to blending unique programming (especially of contemporary music) with a stylish sense of fashion.

The rise of the SSO under Lan Shui's leadership may be seen as meteoric, with a decent national orchestra transformed into a possibly great one making big strides in the international scene. Having an exclusive contract with the internationally recognised recording label BIS from Sweden helped place the orchestra on the world map, with critical acclaim in reviews such as *Gramophone*, *BBC Music Magazine*, *Fanfare* and *American Record Guide*. With definitive recordings of works by Alexander Tchernin, Chen Yi, Zhou Long and Steven Stucky, relatively modern music was healthily balanced with more popular works by Debussy, Mahler (including *The Song of the Earth* sung in Cantonese and the rarely heard Clinton Carpenter completion of the *Tenth Symphony*) and Rachmaninov. Its international tours, including concerts at New York's Lincoln Centre, London's Royal Festival Hall, the Berlin Philharmonie and venues in Shanghai and Beijing, helped maintain its high profile.

The turn of the millennium saw several game-changing developments in the local musical scene. The opening of Esplanade Theatres on the Bay with the 1600-seat Esplanade Concert Hall in October 2002 was characteristic of Singapore's infrastructural development and affluence. The music that followed paralleled this, culminating with Mahler's iconic *Symphony of a Thousand* performed by close to 400 musicians and conducted by Lan Shui at the Singapore Arts Festival in 2004. This would not have been possible, logistically and acoustically, in any other venue in Singapore. Visits by all the major London orchestras, New York Philharmonic, Vienna Philharmonic and Berlin Philharmonic Orchestras have reaffirmed the Esplanade as one of the great concert venues of the world. Today, the SSO concert season boasts appearances by world-renowned and great musicians of our time including conductors Vladimir Ashkenazy, Neeme Järvi and Gennady Rozhdestvensky, and soloists like Midori, Sarah Chang, Stephen Hough, Marc-André Hamelin, Lang Lang, Yo-Yo Ma, Misha Maisky and many others.

Also significant was the establishment of the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music at the National University of Singapore which consolidated Singapore's position as a major centre of musical education. From the viewpoint of a listener, the sheer wealth and diversity of concerts performed at a high level, showcased on a daily basis at the Conservatory, may prove irresistible. With the increasing number of music graduates, here and from overseas, there is a profusion of concerts by young artists and new ensembles too innumerable to be covered in this article.

Professionalism in musical performance has seen a quantum leap within three short decades. Generations of music students and youth orchestra members have meant that there is enough talent to fill several orchestras, and that phenomenon has come to glorious fruition within the last five years. The Singapore Festival Orchestra, Singapore's third professional orchestra (following the SSO and Singapore Chinese Orchestra) was formed by the National Arts Council to perform at the Singapore Arts Festival and the excellent National Piano & Violin Competition. In 2008, a group of teenaged musicians decided to form an orchestra of their own, independent of any cultural or educational institutions, and the OMM movement began. The Orchestra of the Music Makers, led by veteran musician and educationist Chan Tze Law,

has been likened to the miracle of Venezuela's Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra. Its performances of repertoire works have been widely praised, achieving a standard that even surpassed those of the SSO in its early years.

In 2010, its third year of existence, OMM performed both Mahler's *First* and *Second Symphonies*. It was curious to note that in July of that year, two performances of Mahler's *Resurrection Symphony* had initially been scheduled within the space of seven days to be played by two completely separate entities, one professional and the other amateur, both featuring completely different complements of musicians. As it turned out, the SSO pulled out and OMM went on to make a piece of musical history of its own.

All the above paint a rosy picture for the state of classical music in Singapore today, and a very bright future beckons. However there are areas of concern which may prove a stumbling block for further progress. Funding for the arts is vital and economic downturns will deal a crippling blow to music organisations. The SSO, with its operating budget of between 15 and 20 million dollars a year, is only kept afloat by annual governmental grants. Only the government's continual support can prevent the SSO from suffering the fates of the Philadelphia, Detroit and Montreal Symphony Orchestras, just to name several top North American orchestras which have faced financial crisis. The Singapore Lyric Opera receives only a fraction of funding enjoyed by the SSO, and hence is limited to only two major productions a year.

Although the sophistication of local performers has risen, its audience has however struggled to keep up. Concert attendances for events by local groups and performers remain disappointing, with audiences preferring to opt for big-name foreign acts. The Berlin Philharmonic sold out both its concerts at Esplanade in 2010, with the top priced ticket going for \$680. At the first Singapore Lieder Festival in August 2011, fewer people attended the performance of Schubert's *Winterreise* than the actual number of songs on the programme. Concert etiquette remains deplorable, reflecting a general lack of graciousness in society. Students from one elite school almost disrupted a concert at the Esplanade in April 2011, an event which was widely reported in the press, yet its principal offered no apologies for the acts of crassness and discourtesy.

All these shortcomings point to a poor level of general music education here. Despite tens of thousands students taking music examinations, this staggering number does not translate to actual concert attendances. It is as if musical excellence and concert attending were mutually exclusive entities. Parents, music teachers and schools, more concerned with excellent exam grades than actual music appreciation, will have to shoulder the blame. The mass media can do more for music education. *The Straits Times* has gradually increased its coverage of classical music from an all-time low in the early 2000s but is often subject to competing editorial and advertisement space. Despite MediaCorp's classical station *Symphony 92.4* having increased listenership, slicker presenters and around-the-clock broadcasting, the quality of its content has deteriorated markedly from the 1980s. Broadcasts of live recordings of the SSO and studio recordings by local artists, which used to be the norm thirty years ago (and something still practised by BBC Radio 3 and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation), are no longer in existence. The music broadcast has been reduced to short sound bites, with neither context nor commentary to aid the listener. Works by local composers and performances by local artists are rarely heard on the air, if ever. The very tools for promoting local artists and their music-making to a wider audience have been obliterated in favour of commercialism.

Local composer and performers are getting short shrift from the SSO. Its laudable Composer-in-Residence scheme, ensuring at least one new work per season, was dropped after four years. The New Music Forum, which garnered considerable interest for two seasons, was also similarly shelved. The programming of local compositions is an exception rather than something to be expected. Local artists no longer have the same opportunities to perform concertos with the SSO as previously, the orchestra preferring high profile foreign artists in subscription concerts and youngsters to grace its President's Young Performers series. The Young Virtuoso Piano Recital, which I created for the Singapore International Piano Festival to showcase young talented Singaporean pianists, was terminated despite a successful run of five years.

Maybe I have said or written too much, but these are some points to ponder as I survey the changing trend of Western classical music in Singapore over the years. There have been astonishing developments, matched by the wealth and progress of Singapore as a nation as well as the calibre of its musical artists. We



have been richly blessed as lovers of music and there is no turning back the clock. We can only bravely look forward, while being mindful that there is still much work to be done.

**About the Author**

.....  
**Dr Chang Tou Liang**, a family physician in private practice, has been a music reviewer of *The Straits Times* since 1997. He was formerly the Artistic Director of the Singapore International Piano Festival (2004-2008) and sat on the Board of Directors of both the Singapore Symphony Orchestra and Singapore Lyric Opera. His blog Pianomania may be found at <http://pianofortephilia.blogspot.com>.

# Art and the Wet End of 2011

By *Dr Adele Tan*

**This** 2011 Christmas season, Singapore was in the grip of an unnatural paroxysm over the breakdown of its Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) and the flash floods or “ponding” that took place at Liat Towers on Orchard Road and other areas. Damp squib to the year-end festivities this was. This country had been having a macabre spell with water, with dead bodies found in the water tank of an HDB apartment block and at the bottom of Bedok Reservoir. The normally quiescent Singaporean lot was in the mood for demands to the Transport and Environment ministries, emboldened by the not insignificant breakthrough of the Opposition in a social media-assisted election year. Things fall apart but the centre continues to hold – that cannot always be right.

Whilst the debacle over SMRT train breakdowns continues, we might have forgotten that the transport motif had a part to play in the art and cultural life of Singapore for 2011. The biggest event of the year must have been the final closure of the Tanjong Pagar Railway Station on 30 June and the ensuing crush of ideas on what to do with the edifice and track line. As a gazetted building, it must be conserved but the use it should be put to was hotly debated. In response, the competition “Re-imagining the Rail Corridor” was organised as part of a series of events to increase public engagement and awareness on the future use of the former railway land. Creative ideas were mined from students and professionals in design and architecture but only around six key themes: Ecology, Heritage, Recreation, Transport, Education and Community Gardening. One nascent proposal of turning the station into a contemporary *kunsthalle*, a designated space for mounting temporary art exhibitions, was given the cold shoulder but one should expect art to be fungible enough to be able to insert and fit itself into the above six categories. Despite the illustrious precedent set by the Musee d’Orsay in Paris for a converted train shed that housed expensive 19<sup>th</sup> century art, Singapore probably does not need another art gallery or museum, given that high doses of an art fix can be readily attained just across the road at the Tanjong Pagar Distripark, the closest we can get to an art gallery district like Chelsea in New York.

And fortuitously or not, in August 2011, there was a second instance of graffiti found emblazoned on the exterior of MRT train carriages. Incongruously reading “Jet Setter’s”, this was an act which the officials considered vandalism and similar to the deeds of Swiss national Oliver Fricker, and a Briton, Dane Alexander Lloyd,

who both adorned the trains with their own “throw ups” in 2010 by exploiting weaknesses in the perimeter fence and surveillance equipment at the Changi train depot. To the Land Transport Authority (LTA) who had merely fined SMRT a total of \$250,000 for the two incidents, this was regarded as a serious operational lapse and negligence that could compromise national interests. Although Fricker and Lloyd reminded the LTA and certain sections of the public of possible terrorist acts, it was not altogether clear that their guerrilla graffiti were immediately taken as threats. Staff members initially thought that Fricker and Lloyd’s spray-painted creation was a legitimate piece of advertising design work and did not report it till two days later. Quite a stark difference from the instantaneous negative reception of authorised but not very good graffiti-style painting on post boxes, a commercial stunt by SingPost which surely must become by now an example of how graffiti ought not to be done.

My point here is neither to extol the aesthetic merits of graffiti nor to defend its use in appropriate platforms but to draw attention to the somewhat symbiotic but sometimes contradictory relationship between trains and art in our island-city. Efficient rail networks and the creative industries have long been looked upon as reliable answers to the problem of ensuring economic growth and general urban well-being, although they are not fail-proof panacea. The LTA sustains a public art programme promisingly called “Art in Transit” and sponsored competitions to solicit potential commissions from local artists for the North East Line and Circle Line stations. Public art at the MRT functions as a sort of official expression of social glue, showing off the diverse make-up of the country. It is written up inoffensively as “site-specific art integrated into the stations’ architectural finishes, reflecting the cultural and historical heritage of the surrounding communities”. But my beef with this is that when the government tries to marry public art and transportation stations, the results are not often edifying. To be sure, artists challenged to perform within the given constraints of a designated area or conceptual brief is a well-worn gambit, but it all begins to look like lip service to the entire spirit of the “Art in Transit” motto when LTA appears content to consign artists statically to the exterior of the train platform’s lift shaft, a move repeated within the newly-opened stations on the Circle Line in 2011. It is tempting to say that the only transits that are permitted to happen are those taken by the daily commuters and those who had signed up for the two-hour walking tours along the North East Line. The art, however, is not going places.

It must be discernible by now that there is deep underlying anxiety about art in Singapore. The eagerness with which “community” and “outreach” has to be aligned with art can only be apprehended as symptomatic of the great unease with a whole class of production that is not within most people’s economic or sometimes knowledge reach. If art is to be institutionally tolerable, it has to be minced up and reconstituted as “accessible” (as if it were an MRT entrance or platform), another term in this concatenation of words to get art to be acceptable and responsible to the lowest common denominator. And similarly, into this word chain we could add those fashionable *bon mots* such as “participation”, “interactivity” and “engagement”. The LTA is keen to convince that it is right on the money, hip factor and the cultural tide by facilitating “art that left the gallery”. But what began as an intra-aesthetic argument within the art world against the insularity of art in modernity and art’s capacity to transform social consciousness, has in recent times been expropriated by the market and the government into an advertorial defence line for culture, and which can only make for pleasant, feel-good art that works the public, ticks all the right boxes but also has an unremitting dull ache of blandness. Safety is an expected principle and mantra of the LTA and SMRT, but this should not be the criterion that must apply equally to the art they commission. That said, I am almost glad that at least some of the new works on the Circle Line escaped the censorious climate of the public (or pseudo-public) sector with their sly, subversive humour still intact. Ho Tzu Nyen’s *Lieutenant Adnan* at Pasir Panjang MRT station cribs the story of our WWII war hero Lieutenant Adnan Saidi enshrined at the nearby Bukit Chandu museum but puts it to a different pop-cultural use as a mytho-memorial (in the form of a spectacular movie poster) that is forever to come, the endless Derridean *akan datang*. The poster calls out accusatively to passers-by with its proclamation that “Defiance has a name”, an ambiguous exhortation that could easily be from a MINDEF announcement or an opposition party rallying cry. More to the point, Ho’s intervention reveals that institutionalised defiance is reserved only for past patriotism but never for the here and now.

We have widespread acknowledgment that train lines run in tandem with any city’s cultural life and are frequent metaphors or emblems for human rhythms and activities. This was why there was much passion stoked by the undecided fate of the Tanjong Pagar Railway Station after its closure. Like the commissioned artworks for the MRT stations, the railway station’s consistent reference point

remains that of heritage – most have voted for it to become a transport museum. In a city of forgetting like Singapore, we also have a countervailing industry of and for memory where we console ourselves that it is good to remember the past, it is noble to bring to life local history. We do not quite know yet what to do with museums, art or culture, but if they can help us piece together stories of where we came from, or so the argument goes, their utility will be in what the officials and politicians perceive to be gains in nationhood, national resilience, pride in achievement and an anchored sense of home. This is especially useful given the small but significant turn in political fortunes this year. But this heritage approach risks surrendering prematurely what can be done in the present to a fixation on mourning or memorialising the past. And if it is indeed a cruel foregone conclusion that things in Singapore will have to make way for a purported better future, why should we not be equally unflinching in our presentation of history and document the exact conflicts and rancour that persist as part of what we generally embrace as our rich and diverse fabric? Our public art has been largely compliant, good at giving us the micro-narratives and the oral histories of the everyman, and whilst we are at it, decorating our train stations for the mass appreciation of art. Could we not also ask for public art that is more honest about the place of transportation within Singapore? The North-South highway could easily spawn truckloads of material from the social agitation arising from the cutting up of our Bukit Brown cemetery and the demolition of flats at the iconic Rochor Centre. Could our train stations indeed be a more inclusive repository of our transportation history, drawing into its ambit our roads, air routes and waterways?

2012 is shaping up to be a brave new year, with the bigger, expanded Art Stage fair in January entrenching itself ever more firmly into our cultural calendar and becoming a major centripetal force that sends the honchos of the global art world into our presence. Then there is the launch of the fervently anticipated Gillman Barracks with its slate of international art galleries and a Centre for Contemporary Art. There will be, at least on paper, lots of spaces to make, show, talk, sell and buy art that will move at speeds faster than any train on our existing tracks. And we will also soon know if the arts community will continue to have its own champion in the form of an approved Nominated Member of Parliament whom the community has endorsed. But whilst the Singaporean public has remonstrated about the problems plaguing water and transport management,

they have remained taciturn about the cultural life they expect to have in this country. As the familiar litany of complaints about “bread-and-butter issues” pours in on mainstream and online media, complaints about overcrowding, inflation, fare hikes, increased competition and economic stagnation, waxing philosophical about artistic expression and intellectual freedom is a labour more typically left to our artists and cultural critics. But if we do not want this to be a case of *fait accompli*, then what are our demands to the Ministry of Information Culture and the Arts? What do our artists want for 2012? We have been repeatedly inundated by floods in 2010 and 2011, so let me make the first plea that we the denizens of Singapore do not deserve “wet” (in the British sense of the word) and enfeebled art in the public sphere.

**About the Author**

.....  
**Adele Tan** is a curator and critic based in Singapore. She holds a PhD in art history from the Courtauld Institute of Art in London.



*Art installation by phunk studio  
at Promenade Station*

# Editorial Board

**Commentary: A Portrait of the Arts in Singapore**

**Editorial Advisor**

**Professor S Gopinathan**

*National Institute of Education*

*Nanyang Technological University*

**Editor**

**Assistant Professor Angelia Poon**

*National Institute of Education*

*Nanyang Technological University*

**DISCLAIMER**

The views and opinions expressed or implied in *Commentary* are those of the authors or contributors and do not reflect those of the Editors or The National University of Singapore Society.