

HL2008 Singapore Literature and Culture II

Jan 2019 semester – Wednesday, 1230-1530 hrs, HSSSemRm 6

Description

This module is *very focussed*: it examines select literary and dramatic/theatre works that emerged from the 1970s to the present, with an emphasis on the 1980s to the 2000s. *The spotlight will be on the question of Singaporean identity, in relation to questions of race/ethnicity, rapid capitalist/industrial development and the change of life in Singapore, especially in the light of urbanisation that came about with the commitment to very rapid capitalist development.* The main context of the dramatic changes lie in changes in modernisation policy in Singapore – in the 1970s, from a ‘pragmatic’, culturally philistine and highly-intense modernisation process that sought to homogenise/standardise culture and the cityscape in the name of economic development, to a 1990s-present modernisation that (in contrast) desires Singapore to be a more hip ‘global city for the arts’ (a 1992 govt.-policy phrase).

The changing contexts are as important as the texts to be examined – in fact, the texts can’t really be understood otherwise. What happens to ethnic-cultural identities – among the most sensitive of identity questions in the city-state – when they are effectively transformed by the urban change and state-led social engineering to make the city-state a society more open to capitalist development? What sort of literary and other cultural responses were there in relation to the state’s policies on culture, class and racial/ethnic management since the very beginning of Singapore in 1965? Such will be the questions that this module will address.

Texts

- Goh Poh Seng, *If We Dream Too Long* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2010) PR9570.S53I23
Novel
 - Chong Tze Chien, *Charged*, in Chong, *Four Plays: Charged, Poop!, Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea, To Whom It May Concern* (Singapore: Epigram Books, 2011).
Play
 - Kuo Pao Kun, *Mama Looking for Her Cat, Kopitiam (The Coffee Shop) and Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral*, in Kuo, *The Complete Plays of Kuo Pao Kun, vol. 4: Plays in English*, ed. C. J. W.-L. Wee (Singapore: Global Publishing and The Theatre Practice, 2012) PL3099.G8K96 **3 Plays**
 - Alfian Sa’at, *sex.violence.blood.gore and Fugitives*, in Alfian, *Collected Plays One* (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2010) PR9570.S53A387C **2 Plays**
 - Ong Keng Sen (Director), *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral* (produced by TheatreWorks [Singapore]) – script by the late Kuo Pao Kun, production on DVD: *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral* [videorecording]: Hamburg International Summer, Germany / TheatreWorks. Two (2) copies: DS753.6.Z47D445 – **on reserve in Outpost.** (Script is in *Plays in English, vol. 4.*) **theatre production**
- OR**
- Ong, *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral* [videorecording] [TheatreWorks: 1998]. Two (2) copies available at **NIE Library**. Reserves (level 2) PN2960.S55 TwD.
 - Eric Khoo (Director), *12 Storeys* (1997): *12 Storeys* [videorecording] = *shi er lou* (Brink/Springroll/Zhao Wei Films): PN1995.9.S62S884 – **on reserve.**
 - Isa Kamari, *Rawa*, trans. R. Krishnan (Kuala Lumpur: Silverfish Books, 2013). ISBN 978-983-3221-43-1. Please order this book as early as possible; it may be harder to obtain. Again, I suggest using the Select Books website as they are a SE Asian book specialist: <<http://www.selectbooks.com.sg/getTitle.aspx?SBNum=056139>> **Novel**

- Sharon Siddique, ‘Singaporean Identity’ and Chua Beng Huat, ‘The Business of Living in Singapore’, in *Management of Success: The Moulding of Modern Singapore*, ed. K. S. Sandhu and Paul Wheatley (Singapore: ISEAS, 1989) DS598.S762 M266 **2 Essays available as PDFs in NTULearn/Blackboard**

Class Requirements

- **One (1) class presentation, in groups (10%)**; the presentations should be based upon the readings/DVD production.
 1. There should be a concise summary of the author’s/director’s main argument (or some sort of thematic, aesthetic or socio-political-cultural analyses of the artistic material) for the first half of the presentation, and then students are encouraged to bring their own interests for the rest of the presentation.
 2. *Expressing considered opinions of the readings is important, as critical evaluative skills (with evidence for the position taken) are vitally important.*
 3. **Up to a max. of 25 minutes** (for all group presentations). ***You must stay within the time limit – a key skill required here is to get to the major & defining points. Marks for all will be deducted thereafter.***
 4. One group meeting with the lecturer in advanced is required.
- **A final essay of between 1,500-1,700 words. (40%)**
- **A final exam (50%). The exam format:**
 1. a closed-book exam;
 2. **three (3)** questions to be answered in 2 ½ hours;
 3. will **not have** compulsory questions;
 4. will offer a choice of questions – i.e., more than 3 questions will be offered;
 5. will have questions that are *both* comparative *and* on single works; &
 6. **will not allow** the repetition of writers: i.e., an author used for one question *cannot* be used for another. **Penalties apply.**

Suggested Secondary Readings

- Mohammad A. Quayum and Peter Wicks (eds.), *Singaporean Literature in English: A Critical Reader* (Serdang: Universiti Putra Malaysia Press, 2002). PR9570.S5S617
- C. J. W.-L. Wee, ‘Culture, the Arts and the Global City’, in Terence Chong (ed.), *Management of Success: Singapore Revisited* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2010). DS609.M266 2010
- William Peterson, *Theater and the Politics of Culture in Contemporary Singapore* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan UP, 2001) PN2960.S55P485
- C. J. W.-L. Wee, ‘Imagining “New Asia” in the Theatre: Cosmopolitan East Asia and the Global West’ (on Ong Keng Sen’s *Lear* and Kuo Pao Kun’s *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral*), in Koichi Iwabuchi et al. (eds.), *Rogue Flows: Trans-Asian Cultural Traffic* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP, 2004) DS12.R736; alternative version can be found as: C. J. W.-L. Wee, ‘Staging the Asian Modern: Cultural Fragments, the Singaporean Eunuch, and the Asian Lear’, *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 4 (Summer 2004): 771-799.
- Terence Chong, *The Theatre and the State in Singapore: Orthodoxy and Resistance* (London: Routledge, 2011) PN296.S5
- Tan Chong Kee (ed.), *Ask Not: The Necessary Stage in Singapore Theatre* (Singapore: Times Editions, 2004) PN2960.S55A834 – see, esp., essays by Kwok Kian-Woon on state cultural policy and Quah Sy Ren on multiculturalism and Kuo Pao Kun.
- Rustom Bharucha, *Consumed in Singapore: The Intercultural Spectacle of Lear* (Singapore: Centre for Advanced Study, NUS, 2000) (Includes a sustained & critical discussion of Ong Keng Sen and of Kuo Pao Kun) H62.C334 NO.21
- See the intro. essay and the essays (for discussion of *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral*) at the end of C J W-L Wee and Lee Chee Keng (eds.), *Two Plays by Kuo Pao Kun*:

Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral and The Spirits Play (Singapore : SNP International, 2003). PL3099.G8D445 2003

- Quah Sy Ren, 'Evolving Multilingual Theatre in Singapore: The Case of Kuo Pao Kun', in Leo Suryadinata (ed.), *Ethnic Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia: A Dialogue Between Tradition and Modernity* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 2002) DS610.25.C5E84
- Quah Sy Ren, 'Form as Ideology: Representing the Multicultural in Singapore Theatre', in *Ask Not: The Necessary Stage in Singapore Theatre*, ed. Tan Chong Kee and Tisa Ng (2004). PN2960.S55A834
- Angelia Poon, 'Performing National Service in Singapore: (Re)Imagining Nation in the Poetry and Short Stories of Alfian Sa'at', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 40, no. 3 (2005): 118-138.
<http://ehis.ebscohost.com/eds/detail?sid=6fe53a00-f2fa-4363-b347-dc9be2080aac@sessionmgr13&vid=10&hid=http://ehis.ebscohost.com/&#db=edswah&AN=000232076100009>

Notes

1. Students are expected to take the initiative to look for their own secondary reading material A good place is the footnotes/endnotes of books or articles you are already reading: look for other suitable chapters/books/essays dealing with the author/playwright/topic; or look at the end of the book or article & see if there is a bibliography. I'm sorry to cite a no. of my works as you ought to hear other people's thoughts, or just focus on your own opinion & substantiating that carefully in your essay.
2. Alternatively, search author names on <https://www.ntu.edu.sg/education/libraries>. This'll also lead you to articles. There aren't really substantial works on the authors we examine. Also use: <http://opac2.ntu.edu.sg/uhtbin/cgiirsi.exe/8nTFGT640H/0/134900036/60/8/X>

Schedule, Readings, Topics

MEETING ONE: (16 Jan)

Introduction – managing race/ethnicity (the ‘plural society’), capitalist development, urbanisation in Singapore – forgetting and remembering

MEETING TWO (23 Jan):

Siddique, ‘Singaporean Identity’ and Chua. ‘Business of Living’

- The plural society inherited from British colonial times: how do we understand it?
- The rapid and destabilising change of life from the 1950s-1980s.
- Both the above in relation to the overall question, ‘What, then, is Singapore identity culturally? Is it just modern, urban and consumerist patterns that makes “us” this “us”?’

NOTE: These are background readings & will *illuminate some* of what transpires in *some* of the texts. You must *not* assume that each novel will deal with all that raised in this session. Use the material sensibly: the authors are not trying to ‘illustrate’ the readings.

MEETING THREE (30 Jan):

Goh, *If We Dream Too Long*

- Post-independence Singapore – destabilising economic development and urbanisation (the rise of HDB blocks) – unmoored youth identity and life goals in intensely modernising, immediate post-colonial Singapore. The late 1960s/early 1970s.

Modernisation, class, meritocracy, landscape

MEETING FOUR (6 Feb.): CHINESE NEW YEAR – No Meeting

MEETING FIVE (13 Feb):

Isa Kamari, *Rawa*:

- Unrecognised indigenous identity in Singapore under the impact of the post-independence modernising state (the problem of memory in Singapore) – what is ‘Malay’ identity for Rawa? – the disorienting change in physical landscape – youth identification with a pre-independence & older cultural identity. The 1950s-present.

Modernisation, identity, landscape

MEETING SIX (20 Feb):

Kuo Pao Kun, *Mama Looking for Her Cat*

- Modernisation and identity & relationship fractures between generations in Singapore – the problem of language use, cultural values and history given social engineering Singapore – representing multilingual Singapore. The 1980s.

Social engineering, values, cultural identity

MEETING SEVEN (27 Feb):

Kuo Pao Kun, *KOPITIAM*

- Modernisation and the dislocated urbanscape – (the problem of) memory and identity in Singapore – the young and the global world – the individual vs. his family and memories.

Modernisation, urbanisation/landscape, collective identity vs. individualism

RECESS (4-8 March)

MEETING EIGHT (13 Mar):

Eric Khoo (Director), *12 Storeys*

- Life in the now-established modernist public housing and social alienation – identity changes and alienation in self, family, society and values in intensely modernising Singapore after *If We Dream Too Long*. The late 1990s.

Urbanisation/landscape, the lack of social (& therefore national?) identity, dysfunctional individualism

MEETING NINE (20 Mar):

Alfian, *sex.violence.blood.gore*

- Race, class and gender issues and thematics in relation to the challenge of Singapore identity/ies as they emerge from the 1990s/2000s – identity questions in a more ‘hip’ Singapore. The late 1990s/early 2000s.

Challenging text: Cultural and national identity issues in contemporary Singapore

MEETING TEN (27 March):

Alfian, *Fugitives*

- Race and class issues (among *and* between different generations) – the Singapore identity: can we be a national community? The 2000s.

Cultural, class and national identity issues in contemporary Singapore

MEETINGS ELEVEN (3 April):

Chong Tze Chien, *Charged*

- Race relations: both *intra*-race and *inter*-race issues – class and identity – national identity in contemporary Singapore. The 2000s.

Challenging text: Cultural, class and national identity issues in contemporary Singapore

MEETING TWELVE (10 April):

Kuo Pao Kun, *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral*; and Ong Keng Sen

We will examine the text by Kuo Pao Kun this week. The *next* meeting will deal with the theatre production by Ong. *The video must be viewed in advance of the next class meeting.*

- Identity and culture *lost* in the service of the state – the expanding state and the problematic cosmopolitanism it offers – multicultural identity as a benefit of globalisation – the problem of serving an ambitious state. The mid- to late 1990s.

Cultural identity and an ambitious, ‘globalising’ state (an allegory of contemporary Singapore)

- **Given the class size, pls ensure that students plan to watch the video in advance, or else there might be a last-minute crush.**
- **Important note: Pls. note also that students should make notes of the production – staging, costumes, the staging, how actors performed, etc. Students are expected to have familiarity with *both* the script *and* the stage production – the theatre production is a (sort of) literary text that requires close reading: this understanding affects the exam.**

MEETING THIRTEEN (17 April):

Ong Keng Sen (director), *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral* (English-lang.version)

- Identity and culture *lost* in the service of the state – the expanding state and the problematic cosmopolitanism it offers – multicultural identity as a benefit of globalisation – the problem of serving an ambitious state – how the play is interpreted by Ong: how he makes the play fit into his image of contemporary Singapore. The mid- to late 1990s.

Challenging text: Culture and identity in a ‘globalising’ state (that is contemporary Singapore)

Revision.