

## HL2008 Singapore Literature and Culture

Module lecturer: Professor C. J. W.-L. Wee

Semester I, 2020-2021 – August 2020

Wednesday, 1430-1730 hours, Online

TENTATIVE – EXACT DETAILS MAY CHANGE BUT TEXTS WILL BE AS INDICATED

### 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

1. Goh Poh Seng, *If We Dream Too Long* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2010) PR9570.S53I23  
**Novel**
2. 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**
3. 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**
4. Alfian Sa’at, *sex.violence.blood.gore* and *Homesick*, in Alfian, *Collected Plays One* (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2010) PR9570.S53A387C **2 Plays**
5. Ong Keng Sen (Director), *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral* (produced by TheatreWorks [Singapore]) – script by the Kuo Pao Kun, production on DVD: *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral* [videorecording]: Hamburg International Summer, Germany, 1998 / TheatreWorks. Two (2) copies: DS753.6.Z47D445 – **Chinese library AV reserves**. (Script from Kuo, *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.
6. Eric Khoo (Director), *12 Storeys* (1997): *12 Storeys* [videorecording] = *shi er lou* (Brink/Springroll/Zhao Wei Films): PN1995.9.S62S884 – **on reserve**.  
**OR**  
Copies also available in **NIE Library**: XVC 25 disc 1; XVC 26 disc 2; XVC 667 disc 1;

XVC 668 disc 2. **Reserves (level 2)**

**OR**

Available also on iTunes, among other online sites:

<<https://itunes.apple.com/sg/movie/12-storeys/id1257748074>>

If you do not wish to purchase it, then you *must* ensure you use the library copies. I have no solution if you are unwilling or unable to pay for the film.

7. Isa Kamari, *Rawa*, trans. R. Krishnan (Kuala Lumpur: Silverfish Books, 2013). ISBN 978-983-3221-43-1. *Please note that this book may be harder to obtain. Novel*
8. 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. Terence Chong, 'Fluid Nation', in Chong (ed.), *Management of Success: Singapore Revisited* (ISEAS, 2010). **Essays will be available as PDFs in NTULearn/Blackboard.**

**NOTE: I will request that the books be ordered for the bookshop, but you are responsible for the 12 Storeys DVD.**

**Method of instruction:**

3-hour seminar with one break

**Mode of Assessment:**

100% Continuous Assessment

**Breakdown:**

- |   |       |
|---|-------|
| - Essay assignment I (1,200-1,400-word essay)       | 25%*  |
| - Essay assignment II (1,200-1,400-word essay)      | 30%*  |
| - In-class presentation                             | 20%** |
| - End of semester test (2 hour in-class essay test) | 25%   |

**Key:**

\* Inclusive of notes and references. *Must adhere to word limit. Penalties will incur otherwise.*

\*\* Presentation format: a *maximum* of *twenty-five* (25) mins. **Penalties will incur thereafter.** Offer a pared-down overview of the material: (1) *central* ideas/themes, to help focus the discussion; and (2) your critical responses to the film/readings. **Note: Groups must meet lecturer for a short meeting (20 mins.) to give outline of presentation and gain Student Feedback before the presentation.**

## Schedule, Readings, Topics

MEETING ONE, 11 AUGUST:

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

MEETING TWO, 17 AUGUST:

Siddique, ‘Singaporean Identity’; Chong, ‘Fluid Nation’; 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? Is it just modern, urban and consumerist patterns that makes “us” this “us”? Why is it “fluid”?’

**NOTE:** These are background readings & will *illuminate some* of what transpires in *some* of the texts. **Do 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, 25 AUGUST:

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, 1 SEPTEMBER:

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 FIVE, 8 SEPTEMBER:

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 SIX, 15 SEPTEMBER: No meeting: Union Day

MEETING SEVEN, 22 SEPTEMBER:

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, 29 SEPTEMBER

MEETING EIGHT, 6 OCTOBER:

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, 13 OCTOBER:

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, 20 OCTOBER:

Alfian, *Homesick*

- Race and class issues (among *and* between different generations) – the Singapore identity: can we be a national community? Set during the SARS quarantine, 2003.

**Cultural, class and national identity issues in contemporary Singapore**

MEETINGS ELEVEN, 27 OCTOBER:

Chong Tze Chien, *Charged*

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

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

MEETING TWELVE, 4 NOVEMBER:

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

We will examine Kuo’s script. The *next* meeting will deal with Ong’s theatre production. *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, do *ensure* that students plan to watch the video in advance.**
- **Important: This is a theatre production, so staging, costumes, how actors performed must be observed. Familiarity with *how the staging and script* create the meaning of the production matters: this understanding affects assessment.**

MEETING THIRTEEN, 11 NOVEMBER:

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

*Revision.*

MEETING FOURTEEN, 17 NOVEMBER:  
Online test.

## 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>