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Abstract

This study represents the scandal of current colonial racist ideologizing by focusing on the American Orientalizing project in Singapore. It argues that, in the era of global capitalism and post-colonial theory, the new colonialist epistemologies rely on collaborations between the ruling classes of the ‘third world’ and ‘first world’ as well as a rhetoric of ‘native’ nationalism to contain threatening non-Western economic success and to create ‘third world’ populations and governments that will not resist the continuation of the Western/American colonizing project. Using a Marxist-Lacanian psychoanalytical theory of hegemony, of a “libidinal politics” which focuses on the role of desire in national culture, this thesis shows that the Singapore government has used American Orientalist ideology to effect disempowering cultural changes in the people. Examining political and literary texts, I argue that the Singapore government quotes American notions of ‘Oriental’ difference to keep “dangerous Western (liberal) influences” from ‘ethnically contaminating’ the nation, and that it has hegemonized an ‘Asian’/‘Confucianist’ nationalism by hystericizing and repressing the people’s desire, leading Singaporeans to disavow their location in a post-modern world. The Orientalizing of Singapore, where Chinese identity has been produced as a masquerade of Western culture, has also generated a crisis in male identity, involving an inward-looking escapist cultural narcissism that blocks a positive response to historical realities. Paradoxically, the claim to a non-Western modernity has also been used to suppress ethnic difference by producing ethnicity as ‘fetish.’ The East/West discourse that emerged from the caning of an American teenager, Michael Fay, in Singapore is used to reveal the entrapment of Singapore’s ‘Oriental’ national identity in American colonial desire, and to argue that the perceived East Asian ‘cultural confidence’ often spoken about today overlooks the fact that such cultural certitude accrues from the East entering into the West’s fantasy scenarios and staging itself as the other’s object of desire. This thesis suggests that current ‘post-colonial’ claims to “ethnic, non-Western” modernisms be
viewed with some skepticism as possibly involving the ventriloquistic 'passing' of Western colonial ideology as the voice of the 'racial other.'
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Chapter One

Introduction:

‘Non-Western Modernity’ as American Orientalism

Since the 1980s, the discourse of an alternative ‘Confucian’ non-Western modernity has been rapidly gaining ascendance and has been viewed as a sign of the rising cultural confidence of East Asian nations. As Arif Dirlik notes, after half a century as a defunct ideology, “Confucianism began to reappear as a central ideological concern. For more than a decade now, the airwaves over the Pacific, from Singapore to the headquarters of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in Washington, D.C., have been filled with talk of Confucius” (“Confucius” 229). Described as one of the most prolific intellectual industries of the 1980s, the discourse of Confucianism has commanded international participation, but it is the East Asian countries who have most heavily invested (culturally and financially) in its promotion, says Dirlik (“Confucius” 238). In China, a rejection of Confucianism during the Mao Zedong era was reversed with the leader’s death in 1976 and the retreat from revolutionary communism. Over 1,000 articles on Confucianism were produced in the 1980s in China alone and conferences on Confucianism have been held annually since 1978. In 1984, a Confucian foundation was established in China. In South Korea, Confucianism, despite a troubled existence during the 1960s and 1970s when former President Pak Chung-hee had regarded it a hindrance to the republic’s industrialization, is now promoted by the state and forms part of the national discourse of ‘Koreaness.’

Taiwan and Hongkong academics have also contributed to the discussion.

The discourse of Confucianism as offering an alternative ‘Chinese’ modernity to counter Eurocentric notions of modernity was taken up perhaps most dramatically in Singapore, where Confucianist values were extolled almost on a daily basis in the early 1980s in the local media. In 1982, eight foreign specialists (including Harvard and Yale professors) were hired to design a Confucian curriculum as part
of a moral education program for schools, while in 1983, Singapore set up the Institute of East Asian Philosophies to promote and reinterpret Confucianism. In the 1990s, ‘Confucianist’ ideologies were used in Singapore as the basis of a new state-promoted ‘Asian nativist’ nationalism.

Two markedly different readings of this phenomenon of Confucianist revival are currently competing for dominance. There is, on the one hand, as mentioned above, a sanguine tendency to view this new discourse as an assertion of post-colonial Chinese cultural confidence, as a valid effort to break the West’s cultural power by speaking modernity in another language. The other interpretation posits the Confucianist revival as a Western neo-colonial strategy employed for American penetration into China’s market and further exploitation of the newly industrialized economies in the Pacific Rim. This critical metanarrative deconstructs the claim of a new Chinese cultural confidence by representing the Confucian revival as a direct heir of Western ‘Orientalism.’ The East, it claims, is now involved in a “self-Orientalization” that repeats the terms of the earlier colonialist epistemology. Historicizing the discourse of Confucian-style modernization, Dirlik says that what is being revived is not so much Confucianism as it is “the ideological legacy of societies that can claim recent ascendancy within Global Capitalism and, indeed, in some measure, are responsible for creating the practices that characterize Global Capitalism” (“Confucius” 230).

The coincidence of the rise of the East Asian economies with the stagnation of capital accumulation in the West, undermined the Eurocentric teleology of capitalism as well. As a discourse, Dirlik says, Confucianism arose in the West, not in East Asia, Dirlik and was “structured” by “the question of capitalism, its new situation [the decentering by global capitalism] and its contradictions” (“Confucius” 237). The discourse of Confucianist modernization was, according to Dirlik’s metanarrative, constructed to accommodate an ideology that would cure the ‘ills’ of capitalism, for example the politics of civil society (union politics, the women’s movement, youth movements, ethnic politics, etc.), essential for a well-developed democracy but fast becoming hindrances to capitalism in the West (Dirlik, “Confucius” 251). As a functional ideology answering to the Western quest for “new models of social control and
management of the exploitation of labor" (Dirlik, “Confucius” 268), an ‘Orientalized’ Confucianism became the vehicle that could be used to legitimize social engineering, discipline and control of the working classes, women and minorities, and, generally, subjugation of the population to the government and ruling class.

For critics such as Samir Amin and Dirlik, the “modern” brand of Confucianism touted today is an American construct that responds to the needs of international trade and politics, one that is neither post-colonial nor Confucian. Dirlik goes so far as to suggest that the Confucian revival is at least one instance where post-colonial critique, which attempts to challenge Eurocentricity by recovering native pasts, can itself be ideologically caught in the very structures of power it claims to resist (“Confucius” 230). In other words, ‘post-colonial’ notions of ethnic identity and cultural difference can, in fact, produce neo-colonial cultural configurations, a claim that this thesis will support.

But the admitted entanglement of post-coloniality with neo-imperialism in the era of global capitalism, the intersection of the desires of the ruling classes in the West and the rising East, perhaps makes such deconstructive criticism ineffectual in dismantling such neo-colonial ideologies. Illustrating the neo-colonial meanings and intentions of such seemingly post-colonial discourses of identity as the Confucian revival still leaves intact the questions of post-colonial desire and cultural difference, the latter being one of the only strategies left to assert sovereignty and equality with the West on the bargaining table. The revelation that this cultural ‘difference’ was constructed by the West and generated by a cultural crisis in the West does not subtract from the East’s libidinal enjoyment in perceiving itself as the fantasy figure of Western desire, reminiscent of the exoticization of Chinese culture in Chinoiserie and of the fetishization of Asian women in accordance with Western male desire; even awareness of the falsity of post-colonial consciousness cannot erase the real space that has been here opened up for geo-cultural negotiation. The (colonial) history of the territorialization of the desire of the non-Western subject as well as the dominance of Western knowledge in this deconstructive discourse also tends to mitigate the scandal of Western authorization of Eastern identity. The
ideological critique of the anti-Orientalists, it can be said, is itself no less marked through and through by ideology in insisting that authentic post-colonial critique should be anti-capitalist: opponents could equally locate in this another neo-colonial ruse to guarantee the marginalization of the non-Western world, particularly those currently rising to prominence as centers of capital. The impotence of such anti-Orientalist criticism lies also in its neglect of the question of how the Confucian revival has taken hold in the countries concerned. The common person’s surprising lack of resistance towards, and even identification with, such a discursive regime, which is inscribed with both the power of the West and that of East Asian governments, needs to be addressed for a more complete dismantling of the discourse. Anti-Orientalism critiques circulate primarily in the elite intellectual market-place, targeting already-converted academics or precisely those academics most resistant to such criticism, the Western and Eastern academics invested in disseminating the Confucianist discourse. The common person who is the victim of such ideological maneuvers aimed at decimating his rights, the factory worker in Singapore or even the school teacher capable of transmitting critical knowledge, doesn’t have access to this anti-Orientalist discourse: in Singapore, for instance, any such critical point-of-view would not get a hearing in the media.

Then, there is the tendency to totalize the ideological meanings and effects of the Confucian revival in all the East Asian states without considering the different historicities of the discourse in each state. The forms by which the discourse is hegemonized in each state, the means by which the ideology is materialized, and its dependence on the prior cultural history of the nation may well imply important differences in its operation as a discursive regime of power. For instance in the 1980s, the discourse of Confucianism attempted to direct Singaporeans away from ‘Western’ democratic culture by emphasizing their ethnic cultures. In the 1990s, however, the discourse of Confucianism and its related discourse of Asian values are being used to suppress or control ethnic identifications—the government’s emphasis on Asian cultures in the earlier decade had resulted in a resurgence of interest in religion, which the government tried to regulate by promoting an ‘Asian’/‘Confucianist’ nationalism that had very little real
Racial politics in Singapore have led to Confucianism being dislocated from meanings of ‘Chinese’ identity (whereas in the other East Asian states, Confucianism thrives on this association). Instead, in Singapore, Confucianism is ‘Asianized,’ functioning as a metonym for Asian culture and works to homogenize the cultures of disparate ethnic and religious groups, the Chinese, Malays, Indians, Eurasians, Christians, Buddhists, Muslims and Hindus. Again, in the other East Asian states, the Confucian revival does not enter into the arena of inter-ethnic politics (except that of West versus East) as it does in Singapore.

The application of discourse analysis to the Confucianist revival in East Asia, the tracing of its connections to other discourses, the examination of the conditions that made its emergence possible, the singling out of the themes of the discourse and the isolation of its conceptual strategies certainly render more transparent its operations as a regime of power. Probably the most fertile manner in which to begin such a genealogical approach involves the identification of the objects of knowledge of the discourse. Restricting myself to the deployment and development of the discourse in Singapore, I found that here there were at least two apparent objects of knowledge that had been targeted. One was knowledge of Singaporean national culture, of the most basic values that guided citizens from all walks of life and from various ethnic/religious backgrounds. The other object whose truth had to be seized was that of the cultural/value system that would maximize the nation’s economic performance.

But the discourse was delimited from the start by treating these two objects as if they were the same. Many circumstances made this assumption possible and necessary. Singapore’s brilliant economic performance through the 1960s and 1970s combined with Western ideas, especially Weberism, which had earlier causally connected culture (Protestantism) with economic success, made it appear obvious that there was something of a winning formula to Singapore culture. The entire discourse could not have been possible without the publication of Herman Kahn’s two books in 1979, *World Economic Development: 1979 and Beyond* and *The Japanese Challenge*. In *World Economic Development*, Kahn had linked the successful economic performance of East Asian countries with the “Confucianist ethic”
which created “dedicated, motivated, responsible, and educated individuals” who had “an enhanced sense of commitment, organizational identity, and loyalty to various institutions” (122). Though Singapore’s political leaders would have realized that this analysis erroneously displaced credit from their own daring and bold strategies of industrialization as well as Singaporeans’ own sense of developmental urgency onto an absent Confucianist culture, they promptly grasped Kahn’s and other neo-Orientalists’ sub-text: that the rate of economic growth would slow down (not just in East Asia but in the US too) unless ways and means were found to contain ‘disruptive’ cultural influences (demands for equity and representation by marginalized groups). Confucianism then, re-interpreted in the American way, was as good a tool as any to discipline the work force and pre-empt inconvenient radical democratic politics. It had other factors in its favor too such as its reliance on the cultural pride of the majority Chinese population: it would win the approval and co-operation of Singapore’s very powerful clan associations and the Chinese Chamber of Commerce; and it would further Singapore’s efforts at penetrating the mainland Chinese market. Singapore accordingly joined in the international project of re-reading Confucius so as to find in him native cultural legitimation for an enhancement of state power that could reach beyond the boundaries of democratic institutions. As soon as it could, it also inserted Confucianism into the school system.

At this point in the early 1980s, however, the Confucianizing of Singapore culture was also developed as part of a general move to ethnicize the multiracial population. The learning of one’s ethnic language was now mandatory, and university admission was restricted to effectively bilingual (English and mother tongue) students. Schools also began a compulsory religious knowledge program. The ethnicizing program, of which Confucianism was a major element, was clearly aimed at culturally alienating the population from a politics of radical democracy and from liberalism, both of which were ethnicized as ‘Western’ and hence dismissed out of hand as culturally inappropriate for Singapore.

But at the same time, and unconnected to the ‘ethnicization’ of the population, other means involving changes in economic and political institutions were employed to achieve the same effects of putting into
place a new political culture that was less oriented towards principles of democracy. Principles of pragmatic government and instrumental rationality rather than democratic rights began pervasively to constitute the domain of validity of political, economic and social organization, including that of sexuality. These were legitimized by recent American scholarship which re-applied Weber-style culturalist accounts of economic performance in explaining Japan’s post-war success. In line with this, labor power and press freedom, for instance, were curbed during the late 1970s and early 1980s and justified on the basis that labor disputes, a free press and freedom in the circulation of information would hinder the nation’s economic progress. Labor unions had been united under the umbrella of the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) but in 1982, the Trade Union Amendment Act was passed, which made the function of organizing and representing members a secondary objective for unions: first consideration was to be given to promoting rapport between workers and employers. Workers were also to be encouraged to identify more closely with the interests of their employers. The relationship between the ruling party and NTUC are openly admitted to be “symbiotic,” and the relationship become closer in the 1980s as union leaders were co-opted into the ruling party. Also, in the 1980s, union strength was eroded when large, general unions were converted into house or industry unions. Since the early 1970s, annual wage recommendations have been negotiated by a tripartite council of government, labor union and employers’ federation. During this period, former government ministers or seconded top civil servants were appointed as chair to the board of newspaper organizations (radio and television stations were already under government control). Beginning in the late 1970s, education was subjected to increasing rationalization and hierarchy: students were streamed into the monolingual, normal, express and gifted programs according to their ‘learning ability’ as determined by interminable testing (it was considered that neither class and ethnic differences nor socio-cultural environment impacted on this ‘learning ability’). Resources for vocational and tertiary education were also distributed according to projections of industry’s labor needs.
The 1980s was Singapore’s decade of statistics. When it was found (according to statistics) that Singapore’s female university graduates had either found less familial routes to self-fulfillment than marriage and motherhood or that they were postponing these, a government organization, the Social Development Unit, was set up to persuade such women of the pleasures of marriage and motherhood, and to introduce them to suitable men. Graduate women were also enticed into reproducing beyond the usually recommended two children: for example, the third child of a female university graduate could hope to get into a good school whereas the third child of a working class woman would be assigned low-priority status in school placement.

Throughout the 1980s, the nation also saw the increased application of principles of pragmatism, instrumental rationalization and eugenics to social, political, labor and cultural issues. The National Productivity Board spearheaded and supervised a massive program whereby workers competed to increase their productivity and develop their skills at ‘team’ work. The factory floor was saturated with Work Improvement Teams. Everything, even cultural representation, was reduced to the ‘bottom-line’ as Masters in Business Administration took control of organizations, including the media.

The domain of politics was not to remain untouched by this corporatization of life. Government soon became only a matter of making decisions based on statistics. As such, Singapore’s first-generation political leaders of lawyers, writers, journalists and labor activists stepped down to make way for technocrats, corporate financial controllers, bankers, industrialists and military personnel. Rationalization meant compartmentalization, the tightening of boundaries between disciplines and discourses. Even as radical politics and new knowledges the world over were interrogating old divisions and classification systems, in Singapore, politics was heralded as the domain of politicians and parliament. In 1989, religious claims were barred from the political domain by the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act. Earlier, amendments had been made to legislation regarding the registration of societies in order to prevent organizations which are not political parties from making statements on issues which are outside the purview of their declared functions and constituencies (Chua,
Communitarian 196). Henceforth, a citizen had to be a member of a political party in order to critique government actions and policies. Even then, no indemnity was provided for opposition politicians' criticism, not even at election rallies or in parliament (they could be sued for slander/defamation or be found guilty of contempt of Parliament).

Political representation in Singapore is democratic in form but its spirit has been tamed. When two opposition politicians were elected in 1984, breaking the People's Action Party's total domination of Parliament for two decades, Lee Kuan Yew, then prime minister, suggested that the one-man one-vote system may not be adequate for Singapore. Though democratic elections still continue, curtailment of opposition parties, and modifications made to institutions of democracy amount to a mockery of democratic representation.10

But the two, culturalism and pragmatics did come together in one discursive field in the 1980s. This decade saw the proliferation of the discourse of race and the linking of this discourse to that of pragmatic government. Racist stereotyping that duplicated colonial stereotyping of days gone by was normalized again in this decade as its premises were repeated ad nauseam by political leaders and given due uncritical attention in the media. Unequal distribution of wealth was analyzed not along the axes of class but of race, and public debate in the media discussed economic performance in terms of cultural values, religion, and racial traits (uncannily similar to Weberism). Accordingly, Malays were found to be the poorest ethnic group, and colonial anthropology suggested the reasons for this: their 'laziness' and an Islamic culture that discouraged positive attitudes towards modernization and economic progress! Again, their non-stellar performance in education was attributed to lack of ambition due to Islam and their supposed preference for a rural lifestyle. Their comparatively different colonial economic history from that of other racial/ethnic groups was never considered to be a factor.11 The discourse linking race/ethnicity to economic performance also precluded the possibility of viewing Malays' and other ethnic minority groups' poor economic performance as a failure of government or of perceiving the structural presence of racism within the social/economic system. Population control was also organized
on a racial basis: Malays were found to be reproducing at a faster rate than other racial/ethnic groups and were advised to bring down their birth rates.

Political representation was racialized during this period too. For the first time, in the 1988 election, certain constituencies were restricted to political representation by candidates from specific ethnic/racial groups. In the group constituencies, the teams of three or four fielded by each party had to comprise candidates from the various racial groups, Chinese, Malay and Indian. Only politicians of the appropriate skin color could address particular ethnic/racial issues (which were sometimes unjustifiably racialized, for instance, poverty and some social problems were treated as ‘racial’ problems).

Community development was also racially organized. The Malays were provided with an organization that would see to their social, cultural, educational and economic needs, headed by a Malay minister. In time, the Chinese and Indians were also given separate self-help organizations.

But if political representation was racialized, it was also pragmaticized so that the various ethnic groups received representation in proportion to the size of their community. In practice, this often ran contrary to the democratic principle of equal representation (political and cultural) of minority groups. For instance, disparate viewpoints on issues affecting the majority Chinese population are more completely aired in parliament and their implications fully debated, whereas minority concerns often receive token attention, and are more easily brought in line with state interests. The discourse of race has also had the effect of fragmenting Singapore into separate racial/ethnic enclaves—though race/ethnicity became a matter of continuous public discussion and was considered the source of all types of ‘truth’ and knowledge, the practice of ethnic culture itself became increasingly de-politicized and privatized. Ang and Stratton properly trace this body of practice to the divide-and-rule colonial strategy employed by the British in Malaya (77).

But it was the publication of George Lodge and Ezra Vogel’s book National Ideology and Competitiveness in 1987 that allowed the Singapore government to use the discourse of race/ethnicity more completely as an instrument of political control. Discourse analysis allows us to place this book
within a discourse stretching back to the 1970s where conservatives in the West/US sought to displace the location of liberalism and conservatism from the axis of democracy to that of economic utility. It was a strategy aimed at allowing the public to forget the contradiction between democracy and right-wing ideology, and to remember instead the connection between the latter and economic success. Weber was re-cited for the purpose. The themes of the discourse were the same—culture (not violence nor systematic exploitation of the 'other') determined economic performance, and a pragmatic culture guaranteed economic success. Weber's discourse obviously aimed at evading the split in interests between the white capitalist and white labor by substituting race interests for class interests. The structural links between capitalism and colonialism permitted the solution whereby the 'racial other' was placed between the white capitalist and the white worker and declared to be the common enemy. But in Weber, the concept of a national culture, the inversion of colonial racial othering onto the self, also offered a regulatory technology whereby the nation could be simultaneously homogenized (taken beyond class struggle and minority politics) and steered towards greater capital accumulation—but first culture had itself to be rationalized, rendered the same as instrumental rationality. White Protestant (rationalist) ethnicity/culture/race then was used to cover over the class differences between the white capitalist and the worker in a discursive sleight of hand where cultural description slipped into cultural prescription—because all whites were the same (pragmatic, Protestant, rationalist), they had to be made the same. According to this account, ethnic culture was equated with original (and hence authentic) identity but modern life could make one 'forget' it; hence, re-ethnicization was a process whereby one was brought into contact with one's true self. Lodge and Vogel's (and now Samuel Huntington's) more recent discourses are remarkably similar to Weber's in that they view Chinese 'Confucianist' culture in terms similar to the latter's discussion of the cultural superiority of the Protestant religion. But where Weber had represented Confucianism as the 'other' to Protestantism, the neo-Orientalists depict Confucianist values as similar to Protestant ethics. But, again, the 'racial other' is used as the mediating element to resolve a split between the white classes. Only, this time around, the 'racial other' is not the enticing
object of colonial exploitation but a possible subject of future exploitation of the West. Again, culturalist economics emerges as the answer of a perceived threat to colonial domination to the question of domestic problems posed in the metropolis.

For Singapore’s political leaders, Lodge and Vogel’s concept of national ideology tactically dissolved the obstruction posed by a multi-cultural/multiracial society to social/cultural engineering. Weber’s discourse was restricted to cultural homogenization/rationalization of a mono-cultural/mono-racial society, and pre-1987 neo-Orientalism had re-applied Weberian discourse to an East Asian context constructed as monoculturally neo-Confucianist. Thus, prior to 1987, the ideology of ‘Confucianism’ (re-interpreted as the same as Protestant ethics) could only be used to culturalize the majority racial group, the Chinese. Now, however, the concept of a national ideology made possible the idea of a coherent, central (hence national) culture that crossed racial/ethnic boundaries. (This development of Weber’s discourse in late twentieth-century US was no doubt influenced by the changing racial composition and racial ideologies of America.) Also, Lodge and Vogel’s simple binaristic typology of world cultures as “communitarian” and “individualistic” (an uncanny repetition in the sphere of cultural anthropology of the Western political binaries of toryism and liberalism) and their totalization of all Asian cultures as “communitarian” made it possible for the government to embark on a program of cultural homogenization and rationalization by identifying a set of core “Asian values” as common to all ethnic/racial groups in Singapore. Additionally, this set of values was represented as the same as the already rationalized and orientalized Confucianism. Thus, the Confucianization (cultural rationalization) of the entire nation could now proceed under the banner of “Asianization.”

Since Lodge and Vogel had not only linked culture but national cultural coherence to economic performance, cultural reproduction now entered more properly the domain of pragmatic government. As I have indicated, during the late 1970s and the 1980s, the two technologies of ethnic culture and instrumental rationality or pragmatic government were largely deployed separately as regimes of power. Now the state attempted to put in place a specific “national ideology” where ‘Asian/Confucian’
values exactly duplicated the terms of Western right-wing (pragmatic), anti-democratic ideology: the core Confucian/Asian values were described as the prioritization of society's interests over those of the self; of placing the nation (read state) above ethnic communitarian and familial claims; that government would proceed on the basis of "consensus" and not "contention"; that society should aim for racial "tolerance" (a displacement of a previous post-independence emphasis on racial "equality").

It was characteristic that Singapore leaders never considered deploying the concept of national ideology until it received authorization by the West. At least two newly formed post-colonial nations, Malaysia and Indonesia, had already preceded the West in inventing and using the concept of a national ideology— but for a genuine post-colonial purpose of allowing important aspects of indigenous culture and religion (Islam) to share political center-stage with Western principles of democracy. Singapore leaders however quickly made up for this negligence by suddenly paying attention to Malaysia's Rukunegara and Indonesia's Pancasila. These two national ideologies were not discursive technologies aimed at producing economically efficient citizens, but their post-colonial character was used to pass off Singapore's own project of a national ideology as also post-colonial, as an assertion of cultural difference from the West. But Singapore's own proposed national ideology conspicuously lacked real ethnic content. In fact, it sought to weaken rather than strengthen the political status of ethnic claims, as I will argue in chapter 2. However, the form and rhetoric of the Malaysian and Indonesian concept of national ideology provided a useful strategy whereby non-ethnic practices such as political quietism and authoritarianism could be legitimized through their 'ethnicization.'

Despite the 'anti-colonial' rhetoric of the Confucian revival, there are continuities between this discourse and that of colonial racist epistemologies/anthropologies. Adrian Chan has documented the appropriation of this American discourse by East Asian governments for purposes of political legitimization/control. He has also related this to the genealogy of Confucianism in dynastic and communist China. The enunciative modality of the discourse shows it to be a neo-colonial technology of power that relies for its success on participation from the East Asian ruling class and on political
rhetoric. The generators of the discourse are American conservatives with close links to US government (Samuel Huntington, for instance, was an adviser on foreign policy to President Clinton); the proliferators and disseminators of the discourse are East Asian intellectuals, though the dominant ones such as Tu Wei-ming are American nationals. East Asian political leaders take up the discourse and depend on political rhetoric to effect the verbal, logical and metaphorical slippages that cover up the discourse’s multitudinous contradictions and the obsolescence of its concepts.

In Singapore, conceptual contradictions in the discourse include the simultaneous upholding of the concepts of ethnic identity (cultural singularity or difference of Chinese, Malays and Indians), and of Asian identity (cultural sameness or lack of difference). The Singapore government’s deployment of the discourse in bringing about major cultural changes in the population has relied on the transformation of colonial ‘description’ of the ‘other’ into a prescription for ‘native’ identity. Here, two deeply contradictory concepts of identity as essence and as construction illogically come together in a trumped up national ideology—where Singaporeans are exhorted to behave (perform) their identity as ‘Asians’/‘Confucianists’ because they are essentially ‘Asians’ and ‘Confucianists.’ The discourse, while ostensibly using the rhetoric of post-colonial identity, is structured by colonial epistemologies that naturalize racial/ethnic difference. Ignoring historical facts, it also repeats colonial representations of Chinese/Asian people as the ‘other’ to the West: that Chinese and Asians subscribe to authority; that they don’t believe in equal rights since their cultures emphasize hierarchical relations both at the familial and social/political levels; that they sacrifice individual interests to those of the family and the community. The discourse’s domain of validity (the Foucaultian concept referring to the means used by a discourse to ascertain the truth/falsity of its statements) turns on a colonial anthropology that dehistoricizes and essentializes cultures, and frames knowledge of cultures reductively and erroneously in terms only of their alterity to the West.

I am not suggesting that Singapore’s political leaders have been duped by Western neo-Orientalists into misrecognising their continued colonial subjugation as post-colonial subversion. Rather, they
recognized the usefulness of Western neo-Orientalist racist culturalism as a strategy to banish and pre-empt resistance politics from the Singapore scene. Colonial, binaristic ‘whites versus the rest’ notions of race/ethnicity, mediated by post-colonial discourses of ‘native’ identity, have allowed them to racially ‘other’ resistance politics as ‘Western’ and to ethnicize authoritarian politics as ‘Asian.’ A comment by Dr. Goh Keng Swee in the early 1970s illustrates Singapore’s political leaders’ quite different, non-Orientalist perception of Singapore culture. Dr. Goh had said in 1972:

If we are honest with ourselves, I think that we can detect in contemporary Singapore a strange but striking similarity of intellectual climate and social values with Victorian England, together with much of the cruelties and hypocrisies of that age. (Qtd. in Hill and Lian 195)

Yet Dr. Goh as Education Minister then went on to lead the project to ‘Confucianize’ Singapore youth in schools in the late 1970s and the 1980s.

It is not difficult to find a British, colonial discursive heritage in the Singapore government’s call to Singaporeans to return to their native cultures. We recall that in *Culture and Anarchy*, Arnold circumscribes culture in an elitist fashion as the traditional, the “best that is thought and known” by a society, which also gave a people their national/racial identity. As Said observes in *Culture and Imperialism*, this concept of culture allows people to “differentiate ‘us’ from ‘them,’ almost always with some degree of xenophobia” (xiii). “[R]ecent ‘returns’ to culture and tradition,” he adds, “accompany rigorous codes of intellectual and moral behaviour that are opposed to the permissiveness associated with such relatively liberal philosophies as multiculturalism and hybridity” (xiii).

In the same work, Said contextualizes Arnold’s notion of culture within the discourses of British imperialism and domestic politics: in 1865, the year before Arnold published his seminal work, he had spoken for the British Governor of Jamaica’s retaliatory massacre of Jamaican Blacks and the declaration of martial law; *Culture and Anarchy* is also “set plumb in the middle of the Hyde Park Riots of 1867, and what Arnold had to say about culture was specifically believed to be a deterrent to rampant
disorder—colonial, Irish, domestic” (130).

In Singapore, the elitist Arnoldian concept of culture was deployed in a discourse that sought to exclude ‘Western’ concepts of democratic rights as well as the cultural claims of minority ethnic groups from national culture. It also privileged an upper-class Chinese culture and attempted to foreclose cultural and political changes ensuing from the nation’s location within global capitalism and the transnational flow of information/culture. By suggesting that cultural hybridity (Westernization) and change meant cultural erosion, cultural inauthenticity and a lack of moral vigor, the Arnoldian discourse of culture was used to shut out influences of women’s movements, radical identity politics and other threats to state power.

Weber’s and the neo-Orientalists’ pragmatization/rationalization of culture also permitted the objectivization of national culture and race/ethnicity. Cultural identity was, it would seem, a palpable and coherent object, a collection of values, rather than a complex of relations often between contradictory values with different historicities or subjectivity viewed as process, that changed over time. As object then, cultural identity could be manufactured and synthesized and spoken of in terms of mathematical and Platonic logic. Singapore’s discourse of cultural identity and ethnicity often relied on conceptual procedures of intervention that involved the application of the rules of mathematical discourse. For instance, Asian identity was represented as that which was common (the lowest common factor) between the various Chinese, Malay and Indian ethnic cultures, as a discrete element present in all these cultures—as if cultures were a conglomeration of separate and non-related parts. As in Platonic discourse, the generic character of an object (where it was the same as all other objects in its class) was also the object’s essence, the core of its being. The similarity of certain values in all the Asian cultures, that which was generic to them, became their ‘essence,’ the characteristic aspects of an Asian identity.

Just as the dialectics of culture/ethnicity were ousted from the discourse, so too was the concept of modernity de-dialectized. According to this discourse, modernity transformed ethnic culture/tradition but not to the extent of changing its ‘essence.’ Modernity and tradition then were viewed as compatible,
and 'modernized tradition,' it would seem, was not a nonsensical concept. Thus Confucianism/Asian values could be modernized without alteration of its 'essence'—again, there was appeal to the operations of synthesis and integration as if modernity and tradition were systems of compatible parts that could be interchanged for each other without causing structural disruption. One recognizes the concepts of engineering re-applied to the social domain. It is never acknowledged in this discourse that it only admits one particular meaning of modernity—where it functions as a euphemism for capitalism. Banished outside the discourse are the meanings of modernity that are associated with radical democratic politics and other progressive political/social/cultural ideologies; of modernity as anti-despotism, anti-feudalism, etc.

The central themes of American neo-Orientalism, the connection between national culture and economic performance and the importance of cultural coherence for the latter, themselves dictated that the only possible authorities for this discourse could be the government/political leaders. They were the only group of people who could claim expertise in both culture and economics. At the outset then, any pure cultural knowledge was marginal to the discourse as was pure economics. Since the discourse bridged a non-perceptual field (culture) and the visible, positive arena of economics, it could not utilize the epistemological methods of science. It had to rely largely on the rhetorical modes of narrative and interpretation. Placed in the hands of political leaders, it also relied on political rhetoric. Thus, it is not surprising that the public discourse of national ideology, of Asian/Confucian identity in Singapore often depended on translating/transporting very different concepts/objects from one field of meaning into another. For example, the similarities between Confucianism and Malay culture were established, first by pointing out that the Confucianist emphasis on obedience to the king was the same as the contemporary practice of "communitarianism," of placing society's interests before self; and, then, by arguing that this Confucianist notion of righteous behavior was the same as Malay villagers' political culture of gotong-royong. These translations elide the differences in mode of production and political organization (dynastic politics here equals village politics equals modern national politics) and hence
testify to their status as pseudo-knowledge. Again, the discourse's status as a pseudo-knowledge is suggested by the fact that its speaking of the 'truths' of Malay, Chinese and Indian culture has rarely involved the citing of discourse from these culture's major texts--this tends to suggest rather the incommensurability between the archives of Asian ethnic cultures/religions and that of these contemporary interpretations of Asian identity. Rather, the discourse has involved emotional rather than intellectual appeal.

Foucaultian discourse analysis applied here shows the alarming coming together of colonial anthropology, colonial political ideologies (including eugenics) and the post-colonial discourse of identity as a relatively new technology of power in formerly colonized societies. Involving a collaboration (at least in interests) between the ruling classes here and those in the West, a silent 'contract' appears to have been drawn up where the post-colonial society benefits economically and the state's power is enhanced in the era of global capitalism, but not so much as to disturb Western dominance. Yet current Foucaultian critiques of this discourse made inside as well as outside the nation appear to have been unsuccessful in dismantling it. The use of national culture as a political and economic instrument continues unabated in Singapore together with the expansion of the politicized domain of national culture into the private sphere, to include not just political ideologies but also family values. Despite this increased and oppressive intrusion into the life of the Singaporean, and the authoritarian image it has gained in the international press (dutifully reported in the local media as instances of Western bullying), the ruling party went on to grab all the seats at the January 1997 elections and increased its share of the votes.

It would seem then, as post-Marxist psychoanalytical critic Slavoj Zizek has already pointed out in his essay "How Did Marx Invent the Symptom?," that there is a large gap between a subject's critical knowledge of the operations of an ideology and the desire to hold on to that ideology. Foucaultian discourse analysis then can only deliver us to that which Zizek defines in the same essay as the point of "enlightened false consciousness" (29), where the subjects of ideology "know very well how things
really are, but still they are doing it as if they did not know” (32). As Zizek points out here, such critical unmasking of an ideology, of the conditions that determined it, the knowledge of the ways in which the ideology distorts the real conditions of existence, still leaves intact the seemingly ‘post-ideological’ phenomenon of “cynical reason” where the subject of ideology (usually a member of the ruling class who benefits from the ideology) “recognizes . . . the particular interest behind the ideological universality, the distance between the ideological mask and the reality, but . . . still finds reasons to retain the mask” (29). The ideology of cynical wisdom then counters such anti-ideological “probity, integrity” by conceiving these “as a supreme form of dishonesty,” viewing “morals as a supreme form of profligacy” and “truth as the most effective form of a lie” (30).

Since mere knowledge of ideology’s misrepresentation of social reality is not sufficient to dismantle the ideology, Zizek reworks the classical definition of ideology in “How Did Marx Invent the Symptom?” and suggests an approach which provides a place for discourse analysis but which also goes beyond it. The illusion (misrecognition) of ideology, he says, lies not on the side of knowledge (of knowing what one is doing) but on the side of social reality, of activity (doing): although people know what they are doing, they still do it “as if” they do not know it. If, as Zizek says, “the fundamental level of ideology . . . is not of an illusion masking the real state of things but that of an (unconscious) fantasy structuring our social reality itself” (33), then production of knowledge of an ideology’s distortions of social reality will only prompt the social unconscious to rework its fantasy to once again accommodate the same desire and the same activity. Any revelation of social facts that contradict an ideology’s representation of reality will only be recycled as arguments in its favor, as in cynical wisdom: it will not disturb the hold (through desire) that the ideology has on the subject. The more productive approach of ideological critique would be to decipher our desire as it articulates itself in the fantasy-framework and expose how ideology as social fantasy functions to enable us to escape a deadlock in our desire (where we seek to negotiate our own desire with the contradictory desire of the big Other, the Symbolic Order, the political-social-cultural-historical environment we are caught in).
The most crucial contribution Zizek makes to Marxist symptomal readings of the ideological text (made possible by Lacanian articulation of Freudian theory with semiotics) is to treat the ideological text as fantasy, with important implications for ideological critique in general and for the role of the cultural critic as political interventionist/activist. In what follows, I will venture to defend my decision to combine Foucaultian discourse analysis with Zizek’s theory of ideology to investigate recent developments in Singapore’s discourse of national identity, an approach to cultural study attempted by Judith Butler in *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex.”* We are already familiar with the fecundity of Foucaultian analysis in allowing one to see the ‘big picture’ of a discourse, often leading us to make unexpected discoveries about the epistemological and historical ‘roots’ of an ideology (by tracing its concepts, objects and themes to previous bodies of knowledge), and to map the route by which discourse transforms itself from an incorporeality of knowledge into a materiality, operating as a regime of power that acts on the bodies of people. But it does have its limitation such as its treatment of ideological critique as involving only an epistemological deconstruction and not also a dismantling of desire. I will argue that Zizek’s post-Marxist application of psychoanalytical theory in ideology critique compensates for some of the limits of discourse analysis; that the two theoretical approaches are complementary, not contradictory as Foucault claims. Zizek’s approach to political critique is especially useful in moving beyond the historical/Western constraints of discourse analysis by working into its perspective, the *difference* of post-colonial subjectivity, and post-colonial identifications, not to mention its potential for beginning an inquiry into the post-colonial unconscious as a cultural and material determinant. I will also attempt to differentiate Zizek’s methodology from that of previous Marxist and non-Marxist appropriations of Lacanian theory for cultural studies.

Reserving Zizek’s theorization of the element of enjoyment in ideology for later, I will begin instead by differentiating Zizek’s psychoanalytical theory from that of more conventional, previous applications of Lacanian theory to cultural studies. By doing so, I hope to provide the reader with a background to key concepts of Zizek’s methodology.
In Zizek’s reading of Lacanian psychoanalysis, there is not that division between social/public and private (individual) fantasy formations or between political doctrine and the literary and mass-cultural texts that represent it that one finds in previous Lacanian approaches to cultural studies. If we recall, Freud privileged literary over other discourses as relating to the phantasmatic, to the unconscious, to the world of dreams in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, a distinction further developed by Julia Kristeva. She related poetical language to the revolutionary workings of the imaginary, which she feminized. These distinctions rely on the positing of the unconscious and imaginary as ‘irrational,’ ‘illusionary’ or ‘dreamlike’ opposing them to reason, the ‘real’ and the positivity of knowledge. Literature and cultural texts were considered to be products of fantasy in that they involved imaginary identifications that were more motivated by the unconscious than were other discourses. Political and economic discourses, by contrast, located in the domain of the symbolic, were perceived as involving a distanciation from the unconscious since it entered into relations with social reality and social motives, and relied on reason to produce the real as a system of relations of similarities and differences.

The further division of literary and other modes of cultural representation into individual versus collective fantasy also limited Lacanian criticism of culture to being only a reading, on an analogical level, of private fantasy, which translated into social fantasy only when deciphered as a trend in cultural representation. James Donald rehearses the older position in “On the Threshold: Psychoanalysis and Cultural Studies,” describing cultural theory and psychoanalytical theory as two separate discourses, where culture and the subject, social relations and psychic reality are mismatches (1-9). Donald’s identification of the key question for cultural theory as being the failure of ideology is the theoretic conclusion that was always-already his theoretic premise that there is a sacred area in the subject that the ideological does not touch (7). Since, according to Donald, cultural texts contain symptoms of the failure of ideology to take the full measure of subjectivity, the application of psychoanalytical theory to cultural studies can only lead us to “awareness of failure of identity in the psyche and closure in the social” (8). This separation, closing off of the category of ideology from subjectivity and the psyche
from the social, delimits the treatment of questions of cultural representations of national identity, for example, to their failures, their blockages, a futile venture when the real problem is the ideology’s success in political mobilization of the people. Such an approach also implies that the fantasies in individual cultural texts can only be read as analogies of authors’ dis/identifications with the nation, reducing the immediate terms of the text (for example, familial relations) to resemblances at another level with questions concerning national dis/identifications rather than as elements constituted, caught within and shaped by the identifications and desires required by the network of the signifying formation that we call the “nation.”

These problems are surpassed once we realize that all identifications made at the symbolic level, whether in political discourse, in fiction, or in private reverie, are the social.16 There are two types of identifications, the imaginary and the symbolic. While imaginary identifications involve setting oneself aside in identifying completely with the ideal-ego, a person that we misrecognise ourselves as being, symbolic identifications involve a distance of difference. One knows that one is not the person who is one’s ego-ideal but rather that one is (or wishes to be) similar to him/her in certain respects. At the symbolic level, one identifies, not with a person, but with a signifying feature, a trait (Zizek, “Che Vuoi?” 104). But, as Zizek points out, an imaginary identification is caught in or derives from a symbolic identification with a particular gaze (as opposed to the image of imaginary identification), the place or position within the Symbolic Order from which we appear to ourselves to be likable. As Zizek says, a woman may imaginarily identify with a feminine image, but the place from which she does so may involve an accession to a paternal injunction (“Che Vuoi?” 106). These symbolic identifications, in that they involve the negotiation of the subject’s desire with the lack (desire) of the big Other, are social and ideological. As Jacques-Alain Miller says:

On the level of the I, you can without difficulties introduce the social. The I of the ideal can be in a superior and legitimate way constructed as a social and ideological function. It was moreover
Lacan himself who did this in his *Écrits*: he situates a certain politics in the very foundations of psychology, so that the thesis that all psychology is social can be treated as Lacanian.¹⁷

Once it has been established that all identifications are at the level of the social, Zizek is then able to make the theoretical move that all linguistic formations from literature to political and economic discourse are ideological, and further that they are equally determined by the fantasy and the unconscious. Recent readings of Lacanian psychoanalysis by Zizek, Butler, Kaja Silverman and Diana Fuss hence reclaim all semiotic products as fantasy, and theorize symbolic identifications as involving a trafficking between the Symbolic, Imaginary and the unconscious. This includes hysterical discourses which refuse the identifications commanded by the Symbolic Order: as Zizek says, the imaginary identifications of the hysteric are constituted by identifications with a certain gaze of the Other (that outside itself), that gaze which makes the subject likable to itself ("Che Vuoi?" 106). Even in the discourse of the neurotic, where the subject’s identifications and hence the creation of meanings have stalled at a particular master signifier, the subject still remains the subject of signification and testifies to the alienation of the self by the signifier, the social. In this reading, only psychosis and non-linguistic, corporeal hysterical symptoms make up the outside of symbolic (social) identifications. In psychosis, the unconscious has not split from the ego and the subject is unable to differentiate between the registers of the Symbolic and the Real, so that it regards the word and sign as real objects rather than as signifiers of its place in society.

Zizek connects ideology/discourse to the unconscious and fantasy through the concept of subjectivation. The current emphasis on separation and the process of “subjectivation” over that of alienation by the signifier and the interpellation of the subject is due to the inadequacy of the latter concepts in theorizing the “territorialization” (to use a term by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari) of desire involved in identification and of the hold that dominant ideologies have on the subject. The Lacanian concept of “alienation” where language (the master signifier of the name-of-the-father) alienates us from being is not yet the formation of the subject. As Bruce Fink says, language merely
makes us "place holders" in the Symbolic Order (53). It is with separation from mother-child unity, enforced by the Symbolic Order's incest taboo, that we enter being, by desiring. Desire gives us materiality, allowing us to impact on the world. Before separation from the mother (the mother is not yet the Other), the child sees itself as continuous with the mother. With separation, the subject is divided from the mother's desire (the mother embodies the Other). The subject retains however a rem(a)inder of the lost mother-child unity (the Lacanian objet petit a), repeating it through fantasy, the psychic imaginary mechanism by which it gives itself an illusory sense of integrity (Fink 59). Confused about what the Other wants of it, the subject solves this mystery of the desire of the Other by interpreting the Other's lack (the Other's desire), substituting the original objet petit a with another object, and offering itself as the Other's object of desire that will fill that lack.

The concept of subjectivation stresses that it is not just the subject which is alienated by the signifier: the Other is also barred by the signifier (Zizek, "Che Vuoil?" 122 ). Dominant ideology (the Symbolic Order) emerges by repressing certain meanings. These repressed meanings are the lack (the hole) in the Other. The subject goes through subjectivation by trying to cover up this lack, this hole in the other, doing so by negotiating the repressed meanings with the dominant meanings/values of the Symbolic Order. This work of subjectivation is accomplished by the unconscious, which utilizes fantasy as its discourse.

Fantasy, dream, parapraxes, and hysterical symptoms as the discourse of the unconscious (Silverman, Subject 61-86 ) arise in the gap between the Real (the biological, which we can never comprehend in its entirety, including the drives) and the social constitution of reality. Separation effects the process by which our originally objectless libidinal and aggressive drives are controlled, bound, by repression, sublimation and by the assigning of aims/objects (object cathexis), all of which are determined by the Symbolic Order. Desire comprises the bound energy of the drives, which are now accorded object-aims. Before separation, the child relies only on the primary (imaginary, visual) processes of fantasy to fulfill its needs--where hallucinations of desired objects serve just as well as the real thing in securing
gratification (where signifier and signified/referent are not yet distinguished). At this stage, only primary identification is involved, where the infant identifies itself with all its objects of pleasure. But beyond separation, the subject is increasingly faced with pressures from the real world. The route to sensual gratification can no longer operate in accordance with the pleasure principle now that pleasure enters into tension with the demands of the Other. Instead, guided by the reality principle, ways and means must be found to obtain the objects of pleasure as well as to ensure the continued and steady provision of pleasure in the face of the desire of the Other. The very maturation of the self and the business of procuring pleasure for oneself depends then on coming to terms with and negotiating the desire of the Other. It involves repressing or controlling certain sources of enjoyment forbidden by society (for instance, the unlimited pursuit of sexual pleasure) and substituting/sublimating other objects for the original mother-child unity (hence, limiting the objectless drives to specific aims). The secondary identifications (at the social/symbolic level) urged by ideologies are phantasmatic representations of the self which utilize the devices of the unconscious, condensation and displacement (already initiated by the primary processes and involving visuality as well as libidinal attachment to objects) as well as metaphor and metonymy (involving language), to effectuate repressions and drive-objectivations (object cathexis). Life heretofore consists of the quest for the missing objet petit a, where the original objet petit a, the remnants of mother-child unity, is endlessly and perpetually sought in a series of object substitutes and displacements, a quest doomed to failure since desire was, in its original state, objectless. Both primary (imaginary) and secondary (linguistic, symbolic) psychic processes participate in the emergence of these object-causes of desire and in the secondary, symbolic identifications they occasion.

Except for the neurotic subject who is unable to conceive of the Other's desire as anything but a demand on itself, successful interpellation only occurs with "subjectivation," where the subject makes the Other's desire its own. Zizek describes fantasy as a "screen against the desire of the Other [Symbolic Order]" ("Che Vuoi?" 118). Expressed in the formula $<>a$ (the desire of the alienated, barred subject for objet petit a or its substitutes), fantasy, together with dreams, neuroses and hysterical symptoms, is
the mechanism which makes subjectivation possible by moving repressed desires/objects of desire (the lack in the Other) from the realm of the censored to signification. In other words, unconscious thoughts/desires/objects sneak back into the symbolic signifying network, as the return of the repressed, disguised (in order to bypass the figurative and literal ‘censorship authorities’ of the Symbolic Order) via the primary (imaginary, visual) processes of condensation and displacement and the secondary, symbolic ‘rational,’ linguistic processes of metaphor and metonymy.

At this point, it seems as if the fantasy is a ‘revolutionary’ agent of the unconscious that subverts dominant ideology (Symbolic Order) by introducing into it forbidden, anarchic desire. Rather, the opposite is true. As with hysterical symptoms, fantasy enables the subject to escape from repressed desire by working it into the social signifying network (as ideology), thereby introducing oases of enjoyment in the Symbolic Order or dominant ideology (Zizek, “Che Vuoi?” 121-28). This enables the subject to effect the secondary identifications commanded by the dominant ideology by inserting an element of enjoyment into them. As Silverman says, we are accommodated to symbolic laws and the mode of production by an “ideological facilitation,” and we accede to this ideological facilitation through fantasy and “imaginary captation” (Male 2).

Ideology then is a creation of fantasy that interprets our symbolic mandate and teaches us how and what to desire. But the Lacanian concept of subjectivation also suggests that the ego/subject is not a free agent but comes into being with an original collaboration with power. Butler usefully describes the nexus of the Symbolic Order and power: it is not a law; that is, contravening it will not produce psychosis. She suggests rather that the Symbolic should be “rethought as a series of normativizing injunctions that secure the borders of sex [and other identifications] through the threat of psychosis, abjection, psychic unlivability” (Bodies, 14-15). Earlier, Butler had already opened the door for regarding the rigid ‘laws’ of the Symbolic, the taboo against incest, and the heterosexual imperative as themselves phantasmatic creations (Gender 27-8). Current applications of psychoanalytical theory then de-sacralize the Symbolic as being merely the dominant ideology, the one that is in power.
Alternative (non-dominant) ideologies then may be conceptualized as a phantasmatic response by which the subject plugs the hole, the lack, in dominant ideology. The meanings repressed by the dominant ideology find a place in the newer, alternative ideology but still remain attached to the primary concepts of the dominant ideology. As such, every ideological doctrine defines itself in opposition to another but often repeats the same terms. The oppositional socialist and democratic ideologies remain anchored in the concepts of “justice,” “freedom,” and the “people,” differing only in their interpretations of these concepts. This is also how alternative ideologies of ecologism or feminism differentiate themselves from each other. But not only is each ideology permeated with the enjoyment of meanings repressed by the dominant ideology (that is, each ideology is a verbalized hysterical symptom), within itself, every ideology contains its own symptoms (the symptoms within a symptom), where meanings and identifications forbidden by the ideology, its foreclosures as the repressed, traumatic, unsymbolized kernel of the Real return to the ideology in disguised form, marking, again, moments of additional enjoyment, of the subject’s investment of desire in the ideology. These symptoms within an ideology contradict the main tenets of an ideology but they are also the points where an ideology is permeated with enjoyment and exerts its hold on the subject. As Zizek comments, an ideology takes into account its own limitations, its failures, in advance—and paradoxically, these limitations, failures, provide the very support the ideology needs (“Che Vuoi?” 126). Analyzing the figure of the “Jew” as the symptom in Fascist ideology, Zizek comments that the construction of the “Jew” was a symptomatic displacement and condensation from the unconscious of that very repression of social antagonism that constituted Fascist ideology (“Che Vuoi?” 125-28). The “Jew” then marked the contradiction of Fascist ideology, which claimed that society was a united formation, but it also thereby, paradoxically, provided the basis of desire for its support.

Foucault forbids the psychoanalytical interpretation of discourse because, as he shows in The History of Sexuality, psychoanalysis served as a technology of power to support the West’s colonialist and capitalist interests, organizing and regulating sexuality and morality, criminalizing and pathologizing
identifications, institutionalizing material practices such as surveillance as well as influencing the production of knowledge for these purposes. The History of Sexuality also attempts to discredit "repression" and "unconscious desire" as concepts adequate to understanding the productive, material and political effects of discourse and ideology. He does this by illustrating the inaccuracy of the "repressive hypothesis" of Victorian sexuality, noting that Victorian sexuality in fact involved an unprecedented multiplication and proliferation of sexualities and their discourse. Yet, his narrative is not inconsistent with the theory of ideology-as-symptom which would explain that the Victorian project of repressing and regulating sexuality and its identifications was made possible by the leakage of repressed desire into the project, that the nineteenth-century regulation of sexuality and identifications was precisely accomplished by increasing public interest in the sexual.

As Butler argues from Zizek, repression operates as a modality of productive power, so that what is ousted or abjected is produced as the "troubling return" that re-articulates the "symbolic horizon" (Bodies 20-23). The Real is void, unsymbolizable (there is nothing behind the signifier and cultural representation). But the symbolic, constituting itself by repressing certain notions and identifications, creates the Real through these repressions and drive-objectivations as a material force that returns to discourse, modifying it but also penetrating the discourse with enjoyment, which in turn materializes our attachment to the discourse/ideology. We can, however, only know the Real (and the Real of our desire) through its failed symbolizations in discourse, as the symptoms of the Real of our desire. Zizek, she says, theorizes political signifiers (in the case of this dissertation, that of the concepts of communitarian democracy and Asian identity as offered by neo-Orientalist discourse) as performatives which, by becoming sites of phantasmatic investment, effect the power for political mobilization" (Bodies 20-1). With Zizek's theory of subject-formation, identity as performance, as phantasmatic construction, does not involve a free subject and agency. Subjectivity is acquired through the citing of power, where the formation of the I has involved an original complicity with power (Bodies 15). The subject, Butler
argues, is constituted through exclusion and abjection, an abjected outside which is inside the subject as its constitutive repudiation (Bodies 8).

If identity is performativity in the sense that it cites a dominant cultural construction, then resistance must involve, not the rejection of identifications, but the re-citation of abjected identifications, to force the abject term into re-signification (Bodies 21). We must take stock of the "constitutive exclusions that reconsolidate hegemonic power differentials, exclusions that each articulation (of race with gender, sexuality or class, etc.) was forced to make in order to proceed. This critical reflection will be important in order not to replicate at the level of identity politics the very exclusionary moves that initiated the turn to specific identities in the first place" (Bodies 118). Zizek comes to the politicizing of abjection by another route. He argues that the political hold of ideologies can be eased by revealing these as symptoms, as displacements of our desire. A hysterical symptom, enabling the escape from repressed desire, depends on the disguise of our desires and motives. Decoding it dissolves the symptom and brings the subject of ideology in touch with itself, in identification with its symptom. We also have to unmask the fantasy, the illusion, involved in the 'hysterical' symptoms, that behind the illusion there is really nothing, and thereby dismantle the element of enjoyment embedded in the ideological identifications. Zizek quotes Lacan in insisting that fantasy be traversed, i.e. we must become conscious of the Real of our desire and extricate this from the desire of the Other ("Che Vuoi?" 124-28). Interpellation and subjectivation involve the hystereticization of the subject, the questioning of the Other's demand, with ideology (social reality) produced as hysterical symptom, as a coping mechanism, as the response of fantasy in providing a screen for the desire, the lack, the hole, in the Other. That which Lacan defines as hysterical discourse is hysteria that is not brought under control, and involves a failed interpellation, where the subject of knowledge refuses the master's (dominant) discourse and maintains the contradiction between conscious and unconscious (Fink 133). But, ultimately, over and above his/her imaginary identifications, the hysteric identifies with the desire of the Other and makes a transferential illusion. Psychoanalytical decoding of the symptom de-hystericizes the subject and frees it from the
transfertential illusion. We can only become free agents and extricate ourselves from our constitution in power by knowledge of the unconscious, desire, and the workings of fantasy.

Foucault’s analysis of sexuality as a discursive construction in The History of Sexuality, despite his denunciation of psychoanalysis, itself could be read as an attempt to de-hystericize the contemporary Western subject of history. Foucault occupies a hermeneutic position inside the space vacated, repressed, by conventional, dominant historical interpretations, to show that the “repressive hypothesis” of Victorian sexuality is itself a symptom, a phantasmatic displacement, disavowal of current repressions that allow the perpetuation of the regime of sexual/gender regulation.

The critique of ideology as social fantasy is not inconsistent with discourse analysis, as Zizek observes (“Che Vuoi?” 125). The latter estranges ideology, deconstructing its production of meaning as a spontaneous experience. Discourse analysis produces knowledge of the paths an ideology takes towards meaning. It illustrates how the ideology is constituted as a unified semiotic field by constraining meanings through the discursive mechanism of ideological quilting. Here, the metonymic endless slippage of signifieds, of floating signifiers, is halted by a primary signifier at a certain nodal point (the Lacanian point de capiton quoted by Zizek) that quilts these signifiers and delimits their meanings in terms of each other—where each signifier is reduced to being a metaphor of another signifier. For instance, in the ideology of communism, the concept of “class struggle” symbolically over-determines the meanings of peace, freedom, democracy, feminism, ecologism; but over and above that, the meanings of “class struggle” itself emerges, not as object but as a structural relation, in opposition to meanings contained by the ideology of capitalism. The rigid designator, the name of an ideological doctrine, in this case “communism,” the signifier that unifies a given ideological field, is not then a site of plenitude of meaning: rather, it reveals the ideology’s emergence from a lack in the Other, that the ideology is only a structural relation of difference (lacks objectal identity) from another ideology. The rigid designator is then the point where ideology’s ‘objectiveness’ is shown to be nothing but a pure signifier (a signifier without a signified), the point where an ideology, meaning, has erupted from non-
sense, from lack. But as Zizek says, despite an ideology's emergence from desire, it is always striving towards objectivity--towards constructing an object of desire, an objet petit a for its subjects. This is the "sublime object of ideology," which denies its own phantasmatic, performative character (and comes into being with this disavowal) by producing itself as an object of knowledge (sometimes this can result in a science) and materializing itself in social/political institutions and non-discursive practices.

Foucaultian analysis works at identifying the objects and concepts of a discourse and the rules of their formation, the discourse's strategic choices of themes, and its enunciative modality. These defamiliarize the discourse's semiotics. It also allows us to see that the materialization of an ideology is the means it uses to hide its nonsensical character, to escape from itself as lack--where the 'real' 'objective' world around us is merely its organization by the terrorism of the signifier. Through discourse analysis, we view the ideological sublime object, the rigid designator, in its emptiness, seeing behind the representation, the trick of "ideological anamorphosis," an "error in perspective" where nothing appears as something (Zizek, "Che Vuoi?" 99). A genealogical analysis can accomplish that which Zizek describes as "the first task of analysis," which is "to isolate, in a given ideological field, the particular struggle which at the same time determines the horizon of its totality," that is, where the species, the difference in meaning, pretends to be its own universalization or genus, absolute meaning ("Che Vuoi?" 89). Foucault's methodology of comparing and contrasting discourses, his enterprise of unearthing the genealogy of a discourse, is also useful in uncovering the unacknowledged (though not repressed) meanings of an ideology. It reveals ideology as symptom, as a system of the displacement and condensation of previous themes, objects and concepts.

But it is psychoanalytical criticism that can take ideological critique further, towards extracting from ideology its kernel of enjoyment, performing the final operation required to disentangle the subject from ideology's desiring hold. This can be done in two stages. First, one has to read a particular ideology as symptom, as that which fills in the lack, inconsistency, of other dominant ideologies. This consists of showing how a contemporary ideology is permeated with enjoyment as the hysterical attempt to escape
from (by incorporating) desires repressed by the dominant or previous ideology--by symbolizing the specter, the ghostly intimation of the Real that is repressed in the earlier ideology. Then, one examines the ideology itself for its moments of contradiction, where that which the newer ideology represses returns as hysterical symptoms that paradoxically provides the bases for the ideology's support via enjoyment--where the ideology's lack, its hole or inconsistency turns into the surplus of enjoyment.

That which Zizek terms the "spectral analysis" of ideology can be performed by reading ideology as a Freudian dream ("Spectre" 7). Differentiating his concept of ideology from Althusser's, Zizek says that the "fundamental level of ideology . . . is not of an illusion masking the real state of things but that of an (unconscious) fantasy structuring our social reality itself" ("How Did Marx" 316). We cannot know the "real state of things" because ideology as fantasy distorts our perception of reality, including the world of objects. The Real can only be known through psychoanalytical criticism as the traumatic Real that ideology attempts to escape via pathological, paranoid beliefs. A method to decipher the Real of our desire, that which structures reality, is then the analytical tool required to 'awaken' us from our ideological dream.

When Zizek links ideology to dreams, he is not making an analogy, a metaphorical comparison, but rather asserting the two as identities, as species of the discourse of the unconscious, with structural similarities. Ideology is a dream, is fantasy, in that the repressed, banished into the unconscious, returns and works itself into the signifying network of the Symbolic. Insofar as a dream (ideology) has a manifest content, it is at the level of the Symbolic and of conscious desire. But it also has a latent content, which shows the manifest content (the Symbolic itself) to be a condensation and displacement of other ideas/things/desires/relationships/objets petit a. The Symbolic, as has been mentioned, is itself a product of fantasy, an engagement with the Imaginary dimension, its semiotic process using both secondary (linguistic) and primary processes (visual, but also involving childhood memories and attachments to objects) to create meanings. The secondary psychic processes use the resources of language, metaphor and metonymy, to quilt different signifiers (as representatives of objects, subjects,
relations) into an identity, while primary psychic processes load some signifiers with affect. An ideology as a “knot of meanings” uses the signification process to phantasmatically represent race/gender/class/sexuality and other separate concepts in terms of each other, limiting and determining their meanings, excluding some meanings and including others. The rhetorical process (as in metaphors and metonyms) also allows one signifier/signified to be displaced, hidden from view, by reference to another signifier/signified, accounting for the duplicity of language, where it means something other than what it says.

We can locate the imaginary, latent content of ideology by identifying its nodal points, its points de capiton and disentangling its quilting of meanings. But we have not yet completely approached the structural distortion of reality by ideology as dream, nor decoded its element of enjoyment as hysterical symptom of repressed desire, as the point of deadlock in our desire between a conscious and unconscious/repressed desire—where the dream/ideology gentrifies repressed desire by incorporating it within the signifying network and plugging the hole/lack/inconsistency in the Symbolic Order. Zizek, taking his cue from Freud’s Interpretation of Dreams, says the latent dream thought is not yet the unconscious (“How Did Marx” 296-300). In ideology, a ‘normal’ train of thought, seeming to depend only on secondary processes and conscious desire, is already distorted by the primary process of the unconscious because the conscious desire has been short-circuited by an unconscious wish, derived from infancy (involving the libidinal/sexual and aggressive drives) and in a state of repression. It is this distortion that needs to be decoded. Primary processes feature in the semiosis in enabling a signifier, especially the primary signifier or rigid designator to be cathected (invested with desire) and misrecognized as the object-cause of desire, as the objet petit a (at the level of the primary process, words, images, are mistaken for its referent, as the object of desire itself).

As opposed to the latent or manifest content of a dream, unconscious desire or the unsymbolizable Real only announces itself in the dream’s form itself:
This [repressed, unconscious] desire attaches itself to the dream, it intercalates itself in the interspace between the latent thought and the manifest text. . . . In other words, its [the desire's] only place is in the form of the dream: the real subject-matter of the dream, the unconscious desire, articulates itself in the dream-work, in the elaboration of its 'latent content. ("How Did Marx" 298)

One way of approaching this is to identify and decode as symptom the 'strange' elements in the ideology-dream, those which are its contradictory, unheimlich and/or seemingly unnecessary, superfluous aspects. We need also to examine the thought possibilities that the ideology/dream represses, the repression that is its condition of emergence. Then we can consider how this repression shapes the dream/ideology, surfacing in objects of desire which are also fetishes (the desired displacements of the original objet petit a). The psychoanalytic concept of the fetish, a thing/object of desire that disavows the traumatic absence of something, substitutes something for the nothing/lack, and, which, paradoxically also marks or commemorates the loss of the original object (Mulvey, Fetishism, 5) is important for ideological critique in that it identifies the moments of enjoyment of an ideology which are also related to repressed desire. Symptoms may be differentiated from fetishes in that the former are more symbolically overdetermined, emerging from the process of condensation where several different meanings are collapsed into one ideological object, whereas the fetish involves displacement. Also, the investment of desire in the symptom and the enjoyment it procures is less evident to the subject. The subject usually thinks that it hates its symptom whereas it knows, at a conscious level, that it enjoys its fetishes.

Structured by both primary and secondary processes, the production of ideology by fantasy allows, as Butler points out, various vectors of power (race, class, gender, sexuality, etc.) to work together to support the other's imperatives. This means, she says, that racism is not merely an analogy of misogyny, of gender power, but that the regime of racism often collaborates with the regime of male power and that the heterosexual imperative is also used to secure the borders of race (Bodies, 18).
Silverman makes the same point in her description of the operations of fantasy. The Symbolic Order is for her a society’s “dominant fiction,” which brings together family ideology, including the law of language and the law of kinship structure (the primary ideologies) as well as elements from secondary ideologies that relate to the mode of production (ideologies of race, gender, class, etc.). Within fantasy, the subject assigns itself subject-positions from which to desire. Fantasy also frames and constructs the objects to be desired. But since the central signifier of social unity is the paternal family and its primary signifier of privilege is the phallus, male and female are dominant fiction’s most fundamental binary. Other ideological elements (for instance, race or class) exist in a metaphoric relation to the terms of sexual difference. But because the primary and fragile penis-phallus equation requires support from the secondary ideologies, a breakdown of belief in secondary ideologies can cause a crisis in the primary ideologies, and vice-versa (Male 15-51).

Zizek also accords the culture of masculinity a central place in ideologies. On one level, the rigid designator that quilts an ideology and gives it its name has the same unconscious logic by which the penis is fetishized and equated with (male) power. If the fetishization of the penis/phallus emerges from the psychic need to disavow castration/lack, so too does the rigid designator as fetish disavow its own emergence from lack by acting as the point of plenitude of meaning. Just as the phallus is signifier of its own absence, the rigid designator too signifies ideology’s emptiness, its irruption from nonsense. But for Zizek, the rigid designator, the Lacanian point de capiton, which stabilizes meaning, is the phallic signifier, and the original illusion on which meaning depends, that of selfhood, is already linked to myths of male power. As I hope to show in this thesis, a cultural neurosis, then, inflicted by an ideology on a society, first affects the ideology of male identity.

Zizek’s account of ideology as social fantasy enables me then to treat political discourse concerning Singapore’s national identity (including speeches made by politicians) on the same level as that of Singaporean cultural texts (novels and plays) as phantasmatic representations concerning national identity. It also enables me to distinguish between them as fantasies accruing from dissimilar interests.
Further, it allows me to use cultural texts by Singaporean citizens as phantasmatic representations that, unwittingly or otherwise, reveal the real meanings of Singapore’s current discourse of national identity i.e. that stage the unsavory demands that this discourse makes on Singaporeans’ identifications, which are covered up by the fervent, anti-colonial rhetoric of the ruling political party.

This is radically different from previous applications of psychoanalytical criticism to cultural studies where the collective un/conscious is viewed, as I said earlier, as a commonality among individual fantasies that manifests itself as trends in cultural representation. This de-classed, de-gendered, de-sexualized and de-ethnicized reading of the collective un/conscious cannot then reveal the different political pressures that the social/Symbolic Order, in the unity of its desire, makes on different sections of the nation, resulting in them taking on dissimilar subject-positions and trajectories in desire. It is only when the collective unconscious is conceptualized as the difference that is also the same (where the nation as a unity can only come into existence by fragmenting, differentiating the people) that ideology as social fantasy can be analyzed in its complex project of negotiating meanings of gender/race/ethnicity/class/sexuality for the establishment of hegemony.

Zizek’s theory of ideology also allows the post-colonial indigenous critic to speak from outside the historical conditions of the post-colonial Western diaspora in which Homi K. Bhabha’s post-modern deconstructive-psychoanalytical theorization of the nation’s ambivalence is situated. Though Bhabha overrides the distinctions between the private and the public, psychic and the social, treating them as metaphors of each other, he poses different problems of binaries, in particular, the opposition he makes between the “pedagogical” and the “performative” (“Dissemination” 139-70). By setting the two off against each other, he argues that the nation is “Janus faced,” ambivalent in its doubling and splitting. Yet, for all this ambivalence of the nation, its “ghostly spectral other” that causes a “disjunction in the ‘sign’ of the social” (“A Question of Survival”), men do markedly unambivalent things such as taking up arms for their country. Bhabha’s deconstructivist project of opening up a space within the discourse of the nation for the resistance of marginalized groups doesn’t recognize its own emergence as the
subject’s phantasmatic answer to the desire of the Other. Dirlik rightly points out that the surfacing of post-colonial criticism in the West has coincided with the economic/political/cultural interests of Western dominance in global capitalism, where multi-culturalism strategically meets economic interests. It also fits into the context of Western political culture. Bhabha’s separation of the performative from the pedagogic is itself a disavowal of the possible coming together of the two in post-colonial resistance ideology—where resistance appropriated by official ideology produces sites of enjoyment that can only strengthen dominant ideology’s hold on the subject. The “performative” could be the fetish disavowing the lack (of resistance) in the Other. I do not hold that the performative is impossible, but suggest that it doesn’t occur as often as Bhabha supposes and that it is usually accompanied by compromise to the desire of the Other.

Combining psychoanalytical criticism with discourse analysis, this thesis examines the American ideology of the new Orientalism as a neo-colonial technology of power that aims at taming the Eastern threat to Western dominance in global capitalism, while also exerting a regulatory function at home. In chapter 2, I focus on a function the ideology took on at a point where Western power interests intersected with those of the Singapore government: the new Orientalist ideology was used, via a discourse of national identity, to entrench the Singapore government’s control of the population, to render them docile, and therefore ever more suitable for colonial exploitation. By reading into that which was repressed by the Singapore government’s project to institutionalise a national ideology, an attempt that spanned 1988 to 1991, I show that the new discourse of national identity emerged from government fear of growing ethnic identifications and notions of radical democratic identifications that were infiltrating from the West, which could only increase with the nation’s deeper involvement in global capitalism. These threatened economic performance (or at least the power of the capital-owning class) as well as state power. There was, no doubt, also the additional awareness that global capitalism eroded the power of the state, minimizing its role. The “national ideology” project then was a symptom that served both to deny as well as deal with the threats to state power and to overcome public resistance
by taking into account the people's desire. American Orientalism was the discursive means by which the Singapore government strove to repress from public consciousness the fundamental antagonism and difference in interests between the state and the people—that radical democratic politics and ethnic consciousness may be inconvenient for the state but healthy for the nation, and, quite possibly, even positive economic forces. The threat to state power was thus repressed from public consciousness by refiguring it as a threat of the fragmentation of the nation itself and of national power, where nation and state became metaphors for each other. The state pre-empted public rejection of its project of loosening the hold of ethnic culture by fetishing ethnicity itself.

The fetishization of Asian values is a key contradiction of the “national ideology” project and can be identified as a point of jouissance, where enjoyment makes its way into the ideology. If the “national ideology” project aimed at uniting the nation, as it claimed, then why did it take up the ethnicity cause which would only fragment a multi-ethnic nation? I will argue that the escape from the state-people antagonism dictated that the power/unity of the people had to be fragmented but in a controlled manner so that the antagonistic relation to the state could be displaced as antagonistic relations between the people. The concept of “Asian values” was the paradoxical point at which the people could recognize in each other both their self and their ‘other.’ A complex of feelings that had been buried and disavowed through the founding years of the nation, the 1960s to the late 1970s—that of feelings of inferiority to the West and ethnic-cultural divestiture, were now reawakened by the state and enabled the people to identify with the government’s ethnicity project. Singaporeans’ imaginary identifications with their ethnic culture then was rooted in the gaze of the West—a relation of inferiority to the ‘other’ involves an identification with the symbolic gaze of the ‘other,’ through which the self is found to be wanting, thereby resulting in hostility as a reaction against and disavowal of the identification. The people’s desire for ethnic culture, however, was both tapped and compromised, reconciled with state desire, by the resort to fetishistic illusion—where the anti-democratic ideology of authoritarianism disguised itself as ethnic culture in the same silly way that the breast as fetish is mistaken for the penis. This fetishistic
misrecognition of political authoritarianism as “Asian” was, of course, made possible by American neo-Orientalism, which had conflated the two. The figuring of an ethnicized, Asian modernity is another hysterical symptom in the ideology where the people’s desire for modernity—which is also the desire for Western, liberal culture emerging from Singapore’s increasing affluence and its participation in global capitalism—was compromised. The two desires, for ethnic culture as well as (Western) modernity, were then brought together in the fetish of an ethnicized, Asian/Confucianist ‘modernity,’ where the modernity originally desired, that of progressive political ideals, was displaced by its very opposite, that of a regressive, authoritarian political culture, and its repression disavowed by misrecognizing it as involving the liberalization of authoritarianism!

The notion of a “communitarian democracy,” included in the national ideology and borrowed from the West, is yet another interesting symptom that needs to be decoded. I argue that this notion marks Singaporeans’ refusal to cut off their dependence on the West and to surrender their recognition of its superiority: this refusal is the contradictory limit of their assertion of their cultural difference from the West and their anti-colonialism. The trauma that the notion of “communitarian democracy” allows Singaporeans to escape from is not that of losing their ethnic cultures but rather the fearful notion that the assertion of their cultural difference could involve a cutting off of Western support/ recognition. That is why the entire ideology asserting Singaporean national difference from the West depends for its support on its very contradiction: that Singaporean difference be authorized by the West and that in being different from the West, Singaporeans are recognized as only being truly Western, more quintessentially American than the Americans themselves.

I develop this argument in chapter 3 within the context of the discourse of national identity and difference from the West that emerged through the 1994 episode of Singapore’s caning of an American expatriate teenager, Michael Fay, for vandalism. Critics such as J. Clammer and Michael Hill and Lian Kwen Fee have deemed the Singapore government’s project of ‘Confucianizing’ ‘Asianizing’ the nation a failure, especially since the National Ideology White Paper, though issued, was never tabled for
discussion in Parliament. I argue in this dissertation that the project did not need to be taken any further
since its real objective in re-culturalising the people (which was something other than the
Confucianizing/Asianizing of the population), was already beginning to work. Literature and drama
produced in the 1980s and 1990s, which I will deal with in chapters 4 and 5, provide evidence of this.

Meanwhile, in chapter 3, I argue that the Michael Fay episode, which brought the government into
conflict with the Clinton administration, enabled Singaporeans to more completely subjectivate the
desire of the Singapore government, to identify their desire with that of the state’s. The discourse in
Singapore, as it surfaced in the local media, which often also responded to American representations of
the event, made the neo-Orientalist ideology’s territorialisations of desire more apparent and also
unmasked some of its hidden meanings. Coincidentally or otherwise, the event will stand out in
Singaporeans’ memory as one that made it immensely enjoyable for Singaporeans to identify with the
government’s authoritarianism. The government was able to legitimize its authoritarianism as a force
protecting Singapore’s sovereignty so that the Singaporean’s drive to self-preservation was equated with
state power. But the discourse also revealed that the government’s emphasis on Singaporeans’ Asian
identifications was really a bid to increase disciplinary control of the people (especially through the use
of the law), to legitimize an unquestioning attitude to state authority, and to intensify the patriarchal role
of government: in the event, the Singapore government and all its ideologues began to look like
duplicates of right-wing sections of America, which came out in support. The discourse of the Fay
caning will be used analytically as the site that exposes the links between Singapore’s new nationalism
and its relations with the US. The discourse made starkly visible the role Singaporeans were playing in
accepting American neo-Orientalist constructions of themselves: their enjoyment, it would seem, accrued
from viewing themselves through the American gaze as its fantasy object of desire, that they were in
fact what Americans wished dearly to be but couldn’t. The incident also enabled Singaporeans to finally
align their desire with that of the state through a displacement of Singaporeans’ antagonism to the
state/authority onto the American state and its authority—a displacement that also simultaneously allowed them to disavow their American identifications.

Newspaper editorials during the Fay episode also made clear some of the subject-positions Singaporeans had to adopt in order to subjectivate the government’s desires, that of the sado-masochistic and disciplined soldier being among them. The episode also suggests that the new nationalism was disrupting the illusions that make (male) subjectivity possible: the equation of the symbolic father with the actual father and the penis with the phallus (power). This chapter will approach the problem of a crisis in male subjectivity emerging from state usurpation of the subject’s power, a crisis complicated by the sense of inferiority to the West, but this will be taken up in greater detail in chapter 5. In this chapter, however, I will begin the work of suggesting that there is a difference in the West’s utilization of the discourse of race as a technology of power in the era of global capitalism as compared to the days of Empire.

In chapters 4 and 5, I selectively study the literary works written in English that emerged in Singapore during this period, privileging the texts that subjectivate the state’s desire. I restrict myself to works written in English due to my own linguistic incapacities. But English is also the language of the ruling class, who dominate national culture, the nation’s dominant language as the medium of instruction, commerce and government, and the original language of state ideology. It also needs to be said here that the state’s project of Confucianizing/Asianizing the people, which first begun in the early 1980s, and led to the promotion of a “National Ideology,” was an attempt to radically change and renege on a previous nationalism. From the moment of the independence movement to the late 1970s, Singaporeans, as a nation comprising multiracial immigrants and an indigenous Malay population, had been persuaded to dis-identify with their motherlands. Instead, they had been urged to view themselves as culturally hybrid, to recognize both their Western colonial heritage as well as their ethnic cultures and to acknowledge the transformation of the latter by the diasporic experience. The concept of ‘nativism,’ of
ethnic purity, was repressed in this nationalism, and syntheses of the various cultures (as in the ‘melting pot’ concept of multi-culturalism) had been encouraged.

My intention here, as in the previous chapters, is to make evident the successful hegemonization of the new discourse of nationalism and to trace the process by which this was achieved. I examine literary texts in order to rectify a blind spot in previous critique of the Singapore government’s attempt to change national identifications where assertions about the success/failure of a dominant ideology such as a nationalism have been made without listening to the voice of the people.\(^\text{18}\) Literary texts also make manifest the alterations in Singaporeans’ identifications and desires that the new nationalism requires. As products of fantasy that identify with the state’s desire by assigning new objects of desire and placing the subject within a position from which to desire them, they unmask some of the unacknowledged meanings of the discourse. Within the context of a marked change in nationalist ideology—where identifications and desires encouraged in a previous nationalism become the repressed of the new nationalism—literary texts can also be useful in tracking down short-circuits in meaning, which could be signs of cultural neuroses.

In chapter 4, I focus on a literary genre, the historical novel, which emerged from the 1980s, during the period of the new nationalism. I locate these popular historical novels as cultural representations that try to hegemonize the new nationalism, not only due to their content but also because they were written largely by Singapore’s best-known writers who are or were, at the time of writing, connected to the government, especially to the Ministry of Education, which was deeply involved in the project of formulating and promoting the new nationalism. I use these historical novels to argue that the re-interpretation of Singapore history as exclusively involving the Chinese diaspora, where the nation was re-signifed as Chinese, was an integral aspect of the process by which the Singaporean came to cathect the new nationalism. By doing so, I render irrelevant the government’s frequent denial of its racist/culturally chauvinist intentions: even if their denials are true, it does not subtract from the new nationalism’s racist pull. I argue that the enjoyment procured by the new nationalism is that of the
return of the repressed: in the older nationalism emphasising racial/ethnic equality and meritocracy, the
majority Chinese population had been forbidden to assert their dominance. A few novels in this genre,
such as Philip Jeyaretam's *Abraham's Promise* and Rex Shelley's *The Shrimp People*, have been
written by writers from minority groups, countering the Sinicization of Singapore history, but I reserve
comment on the extent of their subversion of the new nationalism for another occasion.

I also argue that the feminist forms of women's historiography/autobiography that these historical
novels have tended to use is symptomatic of a hysterical displacement of repressed feminist desire, that
the Sinicization of Singapore history/nationalization is interwoven with its masculinization. With the
gaining of national independence and perhaps only by dint of economic circumstance, Singapore women
were liberated from the confines of domesticity, and their freedom often operated as signifier of the
nation's modernity. But the new nationalism, if it had to be cathected as an assertion of "Chinese"
identity, also brought the feminist desires of these writers into conflict with the ethnic desire. They
repress and attempt to escape from, negotiate, their feminist desire by feminizing Singapore's Chinese
past, but thereby also representing it as a myth of the original abandonment of the female by the male--
where even female strength is construed as lack of the male. Anti-feminist content is then
symptomatically poured into feminist literary forms, as if to disavow the writers' betrayal of female
freedom. Since feminism was, by and large, a Western cultural import, Western culture is implicitly
represented in these texts as the force (of modernity) that effeminized Eastern culture, alienating it from
its 'manliness,' but also as that which 'perversely' masculinized Chinese women. In many of these texts,
the male-female struggle is also the East-West and tradition/modernity struggles, where the female/West
is demonized and modernity is feminized, i.e. it requires a (male) completion. The ambivalence of these
novels' attitudes towards feminism/the West/modernity remains however: women/the West/modernity
remain strong, if not positive, forces, while the patriarchy/the East/tradition, are rendered as mysteries, as
the focal point of desire that has not yet visibly manifested itself as object. Since the new nationalism
urges ethnic identifications that are beyond Singaporeans' knowledge, given their over-culturalisation by
the West and their earlier dis-identifications from their native past, this mysteriousness of the East as object of desire is not surprising. Also, perhaps, the repressed desire for Western culture directs Singaporeans' enjoyment of their ethnic identifications—where these can only be desired on condition that they remain vague, without content, as the signifier without a signified, or where ethnic culture only functions as the fetish that disavows its own absence by substituting it with its own 'other,' in this case, with Western interpretations of ethnic culture. (Perhaps this explains the lack of public concern with the emptiness in the state's description of ethnic culture and with the nonsensical character of the state's discourse of an ethnicized modernity.) These novels also indicate that subjectivation of ethnic culture is accomplished at the level of guilt and shame, painful emotions motivated by the escape from but also commemoration of the enjoyment incurred from wrong-doing.

In chapter 5, I argue that the conflictual economy of desires and identifications between the new and previous nationalisms appear to have plunged at least one section of the ruling class, rising young male urban intellectuals (including the nation's top journalists, who dominate media representation of state ideology) into cultural neurosis. Fink theorizes that interpellation of the subject which does not involve subjectivation is at the level of neurosis, where the desire of the Other cannot be experienced as identical with the subject's desire but as the Other's demand ($<>D)$ of the subject (72-6). Neurosis occurs, he says, when the master-signifier of the Other's demand cannot be dialectized, brought into relation with other signifiers. For instance, in subjectivation, we often de-sexualize and repress/control libidinal energy by substituting/sublimating it with non-sexual objects such as intellectual activity. In neurosis, the repression is refused, sometimes due to external circumstances that awaken repressed memories. The fantasy cannot, in neurosis, enable the subject to make the substitutions in objet petit a that enable escape from repressed desire. One of the key repressions in patriarchal societies is that of the lack of power of the (male) subject in his castration by the signifier (the Symbolic Order). This is repressed by denying it in a process where the penis serves as signifier of the phallus, as an illusion of the power that the male subject truly lacks. Also, the Symbolic Father is equated with the actual father and castration is
‘forgotten’ through the incest taboo where the son is promised the paternal legacy of the Symbolic Order if he will only denounce his mother and identify with his father (Silverman, Male, 40). In neurosis, the male ‘subject’ cannot perform these illusions: the penis only reminds him of his lack of power. The superego (the repressed memory of his Symbolic/actual father’s real power, which unconsciously determines and limits his identifications and desires), has emerged from retirement in the unconscious, so that the male subject cannot phantasmatically misrecognize its obedience of the Other’s injunctions as signifier of its own desire and power.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a body of plays were written and produced in Singapore which fixated on the implications of the new nationalism for male subjectivity. These plays try unsuccessfully to reconcile Western norms of masculinity (which had been cathected in the previous nationalism, where the rights of cultural and political self-representation and self-assertion are viewed as masculine characteristics) with Eastern (or what are perceived as Eastern/Confucianist) standards of male identity, which supposedly involve deference to authority. Their attempts however only bring the subject into an encounter with the specter of male lack, which is either hysterically escaped by the adoption of reversionary sexual/gender politics, or by a neurotic halt in the manufacture of meaning. In the former case, a reliance on non-realistic genres of drama symptomatize an inability to deal with historical-cultural realities. Dramatic resolutions of cultural conflicts are only made possible by stereotyped character representations or by the intervention of dream sequences that permit the plays to elide their intellectual inconsistencies. The primary signifier of meaning, the penis/phallus, is placed under close scrutiny by Singapore’s journalists, the nation’s experts in the manufacture of meaning, and their dramatic work attempts to desperately combat an awareness that the master-signifier signifies nothing. But the same plays simultaneously resort to a contradictory post-modernist deconstruction of meaning. Transvestism is repeatedly figured in these plays as a forbidden utopia of cultural hybridity (where West and East enter into equivalence with sexual difference), a reminder of happier, past moments of the nation, but it is also the vehicle that allows a post-modern deconstruction of truth, power, and
sexual/gender/racial/cultural authenticity. In at least one play, the post-modern disavowal of meaning is then utilized to argue for an identification with the government's desire on the level of subversive mimicry. However, the surgical cut of a sex operation (castration in the male-to-female changeover) is the Real that reminds the reader of the subject's de-masculinization, of the impossibility of subversive mimicry. In another play, castration (the experience of male lack) is figured as the only means to recover male power, except that the ensuing power can only be imaginary, since the male body has already been fragmented. Post-modern discourse appears to be the route by which the male Singaporean subject escapes from the trauma that, perhaps, the signifier does mean something, signifying a responsibility to history and to one's desire. In these plays, post-modernity involves the abdication of post-colonial identity/responsibility. Post-modern discourse permits repressed desires of resistance, freedom and self-assertion of one's desires (which are tied to male identity) to be expressed and vehemently enjoyed but also to be denied or overcome as excesses in meaning, as fictions. When meaning is conceived as excess, we have the moment of neurosis itself, with post-modern cultural representation appearing as the disavowal of that neurosis. In Singapore at least, accidentally or otherwise, the American ideological task of turning post-colonial societies into docile markets and sources of labour would seem to be a mission accomplished.

In the plays dealt with in chapter five, post-modernity shows up its limitations, at least for the post-colonial subject--it may be the route to disengaging ourselves from the controlling fictions of power, but it stops short of allowing us to rectify the oppressions of history. Although Foucaultian discourse aided me in my project, it also showed up its limits. As Spivak has pointed out in "Can the Subaltern Speak?," despite claims that he is moving beyond a historical analysis that is harnessed to the sovereignty of the subject (which does not permit the understanding of history as discontinuous or non-teleological), Foucault does assume that the centered (Western) subject with his unified desire is the agent of discourse (87). Foucault provides a place for desire in his archaeological method, admitting that "discourse may in fact be the place for a phantasmatic representation," and that even knowledges that have crossed the
threshold of scienticity themselves can be internally constituted through the “imaginary practice of discourse” (Archaeology 68). But his notion of desire, elucidated in a conversation with Gilles Deleuze, is, as Spivak observes, that of the desire of a centered subject: it is coherent and monological so that desire can be equated with the interests of the subject, and is transparent. For Foucault, a discursive statement is the place of a unity of desire, though he substitutes the coherence of the enunciating subject, the “transmitter of signs,” for that of the subject of the statement (Archaeology 92). He only admits contradictory desires at the general level of the discourse, dispersed among some of its disunities, the “points of diffraction of the discourse” (where alternative series of statements and alternative, contradictory themes, objects and concepts form in the same discourse), prompting the different affiliations it may make with other discourses and allowing it to serve different functions in a field of non-discursive practices. This is useful though in showing that alliances of interest and desire can materially strengthen a discourse, enabling it to function more successfully as a technology of power.

Foucault’s notion of desire as centered plays an important role in his theorization of revolutionary agency or consciousness. A revolutionary consciousness, for him, is itself a discursive event, the occurrence of which depends on the laws of formation of discourse and the capacity these provide for transformation of that discourse and the emergence of a body of revolutionary knowledge (Archaeology 194-95). For Foucault, then, the important question concerns how a revolutionary consciousness became possible--not as a matter of subjectivity (the psychoanalytic explanation) nor only of economic circumstances (the Marxist explanation)--but as involving the positivity of a discourse as its condition of possibility. For the post-colonial subject, however, the matter of split desires, of split subjectivity (where discourse itself has placed him/her in a position of desiring to be the same as the colonizer and different too) almost guarantees that revolutionary consciousness as a unified discursive event will be endlessly deferred, since the subject wants to be in two contradictory places at once, in the place of colonial subjection and in post-colonial freedom. For him/her, the emancipatory epistemological operation does not just involve identifying the discursive places where power exercises itself as
knowledge. The post-colonial subject also needs to know how discourse can work to compromise, manage and constitute desire, and thereby hinder revolution.

Zizek’s examination of discourse as the medium of the generation of desire has the added advantage of identifying possible future developments in discourse, something that Foucaultian discourse analysis is unable and unwilling to do. As Foucault says, an archive emerges in its positivity the greater the chronological distance between it and the subject of investigation so that its discontinuity from our knowledges “separates us from what we can no longer say” (*Archaeology* 130). Genealogical analysis then reveals history as ‘otherness.’ Shaking our faith in the teleology of human consciousness, it shows “our reason” to be “the difference of discourses.” Armed with such an agenda, Foucault has no inclination to “sketch out in advance the face that we will have in the future” (*Archaeology* 130-131).

If, as Foucault says, the time of discourse is not the time of an individual speaker of the discourse—the difference lying in the gap of the speaker’s lack of knowledge of the rules of discourse that s/he is playing by (*Archaeology* 210-11)—so is the time of Foucault’s discourse and his politics not that of the post-colonial subject’s. The Western subject feels the burden of too much “face” (coherent selfhood) and seeks release from it; the post-colonial subject, on the other hand, suffers from too little “face” (selfhood) and gazes with desire at the future as the place of identity, of one’s coming into being. The latter then cannot afford to let the future take care of itself and feels anxiety that the present and its state of desire may delimit the future.

But, more significantly, my quarrel with Foucault lies in the limitations of his treatment of transformations within a discursive formation, given my project’s interest in the change that took place in the 1980s and 1990s in Singapore’s discourse of national identity. One could describe this change in Singapore’s nationalism as merely one involving a different theme or strategic choice (a switch from that of West-East cultural hybridity to one prioritizing a regressive return to ‘ethnic’ identity) but where the concepts (of identity) and rules of formation of objects and enunciative modality have remained the same (where, for instance, as in this case, the concept of identity is still tied to notions of hybridity but
has merely exchanged component elements from that of West-East to that of Eastern-modern). Or it might concern a discursive transformation that has emerged due to differences in the conditions of enunciation (such as in the non-discursive functions the discourse now serves where cultural identifications have been linked to the cause of economic progress), which may also involve a change in its positivity and a different affiliation to other discourses. For Foucault, contradictions in a discourse enter the subject into different series of statements in the same discourse or into a different positivity altogether. Where the discourse concerns that of identity, these, however, are not the only options as the experiences of post-colonial subjects plunged into cross-culturality have shown. He does not theorize a situation where the subject, split in desire, is caught in the middle of two contradictory series or positivities, unable to fully enter either, unable to reconcile the contradiction. In Foucault’s discourse analysis, there are no moments of neurosis, of the inability to re-generate meanings.

Foucault also abhors interpretation, the core activity of Zizek’s critical methodology, though, as I have suggested, Foucault himself cannot separate historical “description” from “history as interpretation” in The History of Sexuality. But, further, his opposition to history as interpretation, which he identifies with a hermeneutics of history as the progressive linear development of consciousness, appears to be a response to a perception that “subjectivity always lags behind manifest history”—which I take to mean that the level of thought, of cultural awareness of a people is often discontinuous with actual historical events and the ‘other’ consciousness these reveal (Archaeology, 121). This is, of course, a perception that is limited to Western experience of history: their conquests, their revolutions, their exploitations, their fascisms were, or seemed, often to be in excess of dominant cultural values. Suspecting that an inaccurate definition of subjectivity as hidden, latent and unified in meaning (as the interiority of historical events and texts) may have been the obstacle to genuine historical knowledge, he seeks another definition of subjectivity: where subjectivity, neither individual nor collective, but involving social relations, is that which can only be known in its congealment into the materiality, positivity (exteriority) of a discourse, known only in its manifestations. But for the post-colonial critic, whose experience has
been the rather too overwhelming relation between manifest history and subjectivity, where the former has had the latter in its grip, constraining it, crushing it, the more politically liberating move appears to be that of mapping the oppressive operations of history (as it is solidified in discursive formations and knowledge) so as to release the 'other' repressed subjectivity that could be the agent of a new history, of new discourses, especially of identity.

I hope to show that Zizek’s articulation of Lacanian psychoanalytical theory with Marxist theory and discourse analysis allows the post-colonial critic to avoid the aporia, the abyss of meaninglessness, that post-modern theory has rendered visible without also falling into the trap of essentialisms. Post-structuralism, as Zizek points out, stresses the aporetic moment, where “the process of enunciation always subverts the utterance” (“Which Subject” 151), as the final moment in signification. It misses thereby the other unconscious but productive half of the signifying act, that where a discursive representation points to another representation that it tries to repress but which is the condition of the former’s emergence. In Zizek’s example, a picture about Lenin’s wife in bed with a youth is also a picture about Lenin being out of town, the latter unrepresented event making the former possible. We need not only to look at the field of representation as vorstellung, as that which is positively represented, but also to take into account the signifier’s function as the Freudian “vorstellungsrepräsantanz,” as that which “fills out the place of the missing representation” (“Which Subject” 159). In this way, we can approach the object in the subject, its materiality as desire, where signification fills out the void of the lost objet petit a. Post-structuralism, Zizek says, makes the ultimate assertion of metalanguage by essentializing language as the gap between the signified and the utterance, negating the position from which it makes this statement. The Lacanian theory of signification, in contrast, takes the view that metalanguage is impossible (because the signifier implies its own lack), but it is equally impossible to avoid it. In “The Spectre of Ideology,” Zizek theorizes that we can never be outside ideology. But the strategy of reading the repressed as ideological critique allows us to be simultaneously inside and outside the ideology. This is the “empty place” which ideology does not touch, where “all is not ideology,” the
place not "occupied by any positively determined reality," from which we can approach the Real of our
desire in its failed symbolization and thereby denounce ideology (17).

It is an ethically comforting place for the critic of ideology because it allows her to acknowledge,
even become aware of, her own interests while still producing a truthful account of the ideology.
Throughout this study, I have been brought into confrontation with my own desires and interests in
deconstructing this ideology. As a woman from a minority ethnic group, further lodged in the cracks
between classes (my family lacked the money but had the symbolic currency of the Western-educated
bourgeoisie), I was empowered by the previous nationalism, and, as journalist, became a peripheral
member, a hanger-on, of the ruling class. Lacking knowledge of my mother tongue and of Mandarin,
which are now emphasized by the state, the anti-Western rhetoric that regards especially the overly-
English educated Singapore Indian with suspicion, as well as the government's current emphasis on
pragmatic disciplines have compromised my position in the nation. Disempowered by the new
nationalism, I have every interest and desire in dismantling the new nationalism. As an 'outsider,' I was
able to immediately identify some of the oppressions and inconsistencies involved in the nationalism,
but this did not stop me from wondering about the bias in my work. But the methodology, I found,
allowed me to surpass the limitations of my own antagonistic relation to the ideology, to take into
account the responses of other sections of the Singapore population to the new nationalism--especially by
those more invested in and knowledgeable about their ethnic culture than I am--as these are exhibited in
their literary works. For instance, some of the literary texts studied here suggest that the inconsistency
between capitalism and ethnic cultures is the trauma that Singaporeans seek to avoid--leading them to
disavow their fear of and ambivalence towards their own ethnic cultures through an enjoyable rhetoric of
anti-Westernization. The figure of the white man who stands for both colonialism and capitalism allows
anti-colonialism to substitute for anti-capitalism, where anti-colonialism and 'native' identity are
paranoid constructions, allowing flight from the repressed awareness of the antagonism between
capitalism and ethnic culture. The dissertation has, in a sense, led me to discover myself once again
within the nation, to overcome the divisive instrumentality of the new nationalism by recognizing myself in a national ‘community’ of desire.

Given that my dissertation opposes Western constructions of the East as alterity, it displaces the question of the appropriateness of using Western theory on post-colonial literature. Such a methodological coyness is already to frame, in advance, post-colonial culture as ‘other’ to the West, to exclude the historical fact of the intersections of Eastern and Western desire in contemporary capitalism, to do precisely that which has enabled the governments of Singapore, Malaysia and China, among others, to culturalise the human rights issue and deprive their people of their democratic claims. There is a certain objectivity about the post-Marxist articulation of Lacanian theory that appeals to me, where discourse, the text, is the ground of truth, which reveals itself through its contradictions, superfluities and inconsistencies. The knowledge produced thereby is something more than merely a reflection of the metanarrative regarding the workings of the unconscious and ideological enjoyment, and can itself generate further knowledge/theory. This is, for example, unlike Fredric Jameson’s use of Lacanian theory in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* where ideological critique always delivers us to the Marxist metanarrative of the class struggle as the truth of history. Zizek’s claim that social antagonism is the traumatic, unsymbolizable Real of our desire is arrived at through his critical methodology: it is not the conclusion that was always already the premise (“Spectre” 28). But as a universalizing description of desire, it takes in a variety of antagonisms, of class, race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, nationalisms (without reducing the race, gender and sexuality struggles to the class struggle, as Marxism does), and allows the theorization of antagonisms to keep pace with history, to discover new geo-cultural locations of subjects, new antagonisms or changes in the forms of old antagonisms.

A universalized theory of subjectivity, desire and cultural representation such as Zizek’s, which allows the post-colonial subject to assert its otherness from the West but which doesn’t also simultaneously deprive it of claims to the privileges of the Western subject, is needed for more effective
post-colonial insurgency. As my study will show, there is a deadlock in post-colonial desire, between wanting to assert one’s post-colonial difference and desiring to be the same as the West. Current post-colonial theory has emphasized the former and denigrated the latter. This desire needs to be openly addressed. As I see it, an open testimony of desire may permit post-colonial subjects to develop culturally, in accordance with their desire as well as their interests, so that their culture is not always already a paranoid reactionary formation to the West that involves historical dislocation through investment in the archaic. This knowledge of one’s desires could motivate radically new post-colonial cultural formations.
Notes

1 I refer to Singapore as an ‘East Asian’ nation within the context of the new Orientalist discourse, which has, quite whimsically, effected a geographical and cultural re-classification of Singapore. The new Orientalism associates Singapore with ‘East Asian’ nations such as Korea, Taiwan, and China whereas previously Singapore had always been located in Southeast Asia, and still continues to be classified thus by those who refuse the Orientalist construction. This Orientalist re-classification of Singapore is precisely the bone of my contention. Viewing Singapore as Southeast Asian involves recognizing the history of its cultural pluralism, its colonial and pre-colonial Malayan heritage and the hybridization of its original ethnic cultures. All these are deleted by describing Singapore as ‘East Asian,’ which involves privileging its Chinese, ‘Confucianist’ cultural history, and falsely viewing the nation as culturally homogenous.

2 There is a difference of opinion concerning the year of origin of the Confucian revival in China. Dirlik dates it to 1978 (“Confucius” 240). Adrian Chan however argues in “Confucianism and Development” that “back in 1978 when China launched her Economic Reforms, there was no call for the re-emergence of Confucianism. Its advocacy came in 1982 when the reform agenda could not [sic] longer be subsumed into the First Guiding Principle upon which the government premised its legitimacy” (37). According to Chan, the First Cardinal Principle of Guidance of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought, “gives the Chinese Communist Party and its government the exclusive privilege to lead the Chinese society towards an organization whereby its distributions will be according to need and contributions according to ability, as outlined by Marx” (32).

4 Cho Hae-Joang, "Constructing and Deconstructing 'Koreanness' in 1990s South Korea," qtd. in Dirlik, "Confucius" (241). Adrian Chan, "Confucianism" (40-1).

5 Kuo, "Confucianism as Political Discourse" (9). This paper provides a detailed chronological account of the 'Confucianizing' of Singapore, relating Singapore's promotion of Confucianism to social engineering. Tracking changes in the terms of the discourse, Kuo's genealogy suggests that from the 1990s, 'Confucianism' evolved from being a moral discourse to a political ideology.

6 References to Confucianism will often be placed within single quotation marks in this thesis to indicate a suspicion of the authenticity of contemporary re-interpretations of the sage's teachings. This study will suggest that Confucianist discourse in Singapore is an American manufacture.

7 Dirlik, for instance, says that "basic to the Confucian revival is an effort to propagate a disembodied Confucianism ... that reproduces the essentializing procedures of Orientalism, this time by the 'Orientals' themselves" ("Confucius" 231).

8 Some Singaporeans view this as a 'Sinicization' of the nation. See Eddie CY Kuo, "Confucianism as Political Discourse" (10-12). This may be true to the extent that the Confucianist movement in Singapore strengthened Chinese unity in Singapore by promoting the use of Mandarin and increased their awareness of their ethnic identity. It also prioritised a Chinese philosophy. The government's acceptance of American categorization of Singapore as a 'Confucianist' nation that was culturally similar to China, South Korea, Taiwan and Hongkong

9 Information on the labour movement was taken from Vasil, "Trade Unions" 164-69.

10 For instance, in 1988, under the Group Representative Constituency (GRC) scheme, many electoral constituencies were grouped into GRCs comprising at least three constituencies. Interest political parties had to field a slate of candidates in each district and the party that polls the highest combined votes wins. This placed enormous pressure on opposition parties, requiring them to attract a large number of viable candidates that only the ruling party could draw given the country's political-social environment. (Professionals would find their career security severely compromised if they were associated with an
opposition party: employers are often, justifiably or not, fearful of reprisals from the ruling party. The Singapore Parliament also has some unelected non-constituency members of parliament who are invited by the ruling party to sit in Parliament in order to represent certain sectional interests.

11 The Indians and Chinese were often penniless immigrants who came to colonial Singapore eager to seize new work and business opportunities in a thriving commercial economy. The Chinese immigrant community was also better organized than other ethnic/racial groups due to its secret societies, which had been in existence in Singapore since the 1840s. During the colonial period, then, the Chinese community had a comparatively stronger share of power, enjoying a symbiotic relationship with the colonial authorities (Hill and Lian 164). But the colonial administration in Malaya had, throughout the nineteenth-century, “pursued a policy of discouraging rural Malays from participating in a modern capitalist economy so that they could continue in their traditional role of food producers . . . for the expanding population in colonial society” (Hill and Lian 169).

12 This was the way Singapore’s Asian values were described in the government’s White Paper on “Shared Values” issued in 1991. See Hill and Lian 217.

13 See Leo Suryadinata for an account of the Malaysian and Indonesian national ideologies (24-36).

14 In Political Unconscious, Jameson restricts the workings of political fantasy to narrative and literary texts.

15 Previous ventures into this arena such as by Fanon and JanMohamed (who develops this from Jameson’s notion of the “political unconscious”) tend to ghettoize the post-colonial unconscious as a phenomenon that impacts on subjectivity without pursuing its material impact such as in the production of knowledge and/or discourse, nor do these consider the relations between the unconscious and post-colonial response to new colonial technologies of power.

16 The following account of symbolic and imaginary identification is taken largely from Zizek, in particular, his essay “Che Vuoi?” 104-11. See also Fink 83-97; Fuss, Identification 48-51; and Silverman, Subject 73.

C. J. W.-L. Wee’s “Staging the New Asia: Singapore’s Dick Lee, Pop Music, and a Counter-Modernity” is at least one exception.


I have restricted my discussion of Foucault to *History of Sexuality* and *Archaeology*. Though *Madness and Civilization* deals with Foucault’s concerns about psychology as a discursive regime of power, he assumes in this work that the ‘other,’ repressed history can be restored to its original language. Following Derrida’s critique, in his later works, Foucault is more attentive to the implication of ‘otherness’ in the language/ideology of the ‘self,’ so that, as Robert Young puts it, “he formulates the structures of power . . . so that the forces of domination and resistance are caught up, sometimes, indistinguishably, within each other” (White 86). In *Power/Knowledge*, Foucault abandons his concept of analysing the “archaeology” of knowledge, for the concept of “genealogy” (117), but the idea that, in a general history, different accounts can be given of one event, depending on the series it is located within and the connections the historian makes with other events, was already approached in *Archaeology*. I find *Archaeology* useful too as a detailed description of Foucaultian methodology and supplement this with *History of Sexuality*, which applies Foucault’s concept of genealogy. Young’s discussion of changes in Foucaultian theory further provides an important guide to the issues involved in writing post-colonial history (White 69-90).
Chapter 2

Orientalizing the Nation:
The National Ideology Project

The Singapore government's discourse about the need to revive the people's Confucianist and other Asian ethnic heritages did not become an issue of national identity until 1988 when the government linked ethnic values to a proposal to formulate a "National Ideology." Critics are correct, in this sense, to categorically separate the earlier government Confucianization program, which occurred between 1979 and the mid-1980s, from the later, post-1988, 'ethnicization' project. This, however, recognizes the discontinuities in the ethnicity-revival projects between the two periods without acknowledging their continuities, which, I argue, lies in the attempt to rationalize the people's cultures and to politicize 'race' as a technology of state control. On the other hand, current criticism is not sufficiently attentive to the enormity of the gap, the sharp and culturally disorienting break, between identifications urged by the new nationalism and those previously extolled under the previous foundational nationalism, which were dominant for nearly two decades, during the late-1950s to the late-1970s. If my opposition to the new nationalism is more virulent than the resistant stance adopted by other critics, including indigenous ones, it is also because, unlike them, I view the state's new project of nationalism as immensely successful, as having enticed the people into investing desire in identifications and value systems (definitely not ethnic, as claimed) that are not only contrary to their political, economical and cultural interests but that also involve a betrayal on the part of the majority race, the dominant gender and the capital-owning class of the rights of minority groups. My reading of the new nationalism as involving a new regime of state, Chinese racial, male and class power has also placed me outside the tendency to romanticize these so-called ethnic revivalisms as the forging of new "frontier identities" by a post-colonial society or of
describing them as "modernizing ideologies," as non-Western revisions of Eurocentric norms of modernity.¹

It is important to stress that my critique of the new nationalism, in which I refuse to ascribe an empowering post-coloniality to the new ideological formation, emerges from my location within the nation. As a woman from a minority ethnic group, produced as a citizen by the previous nationalism, and empowered by its emphasis on the equal claim of all individuals to the space of national culture--to the extent of regarding my country with pride as one of the very few in the world that could claim real multi-racial/multi-ethnic communality--I find the new nationalism very distressful. Every utterance by the state promoting the people's ethnic identification, especially talk of Confucianism, left me feeling increasingly alienated from national space. Since I had long been dis-anchored from my ethnic Sri Lankan Tamil culture by the emphasis on Western education and the English language and on ethnic/racial integration, I could not, at the drop of a hat and at the state's injunction, return to my "roots." In addition, the new discourse made me, for the first time, unpleasantly aware of the color of my skin as I felt my body rudely tossed from the center of the nation to its margins. I am no longer able to recognize myself in a Singaporean Chinese person as I used to be able to: the racial composition of my circle of friends has changed over the last few years from having accurately reflected the racial/ethnic composition of the nation, to being now largely only Christian Sri Lankan and Malay, involving a communal identification with the nation's now-minoritized groups. Where before minority groups hardly ever brought up the question of racism when speaking to members of their own group, now it appears to be an inevitable topic of discussion at such private meetings. My nieces, who attend an elite Singapore school, have a sense of their racial difference and minoritization that I had never myself experienced during the 1960s and 1970s when I had received my primary and secondary education. Other young relatives complain of racial harassment at school, of being taunted even for the 'strangeness' of their names, while their parents wonder why their Tamil children should be forced daily to recite the national pledge in Mandarin. In the workplace, including public organizations, many
Indians in professional fields perceive themselves as being passed over for promotions in favor of Chinese. This perception, regardless of whether it accurately reflects the situation, testifies to minorities' sense of their disenfranchisement. Where Singapore institutions of education, including universities, used to offer visible evidence of racial integration in the nation, with multi-racial community being the norm, now one sees only mono-racial enclaves at these same institutions. In the public domain, however, racism and racial polarization are disavowed and are forbidden topics of discourse, so that minority groups find their real social experience in Singapore at odds with the official and public discussion of it.

I cannot prioritize my private experience and observations as a more truthful account of the new nationalism than that of another, but I have used it to guide my critique, to open myself to the possibility that there may be another, repressed side to the story of Singapore's new nationalism than that currently told by critics, especially by indigenous critics from the majority race and dominant gender. Hence, my almost instinctive attraction to Zizek's methodology of ideological critique, since it focuses precisely on the repression of ideology and knowledge. In using his application of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory to political ideologies, where the latter are to be read in terms of social fantasy, and combining this with Foucaultian discourse analysis, I do, however, claim that I offer a more accurate account of Singapore's new 'ethnic' nationalism than that provided by current critiques which largely ignore internal, national issues of racism in claiming this nationalism, with various degrees of ambivalence, as an authentic post-colonial and modern challenge to the West.

Instead, I will present an argument that Singapore's new 'Asian' nationalism is an American manufactured identity construction, a neo-colonial ideology of racial alterity that has arisen as a means of dealing with the economic threat to the metropolis posed by some nations in the East, Japan, South Korea, Hongkong, Taiwan and Singapore. Though it may be a Western ideology of the racial 'other, specifically about East Asian cultural difference, it is a hysterical symptom of the West's repressed desire to move towards right-wing politics in the face of the opposition to capitalism that are produced
by liberal political values such as the claims of human rights and the rights of peoples. It is an ideological fantasy of Oriental 'otherness' that works doubly well for the West: it allows them to disavow their own rejection of liberalism and the threat this poses to their civilizational status by projecting it onto the 'other' and reviling the other as the "barbarian." But the alibi of Eastern cultural difference is also the disguise adopted by that which Immanuel Wallerstein describes as the other, racist and sexist, side of liberalism, where non-Western people may be denied claims to human rights (such as equality) because they are "culturally different," thereby legitimizing continued Western domination.² I will develop this argument further in the next chapter since the international discourse concerning the caning of American teenager Michael Fay in Singapore more properly focalized the East-West dynamics involved in Eastern assertions of their ethnic, Confucianist or Asian identities. In this chapter, I want to argue that American neo-Orientalism displaced Singapore's foundational national myth of democratic multi-culturalism, and replaced it with a nationalism that encouraged archaic, retrogressive identifications and desires, which eventually caused the people, in the 1990s, to dis-identify, to various degrees, from democracy and a global liberal culture. I will argue that this seemingly 'cultural' ideology, as it was inscribed by the West and re-inscribed by Singapore, has a deeply political agenda that has little to do with post-colonial subversion. Already in the earlier period (1978 to mid-1980s), we will see that the Orientalizing of Singapore (1978 to the mid-1980s) was attempted within a context where the revival of native/ethnic cultures was instrumental in producing a disciplined workforce and quiescent citizens as well as in establishing the Chinese-ness of Singapore, which had quite a lot to do with the opening up of China for international trade during this period. This bid at ideologizing however missed its mark as it instead led to some genuine bonding with ethnic cultures, and resulted in ethnic claims coming up against government policies, especially the latter's prioritization of economic interests over spiritual and ethical issues. But this resurgence of Singaporean desire for the ethnic was both deployed and compromised in the next period of Singapore's Orientalization (from 1988 to the present time) and saw the further Sinicization of Singapore. The National Ideology project will be discussed in
some detail here as a significant moment in the successful ‘Orientalizing’ of the people. The primary
texts of this discourse, in particular three key speeches by ministers involved in the project, will be
analyzed to show that this discourse is neither a statement of post-colonial identity nor that of an
alternative, non-Western modernity. I will also argue that the form of the National Ideology project
mirrored its hidden content, that it staged the type of fake consensus and state-controlled civil society
participation that the government would henceforth allow its citizens. The route by which the project
sought to validate itself as a nationalism revealed anti-ethnicity, anti-modernity, racial polarization (the
fragmentation of the nation) as well as authoritarianism to be its structural features.

Hill and Lian aptly describe multi-racialism as “one of the key reasons Singapore is an independent
state today” (93). The origins of Singaporean nationalism and the movement of independence are
closely connected to, even if only as a reaction against, that of Malaysia’s. From the late 1940s to the
1960s, it was never envisaged, either by the colonial rulers or by any local groups, that Singapore would
one day become a nation in its own right. Nationhood, was, in a sense, forced upon Singapore in 1965
when independent Malaysia rejected it as a member-state. In 1946, when the British floated the Malayan
Union plan of de-colonization, which was to unite the states of the Malay Peninsula and the Straits
Settlements (which comprised Singapore, Malacca and Penang, British trading centers that were
administered separately from the other primary-producing Malay states), Singapore was not included
because its large Chinese population would otherwise disturb the Malay-dominated racial composition of
the mainland. From 1955 to 1963, Singapore was granted self-government though it was still under
British protection, but all parties involved assumed that eventually Singapore would be part of Malaysia.
Singapore’s founding nationalism therefore was linked to the Malayan independence movement and
Singapore political leaders were included in negotiations with the British for Malayan de-colonization.
Issues of language and citizenship however fragmented the Malayan independence movement. Britain’s
1947 Malayan Union proposal—which suggested granting citizenship by birth and by residence to all,
regardless of race, with all citizens having equal rights—fostered the Malay nationalist movement which
was represented by the United Malays National Organization (UMNO). The Malays wanted their language as the national and official language. They also wanted citizenship to be restricted to the Malay population, excluding the Chinese who had migrated to Malaya to work in the mines and plantations, so that national culture would be linked firmly to race with the concept of bangsa Melayu or Malay people (which did not even include Indian and Arab Muslims). Accordingly, the British revoked the Malayan Union plan and replaced it in 1948 with the Federation of Malaya Agreement, an exclusively Anglo-Malay proposal. Under this agreement, the sovereignty of the Malay Sultans (monarchs) would be preserved in the new nation, and Malays would be given a special position within it, including dominance in political representation. Citizenship was still to be extended to non-Malays but the qualifications for eligibility, such as knowledge of English and British naturalization, in practice, excluded Chinese immigrants in Singapore and Malaya who were Chinese-educated and, at this point, unwilling to give up Chinese nationality.

A Singapore-based political party, the Malayan Democratic Union (MDU), spearheaded opposition to this Anglo-Malay agreement. Together with other parties, including the Communist Party of Malaya, Chinese business interests and other left-wing groups on the mainland, they formed the Pan-Malayan Council for Joint Action and drafted their own People's Constitution. This document was to assert a different Malayan nationality, where Malay would be the national and official language and the Malay kings would retain sovereignty, but citizenship was to guarantee equal rights to all the races. A new nationalism, that of being Melayu (people of Malaya) was upheld where national culture would transcend primordial, racial origins and would be tied instead to the sharing of a common land and a common destiny (though the Malay cultural origins of the nation was to be recognized). The British rejected the People's Constitution, partly because it was fervently anti-colonial, had the support of communists, and lacked the approval of Chinese commercial and business concerns (which feared British reprisals). At this time too, the Communist Party of Malaya abandoned constitutional struggle for armed insurrection, leading the British to declare a state of emergency, which lasted for five years. The
MDU dissolved but its mission of forming a multiracial, multi-cultural nation was taken up by other less radical parties in Singapore.

The issue of a multi-racial nationality was only to be taken up again and with even greater fervor on the mainland in 1963, when Singapore merged with Malaysia. From the 1950s to 1963, the cause of multi-racial nationality and liberal citizenship had further strengthened in Singapore for several reasons. With the instatement of the Communist government in China in 1949, Malaya’s Chinese immigrant population, the Nanyang Chinese, who were China’s subjects, previously relatively indifferent to the Malayan nationalist movement, began to abandon any notions of returning to their homeland and to take citizenship issues in Malaya more seriously. In Singapore, where the Chinese population was dominant, its claim for more inclusive citizenship had a greater chance of success than on the mainland, where Malay opposition was strong. Also, during this period, Singapore, though still under Crown sovereignty, with its own separate government, could legislate independently of Malaya. The British rejected a proposal by the Chinese Chamber of Commerce that local citizenship would be extended to residents but without the renunciation of Chinese nationality and where the literacy requirement would include fluency in either Chinese or English. But they did reach a compromise in 1957 with Singapore’s coalition government, introducing Singapore’s Citizenship Ordinance which was inclusive, unlike that of citizenship on the mainland. Equal rights was offered to all citizens, and naturalization now offered to those who had resided in Singapore for 10 years. The 220,000 China-born in Singapore qualified for citizenship and now had voting rights.

In the late 1940s, the MDU’s formulation of a multi-racial, multi-cultural nationalism had much to do with protecting the interests of the English-speaking middle classes: the Nanyang Chinese at this point had not properly entered into the political arena, and only the English-speaking had voting rights. The MDU’s brand of nationalism reflected the English-educated middle class’ experience of Malayan culture as ethnically hybrid with an Anglo-Malay base. Colonial partiality itself also dictated that Singapore politics was dominated by the English-speaking middle class, especially by the Straits Chinese. But by
the 1950s, the communists had infiltrated trade unions and schools in Singapore and politicized Chinese language and ethnic cultural issues. Given the recent enfranchisement of the dominant Chinese-speaking population, this meant that any party, even if it had a base of the English-educated, could only hope for power by negotiating the interests of the Chinese-educated population: in the 1950s, the communists communalized student politics, linking it to Chinese education so that student unrest at Chinese schools was a common feature of life; the Chinese student movement was also involved in labor disputes, supporting striking (largely Chinese-educated) bus workers in 1955. Lee Kuan Yew and his People's Action Party (PAP), the current ruling party, which had Western-educated professionals at its helm, came into power in 1959 by linking with the Communist Party of Malaya and using their grassroots organizations.

But from 1959 to 1963, the People's Action Party's policy of multi-culturalism, in addition to appealing to the English-educated middle classes, was also structured by the need to balance Chinese versus Malay claims for political dominance. The PAP, unlike the Barisan Socialis—the former's left-wing faction which broke away from the ruling party in 1961 and had popular Chinese support—opted for merger with Malaysia as a means of quelling Chinese ethnic claims on the island. With an eye towards merger with the Federation of Malaya, the PAP, while claiming the equality of the four principal cultures (English, Malay, Chinese and Indian) and supporting equal treatment for four streams of education (English, Malay, Mandarin and Tamil), added that Malay should be allowed to develop as the predominant second language of the people, to be the lingua franca, rather than English. Malay was made the national language and Malay education was expanded.

Singapore merged with the Federation in 1963 under the Malaysia Agreement, which made Singapore a special state of the Federation of Malaysia, with greater autonomy than the other Federation states, but with less than its proportional representation in the Federal legislature. Singapore citizenship was also recognized as different from Malaysian citizenship (which gave more political rights to the Malays) and indicated the gap in the two nationalisms. With merger, the two nationalisms came into conflict in
Singapore and caused Sino-Malay communal clashes in 1964. In 1965, the PAP led a united opposition against the UMNO-led Alliance government of Malaysia’s concept of a Malay nation by organizing a Malaysian Solidarity Convention and championing its multi-racial nationalism of a “Malaysian Malaysia.” Having reached out successfully to non-Malay Malaysians, Singapore was now regarded as a serious and irreconcilable threat to Malay dominance, and removed from the Federation. An ideology of cultural pluralism under democracy (termed a cultural democracy) thus literally caused Singapore’s abrupt ‘ejection’ into nationhood.

In *Asianising Singapore*, Raj Vasil reflects a dominant perception that Singapore’s Asianizing project, seen to have started with the emphasis on Confucianism and effective bilingualism in 1978 and currently on-going, is a continuation of the ruling party’s commitment to cultural pluralism. He argues that it is a re-interpretation of the founding nationalism in changing geo-cultural circumstances. Though he takes seriously minority groups’ suspicion of the new state policies and nationalist discourse and their fear that the ruling party was backtracking on a commitment to contain Chinese dominance, he treats these as misperceptions.

But in many respects, the late-1970s to mid-1980s saw a complete overhaul of the experience of cultural democracy in Singapore when compared to that of the 1960s to mid-1970s. After separation from Malaysia, in the period from 1965 to the mid-1970s, the ruling PAP government (which has been continuously in power since 1959) pursued a multi-racial/multi-cultural policy that aimed at allowing the people to freely practise their ethnic culture without this resulting in a fragmented nation of racial/ethnic enclaves: a multi-culturalism that would draw the nation together rather than apart. Fearing a resurgence of exclusivist ethnic claims, especially of Chinese claims to power that was the PAP’s paramount fear, the party wanted a multi-culturalism that would not involve a “separate but equal” approach which it saw as breeding chauvinism, and leading to “retrogressive identification” with the ancestral motherland rather than with Singapore (Vasil, *Asianising* 49). Vasil, whose account of Singapore’s early multi-cultural policy is usefully peppered with interviews of the architects of this nationalism, says that this aim was
achieved by inter-related strategies that included “de-emphasizing the Chinese-ness of Singapore,” “according the Malays a special position as the *bumiputra*” (sons of the soil), where territorial claims by a majority were countered by claims of an indigenous population, “establishing a Singaporean Singapore in which all ethnic groups were accorded an equal status under the constitution,” and “creating an English-speaking Singapore” (29-37).

In de-emphasizing Singapore’s Chinese-ness, the PAP sought to convince the dominant Chinese population not to exert their claims as a majority group but to share equal status and rights with the minorities. Looking forward to a “national cultural pattern” that would form in time, they distinguished a genuine Singaporean culture as a multi-racial polity that was not a “Chinese city-state, a third China” (Vasil, *Asianising* 40). The PAP rejected a mono-lingual, mono-cultural approach to national culture, an assimilationist approach of requiring minority groups to surrender their traditional cultures (and take on the culture of the dominant group). Within this context, the promotion of English as a common language was not tantamount to assimilation (as it is sometimes claimed to be in North America). Since English was not the native language of any Singaporean group (except for some Eurasians, although many Eurasians had Portuguese rather than British ancestry), it was thought to be a neutral cultural space where various races could meet. Also, the use of English as the dominant international language of business, of science and technology was essential to the state’s plan for Singapore’s speedy economic development—where economic success was also seen as a factor that would displace ethnic chauvinism and encourage racial integration. But the emphasis on English was supplemented by a bilingual policy where every student was required, from 1966 onwards, to learn English and one other language, usually his/her mother tongue. Those in English-stream schools would learn English as a first language and their mother-tongue or Malay as a second language, while those in vernacular schools would respectively learn Malay, Chinese or Tamil at first-language level, and English as a second language.

Only then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew’s words can accurately express the paradox of this bilingualism, where English, the language of the colonizer, would provide the means for de-colonization
and for developing an Asian consciousness. In 1969, he told Vasil in an interview that the bilingual policy was designed so that:

[N]obody can believe that his own language and culture is the beginning and the end of the world. . . . There must also be the acknowledgment that no single ethnic group has a monopoly of wisdom and genius. . . . For example, when a Chinese boy learns that his Tamil schoolmate has a language and literature which goes back beyond 3,000 years, he stops to think that Chinese history and civilization are not the beginning and end of human history and civilization. He is then aware that his is only one of several great civilizations in the world. I think this breeds an atmosphere of humility and tolerance, without at the same time being apologetic over one's own background. They know that they are not inadequate, that when the Europeans were still in hunting communities in the forests of Western Europe, living in caves, there were well cultivated settlements along the Yellow and Indus Rivers. But introvert smugness, and a few centuries of industrial and technological discovery and progress, have put the Europeans and Americans well ahead of them. (Vasil, Asianising 56-7)

Together with bilingualism, integrated vernacular-English stream schools were established so that students enrolled in vernacular education attended the same schools where English was taught as the primary language and were exposed to students of other races and ethnicities. Racial integration was also accomplished by Singapore's public housing project. The Housing and Development Board, set up in 1961, created only integrated public housing estates and towns that maintained a strict ethnic and social mix, breaking up the racialized district settlements that had developed during the colonial period.

As Vasil notes, the PAP's championing of a multi-racial Malayan culture during the merger years did not translate into the promotion of a specific multi-racial "Singaporean" culture with separation (Asianising 29). This was partly due to nervousness that a Singaporean culture that did not emphasize Malay/Muslim culture might be frowned upon by the largely Malay/Muslim neighbors. But also, there was uncertainty about how a Singaporean culture might develop, and, in the 1960s and 1970s, a general
willingness by the government to allow it to take shape on its own. Nonetheless, there was expectation that a “national cultural pattern” would develop and this was sometimes envisaged as a racially and ethnically hybrid one. Observing to Vasil in 1969 that each Singaporean had a spiritual and cultural heritage over and above his/her English education, Lee Kuan Yew had speculated that “over the centuries, something distinctive may emerge, something separate from China, India, or Indonesia, or Britain” (Asianising 54). Certainly English was viewed as a means by which “a national cultural pattern” could be created through a ‘fusion’ of various cultural elements (Vasil, Asianising 52).

Despite its non-interventionist policy in this regard, the PAP’s integration policies too seem directed at a national culture that would develop through ethnic integration, not unlike the “melting pot” or in local parlance, rojak⁴ model of multi-culturalism. “I do not believe one can legislate for integration or assimilation,” Lee Kuan Yew told Vasil in 1969, but he did speak of an “ethnic assimilation or cultural homogeneity blurring out the cultural boundaries now co-existing” (Vasil, Asianising 31).

Vasil says that the government’s notion of a national culture was linked to cultural integration but that given Malaysian suspicion and the ethnic sensitivities of the various groups, who wanted to maintain their ethnic heritages, the PAP had often to disguise their integrative policies by rhetorical or other practices that also assured Singaporeans that they were maintaining the nation’s cultural diversity (Asianising 47). Thus, for instance, while promoting English as the lingua franca, the government ensured that media facilities were divided among the four language streams and that all official documents and notices were available in the four languages.

For many Singaporeans during this period and especially for minorities, the PAP government had seemed far ahead of the rest of the world in overcoming racial/ethnic polarization and producing harmony in a society that was multi-racial as well as multi-religious. Lee Kuan Yew, in a speech made soon after independence in 1965, gives us a measure of the idealistic and fervent commitment of the PAP to a truly egalitarian multi-culturalism at that time:
The problem was how to create a situation where the minority, either in ethnic, linguistic or religious terms, was not conscious that it was a minority, and that the exercise of its rights as equal citizens with all others was so natural and so accepted by society that it was not conscious of the fact that it was sharing equal rights with the others in dominant ethnic groups.

If all political ideologies involve some loss, some exclusions, so did Singapore's ideology of a cultural democracy. Its nationalism, as I have pointed out, emerged in order to cast out both Chinese and Malay claims for political and cultural dominance. It was also a nationalism that protected the interests of the Singapore English-educated middle class, giving them the political and cultural power in the nation's early years. As a cultural democracy, free practice of ethnic/religious cultures was maintained but ethnic autonomy, as Vasil points out, did have its limitations. Ethnic autonomy was not allowed to the extent that it promoted ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious chauvinism by any group, damaged inter-ethnic relationships, or jeopardized Singapore's political and economic interests and its foreign relations. To this extent, then, ethnic cultural practice tended to be de-politicized and confined largely to the private domain.

It is against this context that one can view post-1978 events and the "Asianizing" of Singapore as discontinuous with the founding nationalism. In the mid-1970s, the government raised the issue of the increasing Westernization of Singaporeans and their consequent "deculturalization." By this period, enrollment in vernacular schools had dropped to a minimum, and the majority of young Singaporeans were English-educated, pointing to the overwhelming success of PAP's English-language policy. But this, together with the nation's economic success and its openness to the global economy, had resulted in Singaporeans' growing political consciousness. Questions were being raised as to the advisability of a single political power monopolizing political power. Liberal political values were beginning to entice the Singaporean. Opposition representation, even if minimal, was being widely viewed as necessary to provide a check on what was perceived as the ruling party's increasing arrogance (Vasil, Asianising 69). There was also some consternation about Singapore's consumerist culture. Liberal ideology, with its
emphasis on individual rights, and demonized as “individualism” was also viewed as the cause for a
trend in job-hopping, where loyalty to the capitalist employer was being threatened (Chua, “Making”
24). By 1976, these socio-cultural changes that were the consequence of a full entry into capitalism, and
that also posed threats to PAP power, were already beginning to be re-semioticized as issues concerning
ethnic identity, as a conference on “Asian Values and Modernization” held at the University of
Singapore in that year testifies. Modern values of effective democracy and consumerism (a cultural
product of capitalism) were represented as the dangerous face of 'Western' individualism, while ‘Asian’
values were taken to comprise filial piety, community consciousness, thrift and hard work. While the
Chinese press supported the notion of “Asian values,” other Singapore intellectuals were lukewarm and
skeptical (Chua, “Culture” 15-6).

Before 1982, when a comment by Prime Minister Lee to Education Minister Goh Keng Swee started
the emphasis on Confucianism, it was the dichotomy of Asian versus Western values (rather than
Confucianism versus Western values) that influenced government policy in dealing with the threat of
over-Westernization. Since the 1960s, South-east Asian intellectuals had been influenced by culturalist
Weberian theory that linked religion to national ideology and to economic performance. These
intellectuals opposed Weber’s conclusions regarding the lack of a fit between non-Western cultures and
economic performance, but without discarding his methodology or his central theme. Knowledge
produced on the link between religion and ideology in South-east Asia and that between Asian values
and economic progress repeated in reverse Weber’s East/West cultural dichotomy (Hill and Lian 193-4).
The PAP too, since the 1960s, had been overwhelmingly guided by Weber’s ideology of instrumental
rationality in governance.

With schools targeted as important locations for cultural ideologizing, the Goh Education Report was
commissioned in 1978. Finding that bilingualism as it then existed had failed in its purpose of anchoring
the people in their ethnic cultures, the report recommended that the most able students be encouraged to
take both English and their mother-tongue at first-language level and that the top eight percent of
Chinese medium students at primary schools be invited to attend special Chinese-medium secondary schools under the Special Assistance Plan (SAP). The top 10 percent of Chinese medium students at primary schools now attend SAP schools where they study both English and Chinese as first languages. Considered the elite of the student population, they are destined for future leadership positions in government, industry and commerce. In an interview with Vasil in 1994, present Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong said that the SAP schools ensure that “the people at the top are proficient in Chinese and possess the strong virtues of the Chinese society” so that “they will give Singapore its Asian ballast” (Vasil, *Asianising* 76). This could not have been said in the late 1970s because the metonymic tropologization of Chinese culture as Asian culture was only just beginning and would have seemed at odds with the founding nationalism that was still paramount in Singaporeans’ cultural memory. By the 1990s, however, as I will argue, the founding nationalism was successfully displaced from Singaporeans’ minds.

Together with the annual “Speak Mandarin” campaign launched in 1979, the special emphasis given to Chinese-stream students marked the beginning of departure from the founding nationalism of equal treatment of ethnic groups. As Hill and Lian observe, “The 1980s may be described as a revitalization of the [sic] bilingualism and a more vigorous implementation of the policy, with a difference. While Malay and Tamil were still offered . . . the emphasis on bilingualism was now English and Mandarin” (87). Other minority groups were never offered the equivalent of the top-flight SAP Chinese schools, and were not even allowed to learn Mandarin at school, though, with the opening of China at this time, knowledge of Mandarin was clearly going to be profitable in the near future. With the “Speak Mandarin” campaign, the Chinese population in Singapore, now forbidden to speak their various dialects, became united as a true majority. The campaign saw a perceptible increase in the use of Mandarin in daily life as now Chinese working in the service sectors (hospitals, clinics, buses, taxis) were required to be fluent at least in oral Mandarin and to use it whenever possible.
As the decade wore on, the discourse of race, especially that of issues of language, became increasingly politicized. As Hill and Lian note, language, which “had only symbolic significance (enhancing cultural unity) in nation building in the past,” has now “evolved into the civic-instrumental management of nationhood” (106-7). A trend was being reversed where the government, which had previously jettisoned issues of race and ethnicity in favor of a focus on economic development and the encouragement of a national culturally-integrated environment, now used the discourse of race as a technology to serve economic interests. The discourse was also seminal in shoring up the state’s authority, resisting challenges to it from liberal quarters. It did this in large part by breaking up the unified power of the people by setting their racial/ethnic differences against each other.

Racial/ethnic integration was giving way to its opposite, racial/ethnic polarization. In addition to the emphasis on Mandarin and on Chinese students, the recommendations of the Ong Report on Moral Education, which closely followed the Goh Report in 1979, were taken up. Existing moral education school programs such as “Education for Living” and “Civics” taught in English in a multi-racial, multicultural context were displaced by a separate moral education program for non-Chinese at primary school, developed by a Jesuit priest, while a Chinese-language program, “Good Citizen” was designed especially for the Chinese. Moral education was co-opted for the purpose of entrenching state control and overcoming resistance to capitalist inequities by being restricted to ideologies of ‘responsible’ citizenship, and focusing on social responsibility and loyalty to country (Hill and Lian 199). Further racial separation of the school cohort was to occur in later secondary education when students would be required to pick the option in Religious Knowledge relevant to them: “Hindu Studies,” “Buddhist Studies,” “Islamic Religious Knowledge,” “World Religions,” and, finally, from 1984, “Confucian Ethics.”

Confucianism appeared suddenly on the Singapore political stage. During the 1979 debate on moral education, and, in the recommendations made, only haphazard reference had been made about Confucianism. But in 1982, when Education Minister Goh had finalized the Religious Knowledge
options (where Confucianism did not feature), a suggestion by Prime Minister Lee saw "Confucian Ethics" being added to the list. A few days later, as Eddie C. Y. Kuo recounts in "Confucianism as Political Discourse in Singapore: The Case of an Incomplete Revitalization Movement," the prime minister at his annual Chinese New Year Reception speech, made it apparent that Confucianism was not just to be treated as just another Religious Knowledge option but was to be hailed as the definitive Chinese culture (6). As one of the Religious Knowledge subjects, it was given a disproportionate share in resource allocation, media coverage and public attention. While the other Religious Knowledge curricula were developed with local expertise, "Confucian Ethics" was developed by a team of overseas (including American) Chinese intellectuals. This, as Kuo notes in the same study, in itself reflected "the lack of an intellectual tradition of Confucianism in Singapore" (6). Dirlik quotes the then-director of the Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore, Wang Mong Lin, responsible for developing the "Confucian Ethics" program as saying that "Confucian ethics was a field which we [the government] were not familiar with " ("Confucius" 239). Kuo says that the year 1982 could be called the "year of Confucianism"(7).

Confucianism, despite all claims by politicians that it was an indigenous tradition, was practically imported into Singapore. In May 1982, the education minister visited the US and met a number of Chinese-American professors from leading American universities who were invited to make suggestions for the course in "Confucian Ethics." Their comments, Kuo says, were timed to appear in newspaper reports on Sundays in consecutive weeks (7). Eight overseas Confucian scholars then visited Singapore that same year to specify the Confucian doctrines that would be relevant to Singapore. They gave public lectures, conducted seminars, met with the nation's political leaders, appeared on TV forums and in press debates. Kuo says that it was decided from the start, and announced by the education minister, that "Confucianism in Singapore will not be merely for the classroom. It will be re-interpreted as a code of personal conduct for modern Singapore and promoted in the form of public debate and discussion over the media" (7).
The English press covered the debate with detachment; the Chinese press, with the support of Chinese interest groups such as the clan associations and the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry, sponsored numerous forums, seminars, lectures and conferences on Confucianism throughout the 1980s (Kuo, "Confucianism" 8). The government set up new organizations, including the Institute of East Asian Philosophy (IEAP), to support the dissemination of Confucianism. The IEAP was envisaged as an institute that could develop Singapore into an international center for the study of Confucianism (Kuo, "Confucianism" 9). The Curriculum Development Institute also set up a project team to take charge of the “Confucian Ethics” curriculum and its teaching, and, in 1985, teachers of the program formed a new Association of Confucian Studies (Kuo, "Confucianism" 9).

The “Confucianism” project marked a new stage in the political utilization of the Orientalist discourse of race. Despite the emphasis placed on Mandarin on a some-are-more-equal-than-others basis between 1978 and 1982, the government’s Asianization project had embraced the various ethnic and religious cultures. The space of national culture, which, under the founding nationalism, had usually been figured in terms of the interstices among the races, was now assumed to be “Asian” as the common denominator among all the races. To some extent, the formation of Mendaki, the Council on Education for Malay/Muslim Children to improve educational achievement by Malay/Muslim students and to promote higher education among them countered the emphasis on Mandarin. But Confucianism, touted by the government as the cultural heritage of the Chinese, began more and more to be spoken of as if it were the national culture, where “national culture” was no longer objectified as the common psychic space of all Singaporeans but as the psychic space of the majority. Speeches by political leaders often used first person plural possessive nouns where previously second person and third person possessive nouns had been used in addressing ethnic/race issues, and Chinese-ness began to stand in for Singaporean-ness. Lee Kuan Yew in his ‘inauguration’ of Confucianism (at the 1982 Annual Chinese New Year Reception speech) had said: *Our [Singapore/Chinese parents] task is to implant these [Confucian] traditional values into our children . . . ”* (my emphasis, qtd. in Kuo, “Confucianism” 6).
The identification of the ‘race’ of Singaporeans with the race of the nation’s leadership was going to be a common feature of public, political discourse in the future. In 1988, for instance, in his promotion of a national ideology, the new Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong, said: “Singapore is a high-performance country because we share the same cultural base as the other successful East Asians, that is, Confucian ethic” (qtd. in Vasil, Asianising 78).

It is reasonable to conclude that the conditions of possibility for the emergence of the Confucianism project were extra-national. As pointed out, both the Goh and Ong education reports did not stress Confucianism as an indigenous cultural tradition, and it was not among the initial subjects mentioned for moral and religious education. Outside expertise was required to develop the “Confucian Ethics” program because of the lack of local knowledge of the subject. Despite the support that the Chinese press and other community organizations gave to it, the majority Chinese did not subscribe to the “Confucian Ethics” program, choosing “Buddhist Studies” instead and indicating thereby that Confucianism was not a dominant aspect of their ethnic culture.

It is generally agreed by some Singapore academics that Western neo-Orientalist discourse, especially that of Herman Kahn in World Economic Development: 1979 and Beyond, and Ezra Vogel’s Japan as Number One, influenced the emphasis on Confucianism. But the assumption is often made that the neo-Orientalists’ culturalist explanation for the success of the newly industrialized economies is transparent and grounded in truth, that the Singapore government was merely prompted by neo-Orientalism to revive cultural resources the nation already had. The Confucianism project is also treated as if it were a mere continuation of the Singapore government’s Asianizing agenda, which had started in 1982.

My emphasis above on the abrupt manner in which the Confucianist agenda emerged, the mass education of the public, the need to resort to outside help for curriculum development, as well as the explicit recognition given that Confucianism needed to be selectively “re-interpreted” for Singapore’s modern context is geared towards illustrating that neo-Confucianism, or a Confucian modernity, is a recently ‘invented’ cultural concept of ‘Chinese tradition’ that the Singapore government has attempted
to objectify and synthesize, and finally to materialize in the people because of the political gains it promises.

The turning to American intellectual resources was only to be expected since from the start, the Minister of Education had already quoted the source and authority of his and the Prime Minister's 'inspiration' in deciding on a "Confucian Ethics" program": new Western knowledge, that particularly generated by Kahn and Vogel, about the East. Apparently, it had been 'discovered' that the success of the four newly industrialized economies, Hongkong, South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore, had depended on the Confucian tradition that had produced a type of character that made it possible for these countries to achieve spectacular growth. “So in this sense,” Goh had said, “there is a direct relevance of the Confucian ethic as a code of personal conduct to a country that is trying to achieve fast economic growth in the 20th century, using modern science and technology” (Kuo, “Confucianism” 12).

Kahn’s and Vogel’s books on East Asian success, both published in 1979, were derived from a trend in American scholarship that, as C. J. W.-L. Wee has pointed out, registered “the change in attitude by some academics towards consensus, state direction of enterprise, need for loyalty to the company,” ideas which were “antithetical to the notion of free markets” and, one may add, political liberal values (“Clash” 221-2). Vogel’s and Kahn’s explanations of Japan’s and East Asia’s success reversed Weberian Orientalism where Confucianism, which the latter had viewed as the cause of Eastern economic stagnation, was now summarily offered as the reason for the emergence of new global centers of modernity in Japan and the NIEs. As Wee notes, the cultural explanation of East Asian success displaced economic accounts of their growth, where, for instance, the transnationalization of world economy allowed Singapore and Hongkong to act as important centers in the new transnational flows of capital (“Clash” 226). Western multinational companies had increasingly turned away from their home countries to the Newly Industrialized Economies (NIEs) in the 1960s and 1970s as cheap sources of labor, thereby paradoxically allowing these economies to flourish via colonial exploitation. Also, the neo-Orientalist accounts erased the fact that, after independence, post-colonial economies, lacking the
infrastructure required for industrialization, had to resort to highly planned economic development and
tight state control of labor (including disciplining the working force) in order to make their entrance into
world capitalism. These economic exigencies were however culturalized by confusing them with
Orientalist accounts of Asian/Confucianist cultures as communitarian in nature, emphasizing authority,
discipline and social obligation over individual rights. Kahn and Vogel suggested that modernity, after
all, was culturally relative, and could perhaps be available in ethnic, non-Western versions.

Singapore’s Confucianizing program, which began in 1982, was a radical departure from its pre-1978
Asianizing agenda. The previous multi-cultural, multi-racial national culture was now implicitly marked
as Chinese/Confucianist and departed from the previous more multi-racial, hybridized South-east Asian
concept of national culture. The view held by some in Singapore that the government’s agenda of
Confucianizing the people had failed or would remain incomplete (Kuo, “Confucianism” 21) does not
adequately comprehend its achievement at the level of a Sinicization of national culture. Poor
subscription to the “Confucian Ethics” program (most Chinese students opted for Buddhist Studies) and
its subsequent phasing out, together with the entire Religious Knowledge program, as well as the change
in research direction at the Institute of East Asian Philosophy (which, originally set up in 1983 for study
on Confucianism, was, in the 1990s, re-directed towards studying East Asian politics and economics) are
cited as evidence of this (Kuo, “Confucianism” 16-19). But as Kuo himself acknowledges, despite the
anti-Confucian sentiments of Chinese-educated Singaporeans influenced by the May Fourth (1919)
modernist movement in China (which had re-evaluated Chinese tradition in the light of science and a
democratic political culture), and the resistance to Confucianism by English-educated Chinese, who saw
it as feudalistic and anti-progressive, many Singapore Chinese, especially the local Chinese press and
Chinese community organizations, nevertheless supported the movement as a “campaign to boost the
status of Chinese culture and Chinese language” in the nation (13). The Confucianist program, together
with the emphasis on Mandarin, had obviously woken desires for Chinese cultural and political
dominance, which had been severely repressed, forbidden, in the early decades of nationhood. In chapter
4, I will argue that literature in English written by Singapore Chinese writers in the 1980s illustrate that buried desires of Chinese dominance re-surfaced as the element that made the state’s Confucianist ideology immensely enjoyable, leading to a sudden literary Sinicizing of Singapore history, of the founding myths of the nation. Chua’s claim privileges government intentionality over that of Singaporean Chinese response:

[The] suspicion that promotion of Mandarin [and presumably Confucianism too] among the Chinese is at once an attempt to Sinicize Singaporean society and culture is misplaced, for to eliminate racial differences is to eliminate an[sic] mechanism in the government’s instrument of social control. (“Culture” 10)

The Sinicization of Singapore, the viewing of themselves as the dominant race, was the only way Singapore Chinese could be persuaded to identify with government policies and, as such, is an important ‘achievement’ or meaning of these policies.

Western neo-Orientalism produced in the late 1970s and carrying on into the 1980s offered Confucianism as a seductive, tantalizing object of fantasy for the Singapore Chinese in which two contradictory desires of post-colonial subjectivity could seek reconciliation: that of anti-coloniality, of desiring to be different from and superior to the West, and that of wanting to be the same, as good as, the West (to the extent where post-colonial imaginary identification has been colonized by an identification with the symbolic gaze of the West). As Singapore sociologist Nirmala Purushotam observes in another context, the “other” is still staring at itself via a borrowed mirror (“Disciplining” 26). As I will argue in the following chapter, Western authorization of Chinese culture, of Confucianism, was therefore essential to Singapore’s Confucianism campaign. But also, imbued with an inherently paradoxical sense of their superiority (since Chinese culture had been judged supreme by Western standards), neo-Orientalism provided Singapore Chinese with an instrument by which they could implicitly assert their cultural dominance in the national arena. Confucianism could not take, as Kuo notes, the “form of a pan-Singaporean national movement” given Singapore’s ethnic/racial diversity (“Confucianism” 14). But it
could be the invisible instrument by which other races/ethnic cultures could be judged, found lacking, marginalized, and their difference disciplined. As Purushotam notes, the discipline of race in contemporary Singapore is much more effective than in past periods of Singapore’s nationhood (“Disciplining” 30). Beginning with the 1980s, as perusal of the local daily newspapers will show, all social problems from drug-taking, to divorce, malaise, poor education performance and class inequities have been racialized, with minority groups always implicitly found to be inferior to the majority race, the Chinese. The Malays especially bore the brunt of the racial disciplining (Chua, “Culture” 11-2). As Hill and Lian observe, in the interests of generating a common cultural approach, the government accepted and promoted orthodox (one may add, colonial) explanation of Malay economic backwardness in terms of their cultural values (169). Quoting D. Brown in his 1994 study, The State and Ethnic Politics in South-east Asia, they say:

[T]he government has promoted the acceptance amongst the Malays of the ‘Malay cultural-weakness orthodoxy,’ whereby the Malays are persuaded to see their own internal attributes as responsible for their socio-economic problems, instead of blaming the Chinese or the government. It is the lack of achievement motivation, or the rural orientation of Malays which is, in this view, the cause of their ‘predicament.’ (169)

His involvement in neo-Orientalism saw the visionary of Singaporean egalitarian multi-culturalism, Lee Kuan Yew, turn abhorrently racist, and especially despising of South Asians. Comments such as this were frequently uttered by him to the press from the mid-1980s onwards:

Now supposing instead of being Lee, I’m a Singham [that is, Tamil] or something, all our time we’ll be putting in mortar shells and lobbing each other. No work will be done and the ground will be totally confused. (Qtd. in Vasil, Asianising 119)

This comment was made after a visit to Pakistan in 1992 and reported in the local press, where he contrasted Singapore’s “consensus-seeking [Confucianist] culture” with Pakistan’s politics, its “constant sniping” and “endless feuding.” This was racialized as South Asian and Lee pointed out that Singapore’s
South Asians, despite being acclimatized into the consensus-seeking framework of the larger population, the Chinese, nevertheless still wrote more letters to the newspapers than other groups (Vasil, *Asianising* 118-9).

Government policy in the 1980s also moved increasingly towards politicizing race, something that had been avoided in the past. Issues of class, such as poverty, poor education accomplishment, etc. were racialized, and government leaders of the appropriate racial origin were appointed to deal with these ‘racial’ issues in a procedure that decentered minority problems from national space.

The publication of Lodge and Vogel’s *National Ideology and Competitiveness* in 1987 was to further advance the cause of Orientalized ‘Confucianism’ in Singapore. Lodge and Vogel’s central thesis was that the degree of ideological coherence of a nation was positively related to its economic performance. Their study of nine countries also apparently influenced them into divining an essential dichotomy among the world’s cultures: those that were “communitarian” and those that were “individualistic.” The former, apparently, and Chinese/Confucianist culture was among them, were more conducive to economic growth, as the experience of Japan and the NIEs had shown. This new development in colonial thought suggested that now ‘Confucianism’ could be promoted as a “national” ideology, not only at the level of the belief system of the dominant racial group, but also as an Asian, and hence, ‘truly’ Singaporean ideology embracing even the minorities (since it was common ‘knowledge’ that Asian cultures stressed collective responsibilities over individual rights).

At about this time, suspicion was growing that a religious revival was occurring in the nation, potentially dangerous to state power since such revivals challenge dominant values and disturb economic interests. The government commissioned a series of sociological studies which appeared in 1988 and 1989 and confirmed that many young, English-educated, middle-class Chinese were gravitating towards the Christian charismatic movement while Islamic revivalism was taking a hold on Malays. That from 1990, “Religious Knowledge,” including “Confucian Ethics,” was struck off the list of compulsory subjects, and the IEAP’s research interests re-directed elsewhere did not mean that the government was
abandoning either ‘Confucianism’ or its ‘Asianizing’ agenda. Rather, these, as instruments of social and political control, were now going to be brought together and more effectively implemented through the “National Ideology” project. This time, however, these two instruments would continue to appeal to racial identifications and communal feeling while simultaneously working to dissolve real ethnic/racial/religious cultural content that could contradict the cause of capitalism and state power. The nation would continue to be fragmented as separate racial enclaves, but would be united in their ‘Asian’ identity, which the National Ideology would re-define as involving nothing more than “communitarianism,” a euphemism for anti-liberal, anti-democratic submission to authority. There is no genuine Asian revivalism or post-coloniality involved in this movement, nor increased government concern to tackle ethnic issues, contrary to the readings of many scholars.

In late 1988, Singapore’s second-generation post-independence leaders from the ruling party, elected into Parliament a few months earlier, inaugurated their ascendance to power with a bid to formulate a “national ideology” for Singapore. The project was widely viewed as a move to win renewed support for the People’s Action Party, whose electoral support had diminished to an all-time low, as well as to validate the second-generation team as worthy successors to leaders such as Lee Kuan Yew, Goh Keng Swee and S. Rajaratnam, who had led the nation to independence. Slightly more than two years passed between the first announcement of the project and the eventual publication of the proposed “National Ideology” in a White Paper in January 1991.

Although the Singapore government made a great show of inviting popular participation in drafting a “national ideology” and arriving at it through consensus, it obviously had another agenda in mind: in particular, it already knew in advance what values it wanted enshrined in the national ideology. The project of formulating a national ideology was announced on 28 October 1988 by the then First Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, the leader of the second-generation leadership who was scheduled to assume the helm in a few months (“National Ideology,” The Straits Times 29 Oct. 1988).12 The project was touted by the-then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew as one that signified the boldness and new style of
the younger generation leaders, a symbol of their intention to share the making of government policies with the nation. Unfortunately, the exercise only revealed that this new consensual style of politics was to be only a cosmetic improvement on the older, paternalistic (if not authoritarian) style of the first-generation leadership: that is, that it was only to look 'as if' there was consensus and participation in the making of government policy.

On 6 December 1988, two months after the initial announcement, Goh, now Acting Prime Minister, announced that a parliamentary panel under the leadership of First Deputy Prime Minister Brigadier General Lee Hsien Loong (who was also Lee Kuan Yew's son)\(^\text{13}\) would devise Singapore's "national ideology" after consulting various sections of the population. The committee's work, he said, was "basically to talk to various people, to find out what values they have and . . . formalise it into a very succinct statement" ("BG Lee," \textit{ST} 6 Nov. 1988).

Barely six weeks after his appointment to the committee, on 28 December 1988, at a point when various ethnic/racial associations as well as schools and private individuals were in the process of debating and submitting views on the national ideology, BG Lee said that the four values that he would like to see enshrined in the national ideology were: 1. place society's needs above those of the individual; 2. preserve multi-racial and multi-religious tolerance and moderation; 3. uphold the family as a core unit of society; 4. solve problems by consensus rather than contention ("Four," \textit{ST} 29 Dec. 1988). On 9 January 1989, Parliament was opened with an address by President Wee Kim Wee, who reiterated BG Lee's guidelines for the national ideology (Hill and Lian 211). A few days later, BG Lee made one of the major speeches on the project, authorizing his approach by deferring to the President's guidelines, which exactly resembled his own earlier proposal ("Westernisation," \textit{ST}, 12 Jan. 1989).

This move was followed on 3 December 1988 by an announcement by Goh that a parliamentary committee, different from BG Lee's committee, would be set up in 1989 to formulate the national ideology after holding public hearings and seeking the views of leaders of the various ethnic communities in order to achieve a broad consensus of views ("Parliamentary Panel," \textit{ST}, 4 Dec. 1988).
BG Lee's committee, he now said, was only "doing preliminary work." This parliamentary committee never materialized. Instead, the next month, in January 1989, Goh said that a Green Paper would be eventually tabled in Parliament for discussion, and that this would be followed by the setting up of the above-mentioned parliamentary committee, which could include an opposition member of parliament ("Green Paper," ST 21 Jan. 1989). Six months later, it was announced that the Green Paper would be coming out early in 1990 and that the government had already asked the Institute of Policy Studies to put up a background paper listing some of the alternatives ("Green Paper on National," ST 20 June 1989).

No Green Paper attempting a discussion of the issue was ever presented to parliament. Instead, more than a year later, on 19 December 1990, Goh, now Prime Minister, revealed that a White Paper would be published the next month. The government's White Paper, issued in January 1991, supposedly after discussion with the public, presented the shared values as five components, which were remarkably similar to those stated on 28 December 1988 by BG Lee long before any 'consensus' with the public had been reached. These "shared values" were to be 1. Nation before community and society above self; 2. Family as the basic unit of society; 3. Regard and community support for the individual; 4. Consensus instead of contention; 5. Racial and religious harmony (qtd. in Hill and Lian 217).

It appears that, despite the massive appeal for contributions from Singapore's civil society by its ethnic/racial/religious, commercial, and student organizations, some of whom did register opposition to some of the values proposed, the "National Ideology" as it was finally formulated was merely the ideological product of the top echelons of government. Thorough debate in Parliament appears to have been avoided since a Green Paper was never tabled for parliamentary discussion. But the fact that the White Paper was never acted on, that the "National Ideology" was never legislated, should not be misconstrued as a failure on the part of government to significantly alter the subjectivity, identifications and belief systems of the people. Hill and Lian claim that the outcome of this project has only been marginally different from that of the previous Asianization program (219) while Chua argues that the government's ideologization has not altered the daily lives of the people, especially of the middle-class.
He also says that there is a level of cultural resistance where the representation of hybridity in multilingual plays and the use of Singlish (a contact language of English influenced by local languages) pits itself against the racial essentialisms propagated by the government ("Culture" 24-6). In the following chapters, I will argue against this through reference to mass cultural texts and public opinion as expressed in the episode regarding the caning of American teenager Michael Fay. First, however, I will rebut this view in a formalist reading of the project.

Zizek argues that the repressed Real often reveals itself in the form of a dream/ideological fantasy. In his account of Fascist ideology, for instance, Zizek says that exploitation and domination as real facts of social existence were repressed by celebrating their opposite, a fake, trumped-up community-of-the-people. This community was materialized, created, in the form of rituals and practices such as mass-gatherings, parades and large-scale campaigns to help the needy, and successfully repressed popular awareness of the real absence of community, of social antagonisms ("Spectre" 14).

Singapore's "National Ideology" project, too, in its form, aimed at establishing specific and exclusionary parameters for the conceptualization of nation and national identity. Through the government's appeal to the various races to deliberate (separately) on the issue, it ritualized a sense of the nation as a divided body of races who were united only in their "shared values," clearly in a bid to exclude non-racialist or hybrid (especially East-West syncretic) identifications from national space. In accordance with the government's invitation, public responses to the project were made on a racial/religious basis. The Majlis Pusat, an umbrella organization of 45 Malay and Muslim groups made a representation to the Ministry of Education concerning the teaching of these core Asian values ("Use English," ST 14 Dec. 1988). At least four Malay associations held several discussions on the subject with their community ("Malay Groups," ST 13 Jan. 1989). Nine Muslim organizations came together to present their views ("Nine," ST 19 July 1989). Council members from the Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan associations met at least twice and made submissions to the government ("Clans," ST 28 Jan. 1989); and 1,800 Chinese business and community leaders from 200 Chinese clan associations and
the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce, attending a banquet dinner, pledged their support to Goh on the proposed national ideology ("PM Goh on Values," ST 20 Dec. 1990).

In addition, the project materialized a form or machinery of passing off a semblance, a show, of the people's 'participation' as the real thing. The absence of popular and democratic 'participation' was disavowed by offering a fetish of 'participation.' A large part of the population was reached by the government, making a convincing argument of numbers, but the parameters of discussion were restricted, and the enunciative authority of the state in leading the 'discussion' was elided. In this performance, the consulting of public opinion was run together with government ideologizing of the public, where popular contributions were elicited at government-organized, government-chaired and therefore government-controlled forums, seminars and conferences. For instance, 13 young professionals were invited to the Ministry of Community Development to give their views in a government-chaired forum; the Ministry of Education planned three forums involving 600 teachers and parents to identify core Asian values and to discuss the teaching of these to children ("Public View Sought," ST 17 Nov. 1988); 120 community leaders, professionals, graduates and pre-university students attended the first of a series of seminars for the Malay community with government officials on the panel ("Malay Forum," ST 18 Dec. 1988); 100 Indian Muslims from six associations attended a forum on shared values, which had government representation ("Core Values," ST 30 Jan. 1989); 100 community leaders representing 17 Malay and Muslim organizations attended a conference ("Muslim Groups," ST 19 Feb. 1989); 60 community workers and leaders attended a forum opened by a PAP member of parliament ("Call," ST 27 Mar. 1989); 28 students from 14 junior colleges took part in a session chaired by the government's Feedback Unit ("JC Students Agree," ST 1 June 1989); the annual Volunteers' Conference of 1990 held a talk and workshop session on the subject after a talk on communitarianism versus individualism delivered by a government minister ("Extracting," ST 6 July 1990); 500 of Singapore's top pre-university students attended a week-long seminar on the government's
proposed national ideology, which was opened by junior minister George Yeo, who then delivered one of the three seminal texts of the discourse.

Not only did government propagandizing contaminate the process of public consultation, it was particularly aimed at indoctrinating certain groups: Singapore’s elite, community leaders, and leaders of the student population, influential members of their particular groups. Remarkably, long before the national ideology was published in the White Paper, discussion had already begun on teaching it in schools. The government organised a series of forums for parents and teachers on the topic (“Asian Values,” ST 25 Nov. 1989) and on 20 November 1989, the education minister announced that the core values would be taught at primary school though the teaching programme would not be finalised until all feedback on the “National Ideology” project had been gathered (“Lessons,” ST 21 Nov. 1989). Given the scale of indoctrination-posing-as-consultation, legislation of the “National Ideology” was not then necessary.

The Malay community, we note, was also targeted for special attention, perhaps because their religious/cultural belief-systems were more resistant to secular authority than those of other cultures, and possibly too because this new nationalism was aimed at decentering their place in the nation. At about this time, the government was also in the midst of passing the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill (1990), which curbed the political power of religious leaders in representing their community’s non-secular interests.

The “National Ideology” project, in effect, staged a mode of “communitarian democratic” representation of the public, which would serve as a model for the government’s “consensus without contention” approach to decision-making. As we have noted, strictly speaking there was no need for consultation since the “shared values” had already been formulated. Besides, BG Lee had already said that Singaporeans should “keep the list [of shared values] to the minimum, in order to focus on the key items,” presumably those that he had already identified (“Westernisation,” ST 12 Jan. 1989). But the ‘appearance’ of consultation was obviously to be a central feature of “communitarian democracy.” It is
important in evaluating the effectiveness of the “National Ideology” project, to treat it as a discourse that was setting paradigms and habits in political discourse for the future. One has to be attentive especially to the way the project established new rules of formation of national identity.

Using Zizek’s method of ideological critique, one has to start by identifying the repressions an ideology attempts to execute and the moments of its contradictions. One particular question that arises about Singapore’s new nationalism project is why the government felt it necessary to move beyond its previous successful dependence on the ideology of pragmatism to legitimize its authoritarian politics, and why a new nationalism was targeted as the answer. I venture that the government was responding to an erosion in an affect that governments often rely on, the people’s loyalty to the nation, which it was at least partly responsible for with its earlier dabbling in racial politics—which tended to encourage communal identifications rather than national ones. The opposite of the ‘national’ is the ‘international,’ and, in the era of transnational and international capital, state power is challenged. At the level of capital accumulation, the economic interests of the individual now conflict with the (pragmatic) economic interests of the nation and the growing income inequities generate antagonism against the government. But, more importantly, the openness to the international economy ushers in progressive ideas from abroad, such as liberalism and radical democratic politics, which, world-wide, was being felt by governments as a contradiction to capitalism and to government power. It was certainly threatening the PAP’s three-decade hold on power--placing it in a context where the ideology of pragmatism could no longer serve as anti-dote, unless the people could identify with it as an important aspect of their national culture. Doubtless, the flattery to the government being handed out by American neo-Orientalists, who had placed Singapore as one of the most progressive post-colonial societies, also allowed the government to easily identify with Orientalist ideology.

As ideological fantasy, the “National Ideology” project attempted to escape from the people’s antagonism towards the government by re-semioticizing it as an antagonism towards the nation. Thus claims of individual rights, of freedom of expression, political representation of minority needs and de-
centralization of state power through the establishment of civil society were projected as forces that threatened the unity of the nation. But the nation also had to be re-conceptualized in such a manner as to place power with the state. As such, the liberal idea of the nation as a system of relations between people was repressed and the nation was objectified instead, and invested with desire by appeal to primordial, racial identifications and anti-colonial affect, where the latter two were rendered as the same. Ministers’ speeches swung between representing the nation as Singaporeans’ racialized body, where international influences of liberal/radical democratic politics were Westernized and represented as colonial threat to this racialized body, and as mobile object made with sophisticated engineering technology, which naturalized ideologies of pragmatism/social engineering as an integral part of the body of the nation.

In Goh Chok Tong’s opening speech on the project, the over-Westernized Singaporean, by whom Goh meant Singaporeans who were taken up by the value of “individualism,” was a ‘monster’ that had to be routed out of the nation (“National Ideology,” 29 Oct. 1988). Ostensibly, such people or their values had to be banished for both economic and cultural reasons. The Minister racializes individualism as Western, erasing it as a historico-cultural product of capitalism and colonialism, and discusses it as simultaneously as a ‘racial’ and ‘cultural’ threat where the two were assumed to be one. Individualism (read “liberalism”) was an “alien” influence that created a “pseudo-Western” society, words that were polysemous. Over-Westernization created Singapore as both a culturally “pseudo” society (a society lacking in culture) as well as a “pseudo-Western” society (a society with an inauthentic, borrowed culture, which it could never get the full measure of given its different racial origins). Western culture (individualism, liberalism) then was depicted as a deculturalizing force (that is, it had no value system) that caused a cultural loss to the Singaporean subject on two counts: splitting it from its original and therefore ‘real’ cultural origins, as well as desensitizing it to value itself. BG Lee’s representation of this loss as Singaporeans being “half-Westernized, if not three-quarters gone” (“Let’s Discuss,” ST 31 Oct. 1988) represents the attempt of Singaporeans to cathect liberal values as cultural depletion and self-betrayal. If BG Lee’s expression is read as borrowing from a local Malay expression, “tiga suku” (three
quarters), an idiom used to refer to mental degeneration, then racial-cultural (the racial as cultural) loss is also psychological instability. As with Goh, BG Lee represented the Westernization of the Singaporean as a racial-cultural crisis: the danger of “a whole Western outlook just taking us over . . . and it will be a disaster.”

Yeo’s speech at the pre-university seminar mentioned above (“Evolving,” ST 20 June 1989), suggests that the “National Ideology” project may be viewed as a representative fantasy of late capitalism where two wealth-creating but antagonistic forces, internationalism and state control sought to be symbolically reconciled. Internationalism enhances capital accumulation by removing the delimiting geographical and cultural boundaries of nations but, as recent history has shown (the international feminist movement, the internationally-organized bid to give blacks self-determination in South Africa, as well as the easier access to progressive literature via international information banks, for instance), it also works to increase democratization of the world’s population, which interrupts capital accumulation and further threatens state authority.

The “National Ideology” project sought to preserve the economically productive aspect of internationalism without its democratizing, anti-productive force, but it also tried to protect the government from the identity-reconstituting effects of internationalism. Yeo’s speech tried to achieve this by ‘recognizing’ internationalism as a new and life-enhancing force in the world, but simultaneously externalizing it as a force ‘outside’ the nation that needed to be met appropriately in order that the nation maintained its integrity in this ‘encounter’ with internationalism. The nation and internationalism were therefore represented as two separate entities, not antagonistic dialectical encounters that transformed each, in an ideological strategy that Zizek describes as a means of escaping from real antagonistic forces by envisioning them as complementary polarities and reconciling them with a third neutral term (“Spectre” 23). For Yeo, that third neutral term that would drive a wedge into the antagonism between internationalism and nationalism was nature itself, the “nature of nations to compete,” indeed the nature of nations to exist.
Internationalism may make “cultural convergence . . . inevitable” with Americans becoming more like Japanese and vice versa, and the world’s cities become increasingly alike, Yeo said, but “the competition among nations” would “continue.” Internationalism, therefore, was not to be conceived as an internal, divisive force within the nation, reconstituting national identities from the inside since it could never get beyond the “nature of nations” not just to compete but to exist as ‘themselves.’ As an external force, internationalism was discursively produced in a particular manner—it was a beneficial force in that it contained the nuclear threat, expansionistic impulses of the world’s nations, and it was working to resolve environmental issues. Internationalism also meant the integration of the world economy, and again, this did not threaten the nation as an entity. As Yeo points out, “The more integrated the world becomes, the more global the division of labor, the more trade will grow, the better we can be.”

By using the metaphor of “the ark of Noah in the Old Testament” in a move that recalls the colonial argument of different races as different species of humanity, Yeo sneaks in the meanings of national separateness as the founding gesture of the international organization of the world. Just as Noah insisted that his ark be representative of the natural diversity of the world’s species, so too the nation was always already a structural feature of internationalism.

Though Yeo explicitly, on the surface of the text, defines internationalism as a presence ‘other’ to but beneficial to the nation, the deep structures of his speech work in an extra-logical manner to terrify his young addressees (pre-university students) into seeing internationalism in its other aspect as identical to old nationalist imperialism. In this aspect, internationalism is itself a racial nightmare, terrifying in its unpredictability and its monstrous largeness, threatening to the small, non-Western nation. Internationalism, which brought Singapore closer to the rest of the world, also brought it into traumatic encounter with racial/nationalist imperialist ambitions. Thus late capitalism is constructed as “this traumatic period [when] the Soviet Union, as it twists and turns in its efforts to modernize, can remain very dangerous,” while “the drama unfolding on a continental scale in China, could well “herald an epoch of dynastic resurgence,” and the reaching out of Chinese power into South-east Asia.
Strangely, this ‘post-colonial’ assertion of national identity showed a greater fear on the government’s part of non-Western than of Western nations. With internationalism, Yeo, said, “competition [would] increasingly shift from the military to the economic,” which could mean political dangers for Singapore “if the Americans leave a power vacuum in South-east Asia and Asean fragments as a result.”

Internationalism, in the process, was represented both as natural and as cultural object, so that the scare effect was doubled. It saw superpowers as threatening spatial monoliths, “big boulders ..rolling and knocking into one another [so that Singaporeans] must be very alert to avoid being crushed or damaged.” But internationalism was also viewed in terms of “supertankers and medium-size ships . . . turning and switching lanes,” in a way that could be perilous to small nations like Singapore.

If internationalism then could be viewed as a new manifestation of the ‘nature’ of ‘nations’ to exist and expand themselves, then Singapore was vindicated in resorting to nationalism as a solution to its threat— or so the argument goes. Thus its sense of itself had to be strengthened, or in other words, its plural identities homogenized to present a united front to face this external force. As Yeo says, “internationalism has its risks because we are still a young nation and our sense of being a nation is not strong. It is because we do not have a strong national identity that we need this seminar on shared values.”

But if internationalism was to be controlled or managed as a force of nature, then Singapore itself needed to marshal its own nature, but getting science, technology and instrumental reason on its side. Thus Singapore could not conceive itself, as supposedly Nepal does, “as a helpless yam”, a “soft yam wedged between the two large boulders of India and China.” Rather, Yeo “prefer[red] the metaphor of a high-powered speedboat to that of a sad potato,” to conceptualize Singapore.

The tropologization of Singapore as technological product, particularly as an engine, commodified Singapore national identity, but also served to provide a place for the state and its centralized authority within this endeavor of the nation to homogenize its identities. If Singapore was a small speedboat, then Singaporeans were or had to be a “good crew,” i.e. a subordinated group, who sunk their differences in
order to perceive of themselves as one, the same, in order to serve the engine. No doubt, as Yeo says, “to run a tight ship, we need good radars, powerful engines and plentiful reserves of fuel and other supplies.” Significantly, Yeo does not mention the captain of the ship in his nautical analogy, but who can forget his (here, the state’s) controlling function. Since “Formula One engines were not easy to maintain,” too, vigilance (continuous state policing) would apparently be needed to ensure that the control was perpetually working. Six months earlier, BG Lee Hsien Loong had likened Singapore to aircraft, with the proposed “national ideology” serving it as a “coat of armour” to protect it from “anti-aircraft bullets or rough weather” (“Ideology,” ST 19 Jan. 1989).

In Yeo’s speech, the tendency of internationalism (as an internal part of the nation, as part of its mode of production) to democratize society and radicalize identities, its interrogation of the subordinate places assigned to women, workers and minority groups within the nation, and its making of self-realization a matter of something more than capital accumulation are features and desires that are not represented as part of internationalism. Instead, this aspect of internationalism is re-located within the nation itself. As a historical contingency rather than necessity brought about by the growth of the middle classes, and viewed as that dreadful “Westernization” of the Singapore, its threat to the nation could, as an internal attitude, be changed, managed [rationalized] to fit into the nation’s need to survive/prosper.

Yeo’s speech was the first and only one to explicitly discuss internationalism as a problem. Goh and BG Lee had adopted the different strategy of mis-recognizing it as “Westernization,” whereby internationalism was produced as the ‘racial other’ to the nation and its tendency towards the democratization of the population combated by the appeal to primordial, racial identifications. In Yeo’s speech, internationalism is something other than Westernization, but it too conjures up the racial threat. That which appears to be a split in the discourse is actually then the site of its doubling—multiplying, in the process, people’s conviction that a homogenized national identity based on Singapore’s difference from the West and centralized state control were necessary for the nation’s survival, on at least two counts.
The contradictions between imagining the nation in turn as primordial racialized body and as technological, mobile object is one indication that the racializing of Singapore is a paranoid, hysterical construction of the government that condenses two incompatible desires, to run away from history by primordializing Singapore subjectivity in terms of race, but also to be a part of history in modernizing/Westernizing Singaporean culture. The seemingly contradictory tropologization allows the government to escape from and disavow its repressed desire to resist real forces of historical changes that intrude on state power. On the other hand, the government also wants to continue seeing Singapore develop as one of the front guard of the post-colonial world, which involves participating in the new historical forces of internationalism. As such, the insistence on racial identity becomes a means by which the government attempted to freeze Singaporeans’ subjectivities against the onslaught of liberal ideologies, where their response to new forces of history would be restricted to maximizing economic growth.

But these two types of tropes of the nation as racialized body are condensed metaphors that also reveal the repressed, that race was being essentialized via construction. Hence in ministerial speeches, metaphors of natural phenomena, of the discovery of essences and cultural roots, quickly slip into tropes such as of speedboats and Formula One engines that unwittingly reveal the construction, manufacture, and social engineering, the artificial involved in the production of race as nature. BG Lee unites the two in employing a mixed, nature-culture metaphor when speaking of cultural “roots” as those which “anchor” the subject (“Westernization,” ST 12 Jan. 1989). A bridging nature/culture metaphor is that of “preservation.” BG Lee, for instance, speaks of the need to “preserve the heritages of our different communities” (“Westernization,” ST 12 Jan. 1989). If racial heritages are a natural presence in the society, “preservation” is an artificial process that tampers with nature, halts and freezes the decay of a nature that is already dead. It also keeps nature/racial heritage in a state of aesthetic suspension, a reminder of it as (dead) object of beauty/desire.
The revival of Singaporeans' racial and ethnic identifications would be, as the government already knew from the burgeoning of spiritual, extra-economic interests in the 1980s, itself anti-capitalistic. Thus, “race” is constructed in a particular manner: it is located in the body itself and marked as difference from the West; but it is also rendered as the same as “communitarian” values, an anti-liberal ideological system that requires state authoritarianism and the restriction of democracy for the maximization of capital accumulation. As I will argue, the ‘racialization’ of the nation involves the fetishization of race/ethnicity that disavows and stands in for the government’s real attempt to de-racialize and de-ethnicize Singaporeans.

Goh urges Singaporeans to “retain” their “Chineseness, Malayness, Indianness or Singaporeanness” as if ethnicity were a possession that they were born with, a birthright that should not be subject to alteration through the process of time and history (“National Ideology,” ST 29 Oct. 1988). In this speech, history itself is represented as a journey where the subject that arrives at the destination is (or should be) the same as the one who had set out on the journey, where indeed the journey itself and the destination are the same as the subject itself. History, conceptualized in this manner, does not require internal, subjective change. The racialization of the nation is a strategy that renders the Singaporean subject as object. Thus the journey of history, the “progress into the 21st century,” for Singaporeans, has “Asian bearings” that they must adhere to if they are to keep themselves from “drifting aimlessly into the future.”

BG Lee spoke in similar terms: “As we develop, we become superficially Westernized, cast off from our traditional moorings, drift into banks and shoals, and come to grief” (“Westernization,” ST 12 Jan. 1989). In BG Lee’s imagining of the nation as an aircraft or bomber (“Ideology,” ST 19 Jan 1989), history is figured as a battle against the outside of the nation where survival and victory depend on keeping the machine/nation intact and whole, preserving it in its original state against the vagaries of history. If history had a necessary will, an inevitable teleology, it was that of modernization, and the responsibility of nations to history was to “modernize without losing [their] soul” (“Westernisation,” ST
12 Jan 1989). Here, modernization which threatens existing cultural forms, is deliberately restricted in its meanings and thereby rendered compatible with the objectification and fetishization of history as the past time of racial/ethnic purity. Yeo accomplishes this reconciliation by restricting history to the Darwinian terms of struggle for survival: “Our Darwinian duty is to survive and prosper in this new age,” he said (“Evolving,” 20 June 1989).

BG Lee further elaborates on this discursive tactic to protect Singaporeans from ‘Western’ ideologies by immobilizing, de-historicizing Singaporeans’ subjectivities (“Westernisation,” ST, 12 Jan 1989). Singapore, according to him, has a fixed subjectivity as it is a “time and a place . . . with a past which we should be proud of and a future that is ours to make.” This temporal and spatial delimitation of Singapore, which ignores the diasporic cultural experience of immigration and its history of colonialism in the essentializing of race, is offered as the Singapore “spirit,” that which constitutes the nation as an ontology. If this “spirit of Singapore [were to] disappear, the society [would] dissolve, and the nation [would] be no more,” BG Lee warns.

In the same speech, he equates national identity with racial identity and this with success by drawing on the Japanese example. “The long term survival of a country,” he says, “depends in large measure on a strong sense of identity . . . the Japanese are totally confident that their next generation will preserve a strong Japanese identity and values . . .” (“Westernisation,” ST 12 Jan. 1989). He also makes an emotional appeal to the ideology of race as biology while intellectually dismissing it:

They [the Japanese] are confident because they are convinced they are a unique people, even to the point of absurdity. Some Japanese even believe that their intestines are a different length, therefore they cannot eat American beef; that because of the Japanese language, their brains function differently from other peoples,’ and so on.

Yeo too in his speech to pre-university students is concerned with tying national fervor to racial identifications, in particular appealing to Chinese racial identifications. He begins his speech by using the downfall of the Han empire to theorize the “tide in the lives of nations which ebbs and flows,” eliding
the structural differences, politically, economically and culturally between feudal, mono-racial empires and modern, multi-cultural nations ("Evolving," ST 20 June 1990). Yeo urges Singaporeans not to "deny [their] own past," their "cultural and historical experiences," their "roots," yet he reduces all this to a single moment in history, to that point where Singaporeans "were drawn from ancient cultures" ("We Must Not Deny," ST 20 June 1990). Here, Singapore’s diasporic and colonial history is displaced by a narrative of its prior racial origins. Yeo contributes to the figuring of race as both nature and as technology by likening Singapore’s multi-racialism to “dissimilar atoms in the crystal lattice” that “improve the overall performance of the crystal” ("Evolving," 20 June 1989).

This new racialization of the nation demanded a backtracking from the previous policy of racial integration, the melting pot approach to multi-culturalism. Racial integration involved viewing national subjectivity as always in the process of becoming, of change, which contradicted the government’s strategic move to de-historicize and essentialize Singaporean subjectivity. The melting pot approach would mean that national identity would always be in flux, always evolving, both of which threatened state control. It also went against the divide-and-rule avenue of state control. Racial integration as public policy also allows a political space to emerge for coalitions among non-racialized interest groups, a cross-cultural solidarity that threatens the government. A melting pot cross-culturalism would also embrace an East-West hybridity.

Although the melting-pot approach to multi-culturalism has been critiqued from many angles, it undeniably attempts an empowering cross-cultural interaction, provides places for various cultural components within the central symbolic constellation of the nation, and brings together different communities through a sense of their common history. Theoretically, at least, it also assigns equal weight to all cultures, including minority cultures. Even if it inevitably involves a cultural takeover by the dominant or bridging culture, this dominant culture is itself altered in the process by the minority cultures. It also offers a site of cultural hybridity where national identity can get beyond the divisiveness and polarization of race, where race could not, as a master-signifier, be used as a weapon of control.
Thus, a large part of the government’s ideologizing was directed at differentiating the new racialization of the nation from the melting pot approach, from a cross-cultural national identity. This is evident from the many press articles that dealt with the issue. BG Lee deals quite comprehensively with the issue in a parliamentary speech that also reveals the holes and contradictions of the government’s ideology as well as its hidden agenda ("Melting Pot," ST 18 Jan. 1989). The melting pot approach, he says, would mean a submerging of the customs, attitudes and values of the different races. This, he equates with "de-culturalizing," the "squash[ing]"] of one’s "personal identity," "personal uniqueness," or "ineffable spirit," the last three of which is equated with one’s racial identity. Instead he envisions the nation as a cultural mosaic:

It [the nation] is a painting, wall murals, many of them—one Indian dancer, one Chinese lion dance, two Malays, either with a kompong [musical instrument] or doing a Malay dance, an MRT [mass rapid transit] in the background. That is Singapore. That is not a melting pot. That is each community remaining itself.

According to BG Lee’s logic, racial integration (melting pot) would cause Singaporeans to be divided and fractious, so that they could not form coalitions, whereas racial division would result in national unity! The repression of Singaporeans’ unity is disavowed by displacing it onto the wrong side of the integration/purism divide. BG Lee gives the game away when he claims that the personal uniqueness of Singaporeans as defined by their racial identity would contradictorily give them a “sense of group solidarity,” so that “individuals did not just get ahead one by one but as a team.” An essentialized racial identity is then the means by which Singaporeans’ desire to protect their individual rights is made compatible with or the same as protecting the interests of the group.

Interestingly, ministers appeared anxious to defer the time when Singaporeans became more alike. BG Lee promises in the same speech that “in time, very gradually, all communities can develop more common, distinctively Singaporean characteristics” (my emphasis, "Westernisation," ST 12 Jan. 1989). For Yeo, Singapore was not a cultural mosaic, but a nation of many “distinct but overlapping circles.”
("We Must Not Deny," ST 20 June 1989). For him, it would take centuries, if it happened at all, for these circles to coincide since the “people of Singapore were drawn from ancient races.” After 25 years of nationhood, “the circles have moved closer together and there is more overlap now,” he admits. “But at no time,” he adds, “should the Government attempt to rub out any particular circle and force people from one circle to move into another as this would provoke the most extreme reaction,” contradicting Singapore’s early history where such racial integration had not only had incredibly peaceful results but had also reversed previous racial turbulence. “Our preferred effort,” he continues, is to “nudge the circles together.” It is implicitly recognized that it is the government who would do this nudging.

Placing himself within the context of the nation-wide ‘search’ for a national ideology, Yeo is able to use the first-person plural possessive noun ambiguously, to over-ride the distinction between the government and the national subject.

Race was thus produced as an essentialism, as an object. The objectivization of racial identity was needed, as I have said, to de-historicize and immobilize national culture but it was also a discursive strategy that allowed values/ideologies not desired by the government to be racialized and their universal application rejected instantaneously. Thus liberalism could be easily racialized and dismissed as “Western.” In addition, this objectivization/naturalization of race, as something always already there, covered over the constructional activity of interpretation and translation involved in the production of race, especially the government’s role as sole interpreter/translator. This move was also strategic to the fetishization of race, where race was invested with ‘anti-colonial’ and communal desire and disavowed the proposed national ideology’s attempt to stifle ‘real’ ethnic/racial subjectivity. As object too, race could be manipulated just as the parts of an object can be changed in a delimited manner yet without altering its ‘essence.’ This arbitrarily allowed for Asian cultures to be modernized but not liberalized, since the latter involved “Westernization.” The objectivization of race also served as the foundation for discovering a ‘generic’ Asian identity, situated at the place where all the Asian cultures met, as that
which they shared in common. As in Platonic discourse, there is a strategic slippage between the generic and the essential.

That exclusion of meanings is the founding gesture of the objectification of cultures, Eastern and Western, is clear in Goh’s opening speech. Goh objectivizes the differences between Eastern and Western values in terms of the difference between textbooks that teach the English language and those that teach Mandarin (“National Ideology,” ST 29 Oct. 1988). He notes that while English-language textbooks start by introducing students to objects (the “A is for apple, B is for ball” routine), Mandarin textbooks begin by teaching students good manners and filial piety. Textuality itself, the most slippery experience of all, is objectivized, framed with a beginning and an ending, with English constructed as a “textbook” of things/materiality, while Mandarin is a “textbook” of values/spirituality. Goh conveniently forgets that English has a phonetic script while Mandarin has a pictorial script and is a tonal language. The function that language pedagogy serves is also forgotten: in Singapore, English is used largely for material activities whereas Mandarin is taught with a bias towards imparting of values.

In the same speech, Goh contrasts Hollywood’s Academy Award ceremonies with Taiwan’s film awards, noting that in the former, award-winners thank their producers, colleagues and partners while the Taiwanese thank their parents. In a strict process of selection and erasure of Asian values, Goh has singled out, yet again, filial piety as a Chinese “value” while gratitude felt towards friends, co-workers and others are Western ‘non-values.’ (Regular watchers of the Academy Award shows may wish to retort that Americans unfailingly thank their parents and very often God too in these ceremonies!) In both instances, only the ritualized forms of culture, culture as habit, as manners, are identified as “culture.” We are excluded from the more dangerous and contradiction-ridden arena of culture as change, as that which generates, sustains and continuously revamps meanings and values. Culture as ‘object,’ as a totalizable entity, stands in for, and erases, the plurality and revolutionary potential of the real phenomena.
The government's attempt to reconcile Confucianism with modernism/democracy is a vital part of the government's hysterical method of solving the contradictions between democracy and capitalism. 'Confucianism,' constructed in a particular manner, was taken up as that which would reconcile democracy and capitalism as antagonisms, the third 'neutral' term comprising racial/ethnic identifications, especially those of the dominant racial group, the Chinese, which would prioritize capital accumulation over democratic rights and hence diffuse their antagonism. In the process of resemiotizing, however, both Confucianism and democracy lost some of their most significant meanings.

Confucianism was objectivized as a cultural object, willfully neutralized of its political content. Although it had "evolved for a rural, agricultural society," BG Lee took it for granted that it could be "revised to fit an urban, industrial society," while retaining its essence just as democracy could be adapted to Confucianist principles without deconstructing itself ("Westernisation," ST 12 Jan 1989). This assumption is enabled by the discursive construction of race as being of the body, that it cannot simply be washed out, transformed, by the forces of history. BG Lee proposes that democracy should be Confucianized by placing society's interests over self. He adds that the Confucianist concept of "government by honourable men, who have the duty to do right for the people, and who have the trust and respect of the population" be substituted for "the Western concept: that a government should be given as limited powers as possible, and always treated with suspicion unless proven otherwise." The racialization of democracy as Western allowed it to be dis-cathedect and viewed as a "deculturalizing" force that should only be accepted in moderation, while the racializing of Confucianism as Chinese introduced primordial affect so it could overcome intellectual recourse to its oppressions.

In this 'reconciliation,' however, the central meaning of democracy that society's rights should not be used as an excuse to deny the individual his/her rights, is lost. The basis of democracy that "right" and "wrong" in government policy is non-transparent and can only be determined after the representation of various interest groups is contradicted by a Confucianist ideology, as BG Lee represents it, where "right" and "wrong" in government policy is assumed to be transparent and easily determined by clear
thinking. The Confucianist doctrine of government, as BG Lee has described it, also assumes, unlike
democratic political culture, that individual and group interests are homogenous.

But Confucianism too must be democratized and “update[d],” BG Lee says. This may be done by
recognizing the insufficiency of its doctrine that “the people can be made to follow a path of action but
they may not be made to understand it.” In a democratic context, then the government’s responsibility of
seeking public consultation in the determining of policy is displaced into the activity of ideologizing the
people into seeing the wisdom of the state’s decisions. As BG Lee puts it, the government must try to
make “the population understand and support the goals of the government.” Democracy here is denied in
the unequal relationship between the people and the government.

But Confucianism too loses its face in its ‘reconciliation’ with democracy and modernity. BG Lee’s
offering of a ‘modernized’ Confucianism as one where the “strictly hierarchical” “traditional Confucian
family relationships”—where “sons owe an absolute duty of filial piety and unquestioning obedience to
fathers,” where “males take precedence over females, brothers over sisters, and the first-born over the
second over the third son”—be replaced by the less authoritarian family bonds practiced in modern
Singapore, completely displaces the Confucianist family institution. One has to wonder if this was a
strategy to diffuse the strength of the family institution which could contradict state interests. Russell
Heng’s play, Lest the Demons Get to Me, affirms that in contemporary Singapore familial patriarchal
power has been rendered impotent by the patriarchy of the state, which supersedes it.

Confucianist precepts of “good,” “right” or “honourable” government would also inevitably be
transformed beyond recognition in their application within a democratic system, where the ruling party
must always play to the ballot-box. In the Confucianist system, “honourable” government idealizes an
‘impartial’ determination of the good of the people, which can only be realized over and above the noise
of the rabble, of contentious claims.

By denying the historicity of Confucianism, its generation from particular materialist forces,
Confucianism was depoliticized and viewed as ethnic tradition. The function it served in propping up
and perpetuating despotism and the hierarchies/subordinations of feudalism, of men over women, emperors over subjects, and patriarchy as a structural feature of society is cleverly elided. But in the reconciliation of Confucianism and democracy, we are left with neither Confucianism nor democracy (except as empty forms), not modernism nor traditionalism, but authoritarian state control where the requirements of the state, of government, ride roughshod over the desires/interests of the people.

The racial objectivization/essentialism of Chinese/Confucianist culture and Western-democratic culture is strategic in covering over the aporias in the discourse of a Confucianist modernity. As BG Lee says, the government is “not suggesting that Westerners are incapable of selfless service to others, or that there are no selfish people in the Orient. But nevertheless there is a real difference between East and West” (“Westernization,” ST 12 Jan. 1989). Since Chinese and Western cultures are real ‘things,’ it also allows the government’s role as producer of these ‘things’ and cultural interpreter to be well hidden. The notion of a Confucianist modernism, of a Confucianist/communitarian democracy, did then provide a discursive regime whereby democracy and Confucianism, modernism and tradition, could always be used against each other, according to the will of the government. The women’s movement for instance could be rejected at the points where it threatens the state or opposes government policy by declaring it un-Confucianist or non-Asian. Conversely, it could be championed as “democratic” and “modern” where it coincided with state goals, including those of capital accumulation often made at the expense of income inequities.

If one is not caught in the trap of the fetishization of Asian cultures that this “National Ideology” project attempted, it becomes quite easy to read the project as a bid to ‘Orientalize’ the nation. The ‘generic’ Singaporean Asian identity that the project identified as that cultural space where all the various ethnic heritages met in a community of “shared values” began with the definition of that space in terms of Lodge and Vogel’s concept of a “communitarian democracy” in Ideology and National Competitiveness, where the rights of the individual were to be counter-balanced with the responsibilities and duties of the citizen toward the nation. The authors had commented that the East Asian economies
of the Japanese, Koreans and Taiwanese were successful because they adhered to “communitarian” values and thus had strong social cohesion whereas the emphasis on individualism by other societies tended to compromise economic growth. They also said that the national culture of a people determined “national competitiveness” in a discourse where a nation’s success was to be judged solely in terms of its overall economic performance, excluding other determinants such as fair distribution of income and services and the maintenance of human rights. When Goh publicly announced the issue of formulating a national ideology, he made it quite clear that Lodge and Vogel were the government’s source of inspiration and that Singapore’s Asian values were to be interpreted in terms of American ‘Orientalized’ notions where Chinese identity was to be totalized in terms of the Confucian ethic. In describing this move as necessary to safeguard the nation’s economic interests, Goh inadvertently reveals that it had nothing to do with the preservation of Asian values as a post-colonial gesture of identity.

Goh said in his speech that he had been reading “a book, Ideology and National Competitiveness by Harvard University professors George Lodge and Ezra Vogel, who coined the word ‘communitarianism’” (“National Ideology,” ST 29 Oct. 1988). Summing up Lodge and Vogel’s ideology, he said that Singapore had to determine which value system—individualism or communitarianism—would be better for the country’s competitiveness or survival. He then quoted former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew’s comments made a few days earlier that the Japanese, Koreans, Vietnamese and Chinese shared a Confucian ethic and had “learnt the valuable lesson that to make the greatest possible progress in the shortest possible time, it is necessary for a people to move in unison. And this implies the need for individuals to make sacrifices for the good of the country and its progress.”

Singapore, Goh added, shared the same cultural base as that of the other successful East Asians, that is the Confucian ethic. So “if we [Singaporeans] want to continue to prosper, we must not lose our core values of hard work, thrift and sacrifice,” he said, appealing to the simplistic interpretation of the Confucian ethic by Vogel in his earlier book, The Four Mini-Dragons and other neo-Orientalists.18
Since Singapore’s “shared values” had already been identified before public consultation, and involved an Orientalization of Confucianism as its starting point, the next phase of the project involved disseminating this brand of Confucianism to Singapore Chinese, and also extending this Orientalization to other Asian cultures, where the latter were re-interpreted as the same as this Orientalized Confucianism. BG Lee’s blueprint of the methodology for the identification of a national ideology of “shared values” warrants close attention. He says:

One way is to identify certain abstract values, common to all Singaporeans, which draw on the essence of each of our heritages, and which all Singaporeans can share. Then we interpret and convey these ideas for each community, in terms of its own cultural and religious traditions. In time, very gradually, all communities can develop more common, distinctively Singaporean characteristics. . . . Which abstract values should we emphasise? I believe we should emphasise non-political, non-religious values. (“Westernization,” ST 12 Jan. 1989)

In a return of the repressed as irony, BG Lee denies that this is “a disguise for imposing Chinese Confucian values on them [the minorities].” Neither is it the “elevation of Confucian ethics to a national status.” “The government,” he says, “cannot force Confucianism on the other communities, or even allow it to lead to Chinese chauvinism. The National Ideology could not be Confucianism by another name.” But, he adds:

Just as the Chinese will interpret the core values of the National ideology in terms of Confucian teachings, Malays and Muslims will elaborate them in terms of Malay traditions and Islamic teachings, and the Indians in terms of Indian traditions. I am not an expert in Islam, but I understand from my Muslim colleagues that Malays and Muslims would find nothing unacceptable in the four items of core values . . . they produced verses from the Quran teaching these same points. . . . On the importance of the community above self, the Malay practice of gotong-royong is an expression of concern for the well-being of neighbors, and a sacrifice of
personal interest for the common good. The concept of consensus translates directly into the
tradition of *musyawarah* or consultation among the community to decide on a course of action.

In the event, 15 Malay and Muslim groups, in their submissions to the government, agreed that the
proposed shared values were agreeable to their culture, but registered their observation that the central
Muslim tenet, the belief in God that "[they] hold dearly," was not included in the formulation of the

Cross-cultural forums could have provided a genuine attempt at drawing on shared values that were
central to the nation’s communities and would have protected minority ethnic cultures from being read as
the same as the dominant culture. But this was never to be. BG Lee’s methodology instead guaranteed
that the aim of identifying shared values that “draw on the essence of each of our heritages” would
degenerate into a search for “shared values” that merely reflected the points of contact of the major
traditions. Highly different cultures are more likely to intersect at points of liminality than at their
centers. The peripheral values, the merely “acceptable” values of the various communities were then
fetishized in place of core values that were being suppressed. Malays were required, for instance, to
think of *gotong-royong*, rural village political culture, not Islamic culture, as an essential aspect of their
ethnic tradition. It was thus that the “National Ideology” was made “compatible” with Singapore’s
Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh and Christian cultures, where only their “non-political, non-religious
values” would be accepted into national space.

Singapore’s cultural diversity as the definitive location of the nation was now homogenized as
“Asian,” where being Asian referred reductively only to the point of translatability of the component
cultures. The government’s disavowal that it was Sinicizing the nation did not address the issue that in
this activity of translation, the original ‘language’ used was that of an Orientalized Chineseness, which
was then translated into the language of Confucianism. Confucianism was then translated into the
‘languages’ of the various ethnic/religious groups. An Orientalized ‘Confucianism’ then was the
dominant term of these ‘cross-cultural’ translations, so that being Singaporean required non-Chinese groups to represent/constitute themselves as mirror images of the dominant group.

The “National Ideology” project could be viewed as a bid to generate many hybrid and multiple forms of ‘Confucianism’: Malay-Confucianism; Tamil-Confucianism; Eurasian-Confucianism, etc. But given the already prior Orientalization of Confucianism by Western/American right-wing ideologues, Singaporeans, when they look into the mirror, will find themselves not mimic Confucianist men, as they feared, but mimic Western anti-liberalists pretending to be Confucians pretending to be Malay, Muslim, Sikh, Hindu, Christian, Buddhist, etc. This could explain the tendency to liken contemporary Singapore to retro-America, to America in the ‘50s, something that repeatedly occurred during the Fay discourse, which I will deal with in the next chapter.

In discussing the activity of translation/interpretation involved in formulating the “shared values,” BG Lee makes a significant omission of the role of the state as interpreter/translator in this venture, and of the relation between interpretation and construction. In this speech, BG Lee is himself performing interpretation/construction by reading Malay *gotong-royong* as a prioritization of community interests above individual interests and *musyawarah* as a form of “consensus without contention.” Here, the enunciative authority of the state as a material force that is itself implicated in class/race/gender interests, and as that which defines, in Foucaultian parlance, “the possibilities of reinscription and transcription” of the discourse (*Archaeology* 103) is hidden and its readings of ‘race’ rendered transparent. Not only is the political content of the “shared values” thereby elided, but a discursive practice of equating the government’s subject position with the subject-position of the nation has also been regularized.

The government’s agenda in this nationalism project, despite its espousal of the return to racial heritages, should not be differentiated from its simultaneous and similarly anti-traditional, anti-ethnic attempt to disempower religious movements via the introduction of the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill in 1990, which was passed in November (Hill and Lian 211). At least two major events and a spate of surveys on religious activity in the nation prompted this bill. In 1987, the government had
cracked down on a community of nearly 20 English-educated, middle-class university graduates with connections to the Catholic Church, who were allegedly involved in pro-communist subversion. A government-commissioned study found that there had been a degree of religious revivalism, especially among Christian charismatic churches, and that conversion was concentrated among teenagers, especially English-educated Chinese. Also, in late 1986, the Muslim community had reacted negatively against the government for arranging a visit to Singapore of the Israeli President. The Muslim community had put forward their views that the government should show more sensitivity towards Malay Singaporeans and that there should be more open and mature discussion on such subjects (Hill and Lian 205-6). However, rather than pacifying a religious community's wish that their values be recognized as a valid part of the nation, the government reviled it by ejecting the Muslim system of values outside the nation and replacing it within the arena of the communal, which was considered in this case to be anti-nationalistic and treacherous. BG Lee questioned the national loyalty of Singapore Muslims and said that Malays were not recruited into the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) because of their privileging of communal loyalties over national interests. He had said then:

If there is a conflict, if the SAF is called upon to defend the homeland, we don't want to put any of our soldiers in a difficult position where his emotions for the nation may come into conflict with his emotions for his religion, because these are two very strong fundamentals, and if they are not compatible, then they will be two very strong destructive forces in opposite directions. (Hill and Lian 206)

Cultural/ethical differences that arise between the government and its people are here constructed as anti-national, where the state is set up as the de facto site of the nation since it is supposedly a culturally neutral place. Ethnic culture here has been assigned the place of the excessive formation that takes away from the nation, causing a 'lack' within it. This approach to race/ethnicity involves a repression of the alternative, liberal view that the government could only be the legitimate site of the nation if it
represented/recognized the desires of its various ethnic/cultural communities, which was indeed what the Malay community had asked for and clearly expected.

The “National Ideology” project was headed in the same direction then as the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill but with a different strategy: the suppression of racial/ethnic traditions, especially some of their non-materialistic emphases, which were to be disavowed by fetishizing race. Such non-materialistic claims were to be further silenced by consigning them to the margins of the nation. The “national ideology” project aimed at creating a new centralized cultural space in the nation, that of the Western notion of “communitarianism” translated into the language of Confucianism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Christianity and other ethnic cultures of the nation, which would then displace Singaporeans’ current racial/ethnic/religious identifications. These, in turn, would now merely be regarded as identifications with the community, which was differentiated from the nation. Hence, one of the core values emphasizes “nation before community.” Another displaces an important stress on racial equality, the founding myth of the nation encapsulated in the National Pledge, with racial “moderation” and racial “harmony,” where individuals would be required to stifle their ethnic/racial/religious differences.

Though the project relied on an anti-Western rhetoric for its emotional affect, only specific Western values (liberalism, but not capitalist materialism) were being attacked. On the other hand, the project effected a more extensive containment of Asian identity, and a re-construction of it. Asian identity was implicitly not to be understood in terms of the histories of the rise and fall of empires and dynasties, the South Asian independence movements, the separation of Taiwan from China and recent student unrest in China, since these were not part of the ‘ethnic’ experience of Singaporeans. Also, these gave the lie to the claim that “consensus rather than contention” was as an Asian value. Singaporean-Asian heritages were also primordialized by suppressing their historical transformation through capitalism, colonialism and the diasporic experience.
These misrepresentations and exclusions of important meanings of racial/ethnic identity were disavowed and displaced by cathecting race as fetish in an appeal to post-colonial sentiment. “The problem of response to Western influence is not unique to Singapore,” BG Lee says, adding:

Every non-Western developing country faces it—how to modernize without losing its soul, how to transform itself without undermining the basis of the whole society. Not all societies rise to the challenge. In Iran, the Shah tried to modernize his feudal, backward country, but he failed. . . . China, since the 19th century, has undergone periodic cycles of opening its doors to the West, and then reverting back to being a closed society. . . . The Philippines have accepted Western (particularly American) institutions, such as the press, in toto. Theoretically, they have the highest number of human rights and freedoms of any country in the region. But the outcome has not been blissful. . . . Now many Filipinos want to cut their psychological ties with the US, in order to develop their own national spirit. In Japan, after World War II, General Douglas MacArthur imposed a Western political system on the country. But the Japanese found a way to transform it to function in a very un-Western fashion. The Japanese Diet works very differently from the US Congress, or the British Parliament. (“Westernization,” ST 12 Jan. 1989)

Singapore’s national ideology was likened to Malaysia’s Rukunegara and Indonesia’s Pancasila, both of which had been created mainly to negotiate the demands of Western democratic and secular institutions with the tenets of religious, Islamic and indigenous culture. Goh said that Indonesia and Malaysia both have their “own national ideologies which formally state the key axioms and premises on which their societies [were] based” and that Singapore too should have a national ideology of its own (“National Ideology,” ST 29 Oct. 1989). This allowed Singapore’s national ideology to be equated with the post-colonial gesture embedded in the national ideologies of these two countries although they were very dissimilar in content. For instance, the Indonesian Pancasila stresses belief in one God, a just and civilized society, unity, democracy and social justice, whereas the Malaysian Rukunegara emphasizes
belief in God, loyalty to king and country, supremacy of the constitution, rule of law, mutual respect and good social behaviour as its guiding principles.

S Rajaratnam, a former minister of culture, one of the architects of the founding nationalism of a "Singaporean Singapore" and a member of a minority ethnic group, provided one of the more lucid moments in the debate. Retired from government, he attacked the phantasmatic nature of the project at the London School of Economics Alumni Association's annual dinner:

It is my thesis that the search for roots has not been pursued within the all-embracing non-ethnic concept of a Singaporean Singapore whose ultimate goal is the creation of a Singapore identity and not a hotch-potch of wary ethnic strangers. ("Raja," ST 11 Mar. 1990)

Singaporeans, he said, had already forged a Singaporean identity out of the many "identities our immigrant forefathers brought with them." Critiquing the view of Singapore as an Asian society, he pointed to its heavy Western borrowings. Singapore's political, economic and social institutions were not traditional, he said. Rather, modern Singapore is rooted in Western, scientific, technical, political, economic and legal cultures modified to suit Singapore's needs. Singapore culture, he added, was "a living culture which is also plugged to a world culture . . . oriented towards and part of the unfolding and continually renewing world culture."

"Singaporeans," he said, "must remember that this exercise [of searching for roots] is like searching at night for a black hen which may be running around in China, India or in the sands of Arabia."

The "National Ideology" project set itself the impossible task of reconciling antinomies. Yeo said the nation had to balance democracy with central state control, be cosmopolitan yet nationalistic, efficient yet humane ("Evolving," ST 20 June 1989). As such, rhetorical questions and lyrical language were the prevailing enunciative mode, used to cover over the impossibility of coherent argument. Since the new nationalism was trying to suppress exactly those values which had been already cathected and interiorized by the population in the two decades following independence, repression could only be executed by dissembling. This, complicated perhaps by the guilt incurred in attempting such repressions
and dissemblance, very often saw the repressed return as irony in government discourse to split and
double its meanings and riddle the project with contradictions. There are numerous examples of these,
and I have already pointed out some of these. BG Lee’s ironized denial that the government was “not
talking about making zombies out of Singaporeans,” for instance, issues from the clash between the new
national culture that emphasized democratic representation, and given the nation’s geographical
proximity to communist regimes in China and North Korea, any attempt to homogenize the people was
suspected as totalitarian indoctrination designed to turn people into idiots. BG Lee adds that the
government is not interested in stifling individuality “the way North Koreans squashed the population
and other totalitarian governments do . . .,” himself placing doubts in people’s minds where none had
been raised in the public domain.

But my favorite example of irony in the discourse occurs when BG Lee likens the activity of deciding
which values should be nationalized to the way World War II scientists identified the problem areas of
British bombers that needed repair. He says that these bombers, examined after their runs, were
reinforced in precisely those parts that had escaped hits:

You think about that. You put the armour where the holes were not because where the holes were,
the aeroplanes came back. Where the holes were not, doesn’t mean they were not hit. They
crashed straight-away and, therefore, the protection had to be in the wrong places. (“Ideology,”

If ideology is fantasy, this ‘dream’ reveals the return of the repressed. BG Lee’s discourse is geared
towards disavowing the claim that government was meddling with people’s subjectivity, and that he in
particular was the chief manipulator of national subjectivity, given his role in the “National Ideology”
project. But the figure of the scientist repairing bombers is a condensed metaphor that collapses macho
heroism with intellectual power, revealing BG Lee’s (self) pretensions and perhaps unacknowledged
desire in his role as leader of the “National Ideology” project to be a national hero through the use of a
highly instrumental and manipulative rationality. The body of the scientist is also the site of concealment of a terrifying power: the bomber pilots may be in the thick of action but it is the scientist’s expertise here that decides the outcome of violence (just as Allied atomic scientists in World War II indirectly ended the war with holocausts in Hiroshima and Nagasaki).

BG Lee’s fixation on his task as reinforcing the national subjectivity where “the holes [are] not” also sees the ironized return of that which the public is not supposed to know: that national culture was not really in need of repair. This is the closest the government comes to revealing that the “National Ideology” project was strictly unnecessary for the nation but was required to buttress the power of the government/ruling party. His use of the words the “non-obvious places” as that where national ideology should be put to work may also be read as a Freudian slip (over and above the sexual connotations of his discursive circling around “holes”): that the holes were really in another place (in the gap between liberalism and state power/capital accumulation, as I have argued) but it was crucial that their location be dissembled by directing the patching up job to the “non-obvious” places, i.e. national culture. The lack of congruity between tenor (national ideology project) and vehicle (bomber repair) in this metaphor is an integral feature of BG Lee’s ideological fantasy: everyone knows that the structural organization of socio-economic-cultural life is different from that of a bomber’s—holes in the former need to be tended to immediately to prevent them from ripping everything apart. But this incongruence is needed to hide from public awareness the intensity of the threat posed to the government and the capitalist class by liberalization/democratization.

The minister’s fantasy also suggests that the sources of threat to state power could only be repaired by re-constructing the national body (“where the holes were not”). As my discussion here has shown, the government attempted to deal with the contradictions between liberalism and state power/capital accumulation by precisely introducing holes where they were not, in the national body, especially in the domain of inter-racial relations.

The project is an interesting example of the ability of governments to reconstitute their nation’s identity, to wrest it away from its originary founding myths in order to produce a new national
subjectivity that would be more amenable to state authoritarianism. It shows how, in these days of late
capitalism, of internationalism and radical democracy, authoritarian governments find other uses for
nationalism than that of nation-building. They appropriate its form and function, as a collective
expression of the nation's desires and aspirations, to subordinate the nation. It also shows how the
discourses of racial essentialisms, based on neo-colonial racist ideologies, can be used by authoritarian
regimes in post-colonial nations to perpetuate the centralization of state power: that, while pretending to
be de-colonizing discourses, these enable yet another colonization of post-colonial subjects.
Notes

1 Wee, "Staging" and "Clash" 227. I read Wee as acknowledging some of the absurdities of the new discourse of East Asian modernity and, to a certain extent, as skeptical towards the new nationalism as an authentic affirmation of ethnic identity. But I will further address the limitations of his approach in later chapters. David Brown links the "National Ideology" project to the "corporatist management of ethnicity" that he notes in Singapore in the 1980s and 1990s. The ruling party came to power in the 1950s by riding the tiger of communism. But, says Brown, "Today’s tiger is perceived as ethnicity, and the strategy has been to tame and housetrain the beast through corporatist management" (32). John Clammer perceives the "National Ideology" project as having arisen from the failure of the philosophy of pragmatism to regulate the encroachment of Western values. Describing Singaporean culture as "a new culture" ensuing from the mingling of folk cultures with European, Arab, Jewish and indigenous Southeast Asian cultures, he views the "National Ideology" project as "an attempt to shore up a culture and social structure which no longer exists, if it ever did" (40-41).

2 In China, for instance, the new colonial Orientalism has provided the state with the ideology required to challenge current norms of human rights as Eurocentric and to ethnicize the state’s oppressive regime. In non-Western nations, the disciplining of the working force arises from the pressures of Western capitalist domination. But we also note an increasing backtracking on the West’s human rights agenda, made possible by the ideology of Eastern cultural difference. In the US, the linking of trade concessions to human rights observations shows signs of loosening. A school of thought gaining ascendancy in US political circles is that the West should only go so far as to demand economic liberalism from its trading partners, and not to insist on political liberalization: that the West is only being ‘liberal’ in recognizing the other’s difference. It would seem that neo-Orientalism, now spoken by the East, with its American origins almost completely obfuscated, is an ideology that permits the West to view its insistence on the human rights of other peoples as so much non-liberal cultural bullying!
The Nanyang Chinese, more recent immigrants to Malaya, still held on to Chinese nationality and sent their children to Chinese vernacular schools. They are to be distinguished from the Straits Chinese, who had been in the country for more than one generation, and whose Chinese culture had been hybridized with native, Malay culture and British colonial culture. The Straits Chinese were British subjects and had taken advantage of colonial education, forming much of Singapore’s English-educated middle class. Straits Chinese culture, with its Anglo-Malay-Chinese syncretism, is considered by some to be the true representative of South-east Asian culture and/or a model for a multi-racial hybridized national Malayan culture.

“Rojak” refers literally to Singaporean dishes which use a wide variety of meat and vegetarian ingredients, and, which, even in their respective Chinese, Indian and Malay versions, combine cultural influences from other ethnic groups. “Rojak culture” as a trope, which developed in the 1960s and 1970s, was often used locally to refer to Singapore’s hybridized culture.

In response to the Goh Education Report, Prime Minister Lee had said in a published letter to the education minister on moral education: “[T]he litmus test of a good education is whether it nurtures good citizens who can live, work, contend and cooperate in a civilised way. Is he loyal and patriotic? Is he, when the need arises, a good soldier, ready to defend his country, and so protect his wife and children, and his fellow-citizens? Is he filial, respectful to elders, law-abiding, humane, and responsible? Does he take care of his wife and children, and his parents? Is he a good neighbour and a trustworthy friend? Is he tolerant of Singaporeans of different races and religions? Is he clean, neat, punctual, and well-mannered?” (Hill and Lian 89-90).

See Kuo, “Confucianism” 12; and Chua, “Culture” 18-9.

On mooting the idea of an institute on East Asian philosophy in 1982, education minister Goh Keng Swee had said that “an academy could be established to re-interpret Confucianism in line with [the] changing times” (Kuo, “Confucianism” 9). In meeting the demands of modernism, it was felt that
Confucian ethics had to be separated from Confucian political ideology, indicating that those in charge had no concern that the new Confucianism being scrambled up should accurately reflect the original culture (Kuo, “Confucianism” 15).

Chua gives an interesting account of this hybridized culture, where he counters the state’s purist notions of Chinese identity by observing that Chinese spiritual practices have, over generations, been syncretized with pre-Muslim Malay animistic practices (“Culture” 1-4).

Chua, for instance, says that the “attempt to entrench an elaborate Confucian philosophy in the Singaporea ideological landscape had failed” and was “abandoned” because of the “absence of Confucianism” as a “foundational idea for the organization of daily life of Chinese in Singapore” and the “weakening” of “belief in the significance of Confucianism as the cultural foundation of so-called ‘East Asian capitalism’ ” (“Culture” 19-20).

See Hill and Lian; Wee, “Staging” and “Clash”; and Vasil, Asianising.

Straits Times is Singapore’s national newspaper: although a public corporation, it is chaired by top (sometimes retired) government officials or ministers. Hence, it is strongly pro-government and, by its own admission, plays an important role in hegemonizing government ideology. It will be referred to in an abbreviated form as ST.

Henceforth to be referred to as BG Lee to distinguish him from Lee Kuan Yew. The title “BG” is an abbreviation of Brigadier-General, a title used by both Lee Hsien Loong and George Yeo.

The notion of a “communitarian democracy” originated in Lodge and Vogel’s study, Ideology and National Competitiveness. See below.

In this regard, the recent institutionalizing of government-appointed “non-constituency” members of parliament can be seen as a discursive legacy of this project. Here, leaders of sectional interests in Singapore (from the women’s movement, trade unions, etc.) are invited to represent their views in Parliament. Their effort however would always only be a semblance/image of oppositional or minority representation since, not representing any political party, they had no real political power. Thus, once
again, the image of democratic representation would stand in for and disavow the absence of the real thing.


17 In 1994, the PAP sought to introduce restricted legislation against family violence but by appending it to the Women’s Charter. A leader of the local feminist movement and a non-constituency member of parliament appointed by the government, Kanwaljit Soin, however, saw this as a delimiting representation of family violence as a woman’s problem and fought in parliament to have it legislated separately. She also wanted spousal abuse to be criminalized. The government argued that this was not appropriate to the Asian family institution.

18 Many interpretations of Confucianism had arisen in China through the two millennia since the sage’s death in 479 B.C. As such, it could be held that there is no exclusive base from which one could theorize about a Confucian ethic. Neither did the Chinese on the mainland always view it as a core component of their ethnic identity. It was disowned by the modernists of the May Fourth movement and again by the communist regime. The Confucian Analects were destroyed during the 1960s’ Cultural Revolution. See Chan, “Confucianism” for a history of the philosophy in East Asia.

19 Interestingly, in the 1980s, a visiting Confucian scholar, Hsu Cho Yun, sought to reassure minority Singaporeans fearful of Chinese cultural domination with this comment: Confucianism was “a universal system of ethics and a universal way of life.” By adopting it, Singapore “might well become the seed of a future global culture looked to by other parts of the world” (Vasil, Asianising 73). Dirlik says that American Confucianist scholar Tu Wei-ming, who played a leading role in the promotion of Confucianism in Singapore in the 1980s, has stressed Confucianism as a “universalistic humanism that could be reconciled (like Christianity) with different cultural and religious traditions. There is no reason,
[Tu] had told a Chinese interviewer, why there could not be, say, an African Confucian” (Dirlik, “Confucianism” 258).
In March 1994, Singapore newspapers reported a legal case concerning a group of expatriate teenagers who had been charged with several counts of vandalism and causing mischief. Under the Singapore criminal code, vandalism is a crime that carries a mandatory caning sentence of three strokes of the *rotan* (cane) for every count. Caning is also the punishment for illegal immigration and numerous other offenses. As such, it was an unremarkable court case which would have gone unreported or merited at most a filler in the newspaper except for its socio-cultural interest. The youths had spray-painted cars belonging to the rich and successful in upper-class neighborhoods. Cars had also been pelted with eggs and their license plates switched. One of the cars vandalized had even belonged to Kanwaljit Soin, a non-constituency member of parliament and leader of the local women’s movement, who was married to a local judge. The offenses had been committed in several wild sprees. In addition, the youths had gained nothing tangible from their actions: the things stolen, the Singapore flag, taxi signs and other signboards, were public property and had symbolic rather than monetary value. Even on the surface, it seemed like a concerted rebellion against the capital-owning class and the power elite: a snub to wealth, property-ownership and power, including state power. The youths, in addition, were sons of expatriates working in Singapore and attended the Singapore American School, allowing anti-Singaporean motivations to be read into their offenses. Among these youths was an American teenager, Michael Fay. Though the reports didn’t mention it at this time, Fay’s successful prosecution would make him the first American to be caned in Singapore. This in itself guaranteed the news value of the case: many newspapers will always report a first-time occurrence of an event.
Over the next three months, the case inflated to gigantic proportions, becoming a world-wide topic of public discussion. It was unprecedented, acquiring a scale far bigger than even international quarrels concerning capital punishment of foreign nationals. Looking back, there is indeed a touch of the ‘fantastic’ about the caning incident, where an American teenager’s crime of spray-painting some cars in Singapore sparked off an international conflict that crystallized meanings around the binaries of East/West, authoritarianism/liberalism, barbarism/civilization and imperialism/colonial uprising. In North America and Singapore, it was an issue taken up almost daily by the mass media. Larry King aired the issue at least twice in his hour-long live show and Phil Donahue was among American talk-show hosts who discussed the episode. The case made this previously unknown teenager famous, sparking media interest in him even after he had been caned and returned to live in the US. By the time the issue died down in May with Fay’s caning, Singapore had also gained a reputation that differed depending on which part of the world one was in. In some quarters, especially the post-colonial world, it was well-regarded for its stance against American imperialism. In North America, opinion swung in two directions: either it was considered by liberals to be a barbaric nation and an Orwellian police state with its authoritarianism racialized as Chinese and equated with China’s, or it was perceived as a nation with a progressive and enviable attitude towards crime and punishment, a utopian state where one could walk the streets at night safe from harm and raise one’s child in a secure environment.

For the critic of discourse, the caning episode offers a site from which to investigate constructions of post-colonial national identity in the era of transnational/international capitalism and to track its relations in desire for the West and identifications with colonial epistemologies. It allows one to differentiate the ‘historicity’ of contemporary post-colonial discourses of national identity from the nationalisms arising from post-independence movements and those fashioned in the first years of nationhood. This is an important task that permits one to factor in the effects of new geo-cultural organizations of time and space and new modalities in the circulation of culture/information and political and economic power.
Frantz Fanon and others have shown that de-colonizing nationalisms are always already caught up in and shaped by colonial knowledges, by colonial anthropologies of the racial ‘other,’ Western territorializations of desire, as well as by the society’s political and economic relations to the West. Recent changes in the international organizations of politics and economics as well as domestic transformations in class, gender, sexuality and race relations must then be expected to produce alterations in colonial knowledges and revisions in anthropologies of the racial ‘other’ that need not necessarily duplicate 19th and earlier 20th century colonial economies of desire and identification nor their representations of the Western self and its ‘other.’ Given their rapid international circulation in a world where Western knowledge still reigns supreme, this is likely to impact on post-colonial nationalisms—perhaps radically changing them—which, I have argued, is the case with Singapore.

Developments in capitalism too and the protection of the capital-owning class now see increasing coincidence of interests and collaborations between Western and post-colonial governments, which, while preserving Western dominance, allows nationalism to become a relatively new technology for a doubled colonization of post-colonial subjects, by the West and by their own government.

Singapore is not a typical post-colonial nation and its current nationalism is not offered as a totalizing model for contemporary post-coloniality, but its experience of a major shift in national identity goes some way in pointing to the need to theorize contemporary post-colonial nationalisms differently from past ones. Especially, the sudden reversions to archaic, retrogressive racial identifications and racial polarizations in post-colonial nationalisms must be contextualized in terms of these societies’ new locations in the circulation of capital and symbolic currency. I will explore the connections between neo-colonial ideology and Singapore’s new ‘de-colonizing’ nationalism further in this chapter. For the moment, it may be sufficient to note that perhaps the post-colonial critic should, as Dirlik has already done, regard new post-colonial assertions of identity with some suspicion for the Western imperialist intentions that may be embedded within them.
I will argue that the Fay caning was utilized by the Singapore government to re-stage and legitimize its construction of the nation’s Orientalized Asian/Chinese identity as the ‘other’ to the West. The episode revealed that a state of crisis where the nation’s sovereignty was perceived to be under threat was germane to Singaporeans’ cathecting of the government’s new construction of national culture. The perception of Asian culture as superior to that of the West added to its attraction. I will show that, if there had been ambivalence towards the government’s proposed “shared values,” this was eradicated by the Singapore government’s conflict with the US government and media. The perceived threat to the nation’s sovereignty saw the people crossing over the nation/government divide to identify its interests and its will with that of the government.

This is known in Lacanian psychoanalysis as the “suture” of the subject to the mandate imposed on it by the symbolic (dominant) order, in this case, that of the Singaporean acceding to the national identifications imposed on it by the government. Silverman recalls Miller’s description of suture as “that moment when the subject inserts itself into the symbolic register in the guise of a signifier, and in so doing, gains meaning at the expense of being” (Subject 200). “A given signifier,” she adds, (in this case, that of the signifier “Singaporean” defined in an Orientalized manner) “grants the subject access to the symbolic order, but alienates it not only from its own needs but from its drives. That signifier stands in for the absent subject,” (in this case, the absent “Singaporean”) “whose lack it can never stop signifying” (200). In suture, similar to interpellation except that it focuses on the aspect of lack and desire, the signifier “I” (in this case, the “I” as “Singaporean”) represents the subject to another signifier, “you” (a “non-Singaporean” in this case, or, an “American”). But the subject finds itself in the symbolic order through an imaginary identification (of itself as a coherent self). In the cinematic model (where the subject identifies with the film’s symbolic gaze), says Silverman, as in ideological coercion, suture is effected by the narrative/ideology producing an awareness of lack/castration, causing anxiety, which activates its desire to disavow/overcome that lack by investing in the narrative/ideological fictional resolution/signifiers offered by the symbolic order (201-22). Analyzing the operations of Alfred
Hitchcock’s film *Psycho*, Silverman says it “terrorizes the viewing subject, refusing ever to let it off the hook. That hook is the system of suture . . . ” (212). For suture to occur, however, “the code, which produces an imaginary, ideological effect” must disappear from the subject’s consciousness; it must be “hidden by the message” so that the subject “absorbs an ideological effect without being aware of it.”

The ‘hooking’ of the Singaporean subject to government ideology depended, I will show, on the discursive creation of a situation which allowed the Singaporean’s fear and suspicion of government authority to be displaced into fear and suspicion of Western imperialism. But this fear of a lost sovereignty that enabled the Singaporean’s cathecting of the government’s mandate of national identification was made invisible in the polls conducted at the end of the incident, which indicated that the people’s desire was now united with that of the state’s. The media’s role in the process of suture was important. As Roger Fowler observes, the media (perhaps more so than government) possesses many resources with which to hide the institutional nature of their discourse, to conceal the voice of authority. It is also able to form, represent or simply assume a consensus among the people, which is crucial for hegemonizing a nationalist ideology (*Language* 46-65).

The suture was also enabled by the compensatory enjoyment the newly constructed national identity offered of feelings of cultural superiority to the West. As I have shown, Singapore’s new nationalism borrowed from a Western revision of Orientalism, which, with its suggestion of alternative, non-European modernities, emerged from Western angst about its cultural superiority in the face of the growing success of East Asian economies (Wee, “Clash” 221-2). Within neo-Orientalism, the West exhibits, at least superficially, an attitude that it may have something to learn from the East, after all. This aspect of the government’s new national identity had not become evident during the “National Ideology” project but the government emphasized this during the caning incident. The media, in particular, the newspaper *Straits Times*, whose discourse I will examine, played no small role in exploiting this sense of cultural superiority.
But as press reports also show, it was an ambivalent sense of superiority, haunted by contradictory moments of inferiority to the West and recognition of its higher power. The caning incident was to show that this Singaporean ambivalence originated in the West’s own ambivalent inscription of Eastern ‘superiority’ in neo-Orientalism. When Singapore began to assert its cultural difference from the West/America by re-staging its recently formulated, Orientalized national identity, it became clear that its claim of alterity from the West was based on a polarization of liberal values as Western/American and authoritarian state control (or its euphemism, “communitarian democracy”), constructed as Eastern. But the caning incident revealed that this Singaporean/Eastern ‘otherness’ was also the face of an ‘other’ America/West, that which rose up in support of Singapore’s authoritarian approach to crime control and its expanded disciplinary control of the people. Tired of rising crime rates and ineffectual prosecution of offenders at home, these ‘other’ Americans saw in Singapore the utopia of a safe society. As they made their voices heard, Singaporeans, in particular the media, began to view themselves as the fantasy object of American desire: that they were what Americans wanted to be but couldn’t. Singaporeans’ validation of state control and their ‘anti-colonial’ affirmation of their ‘Eastern’ identity ironically turned on the enjoyment they gained from being desired and approved of by the West. The caning incident unraveled Singapore’s new nationalism, revealing it to be a colonial construct of subjectivity rather than a decolonized one, as that which produced Singapore as the fantasy object of American right-wing desires for patriarchal state discipline and control.

This enjoyment of ‘Eastern’ cultural superiority, however, was riddled with doubt because ‘liberal’ America, the America of the media, did not take a similar desiring approach to Singapore. For them, Singapore was a barbaric nation which supposedly still employed medieval rituals of public hangings. I will not deal with American discourse except occasionally since my focus is on Singaporean responses to the incident. Suffice it to say for the moment that the American press’ representation of Singapore as Chinese in its ‘barbarism’ revealed the racism embedded in Western liberalism as well as the fear of the ‘yellow threat’ that has emerged with the economic challenge to the US posed by Korea, Taiwan, Japan,
China and other Pacific Rim nations. The racist desire of talk-show host Phil Donahue, for instance, rendered him gullible to the claims of an American featured guest who claimed that he had been a regular visitor to Singapore and had witnessed such a public hanging—where apparently blood-thirsty Singaporeans had cheered on the hangman. It was later discovered that this American had never been to Singapore.

Ien Ang and Jon Stratton argue that Singapore’s new modern ‘Asianness’ is promoted through the construction of the ‘West’ as its ‘other.’ They also point out that its “self-Orientalizing Occidental opposition to the Western, mirrors the West’s persistent neo-Orientalist othering of modern Asia” (85). “There is a complicity,” they say, “between Western neo-Orientalist discourses . . . and Singaporean discourses of self-representation” (69). The Singapore-America discourse on the caning incident certainly bears this out. But the discourses of American and Singaporean national cultures that were generated out of the caning incident also unmasked a split in the self-representation of the American embedded within neo-Orientalist discourse itself.

Singapore’s use of the neo-Orientalist discourse in staging its identity in the caning incident inadvertently revealed neo-Orientalism as an ideological fantasy located in American cultural anxiety. I say this with particular reference to Lodge and Vogel’s well-cited book Ideology and National Competitiveness that spawned Singapore’s effort to define its ‘Asian’ identity. The manner in which Singapore’s self-representation split America into two suggests that the neo-Orientalist construction of the Eastern ‘other’ not only re-articulated old Western racism but that it is also an American attempt to escape from repressed, forbidden, anti-liberal desires for greater state control by projecting them onto the racial ‘other.’ This allowed Americans not only to disavow their own desires but to also use the racial threat to urge a de-liberalization of America, to offer “communitarian democracy” as economically necessary for the nation. This explains America’s split response to Singapore in the incident, where Singapore was either beheld as a desired image of an American future, or that which bore the anxiety that
liberal America felt about a contemporary threat to its most central values—a threat posed by late
capitalism but which is displaced onto the racial ‘other’ as scapegoat.

I will argue that when Singapore asserted its Oriental ‘otherness’ against the West/America, it was
merely offering itself as object of desire for the West, where the ‘other’ revealed itself as the Western
‘self.’ Singapore’s statements of a culturally superior, non-Western ‘difference’ were always framed by
Western authorization and its self-representation gazed with desire at Western approval. I will also show
that anxiety about male identity worked in this discourse as a condensed, paranoid metaphor that spoke
of a deadlock in Singaporean desire to be both the ‘other’ and the Western ‘self,’ and expressed an inner
fear/awe of American power that ironized assertions of cultural superiority. State
authoritarianism/discipline was both eroticized and pathologized (the latter by dissident writers) by
inhabiting subject positions assigned by male masochism and/or sodomization within a heterosexual,
homosocial context.

Singapore’s use of the incident to stage its Asian difference from the West also revealed that this
involved, at base, nothing more than anti-liberalism, and was not *per se* anti-Western. The nation’s
Eastern identity crystallized in the discourse as an equation made with authoritarianism and state
discipline of the social body. The *rotan* became symbol of Singapore’s Eastern culture, which is ironic
because caning in Singapore is strictly a colonial hand-me-down. Throughout the incident, the
Singapore government and media reductively represented America’s liberal political culture in terms
only of lax, ineffectual approaches to crime and punishment. Fay’s miscreant behavior and American
liberals’ protest against his caning featured in the Singapore discourse as metonym for liberalism in
general. “Liberalism kills” was the underlying message in a newspaper article which argued that US
liberal approaches hampered crime-busting (“Liberal Tradition,” *ST* 16 April 1994). Lee Kuan Yew’s
comment that “drugs, violence, unemployment and homelessness, all sorts of problems” were what made
America “hardly safe and peaceful” criminalized all social problems, especially those resulting from
unequal wealth distribution and deftly executed a slippage between tight state control of crime and state policing of all aspects of human life.

But Singapore’s Occidental demonizing of the US rarely moved beyond echoing America’s own self-critical representations made by its right-wing ideologues. The compatibility between Singapore and conservative America that manifested itself in this staging of Singapore’s Oriental identity as well as other aspects of this East-West discourse suggest a particular reading of American neo-Orientalism which will gradually become evident in my discussion of the caning incident.

American neo-Orientalism, especially that articulated by Lodge and Vogel, appears to have arisen as an ideological formation at the intersection of two American cultural anxieties: that of the geo-cultural threat posed by the rising new economies of other cultures and races and the interrogation of America’s own core cultural values of liberal democracy by the economic pressures of late capitalism where further capital accumulation requires anti-liberal approaches to government. As in previous colonial discourses, race as a source of anxiety is repressed by displacing it into methodology where the ‘other’ is studied as an object. In *Ideology and National Competitiveness*, Lodge and Vogel not only misrepresent Taiwanese, Koreans, and Japanese as the same due to their Confucian values, but also interpret this homogenized East Asian culture in terms of Western political interests. At one level, neo-Orientalism is a pathological ideology that seeks to mitigate Western fears about the newly industrialized economies by representing Asian economic success as due to an ethnic/racial accident rather than to the savvy of the people, and their ability to respond quickly to the forces of history. It certainly represses the idea that non-Western people might be better able to play the capitalist game than its originators. According to neo-Orientalism, East Asians would seem to be a never-changing people, whose culture, Confucianism, just fortuitously happened to lend itself to participation in capitalism. But neo-Orientalism should also be situated as an attempt by conservative American ideologues to legitimize right-wing, non-liberal values as ‘American,’ and to get their agenda of greater state control past America’s foundational liberal
political culture. In “The United States: The Costs of Ambivalence,” Lodge identifies a central ideological ambivalence in American history:

From their beginnings in the seventeenth century, Americans have been divided in their devotion to the ideologies of individualism and communitarianism. They have unquestionably preferred the former . . . but they have moved pragmatically toward the latter to confront problems and seize opportunities. If we look back on US history, this ambivalence may have been beneficial . . . If we look forward, its benefits are by no means as clear. (103)

In the past half a century, he says, “a crescendo of events in the real world, domestically and abroad, has accelerated a drift toward communitarian practices” (103). He identifies “East Asian competition” as being among foreign factors that have influenced this move, adding that competition from East Asian economies provide “considerable evidence that some communitarian nations are more competitive than the United States” (104).

Lodge is concerned that even though there has been a “transition to communitarian practices” (119) in the 1980s in the US, there still remains this ideological ambivalence, which, especially when it pertains to the role of government, could be “costly” (126). The “practical drift in the direction of communitarianism was in no sense ideologically motivated,” he complains (119). “Its aim was only to solve problems, seize opportunities, and perform more effectively. Even as the slow swing occurred, leaders in all walks of life propounded the virtues of traditional individualism: free enterprise, free trade, free markets, the limited state, and the rest” (119).

With “tension in American society . . . shaped by an improper fit between its prevailing ideology [liberalism] and a changing world” (137), he hopes that “leaders of government, business, and labor will acknowledge the fundamental law of evolution--adapt or perish--and strive to minimize these crises by using each one to ease the transition to a more effective system” (138) that will overturn the erosion in American national economic competitiveness. By “effective system,” he means, a “communitarian democracy” where, among other things, the government will play a primary role in identifying “the
Lodge wants Americans to confront and come to terms with this ideological “ambivalence” rather than to run away from it as it has done in the past (which apparently retards the benefits and operations of “communitarianism”). He himself rejects the strategy some have offered to deal with this ambivalence, that “camouflage was desirable: change practice but keep in place a veil of ignorance to prevent the disturbing effects of the ideological fallout from disrupting that change” (120).

Lodge and Vogel have already pastoralized “authoritarianism” by re-baptizing it as “communitarianism.” But perhaps the task of national ideological change in the US is too hard and requires some form of “camouflage.” This is where other cultures prove to be ideologically handy. The authoritarianism/communitarianism can be projected onto other races where these are given a Western name as well as a racial/ethnic name. In the case of East Asia, it can be called alternatively “communitarianism” or “Confucianism.” Neo-Orientalism takes Western/American imperialist desire for ever more increased national competitiveness across the cultural border forbidden by liberalism. But by also inscribing it on the Eastern body, specifically the ‘Confucianist” body, it is able to offer this body as racial scapegoat for the need to execute an ideological change within the Western self. The doubled inscription of the racial ‘other’ as both “communitarian” and “Confucianist” means that it can alternate in serving two functions. The term “communitarian” could be allied with capitalist efficiency (and sharable by the West) while “Confucianism” could be seen as the racialized or archaic term, allied with racial otherness.

I will argue through my discussion of the caning incident, in particular through Singapore’s neo-Orientalist construction of Eastern identity, that the discourse of neo-Orientalism is a right-wing construction where the East is presented nostalgically in the image of American culture in its golden age--as one where family values, hard work, thrift and communal solidarity enabled an utopian existence.
and also allowed capital accumulation to proceed unhindered. But this mis-representation of Eastern culture, which is an attempt to extract cultural surplus value from the East, occurs at a site of American ideologically transgressive entry into the political culture of patriarchal authoritarianism, forbidden by liberalism. However, while neo-Orientalism keeps the East where the West wants it be—forever culturally defensive, working with Western meanings that transform and betray the post-colonial subject into recidivism as these meanings cross the West-East divide—the East’s appropriation of this colonial discourse returns the transgressive moment of origin back to the West’s discourse, where it then cleaves the Western nation in two, questioning American cultural coherence and undermining their sense of cultural superiority.

The discourse of national identity that arose in Singapore surrounding the Fay incident was one of the most definitive moments for Singapore in terms of the articulation of its national identity. It was the first time that the Singapore government, helped by the media, and using the American discourse of neo-Orientalism, attempted to stage the identity of Singapore as the cultural ‘other’ to the US. The incident showed that this instrumentalist production of national identity—where the demonized production of the US as Singapore’s cultural ‘other’ was used as a strategy to expunge cultural elements from the nation that were not amenable to an authoritarian political culture and to easy social management—depended on American authorization. But discourse produced from this incident also reveals that this national identity is not viable in that it contradicted earlier constructions of the nation as culturally hybrid. In addition to government statements and press reports, two books will also be examined. The book The Caning of Michael Fay: The Inside Story by a Singaporean by Gopal Baratham, a Singapore fiction writer and neurosurgeon, provides a platform to examine how the government’s construction of the nation’s identity seriously hinders alternative constructions of the nation while lending itself to easy deconstruction. On the other hand, the book The Flogging of Singapore by journalist Asad Latif bears scrutiny as to the ideological demands made on Singaporeans who wish to identify with the government’s proposed Asian national culture. This book, the most elaborate piece of discourse to be
produced out of this incident, tried to authenticate Singapore’s ‘Asian’ identity by re-packaging it as a factual discourse belonging to the genre of historical reportage. But it inadvertently revealed serious contradictions and ambivalence within the government’s construction of the nation.

The state’s construction of national identity significantly began from a moment of high anxiety, that of a threat to the nation’s political sovereignty, which was created by the government itself and opened up a discursive space for culturally ‘othering’ or alienating Singapore from the US. On 3 March 1994, Fay was sentenced to a total of four months’ jail, six strokes of the cane, and a fine of $3,500 on two charges of vandalism, two counts of mischief (for pelting two cars with eggs, switching a license plate and damaging a car door) and one count of dishonestly retaining stolen property (flags, taxi signs and other signboards). Twenty other charges, mainly of vandalism were taken into consideration.

Immediately after sentencing, US embassy official Ralph Boyce registered the embassy’s dissatisfaction with the court findings with a statement released to the press. This was followed the next day by a similar statement from the American Chamber of Commerce in Singapore, expressing its consternation. President Clinton’s intervention came on 8 March 1994.

American official comments from Clinton, the White House and the US embassy in Singapore showed some attempt to avoid suggestions of threats to political sovereignty. Embassy official Ralph Boyce, for instance, in his first public statement (made to the press immediately after Fay’s sentencing on 3 March 1994), began by acknowledging Singapore’s sovereignty in the local administration of justice: “American citizens overseas . . . [were] subject to the laws of that country,” he said (“Reactions to Sentencing,” ST 4 Mar. 1994). He was also careful to situate his intervention within the purview of embassy function: the embassy wanted to “ensure that his [Fay’s] legal rights under Singapore law were accorded to him.” Nevertheless, there is implicature here: that the Singapore justice system did not protect individuals’ rights in the prosecution of crime; that Fay’s prosecution was motivated by anti-Americanism. Commenting directly on the case, he said, “We see a large discrepancy between the offense and the punishment. The cars were not permanently damaged; the paint was removed with
thinner. Caning leaves permanent scars. . . . We have made our concerns clear for a youthful first time offender.” He added: “We are not going to forecast any possible future diplomatic actions.”

Boyce’s objection was made from within the terms of the Singapore vandalism law. He approached cultural criticism of Singapore law, of its legal philosophy, by pointing to the gap between the “offense” and the “punishment,” but he moved quickly to modify that as involving an interpretation of the law rather than its interrogation. The Singapore law on vandalism states that a first-time offender may be excused from mandatory caning of three strokes on each count if the offense does not include vandalism by paint or any other indelible substance. Boyce’s point was that Fay was a first-time offender and that paint, in this case, was not an indelible substance— it was easily removed with thinner. Boyce used a modality of fact. The embassy’s “see[ing]” of a discrepancy depends on a series of facts that are perceptually validated and expressed as a series of independent clauses: the cars were not permanently damaged; the paint was removed with thinner; and caning leaves permanent scars. The nominal “caning” also discursively deletes the relationship between the agent of action/punishment (Singapore) and the object of punishment (the American citizen). In Boyce’s remarks, then, cultural criticism of Singapore in terms of American liberal approaches to punishment was clearly intended but just as clearly, it also aimed to cover over its aggression, occupying a highly ambiguous discursive space.

Singapore’s Ministry of Home Affairs came back with a more confrontational response, interpreting Boyce’s statement as a criticism of Singapore’s culture and as asserting the superiority of American culture:

Unlike some other societies (read US) which may tolerate acts of vandalism, Singapore has its own standards of social order as reflected in our laws. It is because of our tough laws against antisocial crimes that we are able to keep Singapore orderly and relatively crime-free. We do not have a situation where acts of vandalism are commonplace, as in cities like New York where even police cars are not spared. (“Reactions to Sentencing,” ST 4 Mar. 1994)
The Ministry, in asserting Singapore's right to make its own laws, made it seem that the US was denying them this right when Boyce had clearly acknowledged this point of international law. Boyce's use of the pronominal "we" was ambiguous: within the context of his statement, it appeared to refer to the embassy, as opposed to American national agency. In the Singapore ministerial statement, "we" marked the attempt right from the beginning of the incident to 'gang up,' to identify the government with the people, state power with national solidarity. The response situated itself as a 'national' rather than government statement directed at the US.

But Singapore agency was also depersonalized in the government statement: it is, in fact, attributed to its laws. Singapore's "standards of social order" were "reflected in [its] laws"; Singapore's "tough laws" were the agent of Singapore's orderliness and freedom from crime. If the law was indeed the expression of Singaporean national subjectivity, it was also that which totalized that subjectivity and forbade difference. The ministry's response also interpreted America's specific interrogation of the application of the caning sentence in the Fay case as a 'cultural' question concerning "standards of social order." It was this culturalizing of the issue that allowed Singapore to 'other' itself from the West and to legitimize this Singapore identity by demonizing the West. The perceived or constructed threat to sovereignty also permitted anti-colonial desire to be invested in this demonization. The press played up the conflictual elements of the situation: the press report of the Singapore government and US embassy's statements pitted the two sides against each other by presenting it under a banner headline, "Reactions to Sentencing of American Teenager for Vandalism," of which the Singapore side was titled "1. The Ministry of Home Affairs Says The Law Must Run Its Course," and the US side was headlined "2. The United States Embassy Says Punishment Doesn't Fit Crime."

The statement from the American Chamber of Commerce in Singapore was ambivalent (US Chamber," 5 Mar. 1994). On the one hand, it deployed an emotional rhetoric: it said it was "shaken by the reported decision to cane the boy," and "simply" could not "understand how the government [could] condone the permanent scarring of an 18-year-old boy--American or Singaporean--by caning for such an
offense.” But it also said that it had always supported the Singapore government’s “aggressive enforcement of law and order” and believed it was one of the reasons why Singapore was an attractive place to live and do business. Its statement that “it [was] impossible to predict how this [would] affect American business activity” but that it was “likely to cast a cloud over Singapore’s international reputation,” lent itself to interpretation that it was not planning to push for economic sanctions. In the event, American businesses in Singapore refused to comply with New York Times’ call on them to put pressure on the Singapore government (“Several US Firms,” ST 17 Apr. 1994).

President Clinton’s intervention came on 8 March 1994, which was made before the case went to appeal in the High Court. His statement, like Boyce’s, tried to anchor American liberal perceptions of the extremity of the punishment in the application of Singapore law rather than in critique of the law itself (“Clinton Says,” BT 9 Mar. 1994).  

He said: “. . . we believe that, based on the facts and treatment of other cases, similar cases, that this punishment is extreme.” Clinton delimited a country’s right to enforce its own laws: “We recognize that they have a certain right to enforce their own criminal laws.” But this delimitation could have been read as differentiating between correct use of the law and its abuse in the light of his previous comment, rather than as aggressively challenging the sovereignty of Singapore law. He vaguely hoped that “somehow, it (the caning sentence) will be reconsidered” (my emphasis). While there is an implied suggestion that the Singapore government intervene in due process of law, Clinton’s statement is itself a speech act, appealing directly to the Singapore judiciary who would rule on appeal rather than to the executive arm of government.

Clinton’s statement aimed at an under-lexicalization of discourse, where references are generalized and abstract rather than concrete and specific, and it employed a modality of uncertainty, so that international tension was diffused. Like Boyce, Clinton situated the American position ambivalently: it was a position that acknowledged its own interpretative status (“we believe that, based on the facts of the case”), but also underscored its basis in fact. The facts of the case act as pseudo agents, where circumstances stood in for American national agency. Clinton also personalized America in his appeal to
Singapore. He stressed an American introspective, mental transitivity: Americans “believe[d]” that the punishment was extreme and Americans “recognize[d]” that Singapore had a certain right to law enforcement.

Singapore’s Foreign Affairs ministry’s response to Clinton’s appeal (at the least, a disguised demand) was softer in tone (“Clinton Says,” BT 9 Mar. 1994). It merely reiterated the Home Affairs Ministry’s stance that the government couldn’t intervene in the administration of justice, that the law had to run its course. Nonetheless, it contradicted this by making the government’s support of the lower court’s findings of the case quite clear. Comparing sentences handed out in previous cases of vandalism, it said that these reveal “that the court sentence meted to Fay is neither extreme nor unprecedented.” It also said that Fay’s sentencing was the outcome of a fair and transparent legal process. The earlier Ministry of Home Affairs’ statement had also indirectly expressed its support of the lower court’s findings: it said that the law provided a range of punishments, and the court had meted out the punishment of caning, jail and a fine after Fay had pleaded guilty to five charges, with 20 other charges taken into consideration. This support was expressed at a time when government comment on the case was inappropriate since the case was going into appeal.

The press joined in the state’s effort to represent Clinton and Boyce as threatening Singapore’s sovereignty. Business Times’ report on 9 Mar. 1994 polarized the Singapore and American government’s points of view by physically splitting the report, with an adversarial headline: “Clinton says caning of vandal is extreme, Singapore government disagrees.” The headline and the report represented the issue as a battle of wills. Clinton’s statement “that somehow it [the sentence] will be reconsidered” was represented as a prescription of behavior to the Singapore government.

As the following press reports, editorials and government statements will show, the perception of a threat to Singapore sovereignty appeared to be necessary to Singapore’s demonization of the West. The US did keep up pressure throughout the incident but no direct threats were made against Singapore. On 1 April 1994, 24 US senators signed a letter appealing for clemency for Fay from the Singapore president.
Following his earlier intervention, Clinton repeated his opinion one month later that it would be a mistake to cane Fay and urged former US president George Bush, scheduled for a visit to Singapore, to raise the issue with the government (“Clinton” Mistake,” BT 15 Apr. 1994). A week later, Clinton suggested that Fay’s confession may have been coerced and repeated his objection to caning: “The caning may lead to permanent scars and some people who are caned go into shock. It’s much more serious than it sounds,” he said (“Not Clear,” ST 21 Apr. 1994). But he added that he remained undecided about whether to urge US businesses in Singapore to put pressure on the government. Bush too declined to push the issue in Singapore.12 On 10 March 1994, the US State Department said that its protest launched with the Singapore government “was not a one-time expression. This is something we are continuing to push” (“Fay Case: US Says,” ST 11 Mar. 1994). The very next day, however, the US Secretary of State said that American trade with Singapore would not be affected even if Fay was caned but suggested that the incident might affect Americans planning travel to Singapore (“Trade with Singapore,” ST 12 Apr. 1994).

For some reason, however, at this stage, Singapore wanted to adopt the subject-position of disempowered colonial victim, where its narrative of Occidentalism would be seen as spoken in self-defense. The media war between the US and Singapore over the case occurred only later in April, after the Singapore government’s adoption of a recalcitrant stand. But American media responses were cited falsely as that which instigated Singapore’s demonizing of the West.

A look at the chronology of Singapore media reports shows that Clinton’s intervention alone sparked cultural confrontation. Straits Times’ editorial of 10 March 1994, “Spare the Rod, Mr Clinton,” for instance, attacked Western culture in response to Clinton’s comments only. Columnist Koh Buck Song’s editorial on 17 March 1994, which demonized Western/American codes of masculinity, appeared to be self-generated rather than instigated by American hostility (“When To Be Tough,” ST). The first intimation that the American media were anti-Singaporean came in early April 1994, for instance in a report on CNN’s discussion of the issue (Cherian George, “Both Sides Now,” ST 3 Apr. 1994) and in the
article "What US Columnists Say About Fay’s Caning" (ST 8 Apr. 1994). Prior to this, the Singapore press had represented the American public as supportive of Singapore.¹³

The Singapore media, and, later, Latif’s book, repeatedly represented Singapore’s hostile response to American state intervention as a defensive and rational confrontation with an aggressive and hysterical American media--where Singapore was depicted as the victim of American cultural if not political aggression in the media. Latif deleted all references to the Singapore media’s as well as the Singapore public’s denunciation of American culture prior to April 1994 by recalling the incident thus:

To Singaporeans, the case was being blown out of proportion by the American media. It was being transformed into an excuse for the flogging of the tiny state by the world’s remaining superpower. (Flogging 5)

Thus, Singapore was represented as an innocent victim rather than an equal opponent in the media war.

The representation of American comment on the matter as a political and cultural threat hardened Singaporeans’ attitudes in favor of the caning sentence, and made any critique of Singapore laws and punishment seem treacherous to the nation. It encouraged Singaporeans to readily abandon their different subjectivities as private individuals to assert their common identity as national subjects in order to support the nation. As Latif noted, some Singaporeans had argued for leniency and questioned the vandalism law in letters to the press sent before Clinton interference, but they hardly did so after it:

Nationalist sentiments were in rich evidence among those who wrote to the press to comment on US pressure. No matter what many Singaporeans thought about caning--and, as we have seen, there were voices pleading against it--they were united in their opposition to pressure from abroad. Indeed, caning as an issue became entirely subservient to the pressure as an issue. (Flogging 19)

Latif read American officials’ comments as the signifier that hardened Singaporeans’ responses. He did not consider the role of the Singapore government and media in representing American involvement in the case as Western imperialism and their manipulation of information as determinants of Singapore public’s response. As Baratham noted, a significant letter to the press by the late David Marshall, a
former Singapore Chief Minister who had led the nation to self-government, and who was also one of the country's best criminal lawyers, went unpublished (66). Marshall had suggested that Fay's and other similar cases that involved minor damage to property should have been prosecuted as offenses of mischief (which do not carry a caning sentence) under Section 425 of the Penal Code while the Vandalism Act be restricted to offenses that concerned major damage.

As the caning incident showed, a perceived threat to sovereignty can be used as a strategy of containment, precluding meanings and positions that go against the government's interests. This also opens up a space for the de-territorializations and re-territorializations of desire that are part of imagining, or in this case, re-imagining, the nation's cultural identity. In events involving international conflict and crisis, the immense resources of the press in shaping and affirming national consensus are often used to construct national identity as the border that separates “us” from “them.” In the Fay case, this happened in the US as well as Singapore. As the following discussion will make clear, the press used an ideology of consensus, which Roger Fowler defines as the assumption that the interests of the population are undivided, to identify the people's values with that of the government's (49). In the incident, one limited group of values (such as the need for stringent laws and harsh punishment, safety and security, the patriarchal role of the state), repeatedly cited by the press, came to stand in for national values. Between the government and the media, consensus was achieved by the process of dichotomizing “us” against “them,” sometimes literally in split news reports, and by organizing meanings of “homocentricity,” a shared Singaporean world of experience.14

The production of America by the government and the press proceeded by normalizing values related to political authoritarianism, and setting up as their demonized ‘other,’ values cherished by liberalism. Masculinization/effeminization was a major strategy by which ‘American’ liberal value systems were demonized and rendered as ‘alien’ while questionable racial essentialisms were used to ‘nativize’ local authoritarian political culture. The discourse of pragmatism played a central role in normalizing
Singaporean authoritarian political culture and marking American liberal political ideology with lack, hysteria and irrationality.

Singapore's representation of itself as the cultural 'other' to the West duplicated colonial imperialistic discourse. Given, however, that Singapore's 'othering' of itself against the West, its persistent use of the West to authorize its own discourse of identity, was a re-staging of American neo-Orientalism, Singapore's search for native post-colonial authority merely resulted in colonial mimicry, a masquerade of colonial authority, that kept returning to the white father it was trying to kill. The press and government attempted to semioticize the incident as one of East-West conflict rather than as one about crime and punishment or about civil rights. But their elaboration of Singapore identity pivoted ambivalently around the US, keeping it obsessively in view. This circling of Singapore identity around US culture also suggested that the rejection of Western values was merely a displacement of Singaporeans' deep desire to be like and to locate themselves in the Western 'other.' That is, Singaporean desire had not been suddenly de-colonized nor had it undergone any significant change except in form. Due to this, the 'othering' process produced fractures in Singaporeans' sense of themselves. Singapore journalists showed a need to assess and affirm Singaporean identity in the mirror of male subjectivity, a sign that the government's demand of them involved deep structural alterations in their system of identifications and desires.

As Silverman notes, secondary ideologies such as those of race, gender, class (and presumably, nation too) are linked to primary ideologies of sexual identity, and changes in the former threaten belief in the latter (Male 47-8). As I will show, the recirculation of national identity through the economy of male identity figured the 'colonized' native's cultural self-doubt as well as anxiety over his phallic power to represent, ironically expressed by the nation's chief self-representers, male journalists. As Bhabha so mischievously notes, masculinity is "an appendix or addition, that, willy-nilly, supplements and suspends a 'lack in being'" ("Are You a Man," 57).
The Straits Times’ editorial on 10 March 1994, “Spare the Rod, Mr. Clinton?” started the ideological task of culturally alienating American liberal political culture by representing it as a pathological male sexuality that was, contradictorily, both an excess of male sexuality as well as a lack of it. American intervention, perceived as imperialism, was ‘othered’ in the language of thuggery: unlike other countries, Britain and Malaysia for instance, which had similar cases pending in Singapore courts, the US did “not know when to back off,” over-reacted, and was unable to give the “cool and dignified” responses that were the proper expression of a normalized, assured masculinity. The newspaper’s attempt to culturally de-familiarize and thereby set the cultural parameters for Singaporeans’ reading of Clinton’s intervention echoed with a sense of fear of American imperialism as a masculinity gone berserk:

Incredulity would be the reaction of many a Singaporean who learns that the world’s most powerful politician, upon prompting from a reporter’s question in the White House . . . has taken a personal interest in a case that involves neither political hostage-taking nor a breach of national security.

This fear sought to tame itself in a phantasmatic strategy where American power, viewed as wild masculinity, was represented as a symptom of a lack in masculinity itself, which was constantly seeking to disavow its impotency through (false) images or simulacra of the real thing. Clinton’s intervention then embodied a thuggishness that was merely heroic: “Singaporeans who find [Clinton’s] intervention objectionable need to understand that heroic gestures go down well with the American public.” With this strategy, Clinton was turned, in the Singapore imaginary, into a pathetic ‘man,’ a fake Western frontier hero with no masculine free will, who acted according to a script given to him by others, his American constituents: “Poor Mr. Clinton,” says Straits Times, who “burdened as he is” by “the strain of putting out fires abroad (Bosnia, Somalia, difficult relations with China and Japan), and shepherding a controversial health-care package at home,” had to stand up “for a fellow American” because “American
politicians have to answer to demanding constituents, yes. A subject for political enjoinder [in America] can be as big or as trivial as the public chooses to make it.”

Political culture, then, was tied to codes of male sexual identity. In the case of the US, its liberalism was contradictorily marked as variously effeminate, untamed male virility or as male posturing revealing an underlying impotence. Liberal democracy’s placing of the protection of its citizens’ individual rights on par with national or international concerns such as health-care, trade and foreign relations and militaristic decisions was not only Americanized and placed in a cultural ‘enemy territory,’ but it was also pathologized as male hysteria which involved an abuse of state power. Clinton’s representation of the opinion of the American public and the liberal media as well as the philosophical genealogy where government legitimacy is located in its ability to represent the voice of the people were discredited as masculine posturing.

By contrast, the editorial represented Singapore’s political culture as the expression of a national, self-assured masculinity. This culture was equated with the “stringency” of Singapore’s laws, about which, the editorial said, Singaporeans had “no reason to be defensive.” Where American political agency was split between the people and the government, Singapore agency was coherent and monolithic, even if its source was left unidentified: the nation’s “aggressive enforcement of law and order” was “just one of the societal benchmarks it chose to set for itself” (my emphasis). The Singapore government’s response, its setting out “the facts of past prosecutions for vandalism and the equal weight of the law applied, whoever the accused was” was deemed “proper, firm and clinical,” as opposed to American male hysteria. Singapore’s vandalism law and its use of caning was assumed to be the manifestation of an authentic and fixed masculinity. This placed the discussion of the ethics of crime and punishment and the possibility of future legal changes outside the discursive domain of national culture.

The editorial however was divided by contradictions that compromised its assertion of a coherent (hence masculine) Singaporean identity. It also showed that the threat to political sovereignty was the
necessary fiction on which Singapore’s self-representation depended. Singapore identity was constructed in opposition to American imperialism but the editorial itself admitted that neither Clinton nor embassy officials had claimed that Fay’s rights had been violated. It acknowledged that Clinton had confined “his protest to the Singapore government to the caning portion of the sentence, the part he found ‘extreme.’” It also said that Clinton’s request that the sentencing be reconsidered “after paying due recognition to Singapore’s sovereign right to exercise the law in its jurisdiction” would be taken care of by the appeal pending against the sentence. These admissions delegitimized the editorial and its masculine definition of Singaporean ‘difference,’ making these extraneous and false since they contradicted Straits Times’ premise of American aggression and male hysteria.

Another moment of aporia and ambivalence towards the US occurred when the editorial quoted the American Chamber of Commerce in describing “Singapore’s aggressive enforcement of law and order” as “one of numerous societal benchmarks it [Singapore] chose to set for itself.” The editorial defined and authorized Singapore identity exclusively through American words. But the editorial then went on to reject these words, which it had already turned into symbolic capital, by saying that “Singapore neither seeks nor gets chuffed by such observations.” (“Chuffed” is British slang for “delighted.”)

One week later, Koh’s editorial more elaborately masculinized Singaporean political culture (“When to be Tough,” ST 17 Mar). Here Singapore’s ‘authentic’ male identity was defined in terms of the disciplining of the male body and its mind, which were represented as rites of passage to an adult male subjectivity. Singapore’s National Service as well as caning employed at school were offered as local institutions/practices that brought this ideal male subjectivity into existence. National Service—interpreted as an example of a “strict military regimen” that taught people “self-control and respect for others and their property”—was used to reconcile traditional ‘macho’ notions of male virility and bravery (which often involve resistance against authority and class power) with obedience/submission to authority. “Looking back” on his own experience of National Service, Koh recalled the unforgettable “physical and mental stress which combat personnel have to endure.” He also “remember[ed] well the
lessons of duty and honour, and of marshaling oneself and one’s relationship with society.” National Service “can alter a man,” he said, curbing the aberrant masculinity of the adolescent male, who, in school, is given to committing anti-social acts such as the destruction of public property.

Both National Service as well as a school caning of two miscreant youths that Koh witnessed were constructed as rites of passage for young Singapore men. In Koh’s narrative, full adult male subjectivity necessarily included an interpellation of young men as national subjects who were then introduced to the “foundations of their social system.” We may conclude then that Singaporean male culture had no place for an anti-establishment, left-wing brand of male heroism.

Koh’s claim that the “character change” effected by these rites of passage occurred through a “kind of osmosis—such as one finds in the education system—by which society’s values are imbibed subconsciously or unconsciously,” is significant. It not only inscribed caning and legalized state discipline of society, its “tough measures,” as the site of core socio-cultural values (gendered as male) but also revealed an anxiety concerning the male subject’s submission. The contention that state discipline worked subconsciously or unconsciously allowed Koh to escape from accusations of submission.

Singapore’s national service, with all its meanings of discipline and self-control (i.e. not ‘state’ control) was contrasted to the Western (and American) welfare system which, because it lacked Singapore’s rites of passage, was constructed as the site of production of an adolescent masculinity that lacked social responsibility or discipline, where the (male) citizen was never allowed to come to full subjectivity. In welfare societies, unlike societies with compulsory army service, young men were “layabouts loitering in the streets, having little respect for others and believing that the state would provide for them.” Some of them even grew up into workers, Koh said, who “worked less hard and engineered [their] own sacking deliberately, because [they] knew [they] would receive more in social security payments if [they] were fired than if [they] resigned of their own accord.” Thus Fay and America, through their association with the social welfare system, were implicitly constructed as
possessing uninitiated, juvenile male sexualities that were given to acts of "flamboyant public defiance."
The language of American liberal criminology—its "tempering [of] justice with mercy," allowing crime-offenders to "repent and recover," and its concern that punishment could cause "psychological and physical scars"—was effeminized, marked as an inability to respond in a true masculine manner to social needs and obligations. Fay came to stand in for this de-masculinized America who, as juvenile delinquent uninitiated into adult masculinity, needed the "escape route" offered by liberal approaches to crime and punishment. Koh even suggested that these two different types of male sexuality were physically different, literally embodying dissimilar nations/cultures. American-type acts of "flamboyant public defiance" were so culturally alien to Singapore that seeing these caused a "shock in (Koh's) system" (unlike caning, which presumably was part of his "system").

Koh's editorial aimed to offer an ideologeme of the well-trained soldier to reconcile the Singapore government's authoritarianism and overwhelming control of too many sectors of life with the Singaporean's lack of political agency and full subjectivity. It recoded this authoritarianism as producing an honorable, tough and mature masculinity. Koh, however, even while implicitly claiming for himself an adult male subjectivity, needed an Australian—someone from a "welfare society" who presumably was, if we apply Koh's cultural logic about subjects of welfare states, an untamed male—to instruct him on his country's cultural alterity from the West. If Singaporean masculinity was superior to the West's, Koh's construction of national culture via "how others see you" (the opening words of his article), where one looked into the mirror of the 'other' to find oneself, revealed that this national 'masculinity' lacked the central fiction of conventional masculine culture, the phallic power of self-representation.

Singapore's cultural 'other-ing' of itself against the West often appeared to be a contestation between two Western norms of masculinity rather than a conflict between (always abstract and hypothetical) Eastern and Western value systems. On the one side, there was the American untamed/ephebic/pathological masculinity represented by liberalism and, on the other, a self-
assured/controlled/disciplined/productive masculinity that was identified with political authoritarianism and state discipline of the social body. For Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew, America’s liberal approach to crime and punishment, its protection of individuals from state power abuse was the site of a negative masculinity, more specifically, an abdication of the state’s patriarchal function of disciplining its subjects and controlling their behavior. He reinscribed regulatory technologies of power in patriarchal terms, as the government’s duty in protecting society. “The country [US],” he said, “dares not restrain or punish the individuals, forgiving them for whatever they’ve done” (“US reaction,” ST 13 Apr. 1994).

If under the liberal code of masculinity, the infringement of civil rights by the government was deemed barbaric, the authoritarian code considered it “tough” and pragmatic, and human rights became an issue, not of the ethics of power, but of the efficacy of crime control. But Lee also expanded the arena of state policing and discipline as a patriarchal “duty,” stretching the familiar parameters of crime control to include “drugs, violence, unemployment and homelessness, all sorts of problems.” Given the ruling party’s history, the last vague reference quite possibly included politically dissenting opinions, as well as uncontrolled female fertility or equal rights of citizens to public housing. Quoting the Senior Minister, an article of 15 April 1994 declared in its headline that the “Caning of Fay [was] an issue of criminology, not human rights.”

Media responses that appeared after Lee’s comments reproduced his strategy of Occidentalizing the discourse of human rights and separating it from the discourse of crime control. ‘American’ liberal masculinity was figured in terms of the nightmare of rampant street crime, threatening to life and limb. One feature represented liberal ideology as an American cultural “tradition” that, despite its idealism, only managed to usher chaos into the streets. It polarized US-Singapore approaches to crime with its headline “US, Singapore Differ in Attitudes to Law and Order” and its structure, juxtaposing two reports, “Crime and Punishment: Singapore” and “Crime and Punishment: US” (ST 16 Apr. 1994). While the Singapore approach used “Harsh Punishment to Deter Criminals,” as described in the sub-head, the American approach was represented as “Liberal Tradition Hamper[ing] Crime-Busting.” The Singapore
side of the feature included a photograph of a Singapore policeman who had helped a young Singaporean find a job, which the caption told readers was to be interpreted as the “friendly arm of the [Singapore] law,” a representation of state authority as benevolently patriarchal. The report on America was accompanied by a photograph of the grave-site of two Japanese students who had been shot dead by carjackers in California. The caption, reminding readers that “the right to bear arms is enshrined in US law,” suggested the inherent unrestrained violence of liberal rights which caused injury even to people outside the American nation (Japanese) and to children. Guns, of course, are traditionally associated with male power, and here with a destructive ‘rogue male’ power.

But if the US-Singapore discourse could be seen as a conflict of masculine cultures, one male culture (Singapore’s) was attempting to beat, but also to entice and seek the approval of the other, despite the other’s often harsh and racist criticism against it. This ambivalence between antipathy to the West/America and desire for it was resolved by Singapore’s viewing itself as the object of the other’s fantasy, where it adopted a traditionally female rather than a male subject-position. It did this by positioning itself within the circuit of desire of one section of the American public—those who wanted stricter crime control in the US, which was also interpreted as a wish for greater state control.

American debate over crime and punishment and recent pushes within the country for stricter crime control were re-presented as a questioning, and therefore a discrediting, of liberalism at its national origin. The American psyche was seen to be split, on the one hand, wanting to hold fast to its liberal founding myths, but, on the other, increasingly viewing ‘tough’ Eastern political culture with desire, a desire that was constructed in one article as “radical” and progressive. But conversely, the article does not recognize the identification of Singaporean desire with American desire:

One good illustration of the American ambivalence about taking tough measures to deal with crime has been the debate over gun control. Attempts to introduce gun controls have been hampered by the fear of appearing too radical and infringing the Second Amendment in the Bill of Rights. (“US, Singapore Differ,” ST 16 Apr. 1994)
As crime rates soared in US cities, the report said, there was a “backlash of [anti-liberal] opinion, as shown by the large number of Americans who support Michael Fay’s caning.” The subtext was that American liberalism was not just an obstruction of strict crime control: it obstructed the fulfillment of American public desire, which supposedly looked with yearning at societies like Singapore:

The relatively light sentences in the US, coupled with the ever-rising as well as greater severity of crimes, have led to increased calls in recent years to get tough. In a recent survey, 78 percent of Americans said they wanted tighter gun control. A war against drugs has been declared. . . An anti-crime Bill up for Congress approval proposes extending capital punishment to more crimes, as well as tougher penalties for federal crimes. The move to get tough on crime is also being taken up by state governments. How many of these proposals eventually get past the legislative tangles at state and federal levels remains to be seen.

Thus had the Americans snagged themselves in a tangled liberal web of their own making.

Liberalism, so the argument goes, generated violence. American liberal policies of rehabilitation, their “sophisticated system of probation,” as well as the right to bear arms and to be protected from “unreasonable searches and seizures” meant that “one child is killed with a firearm every six hours,” “a handgun injures someone every 20 seconds,” “98 percent of crimes committed do not result in a prison sentence” and “only a minority of criminals are convicted and punished.” The liberal tradition in America also apparently accounted for 12,489 handgun murders in 1993. The report ended by pointing out that “in the time it [took] to read this article more than 50 Americans would have been injured by handguns.”

The ineffectiveness of liberal ideology in curbing crime became a metonym for the general impotence of liberalism as a political ideology. By contrast, Singapore’s “utilitarian” approach to law and order was commendable since “the result” was “streets that are safe to walk in day and night and a record on tackling crime that even the harshest critics have acknowledged as one of the best in the world.”
A fair number of newspaper reports appeared that documented Western approval of Singapore's crime control measures. American/Western media responses favorable to Singapore were often published during this period. A feature, "Lesson on Crime from Singapore," condensed pro-Singapore editorial opinion from London Sunday Times, Washington Times, Los Angles Times and International Herald Tribune and also featured a letter sent to Clinton by an American expatriate in Singapore, which urged the American president not to force the issue (ST 18 Mar. 1994). Charles Krauthammer's pro-Singapore editorial in Washington Post was reproduced with the headline "Sense in Singapore's Approach to Punishment" (ST 12 Apr. 1994). An opinion piece by a former mayor of New York, Ed Koch, which had been originally contributed to Global Viewpoint, was also featured in Straits Times and headlined "Bring Back Caning in US" (21 Apr. 1994). Koch's identification with Lee's attitudes towards the government's patriarchal role in disciplining the people was highlighted. Koch said:

The breakdown of the American family is a fact across the board. If the parent is not there to discipline the children when they do something wrong, by default it must be done by the state as protector of society.

This comment was prominently featured in bold lettering as caption for a posed group picture of an American neighborhood that accompanied the article: the picture accented the absence of the American family as the basic unit of community. Then, the article "Caning Defended on CNN" reported that Singapore's Ambassador to the US had stood up for the nation on American television, on "Larry King Live," and that American and other viewers calling in had supported Singapore's crime control measures. The ambiguous headline also suggested that CNN itself was pro-Singapore on the caning issue. Another article "Americans Back Caning Order in Calls and Letters to Singapore Embassy" said that "Americans [were] hailing a court order for . . . Fay . . . to be flogged" (ST 3 Apr. 1994). In the report, a Singapore embassy spokesman in the US was quoted as saying that more than 300 phone calls and letters had been received by the embassy, of which "the vast majority express[ed] very strong support for Singapore" though he declined to give percentages. The same article quoted Chicago
Tribune as claiming that "scores of [American] readers had written to [it], with 99 percent saying the teenager should be flogged." While Marshall, a prominent Singaporean, had been denied his say in the press (see above), a letter to the editor of Straits Times from Bishop Griffith Mair from New Orleans, who had suggested that "US can learn from Singapore," had been published ("Punishing Offenders," ST 5 Apr. 1994). Another letter from an American, A. Peter Parsons, from Seattle, who proclaimed that Singapore had "instructed the United States" in crime and punishment, was published with the headline "Singapore’s Justice System a Model for US" (ST 8 Apr. 1994).

By contrast, American protest of Singapore’s action was represented as merely restricted to the media and some government officials: "a trend that runs counter to the large degree of support the caning sentence has elicited among many ordinary Americans" ("What US Columnists Say," ST 8 Apr. 1994). An editorial by Business Times says that even among the American media, "some writers, like the surprisingly large number of ordinary Americans who have declared their support for the firm action taken against Michael Fay, envy Singapore its safe, clean streets and high degree of lawfulness" ("Let the Commentary," 8 Apr. 1994). Apparently, these American journalists "yearned for similar conditions" (my emphasis). Another report in Straits Times employed a split headline, where Clinton’s "plea to Singapore" was countered with "Ohio residents [from Fay’s hometown] favor punishment" ("Fay’s Caning," 10 Apr. 1994). In the article "Many Americans Back Caning Despite TV Coverage," Americans are depicted as being "unmoved" by gory representations of caning on television, "saying that they supported the caning" (ST 12 Apr. 1994). The report concluded by saying that the shows commanded "a remarkable degree of support for the punishment." An announcer of an American television program was quoted as saying that s/he hoped that Singapore’s courts would be more lenient "than our [American] court of public opinion." Another article featured a side-bar that proclaimed in bold type that "Britons Want Criminals Caned" ("DPP says," ST 22 Apr. 1994). It said that British viewers of "Good Morning Television" wanted caning in Britain even after having seen clips of a flogging and that British polls showed support for Singapore.
Excerpts of media and public response which supported Singapore and were featured in American and British newspapers were rounded up in the article “Overwhelming Support for Caning Sentence” (ST 23 Apr. 1994). An important speech by the Singapore Law Minister, S. Jayakumar, who argued at an international lawyers’ conference for Singapore’s right to enforce its own laws, had to share public attention with an accompanying report that claimed in its headline that one “US Lawyer [had been] Impressed with Jaya’s Defense” (BT 5 May 1994). American journalist Richard Cohen’s comment in Washington Post that the caning controversy was “not about Singapore at all, but about America” was certainly on the mark (“What US Columnists Say,” ST 8 Apr. 1994).

The representation of the nation as the Western/American object of desire took place alongside the construction of a sense of national besiegement by the US. The latter was necessary to justify the hostile demonization of America, out of which Singaporean difference could be constructed and a unity between people and state produced, but it also underlined the hysterical origins of this national identity and gave the lie to the claim of a Singaporean self-assured masculinity. Even in moments of triumph, the nation was represented in a subordinate subject-position, and presented as “patient” rather than “agent.” For instance, the strong, unyielding stance taken by the Singapore ambassador to the US, S. R. Nathan, on “Larry King Live” was touted as the “defend[ing]” of caning on CNN (“Caning Defended,” ST 28 Mar. 1994). The headline deleted all reference to the Singapore envoy as agent. Yet, asked to comment that Singapore had violated the United Nations Charter on Customary International Law, Nathan had unambiguously moved into attack mode: He said that such declarations were statements of ideals which countries tried to observe within their own laws, and added: “In the case of the United States, you have the death penalty, gas chamber . . . which are probably not consistent with these declarations.”

A letter to the press described American intervention in its headline as involving “political arm-twisting and loud gestures,” playing to the fear of an imperial power that was breaking out of the boundaries of acceptable male behavior (“Political Arm-Twisting,” ST 8 Apr. 1994). In another letter to the press, “Time for Fay to Take His Punishment Like a Man,” a threat to Singapore power,
metaphorized as male power, was disavowed by projecting it on to an American body, Fay’s (ST 8 Apr. 1994). The letter also located male power in receiving rather than handing out punishment.

Significantly, Singapore downplayed its role as agent of punishment throughout the incident whereas the American media highlighted this role by representations of the brutal strength of Singapore floggers (“Americans Told Tales,” ST 1 May 1994). Latif’s book, for instance, describes the caning episode in its title as “the flogging of Singapore,” which covers over Singapore’s dominant position of power in disciplining an American body. There was a tendency to avoid representation of the caning as an inversion of First World-Third World relations. Instead, American media responses that represented Singapore as agent of power, even if it was a “fascist” or “totalitarian” assumption of power, were reproduced in the local press specifically to deny this role of power. These were re-presented as “tales” that the “US media told” its public (“Americans Told Tales,” ST 1 May 1994). In Latif’s editorial “It’s All Invectives [sic] and Not Cold Logic,” which responded to US media commentary on the case, a Singaporean masculinity of “cold logic” combined with “compassion” and concern for an American public being bullied by its liberal media, recognizable as a Western, gentlemanly masculinity, was opposed to American representations of a brutal, primitive Singaporean masculinity, of a nation that had a “barbaric and lawless” system that was compared to archaic, Persian-style methods of torture (ST 8 Apr. 1994). Koh too, we note, had offered a well-trained soldier as metaphor of Singaporean masculinity, not a soldier who had the authority to discipline others. Another report’s headline screamed that Singapore had been “under attack” in “Larry King Live,” where meanings of besiegement and subordinate subject-position were semantically doubled, where Singapore was not merely attacked, but also placed “under” in a traditionally female sexual position (“Singapore Under Attack,” ST 1 May 1994). The law minister’s speech mentioned above was reproduced but with the headline “Shouldn’t Other Countries Let Singapore Enforce Its Own Laws,” which mis-represented the minister’s use of a modality of truth, and turned his demand into a plea, his assertion into a question (my emphasis, ST 5 May 1994). The minister had raised the question of international “respect” for “the right” of a country
to enact and enforce its laws within its jurisdiction." He had concluded his speech by asserting Singapore's right to make decisions concerning crime and punishment. He had said: "Surely it must be the Singapore government and Singaporean people who must decide [on the appropriateness of its laws]" (my emphasis). The use of the negative modal auxiliary "shouldn’t" expressed doubt over Singapore’s sovereignty, while the veiled reference to America in "other countries" as the subject of the statement combined with the plea for permission from the US subordinated Singapore sovereignty to American agency.

Immediately following the caning, Singapore’s ambassador had been called in by the US State Department to register its protest. The press headlined its report “Fay Caned; State Dept. Summons Singapore Envoy,” emphasizing the unequal relation of power between the two countries, where Singapore was represented as a miscreant youth “summoned” to the headmaster’s office. The ambassador, S. R. Nathan, in an interview with the press, linked Singapore’s smallness, its subordinate position to America, to the type of male subjectivity it could afford (“Nathan,” ST 7 May 1994), thereby revealing previous declarations of a Singaporean self-assured, controlled masculinity to be merely a defensive fantasmatic construction in the face of the other’s power. He had said that, compared to the US, Singapore had to keep things in perspective:

Because, if others are angry and you get agitated, it only reflects your own smallness. Being the representative of a small country, I’ve got to keep things in perspective and not over-react abruptly or inappropriately.

In the aftermath of the caning, the Singapore government and media made a concerted effort to capitalize on the impact the incident had made on Singaporeans’ desires and identifications and in setting new paradigms for the discourse of liberalism versus authoritarianism. These were used to reinforce Singapore’s ‘neo-Orientalist’ identity, which had not been fully cathected by the people during the “National Ideology” project. But the effort also showed that this identification by the people was generated from anxiety regarding the nation’s lack of power in the face of American imperialism, which,
in turn, caused doubts over male identity that needed to be shored up. It was also made possible by the enjoyment Singaporeans derived from being viewed as the object of desire of many Americans.

The Minister for Information and the Arts, Brigadier-General George Yeo, noted that the incident had had an “unexpected positive side-effect”: “It has made us all feel very close together. A certain solidarity has resulted in Singaporeans at home and abroad” (“Clash,” ST 10 May 1994). Yeo called the incident “a collective education for all Singaporeans, on what it means to be independent and sovereign,” stressing “the price that must sometimes be paid for independence and sovereignty.” It was implied that heavy state control of the social body was the “price” that had to be paid for the nation’s sovereignty.

Singapore reduced Fay’s sentence of six strokes of the cane to four, which it said was a gesture of good will towards the American government’s appeal for clemency. Straits Times’ straw polls found that nearly half of people interviewed were against the government’s reduction of the caning sentence: they saw it as a caving in to American pressure and an undermining of Singapore’s sovereign will. The prime minister, however, interpreted this as a “robust attitude” that indicated Singaporeans’ support of “caning as a deterrent” (“Fay Case: PM Not Surprised,” ST 8 May 1994). In that Singaporeans had seen the reduced sentence as a “compromise” in the “government’s moral authority,” the prime minister’s re-interpretation displaced and disavowed an underlying sense of national powerlessness, equating Singapore’s “robust” (male) power with its strict laws and the tight state control this involved.

The feature “Crime and Punishment in Singapore: Not Sparing the Rod” deserves special attention in that it was the last comprehensive word on the subject from the Singapore media and recalled the caning incident in terms of its definition of Singapore’s (neo-Oriental) cultural difference from the West (ST 29 May 1994). It attempted to form a consensus, to represent a Singapore that was united in opposition to an Americanized liberalism and supportive of the government’s Orientalized nationalism. As Fowler points out, the media often relies on the oral mode to express consensus because speech suggests informality (not the voice of authority) and solidarity (59-65). Divided into different sections, the feature
had a 'democratic' feel about it: one article rounded up the issue, but comments from ordinary members of the public, using the Singlish dialect as well as more formal remarks by noted professionals and politicians communicated a national texture. The inclusion of the Singlish dialect was a break from usual practice for a newspaper that addresses itself to the middle-class and predominantly uses formal English. Public opinion was prominently displayed in boxes in bold type so that the sense of conversation, of national dialogue, was reinforced by typography and fragmented text, which Fowler says “breaks up the monologic uniformity, the greyness, of conventional print” and is used by the print media to “suggest the presence of speech” (61-2). The results of national surveys on public opinion of Singapore crime and punishment were depicted in illustrated graphics that ensured access to the reader. Published three weeks after Fay had been caned, the feature also legitimized government and media’s re-semioticization of liberal democratic culture and state authoritarianism, and further ‘nationalized’ this by getting the public to echo such opinions.

The feature used Singaporeans’ “tough attitude toward crime and punishment,” especially their approval of caning as the master signifier of national ‘ethnic’ character to racially ‘other’ the nation from the US. The economic and political relations of power between US and Singapore that crystallized Singaporeans’ attitudes towards caning were ignored and culturalized instead in such comments as: “the wholly different historical and cultural experience of Asians--and Singaporeans--also explains their attitudes to the caning of Fay, and punishment in general.” Racial generalizations were used to support this Asianizing of Singapore’s “tough” attitude towards crime. A sociologist, Tan Ern Ser, was quoted as saying that “there has been a strong retributive streak in Asian societies: people believe that those who do wrong should be punished.” The claim that “the sort of cynicism towards authority that Americans might consider healthy, is at odds with Asian societies, where the people have, over the ages, been more willing to defer to their leaders,” was neither backed by historical evidence nor authorized by cultural experts. Going against the facts of recent history in China where dynasty was replaced by democracy and then by communism in half a century, contradicting the history of the Indian sub-continent, and even
Singapore history in the 1940s and 1950s, it merely duplicated American neo-Orientalist constructions of East Asian culture: that East Asians defer to patriarchal state authority; that Chinese culture privileges social duties over individual rights; that it has archaic attitudes towards discipline.

This feature also repeated many of the discursive strategies that had been used throughout this discourse: separating issues of criminology from those of human rights; offering up street crime as the true face of American liberal political culture. A manager sniffed in Singlish at such liberal concepts as freedom by equating American notions of freedom with the right to bear arms. He said:

In the US, they want complete freedom. For example, they insist on everybody’s right to have guns. You have a gun. So I also have a gun. We get into an argument, and one of us will get shot.

What is the point of such freedom.

The idea that one could have a liberal democracy and gun control was not raised at all.

Former US President Richard Nixon instead was quoted as saying in his book Beyond Peace, that the criminal justice system had “abysmally failed to deliver what should be the first freedom: freedom from fear.” It was assumed that this “first freedom” only involved fear of being the object of a crime: notions of freedom from wrongful prosecution were thus elided.

By contrast to the US, Singapore’s safe streets were again presented as the utopian face of an authoritarian political culture. Davinder Singh, a member of parliament with the ruling party who is also a lawyer, allowed human rights as signifier to slip under the signified of crime and punishment in his comment: “Singaporeans are aware of what is going on overseas. They know that in the US, there is a lot of debate on human rights and personal liberties. But the Singaporean looks at this and he says, where has it got them? They see the end-product of tough measures in Singapore, and they support them.”

In its task of representing Singaporean identity in terms of neo-Oriental constructions of East Asian difference, the feature also unwittingly exposed neo-Orientalism’s concept of a “communitarian democracy” as a ‘pastoralization’ of authoritarian state control, given a modern inflection. American
liberalism had by now come to mean, in Singapore, nothing more than ineffective policies towards crime control and prosecution. This American ‘liberalism’ was then represented as involving a loss of innocence through its figuration with an American student Tanya Green.

Green, dubbed the “fear” girl by American media, had hit the headlines when she had complained to Al Gore about crime in school. The feature reported her as having asked Gore: “Why do we have to live in fear? Why can’t we just come to school and learn and have fun doing it?” A typical day experienced by Green at school was deployed to construct liberalism as a nightmarish loss of innocence:

[Green] enters school through a metal detector, hangs an identity tag to show that she is a student, climbs the stairs to her class past the scene of a recent shooting, and cheers in a gymnasium where everyone who comes to a basketball game is frisked.

Green’s world was contrasted to Singapore, which was “a safe haven of law and order,” a “quiet, urbane city,” a society where “children can go to school, or go out at night, without [parents] having to worry.” By implication, Singapore had the security that American parents can only dream of for their children.

This picture of America was framed by what had been ushered outside it: protection of human rights, freedom of speech, and government responsibility to its citizens’ needs. The outside however constituted the inside so as to split its coherence. The story of American liberalism as nightmare was made possible because Green was free to express her fear to a top government official, to whom she had access; Gore further promised Green that something would be done about the crime situation so that her cause for complaint would be eliminated. Whereas in the Green story, the frame, the outside, cracks the interior representation of America as nightmare, in the utopian picture of Singapore, the frame exerted its nightmarish presence, contradicting the internal peacefulness which had been constructed as tantalizing to Americans. The outside, excessive state control, intolerable and violent disciplining of the national body, which were excluded from the representation of Singapore as “safe haven,” returns to the inside with the reference to a government that “has always made sure it wielded a big stick,” strict crime
control that was getting ever more invasive of individuals’ rights and criminalizing more aspects of life with its “toughened sentences,” introduction of new offenses, and its “curb[ing of] some rights.” The article revealed that apart from stiffening sentences, the government had also taken steps to help the prosecution of criminals by removing an accused person’s right to silence and accepting the testimony of a co-accused person in a trial. The Arms Offences Act was also amended to allow the courts to mete out the death penalty to anyone who uses or tries to use a firearm in a crime.

The outside (masochism and sadism, a desire for violence and pain) also sneaked inside to disrupt the results of polls that apparently showed that Singaporean attitudes to crime and punishment were “tough.” The figures showed that 44 percent of Singaporeans interviewed wanted caning to be extended to women, 35 percent wanted it extended to men above 50, 24 percent wanted males below 16 to be caned, and 56 percent wanted caning to be further applied to non-violent crimes. The graphics that accompanied these statistics, including iconic signifiers of extended arms pointing authoritatively to poll results, suggesting the long arm of the law, and a picture of a flogger in the act of caning, were reminders of the violence that supposedly made Singapore’s utopian serenity possible. According to the report, in 1986, less than a decade ago, only 26 percent of Singaporeans interviewed had thought caning an appropriate punishment for vandalism. This number, the report said, had “jumped to 79 percent in the recent poll, probably because Singaporeans felt affronted by the bully-boy tactics adopted by the US media over the caning of Fay.”

This itself was an implicit recognition that the people’s desire for strong punishment had arisen elsewhere than from the willingness to pay the price for an orderly society or from agreement with government policies. But the jump in numbers could also just as easily be explained in terms of pathology, where hostility towards the US and rage over its power generated a neurotic desire to champion everything that it supposedly culturally reviled, i.e. authoritarianism. A frustration in anti-colonial desire, in exercising Singapore’s sovereign and disciplinary power fully over the US, may also have re-directed this desire inwards—where the nation’s sovereignty and its disciplinary power could
only be re-claimed from its people in an extensive socialization of violence. Rather than the signifier of national culture, Singapore’s strict laws and the cane were fetishized towards the end of the incident as that which disavowed and substituted for their absent post-colonial representational power.

In many respects, the article orchestrated an identification of the nation’s tough laws with its national character. Singapore’s tough laws were associated with the nation’s top ranking for confidence in safety and security of property assessed in a 1993 World Competitiveness Report. Singapore’s strong belief in the deterrent aspect of punishment had supposedly constituted the contemporary state of the nation: one Singaporean remembered the “days when the streets [of Singapore] were terrorized by secret societies and gangs” and kidnappings occurred on a daily basis. “Nowadays,” he said, “you only read about kidnappings overseas.” A law lecturer commented that the belief in deterrence had a strong national history, “stretching as far back as 1958.” Singapore’s strict laws were also represented as that which prevented a reversal into a previous historical nightmare of social and economic chaos, with the state bathed in benevolence: “In contrast [to US and UK), Singapore has been presided over during the past three decades by a leadership determined to prevent a slide back into the chaos it remembers from not so long ago. . . .” The journalist, Warren Fernandez, spoke confidently on behalf of the people, and in the process, dictated their desires to them: “It [the government] was aided . . . by the fact that the people shared a similar desire and were willing to pay the price for an orderly society.”

Unexpectedly, as the symbol of national character, the nation’s unyielding approach to crime and punishment also became the site of a true Singaporean democracy, as opposed to the inauthenticity of American-style liberal democracy. The feature argued that Singapore’s non-liberal approach to crime and punishment reflected public desire and hence was democratic, making it appear as if the people were agents in drafting Singapore laws, which is definitely not the case. In fact, the report itself undermined this suggestion by representing the government as sole actor in law making: the “government moved swiftly” to amend the Arms Offences Act to extend the application of the death penalty; “Concerned about rising crime rates, the Government amended the Penal Code in 1973 to
introduce stiffer sentences. . . .” Also the article claimed a sudden emergence of popular support for Singapore laws as something that was always already in existence. Then, contrasting the Singapore situation with that of the West, British and American liberal approaches to crime and punishment were described as undemocratic. The article quotes British historian Paul Johnson to support its claim: “In both countries [US and UK] . . . power over the administration of crime and punishment was captured by a liberal elite in the 1950s. . . . What authority actually does about dealing with crime bears no relation at all to popular wishes,” Johnson said, wondering whether on the issue of law and order, “democracy actually work[ed] in either country.” But this Singaporean claim to a more genuine democracy concealed its own de-liberalized re-interpretation of democracy. Where liberal democracy emphasizes protection of minority viewpoints/interests/rights, the sharing of power as well as free expression, the democracy associated with Singapore was a democracy of numbers, where the viewpoints/interests of the majority overrode those of the minority. In this scenario, “equal” rights of racial/ethnic/gender/class representation is re-read as proportional representation.

If press reports bore any relation to the truth, the people could be seen to have acceded to the government’s mandate of an Asian national identity through the caning incident. The problem was that the threat to sovereignty which had fostered this identification with the government’s desire now threatened to taint that identity with national defeat. The government itself emptied the Cabinet’s reduction of the caning sentence from meanings of a bowing-down to American power. In a statement, it said that “to reject [Clinton’s] appeal would show an unhelpful disregard for the President and the domestic pressures on him on this issue” (“Government Statement,” ST 5 May 1994). This concession, however, the statement said, was made “without compromising the principle that persons convicted of vandalism must be caned.” Nonetheless, some members of the public saw the reduced sentence as a victory for American cultural imperialism and a compromise of Singapore’s sovereignty by the government. An opposition member of parliament even taunted the ruling party by seeing in the act, “the image of Government giving in to pressure from a bigger country.” He also made an ironic
reference to Singapore’s “strong” political will. In press interviews, many Singaporeans came out strongly against the reduction (“Did Fay Deserve,” ST 6 May 1994).

Clearly, if the media’s and government’s construction of the nation was to stick, more ideological work needed to be done. Latif, a journalist with Straits Times took this task upon himself. He tried to resolve the government’s action as an antinomy—as an act that was both an expression of political sovereignty and a compromise of sovereignty, that is, as a decision to compromise that was made freely. As such, he was under pressure to disavow American threat to Singapore’s sovereignty as this tended to suggest that Singapore acted under pressure. Thus, there was a backtracking on previous media representation of the incident. American official intervention in the caning was now recalled in terms of a government performing a legitimate duty of looking after the interests of a national subject abroad. It was also apparently the response of a friendly nation that was mindful of its bilateral ties with Singapore.

But the American media’s response to the caning sentence had been threatening: the media had called for economic sanctions against Singapore and urged Americans to protest the decision, even publishing the Singapore envoy’s contact number (30-1). Latif made this media discourse disappear by excluding it as the voice of the American people. This was done by identifying an ideological divide within the US, which the caning incident had made very apparent. Latif depicted the media as part of a liberal elite minority that mis-represented America, which, he said, was really conservative (12), as expressed in opinion polls conducted in the US about the caning. Thus the American public’s response was selected as the authentic voice of the nation, and the media’s aggression placed at the periphery of the nation: quoting a Straits Times editorial, he said, without self reflection, that the US media were only “merchants of hysteria and disinformation” (39).

Latif suggested that Singapore’s political and cultural difference represented an “emergence of an alternative, if not a challenge, to the model of social and political rights epitomized by the US” (5), but he located that difference in America (of the 1950s) and constructed Singapore as an American object of desire. He said:
The truth might be that Middle America is far more conservative than is imagined abroad. Maybe people yearn for far more than is understood—for the America of an earlier period, when families were less prone to break up, parents were obeyed, the education system was less prone to the vagaries of experiments and the constraints of Political Correctness, the streets were safer and society was a lot more cohesive.

That America existed as late as in the 1950s and it resembled today’s Singapore. Perhaps the [American] support for caning revealed a deep nostalgia for those times; to the extent which [sic] Singapore reminded Americans of those times, they supported its penal system, even though it affected one of their own. (My emphasis, 12)

One cannot but note the perfect match between Latif’s (neo-Orientalist) politics and those of conservative Americans: the anti-Political Correctness, fear of new ideas/pedagogies, the insistence on the obedience of authority, etc.

This ideological divide in America also enabled Latif to represent the US state machinery as the one that was under siege (by the liberal media):

The US Administration’s public utterances were undoubtedly driven by a need to respond to the uproar created by the US press, which subjected the Singapore government, and the values it stood for, to hysterical attacks. (55)

Thus the American government’s words could not coincide with its deeds, and its appearance (of aggression) did not match the reality of its (friendly) relations with the Singapore state. Pressurized by the powerful minority of the liberal elite of America, but mindful of Singapore’s strategic economic, political and military importance to the US, the US government had apparently to say things that were not what it meant. Contradictions between what the US government said and what it did were used to prove Latif’s argument that the US state had to be seen to appear to be chastising Singapore, though it never truly meant any real threat to its sovereignty. Though Winston Lord chastised Singapore’s ambassador to the US, though Clinton expressed disappointment that the caning sentence was not
canceled, though US Trade Representative Mickey Kantor threatened that America would see to it that Singapore did not host the first meeting of the World Trade Organization, Latif argued, America never took anything other than verbal action against Singapore (67-70). The lack of economic sanctions or of military intervention was therefore identified as the site of the US’s authentic meaning regarding its attitude towards Singapore’s sovereignty, and this was where a genuine hermeneutic retrieval of America’s meaning in this situation could supposedly be accomplished.

Almost the entire history of Singapore-US relations was recalled by Latif to prove that America was an ally. But this strategy of representing Singapore’s sovereignty as safe from American threat kept escaping into its opposite meanings, where Singapore was a client-state that was always already hostage to American imperialism. “Economic realities,” he said, “determined the political choices Singapore made,” and “in those choices, the US loomed large” in its ability to offer Singapore “modern technological skills, financial resources, industrial expertise and commercial and organizational know-how” (76). Singapore’s policies of rapid industrialization “crucial for the survival and success of a small state” tied in, he admitted, to accepting the “US as an economic leader for the region” (76). Latif’s comment that American multi-national corporations—which he described as “a centrepiece of Singapore’s strategy of export-led industrialization”—came to Singapore because “their profit-margins here were higher than they would have been at home,” given “Singapore’s lower wages,” its “attractive tax and other policies,” its “harmonious labour relations” and “Singapore’s general political stability” was the discourse of the colonial exploitation of the native, not one of economic alliance (86-7). It also recalled Lee’s comment during the Fay episode that even the very order of Singapore’s streets and its strict crime control measures were necessitated by the need to attract and keep American investment. Lee’s statement that Singapore would “abolish effective punishments and treat criminals the way Americans do” only if Americans were prepared to “underwrite this exercise in human liberty” (“Our Way,” ST 21 Apr. 1994) was an admission that even the upholding of Singapore’s law in the Fay case,
Singapore’s strict laws and its centralized state control—the apparent symbols of the nation’s sovereignty and its Asian difference—were already inscribed with American power.

Latif’s representation of Singapore’s security strategies and America as a military ally also undermined the validity of the nation’s claiming itself as an “Asian” nation, with Asian culture. By Latif’s own account, Singapore supported American military presence in Asia in a bid to contain the power of Asian blocs: to prevent a possible takeover by “Japanese militaristic nationalism;” to curb “modernised China” from its “quest for global importance, beginning with Southeast-Asia;” and to buffer Indian aspirations for “leadership in the Indian Ocean and beyond.” Singapore also needed America to pre-empt instability arising from challenges to China or Japan posed by “a revitalized Vietnam” and “a unified Korea” (83-6). US military power then was the very foundation of Singapore’s political sovereignty and that which Singapore used to contain Asian power.

The same schism then between appearance and reality, word and deed that was used to turn American imperialism into an illusion returned to wreak its revenge on Singapore’s claim to sovereignty. As Latif admitted, “in the world of international relations,” the equal sovereignty of nations was merely a “legal one” (i.e. only good on paper). “In actuality, the system is very unequal,” he said (71). “Small states like Singapore,” Latif said, “charting a course in a world where even larger states cannot afford to ignore how powerful states behave, could not but consider its relations with the US in deciding on the outcome of Fay’s appeal for clemency to the President” (71). Thus, when Singapore said it was sovereign, it could not really mean it!

Latif then turned to another strategy. He said he would use two previous cases of Singapore’s unyielding protection of its sovereignty in the face of international conflict to show that in the Fay case, Singapore was behaving in character: that its leniency towards Fay was not a buckling to a superpower (91). In 1968, he said, two Indonesian marines were hanged for sabotage activities in Singapore during the Indonesian Confrontasi despite appeal from their government since the incident involved the loss of lives. The other case concerned Singapore’s successful insistence that the US withdraw a diplomat,
whom it accused of involvement in domestic politics. But the chapter ended with Latif denying that there were any similarities between the cases. Singapore did not act in "an inconsistent manner" when it reduced Fay's sentence, Latif said: as in the other two cases, Singapore had exercised its political will freely (99). Yet, he said, "in contrast (with these incidents), the Fay case did not touch on the issue of sovereignty... The marines, the diplomat and the teenager belong to different orders; in responding to each, different sets of factors came into play" (99). We must conclude then that the two previous cases were only called up to allow the memory of past assertions of political sovereignty to substitute for a present lack of sovereignty.

Unlike the earlier years of nationhood, "Singapore's de facto sovereignty was now established" so that the "government's decision, whichever way it went" was to be "seen as an exercise in sovereignty, not something that raised doubts about its sovereignty" (95). If Singapore's political sovereignty was self-evident, one wonders why Latif wrote an entire book to prove it. The journalist asserted the nation's "de facto sovereignty" and claimed that "Fay was not a political issue between the governments of Singapore and the US" (95), but also admitted that "the decision on Fay was no less than a foreign policy decision for Singapore," which delimited Singapore's scope for sovereignty. "For a small state like Singapore to survive and prosper," Latif wrote, "it must operate in the margin of possibilities created by the larger members of the international system" (91).

Latif's book was full of self-contradictions, which split its discourse of sovereignty, creating an incoherence that was symptomatic of the impossible nature of Latif's task in representing the reduced sentence as an act of sovereign will. In Jameson's words, "sometimes the wish-fulfilling imagination does its preparatory work so well that the wish, and desire itself, are confounded by the unanswerable resistance of the Real." Latif's "fantasy demands ultimately raise[d] History itself over against him, as absent cause, as that on which desire [had to] come to grief" (Political 183).

Few Singaporean voices of resistance were publicly heard during the caning episode, but one of them was Baratham's. He had written a letter to the press stating his position: he declared American
intervention in Fay’s case to be “outrageous” and asserted Singapore’s right to enforce its laws within its territory (“Are Things More Precious,” ST 8 Apr. 1994). But he also urged Singaporeans to reflect “whether caning for non-violent crimes [was] compatible with our [Singaporean] aspirations to build a humane, caring society.” Baratham’s book disidentified with the definitions of Singapore’s ‘Asian’ identity that emerged out of the caning incident. But since this identity was linked to a psychic, ethical split in American culture and involved a cultural ‘passing’ of American anti-liberalism/authoritarianism as ‘Asian,’ Baratham’s attempt to construct a counter, non-Orientalized post-colonial identity had him mimicking American liberal discourse. Despite his avowed anti-Americanism, Singaporean desire in this book was still directed at the US, just as it had been in the media’s discourse.

In his offering of a counter identity, Baratham tried to create a de-colonized cultural space where Singaporeans could subscribe to liberal values without, in the process, becoming American mimic men and women. He started this project by refusing the equation of liberal values with American culture. He refuted American claim to the “moral high ground on human rights and caning” by referring to recent American history:

The United States was a country that devastated Vietnam for at least a generation, sustained the corruption and cruelty of Ferdinand Marcos for a quarter of a century, supported the torture of the Shah and the savak his secret police inflicted on the people of Iran, fought a war in the Gulf in the pretence of territorial integrity for a despot who suddenly had become more important than the one they had earlier propped up, in the interest of cheaper oil to allow Californians three cars apiece and the means of polluting the earth. (49)

He also linked American liberalism, as it emerged in the Fay case, to an underlying racism. America’s long silence about the detention without trial of political dissidents in Singapore was contrasted with its recent interest in a relatively minor case of human rights abuse, the Fay caning, reconstructing American liberalism as a mode of cultural imperialism underwritten by white supremacy. American human rights groups’ “silence about the Singapore law for the indefinite detention without
trial of political dissidents had been audible” he said (52). But “when an American’s behind was threatened with the cane, all hell broke loose.” He observed that American conception of human rights had all kinds of biases, especially of race, class and nationality: “[H]uman rights, one would assume, applied to all human-kind, not merely to those who had white skins, especially sensitive behinds, and carried a certain kind of passport.”

Since the hegemonic Orientalized nationalism emerged from a rhetoric of anti-Americanism, Baratham required an anti-American stance to authorize his place in the nation, from where he could legitimately subvert the government’s discourse of national identity. It was a strategy that forbade American imperialism from serving as the backbone of Singapore’s assertion of its cultural difference. Baratham refused the culturalization of Singapore’s authoritarianism as its non-Western difference. But if Baratham re-connected the discourse of crime and punishment with that of human rights, a connection that had been severed by the nation’s politicians, he returned himself to the US media’s position where, as A. M. Rosenthal described it in New York Times, the “issue [was] not only vicious flogging but the other laws of which that is part and symbol: detentions without trial, administrative imprisonment and political, press and academic control, the whole nasty authoritarian collection.” Baratham was caught in a situation where the escape route from ‘native’ authoritarianism apparently landed him in intellectual colonization by the West.

He tried to indigenize the discourse of liberalism, deploying a Singaporean Indian former flogger to Hindu-ize liberal ethics, where the two ethical systems may be viewed in their commonality. The man told Baratham that flogging went against the grain of Hindu ethics: “After each flogging, I would take time off, go home and have a bath, and go to the Hindu temple to beg God to forgive me my sin. After a few months I could take it no longer and quit” (119). But the question of the ‘difference’ of Hindu ethics from Western and Christian values is avoided in this attempt to find an East/West simultaneity. We are not told the textual source of the flogger’s Hindu ethics that determined for him that caning was wrong, nor did Baratham pursue the question of Hindu ethics concerning state disciplinary action. The idea of
erasing the repeated committing of a sin by a daily ritual of confessing also sounds suspiciously Catholic to me.

This East-West hybridization however did not contradict Baratham’s project of offering a counter but authentic Singaporean identity. Given Singapore’s colonial past, Western cultural influences are a genuine aspect of national culture: for Baratham, it was the ‘Asian’ essentialism that was inauthentic. Asian cultures’ pluralism refuses any homogenization, rendering the government’s essentialistic construction of Asian culture merely a willful attempt to re-package its tyranny as cultural identity. It also involved a privileging of Chinese culture over other Singapore Asian cultures. Baratham said:

It was necessary [for the government] to point out the superiority of an authoritarian system in which few questions were asked and authority, irrespective of what it demanded, respected. This attitude was regarded as particularly Asian, and the term ‘Asian values’ became fashionable.

No one bothered to ask what these things were that were shared by all of Asia. In the Tobriand Islands, at certain times, girls go on rampage, restrain young men and sit on their faces till they, the girls, were satisfied. In Pakistan, polygamy is acceptable but the eating of pigs is taboo. The reverse applies in the Philippines. In Singapore, wife-beating is an offense but in rural China the proverb has it that a wife is like a horse: “You beat both and you ride both.”

There is one feature that is common to Asian values, or at least to East Asian ones. It is the respect [for] those in power and those who possess property. (48)

Baratham also observed that wife battery and intra-marital rape were accepted by a majority of Singapore men and women as “part of our Asian heritage; some even argue an essential ingredient of the family bond which, in Asian eyes, supersedes individual rights” (85).

In Baratham’s narrative, liberalism was not only a part of Singapore’s British, colonial heritage, but it was also the nation’s founding culture. Lee Kuan Yew was narratively deposed as father of the nation and David Marshall, Singapore’s first Chief Minister, instated in his place—which was strategic to Baratham’s move of de-centering the hegemonic nationalism and re-centering the (liberal) periphery.
Marshall’s feat in winning the 1955 Singapore elections, despite being from the Jewish Eurasian minority group in a predominantly Chinese country, was recalled to emphasize the connection between anti-colonialism and liberal values of political freedom in Singapore history. Marshall’s account of his earlier political career was offered as the voice of Singaporean anti-colonial liberalism: “I was passionately seeking the freedom of our people, but I did not know how to compromise.” After failing to negotiate full independence from the British, Baratham reported, Marshall had resigned, announcing at the time that “the British have offered us Christmas pudding with arsenic sauce” (88).

Baratham’s late father, who was a Western-educated doctor and also a “die-hard liberal,” was also deployed to represent the nationalistic face of liberalism. Baratham recalled that during the Japanese Occupation of Singapore, his father had turned down an offer to escape to Australia or India on a troopship: “My father said, ‘No we are staying because this is our country and whoever occupies it, we will always be its people’”(138).

Marshall’s rhetoric of liberal approaches to crime and punishment was contrasted with Lee’s carrot-and-stick approach. In an interview with the author, Marshall said:

If the state behaves like beasts, how can you expect our citizens not to resort to violence? If the police behave like thugs, what makes you think the thugs will not behave like policemen?

Flogging is barbaric. It is obscene. It cheapens the human individual; it cheapens me to know that there are no less than a thousand human beings being caned every year. . . . I also know that there are 116 human beings queuing up to be hanged. This is very much a black mark against the development of the civilisation of our own people. . . . If it[severe punishment] was a deterrent, you would expect offenses for caning to be reduced. On the contrary, there are more sentences of death than ever before. (89)

Lee’s justification of the vandalism law in 1966 was recalled to underline, by contrast, his authoritarian philosophy: “We have a society which, unfortunately, only understands two things--the incentive and the deterrent” (60).
Baratham implicitly represented this authoritarianism as the expression of a pathological masculinity, one that involved a displaced sexual violence and a suppressed homosexuality. But he displaced this attack on the government's sexuality by projecting it onto another former state flogger, Singham. Singham served as the figure for a demonized Singaporean pragmatism. Self-restrained and fit, "he looked young for his fifty-four years, and though he seemed to like his beer, his belly didn't betray any evidence of over-indulgence," Baratham said (104). Singham, like so many other Singaporeans, saw himself as an automaton rather than a human being, built to produce at maximum capacity. Not bothered by conscience, Singham took great pride in his job as flogger, identifying with it as expertise. Baratham literally demonizes Singham: "[H]e reminded me of Satan. Not the fire-and-brimstone devil with horns and a tail, but the gentlemanly form the devil is supposed to take when he functions as a tempter of the unwary" (104-5).

Baratham allowed Singham's fetishizing of the cane to be read as a signifier of a homoeroticism that was disavowed and displaced into a disguised sexual violence directed against men. Singham said of his training.

The best thing to practise caning on is a banana tree. It has a soft skin which can break with each stroke, but it has layers so one can take off one layer at a time.

This countered the press' and other Singaporeans' fetishizing of the cane as symbol of national unity (see above). Baratham's suggestion of a repressed homosexuality became more evident as Singham described his job in highly sexual terms and obviously derived much sadistic pleasure from it. Though advised to cane on the count, Singham said he generally waited: "I know that prisoners hold in their breath as this reduces the pain. But a man can hold his breath for only so long and as soon as he releases it, I strike" (107).

Describing the "individual styles of floggers," Singham said:

There were those who went from overhead and those who preferred the sideways approach. There were those who twirled and those who drew a breath and took careful aim. There were those who
took three steps forward and those who stood absolutely still. It was all a matter of individual style: some played a serve-and-volley game and some preferred to play from the base-line, some used a lot of top spin, others preferred the quick smash. . . . Most [victims of caning] are silent, but some pray, some beg for mercy, others scream. (107)

Baratham not only played up the caning as signifier of a disavowed/repressed homosexuality, but was less coy than the media about representing Singapore’s caning of Fay as the exercise of power on a white body. The cover of Baratham’s book was unnervingly explicit in representing the racial, sexual and national violence and social submission involved in state discipline, which had long been buried in the discourse. The cover featured a photograph of a white man, stripped and tied to a trestle with his legs spread apart, exposing his naked bottom to a uniformed flogger. With all the visual analogies made to male rape, the cane—which appeared to be in the process of delivering the fourth blow since there were three distinct lines of blood on the white man’s bottom—substituted for the penis. The white man’s spread-eagled body (which recalled the authority of the state/police in performing searches) occupied half the picture space and was fully displayed from the back on a white backdrop that allowed the caning victim’s skin color to be highlighted. The flogger’s dark body was only half shown and was arranged at the side but foregrounded in order not to deflect the view of the caning victim’s rear-end but also to suggest the priority and power of the flogger over the other’s body. The cover’s red and white color scheme were the colors of the Singapore flag. The masthead showed another photograph, the skyline of the city’s harbor and business center, which, by resting on top of the caning photograph, split the former’s suggestion of peace, prosperity and modernity and suggested its underpinnings in the racial and sexual violent disciplining of the national body.

But in all this, Baratham, despite his anti-American stance, wound up duplicating American media’s representations of Singapore and its crime control practices. The latter had represented the Singapore flogger as a mix of sadism and clinical efficiency, which was what Baratham did. They also represented Asian, especially Chinese, culture as archaic and barbaric and Baratham did not do much to refute this.
The liberalism he professed as Singaporean, despite attempts to indigenize it, remained that of the highly privileged Western-educated elite, whose values, he conceded "were different from those of today's Singaporeans..." (69). Interviews with Singapore's "people of the coffee-shops," the working-class, who Baratham described as "a segment of Singapore's population whose views rarely make the media" (76) did not yield much success. Baratham set up this group of people as those who, though they belonged largely to the majority Chinese race and were uncontaminated by Western culture, did not reflect the government's construction of East Asian cultural difference. They disagreed with Singapore's strict approach to crime and punishment, he said. But beyond getting one old man to say that all children were given to vandalism, Baratham was unable to nativize the discourse of liberalism through this group of Singaporeans (78).

Baratham also tried another strategy of Singaporeanizing liberalism by universalizing or de-culturalizing liberalism. He did this by identifying with Fay's and his mother's pain. Geographical boundaries were crossed as the spring night in St. Louis, Missouri on which Fay was born was likened to a Singapore night: "It was a night, moist and warm, like bodies making love: a Singapore kind of night..." (7). But the conflict between Singapore and the US, Fay and the Singapore courts, kept showing up the two nations' difference. The night she gave birth to Fay, Randy Fay "had not heard of that city [Singapore] or the horror it would bring to her and her unborn child" (7). In setting up Randy Fay (now Mrs. Chan) and her son as victims of Singapore law, Baratham romanticized them as Mary and baby Jesus: "There was no way that Randy Fay could anticipate what horrors that circumstances would decree for herself and, worse for her son, the boy with the angelic face. Perhaps, Mary felt the same as she stood on Calvary" (7). In this description, Singapore became Herod persecuting the Jews and Judas betraying Christ: it was the embodiment of evil, compared to American whiter-than-white sons and mothers. This again reflected the demonizing of Singapore by the American media. Chapter one's title "The Blues of the Boy from St. Louis" and the general focus on Fay's predicament also Americanized the victimization of liberal values in the case.
Baratham positioned himself contradictorily in his representation of the case. On the one hand, he was the loyal Singaporean, defending the country against representations of its national culture as authoritarian, non-liberal. On the other, he was the Singaporean riding to the rescue of the Americans, Fay and his mother, who were presented as victims. As Lata Mani has shown, the rescue fantasy expresses the desire of the subject of fantasy for its object. Baratham’s sympathy for Fay was evident in his attempt as neurosurgeon to validate the claim that Fay was suffering from Attention Deficit Disorder, which had been rejected by the Singapore courts. He described Fay as a “wild and enigmatic teenager” to whom Singapore “had to be grateful for making us think again” (33). In chapter 4, titled “Davids and Goliaths,” Fay was constructed as a “David” battling the Singapore state authority, though Singapore too was seen as a “David” battling American power. But Marshall (whose first name was indeed “David”) and Baratham, who identified with Marshall’s’ views on caning and capital punishment, were also Davids fighting against the Singapore state’s unflinching attitudes to harsh punishment. Baratham’s doubled representation of himself as a “David,” as Singaporean and as an anti-government liberal, registered an anti-American/pro-America split in his counter-imagining of Singapore identity.

In contrast to the state’s pathological masculinity (as embodied in the ex-flogger, Singham), the book ventured, through the narrator’s authorial personality, to offer a liberalized Singaporean masculinity as one that involved a dialogue with the feminine and the maternal. For instance, Baratham interviewed Soin as a Singaporean feminist, mother, and as one of those whose property was damaged by Fay. He made clear his identification with her oppositional views to caning for non-violent crimes, and to the state’s refusal to legislate against intra-marital rape. But the maternalization of Singaporean (male) liberalism was sought through the author’s identification with Fay’s (American) mother. Her agony over the caning of her son was at least twice in the book identified with the author’s own pain as a parent: Baratham had one son who had suffered a severe head injury in infancy and another who had committed suicide (8, 26). Among photographs featured in the book was one depicting the author with Fay’s mother. It represented a relationship that was not that of the usual detached, official one between
interviewer and interviewee: Mrs. Chan was seated in an armchair, holding a drink, while the author draped his arms around her from the back. If a desire for camaraderie was circulating here, it was directed from Baratham to Mrs. Chan, not vice-versa.

The caning incident made transparent certain aspects of Singapore’s new state-proposed national identity. It connected Singapore’s new Orientalized identity to American cultural anxiety and exposed within it the circulation of American desire. It also showed that Singapore’s affirmation of its ‘post-colonial’ ‘Asian’ difference was always-already contaminated with desire for and approval from the West. The similarities between the values asserted by Singapore and conservative sections of America, as well as the fact that Singapore’s recently revised self-representation was scripted by the West/US, suggests that Singapore’s ‘Asian’ identity is a cultural transvestitism, a passing of American authoritarianism as Chinese or Asian. The cultural doubling and splitting of discourse as Singaporean and American self-representations were transported to each other’s shores encourage one to think of neo-Orientalism as a schizoid US talking back to itself, but using Singapore’s voice to ventriloquise and disguise its disavowed self-incriminating, culturally transgressive doubts. In this strategic ventriloquism, the voice of colonial authority is made invisible. In that Singapore constructed itself according to borrowed neo-Oriental notions of East Asian culture, attempting to assert and reinforce its authoritarian politics as cultural difference, neo-Orientalism shows itself to be a neo-colonial ideology that works, in the era of late capitalism, to culturally ‘fund’ authoritarian regimes in other countries in a manner that clearly furthers the cause of colonial exploitation of the native. In 1993, for instance, at the United Nations Conference on Human Rights held in Vienna, Lee used this American discourse of Chinese difference to culturalize the issue of human rights, arguing against American linking of its trade relations to the observance of human rights in China. Already we see America backing down from its former insistence on human rights, taking economic advantage of a cultural discourse that it had helped to produce.
This theoretical model of neo-Orientalism and its relation to the discourses of 'post-colonial' Asian/East Asian national identities and alternative modernities that it has generated is to be distinguished from other readings which proclaim the latter to be a sign of the new-found cultural confidence of the East, or as Ang and Stratton describe these, as a “talking back” of Asia. Ang and Stratton say:

While in the past the West could luxuriate in speaking about the rest as a passive, silent other, as in the discourse of Orientalism, the rest is now talking back and interpellating the West on its own terms. In the process, the binary divide between West and non-West is reproduced at the same time that it is updated and... “post-modernized. (65-6)

Far from interpellating the West on its own terms, the East appears rather to be deploying another form of colonial mimicry and dynamics of cultural passing than that which is discussed with regard to British empire and the native. Fuss distinguishes between the two categories of “mimicry” and “masquerade” (Identification 146-7). In mimicry, she says, imitation is ironized, hyperbolically parodied: that is, imitation is not tantamount to identification. In masquerade, the role is not ironized and involves an unconscious identification with the part being played. While in feminist theory, mimicry “resists and subverts dominant systems of representation by ironizing them,” Fuss points out that in post-colonial theory, mimicry is understood not as a “tactic of dissent but as a condition of domination.” But, quoting Bhabha in “Of Mimicry and Man,” Fuss observes that even in that which she identifies as the “mimicry of subjugation,” the native obeying the colonizer’s demand to mime non-Western alterity or to mime Western sameness tended to slip from mimicry to mockery, performativity to parody, discrediting colonialism’s authorized versions of otherness and undermining the colonizer’s elusive self-image (147). In allowing the colonial subject to be in two places at once, the same and the other to the West, “the rents and divisions of colonial narratives of domination become more visible” and puncture the colonizer’s authority (147).
The new colonial 'mimicry' on the other hand disavows itself as imitation and takes itself to be the genuine 'other.' If it is masquerade as Fuss defines it, rather than mimicry, it is a doubled masquerade in mistaking Western self-representation as the representation of the non-Western 'other.' Here the colonizer's command to the racial 'other' to mime non-Western alterity is also a (unacknowledged) command to mime the Western self. Where the formerly tricky colonial subject used to be in two places at once, now it is in one place even when it thinks it is in another, in which it is the Western self even when it thinks it is miming non-Western difference. If as Fuss notes, the borders between the earlier colonial mimicry of subjugation and the mimicry of subversion were permeable, now theorization of these two categories is one category in excess, allowing one to mistake a mimicry of subjugation for one involving subversion.

Current colonial ideologies deploy race as a technology of power and re-territorialize desire in a geo-cultural context where relations of race, class, gender and nation have changed dramatically from the days of empire. Race as object of knowledge now serves a dual purpose: regulating the behavior of the metropolis as well as of the rest of the world. This duality is inscribed in the doubled language of the discourse, where one signified is split into two signifiers, as with neo-Orientalism where tight state control is "communitarian democracy" in the West and "Confucianism" in the East. Also, racial identity is no longer constructed exclusively via the Western/'other' binary but also emerges from 'other'/'other' binaries (again, constructed by the West and reflecting Western desire and interests): Confucianist, East Asian culture is not only differentiated as non-Western, but it is also that which distinguishes the 'East Asian' as superior to other races. Thus post-colonial desire is re-organized and anti-colonial antipathy is deflected onto the non-West. As I will show in the next chapter, Singapore literature of the 1980s was not so much concerned with differentiating post-colonial identity from Western identity as it was with Sinicizing Singapore, displacing earlier multi-cultural and South-east Asian identifications. Baratham's book too indicates that the Orientalizing of Singapore makes other national identifications, such as the former emphasis on an East-West hybridity, virtually unrepresentable.
This difference between new colonial ideologies and preceding ones, between neo-Orientalism and Orientalism, needs to be theorized to provide radically new post-colonial subject-positions. Applying the older rubric of post-colonial identity to new historical circumstances prohibits the post-colonial subject from recognizing transformations in their desires. As the case of Singapore has shown, it becomes very easy then for the post-colonial subject to mistake the voice/desire of the Western ‘other’ as its own.
Notes

1 I realize the difficulties of definitively describing the cultural base of a newspaper and its changes over time, of being familiar with its system of “news value,” which determines the selection of events for publication (Fowler, Language 12). But drawing on my own experience as a former reporter with Straits Times (until 1986) and my occasional coverage of the court beat, I can say with certainty that cases that are considered “unusual” (even if in terms of circumstances only rather than the offense itself) or those that involve well-known or otherwise interesting persons are considered to make good court copy. In this case, the cultural interests noted above, the involvement of foreigners, and the fact that it involved repeated acts of vandalism added to its news value.


4 Singapore’s Law Minister S. Jayakumar mentions this in a speech. See “Shouldn’t Other Countries,” ST 5 May 1994.

5 The Indian independence movement was stirred at least partly by the colonizer’s liberal ideologies of freedom and democracy communicated to the Western-educated post-colonial elite through English education (Viswanathan, Masks 16). The Indian women’s reform movement in the 19th and 20th centuries, where Western feminism was co-opted by Indian men to serve as symbol of the ‘modernization’ of Indian culture, was, again, strongly influenced by Western knowledge and Western notions of modernity (Tharu and Lalita, “Literature of the Reform” 183-86). As Fanon says, “the dialogue between these political parties [nationalist political parties in the struggle for freedom] and colonialism is never broken off. . . . The native intellectual has clothed his aggressiveness in his barely veiled desire to assimilate himself to the colonial world. . . . Thus there is very easily brought into being a kind of class of affranchised slaves, or slaves who are individually free” (Wretched 60).

A play on the caning incident, *Six of the Best*, was staged in Singapore in May 1996. I will not deal with it because I only have a rough draft manuscript of the play, which does not even give the play’s title. Written by a journalist with *Straits Times*, Tan Tarn How, it is of interest in its recapitulation of the discourse of Singaporean identity as it was generated from the Fay case. The play features Singaporean and Western characters as colleagues working together in a multinational advertising agency during the time of the Fay case. The characters’ different responses to the caning sentence brings buried racial, ethnic, national and sexual/gender conflicts to the surface. As in the local press’ discourse, Singapore’s cultural difference from the West is tied to differences in codes of masculinity and sexual power as well as to its subordinate position to the West in the circulation of capital. The difference between Singaporean and Western/American masculinity is represented in terms similar to that in Koh’s article, “When to be Tough,” *ST* (see below), where national service is described as a rite of passage for Singaporean men while, allegedly, acts of mischief and anti-social behaviour initiate Western adolescents into their particular code of masculinity. The play also reveals the link between masculine self-doubt and anxiety over Western imperialism as part of the dynamics of an Orientalized Singaporean self-representation. Although the play shows an awareness that the state’s new nationalism privileges Chinese culture over that of minority ethnic cultures, especially Malay culture, it does not develop this theme. Furthermore, it repeats this privileging of Chinese culture in its own representation of Singaporean national identity via the absence of non-Chinese Singaporeans in the play and its exclusive feature of Chinese dialect as an indigenous language. The connections that Tan makes between masculinity and Singaporean nationalism, however, will be dealt with in the next chapter with regard to other plays staged in the 1990s, including one, *The Lady of Soul*, which is also by Tan.

I do not want to suggest that the Singapore government and media created the Fay conflict. Looking back on the incident, the American envoy Boyce was certainly determined to turn the caning of Fay into an international incident. The embassy had unsuccessfully appealed to the government before Fay’s case was heard in court (“Reactions to Sentencing,” ST 4 Mar. 1994). Following this, Boyce used the media to force the issue, making a statement to the media immediately after Fay’s sentencing and even issuing a transcript of his statement (“Reactions to Sentencing,” ST 4 Mar. 1994). Even if the Singapore media had ignored the Fay case, Boyce’s statement would have landed on their newsdesk. Clinton’s response to the case was prompted by a question posed directly to him by the media at a White House briefing. He confessed ignorance of the case then (“Clinton to Look Into,” ST 6 Mar. 1994). In retrospect, given the ambivalence of the US government’s response, where it made strong verbal condemnations of the caning but without following this up with effective action such as imposing economic sanctions, there is room to think that the US State Department was merely appearing to pander to public opinion, as Latif suggests in his book. However, the Singapore government and media did churn out much symbolic capital from a situation that was presented to them.

Business Times will hereafter be referred to as BT.

The following use of critical linguistics is taken from Fowler (66-90).


Fowler defines “homocentrism” as “meaningfulness” that coincides with “consensus,” a “leaning towards topics which are meaningful to readers because they display interests and experiences which ‘we’ share in our lives” (53).

Jameson coined this word to describe a unit of ideology whereby social contradictions are imaginarily resolved (Political 77-9). An ideologeme, he says “is an amphibious formation” which “as a construct must be susceptible to both a conceptual description and a narrative manifestation all at once.”
Elaborated, it can take on “the finished appearance of a philosophical system” or “that of a cultural text” (87). For Jameson, the ideologeme is also that which registers within ideology the complexity of transactions between the conceptual and the “narrative” or “libidinal fantasy.” Due to these transactions, the basic unit of ideology has a “fundamentally narrative character,” he says, even where it seems to be “articulated as abstract conceptual beliefs or values” (88).

16 As Fowler describes it, language is structured around two types of participants, patients, who typically have something done to them, and agents, who are in control of the action (73-6).

17 The American viewpoint is that of Joe Murray published in Lufkin (Texas) Daily News qtd. in “What US Columnists Say,” ST 8 Apr. 1994. The ‘liberal’ American media’s representations of Singapore were repeatedly racist, especially anti-Chinese. For instance, Jim Hoagland, a columnist with Washington Post said: “In looking at this problem with Singapore, it is not incidental that this city-state at the tip of the Malay peninsula is ruled by ethnic Chinese citizens who have not totally lost the Han emperors’ disdain for non-Han cultures.” Comparing Singapore’s action to China’s stand on human rights, he added, “This conflict revolves around thousands of years of institutionalised racism practised by Chinese leaders, from the emperors to the chairman’s commissars” (qtd. in Han, “Cane Fay,” ST 9 Apr. 1994). Since my focus is on Singapore’s constructions of national identity arising from the caning controversy, I won’t be dealing in detail with these. But it must be pointed out that this is one of the advantageous features of the double-talk of neo-Orientalist discourse, which showed itself up during the caning incident. As a so-called “communitarian democracy,” Singapore could be held up for American emulation. But as a “Confucianist,” Chinese culture, it could also be simultaneously reviled, where liberal American opposition could bypass right-wing American ideologies and project their hatred onto the non-West.


19 Mani discusses the colonial gaze and its libidinal investments in colonial accounts of widow-burning in India. She argues that the language of desire in such colonial accounts suggests the
“voyeuristic pleasure of the male gaze, contemplating what it constructs as the wife devoted to her husband in death as in life” (400). Motivated by such desire, colonial accounts preferred to re-write women’s escapes as “rescue” by colonial male observers.

20 I say this because even a cursory reading of Huntington’s “Clash” suggests that the discourse of race is being used to cover over and deflect feared ideological challenges to capitalism as well as to produce the world in particular racial blocs in a divide-and-conquer strategy. If one uses Zizek’s method of reading the Real through the repressed, Huntington’s article repeats, in what amounts to hysteria, that future causes of global conflict will be cultural (or “civilizational” as he terms it), not ideological: the latter appears to be the nightmare that he wants to wish away.
Chapter 4

**Imagining Chinese Identity:**

**Fictional Revisions of State Ideology**

From the period of the independence movement, the 1940s to the late 1970s, Singapore’s English literary production consisted mostly of poetry and short fiction. Only a handful of novels appeared during this period. Given the massive socio-economic transformation that took place with the end of colonial rule and the move to enter Singapore into the world economy, the literature of this period dealt largely with issues concerning urban life and modern alienation. In this respect, it was influenced both stylistically and in content by metropolitan literature. British standards of writing and literary criticism were observed rigidly in literature in the English language. But given Singapore’s history as the center of the Malaysian nationalist literary movement, this imitation of British literature was counter-balanced with the imagining of post-colonial identity. During the independence movement, Singapore was a significant force in arguing for a new post-colonial literature that would hybridize English with Malay and Chinese. This was known as the Eng-mal-chin movement. Singaporean post-colonial subjectivity was then imagined within the paradigm of an East-West cultural hybridity. Singapore’s early short stories written in English represented the nation as a multi-racial society and explored issues common to all ethnic groups. In this, it tended to steer clear of ethnic-communal issues, which were more frequently addressed in short fiction written in Malay, Tamil and Mandarin. As Edwin Thumboo observes, Singapore fiction written in English had more of a potential to reflect national experience: “fiction in English . . . has the best potential to look at the whole of the Singapore experience, seen as a microcosm within which English-speaking Singaporeans--whether Malay, Chinese, Tamil or ‘Others’-- move” (xviii).
A national anthology of short fiction such as *Singapore Short Stories*, which was edited in two volumes by a leading Singapore writer, Robert Yeo, and featured stories from 1960 to 1978, shows that it was not unusual then for writers from one ethnic group, even from the majority Chinese population, to represent Singapore culture in terms of the subjectivity of characters from other, especially minority ethnic groups (Indian and Eurasian). For instance, Stella Kon, a Straits Chinese Singaporean, features a Sinhalese Catholic as her central character in “The Martyrdom of Helena Rodrigues” (13-20), while S. Rajaratnam, a Singaporean of Sri-Lankan Tamil origins, writes about a Malay character in “The Tiger” (1-8), and Eurasian writer Gregory Nalpon features the relationship between a Pakistani man and a Malay woman in “The Rose and the Silver Key” (59-65).\(^1\) Discussing the early Singaporean short fiction in English, Thumboo notes that “though it relied on the experience of one individual [the author], the writing in English increasingly included characters from other communities—Malay, Chinese, Tamil, Eurasian, ex-colonial—each with its types and sub-types” (xvii).

During this period, Singaporeans who wrote in English frequently signified the nation’s ‘otherness’ in terms of the encounter of Singaporean Asian cultures with Western culture or with other forms of cross-cultural dialogue (as in a writer of one ethnic group assuming the subjectivity of another group). Cultural hybridity rather than racial/ethnic purity was the norm of the system of representation of a multi-racial/multi-ethnic national identity. Ethnic content tended to cross racial boundaries. For instance, as Yeo’s anthology shows, Chinese ethnic content was generally used only as a trope for issues common to all the various ethnic communities living in Singapore, rather than as a simple reference to Chinese value-systems. In a story such as Catherine Lim’s “Jade Pendant,” jade, an object usually associated with Chinese culture, functions as a signifier of universal meanings of the class struggle and of intra-familial rivalry (46-53). In Arthur Yap’s “The Story of a Mask” in the same anthology (37-41), the mask of make-up used by actors in traditional Chinese opera features as a metaphor for the cultural displacement experienced by immigrants and offers the Chinese opera actor as a figure of modern alienation. In this signifying operation, traditional symbols of ethnic culture are made into universals.
Malaysian writer and literary critic Lloyd Fernando attests to the tendency on the part of Singaporean and Malaysian writers in the 1960s to perceive national subjectivity in terms of cultural displacement and estrangement, cross-culturality and a South-east Asian regional ethnic identity. He says in the introduction to an anthology of Singaporean and Malaysian stories published in 1968, that these stories were of an era that "affirm[ed]" "a fidelity to the region as a whole, a region consisting of many population groups (not only, let us add at once, racial) each to some extent astray in unfamiliar conditions which demand[ed] a breaking out from old patterns."^2

From the 1940s to the 1970s, Singapore writers in English largely addressed an elite, middle-class literati, who were familiar with Western canonical literature and who expected some conformity to Western standards of literary excellence. The production of short fiction was also controlled by the literary groups in the local university. Dudley de Souza and Arthur Yap say that the published short fiction in English of the 1950s and 1960s were mostly undergraduate writings published in journals such as Cauldron (1947-1949) published by the Medical College Union Literary and Debating Society, and New Cauldron (1951-1956), published by the Raffles Society of University of Malaya and Focus (1961 to the present), which was published by the University of Singapore’s Literary Society (765-6). In the 1970s, Commentary, a journal published by the National University of Singapore Society provided an avenue for the publication of short fiction. University professors of English such as Thumboo, Ban Kah Choon and Robert Yeo, and others associated with the university such as Geraldine Heng also put together anthologies of short stories in the 1970s.

The literature of this period reflected that era’s state nationalist ideology, which promoted ethnic integration and cultural pluralism. Wary of the dangers of ethnic extremism and chauvinism, the People’s Action Party had tried to dissolve identifications with ancestral homelands (Vasil, Asianising 49). Many of these facets of Singaporean literary production changed in the 1980s and 1990s. Not only was literature now structured along racial lines, but racial/ethnic themes were an important aspect of the popularization of Singapore literature in English during this period. By the early 1980s, Singapore
literary texts were studied in school alongside colonial texts, producing a generation of young Singaporean consumers of local fiction. This radically altered the reading public that the Singapore writer in English now had to address. The new audience was younger but also less well-educated, who read for entertainment rather than 'enlightenment.' In the mid-1980s, the Singapore government had also begun promoting aesthetic production as an industry, with plans to turn the nation into an international center of the arts. The Ministry of Information and the Arts began to fund literary and dramatic activity. This move popularized the arts, with artists/writers inevitably pressured to appeal to mass audiences in order to win state sponsorship, but that also inevitably linked cultural production to state ideology. Literature and drama, then, must be seen in this context in their involvement, to a greater or lesser extent, in hegemonizing state ideology.

The accent on arts/literature, where consumption of the latter began to be viewed as a symbol of social 'arrival' in a newly developing consumerist culture, also created a new market for local literature in English that was soon to be exploited by new publishing firms. Where, in the 1960s and 1970s, Heinemann Asia and Graham Brash were among the few publishers of Singapore fiction in English, Times Books International (a sister company of Straits Times) began in a big way in the 1980s to snap up local titles for publication and to develop Singapore writers' talents. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, other companies such as Landmark Books and Flame of the Forest encouraged experimental writing and literature catering for the masses, respectively, and attested to the new popular demand for local fiction. Fiction then was breaking away from the control of the university and was directed at a new mass audience. Shirley Geok-Lin Lim says: "Since 1985, while there has been a burgeoning of local writing that is selling well, the genres produced (chiefly ghost-stories, humor books, thrillers and teenage fiction) have done little to inspire critical acceptance" (Nationalism 4). She adds that after 1988, the pace of local writing published in Singapore increased, with younger writers aiming at a popular and often teenage audience (Nationalism 159).
Novels unarguably have greater mass-cultural appeal than poetry. The former were few and far between until the 1970s, but the later 1980s and 1990s saw the sudden production of novels. These however were historical novels that dealt with Singapore’s Chinese-immigrant past, and were contemporaneous with the state’s promotion of Chinese culture. Given the nation’s predominantly Chinese population, the racial/ethnic cultural theme also guaranteed a large readership. These novels included Stella Kon’s *The Scholar and the Dragon* (1986), Christine Su-Chen Lim’s *Gift from the Gods* (1990), Goh Sin Tub’s *The Sin-Kheh* (1993) and Catherine Lim’s *The Bondmaid* (1995). As historical novels of a multi-racial nation, they are remarkable for their total absence of non-Chinese Singaporean characters. Markedly different from the literature produced in the earlier period, they throw aside the exploration of contemporary issues of modern subjectivity in order to seek and define ethnic identity. Ethnic culture is, in these works, unfailingly identified with the past. Suddenly Chinese ethnic culture, even though it is not the same Chinese Confucianist culture being touted by the state, is treated as the dominant, if not sole, ethnic experience of the Singaporean. Singapore history is represented for the first time as the immigration of the Chinese, with nary any non-Chinese featured in these narratives; often, the encounter with colonial culture is also either erased or minimally represented. On the rare occasion when the ethnic experience of the minorities is approached, it is viewed as that of the ‘other’ to the dominant (Chinese) experience.

Before these novels appeared however, a trend was already perceptible in Singaporean short fiction in dealing with issues of Chinese ethnic identity. Catherine Lim’s short novel *The Serpent’s Tooth* (1982) vilifies a modern Singaporean Chinese woman for her disregard for traditional Chinese culture. The Malay and the Indian is represented here as the racial ‘other’ and their ethnic present is seen as marked by the negative aspects of a ‘past’ Chinese ethnic culture. Here, the lack in Chinese culture (including male sexual abuse of women and the ‘primitive’) is projected onto the racial ‘other,’ recalling colonial strategies of racial ‘othering’ and stereotyping. Her collections of short stories, *Little Ironies* (1979) and “Or Else, The Lightning God” and Other Stories (1980), which also deal largely with the erosion of
traditional Chinese cultural values by urban, Western culture, were selected for study at N and O levels in 1987/88 and 1989/90 respectively.

Then, as was to be expected, novels dealing with the history of the ‘other’ Singapore emerged in response to the Singapore-Chinese historical novels, re-producing the past of minority ethnic communities. In 1991, Rex Shelley wove the mass cultural appeal of a spy novel with the story of Singapore’s Eurasian community’s contribution to nation-building and its role in Singapore history. In 1993, his story of the Eurasian community was taken up again in People of the Pear Tree, this time focusing on its role in indigenous insurgency during the Japanese Occupation of Singapore. He published another historical novel about the Eurasians, Island in the Center, in 1995. That same year, Philip Jeyaretnam’s novel Abraham’s Promise was published, which looked at Singapore national political history as a tussle between Chinese and Indian value-systems, featuring a liberal-minded former Tamil opposition politician as the ‘other’ to national culture. In a crucial scene in the novel, the liberal politics of the central character, Abraham, a politician during the independence movement is ethnically/racially distinguished as Indian and differentiated from the ‘Chinese-ness’ of the political philosophy of the ruling party. In a frontal attack on the racism of PAP politics, Jeyaretnam pits his protagonist Abraham against a member of the ruling party, a Chinese man Lau Teng Kee, who is extolling the virtues of East Asians and of Singapore’s national culture, which he assumes to be ‘Chinese.’ It is a familiar debate about the ‘consensual’ style of East Asian democracy versus the contentious one of American democracy. Unable to persuade Abraham of his anti-American viewpoint, Lau attacks Abraham racially:

“I think America is a potential threat, because it is they who are scared, scared of us. They would like nothing better than for us to descend into anarchy or chaos, like ...” and here he pauses, as if to make sure that I [Abraham] am listening. “... like India or one of those dark places in Africa.” (74)
Then, annoyed when Abraham points out the alliance between Singapore and the US in the Gulf War and, unable to rebut his opponent, he makes fun of Abraham’s Tamil accent: “They [Americans] [a]re not white knights in shining armour, you know, these American bom-bers as you call them” (75).

“Suddenly,” Abraham notes, “everyone is laughing”:

I look around at their faces, reddened by alcohol into a florid harshness. I have spoken other than in their manner of speaking, betraying my upbringing, my Tamil otherness, most of all my insignificance

. . . . I keep the path immediately before me in focus . . . It would not do to faint here, here in the midst of my enemies. (75)

This racial polarization is to be seen in Singapore drama too. In 1988, Michael Chiang’s play Beauty World commanded packed audiences, a first for Singapore theater and the beginnings of the popularization of Singapore drama-in-English. The play relied for its appeal in a nostalgic send-up of a vanished Singapore Chinese immigrant culture. Featuring music and lyrics by Singapore pop musician Dick Lee, it counters colonial Western culture and Western sexuality with the working-class Chinese cabaret culture and raw sexuality of Beauty World, a 1950s Singapore dance club. Chiang’s play opens with the Westernized world of post-World War Two Singapore with a woman listening to the music of Eddie Calvert. But a radio play takes us to Beauty World, to Ivy Chan, a young woman from a small town in Malaysia who comes to Singapore and to Beauty World, seeking her father. As the lyrics of the closing song remind the audience, “This [Beauty World] is where it [read ‘Singapore life’] all began . . .” (160). The characters at the club eventually leave Beauty World to do things recognized as typical of modern-day Singapore: one signs up for adult education classes, studies at the polytechnic and winds up a supervisor in a garment factory; another becomes a nurse, who wins a singing talent contest (a reference to a real-life Singapore nurse, who won the annual TV Talentime contest); a dancer leaves the club to work for the Salvation Army in caring for orphans, etc.
Strangely, an Indian female character, Rosemary, is made to stand for a Westernized female sexuality and Western notions of romantic love, i.e. she is the ‘other’ to Chinese culture. When Rosemary comes in to Beauty World, looking for Ivy, her friend, a Chinese cabaret dancer rebukes her for her ‘otherness’:

You think you’re so very high class./I’m wondering what’s the big fuss/. . . . Well, Miss High Class, go back to India! /Who do you think you are with your aksi [showy upper-class] slang? /You look like a slut, but you’ve never had a man./Get out of here, take your airs and your class . . . .

(142)

Rosemary, unlike Ivy, ends up “single in Singapore”: while Ivy gets her man, Rosemary meets “the man of her dreams, only to wake up and find him gone,” supposedly done in by her ‘Western’ unrealistic romantic fantasies (158).

The relations between state ideology and Singapore writing are hardly ever examined. As Shirley Lim⁴ points out, this is due in part to influences from colonial New Criticism which “emphasizes the primary of the text and locates its meanings in the text’s literary, that is, linguistic and formal aspects.” The acceptance of New Criticism’s theorization of genre, devices, stylistic features and linguistic effects, Shirley Lim says, “helped to validate literary criticism as an academic discipline and to support assumptions of ‘universality’ inherent in these critical ideas.” “[A]n obvious dislocation, a disjuncture of theory and text occurs,” she says, “when Western theoretical scholarship is applied wholesale to a body of literature from a radically different history, society and culture.” In addition, when the literature is written in the language of Western literary criticism, in English, that “disjuncture is sometimes masked,” especially so when a colonial relationship is involved. This disjuncture, she says, “has negative consequences for the full development of independent national literary production” (Nationalism 1-2).

Within the Singapore context, however, the academy’s critical role is drastically constricted since the state covets the task of defining national identity and national values, and relies on ideological state apparatuses such as the press, education system as well as control over cultural production to hegemonize its ideologies.⁵ This takes away from the people’s agency. Koh Tai Ann’s well-researched
article “Culture and the Arts” argues that the state’s heavy promotion of cultural activity in the 1980s and 1990s is linked to the government’s agenda of developing national solidarity and shaping national culture so that both ethnic communalism and ‘over-Westernization’ are contained (717-8). By promoting the traditional arts of each racial group, ethnic culture is produced as a “museumization of an ossified past, a show-case culture” (734), she says, but such past art forms are also used to communicate “cultural messages now rooted in the new orthodoxy of contingent state-derived values” (721). The government’s ideological commitment to multiculturalism and a “democratic spirit that eclectically combines a socialist spirit with capitalism practices mean that “cultural values and development are consistently, even insistently, linked to economic development and productivity,” she says (720). Koh assesses the relationship between state and cultural production thus:

From its historical experience, the PAP government seems to have mastered two hard-learned lessons. One was the importance of gaining the initiative and retaining dominance in the cultural sphere if it was to win and keep the support of the majority Chinese as well as other races. Second, that to obtain and maintain this dominance, it must capture institutions for its own use, or create the necessary agencies to institutionalize its own cultural hegemony.” (719)

Given this situation, the failure of Singapore literary critics to explore the links between state ideology and writing is not then a matter only of submission to the tenets of New Criticism or a matter only concerning the academy. It may stem from a state-directed refusal to share cultural power with writers or with critics. The contemporary and more influential role of the state and the press in shaping and directing public reception of literary texts also needs to be taken into account. The Singapore academy has moved and is moving towards cross-disciplinarity, attempting more sociological, political readings of literature. But this institutional effort is delimited by and has to negotiate with the power and will of the state, as in any other nation. Given the deep penetration of the ideological apparatuses of the state, it is also more than likely that the academy internalizes state ideology to a greater or lesser extent. In the context of a successful hegemonization of state ideology, as I have argued that the government has
achieved with its Orientalization of national identity, subversion by university intellectuals is likely to be received as anti-nationalistic or pro-American/colonial, placing the academy in a difficult position.

If the local universities have moved beyond New Criticism, the government and media have not, which too conveniently ensures that subversion of state ideology in literature and literary criticism is minimalized. In ministerial speeches and in cultural policies, the government ensures that the domain of arts/literature is kept separate from that of politics. The conflict that erupted in 1994/5 between Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong and Catherine Lim symptomizes the state's willful de-politicization of literature. Catherine Lim had, in her then-regular column in *Sunday Times* (the weekend edition of *Straits Times*), commented on public perception of a division of political style and thinking between Prime Minister Goh and Lee Kuan Yew, Goh's predecessor, who was now Senior Minister. Goh had a people-oriented approach while Lee had a stern, no-nonsense style, she had said. In her two articles "The Great Affective Divide," and "One Government, Two Styles," published on 3 September and 20 November 1994, Lim held that public opinion saw Lee rather than the prime minister as holding the reins of power. In his aggressive response to Catherine Lim, Goh said that Lim should join a political party if she wanted to make such commentary. A report on his response, "PM: No Erosion of My Authority Allowed," published on 5 December 1994 in *Straits Times*, said that Goh felt he had:

to correct mistaken notions--"in firm language"--to prevent them from taking hold and confusing Singaporeans.

He added that in the Asian context, it was important that the authority of the Prime Minister be upheld, not undermined by "writers on the fringe." If left unchecked, snide comments would, over time, erode the people's respect for the office, he said.

Further remarks by the prime minister clarify his reference to the role of writers in the nation. In January 1995, he said that the government had to set the agenda, and anybody who wanted to make critical commentary had to enter the political fray:
You can criticise and we would treat you as if you have entered the political arena. If you do not wish to do so; [sic] you want to hide in sanctuaries to criticise the Government, to attack the Government, we’d say even though you don’t want to join a party, we would treat you as though you have entered the political arena.

I think it’s fair because you can’t just criticise without expecting us to reply to you in the same manner which [sic] you have attacked us. If you land a blow on our jaw, you must expect a counter-blow on your solar plexus.” (“Those with Agenda,” ST 24 Jan. 1995: 1)

The reference to “writers on the fringe” is not then a denigration of Lim’s abilities as a writer, but rather singles out writers in general as a peripheral class, whose activity of cultural production is to be viewed as, and expected to be, non-political. Lee’s statement warns that future departures from this rule would be construed by the state as expressions of a ‘political agenda,’ which supposedly only politicians can possess. The arena of the cultural (including media discourse) then are/should be “sanctuaries,” safe-houses from the rough and tumble of politics. Since Lim had stressed in her articles that she was documenting public opinion, the prime ministerial backlash indirectly suggests that writers could not be counted as being among the nation’s representers. Only politicians had this right. Since the national is always political, Prime Minister Goh’s remark that Lim had “gone beyond the pale” suggests that the government has sacralized and appropriated for politicians the arena of national representation (“Catherine Lim: I’m Not Interested,” ST 6 Dec. 1994). Goh’s responses quoted above underscore his self-perceived role as controller/regulator of public perception, an authoritarianism that he Asianizes. Throughout the incident, the government never commented on the content of Lim’s articles: a move that rendered her representation of public perception irrelevant.

The media too plays its part in creating a cultural ethos whereby the boundaries between literary activity and the ‘political’ is maintained. It does this in the main by restricting reviews of local literature to the aesthetic-literary approaches canonized by New Criticism, distancing even the educated middle-class and professions from newer but more subversive critical methods of reading offered by the
local universities. The typical Straits Times' review of local literature side-steps social issues raised by the texts in order to concentrate on the aesthetic use of language and the writer's artistry in handling a genre, characterization, etc. In the book review pages of Straits Times, one is hard put to find local literature subjected to a 'Cultural Studies' criticism--where the literary text is read as symptom of local culture. Textual meanings are universalized to take the sting out of even the more socially and politically involved and astringent local literary productions and displace any particular critique of Singapore, as Hannah Pandian's review of Tan Tarn How's play Lady of Soul indicates (see chapter 5). 11

I want to break from this tradition of de-politicizing Singaporean literature to provide the type of reading that Shirley Lim calls for, "nationalist, ethnocentric readings," which she says will correct the biases of the British-American critical traditions still taught in post-colonial societies (Nationalism 7). Lim observes that the Singapore writer ideologically removes his/her work from the domain of the political so that, in terms of reflecting national cultural concerns, the Singapore writer becomes "irrelevant" to his community of readers. This tendency to shrink from the social and political, she says, is due partly to the influence of Western liberal ideology regarding the artist's freedom from social constraints but it also has to do with the role of the state in Singapore culture: she says that "political and institutional bureaucracies have intruded and to some extent taken over the public and social spheres," so that Singapore writers are deprived of the motivation to engage in these domains (Nationalism 20-1). Lim attempts a symptomatic reading of this supposedly elitist "irrelevance" in Singapore poetry. For instance, she argues that Thumboo's "dual commitment to '(Western) literary tradition' and '(Singapore) society' " as poet and as critic mark the struggle for cultural integrity "that a colonial radically divisive history had fractured" (Nationalism 128-29). In her analysis of Arthur Yap's poetry, she moves beyond the usual view of Yap as an inaccessible poet and interrupts Yap's own denial of social and political intentionality to read him as a deeply nationalist writer who responds, though subversively, to state ideology.
Lim however appears wary of venturing into the mass-cultural domain where the relationship between state and literature is less mediated: in considering the link between nationalism and literature in English-language writing in Singapore, she chooses only to discuss local poetry. Given the government's attempts to Asianize the national values and subjectivity of Singaporeans, to dramatically shift identification away from a West-East cultural hybridity, it appears an interesting task to examine the role of literature and of writers in hegemonizing state ideology, especially in a context where literature itself is being popularized, and slipping away from university control. As Jan Gordon points out too in "The 'Second-Tongue Myth': English Poetry in Polylingual Singapore," the bonds between the English-language writer and the ruling elite are strong. In poetry, this "privileged relationship" between poet and government perhaps causes an inability to interrupt government discourse, which is escaped by opening oneself to outside, international rather than national influences (Gordon 63). But in fiction, I will argue, the genre's popular appeal can produce literature that helps to hegemonize state ideology. Also, many of the writers who have engaged in imagining a Singaporean Chinese identity and who take a desiring stance towards the state-devised Asian/Confucianist national identity have been associated with the government, in particular with the Ministry of Education and its Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore (CDIS), which we recall played a crucial role in attempting to 'Confucianize' the nation. Catherine Lim was formerly a project director with CDIS and Christine Lim too has worked with this organization. Goh Sin Tub has worked both as a teacher and a civil servant while Ovidia Yu was a teacher before she turned to writing full-time.

Koh Tai Ann perceives that the government's promotion of culture for the purposes of hegemonizing its ideologies, coupled with the failure to develop critical/intellectual resources, allows the government to sets the "dominant tone" in cultural production. Thus, certain "voices or points of view that in the rapidly changing circumstances of today's world may be more relevant, or even central," are marginalized or rendered inarticulate, while more conservative perspectives involving "inflexible, limited and limiting mental habits" and a "failure of imaginative perception" are preferred. The latter,
however, inhibit Singaporeans' ability to respond positively and appropriately to changing historical circumstances (725). It is to be hoped then that socio-political critique of such cultural texts will deconstruct the hegemonized "tyranny of shared assumptions" and help to reverse stalls in the cultural business of making meaning.

With this intention in mind, I will read some of the above-mentioned novels and short fiction that deal with Chinese ethnic identity in terms of their relation to the government's discourse of Singapore's East Asian/Confucianist culture. The Serpent's Tooth and The Bondmaid by Catherine Lim, The Scholar and the Dragon by Stella Kon, Christine Lim's Gift from the Gods and Goh Sin Tub's The Sin-Kheh, as well as the short stories "A Dream of China" by Ovidia Yu and Catherine Lim's "The Journey" will be discussed as the imaginative and desiring responses of the Singaporean Chinese writer-in-English to state ideology concerning Chinese ethnic identity and Asian values.

The study of literary works, especially of texts that support the state's ideology, may well prove a more fruitful approach to unearthing the deeper, even hidden meanings of the state's Asianization and Confucianization programs that are not acknowledged in state discourse and the rhetoric of the ruling party. Until now, as I have shown in chapter 2, academic discussion of Singapore's new Orientalized nationalism which has remained within the discipline of political science has refused to accede to its racist meanings. Vasil as well as Hill and Lian do not take seriously the ethnic minorities' perception of the Asianizing programs as an endeavor on the part of the state to Sinicize Singapore and retract an earlier emphasis on cultural pluralism. They also interpret the government's sudden focus in the 1980s on issues of ethnicity and ethnicity-related policies (such as the "Speak Mandarin" campaign, and the setting up of special schools for Mandarin-English bilingualism) as merely an openness on the part of the state to discuss questions of ethnic identity, which they had feared to do in the earlier period of nation-building. Vasil further says that the new nationalism is only a new interpretation of the founding principle of cultural democracy--that the state does not intend a return to Chinese cultural chauvinism that marked the nation's early history. Singaporean academics such as Chua and Puroshotam, who
approach the problem from the sociological angle, are more skeptical of the Asianization/Confucianization program, but they tend to ignore the favorable reception of this American-Singaporean ideology by Chinese Singaporeans (see chapter 2).

By reading the state’s nationalism as it is interpreted by Singaporean Chinese writers, I want to introduce the voice of the people in the endeavor of imagining their national identity and displace the state’s monopoly of this important discourse of identity. But by necessity, even Singaporeans’ favorable imagining of the state’s discourse of identity must involve some re-interpretation and even mis-interpretation of state ideology as they filter this nationalism through previously held identifications and desires. Very often, the deep meanings of an ideology only become clear in the narratives it generates, in the way these work out an imaginary resolution of the ideology with other ideologies and with the real conditions of existence. As Silverman points out, we are accommodated to symbolic laws and the mode of production by an ideological facilitation, and we accede to this ideological facilitation through fantasy and imaginary captation (Male 2). Fictional narratives plot the path that the ideology must take through other current systems of thought and belief such as those of race, class and gender. They also make clear the kind of structuring gaze and the cultural screens we must use in order to perceive the real world through the eyes of the given ideology (Male 48-51). This in turn renders transparent the ideology’s “will to totality,” the way it operates to shut out certain meanings and to fix others (Male 54). But ideology also has a determining influence on our desire and the construction of our subjectivity, on how we see ourselves. Silverman argues that ideology works through the identification processes of the fantasy and the moi (ego) to frame and construct parameters of desire and to provide myths of identity and desire. It depends then on fantasy to teach the subject how to adopt a desiring position within it as well as to specify the roles and sequences the subject can play within the given ideology, thereby impacting on the formation of identity (Male 15-51). We may then locate the true meaning of state ideology, not in politicians’ words as previous academic discussion has done, which must always remain in the realm of speculation, but in the fantasy tableaus and identity myths that politicians’ rhetoric
encourage. For instance, an ideology must be considered to be racist and anti-feminist if it directs the subject to desire racial exclusivism and patriarchal control, even if racial and gender subordination was not intended by the original creator and disseminator of that ideology.

My study of the above-mentioned works will show that the subjectivation of the state’s proposed ‘Asian’ identity has involved, in the Singapore literary imaginary, a politicization of ethnicity, in particular the Sinicization of Singapore culture, where Singapore history is re-imagined as a monocultural Chinese history rather than as a multi-cultural one. It indicates that the state’s Asianization/Sinicization program requires Singaporeans to imaginatively move away from the founding myths of the nation, from ideals of cultural pluralism and racial equality, towards ethnic chauvinism. The state may continue to disavow its intentions of Sinicization and racism, of its prioritizing of Chinese culture over the minority cultures, but literature produced in these two decades (the 1980s and 1990s) show that the cathecting of state ideology regarding ethnic identity has entailed the marginalization of minority cultures by negating their contributions to national culture, and perceiving Singaporean culture as singularly Chinese.

Before I begin to discuss each of these literary texts in detail, I want to present an overview of some patterns, common features that mark these attempts to imagine Singapore Chinese identity. Firstly, these novels and short fiction responded to the state’s emphasis on Chinese identity by inversely representing Singapore Chinese cultural history in terms of low, peasant culture rather than the high culture referred to by the state. On the surface, these novels and short stories appear to be writings of resistance. Where the state associated Chinese culture with social order, filial piety and structured familial relations, these writings often represent immigrant Chinese culture as socially chaotic as well as dysfunctional in its familial relations, unruly in its male sexual licentiousness, and as an oppressive patriarchal culture. Though the texts superficially appear to refuse government constructions of Chinese ethnic identity, at a deeper level, they work towards switching their readers’ perception of national subjectivity away from that of multi-culturalism and cultural hybridity to Chinese racial and ethnic identity, directing readers’
desire towards that cultural purity. Also, the representation of a low, immigrant culture is part and parcel of an attempt to shore up the inadequacies, the loopholes and vagueness of state ideology. It is my contention that Singapore writers' focus on Chinese ethnic identity in these historical novels and short fiction provided the ideological support that was necessary for the state's "Asianization" or rather Sinicization agenda, where it helped to turn the state's dry and hitherto relatively unfamiliar, reactionary discourse about ethnic roots and tradition into a simulacrum of 'real,' lived cultural experience, that is, as the imaginary apprehension of real conditions of existence.

The association of Singapore Chinese culture with low culture was a means of getting around social and historical contradictions that hindered an absolute and direct identification with the state's Confucianizing agenda. As the protagonist of Christine Lim's novel *Fistful of Colours*, Suwen, notes, Confucianism as the high culture of imperial China was not a part of the historical experience of Chinese ethnicity in Singapore: most of the majority Chinese immigrants were poor peasants who fled China in the 19th and early 20th centuries because they couldn't make a living there. These immigrants practiced Chinese folk culture rather than Confucianism. Suwen asks her expatriate Scottish friend, Mark:

"But don't you think that the richer we get, the more we, Chinese-Singaporeans, talk as if all our ancestors had come from the educated class in old China? As if they had brought with them, high Chinese art and culture? It's all bluff. . . . Our immigration records tell a different story. Ninety-nine percent were illiterate coolies. The landless poor of Old China. But we, their descendants are clamouring for a return to the old values which these immigrants brought over. And what are these so-called old values? Not your Confucian high ideals, you know. But more of the survival values. Survival, hard work, thrift, and the accumulation of wealth and property." (219)

As I noted in chapter 2, Wang Mong Lin, director of CDIS, who was involved in developing the "Confucianist Ethics" program for schools, had also said that Confucianism was unfamiliar to Singaporeans.
The state’s new nationalism also demanded some reversals in the attitudes of Singapore Chinese towards ethnic culture. The nation’s post-colonial English-speaking Chinese elite had been ideologized, through the independence movement and for more than a decade after, to think of their parent culture as just one aspect of their national culture (see chapter 2). State ideology of the 1960s and early 1970s had emphasized that Singapore was not a “third China”—that it was modern, democratic (unlike Communist China), and economically and culturally open (China had a closed-door policy at the time). This degree of dis-identification with China and Chinese culture had caused rifts between the Chinese-educated and English-educated Chinese in Singapore. The latter, especially the successful elite, often thought of Chinese culture as retrogressive and oppressive, and sometimes even denied their ethnic heritage, as is shown in these works of fiction. The representation of China as Singapore’s ‘other’ (as we see in Kon’s novel, *The Scholar*) had also cultivated a sense of antagonism towards China, which was reinforced by memories of the communist threat to Singapore and Malaysia: the state itself had often linked the communist movement of the 1940s and 1950s to Chinese communalism (see chapter 2). This dis-identification with China and with many aspects of indigenous Chinese immigrant culture, as well as the government’s emphasis on education in English, meant that the nation’s cultural memories of Chinese ethnicity were being eroded—a fact that the state acknowledged as the “deculturalisation” of the people, issuing from the emphasis on Western forms of knowledge, on English education and the nation’s openness, economically (and because of that, culturally too) to the West.

Given then that the state’s injunction to Singaporeans to ‘re-assume’ their Confucianist identities addressed an abyss in cultural memory, an empty imaginary where cultural memory could not offer an appropriate store of affirming narratives, some of Singapore’s culture producers sought to fill this empty place of Chinese ethnicity with meaning, introducing into it the only ethnic experience they could recall or relate to, that of Chinese low, folk culture. Since the state’s discourse about Singapore’s Confucianist cultural heritage did not correspond with the nation’s real cultural experience, one begins to understand that Singaporeans’ phantasmatic route to embracing Asian/Chinese/Confucianist identities, to creating
new myths of identity, had to be an indirect and complex route, often involving erasures of previous cultural identifications and dis-identifications (of colonialism, multi-culturalism and their anti-Chineseness). These ‘ethnic’ fantasies also often involved the incorporation of desires and processes of identification that contradicted state ideology but which were necessary to overcome or negotiate the resistance of the English-educated as well as to accommodate real facts of existence. This seeming contradiction of representing Singaporean Chinese culture as low and working-class rather than as classical or Confucianist, as the state conceived it, was not then resistance to state ideology but rather part of the form that fantasy had to adopt in order to enable the English-educated Singaporean Chinese subject to make the leap from one cultural complex to another, unfamiliar one.

As I will show especially with Catherine Lim’s novel Serpent’s Tooth and Christine Lim’s novel, Gift, the portrayal of low, Chinese culture, the generation of nostalgic desire for a lost culture and guilt for that loss cleared a path to high, Confucianist culture, getting around the problem of English-speaking Chinese Singaporeans’ resistance to ethnic identity. These literary texts may be read as providing the intermediate stage where Singapore writers in English attempted to break with the previous national imaginary, which had centered around multi-culturalism and the avoidance of ethnic essentialisms, displacing it with a Chinese ethnic imaginary and constructing narratives which taught readers to identify with their ‘past’ as an ethnic Chinese one.

Another feature characterizing the corpus of historical novels and short stories that were produced in the 1980s and 1990s involves the troping of Chinese ethnic identity as the ‘past’ of Singapore, as the reminder of the past within the present. Read as a symptom, this reveals the inability and/or unwillingness of Singaporean Chinese writers to locate their ethnic identity in the flux of contemporary life. As I will show with Yu’s short story “Dream,” this is also a means of avoiding a confrontation of the differences between traditional Chinese culture with Western culture/capitalism, a refusal to recognize the two as irreconcilable antagonisms. Rey Chow uses Johannes Fabian’s concept of “allochronism to describe this casting of the ‘other’ in another time” (Woman 30). Ironically, Singapore
writers duplicate Eurocentric allochronistic approaches to Chinese culture by using the temporal 'otherness' of the past to represent Chinese ethnic culture itself as their own 'other,' even while seeking to embrace this 'other' as the self. This framing device of time splits Chinese culture into the past and represents present culture as the "modern." As Chow says, "It is only through thinking of the 'other' as sharing our time and speaking to us at the moment of writing that we can find an alternative to allochronism." Chow poses some very pertinent questions for a nation that is seeking to articulate the Asian/Chinese with the modern: "What would it mean to include the [ethnic] 'other,' the object of inquiry, in a cotemporal, dialogic confrontation with the critical [Western] gaze," she asks, and "how might the argument of coevalness affect our reading of [Chinese] modernity" (Woman 33). Singapore Chinese writers sidestep these issues in a careful bid not to problematize the state's construction of essentialistic ethnic identities.

Further, the novels and short stories stage Singaporean identity quests as quests for ethnic identity, which are, in turn, represented as the quest for a mother, father, or grandparent and for his/her story of Singapore's past. In Kon's novel, the narrator tells the story of his grandfather's past and his contribution to the nation's history. In Christine Lim's novel, a young, modern Singapore Chinese woman seeks to understand her mother and to represent her own subjectivity as a response to a maternal past. In Catherine Lim's novel Serpent's Tooth, the antagonistic attitudes of 'modern' (Western) Singaporean Chinese towards their ethnic culture is critiqued as a lack of filial piety and a rejection of one's patriarchal legacy. Goh's novel is a semi-biography of the author's grandfather. In Yu's story, a young Singapore Chinese woman's journey to China is represented as a coming to terms with her patriarchal legacy, which is defined in racial/ethnic terms.

This displacement in literary fantasy of ethnic culture as the story of maternal/paternal origins lends affect to the representation of ethnic identity and naturalizes it, while the modes of fictional autobiography and history work to authorize and 'authenticate' these stories of the ethnic past. Their situating of ethnic culture in the past, however, reveals the underlying lack of real ethnic/Confucianist
content in the daily life of the English-educated Chinese Singaporean, which necessitates such a move in
the first place. The device of the quest and the third-person perspective from which these stories of the
past are told may also be read as an implicit acknowledgment that no matter how strong the desire to re­
claim the ethnic past as their own, none of the writers has a sufficiently strong relation to the past and
knowledge of his/her ethnic culture to assume, even in imagination, the voice and subjectivity of this
ethnic past. For instance, Goh’s narrator never allows his protagonists, the narrator’s parents, to speak
their private thoughts. Christine Lim’s novel gives us access to the mind of its protagonist, a young
Singapore Chinese modern woman, through the pages of her diary but we are never allowed a glimpse
into the mental sanctuary of her mother or grandparents. These stories asserting ethnic identity then
carry a different sub-text: that of the cultural/epistemological alienation of the speaking subject of the
novel from its ‘ethnic’ past, where the desire to take on ‘Chinese’ identity comes up against the limits
posed by history.

This figuring of the low-cultural ethnic past as the maternal/paternal past may also be read as a
hysterical, pathological formation that not only documents Singaporean Chinese ambivalence towards
ethnic culture but also provides the means to escape from that ambivalence. If we recall (see chapter 1),
Zizek suggests that every ideology viewed as fantasy contains a point within it that contradicts the
ideology’s main thesis while paradoxically acting as the basis of its support. He explains this occurrence
in terms of the repressed ‘real’ of ideology, that which is foreclosed or shut off from the ideology,
sneaking back into the ideology but in a disguised and resolved form, in a form where it escapes the
ideology’s censorship, thus providing the ideology with its libidinal support (“How Did Marx” 11-16).
The repressed ‘real’ hence permeates the prevailing ideology in a form that is both acceptable to the
latter but which also answers to the subject’s desire. Ideology, he says, works like a dream, where
forbidden desires escape from the unconscious into the conscious by taking on forms that pass the
consciousness’ censorship laws, using strategies of condensation and displacement to disguise their true
meanings. This working of the repressed ‘real’ into ideology, where the ideology’s contradiction is
resolved in an imaginary manner, yields a form that both contradicts and affirms the ideology, and also provides the support for ideology by offering a source of enjoyment (of repressed desire). It is at this point, Zizek says, that an ideology takes a real hold on the subject, where ideology is successful in interpellating the subject. Without this incorporation of the repressed ‘real’ of desire, the subject cannot be persuaded to invest in a discourse that it knows is lacking and which does not answer to its desire.

The Singapore government’s conception of a national identity based on a high Confucianist Chinese culture has led contradictorily to ethnic identity being imagined in terms of a non-Confucianist, low Chinese culture. But this low culture passes through the ‘censorship’ of state ideology by imagining itself as lack, allowing desire to be re-directed elsewhere (towards Confucianist culture). In addition, this narrative paradigm of ethnic-identity-as-father/mother allows the English-educated, Westernized Singaporean Chinese subject to engage with its own ambivalence to its ethnic culture. The ethnic ‘past’ represented as low Chinese culture can be identified with and desired as part of the subject’s maternal/paternal heritage but it can also be reviled as an ‘inauthentic’ or secondary Chinese culture and be ‘recalled’ in a contradictory mix of love and hate, identification and dis-identification, corresponding with the affect-ridden but conflictual nature of the parent-child relationship. Desire for a more ‘authentic,’ high (Confucianist) culture is then opened as a way of release from this parent-child conflict, of release from the burden of a low ethnic culture viewed as ‘lack.’

As Kon’s novel, Catherine Lim’s text Serpent’s Tooth and Yu’s short story will show, the relation established between ethnic identity and paternal/maternal origins makes it possible to exploit feelings of shame and guilt (in betraying the ‘parent’ culture), through which Chinese culture is paradoxically and ambivalently invested with desire. Shame and guilt are strange emotions: they allow one to stay in an intermediate state of acknowledging the ‘wrong’ one has done without going over to the next stage of deliverance from that ‘wrong-doing’ by rectification of the act, since such rectification is perceived to be impossible. They are, as such, Jamesonian ideologemes or, in Zizek’s language, the repressed ‘real’ source of pleasure hiding in a displaced form, where one is able to hold on to and enjoy the gains
from the ‘wrongful’ act while disavowing any such pleasure. In the case of these narratives, shame and
guilt allow the Singaporean Chinese subject to be mortified at its betrayal of its parent culture, leading it
to invest desire in the parent culture only through delimited forms such as fetishism, where the benefits
of the betrayal, such as the gains from capitalism and the desire for Western culture to which ethnic
culture was betrayed, need not be sacrificed.

As is to be expected, the representation of low-Chinese culture as lack, however, is gendered. As
Silverman notes, we live our relations to the Symbolic Order and the mode of production through the
medium of ideology, but these ideologies depend on the binaries and representation systems of family
ideology, of the dominant fiction that imagines and sustains sexual difference (Male 34 -35). Male and
female, Silverman says, are the dominant fiction’s most fundamental binary opposition, and many
elements of ideology exist in a metaphoric relation to these terms of sexual difference, deriving their
conceptual and affective value from that relation.

Due largely to the economic circumstances of an under-developed country entering into a speedy
program of industrialization, gender roles in Singapore were inevitably transformed, to a greater or lesser
degree depending on class and ethnic group locations. With more than half the nation’s able-bodied,
adult population upon independence comprising women, they were mobilized through the 1960s and
1970s to enter the labor force. Though the bulk of Singapore women worked in factories in minimum-
wage jobs, other women broke traditional rules of the sexual division of labor to enter typically male
areas of work, such as medicine, law, and technical and engineering fields. As Puroshotam notes, the
ruling party’s five-year-plan for 1959 to 1964 included the pledge to safeguard and promote the rights of
women, a commitment to organize a unified women’s movement, to encourage women to participate in
politics and administration, to grant women equal rights in marriage and the family and to provide jobs
for all women (“Women” 322). The Women’s Charter, protecting women’s rights in marriage, was
enacted in the early 1960s. Puroshotam and Chan Heng Chee12 are skeptical that the government’s
interests in emancipating women and national changes in gender attitudes go beyond economic
mobilization but certainly highly-educated women, as were these women writers discussed here, were opened to feminist thought, especially that coming from the West. Women’s emancipation, though it was probably decreasingly significant the lower one descended the class ladder, was often also symbolically associated with the nation’s ‘modernity.’ The PAP had always had its own restrictions concerning female emancipation: in 1975, then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew had said that Singapore women should be educated and become independent but “without too great an upset in traditional family relationships.” He had also ruled out legislation as a means of effecting changes in “traditional male dominant Asian societies” since such “change in social attitudes . . . should be allowed to develop naturally. . . .” During the 1970s, women could treat these remarks as overly-paternal counseling and safely ignore them. But in the 1980s and 1990s, women’s liberation was increasingly culturalized as Western and alienated as non-Asian in government statements, and unfavorably placed in the discourse of ‘Asian’/‘Chinese’ national identity. Puroshotam notes that government attitudes from the 1980s are “understood to be its new stance towards women” (“Women” 321).

The new nationalism then, if it had to be cathected as an assertion of “Chinese” identity, brought the feminist desires of Singapore Chinese women writers into conflict with their desire to assert a post-colonial ethnic identity. Since Singapore Chinese women had already internalized feminist ideals in the earlier period of Singapore history, a simple repression of feminist ideals was not possible. Some sort of engagement with feminism was required in this fantasy of Orientalized Chinese ethnic identity. Zizek is helpful here in theorizing the operation of fantasy in re-ordering identifications and desires in response to changes in the symbolic (dominant) ideology--where that which was approved in a previous period is now subjected to repression. These women writers repress and attempt to escape from their feminist desires by feminizing Singapore’s Chinese past, by recognizing, even celebrating Singaporean Chinese immigrant women’s strength, endurance and ability to adapt to changing historical circumstances. But this female strength is construed as lack of the male, representing Singapore Chinese history in mythic terms as the original abandonment of the female by the male. The transformation of ethnic culture
brought about through the experience of diaspora is here re-imagined as a feminization of Chinese patriarchal culture. Thus, as in Christine Lim’s *Gift* and Catherine Lim’s *Serpent’s Tooth*, Singaporean ethnic history is recalled as the mother’s history, as that which took place in the absence of the male (father) and which is therefore lacking in (patriarchal) authority. The Sinicizing/Confucianizing of Singaporean identity also then entails its masculinization.

In many of these texts, the male/female struggle is metaphorically equated with the East/West and tradition/modernity struggle, where the female/West is demonized and (Western) modernity is feminized, i.e. it requires a (male, hence Chinese/Asian) completion, which refers to the state’s ideology regarding ‘Asian modernity,’ where Western modern cultural norms are to be articulated with Asian traditions. Western culture is implicitly represented in these texts as the force (of modernity) that effeminized Eastern culture, alienating it from its ‘manliness,’ but also as that which ‘perversely’ masculinized Chinese women (which is a reference to the state’s ideology that women’s emancipation is a foreign/ Western cultural intrusion).

If fantasy is understood via Lacan’s formula as a psychic mechanism and formation for plugging the hole of symbolic castration or lack by positing a particular object as the cause of desire (see chapter 1), then these Singapore narratives posit Confucianist culture (either implicitly or explicitly) as the (phallic) object of desire that will answer to the (female) lack in Singaporean Chinese ethnic culture. The demonization of the modern woman in these phantasmatic responses to state ideology reveals the latter’s agenda of female oppression: these narratives recognize, consciously or unconsciously, that the subject position from which the Singaporean Chinese woman can desire and identify with Confucianist culture must involve a rejection of feminist ideas and aspirations. But ironically, the state’s exhortation to Singaporean Chinese to assume their Confucianist ethnic roots has led to the feminized representation of Singapore subjectivity as ‘lack,’ where Singapore national culture is viewed in negative terms as a loss in cultural virility, power and self-confidence, as an emasculated culture. The impact of this on Singapore Chinese male subjectivity will be explored in the next chapter.
Singapore Chinese women writers also dealt with the repression of feminist desires and ideologies by packaging their anti-feminist content in a feminist literary form, the woman's (fictional) autobiography—where the repressed 'real' of desire returned to the ideology, but in a disguised, 'acceptable' form. Catherine Lim, for instance, demonizes the modern young woman's new-found power in *Serpent's Tooth* but disavows this anti-feminism through the use of the feminist form of female autobiography and the female narrative voice.

The use of feminist literary forms, as well as the extolling of Singapore Chinese women's positive qualities, has led to some of these texts finding their way into post-colonial feminist literary canons, especially in the West where their emphasis on Chinese culture is exoticized as non-Western feminist difference. What is overlooked is the political context of nationalism in which this feminine positivity is embedded, where it represents the nation's lack, the signifier of the original loss of the (ethnic) father, of that which must be re-installed in order to construct the nation's identity within the paradigm of 'normal' familial ideology. This contradiction between form and content also testifies to a deadlock in Singapore Chinese women writers' desire to accede to state formations of 'Asian'/'Confucian' national identity: a deadlock not just in the impossible simultaneous desire for feminism as well as for a patriarchal ethnic culture, but also in the desire for modernity as well as tradition, and for Western culture as well as for ethnic culture. Contradictory desires, especially for the post-colonial subject, are a usual fact of life. But one deals with this relatively healthily either by imaginarily reconciling them or by negotiation. In the case of Singapore women, however, the state is forcing a repression of one desire (for the modern/feminist) and demanding the retraction of a set of already-formed identifications. Pushing these desires and identifications into conflict, it promotes paranoid cultural resolutions, which, in Singapore women's fiction, involves female masochism. As Silverman notes, female masochism is a crucial mechanism for eroticizing women's lack and subordination (*Male* 189).

The feminized representation of Singapore low-Chinese culture, where Singapore women metaphorically flagellate themselves for contaminating a great, original, patriarchal culture, is then a
condensed hysterical symptom. It not only allows Singaporeans to escape from their ambiguous feelings towards the ethnic heritage (as mentioned above) but it is also a means for women writers to cope with the demands made by the state’s ideology that feminist aspirations and desires be henceforth banished. In many of these texts, the gendering of Singapore Chinese immigrant culture as feminine is also a narrative mechanism for disavowing contradictions between capitalism and Chinese culture. In this strategy, the transformation of an original Chinese culture by capitalism/Western modernity is re-configured as its emasculation by women’s empowerment through modernity. This then allows Singapore’s Asian/Chinese identity to be viewed as a gender problem (where feminism is seen as threatening ethnic culture) rather than one of de-colonization.

These narratives of Chinese identity also often tend to mix the mode of realism with romanticism. Kon’s novel, both of Catherine Lim’s novels, and Christine Lim’s work teem with dreams that surreptitiously speak the unsayable, that which is barred by state ideology, or which register, at least unconsciously, the writer’s awareness of contradictions between the ruling party’s current ideology and the pro-Western ideologies that were dominant in the early years of the nation. Very often, non-realistic modes of representation also serve to disguise gaps in the writer’s knowledge of the ethnic past which s/he is seeking to reclaim.

In addition, they mystify Eastern culture. Again, this registers an ambivalent attitude towards Chinese culture: Chinese culture is represented and often eroticized as object of desire but it is an object that is deliberately left vague, undefined, or fetishized. As the signifier without the signified, it does not then threaten Singapore Chinese people’s contradictory desire for Western culture/modernity/capitalism. Since the new nationalism urges ethnic identifications that are beyond Singaporeans’ knowledge, given their over-culturalisation by the West and a degree of dis-identification from their native past, this mysteriousness of the East as object of desire is not surprising.

One final observation that must be made before one proceeds to analysis of specific texts is that concerning the ‘moralization’ of ethnic identity. We may recall that in Singapore, following the
publication of the Goh Education Report in 1979, moral education was made mandatory for young school-goers at the primary level, which was to be taught in the students’ mother tongue. This same association of the ‘ethnic’ with the ‘ethical’ structures these narratives and their myths of identity. Again, as with the use of non-realistic modes of representation, the resort to a manichean economy of Western/Eastern identity enables complex, contemporary issues of cross-culturality, which challenge the state’s resort to cultural essentialisms, to be evaded.

Government policies of the 1980s had made the study of Mandarin as well as of Buddhism and Confucianism mandatory for Chinese Singaporean youth at school, while regular bombardment of government ideology against Western values coupled with its Asianizing cultural agenda (in particular its promotion of Confucianism) had made the public very much aware of issues of Chinese ethnic identity. But without the support of cultural texts such as novels, stories, and plays, including television miniseries such as the hugely popular Samsui Women—which was first produced in Mandarin but later dubbed in English and dealt with the history of the immigration of a class of Chinese women to Singapore who worked as manual laborers—it is doubtful that government propagandizing would have been successful on its own in interpellating the nation, especially the Western-educated, English-speaking Chinese elite. But, as I hope to show in the detailed analysis of these literary texts, these novels and short fiction need to be read and decoded as hysterical symptoms. In the words of Zizek, “a symptom is a symbolic, signifying formation,” “a kind of cipher, a coded message” which “arises where the world failed, where the circuit of symbolic communication was broken” (“From Symptom” 73).

These texts try to imaginatively fill in and thereby inadvertently unmask the loopholes in state ideology and the discrepancies between the state-proposed national identity and the realities of daily life and desire in contemporary Singapore. These texts also make evident that Singaporean Chinese writers (and perhaps their audience too) subjectivate state ideology (bring their desire in line with the government’s) by incorporating long-repressed desires of racial domination in the nation, by Sinicizing Singapore history and erasing the literary/cultural presence of other cultures. The government has denied
The Serpent’s Tooth (1982) by Catherine Lim

Published in the early years of the state’s attempt to ‘Confucianize’ the nation, this short novel is a fantasy of Chinese ethnic identity that does not yet take the form of the ethnic historical novel. The novel centers on a modern, Chinese woman, Angela, who belongs to elite Singapore society. Angela finds that Chinese cultural traditions get in the way of her attempt to raise a perfect, successful Singaporean family and run an ideal Western-style household. She feels especially inconvenienced by her aging mother-in-law, whom she thinks is a bad influence on her children because she imparts Chinese superstitions and other aspects of ethnic culture that Angela considers archaic (in comparison to Western culture and its norms of rationality and scientific knowledge). Though she takes her mother-in-law into her household in a gesture of filial piety, Angela cannot bear the Chinese ‘difference’ in home aesthetics: her mother-in-law clutters the house and mars her Western home interior with her Chinese ancestral altar. Angela battles to reduce the mother-in-law’s cultural influence on her children and also generally tries to prevent norms of Chinese traditional culture from hindering her family’s efforts to get ahead in society.

Set in the contemporary period, the novel demonizes resistance to Chinese identity as ‘modern’ female guilt and betrayal of the father’s law. Antipathy towards Chinese culture and customs is moralized simply as an eth(n)ic wrong, which is also gendered as female. The negative attitudes of the English-educated, modernized/Westernized Singaporean Chinese are exclusively viewed as a woman’s problem and women here take the blame for what would otherwise be seen as a cultural phenomenon caused by historic circumstances, especially those concerning global capitalism’s transformation of
Angela’s moves to restrict the encroachment of Chinese culture into her daily Westernized lifestyle, focused in terms of her relationship with her mother-in-law, is also figured as a child’s betrayal of her parents. Angela’s mother-in-law is an immigrant from China who feels culturally dislocated in modern Singapore, for whom traditional Chinese beliefs serve as an anchor in this sea of cultural change. Angela however is unable to ‘see’ this and misrecognizes it as madness, resulting in cruel treatment of the aging, helpless woman, which the reader is encouraged to view as the cause of the woman’s derangement: Old Mother (as the mother-in-law is referred to in the text) only exhibits madness/senility or signs of a nervous breakdown when she lives with Angela, talking to a photograph of her dead husband as if he were alive and capable of helping her, retreating into memories of the past, and wandering around town on her own. Out of ‘kindness,’ Angela removes Old Mother from her domicile in a public housing flat, owned by her son—where she was allowed to look after her grandchild—and re-situates her in a guest-room in her family home, planning eventually to isolate her in a building removed from the main house, where her relations to the family would be curtailed. Then, when Old Mother heads to the House Of Death in Sago Lane—where aging, dispossessed Chinese immigrants, lacking family connections, go to die—Angela tracks her down and brings her back home, causing the woman finally to collapse and later die in hospital. Since Angela’s mother is never mentioned in the novel, the mother-in-law is to be read as her surrogate mother. Certainly, throughout the novel, Angela refers to Old Mother as “mother.”

Old Mother however is not to be simplistically identified as victim of Eurocentric attitudes which ‘other’ her culture and ethnic subjectivity. Angela’s response to the woman is demonized as relying on Western notions of rationality. But Catherine Lim’s perspective on Old Mother-in-Law is not totally sympathetic either: like Angela, her daughter-in-law, she too is not a perfect mother, as the novel makes clear in one episode (45-47). Old Mother favors her youngest son over her three other sons, causing anguish to the rest and destroying brotherly bonds between them. She thinks to herself of how “she loved this youngest son of hers; even his impatience and waywardness brought forth indulgent smiles
and laughs, whereas she used sharp words for her other sons and freely knocked her knuckles on their heads.” On her favorite son’s birthday, she got up early to “make him noodles with pork . . . as well as boil him a big egg, with the shell stained bright red for luck.” When the other sons “trooped into the kitchen to watch,” she firmly told them:

“The noodles with pork are for Ah Siong only, it’s his birthday today. . . . “I didn’t have any noodles for my birthday,” said Ah Tiong sullenly, “and no red egg,” but his mother waved him aside impatiently and said, “Go back to sleep the rest of you! It’s still early. Don’t disturb me.”

By the time the morning sun rose, Ah Siong had already had a big bowl of steaming hot noodles with minced pork and some pieces of liver as well as the hard-boiled red egg.

Ah Siong was also given “gift money,” and Old Mother did not intervene as he celebrated his birthday by “shout[ing] lustily at his brothers and stamp[ing] on their feet.” The reader cannot but conclude that her unequal treatment and neglect of Ah Tiong led him to compensate neurotically by becoming greedy and materialistic later in life, and nursing an obsession to accumulate money.

Thus, both Angela and Old Mother are assigned similar positions in Lim’s myth of Singapore Chinese identity and desire where the nation’s Chinese diasporic and post-colonial (modernized) culture is negatively represented in terms of a gendered lack, as that of a pathological, neurotic effeminization of an ‘authentic’ Chinese culture. Modern post-colonial Singaporean Chinese subjectivity is gendered in this novel as female and represented chiefly through its protagonist, Angela. But this subjectivity is further offered as the inverted mirror-image of a Chinese culture that had already been feminized through the experience of immigration, this first-generation immigrant Chinese subjectivity represented by Old Mother. Angela, standing in for modernization/Westernization, is ‘she’ who has constituted desire against ethnic culture, while immigrant Chinese culture is represented as the effeminate version of a prior ‘original’ culture, that which has been taken over by ‘domineering’ women such as Old Mother and deprived of its virility. The antagonistic relationship between daughter-in-law and mother-in-law figures Singapore’s Chinese cultural history of immigration and colonization as continuous so that when Angela
pits her desires against those of her mother-in-law’s, she confronts herself since the feminized, Westernized present and the effeminized Chinese past are mirror-images of each other.

Angela, figuring modern Singaporean Chinese subjectivity as female, fits the bill as phallic mother and wife, where the ‘feminine’ is the patriarchal gone awry or pathological. Angela represents Singaporean culture as it is popularly conceived: she is the gendered personification of its ruthlessness, willfulness, greed, and overwhelming ambition. Angela wants total control over her children, plotting their futures and molding them in the image of national modern perfection: she points son Mark in the direction of scholarly success, molding his desire to win oratorical and essay-writing competitions, and preparing him for the exams that will win him a place in a new Elite College that is being built to groom Singapore’s third-generation leadership, a college that significantly will come into existence by displacing a Chinese graveyard, i.e. an ethnic past (180). Daughter Michelle is directed towards a career as national swimmer. Identifying with husband Boon’s desires for political and financial success, Angela plots and schemes for him. Her over-investment in ‘masculine,’ worldly desires however scuttles Boon’s chances of being selected for a political career: Boon had been picked by the ruling political party as a possible future member of parliament, but Angela in her anxiety had approached the secretary to the minister in charge of the matter, wanting to know the current status of the matter, which was viewed as pushy and led to another candidate being selected (148-89).

Through Angela, all the ills of capitalism and of modernism (ruthlessness, avarice, wasteful, conspicuous consumption, commodification, dissolution of family ties, heartless competitiveness, the erosion of traditional ethnic culture and over-Westernization), seen as the inevitable consequences of the development of capitalism, are imaginatively misrecognized as owing to the feminization of society, where the modern woman has acquired an inverted (and perverted) phallic power. Sex and class meanings also intersect as the modern is gendered via Angela as female and upper-class, so that Angela is cast as one who not only wants to destroy the patriarchal ethnic father and occupy his place, but also to annihilate the ethnic, working class culture of her mother-in-law.
But this 'feminization' of Singaporean ethnic culture goes back beyond the modern period in that Angela’s ‘phallic’ power, represented as a neurotic expression of a repressed envy of male power, has been passed on to her by her mother-in-law herself. It is Old Mother who tells Angela the stories about the past licentiousness of Chinese men and their sexual abuse of women, leading Angela to reductively equate Chinese culture with this abuse of patriarchal power. Old Mother herself hates her late husband for the sexual infidelities he had practiced in his lifetime: in her conversations with Angela, she refers to her late husband as the “Old Devil,” the “One-accursed-with-short-life” (21), “the-one-with-gold-in-his-mouth” (28) and as “One-who-is-more-lecherous-than-the-farmyard-rooster” (105). The man-hating identity of the two women is established when Angela’s nightmares about Chinese culture duplicate or take off from Old Mother’s stories. For instance, recalling Old Mother’s story about a rich grand-uncle from a town in China, who raped virgin maid-servants nightly, a story that haunts Angela in her sleep, Angela blames her mother-in-law for her nightmares:

The dream--it was definitely more than a dream --

Angela put the blame squarely on her mother-in-law . . . Her mother-in-law had told her this story. . . . Angela forgot the context in which this piece of family history was unravelled; perhaps her mother-in-law wanted to share with her contempt with men . . . (104-5)

The ‘truth’ of the story and the ‘truth’ of patriarchal sexual excesses as a feature of traditional Chinese culture are side-stepped and muddied here as questions of “context.” Also, modern Singapore Chinese women’s dis-identification with Chinese culture is represented as a neurotic response to an oral history passed on to them by their female predecessors, where Singapore’s present culture (as feminine) is represented as the past and on-going repression of male subjectivity and male virility by women. The theme of female solidarity (as it is usually represented in feminist narratives) here receives unfavorable, negative treatment.

Angela’s nightmares and those of other modernized/Westernized Singapore women, such as her Eurasian sister-in-law Gloria and her Chinese friend Mee Kin, are used in the novel to represent
Singaporean antipathy towards the ethnic as woman’s irrational fear of the patriarchal. These dreams also serve to expose the ‘feminist’ guilt involved in Singapore’s betrayal of its ethnic cultures. Angela, Gloria, as well as Angela’s confidante, Mee Kin, are typically unable to meet the (patriarchal) gaze of the portrait of Old Mother’s late husband, which has been placed prominently on her altar table, without having bad dreams afterwards:

The small, piercing eyes in the framed photograph above the altar again compelled her [Angela] to look up. She looked up quickly, then averted the gaze.

“Isn’t it creepy,” she later whispered to Mee Kin. “The old man’s eyes seem to follow me everywhere.”

“My father-in-law’s photo gave me the same eerie feelings,” confided Mee Kin. (80)

While Angela aborts the gaze, Gloria uses (Western) Christian symbols such as rosary beads filled with holy water to dispel her guilt and fear and to escape from Chinese ethnic culture:

Gloria looked away from the framed photograph of the old man. She was sure to have another frightful dream of him; he persisted in coming out of photographs, out of graves and coffins to pursue her. She was never without her rosary at night, each rosary bead filled with the holy water at Lourdes

. . . . It was the presence of the holy water-filled beads that had dispelled those frightful dreams and allowed her, instead, to see herself with her sisters, amidst laughing summer roses and fruit, in faraway happier [Western] lands. (86)

Modern (Westernized) antipathy towards Chinese culture is thereby linked with fear of the Chinese masculine/patriarchal and guilt concerning the rejection, as is sharply communicated by Angela’s inability to sleep peacefully on a restored, antique Chinese four-poster bed belonging to her husband’s family. Angela’s modern (Westernized) attitude of exoticizing and commodifying Chinese culture prompts her to gentrify the bed as a status symbol, rather than as an integral part of her history. She has the bed restored and places it in her bedroom. But her fear regarding the patriarchal abuses of Chinese
culture prevents her from domesticating her deep antipathy towards her ethnic identity via commodification and results in nightmares.

The novel counters Angela’s sexualized/gendered fears of the ethnic as patriarchal abuse of power with its sexualized/gendered fears regarding the future of Singapore’s cultural ‘virility,’ using non-realistic modes of representation to hyper-realize these fears. It suggests that the excessive feminization of national culture and the repression of patriarchal power will produce a less-than-virile society in the future, with two different, nightmarish cultural fates, both involving a latent homosexuality. One scenario is that of the cultural takeover of Singapore by a demonic, destructive, fascist, anti-Chinese hyper-masculinity. This is to be typified by Old Mother’s youngest son, Wee Siong and her grandson, Mark, who is Angela’s favorite son. Wee Siong, whom Old Mother pampered in his childhood with an excess of maternal desire, grows up to hate his mother’s Chinese culture. He assumes instead a Christian identity and wants to obliterate Chinese culture as the non-Christian/Western ‘other.’ In a dream, Angela sees Wee Siong as a delusional, angry, fanatical and vengeful Christ who returns to destroy Chinese culture and religion (173-8). Lim offers this dream as a phantasmatic return of the repressed: forbidden by his mother from identifying with his father, Wee Siong instead takes on another patriarchal identity, but one that is offered by the West. Wee Siong, incidentally, is unsuccessful in his relations with women. In the representation of Wee Siong in the dream, we may read a reference to the type of latent homosexuality that Silverman recognizes in Lawrence of Arabia, where male homosexual desire is repressed and sublimated into identification with male figures, a “reflexive masochism,” where the subject is both the victimizer and victim of sadism (Male 322-28). Certainly, in his verbally abusive letter to Angela, hectoring her about her belief in Chinese geomancy, Wee Siong takes pleasure in the pain that he causes, but it is pain directed circuitously against himself, against his mother, family, and his own ethnic roots: identifying with Christ, he wants to “rescue” his family, but thereby also destroy it (135-7). The novel suggests too that Angela’s son Mark, her favorite, will grow up to be like Wee Siong, to betray his mother and his ethnic culture. On her deathbed, Old Mother mistakes Mark for Wee Siong.
Like Wee Siong, Mark too despises and rejects the maternal: he is nauseated by the very idea of breastfeeding and already, in his school essays, he vilifies Chinese culture as primitive and superstitious, as the 'other' to Western culture. It is also suggested that just as Wee Siong showed so much talent in his youth, only to dissipate it in his adult life, so too Mark, who is a high-flyer in the Singapore school system, will wind up wasting his talent in a neurotic obsession with the repressed patriarchal. The correspondence between son and grandson and between their two mothers, Angela and Old Mother, indicates that history can only repeat itself if nothing is done to interrupt this supposed over-feminization of Chinese culture in Singapore.

The other fate is figured as an emasculated rather than a hyper-masculine national culture, where all the values associated with the male subjectivity such as rationality, progress, activity can be expected to break down. Angela's other son, Michael, who is Old Mother's favorite grandson, figures this fate. Identifying with his grandmother, and, lacking the subject-constitutive law of the father, he is divested of subjectivity: at novel's end, Michael is in hospital having traumatic hallucinations, unable to differentiate the real from the imaginary. As a seeming consequence of his over-identification with the maternal, Michael is unable to move beyond the primary processes, to bind the psychic energy of his drives and render them productive for himself, since secondarization requires the participation of a fully formed ego, which he lacks.

None of the other major male actants in the novel, all of whom are sons of Angela and Old Mother, have anything resembling a well-adjusted male identity: Old Mother's less favored son Wee Tiong is anally retentive, hoarding money, while another son, Wee Nam (Gloria's husband) is financially inept and dependent on his elder brother Boon, Angela's husband. Desire is thereby re-directed in this novel towards the recovery of the father's law (Confucianism), of that which will fill out the lack of this feminized post-colonial culture.
In her book *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading between West and East*, Chow emphasizes the primacy of analyzing the cross-cultural scopophiliac regime of contemporary texts that represent the ethnic subject. She says:

Metaphors and apparatuses of seeing becoming overwhelmingly important ways of talking, simply because “seeing” carries with it the connotation of a demarcation of ontological boundaries between “self” and “other,” whether racial, social or sexual. (3)

In distinguishing between the “seeing” and “talking” aspects of films, Chow points out that the focus on “seeing” enables us to ask some important questions: “who is ‘seeing’ whom and how,” and “what are the power relations between the ‘subject’ and ‘object’ of the culturally overdetermined ‘eye’ ” (3).

*Serpent’s Tooth* is not a film, but it uses an invisible narrator who shows the action rather than commenting on it. The split between Angela’s gaze and that of the narrator’s and between Angela’s *talking* and the novel’s *seeing* play an important semiotic role in the novel that needs to be teased out.

The novel, as I have said, avoids authorial/narrative commentary. Though it is told in the third person, it operates differently from the traditional authorial omniscient gaze. The novel has two ethical frames: the inner frame of the narrative is provided by Angela, but the outer authorial frame invisibly, without talking through the narrative voice, intervenes to expose the former’s ethical and psychological inadequacy. Angela’s gaze and, through it, the cultural screen that structures this gaze are pitted against the narrator’s gaze and his/her cultural screen that implicitly pathologize the former and render it as lack and as female hysteria. For example, Angela’s perception of ethnic culture as a “mess” that has to be cleared up, and her judgment of her mother-in-law as demented and primitive is contradicted by the novel’s showing of this “mess” as the inability of the modern Singapore Chinese woman to ‘see’ the cultural disorientation of a helpless old woman. Angela’s gaze is ‘shown’ to be insufficient to understand the psychological/cultural predicament of the old. Visiting her mother-in-law, Angela notes that the physical environment of Old Mother’s home is unhealthy and is a sign of willful neglect: the planks over muddy ground that she has to cross to get to Old Mother’s house are held down by rusty
nails that could infect barefoot children with tetanus; there are cockroaches in the store room; the house is untidy, “a jumble of urns, joss-stick containers with the ash spilling over, torn prayer paper” (33).

Angela’s perception meets its limit in its inability to explain a sight that contradicts this mess. Despite the overwhelming untidiness of Old Mother’s home,

[T]he altar table for the old man had been newly cleaned; the old man’s framed photograph hung above it, and on the table, in neat symmetry, were little cups of tea, plates of oranges and small jars for the joss-sticks. (32-3)

Through Angela’s gaze, the reader encounters the limits of that gaze, and inevitably Angela’s gaze is passed by the reader through a different cultural screen, which judges Angela’s gaze as insensitive, heartless and blind: this non-acknowledged narrative gaze, which the reader identifies with, suggests that Old Mother is obviously mourning her husband’s death, and that the untidiness of her home is a sign of depression. It appears to me, however, that the narrative cultural screen is just as Western as Angela’s own Westernized gaze of Chinese culture as the ‘other,’ which is being critiqued. Depression is a Western concept as is the association of untidiness with it.

Also, the observations about Old Mother’s home are in indirect speech so that one is hard put to decide whether the gaze belongs to the narrator or to Angela’s, which helps the narrator to disguise her own ethical viewpoint. The reader is made unaware that there is an ethically-biased structuring gaze.

Then the Chinese ancestral altar, which the novel fetishizes at this point as the objet petit a of the desire for traditional Chinese culture, is literally displaced by Angela, when she re-locates Old Mother and the ancestral altar in her own home. Angela perceives her move of accommodating Old Mother as a grand gesture of kindness and filial piety. She tells her husband: “I’m really thinking of your old mother ... She’s already seventy-one years old, a simple, soft-hearted old woman who’s quite lost in a society like ours” (75). But the reader’s knowledge that Angela is far from sympathetic when discussing Old Mother with Mee Kin turns her kind words into lies.
Angela’s words also belie her inner thoughts, which one presumes that she has confided to Mee Kin, who, in turn, has either communicated this to the narrator or is herself narrating the story (see below). Angela is kind and sweet in her words to Old Mother:

Mother, you are not well. You need someone to take care of you. When you are well you can return to your house. But for the time being, you stay with Boon and me. Mooi Lan [Angela’s maid] can cook for you. . . . You’ve grown very thin and pale, and that’s not good for an old person. We’ll take good care of you.

But silently to herself, she thinks of the inconvenience of accommodating Old Mother. She judges however that “she had to do her duty” (77-8).

The reader sees, again through Angela’s gaze as she shows off Old Mother’s new bedroom to her in-laws, the inadequacy of that gaze: Old Mother is now in a “guest-bedroom,” a peripheral area in Angela’s home, where she is treated as guest rather than family. The ancestral altar has not only been marginalized, but visually whisked out of existence: “. . .it was in a neat little corner at the back, hidden from sight by a pretty Chinese screen of four folding panels” (86). We note again, as here with the description of the location of the altar, the difficulty of distinguishing between the narratorial and Angela’s voice. The author silently critiques Angela’s Western Orientalized attitude to Chinese culture: she shows that the Western aestheticization of Chinese culture (“the pretty Chinese screen”) is a means of covering up less beautiful but more central Chinese traditions and value-systems. Angela’s attitude to Chinese culture is equated in the scene with Gloria’s strong attachment to Western culture: immediately prior to this scene, Angela’s Eurasian sister-in-law had “admired the [antique Chinese] bed, feeling the richness of the silken maroon bed-curtains, but [she had] recoiled at the four [presumably phallic] serpents’ heads on the bed-posts.” But Lim’s cultural screen is even more deeply entrenched in Western culture than Angela’s is. She certainly is more familiar with the discourse of Orientalism than Angela appears to be. Also, Lim privileges a racialized reading of Angela’s behavior, interpreting it as a pro-
Western/anti-Chinese act, when Angela’s act could just as easily have been read as a conflict between Chinese high and low culture.

Angela’s voice and gaze (the saying) is constantly belied, contradicted and incriminated by the representation of the events themselves (the showing), which lend themselves to viewing through another gaze. This other gaze however never speaks its own (often Western) name. The absence of a distinctive narrative voice and the invisibility of the narrator’s gaze as a structuring device allows the novel to get away with hiding the subject-position and ideology of the vantage point (and its untenability) from which Angela’s anti-Chinese attitudes are demonized. While Angela’s gaze is vilified, historicized and ethnicized as Western, the novel’s gaze itself, its own interests, its history and the Eurocentricity of its perspective, is unacknowledged.

This invisible-narrator technique and the absence of narrative commentary is also symptomatic in another way. As Zizek says, the unconscious content/repressed desire of a dream/fantasy is often to be found in the dream/fantasy form than either its manifest or latent content (“How Did Marx” 12-3). Lim represses but also thereby reveals her knowledge that her moralistic fantasy designed to cathect state ideology must remain on the imaginary level if it is to have ideological pull, that it must derive its power from emotional/non-rational responses rather than intellectual ones. The writer/narrator must have been aware, at least at an unconscious level, that entering this ‘imaginary’ critique of Angela’s anti-Chineseness into the symbolic order would result in the dissolution of the fantasy, show up its lack of epistemic coherence, its falsity to the realities of life in Singapore and bring Lim’s own desires for capitalism/economic progress, and her own entrenchment in Western culture into conflict with her desire for ethnic identity. For instance, if Lim had used the narratorial voice to chastise Angela’s ‘treacherous’ marginalization of Old Mother and the altar table, she would have had to offer an alternative type of ethical behavior which would have been either anti-feminist or anti-capitalist or both. If Angela had chosen to install her mother-in-law at the center of the family, then she would have inevitably had to sacrifice modern capital accumulation and her freedom. Since Old Mother thinks that
maid-servants are a sexual temptation to the Master, Angela would have had to give up her job and become a housewife, hence participating in her own subjugation and cutting down on family income. Old Mother’s habit of storing things in old biscuit tins and plastic bags and leaving them lying around in full view would have rubbed against Singapore’s investing of Western aesthetics, and put an end to Angela’s and Boon’s dreams of acquiring social and political success. Also, the narrator would then have had to recognize that Angela is morally taking the fall for Old Mother’s cultural dislocation and dispossession, which is caused not only by Angela’s lack of understanding, but also by male irresponsibility: Old Mother’s sons themselves are running away from their parental and ethnic-cultural responsibilities. Nor has the state, despite its rhetoric of Asian culture and filial piety, provided Old Mother and women like her, who are the bearers of ethnic culture, with the economic conditions that would enable their ethnic culture to survive. Narrative commentary would also have had to recognize that Angela’s antipathy to traditional Chinese culture, far from being a female betrayal of ethnic culture, is a consequence of the woman cathecting the state’s (masculine) goals of economic success and Western notions of progress.

The lack of narrative commentary in the novel is a signifier that the state’s notion of an ‘Asian modernity’ is symbolically empty of content. Rather, it can only work by emotional appeal, by displacing modern Singapore society’s betrayal of traditional culture onto women and demonizing them. The hyper-realization of Angela’s voice and gaze, and the rendering of this gaze and voice as demonic, as pathological lack, substitutes for and attempts to cover over the lack of real coherent content in the government’s ideology regarding Asian modernization. Hence, it is Angela’s hystericized and pathologized voice and gaze that, even though it is interrogated and ironized by the narrator’s representation of events, must dominate the novel. Angela’s perception of ethnic culture as a “mess” that she has to “clear” is a structuring and recurring trope of the novel: in the Prologue, it is mentioned three times, when Angela identifies her problems in a conversation with Mee Kin—the burden of looking after her mother-in-law, her attempt to free her youngest son Michael from the Chinese superstitions
communicated to him by Old Mother, and her task in combating the encroachment of ethnic values on the free development of 'modern' values and lifestyles—as a "mess" that had to be "clear[ed]" (1). In describing herself as "the only one left to clear the mess," Angela (and other Singapore women), as wife and mother, not only figures modern Singapore's alienation from Chinese ethnic culture but is also the agent of the destruction of that culture (3). "I've just about cleared the mess," she says (3). When the novel's narrative ends, the epilogue reiterates Angela's framing of the events as "a mess" that she alone was left to "clear" (183-84). Angela’s ironized and demonized voice provides the novel's last words, overwhelming the reader with its evil.

The hiding of the narrative/authorial gaze, where it is sometimes barely distinguishable from that of Angela’s gaze, also suggests a certain level of a disavowed author/narrator identification with the character, Angela. I would suggest that Lim's ethnic demonization of Angela's anti-ethnic subjectivity as betrayal and female hysteria involves the projection on to the 'other' (Angela) of the sense of betrayal and hysteria that form the ground of the author/narrator's desire for ethnic revival. In silencing his/her own voice, in refusing the reader any narrative commentary, the narrator takes away any means by which Angela's hysteria can be contained. Instead, the narrator/author enjoys this hysteria and encourages it to spill all over the novel, while positioning himself/herself vaguely as the 'other' to this anti-ethnic, feminist hysteria. It is indeed as if she was enacting or realizing through Angela, her own repressed doubts about the government's Confucianist agenda. The novel reveals that the cathecting of state ideology of Asian/Chinese identity splits Singapore women's desire. Torn between wanting to identify with their ethnic culture and, on the other hand, wanting to keep the freedoms from patriarchal oppression that they have secured through Westernization/modernisation, Lim resolves the split in her desire in a masochistic fantasy where she expresses her modern, feminist desire (through Angela) and then beats 'herself' up for it.

The narrator's anonymity also suggests the author's (repressed) knowledge that Angela's guilt is the author's own (guilty) construction and symptomizes the author's inability to resolve her own desire
regarding ethnic culture, so that she needs to camouflage this undecidable point-of-view. The narrator/author thus dissociates herself from narratorial guilt and evades the responsibility of narrative certainty by implicating Mee Kin as the disseminator of information. We know that the narrator’s access to information is limited to and identical with Angela’s cognitive knowledge of the events, of past and present, differing only in the cultural screen through which it looks on these events. The novel is also structured as the narrative that Angela tells her confidante Mee Kin: her words to Mee Kin open and close the novel. This allows the reader to surmise that the unidentified narrator is either Angela’s confidante, Mee Kin, or that the narrator has received the story from Mee Kin. If the narrator is Mee Kin, the novel is itself ethically stained as Mee Kin’s betrayal of Angela’s confidence, which threatens to deconstruct the high moral perspective the novel takes toward ethnic identity. This is further aggravated by the narrator’s disavowing of that identity since, in the novel, the narrator distinguishes herself from Mee Kin. Also, if the narrator is Mee Kin, the novel expresses Mee Kin’s decision to counter Angela’s viewpoint (a viewpoint that she agrees with in the inner frame of the novel). Mee Kin’s courage to differ from Angela then derives only from the promise of anonymity, which colors this courage with betrayal.

If the narrator, however, is one who has received the story from Mee Kin, then it loses ground in terms of any claim to objectivity since it is third-hand information, and, further, has twisted Mee Kin’s viewpoint, which is sympathetic to Angela. Here too, the narrator’s anonymity and lack of acknowledgment of his/her gender is troubling and reveals authorial/narrative deception as the base of the novel’s ‘pro-ethnic’ perspective.

Lim represents and explores ‘Asian modernity’ as a hybrid East/West culture, which contradicts the state’s position of regarding Asian modernity as a non-Western cultural formation, where state-approved Western norms of “progress” and “rationality” are de-racialized/de-ethnicized as “modern.” For instance, BG Lee, in identifying “Westernization” as the problem that Singapore was trying to solve through the proposed National Ideology, places “Westernization” outside the boundaries of national culture and the state’s concept of Asian modernization (“Westernization,” ST 12 Jan. 1989). In the
same speech, he implicitly separates modernity and Westernization as categories of cultural influence when he says that every non-Western developing country had to ponder “how to modernize without losing its soul.” He defines a Confucianized modernity (“Confucianism . . . brought up to date”) as one where Confucian ideas are reconciled with other ideas such as “democracy and the rule of law.” But Lee defines democracy, not as a Western institution, but as Singaporean, as “part of our [Singaporean] ethos.” Similarly, he says that the Confucian concept of family ties, “where sons owe an absolute duty of filial piety and unquestioning obedience to fathers,” needed to be modified with ‘Singaporean’ norms where “the parent-child relationship is more respectful rather than one of absolute subordination.” The modernity of the Singapore family institution apparently is held to be an indigenous, not a Western influence: “Sons and daughters are treated more equally because of family planning,” not because of the infiltration of Western gender attitudes.

In Lim’s imaginary, however, the ‘Asian modern’ is explored as the coming together of both Eastern and Western epistemologies, where the subject tries to gaze through an epistemology and value system that is Asian and Western at once. The novel’s titular metaphor “the serpent’s tooth” is an important aspect of Lim’s endeavor to represent the ‘Asian modern’ but as I will show, it also operates to represent the impossibility of such an agreeable, non-contradictory cross-culturality. In the novel, the serpent’s tooth refers to the theme of the ‘unnatural’ betrayal of the child by the parent and more particularly to the rebellion of the daughter against the law of the father as it is represented in Shakespeare’s King Lear, where Lear sees such betrayal as “sharper than a serpent’s tooth.” In that the serpent is also an important symbol in Chinese mythology, the serpent’s tooth may be read as condensed metaphor of an ethical meeting place of the East and West. The use of both Eastern and Western references is used to generate the guilt (including sexual/gender guilt) that is needed to persuade the modernized/Westernized Singaporean to invest in ethnic culture as its parental/patriarchal culture. However, the serpent’s tooth as metaphor of betrayal itself reveals the author’s desire for a simultaneous East/West gaze (rather than a
purely Eastern gaze) and betrays this desire, splitting instead of reconciling East and West, and revealing
the union of the two cultures to be an impossible dream.

For instance, the possibility of an epistemological correspondence between East and West is raised
and then negated in the scene where Angela’s son Mark rehearses King Lear’s speech together with a
Chinese poem for a bilingual oratorical competition, in order to show an East-West agreement on filial
piety (68-72). While the reader will surely get the author’s message that Angela is a mirror-image of
Lear’s unfilial daughters, Mark’s reading of Lear’s speech is more culturally problematical. In
assuming Lear’s persona, Mark’s identification with Lear’s venomous onslaught against filial impiety, of
parental betrayal, also makes him simultaneously Goneril and Regan since he is the Chinese subject who,
in pretending to be a character in a Western canonical play, himself betrays his parent (culture). The
novel has already represented Mark as a type of ‘Westernized Oriental gentleman’ who is antipathetic to
Chinese culture: he primitivizes Chinese culture as a complex of “superstitions” in two school essays
(15; 92). Mark thus cannot occupy Eastern and Western speaking positions at once. Old Mother herself
tells a Chinese tale where filial impiety is, as in King Lear, associated with the bite of a snake (166-7).
But here the surface sameness of Chinese and Western concepts of filial piety dissolves at a deeper level
into difference. In Old Mother’s story, Chinese filial piety is represented in terms of a son’s obligation
of loyalty to his mother rather than his wife.

There is one gaze, however, in which Lear’s speech could be used to unite Western and Eastern
values of filial piety: the feminist gaze, which would point out the common slippage in both West and
East between meanings of filial piety and patriarchal control of women. Given her agenda of acceding to
the state’s masculine ideology, Lim cannot consider this gaze. In fact, the novel spends much of its
imaginative energy trying to control/demonize this feminist gaze, which keeps intruding into the novel in
the form of women’s nightmares.

In another episode in the novel, Angela is unable to ‘see’ the decorative serpents and dragons carved
on her mother-in-law’s four-poster bed until it is restored, that is, turned into a Western Oriental object
of art. Here again the Singaporean subject's dream about uniting West and East in an Asian modernity falls apart. Angela, in fact, is directed towards appreciation of Chinese culture only through the Western commodification of Chinese culture as Chinoiserie. But this Western exoticized 'seeing' of Chinese serpent and dragon motifs, however, also visually triggers the 'other' side of Western Orientalism, causing Angela to 'remember' Chinese culture in nightmares as a culture dominated by sexual abuse and female oppression. Suddenly, the snake or serpent as symbol of an exoticized Chinese culture turns into the phallus, while its bite suggests sexual penetration of the women, both of which are Graeco-Roman meanings attributed to the snake. Sleeping on the restored bed, Angela dreams of her husband's Grand-Uncle in China raping a maid. She dreams that she rushes into the room to rescue the woman but sees Grand-Uncle "naked from the waist downwards" while "the serpent on the [bed] post unwound itself and slid towards her bare-fanged. There was a guffaw of malicious delight from Grand-Uncle." Waking up, Angela utters Kurtz's primitivist, racist response to African culture in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness: "the horror--oh, the horror --" (108). Thus Angela's negative as well as positive attitudes to Chinese culture have Western origins.

Again, the narrative gaze, which resorts to the discourse of psychology in representing Angela's fear of Chinese culture as delusional and guilt-ridden, shows that the critique of over-Westernization of the ethnic subject need not necessarily deliver one to the shores of ethnic identity. The narrative critical gaze is itself implicated in Western knowledge and identifies with Western culture. In another of the novel's episodes, Angela compares Old Mother's telling of the legend of the cow unfavorably to Western versions of the Chinese legend, where she mistakes the Western translation for the Chinese original:

Why, Angela wondered with some sadness, had beautiful legends like the legend of the cow translated into clumsy, unreasonable superstitions that made life more difficult for others? (90)

But if the narrator makes the reader aware of Angela as colonial subject, the theme of translated copy versus original also splits the narrator's story-telling and casts doubt on its authenticity, especially in
asserting Chinese identity in the English language. At such points in the novel, the serpent’s tooth figures the author’s unconscious realization that the East and ethnic culture cannot be understood or recovered except through the Western gaze: that the ‘Asian modern’ may only be the Western masquerading as Eastern culture.

In both these scenes, Mark’s reading of Shakespeare and his mother’s nightmares, the serpent’s tooth figures a metaphorical link between crises of ethnic identity and those of sexual/gender subjectivity. Mark’s reading of the play as Chinese subject also problematises his sexual/gender subjectivity. He can’t be Lear because he is the ‘daughter’ who betrayed the parent (culture). As Goneril and Regan, he is marked by gender perversion since in Shakespeare’s play, the two treacherous daughters are viewed as unnatural women. In the second episode, Angela’s ‘discovery’ of her ethnic culture gives her nightmares about Chinese patriarchal power and its abuse of women. But if Lim fantasizes that the return to ethnic identity will restore masculinity and femininity to their ‘natural’ places, the serpent’s tooth as condensed metaphor is also a constant reminder that perversity is itself a part of nature. For instance, Old Mother tells a story of a “tiny, harmless-looking snake” who repaid a village chief’s kindness in sparing its life by promptly destroying the village’s rice plants (160).

“A Dream of China” (1984) by Ovidia Yu

Barely two years after Singaporeans were bombarded with the government’s Confucianizing project begun, Ovidia Yu’s short story broke with a trend where Singapore Chinese ethnic identity was explored in terms of a Chinese working-class culture. In the previous two decades, as history texts studied in schools indicate, the transformation of Singapore from a fishing village to a modern city-state was attributed to the masculine vigor of immigrant dispossessed peasants from Asia, people of the soil who worked hard to overturn their economic lot. But Yu’s short story “A Dream of China,” which won the 1984 Annual Asiaweek Short Story Competition, seeks instead to link Singapore’s Chinese cultural origins to a high-brow, classical Chinese culture. In particular, it tries to represent Singapore culture as
the modernized version of this elite Chinese culture. In Yu’s mythology, Singapore culture is Sinicized and represented as the historical progression and transformation of Chinese culture through modernity. As the story imagines it, Singapore culture is more truly Chinese than China’s since the spirit of Chinese culture is dead in China.

The story is told in the first person. The narrator, an educated woman, wife, young mother, and daughter of an immigrant from China, leaves Singapore to visit China in order to investigate family matters. Reading a nostalgic poem about China written by her father, she had been surprised that her father was not “content in Singapore after all these years,” that he regarded it as an “ornamental pond,” and “not the wide brimming river. Not home” (1159). Over the years, she had been disturbed by the guilt and shame her father felt about not having returned to his homeland, China, and helping out his family there. She says:

... one thing lay heavily on my father’s conscience. Because of that he had decided that he would die in exile, never to return. He elected to stay in Singapore. It was this decision that in later years he regarded as his supreme act of cowardice. His younger brother returned to China to help repair the atrocities of the Japanese. He remained in Singapore. He had failed to return to China as his brother had. His younger brother had done right and he had done wrong. He was too overcome by shame to return himself later, when he was no longer needed. (1155)

Then the narrator finds out that “it was not only shame for ignoring the call of his country that had barred [her] father from China all these years” (1157). Her husband had found out in conversation with his father-in-law that her father had actually seriously considered returning to China after the war but that his younger brother had dissuaded him. The younger brother had said in a letter that his elder brother’s overseas-Chinese wife, loving luxury, would cause their “lands to be disrupted and sold to support her in her luxury.” The narrator’s father had then felt shame that his younger brother was wiser than he in such matters. He thought his younger brother would serve family interests far better than he could, and resolved not to displace such a
dutiful son by returning himself. Since then he had looked upon his younger brother as a paragon of virtue and dutiful good sense. (1157)

The narrator is overwhelmed by the information: "‘I didn’t know he ever meant to go back to China,’” I said to my husband, surprised. ‘He never told me that’ ” (1157). Then she discovers letters from China, from an aunt asking her father for money. This upsets the narrator because she had always thought of the relationship between her father and his brother (who had returned to China from Singapore after World War Two) as an economically equal one. “But why were they always asking for money if, after all, my uncle returned to build a new China? Don’t they treat him well there then?” she asks her father (1159). Also, she smells something fishy about her uncle since it had been his wife, not him, who had written for money. I would venture that the narrator wishfully suspects here another side of the story, one that would help alleviate the guilt and shame her father feels in relation to his younger brother. (One may read this relationship in terms of the Singapore Chinese subject’s sense of cultural and moral inferiority to the high parent culture.)

Though her father admits that he had financially supported his family in China, the narrator turns away to tend to her child and misses his answer about why he had to do it. Since her father “was not disposed to discuss the issue again,” she was “left to wonder,” and leaps when an opportunity to be tour guide/interpreter on a trip to China presents itself.

The narrator’s visit to China is to be viewed as a hermeneutic quest for ethnic identity. Yu views the representation of Singapore’s ‘Asian modernity,’ the reconciling of Chinese tradition with modernity as important to this venture. But I hope to show that her particular definition of this ethnicized modernity is a hysterical symptom where she seeks to escape from a repressed knowledge that immigration to Singapore and the ceding to capitalism has totally hybridized Chinese culture in Singapore with Western culture so that it can never be viewed as an authentic, ‘pure’ Chinese culture. She attempts to resolve this problem by imagining a Chinese “spirit,” essential and primordial, but which can be transplanted, modernized, without changing that inner, crucial core that is definably Chinese (which echoes state
ideology, as I show in chapter 2). She finds this 'Chinese' spirit in China's landscape, its "distant mountains . . . dreamy and purple in their vagueness" and their "caves of stalactites." For the narrator, a trip down a river in China is "a journey . . . back through time into an age of timelessness" (1161). But for Yu, this Chinese spirit is already dead in China and truly alive only in modern Singapore. Departing from her uncle in China, she says, watching the "drab old man in old worn clothes wandering from puddle to puddle of yellow light," that "it was as though he was the spirit of China, now broken and leaving me." Then, she adds "My father's China no longer exists except in him and in other men who try to live true to the dream of China in their hearts" (1165).

But Yu's imagining of 'Asian modernity' also needs to be analyzed as a paranoid re-writing of history, where she tampers with the chrono-logic of Singapore history in reconciling her contradictory desire for ethnic culture/identity and Western culture. As a fantasy of Singaporean Asian identity, Yu represents the 'Asian modern' through the narrator's father as the hybridization of Chinese classical culture with (Western) capitalism. This is used to cover over, as I will show, the irreconcilable antagonism between capitalism and Chinese tradition. The 'Asian modern' then functions to compromise the de-colonizing imperative with an interest in recuperating Chinese ethnic culture for the service of that other, alien culture, capitalism. But Yu then tries to Sinicize this hybridity by representing the 'Asian modern' culture as originally Chinese rather than Western. This involves a deliberate chronological misrecognition. Yu's story shows the reader that capitalism is the condition of possibility for 'Asian modernity': it funds this 'Asian modernity' that is represented in the narrator's father. But this happy consequence of capitalism (the 'afterwards' of capitalism), where the Chinese person has the economic means and the leisure under a capitalist mode of production to nostalgically recover his ethnic past, is mis-represented as an original Singapore Chinese subjectivity. Yu's fantasy of the 'Asian modern' is also a way to escape from the problem of the guilt of ethnic betrayal involved in the original entry into a foreign culture of capitalism. Her imaginary answers this guilt-ridden problem
of entry into Singapore/capitalism by mis-representing it as the same as the historical impossibility of returning to China.

Yu's fantasy turns on a metonymic slippage where a particular character representing one genus among Singaporean Chinese—a university lecturer in science, with a background in classical Chinese education and culture—who, it is made clear, is not a typical Singaporean Chinese, is surprisingly recuperated at the story's end as the genus that universally represents all Singaporean Chinese. This man, the narrator's father, symbolizes Yu's concept of the 'Asian modern.' As a university lecturer in marine biology, he represents modern knowledge, which, however, he happily combines with Chinese culture and a Chinese subjectivity, practicing Chinese calligraphy, using Chinese poetic forms to express his innermost thoughts, and passing on a Sinicized perspective on life with his stories of China to his daughter. As the narrator, his daughter, describes him:

He was Westernized to a certain extent and did not demand unquestioning obedience from his children. It was not in that that he remained staunchly Chinese, but in his calm, his respect for the ‘face’ of the servants and his disregard for material gain. (1156)

Yu attempts here to subvert Western Orientalist conceptions that Chinese culture is essentially authoritarian. Rather, she represents spiritual strength and ethical grace as the quintessential Chinese. Through this man, however, Yu figures Singapore's original Asian modern subjectivity as the cultural conjunction of Westernization with the guilt of ethnic betrayal. The Westernized/modern subject turns to his ethnic culture in an attempt to compensate for having betrayed his Asian motherland and as a strategy to disavow his (ethnic) lack. Guilt for not having returned to re-build China after World War Two, as well as the lack of masculinity that he senses in himself (in comparison to his brother), makes the narrator's father desire Chinese culture as his objet petit a, that which is a constant reminder of his lack, his castration, but also that which can make him whole again. But let us not miss the point too that, as a phantasmatic solution, the guilt of ethnic betrayal also assures that the Singaporean Chinese person's contradictory desire, that of remaining in Singapore, can be met: viewing himself as traitor to his
motherland, the subject has the perfect excuse for not returning home. Guilt arising from the subject’s
betrayal of his motherland is the answer of the fantasy to an original split in desire caused by the
subject’s entry into the modern/Western: in his wanting to return to the motherland (traditional, ethnic
culture), and in his desire to stay put in the modern (Western). The now-retired university professor’s
‘Asian modern’ subjectivity then allows him to be in two cultural places at once.

Yu eroticizes and represents an original split in desire in Singapore for Chinese culture and Western
capitalism in libidinal and gendered terms as male sexual desire, where the Chinese male immigrant is
torn between two women: his mother and his wife. The desire for Chinese culture is represented as an
oedipalized desire as son to save a beautiful mother (China) who is in trouble, while the desire for
modernity/capitalism/Western progress is depicted as his desire to meet his duties as a husband. The
narrator’s father and his brother, both immigrants to Singapore, yearned to go back to their mother
(China), whose “pulse beat in their bodies” and whose “rich and parched soil” they had “soaked” with
“their blood” (1155). As revolutionaries in China, “disowned by their father,” who was a member of
China’s ruling class, “they saw her [China] differently. Bruised and savaged but nonetheless beautiful”
(1155). The narrator’s father however (unlike his brother) later decides to stay in Singapore because, as
his brother points out, his wife, “used to city life in Singapore,” whom he had married “without their
parents’ consent,” may “pine to return to Singapore, causing their lands to be disrupted and sold to
support her in luxury” (1157).

This gendered and sexualized triangulation of Singaporean desire allows the retired university
lecturer’s ‘Asian modernity’ to be represented as a post-colonial subjectivity that is tied to a
‘normalized’ masculinity. In the Singaporean female sexual temptress (deracialized, one would assume,
since ‘race’ is a male category here), capitalism/Western culture is feminized. But if this
capitalism/woman breaks up the (male) ethnic subject’s devotion to his family and ancestral past, ‘she’
capitalism is also the agent that saves this (male) ethnic subject from subjective divestiture, which
would have been the consequence of his yielding to his Oedipal desire for his mother. The seduction of
the ethnic subject by capitalism (viewed as modernity) is history as patriarchal command, ordering that the ties to the cultural ethnic past and the family be henceforth pursued in a displaced, fetishized form rather than in the real, in a similar manner to the incest taboo. The incest taboo, as we recall, orders that the male subject displace his desire for his mother onto other women, who function as fetishized substitutes for the objet petit a of mother’s voice/gaze/breasts. In the former university lecturer’s brother, we have a representation of the total surrender to the ethnic cultural past as infantile regression. While the brother who obeyed the call of modernity (the narrator’s father) goes on to be a successful and respected member of his community, a good and caring father and husband, who carries on the family line, his brother, who rejected this call and returned to China (to mother) winds up frustrated, destitute, childless, and unable to move beyond narcissistic self-love and an abusive sexual relationship with his wife.

This representation of modernity as a ‘normal’ masculinity serves to shut out the viewing of this encounter between modernity/capitalism/Western culture and Chinese culture as a confrontation between two patriarchal orders of different races/ethnicities, where one patriarchal culture (Chinese) capitulated to the other and was thereby emasculated. It also allows the writer to repress the idea that the desire for money/capital accumulation inevitably caused a departure from and betrayal of China/Chinese culture.

As I have suggested, the retired university lecturer’s ‘Asian modernity,’ his combination of high Chinese culture with ‘modernity,’ is the consequence of the Chinese entry to Singaporean/Western capitalism and is imbricated by capitalism/Western culture, but which is disavowed by its representation as the before, an original, purely Chinese immigrant subjectivity. The narrator is at pains to depict her father’s ‘Asian modernity’ as the exception, not the rule of Chinese subjectivity in Singapore. He is ‘different,’ he is the Chinese ‘original.’ For instance, unlike the more typically over-materialistic Singaporean, he places more value on spiritual qualities than on material gain and is critical of the “shallowness of the lives his students at the university led.” He complains: “All they did was study. If they did dream it was of job security and owning a car” (1155).
Even his own children from his first marriage view him as an overly-idealistic odd-ball. The narrator is his youngest and only child from a second marriage entered into late in life. Since her mother died soon after her birth, the ex-university lecturer is both mother and father to the narrator, retiring from his job to look after his daughter. The narrator thus grows up with her subjectivity and her imaginary shaped by Chinese literature:

They [her elder siblings] were sorry for me, a child living in the company of an old man who told the same old stories over and over again. But children love repetition and I thrived on it. I began to dream dreams of China too, I who was born countless miles from China on this island of Singapore. The strange mountains and still waters... In China there were fat laughing fairies...

There were spirits in the trees and animals. All this was much more interesting to me than the Western fairy stories with their brashly coloured illustrations of Caucasians with wings. More interesting too than mundane life in Singapore... (1154)

But the cultural logic of the story turns on the narrator working as a seme where two aspects of Singapore’s cultural history, quintessential high Chinese culture and capitalism are brought together. Though she identifies with her father’s desire for Chinese culture, unlike her father, however, the narrator does not identify with China as home. She dis-identifies with her father’s sense of cultural and geographical displacement. Though the daughter admits that her “father’s writing made [her] homesick for the China [she] had never known” and that it “stirred up feelings inside one” (1159), on a trip to China, she identifies herself with Singapore’s artificially landscaped beauty rather than with China’s grand mountains and rivers:

My spirit was as alien here [in China] as I was. It inclined toward a diamond city of trees and meaningful occupation, efficiently sparkling in the modern world. That was where I truly belonged, among skyscrapers with glass fronts and gold-encrusted orchids. (1161)

Singapore, one must note here, is to be differentiated from China in its economic and visual aspects, not in its cultural, multi-ethnic pluralism (compared to China’s racial singularity) nor even its South-east
Asian cultural influences. The narrator establishes here her own grasping, over-materialistic nature, which makes her, within the story’s cultural code, just like the average Singaporean. When she finds out that her father declined to return to China in order to keep his family property over there intact, the narrator prioritizes self-interest over family obligation and concern for relatives in China, saying “I would have gone back anyway, and claimed everything that was mine by right!” (1157). The notion that her father, already well-provided for in Singapore, would be dispossessing those who were already financially disadvantaged in China is not allowed to disturb the narrator. She wishes that her father had “gone back to China and taken everything and come back to Singapore,” where he would then “be rich as well as free” (1158). When her uncle pleads with her in China for passage to Singapore, the narrator cannot stop her mind from wondering about the Western commodity aesthetics of the matter. Could this “drab old man in old worn clothes” fit into her “modern little flat,” she wondered; she could not “imagine the man sleeping on [her] Italian-leather sofa” (1153).

Since the narrator is so ‘typically’ Singaporean in representing the two aspects of Singapore culture, its Chinese-ness and its (Western) materialism, the particular is transformed into that which is universally applicable to Singapore when she goes on an identity quest to China to clear her father (her patriarchal legacy) from the guilt of betraying their motherland. When she finds that it was his brother (China) who had betrayed her father, and not vice versa, it is not just her father and herself who are absolved of guilt: Singapore itself is absolved. This betrayal of her father by China (his brother) and her father’s loss of his family inheritance through that betrayal is a trope that wishfully represents Singapore’s history of modernity (capitalism) in terms of China’s betrayal of its own people, forcing them to survive in alien lands, rather than as the Singaporean Chinese immigrant’s betrayal of his parent culture. It is also suggested that China’s betrayal of its own is an act motivated by greed, weakness of character and lack of familial feeling (as exemplified in the character of the narrator’s uncle), all of which are coded as the historical degeneration of the Chinese spirit in China itself. Yu’s fantasy then
depicts Singapore's capitulation to modernity (capitalism) as a justifiable response to historical circumstance (of a forced departure from China) rather than as a betrayal of Chinese ethnic culture.

Singaporean Chinese then are to be released from the original guilt of ethnic betrayal, which obstructs their claim to Chinese identity, by counter-claiming that it was China that betrayed the overseas Nanyang-Chinese. Clearly, the betrayal of the narrator's father by his brother in China is meant to displace her father's betrayal of his motherland, but this is only imaginatively possible through a chronological reversion of history. The story's surface may claim that the narrator's uncle's betrayal of her father is the metaphoric 'cause' that releases Singaporean Chinese from guilt for entering into an alien (Western) culture of capitalism, but the subtext tells a contradictory story. Rather, Singapore's success under capitalism is the condition that enables the uncle to cheat (betray) his brother. The uncle is able to steal his elder brother's patrilineal inheritance only because the brother, now settled in Singapore, did not need this inheritance (given his economic comfort in successful Singapore); the uncle also played on his brother's guilt about his material success.

Also, the narrator's father's 'Asian modernity' is represented as the 'before' of Singapore's entry into capitalism in that he represents the values of an original Chinese high culture. This however involves covering over the fact that the narrator's father could not have practiced his Asian modernity, especially his "disregard for material gain" (1156), without Singapore's prior and total commitment to capitalism, which allowed him a decent living and the ability to afford freedom from financial anxiety and the luxuries it made possible. If he was able to indulge in writing Chinese-style traditional poems such as haiku and to live his life on a more spiritual plane, it was because all around him people were striving solely for economic success, providing work opportunities for him and for his children. Without this frenetic striving, the narrator's father could not have afforded to financially support his family in China, either.

Though the characterization of the narrator's character is important in carrying off these chronological confusions and displacements, it is also the symptomatic seme of the repressed 'real' that
has leaked into the fantasy in order to disrupt it. As the retired science professor’s daughter, she comes ‘after’ him. But in representing Singapore’s excessive materialism, she stands for the original modernity (capitalism) that ‘sponsored’ her father’s Asian/Chinese modernity. As such, the cleansing of the guilt attached to this later Asian modernity does not also erase the primary modernistic (capitalistic) guilt. With regard to this, the story displaces cultural attention from a prior moment in Singapore’s history, that of the moment of migration, which is crucial to the nation’s claim of its ethnic cultural loyalties, to re-focus attention on Chinese immigrants’ decision to stay in Singapore. The narrator provides much historical information on the life of the two brothers: their growing up as sons of the privileged in China, the later revolution in their consciousness as they fight for democracy against the monarchy, their stay in Singapore during the Japanese Occupation, their lives as husbands and/or fathers and citizens, as well as their desire to return to re-build a new China after World War Two. But there is a narrative eclipse on that part of their history that pertains to their decision to leave China for Singapore. One moment, the narrator’s father is a revolutionary soldier in China, spilling blood for his beloved motherland; the next he is a university lecturer in Singapore, with a training in the sciences, and a family. This historical moment of abandoning China for Singapore, I would like to suggest, is that which must be forgotten, that which would give the lie to the myth that the entry into capitalism did not involve an original and irreversible compromise of Chinese classical culture. The two moments of migrating from the homeland and not returning to the homeland cannot substitute for each other nor are they as discontinuous as Yu would have us believe.

Perhaps the reference to “dream” in the story’s title is an unconscious admittance that the notion of the ‘Asian modern,’ understood as a Chinese modernity that is not always-already Westernized, is a delusionary formation. As Yu’s story shows, the ‘Asian modern’ is a second-generation Singaporean’s complex phantasmatic means of escaping from post-colonial guilt regarding ethnic betrayal that is also an escape from the consequent fear and resistance against giving up capitalism/Western culture. Yu’s fantasy shows her need to absolve the ‘Asian modern’ from the guilt of the profit motive. That she
represents the ‘Asian modern’ as involving literal capital loss (her father loses his patrilineal heritage in China to his brother) does not disprove her investment in capitalism. Rather, this eth(n)ic anxiety over capitalism may be read as a symptom of the repressed ‘real,’ that the ‘Asian modern’ itself is constituted by the capitulation of Chinese culture to capitalism, in a fantasy where capital accumulation (the modern) does not negate ethnic identity. That Singapore’s modernity is ethically validated in this story by demonizing China is in itself a sign of an ambivalence in attitude towards Chinese culture that structures this ideology of Asian modernity.

Significantly, the narrator does not, on her return from China, tell her father of his brother’s betrayal and thereby absolve him of his guilt. I would suggest that she omits this action for two reasons. Her father’s guilt constitutes his desire for the ethnic: absolving that guilt may dissolve the desire for the ethnic since, realizing his brother’s betrayal of him, it would shake his faith in the supremacy of Chinese culture. Also, telling her father the truth that she discovers in China may land him in another more insufferably guilty place when he realizes that, despite his financial support, he had still failed to do his brotherly duty: where the mythic, delusional guilt is displaced by real guilt. When her uncle asks to see her father, she notes that “an angry, cheated look had come back into his eyes. He obviously felt my father owed him much.” The narrator then thinks to herself:

No. I would not do this to my father. I wanted to return to Singapore to tell him my uncle was well in China. That he was too busy (not too lazy) to write himself. My father could then breathe easy, believe he had done a good thing and reap in his old age his reward for the good life he had lived and the children he had reared. This man must not be allowed to come and spoil everything.

(1164)

The narrator on the other hand, as a second-generation Singapore Chinese, needs to be absolved from her father’s guilt. She needs to assure herself that her father was a “good man . . . whichever country can claim him as its own” since this would allow her to practice the culture of capitalism, guilt free, alongside that of a fetishized observance of Chinese culture (1165). Her father’s guilt was threatening to
spoil her enjoyment of Singapore’s economic success, morally staining it. This explains the urgency with which the narrator sets out on her quest to China: she needs to expunge her father’s guilt, not in order to liberate him but herself. As we see, she returns from her identity quest much the same as she left it, living her modern lifestyle but “no less eager [than before] to listen to [her] father’s stories of the most beautiful of beautiful lands” (1165). Living East and West jointly but separately, as irreconcilable opposites, on the level of ritual and artifact, she is not much different from her Jewish-Chinese nephew despite her Chinese racial purity. Golden Dragon lives his mixed Eurasian ethnic heritage by smoking opium and wearing “a Jewish skull-cap atop his Chinese-style plait” (1156). The journey does not offer her a new subject-position. The Asian and the modern/Western cannot be dialogized except by subordinating the Asian to the modern (capitalistic) and by hysterically disavowing that compromise. Then there is the irony that Yu’s fantasy of Chinese identity turns on the Western Christian concept of baptism, of washing away original guilt. At the end of the story, Yu likens her father’s “dream of China” to that of “the heaven of Christian converts,” where it is “an ideal to strive for and a vision of things to come” (1165)!

**The Scholar and the Dragon (1986) by Stella Kon**

Kon’s novel was not the earliest of literary texts exploring Singapore’s Chinese ethnic identity. But it was the first in a series of historical novels that sought to re-imagine Singapore history as the story of the immigration of Chinese to Singapore. Among these novels, however, it is also the only one that attempts to imagine Singaporean Chinese culture as specifically Confucian, male and classical at its roots. Kon achieves this by prioritizing one slice of Singapore’s history, the story of a Chinese immigrant, Tan Boon Jin, a scholar of the Chinese classics and a Reformist rebel from China, who seeks a new life in Singapore and becomes one of its “pioneers.” As a successful businessman and Chinese community leader, he plays a salient part in preserving Singapore’s Confucianist and classical Chinese heritage by founding an academy of Chinese studies. Though the protagonist is a fictional character, real
historical characters such as Dr. Lim Boon Keng and actual historical events in an excellently 
researched novel lend authenticity to this novel. Tan Boon Jin is further modeled on some of the real 
pioneering Chinese immigrants of Singapore such as Tan Kah Kee who became highly successful 
businessmen and industrialists, who were responsible for starting up Chinese schools and preserving 
Chinese culture in Singapore. Some readers may also argue that Kon has split the real Dr. Lim Boon 
Keng into two characters. Though Lim is present as one of the characters in the novel, Tan himself is a 
fictionalized re-creation of his friend and mentor, Lim. Like the real Dr. Lim Boon Keng, Tan is a ‘modern’ man but with strong loyalties to Chinese culture and philosophy. Like Lim, Tan is involved 
with establishing Chinese-medium schools in Singapore and emphasizing Confucianism. Tan is also 
involved, like Lim was, in Straits Chinese women’s education. Like his mentor, he too is a reformer 
(rather than a revolutionary) and is involved in contributing to intellectual life in Singapore through the 
media.

Kon’s novel is clearly a positive response to state ideology about Confucianism and Singapore’s 
Chinese identity that was prevalent in the mid-1980s. One can’t but notice the similarities between the 
fictional Wenguang Academy that Kon’s character Tan sets up in Singapore and the nation’s Institute of 
East Asian Philosophy that was set up in 1983 (see chapter 2) to help develop Singapore as a center for 
the study of Confucianism.

Kon’s narrative interest in Tan Boon Jin’s migration is part of an ideological strategy that allows the 
writer to imaginatively link Singapore Chinese ethnic origins specifically to one period of Chinese 
history, that of the last days of the Chinese empire, which were also the final days of the dominance of 
Confucianist culture in China. (With the establishment of the Republic of China in 1911 and, following 
that, Communist government, Confucianist ideology became increasingly marginalized in China.) This 
choice of historical setting (the 1890s-1910s) and the focus on the Chinese empire and its classical 
culture also helps Kon overcome the alienation many of the Singapore Chinese English-educated 
population felt towards Communist China and the superstition-ridden, low folk peasant culture that they
were familiar with. Instead, Chinese culture is essentialized here as Confucianist, and celebrated as a
glorious 2,000-year-old cultural heritage. The novel also resorts to the rhetoric of nostalgia in its
emotional representation of the fall of the Qing dynasty (here made synonymous with the last days of an
authentic and original glorious Chinese culture) to displace this antipathy towards China. This
antipathy, however, as I will show, is itself registered in the novel and is part and parcel of Kon’s attempt
to invest Confucianist culture with desire.

This novel goes some way towards indicating the massive re-inventing of Singapore’s history and the
realignment of ego identifications and national desire that is required for Singaporeans to accept the
newer, Asianized/Confucianist national identity propagated by the state. Kon’s use of the historical
novel form, setting the story in the late 19th and early 20th century, covers over her ideological
imperatives and elisions. The issues the author raises here—the place of Chinese ethnic identity in the
diaspora and in the national subjectivity of post-colonial, late capitalist society; the difficulties of
reconciling Chinese identity with Western value systems; the special value assigned to Confucianism in
Chinese culture)—are contemporary to the 1980s, but symptomatically Kon chooses to dramatize them by
reference to the past than to the present. Important Singaporean historical moments such as those of the
founding of the nation, which would surely have been germane to an exploration of national subjectivity
and the place of ethnic culture within it, are excluded here.

The government’s Asianizing/Confucianizing of national subjectivity was not easily accepted in
Singapore until the later 1980s. As we saw, Singaporean Chinese resisted the teaching of Confucianism
in schools (see chapter 2). Kon could not therefore have set the novel in the 1980s if she was hoping to
effect a resolution between traditional Chinese culture and the modern, often very Westernized
subjectivities of her readers, the English-educated Chinese Singaporeans. Neither could she have set her
novel in the 1950s and 1960s, during the period of Singapore’s national independence movement since
the dominant ideology of that time involved precisely the rejection of racial/ethnic chauvinisms that was
being promoted in the 1980s. Setting the novel in the period of communist China and seeking cultural
resemblance/affiliations between this China and Singapore would also have contradicted Singapore’s founding myths of democracy and modernization.

Kon’s historic interest in the last days of dynastic China must be seen as a 1980s, post-colonial Singaporean phantasmatic re-reading of the history of that period, whereby one period of the past is used as a vehicle to amputate from national memory precisely those aspects of its cultural history that cannot be reconciled with the state’s 1980s’ Confucianizing agenda. The novel instead produces late 19th and 20th century history, a time when cultural connections and identification with China were still strong, as the founding moments of the nation, thereby displacing the actual founding myths of the nation.

Singapore’s anti-colonial movement is also here re-defined as the movement of the overseas-Chinese for independence from colonial rule. The novel thinks nothing of claiming Singapore and Malaysia as Chinese in the manner of European colonial settlers thinking of Aboriginal lands as their own. Seating her characters Tan and his friend Chong Beng on a hill in Malaysia’s Kinta Valley, the narrator notes that by the 1910s, "For fifty years . . . the Chinese tin miners had been working and clearing the jungle in the Kinta Valley. The country near Papan looked much as it does now," the narrator says, overlooking Malay claim to ancestral lands (137). Tan observes to Chong Beng:

"Look at that scene," he said. "There’s the river winding through the plain, and the mountains wreathed in mist. It looks like a classic Chinese painting."

"So it does. Makes you think of home, doesn’t it?"

"But it isn’t our home. This valley isn’t anybody’s homeland, is it?" Boon Jin said, philosophizing sleepily. "The Malays own it, the British rule it, neither of them work or live in that valley below. It ought to belong to the men who spent their blood and sweat to tame the jungle. But they don’t want it, they all want to go back to China." (139-40)

"Fifteen years later," in the 1930s, Kon says that Tan’s thoughts on the valley were published, "asserting the rights of the Overseas-Chinese in the lands they had opened up" (140).
Singaporean history, rewritten as the history of the overseas-Chinese, erases the stories of the minorities, whose role in the novel is reduced to a passive one. The nation’s multiracial character, institutionalized in the discourse of the national independence movement, is here objectivized as merely a visual feature of the island. The only references to Singapore’s multi-cultural composition are as the ‘tourist sight’ that greets the protagonist when he first lands in Singapore:

Boon Jin looked around as he mounted the steps [of the pier], excited to be stepping onto foreign land. . . . There was a long, shadowy hall, crowded with men of many races in exotic costumes. The strangest thing to Boon Jin was that the colors of their faces varied so much, some dark and some very pale. Their languages hummed around him . . . (2-3)

Tan notes too that his Straits Chinese female relatives wear “batik sarongs” and “lace kebayas” (4), that they eat “oily and spicy food” and that the “old ladies ate with their fingers while the younger people ate with Western instruments” (6). Not only are non-Chinese aspects of Singapore reduced to visual and culinary features, but they are also represented as the feminized non-Chinese ‘other,’ the same ‘feminine’ non-Chineseness that the female character Lim Quek Choo, who later becomes Tan’s wife, has to surrender in order to support the national meanings of Chinese identity at the novel’s end (see below).

Kon’s myth of Singapore as a modernized, Confucianist China, with its history made analogous to the biography of the hero Tan and his relationship with his father, is similar to Yu’s. Modernized Confucianism is fantasized here as the articulation of Confucianism with democracy and capitalism, an original Chineseness that undergoes a ‘translation’ through its encounter with Western/modern culture as well as with South-east Asian culture. Singapore culture then is paradoxically both the original as well as its translation, similar to the father-son relationship. Guilt however forms the libidinal center of Kon’s fantasy about her Confucianist Chinese identity, where China’s death is the condition for the recovery of Singapore’s patriarchal heritage from it. The original moment of immigration is a guilty one involving the alienation of the subject from the original Chinese culture. As Kon’s fantasy goes, the awareness
that something has been lost (through migration) and that this loss was executed by the subject itself can only be born by always desiring its recovery. The Chinese classics feature as the object-cathexis of desire, invested with the disavowal of the lack of the original Chinese culture. The dramatization of guilt, so evident in Kon’s novel, is her source of double enjoyment—that which accrues from literally and figuratively ‘killing’ off Chinese culture and celebrating that patriarchal loss as freedom, as well as the enjoyment that comes with displacing guilt onto a fetishized object that will allow one to make only a partial recovery of that absent patriarchal culture. The Chinese classics, so praised by the state, are the fetishized metonym of Chinese culture, permitting the Singaporean subject to substitute the Chinese part for the whole.

The fall of the Qing empire to democratic revolutionaries represents the moment when Chinese culture abandons China and is transplanted to the Nanyang. As Tan notes to Lim Chong Beng:

Dr. Sun’s river, his Revolution. I believe it now. The Revolution will come and there’s no way to stop it. They’ll establish their republic and cut off the emperor’s head and all the glories of China’s history will be washed away in the flood... When they’ve slain the Emperor and burned the temples of Confucius, perhaps we’ll be able to keep Chinese culture alive in the Nanyang. That’s the only work I can see myself doing, for my China. (139)

As a student from late 19th-century China, who hails from thirty generations of Confucianist scholar-gentlemen and a long familial tradition of dynastic support, Tan is an untypical Chinese immigrant to Singapore who is here fantasized as the norm. He is however the modern spirit of China, who rebels against the oppressiveness of Chinese tradition and learning and joins the popular democratic struggle against imperial rule. His rebellion against class and other cultural oppressions is represented however as the rebellion of the son against the father, as the refusing of patriarchal authority. Tan’s ego-ideal is Kang Yu Wei, and his reading of this exiled Chinese Reformist’s teachings mark the rejection of patriarchal instructions:
Boon Jin went back to school, with stern warnings from father to stay well clear of any revolutionary activities. The warnings only made it more exciting to join the clandestine political activity which throbbed through the whole school. They furtively passed around the writings of Kang Yu Wei . . .” (21)

Kang wants to liberalize education in China, moving it away from Confucianism and a pedagogy that privileges imitation over original thought. Tan’s antipathy towards the “eight-legged essay,” a classical Chinese literary form, which Tan views as curbing critical thought, identifies him as a follower of the Chinese Reformist movement. But again this ideology is stitched to Tan’s dis-identification with the patriarchal order: in one scene, his father teaches the son how to write the “eight-legged essay” and chastises the son for being stupid in his inability/unwillingness to master the form. Following the patriarchal scolding, Tan dreams that he is relentlessly pursued by the “eight-legged essay,” figured in the dream as an eight-legged table. Tan’s involvement in the student Reformist movement is also a rebellion against his family’s upper-class position and its ideological affiliation with the monarchy. Tan’s migration to Singapore is a punitive expulsion of the son rebelling against patriarchal authority. But it is also the Chinese male subject’s rite of passage as he moves from a society where the patriarchal order itself was rapidly dissolving to that ‘other’ society that would perform the necessary constitution of masculinity that China is unable to effect at this juncture of its history. Tan’s father views China’s modernizing in 1898, when reforms suggested by Kang Yu Wei were introduced by the boy-emperor, as lacking in adult male wisdom. He says:

What can she [the Dowager] do to stop him? Since the Emperor came of age and started ruling for himself, he packed the Old Ancestor off into retirement, and now this devil Kang Yu Wei is his adviser, his teacher, his corrupting influence. (13)

Then, just before Tan leaves for Singapore, in November 1905, “the Chinese examination system which had lasted for two thousand years, was abolished overnight” (23) and by a woman, the Empress Dowager, who had re-captured power from the young emperor. Henceforth, government jobs would
depend on being in favor with the authorities rather than on good exam results. Tan’s father regards this as an emasculation of Chinese culture. He says, “After all, she’s only an ignorant woman, she never studied the classics” (23). Since Tan had fallen into disfavor with the authorities, this meant the end of all hope for a brilliant career as scholar and instigates his father’s move to send him to Singapore.

... when the government examination system was dismantled, Father really thought that it was the end of the world that his family of scholars had lived in for so many generations. There was no more hope that any of his sons would earn a high government position like the revered ancestor [who had been Chief Minister]. In this despairing mood, he sent Boon Jin off to try to improve his fortunes in the Nanyang. (15)

But Tan’s father is also disappointed in his son’s involvement in Reformist activities:

Father let him know that he had let the family down; he was a disgrace, he didn’t have the first filial virtue. “Wu zhun, wu fu!” Father said to him, “No respect for emperor, no respect for parents” (23).

Tan’s uncle in Singapore affirms the coming together of punishment and salvation in Tan’s move to Singapore. He tells Tan, “Boon Jin, in his letter to me, your father says that you are wild and disobedient at home; you have displeased him and grieved your mother. . . . He has sent you to me so that you can learn something useful, and perhaps reform your way of life” (2).

The novel represents accession to post-colonial diasporic Chinese subjectivity as a displacing, compensatory mechanism for the awareness of an original male lack, of castration. Once he is in Singapore, Tan becomes alienated from his patriarchal culture. His very language itself is strange in this alien land and suffers changes in meanings here: people laugh at his use of classical literary language as an anachronism whereas in China it was a signifier of high culture, of class breeding. When he replies that “the celestial winds were auspicious and benevolent” to his cousin’s polite inquiry about his journey, she “giggled as though he had said something funny” (5). The first thing he noticed about his family in Singapore was the way they spoke:
His own family at home spoke Hokkien dialect in the way of educated people, with many literary words and phrases. But the people in his Uncle’s household spoke like ignorant people; they used simple, rough words which only servants and peasants used at home, and other words which weren’t Chinese at all. (5)

After some unpleasant teasing for his language, Tan resolves that “he must always remember to speak to his cousins, in the way he spoke to servants and peasants at home” (6).

In this land, too, he observes that the enterprising and successful businessman is the signifier of masculinity, and wealth is the path to power, unlike China, where education in the Classics and in Confucianism is the route to power (25). Tan also finds out that his Confucianist values of righteousness and familial loyalty, which form part of Tan’s phantasmatic of masculine virility, have no place in the Nanyang. He dreams of becoming a hero to his Singapore family by revealing to his uncle that his storekeeper, Chua, is cheating him in business: “He imagined himself finding proof of Chua’s dishonesty, and bringing him to justice like a famous judge in old stories” (44). But Chua successfully outwits Tan. The protagonist then sees not only his dream of masculine heroism going up in smoke, but finds he is reviled by his uncle as a thief and cheat as well. His moral ineffectivity only matches his physical and psychic lack of male virility: Tan is attacked by Chua’s secret-society henchman, thrown into the Singapore River, and left for dead (49-50).

Tan’s symbolic death, the defeat of his masculine identity, is metaphor of his alienation from China and classical Chinese culture brought on by migration to a ‘foreign’ land, which is represented as a loss of male identity. For Tan, Singapore is “a foreign, highly Westernized country” (27). But his male/ethnic defeat in the diaspora is represented as the necessary condition that brings him back to Chinese culture, to his patriarchal legacy. In Kon’s Chinese fantasy, Singapore’s ‘real’ non-Chineseness (in the sense of an absence of high culture), its national difference as previously imagined during the independence movement and the following two decades, is re-construed as the castration that causes the phantasmatic desire for Chinese ethnic revival, which is to be cathected as the recovery of male identity.
His family thinks that Tan is dead, but rescued by the Lim family, a humble fishing family of father Lim Chew, son Chong Beng and stepdaughter Quek Choo, Tan decides to remain ‘dead’ to his family since he is unable to come to terms with the dishonor he had brought to it by this inadvertent bad luck.

However, as he moves further and further away from his core familial meanings, widening the chasm between him and China, Tan gets ironically closer to his Chinese culture, though his response to it now is a desiring, imaginary one. Living now with the Lim family at their rustic beachfront home, eating simple meals, working with his hands, and reading the newspaper daily (his father had looked down on the newspaper as a worthless, plebeian literary form), Tan has moved into an entirely different world, class-wise and in terms of physical environment. It is also at this point that Tan cuts off his “queue,” his long plait of hair that symbolizes his mandarin, upper-class male power. As he walks away, “leaving more of his past lying with the cut hair on the floor,” we get the message of the castration from Chinese roots in the diaspora.

Yet it is precisely at this moment, as if in compensation for it, that he renews contact with Chinese poetry, responding to Singapore’s very different tropical seaside at Siglap Beach in terms of the familiar visual and spiritual paradigms used in Chinese poems about moonlight and waves. He also starts to read the Classics daily before setting off on his manual work, though he finds that his response to it now is closer to his affect, filled more with desire, than it ever was before:

He seemed to be listening to the voices of the great scholars of the past, who discussed Confucius with such loving attention. The Classics were not dry to them, but their source for everything they believed in, their guide for every action.

As a schoolboy, Boon Jin had studied the Classic Books as classroom texts to be learned by rote. Now he came to understand his Confucian tradition better than before. (68-69)

Tan imagines himself now as dead to his family, and even dreams one day that he sees his name inscribed on a wooden spirit tablet on the family’s ancestral altar. In the dream, his mother is unable to see or hear his presence (62-3). Yet it is during this period, when Tan is deeply aware of his utter
alienation from his family, his complete difference from them, that he is imaginarily able to turn his Singaporean non-Chinese ‘difference’ (that of capitalism) into the Chinese ‘same’ (of filial piety, of honoring one’s parents).

Boon Jin didn’t feel easy in deciding to let his family think he was dead. But he could see a chance for a new kind of life in front of him. He would make his fortune, and one day he would go home and surprise everyone. His parents would be overjoyed to find that he wasn’t dead after all; he would bow to them and give them money that would solve all their problems. (54-55)

Again, this desiring move is made as an imaginary compensation for that which he has lost. As the narrator says, Tan “day-dreamed [thus] to soothe his guilty feelings” (55). Here, guilt about capital accumulation (Westernization) is escaped by reconciling it with family honor. Tan imagines that capital accumulation will literally as well as figuratively restore his identity and bring him within the circuit of Chinese patriarchal norms of masculinity demanded from sons. Thus does the very alien value of capital accumulation get stitched to core Confucian and classical Chinese values.

But if Tan manages to elide that alterity between Singapore and China, his father will not allow him to carry out that masquerade of the different as same. Returning home after he has made his fortune, Tan finds his father unimpressed by his wealth. To the father, Tan’s Reformism, his belief in modernization, democracy and in a constitutional monarchy, has made him a traitor to his family and to China. It would seem that the patriarch cannot accept Tan’s identification of the “Chinese soul” as merely comprising knowledge of Chinese history and the teachings of Confucius and the classical poets. Neither can he agree with Tan’s rejection of empire and China as central signifiers of Chinese ethnic identity. Tan tells his father his ideas about Chinese identity in the diaspora: “Chinese identity and culture can survive even without the Chinese nation . . . In America, I’ve seen people who are loyal American citizens, and they keep their Chinese identity.” Kon, through Tan, likens the might of Chinese culture to that of Western culture, conveniently erasing the problem of the cross-cultural influence of Western civilization on Chinese culture through colonial dominance and showing up the unacknowledged Western identification
involved in Singapore’s assertion of its Chinese-ness. “Just as the influence of Greece and Rome has shaped Western civilization,” he tells his father, “so Chinese culture can survive wherever our people go, though the Chinese empire falls” (151). The minority Singapore reader will also not miss, as expressed in this revealing comparison, the desire of the Singaporean Chinese ethnic subject to emulate the West’s colonization of other cultures, which is how the West secured its current cultural supremacy.

However, Tan’s father couldn’t accept this “separation between culture and national loyalty” (151). He scolds Tan:

“What is this treasonable talk about the fall of the Empire?” Father shouted, standing up. “I will hear no more. What kind of unnatural son are you? Thank heaven I have your brother to keep our family honor. You are a curse to me, not a blessing, you are a disgrace to us, a shame to your ancestors!”” (151)

His father also tells Tan that he had “become a barbarian in the South, bringing back [his] barbarian wife! You have forgotten all the teaching you were given and turned away from your ancestors; you are a disloyal, unfilial son!” (151).

As the novel shows, Tan can only live such notions of diasporic Chinese identity with the death of the father/China and with his sense of his own guilty contribution to that death. Tan’s father and brother (who is a government official) die at the hands of Dr. Sun Yat Sen’s Nationalist forces when they take over the country in 1911. It is seminal that Tan himself contributed money towards this revolutionary effort. Tan’s determination then that he “will never go back to China,” “not while it is ruled by the men who killed my family” is thus strange if not a deliberation prevarication and a self-delusion that constitutes his desire for ethnic culture (159). By putting the blame on others, he escapes from his own guilty knowledge of his contribution to the death of China/his father. Notwithstanding his funding of the revolution and his anti-monarchic sentiments, Tan judges that “he seemed to be the only person in Singapore who felt regret that more than two thousand years of China’s history had been swept away” (159). But he also recycles that guilt of parental betrayal to keep himself ensconced in the safe,
economic comfort of Singapore. Again, the ideologeme of guilt allows the ethnic subject to be hystERICally in two places at once, in the West and in China. Going back to China (I would suggest both psychically as well as literally) would have jeopardized the very negation of central aspects of high Chinese culture on which his imaginary ethnic subjectivity turns. It is only when China/his father is killed off as the site of original Chinese identity that Tan can put in its place the 'other' Nanyang Chinese culture. The death of his father and 'China' enables Tan to imaginarily substitute the father with an academy devoted to the study of the Chinese classics and the preservation of Confucianist philosophy, where the latter involves, as fetish, the disavowal as well as implicit recognition of the castration of the father/high Chinese culture.

This undecidability in Kon's attitude to China is a symptom of the split desire of Singaporean Chinese in the 1980s towards their Chinese heritage. The enjoyment the writer obviously derives from representing China as dead, a China that's recoverable only from a distance via the fetishization of Confucianism, may be read as the disguised sneaking into this narrative of contemporary Singapore's dis-identification with and antipathy towards Communist China as well as its historical alienation from high Chinese culture. The novel starts by foregrounding the end of the Chinese empire. Tan, watching a public celebration in Singapore in 1906, his first year in the Nanyang, is not aware that only five years away,

the Nanyang Chinese would haul down the yellow dragon flag for ceremonial burning. The aristocratic Chinese Consul in his Mandarin robes, now among the honored guests at Government House, would find himself hiding in terror from blood-thirsty mobs. The Old China he represented--the world into which Boon Jin had been born--would be completely swept away. (8-9)

The novel then moves with desire toward this moment in 1911. One does not sense any genuine remorse in Kon's description of the end of the Old China, though there does appear to be some semblance of nostalgia. For Kon, the event would appear to be the demise of that which had already
been long dead. In the epigrams to chapter 7, she quotes both Dr. Sun Yat Sen, the leader of the
Revolutionaries and Dr. Lim Boon Keng, who speaks for the Reformists. Dr. Sun’s quote, “The
Reformers are indulging in the futile occupation of trying to revive the dead,” is balanced against Dr.
Lim’s statement, “The man who dares to plan a revolt in China of today is not a man but a fierce fiend, if
he realizes all the horrors his diabolical work will cause” (85) but the Singapore reader will ascribe
prophetic meanings of communist rule in China as the “horrors” that are to come to China. In a quote
from the Chinese Book of Histories which serves as epigraph for chapter 11, we are encouraged to read
the trouble in China as a sign that “the Mandate of Heaven has changed,” that the spirit of Chinese
culture has migrated to Singapore (141). Detailing the celebrations in Singapore and Malaya, she says
that it “showed that in the minds of the most pragmatic, there was no more future in supporting the
Imperial Government” (158). The first reports of the fall of Peking to revolutionaries were false, so that
the celebration of the fall of the Chinese empire in Singapore, was at first “imaginary,” Kon says in a
symptomatic use of the word:

The fall of Peking was an imaginary event, that was more powerful than the truth. The story made
people dismantle the loyalties and thought habits of a lifetime; and when that period of rejoicing
ended, the Empire of China was a ghost that had no more power over the minds of its people.

(158)

Perhaps Kon’s use of the word “imaginary” is a return of the repressed ‘Real’ announcing the
involvement of authorial desire and the “imaginary” (as opposed to history-as-fact) and disrupting the
‘truth’ in this re-inscription of Singapore as the “new China” that emerges with the death of the “Old
China.” Kon’s frequent resort to dreams and her detailed tracking of Tan’s fantasies and his desire
suggests that she is more than a little aware of the role of fantasy in her own imagining of Singapore’s
Chinese-ness.

Within the novel, a nostalgic desire for a dying/dead China runs side by side with the desire to
literally and psychically destroy that China. Due to that, Tan’s monarchical, pro-Reform politics is
considered only slightly better than the desire of the Revolutionaries to force an end to the Chinese empire. The revolutionary figure Lim Chong Beng is represented positively, not as someone fanatical or over-idealistic. Lim visits China and witnesses the monarchy's oppression of the poor. This fires his revolutionary zeal and lends it moral credence. While seeming to grieve the end of the Chinese empire, the novel also thereby recognizes its oppressiveness.

The virtual celebration of the demise of China that occurs in this novel is ideologically necessary to reconcile the state's Asianizing/Confucianizing of Singapore with Singapore's own late-capitalist and modern culture. The novel represses the thought that historical circumstances such as migration, colonialism and modernization must necessarily displace a quintessential Chinese ethnicity or at least transform it. This fantasy of an essentialized, ahistorical Chinese culture that survives spatial and temporal dislocation requires however that both Chinese and the 'other' cultures be fetishized (objectivized), and, as objects, therefore rendered incapable of coming into any dialectical confrontation with each other. Kon's fictional Tan, a Chinese scholar-cum-businessman and other characters such as the real Lim Boon Keng, a doctor of Western medicine who is also a Reform movement activist anxious to preserve Chinese culture, are offered as figures that dramatize the possibility that East and West can co-exist, and did co-exist in Singapore without contradicting each other. Tan, for instance, is represented as being able to retain his belief in the imperialist ideologies contained in the Trimester Classics and Confucianism even while transforming himself into a successful businessman and an egalitarian modernist. The desire for the Western as 'other' runs side by side with the desire to retain the Chinese 'self.' But as the text shows, this co-existence of traditional Chinese culture with modernism/Westernization is an uneasy alliance of the modern/Western with Confucianism, where a dialogization is only possible with the death of essential Confucianist values such as patriarchal power and political authoritarianism exemplified in Tan's father's death and the end of the Chinese empire, which ironically also makes that dialogization inauthentic.
The Singapore government's emphasis on Chinese studies in recovering a quintessential Chinese culture is hence revealed in this novel to be a fantasy in which a part of Chinese culture can be internalized in an identificatory process only on condition that the rest is dead. The Chinese classics function as the imaginary substitute for the lost father: the rem(a)inder of the death of the father. If the Lacanian phallus is metaphor of patriarchal order, the Chinese classics are its metonym. In the process, post-colonial, immigrant Singaporean Chinese subjectivity is represented as an under-developed male subjectivity. Since the ego-ideal, Tan, is only a partial image of the real father, we get a partial and ambivalent masculinity posing as the whole.

At points, the novel veers dangerously close to representing the Chinese heritage as feminine. Tan's mother and sister-in-law are the only ones who survive the Nationalist movement's destruction in China and make it safely to Singapore. If fetishes involve the projection of masculine lack onto woman and the denial of that lack via the vehicle of the woman's body, then the study of the classics is the mistaken finding of the phallus on the body of woman, where something female (the breast/Chinese classics) is mistaken for something male (the phallus/father). Significantly, it is Tan's wife, Lim Quek Choo, who suggests that the death of the father/China can be imaginatively deferred by the study of the Chinese classics and the setting up of the Wenguang Chinese Academy (160). Thinking of founding this academy, "Boon Jin put aside his guilt and regrets" (161). The Chinese academy then is the symbol of Singapore Chinese guilt concerning the betrayal of their ethnic culture: it substitutes for the absence in the real of Chinese Confucianist culture.

The paradigms of the adventure story and historical biography are used to establish the male heroism of post-colonial Chinese subjectivity. Capitalism forms the background to this Chinese male virility. Tan and Lim Chong Beng's move from the rural to the urban, from selling fish to processing rubber and manufacturing rubber products enters them into the circulation of international capital and modernization. It is this that finances and makes possible their political activism and sees them
becoming important community leaders. As the novel’s epilogue tells us, Lim Chong Beng was even a martyr to the Chinese cause, as he who died fighting the Japanese in Manchuria (162).

It remains however a fragile masculinity, which finds a place for the Singapore Chinese modern woman. She can pursue her agenda of modernization and female emancipation but not at the expense of failing to prop up the (fragile) masculine identity of her men. As mothers and as wives, women are allegedly needed to repair male castration. Lim Quek Choo, Tan’s wife, is a firm believer in the feminism of Indonesian princess Raden Adjeng Kartini, and she has in the past criticized the Chinese Trimester Classics and classical literary language as so much phallogocentric ideology and a strategy to maintain class power (65-68). She also views herself as non-Chinese (she grew up in Java, and her racial origins are uncertain) and is educated in Western ideas. But it is this woman that Kon selects as patroness of Confucianist studies! Female Chinese desire and identity is hence linked to the restoration of patriarchal power, at least in making sure that its substitute works effectively. Supposedly, only strong women such as Lim Quek Choo can manage this. The feminist threat to a Confucianist revival is thereby disarmed. The subtext is that if women aren’t up to this challenge they could find themselves having to accept eunuchs or psychically traumatized men as their partners, not to mention that the foundations of social organization itself could crumble! Tan’s wife, for instance, suggests the founding of a Confucianist academy to soothe her husband’s mental turbulence and guilt surrounding the death of his father.

Despite having found the phallic substitute, this ‘normal’ male world of post-colonial Chinese identity has not achieved perfection. The novel ends with a dream that implicates Singapore’s ethnic fantasy of Chinese-ness in a contradictory non-adult male subjectivity, with vague references to homoeroticism. Tan, with his father dead and himself at peace because of his decision to found an academy of Chinese studies, dreams of himself as a boy chasing after butterflies in play with another boy. Going by his yellow dress, his playmate is the child-Emperor of China. This pastoral haven is supposedly Singapore as the ‘new China’ (though Kon never explicitly calls Singapore this): it certainly
is the future as Tan imagines it, which is destined to be in Singapore. The two children are playing on a "green hillside, among old blackened timbers half-buried in the earth," where Singapore is represented as the regenerative spirit of an ancient culture. They run "happy and unafraid, over grass and tiny flowers growing between the quiet ruins," playing "along the old paths of a forgotten garden." "The light of a clear spring morning in China shone around them" (my emphasis, 161).

The epilogue ends in a manner that suggests successful ideologizing by the state. Tan's grandson, speaks of his grandfather and recalls that he had told him that "there are some eternal and unchanging truths . . . and in our new society we should still keep hold of them" (162). But if Kon is running away from the 'real' of history, even Chinese classical texts point to the phantasmatic nature of her search for cultural roots, of her pursuit of the eternal in the historical itself. In her epigraph to chapter 11, Kon quotes the Book of Histories, which suggests that even divine will changes over time: "Now Heaven is sending down calamity on the state of Chow. . . . You should realize that the Mandate of Heaven has changed" (141).

**Gift from the Gods (1990) by Christine Lim Su-Chen**

In the state's discourse of Asian identity, we saw that modernity and traditional Asian/Chinese culture were viewed as reconcilable elements, in part by excluding notions of liberal or radical democracy which were proclaimed to be "Western" and selectively re-defining modernity. The antagonisms between them were foreclosed from the discourse. Lim's novel emerges from this space of repression: it pits what may be recognized as a Western feminist discourse (which the novel disavows) against oppressively patriarchal aspects of Chinese culture. I want to argue that this does not, however, amount to a subversion of state ideology. It passes the 'censors' by using a form of this Western feminist discourse, a dialogue between a modern Chinese woman and her maternal past, but in order to dissociate from the maternal past. The novel imagines away the contradictions between 'modernity' and Chinese culture by defining 'Asian modernity' as a 'native' feminist response to Chinese ethnic experience,
where the two, modernity and Chinese culture are supposedly dialecticized. This Sinicized modernity is expressed in the form of a writing event: a Chinese woman attempts to define her modern subjectivity as a response to the oppressions suffered by her mother and grandmother as women under an ethnic patriarchal culture. In doing so, contemporary Chinese modernity is not allowed to be viewed as a capitulation to capitalism, as a contamination by Western culture. A Hakka cradle-song, which serves as the novel’s epigram, establishes the Chinese-ness of its feminist interest so that the reader is not encouraged to interpret this ‘Asian modern’ writing as involving a West/East cross-cultural hybridity. The song foregrounds the writing event as a feminist response to the gender inequalities and female oppression characterizing a past Singapore Chinese immigrant culture:

How sad it is to be a woman;
Nothing is held so cheap.
Boys stand strong and firm,
Like gods fallen out of heaven.
No one is glad when a girl is born. (5)

Modernity as it is complicitious with Western imperialism is shunted outside the novel, but I will argue that this ‘outside’ shapes and fashions the novel from within, refusing it as an expression of an ethnicized modernity. For instance, the narrator, Yenti, ensconced in her perspective of ‘modernity,’ represents Singapore Chinese culture as feminine (i.e. weak, decrepit, sensual), primitive, as belonging to a different time (of the past), which is dramatically similar to Eurocentric colonial readings of Chinese culture. This ‘modern Chinese’ response to traditional Chinese culture is thereby always-already Westernized. The novel’s tour de force however consists of the paradoxical manner in which it ‘reconciles’ feminism (the Western modern, here pretending to be ‘Chinese’ modern) with desire for a patriarchal Chinese tradition. It does this, I will argue, by producing feminist discourse as lack, as the desire for female liberation that arises out of the absence of the father and the father’s story. Thus, female desire in the narrative points towards yearning for the father, while masquerading as a desire to be
free of the mother and of the mother’s experiences of oppression. This ‘modern’ space gestured at by the novel is deliberately rendered ambiguously, mystified and disguised through the use of non-realistic modes of representation such as the dream and fantasy. In doing so, it unwittingly reveals that the state’s similar vagueness about the Asian modern may have something to do, like the novel, with the fact that it insincerely mouths the cause of feminism while carrying out an agenda of patriarchal control. At the end of the novel, Yenti says that she recalled her past in order to exorcise it, leaving her to be free “to sculpt a new me” (213). But this ‘modern’ and new space of subjectivity can be read in two ways within the novel: as liberating Yenti towards a modern, feminist subjectivity, or as releasing her from her mother’s desire so that she can search for the absent father. Just as the state sacrifices female freedom for ‘Asian modernization,’ so too Yenti, and through her, Lim, cathect state ideology by representing modern Singapore Chinese ‘feminist’ subjectivity as an awareness of lack, as castration, so that the Singapore Chinese feminist cause must be to search for wholeness, and thus, for the phallus, for the symbolic order of the ancient Chinese past. This justification of Asian modernity, of women welcoming an ancient patriarchal tradition, can only exist as secret fantasy however: it can never be spoken, at least not in English, because to do so would be to expose it as merely another moment of female oppression, as patriarchal revivalism. It is the desire that can only be known through a false, mystifying name, as “Asian modernity.”

This novel lends itself to reading as a feminist text, as a novel that exposes a culture’s history of female oppression. Its Chinese ‘difference,’ where it historically records, I would maintain with accuracy, the trials and tribulations of Chinese women working-class immigrants attempting to survive in Malaysia and Singapore in the early years of this century, also allows it to be received as a post-colonial feminist text. Being effectively bilingual, Christine Lim is also able to convincingly communicate the ‘native’ voice of Singapore’s early 20th-century Chinese working class, illiterate women. Though the novel is written in English, the novel’s narrator obviously received her oral women’s history lessons from her mother and grandmother in Chinese dialect, so that this women’s
herstory is a translation into English of these women’s experiences. Chinese idioms and proverbs pervade the novel and provide a sense of an authentic ‘Chinese’ immigrant female textuality. But this textuality also often serves to represent Singapore Chinese women as hysterical, resorting to melodrama to hide their wrong-doing and guilt. For instance, when Yenti’s mother, Yoke-lin, gives birth to Yenti, her father-in-law banishes her and her new-born daughter from his home. Chinese idiom is used to portray the full force of patriarchal oppression and contempt for women. Yenti is regarded as a “piglet,” and her birth is considered “bad luck,” while her mother, in giving birth to a girl, is considered a “broomstick spirit” (the Chinese regard broomsticks, when used at auspicious moments in the home such as during the Chinese New Year, as sweeping good luck out of the house):

“Stop that piglet’s cry!” her father-in-law yelled. “No crying under my roof! I am not dead yet! Stop the tears! Change the luck! Get that broomstick spirit out of my house! Nothing but bad luck since she came! Out! Mother and daughter out! You hear me in there! Out!” (15)

But the direct voice of patriarchal oppression is seldom heard in a novel where the woman’s voice dominates. In this incident, patriarchal oppression is countered with Yoke-lin’s foster-mother Tai Ku’s response to the birth of the girl. She takes in mother and daughter but only because of public knowledge regarding her arrangement of the marriage: “She was angry . . . that Yoke-lin had brought dishonor and loss of face to her, and yet, she, Tai Ku must not be seen to abandon her adopted daughter at a time like this. After all everybody knew that she had made this match for Yoke-lin.” She is not therefore naturally inclined to take in Yoke-lin and Yenti. But she will not admit her guilty involvement in her adopted daughter’s fate: she married Yoke-lin off for a good dowry without investigating the would-be-husband, who was a Communist insurgent being hunted down by the government. Instead, she represents her act of providing shelter as an immensely kind act, adopting a martyr-like pose. In public, she defends her daughter while, in private, she harangues her for wrong-doing. She tells Ah Sow, a neighbor and wife of a noodle hawker:
“Ah Sow, you tell me what wrong my daughter has done?” Tai Ku began. “Like swallowing a
dead cat, my mouth’s stuffed! You tell me what can a mother do? You slave to bring up your
daughter! Not my flesh, but never mind! You make sure she’s married well. Then what happens?
She returns crying, a new-born babe in her arms! I’ve no more face to hide! You have the heart to
throw mother and baby out? I, Tai Ku, am not like other mothers. I haven’t! (28)

When her friends suggest that she shouldn’t spend so much on a “girl,” Tai Ku, who is of like mind,
begs to differ: “No grandchild of mine shall come into this world poor and shabby. I might be poor but I
have backbone!” she says (30).

But at home with Yoke-lin, she embodies patriarchal tyranny: “You come home, thrown out by other
people! Not a squeak from you! Did I say a word? Ha? Answer me. I only squeeze my own heart and
suffer my shame in silence. Did I complain? No money, did I ask you?” (36). The real patriarch of the
family, her husband Tai Shook, is, by contrast, represented as soft-spoken and kind. Tai Ku drowns out
her husband’s sympathy for Yoke-lin in a castrating torrent of verbal abuse: “Butcher, you keep quiet,
what do you know? A poor butcher all your miserable life! Remember, she married at seventeen! I, ah, at
fifteen! Who cared about me then? She at least has got me. Who did I have?” (36). But the reader
knows that Tai Ku has had a relatively comfortable life, barring a stint at a brothel in Malaysia. A
Chinese tin-miner had married her and provided well for her, even procuring for her an adopted son and
daughter (23-4). When he died, she married Tai Shook, a gentle-hearted butcher, who again provided
well for her materially. Calling Yoke-lin an “ingrate,” for whom she’d “worked her heart out” (36), Tai
Ku does not mention that she had sent Yoke-lin to work at the age of 12, to wait at tables and clean
dishes “from eleven in the morning to eleven at night” (32). Tai Ku’s action suggests that she had
adopted Yoke-lin as a source of income for herself, pawning her jewelry to redeem Yoke-lin from the
brothel to which she had been sold by her step-father. But she proclaims her “mercy and charity” to the
inhabitants of the tenement house where she lives: “I didn’t count the cost . . . When I help, I help all the
way. You want to accompany the Lord Buddha, accompany him all the way, I always say” (31).
In the tenement gossip surrounding Yoke-lin’s return, this female Chinese textuality is again used to represent women themselves as forces of oppression, tyranny and ignorance. Among themselves, the female tenants at the tenement house agree that “Yoke-lin must have done something to sully the good name of the Chows [her in-laws]. Why else had they asked her to leave with the baby?” (27-8). The trishaw-rider’s wife “rolled her eyes knowingly. Who could say, the baby might not even be a Chow” (28). The gossip has it that Yoke-lin’s mother-in-law herself had suggested that “if Yoke-lin had been more submissive, her son might have stayed” (28). Ah Sow herself is convinced that scandal was involved: “There was more to it than met the eye. Men did not know and the spirits did not see, as the saying went, so who could tell what had gone wrong” (27).

This novel is separated into two parts. For the most part, the novel is set in the past, beginning in Malaysia from the late 1940s and 1950s with the birth of Yenti, with some brief accounts of the earlier period. It recounts, in the third person, the history of three generations of Malayan Chinese women, Yenti, her mother Yoke-lin and her foster grandmother Tai Ku, with Yenti as narrator. But we are brought back to the present and to Yenti’s consciousness in brief sections of the novel which comprise entries in Yenti’s journal. This split in the novel between past and present, third-person and first-person narration, between translated Chinese dialect and formal English, tends to produce the impression that we have two stories here, two female points of view or subjectivities, one traditionally Chinese and one that is modern. In order to read the novel as ideological fantasy, the critical reader must overcome this split to realize that Yenti’s modern structuring gaze pervades the novel, so that even the traditional Chinese past female subjectivity is a figment of her imagination. Yenti herself admits this: “What I am writing may be fiction mixed with fantasy, but still, fiction is fantasy made real by a few facts” (51).

Yenti’s journal entries are included in the novel, I would argue, in order to delimit non-feminist readings of her communion with her maternal past, to disavow her anti-feminist desire for a high, patriarchal Chinese culture. In the second journal entry that interrupts the novel, Yenti says that she wants to acknowledge her ethnic roots but by breaking away from the two distinct Singaporean Chinese
trends in remembering the ethnic past that I have discussed, the story of the peasants of the soil and that of the transplanting of high, classical Chinese culture in Singapore. “Reverse snobbery these days,” she says, “celebrates its humble pioneering origins, but the nouveau riche, like my mother in her grand mansion, dig out the successful family scholar or business tycoon to sing about” (51). Yenti then is determined to show a very different “reality,” that her family had not come from “men of vision and learning” as her mother wanted everyone to think (51). Rather Yenti wants to document the true history of “the wave of [Chinese] immigrants of Cantonese, Hokkien, Teochew, Hakka or Hock Chia origin, the impoverished and inarticulate . . . thousands who farmed and mined the land, who worked and married and produced descendants like me, assistant curator of a museum . . . ”(53). She has “chosen,” she says, “to give them a voice” (53). She adds that she “is not ashamed of them anymore,” but this shame is gendered in the novel. The shame-free aspect of her past is associated with her male history. Referring to the Kinta Valley in Perak, Malaysia, she says:

In this valley, the [Chinese] immigrants had hewn and cut, mined and fought over mining rights, tin ore and women. A few became rich and the streets of Ipoh used to bear their names. But for every Chinese name that is known, there are nameless thousands like my grandfather, Tai Shook. For them life was two bowls of rice a day. And yet they have hewn a niche for themselves in the Malay Peninsula, and produced graduate grandsons and granddaughters like me. It’s something to be proud of, isn’t it? (50).

Even her father, who left her mother destitute by running away into the Malayan jungle and joining the communists, is recuperated imaginatively as an over-idealistic but honest man. Recalling meeting three ex-members of the Communist Party of Malaya, she says they were “hardy middle-aged men, very skillful with their hands.” She sees her father in them:

One of them showed us how to skin a squirrel and pull a tortoise live out of its shell. He chopped it up and made a delicious tortoise soup for us. Poor man, he had surrendered himself because he was starving. He seemed more like an ignorant farmer lured by false ideals for which he paid with
wasted years than a dangerous element out to subvert society. Sometimes I imagine that one of these had been my father and our meeting in Alor Star had been engineered by the gods. (52)

But the shameful aspect of her history resides in the feminine line:

Anyway, every family has its skeleton in the cupboard. I used to be ashamed that Mother was a cabaret woman turned respectable housewife, and Grandmother Tai Ku was a prostitute turned matriarch (51).

At the novel's end, the last of Yenti's journal entries represents the novel as a feminist text, involving the liberation of the modern woman from a history of gender oppression:

There, I've finished.

I have buried my family, given each one its due, and in the process, freed myself of the ghosts which haunt the mind. This writing is an act of remembrance as well as a severance of the ties that bound me to what I was. From now on, I shall sculpt a new me! (213)

Yenti is supposedly free to take on a new subjectivity. Since this is to be different from that of the Chinese women of the past, the reader must reckon that it is to be female 'modern' identity. Certainly, in her journal entries, Yenti positions herself as the modern 'other' to her mother. Unlike her mother, she went to school and does not depend financially on men. Her relationship with her husband does not involve the trickery and deceit embedded in her mother's relationship with her step-father: Ong Kim San, a millionaire's son, married Yoke-lin because he thinks her son Soo Beng is his progeny; due to her financial dependence on him, Yoke-lin had to put up with a long line of extra-marital infidelities. Since Yenti acknowledges her mother's contribution to her 'modern' life, her modernity then has been borne from traditional Asian/Chinese culture, making it an 'Asian modern' identity. The silence the novel peters into regarding the "new me" that is to be "sculpt[ed]" may perhaps be read as an implicit authorial admission of the difficulty of imagining what an Asian modern feminist subjectivity might be that wasn't already contaminated by Western notions of female emancipation. But it also, I would suggest, refers to an Asian modern female subjectivity that is 'ready' to welcome back the traditional ethnic patriarchal.
A feminist reading of this novel would have to privilege Yenti’s closing words over her opening statement. Yenti’s journal entries begin and end the novel. While her last words deal with the ‘feminist’ desire to bury a past that is gendered as oppressively female, her first words speak of desire for a paternal history:

My father ran away to join the Communists in the Malaysian jungles the night I was born. I don’t know him. The two or three times when I tried to find out more about him, Mother pursed her lips and remained silent. That was her way of telling me that that past in her life was dead. It had been willed out of existence. (6)

The novel’s narrative then is a female history, a story of the mother that is put together to substitute for the lack of the father’s story. From the start then, the reader is told that the story of Singapore’s ethnic past recalled is inauthentic in its incompleteness, in the paternal silences that it can never hope to fill because the father abandoned the daughter. The maternal story contained in the novel may be viewed as the fetish, the false substitute for the objet petit a, which is the father’s story, which forms the original source of desire for that which is missing in the female self. The desire for the paternal is hence expressed in a negative and contradictory manner: by fetishizing the mother’s story, producing it as spectacle, full of minute details, but constantly undermining the authenticity of the story, with a ‘this is not it.’ At every point, Yenti foregrounds the fictionality of her story, its existence as a construction of her imagination, pieced together from fragments of the story. The questioning of the truth of her story is posed at every turn.

Asian modernity, I would argue, is produced in this novel as the desire for the patriarchal that is generated by the failure/lack in the narrative of ethnic identity, represented as female. To enter or write this subjectivity, the female must unravel the story of her maternal past, uncover its female ‘shame’ and burden. Discovering and thereby exorcising this sense of an unethically oppressive culture, she can then be delivered to the shores of an Asian modern subjectivity. Yenti thus sets out to track the place she occupies within her mother’s desire. This however requires the co-operation of her mother, who refuses
this demand by denying Yenti access to the truth of her desire. Yenti takes on this task of autobiographic writing as the act of representation that, similar to that of the Lacanian mirror-stage, will yield up a (mis)representation of herself as a coherent whole. Just as in the mirror-stage, the child finds itself looking through the gaze of the other, which structures the self-image, (the gaze being located inside the spectacle rather than outside it), so here, too, Yenti tries to find herself through her mother’s gaze. She attempts, especially, to find herself as the object of the m/other’s desire, which involves framing her mother’s life-story in terms of self-sacrifice and martyrdom, where the mother lives for the child. This narrative of ethnic identity would have been similar to one of the two dominant narratives in Singapore where Chinese culture is figured in terms of the pioneering, hardworking peasant immigrant from China, who rose, against all odds, from rags to riches. Yenti is willing to take on the burden of her mother’s prostitution just so long as she can find in it a motive of self-sacrifice for the daughter. This is the ‘shame’ of her past that she can bear. Instead, Yenti finds herself confronting the possibility of yet another, more unbearable shame: that her mother became a prostitute, not in order to provide for her daughter, but to ensure a comfortable life for herself. Hoping to constitute her subjectivity through her mother’s gaze, Yenti is instead divested of subjectivity: her mother Yoke-lin’s desire, she suspects, had always been directed elsewhere.

Yenti traces this ‘elsewhere’ of Yoke-lin’s desire with a vengeance, so that the narrative is a phantasmatic working out of maternal desire as hermeneutic puzzle. Though suspicion of her mother’s non-martyr-like and non-maternal desire is present everywhere in the novel, it is concentrated especially on Yoke-lin’s sexual adventure at Ping Shan in Malaysia. Yoke-lin, afraid of losing Ong, a millionaire’s son whom she meets at the cabaret where she works in Singapore, approaches the temple medium at Ping Shan, to intercede with the gods for a son for her: Yoke-lin hopes that Ong will marry her if she gives him a son since the unmarried and childless Ong, himself the son of a concubine, stands to inherit a quarter of a million dollars from the family when he has male offspring. This event at Ping Shan takes on a huge significance for Yenti. For her, it contains the vital clue about her mother’s desire, which
supposedly will constitute her own selfhood, where the self emerges from its relation of desire and identification with the ‘other.’ Yenti reconstructs the event frankly as the answer of her fantasy. She admits: “During my teenage years, my imagination and fantasy were fed by the bits and pieces of conversation overheard, and so my fertile mind thinks it knows what happened between Mother and the medium of Ping Shan during her brief sojourn on that magical mountain” (124).

Earlier in the novel, Yenti foregrounds the phantasmatic element of her construction of the past (see above). In her fantasy then, and therefore in her desire, Yenti narrates the event at Ping Shan as centerpiece of her mother’s betrayal of her daughter, son, and husband-to-be. It is the originating moment of Yoke-lin’s betrayal, where she conceives a son by having an affair with the temple medium, whom she then passes off to Ong as his progeny. Literally and figuratively, the son is a “gift from the Gods”: in all likelihood, the son Soo Beng is more probably the temple medium’s son than Ong’s since, at the time, Ong had been busy pursuing a new love interest and had been absent from Yoke-lin’s bed. Though Ong suspects that he is not the father, he marries her in order to claim his patrilineal inheritance. Safely ensconced in a new home, with a rich husband to take care of her material needs, Yoke-lin, when confronted with her duplicity by Yenti, tells her daughter that she did it for her: to get her a home and a good education. Yenti’s representation of the Ping Shan event helps the reader to locate the narrator’s desire. The representation of the affair between her mother and the temple medium is the only non-realistic scene in the novel. Here, Yenti’s desire to find herself as the object of her mother’s desire gives way to or finally reveals a contradictory desire, to find a man as the object of the mother’s desire.

We cannot but read Yenti’s fantasy about the ‘masterly’ manner in which the temple medium takes her mother sexually, sending Yoke-lin to the heights of ecstasy, as anything else but desire for masculine virility, passion and control. She certainly appears bent on interpreting the event as something more than a cultural phenomenon where temple mediums provided an “acceptable source of sexual pleasure and release for apparently respectable housewives” (184).
The novel appears to be about female gender oppression in a pre-modern Chinese culture, in response to which Yenti is trying to fashion a female Asian modern subjectivity. But we note that this effort turns on the very silence/silencing of Yoke-lin [the maternal past]. Yenti’s search for the past is prompted by Yoke-lin’s “purs[ing] her lips and remain[ing] silent” (6). Yenti admits that she cannot totally re-create the past because of the language difference: to restore her mother’s story, she must communicate effectively, but is prohibited by her lack of familiarity with Chinese dialect from doing so. Yenti also represents her mother as uncooperative in sharing her history, but, conversely, Yenti is relieved that her mother, Yoke-lin, will not be able to disprove her own phantasmatic re-creation of the past. She writes/imagines the very past that her mother does not want to discuss:

Mother doesn’t want to talk about her past, that is, her real past. What she doesn’t want to remember doesn’t exist. If she knew that I am writing about her roots and origins, she would be furious. Fortunately, since she cannot read English, the problem will never arise. (50)

Yoke-lin is the only one who can expose the fantastic and the inaccurate in Yenti’s representation of the past. But Yenti diegetically silences her mother by the very act of writing in English. In addition, both Yoke-lin and her foster-mother, Tai Ku, are only shadowy characters in the novel: they lack the complete subjectivity that Yenti is provided with.

Since the novel emerges from ‘Chinese’ silence and from Yenti’s inability to communicate in dialect with her mother, we can only conclude that this ‘modern’ Singapore woman’s representation of the past is at least partially a Western construct. We can certainly recognize in it Western representations of Chinese culture as ‘feminine.’ Yenti acknowledges that her pursuit of ‘truth’ regarding her maternal past has a Western genealogy: “Living the truth is better than living a lie. That much I’ve learnt from my convent education” (184). Unlike Western constructions, however, it is Singapore’s post-colonial Chinese past, not the original Chinese culture itself, that is feminized. Feminist discourse is used but not to help the female subject to identify with her mother or to chart her progress from her. Rather, it provides the narrative framework with which Yenti can dis-identify with the mother, leaving the post-
colonial female subject free to track the path of her father's desire. The novel uses a feminist form to express a content that yearns for the patriarchal. The novel, like the state discourse of Asian modernity that it implicitly supports, relies on a lack of correspondence between form and content, between its surface rhetoric and its deep content, between its connotation and its denotation.

The feminist autobiographical form however combines with the emphasis on the shamefulness of Singapore's (female) ethnic past to communicate its desire for the patriarchal. 'Asian modernity' is represented in this novel as the 'other' subjectivity that is released as the post-colonial subject confronts and exorcises the shame felt towards the old ethnic culture and the oppressions that it perpetuated. Yenti claims that she has written the novel to exorcise the ghosts of shame that haunt her. Yet in the novel we see her doubling, tripling the shame, displaying it in great detail: almost as if she was getting a great deal of pleasure out of it. This motive of shame is important to the production of a feminized post-colonial Chinese culture as spectacle. The gaze of shame structures the novel's scopophilic regime, its production of truth. While the close-ups of daily life in the 1950s, with their claustrophobic female oppression, inspire desire in the reader for release into an other (ethnic) history, the 'out-of-focus' shots (such as the episode at Ping Shan) suggest that what we have gotten is only half of a story, that there may in fact be a more virile story out there that needs to be told.

Lim's narrative is feminist in so far as it seeks to inscribe women's contributions to Singapore's mythologization of itself as a 'rags-to riches' story. The success story of Ong Kim San (Yoke-lin's husband) "in which the downtrodden son of the bondmaid rose to become the new master of the mansion" (210) is incomplete if it does not acknowledge the role that Yoke-lin played in this drama: it is her provision of a son for Ong that allows him to claim his paternal inheritance and thereby save the family mansion from being sold, which in turn allows him to install his mother, for so long banished to peripheral areas in the family mansion, as the new matriarch. But we must remember that it is Yoke-lin's sexual union with the temple medium, Master Loong, that sets Yoke-lin on her new path to success and power. Female delivery is fantasized here in this novel as penetration by the male. Yoke-lin's
sexual union with Master Loong releases her from “her hard encrusted self”(180), making her open “out like a young flower . . . molding her to receive the stream of life” (180-1), answering to that “strange confusion of fear, resistance and desire to submit to a power greater than herself.” It is her fantasy about the sexual union between her mother and Master Loong that enables Yenti to finally identify with her mother and to deliver herself from her original sense of shame about her mother’s past. “When I was young,” Yenti says:

I had judged the world like the young--from the self-righteousness of ignorance. I had kept my knowledge of Ping Shan from Mother and everyone else, clutching the piece of shame and deceit close to my heart. But now that I have tasted passion myself and felt the sting of its victory . . . What Mother did or did not do on Ping Shan no longer carries for me the same immense moral dimensions and implications it once did. (185-6)

The narrator’s strategy of freeing herself from the ghosts of the past precisely by opening herself to them, where “writing is an act of remembrance as well as a severance,” echoes this paradoxical ideology where women’s freedom can only follow from penetration by the male, where female “victory” must have the masochistic “sting.”

It is significant that the union of Loong and Yoke-lin is imagined by Yenti as that between the “Immortal Scholar” (one of the eight Immortals in the Chinese pantheon, who represents the “Spirit”) and his bride. Master Loong himself is, either in Yenti’s imagination or a fact imparted by Yoke-lin, a scholar of the Chinese classics. However, he is a metaphorically castrated scholar, one who descended from monks, but whose “passion to do the honourable thing” had finally dissipated in “steamy massage parlours, lurid bars and crowded gambling dense,” leading him to bondage to a secret society, which cut off his index finger when he dared resist its control over him (162). Castrated, he is a figure of a Chinese masculine virility that has been lost in the Malayan encounter with capitalism, who represents “the lost, intense passions of men, caught in the confluence of the old and new winds of life, with little education to comprehend the contradictions both in themselves and in the world around them” (165).
In contrast to the female characters in the novel, Loong is the only other character aside from Yenti who is given more fully fledged characterization. We are taken into the inner recesses of Loong mind as he philosophizes about his fate. Despite his castration, Loong manages during his period with Yoke-lin to assume an identity with the Immortal Scholar as he momentarily returns to his old virile self: “For the time being, his gods were allowing him to be himself,” the narrator says (177), when he impregnates Yoke-lin with the vigor she apparently needed to make something of her life.

Despite her assertion that her reconstruction of the past is different from the nation’s dominant imaginings of its ethnic past, Yenti’s fantasy accedes to the state’s emphasis on Confucianism, investing Confucianism with desire as the secret, unacknowledged male energy that was an integral part of Singapore’s post-colonial vigor, but which could once again be recovered. Yenti’s desire for ethnic identity is necessarily split between forgetting and remembering: as she says, the “act of remembrance” is necessary for the “severance of . . . ties” (213). Here, the novel reveals that the state’s constructions of Singapore’s ethnic past demands from the Singaporean Chinese that they exorcise, forget, their past understandings of Chinese ethnicity in order to shape out of these a desire for newer understandings of their Chinese-ness. Thus, the forgetting of ethnic identity is an essential aspect of its re-membering. Yenti’s exorcism of Singapore’s feminized, working-class Chinese culture opens out a new ethnic space where Confucianism can be desired and identified with.

Singaporean post-colonial identity, as represented in Yenti’s herstoriography, is constructed as an inauthentic subjectivity that has been interpellated in the absence of the father, the measure of its inauthenticity being contained in its feminine character. Seemingly paradoxically, Western culture and its racist, stereotyped renderings of Chinese culture as feminine in its degeneracy/primitivism/gender oppression are appropriated here and form the path along which the colonized subject is led to ‘de-colonization,’ to desire union with her (masculinized and therefore authentic) native culture. But it raises the question whether, when the path to knowledge and desire is already contaminated with the Western, the object of the quest can be authentically non-Western. Is the Chinese paternal ego-ideal gestured at by
the novel truly ethnic or is it merely the displaced and already colonized desire for a Western form of male subjectivity misrecognized as Chinese?

Migratory displacement, colonialism and capitalism do feature implicitly as the socio-economic structural causes for the post-colonial feminization/emasculating of Chinese culture in the Nanyang. But by gendering this post-colonial subjectivity as female, the novel suggests that rectification of this may be made at the level of reconstructing gender roles and attitudes rather than by opposing either capitalism or Westernization. This novel suggests that the true nature of Singapore’s ‘Asian modernization’ agenda is anti-feminist rather than anti-Western.

“The Journey” (1992) by Catherine Lim

This short story (184-95) polarizes West and East and represents authentic post-colonial subjectivity as an act of achieving manhood, of being able to risk all, including life itself, in choosing the ‘mother’ culture over that of an inauthentic, foreign Western culture. The story literally represents the assertion of Chinese culture in the era of late capitalism as a suicidal venture: the protagonist, suffering from cancer, refuses Western medical treatment in order to return home to his mother, whose Eastern/folk medicine cannot help him. This heroic return to Chinese culture however is a movement towards a Chinese culture marked by lack, a feminized culture that substitutes for the authentic, masculine culture, which is the subject’s object of desire but which is now lost and beyond knowledge. While Chinese culture was at least originally male, and its current status has a maternal, nurturing femininity, Western/capitalist culture is viewed as the demonic and seductive feminine.

Richard, an immensely successful young man, who rose from the rags of an “ulu” (hick-town) existence in rural Malaysia to the riches of a business in modern, affluent Singapore, is diagnosed with cancer and finds himself torn between West and East. Should he seek hope in Western medicine and journey to see a cancer specialist in New York, or seek recovery with his mother, grandmother and aunt in his hometown. The latter’s Chinese medicine may or may not work, but he reasons that they can at
least offer him emotional affection, support and love. His dilemma is fantasized in a dream where Richard sees himself caught between his traditionally Chinese grandmother, mother and aunt, on one side, and his Westernized wife, Mabel, on the other. In the dream, Mabel tries to stop her grandmother-in-law from feeding Richard a brew of Chinese herbal medicine. Richard is caught in "the ensuing struggle, the drink spilt all over him and stained him black." Mabel’s screams and his realization that his wife is a demonic force opposing his return to Chinese culture form the decisive moment when Richard wakes from his dream and announces that he will go back to his home town to seek recovery, and not to New York. The dream offers a manichean vision of the East-West conflict in post-colonial subjectivity, where Eastern culture is seen as a "bitter" but life-enhancing brew, and Western culture is the female demon working to bring a man to his death: blackness, with which Richard was stained in the dream, is a traditional Chinese signifier of death. The moment of epiphany, when the post-colonial person attains an authentic subjectivity, is hence marked here as the decision to renounce Western culture for one’s ethnic culture.

East and West are polarized in the story in terms of Richard’s childhood past, where the female figures of grandmother, mother and aunt loom large, and his present life, where his wife dominates as a controlling force. Chinese culture is associated with the pre-urban, the non-modern, herbal medicine, superstition/the non-scientific, with poverty as well as with a ‘cosmic’ integration with nature. Richard’s grandmother ‘cures’ the sick by giving them herbal brews under the light of the moon, and believes that physical illnesses are caused by “evil spirits.” Grandmother, mother and aunt refuse to move in with Richard because they cannot bear the air-conditioning (the non-natural) in his home. Westernized Mabel, on the other hand, is revolted by bodily processes. Recalling his past to his wife, he tells her of a childhood incident when he had fallen into the latrine:

It consisted of a wooden hut, four feet by two feet; the wooden floor had a round hole over which a person squatted directly over a waiting receptacle, an old rusty bucket. Once . . . he had fallen through the hole, and his mother had taken a long time to clean him up, drawing up one bucket
after another from the well. He had recounted the incident once to Mabel and had immediately
regretted it, for she had felt quite ill and forbidden him to talk of such things again. (188)

While Eastern culture is the spiritual/emotional (identified with the maternal), Western culture is the
material, objectified as a ‘commodity’ culture and associated with objects of material success: the
“Arrow shirt” and “Pierre Cardin tie” that Richard wears, his daughter’s “piano,” his son’s “go-kart,” and
the lifestyle involving chauffeur-driven cars, picking up the wife from the hairdressers and then going for
a game of golf, etc. This Western culture also reduces the other’s culture into artifact, into a commodity
that can be bought and sold.

Thus Western and Chinese cultures take on meanings of class and the story’s romanticized production
of Chinese culture as the more authentic of the two cultures involves also a privileging of working-class,
rural ethics: Chinese culture is associated with family togetherness, and nature, and is represented as the
moment before the subject is alienated from his environment through the process of commodity
fetishism. Richard’s journey home is not merely a reclaiming of ethnic identity; it is the reclaiming of
his ‘original’ class identity. The path to Western culture, on the other hand, is one involving seduction
by the better things in life, a feminine seduction of the masculine: Richard associates his wealth and its
trappings with his role as husband to Mabel, providing her with the diamonds, house and lifestyle she
needs for herself and her family. Mabel’s expertise at interior decor, which results in their home being
featured in magazines, her ability at selling cultural artifacts, initiates Richard into Western culture. This
feminization of capitalism entails a projection onto Mabel and a disavowal of Richard’s own capitalistic
greed. The demonization of Mabel’s displaces and covers over the story of how Richard acquired his
wealth and his own desire for the Western.

This feminized class seduction works until Richard faces death. Until the moment he is diagnosed
with cancer, Richard has less than a proper appreciation of his ethnic culture (associated with his rural
past): he reduces his grandmother’s knowledge of Chinese, rural medicine to voodoo and superstition,
and judges “how culturally deprived had been his environment, how starved of the requisites of
emotional and mental growth"(190). But if Western culture is eroticized as a feminized and sexualized lure into ethnic cultural alienation and an emasculation, the return to Chinese culture is the cultural journey one makes towards the restoration of a full male subjectivity. His decision to “go home” is Richard’s arrival at manhood itself, marking the point from which he moves from “abject self-pity” (191) and his wife’s control to risking life itself in a reunion with more authentic kinship ties.

But the Chinese culture at home too has been feminized, associated with maternal nurturing, housewifely home remedies, ‘old wives’ tales,’ storytelling, and domesticity. Richard has no accession to a masculinized ethnic identity: with his father long since dead, Richard can only wonder “whether, if his father were alive, conditions would have been more bearable?” (189). Desire in the story then is re-directed from a maternal culture to the lost, patriarchal culture.

The Sin-Kheh (1993) by Goh Sin Tub

Goh Sin Tub’s semi-fictional biography of his grandfather shows that the representation of Singaporean Chinese cultural identity as a feminized Chinese identity, where a male Chinese subjectivity has departed, is not restricted to women writers. In this novel, the narrator’s grandfather, Wee Sin Kay, arrives in Singapore from China in 1894, works as a seaman, a chinchew, meets and marries Yeo Mah Cheng, and starts a family. He is later deported from Singapore by the colonial authorities when the tongs (secret societies) frame him for possession of counterfeit money plates. Forced to return to China, he leaves behind his wife to look after their many children and to make a living. Goh admits in his notes about the novel that his imaginative quest for his grandfather Goh Swee Tin (on whom the novel’s hero, Wee Sin Kay is based) led him instead to his grandmother Yap Mah Cheng (on whom the novel’s character Yeo Mah Cheng is based). He says:

In putting together material for this story, I came to realise that the real hero (or rather heroine) of my own family story was my grandmother Yap Mah Cheng, who became mother and father to her
string of children and struggled through those hard times in an often hostile environment to ensure for her family (and their descendants like myself) the good life. (168)

Goh’s novel clarifies the use of feminized Chinese subjectivity as a trope for a post-colonial Singaporean culture. In his novel, this feminized Chinese culture is viewed as the rem(a)inder, as what was left of an original Chinese masculine subjectivity that was either ‘banned’ by colonial culture, or transformed (even deformed) by it. Yeo Mah Cheng takes over the care of her family upon an order from the patriarch Wee, and she cathects his patriarchal wishes in her ambitions for her family. Leaving Singapore upon his banishment from the island by the colonial authorities, Wee’s last words to his wife are:

“Be strong, my little Mah Cheng! Remember you are now the head of our family. Be the Empress Dowager. The Queen Victoria, as they say here!” (116).

Wee’s reading of colonial Western culture (with Queen Victoria as its role model) as being the same as Chinese feminist culture (figured by the Empress Dowager) covers over important differences between the two female rulers. The Empress Dowager was never a ruler in her own right, unlike Queen Victoria: concubine of a preceding emperor, she was a (female) usurper who had the emperor Guang Xu imprisoned in the palace following the Reform of 1898 and ruled in his place as Regent.

Like the Empress Dowager, then, Mah Cheng rules in the patriarch’s name:

She had this single-minded ambition: her sons must complete their schooling in the first-class Gan Eng Seng English school to which their father had thoughtfully sent them and all expenses their education called for must be met. (118)

Mah Cheng works hard to see her children into the future by becoming a seamstress, being mother and father all rolled into one. But her sons' eventual success in Singapore is finally attributed to the patriarch’s vision: “Sin Kay had the foresight to send his boys to an English school instead of the Chinese school nearby in Telok Ayer Street, and so they were going to do well” (112). She also agrees with her husband that
the girls [their daughters] were no problem. They did not need schooling and they could be married off easily once fifteen or sixteen. The market was good, there being a shortage of females in the colony. (113-14)

In so many other ways, too, Mah Cheng (Singapore) is a woman who molds herself and her family by identifying with an absent patriarchal gaze, therefore rendering it present. She frightens off gangsters who come to loot her house in her husband’s absence by becoming the image of her husband as the kungfu fighter, and exhorting her sons too to take up the legacy of their patriarchal heritage:

She remembered Sin Kay’s last words to her. She was now Empress Dowager, she was Queen Victoria.

She called her three boys together and told them what to do. “Remember! You are the Sin-kheh’s sons, afraid of no-one!”

So when her door was suddenly flung open to them, the samsengs [street fighters] saw before them an awesome and totally unexpected sight: one strangely fierce woman . . . a businesslike parang [huge knife] firmly clutched in one hand ready to swing into action, and in the background three bulging-eyed boys, the smallest boy upfront unarmed but rigid in a kungfu posture, the biggest behind him holding a meat chopper, the last boy at the back wielding a firewood axe.

(118)

Mah Cheng’s strength then as woman and mother is a masculinized femininity, a female identity fashioning itself under male identity and male values, keeping patriarchal culture alive in its absence, preparing for the day when it will return to bestow its approval. When Wee leaves, he promises that “someday, somehow,” he would “find a way and come back secretly. Yes, some happier day . . . You will hear a knock on the door, you will open it, and there I will be!” (115-6) That “happier day” turns out to be the occasion of the birth of his first grandson, the day when his wife secures for him his patrilineal heritage.
The feminization of Chinese culture is a gendered metaphor for the changes wrought to the original ethnic culture by its cross-cultural encounter with colonial, Western culture and marks this culture’s transformation by the historical, geographical, economic and geo-cultural circumstances of immigration. The *sin-kheh* ("new guest") were Chinese immigrants who came to Singapore looking for work (mostly as manual laborers but also in the tin mines). In the popular Singapore imagination and in this novel, they are a symbol of Singapore’s representation of itself as a nation of dispossessed who rose to success through their working-class values such as hard work, endurance, thrift, and strong familial bonds.

According to this novel, the *sin-kheh* arrived in Singapore, like Wee Sin Kay, full of an Asian/Chinese masculine virility. One of the first things Wee does upon landing in Singapore is to prove this Chinese masculine virility. Encountering some secret society thugs who make fun of him, he rolls up his sleeves and decimates them with his *kungfu* moves.

This male virile subjectivity however is ‘othered’ by its self-control and its respect for a “no-nonsense countryfolk values . . . a peasant moral streak” from the Chinese hyper-masculinity of secret-society fighters (29). Wee therefore declines recruitment into the top ranks of the *tongs*. Wee’s ‘Chinese’ masculinity is different from that of Black Dog’s, the head of the 18 *tong*. It involves balancing passion with loyalty to his traditional moral code. The “conflicting pull of passion and loyalty” (28) and its resolution is eroticized when Wee has to choose between having a passionate affair with the femme fatale, Jade, or marrying Mah Cheng, who was “every bit the shy Chinese female” (18). In deciding to marry Mah Cheng, with whom he fell in love at first sight, Wee balances passion with loyalty to his ethnic values. His countryfolk values, we are told, “reined him back from galloping on too far with his simultaneous romantic pursuits.” These also steer him away from crime and material greed, stopping him from “following that call to a get-rich-quick career with the tong that was now practically his for the asking. . . ” (29). Black Dog’s Chinese masculinity is, by contrast, pathologized. His excessive dependence on and enjoyment of violence and bullying is linked to a pathological sexuality: it is suggested that he is both incestuous and homosexual, apparently a case of Chinese masculinity turning in
narcissistically on itself. He has sex with his sister, Jade, but it is obvious that this incestuous act is not only motivated by his desire for his sister, but also for Wee. Brother and sister fornicate while making plans to get rid of Wee, who has jilted Jade and who refuses to join Black Dog’s tong:

In the lull [of their sexual activity], they started talking about what had brought them together. Sin Kay. And that got them up once more. (107)

The banishment of Wee from Singapore (his sentence for being in possession of counterfeit money plates) works as a metaphor in the novel to signify the lack of a place in colonial Singapore for an original masculine Chinese culture. Wee’s banishment from Singapore (the banishment of this culture) results from the conflict between his Chinese values and the values of colonial Singapore. He is, firstly, emasculated by Singapore’s business culture, this emasculation and his heroic resistance to it leading to his entrapment by the 18 tong and by Jade. Then, colonial law criminalizes Wee’s Chinese male heroism: it is Wee’s patriarchal desire to protect his family from harm as well as his sense of justice that delivers him into the hands of the secret society and eventually to the colonial police: he has jilted Jade and betrayed a member of the 18 tong to the police, and hence feels that he must pay for this in some manner. But it is Wee’s surrender to female desire that begins the chain of events that leads to his banishment from Singapore: he witnessed the murder of his wife’s best friend by the 18 tong, and it is his wife’s demand that he avenge this murder that leads him to betray the 18 tong to the colonial police.

Singapore’s capitalism is represented in this novel as emasculating, as one of the forces that displaces the original male Chinese culture on the island. But this Chinese culture survives second-hand through Mah Cheng. Wee’s character is the prototype of the mythological masculine Chinese adventurousness and enterprising spirit that is today associated with Singapore’s bold entry into the modern era:

Sin Kay was at heart a good man . . . but from young he had always had that streak of restlessness, he had always been the adventurer, readily seduced by the new and unusual, game to take on risks for the prospect of thrills and quick rewards, unhappy under the restraint of routine (16).
It is not surprising that Wee gives up a desk-bound job as clerk in his younger brother’s business to become a seaman, holding up his future brother-in-law Captain Yeo Leng, “the foghorn-voiced captain with dancing eyes, jaunty beard and endless escapades in exotic places,” as his “swashbuckling” hero or ego-ideal (15-16). Wee is different from the Straits Chinese businessman: he is virile whereas, as Wee’s brother notes, the “Peranakan descendants of Chinese seemed to have become . . . emasculated from entrepreneurship” (15). But when his brother-in-law suffers from a stroke, a sense of family responsibility forces Wee to manage his opium business. This splits Wee’s desire: though he enjoys the get-rich-quick aspect of business, his “peasant moral streak” means that he must temper that enjoyment with guilt (94). So it is almost with relief that Wee succumbs to his fate of banishment from Singapore: “He yearned to return to the sea, to the old good life, the clean air of the waves. Away from people. Away from all this concrete jungle, this choking atmosphere” (100).

The novel represents Singapore’s cultural history then as that of the entry into Singapore of an enterprising, “swashbuckling” sin-kheh peasant masculine Chinese culture, whose encounter with colonialism and capitalism resulted in one of three fates. Either it forces this culture to depart, as with Wee, but not before leaving behind a positive feminized version of this culture; or it becomes hyper-masculinized and narcissistic, as with Black Dog and the secret societies, feeding on its most violent aspects, where Chinese heroic masculinity degenerates into gangsterism; or, it becomes emasculated through business and colonial subjugation, as supposedly with the Straits Chinese. The author prioritizes the first as the dominant narrative of Singapore Chinese cultural heritage in that it is Wee’s descendants who form the modern, progressive cultural energy of present-day Singapore. About 70 years after Wee’s departure from Singapore, his grandson (his eldest son’s child) demolishes his mother’s old neighborhood and home, building on its spot “a 52-storey skyscraper on the same spot for a giant bank named after the overseas Chinese” (142). Another grandson has becomes one of Singapore’s foremost writers, Goh Sin Tub, the autobiographical frame of this novel bringing the author into the circuit of the novel’s meanings. The implicit meanings of this feminization of this original Chinese male culture, of
the difference between the former and the latter, would seem to be allegorized in Wee’s children, who inherited his values and qualities but who were brought up by their mother. His eldest son Song’s English-education and his success as a bank officer marks him out as different from his father, where Singapore has feminized an original male Chinese culture through its encounter with English culture and with commerce. On the other hand, the heritage of the masculine Chinese culture has toughened the female aspects of Chinese culture: before marriage, Mah Cheng was a typical Chinese village girl in her innocence and gentleness, but when cornered by circumstances to look after her family, she becomes tough, enduring, and ambitious. Wee’s cultural legacy to his daughter may be read as a masculinization of female culture: she is “one tough cookie,” “who could fight and hold her own against any boy in the neighbourhood,” who grows up to be “strong-willed, a person who knew what she wanted and was prepared to struggle for it” (85). The soothsayers’ mix ups (they predict a son when it is a daughter, and a daughter who turns out to be a son) are prophetic of their insight into Singapore cultural identity as that involving gender inversions: where male Chinese values are feminized (Wee’s third son backs out of a fight), and Chinese female values are masculinized: even as a child, Wee’s daughter is a strong ‘mother,’ “playing hopscotch with other girls . . . with one little brother or sister strapped to her back” (121).

Goh’s narrative taps into a founding myth of Singapore as a nation which rose from rags to riches on the sweat, hard work, imaginative enterprise and the sheer instinct for survival of dispossessed, rugged and poor immigrants. Though this myth had existed in the earlier decades of the nation and validated Singapore as a meritocratic society where even the poorest of the poor could rise to success, its ‘Asian’ racial/ethnic cultural meanings were stressed and further developed in the 1980s and 1990s. Singapore’s history books, written by government writers for school-use, such as the CDIS’ history textbook History of Modern Singapore (first published in 1984, during the government’s Asianizing project), celebrate the successful business and industrialist immigrant-pioneers as the true representatives of Singapore’s national history. During this period, the literary genre of pioneer biographies provided a paradigm for linking Singapore’s success to its ‘Asian’ values. Goh’s novel is contemporaneous with the publication
of an entire collection of biographies and autobiographies of the poor Chinese immigrants who became the nation’s first tycoons. Eating Salt—An Autobiography by Ho Rih Hwa (1991), The Tiger King: The Life and Times of Aw Boon Haw by Sam King (1992) as well as biographies of Singapore Chinese businessmen-philanthropists Tan Kah Kee, Whampoa Hoo Ah Kay, banker Lee Chee Seng, hotelier Lien Ying Chow and an autobiography of Kwek Hong Png, the patriarch of Singapore’s Hong Leong conglomerate, were published in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In 1994, the semi-governmental Singapore Broadcasting Corporation also produced a series of television programs on Singapore’s successful immigrant pioneers. By equating the nation’s economic roots with its ethnic roots and ethnic values, this myth claims to be ‘Asian.’ As many of these biographies show, however, it is a West-East cross-cultural myth, where Chinese/Asian values are made to reconcile with the values of Western capitalism. For instance, the “Publisher’s Note” frames Eating Salt, the autobiography of Ho Rih Hwa, as the story of “an Asian entrepreneur who has pioneered technology, seized opportunities to build a fortune during the post-war years . . . . All this, while holding true to the traditional Chinese tenets of behavior.” In this frame, the capitalist enterprise is linked to Chinese male traditional virtues of endurance and notions of purposeful living.

In Goh’s novel, the pioneer myth is further nationalized, democratized and Sinicized so as to allow even the average Chinese Singaporean to see himself/herself in its mirror. Here, the immigrant doesn’t need to be a tycoon in order to be considered a pioneer. The sin-kheh are elevated to pioneer status as a class solely on account of their being the forefathers of the present Singapore Chinese. Their achievements may have been modest in their own lifetime, but Singapore’s successes spanning the 20th-century are attributed to them, especially to their Asian ethics of hard work and moral rigor. Except for the absence of the pot of gold at the end, the sin-kheh are rendered as replicas of the pioneer immigrant in their work ethic, their ability to endure, their imagination and their daring. The anonymous and ordinary immigrant’s story borrows from the heroic elements of the pioneer’s narrative to make the ordinary, extraordinary. The novel’s jacket says: “Into old Singapore one hundred years ago sailed an
immigrant from Amoy to seek his fortune, determined to fight for his independence. Wee Sin Kay is... The Sin-Kheh.” Wee’s first name Sin-Kay, a homonym of sin-kheh makes this not just an imaginative biography of a pioneer immigrant but a generic biography representing an original national culture.

This democratization of the pioneer narrative, where it is transformed from being a metonym of the nation’s story (about one class of capital owners) to being its metaphor, however, also changes the narrative’s gender regime. Where other pioneer narratives emphasized the Chinese immigrant’s patriarchal ‘Asian masculinity’ as the source of Singapore’s cultural/spiritual strength, Goh’s more democratic version, given as it is to casting its net over people’s failures as well as their successes and over women’s stories, recognizes the transformation of the original ethnic culture in its encounter with historical and foreign cultural forces, though he genders this transformation as feminine. For Goh, the search for ethnic identity is the search for one’s grandfather, and marks the yearning of the Singaporean subject for an absent, departed patriarch(al culture), for the absent male origins of Singaporean Chinese (feminized and hence derivative) cultural identity, which is ironically the story he cannot write.

The Bondmaid (1995) by Catherine Lim

In this novel, Lim reverses the gender regime she had employed previously. No longer is Singapore’s immigrant Chinese culture represented as an effeminization of an original virile culture, that involves female betrayal. Neither is this female betrayal allowed to become a metaphor for the ethnic subject’s supposed seduction by capitalist/Western culture, as it was in her short story “Journey.” In this novel, set in the earlier half of this century, Singapore’s Chinese immigrant culture is represented as the degeneration in Singapore of an original patriarchal ethnic culture in its encounter with another patriarchal (Western) culture of capitalism. Chinese patriarchal power in the House of Wu, a powerful and wealthy Chinese family in Singapore, is hence doubled by money, worsening women’s lot since class and gender oppression now intersect. Singapore’s early immigrant Chinese culture is represented most unsympathetically as merely involving the abuse of women: aging patriarchs rape young female
servants; Buddhist monks prey on unsuspecting women; young girls are sold as bondmaids to rich households, etc. But the feminist insurrection of Han, a lowly bondmaid who refuses the command of the dominant order, tears apart this structure of patriarchal power: at the novel’s end, her lover descends into a life-long depression, while her oppressors are forced to leave Singapore and return to China in order to escape from her curse. Han’s feminist spirit may be viewed as the ‘modernity’ that destroys this early immigrant culture. In that she derives her revolutionary strength from praying to an ancient Chinese goddess, the “Goddess without Eyes and Ears” (with whom she is later identified in popular gossip), bypassing the ‘patriarchal’ “Sky God,” the reader is encouraged to read Han as the figure of the ‘Asian modern.’

But this ‘Asian modern’ is itself a cross-cultural East-West subjectivity that ambivalently hide its Western genealogy only to expose it at other moments in the novel. For instance, this ethnicized modern set of values is embodied in a few men in the novel, Han’s lover Wu and his father, who are differentiated from the rest of the men in the Wu household: they do not view women as sexual objects and do not abuse their patriarchal privileges. But they are both also the only men in the household who are Western-educated. Though Han’s modernity is represented as ethnic in its relation to a subsidiary Chinese religion and mythology, the narrator also foregrounds Han’s subjectivity as one that is imagined, a fictional creation of the narrator, who is not only modern but writes in English. On one level, Han’s feminist revolt against Singapore Chinese patriarchal exploitation has no recourse to the Western modern discourse of feminism: she is uneducated and, as a bondmaid, is shut out from direct contact with colonial culture. But her story is framed as a fictional speculation by the narrator from tiny fragments of a story surfacing from the past. We are told in the “Prologue” that the biography of the bondmaid takes off from a real event when, in 1992, Singapore newspapers had covered a story concerning an old man. The caretaker of a dilapidated shrine along Kio San Thong Road, he was refusing to clear out from the shrine, which was targeted for a $300 million industrial development complex, turning down compensation of several million dollars. The narrator implicitly acknowledges the participation of her
own phantasmatic in imaginatively ‘retrieving’ Han’s history: the narrator says the history is an imaginative reconstruction of an incoherent “story” floated about by the incident and “never properly pieced together, of a young woman who had died there under the most tragic circumstances, sometime in the middle 1950s,” who was “later seen in the vicinity by many people . . . [who] erected a shrine to her and, for some reason, called her ‘Goddess without Eyes and Ears.’ The old caretaker was said to be connected with her in some way—a brother? a friend? a lover?” Hence Han’s history is the narrator’s projection into the past of present (modern feminist) desire. But the ‘Asian modern’ is also cross-cultural in that the representation of Han’s feminism is implicated in unacknowledged, intertextual references to Western women’s writings. In her collection of short stories published just immediately before this novel, The Women’s Book of Superlatives, Lim admits to a fascination with and familiarity with Charlotte Brontë’s feminism. I will show that Han’s feminism is developed according to the terms of a cultural revolution, like the one delineated in Emily Brontë’s novel Wuthering Heights.

The novel is subversive. Lim here represents the desire for Chinese culture as the desire for a feminist insurgency, for the restoration of a pre-patriarchal Chinese culture. It implicitly refuses the state’s equation of Chinese culture with Confucianism. Published at a time when the government’s Asianizing agenda was still commanding public attention, the negative representation of Singapore’s early Chinese immigrant culture as a decadent collaboration between East and West patriarchal power does appear to suggest that the state’s ideology of the “Asian modern” may be history repeating itself, where Chinese/Asian ethnic tradition is called upon to reinforce the patriarchal oppressiveness of capitalism/modernity/Western culture.

Lim appears to have turned around in her previous anti-feminist attitudes. Women’s Book, published in 1993, a collection of international short stories based on real-life events, critiques patriarchal oppression around the globe. But Lim’s subversion of state ideology in Bondmaid also comes after her unpleasant confrontation with the power of the state in 1994/5. Lim had been represented by the prime minister as politically dangerous, a perception that her later public apology to the Prime Minister did
nothing to mitigate. Lim’s column stopped appearing in the newspaper, and, the next year, the writer—who had previously been published by Singapore’s leading publishers of local literature, Times Books International—self-financed the publication of Bondmaid.  

Lim’s novel is not openly hostile to government ideology. It uses many tactics to disguise its subversion. As I have said, it does not acknowledge its Western intertextualities: this from a writer who had, just two years ago, openly identified with Charlotte Brontë’s sense of female oppression in Women’s Book (Prologue 4-12). In Women’s Book, Lim demystifies men’s glorification of women as a fantasy that allows men to escape from guilt concerning their oppression of women. She says:

“You [men] sing paeans to us; you put us on pedestals, in the shining clouds of myths and legends as your goddesses, warrior queens, glorious martyrs, virgin brides. They have nothing to do with the reality. Perhaps they are to compensate for the reality.” (12)

Yet, in Bondmaid, she adopts this very same male phantasmatic strategy by representing Han as a Chinese goddess. Though the ‘Asian modern’ is encoded in the novel’s “Prologue” as a contemporary feminist subjectivity (that belonging to the narrator), the author/narrator is also at pains to suggest that this Asian modern subjectivity is now dead. The containment of Han’s feminist revolution within the past is effected in the prologue itself when the reader is told that “the bulldozers moved in. Today a huge petrochemical complex stands where once the strange goddess with eyes and ears dispensed miracles.” But Lim also prevents Han’s feminism from escaping into the present by killing off her character: though Han brings a degenerating Chinese patriarchal culture to its knees, she herself dies in the process. Neither is her son allowed to survive. Wu himself is quite mad and so cannot keep her story alive. Add to this, the literary techniques of mystification that Lim uses where feminist desire is expressed in dreams (see below). I would suggest that Bondmaid’s ambivalence about feminism and the desire for Western culture is a cultural symptom. It testifies that the dominant ideology of Asian/Chinese national identity has driven contemporary Singapore women’s desire for female emancipation and Western culture ‘underground.’ The novel suggests especially that the representation of contemporary feminist
desire must be displaced into Singapore’s past and dealt with as a ‘dead’ subject if it is to get past the
censors’ of the currently dominant ideology of Asian/Chinese identity that Singaporeans have invested in. The text shows that Singapore women need to hide and deny a very real part of their cultural experience (their Western education, and Singapore’s history itself of colonization and capitalism which transformed gender roles/attitudes) in order to demand a fair hearing in Singapore society. Meanwhile, the subterfuge compromises the feminist cause itself.

Also, Lim’s fairly convincing representation of the Western as Asian in this novel, where Han’s ‘Asian’ feminism is really a re-staging of Heathcliff’s revolution against Western aristocratic culture in Emily Brontë’s novel *Wuthering Heights*, also casts doubt on the ethnic purity of the government’s own notions of the ‘Asian modern.’

In Brontë’s novel, capitalism is expressed as a hystericized desire for upper-class privileges and culture arising among the poor and dispossessed. Heathcliff, as an orphan of unknown origins, does not go through the child’s normal pre-Oedipal and Oedipal processes of desire and identification with his parents. As a heterosexual male subject in the making, he is not commanded by the law of the father to identify with the father and to substitute his desire for his mother with another love-object. Subjectivity is usually constituted through separation from the mother or primary care-giver, as a response to this lack or loss. This separation, necessary for subject-formation, is executed by the intercession of the Symbolic Order. In Heathcliff’s case, the Symbolic Order attributes lack to him: instead of interpellating him as a subject in terms of his difference from the mother, it interpellates him as a non-subject. This lack of being itself propels Heathcliff into his relationship with Catherine. He derives his selfhood from identification with her: he is her, and she is him. He sees himself through her gaze, and identifies with her desire, the classic scenario of hysteria in Lacanian psychoanalysis (see chapter 1). The hysterical subject is also the revolutionary subject, who rejects the Symbolic Order. Heathcliff imagines himself as equal to and the same as Catherine, despite her class, gender (perhaps even racial) difference. When the Symbolic Order intercedes again, to interpellate Heathcliff as different from Catherine, Heathcliff
must necessarily refuse this interpellation: to do otherwise would mean sinking into non-being again. Instead, Heathcliffe identifies with Catherine’s desire: if she wants a rich and propertied lover, then he must beget himself that wealth and property and become the object of her desire. With the entry of the Lintons into Catherine’s life, Heathcliffe can no longer locate himself as a subject through Catherine’s gaze, the gaze of the ‘Other.’ His desire for selfhood is now eroticized: his goal of identity must henceforth be pursued in terms of obtaining Catherine as lover. Since Catherine’s own desires are for power and wealth, these attain erotic value for Heathcliffe. Capitalism then is represented in the novel as that cultural moment when the desire for selfhood is eroticized as the pursuit of wealth and power. At this moment, too, the subject is sexualized and the quest of wealth and power is also the quest for male identity. Capitalism is also represented as originating in the subject’s hysterical refusal to occupy the subject position constructed for it by the desire of the Big Other, of gentry culture. Heathcliffe refuses to see himself through the eyes of the Lintons, as poor and inferior in culture, and hence as not deserving their respect or consideration.

The tragic relationship between the child Han and the young master Wu is similar to that between Heathcliffe and Catherine. Just like Brontë’s famous lovers, Han and Wu are orphans. Both of Wu’s parents are dead: his mother died soon after his birth, and his father committed suicide shortly after. Han’s mother sold off her youngest daughter as a bondmaid to the House of Wu. As with Heathcliff’s identification with Catherine, Han’s love for Wu is a displacement of her love for her mother and Older Brother. Han reaches out to Wu in utter destitution, when, after being abandoned in the Wu household by her mother, a temple medium ‘exorcises’ her demons by burning her body with lit joss-sticks. Her memory of the meeting with Wu is dense with the association of primary affect:

Somewhere in the child Han’s mind was a dim memory of herself lying sick on a wet mattress, in a room filled with angry adult faces rising from joss-fumes. The faces became open screaming mouths, attacking hands, kicking feet. Somebody held her down and somebody else forced a drink down her throat which came out again in a raging torrent, carrying out everything with it, so that
she felt completely empty, like an egg sucked out of its insides. She remembered an excruciating hunger, and then everybody stopped shouting and turned to look at the young master Wu who had come into the room. He went straight to her and gave her something sweet and warm to eat.

The child never spoke about the memory to anybody.

There was the other memory of a loved older brother who had carried her about on his shoulders and on his hips, making her laugh out loud in joy. Some vestige of the old adulation remaining in her small faithful breast, she resuscitated it and re-directed it towards the young master, nursing it to feverish flowering. . . . (72)

Wu’s and Han’s childhood friendship is reminiscent of Catherine’s and Heathcliffe’s in that “the children’s fascination with each other was exclusive” and crosses class boundaries, Wu showing “no interest in the stream of little visitors, as impeccably dressed as himself,” and Han having “no interest in the village children who sometimes came up with their mothers to help in the housework” (71-2). The “awareness of adult reproof had been the only moderating influence on their intense inseparability. As soon as he awoke, the boy asked to be taken down to play with her; as soon as she finished the small chores she had been assigned, she darted out of the servant’s part of the mansion and went in search of the boy,” meeting “in a paroxysm of pure joy” (70). Their “childhood’s engaging primitivism” involves the revolutionary rejection of dominant cultural codes:

master and servant, princeling and beggar: childhood’s insouciance sent the walls tumbling . . .

Walls upon walls: the boy broke through the bounds of a lonely swaddled childhood in a house of protective females, the girl through the barricades of a hundred raised voices and hands to remind her of who she was and to keep her in her place. (71)

But just as Heathcliffe’s dream childhood comes to an end, so does Han’s, and her amalgam of desire for and identification with Wu is now eroticized and Wu must necessarily become her sexual love-object. Like Heathcliffe, Han too sees herself looking in from the outside as her playmate meets with other children his own class, and with Li-Li, from the House of Chang, who is to be his future wife. Han is
unable to catch Wu's gaze nor to find herself in his gaze as he remains fascinated by posh toys, by the trappings of wealth:

The child knew there was a window looking into the room from the outside. She ran outside, dragged two flower pots, to a spot below the window ledge, put one on top of the other and mounted them to have a peep inside.

Watched by the bondmaids, the three children in the room were on the floor, playing with trains whose magnificent tracks stretched the whole length of the room.... Handsome toys, lavish food on the table--Han had never seen such a spread; lavish adulation from the bondmaids--the bondmaid Pin was fanning Miss Li-Li with a paper fan and the bondmaid Lan was now and again wiping off the perspiration on young Master Wu's forehead with a small white towel.... Miss Li-Li, clad in her finest, another shade of pink, was smiling and pointing excitedly to the moving trains.... She [Han] tried to catch the boy Wu's eyes, waving a large cigarette-box.... Cigarette-box stood no chance against train; the boy's eyes were glued on the toy and never lifted.

When Wu finally looks out at her,

her heart beating wildly, she waved at him. He merely stared, as if unable to fit her presence into the present scheme of enjoyment. Frantically, she pulled out the cigarette-box, mouthing something to suggest the wondrousness of its contents. But he had already turned his back on her and gone back to his friends.

The child Han turned pale. It had never happened before, and happening for the first time, it convulsed her with shock. The dull pain flared into a bright flame of anger. For the first time, other sensations--jealousy, a sense of betrayal, a screaming sense of loss--combined with longing to form a single surge of furious energy that pitched the child forward and caused her to beat at the window, shouting and crying. She banged with both fists, screaming to be allowed in. (110)
Since male identity is linked to wealth, Heathcliff is able to use capital accumulation to overcome his class 'lack.' Han does not have this recourse since money will not provide the gentility, the upper-class breeding that forms women's erotic appeal: as Miss Li-Li warns Han, "you mustn't forget you're a bondmaid, a mere servant girl. How can you have such audacity? The young master of the House of Wu will never stoop so low as to look at a bondmaid" (208). But her childhood relationship of equality with Wu enables Han's hysterical refusal of the desire of the big Other of patriarchal Chinese culture. Han's response to Miss Li-Li's statement, "If that is so, then you have nothing to worry about," is similar to the answer Elizabeth Bennet gives to Lady Catherine in Jane Austen's novel, *Pride and Prejudice*. Lady Catherine claims that Darcy is promised to her daughter, and wants to know if her nephew had proposed to Bennet. Bennet answers thus: "Only this: that if he is so, you can have no reason to suppose he will make an offer to me" (273).

Han exploits loopholes in the Chinese discourse of female desirability to carry out her feminist rebellion: for instance, she plays the role of "loving woman" and bears Wu a son. But this cannot cover over the fact that her rebellion originates in a foreign, non-Chinese cultural space. Without that Brontëan strategy of a particular type of idyllic inter-class and inter-gender childhood relationship that allows the formation of a revolutionary consciousness, Han could not have come to her awareness of the female and class oppressions involved in her ethnic culture, nor of her right to human dignity. At the very most, like Chu, who had to serve the patriarch sexually from age 15 (including enforced participation in sexual orgies), Han could only have responded with hatred and revenge. Chu's elder sister died at 20 from sexual abuse from the same man. Chu avenges herself and her sister much later in life and only when the opportunity finally presents itself: she deceives her rapist, now old and helpless, into eating fecal matter and insects' droppings which she places in his food. But the thought of protesting against the rape when it occurred had never occurred to Chu. Bound as they are materially and ideologically into their cultural situation, the other bondmaids in the Wu household are incapable of thinking of their human rights, which would have enabled them to cry rape. Han's subjectivity is 'different': she openly rebels against
and foils sexual abuse by the men in the Wu household and the visiting Buddhist monk. Han's feminist notions are ethnicized through her devotion to the Chinese "Goddess with Eyes and Ears." Finding an old, abandoned shrine of a goddess near the Wu home, Han creates her own feminist mythology through fantasy. She thinks of this goddess as a feminist rebel, who plots to castrate her abuser, the Chinese patriarchal Sky God. Han projects her desired female power onto the goddess. But she creates this Chinese feminist mythology only after her very unusual childhood experience of gender and class equality. By contrast, Han's mother, who is just as aware as Han of female oppression and resents her pitiful life as abused wife and poor peasant, goes so far as to spit on the ashes of the Sky God, whom she calls the "god with no eyes or ears." Unlike Han, though, she never realizes the gender bias of the Sky God religion itself. Han's 'difference,' perceived by everyone around her as demonic (she is often said to be possessed by demons), is an admission of Han's non-Chineseness: her sense of women's rights and demand of equity is alien to her cultural environment, so that only the supernatural (demonic) can account for it.

As in Wuthering Heights, the romantic and realistic modes are used together in Bondmaid. In Brontë's novel, the romantic mode of representation (where Catherine's ghost appears to Lockwood and to Heathcliffe after her death, the reunion of the two lovers in life-after-death, and the use of dreams) enables the writer to represent the unconscious as well as desires not approved by dominant ideology. The romantic mode allows the unacceptable, the unthinkable, that which is repressed in the present cultural order to take form, and in a disguised manner. In Bondmaid, Han is unable to verbalize her desire even in her communication with the Sky-God, her desire for Wu being unthinkable within her cultural orbit. Asking the god to grant her what her heart desires, "she left unspecified the desire [for union with Wu], in the belief that even an all-knowing deity could be tricked into answering an audacious request if the audacity lay hidden under a generality" (my emphasis, 124). Han's erotic dreams and her fantasies about her union with Wu after death as ghost-lovers allow her to represent and to know the depths of her tabooed desires in a culturally acceptable manner: stories of ghost-lovers,
whose forbidden love is fulfilled after death, form the cultural idiom of Han’s environment. In dream, 
too, cultural subversion and non-approved desires can take refuge in hermeneutic ambiguity. For 
instance, Han’s dream about the Sky-God’s violent rape of the goddess may be read as signifier of her 
sexual fear of the men in the Wu household. Or it could be read as Lim/Han’s damning representation of 
Chinese culture, even its religion, as violently, unbearably patriarchal, oppressive of women’s bodies 
and their desire. The dream in which the goddess castrates Sky-God, and then invites the bondmaids, 
including Han, to castrate the men renders real, via representation, the desire of Chinese women to 
avenge their oppressors, and to discover the sources of their own power. But the romantic mode also 
answers perfectly to Lim’s need to disguise the foreign/modern/Western as the ethnic/Chinese, where 
modern or Western ideology of women’s rights and democracy is sneaked into an ethnic cultural idiom: 
where, for instance, feminist rebellion can be mythologized as the re-discovery of an ancient and long- 
forgotten Chinese religion involving the worship of a goddess. Literary realism, which emphasises 
developed dialogue and characterization, would most likely have revealed the Western intertextualities 
of this novel’s feminist and modern ideology.

The novel ends with Han destroying the patriarchal order of Chinese culture but herself dying in the 
process. She gives birth to a son and manages finally to win Wu over: while she is dying, he manages at 
last to speak the “love and longing that had stayed in shadows all those years” when he had been too 
overwhelmed by his culture’s class ideology (378). If Han had survived the birth of her son, Wu would 
have probably publicly acknowledged her as his secondary wife. Even Han’s brother comes to realize 
his wrong-doing in procuring women for a brothel. He undergoes “a period of self-chastisement in a 
temple” and finally settles in a foreign country (“Epilogue”). At any rate, Han’s feminist insurrection 
makes it impossible for Chinese patriarchal culture to survive. Both her son and Wu’s daughter by Li-Li 
die, their deaths attributed to Han’s death-bed curse on the Wu and Chang (Li-Li’s) families. Li-Li 
herself approaches insanity with her grief over her daughter’s death, while Wu becomes “reclusive, 
keeping to himself and behaving like a madman” (“Epilogue”). In the end, tormented by Han’s curse,
the Wu and Chang families leave Singapore to return to China as “curses do not travel over water” (“Epilogue”). Only Wu remains, who, by taking care of the goddess’ shrine, is now to be identified with Han. With her progeny dead, and both Wu and her shrine displaced by a new petrochemical complex, Han’s feminist revolution is contained within the past.
Notes

1 My references are to a selected edition of Yeo’s anthology published in 1989 with the same title. This edition features stories from Yeo’s earlier anthology which had been selected for study by the Cambridge Examination Syndicate for the O-level examinations.

2 Twenty-Two Malaysian Stories. Qtd. in Yeo 126-7.

3 Yeo says that the two-volume anthology Singapore Short Stories, published in 1978, were taught and read in schools soon after publication (“Introduction” ix).

4 Given that there are three Lims mentioned in this chapter (Christine Lim, Catherine Lim and Shirley Lim), I will refer to them by their full names in order to avoid ambiguity except where reference is obvious.

5 Straits Times has officially stated its identification with the government on a few occasions. In an article, “The Press in Singapore--the Misconceptions and the Reality,” an editor with the newspaper, Felix Soh, defends the newspaper against public criticism of its pro-government stance, which he notes “undermines the newspaper’s credibility.” He counters: “But the reality is that Straits Times--as well as other SPH [Singapore Press Holdings] publications--is pro-Singapore. The fact is that being pro-Singapore and pro-government coincide on many issues and occasions” (ST 3 June 1993: 27).

6 Koh Tai Ann points to a contradiction in the state’s cultural policies, towards wanting to develop a national, integrated culture that surmounts ethnic differences, but also encouraging the cultural differences among the races by promoting traditional art forms (“Culture” 712). I hope I have shown in chapter 2 that this is not really contradictory, that an “Asian” national culture is being promoted as that which the various ethnic communities share in common. Between the 1970s and 1980s, the terms of a “national, integrated culture” have changed quite drastically, so that it still forms a government ideal but not in the previous manner of a cultural hybridity. Also, this ‘contradictory’ cultural policy is
strategically related to a “divide-and-rule” agenda, where national solidarity, as something existing among the people, is to be displaced by solidarity between each separate ethnic group and the state.

Playwright Tan Tarn How’s “Diary of Censorship” of his play *The Lady of Soul* gives an account of transactions between the state’s censorship authority, Public Entertainment and Licensing Unit (Pelu), and the producers of theatre. It reveals the tight boundaries culture producers work within when making social-political commentary. Tan notes that Pelu’s objections to his play included the critical references to Singapore as a nation without soul, the representation of government committees as ineffective, and the unfavourable portrayal of ministers and civil servants (75).

The Minister of Arts and Information, BG George Yeo, elaborated on the roles of writers and the state. Attacking journalists for their criticism of political leaders, he said: “Debate, yes, but do not take on those in authority as ‘equals’” (“Debate, yes,” ST 20 Feb. 1995: 19).

Another incident that took place a year earlier, between January and February 1994, also indicates the government’s view that the arts are/should be non-political. In a joint statement made by the ministries of home affairs and the arts against a production of performance art, the government said that such new art forms “pose greater risks to public order, security and decency.” Such art and dramatic forms, it said, “may be exploited to agitate the audience on volatile social issues, or to propagate the beliefs and messages of deviant social or religious groups, or as a means of subversion” (“Sequence,” ST 8 Feb. 1994: 18).

In the incident quoted in the previous note, for instance, *Straits Times* made an issue of two Singapore dramatists attending a left-wing drama workshops at the Brecht Forum held in New York. The report of the government’s response to the performance art was accompanied by an account of how reporter Felix Soh chased and confirmed the story of Alvin Tan and Haresh Sharma’s attendance at this Marxist event. Soh interviewed a spokesman for the Brecht Forum, whose remarks about the political nature of drama were faithfully reported as if it were ‘news’ (which indeed it probably was for *Straits*
Times). She is reported to have said: “There is a political function to what we are doing. We are using art to work for social change” (“Sequence,” ST 8 Feb. 1994: 18).

11 I was placed in a similar dilemma in 1995 when editing the books column of Eight Days, a weekly cultural/entertainment magazine published by the former Singapore Broadcasting Corporation. In the event, I used socially and politically inflected literary criticism only on non-Singaporean literary texts. Earlier, in 1991, when reviewing local art for the same magazine, I had tried a “Cultural Studies” type of approach but only to celebrate rather than critique aspects of local cultural representation.


13 Prime Minister’s Address to the National Trades Union Congress to mark 1975 as the International Women’s Year, qtd. in Puroshotam, “Women” 327.

14 As Kon’s novel shows, in the early 1900s until the fall of the Qing empire in 1911, China’s and its overseas-Chinese political activists were split between those wanting to ‘modernize’ the monarchy and establish a democratic system within the framework of a constitutional monarchy (the reformists) and those who wanted its overthrow (the revolutionaries).

15 Koh Buck Song reports on the difficulties Lim faced in finding a publisher for Bondmaid but does not mention her relationship with the government as a possible factor for publishers’ sudden lack of interest in the writer’s work (“Over-Cautious Publishers,” ST 15 Jan. 1996: 4).
Chapter 5

The Cut at the Center:

Male Identity in Crisis in Singaporean Drama

In the last chapter, I dealt with novels and short fiction written in the 1980s and 1990 which attempt to offer new myths of origin of the nation that are in keeping with the current state-authorized nationalism. I showed how these novels and short fiction hegemonize this discourse of identity by Sinicizing Singapore history, demonizing certain ideologies such as feminism and individual rights, and recirculating readers’ desire from a post-colonial East-West cultural hybridity represented as female (impure, weak, hysterical, lacking), channeling it instead towards a Chinese culture represented as male (strong, pure, promising the return of an ethnic cultural power conceived as the restoration of a male, decolonized identity). Deep affect was invested in the discourse of the revival of ethnic culture by figuring Singapore cultural identity in terms of the search for an abandoned or lost father. But given that the new discourse of national identity involved a denial and backtracking on an older discourse of an East-West culture, desire became conflicted. In many of these texts, this conflict is addressed by taking on a subject-position of guilt and/or shame from which this ‘strange,’ ‘archaic,’ unfamiliar ethnic culture could be both desired and distanced through fetishization.

In this chapter, I will turn towards Singapore English-language theater, a form that began to attract a popular following in the 1980s. This was the era in which the ruling party promoted the development of cultural activities in line with a vision of Singapore as an international center of the arts. As Koh Tai Ann notes, “in the 1980s there has been a tremendous upsurge of interest in local drama in the three main language streams of English, Chinese and Malay” which reversed a long-time trend where drama in English especially was a mainly middle-class activity depending on the enthusiasms of “would-be Thespians” (“Culture” 727). This was also the period of the emergence, for the first time, of professional
drama companies. Much of the interest in local drama in English was sustained by Theatreworks, which ensured a steady stream of plays and whipped up enthusiasm among theater-goers and drama workers for locally written plays in an industry previously dominated by the production of colonial and European plays. With corporate sponsorship, more generous public funding of the arts and the expansion of the middle class in the late 1980s and 1990s, local drama in English provided a source of entertainment, especially to young urban professionals and university and pre-university students. Even though more drama companies began to form, Theatreworks continued to maintain its leading position so that its role in territorializing desire and suggesting national identifications cannot be ignored in the construction of a hegemonic discourse of culture. Four of the five plays discussed in this chapter were produced by this company.

With press and television writers and producers as its founding-members, Theatreworks inevitably drew participation from personnel in the mass media who, daily in their work, had to confront and cope with the government's discourse of national identity. This influence pervaded their writing for the local theater and, in the 1990s, a body of plays was written and produced that directly or indirectly approached issues of national identity and responded to the government's stance. I will discuss five of these: Private Parts by Michael Chiang; Lest the Demons Get to Me by Russell Heng Hiang Khng; The Lady of Soul and the Ultimate 'S' Machine, and Undercover by Tan Tarn How; and Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral by Kuo Pao Kun. Three of these four playwrights have been or still are associated with the mass media. Chiang worked for Straits Times and is now chief editor of Eight Days, a weekly entertainment/cultural magazine associated with Singapore's now-privatized broadcasting stations. Tan is a leading journalist with Straits Times and covers political issues. Heng was with Straits Times but is now associated with Singapore's Institute of South-east Asian Studies and is also a commentator on the local political scene.

In trying to track the path by which Singapore's current discourse of national identity has been hegemonized, I choose to discuss these plays over and above others such as Eleanor Wong's Mergers.
and Accusations, Kuo Pao Kun's The Coffin is Too Big for the Hole and No Parking on Odd Days, and Chng Suan Tze's Good Asian Values which also approach issues of national culture. These last-mentioned plays subvert state ideology whereas I am interested in studying the cultural work of those who are daily exposed to state ideology in their occupation and who are ‘professional’ representers of the nation as journalists. The work of Chiang, Tan and Heng commands interest in that these writers work or were working for institutions that have been associated with producing pro-government hegemonic discourses. Also, plays written by writers from the mass media receive greater public attention in the press and thus wield greater cultural influence.

In the process, however, of studying these particular writers, I have found that the conflict between the new and previous nationalisms appears to have plunged an important, culturally influential section of the ruling class, rising young male urban intellectuals (including the nation’s top journalists) into a cultural neurosis concerning their male identity. In their works, the primary signifier of meaning, the penis/phallus, is placed under scrutiny and found to be wanting. If neurosis is to be defined as the stalling in meaning, as Fink does (see chapter 1), the failure even of Singapore’s experts in the manufacture of meaning has important implications for the nation’s potential for cultural regeneration.

Kuo Pao Kun is not a journalist but some consider him to be the nation’s most important playwright. His play Descendants will thus be discussed, especially since it confronts head-on the government’s construction of national identity. It is also similar to the other plays in documenting a crisis in masculinity as one of the effects on national subjectivity of the state’s Asianization/Sinicization project. Kuo however probes this crisis more daringly and relentlessly than the others do, making the play one of the most salient works in Singapore drama. Kuo also offers a significant but different perspective on the Sinicization of Singaporean national identity. He belongs to an older generation of playwrights, and, unlike the other writers, is a bilingual practitioner of theater. He is also a full-time dramatist and is free of the type of institutional pressures the others face, though, no doubt, he works under other tensions. He is the most ‘Chinese’ among these playwrights, if it is possible to quantify ethnicity, having been
born and resident in China till 1949 before migrating to pre-Independence Singapore. A pioneer of Chinese theater in Singapore, he is said to have “become a part of the Singapore version of the Chinese Cultural Revolution” in the 1960s and 1970s, when he worked with the Singapore Amateur Players (Jit 14). It is ironic then that among this group of playwrights, his work is the most skeptical about the state’s essentialist construction of Chinese culture as Confucianist, as is evident in *Descendants*, and that it should be Kuo who champions a multiracial/multiethnic Asian cultural identity. But to classify him under Singapore Mandarin Theater is only to tell half the story. Kuo also has much experience with English-language theater, and studied with Australia’s National Institute of Drama Arts in the 1960s, at a time when Australian theater was beginning to be self-reflexive about national identity. After release from political detention in 1980 (he was detained in 1976 during a Singapore government anti-leftist purge), he worked with both Mandarin and English Singapore theater and pioneered experiments in multilingual theater (Jit 7-28).

I will discuss these plays as written texts, ignoring their production history and their critical reception. With the exception of Kuo’s text, the plays dealt with here have been published. As such, these plays have an on-going symbolic currency in Singapore in the print media.

In trying to construct a coherent narrative of the effects and patterns of subjectification wrought by the state’s discourse of national identity, I will no doubt fall prey to the limitations of a totalized reading. The gain is that Singapore’s cultural efforts will be contextualized in a manner not attempted before, where it will be read through local time and place; it will also throw light on the ideological and psychic shifts, of which some may be traumatic, demanded by the state’s discourse of Asian identity. In trying to bring together plays that have a claim to exist as discrete consciousnesses, some violence will be incurred in emphasizing the similarities rather than the differences between the plays and in silencing other plays that do not fit into these patterns. As far as possible, I have attempted to minimize the former by letting each play speak its difference so that the totalized reading is that of an articulation of the relations between the plays. Culture after all undeniably achieves its effectiveness out of the
accumulation of and tensions between individual consciousnesses. I write with the conviction that I am not making a body out of these plays but rather am tracing the outlines of an ideological body that has gone forth before me, doing its work surreptitiously and invisibly. In doing so, I hope to make this 'body' visible.

The plays considered here reveal that the state's attempt to change Singaporeans' perceptions of their national identity has led to a cultural crisis that is causing trouble with the society's "dominant fiction" (Silverman, Male 35-48). A society's dominant fiction consists of its family ideology, which, Silverman says, includes core elements of the Symbolic Order (the laws of language and of kinship structures). On its periphery are secondary ideologies relating to mode of production such as ideologies of race, gender and class. But the latter exist in a metaphoric relation to the binaristic terms of sexual difference that rule family ideology, which, through the Oedipus Complex, organize and delimit our desires and identifications. As Silverman says, a contradiction haunts family ideology: the law of language dictates universal castration, where the self can come into being only through its loss or alienation (the lost 'self' being banished into the unconscious); but the law of kinship structure equates the father with the law and exempts him from castration. This contradiction is resolved by the imaginary by equating the phallus with the penis and the actual with the symbolic father in a central misrecognition. This fiction, which involves a denial of castration, calls on the male subject to see himself only in terms of images of unimpaired masculinity and the female to desire the male subject (42). The penis serves as a 'screen' denying castration and lack of being. Connecting the secondary with the primary ideologies of the family, Silverman says that the fragility of this penis-phallus equation requires support from the former. Thus, changes in secondary ideologies can precipitate crises in the primary ideologies and vice-versa. I will show that the plays under study indicate that changes in the master narrative, in the ideology of race and ethnicity in Singapore, have led to crises in the primary ideology concerning male identity. The equations of phallus with penis and the actual with the symbolic father are currently very tenuous in
Singapore. The latter is especially shaky in a situation where state authoritarianism and interference even in familial values erodes the power of the ‘actual’ father.

Silverman calls a situation involving threat to the belief in the dominant fiction, where society confronts the spectacle of male lack, a “historical trauma.” She describes this trauma as a historical, social or natural event that brings a large group of men into intimate relation with lack so that they are unable to sustain the phallus-penis equation (55). Traumatic neuroses, she says, are “those which are produced in response to an external event which reactivates an earlier trauma” (60). Following Freud, Silverman associates such neuroses with the death drive, which is always there in the subject and which opposes, to various and compromised degrees of success, the ego’s drive for mastery, with the drive to self-disintegration. The death drive is a threat to the ego’s “psychical cohesion and binding” (60), striving to undo the latter’s binding with its own “radical unbinding” (58). Such a threat is quickly followed by a process of “cultural binding,” which can involve “the gradual reaffirmation and reconstitution of the dominant fiction” (64). But the cultural effort also repetitively stages the threats to normative masculinity and the spectacle of male lack, which Silverman views as symptom of the death drive. Discussing Hollywood films of the 1940s in terms of the erosion of faith in male power caused by the world war, she documents two possible ensuing fantasies: either the male subject could accept his lack and eroticize masochism, or he could re-establish the dominant fiction and shore up the ruins of masculinity by blaming women for its downfall (120-21). She also suggests another alternative: that new male subjectivities could be constructed that take in female desire and identification. Silverman sees revolutionary potential in the construction of a revisionary masculinity that includes the psychic and physical marks of femininity (372).

But Silverman theorizes “libidinal politics”--the politics of desire and identification arising from the profound association of secondary ideologies and their distribution of power with ideologies of sexuality and gender--in a largely mono-cultural, Western context (1-3), except for some discussion of the intersection of male sexuality and gender with racial ‘otherness’ in her study of T. E. Lawrence’s
writings (299-338). My reading of recent Singapore plays does indicate the presence of a historical trauma, a neurotic situation involving confrontation with the spectacle of male lack. But it appears to be generated by the historical event of the new Asianizing project, where the state’s demand that the nation re-arrange its identifications and desires appears to have re-activated the foundational trauma of male lack that the male ego seeks to escape through myths of male power. I will show that this is a trauma concerning West and East cross-culturality that appears to have injured Singaporeans’ central fictions of male identity. It also involves a rupture in cultural ‘time’ as previous identifications, fantasies and desires now become forbidden. The account of cultural binding is then likely to be different and more complex than in Silverman’s narrative. In the plays studied here, the male subject has sundered the penis-phallus and actual father-symbolic father equations in order to exclusively identify the site of power/masculinity with the state. He has been taught to desire this as a de-colonizing venture, as the assertion of post-colonial difference, as the reclaiming of a symbolic father who has been denied by the West. Some of the power that the male subject has lost to the state is imaginarily reclaimed from women and from Western culture, which is feminized. The Singapore woman, who has gained some economic and cultural power in capitalist ‘modernity,’ must now evacuate that space as power gets redistributed from a binaristic division of male and female to a triple hierarchy of state, male subject with little power, and female subject with even less power. In this sense, the surrender of male power of self-determination and the power to represent oneself to the state is accompanied by a regression towards reactionary masculinities in relations with women. It is now a commonplace of feminist psychological theory that the category of femininity is the site at which the male subject deposits and denies his lack. In these plays, however, the category of femininity is expanded to include the Western culture that must be disavowed. The disinvestment of aspects of ‘Western’ culture which had been previously cathected by the Singaporean as part of his East-West hybrid but masculine national culture is accomplished by feminizing Western values, by representing them as hysterical, excessive, perverse or delusional, thereby
disavowing and displacing onto the female 'other,' the lack that the Singaporean male subject feels at this amputation of parts of a previous self.

Not all of the male power that has been lost can be recovered imaginarily in this manner. As Silverman says, quoting Zizek, it is through fantasy that we learn how to desire (6). The fantasy stages the *mise-en-scène* of desire by drawing on images on which the self is constituted (5). Hence, in the Singaporean fantasy, as seen in these plays, the new scene of desire (for Asian/Chinese identity) can only be staged in terms of older cultural identifications, by rejecting, inverting or incorporating them (as, for instance, by 'passing' the Western 'other' as the Asian/Chinese self). As these plays show, the substitution in the object which is to be desired (which has changed from cultural hybridity to ethnic cultural purity) demands the generation of new identifications from old, and the re-routing of desire.

The phantasmatic, Silverman says, is not so much about the object which the subject aims at but is more concerned with working out a sequence in which the subject has a part to play (6). Through the phantasmatic then, a desiring subject-position is worked out. In plays such as Heng's *Lest the Demons*, Singaporean male subjects identify with the desire of the Symbolic Order (the dominant discourse) only by assuming disempowering subject-positions as tragic victims of an inconsistent Symbolic Order, as castrated men (such as post-operation male transsexuals) and/or by demonizing, pathologizing and/or feminizing the Western 'other' (or its representatives). In some of these plays, certainly, masochism is eroticized.

But perhaps the most significant psychic effect produced on the colonized 'object' by neo-colonial epistemologies such as those of neo-Orientalism could be the split executed in the 'other's desire, so that the colonized 'object' becomes a cipher, a masquerade, of subjectivity. All these plays show that the desire to be 'Asian' or 'Chinese,' to yield the individual's power over to the state in accordance with a particular perception/interpretation of ethnic culture, is not unambivalent. Given the history of the situation, the Singaporean (male) subject is deeply conflicted: he desires to be both 'Asian'/'Chinese' (communitarian) and 'Western' (individualistic, democratic). This is ideologically and phantasmatically
resolved by the male subject imagining himself in Western scenarios for which he has himself already provided the ‘tools’ for Western defeat. For instance, Singapore writers resolve their desire for resistance against state authoritarianism, which they have cathected as a ‘Western’ liberal-democratic norm of masculinity, by repeatedly staging this resistance only to defeat or interrogate it. As such, masculinity is assured by a masquerade of resistance which substitutes for real resistance. In the same manner, these plays draw on the post-modern discourse of identity, deconstructing notions of cultural authenticity, eroticizing identity as masquerade only in order to then create a space of desire for ethnicity as masquerade.

It has been noted, sometimes with disdain and worry in official quarters, that gay writers appear to dominate the local English drama scene and that they exploit marginalized sexualities on stage. The first is not true, but homosexuality, transvestitism, transsexuality and bisexuality do appear frequently in these plays. This however is not related to writers’ homosexuality. Rather, marginalized sexualities are used by both gay and heterosexual writers as condensed metaphors that signify a crisis in male myths of identity and power, that I will argue has been generated by the state.

In these plays, marginalized male sexualities signify cross-culturality, the crossing of genders, in/authenticity, seeming versus being, and are important vehicles in the imagining of new identifications and desires, allowing the subject to move beyond the polarizations of West/East and male/female. In at least two of these plays, Chiang’s Private Parts and Heng’s Lest the Demons, transvestitism/transsexuality’s gender crossings are used to construct alternative male subjectivities where the ‘female’ is appropriated into the male. The state as symbolic “father” is felt to have castrated the actual father, who is thus powerless to effectuate a proper oedipalization of his son/s. The consequent crisis in male heterosexual identity forces the male to take up more feminized subject-positions that are figured as being similar to those of male transvestitism and transsexuality. The Singaporean male subject experiencing hysteria, lack and doubt about his masculinity identifies with the male transvestite/transsexual. But in both plays, transvestitism/transsexuality as figures also signify the
intersection of cultural with gender crossings, where to be a Chinese/Asian subject desiring Western culture is equated with being a man desiring to be a woman. Strategically, then the feminization and pathologization of Western culture is accomplished via the figure of the transvestite/transsexual and also, as in Tan Tarn How’s play, through the male homosexual. But, as in Heng’s play, the transvestite/transsexual can also simultaneously figure the loss of faith in the (male) power of Chinese culture, where the latter too is feminized. In Heng’s play, the surgical cut that the male transsexual receives is the cut of modernity which postpones the attainment of Chinese patriarchal identity indefinitely, so that the latter can only be experienced as masquerade, as an honoring of a past identity. But the pre-operative transsexual undergoing male-to-female sex-change surgery is also the perfect vehicle to represent the rupture of a hybridized Singaporean culture into cultural essentialism, where the cultural purity experienced is artificially assumed by an already mutilated subject, desiring and identifying from a subject-position marked by lack (the loss of the phallus in castration) and inauthenticity. For Chiang, Singaporean hybrid East-West culture, represented as male transvestitism, is to be despised as inauthentic (where the master-signifier no longer guarantees meaning). His play tries to argue for cultural authenticity (imagined in terms of gender ‘authenticity’), for a retreat from the postmodern discourse of gendered/sexed identity as construction. But, as his play all too symptomatically indicates, cultural ‘authenticity’ must be preceded by a ‘fixing’ of the body of Singapore culture, represented as sex-change surgery: either the male subject must accept his loss of male power and match the symbolic castration with an actual castration (and become a woman) or he must add on a fake penis through reconstructive surgery and ‘identify’ with a male ego-ideal, whom he knows he can never be.

Diana Fuss warns, in Identification Papers, against assuming that a conscious imitation of a role implies an unconscious identification with that role (148). Here she differentiates between genuine (unconscious) identifications and those that only appear to be identifications: she calls the former “identification” and the latter “impersonation.” But in assuming that “impersonation” involves a subversive mimicry, she does not make space for another sort of “impersonation,” where impersonation
substitutes for the inability to effect an identification. In Chiang’s play, the central character is caught between an impersonation of and an identification with maleness. If one uses Fuss’ differentiation of masquerade and mimicry, where masquerade involves the “non-ironic imitation of a role” and mimicry, the “parodic hyperbolization of that role” (146), and if, in accordance with this, identifications involve masquerade rather than mimicry, then Chiang’s character as the figure of cultural ‘authenticity,’ must mime the masquerade of masculinity, always aware that, given his castration, he can only adopt an ironic though desiring stance toward it.

The Freudian/Lacanian master narrative of the formation of subjectivity (gendered as male) against the alterity of the female gets challenged here in a society brought face to face with male lack. When the (male) subject must either accept lack/castration and/or disavow it by identifying with and desiring his lack of lack through the state, the ‘other’ against whom he defines himself is also male. Eve Kosofsky Sedgewick’s concept of the homosocial continuum, where male homoeroticism is triangulated by the female, is interrupted here as male identity is worked out in encounter with other male subjectivities. If heterosexual male identity is the sublimation of forbidden male homosexual object desires, in these plays, masculinity is both the object of desire and the object of identification. Where the female symbolically represented the phallus to the male, assuring him of his lack of lack, now other men provide the mirror to the affirmation of masculinity. If the dominant discourse of gender works to sustain heterosexual desires and identifications, where within heterosexuality would women be positioned when this dominant gender discourse incorporates into its definitions of masculinity, marginalized, non-heterosexual male subject positions which include feminization? My guess would be that women would be made to retreat even further into ‘femininity,’ into further weakness, passivity, into ever more reactionary femininities. As these plays indicate, the construction of these new male subject-positions (which include the consciousness of lack) depend on the ostracism of modern and post-modern feminisms. Silverman’s thesis in Male Subjectivity at the Margins, that adopting positions of identification and desire in accordance with so-called ‘perverse’ or ‘deviant’ sexualities are sometimes
tantamount to a subversive gesture, that saying “yes” to marginalized sexualities can involve a saying “no” to power, cannot be upheld in this particular instance (1-2). One cannot argue with her claim that in conditions of historical trauma, there is a resultant ‘feminization’ of traditional masculinity, which one easily detects in cultural texts (where men adopt female subject positions). But this does not necessarily mean that sexual differences are being broken down and that power is now being assigned in a more equal manner. In Singapore drama, a crisis in traditional masculinities is dealt with by feminizing male identity, but this has led to the male/female binary being constructed in new ways rather than effectively deconstructed. The newer, proposed masculine identities now take on, in something that amounts to appropriation, some traditionally female subject positions, such as that of the ‘female’ hysteric and the recognition of castration as the male ‘other’ to the symbolic order. But, just as significantly, they also reassign meanings of inauthenticity to female identity, where the crisis in male power is projected onto women--where women are viewed as impotent phallic mother or as abject. That women in these texts are women who think, falsely, that they are men suggests that the newer, proposed masculine identities leave women even more in the lurch--where they are now not only not the ‘other’ to men, but are castrated men, eunuchs, assigned to a space of pure representation as specters of men.

As Marjorie Garber suggests in Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety, transvestitism and transsexuality are often used in cultural texts to figure gender liminality, an in-between cultural space in gender identifications, but this can also add up to a re-affirmation of phallic power rather than a deconstruction of it. She cites the case of the Harvard Hasty Pudding Theatricals that externalized and acted out crises and conflicts that arose from the construction of a certain kind of male identity set up by an intellectual and social elite. Far from deconstructing gender and sexual identities, this transvestite theater expressed misogyny and homophobia. Male-to-female cross-dressing, she says, is a “fetishistic scenario” in which the imagined maternal phallus of the phallic mother is replaced by clothes and false breasts. The cross-dresser as fetishist thus does not need woman: he only requires the fetish (60-65).
Garber's work is crucial in reading transsexuality and transvestitism as vehicle rather than tenor, where these often indicate a crisis elsewhere than in gender. "Category crises," she says, "can and do mark displacements from the axes of class and race onto the axis of gender." Transvestitism and transsexuality in cultural representation have often appeared, then, as cultural effects of permeable borders that signal toward an irresolvable conflict or epistemological problem that invalidates binarity and "displaces this discomfort onto a figure that incarnates the margin" (17).

Two of the four writers studied here are non-heterosexual. But since the works do not as such thematize homosexuality, transvestitism/transsexuality, or bisexuality but use marginalized sexualities as vehicles to talk of cross-cultural issues of identity and desire, I am reading them as non-queer texts. At any rate, since Singapore audiences are generally unaware of the playwrights' sexualities, and these in no way frame their texts, the plays are dominantly received as 'straight' ideology and 'pass' as such. I will argue that the state's recent championing of authoritarian political culture as 'Asian,' pitting it against Western values of liberalism and democracy as well as the consequent re-alignment of relationships of power between the state and (male) citizen would seem to have triggered a breakdown in male myths of power in the Singapore man. As such, the frequent appearance of marginalized male sexualities and gender trouble, to use Butler's apt phrase, is a response to a cultural conflict and has little to do with the sexuality of Singapore's writers.

In addition to falling within Silverman's category of "historical trauma," the plays discussed here also fall into Fink's definition of neurosis. Fink says neurosis can be presumed to have occurred when the interpellation of the subject does not involve subjectivation. In successful subjectivation, the subject identifies its desire with the desire of the Other. In neurosis, such subjectivation is not possible and the Other's desire is experienced as demand (72-6). Neurosis occurs, he says, when the master-signifier of the Other's demand cannot be dialecticized, that is, brought into relation with other signifiers. For instance, in subjectivation, we often de-sexualize and repress/control libidinal energy by substituting/sublimating it with non-sexual objects such as intellectual activity. In neurosis, the
repression is refused, sometimes due to external circumstances that awaken repressed memories. The
fantasy cannot, in neurosis, enable the subject to make the substitutions in *objet petit a* that enable escape
from repressed desire. In patriarchal societies, the male subject represses its lack of power brought about
by castration by the signifier (the Symbolic Order) by denying it in a process where the penis serves as
signifier of the phallus, as an illusion of the power that the male subject truly lacks. Also, the Symbolic
Father is equated with the actual father and castration is ‘forgotten’ through the incest taboo where the
son is promised the paternal legacy of the Symbolic Order if he will only denounce his mother and
identify with his father (Silverman, *Male* 40). In neurosis, the male ‘subject’ cannot perform these
illusions: the penis only reminds him of his lack of power. The superego (the repressed memory of the
Symbolic/actual father’s real power, which unconsciously determines and limits his identifications and
desires), has emerged from retirement in the unconscious, so that the male subject cannot
phantasmatically misrecognize its obedience of the Other’s injunctions as signifier of its own desire and
power.

In these plays, the attempt to reconcile ‘Western’ and ‘Eastern’ standards of male identity bring the
subject into encounter with the specter of male lack, which either neurotically halts the process of
meaning, or is escaped by colonization of women’s constituency and the adoption of reversionary
sexual/gender politics. Transvestitism is repeatedly figured in these plays as a forbidden utopia of
cultural hybridity (where West and East enter into equivalence with sexual difference) and a reminder of
a happier, past, but it is also the vehicle that allows a ‘post-modern’ deconstruction of truth, power, and
sexual/gender/racial/cultural authenticity. In Heng’s play, the post-modern disavowal of meaning is
utilized to argue for an identification with the government’s desire on the level of subversive mimicry.
However, the surgical cut of a sex operation (castration in the male-to-female changeover) is the Real
that reminds the reader of the subject’s de-masculinization, of the impossibility of subversive mimicry.
In Chiang’s play, castration is figured as the only means to recover male power, except that the ensuing
power can only be imaginary since the male body has already been fragmented. These plays generally
indicate an inability to come to terms with reality, their flight from reality further symptomatized by their reliance on non-realistic genres of drama. Cultural conflicts can only be resolved here through stereotyped character representations or by the intervention of dream sequences that permit the plays to elide intellectual inconsistencies and fragmented subjectivities.

The post-modern deconstruction of meaning here is not a means to create new identity spaces, new meanings. Rather, it is the route by which the male Singaporean subject avoids meaning, escaping from the trauma that, perhaps, the signifier does mean something, a responsibility to history and to one’s desire. The ‘post-modern’ is used here, as I see it, to abdicate from post-colonial identity/responsibility, to enable the subject to ideologically ‘sit on the fence.’ Split in its desire for and hence ambivalent towards both Western culture and Asian/Chinese identity, post-modern discourse provides a cultural logic where the subject can freely express and enjoy forbidden desires of resistance, freedom and self-assertion of one’s desires (which are tied to male identity) but also then deny these meanings as excessive, as fiction. When meaning is conceived as excess, we have the moment of neurosis itself, with ‘post-modernity’ appearing as the language of disavowal of neurosis.

Camp, which is in some respects similar to post-modern textuality’s tendency to simultaneously gesture at opposite sets of meaning, also features in these plays as symptom of the subject’s inability to locate itself in a coherent geo-cultural place. Since the state’s new nationalism disrupts a previous national culture and identity, camp allows the writer to use humor, parody and hyperbole to cover up and distract attention from the troubling incongruency, the mismatch, between current and previous ideologies and value-systems.

**Private Parts (1992) by Michael Chiang**

The main plot revolves around a television broadcaster, Warren, who faces male anxiety, a psychological lack that matches his physical lack when an accident sexually wounds him. He checks into a sex-change clinic for reconstructive surgery, where he meets transsexuals scheduled for sex-
change surgery. It is apparently a place where Warren receives a re-education about gender identity. The loss of his penis, the signifier of male power, apparently, enables Warren to once again become a 'real man,' to regain the signified. Chiang recuperates reactionary notions of male identity as a corrective for a national culture that he perceives as emasculated and threatening to male subjectivity. Here, transvestitism and transsexuality are used as vehicles to critique gender blurring and re-establish old gender boundaries thought to be in danger of disappearing under the onslaught of modernity, corporatization, global capitalism and Westernization. Ideologically conservative, the play exploits camp's potential for humor and its subversion of race, gender and class boundaries but also denigrates its set of values. But the use of camp is also symptomatic of a split in the playwright's attitudes and desires concerning the observation of gender and race boundaries. There is enjoyment here of camp's transgressive crossings. But camp is also the means by which the playwright self-consciously covers over the conservatism of his attitudes, which indicates authorial guilt and hence an ethical uncertainty towards his agenda. Chiang's desire for the old (tradition) clashes with the new (modernity) so that the former cannot be retrieved without a sense of its inappropriateness, its 'oddity.' Camp fantasy also provides the vehicle for Chiang to deny the unrealistic nature of his answer to the problem of a crisis in national subjectivity in that a return to traditional gender norms is impossible, given Singapore's historico-cultural situation. As pre-1980s ideology of an East/West hybridity confronts the new 'Asian' essentialisms, desire is deadlocked and must necessarily be ironized.

A drag performance opens the play. The Dreamgirls are three men playing at being the Supremes, a popular 1960s' American Motown female singing trio. Miming the Supremes' hit-song “Baby Love” and vamping to the hilt in their elaborate hairdos, sequined evening gowns and long gloves, the performers also begin to strip, and end the song in their underwear. It is soon apparent that the point of this transvestite performance is not to celebrate gender as performance, as construction, but rather to point to the gap between signifier and signified, where the penis/phallus is the master-signifier that signifies nothing. As gender masquerade gives way to strip-tease, the redundancy of the phallus/penis is
foregrounded. The appearance of the phallus, revealed in the end, though veiled by the underwear (there is still room for doubt!) fails to signify masculinity since this has already been placed under suspicion by three men who have forsaken their masculinity in order to “dream” that they are “girls” (hence, their name). This drag performance does not belong to the heterosexual tradition where the difference between the performer’s sex and the gender role s/he mimes is part of the act: that is, the performer mimics (parodically, without identifying with) the ‘other’ sex. As transvestite performance, the Dreamgirls’ act belongs to the tradition of male actors playing female roles: the difference between performers’ sex and the gender role assumed is hidden. If we return to Fuss’ differentiation between mimicry and masquerade, the Dreamgirls’ performance involves masquerade, where there is identification with the ‘other,’ rather than mimicry (Identification 146-8). A strip-tease act is thus required to disclose the performer’s sex, but this is a ‘straight’ intervention in a transvestite scene of desire, re-reading permeable gender boundaries as the ‘perverse’ split between body/nature (sex) and mind/culture (gender).

Although a black music group is impersonated, the performance does not involve cross-cultural desire and identification of the Singapore subject with African-American culture but rather with ‘white’ culture, with an American-British subculture of gay camp and drag performance. In her article “‘You Don’t Have to Say You Love Me’: The Camp Masquerade of Dusty Springfield,” Patricia Juliana Smith says that in the 1960s, British lesbian singer Springfield’s camp masquerade of American Motown female groups, including the Supremes, transformed a “nice, white girl” into a black woman and femme gay man (186). Springfield combined their high beehive hairstyles, heavy mascara and false eyelashes with the jeans and men’s shirt that made her a model for British drag queens (187). During this period, black women and their music symbolized sexual freedom and power to middle-class white audiences, Smith says (190). Chiang uses the exaggerated emotion, excessive sentimentality and melodrama of the music of the Supremes, which was appropriated by Springfield for camp parody, as I will show, contradictorily, to mock transvestites and their supposed self-delusions concerning gender-crossing. But
these qualities are also held up as the ‘essentially’ feminine in the playwright’s representation of ‘normal’ gender identities.

In the next scene, it becomes evident that the failure of the master-signifier to signify, as well as the splitting of dream from reality, the image from the real, form from content and shadow from substance, is to be read as a national affliction. A live television debate is being held over the government’s decision to develop a new tourist attraction, a theme park featuring international transvestite entertainment, to be called Bugis World. As Act I, scene i shows, Singaporean national culture revolves around representation, where acting is the only reality, where images have no original in this nation of ciphers (much like the Dreamgirls staging a version of female identity that was already packaged as image by the Supremes). In fact, a member of the Dreamgirls is one of the participants in the debate. The other participants are Warren, the host of the debate; Mrs. Betsy Tan, who supposedly represents Singapore’s privileged class of “graduate mothers” and the “National Morals Council,” of which she is a founding member; and Cyril Collins, spokesman for the tourist board which is in charge of the development of Bugis World. None of the characters are individuals: their very identity, their voice is not to be distinguished from the roles they represent and have chosen to play. Through the characters, the debate puts together a pastiche of often heard banal lines about national values from the government and media. The artificiality of life in Singapore is communicated in this scene where identity becomes merely a matter of occupying ready-made roles/subject positions, where style rather than substance dominates public discussion of important issues. For instance, it appears at first that Mrs. Tan has a substantial viewpoint: she opposes Bugis World and views it as Singaporeans’ fashioning of their identity as Asian exotica in accordance with the desires of more powerful nations such as Japan and the US. But this legitimate viewpoint rapidly degenerates to reveal that Mrs. Tan is merely acting: her lines are too pat, and echo the state’s discourse of Asian values. Given her tone of moral and intellectual superiority, it would seem that she has identified with the role assigned to her as a “graduate mother” and representative of the National Morals Council, and only too willingly repeats the ideology of her most
trusted patron, the ruling party. Even after Warren has sufficiently introduced her, she insists on advertising her qualifications and underlining her agreement with government ideology regarding family values and the role of the mother in re-producing a particular morality in society:

“If I may tell you a little bit about myself. (Pauses to make an impression.) I am 36, I have an Arts degree from NUS [National University of Singapore], and I worked for about seven to eight years doing personnel work in a multi-national corporation before I decided to give up my career for my family. . . . As a mother, I have to worry about my children and what kind of influence they are subjected to everyday.” (233)

Collins’ comment that Bugis World (and hence Singapore, which it resembles) is “like Disney World for grown-ups” is ironically acute, reflecting Singapore as fantasy-land (a copy of a copy of the US), a land of entertainment and make-believe. When Collins as civil servant adds that “adult Singaporeans are mature enough” for this fantasy-land, it is even more pithy commentary on the government’s desire for its people: that as adults, Singaporeans should play at being children (234).

The play’s protagonist, Warren, a television talk-show host who is a former actor in Chinese-language television drama, appears to be someone who packages and represents Singapore as image for television consumption, who controls the parameters of public discussion, and who regulates what is said and not said. Warren’s control over the show is metaphor for governmental and corporate regulation of identity and thought in Singapore.

Through Diana the Dreamgirl as drag queen chosen to “represent [her] country” at the opening of Bugis World, the lack of substance in Singapore national culture and its overwhelming concern with image and representation is linked to a sense of alienation, of a cultural disorientation that involves gender trouble. Diana claims to be “more of a woman” than Mrs. Tan. Though she cannot bear children unlike Mrs. Tan and thus lacks female ‘nature,’ she considers that she is more feminine and sensual: where she treats culture/appearance as the ‘real’ instead of ‘nature.’ But she conveniently switches over to her male voice when Collins makes an unwanted pass at her.
This confusion of appearance with reality is interpreted as a crisis in masculinity, where gender confusion is analyzed as being part of the problem. None of the characters act their sex. Collins mistakes Diana for a woman and himself gets terrified too easily: we are told that he "backs off immediately" when Diana rebuffs him (232). Warren appears to be the man of the hour but cannot control the conflict that erupts between Diana and Mrs. Tan. Then he is scolded by Sam[antha] Wong, who apparently is the 'real' man behind the show. Mrs. Tan is phallic mother. This is confirmed in Act I, scene iii where a Malay man places a call to the broadcasting station to protest the featuring of transvestites on a television forum. The man, standing for conventional, heterosexual and binaristic norms of gender, is displeased by what he views as an affront to masculine culture: "What bloody nonsense, is this?" he asks, "Men wearing women's clothing, putting on the makeup. It's very shameful." The caller is typically immediately concerned about image, that the incident may misrepresent the nation:

"If I am a visitor to Singapore and I put on the TV, I will think the country is all made up of such people. What kind of impression are you trying to give outsiders. How can you all like that?"

(241)

As this scene proceeds, it becomes clear that the caller's anxiety over gender liminality is at least partly caused by doubt over his own male power, an insecurity that arises from cultural disorientation, from being overwhelmed by modern life, especially by an elitist corporate culture that offers no space to those marginalized by class and language. Obviously a working-class man with little education in the nation's language of power, English, he feels his control ebb. Though a citizen rightfully concerned about the nation's values and its representation, he is unable to keep up with the urbane 'corporate' language of the television station's duty officer, who attends to his call. The duty officer wants to know his name so that she could "get the executive producer concerned to assess [the caller's] views and maybe table it for our next editorial policy meeting." But the man interprets this as corporate intimidation, responding:

Even the request for his name terrifies the caller into thinking it is a trick meant to trap him in some manner, a response that many Singaporeans will recognize as stemming from a fear that Big Brother is always watching.

The loss of the people’s power to represent themselves as well as their disorientation in late-capitalist culture is here gendered in the sub-plot as a lack in masculine identity. But this theme is also developed in the main plot, in the situation of the play’s protagonist. Warren, as the host of an important TV show “Today in Singapore,” conducted in English, the country’s dominant language of business and national culture, appears on-screen to be in control of representation, but this is a false image belying a real (male) impotence. The power to represent is actually in the hands of Sam(antha) Wong, Warren’s female boss and the show’s editor, who tells Warren what to represent and how to represent. Agitated over Warren’s loss of control over his guests, especially at his inability to control and appropriately frame Mrs. Tan’s discourse, she hauls Warren off during the interval to upbraid him for his loose control over his pen(is):

“You are wasting precious time on my show! The issue today is the opening of Bugis World, not the world according to Mrs. Betsy Tan. . . . This is prime-time TV. We hired you to host a current affairs show, not entertain morally constipated housewives.” (231)

She then proceeds to represent “real life” for him. It certainly doesn’t include the viewpoints of women confined to domestic spaces: “This is not one of your TV soap operas, Warren. This is real life. Get a grip on the subject.”

The problem with modernity, as Chiang sees it, is the lapse of traditional gender norms that leads to the emasculation of men, with social formations no longer guaranteeing power to the male. Nature (gender authenticity), it would seem, is betrayed and the bottom has dropped out of culture as women are
scandalously permitted to ascend to pinnacles of power. Accordingly, Sam(antha) Wong is depicted as a usurper of (male) power: in her "power dressing" consisting of men’s clothes (pants and jacket) and her identification with traditionally male values such as discipline, control and authority, she too is a cross-dresser, the inverse of Diana the Dreamgirl, the woman pretending to be a man. In fact, things have gone so awry in the modern world that it is supposedly only women today who can supply the models of masculinity: Sam(antha) urges Warren to "act more like a man. A man in charge . . . a hot-blooded male," and suggests that he be "like Oprah Winfrey, or, or Barbara Walters!"(238). The subtext is that if Winfrey and Walters are "professional broadcasters who just happen to be women," then, within modernity, representation, the making of meaning, is in the hands of women (who are pretending to be men), which can hardly result in anything other than producing ciphers out of ciphers. Chiang thereby suggests that the tendency in Singapore national life to emphasize image over substance, to substitute rhetoric for thought, and to negate the desiring self for the social self (as in the self being taken over by corporatization) has its roots in the erosion of traditional norms of gender identity--where gender, set adrift from its moorings in ‘nature,’ has become mere masquerade. Sam(antha), it would seem, has wrongfully appropriated male power in that she has shattered the integrity of the phallus as an iconic signifier, where the signified, power, is to be equated with that which signifies it, the penis. Alienating the signified from the signifier, the mind from the body, she devalues the master signifier by ‘mistaking’ it for a trope, as a signifier signifying something other than itself (of a gender-neutral power).

Sam(antha) literally lacks the master signifier but her admittance to her superior in jest in Act III, scene iii that she doesn’t “have any [balls] for him [Warren] to carry” is ironic because figuratively speaking, she does have the balls (power) that Warren covets (279). Despite the absence of the signifier, she nevertheless signifies masculinity and male desire.

If the signifier no longer signifies, then perhaps its absence (castration) will instantiate its meanings as desire attempts to substitute the signified for the missing phallus-signifier. So argues Chiang and castrates Warren. Warren is on a golf course when a Japanese man accidentally wounds his sexual organ
so that surgery is required. Fitted with an artificial and sexually non-functional penis, Warren’s body now catches up with his mind, bringing him to self-awareness of his cultural/social/psychological impotence. But the fake penis or male lack spurs him on to become the ‘man’ he never could have been earlier. As his male-to-female transsexual friend, Mirabella, notes, he is a more effective broadcaster after his sexual wounding: She judges him “much better than when I first saw you. Your style has changed. . . . It’s like you’re not so, not so, wide-eyed” (275). Warren concedes that he is “not such a greenhorn anymore,” explaining that “It’s not so frightening anymore. After what I went through, very few things faze me these days.” In Chiang’s fantasy, castration enables Warren to seize true representational power: he is promoted to editor and is now in control of the show, having taken over from Sam(antha). But more than that, he is now aiming at cultural integrity, at restoring substance to the representational image so that it is no longer a cipher signifying nothing but accurately represents the life-experiences of Singaporeans: he decides to devote one show to the gender problems of a marginalized section of society, transsexuals, an uncomfortable topic that many Singaporeans prefer to sweep under the carpet. Further, he tells the group of transsexuals invited on his show: “Be yourself. Be honest. And speak from the heart. Don’t be afraid” (283).

After this, the play degenerates into mere wish-fulfillment and reveals the impossible nature of Chiang’s phantasmatic cultural solution for Singapore. Warren’s new-found sense of male identity has revolutionary potential. But this potential is suppressed as Warren’s desire for social change (he wants, for instance, to change Singaporeans’ attitudes towards transsexuals) is represented as being in tandem with the values of the hegemonic order. Despite knowledge of his sexual impotence, the Singapore women’s media supposedly hails Warren as the nation’s “sexiest bachelor” and there are even rumors that “they,” the ruling People’s Action Party, are offering him a political position. Both of these scenarios are highly improbable within Singaporean culture: even if Singapore women had sufficient ironic humor to vote an impotent man as a sexy bachelor, it is highly unlikely that the ruling party, known for its conservative recruiting criteria, would approach a man who was publicly revealed on
national TV as sexually impotent, who is physically incapable of being a family man (the ideal citizen) and who has been associated with transsexuals, to join its ranks. Here, camp humor is a means of escaping from the knowledge of the impossibility of such an easy restoration of male power: laughter provides the distraction to reflective thought, while the unconscious awareness of the impossible fulfillment of desire for a coherent male identity is disavowed by displacing it into an ‘impossible’ hyperbolic rhetoric of camp.

Inadvertently, the play’s ‘unconscious’ shows that identification with the power of the ruling class contradicts ideals of masculine identity (and self-hood itself). Chiang tries to diagnose Singaporean cultural anomie as due to a ‘private’ failing of its citizens in realizing their self-hood, but the play consistently comes up against ‘public’ institutions/culture as that which hinder the achievement of subjectivity. Despite Warren’s sincere, ‘manly’ intentions to represent the plight of the transsexual on his TV show truthfully, to take up the power of representation, Warren has to steer the debate away from complaints regarding the state’s inconsistent attitude towards surgical sex-change (the Defense Ministry recognizes the sexual change but the Registry of Marriages does not) and direct it toward ‘safer,’ supposedly less political matters such as the discussion of love and romance. Again, though he is obviously attracted to the male-to-female transsexual Mirabella, Warren is unable to commit himself to her/him. When Mirabella asks him if he could have loved her despite her transsexuality, Warren answers vaguely, “Why is it so important to you? What difference can it make now?” (295). One is not sure if Warren is referring to his or Mirabella’s surgery, to his sexual impotence or to Mirabella’s revelation of this on television as cause of the impossibility of their relationship. Certainly, Warren’s romantic involvement with a publicly self-confessed transsexual would destroy his career as national broadcaster and end all access to (male) power.

Mirabella’s attraction to Warren is one of the means the play uses to eroticize masochism and the realization of one’s powerlessness. But it would also appear that Chiang introduced such a problematic situation as a love-relationship between Warren and the transsexual Mirabella only in order to deny its
possibility, to represent its ‘otherness’ to the ‘normal’ heterosexual relationship. But since his ‘other’
modern attitude towards transsexuals forbids him from verbalizing such a reactionary ideology, the
reasons for Warren’s rejection of Mirabella must remain vague. Chiang hence represents the question of
Singaporean men’s inability to accept transsexuals as a lack in male confidence, but yet he is unwilling
to allow Warren to marry Mirabella, indicating his own ambivalence towards such relationships. On the
second “Today in Singapore” shows featured in the play, Warren asks Lavinia, who is married to an
Englishman, if “Westerners are more open-minded about transsexuals.” Lavinia replies:

“Oh, definitely! Even if Asian men are understanding and supportive, very few will marry a sex-
change person. All my girlfriends in Hongkong who have [sic] Chinese boyfriends before their
operation always end up marrying Westerners. I think Chinese men are always very frightened
what other people will say about them.”

Mirabella adds:

“In Singapore, it’s the same. I tell you, these local men only know how to make jokes about us.
But deep down, I think they are scared. I think that men find it hard to accept us because they
don’t know where they stand with us. They can’t decide if we are men who enjoy acting like
women, or if we are really women.” (286)

The play then is ideologically split regarding attitudes towards transsexuals.

More than half the play takes place around transsexuals. Six scenes are centered around the group of
transsexuals who meet at the sex-surgery clinic, “Falcon Crest” in Batam, while Act IV, scene i features
a TV forum on transsexuality with these very same transsexuals, Mirabella and Lavinia (both male-to-
female transsexuals) and Edward (female-to-male transsexual) as participants. The prologue and Act IV,
scene ii comprise transvestite performances. The play however is only marginally about transsexuality.
Rather, transsexuality appears to be the vehicle Chiang uses to thematize and recover traditional
binaristic norms of gender identity as important aspects of cultural life. By featuring issues of gender
identity faced by transsexuals, the play deconstructs gender as sexed identity, as nature, only to reinforce
gender as cultural ‘norm.’ As the transsexuals plead for recognition of their ‘normality’ on the TV forum, they underline standards of gender as central to the formation of identity, and normalize the traditional binaristic code of gender. Mirabella for instance recounts that before her sex-change operation, she was “always feeling insecure . . . like [she] didn’t quite fit in.” So she spent “all her time and energy saving up enough for an operation which [she] believed would make [her] normal.” She says, “I wanted to be like everyone else . . . But now I am here, the last thing I want to be is a normal, average woman. I am terrified of becoming an average woman” (289-90). Far from eschewing conventional notions of female identity, her aspiration, it would seem, is to be ultra-feminine:

I want more than the average woman. More love, more attention. I want to be noticed, I want to be valued. I want so much to be respected. And that’s when I realise [sic] that things are going to be much harder after the sex-change. It’s no longer about daring to dress up in women’s clothes and facing the world. It’s about actually being a woman. And that’s something that goes beyond wearing a bra, beyond putting on make-up. (290)

The transsexuals equate gender with identity itself, with a form of “being,” and raise the question of gender in/authenticity and its impact on self-realization. According to Mirabella, gender is more than a matter of style, an exterior language of the body. Her reference to it is vague and rendered in negative terms, as something that “goes beyond wearing a bra, beyond putting on make-up.” But the critical reader can not only supply the elided content but also speculate about the reasons for Mirabella’s coyness in expression. Gender is here suggested to be a system of values, a code of behaviour and a prescribed set of emotions and attitudes, but it cannot be completely verbalized without making transparent the inadequacy of this definition of gender, its evasion of questions concerning the historical and cultural specificity/relativity of norms of gender and the constitutive links between structures of power and gender construction.

Chiang recognizes that in a modern, even postmodern society where traditional attitudes to gender identity are being dismantled on nearly all fronts, in the home as well as at the office, that public attitude
to transsexuality remains one of the last cultural sites within late capitalism where a residue of pre-modern ideologies of gender may be found and tapped. Accordingly, he exploits this as a means to reinstate traditional notions of gendered identity.

Conventional regard of transsexuality as a form of inauthentic being (where sexed identity does not conform to gender identity) relies on the belief that gender is nature, that it is grounded in the body and is not merely a cultural construct; that inappropriate gender expression is a betrayal of nature and a signifier of a lack in being. The play uses the modern discursive form of a plea for transsexuals' rights as a vehicle to remind audiences of the cultural code by which they represent transsexuals as the 'other' to society and to prosecute society for having become its own 'other.' The play pathologizes post-modern notions of gender identity by equating these with the gender dilemmas experienced by transsexuals/transvestites, whose 'perversity' is both ambivalently enjoyed and derided in the play.

This backhanded use of transvestitism/transsexuality to argue against gender confusion is in tandem with the play's deeply ambivalent attitude towards transsexuality/transvestitism. On the one hand, as during the TV forum show in Act IV, scene i, the play appears to be sympathetic to transsexuals. But, on the other, transsexuality and gender confusion are explored as a spectacle of the 'unnatural.' The transvestite act that opens the play depicts the monstrosity of gender masquerade: the "women" suddenly displaying their maleness brings to mind the petrifying potential of the phallic mother as well as the sexual threat posed by the wolf dressed as grandmother in Red Riding Hood. Diana the Dreamgirl's claim that she is "more of a woman" than Mrs. Tan is ridiculed by that which Mrs. Tan stands for, motherhood. But conversely, Mrs. Tan herself appears to be gender-trespassing, given her identification with the state's patriarchal authoritarianism. Transsexuality/transvestitism as monstrous perversity returns as Diana scares Cyril Collins off by suddenly switching from female to male voice. The scenes of the transsexual community at the sex-change clinic "Falcon Crest" emphasize this community's 'difference': Warren is startled by the earthiness of their scatological humor and their excessive sexuality. The transvestite miming in Act IV, scene ii of another hit-song by The Supremes, "Where
Did Our Love Go,” undermines the earnestness of Mirabella’s love for Warren, openly declared on live national TV, reducing it to a parody of love.

Transsexuals undergo a crisis in identity because their sex and gender identifications do not correspond. In a bid to resolve this ‘problem,’ they tend to make gender the supreme locus of subjectivity and are more reflexive about gender than many sections of society. This does not mean that they necessarily gravitate toward reactionary and antiquated gender norms. However, some of them do and Chiang features this type of transsexual as the standard and uses their ruminations about gender identity to validate an essentialist concept of gender based on outdated, pre-modern notions of male and female identity: where masculinity is equated with control, strength, discipline and the possession of power, while female identity is associated with qualities such as sympathy, a need for domination. In addition, women are supposedly objects rather than subjects of love: the playwright does not feel that his character Warren owes Mirabella any explanation about why he feels their love to be impossible.

Though Mirabella was a pre-operative male transsexual, she has the ‘feminine’ qualities of compassion and humor that attract Warren. In addition, s/he provides him with moral support at a difficult time, a quality that Warren’s girlfriend Rosalind lacks, who leaves him when she finds out about his sexual impotence. Camp allows Chiang to verbalize an outdated female saccharine view of romance. Mirabella delivers a lesson on true love to Warren:

“Hey, take one step at a time, okay? If it’s meant to be, it’s meant to be. (She smiles) Warren, if she really loves you, your little handicap won’t be very important. (Takes his hands and holds them over his heart) Here. Here is where it matters. This is the organ you should worry about.

(268)

Andrew Ross’ account of Western heterosexual and homosexual camp as a cultural phenomenon can be useful in approaching Chiang’s use of camp (“Uses of Camp” 54 -77). Ross suggests that camp is a response to disempowerment by marginalized groups but that its subversion can contain elements of the reactionary. Looking at both straight and gay camp, Ross says that such groups “lack inherited cultural
capital, and thus the accredited power to fully legitimize dominant tastes” and so parody their lack in a self-mocking abdication of claims to power (64). Thus American heavy metal groups critique middle-class masculinity, but displace it with a reactionary working-class sexism (74). Camp, he says, also has a necrophilic economy that resurrects deceased art forms to oppose bourgeois culture (68). Chiang’s camp rendition of Singapore Chinese culture as a hybrid mix of working-class ethnic culture, English and the bawdy humor of the sexually marginalized subverts the state’s elitist ideology of Singapore’s Confucianist Asian identity but not to the extent of interrogating its emphasis on family values and strict heterosexual, phallogocentric gender codes. A ‘dead’ local culture of transvestitism that had been destroyed in the 1980s with the redevelopment of Singapore’s famous Bugis Street is explored nostalgically here but as metaphor of an energetic and unpretentious, now lost cultural hybridity. While it contrasts with the manners of bourgeois culture, it also gestures with desire at suburban values. Mirabella’s and Lavinia’s gender crossings coincide with their linguistic crossing of Chinese with English idiom. When Lavinia asks Mirabella if she should wear make-up during her surgery, Mirabella replies:

“Darling. During the operation, you are going to be unconscious, with one leg pointing to Singapore and the other leg pointing to Penang. Who will have time to look at your face?” (243)

But following their operation (the loss of hybridity), they settle into their fixed roles as women. Camp permits Chiang to re-introduce (while ironizing) vanishing Western suburban values such as those embodied in The Supremes’ repertoire. Perhaps we are meant to laugh at the first scene between Warren and his girlfriend Rosalind in Act I, scene iii. Warren comes to call on her, tired after the show and depressed over his female boss’ ill treatment of him. Rosalind is in her apartment, “dressed in a silk nightdress and seated on the sofa and reading a magazine,” while “classical music is playing.” She apologizes for looking “such a mess” whereupon “he wraps his arms around her and kisses her.” He says, “I really needed to see you,” to which she responds: “Oh, my poor honey boy! (Pats him on the head and kisses him on the nose). Just sit here and relax a bit while I microwave the nasi briyani” (239).
But when Warren rejects Mirabella, it is at least partly because they can never hope to enjoy such a ‘normal’ conjugal relationship as this.

**Lest the Demons Get to Me (1993) by Russell Heng Hiang Khng**

Heng’s play tries to deal with the contradictions that the currently dominant Singapore ‘Asian’ values pose to ‘Western’ norms of masculine identity, which had been invested during the earlier period. This inter-cultural conflict appears to have caused some male anxiety (which this and other plays document). The inability to be open and above-board about one’s desires, and the consequence of this dishonesty in living one’s life against one’s desire are contradictions that interpellate Singaporean men as lacking in courage and self-determination. The state’s exhortation to Singaporeans to assume their Asian/Chinese/ethnic identities opens up more cultural spaces for male doubt. It splits the trajectory of male identifications, placing Singapore men in a quandary as to whether they should internalize ‘Western’ or ‘Asian’ norms of masculine identity. This endlessly defers the attainment of an integrated self-hood that is an essential myth of male power. In addition, ‘Asian’/‘Chinese’ norms of male identity, viewed as “traditional” and racially authentic, conflict with modern (and post-modern) norms of male identity (that deconstruct racial and gender authenticity), threatening Singapore men’s sense of their cultural appropriateness, of their historic timeliness.

These East versus West cultural contradictions also raise the question of authenticity in being (yet another value related to masculinity). This has thrown up the problem of seeming versus being. There is also concern about the location of cultural/ethnic/gender authenticity: is it in the body or in the mind? International perception of Singapore as politically authoritarian, and the state’s linking of this authoritarianism to Asian/Chinese identity have also demanded that resistance to the state and the ethical appropriateness of asserting one’s individual rights be theorized, especially since male subjects’ submission to political authoritarianism contradicts traditional, Western norms of masculinity and male power. The transvestite/transsexual is, on the one hand, the perfect figure for the culturally-conflicted
Singaporean facing a crisis in male identity: he is the *in-between* person searching for wholeness and purity of being. The male transvestite/transsexual is also the figure *par excellence* of resistance, of the hysterical who refuses the desire of the Other (the Symbolic/dominant Order). S/he is also poised to provide a critique of conventional masculinity from the ‘outside’ without entirely stepping out of the masculine arena altogether. Transvestitism/transsexuality thus is the condensed metaphor of all the above-named sources of male anxiety as well as the metaphor of resistance and the vehicle for exploring cultural hybridity, while cutting women out of the equation.

The use of transvestitism as metaphor then must be read as a strategy of generating an alternative masculinity without having to resort to a feminist critique of traditional norms of masculinity. The latter poses the danger of deconstructing masculinity altogether as a power structure overdetermined by racial, gender and (hetero)sexual oppression. This reading of transvestitism in the play must turn however on proving that the male transvestite/transsexual occupies, within the text, a masculine subject position and economy of identifications and desire, even if untraditional, rather than a female position.

The protagonist of the two-act play, KC, begins as a male transvestite/pre-operative transsexual who, by the second act, becomes a “real woman” (34) by surgical transformation. It is evident from the beginning of the play that KC takes up a position as the ‘other’ to the Singaporean male that does not quite involve a crossing over to the female side of the gender divide. KC views himself as “honest” in contrast to the typical hypocritical Singaporean male and, in this, the text’s attempt to resolve contradictory norms of masculinity is inscribed on KC. The protagonist’s ‘other’ is his lover, Chuck/Chak, a seemingly bisexual Singapore man who leads a secret double life. Chuck is married but seeks out male transvestite prostitutes such as KC. That he is suspected to be one of Singapore’s ruling elite, possibly a “civil servant,” “one of Singapore’s four Rhodes scholars,” or a doctor, lawyer or professional (32), allows the audience to read him as signifier of a dominant ‘national’ masculinity that the writer is placing under suspicion, so that the liminal (the bisexual) here represents a mainstream sexuality and masculinity.
The play never reveals Chuck’s professional identity but the audience could also read him as an agent with Singapore’s Internal Security Department: he is “built like a rugby player,” suspected to be a civil servant and scholar except he carries a pager, and appears unusually adept with security matters (he uses only public phones and typed letters to communicate with KC, changes his typewriter when KC points out that its “Capital C’s are chipped in the middle,” parks several blocks away when visiting KC, screens his conversations with KC and is well-informed about international politics).

Even after surgery turns him physically into a woman, KC is represented in the play as a male on the fringes of masculinity rather than outside it. In the beginning of the play, he identifies with the space between male and female, as a male transvestite rather than as a woman. He loved working Bugis Street (now defunct, but once Singapore’s haven for transvestite/transsexual prostitutes) as a transvestite prostitute because “We just had to be ourselves to be happy. And Bugis Street is where we can be our campy best and people leave you alone because it is expected of you” (34). He recalls too that as a youth, he used to stand in front of a mirror and “do what had always come naturally to me: play at being a woman” (my emphasis, 38). His sex-change is necessitated by the economics of the sex trade and the practical realities of living within heterosexual structures of power rather than a desire to be a woman: “The most agonising part [about the sex-change] is being sure yourself that you want this final irreversible crossover from one sex to another,” he muses (34). He makes the final decision on the advice of a “sister,” another male transvestite, who says the sex-change will give him more options, such as allowing him to marry or at least be provided for as someone’s mistress, and to give up the insecure sex-trade (which gets more insecure as one turns 40). KC’s identification with ‘female’ subjectivity is restricted by the play to costume, to his penchant for women’s clothing, and to his identification with a fictional character from Chinese opera, Madame Chin, whose theme song “The Final Night of Madame Chin” he sings throughout the play. Chuck offers a reading of Madame Chin’s ‘female’ subjectivity as belonging to that of “sentimentality,” as the awareness “about everything being so mutable” (44), but this is a male interpretation of female subjectivity. KC’s identification with “Madame Chin” is thus a male
fantasy about female identity which the play uses, as I will show, to construct an alternative mode of (male) selfhood that will deliver Singapore men from crises in hegemonic masculinities.

In the play, KC is not so much the female figure that resists dominant male constructions of identity as the male hysterical who refuses to answer to the desire of the Big (Br)Other (the Symbolic Order) in constituting himself as male. In being the apparent opposite of Chuck, whose male lack in a heterosexual hegemonic masculinity has been exposed, KC is the 'real' man: he thinks of himself as honest, as courageous in his sexual frankness, and he is the agent able to turn powerful men into figures of impotence. For instance, as KC's family repeatedly points out, his father's masculinity depends on the affirmation of his son's masculinity. As KC says, "God, all these years, my family never lets me forget that what I am [a male transvestite prostitute and transsexual] can kill my father if he finds out" (35). Not surprisingly, given the play's semiotics, KC's father dies when KC undergoes his sex-change operation. KC as transsexual is also in the position to deny his father his masculinity (his patriarchal identity) by refusing to perform the funeral rites for his father as his only son. In addition, KC succeeds in reducing Chuck to a position of powerlessness: at the beginning of the play, Chuck has the upper hand over KC with his superior knowledge, but gradually KC exposes Chuck as society's victim, who lives in fear of people finding out his secret.

Through Chuck, Heng deconstructs the national, dominant heterosexual masculinity as a mere semblance of male power. Though Chuck may have the accouterments of power, he is not in charge of his own desire, having to sneak around to meet with KC. This masculinity is further subverted through the figure of KC, where the norms of the national code itself, especially its insistence on honesty and courage, are exposed as originally excessive, so that the 'real man' can only be a male transvestite/transsexual. The play then proceeds to bring the audience to its awakening to an alternative masculinity: that 'true' masculinity resides in men's recognition of their lack, their impotence, and their awareness of the contradictory nature of their desire, which sometimes answers to the desire of the big 'Other' and sometimes does not. According to the play's ideology, real 'manliness' as that required for
survival in the modern world sometimes involves dissembling, dishonesty, and a lack in courage. The play suggests this by first representing KC as the marginalized 'other' to Chuck as national male figure, and then revealing KC’s ‘otherness’ to be the same: KC’s self-declared honesty has its own limitations, making him similar to Chuck. KC’s verbal gesture that “People like us [male transvestites/transsexuals] who parade on Bugis Street for all to see are some of the very few honest people there are” is ironized by his physical gesture as mentioned in the stage instructions: “(At this point, takes off bra and removes tissue padding).” Self-ironically, KC then adds “Well, perhaps not that honest,” as if any underscoring of the message were necessary (32). Later on in Act I, scene ii, KC reveals that, once a month, possibly over several years, he has been visiting his family, masquerading as a straight man so as to protect his father from knowledge of his secret life as a transvestite prostitute. Pretending to have come from Bangkok where he supposedly works at a Thai branch office of his company, he even supplies Thai fruits in season, bought at Singapore markets, flaunts a Bangkok Airport tag on his suitcase and puts up with his father’s exhortations to avoid the charms of Thai women! This grand subterfuge makes him no different from Chuck, whom he puts down for his lack of courage and honesty in leading a double life. In the second act, when Chuck upbraids him for not daring to reveal his transsexuality to an American pen-pal, Jeff Slater, who has proposed to KC, believing him to be a woman, KC comes more and more to resemble Chuck. Chuck’s comment to KC shows up traditional (Western) male virtues such as honesty and courage as phantasmatic, involving a mere “strike[ing of] a posture” (50):

... deep down you know that you are no more honest than any one of us. You sneer at us for our lack of courage ... we lead lives of secrecy because we fear the consequences of others knowing about our secret. But you should not sneer at us and now you understand why; because, at last you also know what it is like to count the cost of somebody knowing your secret. (51)

In the final conversation between KC and Chuck, the playwright rehearses exceptions to honesty. Among them, the fourth “exception to honesty” is that the truth is “not always apparent,” while the fifth exception is that “it is sometimes beyond our means to know enough about something to be honest about
it” (52). Though KC ironizes these exceptions by being less than serious about them, the play’s dismantling of KC’s own claim to honesty and its exposure of honesty as an inadequate means of coping with the realities of life, leads the audience to accept this ‘post-modern’ attitude toward honesty and truth. Nevertheless, as in Chiang’s play, the ironizing reveals the playwright’s ambivalence towards his ideology.

The economy of desire and identification in the play works towards eroticizing and validating an alternative masculinity: one that comes to terms with lack, which recognizes that even the strongest man is a victim of the Big (Br)‘Other’ (the Symbolic Order). At the beginning of the play, KC as the character the audience identifies with and in whom desire is invested, provides a subject position for the audience to occupy, a site from which the playwright as the hidden “speaking subject of the discourse,” the producer of meaning, directs the audience’s identifications and its desire. Through KC, the playwright gets the audience to recast itself by identifying with KC’s many areas of lack: his lack in masculinity/gender coherence, his difference/lack in economic ability, class identity (he comes from a middle-class family but is now a prostitute and he went to the prestigious London School of Economics only to drop out after three years), his lack of cultural purity (he speaks reflexively in English, and sings in Chinese, but he cannot communicate with his mother in her dialect). The audience as the “spoken subject of the discourse,” the projected viewers, in this case, English-educated and Westernized Chinese Singaporeans, identify with his lack of power: he cannot be himself, having always to resort to disguise and masquerade; his desires (for sexual satisfaction, familial and social acceptance) always run foul of the demands of the dominant ideology and hence cannot be answered. The audience also identifies with KC’s desires: those named above, as well as his desire for an open, honest society that does not curb individual desire. The audience identifies with KC’s insistence on openness and honesty and invests it with desire because in it the audience sees a possible means of overthrowing the center and the position of lack/marginalization it has identified with. At various points in the play, the audience identifies with KC as the figure of resistance who will deliver them from their domination. The audience also views
Chuck with the ambivalent mix of desire and contempt that KC has for his lover. Identifying with and desiring like KC, the audience is set up to desire Chuck's position of power in society. Chuck has money, class and knowledge, the rudiments of power. As a possible agent with Singapore's Internal Security Department, he is a figure at the center of the nation's authority, power and surveillance.

Chuck hence has everything that KC (and the audience by identifying with KC) lacks but desires in a man. Chuck suffers lack in only one respect: he is unable/unwilling to be open and honest about his bisexuality. Although we have contempt for his seeming cowardice, Chuck is set up as a figure of mystery in the play: the one towards whom desire and curiosity are directed. Increasingly, however, as the play proceeds, the audience moves from identifying with KC and desiring what he desires to identifying with Chuck and desiring either to be or have him. In this manner, the play carries out several of its ideological projects. One of these is to theorize resistance away. The play starts by investing the audience with desire for resistance, but works towards invalidating that resistance. KC as the initial "spoken subject of the discourse" champions resistance against the heteronormative hegemonic order and insists on his desire but when he is himself unable to live up to his own tenets regarding honesty and courage, the audience starts to dis-identify with him. This dis-identification is sealed in Act II, scene ii when KC confronts his mother and sister. Initially, the audience identifies and sympathizes with KC's belief that it was his parents who caused his gender and sexuality problems and it perceives the consequent lack of family acceptance as a grave injustice done to KC. But in this scene, KC's mother and sister point out that KC cannot blame everything (his dropping out of university and his prostitution) on his family, so that KC loses his status as hero of resistance and as the audience's male ego-ideal.

When Chuck points out the similarity between KC and himself, in that both lack the courage to be open and honest about their sexuality, and that KC's policy of openness is not even a viable option in modern society with its heteronormative bias, the audience shifts identification to Chuck. The lack that KC saw in Chuck, he now sees reflected in himself, and KC moves from a desiring position towards Chuck to that
of identification. This switch is completed by the time he takes Chuck’s advice to attend his father’s funeral.

Throughout much of the play, KC appears to be the “speaking subject of the discourse,” the producer of meaning: initially, he controls the audience’s gaze and his castrating gaze inspires lack in the audience. He narrativises, reads and judges Chuck as dishonest and cowardly, and his father as the impotent patriarch (who is unable to stop his only son from becoming a woman). But at the end of the play, the “speaking subject” talks through Chuck, retrospectively ironizing its earlier masquerade as KC. This changeover is crucial for the play’s ideological project in debunking resistance and maintaining the status quo: by first arousing desire in the audience for resistance and then revealing its lack (its impracticality), the audience is convinced both intellectually and emotionally of the futility of resistance, and its desire is instead transferred to the now perceived need to compromise on one’s desire and to negotiate with the hegemonic order, as Chuck does.

Both the object of desire and the subject/s of identification in this play are male. The alternative masculinity that Chuck stands for has been elaborated and eroticized through KC’s desire for him. If we read him as a government spy, or even merely as a civil servant or a professional, Chuck is a figure who undercuts the national hegemonic heterosexual masculinity of the establishment and shows its linkages to values such as honesty, courage, familial (patriarchal) control, sexual ‘normality’ and (authoritarian) power to be merely an appearance, a masquerade. KC as Chuck’s seeming opposite is the figure of resistance to national masculinity, who is eventually and surprisingly recuperated by the play as Chuck’s double in order to vindicate Chuck’s offer of an alternative masculinity for Singaporean men, which excludes the need for resistance against the hegemonic order.

Heng’s offering of an alternative masculinity turns on a particular theory of desire and resistance that the play dramatizes. As both KC’s and Chuck’s experiences show, desire is often conflicted, located at contradictory and multiple sites, hence problematizing resistance (an insistence on one’s desire, against the desire of the big Other). For instance, KC is aware of his father’s impotence as patriarch and desires
to throw away his patrilineal heritage (he wants to be his father’s daughter, not his son) as well as to insist on his identity as a “real woman” but he also loves his father and wants to honor his memory. Now a post-operative female, this places him in a dilemma over whether he should attend his father’s funeral dressed as a woman and thus demand public recognition of his female identity, or appear dressed (disguised) as a man in order to perform the son’s last rites for the father. Similarly, Chuck as a bisexual, desires a regular family life (hence his marriage) but also desires a same-sex relationship, necessitating subterfuge and duplicity if he is to have both his desires met under the hegemonic order. Masquerade is also essential for Chuck (as a bisexual) if he is to attain his other desires such as professional fulfillment, economic success and power: revelation of his sexuality would jeopardize his chances in a heterosexual male-dominated culture. Chuck’s ‘alternative masculinity’ shows that male power can coexist in the same subject with male impotence, that masquerade and deception are not indices of male lack (of cowardice) but rather are means for survival. The play also invalidates resistance against the hegemonic order as unnecessary, ‘excessive,’ with KC’s male hysteria being the signifier of (Western) resistance as ‘over-the-top,’ excessive, campy. Why bother to resist, the play asks, when one’s desires and identifications are conflicted, being both in tandem with the Symbolic Order and against it too. It suggests instead negotiation with the Symbolic Order and masquerade, both negotiation and masquerade now being recuperated as masculine values since they are the means to power.

If fantasy is the screen against the threat to the subject posed by the desire of the big Other (Zizek, “Chez Vuoi?” 118), this play fantasizes that the desire of the big Other is itself conflicted, lacking coherence, thereby permitting conflicted identifications and desires to occur in the formation of subjectivity. Though this may make us all victims of the big Other, this theoretical fantasy of the contradictory desires of the big Other also allows the subject space for maneuver. This ‘theory’ of the big Other (of Chinese culture, in this case) is illustrated in the play’s ‘explanation’ of KC’s transsexuality. KC’s parents apparently attached excessive value to having a son, which led to guilt over their good fortune when KC was born. Thus when KC fell ill, they immediately consulted a Chinese
fortune-teller rather than a doctor in order to interpret the desire of the gods. Their guilt led to their easy acceptance of the fortune-teller's reading of the desire of the gods because the fortune-teller was only reading their own desire back to them: he told them that KC's parents had cheated destiny by having a son and that the "demons" would be out to get him. His advice: that the parents dress their son as a female in order to deceive the "demons," especially on festival days. The "demons," of course, are only an outward projection of the parents' own internal fears and guilt. In running away from these "demons," they, however, run straight into their arms. Dressing up their son as a daughter, they 'cross-dress' their fears as their desire, leading KC to mistakenly identify with his parents' fears (the flip side of their desire) rather than with their desire. KC, delivered from culpability for his identifications and desires (he is a victim of contradictions in the desire of the big Other), is then ethically free to resort to masquerade and appearances in order to attain the objects of his desire.

KC's gender cross-dressing is also a cultural cross-dressing: his problems of ethnic identification are interpreted as problems of gender identification in that the former have given rise to a crisis in masculine identity. His transsexuality is represented in the play as originating from the excessive value and desire attached to males in Chinese culture. His identification with women is tantamount to a rejection of the desire of the Chinese patriarchy (he refuses to take up the mantle as his father's son). KC's language of resistance as transsexual is set up as the Western language of liberalism confronting the language of a 'Chinese' 'communitarianism': he prioritizes his individual rights over those of social obligations, telling his sister, "If the old folks cannot accept me as I am then they have no business demanding that I have a duty to them!" (49). KC's dilemma of self-interest (Western) versus family interest and the demands of filial piety (Chinese) is metaphor for the dilemma of the nation in having to choose between its Western colonial heritage of democracy and liberalism and its supposed Eastern 'ethnic' heritage of authoritarianism and communitarianism, where 'ethnic' heritage is conceptualized as one's patriarchal (blood) heritage. As the play reveals, not only do Singapore's multiple cultural heritages threaten the formation of a coherent (male) subjectivity (where masculinity implies integrity, the possession of an
unfragmented self-hood), but the state’s insistence on prioritizing the nation’s Asian/Chinese cultural heritage also poses problems to male identity: firstly, it subordinates its male subjects’ desires with its insistence and dominates their will; then it wants them to identify with a culture that they have already been taught to view, through the spectacles of modernity (or colonial knowledge), as impotent and primitive. KC’s father, the signifier of Chinese patriarchal power, is shown to lack power and, as head of the family, he has no familial control (he is unable to make his son take up his patriarchal legacy, even watching speechless as his adolescent son wears his mother’s bra and cavorts in front of the mirror). KC recalls that when he used to mime the heroines in Chinese opera, going against his father’s objections, “there was nothing he [the father] could do about it” (37). KC’s desire too runs the route of Western masculinity: “KC wants a man . . . who writes good English, even if it is American English” (35). In the play, modernity is represented as that (surgical) cut that annihilates Chinese patriarchal culture’s claims to power/masculinity. KC’s transsexuality does not threaten his father’s male identity as completely as does his sex-change operation. In fact, his father dies almost immediately after his son’s operation so that KC’s figurative claim that “what I am can kill my Father if he finds out” (35) becomes literal truth and suggests that the father’s male identity was a fragile one, dependent on his fathering male progeny: where masculinity is a meaning conferred retrospectively through its reproduction, the original that exists only through its copies. Chinese norms of gender identity and the roles assigned to the sexes in family ideology are rendered meaningless and impotent however when modern science and technology can so easily reverse nature’s handiwork: even if KC finally decides to perform the last rites for his father as his only son, the gesture of filial piety would be mocked by modernity. Modernity kills aspirations to Chinese ethnic identity because, the play suggests, traditional Chinese culture turns on sex/gender norms that modernity has already deconstructed. It can only be kept alive as dead tradition, as form without content, as empty ritual, as pretense or masquerade, the substitute-rem(a)inder of the original lack.
Heng rejects readings of Chinese culture as traditional, as belonging to the past and as pre-colonial. Instead, he redefines Chinese male identity as post-colonial and modern, aware and accepting of its lack, its colonization/castration, but as nevertheless alert to the attaining of power. Here, being ‘Chinese’ involves masquerading, being Chinese but pretending to be white or vice versa if and when necessary, a cross-cultural passing that is supposedly as easy as passing off one’s name: Chuck’s Chinese name, “Chak,” passes as the Americanized “Chuck,” while “Kim Choon” is shortened to the gender/ethnic neutral name of “Kim” or “KC.” In contrast to the new post-colonial Chinese male identity, Western masculinity, its ‘other,’ is represented as ignorant of its inadequacies, as being delusionary, involving a false recognition of sexual/cultural power. This, despite the Western male’s appearance of rippling muscles and greater body mass as compared to the Chinese man’s smaller physique: KC for instance intends to dupe Slatter, the American hamburger cook with that “firm Caucasian angular jawline and the greenish hint of unshaven stubble” (42) and rugged good looks into marrying a man, while the latter foolishly prides himself on having nabbed a nice, docile Oriental wife!

The play’s offering of the solution of masquerade to conflicts in identification and desire is made against that of resistance, of fighting for cultural change: it deconstructs the discourse of identity politics by rendering identity itself as conflicted. It also rejects another possible solution to Singaporeans’ problem of West/East conflicts posed by their cultural pluralism: that of inhabiting a third, in-between, space between the two cultural poles, a cultural hybridity where one is neither Eastern nor Western but both at once and neither. This possible option is suggested at the opening of the play and then shut off forever through the metaphor of the historic closing of Bugis Street, Singapore’s ‘red-light’ district for transvestite/transsexual entertainment, where KC works his sex trade. This hybrid model of cultural/gender identity is the return of that which is repressed by the state’s dominant discourse of national identity, which turns on ethnic essentialisms concerning East and West. It is ideologically necessary for Heng to foreclose this option of an in-between space (to wish it away) in order to validate his solution of masquerade and negotiation with the hegemonic order (where one alternates
schizophrenically between fixed identities as Asian/Western, male/female, gay/straight): hybridity eschews polarity, mocks boundaries and calls for a new epistemology: it screams for resistance against the hegemonic order, which does not answer to Heng’s desire.

But, as the play indicates, this inhabiting of an in-between cultural/gender space must necessarily precede Heng’s solution: it is the condition making the latter possible of attainment. One cannot be Western-educated and play at being Asian/Chinese when the occasion calls for it, or be homosexual in one’s private life and appear to be heterosexual in public, or be a woman sometimes and a man at other times (as KC tries to be) unless one’s identifications and desires have run through the spectrum of all poles of identity: that one has already been subjectivated as culturally and sexually hybrid in the first place. Hence, Heng’s imaginary resolution of Singaporean identity problems insists that this in-between space must both appear (figured by KC’s transsexuality) and then disappear (when Bugis Street is closed, economically necessitating KC’s sex change). KC’s experience of transsexuality is the utopian fantasy of cultural hybridity that is remembered with nostalgic desire, and then banished from memory. He thinks of his days as a transvestite prostitute on Bugis Street as his happiest. As a transvestite, KC could be “campy,” be a man playing (parodying, caricaturing) at being a woman, so that he is neither all-woman or all-man, but both and neither: the authenticity of his identity defined by this gender/sex inauthenticity. The Singapore government’s recent attempts to push forth an Asian/Chinese identity, its reneging on a previous discourse of East-West cultural hybridity promoted in the 1960s and 1970s, is metaphorically displaced in the play as that of the closing of Bugis Street in the 1980s (a reference to a real event) which ends KC’s transsexual gender/sex hybridity. KC is forced to eschew hybridity just as Singaporeans were forced to decide in the 1980s and 1990s whether they were Asian/Chinese or Western. Symptomatically, the end of transsexuality/hybridity is greeted in the play with resignation, and desire for a utopian cultural/gender hybridity is offered only as nostalgia, as desire for that which is lost forever, which covers over the possibility of resistance. The play opens with KC mourning the loss of Bugis Street: “Well, we have come to the final night; the final night of Bugis Street! God, what a party
it was! You should have seen the people who turned up and the things we did." KC’s ‘sister,’ fellow-transsexual Anita Sarawak tells him:

“KC, we are going to make the most of this night and after that, we will not talk about it any more. There’s no point looking back for we are never going to get another place like this street again, ever! Not in Singapore. Not in the whole world!” (29-30)

With surgery, KC is cut off from hybridity and will henceforth have to choose between the two gender poles of male/female (so that surgery is a condensed metaphor in the play, signifying the cut of modernity as mentioned earlier but also referring to the state as castrator since the closing of Bugis Street was a government action). Wittingly or unwittingly, the play shows that lack of cultural/ethnic/gender purity is not a threat to coherent identity nor would it generate anxiety over male identity: it only becomes a problem when the option of a hybridized identity is foreclosed. KC faces identity dilemmas only after his sex-change: as a transsexual, he would not have had a problem performing funeral rites for his father as his only son; but now that he is a “real woman,” he becomes inauthentic both as daughter and as son. The play’s ending is symptom of the untenability of Heng’s solution of masquerade and compromise: although the audience knows that KC must turn up at his father’s funeral dressed as a man, in keeping with the advice Chuck gives him as the “speaking subject of the discourse,” the play cannot show the sex-changed KC in male dress because, with his new woman’s body, he can no longer convincingly pass as a man. Hence, the play ends with KC in the process of deciding.

The movement of the play from parodic comedy to absurd theater and its rejection of dramatic realism are also symptoms of the limits of Heng’s ideological solution of negotiating with the hegemonic order. Fixed categories of identity (gender/race/ethnicity/sexuality/nationality) are mocked and this subversion enjoyed in the comedic first section of the play. KC’s Malay male transsexual friend “Anita Sarawak” (named after Singapore’s most successful female singer/performer, who is Malay) sings in Chinese but doesn’t know the meaning of the lyrics. KC considers Anita his “sister”; KC himself spouts Western liberal philosophy and punctuates it with renditions of a song from the
Chinese opera. KC, playing up his woman's identity, switches from talking like a prostitute to thinking like a schoolgirl in love, and desiring like a yuppie woman who wants a man with "wide-ranging interests . . . Books, the theater, music, both pop and classical, and politics" (31), all the while undressing to show that s/he is not a woman. Finally, visiting his family, KC confounds geographical/national boundaries by pretending he has come from Thailand. In KC's transsexuality, gender cross-dressing intersects with cultural and class cross-dressing, and hybridity of all forms: aside from the class and cultural crossings already mentioned, he is the Chinese, cross-dressed opera singer waiting to marry a straight American man; he is the Third World urban proletariat (as prostitute) with dreams of becoming a First World suburban housewife.

But in Act II, the comedic and revolutionary aspect of this post-modern approach to identity is reinterpreted as the tragedy always-already inherent in post-modern identity. This sense of the tragic condition of human beings inevitably doomed to alienation by the Symbolic Order, an epistemology institutionalized by the theater of the absurd, allows Heng to invalidate resistance as futile. It also helps him to push forward his suggestion of negotiation with society's codes: at least then we can attain satisfaction of some of our desires and compromise without the hindrance of subscribing to 'idealistic' notions such as truth to self, freedom, etc. What is hidden in this move from comedy to tragedy is the playwright's role as manipulator of meaning, where the tragic sense is evoked only because we are now in an arena other than that of post-modernity. The sex-change, via which KC moves from a liminal space of identity to that of fixed boundaries, is the dramatic ploy that Heng absolutely requires in order to turn KC from an empowered figure of resistance to life's tragic victim, to carry off his ideological project of discrediting and hystericalizing resistance against the hegemonic order.

The play is also structured as a monologue with KC the only figure on stage, addressing the audience with meditations on his life. The other characters are restricted to representation as disembodied voices that KC calls up as he remembers past and recent events. By staying away from representational realism, the playwright, in theorizing resistance, elides the problem of society's responsibilities to the individual.
For instance, KC is able to represent his monthly visits to his family in the comic mode via narrative recollection and thereby maintain his position of power as resistance figure in the first act. But the actual staging of this scene would have revealed instead the site of powerlessness from which KC speaks his resistance, and the cruelty of society’s demands where these force him to take up a subjectivity that he cannot identify with. It is only by withholding dramatic realism that the play can represent KC’s resistance as excessive, as hysterical. We are also never shown KC working as a transvestite prostitute on Bugis Street. This would have revealed the depth of his marginalization by society and evoked audience pity for him. KC’s difference would have also hindered a largely-heterosexual audience’s identification with him, which the play depends on for its ideologization. KC’s appearance as center figure on stage belies his true position in society as a marginalized subject who lacks power and voice.

Identifications, says Fuss, involve colonization/appropriation of the ‘other’s difference, where the ‘other’s subjectivity is reduced to being the same as that of the self (Identification 1-14). By making it such that KC appears to be ‘everyman’ (he has boyfriend/girlfriend problems like the rest of us, differences of opinion with his family; he cannot always identify with society’s desires, yet yearns for social/familial acceptance), by forgetting that s/he is the ‘other,’ the Singapore audience can identify themselves with him/her as a tragic victim of society, and cover over their culpability as social agents in reproducing and supporting the structures of power that marginalize this ‘other,’ as well as their social responsibility to change/resist the existing order. The ‘over-Westernized’ Singaporean who has cathected Western norms and is unable to identify with the state’s privileging of ‘Asian’ values cannot be likened to a transvestite/transsexual whose gender identity does not match society’s sex-ing of his body unless one views the state’s discourse as a body that one must inhabit. The play also equates Chuck’s dishonesty with KC’s. But KC’s dilemmas about truth-telling are caused by the temporal split in his/her sexed/gendered subjectivity: she cannot confess to Slatter that she was a man because she is no longer one. Moreover, KC had to dissemble to his father because the latter’s life was in the balance.
Chuck on the other hand has no such valid excuses in pretending to a straight sexuality that he does not possess.

The tranvestite/transsexual is used in this play to convey the repressed (of liberalism) returning under cover of a non-censorable term. Transvestite/transsexual gender-crossing and subversion of fixed gender categories are strategies by which the Singaporean tries to imagine alternative subject positions and value systems while bypassing or at least camouflaging the Western discourse of liberalism. Within the current political situation, cultural texts that openly spout liberal ethics are liable to be read by Singaporean audiences as well as by the state as a capitulation to Western imperialism, as a betrayal of one’s racial/ethnic identity. The transvestite protagonist, KC, gets away with speaking the tenets of liberalism (asserting one’s individual rights against social and familial norms, being true to one’s principles, etc.) because he is seen to arrive at his liberalism via his marginalized sexuality rather than through a fascination with Western culture. Thus, his championing of his individuality and his prioritizing of the interests of the self over those of society are received with sympathy as being akin to that of a visually-challenged or movement-challenged person pleading for a new social space for himself.

In this manner, too, a deep rebellion against society’s central values can be covered over to appear non-threatening to society, to be viewed as something that only affects the margins of the nation. Transsexuality provides the Singaporean with a language of escape from repressed desires such as that for Western culture and post-modern hybridity as well as from repressed cultural knowledge. KC as transsexual is allowed to inhabit a transgressive cultural space from where his/her critique of Chinese culture is able to get past the censorship authorities of the symbolic order by masquerading as a contingent and exceptional response. KC’s indeterminate gender identity mocks and exposes the inability of Chinese family culture to function as anything more than empty form in its encounter with ‘modernity.’ Though she is a post-operative woman, KC is importuned by his mother to return home dressed as a man in order to perform the funeral rites for his father as the latter’s only son. KC’s
insistence that he is no longer his father’s son but is now his sixth and youngest daughter does not matter: social custom must be observed, regardless of the lack of real content inside the form.

Within the play’s semiotics, the male transvestite/transsexual as the ‘other’ represents the demon (of Western values) in Singaporean subjectivity that needs to be exorcised, that is, recalled and then banished, which testifies to Singaporean ambivalence towards liberalism and democratic culture, to a split in their desire. Not accidentally, in Heng’s play, the male transsexual protagonist is one who has literally identified with the desire of the “demons” in wanting to be a woman despite his possession of a male body. KC’s transsexuality involves the return of repressed demons, those which his parents sought escape from.

The play itself signals the intellectual incoherence in Heng’s solution of masquerade as the key to coping with the desire of the Other since he merely repeats KC’s parents’ ill-fated decision concerning gender impersonation as a means of escaping from their guilt/fears. If the attempt by KC’s parents to deceive the demons led them instead to fulfill the demons’ desires (that they shouldn’t have a son), then the Singaporean, in pretending to obey the Symbolic Order/dominant culture/state ideology, will, in all likelihood, answer to the desire of the very demons (oppressive structures of power) that he means to avoid, as well as reproduce the latter’s power. The ‘explanation’ for KC’s transsexuality is the unconscious element that disrupts Heng’s intellectualized fantasy of masquerade, an unsuccessfully repressed desire for resistance that spoils the fun and points towards a future of conflicted identifications and desires, a neurotic stalling in meaning such as we see in KC’s inability to decide the sex/gender he will assume at his father’s funeral. The play ends with these stage directions:

(Music from “Final Night” begins and gradually gets louder. KC collects men’s clothes from the wardrobe and changes in front of a standing mirror. Then she changes into the black dress. Still unhappy, she changes into men’s clothes again. Lights fade out as she is changing, leaving the audience guessing as to her final decision.) (53)
The Lady of Soul and Her Ultimate ‘S’ Machine (1991) and Undercover (1993) by Tan Tarn How

For playwright Tan Tarn How, as with Michael Chiang, the shortcomings of Singapore's national, especially political, culture are explained, critiqued and consequently mediated by the culture of masculinity. Both of Tan's plays, Lady of Soul, written in 1991, and Undercover, first dramatized as a reading in 1993, treat themes associated with the nation's political culture such as the lack of freedom in expression and political authoritarianism as issues that concern masculine identity. The women in these plays are largely represented as men's minions, as their helpmates who have internalized male values, or as the 'other' to the (male) nation, onto whom the negative, disorderly parts of the national male psyche are displaced. In Lady of Soul, woman is metaphor of the nation's desire for an alternative culture but, as the metaphorized object of (male) desire, she is feared for her potential to produce cultural chaos and degeneration. As Deniz Kandayoti and Chandra Talpade Mohanty have already articulated for us, this is a masculinization of the nation where women are treated as a different trajectory of the nation, which marginalizes women's desires and their needs on national agendas. But I hope to show with my discussion of these two plays that the masculinization of the nation is also an ideological strategy that serves to shut off the nation and its cultural problems from radical critique. It is, in this sense, a crucial aspect of the endeavor of the public imagination to bring public desire into correspondence with totalitarianism or at the very least to delimit and problematize opposition to statism.

Lady of Soul is a satire about a nation that is looking for “soul.” Though written as a surrealistic drama featuring dream sequences, musical acts in the vaudeville tradition and improbable events set in an unnamed country, the play has many local references. The central event of the play, where a group of civil servants and a cabinet minister put together a program of action and policies that will transform the nation into a vibrant society, one with “soul,” takes off from a real event. In 1984, the ruling People's Action Party issued its election manifesto “Agenda for Action: Singapore, City of Excellence--A Vision of Singapore by 1999,” where Singapore was to be developed as “a society” that was “culturally vibrant.” In a speech to the Alumni International, Goh Chok Tong, then First Deputy Prime Minister
and Minister for Defence, said that once a society’s “basic needs” were “secure,” as Singapore’s were, it would want “similar progress in the social and cultural fields” as in the economic domain. Singapore was to be produced as a “cultivated society,” by which Goh meant

a society of well-read, well-informed citizens, a refined and gracious people, a thoughtful people, a society of sparkling ideas, a place where art, literature and music flourish. It is not a materialistic, consumerist society where wealth is flaunted and money spent thoughtlessly, in short a parvenu society.5

In March 1985, an Economic Committee was appointed to identify new directions for Singapore’s future growth. A Sub-Committee on Services published in 1986 its recommendations for the development of a “vibrant cultural and entertainment services industry.” A Task Force on Cultural and Entertainment Services was then appointed that same year to implement these recommendations. Though the government expressed concern about what would happen if the arts developed in an unfettered manner, by 1991, film censorship was liberalized with a film classification system. A Censorship Review Committee was also set up to review censorship criteria imposed on plays and recommended, in 1992, greater artistic freedom for artists and self-regulation for established theater groups. Lady of Soul was one of the first plays to be passed uncensored under the new guidelines,6 but, in an earlier submission, the licensing authority had recommended changes to the play. In his earlier letter of appeal addressed to the Public Entertainment and Licensing Unit, Tan situates his play within the government’s project in developing the arts, and echoes its discourse of cultural promotion:

. . . the whole theme of the play--that of a nation searching for soul--is a serious and immediate concern for Singapore. After all the Government itself has declared that it wants to make the nation vibrant and cultured, that it wants Singapore to have a soul that it hitherto lacks . . . It has voiced its worries about what may happen if this happens in an unfettered way; the play gives the chance for the minister to reiterate these worries. The audience is therefore not given a one-sided perspective of the debate. . . . I think that Singapore’s quest for a soul is one that other newly
industrializing countries are concerned about: What comes after prosperity? How do we repeat culturally what we have succeeded in economically?  

The play rehearses the issues connected with state promotion of the arts and with censorship, the liberalization of the arts and freedom of expression. It also critiques local political culture, featuring characters such as a “Minister” and a “Minister of State” (junior minister) leaving no doubt about the geographical location of this unnamed nation.

As printed text, *Lady of Soul* extends beyond the boundaries of the play’s script. The play was published as a text in 1993 together with “A Diary of Censorship” (in which Tan documents and comments on the play’s trials and tribulations with the censorship authorities). It also includes Tan’s “Letter of Appeal sent to the Public Entertainment and Licensing Unit” in 31 October 1992, where he requested that the play, which had to be revised in accordance with existing guidelines, be reviewed under the new, more liberal guidelines set out by the Censorship Review Committee, which had been published earlier that month. Sirius Books’ publication of the play also features a local news report of the play’s censorship history, which called *Lady of Soul* “a landmark play . . . heralding a new phase in theater” in view of its being a political satire that was passed under the new guidelines (83-5).

The play proper, which has six scenes excluding the prologue, starts by establishing, in the first scene, women’s subordinate position in Singapore’s hierarchy of political power. Derek is a top civil servant, possibly a Permanent Secretary, who is about to make a presentation of the findings of the “Committee For the Creation of a Vibrant Society” to the Minister of Culture and the Minister of State. Advising Chris and Les, his two female assistants, not to be nervous, he sets the women up as his minions and prepares the audience to make the equation between the masculine gender and political power. This point is underlined in the following discussion between Derek and Paul, the Minister of State (Singapore’s title for junior ministers), where political power is specifically framed within the coordinates of the ‘old boys’ network.’ Paul and Derek, it turns out, were not only fellow-students in a graduate program in Public Administration at London University but had been lovers too. Paul has just
returned from a trip to England, and in a typical scene of male bonding, they recall former British (male) lecturers of theirs, quote the tenets of colonial public administration, and laugh about their former university exploits in London. Paul’s wife merits a mention in their conversation if only to reinforce the masculinity of political culture: Elizabeth was apparently, according to Paul,

a bit bewildered by the fuss I was making about it [visiting old haunts in London in a ‘pilgrimage’], but she dutifully followed behind. I supposed [sic] it got better for her when we moved on to the Lake District on the business part of the trip. (8)

Elizabeth then is cast out of this masculine culture of public administration. As a woman, no doubt, she understands the Romantic poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge and the Lake District better than the “bewilder[ing]” ‘real’ world of politics.

The first scene continues with a discussion by the three men—Derek, Paul and the Minister—of the proceedings and findings of the “Committee for the Creation of a Vibrant Society,” where government business is represented as a masculine responsibility. This would have been no less evident when the play was staged in 1993 with a woman cast in the Minister’s role. As the playwright notes in his diary of censorship, “the Minister was written as a male part” (63). Earlier, worried about getting the play passed by the censorship authorities, the playwright had suggested, in a meeting with the director of Theatreworks, the theater company that was to stage the play, “that maybe we could change the Minister to a woman, and not only for censorship reasons” (“Diary” 62). This cryptic comment may be explained by reference to the play and the role of the Minister within it. Despite the playwright’s disclaimer that the play says that “ministers and civil servants in Singapore are like the characters it portrays,” the satirical appeal of Lady of Soul depends on the local audience’s recognition of the rhetoric and discourse of evasion, caution and double-speak used by Singapore’s political leaders and top civil servants in public statements made about progress on new policies. Since Singapore’s ministers and ministers of state are predominantly male, this type of discourse, even if voiced by a woman cast as minister, would have been read by a local audience as a male discourse spoken by a female minister who
has internalized a male political and civil service culture. The minister also defines her position as that of upholding male authority: “Well, I want this [the project] to be handled with the utmost care and discretion. You know how the Prime Minister is, he’s a man of care and discretion” (19). Adding, “I will be depending on you, Derek,” she represents herself as a conduit, someone who will deliver one man’s ideas to another man.

At this point, the play is a local rendition of the British TV comedy series Yes, Minister, which satirizes British civil service culture’s conservatism, its resistance to social change and progressive ideas. In a direct reference to the British series, Derek repeats the show’s signature line, “Yes, Minister,” several times in order to underline the civil service’s prioritizing of authority and hierarchy over serious commitment to social improvement. By referring repeatedly to the British TV series and emphasizing Derek’s and Paul’s British education, the play suggests that the Singapore civil service’s wariness towards social change and liberalism is the legacy of an outdated British colonial culture of public administration, fashioned when the Empire was already in decline. This colonial culture is personified by Paul’s and Derek’s British “rickety old professor,” “old Kowalski,” and exemplified in the principles of public administration he taught them: where “Rule One” dictates that “Committees Spontaneously Reproduce Themselves Asexually” and “Rule Two” that “A good public servant encourages the realisation of Rule One” (13).

As Derek becomes a figure of resistance who will fight for change and an effective civil service, the playwright ventures that a new kind of masculine culture is required to turn Singapore into a vibrant nation. Derek’s desire to “change society” (19) is associated with a post-colonial machismo, a masculine responsibility to be true to one’s ideals despite social and political opposition, accompanied by strong national fervor. We are told that Derek had a “devil-may-care attitude” in his student-days, which is suggested by an anti-colonial quarrel he has with a British professor. Recalling the incident, Paul says to Derek:
“I thought you would get kicked out when you told him off in the senior common room. ‘What do you mean, you pompous old fool? If you are not acquainted with my country, you are hardly in the position to pass judgement on it.’ I could hear the sound of everyone breathing after you said that.” (20)

Derek’s masculine qualities extend beyond anti-colonial courage. He is a man of action, with a revolutionary streak in him, always open to new ideas and experiences. Derek is thus established as an unusual Singaporean, unlike Paul. As a student, for instance, he “wanted to spend half a year driving across America,” an idea that Paul, in a typically Singaporean manner, considered “crazy” (41). (Paul’s response is a side-swipe against an often-made observation that Singaporeans tend to measure everything in terms of opportunity costs, and familial or career responsibilities.) When Derek loses his premier civil service job for pushing the idea of freedom of expression and is reassigned to a television station, Paul fears that he “might create a revolution in the television station” (52). Derek champions liberalization of the arts and resists the state’s over-cautiousness, and, in doing so, we are told that he has become “a different man” (52), where ‘liberalism’ is linked to a type of masculinity. Paul, by contrast, is the typical civil servant with a masculinity marked by lack: he is short on ideals and the strength to be honest and steadfast to his principles. Politically, Paul is a chameleon, changing his beliefs as and when necessary to advance his career; he has also developed “the habit of saying things which are exactly the opposite of what” he means (53). His self-declared motto in life is to be “like a bamboo stem. Bend with the wind.” Since the world won’t change, “not without us breaking our necks,” he does not believe that it is a man’s responsibility to effect social improvement: far better to “[ride] the wave, not [drown] in it” (42).

In the end, however, the play does not underwrite Derek’s more subversive, heroic masculinity. Derek is allowed his moment in the fifth scene when he explains and justifies his set of values in terms that the audience is obviously meant to identify with. He speaks up for the moral necessity of sticking by one’s principles instead of compromising on them for the sake of material gain, career improvement and security. Otherwise one would be “living a lie,” he declares. The “adjustment” of one’s “attitudes in
order to hold on to the job” holds a high social and moral cost, he adds, far outweighing the “benefits of the job” (51). He is the play’s hero when he risks his career as well as the social status, material security and political power that the job has offered him to stand up to his belief in freedom of expression. But it is a short-lived heroism. Almost immediately the play works to discredit this masculinity. When Paul leaves him to complete his packing (he has just been transferred out of his department), Derek has a dream that suggests that his promotion of free cultural expression had some materialistic motivation, so that his ambitions are rendered as not different from the Minister’s or Paul’s. In the dream, Derek translates the ideal of freedom in the arts into business terms: that it would promote local trade in pornography, sex as well as the arts and generate income in terms of international sales of the newly-invented “Ultimate ‘S’[ex] Machine,” in which he would have a share. In the play’s final scene, where the government makes a music-and-dance presentation of its severely compromised program for cultural vibrancy, it is suggested that Derek has recanted on his vision. Together with the others, he raps out the findings of the “Committee for the Creation of a Vibrant Nation”: “We’ve tried the free road/And we don’t like what we see/This is the path to hell/This is the street to ruin/So let’s be safe than sorry” (60). The play hence raises and then resolves the problem of male anxiety surrounding the failure to resist state authoritarianism by suggesting that male desire is in itself many-faceted, often ridden by contradictions and capable of generating chaos, so that, the ideological message goes, caution and control of its expression is justified. The objectification of women as “soul” in this play is a central ideological strategy of the play where the male desire for a nation with “soul” or cultural vibrancy is sexualized, linked to heterosexual male libido. Just as woman is the object of male sexual desire, so too is she made the object of male desire for cultural vibrancy, so that she is the glue that knits together sexual desire and cultural vibrancy. As object of the other’s desire, woman is the mirror that reflects the darkest aspects of male desire, which have been projected onto her. Hence, among the proposals for national cultural enrichment which the Committee receives from the public, it is a female brothel keeper who equates cultural vibrancy with the ultimate male fantasy of unlimited sex, “soul” with orgasm, and
commodifies the whole by promoting her invention, a sex machine, an electronic latex doll capable of providing sexual services. In the vaudeville section in the first scene, when Derek, Les and Chris present the initial findings of the Committee to the two ministers in a music-and-dance routine, the two women figure as “soul” and, playing the role of sexual temptress, sell soul’s benefits in a rhetoric of carnal temptation: “Soul’s extremely, utterly nice/ Taken straight or with a little vice. . . . /It makes the blood pump, the heart jump, the pulse pidipidapitdapididump” sings Les, while Chris adds, “Soul’s super on Sundays, divine on Saturdays and nifty every other day. . . . /Soul’s educational, inspirational, sensori-sensational,/It’s lovable, unforgettable, and absolutely laudable . . .” (16). At the end of the play, the government’s ‘safe’ approach to cultural expression (no sex, religion or politics in the arts) is critiqued as neglecting human desire. But predictably this desire is sexualized and associated with female licentiousness. In the music-and-dance routine that ends the play and iterates the government’s stance on cultural liberalization, Chris is slowly stripped by the other actors. “Now nearly naked,” Chris provides the play’s last words as she explodes in lust, uttering “AH, MEN!”(60). The audience hence leaves provocatively reminded that freedom of expression can be as anarchic as a woman on heat.

Strangely, Lady of Soul, which the playwright calls a “satire” (“Diary” 66), and which he hopes will “provide a stimulus” for “rapid liberalization” (“Letter of Appeal” 81-2), takes an even more reactionary stance against free expression than the Singapore government does. The latter has moved towards liberalized censorship regarding the representation of sex and does not reductively equate freedom in cultural representation with liberalized sexual representation. In 1991, when the government introduced the film classification system, censorship of sex on screen became a dead issue. Contemporary national discussion about censorship sometimes focuses on freedom in the expression of political ideas while the issue of a free press surfaces from time to time. Tan has effectively set the debate years back by refusing to differentiate freedom in political expression from the freedom to produce pornography.

Recognition of female subjectivity and female desire would have interrupted the play’s negative representation of freedom of expression and cultural vibrancy as potentially dangerous to society and
disruptive of social order. The play divides freedom of expression into four separate issues: the right to freedom in sexual expression, the right to express fascist political ideas, the right to represent fundamentalist ethnic viewpoints, as well as the right for limitless expression in the arts. The first three rights are used to represent the nightmarish aspects of the issue of freedom of expression. But the constituency of women's rights would check such dangers: it would certainly act to stifle pornographic representation by opposing the representation of women as mere objects of male sexuality as well as possibly re-territorialize sexual desire in terms that include maternal feeling and child-care. Feminist ideology would also oppose right-wing politics and ethnic fundamentalisms by exposing them as machineries of gender-oppression. The inclusion of female desire and subjectivity in this play would have structurally split the representation of free expression and cultural vibrancy along different axes than those that Tan chooses. There would be two axes, male versus female, current state of knowledge versus new ways of knowing. These would have disrupted the binaristic terms that currently frame the discourse of free expression in Singapore as that of good-versus-bad. The inclusion of female subjectivity/desire may also have dictated that free cultural expression be viewed more positively as promising the new, rather than as the mere return of old demons. Women, then, are the repressed, whose foreclosure is necessary for the text to spin its reactionary ideology.

The state's re-posing of the problem of social resistance in terms of West(ern liberalism) versus East(ern tradition) can be seen here as having generated a crisis in male identity in this culturally-hybrid post-colonial nation. As this play attests, at least some Singapore men feel trapped in the contradictory demands made on them by two, very different masculine cultures: by identifying with Western, liberal norms (which make acting on one's principles the cutting-edge of masculinity), they must reject 'Asian'/Confucianist' norms as these are defined by the state (where male responsibility is linked to the maintenance of social order and the propping up of patriarchal authority), and vice-versa.

Though clearly the crisis in male identity is caused by the 'East'/ 'West' contradiction, the play attempts to disavow this cause, to escape from this irreconcilable difference at the core of state ideology.
It is an aporia, perhaps, that anyone who has internalized the government’s exhortation to be both “modern” and “traditionally Asian” cannot bear to contemplate. Derek’s homosexuality is a ‘queer’ feature in the play that needs decoding. Neither homosexuality nor the marginalization of the homosexual is thematized in the play. His male subjectivity is not set up as a non-heterosexual one; rather, it can easily be categorized as that of Western liberal male culture, though there is a hint of an equation being made here between liberal idealism and homosexuality (see below). I would like to suggest that Derek’s homosexuality is a strategy whereby the playwright can avoid the East versus West conflict in norms of male identity. Since Derek is gay, he is also single and does not have a family to support. Hence, he can afford to stand by his principles even at the risk of losing his job and status in society. A heterosexual married family man in his position would have been conflicted by the demands made on him by such Western liberal norms of masculinity and those of ‘Asian’ culture, which would require that he observe his patriarchal duty in financially providing for the family as well as guard the family ‘name’ against dishonor. As a straight man, Derek’s adherence to Western liberal norms of male identity would have demanded a re-assessment of his roles as Asian/Chinese father, husband and son.

Instead, the conflict between East and West is displaced into the conflict between Western liberal male culture and Western conservative, even puritanical norms of masculinity. For instance, Derek’s ‘liberal’ sexuality is opposed to the minister’s repressed sexuality. Discussing his ‘study’ trip to Disneyland, the minister tells Paul it was

“Oh, extremely educational. Especially the Space Mountain. (Squeezing his knees together.)

Such an enlightening experience. My wife went on it three times.” (9)

When Derek insists on speedy industrialization of the arts, the minister tells him off in a prissy, school-marmish manner:

“Derek, I am very disappointed in you. I have been very surprised, no shocked, by the things that I have been seeing in the office recently. Violence and dare I say sex. I have been seeing women around here
--- not only that, women in loose attire and lewd poses. And add to that a few strange airy, fairy
men. This is a government office, you must never forget.” (45)

By contrast, Derek’s liberalism, his need for “freedom,” is associated with his homosexuality. He
tells Paul that he feels his “hands are so tied up” in the civil service. Complaining that “there seems to
be so little room to maneuver,” he yearns for “the freedom” of their student-days in London, and recalls
this in terms of “those cold, but also warm walks in the night” with his lover, Paul, and with the freedom
of not having to hide his gay sexuality. “We could do anything we wanted then,” he recalls. “Walk into
any darn club, and not give a damn about who’s looking at us” (20).

Desire is split in the play: the playwright calls up a heroic ideal of masculinity (Derek) only to
discredit him later. The play also severely critiques the Minister and Paul as wimps but, at the end, these
are the men who stand between society and chaos. Inadvertently and perhaps unconsciously, the form of
the play signals to a compromised resolution of East-cum-West masculinity, an intellectual position that
also answers to fears of government reprisal: the satirist as male hero who voraciously attacks the state in
biting comedy but who cautiously refrains from offering any alternatives to the status quo.

Certainly, Tan’s “Diary” reveals that fear of government reprisals dogs the playwright. During a
public reading of the play, he fears

a middle-aged man [who] came in, sat grimly through a third of it, and left . . . could be ISD
[Internal Security Department]. I was prepared not to be afraid, but could not help feeling a knot
of fear for a while during the interval. (64)

When Theatreworks decides that it would push for the play to be vetted without cuts by the censorship
authorities, Tan wonders “how that will affect Theatreworks as a company--would they be blacklisted or
something?” (68).

Tan’s re-framing of political resistance within the parameters of male identity is an imaginative
venture whereby that which is repressed by the state (the questioning of its authority) returns but in a
manner in which it is made acceptable to the ‘censorship’ authorities (here, literalized). It not only
closes off the potential of women's struggle for real political intervention, it effectively shuts out the investment of desire in resistance and its potential for social change. Rather, resistance is reductively represented within the paradigm of two men fighting for power and vindicating their masculinity in a tussle where the resistance figure can be easily perceived and discredited as the inverted mirror image of the figure of authority. At play's end, Derek is the same as Paul and the minister. We are given to understand that Derek's proposal for cultural liberalization was only a bid to gain power, to ascend the social ladder. Once or twice, he does reveal his ambition, quizzing Paul as to whether he felt that his marriage of convenience to Elizabeth had boosted his career.

It is precisely this conception of resistance as the flip side of power/authoritarianism that Tan thematizes in his next play, Undercover. During the climax of the play, Qiang, an anti-government community worker, captured by an imaginary government's secret police, tells the story of his entry into subversive work: "Once I met a man who made this country what it is... Yes, him. Face to face at a function." Asked by one of his interrogators if it was scary, he replies:

"It was hairy. We talked less than a minute, actually. The strange thing is I found it so hard to look into his eyes. But eventually I forced myself to--it was an electric moment. What I saw behind those eyes was absolute power. They said: 'I will crush anyone who gets in my way.' Do you know the meaning of fear, of terror? I felt I understood its meaning then. I have carried that feeling with me ever since. When I think about the Center [for social work which Qiang started], about why I dare to call into question his way of doing things, I think I must be the bravest or the most foolhardy person in the world. Why do I need to confront my fear this way? Why do I need to prove to myself that even though I am afraid I will do the right thing even if it crushes me? Why do I need to exorcise this demon by invoking it? The reason is very simple: It proves that I am a man." (170-1)

If subversive work makes Qiang "a man," it does not however make him a better man than the head of this imaginary gestapo, but rather his double. Like the Head, Qiang is sexist and uses women for his
own ends. He is also just as manipulative as the Head, giving children an alternative education, not out of the strength of his radical political beliefs but because he is "a fucking troublemaker... I just want to stir up things. I can't leave them alone" (136). When Qiang and the Head meet for the first time, the stage instructions direct that they "look at one another, sizing one another up. There is a feeling of equality, of sameness about them. For a moment, it looks like they could possibly even switch positions" (158).

Tan is like Qiang and Undercover could be read as self-critique of the playwright's own assumed position as male hero. Like Qiang, he needs to "exorcise this demon by invoking it," to destroy something by repeating it, the modus operandi of satire itself. As satirist in this play (and in Lady of Soul), Tan critiques the government's authoritarianism by repeatedly representing it. The arrest of subversives by the secret police is represented three times in Undercover, twice in rehearsals of the play-within-a-play that Qiang writes, produces and directs and then in the closing scene of the play, where its fictional status is deliberately rendered ambiguously. The play also devotes two scenes to the interrogation of a subversive. Though Tan sets the play in what he claims to be an "imaginary country" (107), he consistently taunts the authority of the Singapore government by making recognizable references to its activities and institutions. The local audience would have had no trouble recognizing the references to Singapore's Internal Security Department and its detention-without-trial of political prisoners, given that international critique has turned these two institutions into the primary signifiers of Singapore's state authoritarianism. This is combined with other local markers of Singaporean identity. The interrogation of Qiang as subversive social worker who was also a dramatist, calls up the Singapore government's 1987 arrest of a group of Christian social workers attached to a Catholic church who were denounced as Marxist conspirators against the state, two of whom belonged to an English-drama group (Koh Tai Ann, "Culture" 727). Finally, and most importantly, Tan (through Qiang) "invokes" the one who is viewed as the supreme figure of authority in Singapore, Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew. Qiang's nemesis, "the man who made the country what it is" may be recognized as Lee Kuan Yew, who was
Singapore's Prime Minister through three decades following self-rule, and who is often discursively identified with the nation’s success. Both internationally and nationally, Lee Kuan Yew has often been referred to as “the man who made Singapore what it is.” As if to dispel all doubt, Qiang’s comment, “It was hairy” is a double entendre that not only describes Qiang’s first meeting with the leader but also identifies him: “Harry” was the name Lee Kuan Yew used in his Cambridge student-days.

In his diary of censorship of Lady of Soul, Tan too appears, like Qiang, to be nothing but a “fucking troublemaker” (Undercover 136) “invoking” the authority that he fears. Tan admits in his diary of censorship, “I have half a mind to do a piece that is so gross—sexually, politically, morally—that everyone who has any qualms at all would be offended. That would be the acid test of their word that nothing would be censored. Would that be irresponsible—testing for the sake of it?” (65-6). He adds, “In fact, I am hoping with some perverse delight that they will cut it [Paul and Derek’s homosexual relationship in Lady of Soul] and show my fears to be true about the kind of people they are” (“Diary,” 66).

The masculine position of resistance that Tan has set up then is, by Tan’s own admission, a psychotic and disempowering reaction to fear that only repeats the fear and has the further effect of re-centering the authority that it feigns to dismantle. As the Deputy head of this fictional gestapo says of Qiang’s confession: it is “incontrovertible evidence that he has a psychotic grudge against our great leader, to the extent that... he became obsessed by it” (171). The authority’s power is entrenched deeper, and audiences of satirical plays such as Undercover leave the theater more afraid of the state’s power than before, convinced that resistance is nothing more than a hysterical reaction to (male) impotence.

Tan however does not go so far as to recognize his own complicitious participation in state authoritarianism in his role as satirist-playwright. He reflects in his diary of censorship that Lady of Soul is caught in a paradox:

if they [the censorship authorities] let it through without any censorship at all, then the premise of the play [that there is little freedom of expression in Singapore] would be wrong, so making
reasons for staging it less compelling: if they don’t [let it through], then the premise would be
proven, which makes it even more important to have it staged uncensored. (64)

This "paradox" is re-stated in *Undercover* when Qiang, who is producing a play about the state’s
 crackdown on dissent, notes that there is “an inherent paradox in the premise of the play.” He argues that
“the play is saying that they [the government] don’t tolerate dissent,” and that “the play” is itself “an
example of dissent.” As such, if the government passes the play for production, “that would
demonstrate that they are not intolerant of the dissent,” thereby disproving the play’s premise. On the
other hand, the play’s premise could only be proved if the play is not passed, that is by its very non-
existence.

In stating the paradox thus, Tan symptomatically does not consider that the censorship authorities
could have passed the two plays simply because they were wily enough to differentiate the semblance of
dissent from dissent itself and/or that the plays problematize dissent. As I have argued, Tan’s two plays
are ambivalent about dissent. They also rely on the ability of satire as a genre to offer writers a vehicle
through which they can express a form of dissent but not necessarily with the political ‘inconvenience’ of
real subversive content. The British satiric comedy series *Yes, Minister*, for instance, exposes the
scandalous bases on which many public policy decisions are made, but it also reduces these to the level of
humor, as a comedy about British ‘manners.’

Tan also does not factor in the split in his own desire in formulating the paradox, of his own
compromised desire for resistance. While Tan may have wanted the authorities to legitimize his critique
by censoring his play, he also wished just as much to have his play staged. As he notes in “Diary,” the
passing of *Lady of Soul* does not indicate an unambiguous liberalization in the state’s attitude. He
thinks that *Lady of Soul* was “cleared because it is an absurdist satire and that the government was
comfortable with that,” and is doubtful that “a naturalistic play of a similar theme” would have passed
through the censors (74). Knowing this, then, one must raise the question as to whether Tan’s choice of
the non-realistic mode of representation was deliberately chosen to make the play (and his critique) more agreeable to the authorities.

Certainly, the play’s rejection of realism is a strategy that allows it to shut out feminist subjectivity and desire from the formulation of ideology and from representation of the nation. For instance, Tan’s guilty projection of male lust onto a female brothel-keeper, Madame, who, we are told, should be thought of as “a sexy philosophy dropout with marketing savvy and charisma” (25) relies on the improbable. There aren’t enough philosophy dropouts in the nation to warrant Madame being represented as a type. At any rate, such a woman in Singapore would make more money selling real estate than sex. In the meritocratic, highly select Singapore Civil Service, too, women such as Les and Chris, who are assistants to a permanent secretary or a division head (as Derek must be), would themselves be extremely capable women, either government scholars, or, at the very least, top graduates from leading universities, fighting the tide of gender-oppression, not colluding with it as Tan wishfully represents them.

Satire and non-realistic representation often work in tandem to expose the ridiculous, the ‘abnormal’ in seemingly ‘normal,’ real-life events. But they can also, simultaneously and conversely, normalize the ridiculous. George Orwell’s satirical novel *Animal Farm* ridicules the contradictions between Marxist theory and practice at a specific historical moment in the Soviet Union’s adoption of socialism, but it also normalizes these contradictions as an ahistoric condition intrinsic to socialism itself. In a Freudian slip of the tongue, Tan describes satire in *Lady of Soul* as “making the ridiculous normal” (“Letter of Appeal,” 80). If *Lady of Soul* ridicules the government’s go-slow tactics in terms of an ineffectual masculinity, it also normalizes this masculinity by juxtaposing it against Derek’s errant and uncontrollable masculinity, which, the play suggests, could be harmful in different ways. Derek’s liberal masculine culture could be socially chaotic as is suggested in Derek’s dream of building an “art house inside [a] tart house” (55). It could be potentially fascist, since Derek liberally approves Alban’s dream, expressed in the rhetoric of Maoist China’s Cultural Revolution, that the arts should be “the music that the nation marches to,” the “hundred flowers that will bloom,” all “dandelions,” “field upon swaying
field of identical, nodding and agreeing dandelions" (35). It could also be sexually perverse since Derek also promotes Madame’s suggestion of making an ultimate sex machine available to everyone.

There is another way to dissolve the paradox that Tan poses about the censorship of plays that represent dissent. As a Singaporean writer who is himself so enmeshed in the dominant ideology and forced to work within its limitations, Tan’s plays show that the censorship authority’s passing of a play that critiques state authoritarianism does not necessarily falsify the play’s premise. It can also prove the play’s premise in that the ‘censorship’ is self-executed: the ‘cut’ is already inside the play.

Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral (1995) by Kuo Pao Kun

Among the plays studied here, Kuo’s play offers the most direct attempt at subverting government ideology about Singapore’s Asian identity. Given his bilingualism, he, more than other Singapore playwrights, is able to address the identificatory problems of a people caught between Western and Eastern cultures and histories, and to offer cross-cultural and alternative myths of origin. Descendants was written originally in English. The play features a group of amateur drama workers, among them a teacher and a lawyer, who are in the middle of a drama workshop that represents the life of Admiral Zheng He, a 15th-century eunuch who was in the Chinese Ming Imperial Service. Working in a non-naturalistic medium, Kuo draws on the eunuch admiral’s life and psyche in order to map out a subject position for Singaporeans in terms of their relation to state power. Kuo’s play rebels against state ideology by cheekily re-writing the story of Singapore’s Chinese heritage, locating it, not in the government-extolled imperialist Confucianist culture but in a subaltern Chinese history, where he represents the culture and psychic identity of the victims of Chinese imperial culture. While this is a vehicle through which Kuo unmasks and attempts to contain neuroses of male identity in Singapore culture, the play also deconstructs Chinese/Asian cultural essentialisms. It underlines the phantasmatic dimension of contemporary representations of traditional cultures, where the object of representation is implicated in and shaped by the desires of the representing subject, desires which may even have arisen
from the representing subject’s immersion in alien, non-Chinese or non-Asian dominant ideologies. As this play shows, even essentialist notions of Chinese/Asian ‘identity’ can be cross-cultural, involving a culturally transvestite masquerade, where Western ideas are displayed in Chinese/Asian dress and idiom. The play suggests that current constructions of Chinese/Asian culture may be, at least to some extent, an Eastern stylization of Western ideas.

Descendants tries to construct a modern Chinese subjectivity by re-reading the Chinese past from the perspective of the present time and its modes/paradigms of perception. But, given the state’s injunction against identifying with “Western values,” repressed Western values/knowledges return under cover of the Eastern so that any imaginary construction of a modernized Chinese subjectivity is bound to be structurally similar to that which Singaporean Chinese derogatorily refer to as the inauthentic Chinese culture of the “banana” people: those whose yellow exterior covers up, belies a white interior, so that Chinese/Asian modernity can only ever be Western culture masquerading as Eastern, a tra(ns)vestic performance. As acts of gender impersonation indicate, masquerade involves an interpretation and objectivization of the ‘other’ from within the positionality of the self, the subject of masquerade. Female impersonation, for instance, is often a ‘reading’ of female identity from the viewpoint of male subjectivity and is thus cross-gendered not only in terms of the structural split between body and style, nature and culture. In Descendants, the representation of Chinese/Asian culture centers around Western ‘psychological’ modes of perception so that the subject or body performing the masquerade is Western, and Chinese culture is that which is being masqueraded.

It is possible to read in this play the concept of the ‘Chinese/Asian modern’ as fantasy’s defensive reaction formation against the return of the repressed. In Horowitz’ rehearsal of Freudian theory, adult maturation, in its movement away from the pleasure principle to the reality principle, involves the sublimation and/or repression of certain drives that are not conducive to living within a specific social formation. In sublimation, the conflict between the ego and the id concerning a specific drive is resolved by a defense mechanism whereby the ego displaces the drive’s sexualized or aggressivized original
object with a desexualized or sublime object or aim. The drive then acquires a derivative or altered motive. At this stage however, the energy of the drive has not been neutralized so that there is not a complete desexualization or de-aggressivization. The ego still needs to counter-cathect (disinvest desire from) the original motive in order to repress it. Eventually, however, in successful repressions, the derivative motive completely or almost completely neutralizes the original drive so that counter-cathexis of the original motive is no longer required. In most normally successful repressions, regression to the original motive occurs only in dreams. External circumstances, however, causing stress and frustration or a weakening of the ego, can allow a strong repressed instinct to re-assert itself and cause the resexualization or desublimation of the sublimated drive. This return of the repressed characterizes a neurosis or psychosis, a return to the pleasure principle. Here, the derivative (altered) motive regresses to its defensive stage, and that which has been repressed attempts to frustrate the derivative motive’s workings as a defense mechanism (Horowitz 31-37). In neurosis, this is done through means of hysterical symptoms while in psychosis, there are hallucinations and a complete nervous breakdown. In desublimation, Horowitz says, there is “interference by primary process forms of cognition with the workings of the secondary process” so that neutralization of the drive gives way to displacement, resulting either in neurosis or psychosis where “the symbol [the substituted derivative motive] is merely equated with the symbolized [the original motive].” In neurosis, he adds, the “normal functioning of the ego is interfered with, the autonomy of the ego from the id is reduced, and, in energy terms, neutralization is reversed: the ego-activity is recathcted with non-neutralized energy” (Horowitz 37).

Hysteria is associated with neurosis, not psychosis. If one may give an example of neurotic versus psychotic returns of the repressed, imagine the case of a writer who copes with fears of failure by pushing at a career in journalism. One day, he gets the top job he has always fantasized about, but with it return his insecurities about his abilities. In neurosis, the repressed expresses itself in a hysterical symptom, such as a psychosomatic blindness, so that the subject can no longer substitute success at work for his fears of failure. The writer is not conscious of his fears because the repressed has hidden itself...
within the subject's code of values, sneaking past the censorship authorities as Zizek would say: the writer thinks that he is unable to work because of a physical affliction, not because he has been taken over by his fears. In psychosis, the writer would have experienced hallucinations, returns of repressed primary memories that he associates with failure, or be gripped by fear every time he take up his pen: thus, the fear of failure exerts its presence in the consciousness and refuses substitutions.

Hysteria is broadly defined as the subject's refusal of the desire of the big Other, the Symbolic Order, including, in this refusal, the rejection of the identifications commanded/demanded by it. Generated by the failure of repression, where the unsuccessfully repressed breaks through the barriers of ego defense mechanisms and stages itself in consciousness, the hysterical symptom foils the object-substitutions which may have in the past made it possible for the original sexual or aggressive drive to be sublimated or neutralized. In doing this, hysteria subverts dominant ideology and acts out a desire that is the 'other' to the desire of hegemonic culture. But it does this by exploring loopholes within this ideology so that it appears to be still within this domain.

Lifting an unsuccessful repression in psychoanalytic therapy, says Horowitz, involves integrating the repressed impulse into the ego, and neutralizing its energy. This makes the repression successful, in which case the impulse is permitted various forms of sexual and/or non-sexual ego-syntonic expression. The impulse concerned is abolished, preserved and transformed (40).

In Kuo's play, the repressed that returns is fear of the loss of self-determination and of the power of self-representation. Since both of these are linked in patriarchal cultures with male identity, the play represents the loss of the power of self-determination/self-representation as a trauma of castration, the cutting of male identity. Unable (because of state injunction) or unwilling (due to interiorization of dominant ideology) to locate his rebellion against state authoritarianism within recognizable Western discourses such as those of human rights, self-representation and democratic political representation, Kuo seeks hysterically to express his (Western-influenced) repressed desires by ascribing a Chinese genealogy to them, to render these desires as always-already Chinese. Thus Kuo rejects the state's
command to invest in ‘Confucianist’ norms but meets its insistence on Singapore’s Asian Oriental identity by Sinicizing/Asianizing ‘Western’ desire.

It is easy to read the excessive amount of textual/representational energy expended on castration in the play as a hysterical symptom staging/expressing a neurosis and non-neutralized sexual energy on the body of the text. Kuo’s play is structurally divided by suggestions made in turn by each drama worker as to the various ways in which Zheng He’s life and subjectivity may be dramatically represented. (Note the play’s direct thematic interest in the activity of representation, and the link between this and the portrayal of a male subjectivity.) In their representational endeavors, they exhibit an obsession with Zheng He’s castration and the whereabouts of his “cut-and-dried penis.” While Patrick is concerned with representing the “Treasure” chamber in the Imperial Palace, which contains the severed penises of those in the eunuch service, Uncle Tay wonders where this severed penis was kept while Zheng He was on his travels. Boyd stages the castration of Zheng He, representing it as a voluntary decision made by Zheng He to enter the eunuch service in search of wealth and fame; he also depicts Zheng He’s father as the one who performs the castration (8-9). Samy contributes to the representation by dramatizing a dream where, identifying with Zheng He as famous voyager (as the ‘other’ Columbus), he experiences fear of castration. The play also elaborately details at least three different ways of castrating a man, as in:

“You take a piece of string, tie it at the base of the testicles when the boy is still young and small. Tie it tight enough but short of causing pain to him. As the boy grows bigger and bigger, the tightness of the string remains. Gradually, in time, the base of the testicles will break off . . . You start them early enough and they won’t feel the pain. They may not have even got [sic] a trauma. Because in this way the most characteristic part of the organs is still there. And it still works fine. Some say even better. Most important of all, they [sic] are safer.” (23)

The presence of the repressed male lack exerts itself throughout the play in the form of a cloth portrait of Zheng He, a permanent backdrop. This portrait is split from the waist down. The play’s
second scene opens with the drama workers swinging a bamboo pole in front of the portrait; as the pole hits the floor, they let out a painful cry to simulate penile injury. A netball post with two balls suspended from it, an obvious phallic symbol, forms part of the permanent set of the play (2).

The specific manner in which the repressed returns in this play, in hysterical symptoms that are literally visited on the ‘body’ of an old Chinese legend and a story of Ming/Chinese masculinity, reveals something about the etiology of the contemporary socio-cultural crisis of male identity that has manifested itself in much recent Singapore theater. In Descendants, the neurosis of castration anxiety attacks symbols of a ‘traditional’ ‘Chinese’ culture where masculine identity (phallic power) is associated with socio-economic-political success: as it is with Admiral Zheng He as well as with that other icon of Chinese masculinity, Confucius. Doing so, it indicates that the dominant ideology—which promotes discipline, submission to authority, hard work, brilliance in bureaucratic skills and the imagination required to expand the frontiers of knowledge and national power as the ‘Chinese’/‘Asian’ route to male identity—is not sufficient as a derivative motive to defend against and neutralize that ‘other’ objectal desire for male selfhood that is associated with political and cultural self-determination (which has a Western genealogy in its links with the culture of democracy). The play as hysterical symptom subverts the ego’s equation of socio-economic-political success with phallic power by repeatedly marking the former with the absence of phallic power. It also refuses the ego’s symbolization of socio-economic-political success and submission to authority as a ‘Chinese’/‘Asian’ masculinity by re-presenting the ‘Chinese’/‘Asian’ as male lack, as the splitting, cutting up, disintegration of the male body.

Kuo explores and represents the Singaporean subjectivity of the drama workers as a psychic and socio-politico-cultural legacy handed down by a Chinese ancestor, the eunuch admiral Zheng He, and the Ming imperial service. The play constantly makes equations between past and present subjectivity. As these workers point out, the eunuch admiral’s success as explorer-bureaucrat-imperial official depended on his castration: by entering the Imperial eunuch service, Zheng He received the “licence to enter the
imperial palace, to hold privileged positions in the imperial household, to scale higher positions, to attain wealth and status” (9). Though his initial duties consisted of attending to the quotidian needs of the emperor and the nobility such as “eating, drinking, dressing, cleaning, pissing, shitting and copulating,” he “graduated himself to more significant affairs such as writing, building, worshipping, warring and sailing ships hundreds of thousands of miles into the ocean, leading great armadas . . . representing a great empire” (10). The play then uses Zheng He’s story of success to parody the discourse of nation-building, which includes the ethics of hard work and restraint of individual desire, which Singapore politicians use to justify oppressive policies. The play identifies Singaporeans’ submission to authority with Zheng He’s fate, where the fame and public power he attains fails to substitute for and erase an original loss of personal power/liberty. At one point, the “Figure” representing authority, ironically chastises the players:

“Yes! Yes! Discipline, pressure, confrontation, even suppression. These are indeed necessary conditions to nurture worthy men and women . . . When given your liberal freedom, you guys while away your youthful days, your family wealth and the nation’s resources . . . Now, after we have given you some tough treatment, hard discipline and sometimes seemingly unreasonable and oppressive measures, you overcome! You transcend! And now you’re on your way to becoming really worthy citizens.” (10)

Earlier, Patrick, one of the drama workers, discusses a special chamber in the Ming Imperial Palace where eunuchs’ penises, cut and dried, are preserved in boxes and hung from the ceiling in a network according to their status in the Imperial Service. This “network” is dramatized by players positioning themselves at various levels on ropes hanging from the ceiling. As Patrick then points out, this “network” looks “like the organisational chart of [his] company,” while Alan adds that his civil service “department can also look like this” (5). A joke is made that Singapore is a veritable “Treasure Island,” full of “bao beis,” the cut-and-dried penises of eunuchs preserved in boxes (6).
The play leaves no doubt that it is the irreconcilable conflict between East and West viewed as despotism versus democracy, the Asiatic mode of production versus capitalism, that has caused a blockage in the Singaporean male ego’s drive neutralization. Western knowledge makes it impossible for the players to take ‘Chinese’/’Asian’ norms of ‘masculinity’ seriously, to substitute the latter for the former. As Alan, Kelvin, Mr. Chng and Sally comment, Zheng He’s heroic stature as pioneer explorer has been over-estimated in relation to Columbus’ achievements. As Alan says of the Ming explorations:

Stupid expeditions all these. Never got anything back. Always give give give. You know how many bundles of silk and how many kilos of gold these guys gave away. . . . Every time, seven times, and they never learned! Stupid emperor, stupid eunuchs! Want to act big shot, big kingdom, big people, big land! (12)

Mr. Chng observes that “you really have to give it to the Europeans. I mean, Columbus was not to see the Atlantic Ocean until almost a century later, and they immediately colonised America!” Sally adds:

“Bad luck we didn’t learn from the West earlier, or else we could have won the entire market of the East, and Japan would never get chance! Don’t know what the grand eunuch was thinking all the time. Silly feudal eunuchs, probably only thinking about the glory and prestige of the Middle Kingdom.” (12)

Again, only Western knowledge can provide the players with access to a Chinese/Asian modern subjectivity. Kuo tries to Sinicize the (male) desire for self-determination and self-representation by attributing such desires to Zheng He. But the play’s representation of Zheng He’s subjectivity draws deeply on the language of Western narratives of human alienation and on the Western discourse of psychology. The play begins with seven actors taking turns in representing the role of “the Figure” which, the play’s instructions inform us, “is, in a sense, also their common consciousness” (1). Assuming a Singaporean “common consciousness,” the actors speak of a world of “dreams” which allows them to take flight from their real world, “a place of insanity” (which the play covertly locates as
Dreams also provide the means to see their 'real world' in a new perspective, a perspective that re-presents their success as bondage, oppression, and a loss of manhood. They speculate that, in this, they must be carrying on the legacy passed on to them by Admiral Zheng He. The association of “dreaming” with “freedom” that the first player makes echoes that of Freudian discourse where the unconscious is the site of that which is beyond repression, knowledge of which promises freedom to the subject. The third figure represents the “dreamworld” as that of the “unknown” and the “nightly unknown” again taking up psychoanalytical representations of the unconscious as the self’s Other, as that which marks the self’s alienation from itself, a site that is mysterious, dark, unknown and unknowable except through its symptoms. When figure 6 says that “Only in these dreams, being alone, was I able to look at myself, inside myself and through myself,” he too draws on the discourse of psychoanalytical therapy which uses dreams to decode long-buried and repressed, disavowed feelings. The song and dance chorus that closes the play gives voice to Zheng He’s longings and subjectivity, which are offered as a desiring subject position for Singaporeans to identify with. Described as being “nameless,” “sexless,” “rootless,” “homeless” whose “wandering is [his] roots,” whose “departing is [his] being,” Zheng He is made out to be a Chinese Ulysses whose sea voyages are voyages of (self) discovery, of the discovery of human alienation.

“The removal of [Zheng He’s] manhood” and thus of Singaporeans’ loss of liberty/power is mourned and condemned in this play. But this raises several questions that haunt the play. One wonders whether the lost male identity is Chinese or Western, medieval or modern? Are these different or the same? Can Kuo or modern-day Singaporeans have access to Zheng He’s 15th-century masculine identifications and dis-identifications? What is added in the process to historical truth or subtracted from it? The play’s representation of Zheng He’s male subjectivity as lack is made by a representing subject who is himself located within Western liberal norms of masculinity, where lack of self-determination, individual autonomy and the power of self-representation are signifiers of a loss of masculine self-hood. If the claims in some quarters are correct, that Chinese/Asian traditions emphasize social responsibility over
individual’s rights, then one could argue that traditional Chinese/Asian male identity is the ‘other’ to contemporary (Western) modern masculinity, and that Zheng He’s saying “yes” to authority and attaining success and fame is precisely the Chinese/Asian scene of male identity. But the play does not consider this for a moment. The subjectivity of the eunuch admiral as represented by the play then is a white male subjectivity masquerading as a modern Chinese/Asian male subjectivity.

No doubt, an East-West cultural hybridity would have averted the formation of a neurosis by providing desire with ways of negotiating contradictory values. As Lacanian psychoanalysis argues, the phallus (masculine culture) is the substitute that tries to cover up an underlying male lack, the absence of power. It is the veil of power, behind which there is nothing. The Singaporean male ego sublimated and neutralized the threat of castration/powerlessness with both Western and Eastern norms of masculinity. ‘Western’ norms of self-determination and their association with male identity were cathected as part of colonial culture but these were also reinforced in the struggle for independence. In the cross-cultural encounter, these norms were hybridized with Asian norms of male identity. However, since the 1980s, the state has demanded that these Western values be rejected as contradictory to Singaporeans’ ethnic/racial heritage, where, indeed, the cathecting of such values is viewed as disloyalty towards one’s ethnic/racial culture. Since the values targeted for suppression had already been strongly invested and could not be easily erased, state emphasis on ‘Asian’/‘Chinese’ values would seem to have provided the circumstance that causes the return of the repressed (the awareness of male lack) and a concomitant neurosis. As Horowitz says, repressions are successful to the extent that the ego is able to ideologically condemn the instinct that is to be repressed rather than merely taking flight from it (38-9). But secondary processes of sublimation/repression operate on the ‘reality’ principle and such ego defense mechanisms as masculine culture are designed to help the subject cope with the realities of social living. Given Singapore’s real economic-cultural context, such a condemnation of Western values required for a successful repression cannot be expected without also involving a dismantling of currently dominant economic and political cultures. Displacing these Western values with a conflicting authoritarianism
dressed up as 'Chinese'/'Asian' tradition cannot fix the repression because the substitute object of
desire (a past Chinese/Asian culture) that has been offered to the people cannot be easily cathected given
its alienness to daily cultural life. As such, it would seem that the injunction to reject Western values has
caused the fragile veil of male power to be lifted, revealing the emptiness behind it.

Descendants attempts to extricate the Singaporean male ego from its awareness of male lack by re-
locating the banished (Western) desire for self-determination and self-representation within the world of
'Asian' or 'Chinese' desire, so that the repressed impulse can find an alternative racialized/ethnicized
expression. The repressed desire for self-determination/self-representation is re-circulated through
Chinese/Asian history, and located in the moment where Admiral Zheng He supposedly encounters, on
his travels, a South-east Asian social formation where citizens ruled themselves. This “negara
rajaraja” (a country of many rulers) had supposedly been an outcome of benevolent despotism, where
a kindly king ruled his country “in such a wise manner that oppression and injustice disappeared. And
when that happened, he also disappeared.” Having forbidden anyone to succeed him, the country had
become noted as a country without rulers, or where “all the people became their own rulers” (26).11

The play structurally stages this ‘Asian’ form of democracy by featuring each scene as that where the
activity of (political, cultural) representation is polarized into two subject positions, that of the authority
figure (the “Figure”) versus the subject performing the representation. In each scene, the “Figure,”
“theatreically dressed, larger than life but without a face” (1) listens to, evaluates and adjudicates drama
workers’ ideas on how to represent Zheng He’s life. The role of this authority figure and the subject
performing the representation is however interchangeable and drama workers take turns to play the
“Figure.” In the third scene, Boyd even momentarily doffs the robes of the “Figure” to make a
contribution as subject performing the representation. Towards the end of the play, the last actor to play
the “Figure” promises to let them know the following day “how the show will be edited and presented.”
“Rest assured,” he says, that “all [their] creative contributions will be greatly valued” (27). The drama
workshop is offered in fact as a politico-cultural model of an Asian democracy, where decisions
concerning representation will be made, presumably, according to the needs and aspirations of the community.

But the model of representation here is not that of democracy, where representational authority is both given and taken away by the subject of representation in the election process. In an ideal democratic situation, representational authority involves a relation between government and citizen. Rather, the play uses a model of representation that appears to be borrowed from a pre-democratic, despotic political culture. Here, authority is not a relation but a body, that of the "Figure," different and "larger" than the subject of representation. The decision to ignore the will of the people or to take heed of this will rests entirely within this "body" of authority. As Patrick points out, the will of authority, answerable only to itself, can be arbitrary and enigmatic. When the "Figure" commands everyone to decide for themselves in an unexpected granting of freedom, it is greeted with suspicion, and Patrick asks it a pertinent question, "What if you get angry afterwards, how?" (20).

The play shows awareness of the nature of authority in a despotic state. Despite this, it points to faith in and hope for a benevolent despotism as the way to integrate the repressed impulse for self-determination within an 'Asian'/'Chinese' system of values. As an ideological defense mechanism aimed at resolving a cultural neurosis/blockage, however, it involves a "flight" from the repressed (Western) impulse rather than a condemnation of the instinct or even a confrontation with it, a form of sublimation that is not likely to succeed. The placing of passive hope in a future benevolent despotism is similar to the primary process's means of dealing with drives: that of wish-fulfillment by hallucinating the object of desire. The play even signals its own consciousness of this through a remark that one of the characters makes: "happiness is better when they [sic] are actually enjoyed; happiness are [sic] pains when you can only desire them [sic]" (14).

The play's solution is modeled then on the "pleasure" principle of the primary process rather than on the "reality" principle of the secondary process. Descendants' dependence on the non-naturalistic mode of representation, its narrative organization by idea rather than chronology, its dependence on a fictional,
highly speculative history and on highly stylized arts such as song, dance and symbolic theater are themselves symptoms of this need to take flight from a pluralistic and diverse reality, to reduce its complexity. In this it shows that any response to state ideology must repeat the latter’s reduction of life’s complexities to a few simple abstract principles, and re-iterate its temporal confusions. The ideological solution extolling the Singaporean subject to hope for benevolent despotism and to identify with a traditional ‘Asian’ political culture of benevolent despotism involves asking the subject to blind himself to the realities and seductions of living and working within institutions of democracy, capitalism and global culture. This ‘solution’ could lead to two different fates for the Singaporean (male) subject: as a sure invitation begging the repressed to return yet again, or it could be the first step delivering him through regression and a split subjectivity to the rubbish heap of history.

In addition, the play’s imaginary resolution of ideological conflict between ‘West’ and ‘East’ is made possible only by the silencing of such idea-complexes as female difference and minority difference. There are two women among the drama workers, Sally and Maggie, but they are not allowed female ‘difference.’ Quite weirdly, the two women identify with the male castration anxiety experienced by the other players. At one point, Sally, who is probably a teacher in a girls’ school, comments that the Imperial network of castration is similar to the organizational network of her school, and needs to be reminded that girls don’t have penises (5). Instead of then dissociating herself as the ‘other’ to the subjectivity experienced by the male players, she merely joins the men in laughter and carries on with her male identifications. Maggie’s is a token female role and could be played by a male actor without requiring any change in the script. Samy, the only Indian in the play, also ignores his marginalized, hence different, subject-position from his Chinese counterparts by identifying with the eunuch Admiral Zheng He. This erases the difference between Indian and Chinese cultural heritages. Minority ‘difference,’ it would seem, doesn’t permeate beyond one’s darker skin. As such, Samy’s contribution to the representation of Zheng He differs from those of the others only in that it is “dark.” He dreams “a
darkly dream," and, at the end of his representation, the character playing the “Figure” evaluates it only as the “dark dreams [sic] they are” (13-14).

The play deconstructs the dominant categories of East and West only to reconstruct them differently. By covering over female and minority differences, it forbids the complete deconstruction of the two categories which, ironically, would have provided an ideological mechanism to dissolve the cross-cultural neurotic blockage dramatized in the play. If either Sally or Maggie had asserted their female difference in identifications and desires, the conflict between East and West, male power versus male lack would have been re-semiotized as a conflict of feminism against the patriarchy, demanding that male identifications and desires be themselves re-imagined outside the current norms of both West and East. If Samy had asserted his Singapore Indian male difference, the conflict between Western and Eastern norms of male identity would have doubled and split endlessly to take in the existence of multiple (not merely two) male cultures, which are additionally overdetermined by the various intersections of gender with race, ethnicity, class and sexuality. Again, this would have dissolved the neurotic fixating on two contradictory norms of male identity.

**Conclusion**

The battle between democratic representation and state authoritarianism is framed in Singapore political discourse as the battle of West versus East to cover over the fact that it is a conflict between modern (democratic) values versus the traditional (pre-democratic). The racialization of the battle gives political cachet to the state’s position and depends on affect whereas representation of it as the modern versus the traditional would delegitimize the state’s ideology as archaic. As if to cement this covering over, the state often speaks of an ‘Asian modernity,’ disavowing its rejection of “modernity” but in the process also re-contextualizing and controlling its (democratic) meanings. The unwanted meanings of modernity, such as ‘individualism’ and ‘press freedom,’ are placed in the opposite camp of a demonized Western culture. This ideological maneuver allows repression to occur in two directions. It forbids
those meanings of modernity that have been placed in the ‘Western’ camp. But, also, the move denies
ideological space to other meanings of modern culture such as radical democracy, post-colonial identity,
minority identity, and feminisms that cannot be fitted into the West versus East polarization, those
meanings of modern culture that would deconstruct the categories of West and East, dismantle their
polarization, and oppose both. These form the outside of the debate surrounding the dominant
ideology in Singapore. They are the unspeakable in dominant ideology, which may only be voiced in the
cultural spaces allocated to the liminal areas of the nation, always already marginalized, to appear in
academic journals or in fringe literature/theater, with their discourses classified as “gay,” “non-Eastern,”
“over-Westernized,” “non-Singaporean” and/or “anti-Singaporean,” “feminist,” “Marxist,” “anarchist”
or “ethnically chauvinist.”

The necessary silencing of the claims of radical democracy in the plays discussed in this chapter are
symptoms of the deep meanings and repressions of the dominant ideology. They reveal that the
ideological battle lines may be drawn up in dominant discourse as that between West and East but that
the real fight is taking place on and over the terrain of modernity (by which I mean the various cultural
claims posed by capitalism and democracy, and post-modern, post-colonial and post-Marxist
epistemologies).

These plays provide evidence of a national crisis in male identity which may perhaps explain
Singaporeans’ lack of resistance towards state authoritarianism. We saw for instance that Singaporeans
publicly defended an oppressive regime against American accusations of brutal state control in the Fay
caning incident. More recently, in the January 1997 elections, the ruling party not only won but
increased its share of the votes. As my analysis of the Fay incident shows, Singaporean men’s felt male
lack is disavowed by identifying (male) personal power with the authority of the state. The
unquestioning acceptance by many Singaporeans of their state-constructed Chinese/Asian identity could
well be a defensive reaction-formation that allows them to escape from anxieties concerning male
identity. But it is also a cultural response that demands that the power of the Chinese male citizen that
has been appropriated by the state be in turn made up by stealing power from the minority and women's constituencies.
Notes

1 More recently in 1994, the drama company which Kuo co-founded, Neccessary Stage, was involved in an incident with the government. The company’s forum theatre program was thrust into the limelight when two visual artists doing performance art obtained the attention of the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Ministry of Information and the Arts. The government’s objection to such “political” art led to the National Arts Council withdrawing financial support to stage forum theatre and performance art. In addition, Straits Times made an issue of two Necessary Stage members attending a Marxist-oriented drama workshop in New York. See “Sequence,” ST 8 Feb. 1994: 18.

2 Production history and critical reception are important in studying the role these texts play in hegemonizing the new nationalism. Given that all of these plays are ambivalent in their attitudes towards both Western culture and state ideology and contain scenes that variously resist and invest state authority, the staging of these plays, especially of such ‘ambivalent’ scenes, is an important factor in decoding their messages. The production history of these plays would also throw more light on the gender regime involved in the exploration of transvestitism, transsexuality and homosexuality as metaphors of national culture. For instance, I argue that, going by the text, the transsexual figure in Heng’s play represents an alternative male rather than female subject-position. In the first stagings of this play, male actors were used to represent the transsexual, which confirms my reading (Lest the Demons 28). But a female actor in this role could alter some of the central meanings of the play. However, I have only caught Tan’s play Undercover on stage due to my absence from Singapore, so that I am unable to deal with production history. The theatre scene is also relatively small in Singapore, and, at the moment, concentrates on developing new works and writers rather than in preserving a ‘tradition.’ Re-staging of Singapore plays are rare, except with very popular works such as those by Chiang. In such a context, it appears to me more fruitful to examine trends in drama to uncover a ‘hegemonic’ effect
and patterns in responses to state ideology than to focus on a few plays and their production/critical histories.

3 Silverman distinguishes between three enunciative levels in the cinema text (Subject 196-98). She describes the “spoken subject” of the film as the projected viewer, who is located at the site of the consumption of meaning whereas the “speaking subject” of the film is the (often hidden) producer of meaning, who controls the gaze. As I understand it, the “spoken subject” of the film refers to the type of consumer who would identify with the film’s ideology. But the film’s signifiers are activated, Silverman says, when the “spoken subject” agrees to identify with the “subject of the speech,” the fictional character who is the discursive representative of the “speaking subject.” The “speaking subject” often works through the fictional character, so that the latter is seen by the audience as controlling the gaze, as being the producer of meaning.


5 Qtd. in Koh Tai Ann, “Culture” 713-4. Information about the government’s proposed development of the arts and its “Agenda for Action” was also taken from Koh’s article (713-5).

6 See Pandian.


8 Geraldine Heng and Janadas Devan note that the mama-san in Lady of Soul services a “male fantasy” (“Being Obsessed” 113). They place Tan’s play within a trend in Singapore writing where “the attention of a cultural text that would present itself as social and political critique is split and undermined by its own obsession with sexual display.” This overwhelming attention placed on the sexual, they suggest, could be “a form of political censorship, an indication of either the unwillingness or inability (or both) of writers to advance a serious critique of their society” (112). Acknowledging that the sexual can
be the political, they argue that in Singapore texts, however, the "equation of sex with politics" often serves as the "alibi for the absence of the political," where "adolescent jokes and juvenile protests" are not "the sexual as the political" but the "sexual in place of the political" (114). This is certainly true of *Lady of Soul* but I would add that the relationship between the sexual and the political is not only one of displacement but that the two are more closely ideologically connected in Singapore than is often supposed.

9 The Censorship Review Committee’s recommendations, which were published in 1992, do not fixate on the representation of sex but do approach issues of political censorship. Tan himself quotes some of these recommendations in his letter of appeal to the licensing authority: the committee notes that the "artistic and literary merits of a production should be taken into account as redeeming factors" and recognizes that "by its nature, art must be understood, at times, to challenge orthodoxy and provide a stimulus for social change and evolution" (76-81).

10 I am working with the fourth draft manuscript of the play, which is dated April 1995.

11 Kuo is the only one of the playwrights dealt with here who tries to offer an alternative Asian masculinity that is South-east Asian rather than Chinese. In scene 14, it is suggested that Zheng He is Muslim and belongs to the marginalized areas of the Chinese empire: when his armada is caught in a storm, the eunuch admiral cries out, "Insya Allah, save us . . . remembering how he and his family and relatives prayed in his childhood days" (25). Zheng He is also familiar with "Sang Nila Utama the Prince of Temasek," and follows his historic example during the storm by throwing possessions into the sea. As admiral of the Ming fleet, he has also travelled widely in the South-east Asian region. My knowledge of South-east Asian myths and history leaves much to be desired, but it would appear that the "*negara rajaraja*" (which is a Malay term) that Zheng He discusses is a fictional hybridization of a 15-th century Malay kingdom and a society in Sri Lanka, which is often described, as Zheng He does, as "the jewel of the world" and "the Buddha’s tear."
Sylvia Walby’s work is an instance of such a deconstructive feminism. In her article “Woman and Nation,” she argues within the context of Western democracies, but her contention that the modern nation-state has been transforming the nature of patriarchy from private to public allows the focus on female oppression to penetrate the barriers of national authoritarianism that disguise themselves as racial cultural ‘difference’ (235-54).
Conclusion

I have tried in this dissertation to make sense of the large cultural changes that have swept Singapore over the last 15 years in its effort to 'Asianize,' and to understand, in particular, the baffling possibility that a new ethnicized national identity can be constructed practically overnight to take hold of a people's imagination and alter their most central and long-held cultural identifications. Working as a journalist, I was fortunate to be immersed for some years in the clearing-house of information and thoroughfare of national culture that a newspaper office often is. Though Singapore is not noted as one of the world's centers of press freedom, this does not mean that journalistic news gathering is limited: merely, that what is uncovered often cannot be published. As such, I collected much 'unofficial' information both about public responses and government attitudes that have guided my academic work here in more ways than I can document. All that was left was for me to develop my impressions under the light of current literary theories. Lacanian psychoanalytical theory, inflected with Marxist cultural critique, has allowed me to tackle the sense I had then that something weird was happening in the country with the introduction of the new nationalism, something quite psychologically twisted, culturally unproductive, even regressive. About 10 years ago, reading contemporary Singapore literature, I vowed that one day I would read the 'repressed' in local texts, move beyond their silences, their gaps, and their elisions, of which I had felt there were many. Hence, my instant 'bonding' with Zizek's critical method.

Perhaps because Singapore, unlike many post-colonial societies, found a quick way to displace post-colonial cultural anxiety through economic success, the cultural became subordinated and made functional to the economic. In that the nation's rapid rise to economic stardom involved colonial mimicry and the courting of Western capital, national desire is closely bound with the West, though with the US rather than Britain, the former colonial master. This has made Singapore highly susceptible to Western ideological manipulation. As I have shown, its political leaders have been only too willing to culturally re-fashion themselves and their country according to a Western say-so. When a culturally
insecure nation realizes that its own ‘master’ looks at it with desire and envy (and the homoerotic implications are not accidental here), it styles itself, in Confucian robes, with Chinese brush at hand, to be the object of the other’s fantasy in a manner that differs little from Singapore’s “sarong party girls,” career women by day who, with their tanned skin, long silky hair and tiny hips wrapped with locally-crafted fabric, turn into would-be South Seas Gauguin models by night, fitting themselves into the Oriental fantasy scenarios of Caucasian men. When such Oriental fantasies can be used to entice the ‘other’ master, China, then these become multiply seductive. The confidence that comes with wealth does not appear to have eroded Singaporeans’ ‘colonial mentality’: it has only doubled it. On 29 April 1995, for instance, at the opening of an exhibition in Singapore, culture minister Brigadier-General George Yeo said, with apparently no sense of irony: “If we [Singaporeans] are no longer different from Americans, we will cease to be of use to Americans. Equally, if we are no different from the Chinese in China, we become of no use to them.”

“Exile,” says Edward Said, “far from being the fate of nearly forgotten unfortunates who are dispossessed and expatriated, becomes something closer to a norm, an experience of crossing boundaries and charting new territories in defiance of the classic canonic enclosures, however much its loss and sadness should be acknowledged and registered” (Culture 317). I am not in exile but my current cultural in-between location, being abroad in the West but writing about “home” in the East, has in many ways allowed me to transcend cultural blindness experienced by resident Singaporeans. Living in Singapore, the nation can often be experienced claustrophobically as a walled city, its borders as rigid, impermeable, tirelessly constructed and daily policed by the government. The government then becomes the ‘enemy’ on whom one focuses. But crossing the border, these walls come into view as fragile, permeable fantasies spun out of fear, anxiety, and desire. As government authority degenerates to pose, the national border shows up its inter-nationality as a dualistic containment strategy: as not only that which keeps Singaporeans inside, but also that which keeps them outside the Western center of power. Residing in the West, one becomes only too aware that non-Western nationalisms involve a complex trafficking of
desire between metropolis and periphery and, paradoxically, mark the non-Western nation's alienation from itself.

The moment that I suspected a conjunction in desire between the West/US and Singapore, ironically, my project of de-colonization appeared to demand that I work within the gaps of 'post-colonial theory.' In opposing essentialistic constructions of racial/ethnic difference, I rubbed up against post-colonial theory's emphasis on non-Western cultural difference. Since state cultural oppression was itself clothed in post-colonial rhetoric, 'post-colonial theory' seemed to be part of the problem rather than its answer. Then too, post-colonial literary criticism prioritizes post-colonial texts that resist colonial power/culture and considers de-colonization in terms of a recovery from a past colonization--so that a romanticized accent on de-colonizing displaces scrutiny of the very real violence of on-going contemporary imperialism. My contextualization of Singapore literature with national politics, I found, opened me to meanings that I could not have located through 'post-colonial' reading practices. For instance, the texts studied in chapter 4, with their emphasis on 'Chinese' identity and use of feminist literary forms, can be quite easily mistranslated through post-colonial critique as anti-colonial and/or feminist. What Chow says about Third World cultural products offered to First World audiences in Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema, applies also to the manner in which such texts/products are received within a 'Western' discipline of post-colonial criticism. There's a certain extent of "commodity fetishism" of the Third World text involved in post-colonial readings of non-Western national difference, where the 'third world' is "enlisted" in "the manufacture of a reflection, an alterity that gives (back) to the 'first world' a sense of 'its' freedom and democracy" while allowing the 'third world' product to be viewed against the authoritarian policies of 'third world' governments. Applying Chow's reading of Jean Baudrillard, it would seem that in post-colonial criticism, the non-Western text takes on the figurative "labor" of signification while being emptied of its actual substance of labor, which is often accomplished by neglecting, through the practice of interpretation, the economic and political tensions, both domestic and international, that generated the
text (59-60). Chow poses this immensely pertinent question that ruptures the “currently hegemonic reading of ‘third world’ cultures . . . that insists on their oppositional alterity to the West”:

One question that the inscription of “third world” cultures in opposition does not seem to be able to deal with is what else there is in such cultures besides the struggle against the West. What if the primary interest of a “third world” culture is not that of resistance against Western domination? (56).

Though Singapore and China are worlds apart in their cultural histories, American neo-Orientalism has apparently succeeded so well in its racialist ideologizing that I find many similarities between Chow’s account of post-Cultural Revolution sinocentrism in China and recent Singaporean cultural activity. Chow, for instance, relates the reinvention of Chinese tradition in China to the phantasmatic staking of a claim to an “original” modernism, where Chinese tradition comes together with “modernity.” But this idea that “China can have part of the West -- technology -- without changing its social structure” is a “fantasy” (73). As Chow says:

... the notion that “China” is first and original is already a response to the exchange with the West, a claim that is made after the onslaught of the West has become irreversible. . . . the insistence on an original “Chinese” culture is an insistence on a kind of value that is outside alienation, outside the process of value making. The wish to return a culture to an original (native) value is thus the wish to remove that culture from the process in which it appears “original” in the first place. (64)

This disjuncture between economic reality and ethnic desire, where Chow suggests that self-repression itself has become aestheticized (51), demands that questions be asked concerning the “reconstruction of origins, the truncating of libidinal economies, and the imaginary reinvestments that make up the ‘labor’ moving within a ‘third world’ culture as well as between the ‘first’ and ‘third’ worlds” (65 ). In this manner, we can uncover “national culture as a kind of economic text--a kind of value writing” (63).

Chow notes, as I have in chapters 4 and 5, that the ‘new’ identity is expressed through the ‘old,’ that
consciousness is "inter[media]ry," that it struggles between voices and crosses between sign systems (117). Just as a Chinese filmmaker returns the Oriental gaze in all its cruelty back to the West by repeating it (166-67), so too, but less subversively, the Singapore playwright cross-dresses as Chinese, Western, liberal norms of masculinity invested during an earlier period. The "primitive passions" that Chow sees in Chinese films made for Western consumption may copy Orientalist representations of Chinese culture's datedness and alterity, but as "coeval, co-temporal" representational structures of myths of "retrospection and forwardness, nostalgia and idealism," that construct a new aboriginality, they involve a "crisis-laden, ambivalent time" where the nation sees itself anew as an 'other' (43). In recent Singapore 'historical' fiction too, one observes a similar Oriental primitivist 'othering' of the self, an exoticization of the backward, of a "noble savagery . . . as yet uncorrupted by modernity" (74) that is inscribed within an identity crisis but which is, as Chow emphasizes, caught in a "cross-cultural interpretative politics" (142). Chow too sees in the "unconscious that is lurking beneath Han sinocentrism," an ethnic 'emancipation' that is complicitious with patriarchal culture, which I have observed in Singapore drama and fiction (43-44).

But it is Chow's analysis of the cultural narcissism she detects in contemporary Chinese films that strikes an alarming chord with Singapore cultural production, especially with the drama considered in this study. Chow links the (heterosexual) masculinist narcissism in Chinese films -- where men watch other men, and where for the male cultural producer, the object of desire is another man rather than a woman -- to the failure of dominant national culture. Since these culture producers are dissatisfied with national culture, women, who signify for them the reproduction/transmission of that culture through the marriage and familial institutions, are hence evaded. Desire is instead directed narcissistically towards other men, in search of that which has been denied in themselves. The narcissism then is a flight from reality necessitated, Chow says, by the "censorial institution of conscience," and it is not oppositional to the West. We have to rethink narcissism, Chow says, not in terms of "independence" but as the "outward symptoms of a process of cultural devastation, which leaves the self recoiling inwards, seeking
its connection from itself rather than with external reality” (135). Chow adds that narcissistic desire and identification in these films are often directed at male figures of powerlessness, who are the “safest for the realization of otherwise unenactable fantasies” (137-8). The narcissistic gaze of the culture producer, which he projects onto his protagonist, results from the latter’s sense of marginalization, of exclusion from the nation, which is coped with by identifying with powerless figures. “A certain emotional stability,” Chow notes, “arises from observing the powerless as spectacle.” But a sense of empowerment is also gained in the process, accruing from “the illusion of a ‘solidarity’ with the powerless,” which in turn forms a “unified community” of sympathy which is other than that of a hegemonic national collectivity (135-36). As I have noted, Singapore playwrights do become overly concerned with watching other men and desiring them and this is linked to anxiety about male selfhood and with a need to identify with the powerless (such as transvestites and transsexuals), the non-national. My own reading of the male culture inscribed in recent Singapore plays compels me to agree with Chow’s plea that “this masculinity is the sign of a vast transindividual oppression whose undoing must become the collective undertaking for all those who have a claim to modern Chinese culture” (141).

I read Chow’s *Primitive Passions* after much of my work had been done so that the similarities in her critique of Chinese cinema and my study of Singapore literature and the discourse of Asian/Confucianist identity do suggest that psychoanalytical-Marxist theory holds promise in unfolding a new collectivity of representational structures of post-colonial fantasy, that will allow us to better understand the cross-cultural relations and deadlocks in non-Western desire in the era of global capitalism. Chow’s concept of an intersemiotic translation--of the “translating from one sign system to another,” and not only from one language to another or the verbal to the visual but the transporting of narrative paradigms from one culture to another--could also be productive in problematizing the notion of originality in post-colonial culture and allow us to see instead the way the non-Western unconscious is caught up in Western desire. In this manner, we can penetrate the racial dissembling of the post-colonial class struggle (that Etienne Balibar and Wallerstein warned us about) and see, as Chow says, both “East and West . . . as full,
materialist and most likely equally corrupt, equally decadent participants in contemporary world culture” (192-95).

Though my work deals with the instrumentalist, authoritarian function that nationalisms can be made to serve, I continue to believe in the usefulness of nationalisms for post-colonial societies. Just as the private subject can find empowering ‘illusions’ for itself despite the alienation involved in entry into the Symbolic Order, so too national subjectivity, I believe, is capable of dreaming up fictions, and not merely regressively native ones, but those that promote multi-cultural and extra-national, regional identifications, to help in de-colonization. Paranoiac, hysterical nationalisms can be avoided by knowledge of society’s desires, by an active critical tradition. But, also, to be culturally regenerative, national culture must be a constantly negotiated democratic formation that is in the hands of civil society rather than with the state. Jürgen Habermas notes that the ‘nation’ concept has helped to reinforce constitutional abstract notions of citizenship and social solidarity beyond race and class, though, undoubtedly there is a tension between an egalitarian universalism of a legally constituted community and the particularism of ethnic identifications. As he suggests, constitutional principles of human rights and democracy should prevail over the idea of the nation as a pre-political ethnic collective (281-94). Marxists have traditionally opposed national loyalties as intervening in the class struggle, but as Gopal Balakrishnan notes, the proletariat emerged as a political force in modern history only as a national class, so that far from being mutually exclusive bases of collective organization, nation and class can be complementary (200).
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