

HL2008 Singapore Literature and Culture
Module lecturer: Professor C. J. W.-L. Wee
Semester I, 2023-2024 – August 2023
Wednesday, 1430-1730 hours, venue: HSS Seminar Room 9

Description

HL2008 examines select literary and dramatic/theatrical work from the 1970s to the present, but mainly in the 1980s to the 2000s. *The focus is specific: Singaporean identity in relation to questions of (1) race/ethnicity and (2) rapid social and cultural change, especially given the urbanisation that accompanied planned rapid economic development.* The PAP's commitment to apply 1960's *modernisation theory* led (by the 1970s) to a 'pragmatic', culturally philistine Singapore society where the arts, heritage and culture were largely irrelevant and to the management of ethnic and class tensions. *Culture* meant the ways people lived and the values attached to such ways-of-life: these had to be curtailed if development was threatened. Development is predicated, in a way, on the *forgetting* of tensions between ethnic identities and even 'old-fashioned' culture itself. (Read: <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/the-race-issue-how-far-has-singapore-come> and <https://thesmartlocal.com/read/5-riots-that-rocked-singapore/> – zoom in on September 1964 race riots in Geylang.) From the 1990s, a revised thinking of economic development gave space to culture, heritage and the arts given a desire for Singapore to be a 'global city for the arts' (the title of a 1992 government policy publication): the city-state could not be a global city like London if what the late-Foreign Minister S. Rajaratnam called 'moneytheism' reigns. The challenge was that a new generation had resulted in which *rootedness seemed no longer to need memory*: what a previous generation went through might be irrelevant to the consumerist present.

To gain an initial understanding of *modernisation theory* as it will be used in this class, please read this: <https://www.thoughtco.com/modernization-theory-3026419> (ThoughtCo., 'A Brief Guide to Modernization Theory'). A general understanding of this theory is *fundamental* for this class.

Changing historical contexts are important to understand the module's texts – they do not make sense otherwise. What happens to ethnic-cultural identities, among the most sensitive identities and therefore political questions, when transformed by state-led social engineering to make the city-state more culturally and politically stable for economic development? What literary and dramatic-theatrical responses were there in relation to the state's policies on culture, class and racial management since independence in 1965? Why should forward-looking Singaporeans brought up on social media bother with older persons' cultural identities? Maybe the older forms of Singapore culture now are ... irrelevant.

Texts

1. Goh Poh Seng, *If We Dream Too Long*. Singapore: NUS Press, 2010; new edition 2020. PR9570.S53I23. **Novel**
2. Chong Tze Chien, *Charged*. In Chong Tze Chien, *Four Plays: Charged, Poop!, Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea, To Whom It May Concern*. Singapore: Epigram Books, 2011. PR9570.S53C548. **Play**
3. Kuo Pao Kun, *Mama Looking for Her Cat; Kopitiam (The Coffee Shop); and Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral*. In Kuo Pao Kun, *The Complete Plays of Kuo Pao Kun, vol. 4: Plays in English*, ed. C. J. W.-L. Wee. Singapore: Global Publishing and The Theatre Practice, 2012. PL3099.G8K96. **3 Plays**
4. Alfian Sa'at, *sex.violence.blood.gore*. In Alfian Sa'at, *Collected Plays One*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2010. PR9570.S53A387C. **Play**

5. Isa Kamari, *Rawa*, trans. R. Krishnan. Kuala Lumpur: Silverfish Books, 2013. ISBN 978-983-3221-43-1. PL5139.I735R257. **Note that this book is hard to obtain; make it a priority to obtain it. Novel**
 6. Ong Keng Sen (Director), *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral* (produced by TheatreWorks [Singapore]) – script by the Kuo Pao Kun, production on DVD: *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral* [videorecording]: Hamburg International Summer, Germany, 1998 / TheatreWorks. Two (2) copies: DS753.6.Z47D445 – **Chinese library AV reserves.** (Script from Kuo, *Plays in English*, vol. 4.) **theatre production**
OR
Ong, *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral* [videorecording] [TheatreWorks: 1998]. Two (2) copies available at **NIE Library**. Reserves (level 2) PN2960.S55 TwD.
 7. Eric Khoo (Director), *12 Storeys* (1997): *12 Storeys* [videorecording] = *shi er lou* (Brink/Springroll/Zhao Wei Films): PN1995.9.S62S884 (**on reserve**).
OR
Copies also available in **NIE Library**: XVC 25 disc 1; XVC 26 disc 2; XVC 667 disc 1; XVC 668 disc 2. **Reserves (level 2)**
If you do not wish to purchase it, then you *must* use the library copies. Purchasing literary texts and DVDs, though, support the arts and culture in Singapore.
 8. Kelvin Tong and Jasmine Ng (Directors), *Eating Air; A Motorcycle Kongfu Love Story* (1999): Business Library, PN1995.9.L6E14 2000 (**For 2022: The film can also be viewed on Netflix: <https://www.netflix.com/sg/title/81287251>**)
OR
National Institute of Education Library Reserves (Level 2) PN1997 Eat
 9. Sharon Siddique, ‘Singaporean Identity’; and Chua Beng Huat, ‘The Business of Living in Singapore’. In *Management of Success: The Moulding of Modern Singapore*, ed. K. S. Sandhu and Paul Wheatley. Singapore: ISEAS (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies), 1989. DS598.S762 M266. **Will be made available as PDFs.**
 10. Terence Chong, ‘Fluid Nation.’ In *Management of Success: Singapore Revisited*, ed. Terence Chong. Singapore: ISEAS, 2010. DS609.M266 2010. **Will be available as a PDF.**
- NOTE:** I have requested that the books be ordered for the bookshop, but you are responsible for the *12 Storeys* and *Eating Air* DVDs.

Method of instruction and small-group seating requirement:

- Three-hour seminar with one break.
- Seminars will generally, with some exceptions, follow this format: (1) student presentation and Q&A immediately; (2) general discussion of the material; (3) break of about 15 minutes; and (4) small-group discussion.
- Students will be required to sit in the *discussion small groups of about 5 students* for the semester. A list will be confirmed by the second week, once class registration stabilises. Learning to have strong conversations with people you know less well is a vital life-long skill that will enter the working and practical world.

Mode of Assessment:

Breakdown:

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|--|--------|
| - Essay assignment (1,500-1,700-word essay) | 35%* |
| - In-class group presentation at the start of each class | 15%** |
| - End of semester final examination (2 ½ hours) | 50%*** |

Key:

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

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

***** Exam format:** (i) closed-book exam; (ii) **three (3)** questions to be answered; (iii) no compulsory questions; (iv) more than 3 questions will be offered; (v) exam questions may be **either** be comparative **or** on single works; (vi) a text used for one question *cannot* be used for another – **penalties apply**; and (vii) final essay assignment material can be used in the exam.

Academic Integrity:

All members of the NTU community are responsible for upholding the values of academic integrity in all academic undertakings. You are required to understand that all graded and non-graded work throughout the semester is original and is created without assistance from others except where explicitly allowed by the module lecturer. **Serious penalties will result for breach of academic integrity.**

- A guide to academic integrity can be found here:
<http://www.ntu.edu.sg/ai/ForEveryone/pages/aguidetoacademicintegrity.aspx>
- The full academic integrity policy can be found here:
<http://www.ntu.edu.sg/ai/ForEveryone/Pages/NTUAcademicIntegrityPolicy.aspx>
- **Generative AI Policy:** Generative AI, such as ChatGPT, cannot be used for any of your assignments.

Schedule, Readings, Topics:

MEETING ONE, 14 AUGUST:

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

MEETING TWO, 23 AUGUST:

Siddique, ‘Singaporean Identity’; Chong, ‘Fluid Nation’; and Chua, ‘Business of Living’

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

NOTE: These are background readings & will *illuminate some* of what transpires in *some* of the texts. **Do not assume that each text deals with all that raised in this session. It is important to learn to use background/contextual sensibly, especially for when you write longer essays (e.g., the FYP): the authors are *not* trying to ‘illustrate’ the readings.**

MEETING THREE, 30 AUGUST:

Goh, *If We Dream Too Long*

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

Main issues: Modernisation, class, meritocracy, landscape

MEETING FOUR, 6 SEPTEMBER:

Isa Kamari, *Rawa*:

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

Main issues: Modernisation, identity, landscape

MEETING FIVE, 13 SEPTEMBER:

Kuo Pao Kun, *Mama Looking for Her Cat*

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

Main issues: Social engineering, values, cultural identity

MEETING SIX, 20 SEPTEMBER:

Kuo Pao Kun, *KOPITIAM*

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

Main issues: Modernisation, urbanisation/landscape, collective identity vs. economic individualism

MEETING SEVEN, 27 SEPTEMBER:

Eric Khoo (Director), *12 Storeys*

- Life in the now-established modernist public housing – social alienation in self, family, society – materialistic values in successful Singapore after *If We Dream Too Long* in the late 1990s – social aspiration.

Main issues: Urbanisation/landscape, the lack of social (& possibly national) identity, dysfunctional individualism and a lack of social mobility

RECESS WEEK, 4 OCTOBER

MEETING EIGHT, 11 OCTOBER:

Kelvin Tong and Jasmine Ng (Directors), *Eating Air: A Motorcycle Kungfu Love Story*

- Life in public housing – social alienation and values with the less-educationally privileged young – expressive freedom and male, working-class youth culture – class and youth. The late 1990s.

Main issues: Urban landscape, class and identity issues for youth in contemporary Singapore, lack of social mobility

MEETING NINE, 18 OCTOBER:

Alfian, *sex.violence.blood.gore*

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

Main issues: Challenging text as need to see how the smaller episodes offer a general position: Cultural and national identity issues in contemporary Singapore

- ❖ Suggested essay topics to be made available on **Friday, 20 October**. Note that there is *neither* obligation *nor* support (apart from usual short consultations) available if students write on material taught after the topics are released. You

can use the questions as guide and support for examination prep.

MEETINGS TEN, 25 OCTOBER:

Chong Tze Chien, *Charged*

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

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

MEETING ELEVEN, 1 NOVEMBER:

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

We will examine Kuo's script. The *next* meeting will deal with Ong's theatre production. *The video must be viewed in advance of the next class meeting.*

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

Main issues: Cultural identity and an ambitious, 'globalising' state (an allegory of contemporary Singapore)

- **Given the class size, do ensure that students plan to watch the video in advance.**
- **Important: This is a theatre production, so staging, costumes, how actors performed must be observed. Familiarity with *how the staging and script* create the meaning of the production matters: this understanding affects assessment.**

MEETING TWELVE, 8 NOVEMBER:

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

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

Main issues: Challenging: Visualising and interpreting culture and identity in a 'globalising' state.

❖ **Essay due on Monday, 6 November by 4pm. Hard *and* soft copies required.**

MEETING THIRTEEN, 15 NOVEMBER:

Revision

Suggested Secondary Readings:

- Mohammad A. Quayum and Peter Wicks (eds.), *Singaporean Literature in English: A Critical Reader* (Serang: Universiti Putra Malaysia Press, 2002). PR9570.S5S617
- C. J. W.-L. Wee, 'Culture, the Arts and the Global City', in Terence Chong (ed.), *Management of Success: Singapore Revisited* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2010). DS609.M266 2010
- William Peterson, *Theater and the Politics of Culture in Contemporary Singapore* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan UP, 2001) PN2960.S55P485
- C. J. W.-L. Wee, 'Imagining "New Asia" in the Theatre: Cosmopolitan East Asia and the Global West' (on Ong Keng Sen's *Lear* and Kuo Pao Kun's *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral*), in Koichi Iwabuchi et al. (eds.), *Rogue Flows: Trans-Asian Cultural Traffic* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP, 2004) DS12.R736; alternative version can be found as: C. J. W.-L. Wee, 'Staging the Asian Modern: Cultural Fragments, the Singaporean Eunuch, and the Asian Lear', *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 4 (Summer 2004): 771-799.

- Terence Chong, *The Theatre and the State in Singapore: Orthodoxy and Resistance* (London: Routledge, 2011) PN296.S5
- Tan Chong Kee (ed.), *Ask Not: The Necessary Stage in Singapore Theatre* (Singapore: Times Editions, 2004) PN2960.S55A834 – see, esp., essays by Kwok Kian-Woon on state cultural policy and Quah Sy Ren on multiculturalism and Kuo Pao Kun.
- Rustom Bharucha, *Consumed in Singapore: The Intercultural Spectacle of Lear* (Singapore: Centre for Advanced Study, NUS, 2000) (Includes a sustained & critical discussion of Ong Keng Sen and of Kuo Pao Kun) H62.C334 NO.21
- See the intro. essay and the essays (for discussion of *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral*) at the end of C J W-L Wee and Lee Chee Keng (eds.), *Two Plays by Kuo Pao Kun: Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral and The Spirits Play* (Singapore : SNP International, 2003). PL3099.G8D445 2003
- Quah Sy Ren, ‘Evolving Multilingual Theatre in Singapore: The Case of Kuo Pao Kun’, in Leo Suryadinata (ed.), *Ethnic Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia: A Dialogue Between Tradition and Modernity* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 2002) DS610.25.C5E84
- Quah Sy Ren, ‘Form as Ideology: Representing the Multicultural in Singapore Theatre’, in *Ask Not: The Necessary Stage in Singapore Theatre*, ed. Tan Chong Kee and Tisa Ng (2004). PN2960.S55A834
- Angelia Poon, ‘Performing National Service in Singapore: (Re)Imagining Nation in the Poetry and Short Stories of Alfian Sa’at’, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 40, no. 3 (2005): 118-138.
<http://ehis.ebscohost.com/eds/detail?sid=6fe53a00-f2fa-4363-b347-dc9be2080aac@sessionmgr13&vid=10&hid=http://ehis.ebscohost.com/&#db=edswah&AN=000232076100009>

Notes

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