

## HL2008 Singapore Literature and Culture II

Jan 2017 semester

### Description

This module will examine select literary and dramatic/theatre works in the light of the changes in Singapore literature and culture from the 1970s to the present, with an emphasis on the 1980s to the 2000s. The central context of the dramatic changes lie in changes in modernisation policy in Singapore – in the 1970s, from a ‘pragmatic’ and culturally philistine modernisation that sought to homogenise/standardise culture and the cityscape in the name of economic development, to a 1990s-present modernisation that (in contrast) desires Singapore to be a more hip ‘global city for the arts’ (a 1992 gov.-policy phrase). The changing contexts are as important as the texts to be examined. Why was the Singapore state not interested in what can be called ‘high culture’ or ‘serious art’ in the 1960s & 1970s? The emphasis then appeared to be on culture conceived of as ‘racial’ and ethnic culture – and such ethnic-cultural identities are effectively transformed by the urban change and state-led social engineering. What sort of literary and other cultural responses were there in relation to the state’s policies on culture and racial management in the 1980s? What happened in the state’s thinking on culture in the 1990s that led a (supposed move away from a philistinism) to a desire to invest in the arts? How did creative-cultural producers relate to these unexpected changes? Such will be the questions that this module will address.

### Texts

The readings are a combination of short plays, a novel, a film a theatre production (a DVD to be placed on 3-hour reserve in the Media Library), and key selected essays on Singapore literature and culture. *Emily of Emerald Hill*, Alfian’s *Collected Plays One, If We Dream Too Long* and Kuo Pao Kun’s *Plays in English* (vol 4 of *The Complete Works of Kuo Pao Kun*) will have to be purchased. The rest can either be copied from library copies or will be made available as PDFs.

### Class Requirements

- One (1) class presentation, probably in groups (10%; the presentations should be based upon the readings/DVD production.
- There should be a concise summary of the author’s/authors’/director’s main argument (or some sort of thematic, aesthetic or socio-political-cultural analyses of the artistic material) for the first half of the presentation, and then students are encouraged to bring their own interests for the rest of the presentation.
- *Expressing considered opinions of the readings is important, as critical evaluative skills (with evidence for the position taken) are vitally important.*
- Between 15 mins. (for a single presenter) to 20-25 mins. (for a group presentation). **Please stay within the time limit.**
- **A final essay of between 1,500-1,700 words. (40%)**
- **A final exam. (50%) The exam format:**
  - will be a closed-book exam;
  - will require **three (3)** questions to be answered in 2 ½ hours;
  - will **not have** compulsory questions;
  - will offer a choice of questions – i.e., more than 3 questions will be offered;
  - will have questions that are *both* comparative *and* on single works; &
  - **will not allow** the repetition of writers: i.e., an author used for one question *cannot* be used for another. Penalties *will* ensue.

### Readings

- Goh Poh Seng, *If We Dream Too Long* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2010) PR9570.S53I23
- Stella Kon, *Emily of Emerald Hill* (Singapore: Constellation Books, 2002) PR9570.S53K82  
Can be purchased directly from: <<http://www.emilyofemeraldhill.com/bookstore>>
- Kuo Pao Kun, *Mama Looking for Her Cat* and *KOPITIAM (The Coffeeshop)*, in Kuo, *The Complete Plays of Kuo Pao Kun, vol. 4: Plays in English* (Singapore: Global Publishing, 2012) (two short plays) PL3099.G8K96
- Alfian Sa'at, *sex.violence.blood.gore* and *The Optic Trilogy*, in Alfian, *Collected Plays One* (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2010) (two short plays) PR9570.S53A387C
- Ong Keng Sen (Director), *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral* (produced by TheatreWorks [Singapore]) – playscript by the late Kuo Pao Kun, production on DVD: *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral* [videorecording]: Hamburg International Summer, Germany / TheatreWorks. Two (2) copies: DS753.6.Z47D445 – Business Library, AV Collections (level B2). (Script is in *Plays in English, vol. 4.*)
- Eric Khoo (Director), *12 Storeys* (1997): *12 Storeys* [videorecording] = *shi er lou* (Brink/Springroll/Zhao Wei Films):

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- Kwok Kian Woon and Low Kee Hong, 'Cultural Policy and the City-State: Singapore and the "New Asian Renaissance"', in *Global Culture: Media, Arts, Policy, and Globalization*, ed. Diana Crane, Nobuko Kawashima and Ken'ichi Kawasaki (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 151-168. P94.6.G562 ++
- Koh Tai Ann, 'Culture and the Arts', in K. S. Sandhu and Paul Wheatley (eds.), *The Management of Success: The Moulding of Modern Singapore* (Singapore: ISEAS, 1990) DS598.S762M266 ++
- Isa Kamari, *Rawa*, trans. R. Krishnan (Kuala Lumpur: Silverfish Books, 2013).

Key:

++ Material either to be copied from library copy or will be made available as a PDF

**Select Secondary Readings:**

**(Note: Will be in reserve)**

- Mohammad A. Quayum and Peter Wicks (eds.), *Singaporean Literature in English: A Critical Reader* (Serdang: Universiti Putra Malaysia Press, 2002). PR9570.S5S617
- C. J. W.-L. Wee, 'Culture, the Arts and the Global City', in Terence Chong (ed.), *Management of Success: Singapore Revisited* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2010). DS609.M266 2010
- William Peterson, *Theater and the Politics of Culture in Contemporary Singapore* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan UP, 2001) PN2960.S55P485
- Kenneth Paul Tan (ed.), *Renaissance Singapore? Economy, Culture, and Politics* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2007) DS609.R393J – see essays by Tan on 'Renaissance' city policy and by Terence Lee on 'creativity' in the new economy
- 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
- Kwok Kian Woon, ‘The Bonsai and the Rainforest: Reflections on Culture and Cultural Policy in Singapore’, in *Ask Not: The Necessary Stage in Singapore Theatre*, ed. Tan Chong Kee and Tisa Ng (2004). PN2960.S55A834
- Angelia Poon, ‘Performing National Service in Singapore: (Re)Imagining Nation in the Poetry and Short Stories of Alfian Sa’at’, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 40, no. 3 (2005): 118-138.  
<http://ehis.ebscohost.com/eds/detail?sid=6fe53a00-f2fa-4363-b347-dc9be2080aac@sessionmgr13&vid=10&hid=http://ehis.ebscohost.com/&#db=edswah&AN=000232076100009>

#### Notes

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

## Schedule, Readings, Topics

### MEETING ONE:

Introduction

### MEETING TWO:

Koh Tai Ann, 'Culture and the Arts' (Essay)

Context for literature and the arts in Singapore from the 1960s to the 1980s: Culture in post-independence Singapore – race/ethnicity as 'culture', rather than literature and the arts – Singapore as 'cultural dessert' – the (weak) role of the arts: 'pragmatic' development vs. airy-fairy arts

#### **Modernisation I**

### MEETING THREE:

Goh, *If We Dream Too Long*; & Intro to Rem Koolhaas, 'Singapore Songlines: Portrait of a Potemkin Metropolis ... or Thirty Years of Tabula Rasa' (Essay)

Post-independence Singapore – rapid economic development and urbanisation; the change in the urbanscape (the rise of HDB blocks) – identity changes in intensely modernising, immediate post-colonial Singapore

#### **Modernisation II**

### MEETING FOUR:

Stella Kon, *Emily of Emerald Hill*

History and culture as literary and dramatic theme in Singapore literature and culture: the first text – reclaiming and remembering Singapore-*Peranakan* cultural identity – women and culture in Singapore – modernising culture and identity

#### **Modernisation III**

### MEETING FIVE:

Isa Kamari, *Rawa*:

Indigenous identity in Singapore under the impact of the post-independence modernising state – youth identification with older cultural identity

#### **Modernisation IV**

### MEETING SIX:

Kuo Pao Kun, *Mama Looking for Her Cat*

Modernisation and identity fractures in Singapore – the problem of the continuity of culture and identity in Singapore – representing multilingual Singapore.

#### **A lost generation I**

### MEETING SEVEN:

Kuo Pao Kun, *KOPITIAM*

Modernisation and the urbanscape – memory and identity in Singapore – the young born after independence in Singapore: exposure to the larger world.

#### **A lost generation II**

### MEETING EIGHT:

Eric Khoo (Director), *12 Storeys*

Modernist public housing and social alienation – identity changes in intensely modernising Singapore after *If We Dream Too Long*

#### **A lost generation III**

MEETING NINE:

Kwok Kian Woon & Low Kee Hong, 'Cultural Policy and the City-State: Singapore and the "New Asian Renaissance"' (Essay)

Context for literature and the arts from the 1980s to the present: Beyond the cultural desert – 'culture' defined as the arts rather than as race/ethnicity – Singapore as aspirational 'global city for the arts' – culture, creativity and the New Economy

**Globalising/Contemporary Singapore I**

MEETING TEN:

Alfian, *sex.violence.blood.gore* (main focus); *Fugitives* (secondary focus)

Race, class and gender issues and thematics in relation to the challenge of Singapore identity/ies as they emerge from the 1990s/2000s

**Globalising/Contemporary Singapore II**

MEETING ELEVEN:

Ong Keng Sen (Director), *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral* – English-language production of Kuo Pao Kun, *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral*

We will examine the text by Kuo Pao Kun 1<sup>st</sup> but then spend most of the time with the theatre production by Ong. *The video must be viewed in advance of this class meeting.*

Identity in the service of the state – the expanding state and the problematic cosmopolitanism it offers – multicultural identity as a benefit of globalisation.

**Globalising/Contemporary Singapore III**

- **Viewing the video:** Given the class size, pls ensure that students plan to watch the video in advance, or else there will be a crush at the last minute. There cannot be a full screening during class time because of time limitations.
- **Important note:** Please note also that students should make notes of the actual production – staging, costumes, how actors performed, etc. Students are expected to have familiarity with *both* the script *and* the actual stage production.

MEETING TWELVE:

Ong, *Descendants*, cont'd

**Globalising/Contemporary Singapore IV**

MEETING THIRTEEN:

Revision