

Book Reviews

Singapore: The State and the Culture of Excess. By Souchou Yao.
London: Routledge, Asia's Transformations, 2007.

Souchou Yao, a Malaysian anthropologist based at the University of Sydney (Australia), explains how he wishes his book had been named *Singapore on the Couch* since its central concerns is with “a nation-state in mental turmoil seeking a cure” (p. xiv). Indeed, Yao’s book is a collection of case studies of contemporary events in Singapore, framed in terms of what he calls a “culture of excess” inextricably linked to national anxieties that are deeply rooted in the traumatic experiences of a struggling nation and its founding father Lee Kuan Yew. Yao’s approach is innovative and eclectic, drawing analytical concepts and methods quite freely from anthropology, political philosophy, legal studies, psychoanalysis, and cultural studies.

In the first two chapters, Yao sets up the framework. He explains the conventional distinction between contractual bases of political authority (often built up from liberal assumptions) and the moral bases of political authority, the second of which he claims is important for understanding how the Singapore State has managed the contradictions between capitalism and socialism (formulated as a “socialism that works”) and succeeded at garnering popular support through an appeal to family, community, and shared values. In *The Singapore Story* — the title of Lee Kuan Yew’s memoirs and the endlessly retold public narrative of “Singapore’s struggles and the PAP leaders’ heroic endeavours” (p. 31) — Yao identifies examples of “high drama” (p. 28), “a sense of the tragic” (p. 31), “over-responses” (p. 41), an “over-wrought imagination”, and “psychological urgency” (p. 45),

all part of Singapore's culture of excess that characterizes even the way the State, in its "totalitarian ambitions" (p. 44), deals with a society that is divided, conflicted, in flux, and in danger of entering a democratic void. By constantly regenerating the experience of trauma, *The Singapore Story* produces national subjects who are compelled to remember by endlessly revisiting the drama, chaos, danger, and violence of Singapore's past, and thereby receive continuous confirmation of the solution that only the PAP State can bring.

Chapter 3 locates the culture of excess in Singapore's ambivalent attitudes to the West, whose morally decadent "yellow culture", bodily indulgence, and bourgeois individualism must be rejected and even condemned in order to protect social discipline; and yet capital, technology, and consumer goods of the West are greatly desired by this postcolonial nation seeking prosperity and international status. The chapter gives an account of the anti-yellow culture activism of the Chinese-educated youth in the 1950s and 1960s and of the newly-installed PAP State's dismissal of a distinguished British professor at the University of Malaya in Singapore for being critical of its cultural engineering policies. Singapore's Occidentalism presents the West as "the silent, passive figure of alterity", and Asian Values as all the elevated qualities that the West does not (or cannot) possess. Nevertheless, a fundamental ambivalence towards the West creates complex formations such as "Confucian capitalism" which Yao describes as a culture whose "economic calculations and pursuit of profit do not go together with heartless market forces, but sit cheek by jowl with social harmony and moral considerations" (pp. 73–74). The West, Yao explains, serves to warn of the vulnerability of this formation.

Chapter 4 examines the international and local reactions to the caning in 1994 of Michael Fay, an American teenager charged with mischievously damaging a large number of cars. Originally sentenced to six strokes of the cane, Fay received four strokes after the American President intervened with a plea for clemency. Yao explains how "order" in Singapore takes precedence over "law", pointing to Lee Kuan Yew's insistence on making the State master rather than

servant of the law. And through this mastery, the State “practises” the law in order to “make meaning”: specifically, communicating in an unambiguous and belligerent way the disparity between Singapore’s tough stand and the West’s soft stand on crime, as well as the associated images of safety in Singapore and danger in the West, and then ultimately the denouncement of the West as “Evil Other” (p. 91). Yao concludes by explaining the State’s “excessive, over-compensatory moves” in terms of a sense of insufficiency and a Lacanian lack: Singapore’s dependency on the West is, through the spectacular caning of Michael Fay, turned into a “fantasy of its wholeness” (p. 95). The caning was an occasion to tell *The Singapore Story*, a story that needs endless retelling.

Yao examines, in Chapter 5, the technical and practical aspects of the anachronistic law against unnatural sex in Singapore — in particular, oral sex. Dismissing claims that the criminalization of non-procreative (and therefore biologically/economically wasteful) oral sex is instrumental to the State’s population planning policies, Yao argues instead that the pleasures of oral sex defy the State’s economic needs. The State’s electoral successes, Yao asserts, depend on “national enjoyment” — the “morally considered, socially minded experience of the senses” (p. 112) — provided by the State to a grateful citizenry through its social policies on housing, health, and education (but not welfare payments). And so, this national enjoyment will be regulated in order to prevent it from degenerating into immoral and unproductive appetites, of which the pleasures of oral sex are an example. With its totalitarian ambitions, the State cannot allow national enjoyment to become, like oral sex, “excessive enjoyment” (p. 115), for this out-of-control enjoyment would also make people forget that the State is the source of their enjoyment.

In Chapter 6, Yao discusses the everyday activity of “talking cock”, which involves informal gatherings for “idle talk and leisurely enjoyment” (p. 124) of topics that range from the most mundane to those that relate to government and politics. Focusing on how the Lee family’s alleged control of everything in Singapore has been a subject of such idle talk, Yao notes how talking cock allows

Singaporeans to “manage the anxiety” (p. 124) that characterizes their relations with a state that rewards and punishes, a state that strains to articulate market competition with Asian Values. But talking cock is also mimicry of the State’s “endless boasting of its achievement, of its wise and selfless leadership that has brought happiness to all” (p. 131): these are excessive gestures and pretensions that Yao also describes as “talking cock”. For the powerless, talking cock delivers solace and gratification from being able to reduce the State to an object of gossip and lies, and thereby unfasten it from its powerful position. Not able to control the relentless irreverence of talking cock, the State is also unable to ignore it.

Yao discusses, in Chapter 7, the commercially successful Jack Neo film *I Not Stupid*. The film is highly didactic and suggests that the State, in spite of the material benefits that it has delivered, is the cause of “emotional sterility and oppressive anxiety” (p. 140) among Singaporeans. The film features stereotyped characters that are very familiar and endearing to Singaporeans; and, through these characters and their relationships, offers an allegorical treatment of larger social and political matters. The film, in these ways, presents a critique of the education system, the foreign talent policies, and “kiasu-ism” (the quality of being afraid to lose out); but the critique, according to Yao, is superficial because it ultimately exonerates Singaporeans by directing the blame for everything at the State. Yao explains how the film provides a “giant group therapy session” (p. 150) for Singaporeans who, unlike foreign audiences, get the in-jokes. But this is, as Yao argues, cinema as catharsis: Singaporeans, once purged of their anxieties, will return to their repressed and repressive lives.

Having started the book with an account of the sick and traumatized body of a young Lee Kuan Yew at the nation’s birth and how this has translated into national anxiety and the State’s totalitarian ambitions, Yao concludes with a chapter discussing the “National Father’s” eightieth birthday celebrations, suggesting that the question of Lee’s mortality together with the experiences of terrorism and economic recession at the turn of the century have pointed towards the “coming of a new epoch...the end of history” (p. 168). And yet, Yao explains

that the oedipal process will be obstructed by the “eternal National Father” who refuses to die so that he can prevent the “end of history” by preserving the logic of economic competition. In a short epilogue that follows, Yao questions the continued usefulness of pragmatism, pointing to the way in which it now squanders the moral authority of the State.

The book, unfortunately, contains a few factual errors, though most do not seriously compromise the central arguments. One that does, however, is the mistaken assertion that voting is *not* compulsory in Singapore (p. 20). Otherwise, the errors are minor: for example, the “Indian Development Agency (IDA)” should be the Singapore Indian Development Agency (SINDA) (p. 13) — IDA is, in fact, the Infocomm Development Authority of Singapore. Other facts need to be updated: for instance, Tommy Koh, at the time of publication, was Chairman, not Director, of the Institute of Policy Studies (not the Centre for Policy Studies), and it has been more than a decade since he was Chairman of the National Arts Council (p. 70). Generally, the book would benefit greatly from another round of proofreading.

Nevertheless, this is a skilfully written, wide-ranging, and well-organized book whose author has effortlessly assembled a disciplinarily eclectic analytical toolkit to produce some of the most interesting, insightful, refreshing, and (unexpectedly) accessible interpretations of contemporary politics in Singapore. The analysis is often very personal and the prose is lively, making this a book that should not only be on scholarly reading lists, but one that will also appeal to intelligent non-academic readers hungry for alternative and innovative ways to explain politics in Singapore.

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