

# Editor's Note:

**Harmony**, in music, is formed by multiple, different notes, co-existing peacefully. Harmony cannot be formed by a single note, and a single note does not quite make a song. What then can we make of this observation about the nature of a truly harmonious chord? What about discord? Is discord a peacefully?

DISCORD  
HARMONY  
SIDELINE

alvin tan / ng kim chew  
daniel hui / ct lim / chao kang

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Discord/Harmony Side A

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d r a m a b o x

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To those of us born and bred in to and the television programmes

# Editor's Note:

**Harmony**, in music, is formed by multiple, different notes, co-existing peacefully. Harmony cannot be formed by a single note, and a single note does not quite make a song. What then can we make of this observation about the nature of a truly harmonious chord? What about discord? Is discord a case of different notes not being able to co-exist peacefully?

Is discord the antithesis of harmony?

**The theme** for the third volume (2014) of *Draft* is 'Discord/Harmony'. Issue 1 is named 'Discord/Harmony Side A', while Issue 2 is named 'Discord/Harmony Side B'. We hope to explore the various situations and states of 'discord' and 'harmony' in our society, especially when our system believes fundamentally in 'harmony' and 'order'. Do we ponder and reflect enough on

'harmony' and 'order'?

**The design** of the theme is representative of the perspective held by the editorial team. We did not use 'VS', for instance 'Discord VS Harmony', because 'versus' suggests binary opposition. In using '/', we hope to bring to light the relationship between discord and harmony, as two sides are to a coin.

Can one exist without the other?

**In this issue**, for Feature, we interviewed Alvin Tan, the artistic director of The Necessary Stage, and he shares with us his insights on plurality and postmodern sensibilities. In the three Columns, we have Taiwan-based Malaysian Chinese author Ng Kim Chew writing about Singapore, from the neighbouring position of Johor Bahru; local filmmaker Daniel Hui uses Jack Neo's films as a springboard

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to talk about the discord in Singaporean identity; local comic researcher CT Lim talks about the disjuncture in the little-known political cartooning sphere in Singapore.

In Open Call, Cherilyn Woo attempts to record the constant discord in her mind through words and images.

**In mid-March**, the Sunflower Student Movement blossomed in Taiwan. There were outbursts of dissonance on Facebook, but mostly lacking insights. I chanced upon an insightful take on the movement written by a Taiwanese sociology professor, Chao Kang, and was deeply enlightened. Thus I asked for his permission to republish his essay here, and he agreed without hesitation. The essay can be found in

Extra Feature.

**In this issue**, we have invited local artist/photographer Hong Guoyao to curate the visuals. We also partnered again with local graphic designer Yong Yi for the layout design. Their works of genius have greatly enhanced the theme of this issue — the discord in the visuals bringing

about the harmony in the editorial.

**Without further ado**, shall we listen to the sound of 'discord', and contemplate 'harmony' and 'order'?

- Eng Hao

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## PLURALITY & POSTMODERN SENSIBILITIES an interview with Alvin Tan

Theatre director Alvin Tan needs no introduction. The founding artistic director of The Necessary Stage (TNS), his works are known

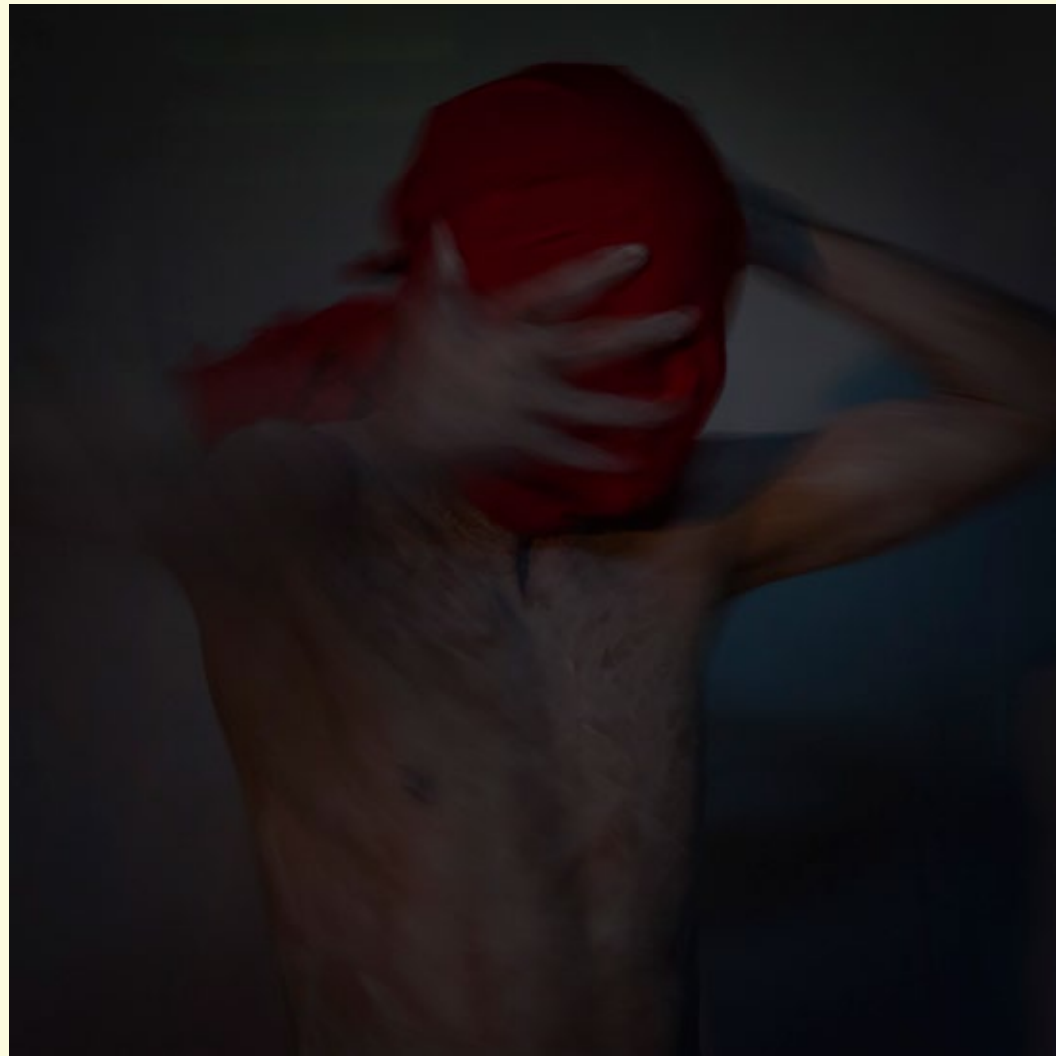
for their sharp social sensibilities and multi-layered aesthetics, amongst many others. This issue, we wanted to talk to Alvin about his approach to artistic creations, his views on the audience and the social environment, and how he finds balance in the array of ideologies today, and that we did, over tea and cupcakes.

01 ..... We know that you used social media in your new play *Poor Thing*, can you tell us more? How were the responses from the audience?

02 ..... How do you see your plays deal with social issues? Do they promote harmony or discord?

03 ..... Can you tell us more about this plurality?

04 ..... How then do we find mutual respect in such a diverse world?



\*plurality & postmodern sensibilities—

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We know that you used social media in your new play *Poor Thing*, can you tell us more? How were the responses from the audience? It was the first time we were using social media with such a high frequency in a single play. It was interesting because some said they missed the on-stage action as they were too busy checking the social media, and that made them reflect on how we live our lives in our contemporary reality.

But there were also those who were used to multi-tasking, and felt their theatrical experience enhanced because they could immerse themselves in a reality that was no different from how they live – one that had both live and social media going on at the same time. What they were accustomed to in their reality, they found in the world of this play. They did not have to switch off their social media and pay attention to a play. So there were all sorts of responses.

In our *Poor Thing* preview in December the audience did not go onto social media to interact with the characters even though there weren't any pre-show announcement requesting them to switch off their mobile phones. They said their default mode was to respect theatre etiquette, so if we had wanted them to go onto social media it was only fair that we told them clearly from the outset. That's very Singaporean. Shows how much of a rule-follower we all are.

So eventually we had the pre-show announcement: 'Do S-W-I-T-C-H ON your mobile phones, please walk around and do interact with the characters.' Yet there were still

The audience is plural, they all have different ideologies and perspectives.

audience who preferred more facilitation to encourage or ensure participation. No one had intervened in the play throughout the run, although the cast was prepared. But many responded during the post-show discussions, saying that they had thought of intervening during the fight scenes and felt guilty that they did not. But we told them that was not our intent. It was not to catch them out. We don't want to judge them, because engagement can happen in many other ways and at different levels. Basically for us, we don't want surveillance, we want freedom. But when we have the freedom, are we able to manage our very own disagreements and conflicts? Singaporeans now are very articulate and eloquent, very sensitive of our rights. In the age of social media, we have to reflect on how we use it. The character in *Poor Thing* uploads a fight video during the accident on Facebook. The audience is able to discern the difference between how the uploaded video is going to be received on Facebook (out of context) and what is actually happening on site because the audience has access to both expressions. The audience is witness to how a character has provoked the opposite party, video-recorded her provoked state and uploaded the video. This is done out of freedom but is the intention to mislead the Facebook audience (who has limited perspective) really a responsible act? Should we, who receive such video clips on Facebook then be more discerning and defer judgement until we get a fuller picture?

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Some audience members might have missed the point of our intent, but we trust them to discover it through post-show discussions.

How do you see your plays deal with social issues? Do they promote harmony or discord? There was a community theatre practitioner with social work background who came to watch the play and told me that she was rather disturbed, because there was no closure to the play; it's like putting a work out there that's bleak and hopeless, and is that responsible? But actually for me, there was hope, just that the humanity that was shown was seemingly not as significant as the conflict.

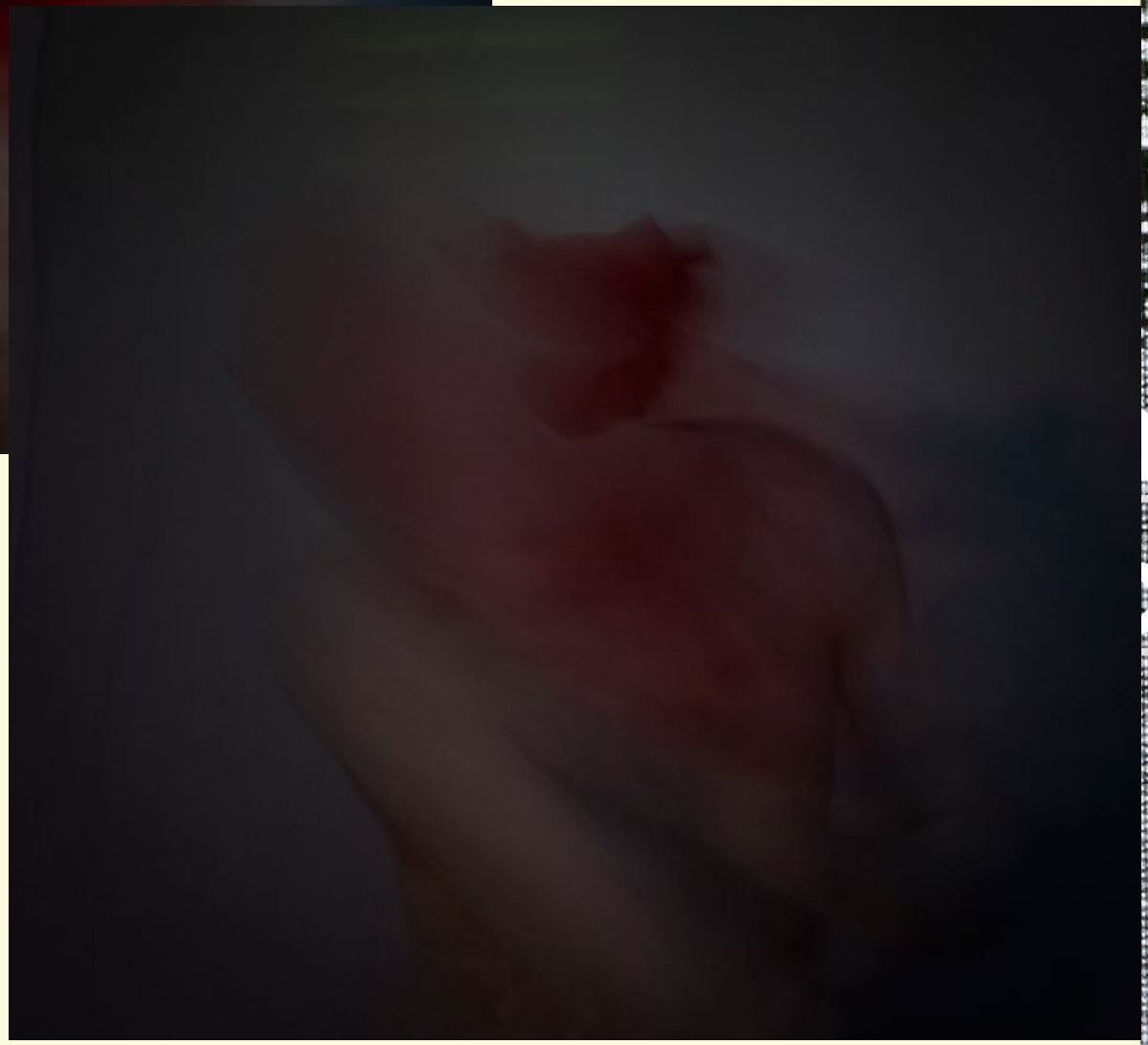
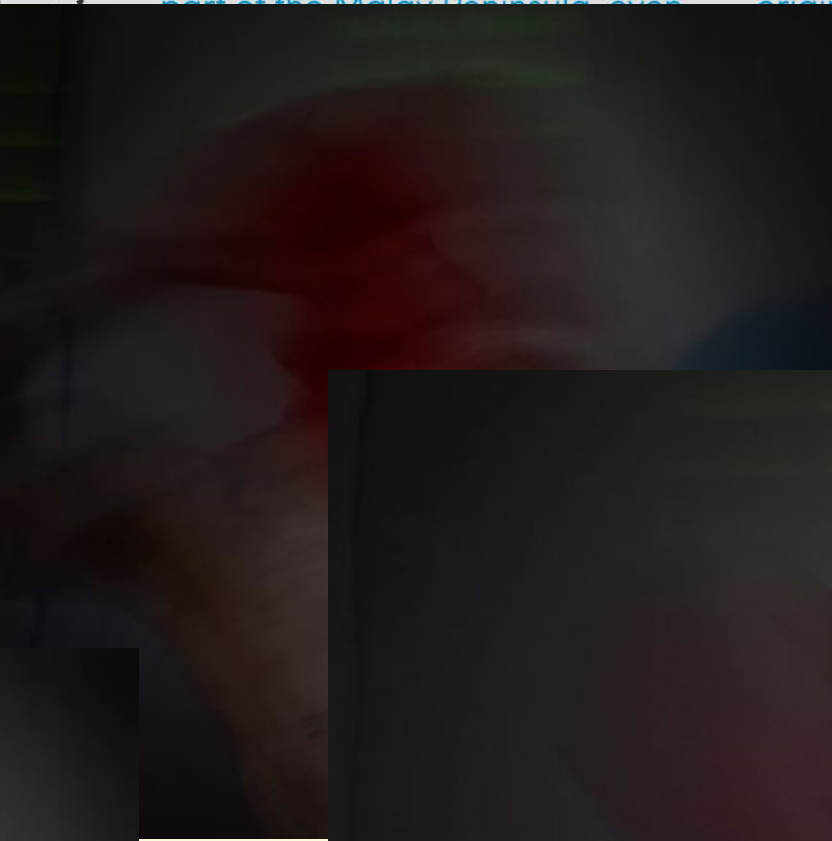
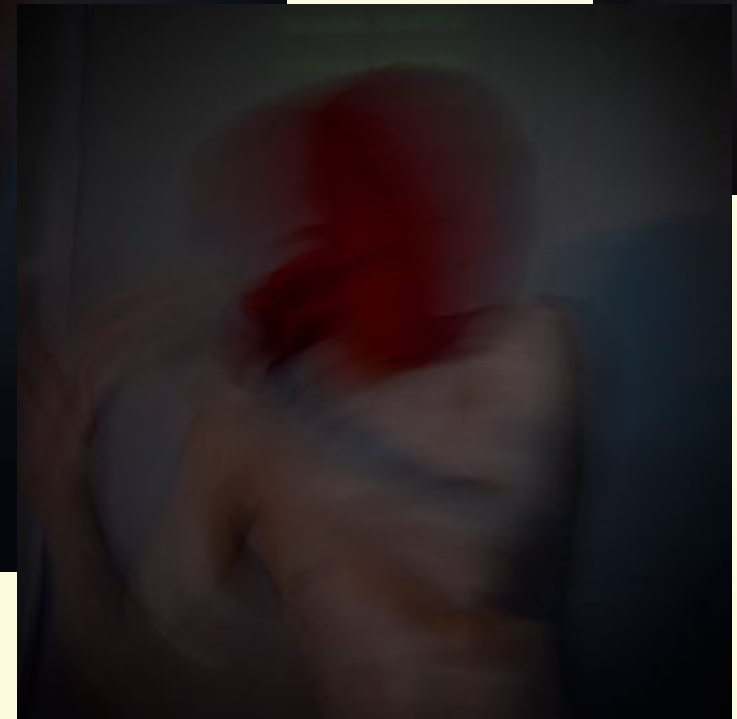
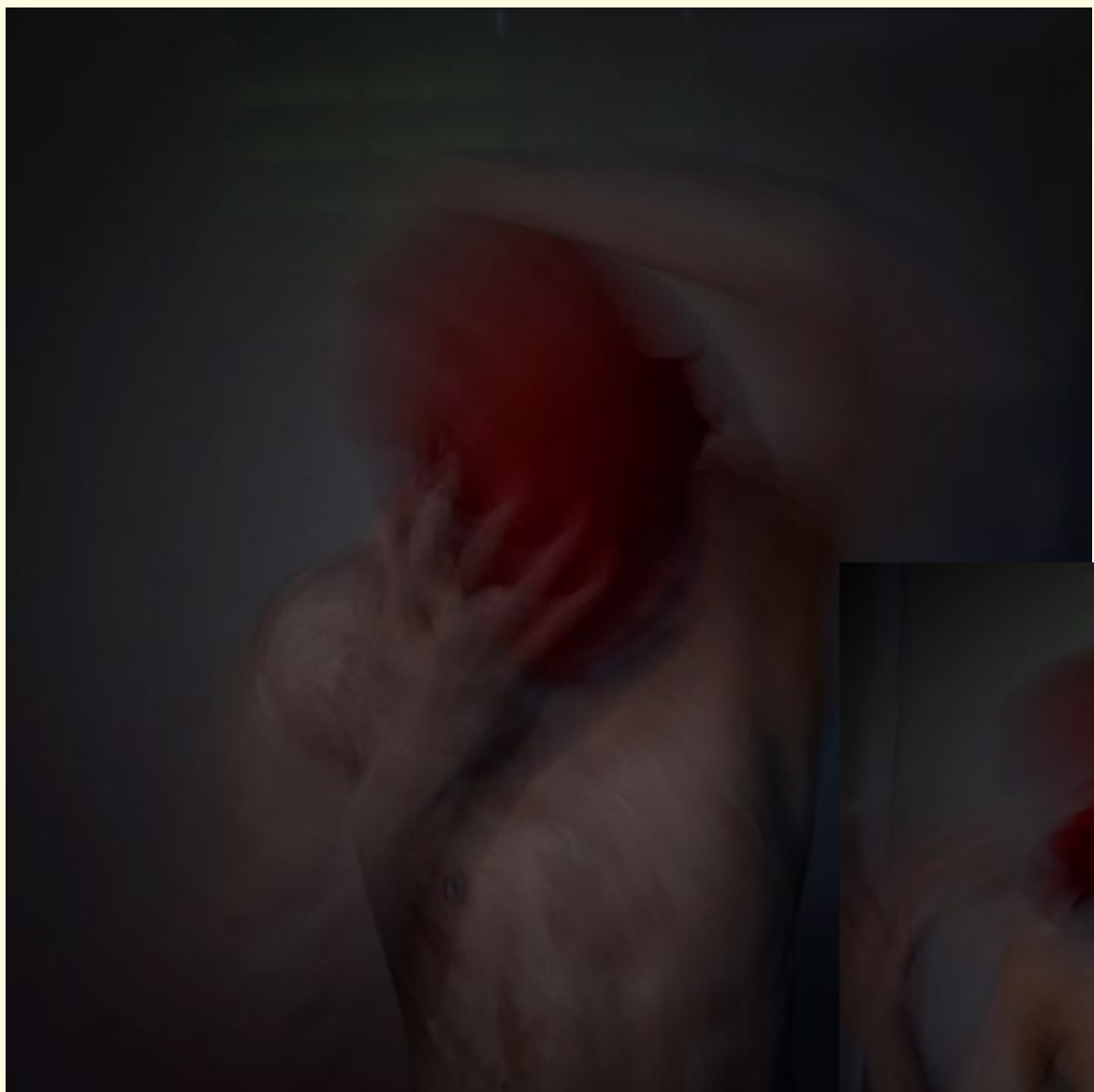
Take *Off Centre* for example, the authorities thought that by showing a suicide on stage it is promoting something negative. But in the play one person commits suicide, the other protagonist did not. We actually want to transmit the idea that life is precious. But it won't do anyone any good if we do so in a simplistic or reductive way. Life is complex and not so simplistic and tidy. Besides, different people react differently to the same play. What we need is discussion after watching a play, to continue to open up each other's minds to what seems bleak or hopeless on stage.

Our plays do not garner the audience with the sole intent to criticise the government. The audience is then perfect and the establishment flawed. How reductive can that be? The audience is not implicated at all. Our works disturb or challenge the audience as well, because the

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government is not the only problem. The people themselves are also problematic. Being anti-establishment is too easy. Such works get easy applause and endorsement. In the bourgeois theatre, everyone's sitting in the dark and they think everyone is thinking like them. Shallow theatre reviewers commit such a flaw when they claim that at a particular point in the play, the audience was not engaged. Did the reviewer interview every single person in the audience to make such an assumption?

The audience is plural, they all have different ideologies and perspectives. Some of our plays reveal that plurality of the audience to the audience themselves. Forum Theatre pieces and plays such as *Completely With/Out Character*, where a Q&A segment is inserted midway in the play engendering opportunities for audience feedback and responses to reveal a diversity of views to all present before the play continues to the end. So I would say it's not so much about dividing the audience up, because the audience is already plural.

Can you tell us more about this plurality? Plurality is actually the human condition, and it is only in the postmodern era did the consciousness of plurality and multiple positions become embraced by the mainstream. I think the modernists had a lot of difficulties with it, that's why realism then was very problematic as it was limiting – there was the unity of time, unity of character, unity of space to deal with. With such a worldview, when one is not in alignment, one is easily dismissed as a hypocrite or a character under duress or that the playwright is not

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competent as s/he did not write a character that was consistent. It was very patriarchal too.

What TNS is doing with its New Realism plays, is that we don't look at the oppositional position as the only alternative, we look at alternative positions as multiple. Opposition is but one of the many alternative positions. So in our plays, all different positions are explored, including the oppositional position, but we don't harp on it, because then it becomes counter-propaganda and didactic.

A postmodern sensibility for me is when a character can feel for the poor in the morning and eclipse that concern with a first-world worry by the afternoon. That doesn't mean we do not care about the poor because the concern will return at another time, as it is one of our multiple selves. We accept the fluidity of character without viewing it as contradiction or hypocrisy. But for the modernists, if some beliefs contradict within one self, one is perceived as being not consistent and therefore, hypocritical.

It's like the National Arts Council (NAC) – it used to be the artists versus NAC. When Forum Theatre got into trouble I realised that one cannot just be anti-establishment, because within the establishment there were supporters and potential allies. The binary broke when I was consoled and advised by a friend in NAC. It wasn't polarised any longer.

When there are points of contention, we must fight. When NAC was still policing the arts as censor, I would question NAC's primary role. But when I talk about NAC

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support at international platforms, I would include the Arts Housing scheme and praise NAC to the heavens, because I honestly think that the scheme together with their other grant schemes have been responsible for the exponential development of arts in Singapore in the past 25 years. We give them credit when it's due, we shouldn't be oppositional just for the sake of it.

I'm not saying that that to be oppositional is useless, but the oppositional card must be used in a very discriminatory way, or else it becomes one's default identity.

I'm Peranakan and a cultural hybrid. We have different racial groups in Singapore and each has their own sensibilities. That's why I do intercultural plays. We don't privilege one position or the other in the play, they coexist and the contestation, if any, stays unresolved challenging the audience to deal with the differences and to imagine ways in which to bridge them. The spotlight is no longer on the creators but turned onto the audience. It's a more complex world right now; everything overlaps, contradicts and is interconnected. Therefore, art has to be reflexive and not just reflective.

**How then do we find mutual respect in such a diverse world?** Yes, there are problems that come with it. But we'll have to understand and respect that history and time is different for everyone. There is no more macro-narrative, it is always going to be micro-narrative from now on. It's like when feminism breaks down into bourgeois feminism, socialist feminism and radical feminism, the question is: when it comes to fighting patriarchy, can all feminists join hands

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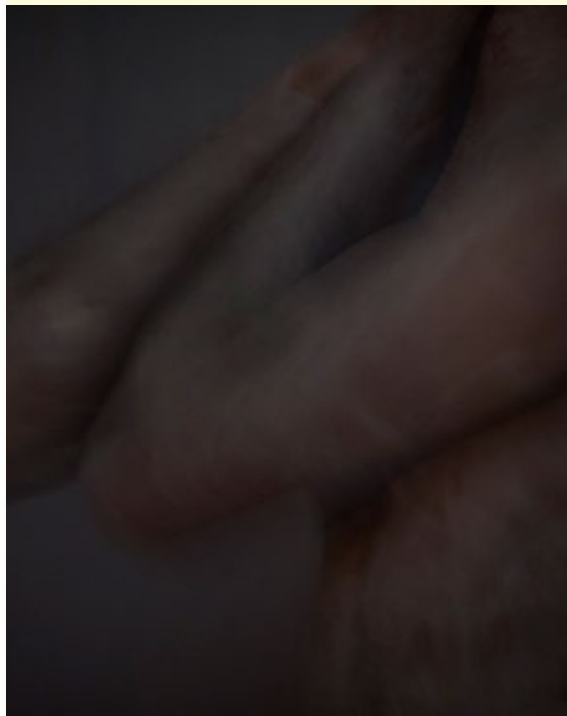
again? I'm not so sure. The postmodern situation can be atomising.

Caryl Churchill said in an interview, 'Today's solution becomes tomorrow's problems.' I really like that. The feminist sensibility is very different from that of the male socialist playwright. The male socialist playwrights

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tend to have a solution and hide it behind a metaphor or some allegory so as to avoid being too didactic. But the feminist sensibility is one that says: I can only show you what I have observed, and what I have observed is that some problems of the past get solved, but as they get solved, seeds of new problems arise. I find that very humbling. It's also very self-reflexive because it is aware of its own position, its own complexities and complications that may emerge from it before making any recommendation, and then it critiques its own recommendations. I love that.



-plurality & postmodern sensibilities-

## Our Singapore

To those of us born and bred in Johor, Singapore has always felt like part of the Malay Peninsula, even though it gained independence in 1965. The histories of these two nation-states are too brief, thus for the older generation, they were one and the same for the better part of their lives. Those were unforgettable memories. As for those of us born after they became two separate countries

to and the television programmes that we watched from young originated from Singapore. When Singapore launched its Speak Mandarin Campaign, the effects were felt even in South Johor. My illiterate mother, for example, learnt Mandarin by watching Singaporean television drama serials. Even the common men and women in the marketplace could speak Mandarin in guttural tones.



(let's take me as an example - born in 1967 and only two years younger than the Republic of Singapore), Singapore still felt like part of Johor due to its geographical proximity.

Chinese kids like us who grew up in the southern part of Johor literally watched Singapore grow and develop, even though we might not have understood how it struggled to carve a way out for itself in the Malay world. The radio broadcasts that we listened

Perhaps that was why our Malay was much worse compared with fellow Malaysians from the central and northern parts of the country. We had the opportunity to be reliant on Mandarin in that environment, even though it had a somewhat awkward status in Singapore. At the time, we were unaware (and perhaps not very concerned) that a Chinese education system with a long history in Singapore was being completely dismantled by then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew (not

only Nantah but perhaps even more devastating was the elimination of Chinese secondary and primary schools). This was because we had a relatively more dependable system of Chinese education in the form of independent Chinese secondary schools that struggled to survive against the odds. But we may also have been subconsciously influenced by Singaporean values.

By the time I finished secondary school, we were even collecting Chinese speeches made by Lee Kuan Yew every year during Singapore's National Day. After some enquiry, I realised that many locals from southern Johor did the same. Our elders were also paying close attention and listening carefully to his speeches, even though they fumed at his decision to close down Nantah. This was in stark contrast to the torrent of angry abuse that arose whenever some comment from a rich businessman in the Malaysian Chinese Association claiming to 'represent the Chinese' appeared in the news. As for those from the opposition, one could only sigh watching them being driven to a dead end by the reality of Malaysia's racial politics.

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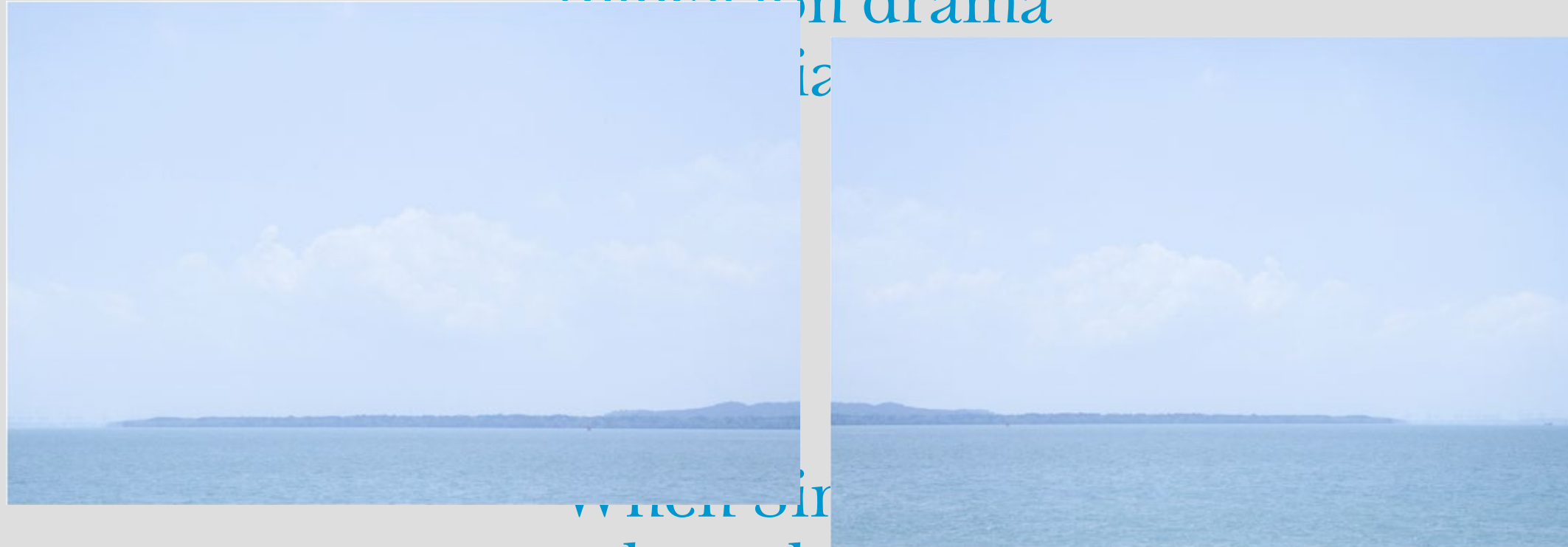
I can no longer recall the precise content of those speeches, but the impression is that they inevitably touched on the issues affecting Singapore's survival, whether from the macro-perspective of geopolitics or individual aspects such as politics, economics and defence. Lee, with clear logic, unambiguous language and no patience for flowery rhetoric, gave a down-to-earth analysis of Singapore's future and survival. These were profound lessons in politics during our secondary school years. Towards the end of high school, I also acquired collections of Lee Kuan Yew's speeches at book fairs—both the Chinese translated versions yellow with age and the English ones with their smooth glossy pages. Even after moving to Taiwan many years later, I still paid attention to Lee Kuan Yew's analyses of international politics. It was then when I gradually realised that he was a skilled messenger for Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. For instance, in the late 1980s, he had advised Lee Teng-hui to hasten talks with the Communist Party of China. That was when Taiwan was still basking in the glory of its status as one of

Asia's 'four dragons'. Its economy was booming, and it was wealthy and confident. But Lee Kuan Yew warned that Taiwan's advantage would only last for two decades and beyond that, it would lose its bargaining power. True enough, a Taiwan that has fiercely guarded its native identity and not sought integration with the Mainland has seen its economy come to a standstill in the past decade or so. At the same time, its fear of big powers has grown. Its mournful hopes of the Americans and Japanese coming to its aid are in vain. In the meantime, China has morphed from an ailing cat to a mighty tiger. It is now their turn to be 'flush with cash'. They do not only have their sights on Asia but also on Africa.

Lee's criticisms of Malaysian politics in his speeches gave us a deeper understanding of the reality of racial politics. The outflow of Malaysian Chinese talent under the bumiputra policy is a recurring theme in his speeches, as he exhorts them to come to Singapore if Malaysia does not want them. That is at least of some consolation. Hordes of Malaysians cross the



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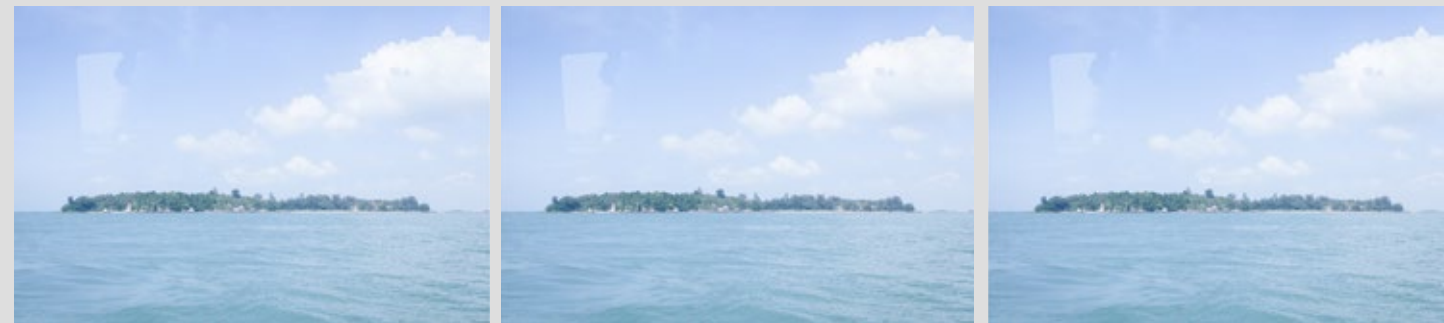
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causeway between Malaysia and Singapore daily in their motorcycles and cars (even to this day) just to make a living. Almost all our relatives have someone at home who does this. They work in factories, in renovation and in the kitchens. Some live in rented apartments in Singapore. The better among them obtain student loans to study in a Singaporean university and settle down as white-collar employees after graduation. This last scenario is what families hope for the most, especially as the Singapore dollar continues to grow stronger against the Malaysian ringgit and the income divide between the two countries widen. Singapore provided a living reference of what life could have been. How is it that two nation-states that started out on the same footing have become so disparate in so many aspects?

There were no good books to be found in the bookstores of our small town and Kuala Lumpur was just too far for those of us who lived on the southern tip of the peninsula. And so in high school I found myself hopping on a train heading south on numerous occasions to get some

books. The train chugged along sleepily on a single track, with older trains stopping by the side to give way to the express trains plying the north-south route. The terminus at Tanjong Pagar, with its mud-yellow walls, was a relic of the colonial era. From there, I took a bus to Bras Basah Complex where there were several Chinese bookstores selling volumes of old books from Mainland China. Many years later, I realised that the owners of most of these bookstores had graduated



from Nantah. On an island where Chinese education was dying a slow death, they sold Chinese books that fewer and fewer people wanted to read, with the resolve of one living in asceticism and in vigil. During a recent visit, it was almost impossible to enter one of the bookstores as it was overflowing with unsold books.

While waiting to study in Taiwan after graduating from high school (Singapore had yet to recognise the Malaysian Unified Examination Certificate at the time), I joined some classmates for temporary work in Singapore (on social visit passes that were valid for two to three weeks) as the economy back home was not doing too well. We worked at a factory assembling cheap furniture by hand. I was clumsy and damaged many of the pieces I was supposed

to put together with a nail gun. Nevertheless, the boss, a scruffy-looking young man, was rather awed by the fact that we were going to university and treated us with great respect. He used to treat us to supper after the overtime work that we did (we loved working overtime as the pay was 1.5 times the normal rate). But he had a bad

habit, which was to drive off his car before those of us at the back were properly seated. We practically had to shout at him to stop.

Years later, many of my high school classmates who had studied in Taiwan (all hailing from southern Malaysia) eventually ended up in Singapore after graduation, where they worked, bought houses and had children, with some also becoming citizens. I would catch up with them sometimes when I happened to be in Singapore. In our chats, there were the inevitable grumbles about Singapore as they compared the three countries they had lived in, which basically revolved around how stressful their work and lives were and how insecure they felt, as if expecting to be fired any day for failing to perform. They would also reminisce about Malaysia in the past when life was slow and pleasurable and it was a safe place to be. They would also think about life in Taiwan, but more in terms of retiring there. Perhaps it was my own subjective feeling, but it seemed that they were generally unhappy in Singapore.

About ten years ago, a senior retired academic frequently drove his Mercedes Benz to Malaysia for a game of golf at one of those clubs that catered exclusively to colonial officials in the past. This academic, who had also studied in Taiwan, missed the kinder and gentler Taiwanese society that encouraged slower and yet more energetic living, and which had a better intellectual atmosphere.

It is common to hear Taiwanese politicians and commentators enviously praising Singapore on radio and television. They admire Singapore's housing policy, its central provident fund system, the high income, the competitiveness and even the language policy. Recently, a former blue-eyed boy of Taiwanese politics even exclaimed: 'What's the use of clinging on to our mother tongue? Our medium of instruction should have been American English a long time ago, otherwise how can we compete? An Indian is now the CEO of Microsoft!'

Wang Anyi, whose father was born in Singapore, showed more understanding towards Singapore's language policy. In order to have

a cohesive society, it had to have a common language. English, a colonial legacy, became a convenient choice. Such a move could prevent interracial conflict and hatred, as well as help the island-state rapidly integrate itself into the vast English-speaking world created by British colonial expansion, a world now virtually synonymous with the 'modern world'. This was a pragmatic choice. One could not live on poetry and thus had to sacrifice one's mother tongue, the ancient temples and dialects, all of which gave life its poetic quality, in order to survive. As the bastion of Chinese culture in the Malay Peninsula in recent history, Singapore had accumulated a rich cultural heritage, but the relentless pace of modernisation depleted this. This is perhaps the common fate of all developing countries seeking 'progress' at all costs—managing, quantifying and rationalising everything while quashing all useless sentiments that could hinder progress. *Singapore under Lee Kuan Yew was arguably the biggest political experiment in the history of the Southeast Asian Chinese. The merits and demerits*



*of such an experiment can only be ascertained after a longer period of observation.*

Many among the intellectual elite who were arrested during Operation Coldstore in 1963 and sacrificed against their will have now passed on or are in their twilight years. With the possibility of being obliterated, had they succeeded in turning the tables back then, what would Singapore be like today? This can only be left to the imaginations of novelists.

A passage I had read in the past in a book about the ancient history of Singapore left a particularly strong impression. In the early years of Singapore's founding as a trading port, tigers roamed the primary forests of Johor and some of them would swim across the Straits of Johor to Singapore to attack labourers who arose to work at the crack of dawn. After a full meal, the tigers leisurely swam back to the rainforests of peninsular Malaysia to rest, while the females would probably also bring food back for their cubs. From historical records, we can see that the island's inhabitants



were extremely alarmed by this frequent occurrence. If we look at this period in history from the tiger's perspective, the trading port had an ample human population (food source) and these soft fleshy mammals (humans) could only move on two legs, were slow to react (could not sense the tiger approaching), could not run fast (even a dog ran faster) and could not climb well (unlike monkeys). This should have made them delectable and easy prey (unlike pangolins with their scales, monitor lizards with tough leathery skins and tortoises with hard shells).

But in the nearly two centuries that have passed, it is the wild tigers of the Malay Peninsula that are on the brink of extinction. The rainforests have been destroyed and replaced by an endless stretch of rubber plantations and the featureless expanse of oil palms. The surviving wild tigers live a miserable life in perpetual fear of being hunted. By now, they hesitate to attack even the Malaysians, much less the Singaporeans. If tigers had grandparents to tell them stories, they would surely hear about the glorious accounts of their ancestors swimming across the straits to feast

on humans in Singapore. Their descendants, pale shadows of their once mighty selves, would probably think that this was *pure fantasy*.

Ng Kim Chew was born in the Malaysian state of Johor in 1967, with origins in Nan'an in the Fujian province of China. In 1987, he left Malaysia for further studies in Taiwan and graduated from the Chinese language and literature department of the National Taiwan University. He subsequently obtained his master's degree in Chinese language and literature from Tamkang University and a doctorate degree in Chinese from the National Tsing-Hwa University. He has been teaching at the department of Chinese language and literature at the National Chi Nan University since 1996 and has been the recipient of various literary awards such as the 'China Times Literary Award'. He has also authored various works including 《夢與豬與黎明》 (*Dreams, Pigs and Dawn*) (*Jiuge Publishing House, 1994*), 《刻背》 (*Carving on the Back*) (*Rye Field, 2001*), and 《南洋人民共和國備忘錄》 (*Memorandum of the Nanyang People's Republic*) (*Linking Publishing, 2013*). He has also edited various essay volumes including 《馬華文學與中國性》 (*Malaysian Chinese Literature and Chineseness*) (*Yuan Zun, 1998*), 《謊言與真理的技藝》 (*The Craft of Falsehood or the Craft of Truth*) (*Rye Field, 2003*) and 《文與魂與體》 (*Textuality, Soul, and Body*) (*Rye Field, 2006*).

translated by LU CAIXIA

## Jack Neo and the Vicious Circle

Some days it doesn't take very much. An announcement that Jack Neo is making a new movie is all it takes for me to lose hope. It is proof, once and again, that the people in power – and I don't just mean political power, but also financial and cultural power – are able to force anything down our throats – the worst things – and we would still hunger for more, simply because we are grateful to have been given anything at all.

Don't get me wrong. I had nothing against Jack Neo. In fact, I used to really admire his films. Which other Singaporean filmmaker could command so much attention from the very society he was criticising? In his films, I saw a genuine love for the people, for all our flaws and idiosyncrasies. His films discussed what were often perceived as our trivialities – our stinginess, greed, competitiveness, etc. – as if they were grave political matters. Neo explored the very real fears of the people – losing the means to support our family, becoming addicted to materialism, falling through the cracks of a ruthless education system. He did something the state never could – he took the people seriously.

However, as is the case with so many Singaporean artists, it didn't take long before the state co-opted Neo's power over the people. Now, often funded by government agencies and sponsored by corporate money, Neo's films are thinly veiled propaganda pieces for both the government and big corporations. Of course, one could argue that Neo's films were like this all along, that his social commentary was just a pretext

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for advertising. But the degree of enthusiasm for state authority displayed in his recent films – the *Ah Boys to Men* films for example – along with their ideology of the total sublimation of self for the sake of the state causes one to fall into despair.

The most upsetting thing for me is not Neo's change of heart; it is, rather, the audience who laughs along with his sick jokes and sycophancy. As disgusted as I was

with the shameless militarism on display in *Ah Boys to Men*, I was infinitely more saddened by the Singaporeans in the cinema who enthusiastically agreed with the militarism to which each male citizen in the state is subjected. It made me sick that the fears of the people, which Neo grasped so acutely in his early films, could be so easily exploited and perverted into a form of self-oppression. What is it in us that crave and actively seek out our own oppression? Why do we perversely take comfort in and enjoy our suffering? The answer to me is not some form of masochism. All I could hear in the laughter and applause of the audience was its insecurity and self-loathing.

We use Western ideas to evaluate a native product, and of course, because of that, the native product will always fall short, simply for the fact that it is not, and does not want to be, Western.

I met a white New Zealander a few months ago who had spent some time in Singapore. While reminiscing about the place and the food, I happened to mention the pride I feel when I speak Singlish. It is, after all, the one thing that best represents Singapore – its hybridity and multiculturalism existing only for the simple need to communicate between different ethnicities. He looked at me with surprise. ‘Singlish? I’ve never met a Singaporean who was proud of speaking Singlish. Why would you feel proud of speaking broken English?’

His obvious racism aside, I was struck by how true his statement was. The fact is that Singaporeans aren’t proud of speaking Singlish – it has long been drilled into us, by the government, that it is an inferior language, a perversion of proper English, that it shouldn’t be encouraged simply because no one outside of Singapore would be able to understand us. Language is the most immediate representation of a people, and taking that away from us implies that Singaporeans just aren’t significant enough to be recognised as a people in the international community. I

remember how forcefully our English teachers scolded us when we spoke Singlish in class. Singlish has come to signify status and class; it doesn’t represent an identity, rather, it represents the lack of one – the inability to speak Standard English. Singlish, the single thing that for me represents our identity, is seen as an aberration, a mistake to be corrected.

The ability to speak Standard English, on the other hand, is seen with pride, a sign of education and intelligence. I remember how proud we would feel when we received the news that the Angus Ross Prize, the award for the best GCE A-level English Literature paper written by a non-British person, had been awarded to a Singaporean again. Standard English has come to be synonymous with culture, something far removed from the lower classes (who, because of their inability to speak in ‘grammatically correct’ sentences, are rendered unable to participate in the international community). Is this the reason why there is so little Singlish in local art? In local literature, we all try to write in ‘grammatically correct’ Standard English in order to be recognised as an intellectual who can hold up

to other international Anglophone writers. Somehow, we have come to equate excellence as being similar, or even better, than the ‘original’ (our true motherland – the English-speaking West).

The irony with us English-speaking intellectuals is that we truly became colonised only after the colonisers left us. When we were still under British rule, before the idea of a Singaporean nation took root, we were all separated by our respective ethnicities, involved only in our communal struggles. Since we achieved independence, our solution to bridge the gap between different ethnicities was not to create a new hybrid identity, but rather to discard all particularities to fully become an Other – to be Western. But the truth is that we can never be Western. This damning inferiority complex characterises everything we do. It is the reason why we intellectuals lament the lack of culture – it is not culture that we lack, but Western culture.

This, I suspect, is the true reason why Jack Neo’s films are widely despised by the intellectual community. His films are seen as crass, artless, and melodramatic;



his screenplays are always maudlin and predictable, his humour broad and slapstick, the cinematography in his films flat and ugly, and there is no sense of *mise-en-scène* at all. Yet, all these quality indicators are those that have been passed down to us through a very Hollywood-European tradition, a Western way of looking at art and cinema. People argue that Neo's films lack sophistication, but this very idea of sophistication comes from a specific cultural context that is foreign to our own. We use Western ideas to evaluate a native product, and of course, because of that, the native product will always fall short, simply for the fact that it is not, and does not want to be, Western.

Neo's films are generally in the colloquial language that his working class Chinese characters speak – a *mélange* of *Hokkien*, *Singdarin* (the Mandarin equivalent of Singlish), and 'bad' English (Singlish). His films are constructed from the melodrama that has been a staple of Southeast Asian television and cinema, featuring ordinary characters (here the working class Chinese who are the majority population in Singapore) through whom the audience

identifies and achieves catharsis for their everyday problems. Neo's films represented the population that had been left behind by the government's increasingly alienating policies, giving voice to the people's complaints. It is for that reason that he was greatly popular with the 'heartlanders' (a term popularised by then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong in 1992 to differentiate the working-class English-as-second-language population from Singapore's 'cosmopolitan' population, the younger generation who spoke English, or rather Singlish, as its native language), the people who had no interest in the 'high culture' the government was promoting.

So how did this shift happen? How did Neo go from government critic to government mouthpiece? The scariest reason, and the reason I'm afraid to admit to myself, is that Neo was always a government mouthpiece to begin with. Let me explain. Neo came from television, a medium that has to maintain its broad appeal to the audience by representing – or at least, claiming to represent – the majority opinion (in Singapore's case, the Chinese-speaking majority population). In

order to do that, he creates broad archetypes of the population based on the problems this population faces on a daily basis. In so doing, he reinforces these archetypes in the audience's mind; in being already willing to identify with his characters (a privilege Neo earned through years of television work), the audience accepts this image of itself, claims the image as its own, and feels a natural protectiveness over it. This image gained its power and credibility because it so clearly stood in contrast to what the government expected of the people – the 'cosmopolitan' Standard English-speaking, business-minded, and cultured upper-middleclass; it is the people's own reaction to the top-enforced inferiority complex from which we intellectuals suffer.

That is the reason why Neo's films, save a few exceptions, have always done well at the box-office. In an overwhelming sea of Hollywood and Hong Kong films, Neo's films seem to stand out as beacons of Singaporean-ness in an otherwise alienating cultural sphere. His films are like Lent – after being subjected to (and no doubt enjoying) a glut of foreign films that assert a cultural superiority over us, we forego our

comforts to 'return to our roots,' to explore this precious identity that makes us feel Singaporean again. You can say this comes out of self-love, a desire to affirm one's own identity. But I think it comes from insecurity, a fear that we aren't actually enough, that we need someone else (an authority, either cultural or political) to define us to ourselves. In Singapore, this 'someone else' has traditionally either been the media or the state (which are often one and the same). Neo's films used to come as a breath of fresh air because they seemed to stand apart from how the media stubbornly portrayed us.

But have they really been that different? In the *I Not Stupid* films, Neo tackles the streaming system in our education structure. His general conclusion is that these underperforming students, who have been generally ignored by educators in favour of the 'smarter' students, eventually find their place in society, becoming 'useful' people in the Confucian sense of the word – every one, even the poor and displaced, has his place in society. In Neo's *Money No Enough* films, he satirises the greed of his characters and affirms the need

to sacrifice oneself for the greater good (the good of family, society), echoing the state ideology of every individual being part of the body politic. In this way, the messages of these films, although outwardly critical of the system, reinforce the hierarchical family-oriented societal structures that the government has laid down for the people. The way in which he differs from the mainstream media is then only a matter of methodology – whereas the media prescribes a certain way the people behaves, Neo describes the way people behave, but only in a way that vindicates their place, thus challenging very little of the situation in which the government puts them.

*Ah Boys To Men* is no different. In internalising the state's fear mongering, Neo portrays compulsory military service as a necessity. The film describes a reluctant National Service enlistee who, through a family crisis, gives up his 'selfish' desire to avoid the army, eventually sacrificing himself for the sake of becoming a responsible, assimilated 'citizen.' Throughout the film, we see the lineage of National Service through the generations; it is a 'rite

of passage' through which boys grow up and form meaningful relationships with other men. Refusing this 'rite of passage,' as the protagonist does at the beginning, is to reject one's Singaporean identity and the fundamental values of society; it is to alienate and subjugate his loved ones to his own selfish and pithy desires, a notion the film strongly condemns. What is appalling is that this *description* of Singaporean identity and society adheres to and reaffirms the image that Singapore has of its boys/men. Neo, as an entertainer and artist, only has to describe that psychology to fully embody the insecurity and self-loathing that we feel toward ourselves.

The horrifying implication is that the closer an artist comes to describing the people – something we English-speaking intellectuals often envy Neo of being able to do – the more he is unable to diagnose the problems within us. The mere act of description is enough to entrench us within our set archetypes (that we no less believe ourselves), and perpetuate the cycle of self-oppression. In sympathising with the 'heartlanders,' in adopting their point of view and taking their

side, Neo inadvertently reflects and promotes the state values that have been fully internalised by the people, values from which – to be clear – neither the intellectual 'cosmopolitan' class are exempt. Is the solution, then, to look at foreign culture as an escape from all this? Is our inferiority complex, after all, a necessary evil?

One thing is clear: it is not the art that is the problem – it is us. The happy endings of Neo's films represent what we, as a people, want to believe – that going through the army *does* make you a better person despite the pain and torture, that sacrificing yourself for your family *is* worth it. These white lies are worth believing in because we are afraid of what would happen if we *don't* believe – the external manifestation of our internal violence and rage. But by forcing ourselves to believe, we end up being unable to believe in anything at all. Late at night, the worthlessness of our lie hurts, the sad ghost that passes as our identity withers away, and we are forced to confront the meaninglessness of our lives.

The fact is that Singaporeans aren't proud of speaking Singlish – it has long been drilled into us, by the government, that it is an inferior language, a perversion of proper English, that it shouldn't be encouraged simply because no one outside of Singapore would be able to understand us.

And so the search for our identity continues – this blazing heart in Singaporean art, the one thing we use to parade our importance, the endlessly explored but still wild frontier in our dreams, hopes and memories. We are tortured by it, filled with a delusional responsibility to find it, define it, and fix it in place, so that we can feel material, like other nations, through culture. Unlike other post-colonial nations who have insisted on their indigenous identity after independence, our state



had, instead, rejected it, bringing about the marginalisation of our indigenous Malay minority. Our indigenous identity somehow reminded us too much of our neighbour, Malaysia; it wouldn't have fit our neat (and 'yellow-washed') narrative of 'rejecting' communal politics.

Because of this unease, we want a history for ourselves so much that we would accept any established ideology, foreign or ethnic (and often ethnicity is another subtler form of cultural colonialism), as long as it means that we don't have to struggle to forge a new identity for ourselves (Neo is only one of many cultural snakeoil dealers that we enshrine and worship). We would rather throw ourselves at something bigger, subsume ourselves within something already established, rather than form a new hybrid community that is truer to our situation in this country. We would rather look to the past (our individual ancestries, heritage, and traditions) than to the future – the only thing that is still possible to change! We cling to our memories – our nostalgia for past events, buildings, people – as if the past can miraculously bring us salvation,

as if the past can remake us anew. But we forget that seeing through state-approved 'history' doesn't change a goddamn thing about the present, and that, more importantly, memories also lie.

**In an overwhelming sea of Hollywood and Hong Kong films, Neo's films seem to stand out as beacons of Singaporean-ness in an otherwise alienating cultural sphere. His films are like Lent – after being subjected to (and no doubt enjoying) a glut of foreign films that assert a cultural superiority over us, we forego our comforts to 'return to our roots,' to explore this precious identity that makes us feel Singaporean again.**

Yet, somehow, all this leaves us wanting; rather than placate us, our inferiority complex agitates

us. Is that why we feel so angry when other Southeast Asian groups claim our space for our own (see the recent furor over Filipinos taking over Orchard Road for their Independence Day celebrations)? Is that why Singaporean Chinese are so xenophobic toward the Mainland Chinese immigrants (our own inferiority complex kicking in perhaps because they remind Singaporean Chinese too much of ourselves)? We always feel the need to compare ourselves to others. To use a term by Frantz Fanon, we are *comparaison*. We assert ourselves through question and merit – we are more cultured and civilised than the Mainland Chinese because we speak English and have adopted Western manners; we are superior to the Filipinos because we aren't poor and wretched like them. This psychology of question and merit permeates every part of our culture. We are obsessed with trends and with giving our opinions on it. We aren't creatures of hype so much as we rely on hype to make judgments and, through that, assert our individuality. Because why else would we be so obsessed with judging things if not to dispel, and temporarily forget, how inferior and insecure we feel?

We feel the need to be above everything, above politics and culture. We don't believe in anything because we are too smart for it. But no longer believing in anything creates a despair of its own. As much as we like to complain about the government, we still insist on voting for the ruling party in every single election. We recognise their flaws, their errors; we castigate them for their hubris. And yet, we don't believe that there is anything beyond them. We are so convinced of the efficacy of the bitter pill that we see suffering (and, yes, that includes the military service depicted in *Ah Boys to Men*) as necessary and, even, good for us. We see the problems in our society as necessary too – the permanent marginalisation of racial and sexual minorities (inevitable in a democratic majority rule), the increasing stratification of social classes (inherent in every capitalist system), our self-acknowledged inferiority in relation to other economic/cultural powers (part of being a small country in a big world). But can we aspire to more? How to 'lie up a nation' where there is none? How to bring together a community that doesn't see itself as



one? I don't have an answer. But maybe it's time to forget the poets, writers, artists, and filmmakers. We don't represent you. And forget the politicians, the newspapers, and the television that claim to represent you. For as long as we feel the need for an identity, all these institutions will continue to feed you their lies. And let's move on, once and for all, beyond binary oppositions – government vs. opposition, Singaporean vs. foreigner, cultured vs. non-cultured, majority vs. minority – and realise that we are all in this together, and that, despite what they tell us, there is space enough under this sky for all of us. Let's finally realise that fighting for ourselves also means fighting for others, that the first step in accepting ourselves is to recognise that Singaporean identity is plural, that to be Singaporean itself is to be more than one.

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## Disjuncture and Discord in Singapore Comics and Cartoons



CT LIM  
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DISJUNCTURE  
AND DISCORD  
IN SINGAPORE  
COMICS AND  
CARTOONS

In the last week of December 2012, two cartoonists from different generations met in a small studio at Kampong Eunos. 2010 Young Artist Award recipient, Sonny Liew, finally met Koeh Sia Yong, an artist/cartoonist active in the 1960s and 1970s. Their stories paralleled the story of cartooning in Singapore and the history of the island nation. The history of cartoons in Singapore has always been political. The first Chinese cartoon appeared in 1907, in *Chong Shing Jit Pao*, a newspaper that was set up to rally support for the cause of Dr Sun Yat-Sen to create a new China. These cartoons were anti-Ching Dynasty cartoons, to show the overseas Chinese in Singapore the corruption and incompetence of the Ching government in China. The efforts

of writers, artists, cartoonists and other intellectuals paid off when the Ching government fell in the 1911 Chinese Revolution.

However, China's problems were not over. In the following two decades, the young republic was plagued by threats of warlordism that divided the country. Cartoonists in Singapore once again took up their drawing pens to caricature General Yuan Shih Kai and other warlords in *Kuo Min Yit Poh* and later, *Sin Kuo Min Press*.

Cartoons in Singapore started out as a political weapon, a tool for agitation. It was used against the Ching government in the 1900s, against the warlords in the 1910s and 1920s and then against

the Japanese in the 1930s. The Chinese in Singapore were more concerned about the political and social situation back in China and the cartoons reflected that. There was limited localisation, although there were some attempts to introduce local topics and imagery in cartoons in the late 1920s and 1930s. But all that stopped in 1937.

In 1937, Japan invaded China. The Sino-Japanese war marked the start of a nine-year war in China that would feed into World War II in 1941 when Japan bombed Pearl Harbour. But for now, the invasion of China by Japan would once

again rally the overseas Chinese intellectuals, including writers and cartoonists to take up their weapons of choice, to show that the pen is equal, if not mightier, than the sword.

Many cartoons were drawn in Chinese newspapers in Singapore to condemn the Japanese for their invasion of China. This would prove fatal for the cartoonists in 1942 when Japan invaded Singapore. During the Sook Ching massacre, the Japanese soldiers rounded up many anti-Japanese elements, including cartoonists, to be executed. The atrocities of the

Japanese were captured in cartoon form in *Chop Suey*, a book drawn by Liu Kang, one of Singapore's postwar pioneer artists. *Chop Suey* was published in 1946, almost immediately after the war.

The Japanese Occupation of Singapore between 1942 and 1945 changed the mindset of the Chinese in Singapore in various ways. They realised that they could not depend on the British colonial rulers of Singapore to defend them. Secondly, they were politically riled by the Japanese Occupation and saw the need to be involved in the politics in Singapore and not just what was happening in China. Thirdly, Asia and Africa were swept by a wave of anti-colonial sentiments after the war and Singapore was not left out.

Cartoons were part of the arsenal against colonial rule in Singapore and there was the reemergence of local concerns and topics in cartoons. Cartoonists and artists became part of the independence movement, raising the people's awareness about social and political conditions. It was agit-pop at work.

It is from this milieu that Koeh Sia Yong came forth as an artist and cartoonist. Born in 1938, he did not have much memory of the Japanese Occupation as he was still a child then. But growing up in a poor family in the 1940s (Koeh did not attend secondary school) meant he had to grow up faster, to be financially independent at a young age. He attended a few years of art classes at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in the early 1950s and went on to work in the advertising field, as well as freelance commercial work.

But he was not a bystander of the tumultuous changes going on around him. He joined the Equator Art Society, a social realist art group that advocated art for society's sake, and not just art for art's sake. They believed that art and artists had a social responsibility to provoke change and improve the society and that meant fighting for a socialist cause and against the British colonial rule. Koeh would be part of the drawing team that drew posters and banners in support of the early People's Action Party (PAP, the ruling political party of Singapore since 1959). When



the Equator Art Society stopped agreeing with the PAP's political direction when the latter came to power, it turned its support to the main opposition party of the 1960s, the Barisan Sosialis, against the PAP.

Cartooning in the 1950s and 1960s were exciting times for the artists as they created works that would influence the public's opinion about the British or the PAP. They appeared in the newspapers like *The Straits Times*, *Nanyang Siang Pau*, *Sin Chew Jit Poh* (these two Chinese papers would amalgamate to become *Lianhe Zaobao* in 1983) and many other dailies and magazines in the newsstands back then. However, that changed as the government tightened its control over the press and sent out the message that 'you are either with us or you are against us'. Singapore gained self-government from the British in 1959 and full independence in 1965 (after two years of merger with Malaysia between 1963 and 1965). The 1960s to the 1980s were seen as years of nation-building and the press was expected to take part in the building of social consensus and preserving the social fabric. The press was not

to play the role of the fourth estate like in the West.

From 1961 onwards (the year members of the PAP split from the party to form the Barisan Sosialis), political cartoons stopped appearing in *The Straits Times*. While they continued to appear in other newspapers, there was less usage of political caricature as they were deemed disrespectful to members of parliament and ministers. The cartoons became

Cartoons were part of the arsenal against colonial rule in Singapore and there was the reemergence of local concerns and topics in cartoons. Cartoonists and artists became part of the independence movement, raising the people's awareness about social and political conditions.

more like social commentary than targeting specific policies or politicians.

This cartoon by artist See Cheen Tee, is a prime example of this. Appearing in *Nanyang Siang Pau* two days after the Christmas of 1968, it showed old Santa presenting a new electric fan to a working class household (as identified by their clothes) living in a flat. The blades of the fan are in the shape of 6s or 9s, depending on how you look at it. It cleverly symbolises the new year, 1969, that is arriving in a few days' time. However, the family is seen rejecting the gift. The reason why they are doing so lies in the central positing of the electricity reading meter in the cartoon. By placing the meter in centre, our eyes natural focus on it – and there lies the rub. It hints that this rather huge household is too poor to afford the increase in electricity bills if they were to accept the fan. Furthermore, the younger child placed just below the meter is coughing his lungs out. Is the family



too poor to see a doctor? A new electric fan is a luxury they could do without. See's cartoon is a brilliant subtle commentary on the social realities of blue collar living in the late 1960s, especially when the British had announced in 1968 that they would be withdrawing their naval base, affecting thousands of workers in Singapore. No politicians were caricatured or any government policies criticised. These were the boundaries cartoonists had to work within.

Those who ignored the signs that the tolerance for political cartooning had shifted paid the price for it. In 1971, the *Singapore Herald* took on the Singapore government when it mixed journalism with socio-political commentary. It made the government look bad when



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it covered sensitive stories like national service and the poor in society. The quarrel was made public and the *Herald* published a famous cartoon by Morgan Chua and printed it on the front page. A tank driven by then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew is about to crush a helpless baby that represents the *Herald*. A week later, the paper was shut down.

So one either has to draw non-threatening humorous cartoons or draw cartoons about international politics, but not local issues. That was what Koeh Sia Yong did in 1979 when he was invited by *Nanyang Siang Pau* to contribute cartoons to its editorial pages. Having been an artist-activist in the late 1950s and 1960s, he knew the winds had shifted. In the 1970s, Chinese newspaper executives, journalists and theatre practitioners like Kuo Pao Kun were detained. Koeh only drew political cartoons about other countries and foreign affairs.

Koeh's sensing was right as the early 1980s saw the tightening of the press conditions and further consolidation of the newspapers in Singapore. In 1982, a top civil servant, S.R. Nathan, was sent in

to be the Executive Chairman of *The Straits Times* (Nathan would later become the President of Singapore). In 1983, *Nanyang Siang Pau* and *Sin Chew Jit Poh* were merged to become *Lianhe Zaobao*. In 1984, the Singapore Press Holdings was formed to manage *The Straits Times* and *Lianhe Zaobao*. Koeh only drew cartoons for one year in 1979. He retired from the world of advertising and commercials in the early 1990s to be a full-time artist.

Koeh's life story as an artist and cartoonist reflects the disjuncture in the story of political commentary and cartooning in Singapore. There is a clear break in the history of political cartooning in 1961 when *The Straits Times* stopped publishing cartoons about local politics for many years. Often people would ask what political cartoons do we have in Singapore, which is precisely the point. We had a vibrant scene in the 1950s and even earlier when cartoonists risked their lives to draw anti-Japanese cartoons. It was a rich tradition of doing art for society's sake. There was a certain amount of freedom in the 1950s as the British was preparing Singapore

for decolonisation. Discussions in the university (eg. University of Malaya Socialist Club) and in the newspapers were allowed as part of the political education for the English-educated elites, for the latter to take over from the British. I am reminded of what the late theatre doyen, Kuo Pao Kun said once during a forum at The Substation, the first independent contemporary arts centre in Singapore, founded by Kuo himself in 1990. He paraphrased Lu Xun – that artists and politicians joined forces in times of revolution. But once the war is over, they go their separate ways.

It is appropriate to end Koeh's story and the story of political cartooning here, as the 1980s was the start of comic book era in Singapore. In 1983, Roger Wong quit his job as senior manager of a departmental store to draw and publish *Pluto Man*, the first superhero comic

book in Singapore. It only lasted for two issues. *Captain V* fared better. Sponsored by the Singapore Police Force in 1986, it lasted three issues with stories written by Siva Choy, a



pioneer pop singer in Singapore. The late 1980s and 1990s could be considered as a vibrant period for comic books in Singapore. The first graphic novel of short stories, *Unfortunate Lives: Urban Stories*, *Uncertain Tales* by Eric Khoo (now a famous film director) was published by Times Publishing International in 1989. In 1990, Johnny Lau, James Suresh and Lim Yu Cheng put out the first *Mr Kiasu* book to much commercial success. The rock magazine, *BigO* also published comic stories by Khoo and Lau and other emerging talents. *The Sunday*

*Times* and *The New Paper* were also serialising comic strips by Chan Man Loon, Kelvin Chan and Colin Goh.

Around the time when *Mr Kiasu* was at the height of its popularity in the mid 1990s, a young Malaysian-born comic artist studying in Singapore, Sonny Liew, started his cartooning career drawing a satirical strip for a tabloid paper in Singapore. The link between the creators of *Mr Kiasu* and Liew is that they show the commercial viability of doing comics in Singapore, especially the current success of Liew, who makes a more-than-decent living by drawing for DC and Marvel Comics.

Liew received the Young Artist Award from the Singapore National Arts Council in 2010, the first comic book artist to do so, signaling an acceptance of the art form in Singapore. Liew started out drawing a daily strip, *Frankie and Poo* for *The New Paper* before going overseas for his studies. After returning to Singapore to work for a few years, he went to the United States to study art. He managed to break into the American mainstream comics market after attending the San Diego Comic

Con to hawk his portfolio. He drew the Marvel Comics' adaptation of *Sense and Sensibility* (2011) and also *My Faith in Frankie* (2004) for *Vertigo* and *Re-Gifters* (2007) for Minx.

Liew does not make his living from drawing comics for the Singapore market. He draws mainly for American comics companies such as SLG, Image and First Second, and also sells his paintings. But he is doing more Singapore-based works in recent times. He just completed a story about Georgette Chen, a pioneer in Singapore's art history. His next book will be *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*, to be published by Epigram Books sometime in 2014.

It is for this project that I introduced him to Koeh Sia Yong. Liew wanted to find out more about the cartoons of the 1950s and 1960s. But from his own output, he should already know the difference between him and Koeh. The latter is from an earlier generation who believes in the socialist cause. That era is gone. For those who started drawing comics or cartoons in Singapore after 1990, hardly any of them deals with political themes

or social commentaries. Liew did try to inject some of that in his strip for *The New Paper* in *Frankie and Poo*. Since turning professional in the 2000s, he has 'stayed away' from Singapore – from *Wonderland* (2009) to the Austen territory of *Sense and Sensibility*, and the science fiction world of *Malinky Robot* (2011). But that seems to be changing in the smaller stories Liew has been doing.

In 2008, Liew drew a story written by Mike Carey, a short meditation on the effects of colonialism. This questioning of authority and master narratives continues in *The Hunt for Mas Selamat*, a story Liew wrote and drew for *Liquid City Vol 2*, an anthology of Southeast Asian comics edited by him and myself in 2010. This subtle challenge to the official story of what really happened to Mas Selamat is conveyed playfully by Liew who draws different panels in different comic styles, taken from the gamut of comic book history. The shifts in form hint to the reader to question the shifts in government speak. This technique of juxtaposing contradictions and putting jarring images together is to make things unfamiliar, to destabilise current

social or political realities. *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* will be the culmination of such experimentation. It will feature the politicians of the 1950s and 1960s. But I shan't say more. You will get an idea from the political caricatures in Liew's paintings.

In 1998, at a Singapore Art Museum forum, Kuo Pao Kun asked how we can make fun of other countries' politicians when we cannot even laugh at ourselves. 16 years later, that question is still relevant as drawing cartoons can still get you into trouble as in the case of Leslie Chew and his Facebook cartoons. The medium continues to be a source of discord in our political space.

CT Lim writes, edits and research about comics in Southeast Asia. He also writes about the student movement in Singapore.



What happened on the early morning of April 24 was unfortunate.<sup>2</sup> Violence by the state is to be censured. However (and ‘however’ is still necessary here) in the final analysis, this violence stems not from individuals, but from the system of the nation-state. In other words, be it a capitalist or a socialist regime, all governments will have more or less the same response when faced with such a challenge, whether violent or non-violent. Relative to Europe, the United States and Japan, which are much admired by Taiwan’s intellectual circles, if

we take the police as a representative of state violence, state violence in Taiwan is objectively speaking, the most ‘civilised’ or the ‘softest’ and there should be no contention about this. It would perhaps be more meaningful if we could take this

opportunity to elevate the grievances **on and condemnations of state violence to the level of a discourse on ‘the nation-state and violence’.**

**But the absence of a discourse or the failure to raise the level of discourse is precisely a striking feature of this ‘Sunflower student movement’, wordlessly and objectively** reflected

<sup>1</sup> Editor’s Note: An abridged edition of the original article in Chinese was published in China Times on March 26, 2014. A full edition was published on the Facebook page of Taiwan: A Radical Quarterly in Social Studies on the same day. We are republishing the full edition here, with the consent of the author.

# IDEÓ- LOGY AND THE STUDENT MOVE- MENT<sup>1</sup>

SPECIAL FEATURE

WRITTEN BY CHAO KANG  
TRANSLATED BY LU CAIXIA

in the movement’s changing demands. We can delve into the reasons from at least two perspectives. First, this is a fairly common phenomenon in contemporary societies marked by ‘the end of history’ or ‘the end of ideology’, particularly in the colour revolutions that have occurred in former Third World authoritarian states, in which discourse was woefully absent. Second, the history of Taiwanese student movements, from the Wild Lily to the Wild Strawberries and the Sunflower movements, also has a genealogy of the absence of discourse. Admittedly, it is common knowledge that there is ‘no need’ for discourse when it comes to resisting authoritarianism and fighting for freedom, as is the case when fighting tyrants and despots. But in Taiwan’s mainstream discourse over the years, especially in its smug comparison with Mainland China, has it not already shed its authoritarian status? If so, why does it continue to abandon all meaningful discourse whenever a movement arises? Even though a certain section of this movement had stood in the margins and showed a measure of progressiveness, but if they simply raise the banner of ‘anti-neoliberalism’ to express their views and hopes without offering any

<sup>2</sup> Editor’s Note: On the morning of April 24 2014, police evicted a group of protesters that occupied the Executive Yuan – the executive branch of the government of the Republic of China (ROC or Taiwan).

explanation or justification, it too reflects the lack of discourse. But we can talk about this section of the movement separately.

Paradoxically, the lack of a discourse is in fact one of the 'driving forces' sustaining the movement. This is because the movement depends on a sense of 'we-feeling' rather than an analysis of reality—one only has to look at the 'quick guides' that was circulated to understand the rest. Frankly, if we analyse the student movement from the cold, hard lens of realism, how and in what ways is the mindset of the Ma Ying-jeou administration—which dichotomises economics and politics (that is leveraging on China's rise to seek economic development opportunities for Taiwan while being politically aligned with the United States and Japan against Communism)—antithetical to the movement? Unless the movement insists that Taiwan must completely sever itself from China politically and economically, and on all other issues, with them being the 'Chinese' and we being the 'Taiwanese'. But if that is not the case, what is the movement arguing for? Is it for how Taiwan should view the reality of its dependence on trade? Or is it for its position in East Asian geopolitics? Or how to pursue peaceful Cross-Strait relations? Or how to unite a divided society? These questions need to be approached not with emotion or 'conviction', but with an 'ethic of responsibility'.

Is it for how Taiwan should view the reality of its dependence on trade? Or is it for its position in East Asian geopolitics? Or how to pursue peaceful Cross-Strait relations? Or how to unite a divided society?

To put it bluntly, even though emotion and conviction may make one feel good for standing up to the evil of others, is it possible that this 'do-good' feeling may precisely lead us to more dire and tragic circumstances? We cannot predict the future. If we take a step back and look at fears about the future that are being propagated by the movement's voices and in the so-called quick guides, are they providing an outlet for us to desensitise ourselves to and forget the various social problems that are not going to arise in the future, but have in fact existed and deepened over the past two decades? In this structure of feeling, the greatest fear is the idea that young Taiwanese will have to rent their homes from the Mainland Chinese in the future, and not the fact that they already find it impossible to own homes and have long been living in rented housing, given their insufficient incomes.

But this is of course not the sole responsibility of the students. Strictly speaking, it is not even a problem of the students to begin with, but that of the teachers, Taiwanese intellectuals and the moral texture of Taiwanese society. For a long time, Taiwanese intellectual circles, particularly the social sciences circle, and especially the sociology circle, have tried to be politically correct. They have shirked their responsibilities when the students and the broader public needed them to provide a discourse. But when the students abandoned reason for emotion and angrily took to the streets, these were the same people who unabashedly declared their support for the students and even took their classes to the streets. If they cannot present their arguments in the classroom,

# MOVEMENT

it is unlikely that they can resolve the problem once they take to the streets; it is at most, a performance. 'Professors of sociology' including myself, are not part of the solution but the problem. The students do not need the professors' permission to skip classes in order to protest on the streets because participants of the movement should rightly take responsibility for their own actions. If students are boycotting classes as a form of protest, what professors ought to do is not just conveniently support such action. Instead, they need to pay their own price by going on strike, supposing that this is already a 'social movement' as some of them claim. If no one wants to pay the price for his or her own political choice, then who should pay? For a long time, intellectuals who made a mess during their political stints have 'returned to teaching' after stepping down! But then again, students must also take historical responsibility for their own actions. Did the participants of the student movement try to engage in self-criticism for the racist or quasi-fascist undertones in the movement's rhetoric? If we allow the discriminatory language of racism to go unchecked while continuing to pat ourselves on the back for our 'diversity', 'heterogeneity' and 'civil society', are we not being too hypocritical?

No one knows where this student movement will lead Taiwan, but its genesis is relatively clearer. It is but a periodic manifestation of the unresolved issues in the historical legacies of Taiwanese society, which went through Japanese colonialism, the Chinese civil war, the White Terror period, separation from the Chinese mainland and subsequent democratisation. If it is everyone's view that Taiwanese 'democratisation' has encountered a problem, it is correct. However,

The violence unleashed by the state machinery on the 24<sup>th</sup> might perhaps have us reconsider the whole system of a nation-state and the deeper implications of its status as the paradigm for knowledge, morality and politics.

the solution is not about finding someone to take the rap but to recognise that there are some problems in the route to democratisation. This route has narrowly focused the discourse on 'anti-authoritarianism' and 'breaking free' and has thus taken the Taiwanese on an 'us versus them' shortcut. This has in turn led to the rise of identity politics, ethnicism and even quasi-

fascism, which causes any discourse that takes into account the overall situation and the future to be severely stifled.

But how **can one consider a certain aspect without considering the overall situation? And how is one who has no long-term consideration able to seize the moment? We can only face the consequences of our own deeds now that the chickens have come home to roost.**

Since ethnicism (which defines who are 'insiders') and resistance against China and 'Chineseness' form the core 'spirit' of this movement, and the 'services trade pact' is but a metaphor for

this in a sense (after all, who cares about Taiwan-New Zealand, Taiwan-Singapore or even the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreements?), then in the current atmosphere, the only solution to the present problem is for the ruling Kuomintang party to step down and for the Democratic Progressive Party to take over. When that day comes, perhaps the island's people will have a clear-headed view of their desires and emotions, as well as the price that

they are prepared to pay for them. This will mark the beginning of real politics. My guess is that by then, our fervent sociologists would perhaps go into another period of dormancy similar to what happened after Lee Teng-hui took power. What Taiwanese sociology needs the most is its own sociology, but who cares?

Chao Kang, Professor  
of Sociology, Tunghai  
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This is perhaps Taiwan's destiny, but intellectuals should not talk about destiny. Instead, as intellectuals, students and especially teachers, should we not face our responsibilities by providing the ideological discourse on the future of this island? This ideological work has no conflict with action on the streets. There are restrictions in the state machinery but not in ideology. The violence unleashed by the state machinery on the 24th might perhaps have us reconsider the whole system of a nation-state and the deeper implications of its status as the paradigm for knowledge, morality and politics. An in-depth consideration of this problem cannot avoid looking into the region or history. In the final analysis, independence and autonomy of thought is the prerequisite for any form of autonomy and independence.

IDEO.  
HOC

OPEN CALL

# Switching Through the Channels of My Mind

cherilyn woo

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Chao Kang, Professor  
of Sociology, Tunghai  
University, Taiwan

Lee Teng-

At any moment our minds are in constant discord, disagreeing from one thing to another and then back again. A 'no' to a 'yes' in a heartbeat, a black shirt to a white shirt without batting an eyelid; sometimes we balance between different choices simultaneously. The human mind, I think, exists in an extreme disharmony. We spend most of our time in a state of limbo as we battle different disagreements that pass through our consciousness. Yet, I marvel at the strength of an individual body, carrying this strife daily and appearing seemingly harmonious.

In an attempt to observe the mental discord in all of us, I sit down to think about what comes to mind as all that is in front of me is a blank white MS Word document. The white space transforms, and I find my mind working like a television. Restlessly switching between channels, wondering which channel intrigues me long enough. The human consciousness pulls out a million different thoughts that surge through us at any given time, from reality to imagination, past to present, being present and being elsewhere. It is only later that I discover, perhaps in the discord of our mind, we find the freedom to wander, dream and realise all that pulls us apart, also strings us together.

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Chao Kang, Professor of Sociology, Tunghai University, Taiwan

Lee Teng-



#### channel 080112

I sit in the waiting area of gate 119, I'm about to board the plane back. On my left sits a six-year old girl who has sandwiched herself between two armrests, fitting snugly in the chair that can only hold the bottom of an adult. I wonder if I too, could at one point in time be small enough to fit into gaps of things around me. It would have been a perfect hiding technique. She knocks the tips of her toes against the hard surface of the table rhythmically, a common tactic to lull oneself to sleep. I remember I was once as restless as she. Yet in her restlessness she finds nothing else more desirable than to fall asleep in the waiting area of a boarding lounge.



#### channel 250613

I walk through the British Museum today and a white marble statue of a girl stops me in my tracks. It is the marble bust of Clytie, that originates from the Roman empire. In Greek mythology, Clytie, a water nymph fell in love with the Sun God, Apollo. When he deserted her, she was transformed into a sunflower, turning her head to follow the sun on its daily course from East to West. I wonder what happened to her at night.



#### channel 070112

I sit at Costa Coffee, sipping hot chocolate with my parents. I intermittently switch my attention from the words of my father, the anxiety of school starting and wondering if I made the right choice ordering hot chocolate. I look at the two cups of latte my parents have ordered. I look back at my hot chocolate. Now I wish I had ordered a cappuccino. I don't really want to go back to school next week. I thought sipping hot chocolate would make me feel better, but now I want a cappuccino, and I still don't want to fly back to school.



#### channel 200713

In the afternoon I see the sun shining through the gaps of the trees, people in front of me are dancing and circling me. Hands held. Festivities – a wondrous cacophony of music from different sources.

Now I sit next to Ville on a couch, he's playing 'Lemon Tree' and 'I Shot the Sheriff' on the electric guitar. I feel like I'm in a foreign movie. Who knew 'Lemon Tree' could bond people? Music, I guess brings people together. On the island, Ville tells us many things about life, like how foxes who appear calm and nice, but could really steal the pizza you left under the sofa.

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Lee Teng-



### channel 180712

I am currently on the Trenitalia, a train that takes us across states in Italy. The train travels at 163 km/h. That is fast, like how time passes. At the ticket counter, I repeat the exact instructions given to me by the ticket master on how to validate a ticket. He says I should be a tour guide, I smile and disagree in my head. Florence is pretty. It is the kind of pretty that puts you at ease. I thought the only amazing thing was climbing the Duomo, because it felt like an accomplishment. As I was climbing the Duomo, I was only thinking about the amazing view on top. Needless to say, I wasn't disappointed. I thought it was worth the 10 euros and the tiring climb in a dress. Perhaps happiness is something you have to work hard for, or is it something to distract so that you continue to work?

### channel 151112

I am back in Singapore at Starbucks. Opposite me sits a man and a woman. I would call them a couple. The woman grazes the insides of her calf, leaning into the man's words. He drifts off into the words of his phone. As she desperately tries to latch on to him with her attentive eyes, he falls deeper into the entrapment of his phone. One, two, three, and she has lost an inch of hope. I wonder what shapes the sadness and emptiness of his eyes. Perhaps it is boredom. I hope it is not, because then there might still be the possibility of him putting down the phone to look up and return her what she's reaching out for; reassurance.

### channel 180613

**Oxford Circus – Chinatown – Covent Garden – Bryon**  
We sit across each other at the makeshift dinner table. He tells me that if I did have a huge mansion that was paid for by some high corporate job I never wanted, I would never want to leave the big empty mansion. He challenges me further, 'What life would that be?' Before I can even answer, he replies himself, 'Life should be like camping. You may have a crappy place to sleep in, but everyday you want to get out of the tent because what you do out there is so much fun.' It sounds like a very ideal philosophy to live by. For a moment I find myself imagining the possibilities of living in a forest, excited to get up and walk through the tall oak trees and smell fresh greenery. Then I realise I don't like the lack of proper toilets in nature, and I might have to dig holes in the ground.

### channel 230613

My phone vibrates and a number of messages come in. One from him saying she's not the one. Someone else shaves her head and another feels betrayed. I feel like this is a new era for all of us, and I don't really miss where I came from. I put down my phone and head out.

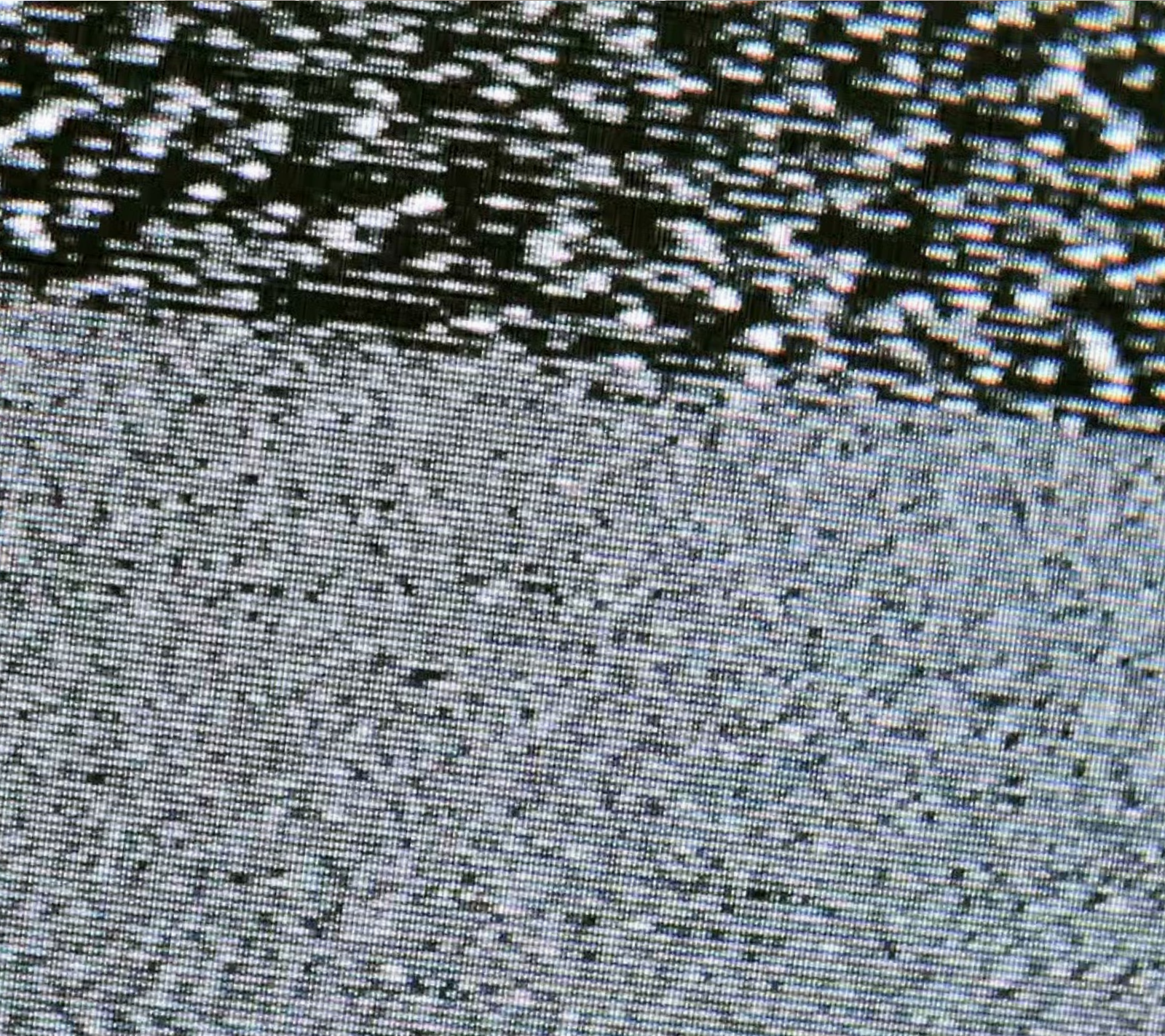
We walk through a forest where the Finnish soldiers fought the winter war against Russia. Outi gives us brief directions on how to get here from her house. On our walk, we saw a naked man sunbathing and an old woman laughed at me as I held Jun's hair like a leash. We finally find our way back to Outi's where she has bought us butter buns. According to her, it is a Finnish home tradition. She warms them up in her oven and serves it to us at a perfect temperature, just warm enough to blanket your taste buds, but not hot enough to scald your tongue. For a moment there is a serene quietness and ease. I miss home.

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