

# *Manufacturing Authenticity: The Cultural Production of National Identities in Singapore*

TERENCE CHONG

*Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 29 Heng Mui Keng  
Terrace, Singapore 119614  
Email: [terencechong@iseas.edu.sg](mailto:terencechong@iseas.edu.sg)*

## **Abstract**

According to Prasenjit Duara, the sacredness of the nation hinges on its ‘regimes of authenticity’ where timelessness and the politics of embodiment are key to an authentic national identity. This paper looks at three different cultural impulses that have attempted to manufacture authenticity in Singapore. They are: the Malay literary movement *Angkatan Sasterawan 50* prior to independence; the state-sponsored Confucian ethics discourse during the 1980s; and the romanticization of the working-class ‘heartlander’ through contemporary popular culture in confrontation with the politics of global capitalism and globalization. In doing so, this paper articulates the difference between the regimes of authenticity of state elites and non-state cultural producers, as well as their ‘national imaginaries’. It concludes that the regime of authenticity, that operationalizes the representations of the working class as a diametric opposite to the logic and force of globalization, offers the most popular symbols of national identity in Singapore.

## **Introduction**

Singapore’s oscillation between its nation-state and global city *habitus*, together with their conflicting demands, has thus far made an authentic national identity rather elusive. The search for an authentic national identity has often little to do with the power of the state or the clarity of its boundaries but with the politics behind the production of its national imaginary and its values. According to historian Prasenjit Duara, the sacredness of the nation hinges on the ‘regimes of authenticity’, that is, the complex relationship between the

concept of time, timelessness and embodiment in national histories.<sup>1</sup> For Duara, the regime of authenticity is the political project to inscribe the nation with timeless values, thus rendering it eternal, in order to anchor it in the ferocious stream of capitalism and modernity,<sup>2</sup> while images of authenticity, according to Duara, ‘can nourish sentiments of nostalgia and loyalty that political forces try to channel to their goals’.<sup>3</sup>

Duara’s work on Manchukuo and its state-building history under Japanese control examines the construction of nationalism when the Japanese Guandong Army seized Manchuria in 1931, and creating Manchukuo a year later. Duara’s contribution is to turn away from the established practice of perceiving the nation as the subject of linear history, and to examine it as a politically constructed entity that is unchanging and eternal such that the nation stands in stark and, ultimately, comforting contrast to modernity and historicity as a ‘river of time’. Such an entity must necessarily embody qualities of purity and sacrality, while the state, intelligentsia, cultural producers and nationalists struggle for the privileged position to be able to stake their claim as custodians and authors of this authenticity. Duara advances this by demonstrating the systematic construction of woman as a symbol of national cultural essence and embodiment of continuity and tradition in juxtaposition with modernity and capitalism. He argues that Chinese nationalists of various hues produce a unitary national imaginary for their objectives, but the unity in their narratives was as much a pre-existing unity as it was a future goal.<sup>4</sup> ‘Thus the unchanging unity of the nation over time, its timelessness, has to be marked by signs of its authenticity. The authenticity of this originary unity is demonstrated and guaranteed by the values of the

<sup>1</sup> Prasenjit Duara, ‘Of Authenticity and Woman: Personal Narratives of Middle-Class Women in Modern China’ in Yeh Wen-hsin (ed.), *Becoming Chinese: Passages to Modernity and Beyond* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 2005); Prasenjit Duara, *Sovereignty and Authenticity: Manchukuo and the East Asian Modern* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, New York, 2003); Prasenjit Duara, ‘The Regime of Authenticity: Timelessness, Gender, and National History in Modern China’ *History and Theory* 37, no. 3 (1998), pp. 287–308; Prasenjit Duara, ‘Historicising National Identity, or Who Imagines What and When’ in Geoff Eley and Ronald G. Suny (eds.), *Becoming National: A Reader* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Prasenjit Duara, ‘The Regime of Authenticity: Timelessness, Gender, and National History in Modern China’, in Chow Kai-wing, Kevin M. Doak and Fu Poshek (eds.), *Constructing Nationhood in Modern East Asia* (University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Duara, *Sovereignty and Authenticity: Manchukuo and the East Asian Modern*, p. 171.

<sup>4</sup> Uradyn E. Bulag, *The Mongols at China’s Edge: History and the Politics of National Unity* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, New York, Oxford, 2002).

pure, the honourable, the good, and the spiritual which the nation supposedly embodies. Their immateriality renders them insusceptible to historical corrosion'.<sup>5</sup> This national authenticity is embodied by the 'representation of the woman—in body and spirit—a very significant site upon which regimes and elites in China responsible for charting the destiny of the nation have sought to locate the unchanging essence and moral purity of the nation'.<sup>6</sup>

Duara's theoretical framework is a useful tool to untangle the identity-making processes in Singapore. He alerts us to the straightforward binaries that are at the core of identity processes including tradition–modernity, nation–global and authenticity–capitalism, as well as the custodians who exploit these binaries in their social constructions of identity and value-embodiment. In Singapore's case, his framework puts into sharper focus the fact that the city-state has had to forfeit much of the traditional ingredients that go into the formulation of nation and national culture. For a variety of reasons well documented elsewhere, its immigrant population, multiethnic complexion and sudden separation from Malaysia all conspired to arrest the development of an ethnic-based national culture or the idea of a stable and timeless nation. Quite the opposite; with economic growth so central to the idea of national survival, the Singapore nation has been defined as necessarily dynamic, open to change and adaptable to the demands of the world economy. Hence, through Duara's analytical lens, it can be seen that instead of the division between nation (stable) and modernity (dynamic) from which an authentic national identity may emerge, the Singapore nation and modernity are collapsed into a political project designed to keep citizens entrenched in economic realism, the result of which is a fluid nation and an identity that responds to the global economy. However, as Duara has noted, this does not preclude multiple sources of identity creation from challenging dominant ones.<sup>7</sup> This is certainly true in the case of Singapore where there has been no lack of effort by the state and cultural producers to engage in the politics of embodiment. Various actors in history have endeavoured to define national or collective identities in Singapore through the politics of embodiment but have succeeded in varying degrees for various reasons.

<sup>5</sup> Duara, 'The Regime of Authenticity: Timelessness, Gender, and National History in Modern China', p. 290.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 296.

<sup>7</sup> Duara, 'Historicising National Identity, or Who Imagines What and When'.

This paper looks at three cultural–political impulses that have attempted to manufacture authenticity in Singapore: the first under the Malay literary movement *Angkatan Sasterawan 50* (Literary Generation of 1950) prior to independence; the second through the Singapore government promotion of the Confucian ethics discourse during the 1980s; and third, the romanticization of the working-class ‘heartlander’ through contemporary popular culture. These different ‘cultural impulses’ were chosen for the way they were specifically instructive of the way their different national imaginaries were a direct response to the immediate cultural politics of the day and their power structures, and the embodiment of the values and traits that would serve as a political and ideological antidote to the perceived social ills. *Angkatan Sasterawan 50* may be investigated as a body of cultural producers who, through Malay literature, attempted to embody the Malay peasant with socialist and anti-colonial values in opposition to the English-educated Malay elite, thus embedding notions of the rural with the concept of authenticity within a broader anti-colonial struggle. This cultural impulse failed in Singapore with the transition from colonial to postcolonial state and the politics of multiculturalism that accompanied it. The second impulse came in the form of the state-sponsored Confucian ethics discourse which offers an ideal case-study of the state’s identity-making process, while the final impulse, that of the romanticization of the working-class ‘heartlander’ identity through contemporary popular culture will be examined as a rooted and territorial social persona in contrast to the capriciousness of global capitalism and globalization. This paper concludes that in a Singapore nation premised on change, global capitalism and modernity, the regime of authenticity that operationalizes the representations of the working class as a diametric opposite to the logic and force of globalization will offer the most popular symbols of national identity.

### ***Angkatan Sasterawan 50: The Malay Language as Embodiment of Authenticity***

Although the 1946 rejection of the Malayan Union lent a sense of urgency to the struggle for the Malay soul, the sources of Malay nationalism were certainly diverse.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps the most influential,

<sup>8</sup> Willaim Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism* (Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur, 1994).

according to Roff, was the vernacular school system and its production of the core of politically radical Malay-educated intelligentsia comprising mainly of journalists and teachers in the 1920s. This radical intelligentsia became known for their strong Malay (and Indonesian) literary and political orientation, as well as their cultural vigor. Previously impoverished, Malay education underwent reformation when the Sultan Idris Training College (SITC), a facility for teacher-training, began to emphasize the study, use and development of the Malay language, history and literature. The SITC also became responsible for the 'rationalizing' of Malay history where the syllabi steered clear of myths and folk stories, and turned to logical arguments in the education of Malay teachers.<sup>9</sup> Students received something akin to a liberal arts education where all lessons were conducted exclusively in the Malay language.<sup>10</sup> Textbooks were imported from the Netherlands East Indies, a fact that opened later Malay literary groups to the influence of Indonesian political ideology. This resulted in Malay access to higher education and awareness of a Malay literary tradition that brought about the belief that the state should yield to ethnic loyalties. This belief came at a time in the 1920s when there was enough self-confidence amongst the Malay intelligentsia to focus political change and discussion on the redefinition of the relationship between the Malays and the British. The ideological fermentation of this Malay intelligentsia continued without contributing much to the public sphere until 1934. In March of that year, the twice-weekly newspaper *Saudara*, published in Penang by religious reformists, introduced a new column—Pa' Dollah—on its back page, usually reserved for children's stories and educational articles. The young Kedah Malay journalist Arifin Ishak, assuming the Pa' Dollah pseudonym, modelled his new column after *Lembaga Malaya's* widely popular 'Pa' Pandir' which indulged in wry and often insightful socio-political commentary on Malayan society. Arifin's first Pa' Dollah article appeared on 31 March 1934, 'and from this small beginning grew, beyond all the expectations of its sponsors, the first

<sup>9</sup> Mohd Hazim Shah, 'Historicising Rationality: The Transmission of Rationality and Science to the Malay States under British Rule' *Asian Journal of Social Science* 35, no. 2 (2007), pp. 216–241.

<sup>10</sup> The person responsible for the reformation of Malay education was O. T. Dussek, the headmaster of the Sultan Idris Training College from 1922 to 1936. Dussek believed that the improvement of Malay education began with the improvement of Malay teachers, and is thus credited with providing the necessary conditions for the growth of a nationalist intelligentsia (Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*, p. 148).

and one of the largest pan-Malayan Malay organisations to appear before the Second World War'.<sup>11</sup>

Initially, there was nothing to suggest that Arifin's column would become so popular as it began genially with a strong dose of folksy humour. It was in the second article, entitled 'Berkenaan Sahabat Pena' (Concerning Pen Friends), where the objective of preventing 'the disintegration of our Muslim brotherhood—already evident to those who have eyes to see' was laid out. On 7 April 1934, the column established *Sahabat Pena* (Friends of the Pen), a newspaper correspondence club to keep in touch with readers, as well as to promote the practice of letter-writing within the Malay community. There is no evidence that *Sahabat Pena* was formed for anything else other than to facilitate the growth of Malay literacy and the exchange of social and cultural ideas. *Saudara* even found it necessary to warn members of *Sahabat Pena* 'that boys should correspond only with boys and girls with girls, or the name *Sahabat Pena* would come to be abhorred in the eyes of all right-thinking people'.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, romantic distractions aside, in just a year after its formation, *Sahabat Pena* boasted over a thousand members from all over the peninsula and Borneo<sup>13</sup> and served as a vital platform for its members to possibly realize an 'imagined community' where 'in the minds of each lives the image of their communion'.<sup>14</sup> Predictably, its impressive growth aroused suspicions from members of the public and the colonial state, and in order to pre-empt any trouble, the club put in a successful application to the government to exempt it from registration under the Society Ordinance. The catalyst for *Sahabat Pena* came in the form of the Malayan Emergency in 1948. When the Emergency was declared by the British, many of the Malays left; a large number of these, including journalists and teachers, found their way to Singapore either because of the island's less restrictive laws or family ties. Members of this Malay group that had left linked up with each other in Singapore through the *Sahabat Pena* network which was about 14 years old by this time.<sup>15</sup> The journalists and teachers of this group,

<sup>11</sup> Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*, p. 212.

<sup>12</sup> Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*, p. 213.

<sup>13</sup> Nicholas Tarling (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, volume 2 (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992); T. N. Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999).

<sup>14</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, London, 1983), p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya*.

among them Keris Mas and Samad Ismail, no doubt influenced by the ideas and ideals circulating in the *Sahabat Pena*, proceeded on 6 August 1950 to establish the literary movement *Angkatan Sasterawan 50* (Literary Generation of 1950) or ASAS 50. The establishment of ASAS 50, a nod to the Indonesian literary movement *Angkatan 1945* (Generation 1945), signalled the first time that Malay literature and the arts were harnessed to express Malay identity and nationalism, something which the political elites and aristocracy took little interest in.<sup>16</sup> Driven by its motto ‘*Seni Untuk Masyarakat*’ (Art for Society), ASAS 50’s objectives were: to free Malay society from anachronistic elements in its culture that obstructed modernity and progress; to nurture intellectual awareness among the *ra’ayat*; and to foster Malay nationalism through the promotion of Malay literature and language.<sup>17</sup>

The Malay-educated intelligentsia of ASAS 50 rapidly became one of the key agents of Malay nationalism. Though it arose from the religious-based *Sahabat Pena*, it seemed to have shed most of the Islamic vocabulary of the pen club. It did not advocate formal participation in party politics but, rather, the intellectual and cultural socialization of the Malay community *vis-à-vis* Malay literature. The primary objective of ASAS 50 was the promotion of the Malay language as the national language for Singapore and the then Malayan Federation because it regarded literature as inseparable from cultural development. When the Rendel Constitutional Commission met to establish the political structure of Singapore, the ASAS 50 submitted a memorandum that argued for the promotion of Malay language and culture. Three years later, at the third Congress on the Malay Language and Malay Letters in 1956, ASAS 50 proposed two immediate and pressing tasks: ‘the need to exemplify through literature effort and dedication to regain self-rule, and to work to replace the colonial administration and educational systems with other systems consonant with the needs and aspirations of the people’.<sup>18</sup> The Congress also demonstrated

<sup>16</sup> Seong Chee Tham, ‘The Politics of Malay Literary Development’ in Seong Chee Tham (ed.), *Essays on Literature and Society in Southeast Asia: Political and Sociological Perspectives* (Singapore University Press, Singapore, 1981).

<sup>17</sup> Tham, ‘The Politics of Malay Literary Development’; Muhd Khairudin Aljunied Syed, ‘Films as Social History: P. Ramlee’s “Seniman Bujang Lapok” and Malays in Singapore (1950s-1960s)’ *The Heritage Journal* 2, no. 1 (2005), pp. 1–21; Suratman Markasan, ‘Contemporary Singapore Malay Literature as Seen Through Two Streams of Social Critique’ *Malay Literature* 4, no. 1 (1991), pp. 1–11.

<sup>18</sup> Tham, ‘The Politics of Malay Literary Development’, p. 218.

the exclusive nature of language with Arnold Toynbee, who attended it, commenting that ‘it was a display of unity by 100 million Malay speakers against “the insinuating Chinese hucksters”’.<sup>19</sup> It was also at this Congress that the slogan *Bahasa Jiwa Bangsa* (language is the soul of the nation) was introduced. The slogan leveraged on its Sanskrit etymological meaning of ‘*bahasa*’ which was ‘language’ and ‘manners’, and could be further translated as ‘speech and breeding’ or ‘speech indicating breeding’.<sup>20</sup> The ambiguity of ‘*bangsa*’, which could be taken to mean nation or community, further facilitated the conceptual elevation of the Malay community to national realm.

Through popular narratives in poetry, ASAS 50’s ‘regime of authenticity’ constructed the Malay *habitus* with progressive and essentialist values like loyalty, goodwill, anti-colonialism, justice, freedom, unity and development through Malay literature.<sup>21</sup> This embodiment was extrapolated and transposed on a national level when the *Bahasa Jiwa Bangsa* was co-opted later by United Malays National Organization (UMNO) politicians. The Malay nation, through the agency of the Malay-educated intelligentsia ASAS 50, began to congeal through its literary production with the *Bahasa Jiwa Bangsa* discourse at its postcolonial core. ASAS 50 did not only reject British rule for its cultural impositions on the Malay community, but also for widening the chasm between the Malay bureaucratic elite and the masses. This agenda of agitation earned the works of ASAS 50 various labels such as *sastera terikat* (committed literature), *sastera bertendens* (directed literature), *sastera propaganda* (propaganda literature) and *sastera protes* (protest literature).<sup>22</sup>

The second strategy in ASAS 50’s regime of authenticity was its specific representation of the Malay peasantry. The rural Malay peasant was constructed by the Malay-educated intelligentsia in literary works to embody moral and ethical values, often in contrast to representations of the Malay aristocracy as corrupt and selfish, and of the English-educated Malay elite as pejoratively cosmopolitan and too close to the British. ‘A common trait was the portrayal of the

<sup>19</sup> Arnold J. Toynbee, *East to West: A Journey Around the World* (London, 1958), p. 59, cited in Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya*, pp. 305–306.

<sup>20</sup> Tham, ‘The Politics of Malay Literary Development’, p. 256.

<sup>21</sup> ASAS 50 (1961), *Memoranda Angkatan Sasterawan 50* (Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur, 1961).

<sup>22</sup> Ungku Maimunah Mohd. Tahir, *Modern Malay Literary Culture: A Historical Perspective*, Research Notes and Discussion Paper no. 62 (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 1987).



poor as diligent, patient and steadfast in the face of hardship and with a high sense of religious piety. On the other hand the British were seen as patronising hypocrites bent on flaunting their supposed superiority while the Malay leaders were callous, uncaring of their own people and guilty of betraying their own “race”.<sup>23</sup> In this way, ASAS 50 served to ‘act as the conscience of the political leadership’.<sup>24</sup> Given the divisions, both economic and ideological, within the larger Malay community, and the belief that “Malayness” was associated with values embedded in the rural masses,<sup>25</sup> ASAS 50 used its *Bahasa Jiwa Bangsa* slogan to blend progressive values like justice and anti-colonialism with timeless rural and folksy values like brotherhood, friendship and togetherness.<sup>26</sup> This appeal to the rural realm was made by evoking everyday agricultural and pastoral Malay practices as metaphors for life and formation of the self.<sup>27</sup> A typical example would be the poem *Nasi yang ku Suap* (The Rice that I put in my Mouth) written in 1958 by Dr Masuri Bin Salikun. Dr Masuri, whose pen name was Masuri SN, used a Southeast Asian staple food as an image of authenticity for social and political sustenance, thus linking notions of progress with locality. Such forms of literary output served effectively as a regime of authenticity where Malay language, Malay literature and Malay ethnicity were collapsed into a dynamic embodiment of the Malay nation. And with this, the Malay nation was endowed with authentic meaning.

Hence, just as the representation of Chinese women in popular narratives was constructed by nationalists to carry ‘the unchanging essence and moral purity of the nation’,<sup>28</sup> so too was the idea of the Malay nation embodied by the Malay language as produced by these Malay-educated, literary-minded teacher–journalist actors who had access to Malay literature and historicity. Just like the Chinese woman became a deep repository for the qualities and values of the nation within a patriarchal ideology, representations of the rural

<sup>23</sup> Ungku Maimunah, *Modern Malay Literary Culture: A Historical Perspective*, p. 44.

<sup>24</sup> Gungwu Wang, *Community and Nation: China, Southeast Asia and Australia* (Allen & Unwin, New South Wales, 1992), p. 205.

<sup>25</sup> Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya*, p. 302.

<sup>26</sup> See also ASAS 50: *Senarai Awal* (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur, 1980).

<sup>27</sup> For a broad discussion on Malay identity, see Timothy P. Barnard (ed.), *Contesting Malayness: Malay Identity Across Boundaries* (Singapore University Press, Singapore, 2004).

<sup>28</sup> Duara, ‘The Regime of Authenticity: Timelessness, Gender, and National History in Modern China’, p. 365.

Malay peasant became a powerful antithesis to the English-educated Malay comfortably ensconced in the British administration or the religious reformist who was too far on the periphery. ASAS 50 and its representations only succeeded as a regime of authenticity because of two important factors. Firstly, teachers and journalists were at the core of the literary group. With newspapers and magazines, the only medium through which literary works reached the masses, the journalists' role was crucial. Secondly, the most established and widely circulated newspaper of that era was *Utusan Melayu*, and its off-shoots, *Utusan Zaman* and *Mastika*, with the core members of ASAS 50 directly linked to *Utusan Melayu*. The combination of journalists and access to print media greatly enhanced the distribution of the images of authenticity.

It is no surprise that the teachers and journalists played such a crucial role in the 'regime of authenticity', or meaning-making process, since they were in the privileged position to take advantage of the dual and conflicting tendencies that Partha Chatterjee ascribes to most postcolonial nations. According to Chatterjee, the irresistible lure of modernity and capitalism, and the desire to retain notions of the traditional in defiance of the global capitalist order, often represent an ideological impasse suffered by the native intellectual.<sup>29</sup> Chatterjee demonstrates how Indian nationalists formulated the idea of an inner sovereignty embedded with historicity and the timeless values of the nation. This inner sovereignty, like a trump card, empowers Indian nationalists with a combination of ethnic legacy and access to traditional history, thus making them unchallengeable on the ideological landscape, in contrast to their weakened status on the economic and political landscape. This inner sovereignty is at once an *ad hoc*, complex blend of ethnicity, tradition, literary historicity and familiarity, defined most sharply against the background of colonialism. The Malay-educated Malay, with *Bahasa Jiwa Bangsa* as his clarion call, likewise, develops an inner sovereignty within the literary world where language, and eventually ethnicity, becomes the unalienable conduit for the Malay nation's timeless values.

Nevertheless the *Bahasa Jiwa Bangsa* campaign soon became derailed by the politics of the postcolonial state. Singapore's expulsion

<sup>29</sup> Partha Chatterjee, 'Whose Imagined Community?' *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 20 (1991), pp. 521–525; Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1986).

from Malaysia in 1965 saw the People's Action Party (PAP) government embark on an export-oriented development strategy and the attraction of global capital. This economic decision necessitated the adoption of English as the language of business and government. Postcolonial politics also unhinged the campaign. English was seen as the 'neutral' language among the four main ethnic groups and though Malay was enshrined as the 'national language' for symbolic purposes, postcolonial politics ensured that English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil were all recognized as 'official languages'. The postcolonial state also implemented bilingual policies in education, thus introducing the notion of 'mother-tongue' to the populace, wherein the English language was taught alongside the language most closely associated with one's ethnic background. These policy moves by the postcolonial state brought a close to ASAS 50's regime of authenticity, one which would have been problematic in the longer term anyway given Singapore's Chinese majority. Nevertheless, ASAS 50 and its *Bahasa Jiwa Bangsa* campaign mark one of the earliest attempts by a local well-educated community to embody a subject with values and traits in the search for an authentic identity. Today, the ASAS 50 in Singapore still exists as a literary organization, though much of the progressive political content has long since faded.<sup>30</sup>

### **Confucian Ethics Discourse: Embodying the *Junzhi***

By the mid 1970s, Singapore had witnessed significant economic progress and material affluence. The PAP government, through a variety of domestic strategies such as the clamping down on trade unions, press freedom, strict labour and industrial regulations, together with advantageous global market trends, had managed to secure a remarkable level of economic development. This high level of economic development ushered in other phenomena like higher rates of mass consumption, better proficiency in the English language and exposure to global popular culture that, in turn, led to fears amongst those in the PAP government that the local populace was becoming more susceptible to 'westernization', which to the PAP elites was generally synonymous with liberalism, hedonism and individualism. The Chinese community, more than the Malay or

<sup>30</sup> ASAS 50's journal in Singapore, *Sasterawan*, was published from 1971 and ceased in 1980.

Indian, was portrayed as one de-rooted from its 'distinctive' cultural values and identity.<sup>31</sup> These worries led to landmark national policies. The year 1978 saw the *Report on the Ministry of Education*, produced by the then Deputy Prime Minister Goh Keng Swee, in which he warned: 'With large-scale movement to education in English, the risk of deculturalisation cannot be ignored'.<sup>32</sup> The spectre of 'deculturalisation' led to the *Report on Moral Education*, submitted by the then Deputy Prime Minister Ong Teng Cheong, the very next year. These two reports resulted in the implementation of Religious Studies whereby major religions—Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism—together with Confucian ethics, were taught in secondary schools.

Following closely behind the two reports was the Speak Mandarin Campaign. When the PAP government launched the national Speak Mandarin Campaign in late 1979, it 'signalled a dramatic shift in the application of its founding principle of cultural democracy'.<sup>33</sup> The primary reason for this campaign was the fear that 'Singaporeans, especially the Chinese, would lose their distinctive Asian identities, values, cultures and heritages'.<sup>34</sup> According to the then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew:

To have no emotionally acceptable language as our mother tongue is to be emotionally crippled. . . Mandarin is emotionally acceptable as our mother tongue. It also unites the different dialect groups. It reminds us that we are part of an ancient civilisation with an unbroken history of over 5000 years. . . [Chinese] Parents want their children to retain traditional Chinese values in filial piety, loyalty, benevolence and love. Through Mandarin their children can emotionally identify themselves as part of ancient civilisation whose continuity was because it was founded on a tried and tested value system.<sup>35</sup>

The aim of the campaign was two-fold—to retain fluency in Mandarin and its associated cultural values, as well as to replace other provincial dialects amongst the Chinese community with an overarching

<sup>31</sup> Seong Chee Tham, 'The Perception and Practice of Education', in Kernal Sandhu and Paul Wheatley (eds.), *Management of Success* (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 1989); Beng Huat Chua, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore* (Routledge, London, 1995).

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Raj Vasil, *Asianising Singapore: The PAP's Management of Ethnicity* (Heinemann Asia, Singapore, 1995), p. 69.

<sup>33</sup> Raj Vasil, *Governing Singapore: A History of National Development and Democracy* (Allen & Unwin, New South Wales, 2000), p. 100.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, pp. 101–102.

language. Unlike its previously neutral stance on national culture, the government began to recognize the cultural capital of ethnic-based culture in its project to inculcate 'national identity', with the two reports having articulated for the first time in public the importance of ethnic-based cultural values to national culture. Though government leaders took pains to assure ethnic minorities that they remained committed to a multicultural Singapore, this national emphasis on Mandarin in national discourse had the effect of validating Chinese conservatives and their interests.

While all this laid the ground for the rise of the Confucian ethics discourse, it was the need to explain the character of the Asian state and the Asian miracle that explains its international fame. This need was made all the more pressing when the Socialist International, of which the PAP was then a member, accused the ruling party of losing its democratic and socialist ideals. This prompted the PAP to resign from the international body. The PAP defended its mode of governance by appealing to its economic track record, and claimed to have found a 'Singapore way' that prioritized socialism, democracy and human rights according to the needs of national interests.<sup>36</sup> Left with an ideological vacuum created by its resignation from socialism, the PAP state began to look towards an ethnic- and culturally-based set of values, one which the academic symposium on 'Asian Values and Modernisation' seemed specifically designed to fill.<sup>37</sup> The project eventually developed into a particular reading of Chinese values and Confucian ethics by Lee Kuan Yew which came to embody the PAP government's Asian values discourse where traits such as state and family-centred social networks, hard work, thrift, respect for authority and elders, and education, among others, were lionized.

One of the paradoxes of the Confucian ethics discourse was its chimera objectives. On one hand, it was an ideological move to anchor an increasingly 'deculturalized' and 'westernized' citizenry in the timeless and 'authentic' site of traditional ethnic culture. In this sense, the discourse falls neatly into Duara's tradition-modernity, nation-global and authenticity-capitalism binaries that are so central to nation-building. On the other, it also transgressed these very binaries. Confucian ethics, as purported by the PAP government, were not only a

<sup>36</sup> Devan Nair (ed.), *Socialism that Works...the Singapore Way* (Federal Press, Singapore, 1976).

<sup>37</sup> Chee Meow Seah (ed.), *Asian Values and Modernisation* (Singapore University Press, Singapore, 1977).

traditional culture for identity-formation, but relevant to modernity; it was not only an authentic source of Chinese civilization, it also offered an explanation for the economic rise of the four Asian dragons of Hong Kong, South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore. The postcolonial state's commitment to developmentalism and global capital, together with its interventionist attitudes over its citizens' cultural orientation, saw the Confucian ethics discourse emerge as a regime of authenticity whereby the timelessness of the postcolonial nation was borrowed from the civilizational elements of the discourse. In other words, the relationship between the timeless nation and capitalism was made by the PAP government with the help of willing scholars and cultural producers.

Like the Chinese woman in popular narratives who symbolized the moral purity of the Manchukou nation, the PAP elite engaged in the politics of embodiment by constructing imaginations of *junzhi* (honourable men).<sup>38</sup> Government officials and PAP leaders were the embodiment of *junzhi* responsible for the nation's success story and its safeguarding. Located in such embodiment politics were implicit expressions of moral authority and legitimacy from which power was derived. The then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong went one step further by publicly announcing that Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew should be seen as the 'modern Confucius'.<sup>39</sup> The PAP's embodiment of these 'timeless' Confucian values provided a unitary national imaginary of the Singapore nation that was not only in contrast to 'westernization', but also Western concepts of 'civilization'. This echoes the way in which modern German imperial advocates of *Zivilisationskritik* (critique of civilization) fended off democratic modernity by appealing to *Kultur* (culture). The implication was that 'One could be modern and retain one's "Asianness" just as industrialised Germany of the nineteenth century maintained its distinctive, non-Western "*Kultur*"'.<sup>40</sup> Hence, while the Confucian ethics discourse lost much of its credibility in the international arena after the 1998 Asian financial crisis, at the domestic level, its existence

<sup>38</sup> *White Paper on Shared Values* (Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts, Singapore, 1991).

<sup>39</sup> Eddie Kuo, 'Confucianism as Political Discourse in Singapore: The Case of an Incomplete Revitalisation Movement', in Tu Weiming (ed.), *Confucian Traditions in East Asian Modernity: Moral Education and Economic Culture in Japan and the Four Mini-Dragons* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1996).

<sup>40</sup> Mark R. Thompson, 'The Survival of "Asian Values" as "Zivilisationskritik"' *Theory and Society*, 29 (2000), p. 664.

is more complex. In Singapore, where a substantial degree of economic success had been achieved prior to the crisis, the discourse is likely to linger, albeit without its pre-crisis conviction.

### **Romanticising the Working Class in Popular Culture**

The third cultural impulse comes from contemporary local cultural producers, particularly from the film and television genre. This section looks at the way that local film, with particular attention to Jack Neo's body of work, has sought to romanticize the working-class Singaporean in the face of globalization and the subsequent politics that follow. This is not to say that the genres of film and television alone have been articulating the narratives of the working class or marginalized in Singapore. Singapore theatre, from socialist theatre of the 1970s, has played a key role in identity formations within a fast-changing urban landscape. According to the late Kuo Pao Kun, Chinese-language theatre remained the most socially committed and politically sensitive of the different language theatres because of its intimate links 'with the student movement, the labour movement, teachers, [and] the intellectual movement'.<sup>41</sup> Political theatre was not confined to Chinese-language theatre. In the 1987 'Marxist conspiracy', several members of The Third Stage—an English-language social and political theatre—were detained without trial under the Internal Security Act. According to William Peterson, 'English-language theatre [is] a primary lens through which to view the politics of culture in Singapore. . . .because throughout the 1990s, theatre in English showed itself to be the single most dynamic and volatile form of cultural expression' and that the genre has resulted 'from the intersection of numerous politically driven factors, such as language and cultural policy, along with the continuing push for sustainable economic growth and development'.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, film and television in Singapore have developed rapidly in the last decade. The two genres have seen vast improvements in production values, creative content, artistic skills and public funding. But more importantly, these genres are more

<sup>41</sup> Jacqueline Lo, 'Theatre in Singapore: An Interview with Kuo Pao Kun' *Australasian Drama Studies* 23, (October 1993), p. 139. See also William Peterson, *Theatre and the Politics of Culture in Contemporary Singapore* (Wesleyan University Press, Connecticut, 2001).

<sup>42</sup> Peterson, *Theatre and the Politics of Culture in Contemporary Singapore*, pp. 3–4.

mainstream than theatre and are much more accessible to ordinary Singaporeans. As such, film has become a vital genre to understand the social construction of the working class, not least because it is accessible to this constituency but also because a director like Jack Neo purports to speak for them.

Jack Neo has emerged as Singapore's most popular and populist film-maker whose work has become synonymous with the Singaporean heartland.<sup>43</sup> His stories about the plight of the Chinese Singaporean working class in the fast-paced global city are often soaked in socio-political critique and cultural moralism, and presented straightforwardly in a conventional style. His protagonists are predominantly Chinese males who are poorly educated and dialect- or Mandarin-speaking, and are often portrayed as victims of global capitalism and/or the PAP state's education, bilingualism and foreign talent policies. Neo's 'heartlander' typically resides in a state-subsidized Housing Development Board (HDB) flat in one of the many satellite towns, holds a blue-collar or low-paying white-collar job and is most linguistically comfortable in Singlish, the local hybrid of English, Chinese and Malay.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, heartlanders 'tend to be rooted in their cultures and traditions, respectful of authority and less vocal in their demands. Their concerns centre on their livelihood and children's education rather than abstract notions of artistic and political space'.<sup>45</sup> While his production values are considerably lower

<sup>43</sup> For discussions on Neo's work, see also Beng Huat Chua and Wei Wei Yeo, 'Cinematic Critique from the Margins and the Mainstream', in Beng Huat Chua (ed.), *Life is Not Complete Without Shopping: Consumption Culture in Singapore* (NUS Press, Singapore, 2003); Kenneth Paul Tan, 'Ethnic Representation on Singapore Film and Television', in Lai Ah Eng (ed.), *Beyond Rituals and Riots Ethnic Pluralism and Social Cohesion in Singapore* (Eastern Universities Press, Singapore, 2004); Royston Chan, 'Socio-Political Commentary in the films of Jack Neo', available at [http://www.sgnewwave.com/sg\\_jackneo.htm](http://www.sgnewwave.com/sg_jackneo.htm) (2006; last accessed: 15 April 2007). To date Neo has written, directed and acted in 10 films. They include *Money No Enough* (1998); *That One No Enough* (1999); *Liang Po Po: The Movie* (1999); *I Not Stupid* (2002); *Homerun* (2003); *The Best Bet* (2004); *I Do, I Do* (2005); *One More Chance* (2005); *I Not Stupid Too* (2006); *Just Follow Law* (2007); *Money No Enough 2* (2008).

<sup>44</sup> The term 'heartlander' was popularized by the then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong in his 1999 National Day Rally Speech to describe Singaporeans who were rooted to the locale, in contrast to globally mobile Singaporeans, or 'cosmopolitans', who possessed the skills and talents to ride the waves of globalization. Since then, 'heartlander' has entrenched itself in the local lexicon and is impregnated with working-class connotations and values.

<sup>45</sup> Elaine Ho, 'Negotiating Belonging and Perceptions of Citizenship in a Transnational World: Singapore, a Cosmopolis?' *Social and Cultural Geography* 7, no. 3 (2006), pp. 388–389.



than his contemporaries like Eric Khoo or Royston Tan, they exude an economical aesthetic that coats his films with a patina of no-frills authenticity. Meanwhile, his success at the box office has not only established his commercial viability but also shows that his stories about heartland life have struck a chord with the average Singaporean. It has been argued that Neo's ability to speak simply and straightforwardly to his audience was nurtured in his national service days when he served in the Singapore Armed Forces' Music and Drama Company (MDC). At the MDC, in charge of script-writing, Neo quickly learnt the craft of efficient story-telling by constantly looking for ways to get his points across to national servicemen, many of whom were not particularly well-educated or did not have the patience for abstract narratives. It is also suggested that the ideologically strict and prohibitive army environment also made Neo sensitive to the boundaries of acceptable critique of the Singapore condition.<sup>46</sup>

Neo's films are a key feature in the regime of authenticity that comprises many contemporary cultural producers from directors, novelists, poets, scriptwriters and actors who are utilizing the heartlander or the '*Ah Beng*' as signifier of unpretentiousness, genuineness and a down-to-earth demeanor.<sup>47</sup> Part of this regime are popular sitcoms like *Under One Roof* and *Phua Chu Kang* where comic situations gleaned from the everyday lives of Singaporeans often end with a heavy dose of moralizing.<sup>48</sup> Popular representation of the heartlander or the *Ah Beng* is a site upon which cultural producers dedicated to stories of the locale have sought to locate the values of brotherhood, loyalty and integrity. They are romanticized with virtues and redeeming qualities in their everyday struggle against state institutions and structures, offering themselves as heroic figures who can overcome socio-economic adversity. These 'heartlander heroes' are metaphors for rebirth, self-awakening and self-purification for a nation of consumers devoid of a 'golden age'. Hero-making, and heroes themselves, Anthony Smith informs us, are necessary for

<sup>46</sup> Royston Chan, 'Socio-Political Commentary in the films of Jack Neo', available at [http://www.sgnewwave.com/sg\\_jackneo.htm](http://www.sgnewwave.com/sg_jackneo.htm) (2006; last accessed: 15 April 2007).

<sup>47</sup> *Ah Beng* is a local slang used to denote an unsophisticated, usually poorly educated and socially problematic, working-class Chinese male. It is an equivalent of the British 'yob'.

<sup>48</sup> *Under One Roof* revolved around a typical Chinese middle-class family living in a HDB flat in Bishan. *Phua Chu Kang* is the name of the lead character, a crude poorly educated but kind-hearted *nouveau riche* contractor.

the transmission of values, culture and customs from generation to generation.<sup>49</sup>

As an ideal type, Neo's heartlander is a Chinese male, vulnerable to hardship yet resilient, crude yet kind, materialistic yet sentimental, able to overcome his socio-cultural disadvantages through hard work or sheer luck. His protagonists are essentially well meaning, even if sometimes morally misguided, but nevertheless always redeemable and thus able to achieve absolution or reprieve through self-realization by the end of each film. Hence, whatever struggles, hardships and luckless escapades they go through, his protagonists are guaranteed of a happy ending. In *Money No Enough* (1998), Ong (played by Mark Lee) is a happy-go-lucky renovation contractor who borrows a large sum of money from illegal money-lenders. He is confident that he can repay the money-lenders because his friend is supposed to return him some money borrowed earlier. However, when Ong's friend absconds, Ong is unable to pay the money-lenders and gets a beating from them. These money-lenders later interrupt a funeral but are conveniently arrested by the police. Having avoided the nasty consequences of illegal money-borrowing, Ong goes on to set up a car-polishing business with his friends, and the film ends with the business achieving some degree of success. Another example of Neo's luckless-working-man-trying-to-make-good narrative is found in *The Best Bet* (2004), a cautionary tale on the evils of gambling. Tan (Mark Lee), a hawker and incorrigible gambler, dreams of striking it rich. After several attempts at lottery and gambling, Tan starts a business with his two friends, Yong Shun (Christopher Lee) and Richard (Richard Low), which very quickly folds up, landing all of them in debt. Tan is arrested for trying to borrow money from illegal money-lenders but eventually and facilely strikes it rich with a winning lottery number. The film closes with Tan partnering Yong Shun and Richard in a *bak kut teh* (herbal pork rib tea) business which prospers. In *One More Chance* (2005), a story about convicts and second chances in life, Zhou (Henry Thia) is a factory supervisor cum burglar. Though a criminal, Zhou is also a filial and devoted son who cares for his senile mother. After a spell in prison, Zhou decides to turn over a new leaf but finds that he is not accepted by society. To top it all, his romantic overtures to a warden officer are rejected. Driven to desperation and fuelled by the desire to fulfil one of his mother's wishes, Zhou gathers a couple of his ex-prison mates to

<sup>49</sup> Anthony Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999).

plan for a burglary. Nevertheless, everything works out for the better in the end and the film closes with a heavy dose of moralizing.<sup>50</sup>

Finally, Neo also accentuates his heartlanders' authenticity by setting them up against middle-class English-educated and English-speaking characters. In Singapore theatre, television and film, several stereotypes have emerged as literary devices to encapsulate different cultural values and socio-political groups. One of the most persistent and recognizable stereotype is the English-speaking middle-class character, the epitome of political and bureaucratic power (civil servants), or Western values (proponents of liberal democracy and freedom issues), and economic success (well-educated professionals and beneficiaries of global capital). Neo sometimes accentuates heartlander authenticity by highlighting Western values or Western orientation as foreign and alienating. Take, for example, a scene in *I Not Stupid* (2002), where a young precocious female Chinese student stands up in class to declare that she wishes she was a Caucasian because 'if I am a Caucasian, I won't have to learn Chinese anymore'. This prompts the Mandarin teacher to launch into an impromptu lecture on how Mandarin is the key to personal and national identity, and without mastery over the language, the young anglophile would not understand who she is or where she comes from. Explicit in the teacher's discourse is that ethnic Chinese who are better versed in English and the 'West', like the young student, are likely to be rootless and inauthentic. Such encounters also accentuate the contrasting worlds of the beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries of global capitalism. In *Money No Enough* (1998), Keong (played by Jack Neo), a Mandarin-speaking, senior and more deserving worker, is passed over for promotion in favour of his new colleague, Jeremiah Adolpher Lee, who has an overseas Western education. As the film unfolds, it is revealed that Lee's command of English and overseas education triumphs over Keong's qualities such as industriousness and sincerity in the corporate world. This perhaps echoes the sentiments of the Mandarin-speaking majority who may feel that their nation-building sacrifices have been glossed over by the English-speaking elite who have made the Singapore Story one that celebrates only the achievements and successes of the English-proficient Singaporean. Neo hints at this in the film by having the overseas-educated Lee deploy his command

<sup>50</sup> It should be noted that *One More Chance* was supported by the Yellow Ribbon Campaign, a government effort to assimilate ex-convicts back into society. Interestingly, the literal translation of the film's Mandarin title is 'Three Good Men'.

of English to embarrass and put down his Mandarin-speaking colleagues. By contrasting them against the English-speaking elite, Neo aligns the heartlander with the constant struggle against the logic of global capitalism. As marginalized by the ever-shifting forces of globalization, the heartlander is a stable site of down-to-earth values upon which the Singapore nation should be ideally premised upon.

### Conclusion

Although this paper presented three instances of manufacturing authenticity in chronological order—ASAS 50, the Confucian ethics discourse and Neo's 'heartlander'—this is not to say that such regimes operate and expire on a linear time line. It is not uncommon for national elites to resurrect discourses from past regimes such as the cultural essence of ethnic languages or the use of Confucian ethics discourse as cultural and ideological reasoning against pluralist politics. As such, it is more helpful to see attempts to manufacture authenticity echoing narratives in a nation's collective memory.

Nevertheless, these three attempts to manufacture authenticity demonstrate the difference between the interests of state elites and non-state cultural producers. As has been seen with ASAS 50 and the cultural production of 'heartlanders', the subject of representation tends to be of working-class, or in the case of ASAS 50, rural origin. The representations of the Malay farmer and peasant were sites upon which these Malay intellectuals and cultural producers responsible for imagining a Malay nation and nationalism sought to anchor the unchanging essence of morality and honesty. Such representations of the poor and rural Malay in popular narratives were easily recognized as a powerful antithesis to the English-educated Malay who was too close to the British colonial administration or the Islamic reformist who was too far on the periphery. It was thus inevitable that ASAS 50 turned to the Malay farmer as a representation of the Malay *habitus* endowed with progressive and essentialist values like loyalty, anti-colonialism, justice, freedom, unity and development through the promotion of Malay literature. Meanwhile, contemporary cultural producers of the 'heartlander' like Neo are part of the regime of authenticity that locates the heartlander on the periphery of globalization but still in possession of traits like honesty, industriousness and sincerity. Such popular

narratives portray the heartlander to be more 'natural' and truer to himself, thus echoing with notions of the Sartrean authentic life. The strong link between authenticity and the working class is well researched,<sup>51</sup> and may have roots in the Marxist belief that proletariats possess the potential to one day break free from the shackles of false consciousness and begin self-determination. This inherent capacity for the proletariat to awaken from false consciousness and take charge of his own destiny aligns neatly with the Sartrean potential to break free from social institutions and structure in the pursuit of the authentic life. In contrast to these is the Confucian ethics discourse, a predominantly top-down approach to the construction of national culture. PAP government elites identified societal trends such as 'westernization' and mass consumerism in order to perpetuate a sense of loss and disorientation through discourses of 'deculturalization'. Through the Confucian ethics discourse, this state-sponsored regime of authenticity represents the ruling party itself as *junzhi*, epitomized by Lee Kuan Yew, the modern Confucius. The PAP itself becomes a site in which political elites responsible for leading the nation locate qualities like integrity, honesty and morality. Against the rapacious logic of global capitalism and the capriciousness of modernity, the PAP is represented through official narratives as the embodiment of unchanging virtues.

On a broader level, the oscillation between nation and global city is heavily problematic for the identity-making project. Since all national societies see themselves as subjects of time and history, they must formulate an unchanging core of principles and values to serve as an anchor of reference and identification in the constant stream of linear time. However, the very survival of the Singapore nation, as one is led to believe, hinges on its ability to function as a global city where change and modernity are the norm. As such, it may be best to approach the Singapore case as a landscape in which sources of ethnic cultural essentialism, modernity and capitalist practices offer themselves as resources for various cultural producers driven by specific interests in the perennial search for an authentic national identity.

<sup>51</sup> See Richard A. Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1997); David Grazian, *Blue Chicago: The Search for Authenticity in Urban Blues Clubs* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2003); Candace Jones, Anand Narasimhan and José Luis Alvarez, 'Manufactured Authenticity and Creative Voice in Cultural Industries' *Journal of Management Studies* 42, (July 2005), pp. 893–899.