CHAPTER FOUR

UNDER ONE IDEOLOGICAL ROOF? TV SITCOMS AND DRAMA SERIES

Like the Singapore Idol competition, made-in-Singapore television situation comedies and weekly dramas are typical—though certainly less spectacular—products of the culture industry, performing similar ideological work while attempting to marginally differentiate themselves from the stream of very similar television shows produced every year, all without risking any real departure from the tried and tested formats and formulas. While these sitcoms and dramas tend to mimic and thereby support dominant ideological formations largely through the use of stereotypes (especially racial and class stereotypes), the sitcoms in particular sometimes contain playful and satirical moments of resistance against the seriousness of bureaucratic authority and the follies of contemporary society. This chapter will identify these critical possibilities amid the usually conservative tendencies in Singapore’s English-language sitcoms and dramas. It will make critical references to a selection of responses from focus group discussions conducted by Chong Kai Yee as part of her 2001 honors thesis written for the National University of Singapore, revealing audience responses that range from preferred readings to more clearly oppositional ones. The chapter will conclude with a detailed critical analysis of episodes from Singapore’s most commercially successful English-language sitcoms: Under One Roof (1994-2003) and Phua Chu Kang Pte Ltd (PCK) (1997-2007).

Situation Comedies and Melodramas

While the sitcom format has become more innovative in recent years, even deliberately drawing attention to its own format and artifice in the postmodern style, the basic structure of the traditional American sitcom still, by and large, informs most of the output internationally, mainly because producers and buyers prefer formulas that have worked, as these allow them to cover the high production costs while still generating profits. The traditional sitcom,
whose comedy relies mostly on one-liners, running gags, and humor that often draws from racist, sexist, and generally bigoted stereotypes, usually consists of weekly, self-contained half-hour episodes. The same main characters appear in every episode in a regular setting: typically, the family home or workplace. The basic premise or concept of the show is usually linked to running gags (associated mostly with particular characters) that audiences can immediately identify and associate with the show.

The regular ensemble usually consists of archetypes whose generally problematic interactions and relationship to the social world present many possible story lines. At least one of the characters is often a ‘fool’ or ‘buffoon’ who goes through life in a naive and unknowing way; but in spite of nearly always misunderstanding the less honorable intensions of others, the fool—without intending to—draws attention to the foolishness and folly of others. Sometimes, the fool is the eternal loser no matter how hard he or she tries, but in this way, gains the sympathy of other characters and the audience. At other times, the fool is a superficial, ignorant, vain, and insensitive character, who goes through life with complete disregard for others. Often, too, there is a ‘sage’ who possesses superior wisdom, academic qualifications, maturity, or a broader experience of life, offering mostly unsolicited solutions to resolve the main conflicts in the plot. The sage is sometimes the source of wisecracks that range from good-natured to ill-tempered to downright mean. In family sitcoms, the nuclear family is often supplemented by grandparents, domestic helpers, neighbors, and colleagues from work, all of whom mostly possess the quality of being ‘outsiders.’ In keeping with the logic of efficient mass production, scriptwriters almost always resort to basic plot formulas that might be adapted and combined in a variety of ways, sometimes with a main plot and one or two subplots. The plots rarely extend beyond a single episode, and the characters hardly develop from season to season. In this way, episodes do not need to be contextualized and can be watched in any order. This sort of ‘modularity’ makes the shows more appealing to network buyers.

Essentially, the plot presents a problem of some kind that will be resolved by the end of the episode. The problem could be the unintentional consequences of making a mistake, of telling a small lie, of misunderstanding what someone said, of borrowing something without permission, and so on. The problem could also arise