
Finally, a book on the miraculous Singapore state that is a worthy successor to Chua Beng Huat’s Communitarian Ideology and Democracy (London: Routledge, 1995). The importance of the quest to understand the Singapore state cannot be underestimated, as the litanies of its political and economic makeover successes sung by the international crowd of admirers and critics alike show. Culture is also an integral part of its beholding power. Since Chua performed the decisive cultural cut that showed us the epistemic horizons of state power, many analyses of the Singapore state have been launched in academia and pseudo-academia, but most are banally wrecked on rocks of unsophisticated cultural theories. Hence, Benedict Anderson’s comment in his comparative study of Southeast Asian post-coloniality is still very relevant: “the anomaly of the municipality of Singapore: formally multi-ethnic or multi-racial, but in effect a third Chinese national possibility, under the interminable regime of Lee Kwan-yew and his henchmen” (The Spectre of Comparisons, London: Verso, 1998, p. 15). What is the magic of Lee’s interminable municipal regime?

Drawing from an underlying psychoanalytic cultural theory woven with the insights of a range of social theorists from Emile Durkheim to Walter Benjamin, Yao masterfully unfolds the magic of the Singapore state, giving details of the desires and works of its magician-statesmen and the dreams and fallibilities of the citizen-audience in a narrative worthy of a cinematic classic. Yao is very much like the ingénue Cutter, played by the legendary Michael Caine with his irrepressible Cockney accent, in the movie The Prestige (Christopher Nolan, Touchstone Pictures, 2006), who narrates the gothic suspense thriller and morality tale of two partners turned rivals in magic set in late Victorian London, the same period in which the modern state began its formation when Singapore became a Crown Colony. The movie begins with Cutter outlining the three-part anatomy of an illusion, “The first act is called ‘The Pledge’; The magician shows you something ordinary, but of course… it probably isn’t. The second act is called ‘The Turn’; the magician makes his ordinary something do something extraordinary. Now if you’re looking for the secret, you won’t find it, that’s why there’s a third act called ‘The Prestige’; this is the part with the twists and turns, where lives hang in the balance, and you see something shocking you’ve never seen before.” I will return to this in a moment.

In Yao’s unfolding, the state is neither a social fact nor a political institution, but the Hegelian Idea manifested as a magical Fanonian mask that hides the deep cultural scars informing political practice in an almost-stillborn post-colonial nation. Trauma lies at the heart of the Fanonian manifestation of History’s reason. Yao begins with a visceral resurrection scene: Lee weeping on television on Singapore’s expulsion from Malaysia, his six-week disappearance into the government barracks and his recuperation as the National Father
exemplifying moral fortitude. Henceforth, the state intervened like an omnipotent being into all spheres of life, shaping an acquiescent populace that wants to believe — symptomatic excesses to repress, resolve and harness the disturbing anxieties arising from the trauma of a precocious infant prematurely thrown into the wilderness of postcolonial realpolitik with the attendant geopolitical and economic security threats now signified under “globalisation”.

I only have a small quibble with this argument. Yao locates the trauma at the point of Singapore’s divorce from Malaysia, but the traumatic post-coloniality of Singapore has its roots in the colonial era in at least two ways. Firstly, Lee and his English-educated lieutenants were part of the Straits Chinese Peranakan elite stratum that had developed a form of political-cultural hybridity in their collaboration with the British. The denial of this cultural identity in favour of a spartan socialism in the alliance with Chinese-speaking leftists in the 1950s must have been wrenching for the English-educated ruling elite. Secondly, the British had their own colonial trauma dealing with Chinese secret societies allied with Malay sultans and, later, Chinese and Indian nationalist movements, all brought on by transnational political-economic forces that the British tried to domesticate in colonialism. A large part of the domestication process involves the encoding of the arising anxieties in the legal code and apparatus, which were then inherited by the postcolonial state and used in extended mode to deal with similar anxieties provoked by transnational political-economic forces in the postcolonial era, as Yao recognizes in his discussion. In other words, a fuller discussion of traumatic post-coloniality must also include the colonial origins, though this point does not diminish the brilliant incisiveness of Yao’s post-1965 analysis.

The ingenuity of Yao’s work is in his deployment of popular culture and other materials usually considered as marginal to social science for analysis. There is a method to his selection of the English-educated ruling elite’s mimicry of revolutionary Nantah students in their anti-Western “yellow culture” campaign; the profusion of Asian-speak surrounding the silent judicial caning of an American teenage vandal; the legal proscriptions of pleasurable oral sex; the vernacular public sphere subversions of “talking cock” at neighborhood food centers; and the cathartic effervescence of watching a realist movie mocking bad Singaporean manners and the overbearing government. Each topic reveals an aspect of state magic, the anxiety driving its performance and the recurring trauma in the depths of history. In each case, except for the “talking cock” subversions, the magician-statesmen takes something culturally ordinary, such as caning and vandalism, turns it into something extraordinary, such as the judicial caning of an American teenager, which produces the excessive culturalism of Asian values with all the twists and turns of international diplomacy and debates about East-West identities, and ends in the spectacle of the Singapore Story retold and reaffirmed.

At the heart of the matter is the relationship between the performativity of speaking culture and the reading of the other’s speaking culture, and all the hubris and (mis)translation in between. The magician-statesman performs his magic successfully only by tapping into the people’s anxieties, turning anxieties into the desire to believe. In other words, the audience is complicit in the success of an illusion. Significantly, for Yao, the people can only discover the secrets of the magic and undermine the illusion if they artfully mistranslate and contemptuously misrepresent the magic and themselves in ironic spoofs and jokes — the laughing murmurings of a cynical crowd — such as in the vernacular practices of “talking cock”. But I have my doubts. Ironic cynicism is compatible with pragmatic realism, and