Modern Subjects/Colonial Texts
Holden, Philip

Published by ELT Press

Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/25264.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/25264
The house is not, and never was, an English country house. From the busy street, coming out from the bustling, marble-clad air conditioning of shopping centres, you can sometimes catch a glimpse of it, up the road, past the waiting sentries, the curve in the drive, the lawns. A flagpole, and a flash of white stucco. Government House has become the Istana, the residence of Singapore’s elected President. Since its departure from the Malaysian Federation in 1965, Singapore has become an economic success story scarcely to be dreamed of at the time—a high-wage, low-tax economy, with free elections every five years. There are few traces of the past: Shenton Way has become a thriving, skyscraper-crowded financial district which resembles Vancouver or Hong Kong; further from the centre, Housing Development Board flats and new private condominiums transform the landscape. The Singapore Tourist Board’s new slogan is “New Asia Singapore”: Singaporeans’ visions, as Edwin Thumboo puts it slightly more elegantly, are “[s]o shining, urgent,/Full of what is now.”¹

From positing a largely culturally neutral vision of modernity in the early years of independence, the ideology of the governing People’s Action Party has moved to a vision of what has variously been described as “shared values,”² “communitarianism,”³ or “Asian self-identification.”⁴ Here, Confucianism replaces Protestantism in a Weberian work ethic. Asian values, derived largely from neo-Confucianism, are seen as maintaining the social cohesion necessary for continued development. In a strategic reversal of Otherness, the West is now seen a decadent, as undisciplined and subject to degeneration and disintegration. One might even characterise Singaporean governmental discourse as Occidentalist, with Asia taking on the baton of modernity from an exhausted and morally depleted West. The current Asian crisis has done little to dent such optimism, and Singapore seems well set to play a key part in any economic recovery.

There is a certain relish in seeing Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew, or, in Malaysia, Prime Minister Mahathir Bin Mohamad occupy the moral ground the West so long thought to make its own, to talk back and dismiss former colonising powers in the same language in which the same countries used to justify colonialism. Yet there is also a certain irony. At times, Asian values seem very much like Victorian values. Societal discipline is stressed, the need to govern the unruly body of the nation riven by feminised racial and communal desires. Geraldine
Heng and Janadas Devan have described post-independence national discourses in Singapore as "state fatherhood," continually manufacturing crises which must be managed by "the proper mechanisms of correction" upon a feminised body politic. Wee Wan-ling has noted that Lee's public discourse of nationhood is marked by "English-style, late-Victorian manliness," in which the fear of the loss of cultural rootedness is paralleled to a fear of emasculation. The metaphors by which Singaporeans live show how deeply-rooted is this gendering. English, one of Singapore's four official languages, is perceived as the language of technological development, of business and commerce. The other three languages, Mandarin Chinese, Tamil and Malay (which retains a de jure if not de facto status as the bahasa kebangsaan, or national language), are designated as "mother tongues," feminised repositories of cultural ballast which will be pressed into the service of a masculinised, technologically-governed state.

Given the gendering of Singapore governmental discourse, its extension of governmentality in a different guise, the story which this book has to tell may prove to be more than a curious moment, a footnote in colonial history and literary studies. The actors in the story have been largely forgotten. Clifford ceased to be an actor in events in Singapore in the 1930s. Lim's contribution was more long-lasting: he attempted to ameliorate the conditions of Chinese Singaporeans under the Japanese occupation and nearly lived to see the granting of self-rule to Singapore in 1959. Clifford's name remains most prominently in Clifford Pier, a rather embarrassingly dilapidated structure from which tourist launches depart on harbour cruises, likely to be demolished in the next wave of development. Lim is rightfully studied by Singaporean students as a major historical figure: as with all historical figures, he often becomes a name and a series of facts remembered for examinations, despite teachers' efforts to the contrary. And yet, I would suggest, there is a connection, or rather a parallel, between the end of two centuries, between Lim and Clifford then and Goh Chok Tong and Lee Kuan Yew now.

This connection can perhaps be best illustrated by three anecdotes, each separated by approximately thirty years. In the first, Willie Yap studies Literature in the 1930s, attending Raffles Institution, the same school Lim had attended fifty years before. Here he studies a syllabus devised by the then headmaster, D. W. McCleod. McCleod's 1937 Syllabus of Instruction for Raffles Institution, which was later adopted by the Straits Settlements public school system, for instance, states that literature provides "opportunities for the most interesting study of all-mankind." Among the texts studied was A. W. Kinglake's Eothen, a nineteenth-century travelogue written by an Englishman who travelled in the Ottoman Empire. Presumably chosen because of its Asian content, Eothen is clearly Orientalist, marking out a clear boundary between an efficient, technologically advanced West and a decadent, unchanging East. In Turkish-occupied
Serbia, Kinglake encounters a pile of skulls that are the last remains of Serbian nationalists who have rebelled against Turkish rule:

[T]he only public building of any interest that lies on the road is of modern date, but is said to be a good specimen of oriental architecture; it is of a pyramidal shape, and is made up of thirty thousand skulls, contributed by the rebellious Servians in the early part (I believe) of this century; I am not at all sure of my date, but I fancy it was in the year 1806 that the first skull was laid. I am ashamed to say that in the darkness of the early morning we unknowingly went by the neighbourhood of this triumph of art, and so basely got off from admiring "the simple grandeur of the architect's conception," and "the exquisite beauty of the fretwork."8

Willie Yap, writing his examination paper at Raffles Institution in the 1930s, clearly recalled this incident in his essay: "Kinglake saw a pyramid of skulls in Syria. During the Servian wars, the Servians collected the skulls of their enemies and built a pyramid of them. Kinglake admired the way the pyramid was built and was ironical about it being a good specimen of oriental architecture."9 The teacher grading the exam was not concerned about Willie's appreciation of literary merit, but instead registered displeasure that Willie had put the Serbs on the wrong side of the Orient/Occident binarism. He gave the reply only two marks, scored it through with several lines, and added the word "No" followed by an exclamation mark in the margin. The teaching of literature here, despite the rhetoric of cultural neutrality which syllabi by then promoted, teaches Asian subjects to know themselves through themselves taking on the viewpoint of the gaze of the West.

The second anecdote has a connection with the first. In August 1966, a year after Singapore's traumatic separation from the Federation of Malaysia, its young Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew addressed a meeting of school principals. Concerned about Singapore remaining "a passive society, . . . meek, self-deprecating, self-effacing,"10 Lee reached back to his own experience at Raffles Institution under McLeod as a founding metaphor for the discipline require of the new nation: "There was a Principal at R.I. who was a disciplinarian, but he cared. And those of you here will know when I say Macleod [sic] and will say 'Yes, the chap really cared.' He cared for the pupils. He caned them. He took a personal interest . . . . This was his school and he was going to mould character of this school and he did it."11 The ideal educational product for the emergent nation, Lee argued, would be similar to a product of Geelong or Eton, "strong, robust, with great intellectual discipline,"12 fully equipped with the resolve to pursue the quest of nationhood. The body of the nation here substitutes for the body of the colony in Clifford's schema, and the body of the community in Lim's. Each individual national subject, imagined as normatively male, will take on the responsibilities of self-government, and self-improvement: the nation, like the school, will provide the environment that will naturally encourage such discipline.
My third example comes from a different situation again. In August 1997, the Prime Minister of Singapore, Goh Chok Tong, testified in an appeal by J. B. Jeyeretnam, the veteran opposition, against the damages awarded against him in a defamation suit launched by the People's Action Party Leadership. He was questioned by the Queen's Counsel George Carman, who attacked him from the perspective of liberal democracy: Singapore's political leadership, Carman noted, attempted to silence opposition politicians by suing them for defamation, asking for punitive damages which essentially bankrupted them. It is, of course, difficult for anyone not in the court room to judge the success of Goh's handling of Carman's questions, but it is probably fair to say that Goh's defence was considerably more successful than widely reported in the international press. 13

When pressed about the Singapore government's allegedly authoritarian tendencies, Goh replied as follows: "We are a different society. In Singapore, we believe that leaders must be honourable men, gentlemen or junzi, and if our integrity is attacked, we defend it." 14 The mapping of the Confucian junzi onto the idea of the English gentleman reads as a statement of cultural definition. Goh tries to explain Singaporean society to an Englishman, and thus he reaches for an English equivalent for the Confucian concept of the righteous man, or junzi. The history this book and the anecdotes above have told might suggest a different story: the idea of the junzi is a retrospective nativisation of the concept of the gentleman, one that is already firmly established within Singapore discourse of governmentality, associated with bodily "integrity" now imagined as the body of the nation, its origins now subject to a process of forgetting.

Three moments, then, and nothing more—not themselves a history, but perhaps suggesting an outline in which a genealogy of discursive construction of nation and community in Singapore might be traced, one that would place Clifford and Lim's masculinised incitement to self-regulation and improvement, next to the similar strategy adopted by Lee and Goh today. Such a critical genealogy, an understanding of the emergence of elite cultures which attempt to make a nation in their image, would supplement the authorised story of Singapore's development, would suggest other possible ways of conceiving Asian modernity. "The plunge into the chasm of the past," wrote Frantz Fanon in very different circumstances, "is the condition and the source of freedom." 15 What we have perhaps learned in the proceeding forty years is that such plunges must be continually repeated, not only into chasms which are open, but into those which are sealed off, or so overgrown as to make one doubt their existence.