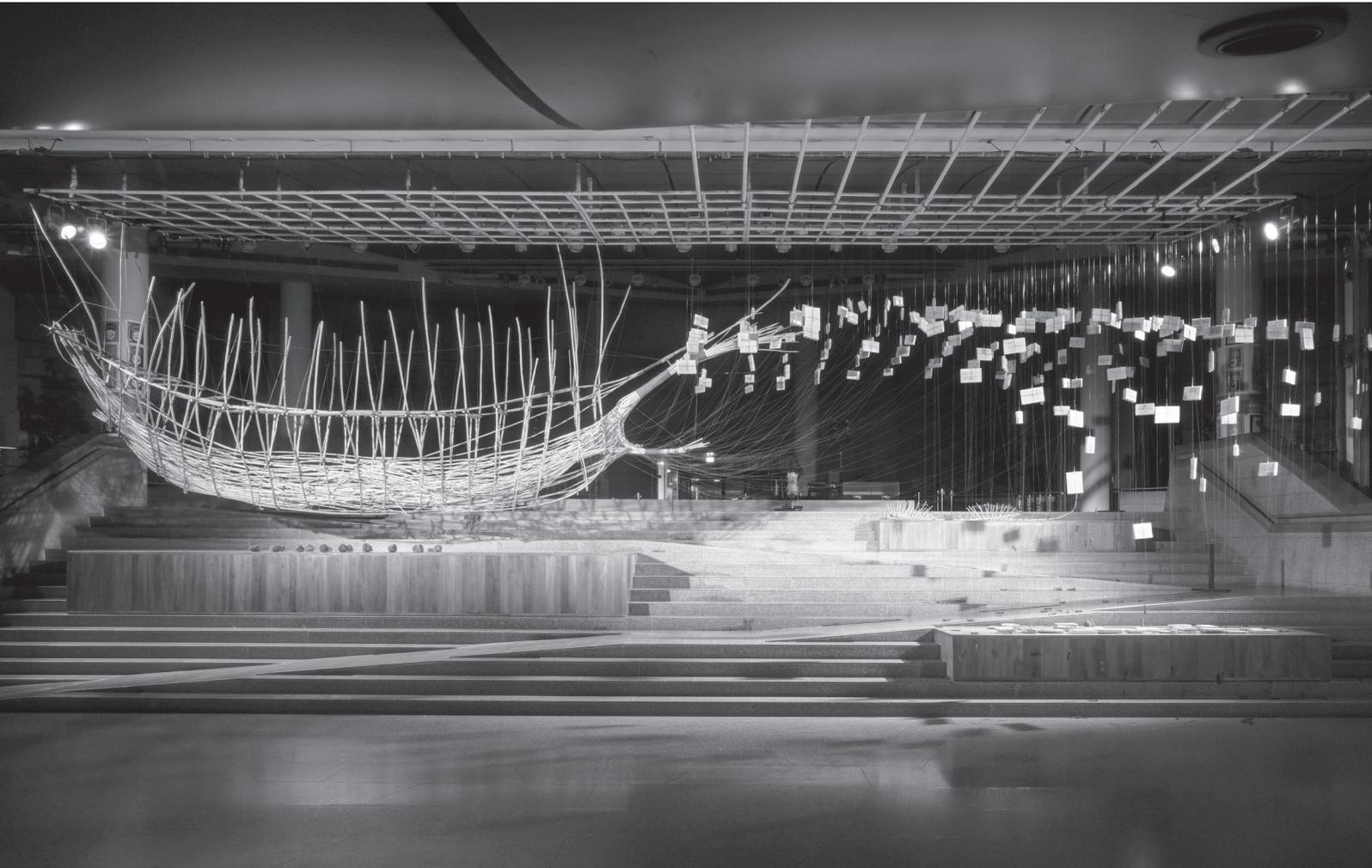


YAO SOUCHOU

Every Step in The Right Direction:
Singapore 1819-2019



Zai Kuning's artwork for the Singapore Pavilion at the 2017 *Venice Biennale* was titled *Dapunta Hyang: Transmission of Knowledge* (2015). It was an installation of an imagined life-size vessel that served the voyages of the Dapunta Hyang Sri Jayanasa, the first Malay king of the seventh century Srivijayan Empire that covered the Riau Islands south of Singapore. Its centrepiece was a rattan ship suspended in mid-air, seventeen metres long and four metres high, flanked by books sealed in beeswax, insinuating the closure of regional history in the collective memory. Karim Raslan, writing for the *South China Morning Post* described it as "Haunting, mysterious, full of magic and beauty."¹ The Singapore Arts Council, which brought the work back from Venice to present it at TheatreWorks, a local art and theatre venue, proclaimed less lyrically: the work "is critical to our understanding of the region we are in, even while inviting reflections on the complexity of our cultural identity."² Beauty and utility – they are compliments enough for the artist. Yet *Dapunta Hyang* is glossed with a remarkable existential tinct. Neither lyrical expressionism nor as aid to national identity truly captures its spirit. It teases, it is ironic, it insists on being itself. The gigantic artifice of an ancient ship may well serve to rediscover the history of the region, but it could not have done this with the aesthetics of awe, the pointed spectacle that seems to lead the viewer elsewhere – to the venal ordinariness of social existence in the island republic.

The 2019 Singapore Bicentennial has declared its mission. This year marks the two hundred years of the founding of modern Singapore by Sir Stamford Raffles, and the nation is to "embark on a journey of discovery... and reflect on leading up to, and beyond 1819."³ Lee Kuan Yew was the national father who negotiated for the country's independence, but Raffles was the founder, the original maker of Singapore. Everything of Singapore, including Lee Kuan Yew himself, was owed to the man. The Singapore Bicentennial would trace the beginning of the nation's history to Raffles' landing on the island on 28 January 1819, whose genius and foresight would eventually transform the place from a fishing village to a great seaport and modern metropolis. As with so much of the state narrative, this, too, simplifies; the from-fishing-village-to-modern-metropolis story is only half the truth. If Singapore had been the personal vision of one man, he had a lot of trouble getting Britain to accept it into the colonial fold. Raffles was a former clerk at the East India Company's headquarters in Calcutta, a modest background in the social hierarchy of pre-Victorian Britain. He saw the island as a place of trade and strategic importance, and he thought a port could be established on the trade route between China and British India that passed through the Malacca Straits. Raffles' 1818 expedition to Singapore was financed by the East India Company – not the British government. The following year a treaty was signed with the Johore Sultanate, and five years later, in 1824, the island acquired formal colonial status. Between the two events, there was much to and fro between London and Bencoolen, the British possession in Sumatra where Raffles was Lieutenant Governor. He had to convince Whitehall of his own vision, and to give assurance Singapore would not cause a diplomatic row with the Netherlands. Whitehall, in its part, was cautious and as always, worried about the costs of keeping and defending a colony. But London was almost seven thousand miles away. The exchange of letters between Singapore and London took ten months, at that distance the Foreign Secretary could be forgiven for thinking that Raffles was motivated more by personal ambition than by Singapore's potential benefits to Britain. After all, another 'upstart', Captain Francis Light, in 1786 had given Britain the island of Penang, which proved neither profitable nor suitable for ship repair.

Singapore, the reluctant colony, is not a story much told in the island nation. The founding of modern Singapore almost didn't happen; it was a near stillbirth. The Singapore Bicentennial would want to run a lustrous story of Singapore, starting from its founding, to the struggle for independence and its arrival as country of First World prosperity. Yet Singapore of near-stillbirth could have served the way the nation sees itself. As the government tells it, Singapore has faced one obstacle after another, everything has been a struggle. Like a sickly child, the Singapore nation was born of pain and trauma: this has been the consistent theme. If many aspects of the Singapore story are ideological sham, the nation's birth pain is the truth every Singaporean has learned by heart. Raffles' difficulties and resolve were too distant to be easily imaginable, but the heroic struggles of the People's Action Party (PAP) under Lee's leadership are timeless and real. In this telling Singapore was founded by two decades of social chaos and the PAP's political machinations during the 1950s and 1960s, less by Raffles' arrival. And to consider a beginning point, that may well be Lee's 1962 speech he gave to the Malaysian and Singaporean students in London; the subject was Singapore's economic future;

If we lose, fritter away the next decade that we have and not make preparation for our take-off into the industrial age, then we may well have to regret it... We have got to make sure that the capital we have accumulated is put to good use, that in ten years we take one stride forward, in twenty years we enter the industrial age and in thirty years definitely, we are an emergent nation, not an emerging one. Because, definitely in thirty years, we are going to have an emergent China.⁴

It was a picture of chilling vulnerability. And the message was clear: people must forever try harder, for all strivings were haunted by their potential failure. The enemies are domestic, and external. In 1964, a year after Singapore joined the Malaysian Federation,⁵ Lee expressed the same fear;

One day, God forbid, not too soon, in (Indonesia)... some order will be restored in place of chaos, and they will begin to move forward. Any time now, it is estimated that the Chinese government can explode a nuclear device. Any time now, the Indians are going to set up jet fighter factories... The moment one of these countries outstrips Malaysia in the human material comforts of life... (Malaysia) must go asunder.⁶

An Indonesia in chaos, a jet fighter-manufacturing India, and a China with nuclear weapons: they made for an apocalyptic vision. But Lee's mind was over-wrought, he had a lot to worry about. Besides the prospect of regional conflict and economic rivalry, there were the Communist-led labour unions and radical students to deal with, and not least the eventual British military withdrawal which was sure to leave a defence vacuum. The following year, in 1965, Lee had a minor breakdown, following Singapore's expulsion from the Federation of Malaysia. He had worked feverishly in negotiating with the ultra-sensitive Malay leadership in Kuala Lumpur to secure a future for the Chinese-dominated city-state. He failed, and had broken into tears at the press conference where he announced the news. He was, in his own words, "emotionally overstretched" and "close to physical exhaustion," and the separation "weighed [him] down with a heavy sense of guilt" for having failed his supporters and allies.⁷ To help him sleep his doctor had prescribed sedatives, and pep pills to face the day. Taking these drugs in a condition of nervous exhaustion had a debilitating effect:



Some in Lee's circle... felt that commonsense advice had been neglected because of a pharmacological bias to his doctor's training. The drugs had an innocuous enough effect when Lee could see his way through situations, but under the enormous strain of recent events their impact was curious and unpredictable. One moment Lee could be smiling, offering Tunku a brittle picture of acceptance, even some sort of pleasure. The next moment when he was near people with whom he could allow himself to relax... he would burst into tears or pour forth a torrent of emotion-laden words, recollections, predictions.⁸

On the night of 30 September the same year, he received news of a military coup led by General Suharto in Indonesia; it triggered off another bout of sleepless brooding. As he remembers: *Choo [Lee's wife] got my doctors to prescribe tranquilisers, but I found beer or wine with dinner better than the pills. I was then in my early forties, young and vigorous; however hard and hectic the day had been, I would take two hours off in the late afternoon to go on the practice tee to hit 50-100 balls and play nine holes with one or two friends. Still, I was short of sleep. Late one morning, when the newly arrived British high commissioner, John Robb, had an urgent message for me from his government, I received him at home lying in bed, physically exhausted.⁹*

All of this was out of character with a man given to emotional restraint and tough-mindedness. Lee's breakdown was not exactly a secret; historians wrote about it, he talks about it in his memoir. But it caused no damage to his stature. As far as mythmaking goes, the National Father fallen sick is godsent. For he had taken the burden of the crisis-ridden nation on his shoulders; the affliction was Lee's gift to his people, and a template for nation-building.

Singapore is not the only country that follows the from-crisis-to-triumph model of national mythmaking. In its short history, the Singapore nation seems to have had its share of obstacles and adversaries. Indonesia had sent commandos during *Konfrontasi* (1963-66) to cause mayhem in opposing the formation of Malaysia; there were, more prosaically, the writers and journalists out to

tear down social order; and most devastatingly, something that left an indelible mark on the national psyche, there were the left-wing radicals and communist-led labour unions during the 1950s and 1960s.

The pose is languid and a touch defiant. They lean against the wall with their arms barely touching, behind them the Cambridge University landmark, the Bridge of Sighs. Lee Kuan Yew and his then girlfriend Kwa Geok Choo were law students at the university since 1947; they were young and in love. Their quiet repose exudes a delicate intimacy, and a certain social bearing nurtured by family background and the best of British tertiary education. Here at Cambridge, before Lee's graduation and return to Singapore in 1950, there was still time to relax and enjoy what fancied any young man of reasonable means. The picture dated to 1948. War-worn London might not be the centre of chic and fashion, but it nonetheless held the Olympic Games that summer, and the 'American Broadway Invasion' brought *Oklahoma!* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* to the theatres. Of these pleasures Lee makes no mention, preoccupied as he was with his final examinations. Nonetheless, this and other pictures included in his autobiography *The Singapore Story* (1998)¹⁰ do show something more than his usual, stern demeanour. The slick hair, the sartorial elegance of tie and woollen vest under a jacket—a picture taken outdoors in the winter of 1947 showed him with a cigarette in the right hand—would have suggested, if not for the academic gown and the Cambridge backdrop, something of a dandy. There is in these postures a quiet, youthful defiance, a romantic indolence of a James Dean or a Marlon Brando, or a character from the sharply fashionable films of the Hong Kong auteur Wong Kar Wai.

Some ten years later in 1959, Lee and his team walked to the City Hall to be sworn in as the first self-government of Singapore after winning forty-three from fifty-one seats in their electoral victory. All were dressed in white; the men in open-necked shirts and trousers, the few women in Chinese blouses and cotton pants. It was the attire of the Chinese-educated world whose dynamism and mass support had helped the PAP rise to power. For the students, teachers and labour activists, they had taken to wearing white starched cotton not only for its cool, airy practicality, but also as ideological fashion statement. Pregnant with signs of austerity and sombreness, white cotton was indeed *the* attire of the politically committed for whom dark Dacron, and not to mention Elvis Presley and Cliff Richard, were Western decadence reincarnate. Of this the PAP leaders were all too keenly aware. Apart from official functions, they would take to dressing in immaculate white even in a tree-planting ceremony or a street-cleaning campaign. These were "copycat exercise[s] borrowed from the communists," Lee informs, exercises that mimicked the energy and commitment of the radical left. Mobilising "everyone including the ministers," such public works signified "service to the people" by toiling with the hands and soiling of clothes.¹¹

Lee the Cambridge-educated solicitor, and Lee the austere white-shirted leftist politician courting the masses—they were signs of a remarkable transformation of the man and the party he led. The People's Action Party has dominated Singapore since its formation in 1954. From the onset, it took a strong anti-colonial stance, demanding national independence through constitutional means. To build a party with a mass base Lee and his colleagues relied on the trade unions and Chinese school activists who brought working class supporters. The period 1954 to 1961 saw the collaboration between the PAP moderates and the radical unionists and communists. But the relationship was volatile. It reached a climax in June 1961 when the radical faction led by the charismatic unionist Lim Ching Siong broke with the PAP and called for the government to resign. Lim together with other radicals were later arrested in a security operation in September 1963.

The history of Singapore from 1954 to 1961 was described by the PAP circles as one “astride [the back] of the tiger.”¹² A popular cartoon book depicts Lee with his legs across the ferocious beast, the right fist in the air clasp the PAP emblem, ready to punch a blow on its head.¹³ Melodramatic at best, the cartoon celebrates the heroism and dangers of the PAP enterprise. When we recall Lee’s deft machination in harnessing the left-wing unions to ensure the PAP’s electoral success, ‘crushing the tiger’ also speaks darkly of betrayal and parasitic undertaking of Machiavellian genius. But it was no paper tiger on whose back Lee and the PAP had ridden to power. Lee’s attitude towards the radicals was ambivalent. Their political resourcefulness and commitment were both dangerous and useful to the PAP – unionists like Lim Ching Siong were able to call for mass strikes and violent confrontation with the police. In the PAP narrative, Lim and his followers were “radical beasts” out to destroy the nation. Aware of the violence that the radical left could unleash, envious of the mass support it enjoyed, Lee nevertheless had to defend the unionists. To condemn his leftist colleagues would be seen as throwing weight behind the British and colonialism. Lee, the reluctant suitor of communists, made his position clear in the Legislative Assembly;

Not all the riots will make me do it. But I say here and now that if I had the choice between democracy – an independent, democratic Malaya, a Communist Malaya, and a colonial Malaya, I have no hesitation in choosing and in fighting for an independent, democratic Malaya... We will not fight the communists or other fascists to preserve the colonial system.¹⁴

However, what was desirable was not only the labour unions’ electoral power, but also their culture. It was not enough to bring the radicals into the PAP’s ranks, the party must itself make visible their socialist-communist commitment. The adoption of the leftist dress code was a part of this strategy. The white cotton shirts and trousers, the street cleaning, the tree planting: they displayed to the masses the party leaders were, in a way, more left than the leftists themselves. The term “yellow culture” (*huangse wenhua*) refers to pornography, literature of love and romance, and pulp fiction of crime and violence. These inspired anti-social, hedonistic behaviour; they made one oblivious to social commitment and revolutionary aims. Lee traced the idea to Mao’s China;

“Yellow culture” was a literal translation of the Mandarin phrase for the decadent and degenerate behaviour that had brought China to its knees in the nineteenth century: gambling, opium-smoking, pornography, multiple wives and concubines, the selling of daughters into prostitution, corruption and nepotism. This aversion to “yellow culture” has been imported by teachers from China, who infused into our students and their parents the spirit of national revival that was evident in every chapter of the textbooks they brought with them, whether on literature, history or geography. And it was reinforced by articles of left-wing Chinese newspaper journalists enthralled by the glowing reports of a clean, honest, dynamic, revolutionary China.¹⁵

Lee and other PAP leaders were nothing but culturalists as well. They were aware of the need to *perform* their leftist credentials, and that personal and collective habits can be remade. However, it was realised that the performance of austerity and self-denial might not be enough. Such a performance must be built on an Other who would embody all the qualities the Singapore nation should not have. The West as transcendental evil given to luxury and bodily corruption: the idea was seeded during the anti-yellow culture campaign and it was planted early in Lee’s feverish imagination. During a visit to Italy in 1957, Lee noted the scene in the streets of Rome;

[I]t was the age of the scooter... Five years ago, all Vespas running around. This time I went there and the first thing I noted was all the scooters had been replaced by little Fiats, 600, 500, and chaps who've got Fiats don't go and embark on revolution. They are thinking of the next instalment, how to make sure that they've got the next instalment to pay the Fiat dealer.¹⁶

One day, Lee and his party took time off from official duties for an outing to the countryside: "We went out to the country on Sunday... there must be 100,000 families with the same ideas... everybody with a little Fiat or an Alfa Romeo... And everybody brought a little tent or a fishing rod... if they were young they made love, if they were old they just sat down under the sun and sipped mineral water."¹⁷ As usual, Lee would inject into these scenes of popular idyll something of his didactic vision. "Chaps who've got Fiats don't go and embark on revolution" was a lesson in his mind, for Singapore. People satiated with material goods and social enjoyment had no use for idealism or irrational political demands. People with jobs and a full stomach do not throw barricades up in the streets.

History, suitably told and retold, aids the imagining of a nation's future. In Singapore's nation-building, real and imagined deprivation, actual and fantasised enemies and figures of evil had run parallel with the reality of economic achievement. The spellbinding story of modern Singapore's birth is all about that. But the Singapore story, dramatic and heroic, is also the PAP story. Singapore is nothing without the PAP, especially Lee, the architect-parent who brought it into being. The ghostly figures of alterity loom large. And these figures are double-faced. The communists and radical unionists were both builders and destroyers of the nation, and the West had presented itself as cultural evil, but it was also an object of emulation. In Singapore today, the idea of the West as transcendental evil has all but lost its purchase. It is now valued as a source of foreign capital, technology and not the least, designer goods and lifestyle consumption.

All that is history. The best one can say about it is that it is a case of *plus ça change*; things have indeed changed and some remain the same, but the radicals have long gone. The West is no more the figure of the anti-yellow culture crusade, and the government approach to Malaysia and China is cautious. As for the cleaning-living, strong-bodied citizenry, they are out of fashion. But the fear of moral corruption remains. To enter the Marina Bay Sands Casino, Singaporeans require an annual \$3,000 pass and a daily levy, a measure to discourage gambling by locals. Homosexual activities are now rarely prosecuted, but the laws against sodomy and oral sex remain enforceable. In these and other cases, the spirit of the state restrictions and regulations is recognised: they are for the national good.

Singapore is a fascinating place for the anthropologist. There are no villages and tribal rituals, but there are government announcements and policies with twisted logic and ideological slant, with people's responses as creative as they are complicit with the state's agendas. During the time I was there in the 1990s, my ethnographic fieldwork consisted of reading newspapers and watching the evening television news, and a good deal of time was spent in the coffee shops in the public housing neighbourhoods to catch local gossip. This was 'fieldwork', and the anthropologist had counted on a rich harvest over the three years he and his family were living there—an American teenager was sentenced to be caned by the Court for spray-painting graffiti on cars; the judiciary, in the determination of a sex offence case, ruled that only 'Nature' could decide what is natural

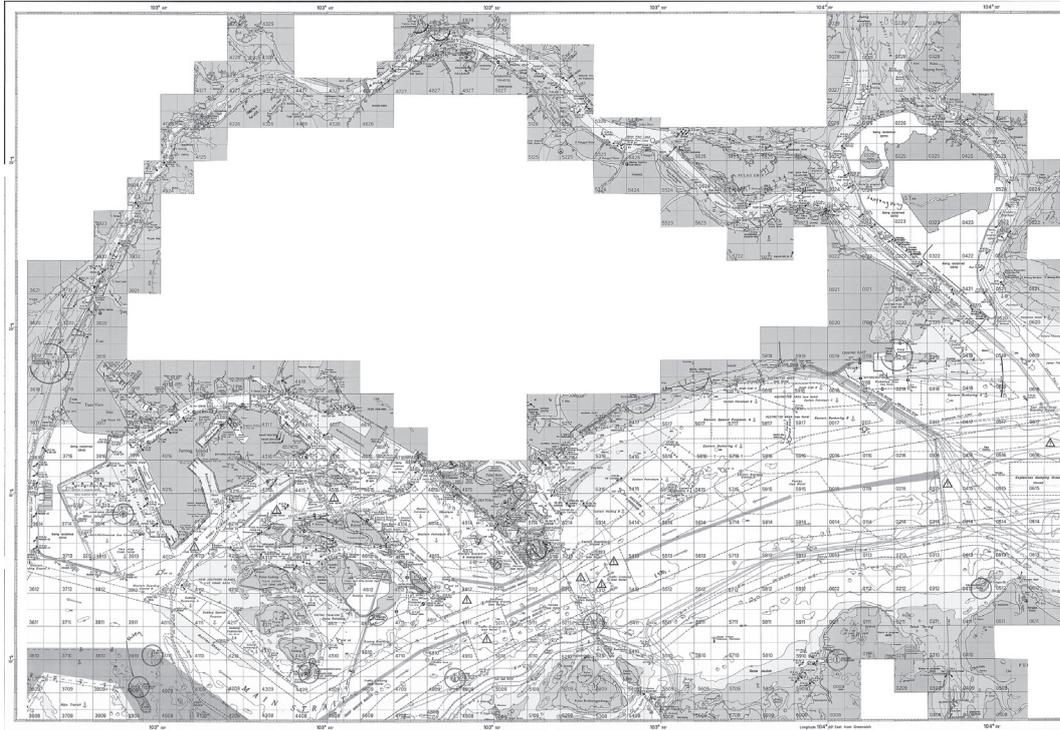
or unnatural; Parliament debated the moral and physical peril of bar-top dancing by short-skirted young women; and the government successfully sued a foreign newspaper for insinuating that the Singapore state suppressed political dissent. The byzantine arguments and offbeat reasoning were as comical as they were of serious import to local life.

On 16 September, 2003, Lee Kuan Yew turned eighty years of age. In the Shangri-La Hotel, some one thousand guests, grass-root leaders, foreign businessmen and government officials gathered to honour him. In his speech, he remembered how life had turned out for him and the nation he had led. "I cannot say I planned my life. That is why I feel life is a great adventure, exciting, unpredictable and at times exhilarating... At the end of the day what I cherish most are human relationships."¹⁸ For all that has been said about him, Lee casts a giant shadow in the region remembered for its Marcoses and Suhartos, their cronies and corruption. His insistence on personal integrity and morality standards for his ministers produces no secret Swiss bank accounts, no public statues of him in heroic poses, no grand edifices as monument to Singapore's collective glory. After forty years of political power, it was a mellower Lee that people found that night. The birthday dinner was a moving event. People were touched by the passage of time, and the remembrance of the past that had been Lee's youth and the nation's beginning. *The Straits Times* reported, "[Lee] ended the celebrations by toasting the health of Singapore and all Singaporeans, choking back the tears that welled up just before he recited the national pledge. His voice broke toward the end as it became charged with emotion. It was a symbolic end to his birthday."¹⁹

Lee's eightieth birthday also raised the question on many people's mind. Having done so much for Singapore, was it not time for him to retire? Lee quickly put an end to such speculation. He announced that he was staying on as Senior Minister in the Prime Minister's Department (his eventual title was Minister Mentor). To keep his seat in Parliament, he would continue to contest the general election. In a special interview with *The Straits Times*, questions were put to him directly: "Do you see yourself ever being able to withdraw completely from government and politics? When will you retire?" His answer began with a firm rebuttal; he then gave his reasons: "I undertook this responsibility after I won the first elections in 1959, took them into Malaysia in 1963, and took them out of Malaysia in 1965. I still feel a responsibility for them... I will retire from office when I am no longer able to contribute to the Government. But as long as I am fit and able, I will stand as an MP."²⁰ The journalists persisted. Embolden by the changes signalled by Lee's ripe age, they continued with their questioning, in a tone almost rhetorical: "Why does it require the Senior Minister to suggest [new policies]? Why not the younger leaders? How come you are still the sole visionary?"²¹ These questions Lee answered with his usual directness. "I will retire from office when I am no longer able to contribute to the Government," he said; when that day would be "depends on my DNA, my doctors, and the value of my data bank."²²

Yet one detects a certain disquiet, a sense that his answers no longer satisfied, even for a newspaper renowned for its pro-government views. Can we read into the interview the hint that most Singaporeans would like the Senior Minister to retire, that his staying on was a disappointment? A 'Singapore without Lee' may not be the doom scenario the PAP would like them to think. The National Father at eighty was by any standard a finale of sorts. Singapore had experienced no revolution and no grand bloodletting to rewrite the past—even though the nation's brief history is retold as struggle, filled with traumatic events of its birth. When Singaporeans wished for Lee's retirement, they were registering the change of time, and the reckoning that perhaps things could be done better and life freer in a 'Singapore without Lee'. But the National Father rapidly aging was not

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quite his death. The Oedipal struggle was not going to be easily won. The idea had been raised in 1984 about the way future governments would use the national reserve accumulated over the years. Senior PAP leaders like Lee wanted to protect the fund, and to discourage the government from squandering it to appease voters. The government White Paper declared:

In many countries, irresponsible free-spending governments have mismanaged the national finances and irreversibly ruined their economies. When a government sets out to spend money on generous subsidies, dispenses largesse in order to bribe the electorate, it has to do so by raiding the country's financial reserves or by raising large international loans for consumption rather than investment. Before long the country, no matter how rich or well endowed, approaches bankruptcy and economic growth comes to a halt.²³

The outcome of the government report was the elected presidency, which since 1993 had taken on, in addition to its ceremonial role, “veto powers over budget decisions” and over government “spending from financial reserves.”²⁴ When the idea was first mooted, there was much speculation whether Lee Kuan Yew would become the President, as he was preparing to handover power to the next Prime Minister after the 1988 general election. However, Lee told the audience in a public speech, “I don’t have to be president and I am not looking for a job. Please believe me.”²⁵ Nonetheless, the elected presidency as guardian of the national coffers was very much Lee’s brainchild, and it seemed most logical that he should take the office. The elected presidency was

an unforgettable rehearsal of what was later brought up by his eightieth birthday. The subject of Lee's mortality would not go away. Lee quickly moved to foreclose on the subject, and his reply was dramatic and with a touch of the macabre; *The Straits Times* reporting,

*Mr Lee said that as a member of "that exclusive club of founding members of new countries, first Prime Ministers or Presidents", he could not disengage himself from Singapore. "Even from my sickbed, even if you are going to lower me into the grave and I feel that something is going wrong, I will get up. Those who believe that [I would not do so] when I have gone into permanent retirement, really should have their heads examined."*²⁶

Perhaps the august National Father too, not only the citizens, could do with a bit of examining the head and gentle probing of the unconscious. For Singaporeans, the wish for his retirement was a wish for the freedom from his continuing firm hand in national affairs. However, this was always mixed with great deal of fear for a world without his political wisdom and powerful influences. Thus the Singaporean subject is caught: Lee's lasting political influence is a national blessing, but it is also something with which people must struggle in order to break free. With elementary Freudian insight, we say that a father of eternal life, who refuses the natural logic of mortality, is also a father who refuses to let go. And a father who refuses to let go thwarts the maturity of the young, whose arrival in the world demands the critical battle with—and the symbolic slaying of—the father. In the psychic drama of Freud, the son's Oedipal struggle against the father is over the authority and resources—material and sexual—he holds. Maturity is a matter of breaking out of the shadow of the father, whose real and symbolic demise allows the son to come into his own. The National Father undead works against all this.

Singapore is a small nation. Located at the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula, it consists of the Singapore Island and some sixty small islets; mainland Singapore is fifty kilometres from east to west and twenty-seven kilometres from north to south, with 193 kilometres of coastline. The southern limits run through the Singapore Strait, where the Riau-Lingga Archipelago—a part of Indonesia—comes within sixteen kilometres of the main island. Singapore is small, it is also a place of the sea. Overbuilt, the place pushes the sea outwards, its miserly sandy patches unworthy of the label 'beach'. To find a beach of sparkling sand and coconut palm, my family and I went to the St. John's Island, a thirty minute ferry ride south from Singapore harbour. It used to be a quarantine centre for newly arrived immigrants, a post-war detention centre for political prisoners, and later a rehabilitation facility for drug addicts. (It was also was the site of Raffles' anchorage before meeting the Malay chief of Singapore in 1819.) We had a picnic on the beach, and a view of the city under the azure sky.

To say that coming to St. John's was to take a break from Singapore sounded ungrateful. I had my first full-time university job in Singapore after more than a year's research, my wife received her artist break by being selected for an exhibition at the Venice Biennale, and our children were happily settled at the Dover Court International School, added to our good feeling. But Singapore's rich offerings were complicated; they sometimes made you feel you've been bought off. The university wage was generous, but the stress and competition among the staff was toxic. The appointment of senior staff had to go through the government channels, and everyone observed the unwritten rules. It was not a good career move to specialise in Marxism or Maoist revolutionary theory. One could write articles critical of the government in academic journals, but not in the popular press in the region. And this was absolute: one was not to associate with the opposition parties. To interview their leaders and to be seen in an opposition rally risked losing your university post. I was just starting

out, and my expertise in the radical thoughts of Marx, Althusser and Gramsci were rough-hewn. The threat of official censure did not touch me. As usual with these things, its effects did not come to you in a sudden onrush of realisation, but slowly, imperceptibly. A gradual sense of alienation, a habit of being out of sync with the wont of my colleagues—they reminded me how much the ‘thinking profession’ here was at one with wider political culture and the state.

Modern Singapore was built by Raffles’ pioneering insight. Location and geography had defined it, British colonial legacy had moulded and crafted it. Unlike many of Britain’s former territories, Singapore had not gone through much in the way of postcolonial soul searching. Its Bicentenary is a small illustration of the Anglophilia that pervades in government and the upper social echelon. Singapore, it is not too much to say, had independence handed to it on a platter by the British: the PAP’s foes were the radicals, not the Empire. If only for this reason, pro-British bourgeois views and habits are not surprising. Built on a small boxy island, Singapore has not conducted to path-blazing heroism and the creation of epic enterprises. Culturally, it is the proud offspring of the ‘nation of shopkeepers’. The culture of Singapore is pragmatic, commercial-minded, conservative; seemingly a page from Mother England of mercantile capitalism. If Singapore is not governed by shopkeepers, it is certainly by leaders of classic petite bourgeoisie values. The ‘petite’ puts the bourgeoisie values one grade above in political conservatism; and it elevates modesty to the point of virtue—Singapore, full of bluster about its economic wealth and clean government. But it also knows its place against the leviathans of the world, the United States, China, Japan, Great Britain. Among the citizens ‘petiteness’ is reborn as self-censorship, and as cringing modesty before the National Father and the PAP whose effective rule which has made them again and again return it to power.

And the everyday life feels hemmed in. Space matters; the nation’s capital, the centre of political power, is not some faraway place but right where you are. It is hard to sense the mystic, the awesome ritual of the political game. And political leaders have been chosen almost for their sheer lack of charisma and rhetorical passion, qualities no longer suitable in these peaceful times. If one has to put a finger on the texture of social existence, it is the lack of monumentalism and grand gestures. With evident prosperity all around, you feel these are sorely needed in the way of whipping up emotional excitement. And without emotional excitement there is little of febrile imagination. The culture of shopkeepers cuts deep. The conservatism and social stability have been arguably good for Singapore, but they serve poorly the inducement of ideas and path-breaking undertakings. The yearning for bold intellectual and artistic expression is frustrated.

And on artistic expression: in a society defined by smallness in many respects, monumentalism comes across as both necessary and an appropriate response to the national ethos that has been so carefully nurtured by the state. If this risks over-generalisation, one is also struck by the veracity of it when one surveys the local art scene. As a critic, I rather think in the local context, a work of modest conception and low-key execution becomes a kind of self-willed belittlement. It is as if the ‘petite’ of petite bourgeoisie values has left its mark. Everything of Singapore’s social and political life cries out for an aesthetics of aggrandisement, a magnification of form and conception, in an artwork. The effect would be a profound ironic play on the banal vanity of social and political power. There are artists who have seemingly opted for this approach. In viewing Zai Kuning’s *Dapunta Hyang: Transmission of Knowledge*, or Charles Lim’s body of work *Sea State* (2005-15), one is struck by the paradox of life in Singapore they have strategically brought back. Both open up the vista of the sea and ocean that have been modern Singapore’s origin and economic lifeline; and yet each work is a pin-prick of the

spatial confinement and the watery existence that has been rubbed by the urban growth and dense living. There is in their work little in the way of political intent or critique, but a kind of mimicry of the grand ideas and stupendous struggles that make up the national narrative.

Notes

¹ Karim Raslan, 'Southeast Asian art at Venice Biennale: the good, the bad and the globalised', *South China Morning Post*, 14 June 2017; <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/society/article/2098256/southeast-asian-art-venice-biennale-good-bad-and-globalised>

² <https://www.nac.gov.sg/media-resources/press-releases/Dapunta-Hyang-Transmission-of-Knowledge-by-Zai-Kuning-will-be-presented-by-TheatreWorks-in-April-2018.html>; accessed 26 October, 2019

³ <https://www.bicentennial.sg/> accessed 23 October 2019

⁴ Michael Barr, *Lee Kuan Yew: The Beliefs Behind the Man*, Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2000, p. 75

⁵ Singapore gained independence from the British by being admitted into the Federation of Malaysia in 1963; it became a nation-state after separation from the Malaysian Federation on 9 August, 1965

⁶ Quoted in Barr, *Lee Kuan Yew*, op cit., p. 76

⁷ Lee Kuan Yew, *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew*, Singapore: Prentice Hall, 1998, p. 16

⁸ James Minchin, *No Man is an Island*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1986, p. 156

⁹ Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: the Singapore Story: 1965-2000*, Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings & Times Editions, 2000, p. 25

¹⁰ Lee Kuan Yew, *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew*, Singapore: Prentice Hall, 1998

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 332

¹² John Drysdale, *Singapore: Struggle for Success*, Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1984, p. 172

¹³ Joe Yeoh, *To Tame a Tiger: The Singapore Story*, Singapore: Wiz-Biz, 1995

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 111

¹⁵ Lee, *The Singapore Story*, op cit., p. 326

¹⁶ Han Fook Kwang, Warren Fernandez and Sumiko Tan, *Lee Kuan Yew: The Man and his Ideas*, Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings and Times Editions, 1998, p. 139

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ *Asia Times*, 25 September 2003. Regarding the following *Asia Times* and *The Straits Times* references, these are from my fieldnotes when I was working in Singapore. I had used these in my book *Singapore: the Culture of Excess (Asia's Transformations)* (2007), but the publisher Routledge asked not to have the URL references, etc.

¹⁹ *Asia Times*, 25 September 2003

²⁰ *The Straits Times*, 14 September 2003

²¹ *ibid.*

²² *The Straits Times*, 14 September 2003

²³ Government of Singapore, White Paper on Constitutional Amendments to Safeguard Financial Assets and the Integrity of the Public Service, Singapore: Government Press, 1988

²⁴ Kevin Tan and Peng Er Lam eds, *Managing Political Change in Singapore: the Elected Presidency*, London; New York: Routledge, 1997, p. xi

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 208

²⁶ *The Straits Times*, 15 August 1988