

## (En)Gendering the Nation: An Analysis of Kuo Pao Kun's Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral <sup>1</sup>

*Susan Philip*

### Introduction

In this paper, I take the position that as a nation, Singapore is 'gendered' in a specific and very deliberate way which serves to re-entrench the dominant role of the patriarchal state over its people, towards the goal of achieving economic prosperity and stability. The state has provided its people with a remarkably comfortable lifestyle, and has taken, in return, the political will and agency of the people. I argue that this is done through the construction of two levels of gender: a masculine, paternalistic gender at the state level, and a de-masculinised, neutered gender identity at the level of the people. This deliberate and considered gendering of state and nation will be analysed through a close examination of Kuo Pao Kun's 1995 play *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral*, a subtle allegory which looks at state intervention in the creation of a materialistic society, but also implicates the individual who capitulates to materialism, thus losing both spiritual ease and political agency.

Many commentators on Singapore have remarked on the economic imperative which drives so many aspects of the state's planning and rhetoric, and underlies its desire for control. As far back as the nineteenth century, amateur historians tended to focus on "Singapore's considerable economic potential" (Lau 35). In a more contemporary context, C.J.W.-L. Wee has noted Singapore's "desire to emulate the advancements of the West while forsaking not only many of the political dimensions of democratic life but also its cultural dimensions" (84); while Singapore aspires to material advancement, the state's urge to control militates against the achievement of a parallel political and cultural advancement. Ban Kah Choon echoes this sentiment, claiming that "cultural and political discourses lag behind the economic and technological development of Singaporean society" (5). This economic message has been, to a very large extent, internalised by most Singaporeans; they are driven by a desire for economic prosperity rather than for political agency. This is, perhaps, unsurprising, given the high level of comfort and security which the state provides – a fact acknowledged by Kuo in his nuanced and complex reading of the state of play in contemporary Singapore.

In *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral*, the various levels of argument about state control, political freedom, democracy and materialism come together, generating questions about Singapore as a nation in which the individual's desires are subordinated to the economic imperative, and in which political and cultural

power have been taken away from a complicit populace, to ensure continued state dominance towards the achievement of even greater prosperity. The main focus of my argument will be on how the state strategically constructs the gender of the nation and how Kuo, through a critical engagement with history and the contemporary situation in Singapore, demands a re-appraisal of the materialism and the lack of political will which seem to characterise many Singaporeans. The Eunuch Admiral's physical castration becomes an apt metaphor, in Kuo's hands, for the way in which contemporary Singaporeans seem to have relinquished political agency to the state, in favour of a famously comfortable standard of living.

Kuo Pao Kun's post-modern take on history allows for a telling juxtaposition of past and present, with modern-day Singaporean yuppies encountering Zheng He (Cheng Ho), the Ming Dynasty Imperial Eunuch. Through this juxtaposition, Kuo raises questions about possessing power and individual agency within the authoritative, patriarchal nation. I will argue that, while the patriarch is the dominant figure in Singapore's national landscape (reflected most obviously in the still-powerful presence of Lee Kuan Yew in the Singapore government), among the populace, not even men are accorded that same level of 'male' power: both men and women have, in effect, allowed themselves to be, or have been, metaphorically castrated and thus rendered impotent. They are, then, the spiritual descendants of Zheng He, the eunuch admiral. In this play we are shown, through clever deployment of the metaphor of castration, that in engendering the nation, the Singaporean authorities have effectively emasculated, or 'de-gendered', the people, thus ensuring that power remains centred within its own distinctly male, patriarchal ambit.

## 1.1 Nation and Gender

Most theorists of the nation suggest that nationalism as a concept can be, and generally is, used to create a particular identity for the nation. Ernest Gellner, for example, suggests that: "Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it *invents* nations where they do not exist" (6); this suggests the potential for political manipulation of nationalism. As Timothy Brennan states: "The 'nation' is precisely what Foucault has called a 'discursive formation' – not simply an allegory or imaginative vision, but a gestative political structure" (4). That is, it is a political structure that can actively *create* an identity or ideology. Brennan's definition is reminiscent of Benedict Anderson's view that "so often in the 'nation-building' policies of the new states one sees [...] a systematic, even Machiavellian, instilling of nationalist ideology through the mass media, the educational system, administrative regulations, and so forth" (113 – 114). In Singapore, this Machiavellian instilling of national ideology and identity has been carried out through the constant repetition and reiteration of slogans, exhortations and images in the mass media and, in some cases, in popular public spaces.

National identity in Singapore has been gendered, in such a way as to actively disempower the individual, while at the same time focusing power within the state. Assigning a gender to a nation is a symbolic but deeply meaningful act. Many nations are cast as female, referred to in female terms such as 'motherland'. The icons embodying these nations are also often female – such as Britannia, Marianne, or the Statue of Liberty. This iconography works towards positioning women within the state as passive symbols, while men are cast in active, powerful roles. In that context, it is interesting to look at Singapore, where the female icon seems not to exist. Rather, an apparently stronger, more decidedly 'male' image was created. And yet, this 'male' identity does not necessarily confer any of the power traditionally associated with men. While the *state* is powerfully male and paternalistic, the male image of the *nation* can be seen as being emasculated and therefore impotent.

In its early years of independence, Singapore needed urgently to build an identity for itself which would help the fledgling nation fight its way to prosperity and power. Nationalism, as a goal to be worked towards together, "offered the prospect of the achievement of governmentality, the transformation of a society through the creation of a disciplined body of citizen-subjects" (Holden 408). This was precisely the strategy adopted by the Singapore government. Holden expands the argument by noting that: "Nationalism and early proto-nationalist movements sought to purify the body and the home, to create robust national subjects who might then act within the public sphere" (408). Again, the idea of the disciplined body is highlighted – the creation of disciplined subjects who would work for the improvement of society. However, the term 'disciplined' refers not just to the ability of the citizens to control themselves, but to the Foucauldian sense of control being exerted over them, so that their bodies function in ways desired by the state. Discipline always encapsulates the notion that external control is exerted over the body in question, and this was certainly the case in the first attempts at instilling nationalism in Singapore, namely, the concept of 'rugged individualism'. Although the term implies a level of autonomy and strength, the individual is in fact disciplined and controlled, in the name of achieving a transformation in society.

Turnbull explains 'rugged individualism' as a system whereby: "The government sought to inculcate discipline and dedication, to toughen moral fibre by spartan Puritanism, to build a 'rugged society' and wipe out corruption, both in high politics and in everyday administration" (292). In the Singapore context, then, the term does not denote toughness and self-reliance, so much as a need to work hard and live a spartan life in order to create economic prosperity – that is, to make sacrifices for the greater good, as defined by the authorities. As Holden notes: "Discipline was thus a blissful submission to work for the nation" (411). While individualism suggests a high degree of independence, the whole concept of rugged individualism was state initiated and ordered, and in fact asserted the need for a high degree of *dependence* on the government. If the state program of hard work and sacrifice was not followed, it was implied, anarchy would follow. In the

PAP dominated schema, Singaporeans are constructed as needing to be controlled, as a lack of control can lead to destructive chaos. The state constantly reminds the people of past crises such as racial riots, which, it asserts, came about because people and ideas slipped beyond the bounds of control. David Birch states that the Singapore state maintains a “discourse of crisis” (75), in which the nation is portrayed as being under constant threat from a series of crises which can only be held back by a high level of authoritative control. The implication is that only authoritative control and submission to it, can ensure continued stability. Thus political motivations (notably the desire to maintain a tight grip on power) have engineered a particular Singaporean identity – apolitical, compliant and, with increased economic prosperity, complaisant. Authority inheres entirely in the government.

In this context, it will be interesting to look at some of the iconic figures usually associated with Singapore (either with the state, or with the nation), to examine how gender identities are constructed to ensure the continued existence of a disciplined and compliant nation, working towards the ultimate goal of increased prosperity for the state. One male icon important to Singapore’s identity, Stamford Raffles, is hailed as the founder of modern Singapore. Statues of Raffles abound in Singapore’s public spaces, thus focusing indirectly on Singapore’s importance as a trading post, an economic tool in the hands of the East India Company. There are no statues of Sang Nila Utama, the legendary Sumatran prince who named the island ‘Singapura’ (literally, ‘Lion City’ in Sanskrit). Singapore’s focus has, for a long time, been almost exclusively on its modern history as a trading post,<sup>2</sup> and the abundant statuary acknowledging Raffles helps to constantly focus attention on Singapore’s economic role.

However, former prime minister (and current Minister Mentor) Lee Kuan Yew is the primary icon of the state; he is its progenitor. His own labours catalysed the creation of Singapore as an independent political entity. It is significant that his autobiography is titled *The Singapore Story*, suggesting that Lee’s story and Singapore’s story are synonymous, that Singapore as it exists today arose primarily out of Lee’s labour. Dennis Haskell notes that Singapore is “a nation utterly identified with one person – Lee Kuan Yew” (236) and that “[n]o-one else could title their memoirs ‘The Singapore Story’” (237). Holden suggests that Lee’s memoirs “constitute, in effect, a national autobiography” (402). State and father are one, and they are determinedly masculine and patriarchal, and powerful. But Holden goes on to state that the autobiography draws parallels “between the governing of a city-state, and the governing of a male body through a certain style of masculinity” (402). This implies that the (male) bodies within the nation are required to abide by a prescribed style of masculine behaviour. Geraldine Heng and Janadas Devan approach this argument from the opposite angle, focusing instead on the prescribed roles and the discipline exerted on female bodies, in order to uphold the patriarchal power structure, because: “Women, and all signs of the feminine, are by definition

always and already anti-national" (356). The national, therefore, can only be male.

However, the nation can be read as male and powerful, only insofar as this maleness and power inhere in the authorities. So strongly paternalistic is this state, that all members of the nation remain in a sort of perpetual adolescence, in need of constant control and discipline from the state/father. Heng and Devan contend that:

The narrative behind Lee's narrative could then be read: a fantasy of self-regenerating fatherhood and patriarchal power, unmitigated, resurgent, and in endless (self-) propagation, inexhaustibly reproducing its own image through the pliant, tractable conduit of female anatomy – incidental, obedient, and sexually suborned female bodily matter. (350)

Again, this implies that the male anatomy is not "pliant" or "tractable". However, this demand for tractability is exerted over male as well as female Singaporeans, implying that, although not actively feminised, male Singaporeans are de-masculinised, in that they are expected to be as pliant and tractable as the ideal female body. The "fantasy of [...] patriarchal power" is limited to the state only, and the people of Singapore, whether male or female, are disempowered by the controlling, disciplining state.

In this context, the second iconic Singaporean figure becomes singularly meaningful. The visual icon of Singapore is the Merlion, a strange, mythic beast, half lion and half sea-creature, which functions as a symbol of national identity. Like Raffles, the Merlion is constantly, publicly visible through statues, souvenirs, and posters; in 2004, I recall seeing, on the way into town from Changi airport, a Merlion constructed entirely out of red and yellow McDonald's french-fry containers. Because the Merlion is so omnipresent, it too serves to reiterate and thus entrench a specific identity on the nation.

Supposedly inspired by ancient legends about the founding of Singapura by Sang Nila Utama, the Merlion was designed in 1964 by Mr. Fraser Brunner who at the time was a curator at Singapore's Van Kleef Aquarium ("Merlion Park"). The choice of a lion, quite apart from its historical associations with the name of the city, obviously implies male strength and pride. But this message of maleness is curiously truncated. The merlion is a strangely sexless beast; the lion, with its proud mane and snarling mouth, is rampantly male. But it has a fish tail instead of mammalian sexual organs; while fish clearly must have sexual organs, it would be a challenge for most people to identify them. Furthermore, the Merlion is generally depicted with the tail portion of its body curled forward and upward, discreetly covering any fishy sexual organs it might have.

Paul Rae, analysing the prevalence of the lion as a symbol in Singapore's state rhetoric, refers to "Singa the Courtesy Lion", a cartoon character "who, although naked from the waist down, considerably headed off any potential embarrassment by lacking genitalia" (121). Again, the putative 'maleness' of the lion, which in this case is meant to represent the ideal, courteous Singaporean, is neatly erased. Rather than creating a masculinising discourse of power, "the lion icons have been instrumental in promoting a processual and disciplinary mode of correct behaviour and identity formation, consistent with the broader national aspiration" (Rae 121). The national icon, then, encourages the continuing subservience of the nation to state discipline, rather than individual agency, and this is reflected in the apparent castration or neutering of the iconic merlion.

However, the Singapore state does not take agency away without putting something else in its place to satisfy its inhabitants. In *Descendants* Kuo approaches this point, appropriately, through the metaphor of castration, using the figures of the castrated admiral and his yuppie 'descendants' to comment allegorically not only on the desire of the state to exert discipline over the populace, but also the willingness of the people to cede their power, in return for perceived rewards. The rewards in this case are the prosperity and high standard of living which are the hallmarks of Singaporean society today.

The strong focus by the authorities on issues of economic prosperity has resulted, inevitably, in "the cultural and material transformation of Singapore's population into a disciplined labour force whose everyday life is subjected to the logic of industrial economy" (Chua 20). Chua goes on to argue that "this pragmatism has [...] become a fleshed-out conceptual system" which not only "governs the regime's administrative policies and strategies [...] but] has also penetrated the consciousness of the population and has come to serve as the conceptual boundaries within which Singaporeans think through significant portions of their daily life" (68). Materialism thus became entrenched as central to the lives of most Singaporeans. As early as 1977, senior politician S. Rajaratnam referred to Singapore's most prominent value as "moneytheism" (qtd. in Milne and Mauzy 24). The focus, in the early years of developing the national identity, was on hard work and sacrifice in the service of future economic prosperity and success. So entrenched did the search for prosperity and security become that materialism and the desire for a comfortable life are now seen as being the hallmarks of the average Singaporean. The state openly deplores this situation, frequently complaining about the tendency of young Singaporeans to think only of themselves and their future pay packets, rather than of their responsibility to the nation; then-Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, speaking of Singaporean students studying overseas on government scholarships in 1999, noted that most of them wanted to know "how they could break their scholarship bonds instead of how and where they could serve on their return to Singapore" ("Singapore Tribe").

But it should be noted that it is only when the tendency toward materialism and individualism threatens to undermine state projects and authoritative discourse that it is officially condemned. It can be argued that the state has in fact fostered the desire for greater material resources and wealth in order to extend and further entrench its already considerable control, using the lure of comfort and ease to construct a materialistic and politically apathetic population.

As Chua Beng Huat notes, the state has effectively bartered increased material comfort for greater political control (19). Jacqueline Lo takes the argument a step further, stating that: "Anxiety and/or dissatisfaction with the heavy-handedness of the government has been ameliorated by discernible material rewards as Singapore's economy developed rapidly" (138–139). The suggestion here is that material comfort placates the people, removing the desire to challenge state hegemony or even to express "dissatisfaction". Here, we see how the two state-authored ideas – rampant materialism and the ceding of personal agency to the authorities – come together to create a comfortable, compliant nation. In this highly materialistic society, political power and individual agency are ceded to the state, in exchange for the provision of a high standard of living, in much the same way that Zheng He surrenders his manhood to the Imperial Court, in exchange for a high-ranking, well-paid position within the court.

### *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral*

#### Synopsis

The play *Descendants* (written in 1995) does not take a linear, chronological form, and has no plot in the conventional understanding of the term. The play is divided into scenes of varying length. The lines are not divided among specific characters; it is thus up to the director to assign lines to actors, and indeed even to decide how many actors there should be, and of what gender, as Kuo's text makes no specifications. The play appears simple: a few speakers (or possibly just one) are recounting the exploits of Admiral Zheng He. They sometimes merely narrate the stories, while at other times they take on the role of Zheng He. The retellings are interspersed with anecdotes from the lives of the speakers. All we know about the speakers is that they are corporate workers – it is not even entirely clear from the text that they are Singaporeans, although theatre director Ong Keng Sen, who staged the play in 1996, refers to them as "archetypes of the successful Singapore" (Ong, 1996).<sup>3</sup> Through their narrations they – and we – become aware of a deep connection between them and Zheng He, marking them as his spiritual descendants. Kuo explores the implications of this connection in the rest of the play.

As the play progresses, the Yuppies grow to an awareness that although they have achieved success in their careers, as well as material wealth, they lack power as individuals. It is this lack which forms the central theme of the play, the idea

being embodied in the historical figure of Zheng He. Born Ma He to a minority Muslim family in the Yunnan province, he was forcibly taken from his family and castrated while still a boy. Through hard work, he was able to rise in the ranks, coming to the attention of the Ming Emperor Chu Di, who changed Ma He's name to Zheng He. As a eunuch, Zheng He has literally given up his manhood (or had it taken from him); symbolically, he has ceded his personal power or agency to the higher authoritative power of the Emperor. Ironically, this has led to a highly regarded position in Chu Di's court, which suggests that castration can lead to the amassing of power. As Susan Tsang points out, "for those caught in hopeless poverty, the removal of their potency was the only way to gain power, wealth and position in court" ("Same Formula"). However, as a subject, Zheng He would have been completely at the mercy of the Emperor; such power as he had amassed, therefore, was illusory. His physical castration is reflected by the fact that, before the all-powerful Emperor/patriarch, he has been, effectively, neutered in terms of politics and power.

### **Castration and the Powerless Individual**

Zheng He can be seen as symbolising the position of Singaporeans today – those Singaporeans for whom the fish-tailed merlion and the neutered Singa are such appropriate national icons. Ong Keng Sen, in his interpretation of the play, laments that the yuppies "may have castrated themselves in trying to get ahead" (Program Notes). According to William Peterson, the play uses Zheng He's "sacrifice as a metaphor for the losses of his compatriots. As with Zhenghe, who lost the full use of his ultimate signifier, each of the yuppies depicted in the play gave up some sacred or personal part of themselves in order to ascend the corporate ladder" (96 – 97). As noted earlier, it is suggested that Singaporeans have given up their political will and personal agency for a comfortable lifestyle; their eagerness to embrace material wealth has left them empty and powerless – Ong has stressed this particular point in his program notes, stating that he has used his production of the play to protest "how Singapore has become so fixed on the tangible and the material". At the same time, Kuo also criticises the overly-authoritarian nature of the government, which demands total control over the lives of its citizens.

However, for Kuo, this is never a black-and-white matter of authoritative state versus powerless individual. He complicates the argument by implying that there is a strong element of choice in the powerlessness of the individual. Ong echoes this ambivalence when he says that "in that respect, I am a eunuch. I often censor a natural part of myself. That, on the simplest level, can be said to be castration" (Program Notes). Actor Andrew Kee Tiang Hiong (who took one of the roles in a Mandarin-language staging of the play in 1995), adds an extra dimension to the argument when he says that: "Too many people live by the standards others have set. They fear to be branded as aliens when they seek to differ and are so castrated



of their own thoughts" (Ho). This viewpoint brings us back to Foucault's ideas of discipline – individuals are compelled to live according to standards and demands set by those in authority; they fear to live by other standards because they would then be marginalised, "branded as aliens", punished.

Kuo does not condemn this tendency to censor/castrate oneself. He himself, having come out of the harsh environment of detention,<sup>4</sup> had to come to terms with the "peculiar softness" that governs Singaporean life (Kwok, 198). As Kuo notes, this soft way of life "somehow massages you in a way so comfortable that you tend to forget that before [...] you had some ideas" (Necessary Stage, "Playwright's Voice" 71). This awareness complicates the idea that Singaporean bodies are disciplined and controlled, and that they submit to authority because they fear punishment. The fear of punishment is much leavened by the 'reward' – namely, the comfortable, soft lifestyle which lulls them into forgetting that they once "had some ideas".

The complexity of this layered argument about the authoritative desire to control, and the seeming willingness of the populace to cede control, is apparent in scene five, in which the story of Zheng He's castration is narrated. Kuo presents two different versions of the story, one which highlights personal choice and one which positions the castrated individual as subjugated and victimised.

In the first version, Zheng He states that the castration was voluntary: "It was my own decision to want to become a eunuch, because our family was very poor" (Kuo, *Descendants* 44). When Zheng He is given his severed penis, he regards it as "a licence to enter the imperial palace, to hold privileged positions in the imperial household" (Kuo, *Descendants* 45); in other words, relinquishing his physical potency is a step towards amassing personal power and the agency he would lack as the undistinguished younger son of a poor family. Furthermore, he declares that the castration was carried out by his tearful and loving father, who would not perform the procedure without being convinced that his son was entirely willing for it to be done. In this patriarchal society, the father can be read as representing the state. If the state and the father are one, then Zheng He's submission to castration in order to join the ranks of the imperial eunuchs (as a means of earning money for his father/family) can be read as the individual voluntarily making a great sacrifice in the service of the state. The state here is figured as benevolent rather than dictatorial, uncertain about exacting the ultimate sacrifice unless the individual is completely aware and willing; furthermore, the sacrifice is made, it would seem, to create a better life for the whole family. In this version, castration is seen to be a necessary price, willingly offered to the loving state/father, for the good of all.

However, Kuo then goes on to undermine the vision of the benevolent state by abruptly confronting the audience or reader with the second version of what happened to Zheng He. The speaker claims that he "didn't choose like this"; rather, he was "summarily cut and cleansed by his masters [...] because there was

a need, a huge need for eunuchs" (Kuo, *Descendants* 45). In this second version, the state as loving father is replaced by "masters"; the choosing subject of Zheng He's narration becomes an object, violently worked upon by the state for purely economic/administrative reasons (that is, to meet the "huge need" for eunuchs). This reading highlights the individual's utter lack of agency in the face of the demands or needs of the state. The individual is passive, "cut and cleansed by his masters" rather than actively choosing to cede his power.

The 'positive' version of the story is narrated in the first person, underlining Zheng He's positioning of himself as speaking/choosing subject. The negative version, however, which shows him as object rather than subject, is narrated by someone else; Zheng He is thus shown not to have an active voice, whereas in the first version he actually articulates his own willingness. The first version of the story suggests the construction of a choosing and empowered subject, with Zheng He rewriting his story/history to imply a high level of individual agency. And yet, his acquiescence to castration, the removal of his "ultimate signifier" (Peterson 96), points to a fundamental lack of choice and agency. Whether voluntary or not, castration signifies the removal of power. By literally handing his penis to the Imperial Palace, the eunuch submits fully to authority.

The second, more brutal version of the castration highlights complete involuntary submission to the state resulting in the absence of choice and agency. In the first version, the presentation of the individual's submission to castration as being voluntary can suggest a refusal on the part of the castrated individual to acknowledge lack of agency. Extrapolating, we can link Zheng He's refusal to engage with the reality of the brutally interventionist state, with the refusal of Singaporeans to acknowledge that their materially comfortable lives have been achieved at the cost of political power.

Kuo's contention that the Singaporean state has amassed considerable power over the lives of individual Singaporeans by providing a high standard of living is allegorised in scene fifteen, a graphic account of "the most sophisticated method" of castration (Kuo, *Descendants* 64). This method begins with gentle massage during babyhood; this massage is experienced as pleasurable. Slowly the pressure is built up, eventually destroying the testicles; however, the individual is by this time so habituated to the destructive pressure that it is still experienced as "comforting, enjoyable and even highly desirable" (Kuo, *Descendants* 65). Reading castration as the removal of individual power, we can say that the authority figure here removes the individual's power either without the individual being aware that such an infringement of personal agency has been perpetrated, or with no objections being raised by the individual, who has been lulled into a state of comfort and pleasure. Similarly, submission to the agency-negating methods of the Singaporean state is viewed as pleasurable, because they create (material) comfort. Like all those eunuchs who had been castrated through this comforting, pleasurable method,

these individuals are barely aware that their potency has been completely removed, that they have, effectively, been neutered.

Historically, Zheng He and the other Imperial eunuchs have been portrayed as being powerful figures within court circles. Even in his physical appearance, he presented a façade of power and great strength, departing from the stereotype of the eunuch as soft and feminised. Family records portray him as being “seven feet tall”, with “a waist about five feet in circumference. [...] He had glaring eyes, teeth as white and well-shaped as shells, and a voice as loud as a huge bell” (Levathes 64). Kuo, however, erases this vision by portraying him as “this 600-year-old legend of a molested and incarcerated man” (*Descendants* 38); this description focuses more on his victimhood (he was “molested”) and his subjugation to the Emperor’s control.

Throughout the play, Kuo challenges the idea that the Imperial eunuchs had substantial power or agency. In scene six, when Zheng He is given orders to embark on the first of his voyages, the dialogue reveals that despite the considerable latitude he has been given in terms of outfitting his armada and setting forth on his explorations, he is very much subordinate to the Emperor, who dismisses the eunuchs with threats of execution if *his* desires are not fulfilled: “This is a military command: The punishment for whoever fails to expedite his duties as commanded is no less than summary execution!” (Kuo, *Descendants* 47). The state as benevolent father has been replaced by the figure of the state as dominant and imperious ruler; as Zheng He realises, he lives and thrives only at the whim of his Imperial master: “My master’s will is my survival” (Kuo, *Descendants* 54).

The Emperor’s absolute authority is revealed in scene seven, in which Zheng He is renamed. His original name is Ma He; however, in Chinese, ‘Ma’ means ‘horse’, “and so when he went to pay respects to the Emperor, you could, arguably, say that a horse had gone to court” which for the superstitious meant that there would be war (Kuo, *Descendants* 55). The Emperor therefore decrees that Ma He shall henceforth be called Zheng He, thus removing the suggestion of threat. Symbolically, he is castrated again, his powerful, possibly antagonistic, name being removed and replaced with something innocuous. The Yuppies become aware of the ambivalence of the position of apparently powerful figures like Zheng He, questioning the appearance of dominance. Debating the likelihood that Zheng He died “incomplete”, because when he died at sea, his penis was probably still in the Imperial Palace, the Yuppies realise “how temporary and transient the power, status and authority of these people occupying high positions really are” (Kuo, *Descendants* 43). The grand eunuch Zheng He, they declare, ended up “pathetically”, his power literally still in the hands of the all-powerful state.

As the Yuppies are drawn further into the examination of Zheng He’s life, they become more aware of the links between them, as well as the illusory nature of the power traditionally ascribed to Imperial eunuchs. In scene three, they recount a

story about a room in the Imperial palace, where all the boxes containing the penises of the eunuchs are stored. Legend states that these boxes were suspended from the ceiling, and that as a eunuch's status rose, the box would correspondingly rise closer to the ceiling. The Yuppies realise that these suspended boxes look remarkably like a corporate organisational chart, with the most senior or most powerful individuals at the top. However, this realisation does not cement their belief in power. Rather, they become aware that they, because they too are governed by these charts and their position within them, "look like a network of pricks" (Kuo, *Descendants* 41); this line, while comically deflating, also draws a direct link between the Yuppies and the dried-up, impotent penises of the eunuchs.

Thus, by constantly foregrounding Zheng He's position as a eunuch, submissive to the patriarchal state in the figure of the Emperor, despite his apparently great powers, Kuo also reminds us of his central idea: namely, that Singaporeans have been castrated, cut off from the possibility of exercising individual agency.

Having thus been neutered, these Yuppies can be seen as having been disciplined into becoming ideal subjects of the state – in the Singapore context, this means that they will contribute to the continued prosperity of the nation-state. Kuo links the idea of castrating the individual (removing his or her individual agency), with the idea of providing the right kind of service to the state:

Year after year, stage by stage  
 You nurse the man, until he is usable  
 It doesn't matter the pain is unbearable  
 It doesn't matter the results are still visible  
 Because this thing the loyal creature  
 Has always been, and still is, highly marketable

(Kuo, *Descendants* 58)

The idea of 'nursing' a person here does not refer to ministering to the body, but to disciplining and manipulating it until it is "usable", that is, fit to be used by the state, to further its own programs. The individual is now not only neutered, but is barely seen as being a person – it is a "thing", a "loyal creature", rather than a person. The only concern is that this creature be "marketable", that is, that a profit can still be extracted from its existence.

The markets – that is, profit and material wealth – are a central point in this play. Zheng He's voyages, justified by the Emperor's desire to extend the "power, prestige and splendour of the Imperial Court [...] to the farthest shores" (Kuo, *Descendants* 46), were also motivated by the desire to accrue the wealth and tributes that would come with the setting up of dominions. Geoff Wade explains that the Ming voyages were intended to "achieve a *pax Ming* throughout the known world and collect treasures for the Court" (11). However, Kuo suggests, there is a difference between capitalism as imagined in the Ming Dynasty, and that

experienced in modern-day Singapore. Scene thirteen portrays a trading mission between Imperial China and one of the countries visited by Zheng He. Although this is a commercial transaction, Kuo highlights the spectacle, the grandeur, the sheer dazzling wealth of the two parties involved, the nobility of the people, and the excitement it brings Zheng He. In the 1996 TheatreWorks production, Ong had his actor continuously whirling around as the speech was delivered, creating an impression of wild, unrestrained joy. Significantly that joy only manifests itself when a commercial transaction is taking place.

While the commercial is also central to contemporary Singapore, however, it does not bring happiness in its wake. Wee and Lee suggest that Zheng He experiences "a sort of prelapsarian capitalism," something which exceeds "the confines of alienated life in the modern nation, with the potential for cultural exchange still alive" (27). The postlapsarian capitalism of modern-day Singapore ignores the potential for cultural exchange, for spiritual rather than material dialogue, and emphasises only the financial. Spiritual considerations are ignored, with the result that the Shentonites experience only "some yearning unhappiness within them" (Tsang, "Castration"), knowing nothing of the joy that comes to Zheng He.

Kuo suggests that it is only in isolation – that is, in separation from the state – that individual agency can be assumed. He states in scene two that: "For three decades Zheng He's armada ruled the ocean", but we are not allowed to forget that his power came only by "divine command from the Ming Emperor" (Kuo, *Descendants* 39). Later, a Yuppie muses about Zheng He's "loneliest moments, which probably were also his freest moments" (Kuo, *Descendants* 52). This takes us back to the first scene, in which a Yuppie declares that "this loneliness is a potent one; it is an inviting loneliness. There is a vast space all around me. Endless. Haunting. Unknown. But promising." (Kuo, *Descendants* 38). While the Yuppie expresses "fear of this unknown", he/she also yearns for it. Loneliness suggests isolation, but the Yuppie dreams of a *potent* loneliness, suggesting the power of choice and agency. Thus loneliness and vast space can be read as individuality and freedom. Wee has also noted this point, stating that "the moments of transcendence beyond Zheng He's present condition come about only *during* the voyage to realms and markets away from the ambiguous and discomfiting home that is China" ("Creating" 94). It is only through separation from the seemingly benevolent but ultimately castrating force of the state that any sense of individual power can be achieved. In a nation like Singapore, where the authorities are able to legislate on even such intensely personal matters as marriage and childbirth, such separation seems impossible. Just as Zheng He lives under the Ming Emperor's decree, so individuals in Singapore are ultimately governed by the dominant state.

Kuo suggests that there is a constant struggle against this dominance, although this struggle is in tension with the urge to capitulate. In the final scene, the Yuppie speaker declares that:

...the eunuch admiral seemed never to have given up the hope of finding an alternate life. On board his drifting vessels, in the loneliness of the vast ocean, in the limbo between despairing and arriving, between being a man and a non-man, he kept on dreaming, hoping, searching, struggling. (Kuo, *Descendants* 66)

This speech references the ambivalence that characterises the lives of both Zheng He and the yuppies, as they drift uncertainly between two states of being. But the final words of the play seem to suggest that ultimately one path dominates the other. Zheng He speaks lyrically of his freedom on the ocean, declaring that "Departing is my arriving/Wandering is my residence" (Kuo, *Descendants* 66): leaving China for the ocean, he feels he has arrived; leaving 'home', he feels he has 'come home'. Yet he is inextricably tied to the economic imperative of his emperor's demands:

I cannot tarry  
I must hurry  
The sea, the land, the sky is waiting  
The Market is calling me!

(Kuo, *Descendants* 67)

The entrenchment of this imperative in Singaporean life is underlined by its appearance in Edwin Thumboo's poem called, appropriately, "Ulysses by the Merlion"; in this poem, the wandering Ulysses is confronted by the Merlion, which he refers to as "this lion of the sea/Salt-maned, scaly, wondrous of tail,/ Touched with power" (80). Here, the Merlion seems to symbolise power; but even in Thumboo's poem, that power does not seem to belong to the people:

Peoples settled here,  
Brought to this island  
The bounty of these seas,  
Built towers topless as Illium's

They make, they serve,  
They buy, they sell... (80)

Initially, this excerpt sounds celebratory, with its excitement at bountiful seas and topless towers, but this is destabilised by the grinding monotony of the next two lines, which reinforce the servitude of the people to the economy, the "Market" which ceaselessly and insistently calls to Zheng He.

## Conclusion

Thus, the castrated admiral – so apparently powerful, but ultimately subordinate to the state in the person of the Emperor – functions as a symbol for modern-day Singaporeans: wealthy, comfortable, but powerless, dominated by the state's relentless pursuit of economic stability. Both have ceded their power for material gain. Ultimately, although Singapore is figured as male rather than female – through the dominating icon of patriarchy, Lee Kuan Yew, and through the more problematic icon of the Merlion – individuals within the state are constructed as powerless. If Singaporeans are constructed as 'male', and therefore as part of the dominant patriarchy, they are at the same time emasculated, that 'male' force taken away from them. Power inheres only in the authorities.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Some portions of this article have been taken from my unpublished PhD thesis, "Re-Scripting Identities: Performativity in the English-language Theatres of Singapore and Malaysia" (Australian National University, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that there are signs of a more inclusive vision of history slowly taking root. The National Museum screens an excellent short film which acknowledges three different versions of Singapore's origins, without privileging any one version.

<sup>3</sup> In this paper, I will refer to both the published text of the play, and to Ong's 1996 staging of it.

<sup>4</sup> In 1976, he was detained under Singapore's Internal Security Act (ISA) for allegedly espousing Communist views. He was released four years later, and in 1989 "was awarded the Cultural Medallion for outstanding contribution and achievement in Singaporean theatre" (Kuo, "Theatre" 392); however, his citizenship (which was automatically revoked upon detention) was only restored in 1992, on Kuo's second application.

## Works Cited

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. London: Verso, 1991.
- Ban Kah Choon. "Narrating Imagination." In Ban Kah Choon, Anne Pakir and Tong Chee Kiong, eds. *Imagining Singapore*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2004 (1 -15).
- Birch, David. "Staging Crises: Media and Citizenship." In Garry Rodan, ed. *Singapore Changes Guard: Social, Political and Economic Directions in the 1990s*. New York: Longman Cheshire, 1993.

- Brennan, Timothy. *Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myths of the Nation*. New York: St. Martin, 1989.
- Chua Beng Huat. *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore*. London: Routledge, 1995.
- Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral*. By Kuo Pao Kun. Dir. Ong Keng Sen. 1996. Videocassette, 1996.
- Gellner, Ernest. *Nationalism*. New York: NYUP; UK: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1997.
- Goh Chok Tong. "The Singapore Tribe: Speech by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong on Singapore 21 Debate in Parliament on Wednesday, 5 May 1999, at 2.30 p.m." Ministry of Education, Singapore. 12 May 1999. 13 October 2004 [http://www.moe.gov.sg/speeches/1999/sp120599a\\_print.htm](http://www.moe.gov.sg/speeches/1999/sp120599a_print.htm).
- Haskell, Dennis. "Whose Singapore?" In Bennett, Bruce, Susan Cowan, Jacqueline Lo, Satendra Nandan and Jennifer Webb, eds. *Resistance and Reconciliation: Writing in the Commonwealth*. Proc. Of the 12<sup>th</sup> Triennial Conference of ACLALS, July 2001, Canberra, Australia. Canberra: Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (ACLALS), 2003 (236 – 247).
- Heng, Geraldine and Janadas Devan. "State Fatherhood: The Politics of Nationalism, Sexuality, and Race in Singapore." In Andrew Parker, Mary Russo, Doris Sommer and Patricia Yaeger, eds. *Nationalisms and Sexualities*. New York: Routledge, 1992 (343 – 364).
- Holden, Philip. "A Man and an Island: Gender and Nation in Lee Kuan Yew's *The Singapore Story*." *Biography* 24.2 (2001), 401 – 424
- Ho Sheo Be. "New Version of Play to be Staged." *Straits Times* [Singapore]. 28 July 1995: 12
- Kuo Pao Kun. *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral*. In Kuo Pao Kun, *Two Plays by Kuo Pao Kun: 'Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral' and 'The Spirits Play'*. Singapore: SNP, 2003 (37 – 67).
- Kwok Kian-Woon. "Remembering Kuo Pao Kun (1939 – 2002)." *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 4.2 (2003) 193 – 201.
- Lau, Albert. "The National Past and the Writing of the History of Singapore." In Ban Kah Choon, Anne Pakir and Tong Chee Kiong, eds. *Imagining Singapore*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2004 (34 – 53).
- Levathes, Louise. *When China Ruled the Seas: The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne, 1405 – 1433*. New York: OUP, 1996.



- Lo, Jacqueline. *Staging Nation: Postcolonial English Language Theatre in Malaysia and Singapore*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP, 2004.
- "Merlion Park." [http://www.visitsingapore.com/publish/stbportal/en/home/what\\_to\\_see/landmarks/merlion\\_park.html](http://www.visitsingapore.com/publish/stbportal/en/home/what_to_see/landmarks/merlion_park.html)
- Milne, R. S. and Diane K. Mauzy. *Singapore: The Legacy of Lee Kuan Yew*. San Francisco: Westview, 1990.
- The Necessary Stage. (n.d.) "Playwright's Voice: A Forum on Singapore Theatre." In *The Necessary Stage. 9 Lives: Ten Years of Singapore Theatre. Essays Commissioned by The Necessary Stage*. Singapore: n.p., n.d. (54 – 71)
- Ong Keng Sen. (1996). "An Interview with Ong Keng Sen." By Mok Wai Yin. *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral Program*, Singapore
- Ong Keng Sen. "Program Notes." *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral Program*, Singapore, 1996.
- Peterson, William. (2001). *Theater and the Politics of Culture in Contemporary Singapore*. Connecticut: Wesleyan UP
- Rae, Paul. "Cat's Entertainment: Feline Performance in the Lion City." *The Drama Review* 51.1 (Spring 2007), 119 – 137.
- Tsang, Susan. "Castration and Modern Life." *Straits Times* [Singapore] 1 June 1995
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1996). "The Same Formula, But Still Worth the Trip." *Straits Times* [Singapore] 7 Oct. 1996: 6.
- Thumboo, Edwin. "Ulysses by the Merlion". In Edwin Thumboo, *A Third Map: New and Selected Poems*. Singapore: UniPress, 1993 (80 – 81).
- Turnbull, C. M. (1989). *A History of Singapore, 1819 – 1988*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Singapore: OUP
- Wade, Geoff, "The Zheng He Voyages: A Reassessment," ARI Working Paper, No. 31, October 2004, [www.ari.nus.edu.sg/pub/wps.htm](http://www.ari.nus.edu.sg/pub/wps.htm).
- Wee, C.J.W.-L. "Creating High Culture in the Globalized 'Cultural Desert' of Singapore." *The Drama Review* 47.4 (Winter 2003), 84 – 97.