

Singapore's New Thrillers: Boldly Going Beyond the Ethnographic Map

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Douglas Chua's *The Missing Page*, published by Angsana Books in Singapore in 1999, opens with the construction of a massive development project to link Singapore with Malaysia through a tunnel "modelled after the 51 km Eurotunnel" (14). But the workers stumble upon a disturbing, possibly threatening find: a mysterious territorial document that disputes Singapore's sovereignty. The super-agent who saves the day after various action-packed confrontations is the James Bond-like Alex Han, who "thinks he is Mel Gibson chasing after thugs" (45) and repeatedly has to remind himself that he is "no Rambo" (317). He is the native answer to the superheroes of imported popular culture. Testifying to a new interest in regionally produced fiction that has definitely invigorated Singapore's book-market, Chua's science fiction thrillers with a local twist form a respite from narratives that Shirley Lim has diagnosed as "almost ethnographic in their fidelity to ethnic surface and social interactions" (138). Even more pointedly, those narratives emulate the popular historical "exotic" of diasporic and postcolonial writing—a globally immensely marketable genre, which the Singaporean novelist Tan Hwee Hwee has dismissed as "Chinese Chick Lit" (66).¹ Instead, they indicate a new direction in localized literature that generally bodes well for the regional book-market's coming of age, even when it generates some clichéd narratives along the way. This article aims to trace these new developments to go beyond studies that emphasise the globally marketed fictions of the island-state Singapore and Southeast Asia generally. A re-examination of the thriller's growing local popularity promises to shed a new light on the Singaporean novel, its potential, versatility, and interest for a local readership rather than for consumers of what Graham Huggan has recently termed the "postcolonial exotic." This analysis reassesses the growing export of these new fictions and

the ways they set out to rework insular analyses of the region's "exotic" representations.

The greatest appeal of Chua's thrillers is clearly their specific imaginary. Han is a cross between James Bond and Jackie Chan, and his adventures show how regional preoccupations can be translated into different genres. The dispute over the island-state's sovereignty in *The Missing Page*, Malaysia's threatened invasion of Singapore in *Crisis in the Straits: Malaysia Invades Singapore* (2001), the take on current water-disputes in *Ransom* (2002), and the disappearance of Singapore during a diplomatic crisis between China and the USA in *The Missing Island* (2002) set familiar action-stories in the region. The horrors associated with imported fictions break into a familiar world, and there is a certain degree of originality in the transposition of science fiction or horror clichés into the quietude of Singaporean daily life. In *Crisis in the Straits*, for example, Han's wife runs *amok* in the Takashimaya, an upmarket department store (131), and a baby is attacked by birds that are manipulated by mysterious technology while living in an expatriate enclave (19). Sensitive issues are taken up; anxieties are spelled out and projected onto dystopian near-cataclysms; and local issues become the concern of impressive super-agents. Focusing on terrorist attempts to poison Singapore's water supply, *Ransom* engages with rising concerns about terrorist networks in the region and a water-dispute between Singapore and Malaysia. Simultaneously, the interweaving of local jokes that stab at international politics pokes fun at the science fiction genre itself. The plausible meets the blatantly ridiculous almost seamlessly. *Ransom* opens with the Singaporean football team set to enter the world cup; *The Missing Page* announces that Harrison Ford has become the president of the United States and that the Americans have landed two men on Mars; *Crisis in the Straits* lists a conglomeration of futuristic events:

A 40-year-old man in Sweden became the first male to give birth to a child. The United States finally developed the long-awaited magnetic highway. . . . In Asia, a war between China, Japan and South Korea almost erupted following the discovery of a potentially oil-rich island off the South China sea. (25)

Chua's novels reflect millennial anxieties and hopes; yet, they remain infused with a recognizable local flavour for a communal readership. While new economic developments shape the plots, the sensational potential of the millennium, with all its (narrative) promises, horrors, and special bugs, clearly sold books. A pre-millennium novel, *The Missing Page* is particularly replete with evangelical speculations that express millennium paranoia. The economic transformation of Batam, an Indonesian island near Singapore, is premised on the millennium's first tragedy on the resort-island Bali: "The millennium's first seismic wave disaster was so tremendous and expansive that not a single building was left standing on the island" (19). *Crisis in the Straits* even more pointedly spells out dystopian realities beneath economic success: "The new millennium had ironically brought about a divided economic world, which few world leaders had anticipated. Size seemed the only logical way to compete and survive in an increasingly smaller world" (25). Replicating dystopian fictions of virtual realities that have swamped the global movie-market, *Ransom* capitalizes on the dangers of the dot.com boom: "In the merciless corporate world of the new millennium, dot.com companies began sprouting all over Singapore like mushrooms in a damp open field" (30). Terrorists are ridiculously codenamed Dotcom, Website, and Virus. A similar interest in millennium anxieties informs Ooi Yang-May's novels; yet, these texts go further in exposing the paranoia of the times and the dangers of evangelical millennialism in new forms. Published by a British press and marketed as thrillers both in the region and abroad, they evince new opportunities for fiction set in the region's booming urban centres such as the city-state Singapore or, to a more limited extent, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia's capital, to go beyond the ethnographic mapping of the "postcolonial exotic."

Although the market for thrillers in and about Singapore has expanded rapidly over the last few years, it is surpassed by the more steadily growing popularity of ghost story collections since the publication of Russell Lee's hugely successful *The Almost Complete Collection of True Singapore Ghost-Stories* in 1989. The "runaway bestseller of the Singapore book fair '89," as the blurb proudly proclaims, it has spawned an entire series. That Catherine Lim, one of Singapore's most estab-

lished and internationally known writers, has published a collection of ghost-stories, *The Howling Silence*, in Singapore in 1999, clearly testifies to its marketability. Other Singaporean collections include *Death Rites: Tales from a Wake* (1990) by K.K. Seet; *Evil Eyes* (1992) by Pugalenthii, Noel Chia, and Rashid Saini; and F.J. George's *Teenagers' Ghost-Stories* (1991). Russell Lee's more recent collections revealingly caution against "pirated" versions using occidental ghosts: "And do remember that I only write for Angsana's *True Singapore Ghost-Stories* . . . then you have the genuine stuff in your hands. If not, don't buy the book!" (*Collection Book 10* n.p.) Most ghost-stories are in English, although Othman Wok's *Macabre Tales of Singapore and Malaysia in the 50s* (1991) and *Tales of Horror and Mystery: More Macabre Tales from Singapore, Malaya and Indonesia* (2002) have been translated from Malay and compiled by the author's daughter. Ignored and almost forgotten for nearly half a century, these tales have been rediscovered for a readership hungry for more local horror.

In Book 10 of his collection, Russell Lee capitalizes on the genre's success as he ridicules the aversion to ghost stories expressed by academics who deplore the lack of more "serious" literary productions. Ironically, the derision Lee evinces is steeped in class-alignments that at once replicate and invert these critiques of popular culture. The consumption of local ghost-stories, Lee further suggests, feeds on and into a preference for local, multicultural food over the proverbial cup of tea: "It shouldn't surprise us that there are some Singaporeans who, as Dr Kirpal writes, 'cringe' at what most of us like to read. . . . I do enjoy the sarabat and roti prata, char kway teow and kopi-o, or nasi lemak, even though it may not be Mr Rich Snob Singaporean's cup of tea" (Lee *Collection Book 10* n.p.). In this, Lee responds to Kirpal Singh's repeated comments on the ghost story collection's doubtful claims to fame as Singapore's most prolific genre. As Singh puts it in *Singapore Book World* in the early nineties, when he attempts to qualify his earlier enthusiasm about the increasing output of "popular" fiction, "[i]n reading some of the recent fiction published I am not assured that the direction we are taking is altogether wholesome or qualitatively better" (21). In the introduction to the more recent volume of *Interlogue: Studies in Singaporean Literature* dedicated

to fiction, Singh complains even more pointedly that Singapore is being “flooded with ‘popular’ texts” and refers directly to Lee’s series:

take the many ghost stories books, especially those by the “phantom” writer Russell Lee. Whoever this person is, he/she hit on the right formula and thousands flock to the bookshops every time a new volume in the famous/infamous Ghost Stories Volume appears. . . . Add . . . the many other titles which are commonly seen staring at us even in *mama* stalls around HDB estates and we get some idea of what many out there are really paying money for to read. (xiv)

Lee’s sarcastic reference to the consumption of food pinpoints the main objection to the popular genre as an unrefined consumer product and answers Singh’s dismissive references to the Indian corner-shops (or *mama* stalls) near the subsidized Housing Development Board (HDB) blocks. Moreover, Lee critiques the imported colonial criteria that underlie this distinction in the first place. A local mix of dishes, inexpensively available at street stalls, nicely encapsulates Singapore’s multiethnic population, composed of Chinese, Malays, Indians, and those groups subsumed as “others” in the official ethnographic categories. The cuisine and the people are contrasted pointedly with the cup (or dish) of tea that continues to be associated with the upmarket High Tea practised in overpriced restaurants and hotels as part of a marketed colonial nostalgia. The local ghost stories feed on an imported genre; yet, so do the criteria that seek to categorize their literary worth.

Although a number of these stories take place in Singapore or neighbouring countries and some contain references to ancient Chinese or Malay tales, the majority are influenced by “Western” clichés. Russell Lee’s series has moreover become increasingly moralizing, harking particularly on a conservative Christian attitude to abortion, contrasting with other popular collections of ghost- and horror-stories that attempt to engage with local issues as more than a backdrop. In Book 10 Lee, for example, sets out to investigate human sacrifice through the ages, providing a gruesome list of sensationalized atrocities that range from ancient burial grounds to the Holocaust. He refers to “The new gods:

Money, Lust and Self,” and says, “Human sacrifice in the guise of abortion is still rife today. We sacrifice these lives because of three demons which we call ‘Money,’ ‘Lust’ and ‘Self’” (56). Abortion, Lee stresses repeatedly, in case the message has not come across, “is a medical holocaust” (54).

Catherine Lim’s *The Howling Silence* includes a story featuring an aborted foetus haunting its mother. Yet, the briefly invoked “pro-life” agenda is interwoven with ancient Chinese beliefs in the ghosts of the unborn and a social critique of both “Western” and “Eastern” cultures in Singapore. In “Temple of the Little Ghosts,” Rosalind keeps up the tradition of having abortions, a tradition “carried on by the entire female line, from her mother backwards through her grandmother, great-grandmother and forbears lost in the mists of the remote past, way back to the ancestral village in southern China” (32). However, it is in accordance with the cultural alignment of “the West” with corruption or sexual depravity as promoted by “Asian values” that she becomes pregnant while in the United States “for a working stint”; “There she fell in love and lived with a man who turned out to be totally unsuitable” (34). His unsuitability remains unspecified, and, the reader is left to imagine his ineligious qualities. The abortion is as much the result of unsuitable Western affairs as of an Asian family tradition.² Caught between Roman Catholicism and a submerged belief in vengeful ghosts of the dead and the unborn, Rosalind finally exorcises the baby-ghost by making a pilgrimage to the Temple of the Little Ghosts, erected by “[a]nother similarly guilt-stricken woman” in China (34) and by joining Western pro-life organizations. The story ends with the first person narrator marvelling at the conflation of Rosalind’s beliefs, epitomized by the books on her shelves: “I see copies of her beloved Shakespeare on a shelf side by side with *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* and an impressive-looking tome called *The Psychology of Guilt*” (38). The ghost story has thus become a vehicle of cross-cultural comparisons.

As they capitalize on the region’s specific horrors, the marketing and analysis of such transpositions of cultural conflicts have begun to encompass recent publications by Malaysian presses as well, and this is vital to the ongoing ethnographic remapping in Singapore’s new thrill-

ers. Published in English, the thrillers cater predominantly to the regional market. Tunku Halim Abdullah's horror-stories, published by a Malaysian press, for example, cast an important light on this growing interest in ghost- or horror-stories that have more than just a local (or regional) backdrop. Born and raised in Malaysia and educated in Britain, Tunku Halim lives in Australia, where he works as a corporate solicitor; yet, his fiction is emphatically crafted for the Malaysian and Singaporean Anglophone book-market. His collection contains titles like *The Rape of Martha Teoh & Other Chilling Stories* (1997), *Bloodhaze: 15 Chilling Tales* (1999), or *The Woman who Grew Horns & Other Works* (2001). In his novel, *Dark Demon Rising* (1997), Halim not only evokes the historical background of Malaysia's early post-Independence era in the mid-sixties, but also makes use of Malay legends of vampires. Storytellers revive the horrors of the past after an elderly foreign scholar conducting research on "Folklore: Demons and Vampires in Malay Culture" stirs up the past. The colonial vestiges that hold on to the old man mark him out as a part of the past as well:

"So you've come to hear of demons?" The elderly gentleman stared out of an inquiring milky face, brightly lit by the strong sun, a shock of white hair sprang back, skywards towards the spidery coconut trees. A white-brimmed hat sat on his knobbly fingers, a matching safari suit, reminiscent of colonial times, hung to his thin body. . . . "And about vampires?" (9)

While his inquiries of eyewitnesses establish an emphatic claim to authenticity, there is an air of deliberate research about the story, and this links it to the ghost and mystery stories by colonialists and early post-Independence expatriates. Somerset Maugham's stories of fateful curses and inexplicable occurrences form a literary legacy that has informed subsequent neo-orientalist anecdotes of colonial Malaya and later the postcolonial nation-states Singapore and Malaysia. Further, via more recent adaptations of the genre, locally produced ghost stories have been influenced as well. It is these linguistic and literary aspects of colonial influence that facilitate the ready absorption of Malaysian Anglophone writers in the marketing of "local" thrillers in Singapore—most specifi-

cally in Singaporean bookstores. Paul Theroux's *Sinning with Annie and Other Stories* (1969) and *The Consul's File* (1977), for example, written in and about early post-Independence Malaysia and Singapore, are already self-reflexively ironic about writing regional anecdotes of the last colonials in Maugham's wake. "A Deed without a Name," in Theroux's earlier collection, describes expatriates in Singapore who "fancied themselves amateur detectives, better than the fictional ones" (153). Their "infatuation . . . with murder stories of quite a different stripe" is evoked twice to indicate that their orientalism is steeped in their desire for the exotic: "They had such things as tiger skins and opium pipes, fascinating Oriental pots, and bric-a-brac imprinted with abracadabra" (155–57). *The Consul's File* contains episodes in which only local superstitions can account for mysterious occurrences. A clear example of this is the "hopeless liaison" (52) between a Malaysian prince who wants to be American and an expatriate woman who aims at being Malay ends when the woman is repeatedly raped by a Malay incubus or demon and the prince wrongly sent to prison.

The somewhat belated three-fold impact of ghost stories on locally produced fiction comes only after realist beginnings and a vehement rejection of the supernatural. At the most basic level, C.M. Woon's *The Advocate's Devil* (2002) replicates Maugham's short-stories, combining a detective-plot, a touch of the supernatural, and local atmosphere: "I had been precipitated in the midst of a murder-mystery, zipping around Singapore town with the legendary Clarence d'Almeida, who even now was hot on the trail of the killer. Who needs fiction?" (32). Second, as we have seen, the popular genre of the ghost story has built on this colonial legacy; and finally, romance—and even realistic social-issues—novels have recently integrated aspects of the ghost story. Catherine Lim has included ghosts and gods as a supernatural undercurrent of her globally marketed, and locally immensely popular, romances of subaltern women. They are in pointed contrast to her earlier social-issues novel, *The Serpent's Tooth* (1982), in which a self-consciously "modern" woman struggles against her mother-in-law's Chinese superstitions, waging a losing war on herbal brews and the old woman's conversations with her late husband.

Lim's most recent novels feature a wealth of dreams, mysterious tokens, and communions with goddesses. The bondmaid's story in the eponymous novel ends with her transformation into urban legend: "Stories began to spread of a goddess residing in the pond, who worked miracles" ("Epilogue" n.p.). In an attempt to protect "a little dilapidated shrine in the way of a three-hundred-million dollar industrial development project" ("Prologue" n.p.), the bondmaid's former master, reduced to the crazed caretaker of her shrine, is killed by fire, thereby fulfilling the prediction that they would be united in death. *Following the Wrong God Home* presents an old servant's ineffectual struggle to protect a piece of land, chosen by her god-with-no-home, against "the construction of the giant petrochemicals plant" (263). Like the caretaker in *The Bondmaid*, she dies of injuries sustained in a fire that razes the shrine. In contrast to Lim's earlier accounts of the struggles between modernization and tradition in colonial Malaya and Singapore, in these works ghosts and gods are poised against globalization and building-projects that sterilize the city's rich past. Yet, a recent local social-problems novel, *Heartland* (1999) by the younger writer Daren V.L. Shiau, reverts to the dismissal of the supernatural that has become a standard feature of ethnographic fiction. "[T]hat the blocks near Ghim Moh were built over a hilly Hakka [a Chinese dialect group] burial site" is nothing more than an urban legend that can safely be ignored as an "unusual story": "But soon, the unusual story that the bricks of the estate were set on vacated tombs would only be legend" (33). By contrast, in the epilogue to Lim's *The Song of Silver Frond*, the heroine's descendant takes the exhumation of graves—"part of an ongoing exercise of the government to reclaim land for residential and industrial use" (328)—as an opportunity to mix her ancestor's ashes with that of her husband to fulfil her unrealized wish to be buried closer to him than his first wife: "I went away in the joy of having enabled a wonderful ancestor, more than thirty years later, to finish singing her song," she claims (328). Exhumation opens up new possibilities for the dead; yet, it is nonetheless a sign of modernization that is starkly opposed to the impressive mansions and quaint shanty-villages of the main plot.

Although not all ghosts in recent local novels feature in struggles against modernization, nor are they necessarily part of local legends,

Goh Sin Tub includes the tellingly titled story “Ghost from a Collapsed Hotel” in his second collection of ghost-stories. Some texts have little to do with the locale in which they appear. The companionable ghosts in Gopal Baratham’s *Moonrise, Sunset* (1995) or Marie Gerrina Louis’s *The Eleventh Finger* (2000), visualized as the half-faded replica of their human bodies, are very much the kindly spectres of Hollywood comedy. In both novels, the ghost of a loved one (a suicidal mother, a murdered lover) keeps the first-person narrator company, sitting in the back of a car or on the edge of a desk. Visible only to the narrator (and the reader), the ghosts listen to the conversations of the living, nodding vigorously or shaking their heads to assist in murder-cases. At one point in Louis’s novel, the narrator dismisses the spectre of the past: “Go away, Mum, I told her apparition wearily and she obligingly disappeared” (236). Even more comically, the narrator of Baratham’s novel is in a state of permanent sexual arousal as his dead lover “haunts” him. This ghost does not disappear until her murder has been solved, reinstating elements of the murder-mystery into a self-ironic critique of Singaporean society that Ban Kah Choon has called Baratham’s “great comic vision” (39).

The murder-mystery with a local backdrop or involved in local issues has become increasingly popular. Writers of these texts aim to fuse internationally popular clichés and a local imaginary. Although the neurosurgeon Gopal Baratham, a member of Singapore’s Indian minority, and Ooi Yang-May, a Malaysian-Chinese lawyer living in London, have published both local and global financial thrillers with foreign presses, the local ghost story as well as the globally marketed thriller are published primarily by Singaporean presses. *The Eleventh Finger* by the Malaysian-Indian Marie Gerrina Louis was published by a Singaporean press. A social-issues novel, it qualifies as a detective story and is engaged with two suicides, a murder, and a false accusation of murder. As in Baratham’s, Woon’s, and Ooi’s novels, Louis’s main protagonists include lawyers who have to act as amateur-detectives in cases that involve them on a personal, even intimate, level. Nor Farida Abdul Manaf and M.A. Quayum have argued that Louis’s short story “Extenuating Circumstances” “breaks away from the Anglophone women’s writing tradition through its use of the detective genre” (387). With *The*

Eleventh Finger, she furthers this interest in the genre and combines it with aspects of the social-issues novel. Its focus on domestic violence and class issues ties in with the murder-mysteries to serve as extenuating circumstances for the heroine's criminal acts.

This new centrality of elements of the thriller has, in fact, not simply displaced, but in many ways integrated, the postcolonial agenda of earlier "writing back" projects. This is not to say that early fiction did not include thrillers. *The China Affair* by Kirpal Singh, who later emigrated to Canada, was published in 1972. Kirpal Singh, an academic of the same name as the aforementioned writer, has compared it with another Singaporean novel that came out in the same year: *If We Dream Too Long* by Goh Poh Seng. While the latter is a conscious attempt to portray daily life in early post-Independence Singapore "in a contemplative, philosophical manner," *The China Affair* "is good entertainment," as if one precluded the other: "as the blurb tells us, [it is] 'an exciting tale of international intrigue' [with] absolutely no pretension to literary sophistication" (Singh 68). It sold very well both locally, and abroad and was even considered for a film. Admitting its "popular" appeal, Singh seems to suggest that this popularity indicates its failure as a literary achievement: "Goh's novel becomes topical and dated as the Singaporean scene changes . . . whereas [Kirpal]Singh's novel remains a good read" (68).

Goh's novel, however, has spawned the local genre of the social problem novel, and has thus exerted a different, yet significant, influence on Singapore's specifically urban thrillers. The Singaporean social-issues novel can, in fact, be traced from Philip Jeyaretnam's *First Loves*, a surprising success in 1987, and Colin Cheong's *The Stolen Child* (1989) to Shiau's *Heartland*, which takes up plots and even names from these earlier novels. Thus, Cheong's main character Wings becomes Shiau's Wing, for example. In many ways, locally published fiction has continued to follow in the tradition of urban social-issues novels, while internationally printed and marketed novels, including works by diasporic writers, are still primarily limited to postcolonial or "exotic" historical fiction. These works are inflected by the global publishing strategies that Huggan has perceptively analyzed in his study of the "postcolonial exotic": an "alterity industry" entrenched in "mechanics of exoti-

cist representation/consumption” (x). While the fiction that is most popular among local readerships has long been confined to the denigrated ghost story and has only secondarily included historical novels or romances, more recently, novels have incorporated elements of the thriller into the fictions of the region and local or regional issues into fully-fledged thrillers. I have taken Chua’s novels as an entry point to this significant development and Lim’s as a very different engagement with shifting attitudes to ghostly urban legends. Louis’s *The Eleventh Finger* and Baratham’s *Moonrise, Sunset* use local ghosts divorced from local contexts, but they are also important examples of this trend, and I shall come back to the latter’s critique of what is represented as a specifically Singaporean economic awareness. In the remainder of this essay, I shall take up examples of such local thrillers that have tackled this new interest in the genre in different ways, including Rex Shelley’s spy-novels, Ooi’s financial thrillers, and Cheong’s *The Man in the Cupboard*, winner of the 1998 Singapore Literature Prize Award. The latter neatly exemplifies a new focus on the criminal’s mind, as anarchic energies are harnessed and marketed as a subversive fiction, while often being comically presented.

Even while Singapore appears to retreat to the margins of the narrative, Cheong’s *The Man in the Cupboard* ridicules prevailing cultural alignments, including the much-used cliché of the corrupted or corrupting (English) literature teacher in Singaporean fictions. Pointedly, the first-person narrator links his desire to murder his wife to an individualism learned from literature: “The only things that I could really be said to be crazy about were books—English Literature to be specific” (6).³ The connection between literature, individuality, and murderous madness is evoked repeatedly and in a delightfully self-ironic way: “Well, at least as a literature teacher, I’m supposed to have pretensions to individuality. But to be an individualist—one has to have a certain amount of assertiveness, which you probably gather by now, I did not have. And still don’t—unless murder is an act of assertion” (13). The novel ridicules alignments that lump these imported goods together as valueless and dangerous, just as it circumvents the cheap psychologizing that ruins so many social-issues novels. In diagnosing himself as a

submissive, as one who has failed to assert his individuality, the narrator conjures up contrasting “extenuations”:

My mother used to be like really proud of that fact though—that I was a nice, helpful, obliging boy who was quiet and undemanding . . . I was so good (read submissive) that I was made class monitor with three other submissives (yes, I know that word's from S&M, but the connection to bondage is appropriate). (15)

“But if I were a therapist” (52), he reiterates, in order to poke fun at popular psychology. Motives for murder stretch across the psychology of the submissive and the problematics of a cross-class relationship, as the wife's nastiness is traced to “her upper middle-class upbringing, her accomplishments and her rank” (58). Finally, even the predicaments of “modern man” can be blamed: “A Ken doll made out of Plasticine. Mr. Ken Gumby. Which was a crock. Because all my life, I'd wanted to be Action Man,” (44). He is the feminized man dominated by his masculinized wife, and the novel indeed capitalizes on this clash of clichés—clichés epitomized by “Western” commercial products. Sexism is at once muted and accentuated by the narrator's self-inflicted ironic whining, and the result is comic as well as pathetic: “All I want is to be me” (48). His proclivity for literature helps him juggle with the mental, emotional, and class-driven clichés that parody psychological and sociological plots. Predictably, he leaves the closet only to collapse into submissiveness once more. Instead of smothering his wife with the smelly pillow she keeps complaining about, he bends over her and says “[t]hen I pull the comforter over her, right up to her chin” (105).

The novel has significant affinities with Baratham's in the implicitly, even gleeful, self-effacing critique of Singaporean society with its discourse of “Asian values,” and the ridicule of cheap psychologizing. The first-person narrator in *Moonrise, Sunset* also plays out unconvincing scenarios in his mind to account for his putative murder of his girlfriend, of which he is, in fact, totally innocent: “I began to invent reasons for the murder. I used to think that psychoanalysis was bullshit. . . . The picture wasn't convincing. I decided to try one even more bizarre” (25).

Plagued by his unconventional name, which invites a plethora of puns, his effeminate physiognomy—counterpoised by an oversized penis that is similarly the object of much comment—and his self-diagnosed “peculiar” mental processes (12), How Kum Menon is unique in his ethnic make-up (Hokkien mother, unknown Malayalee father), his background (raised by his mother’s employer/lover Oscar Wellington Wu), love-interest in the Indian girl Vanita, and the ways he sees the world. He is an individual among groups of communities that are as bizarre to him as they are exclusive: “I see things different from other people. The sky talks to me, sends messages in rainstorms and lightning. . . . This is how the world has always been to me; this is how, I hope, it will always be. I keep my thoughts to myself, however. If I didn’t, people would think me mad” (1). Despite this gesture towards psychological typecasting in the opening chapter, such attempts are evoked only to be ridiculed, as are the esoteric would-be analysts from America. Science and mumbo-jumbo mutate nicely into each other: “I realised that Mohan was telling me in Hindu jargon what Quincey said in sociological mumbo-jumbo. By Mohan’s book it was karma that made us bad. By Quincey’s, it was perverse genes” (207).

Baratham’s murder-mystery ultimately boils down to money issues. The cross-cultural relationship is a red herring that confuses detectives, analysts, and mediums: “It’s never sex or race, you know. It’s always cash, big dong. Cash is what makes people kill” (272). Most importantly, this critique is aimed specifically at Singaporean society: “Revenge, disapproval and that kind of thing are only motives for murder in TV soaps. In the real world people kill for money. Especially in Singapore where they do everything for money” (75). As critics regularly point out, Baratham is one of Singapore’s most controversial writers. Peter Wicks has called Baratham’s first novel, *A Candle or the Sun* (1991), a “political fable of conspiracy and intrigue [that] attracted considerable public comment” (“Singapore” 75–76). Leong Liew Geok has used it as an example of “dissenting voices” in Singaporean novels to show how politics have “forcibly redirected” the direction novels take (285). Thus, Baratham’s earlier novel pointedly satirizes a simplistic understanding of “Asian values” as the manager of a furniture-store decides to “install

traditional Asian values” by selling fake Chinese antiques instead of “Western” products: “We must flung [sic] out false Western values leading to moral decay, unemployment and social welfare. No more imitating falsity” (45). Throughout his fiction, Baratham keeps returning to his central critique of the role of the individual in Singapore and its fictions; yet, that critique is always mediated through a comic, self-reflexive, and ironic vision.

The exposure of simplistic polarizations of “Asian values” debates also drives Ooi’s thrillers. These novels, published in Britain, take Southeast Asia’s emerging cityscapes as points of entry into critiques of a globalizing capitalism. At the same time, however, they also seek to dismantle the typecasting involved in anti-globalization campaigns. In *The Flame Tree* (1998), a development project in the Malaysian jungle literally collapses. Out of the rubble emerges a much maligned Western “greenie” as the heroine’s true love. An independent consultant, he is neither one of those “Western environmentalists who are like Victorian missionaries, [and who] come in with their own agenda to take up a local cause and twist it to fit what they think is best for you” (118), nor is he a lover of the Orient who seeks a “child of the East, uncorrupted by our English hypocrisy” (263), unlike his double, the heroine’s upper-class husband. Despite the centrality of the development project, this is no clear-cut story of tradition versus modernization, nor one of “Western” environmentalists versus “Asian” pursuit of technology. The titular tree does not symbolize untouched tropical nature, but rather conceals a gruesome murder. Nothing really is what it appears to be, and Ooi foils ethnographic readings.

Mindgame (2000) takes this dismantling of clichés further. The heroine, a Chinese-Malaysian lawyer, needs to decide between two (white) female lovers, who are caught up in a witch-hunt instigated by the fictitious Asian Values Association (AVA) and the Pentagon’s secret machinations. Singapore is very pointedly featured as the showcase of rapid urban development, of a postcolonial city that, AVA rhetoric announces, “transformed itself from a little-known mosquito-infested backwater into [a] financial hub,” serving as a useful contrast to the picture the AVA paints of the rest of Asia as “a single mind . . . divided . . . by the conflict

between old and new” (33–34). Most significantly, culture-clashes and cultural stereotyping, used by the AVA and its opponents, as well as by the developers and environmentalists in Ooi’s earlier novel, are reworked repeatedly. The reader’s expectations are successively shattered. The exposure of an American double agent delivers the final shock. They had trusted him “[b]ecause he had been white. An American. Swamped in all the AVA’s anti-Western polemic, they had instinctively turned to the man who had been other” (432–33). Alterity alone is no guarantee of alternative discourses; shared ethnicity not a sign of affinity. Conversely, the AVA’s founder feeds as much on discourses of “Asian values” as on the evangelicalism learnt as “a fervent ‘born-again’ Christian in Sydney” (34–35). A newly sanitized pan-Asia is to “take the helm through the new millennium” (34), but as a secret agent doubling as local thug puts it, this is merely millennial rhetoric: “He didn’t care about politics or any of the moral niceties the Suits droned on about. Western values, Asian traditions, liberal sentiments, right-wing dogma—they were all a smokescreen for the same fucking thing: Power” (64). Most importantly, this exploration of cultural and ethnic typecasting on a specifically regional and a global scale is integral to the thriller. It is much more than a backdrop: it is central to the plot.

In an essay on Rex Shelley’s use of ethnicity in his historical novels, Patricia Wong distinguishes between its accidental and incidental functions. In *The Shrimp People* (1991), Shelley creates a panoramic account of the Eurasian community in the former Straits Settlements, roughly what is now Singapore and parts of Malaysia. Yet, suddenly towards the middle of the sizable book, this emphatically ethnographic introduction to a hitherto neglected community, with its litany of Portuguese-Eurasian, Dutch-Eurasian, Anglo-Eurasian names, turns into a story of espionage and terrorism. Analyzing the ways the novel effects “its mutation into spy thriller” (51), Wong argues that ethnicity is the reason the text mutates (46). Simply being Eurasian singles out the central character, Bertha Rodrigues, as an ideal spy and, as it turns out, a double-agent, “committed to do all she could to prevent the formation of Malaysia [and] the merger of Singapore and Malaysia” (370). Symbolically, another Eurasian, “Wee Andy”, has to die to prevent her double-play from

being exposed. Eurasians embody the meeting of East and West in the novel and its sequels; yet, there is a certain irony, an ambiguity, harbouring disruptions of this neat categorization. The celebration of the region's history and the Eurasian community engenders much more than a "tale . . . woven around a small minority in Southeast Asia: mixtures of the East and West known as Eurasians" (5).

People of the Pear Tree (1993) and *Island in the Centre* (1995), Shelley's subsequent novels, work to simplify representations by filtering them through the perceptions of a Japanese protagonist. In the first, a Japanese officer falls in love with a woman who is "a mixture of the east and the west" (50), helps to save her family during the Japanese occupation in World War II, and ultimately marries her. The epilogue emphatically denounces post-war prejudices against the Japanese. In the latter, the diary of a Japanese engineer learning English portrays Shelley's commitment to linguistic authenticity beyond representations of the changing local patois and introduces the reader to the Eurasian community through the eyes of an outsider. Most importantly, Shelley's novels highlight the multiplicity of the region's communities. Unlikely individuals become involved in espionage networks. Like Bertha, they are marked by their background. To transcend simplistic categorisations, Shelley juxtaposes different minorities. In *A River of Roses* (1998), so far the last of the "Shrimp People" novels, a Eurasian woman falls in love with a Baba Chinese, a member of the region's Peranakan (locally-born) culture, which had evolved from intermarriages of Chinese and Malays over the centuries. His ethnicity becomes symbolic in the discussion of the nation's future:

Keh's a Chinese. And a Baba. But neither of these completely. You know, he's genuinely concerned that we should build a Malaya out of the shrewdness of the Chinese, the warmth and people-sensitivities of the Malays, with bits of *Klings* and *Seranis*, or even the Singapore Jews thrown in. (*A River* 262)

Eurasians and Peranakans are drawn together as outcasts, and yet there are ways of typecasting at work that need to be further exposed. Thus, in *Island in the Centre*, a Baba sees his specificity reflected in that of a Eurasian woman: "The spirit in the woman. Un-Chinese. Un-European.

Un-Malay. Un-anything. . . . Un-classifiable. Outside of the realms of all their ethnic pigeonholes. And therefore, to them, outcast” (102). However, he considers her to be outside his cliché of the Eurasians as well: “She can’t be *Serani* [Eurasian]. They’re not like that.” (101) Conversely, he serves to dismantle stereotypes of the Babas: “Hey, this guy is no limpid Baba, she said to herself.” (101) Wicks has suggested that the Eurasians’ distinctive historical experience “richly frames” Shelley’s fiction (“Eurasian” 377). It does more than that. First, a self-reflexively ironic undercurrent ruptures cultural categorizations. Whenever characters engage in ethnic typecasting, they imbue it with irony, thereby exposing any symbolic reading as flawed: “Marrying the Chinese astrology with the western. Surely nobody could do that better than a Eurasian? Ha, ha, she chuckled to herself, you’re getting senile sweetheart” (*A River* 80). Second, as Wong has suggested, the spy-story is premised on the protagonists’ ethnic distinctiveness. To read it as a mere backdrop or to see the introduction of the thriller as a generic disruption is a failure to recognise what Shelley’s novels achieve as they represent generic and other forms of hybridity.

The new interest in popular genres such as the thriller, the detective-story, or science fiction in Singapore’s fictions of the region clearly includes the integration of local concerns. As we have seen, even some of the prolific ghost story collections produce new engagements with cross- and multicultural issues. When Ooi’s thrillers situate the problematics of globalization in the divide between urban Singapore and emulative jungle projects in Malaysia, the novels rework the postcolonial exotic and confront local reactions to complex issues. Like Baratham’s fiction, they shatter expectations raised by neo-orientalist and occidentalist stereotypes through the medium of the detective or mystery story. False leads are premised on ethnic typecasting. In fact, the meeting of orientalism with occidentalist “Asian values” discourses provides material for a thriller, and, at the same time, the genre exposes stereotyping strategies. Shelley’s novels do the same for neglected minorities in the region, moving beyond East-West clashes to foreground ethnic multiplicity. Although some recent genre novels, fall short of complex self-reflexive engagement with literary representation, most thrillers feed into

(as well as upon) these developments and are thus central to the widening of Singapore's fictions.

Notes

- 1 Shirley Lim criticizes Maniam's *The Return* (1981) and Catherine Lim's *The Serpent's Tooth* (1982) for slotting characters neatly into the two partitions of Indian/Chinese (old) culture and "Westernized" (new) society (142–43). More recently, in a review of Min's *Wild Ginger* (2002), Tan refers specifically to Asian-American novels that feed on this trend: a feisty, exotically gorgeous woman faces political/patriarchal adversity in China in a sensationally marketable plot. For a recent discussion of the impact of such diasporic novels on Singaporean novels see Wagner.
- 2 On Singapore's ongoing "Asian values" debates, "anti-Western" tags, and theories that postulate that the values labelled "Asian" were originally Victorian and absorbed at the height of imperialism see Mauzy and Milne (57, 213).
- 3 On Singapore's official bilingualism see Pakir: while English "is deemed necessary for access to cutting-edge technology and world markets," its use for cultural purposes has been controversial (263). Compare Talib on its instrumental versus cultural uses: "Another reason for the controversy was the association of the English language with Western values, which some people felt might threaten traditional Asian values" (1).

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