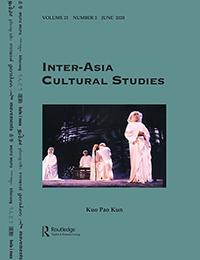
**Inter-Asia Cultural Studies**

**ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage:** [**https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/riac20**](https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/riac20)



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**To cite this article:** Sy Ren Quah (2020) Intellectual consciousness and the negation of the

intellectual class: Kuo Pao Kun’s pre-detention drama and its context, Inter-Asia Cultural Studies,

21:2, 212-224, DOI: [10.1080/14649373.2020.1759882](https://www.tandfonline.com/action/showCitFormats?doi=10.1080/14649373.2020.1759882)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649373.2020.1759882>



Published online: 25 Jun 2020.



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INTER-ASIA CULTURAL STUDIES



2020, VOL. 21, NO. 2, 212–224

https://doi.org/10.1080/14649373.2020.1759882

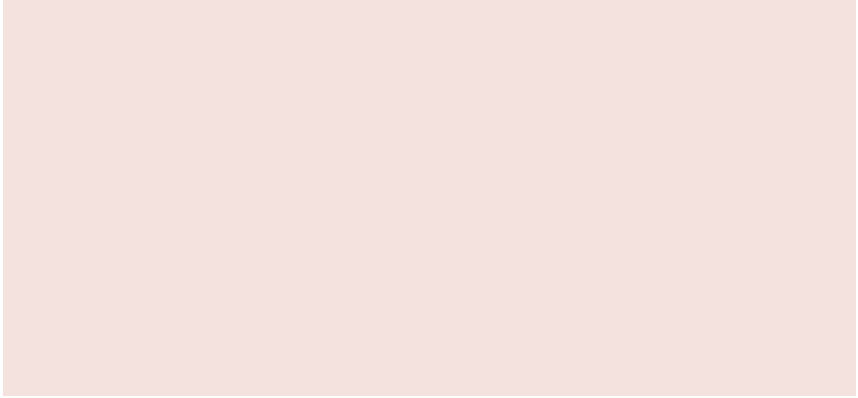


Intellectual consciousness and the negation of the intellectual class:

Kuo Pao Kun’s pre-detention drama and its context

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ABSTRACT

Kuo Pao Kun (1939–2002) is the most important dramatist in contemporary Singapore. His post-1980s works are extensively analysed but his artistic practices of his early years, though equally important, have rarely been discussed, partly due to the fact that relevant materials are available mainly in Chinese. This article provides a close examination of Kuo’s work in the 1960s and 1970s. Starting with a detailed delineation of his personal experience in relation to the development of his social and intellectual and consciousness, my discussion situates Kuo and his work within several layers of context, including modern Chinese cultural and intellectual thought and activism, especially the May Fourth movement, and the anti-colonial social and political activism of the Chinese-speaking intellectual community in Singapore from the 1950s.

KEYWORDS

Kuo Pao Kun; Singapore theatre; Singapore Performing Arts school; intellectual class; cultural activism

Recognised as one of the most important dramatists and cultural thinkers in contemporary Singa-pore, Kuo Pao Kun (1939–2002) was active artistically between 1965 and 2002, with a brief disrup-tion from 1976 to 1980. His theatrical repertoire, critical writing and cultural thought since the 1980s have been a great inspiration to many Singaporeans over many years, including those who collabo-rated with him in theatre and in intellectual circles, as well as the audiences who grew up and had part of their intellectual life nurtured by watching his plays and reading his thought. In the last three-and-a-half decades of the twentieth century, Singapore, in a postcolonial, high-capitalist era, has experienced rapid economic growth, along with the social and cultural transformations that follow from growth, and which achieved the status of a developed nation in merely one generation. Against this backdrop, Kuo’s body of work is both a powerful representation and an intense critique of the uncertainties emerging from the struggle with breaking away from old social forms and attaining new material gains. He is widely perceived as an emblematic figure who crossed the language, cul-tural and ethnic divides.1 The last twenty years of his life — which incidentally coincided with a highly capitalist-driven development in Singapore — are commonly labelled as his “post-detention period,” starting from 1980.

That, however, is only the second part of Kuo’s story. In 1976, at the prime and most-productive age of 37, he was arrested and detained without trial under the Internal Security Act for alleged invol-vement in politically subversive activism.2 He was detained for a period of four years and seven months, during which he was not only excluded from society but was also deprived of all artistic



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creation. This incident noticeably divided Kuo’s artistic life into two stages: a pre-detention period, ending in 1976, and a post-detention period, starting from his release in 1980. The latter part of his creative life has been well documented and extensively discussed. The question, however, is whether and how this emblematic figure’s post-detention work is connected to the period before 1976. And if a connection there is, what significance does that carry for our understanding of Kuo’s oeuvre?

This article will discuss Kuo’s cultural activism and theatre practice from 1965 to 1976, situating them within their varied historical contexts: these are, primarily, the tradition of Singapore’s modern Chinese-language theatre that started in the early decades of the twentieth century, predominantly inspired by the May Fourth, 1919, cultural and intellectual movement in China; the history of arts and social activism of Singapore’s Chinese-educated intelligentsia from the 1950s, which strongly identified with the regional and worldwide anti-colonial struggles; and Singapore’s socio-political development after independence from Malaysia in 1965 and into the 1970s. The 11 years before Kuo’s detention can be loosely subdivided (although with pertinent interconnections) into two phases with the year 1969 as a turning point, after which his work becomes more clearly politicised.

Kuo began his professional career with a deep concern for the underclass and a profound interest in introducing theatrical forms other than the conventional realist modes of representation. How-ever, he later adopted a social-realist approach to theatre making, signifying an ideological shift toward a closer partnership between theatre and social activism. Kuo and his theatre practice in the 1960s and 1970s needs to be examined as drawing from the intellectual tradition of modern Chi-nese theatre in China, and as part of the heightened social awareness in the anti-colonialist move-ment within the Chinese-educated intellectual community in Singapore. This article hopes to not only highlight the significance of Kuo’s pre-detention artistic practice, but also in the process to repo-sition our understanding of the history of artistic activism and social engagement in the pre- and immediate post-independence eras in Singapore.

The May Fourth tradition and the concern for the underclass

As a playwright and director, Kuo’s professional career in Singapore began in 1965. After working and studying in Australia for six years, he returned to the city-state and co-founded the Singapore Performing Arts School (SPAS) with his dancer-choreographer wife, Goh Lay Kuan, in July 1965.3 His personal experience as a high school student who witnessed the surge of intense anti-colonialism in the 1950s, and his professional exposure to theatre productions in Australia, both made an impact on his creative works and cultural practices during the first years back in Singapore. Kuo first became involved in the creative process of dance and directing short plays from 1965 to 1968, and later directed three Western classics (in Chinese translation) and two full-length local plays, one of which was penned by him. A common concern in these works in both translated and locally-written plays was the vivid representation of the plight and struggle of members of the underclass. To com-prehend the source of this concern, it is imperative to gain a sense of Kuo’s socio-historical milieu when he was a youth. The key components of this milieu are, first, the anti-colonial activism led pre-dominantly by the Chinese-educated intellectual class; and second, the particular ideas of being modern generated by mainland China’s May Fourth movement. The latter was a direct inspiration for the former.

Born in China’s rural Hebei province, Kuo left Beijing for Hong Kong, en route to Singapore. He arrived in Singapore in 1949, aged ten.4 Between 1953 and 1958, when the then-island colony was in a period of fervent social activism by Chinese middle-school students, Kuo attended a total of five schools, one after another: the Catholic High School; the Chung Cheng High School Branch at

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Kim Yam Road; the Chinese High School; Kallang West Government Chinese Middle School (the predecessor of Dunman Government Chinese Middle School and Dunman High School); and Pasir Panjang Government High School. As a high-school student, Kuo witnessed the May Thir-teenth Incident (1954), during which Chinese middle-school students held demonstrations in oppo-sition to the attempt to enforce conscription by the British colonial government.5 In 1956, he personally participated in a student strike in Chung Cheng High School, in opposition to govern-ment’s forced closure of several student and social organisations. As a result of his participation in these student movements, Kuo was transferred by his father to the Kallang West school, one of the Chinese middle schools set up by the Labour Front government of then-Singapore chief minister David Marshall to counter the anti-colonial forces within traditional Chinese middle schools, which were allegedly infiltrated by the communists. Although largely perceived (and rightly so) to be directly inspired by China’s May Fourth movement, the Chinese-educated intellectual-activists in Singapore “had moved out of the confines of strictly Chinese-focussed issues, to link themselves to a larger historical context of anti-colonial movement identifying as predecessors the students of China, India and Indonesia who played a role in their country’s liberation” (Hong 2011, 100). A key concern here was what British Malaya — including Singapore — could become if indepen-dence was gained from Great Britain. Although the experience and spirit of the Chinese middle school student movements, the resistance against colonialism, and the imagining of a modern, inde-pendent Malaya were not expressed directly in Kuo’s works of that time, they have nevertheless later emerged in various permutations in his theatre, all the way to those in his last years (Quah 2002).

Intellectually enlightened and imbued with idealism, students have often occupied the centre stage of the Chinese pursuit of modernity. From the Gongche Shangshu movement in 1895, when the civil examination candidates initiated a petition to Emperor Guangxu against the Treaty of Shi-monoseki, to the May Fourth movement in 1919, Chinese students, as an intellectual class, were in the avant-garde in leading China’s desire and hope for socio-political transformation. The May Fourth generation represented a strong resistance against the forces of tradition and a dissatisfaction with social backwardness: they aspired to subvert the status quo with literature and art as eﬀective media in introducing modern Western ideologies. As the literary critic Marston Anderson put it, Chinese intellectuals of the May Fourth generation created a “new literature” and aspired to “pave the way for a complete transformation of Chinese society” (Anderson 1990, 3). In the context of the pursuit of modernity, Western literature and art — especially the modern tradition of realism with a strong utilitarian function — became a useful means for enabling social intervention and could eﬀectively be integrated with social activism. Chinese intellectuals chose realism, amongst other “isms,” as that literary form which “oﬀered a necessary grid through which to view the vast quantity of new ideas and new information that suddenly became available when the doors to the West were opened” (Anderson 1990, 3).

Inspired by May Fourth developments, Singapore’s modern Chinese theatre in the 1950s was also intimately connected and closely collaborated with the student movements of the time. Theatre was directly involved in social activism, and was in turn inspired by it. The concern for society — especially for the underclass — and the link with theatre became deep-rooted in the intellectual con-sciousness of students. As a secondary one student in 1953, when Kuo was fourteen, he was involved in a school drama production, Millionaire Wang, a play that drew its content on the fundraising events in support of the Geylang Great Fire that happened earlier in the same year.6 He recalled that the students visited the site of the fire to interview victims and to collect information in prep-aration for a production (Kuo 2008 [1968], 23). The students who took part in this production showed a strong attachment by the educated class to society at large, and this spirit was apparently

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the motivation that initiated the “Go into Life” (tiyan shenghuo)7 movement in the late 1960s. I will return to this later.

Beyond the high-school school compound, Kuo was a member of the pioneer group which founded the Mandarin Drama Section within the cable radio station Rediﬀusion8 when he was a sec-ondary two student in 1954. That was also the year when the May Thirteenth Incident occurred. The 1950s are widely regarded as one of the most vibrant eras in the history of Singapore’s modern Chi-nese theatre. During this time, Chinese-language medium schools such as Chung Cheng High School, Chinese High School and Nan Chiau Girls’ High School, started their own drama societies that had regular activities and public performances. Several drama groups, such as Kang Leh Musical Association (1954) and Singapore Amateur Players (1955), were also established by recently gradu-ated Chinese school students. The Victoria Theatre, the biggest and most professionally equipped venue for theatre performances at the time, was their favourite choice as a performing venue (Quah 2013, 58–61, 64-68, 79-89). Many of these Chinese-educated theatre enthusiasts were also actively engaged in student and social activism. The plays that they staged were mainly drawn from the realist repertoire, such as The Government Inspector (1957) by Nikolai Gogol, or The Lower Depths (1958) by Maxim Gorky, as well as works by Chinese playwrights such as Cao Yu (1910–1996), Xia Yan (1900–1995) and Hong Shen (1894–1955), from the May Fourth generation, who were profoundly inspired by the European realist tradition. These writers and their works have the characteristics of a strong spirit of idealism, a deep concern for society, an intention to transform the status quo and a pursuit of a liberated future. The realist tradition and format appeared to be the most useful means to facilitate social criticism and resistance for the theatre activists in Singapore during the period of anti-colonial struggle.

Social and dramatic movements were at their height when Kuo was a high school student in the 1950s. A historical event signifying the end of this stage of anti-colonial struggle was when the People’s Action Party (PAP) won the general election and formed the first autonomous government in May 1959 — and the PAP continues to be in power now. Singapore was granted self-rule in 1959, with external relations still managed by the colonial authorities. Kuo in 1959 was a news reporter with Radio Singapore, which broadcast the news of the PAP victory.

A month later, Kuo left for Australia, and first worked at a radio station in Melbourne for three years, and subsequently graduated with a Diploma in Theatre Production from the National Institute of Dramatic Arts (NIDA) in Sydney. During his six years in Australia, Kuo also worked in pro-fessional theatre productions, as well as a construction worker in Queensland. In May 1965, he returned to Singapore. By then, the anti-colonial struggle was over. Singapore on 9 August 1965 would become an independent state after a short two-year stay as part of the new Federation of Malaysia (1963–1965), which included the former British North Borneo (renamed Sabah) and Sarawak. The six years when Kuo was not in Singapore turned out to be a time when Singapore’s political struggle was at its most intense, and when the social and political activism that evolved from the 1950s Chinese middle school students’ anti-colonial struggle met with the harshest oppression.9 Kuo was away and hence was not embroiled directly in any of the related activities during these diﬃcult years.

In 1965–1968, the first part of Kuo’s pre-detention artistic phase, the plays that he created and directed were fundamentally ongoing expressions of the Russian Realist tradition that had inspired the Chinese-educated generation of the 1950s, as culturally mediated by China’s May Fourth move-ment. However, there was also a new dramatic dimension that Kuo had acquired during his pro-fessional training in Australia: his selection of modern Western classics to be translated and produced in Singapore were notably diﬀerent from the European Realist repertoire (especially

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Russian plays) conventionally preferred by the Chinese-language theatre practitioners, which tended to focus on plays from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Kuo’s choice of plays, nonethe-less, still manifested the concern for the underclass, the underprivileged and maginalised communities.

The first full-length play Kuo directed in his professional career was Alan Seymour’s The One Day of the Year (1958). The Australian play was translated and adapted, and given a new name — The Trial — when it premiered in 1966. The new title appeared to be one that literally manifested the theme in a didactic manner, while the original title possessed a more ambiguous and metaphorical tone.10 In Kuo’s adapted version, ANZAC Day11 becomes represented as a positive symbol of nation-alism, as opposed to Seymour’s treatment of the problems associated with political remembrance — understandable in the context of Singapore’s recently achieved independence and the fervent cele-bration of nationhood. The renaming of titles in translated plays and the choice of didactic titles in original works, a consistent practice for Kuo until 1976, are unmistakeably an inherited charac-teristic of the May Fourth-inspired belief that drama, along with literature and the arts in general, are a means to eﬀect positive change to society.

In March 1967, Kuo produced and directed a second translated play by the American playwright Lorraine Hansberry, originally titled A Raisin in the Sun (1959), and renamed The Black Soul, high-lighting the struggle and plight of a black working class family. The purpose of staging this play was stated in the programme: “The play represented the struggle of the black people in the United States, which was as well the struggle of a universal nature closely relevant to us” (“Our Words” 1967).12 It is apparent that Kuo critically apprehended the theme of the play in the context of the 1960s civil rights movement, although the characters were played by Mandarin-speaking actors with their faces painted black, which was undertaken as a technical issue, rather than an approach with racist undertones.

In December 1967, Kuo chose to stage the German playwright Bertolt Brecht’s The Caucasian Chalk Circle, which was renamed The Caucasian Mother, clearly to emphasise the dilemma of the protagonist. Until then, as noted, translated plays to be staged were mostly drawn from a late-nine-teenth and early-twentieth century repertoire, many of which had been translated into Chinese by May Fourth generation writers, published in China and locally available in Singapore. Kuo’s choice of plays tended to be the more recent classics, which were closer to contemporary realities and social contexts. Among these plays, The Caucasian Chalk Circle, written by Bertolt Brecht in 1944, and pre-miered in 1948, was the farthest back in time. Even so, the play’s premier was merely two decades before Kuo staged his translated version of it. Both in terms of issues represented in these works, such as identity and the class struggle, and the dramatic techniques employed, such as Brecht’s alienation eﬀect that intended to push the audience to critically engage with reality, these modern works were more directly relevant to Singapore’s social realities in the 1960s, when compared with the late-nine-teenth and early-twentieth century plays. They were more eﬀective in facilitating timely reflections on current issues and problems at a time when Singapore was in a transitional phase experiencing the fading out of colonialism, an ongoing exploration for a suitable model of social and economic development, as well as an emerging quest for post-independence identity construction.

Nevertheless, however relevant the themes and issues might be in these translated plays, with their socio-historical settings in remote and foreign lands could only function as metaphors in reference to the realities in Singapore. Kuo began to produce and direct original plays that directly explore var-ious pressing social problems in the hope of providing definitive directions forward. In 1966, just one year after the founding of the SPAS, Kuo directed The Overflow of Life written by Tan Poh Han (b.1938), a playwright and actor who was Kuo’s contemporary from the Rediﬀusion Mandarin

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Drama Section.13 Two years later in 1968, he wrote and produced his first full-length play Hey, Wake Up!, which dealt with the sense of being lost in life’s direction in a rapidly changing socio-economic milieu; this play received enthusiastic responses and marked a complete turn to the production of local plays.14 A similar turn from staging translated play to original scripts had happened in Singa-pore Chinese-language theatre scene a decade earlier, at a time when there was an emergence of a local consciousness. The Nanyang University Drama Society, a leading troupe at the time, advocated for “courageously writing plays that reflect the here and now with collective wisdom and common strength” (Nanyang University Drama Society 1957). The young drama enthusiasts staged three one-act plays written by Singaporean and Malayan playwrights in 1959, a historically significant year in which Singapore gained self-rule, though the British retained control of external aﬀairs: 1959 thus symbolised the breaking away from colonial rule and progress towards full self-governance. After that, drama groups such as the Singapore Amateur Players, Kang Leh Musical Association, Chung Cheng High School Drama Society and others followed suit, inaugurating the trend of creat-ing original plays in the early 1960s.

Notably, both Overflow of Life and Hey, Wake Up! dealt with the moral theme of youths losing direction in life during the nation’s socio-economic transformation. The protagonist in the first play is a young unwed mother, while Kuo’s own play is about a high school graduate who is cheated by her employers and loses her chastity. The latter premiered in December 1968, a year after the sta-ging of The Caucasian Mother. Inspired by Brecht, Hey, Wake Up! adopted and adapted some of Brecht’s dramatic techniques, such as the replacing of a choir in epic theatre with a poetry-recitation group. Such adaptations, however, were not meant to create the alienation eﬀect that Brecht intended to spur the audience on to reflect upon reality, but rather to achieve a more direct and intense didac-ticism. Although Kuo’s theatre attempts new techniques, it clearly recalls the spirit of the May Fourth tradition in propagating ideologies and reforming society through drama. Hey, Wake Up! impor-tantly signifies a turning point in his creative career and marks the beginning of the next phase, during which his dramaturgy and political orientation became more strongly leftist.

Hey, Wake Up! has a typical linear narrative structure which basically illustrates a self-awaken-ing process. Leaving the comforts of the school and entering society, the protagonist Lu Xiao Mei, a young lady around the age of 18, is unable to resist the temptations of the capitalist-material world, causing her to waver. Losing her chastity represents the greatest crisis of her fall — a com-plete destruction of her unadulterated self. At the end of the play, the anticipated salvation comes about in the form of encouragement and support of friends and family, and Lu Xiao Mei finally regains her senses and picks herself up. This experience of transformation could, in fact, be seen as a representation of Kuo’s own awakening process as a young, educated individual, with similar implications for the intellectual community that he belonged to. Lu Xiao Mei does not enter into a phase of interiorised self-reflection, which a modernist protagonist may usually do, during and after her ordeal. Instead, the play ends oﬀ with her coming to realise that the world beyond the closely-knit and mutually supportive community she belongs to is full of traps, with the further suggestion that her transformation has given her a strengthened will and realigned direction in life. Although it seems to resemble Brecht’s theatrical techniques, the poetry-recitation team that appears in between scenes represents a perpetual voice of morality throughout the play: they pos-sess a high ground of authority and guide the audience to exercise moral judgement on society’s ills. The moral lesson unquestionably expressed by the reciting team echoes May Fourth writer Lu Xun’s famous call, “Save the children … ” (Lu 2009, 31), from his classic short story “Diary of a Mad Man” (1918): the intellectual class takes upon itself the moral responsibility of awakening the masses.

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A product of the dialectical-materialist style of artistic creation, Hey, Wake Up! demonstrates an uncompromising viewpoint that clearly diﬀerentiates between black and white, good and evil. The two communities in the play are presented as binary oppositions, as mutually incompatible social groups which clash starkly in terms of their ways of living, morals and value systems. On the one hand, there is the underclass — construction worker, carpenter, janitor, laundry lady, hawker, news-paper delivery boy, etc. — who live together as a tightly-knit community in a tenement-like environ-ment, where the protagonist was brought up and lives in. On the other hand, there are the bosses and patrons of the travel agency who form the other group of characters, and who are mercenary and materialistic — and prostitution goes on behind the scenes.

In the second half of the 1960s, during the immediate stretch after Singapore gains its indepen-dence, the PAP government adopts a socio-economic development plan that, in the midst of the Cold War, takes the side of capitalism. The two groups in Kuo’s play, therefore, represent two poss-ible formations of modern postcolonial society that are inherently filled with irresolvable contradic-tion and opposition. Faced with what the play takes to be the inevitable exploitative and oppressive nature of capitalist modernity, the imagining of a transcendental moralistic humanity oﬀered by Kuo and his intellectual community took on a leftist route inherited from China’s May Fourth movement and the 1950s anti-colonial movements in Singapore. Their direction, however, did not follow either the aggressive route of resistance oﬀered by China’s Cultural Revolution that erupted in 1966 (as advocated by cultural groups such as the Kang Leh Musical Association, formed in 1954, ostensibly to practise music, drama and other such cultural activities, and the Barisan Socialis [Malay: socialist front], an opposition party formed in 1961 by breakaway, left-wing members of the PAP), or the violent political struggles happening in many other Third World formerly colonised countries.

The alliance of theatre and politics

In contrast with some theatre groups in the 1960s that manifested a more aggressive resistance to the emerging socio-political status quo, Kuo’s leftist sentiments found representation in his conscious-ness of the underclass and appeared as non-confrontational. In Hey, Wake Up!, class conflicts were not directly manifested in class terms but were subsumed under a traditional dramatic narrative structure oﬀered by the “social problem” play. Having said this, four theatre and dance productions by the SPAS were refused public performance permits application after 1969. All four pieces were written by Kuo: The Struggle (1969), The Sparks of Youth (1970), Evergreen (1969) and The Story of the Old Stonemason (1971). Evergreen and Story of the Old Stonemason were dance performances choreographed by his wife, the ballerina Goh Lay Kuan, but with their storylines written by Kuo. While the social consciousness and engagement in Hey, Wake Up! articulated a moderate leftist stand, in subsequent plays such as Struggle and Growing Up (1975), the exhibition of resistance became stronger, given the intensified suppression of leftist social and political activism by the authorities.

Leftist thought and expression in Singapore’s modern Chinese-language theatre reached its zenith in the first half of the 1970s. However, they can be traced back to the 1950s, the era when anti-colo-nial movements found allies in theatre practitioners. And going further back, theatre activists from China in the 1930s and 1940s had actively used theatre to propagate leftist ideologies and to encou-rage anti-Japanese sentiments in colonial Singapore and Malaya. Theatre activists who allegedly had connections with or were supported by the Chinese Communist Party were deported to China during the first couple of years after 1948, when the colonial government in Malaya declared a state of emergency in a bid to counter local communist activities (Quah 2013, 45–57). As an eﬀective

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means for instigating mass emotions, modern theatre performed in vernacular Chinese, which had come to Singapore and Malaya in the early 1910s from Shanghai and Hong Kong. This vernacular theatre had been utilised as an important tool for propagating modernising ideas and ideologies.

When Singapore became embroiled in local political struggles in the 1960s, theatre was also uti-lised as a tool for propaganda by some leftist groups. The Kang Leh Musical Association — men-tioned earlier, and founded in 1954 when anti-colonial sentiment was on the increase — took a more aggressive turn in the early 1960s, in opposition to socio-economic development plans mod-elled upon capitalist principles. Such development was perceived as being able to cause the fall of humanity and to initiate the rise of critical social problems.15 At the same time, the PAP also began to adopt theatre as a means of political propaganda in the latter part of the 1960s. While most theatre activists at the time were left-leaning, to various degrees, the playwright Wang Li (1935–2002) was a rare playwright who wrote plays in strong support of government policies. Edu-cated in the Chinese High School in the 1950s and graduated from the Nanyang University in 1963, he started to be involved in theatre in the 1960s. Many of his plays were produced by various PAP regional branch organs. In Wang’s plays, student activists involved in the anti-colonial movements in the 1950s were represented as being politically manipulated, and they later experience an awaken-ing process. Eventually, they turn to support the government and its development policies.

The clash of ideological directions in theatre between the left and an illiberal social-democratic group open to capitalism was not unique but was also happening in other fields such as literature and visual arts in Singapore. Such artistic ferment should be understood in terms of that historical moment’s larger context. There was social and economic restructuring at a massive scale propelled by enforced acquisition and redistribution of land by the state, as well as by the attraction of foreign capital and rapid industrialisation. Government-led plans in economic development inevitably brought about structural change to the livelihood of the people and the way people were connected to their social environment. Such pressing issues were explored through the medium of theatre, sig-nifying the struggle between two fundamentally opposed imagining of and take on modernity. Whether it was the capitalist modernity pushed forward by the government, or the humanist mod-ernity of the leftist camp that strongly resisted developmentalism, there was an intellectual class in the background thinking of such concerns. The main diﬀerence between these two versions of mod-ernity lay in which side members of this intellectual class aligned itself with, whether it be the capi-talists, or with those in the working class who were powerlessly trapped in the process of development.

In his first full-length play, Hey, Wake Up!, Kuo depicts a working-class community which mani-fests resilience, inclusiveness and idealism as their corporate character. In contrast with this commu-nity, the protagonist who receives higher education — and hence becomes member and a symbol of the intellectual class — is represented as a victim of drastic socio-economic transformation. She nevertheless eventually returns to the embrace of the community, signifying that a self-reflective pro-cess by the intellectual class has transpired. In The Struggle, Kuo’s second play that was banned and that has never been staged, the working-class community is seen to have become stronger, more determined and empowered to launch a resistance to oppression. The Struggle tells of the story of a farming family and the land they have rented for a long time being reclaimed by the landowner to build factories. Ah Long, the protagonist who had received higher education, was left with no options but to work at a factory. At the factory, the employer made use of Ah Long to incite conflicts among her fellow workers, causing them to fall apart as a community. After an incident in which there is an injury-causing explosion in the factory, Ah Long finally realises the employer’s merciless and irresponsible disposition, and decides that the working class community is where she belongs.

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The play follows the narrative style of Hey, Wake Up!, characterising the capitalist employer as cold-blooded, unreasonable and a treacherous oppressor, while the impoverished workers are the oppressed who are righteous, compassionate and united.

We can see that dramatic conflicts in Hey, Wake Up! and The Struggle are rooted in and built upon the contradiction and tension between two camps. The protagonists share a common trait in their characterisation: they are members of the oppressed camp who naively submit to the sweet talk of the oppressors. They initially gain personal benefits but eventually end up getting hurt. While the protagonist in Hey, Wake Up! was the only one hurt in her fall, Ah Long in The Struggle not only had herself been manipulated by the oppressor, but the entire community of the oppressed has to pay the price for her misdeeds. Despite this diﬀerence, both protagonists eventually undergo a formulaic awakening process and return to the community’s embrace. The message is unambiguous: the only way to fight back oppression is for the community to be strongly united.

The most-heightened representation of the consciousness of class struggle occurs in Kuo’s Grow-ing Up, which premiered in 1975. It was the result of several revisions of an earlier banned play, The Sparks of Youth. The main character, Lin Zhi Gao, resembles the two protagonists in the earlier plays in that he is also from a working-class background and later receives higher education. However, his fate is depicted diﬀerently. Lin goes to Australia for further study with financial support from his girlfriend, who had quit school to work. Upon his return after graduation, he abandons the girlfriend and marries the boss’s daughter. Eagerly joining the ranks of the capitalist class, Lin Zhi Gao becomes a ruthless oppressor of the workers who were once his friends. In contrast to what Lu Xiao Mei and Ah Long in the earlier plays experience, Lin does not go through an awakening and self-reflective process; nor does he finally return to the embrace of the oppressed community. Instead, he becomes despised and meets resistance. The absence of any self-awareness of his class defection and psychological transformation means that the class-specific moral consciousness man-ifested in Growing Up appears to be unequivocally insistent and uncompromising. The expression of class struggle in this play is typically like and also most likely influenced by the model plays in China created and canonised during the Cultural Revolution, in which the clashes between the heroes and the villains were unresolvable, and with characterisation becoming flat and monolithic.

It is worth noting that there is a third group of characters — the intellectual class — besides the two mutually intolerable capitalist class and working class. In all three plays discussed above, this class is explicitly disavowed. Lu Xiao Mei in Hey, Wake Up! remains unemployed for half a year after she graduates from middle school. Her mother could not bear to ask her to help with the laborious job of washing clothes, thinking that education should grant her in a job with higher social status and better financial prospects. Lu was the most highly-educated person in the neighbourhood, and yet is the one who ultimately falls into the oppressors’ trap. In The Struggle, Ah Long sought employment at the factory after her family was faced with eviction and her action is met with suspicion by the factory manager. However, when the manager realises that she is not an uneducated worker but one who had attended school, his perception of Ah Long turns around: “It is a diﬀerent story if you have been to school … . Students nowa-days are much more practical than before.” The endorsement of the educated by the villainous character in eﬀect demonstrates an ironic and contemptuous attitude towards the intellectual class. Such a tendency of highly-reflexive self-doubt is also clearly illustrated in works by May Fourth writers such as Lu Xun (1881–1936), Mao Dun (1896–1981) and Ye Shaojun (1894– 1988).16 In times of great socio-economic transformation, intellectuals should begin to reflect upon their roles and the nature of idealism in society, and might look to the masses both for strength to change the status quo and for empowerment.

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This disdain for the intellectual class when it fails comes across most straightforwardly and firmly in The Struggle. Lin Zhi Gao, who received a master’s degree from Australia and is the most highly-educated character in all three plays, is depicted as ungrateful and immoral, who relentlessly leaves the community which groomed him to join the oppressor class. In contrast, the characters who are portrayed as aspiring and righteous are youths who have not received much formal education but were all competent and capable of independent thinking. One of such characters is Zhou Xia, a typi-cal member of the working class in Kuo’s plays: she is confident and idealistic, and with a strong critical attitude towards reality. While Zhou recognises the importance of higher education in terms of knowledge acquisition and professional training, she criticises the universities as establish-ments for instilling selfishness and greed. Subverting the common understanding of what the achiev-ing of university qualifications represents, and thus stripping oﬀ the positive identity of an intellectual class, it is suggested that Zhou and her peers, with their working class status, take over as the avant-garde in the search of more authentic modern social formations. The negation of the intellectual class also suggests an attitude of disagreement with a national education system that emphasised vocational and professional training over moral cultivation. The intensifying criti-cism of the intellectual class demonstrated a deepening of dissatisfaction with and resistance to the status quo. The Struggle ends oﬀ with the community with progressive thought deserting formal edu-cation and conducting their own classes. In these classes, the plays intend to re-educate the members of the community and to re-empower them with an alternative vision for the future.

Kuo and his contemporaries were undoubtedly members of the intellectual class who have received education in the existing system. Their disdain for their own class background represented in these plays reveal a rejuvenated literary-dramatic mechanism of self-doubt and self-reflection. The question that follows is: through what means do the intellectual class go through to imagine and rep-resent the working class? The “Go into Life” movement, which was launched by Kuo and his col-leagues at the SPAS in 1968 in preparation for the writing and staging of Hey, Wake Up!, proved to be an eﬀective way of connecting the two classes. Most likely inspired by Mao Zedong’s call for writers and artists to join the masses for real-life experience in his famous 1942 “Talks at the Yan’an Conference on Literature and the Arts” (MacDougall 1980), and later propagandised through the Cultural Revolution, theatre activists in Singapore began their own journeys to seek inspiration for creating works which better represented the underclass. Their stints at rural villages, rubber and pineapple plantations, fishing villages, construction sites and so forth, mostly in Singapore and occasionally in West Malaysia, were usually short, varying from day trips to week-long excursions. Upon return, they would organise mass activities, such as talks, debates and group discussions in order to create plays and songs. Such activities were not exclusive to the SPAS but were also fervently adopted by many other theatre and social groups with similar ideological inclination. Moving out of the comfort zones enjoyed by the intellectual class, they aspired to establish a stronger alliance between the educated and the working class. With the experience gained through the “Go into Life” campaign, their process of artistic creation was enriched and idealised representations of the working class were created in their works. Evidently in plays such as The Struggle and Growing Up, members of the working class were stripped oﬀ the image of helpless victims and represented as progressive agents who were able and ready to subvert the oppressive realities.

Though similar to earlier mainland Chinese generations of intellectuals who demonstrated a deep concern for the underclass and represented them in an idealised form with an intention to facilitate social transformation, the artistic practices of Kuo and his contemporaries should not be seen as dri-ven merely by ideology, but should be understood as an ambitious expression of social engagement. In the context of the 1950s anti-colonial movements and the 1960s political resistance to exploitative

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capitalism, the social consciousness amongst theatre activists is likely to share similar concerns with social and political activism, forming varying degrees of aﬃliation with them. However, neither the activities at the SPAS nor the plays created by Kuo and his colleagues revealed a deeper connection with any social or political movements, save a similar belief in expressing concern for social pro-blems. In the eyes of those in power, these artistic representations and activism within the sphere of Chinese-language theatre were perceived to bear resemblance to and may have led to alliances with leftist political movements, thereby posing serious challenges to the state’s developmentalist ideology and policies. In this light, it is not surprising that Kuo and his colleagues at the SPAS were arrested under the Internal Security Act in 1976. He was subsequently imprisoned without a trial for four years and seven months. When he was released in 1980, Kuo’s engagement with social reality had not deviated from that in the pre-detention period. The diﬀerence is that his post-1980 theatre became less direct and more allegorical, with his intellectual inquisitiveness remaining as critical as it ever has been.

Notes

1. For a sketch of Kuo’s life and work, see Kwok (2003), and in more details, Lim and Tan (2012). For a general view of Kuo by his critics and friends, see Kwok and Teo (2002), a commemorative book pub-lished soon after Kuo’s passing away.
2. A statement from the Ministry of Home Aﬀairs stated that 50 people were arrested in early 1976 under the Internal Security Act for their connections with underground communist organisations. See “Exposed: The Dark Secrets of Sister Fong.” Straits Times, 27 May 1976. Kuo, together with his wife Goh Lay Kuan, as well as members of Practice Theatre School (formally the SPAS) and Selatan Arts Ensemble, an arts organisation formed by graduates of Practice Theatre’s arts programmes.
3. When it was founded in 1965, the organisation was first named the SPAS. In the years that followed, the name was changed to the Practice Theatre School (1973), the Practice Performing Arts School (1984) and The Theatre Practice (2010). For the sake of consistency and not to confuse the readers, it will be mentioned as SPAS henceforth in this article.
4. The following accounts of Kuo’s life are drawn from Kuo (2000) and Lim and Tan (2012), unless other-wise stated.
5. For the May Thirteenth Incident and a general account of the 1950s student activism, see Tan, Tan, and Hong (2011).
6. A fire in July 1953 in Geylang, a neighbourhood east of but adjacent to the town area, reportedly resulted in four thousand people being made homeless, and was described as “the worst” fire in post-war Singa-pore. The incident has been widely reported and discussed in the press. An initial report was published as “After the Fire,” Singapore Free Press, 17 July 1953.
7. A more direct translation of the Chinese expression would be “Experience Life.”
8. Rediﬀusion Singapore started in 1949. The cable radio service was seen as a remedy for the poor recep-tion of wireless radio in parts of the isalnd. The company was operated by Overseas Rediﬀusion, a sub-sidiary of the broadcasting business based in Britain.
9. A watershed event was “Operation Coldstore” in 1963, during which politicians from the opposition parties, unionists, and university students were arrested and detained without trial. For the perspectives of the people arrested, see Poh, Tan, and Hong (2013).
10. The point becomes obvious when the titles of Kuo’s plays during this period are compared to those written after the 1980s. Titles such as The White Sailing Boat (1982), The Coﬃn is too Big for the Hole (1984), The Silly Little Girl and the Funny Old Tree (1987), Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral (1995), etc., are all potent and complex metaphors rather than literal captions of the themes. The White Sailing Boat is pub-lished only in Chinese (Quah and Pan 2005a), while the rest are collected in Kuo (2000) and Wee (2012).
11. ANZAC Day is a day of remembrance in Australia and New Zealand, observed on the 25th of April; the event remembers all Australians and New Zealanders who served and died in wars, conflicts and peace-keeping operations. ANZAC stands for “Australian and New Zealand Army Corps.”

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1. All translations from Chinese-language texts in the article are by the author.
2. The Overflow of Life was not published. A synopsis of the play is found in the programme booklet.
3. Hey, Wake Up! and other plays Kuo wrote during this period do not have English versions. The Chinese versions are published in Quah and Pan (2005b).
4. Members of Kang Leh Musical Association were arrested and the organisation was dissolved under the Internal Security Act in January 1970 “for carrying out subversive political activities,” as reported in Straits Time, 1 February 1970.
5. For a discussion of these Chinese writers and their intellectual self-doubts, see Anderson (1990).

Acknowledgements

An earlier draft of this article was written in Chinese and translated into English by Yeo Min Hui. Her trans-lation is much appreciated as it provides me with a foundation on which I reworked into this final version. I am especially grateful to C. J. W.-L. Wee who has inspired me on how Kuo’s pre-detention works could be mean-ingfully understood and discussed. I am also deeply indebted to the many people, especially Goh Lay Kuan and Kuo Jian Hong, who have worked with me and contributed to the publication of the ten-volume Complete Works of Kuo Pao Kun, of which I am the general editor.

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Special terms

Gongche Shangshu tiyan shenghuo

公車上書

體驗生活

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