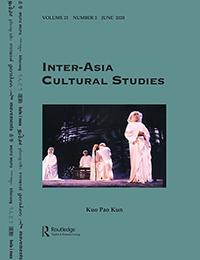
**Inter-Asia Cultural Studies**

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



**The feeling of being watched: lived Confucianism and theatricality in Kuo Pao Kun’s mid-1980s monodramas**

**Paul Rae**

**To cite this article:** Paul Rae (2020) The feeling of being watched: lived Confucianism andtheatricality in Kuo Pao Kun’s mid-1980s monodramas, Inter-Asia Cultural Studies, 21:2, 225-237, DOI: [10.1080/14649373.2020.1759885](https://www.tandfonline.com/action/showCitFormats?doi=10.1080/14649373.2020.1759885)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649373.2020.1759885>



Published online: 25 Jun 2020.



[Submit your article to this journal](https://www.tandfonline.com/action/authorSubmission?journalCode=riac20&show=instructions) 



Article views: 55



[View related articles](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/mlt/10.1080/14649373.2020.1759885) 



[View Crossmark data](http://crossmark.crossref.org/dialog/?doi=10.1080/14649373.2020.1759885&domain=pdf&date_stamp=2020-06-25)



[Citing articles: 1 View citing articles](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/citedby/10.1080/14649373.2020.1759885#tabModule) 



Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at

<https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=riac20>

INTER-ASIA CULTURAL STUDIES



2020, VOL. 21, NO. 2, 225–237

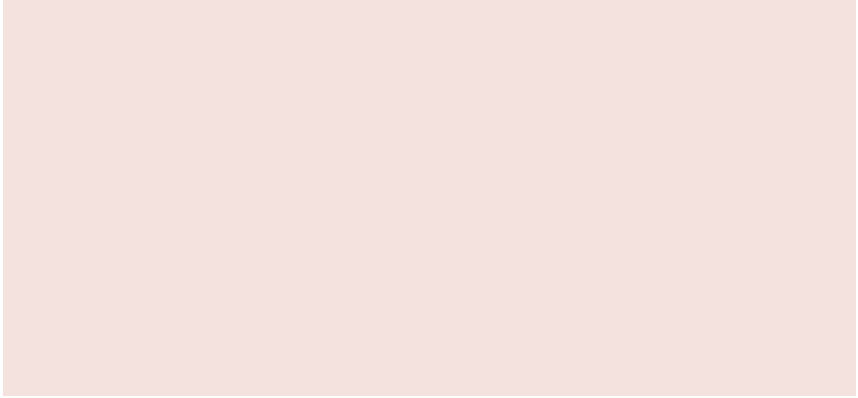
https://doi.org/10.1080/14649373.2020.1759885



The feeling of being watched: lived Confucianism and theatricality in Kuo Pao Kun’s mid-1980s monodramas

Paul RAE

School of Culture and Communication, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia



ABSTRACT

The first plays Kuo Pao Kun (1939–2002) wrote after being released from detention in 1980 coincided with a concerted eﬀort by the Singapore government to formalise the Confucian basis upon which it claimed that Singapore society and its increasing economic success were built. Kuo was no traditionalist, but The Coﬃn is Too Big for the Hole (1985), and No Parking on Odd Days (1986) can be interpreted as expressing — and producing – the lived experience of the ordinary in ways that are informed by a Confucian sensibility. In this article, I contextualise these plays with reference to the Singapore government’s “Confucian turn” in the 1980s, and then demonstrate how they provided an intermediate domain between the state and the individual for exploring the classical Confucian concerns of moral action and ritual within a rapidly modernising society.

KEYWORDS

Kuo Pao Kun; Confucianism; monodrama; political theatre; Singapore drama

Early on 23 March 2015, an unfortunate juxtaposition on the Straits Times website announced the death of Singaporean eminence Lee Kuan Yew alongside the more mundane headline, “Mandai Cre-matorium to expand to meet demand.” Taking advantage of a brief window before long-planned propaganda protocols put paid to such happenstance associations, I fired oﬀ a screen grab to a few friends. Almost immediately, several replied with the same mordant one-liner: “The coﬃn is too big for the hole.”

They were referring to the 1985 play of that name by Kuo Pao Kun. But what did the riposte mean? After all, the headline described the expansion of a crematorium, not a gravesite, and under-standably so: over the past four decades, cemeteries have been progressively deconsecrated and rede-veloped — sometimes controversially — as Singapore’s urbanisation has continued apace. My friends could have been suggesting the crematorium itself would not be big enough to consume a figure of Lee’s political stature or immense self-belief: a figure, after all, who famously remarked in 1988, towards the end of his premiership, that if things went wrong in Singapore he would rise from his grave to rectify them. But explaining the joke this way is both reductive and more macabre than perhaps meant. Like that brief interregnum in the early hours of 23 March, between Lee’s long-expected death, and the rising of the sun on a new page in history, it is perhaps better to let the gag hover, suﬀused in the half-light with inference and association, and in its ambiguity gesturing towards a number of themes that I will explore in the course of this article: history, theatre, culture, power. In so doing, I wish to elaborate on some of the meanings that Kuo’s monodrama — and its



CONTACT Paul Rae paul.rae@unimelb.edu.au School of Culture and Communication, John Medley Building, University of

Melbourne, Parkville 3010, Melbourne, Australia

© 2020 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

226  P. RAE

similarly diﬃdent sibling, No Parking on Odd Days (1986) — held at the time of their writing, and to reflect on how these modest, almost negligible oﬀerings prompt a way of thinking about theatrical and lived experience in Singapore today. I will come around to the plays presently. First, however, some scene-setting is in order.

The temptations of Confucianism

In an article written upon Kuo’s death in 2002, the Chinese writer Liu Qiuyu (2002, 53) commented on the playwright’s cultural and intellectual ambivalence, noting, amongst other things, that “He rep-resents the temptation of Confucian culture to those steeped in Western culture, and of Western cul-ture to those steeped in Confucian culture.” There was no such nuance on display when, two decades earlier, Confucianism had been on the front-burner in Singapore politics. “Having started out with basic Confucian core values, and having picked up Western beliefs along the way, we took oﬀ.” This is how Minister for Communications, Dr Yeo Ning Hong, explained Singapore’s economic success in the early 1980s (as quoted in Tu 1984, 180). Even presuming Dr Yeo spoke in good faith, however, the fact of the claim says more about Singapore’s cultural trajectory than its content. It was not that long before that those same cultural resources had come in for a collective drubbing from the same government.

On 9 April 1967, less than two years after independence, the Straits Times reported that Minister for Defence Goh Keng Swee had used the occasion of a speech at a People’s Action Party (PAP) var-iety concert to oﬀer a few “pointers” on how to write a play:

First, he said, the themes of the plays should be in keeping with the realistic life in Singapore and its multi-cultural, multi-racial and multi-religious spirit. Second, they must discard the crazy, sensual, ridi-culous, boisterous and over-materialistic style of the West. In the same way, the feudalistic, superstitious, ignorant and pessimistic ideas of the East are equally repugnant. (Goh 1967, 12)

These imperatives were in line with nation-building policies whose impact on the Singaporean sense of identity would be pervasive and long lasting. With the spectre of pre-independence racial riots haunting the national imaginary, and a Chinese-educated majority that maintained both a strong attachment to traditional culture and a historical association with communism, up to the end of the 1970s the Singapore government sought to de-emphasise Chinese cultural identifications. This culminated in the controversial absorption of the Chinese-medium Nanyang University, along with the University of Singapore, into the newly constituted and English-language National Univer-sity of Singapore in 1980. However, by the early 1980s, with the economy growing rapidly, and industrialisation and development testing traditional community and familial ties, concerns over the Western threat of, as one Minister put it, “a libertine pre-occupation with self-gratification” (Tay 1982, 11), began to outweigh the “repugnance” Goh Keng Swee had expressed towards Chinese tradition. In 1982, an eight-strong delegation of scholars from China and the United States came to Singapore on the invitation of the PAP to discuss and debate Confucian ethics, and advise on its introduction into a “Religious Knowledge” (RK) curriculum in secondary schools.

Given that Confucianism — itself not a religion — sets great store by the cultivation of wisdom as a means to achieving the status of a morally unimpeachable “gentleman” ( junzi), there was some-thing particularly apt about a group of scholars being drafted in to advise on the creation of a syllabus on Confucian ethics. Indeed, the transcripts subsequently published by one of the eight, Tu Wei-ming (1984), with chapter titles such as “Conversation with the Ministers,” and expressions of def-erence to more senior academics, suggest that the visit itself represented an exemplary exercise in the

INTER-ASIA CULTURAL STUDIES  227

practice of Confucianism. However, the fact that the delegation was required at all highlights the novelty of the situation, and begs the question as to how deeply-rooted a philosophical understand-ing of Confucianism really was amongst Singapore’s Chinese population. There is room for scepti-cism. As Eddie Kuo (1996, 298) points out, Confucian ethics “was showered with a disproportionate share of resource allocation” relative to the other RK subjects, while simultaneously “being promoted at the societal level, in a manner and following a format similar to those of numerous other cam-paigns in Singapore” (299). But, at 17.9 per cent of the total RK enrolment in 1989, the take-up of Confucian ethics remained lower than Buddhism (44.4 per cent) and Christianity (21.4 per cent), and as RK was phased out soon after over concerns about increased religious polarisation, so the public profile of Confucianism went into decline. This has led Eddie Kuo to dub the exercise “an incomplete revitalization movement” (294), albeit one that would play an instrumental role in the rise of the widely-debated “Asian Values” discourse of the 1990s, and would underpin the for-mulation of “Our Shared Values,” a national ideology adopted in 1991 and still prevalent today.1

So goes the standard narrative about the Singapore state’s dalliance with Confucianism in the 1980s. However, as Joseph B. Tamney asserted as recently as 2012, at the end of a survey of the main characteristics of traditionalist, modernist, and state Confucianism, “Little is known about con-temporary lived Confucianism” (Tamney 2012, 129). Given the recent rehabilitation of Confucius in political discourse in China, and the huge upsurge of interest there in Confucian ideas and rituals, this gap will increasingly be filled, at least ethnographically.2 But there is also a particular methodo-logical challenge to understanding the contours of lived Confucianism, since so much of it is tacitly understood, specific to particular circumstances, and practised without reference to — or even self-reflexive knowledge of — the formal articulation of its principles in written form or oral trans-mission. This being the case, I would like to argue that lived Confucianism may not only be disclosed in the details of everyday life, but can also be discerned through particular modes and instances of cultural expression. In the case of 1980s Singapore, where state narratives dominate the available archive, I suggest that we can look to the plays Kuo Pao Kun wrote contemporaneously with the gov-ernment’s Confucian turn in order more fully to appreciate how the tenets and principles of Con-fucianism made their presence felt in lived experience. In order to do so, however, several nuancing factors need to be recognised, which I oﬀer by way of contextualisation for the plays.

The first is that one would be hard-pressed to describe Kuo as a Confucian in any simple sense of the term, and his plays can hardly be seen as exercises in the kind of morally improving aesthetic refinement that Confucians themselves have traditionally looked to in the arts (especially music). If anything, Kuo’s pre-detention political sympathies and agit-prop aesthetics were rooted in forms and ideologies that had been defined against Confucianism earlier in the century. By 1980, left-wing alternatives to the PAP’s radical programme of modernisation had been suﬃciently sup-pressed for Kuo to be released from detention, and the turn to Confucianism, which represented a shift to a less heavy-handed (but arguably more pervasive) mode of “soft authoritarianism” by the government, was mirrored in a shift to a less confrontational aesthetic style on Kuo’s part. In detention, he subsequently claimed in interview, he realised that “art first and foremost has to be art, even if you want it to be very political, you still have to be first and foremost artistic” (as quoted in Lo 1993, 142), and while the extent to which this epiphany was guided by the legal or paralegal conditions of his release cannot be known, the initial outcomes were to prove instrumental in envi-sioning alternatives to state-sanctioned descriptions of the individual that were notable for exploring some of the same thematic and experiential terrain.

These nuances were on display when Kuo was asked in 1993 if he felt his shift of focus in the 1980s to what he calls “the inside story” of human beings was a result of Western influences and the eﬀects

228  P. RAE

of capitalism. He replied: “I think it is the reflection of the individualisation of the person, in a mod-ern political economy that produced the individual” (as quoted in Lo 1993, 142). This gnomic for-mulation seems to express as much in what it leaves out as in what it says. Kuo refuses to be drawn on the cultural provenance of the trend, nor to ascribe it directly to industrialisation. Instead, there is a circularity in his answer that suggests a lingering dilemma rather than an easy resolution. Rapid social change seems to impact on the individual in ways that precede understanding, yet the individ-ual is nevertheless as much an agent of as subject to that change. This ambivalence about the causes, extent and eﬀects of individualism and its relation to broader debates about Confucian and liberal humanist conceptions of selfhood is what distinguishes Kuo’s theatrical output in the mid-1980s from the simplified concept of the Confucian citizen that was then being formulated by the govern-ment. In fact, we might go so far as to say that it is precisely because Kuo had no Confucian agenda that he was able to give expression to a Confucian sensibility as and when it arose out of the situ-ations he was writing on, and ran up against its more explicit articulations by the state. Specifically, the monologues The Coﬃn is Too Big for the Hole (1985) and No Parking on Odd Days (1986) both detail personal encounters with state bureaucracy, and dramatise that constitutively vague area of identity formation that lies between action and self-realisation, structure and agency. In so doing, they suggest an interpretation of relational identity that refers to a range of cultural perspectives in its exploration of what it means to live in a rapidly industrialising postcolonial state. At this point, however, it is useful to look more carefully at the plays in order to demonstrate, first, how and where Confucian preoccupations can be said to make their presence felt (which I will do with reference to No Parking), and, second, what this means for understanding theatre aesthetics (which I shall do with reference to Coﬃn).

Right action: No Parking on Odd Days

“Do you drive?” asks the narrator at the very beginning of No Parking on Odd Days (Kuo 2012, 11). The question is innocuous, while at the same time indicative of Kuo’s preoccupation at the time with the trappings and mechanisms of modernity. Indeed, the speaker’s subsequent confession that, while he’s fine with driving, “What I’m afraid of is stopping. Parking” (11), suggests the play is gearing up for a thematic critique of the onward rush of modernity whose ontology, as Peter Sloterdijk has defined it, is “being-toward-movement” (as quoted in Lepecki 2006, 7). This interpretation would seem to be borne out by the events subsequently recounted by the speaker, which turn on the min-utiae of three separate run-ins with that other exemplar of modernity, state bureaucracy, over minor parking infractions. But although No Parking has echoes of Franz Kafka, it is too mundane to rise to the status of social diagnosis or existential critique. Indeed, at first blush the play can seem trivial and slight. It is anecdotal, but lacks a transfiguring theme or aesthetic form.

This, of course, is where the innovation lies. Where Kafka describes the modern condition by ren-dering social structures as grotesque abstractions, Kuo undercuts the aesthetic forms that are them-selves a part of modernity, and which Kafka wielded with such skill. Moreover, Kuo himself traced the roots of this move to the lived experience of a situation that Kafka only ever wrote about. In a 2002 interview, Kuo reflected on the personal challenges of the solitary confinement and interrog-ation he endured while detained without trial:

in that moment, when a lot of false pride had been stripped away, I also began to appreciate the pride and strength of being ordinary, and realised that it is actually on the level of being ordinary that one sees the power of ordinary people. (Kuo 2002, 120)

INTER-ASIA CULTURAL STUDIES  229

By this token, the most distinctive thing about the opening line of No Parking — “Do you drive?”

— is that it is a question, addressed to the audience. The unnamed narrator is a somewhat timor-ous Everyman, who looks to establish a connection based on what he shares with the audience, rather than to distinguish himself with notable or quirky details about his character or back-ground. The avuncular second-person address continues throughout the play — “I’m sure that’s what you do also” (Kuo 2012, 11); “I think you all understand that lah” (19) — innocuously interpellating the audience on the assumption that the experiences described are nothing out of the ordinary.

This is not to say, of course, that the ordinary is in any way uneventful or insignificant. For, having established an aesthetic of the everyday, Kuo goes on to elaborate a situation that, while banal from the perspective of ideology critique, is, when viewed in light of then-current (and still relevant) debates over Confucianism, of notable moral and political resonance. At issue is the question of right action in a contested situation: under concrete circumstances where authority appears to be misapplied, how should one respond? This is a notable preoccupation of Confucius and his disciples in The Analects; all the more so because the hierarchical structures of Confucian social organisation mean that most of the time one must show respect for the law and reverence for figures in authority. Nevertheless, a certain principled flexibility within such structures is characteristic of Confucian thought, and as such it may be better to speak up than show blind obedience.3

Of course, contesting fines in No Parking — in the first case for parking too close to a junction, in the second for using insuﬃcient parking coupons, and in the third for using a “lorries only” space — seems a far cry from the weighty matters of state considered in classical Confucianism. But then one way of understanding Kuo’s post-detention re-evaluation of the ordinary is as an exploration of the meaning of Confucian ideas for those traditionally seen as subject to them, rather than as agents of them. “The common people” feature regularly in The Analects. However, although their well-being is the Confucian gentlemen’s raison d’être, the gentleman’s qualities of virtue, benevolence, and refine-ment are invariably defined against those of both the common people and the “small man,” whose acquisitiveness and lack of learning could render them socially and morally inferior, and in need of guidance. As Confucius puts it in The Analects (12: 19):

In administering your government, what need is there for you to kill? Just desire the good yourself and the common people will be good. The virtue of the gentleman is like the wind; the virtue of the small man is like the grass. Let the wind blow over the grass and it is sure to bend.

There is a coded riposte to this thinking in Kuo’s play The Silly Little Girl and the Funny Old Tree (1987). When the tree asks the girl if she would like to dance with him, she replies:

Girl: I thought you can only sing and dance when there is wind?

Tree: That’s what the wind says. Actually, only when we sing and dance is there wind; only when our

leaves and branches swing is there wind. Wind mustn’t be so proud. (Kuo 2012, 106)

The tree goes on to explain that when it dances, it bands together with all the other trees, granting power and force to the wind. In the process, perhaps, it exemplifies what Kuo, in the 2002 interview cited above, called the “might” of ordinary people, here reframed as venerable, strong trees, rather than as pliable, short-lived grass. No Parking is rather more modest in its ambitions, but that is where the interest lies. In showing us a man seeking to stand up for what he believes is right while negotiating the complex web of relations that define Confucian identity, we encounter some of the day-to-day complexities of lived experience within a broadly Confucian framework.

230  P. RAE

In fact, it is a tug from within this web that initiates the speaker’s actions. On their way to pay the fine for parking too close to a junction, the man’s son notices that some parking spaces are located much closer to junctions than they were parked:

And when I understood what my son was saying, I felt disturbed. I was disturbed because my boy, only nine, saw something which I meet so many times every day but don’t see anymore.

“Go and fight lah, father. If this can, why you cannot? Go and fight lah!”

I looked at my son and I felt good. Boy only nine, already so observant. Even just for him I should, man! (Kuo 2012, 12)

Several things are at issue here. The man has become oblivious to contradictions in the everyday environment that may signal double standards on the part of the state. The main reason he decides to address it is because he feels he must act well in the eyes of his son: he must meet the standards of moral probity expected of a father. And indeed, it is under the gaze of his highly observant son that the man will seek justice. Ignoring the Confucian precept that the hardest part of being filial is to manage the expression on one’s face (The Analects 2: 8), the son — the man tells us — makes his feelings very clear. After his first failure, he says, “What bothered me then was not the $20 I finally paid but the look on my son’s face” (Kuo 2012, 14); following another, “[m]y boy’s seriousness, that bright spark in his eyes, the fighting spirit in his voice hit me hard somewhere inside” (16). But for the man, the challenge is to meet the expectations of his son beneath the gaze of various representatives of the state.

Accordingly, the man places great emphasis on politeness and proper procedure in appealing the fines. It is important that the bureaucrats see him not as a westernised individualist, petulantly demanding his personal rights, but rather a petitioner of sorts, who respects the Confucian hierarchy, but acts for the common good.4 Hence, confronted by a dismissive bureaucrat in the first appeal he makes, who asks him “don’t you know your udang-udang [Malay: law]?” the man tells us “I tried very hard to be polite” (13). During the second appeal, “I made myself very polite” (15), and during the third, “I treated the whole thing with a lot of honesty and frankness” (19). Ironically, however, it is here that he makes a misstep. In this case, which goes to court, the man cross-examines the parking attendant, who is unable to recall the details of the oﬀence. The man is on the brink of winning his case, but, as he himself says, “I wanted to make a bigger issue than just clearing my ticket” (21), and so lays out all of the facts for the witness, on the basis of which, the magistrate finds him guilty.

“The gentleman is devoted to principle but not inflexible in small matters,” writes Confucius (The Analects 15: 37). In No Parking, the man presses the principle, but fails to recognise the kinds of accommodations that are possible — and perhaps necessary — over small matters. The result is more complex than the opposition between Western individualism and Confucian obedience that was being propagated by the PAP government at the time, nor does it simply invert the situation by holding up the speaker as a paragon of Confucian virtue in the face of bureaucratic intransigence. Rather, the play draws attention to a series of diﬀerentiations that are internal to the relational whole. Each of the three parking fines discussed in the narrative is incurred in the course of going about the everyday business of network maintenance. The first fine is given while the man is visiting a friend; the second, when collecting in-laws from Changi airport; even the third, which happened longer ago, is dated with reference to family: “even before I got married” (Kuo 2012, 16). There is no “gentle-man” to speak of here, but nor are there the “common people” in the paternalistic sense outlined in The Analects. Instead, while we are introduced to a range of agents within the conventional Con-fucian web of relations, virtue is neither a property nor the preserve of any one of them. Instead, it is distributed across them, and is subject to negotiation, adjudication and dispute.

INTER-ASIA CULTURAL STUDIES  231

It is perhaps inevitable, then, that the play should end on an ambivalent note. In the Confucian declen-sion, the gentleman is “a man who has a sense of shame in the way he conducts himself.” Then comes the respectful son. “A man who insists on keeping his word and seeing his actions through to the end can, perhaps, qualify to come next, even though he shows a stubborn petty-mindedness” (The Analects 13: 20). This latter characterisation seems a fair description of the flawed but well-intentioned speaker in No Parking. What is most excruciating in the play is that he learns shame, but it is the shame of hubris, rather than the self-eﬀacing humility of the gentleman. After recounting his court appearance to his son,

[w]e went home quiet. And he didn’t ask me about those things again. That suited me fine, ’cos it’s not always easy to explain to your son why you didn’t stand up for things the way the story books say every respectable person should. (Kuo 2012, 22)

As he grows, his son recedes into quietness and timidity. The father explains it away with a glancing reference to classical Chinese culture: “You know, wise men are always more thoughtful, quieter characters” (22). At the play’s end, the boy is 18 — a man, who will know his place.

Reflexive ritual: The Coﬃn is Too Big for the Hole

First performed in 1985, a year before No Parking, The Coﬃn is Too Big for the Hole clearly antici-pates the later play in its anecdotal recounting of a nameless everyman’s run-in with state bureauc-racy. In this case, the dispute arises at the funeral of the speaker’s grandfather, when it transpires that the “standard-size” (Kuo 2012, 3) grave is too small for the elaborate coﬃn, and oﬃcials of various ranks refuse to budge since, as one of them puts it, “[t]he consideration for humanity and sympathy cannot overstep the constraints of the state policy!” (6). Eventually the oﬃcials relent, after the speaker, not knowing “where [he] got the passion and where [he] got the courage” (7), threatens a mass occupation of the grave site by family members. As in No Parking, Coﬃn ends on an ambiva-lent note, with the speaker worrying that despite victory for his grandfather, his own grave will inevi-tably be a standardised one that will make it hard for his descendants to find him.

As may already be apparent, in some ways, Coﬃn is coarser than No Parking, its satire painted on a broader canvas. The oﬃcials are more caricatured, and the script includes some piquant but gratuitous jabs at state institutions and initiatives. Indeed, when the speaker complains to a functionary that bury-ing his grandfather “is not the drawing of rectangles for your parking lots” (7), we glimpse the seed of No Parking in a sentence whose unprepossessing quality as an idea for a play underscores the latter’s greater subtlety. In one important regard, however, Coﬃn presents a more acute enquiry into similar moral terrain as No Parking: it concerns the proper observance of a ritual.

It is impossible to overstate the importance of rites and rituals to traditional Confucianism, for it is through them that the social order is maintained, benevolence cultivated, and governance, in accord-ance with the Way, instantiated. Proper observation of the rites is essential, otherwise all else will be out of joint. As The Analects has it, “[W]hen rites and music do not flourish, punishments will not fit the crimes” (13: 3). And of all the rites, funerals have a particular significance, because they must smooth the passage of the deceased into the afterlife, while reaﬃrming relations amongst the living at the point that they are reconfigured to absorb the loss. Hence, for instance, the detailed stipulations around mourning rituals, garb and periods, as laid out in The Book of Rites.5

This preys on the mind of the speaker in Coﬃn. Although it is his grandfather’s funeral, he explains, his father and uncles are already dead, so, as eldest grandson, he is head of the family. When it transpires that the coﬃn is too big for the hole, it falls to him to rectify the situation; a duty he must perform, he explains, in front of about 200 mourners. This is the son’s expectation

232  P. RAE

of the father in No Parking writ large: not only must the speaker take the right action according to the situation (“I mean, how many times in your life can you get a chance of burying your grandfather decent-like? So while I’m at it, shouldn’t I just do it right and proper?” [Kuo 2012, 7]), but he must do so under the scrutiny of those whose own identities are in part determined by how well he performs his role.

The central challenge to the speaker turns not on an encounter with faceless bureaucrats, then, but rather on the attempt to do something conventionally tacit in an age of reflexive modernity. The sin-cere performance of ritual is central to the enactive dimension of Confucian morality. Or, as Lee Dian Rainey (2010, 38) puts it, “When we learn rituals and perform them properly, with inner moral intent, we become better people. The respect expressed in the ritual becomes the outer form of an inner moral world.” In the course of Coﬃn, the narrator becomes increasingly aware of the funeral as a ritual. Near the beginning, he ruefully mentions that over the preceding half-century, his extended family has drifted apart, so that he is no longer exactly sure who among the assembled mourners is a member. Some of those mourners, he notes, have cameras, giving him to believe they have only come to enjoy the spectacle of the funeral; and when he bursts in on the senior oﬃcial’s oﬃce to remonstrate over the grave, “I found everyone staring at me wide-eyed. It was only then that I realised I was still wearing my full set of funeral costumes that becomes a pious grandson!” (Kuo 2012, 5). By the time the matter is resolved, and our speaker returns to complete the ceremony, word is out about the unusual situation: the crowd has grown from 200 to 800, and the press has arrived. The event ends up being voted “one of the Top Ten National News Stories of the Year,” and the oﬃcial who relents is voted “Most Humane Personality of the Year” (8).

This shift from the ordinary to the extraordinary is amusing, but, as I have already noted, it dis-tinguishes Coﬃn from the later No Parking, whose more sustained attention to the ordinary gives it greater integrity as a piece of writing. As a piece of theatre, however, Coﬃn is the more intriguing, precisely because of the importance it assigns to the relationship between ritual and spectacle. In addition to the assembled mourners in the narrative, it is not hard to see how the theatre audience might also be implicated in the man’s “feeling that we were being watched” (1). This, in turn, raises the question of the relationship between the events recounted within the play, and the fact of its per-formance. Does theatre as a medium have anything to tell us about the practice of lived Confucian-ism? Ostensibly not. The Analects expresses what we might today describe as a persistent anti-theatricality in its parsing of appropriate behaviour: “To make friends with the ingratiating in action, the pleasant in appearance and the plausible in speech is to lose” (16: 4). Or, as Henry Rosemont Jr. (1997, 71) writes:

I am the totality of roles I live in relation to specific others. Moreover, these roles are interconnected in that the relations in which I stand to some people aﬀect directly the relations in which I stand to others, such that it would be misleading to say that I play or perform these roles; on the contrary, for Confucius I am my roles. Taken collectively, these roles weave, for each of us, a unique pattern of personal identity, such that if some of my roles change, others will of necessity change also, literally making me a diﬀerent person.

Theatre would therefore seem to have no privileged or explanatory place in the constitution of Con-fucian selfhood. At the same time, and beyond the simple question of representational play-acting, is it possible to see a performance such as Coﬃn as itself a particularly visible exercise in Confucian self-constitution or self-maintenance? If so, there are two ways in which this happens.

The first is through the specific aesthetic strategies of Kuo’s monodrama. On the face of it, solo performance would appear to be at odds with staging the communitarian dimension of Confucian

INTER-ASIA CULTURAL STUDIES  233

relationality — a point underscored by the historical alignment in the West of the development of the soliloquy in Renaissance drama and the emergence of the individual subject (Belsey 1980, 42–49). However, several aspects of Kuo’s script exploit the presence of the single performer precisely to highlight its composite, relationally-determined qualities — something that can also be seen in No Parking. The most obvious is that it falls to the actor to tell a story featuring a number of diﬀerent characters interacting: sometimes he paraphrases them, and at other times he voices them. But more fundamentally, this takes place within a text whose apparently casual mode of storytelling masks a high degree of narrative and identificatory mobility. In No Parking, multiple stories are nested inside each other, each transitioning to the next in ways that can make it hard to maintain a clear distinc-tion between them. As the play proceeds, it becomes increasingly diﬃcult to maintain a clear sense of the chronology which appears to span — in non-chronological order — the period from when the speaker is a young adult to when his son is the same age. With the blurring of conventional markers of narrative orientation, the armature of familial and citizen-state relations becomes all the more sig-nificant as a structuring framework: at once a constant presence, and subject to continuous nego-tiation and modification.

In Coﬃn, this narrative fluidity that swirls around and through the narrator takes on a more expli-cit cast through the framing trope of the dream. “I don’t know why, but it keeps coming back to me. This dream. Every time I get frustrated, it comes back to me” (Kuo 2012, 1). So begins Coﬃn. Dreams are of course a common feature of classical Chinese literature and drama, often serving to highlight a thematic preoccupation with the relationship between illusion and reality. And yet what is discon-certing in Coﬃn is that the dream element almost immediately falls away, in favour of an anecdote that could be entirely believable. The dream element does not serve to legitimate fantastical occur-rences, but rather to grant an oneiric wooziness to the narrative. The indistinctness and vague con-fusion over the identity of the gathered mourners suggests they may not only be curious onlookers, but the shades of the ancestors to whom the man is ultimately answerable for his actions at the grave-site. The narrator’s sudden realisation, beneath the startled gaze of the oﬃcials, that he is still wearing his funeral garb, has the cast of an anxiety dream in which one finds oneself acutely exposed in a situation one secretly fears. And the strength the man gathers from the coﬃn in standing up for his grandfather lends it a totemic force. By the end of the play, the status of the events recounted is hard to determine. As he approaches the end of his narrative, the speaker repeats the opening, highlighting that “the funeral somehow stuck in my mind and it would often come back to me. In a dream. Especially when I’m frustrated” (Kuo 2012, 8). The logic — a dream-logic, perhaps

— is iterative rather than circular. Having framed the event as a dream at the outset, by the end of the play, it has been reconfigured as something that actually happened, which returns in dreams when triggered by frustration. Again, the narrative is best understood as one that the narrator cycles through, inhabiting at diﬀerent points, in a fluctuating relation to its other actors and agents, who are at times rendered with great clarity, and at other times indistinct.

This not-quite-return to the dream sequence of the play’s opening is something of a sleight that Kuo would develop in several other plays, most notably in Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral (1995), whose unnamed narrator opens with the confession that “I have come to realise of late that dreaming has become the centre of my life” (Kuo 2012, 235).6 The move raises an intriguing question about the eﬀect of the play on its audience, who are drawn into Kuo’s dreamworld, and thereby fast-tracked into the web of relations spun by the narrator — and by the actor. On stage, the actor’s performance undergirds the characters’ narrated acts of self-realisation in ways that do not wane with the characters’ confidence, and key to this is the public telling of the stories, where the presence of the assembled audience members is integral. This raises the possibility that, rather

234  P. RAE

than the inherent doubleness of theatre bringing to light the dynamics of identity formation in life, it is the sincere attention of the audience that legitimates the unfolding of the theatrical event, and grants it its integrity. In the case of Coﬃn and No Parking this means that the actor is constituted in his role as an actor only cumulatively, as he draws his audience into a relational network of associ-ation and aﬃliation. Perhaps this, more than being the verbal tic of the avuncular Everyman, is the reason for those moments of shared recognition with spectators (“I think you all understand that lah,” and so on), for these are also the moments that bore through the tale to speak for the teller, too.

It bears noting that this idea of theatrical performance as relationally produced is not one that derives directly from Confucian aesthetics, which is conventionally focused on moral improvement. However, some writers have described related phenomena. Of particular interest is Haiping Yan’s discussion of audience responses to the fantastical “marvel plays” of classical Chinese music-drama:

As a performer uses artistic means — including dancing, singing, pictorial gestures and bodily move-ments, narrating and poetry-recitation of varying tonalities, all with extraordinary stylization — to ani-mate a sphere beyond the routinized, she moves the audience to do their imaginative “knowing” and “feeling” as they decide how to relate to the performer, the performed and their “normal” state of mind. Spectatorship of Chinese “yanxi” or “enacting of stories of suppositionality as plays,” it follows, is crucial to the operation of theatricality. Theatricality is not only about beholding the explicitly thea-trical on stage but also about participating in it. Being “moved” by or “moved” into “most profound feel-ings” as a witness to yanxi involves decisions that create sites of theatricality. So theatricality, one may argue, inherently involves the production of human agency. (Yan 2003, 84–85)

Taking place in a diﬀerent context and in a diﬀerent form, one nevertheless sees an overlap between the ways in which Kuo’s plays could be said to be collectively produced, and the active role of the audience in underwriting the theatricality of Chinese music-drama. It also oﬀers a more generous way of conceiving the potential of relationality than the rather rigid version that informs Singapore’s Shared Values. As Tu Wei-ming (1985, 134) writes:

The self is situated, but neither enclosed nor enslaved, in its sociality. The texture of the dyadic relation-ships that define its social roles is never fixed. It has to be constantly interwoven with the changing configuration of disappearing and emerging threads which the self encounters in its life situations.

While this may conventionally take the form of what Tan Sor-hoon calls “graduated love” (2002, 173), in which an intensification of relations near the centre ripples out to aﬀect all others, in con-temporary contexts, a range of diﬀerent relationships may be mutually beneficial, including those nurtured at the outer reaches of the network. As the network flexes and grows, so all the relations within in it are altered accordingly, and in this regard, one can see the theatre as a site in which relations between people that may otherwise be distanced are temporarily drawn close, influencing them and the other relational networks in which they conventionally participate in more long-lasting ways. In this small-scale but intimate way, the theatre takes advantage of a cosmopolitan aspect of Confucian relationality more generally, whose mutability suggests a responsiveness to the flux of interactions that increasingly define the experience of sociality in globalised contexts. As Confucius writes in The Analects: “The person who does not consider what is far away will find worries much closer at hand” (15: 12).

All this is underscored in the case of Coﬃn and No Parking by the cumulative eﬀect of their enduring popularity. Few other Singaporean plays have been so consistently revived and reinvented.7 They have been presented in multiple languages, performed by women, and deconstructed and reconstructed by artists from Hong Kong, Taiwan and China. When, in March 2004, the Old Parlia-ment House re-opened to the public as the Arts House, No Parking was a piquant choice to

INTER-ASIA CULTURAL STUDIES  235

inaugurate the renovated Chamber. In consequence, Kuo’s monodramas have accreted a kind of associative and aﬀective density, with many audience members already familiar with the stories. Each performance is no longer simply the recounting of a fictional event, but also the recounting of previous performances: the narratives have taken on the status of urban myths, whose every re-telling, while embellished and adumbrated by each performance as all such stories are, is also a collective process of re-invention.

In this regard, the relational interactions that produce each performance in the manner intro-duced above can be seen to extend beyond the parameters of a given theatre on a given night, to encompass a host of other features. Like the mundane objects by which the narrators mediate their relationships with other people — be they friend or foe — so the plays themselves have become the means by which audience members interpret their own, developing interactions: touchstones for an understanding of state-citizen relations, for instance; or a punchline in a mordant gag upon the death of Lee Kuan Yew.

Conclusion

It is important to recognise that Singapore society and Singapore theatre have changed significantly in the three decades since Kuo wrote his monodramas. And yet, Kuo’s plays remain among a very small number that comprise a Singapore theatre repertoire, and, perhaps by dint of their ordinari-ness, the circumstances explored in Coﬃn and No Parking remain resonant in the city-state. The high costs of car ownership in Singapore are an ongoing bone of contention between the state and aspirational Singaporeans. And when, in 2012, the Government announced plans to build a new four-lane road through the neglected but historically and environmentally significant Bukit Brown cemetery, contestations over cars and coﬃns, the future and the past, came to a head. Many Singaporeans were galvanised into action: tracking down and restoring the graves of forgotten ancestors; researching the history of the cemetery and its occupants; raising public awareness over the issue; and petitioning the government for a change in its construction plans.

Coﬃn and No Parking were written in a period when the PAP government was seeking to introduce a novel version of Confucianism that aligned closely with its interests and policies, even as it made a culturalist claim to the pre-existence of those same ideas. The plays gave expression to the Confucian sensibility that was already at work in the lived experience of many Singaporeans of Chinese heritage and ethnicity. In so doing, they highlighted limitations to the implementation of state Confucianism, and both the tensions and compromises that arise, not between the clichéd dichotomy of Western self-interest and Asian rectitude, but within a society where Confucian ideas and practices are distributed widely but unevenly, and are sometimes subject to diﬀering interpretations.

The death of Lee Kuan Yew threw these complex developments and aﬀective relations into relief. The reaction among many Singaporeans was heartfelt and sincere — more so, perhaps, than the state, which sought in petty ways to mandate the mourning process, had anticipated. Have they not read their Confucius, I wondered: “In mourning, it is better to err on the side of grief than on the side of formality” (The Analects 3: 4). These nuances are what grant Confucian thought its practical and dur-able aspect, and escape any attempt at a rigid implementation of its hierarchies. Although the formal revitalisation of Confucianism has long passed in Singapore, it continues to inform governance, policy and the oﬃcial national narrative. Likewise, although Singaporeans rarely make explicit reference to Confucian doctrine, the lives, worldviews and inter-relations of many continue to instantiate its ideas. Kuo’s plays used the intermediate scale of the theatre to explore the points where lived and state Con-fucianism interpenetrated, within the context of a fast-changing modernity. To understand Kuo’s

236  P. RAE

monodramas today, we must take them as part of a larger social and historical whole, occupying a defining but also variable place within a network of artistic and political relations.

Notes

1. The Shared Values are: Nation before community and society above self; Family as the basic unit of society; Community support and respect for the individual; Consensus, not conflict; Racial and religious harmony (Lim and Tan 2015). For a Confucian critique of the Confucian basis of the Shared Values, see Tan (2012).
2. In terms of Anglophone scholarship, see, for instance, the collection in which Tamney’s own claim appears (Yang and Tamney 2012), as well as Bell (2008), and the essays collected in Hammond and Richey (2015) and Billioud (2018).
3. “Make sure you are not being dishonest with him [your Lord] when you stand up to him” (The Analects 14: 22). Hereafter, I will follow convention in referencing cited Analects only by the relevant chapter and section.
4. The baldest articulation of this hierarchy in The Analects states: “Let the ruler be the ruler, the minister

the minister, the father father, and the son son” (12: 11).

1. See, in particular, the Tables outlining mourning wear for various family members, as determined by their relation to the deceased, in The Sacred Books of China (1966, 209). One further notes that funeral rites take up 50 per cent of Chu Hsi’s Family Rituals (1991).
2. Kuo’s play The Eagle and the Cat (1997) reiterated the point through a telling inversion, when the unnamed narrator states near the beginning of his fantastical story that “It should have been a dream. Because some-thing like that couldn’t have happened in this world. And yet it was definitely not a dream” (Kuo 2012, 115).
3. A distinguished exception is Stella Kon’s Emily of Emerald Hill (1986). A Singaporean monodrama writ-ten contemporaneously with Coﬃn and No Parking, its narrative of a resourceful female protagonist operating within the rigid networks of a Peranakan (that is, Straits-born Chinese who are the descen-dants of Chinese immigrants who came to the Malay archipelago) family unit and social world rep-resents a crucial — if ultimately fatalistic — corrective to the explicitly patriarchal biases of much Confucian thought.

Notes on contributor

Paul Rae is Associate Professor of Theatre Studies at the University of Melbourne. He has published widely on contemporary theatre and performance theory, with a focus on the Asian region. He is author of Theatre & Human Rights (2009) and Real Theatre: Essays in Experience (2019), and a former editor of the journal Theatre Research International. He is at work on two new books: Performing Islands and Mousetraps: Adventures in Theatrical Capture.

References

Bell, Daniel A. 2008. China’s New Confucianism: Politics and Everyday Life in a Changing Society. Princeton:

Princeton University Press.

Belsey, Catherine. 1980. Critical Practice. London: Methuen.

Billioud, Sébastien, ed. 2018. The Varieties of Confucian Experience: Documenting a Grassroots Revival of

Tradition. Leiden: Brill.

Chu, Hsi. 1991. Chu Hsi’s Family Rituals: A Twelfth-Century Chinese Manual for the Performance of Cappings, Weddings, Funerals and Ancestral Rites. Translated by Patricia Buckley Ebrey. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Confucius. 1979. The Analects. Translated by D. C. Lau. London: Penguin.

Goh, Keng Swee. 1967. “Writing a Play: 5 Pointers.” Straits Times, April 9.

Hammond, Kenneth J., and Jeﬀrey L. Richey, eds. 2015. The Sage Returns: Confucian Revival in Contemporary

China. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Kuo, Eddie C. Y. 1996. “Confucianism as Political Discourse in Singapore: The Case of an Incomplete

Revitalization Movement.” In Confucian Traditions in East Asian Modernity: Moral Education and

INTER-ASIA CULTURAL STUDIES  237

Economic Culture in Japan and the Four Mini-Dragons, edited by Tu Wei-ming, 294–309. Cambridge, MA:

Harvard University Press.

Kuo, Pao Kun. 2002. “The Power of Ordinary People.” In Kuo Pao Kun: And Love the Wind and Rain, edited by

Kwok Kian Woon, and Teo Han Wue, 120–121. Singapore: Cruxible.

Kuo, Pao Kun. 2012. The Complete Works of Kuo Pao Kun, Volume 4: Plays in English, edited by Quah Sy Ren

and C. J. W.-L. Wee. Singapore: The Theatre Practice and Global Publishing.

Lepecki, André. 2006. Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement. Abingdon: Routledge. Lim, Tin Seng, and Eugene Tan. 2015. “Shared Values.” Singapore Infopedia. [http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_542_2004-12-18.html)

[infopedia/articles/SIP\_542\_2004-12-18.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_542_2004-12-18.html).

Liu, Qiuyu. 2002. “The Temptations of Kuo Pao Kun.” In Kuo Pao Kun: And Love the Wind and Rain, edited

by Kwok Kian Woon, and Teo Han Wue, 51–53. Singapore: Cruxible.

Lo, Jacqueline. 1993. “Theatre in Singapore: An Interview with Kuo Pao Kun.” Australasian Drama Studies 23:

135–146.

Rainey, Lee Dian. 2010. Confucius and Confucianism: The Essentials. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

Rosemont Jr., Henry. 1997. “Classical Confucian and Contemporary Feminist Perspectives on the Self: Some

Parallels and Their Implications.” In Culture and Self: Philosophical and Religious Perspectives, East and

West, edited by Douglas Allen and Ashok Kumar Malhotra, 63-82. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

The Sacred Books of China: The Texts of Confucianism, Part III, The Li Ki I-Xi. 1966. Translated by James

Legge. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

Tamney, Joseph B. 2012. “The Resilience of Confucianism in Chinese Societies.” In Confucianism and Spiritual Traditions in Modern China and Beyond, edited by Yang Fenggang and Joseph B. Tamney, 97-130. Leiden: Brill.

Tan, Sor-hoon. 2002. “Between Family and State: Relational Tensions in Confucian Ethics.” In Mencius:

Contexts and Interpretations, edited by Alan K. L. Chan, 169-188. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press.

Tan, Charlene. 2012. “‘Our Shared Values’ in Singapore: A Confucian Perspective.” Educational Theory 62 (4):

449–463.

Tay, Eng Soon. 1982. “Bilingualism Burden is Worth the Eﬀort.” Straits Times, December 3.

Tu, Wei-ming. 1984. Confucian Ethics Today: The Singapore Challenge. Singapore: Federal Publications.

Tu, Wei-ming. 1985. Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Yan, Haiping. 2003. “Theatricality in Classical Chinese Drama.” In Theatricality, edited by Thomas Postlewait and Tracy C. Davis, 65-89. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Yang, Fenggang, and Joseph B. Tamney, eds. 2012. Confucianism and Spiritual Traditions in Modern China and Beyond. Leiden: Brill.