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USE2304/Group 1 (Wednesday)
Paper 5
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19/11/2021
Word Count: 2954

Red Dot in a Sea of Green: Analyzing Money and Power Dynamics in Singaporean Society

In this paper, I, a Belgian, will analyze Singaporean culture, history, and society, when seen through the lens of five films: episode two of *The Accidental Nation* (2006), *Diminishing Memories* (2005), *Singapore Dreaming* (2006), *Ilo Ilo* (2013), and *7 Letters* (2015). I will deal extensively with the twin themes of money and power which I posit to be deeply entrenched in Singaporean life. I highlight money, and its absence, growth, and system of distribution as a critical occupation of the Singaporean and the state. Money begets power, and thus I extend my argument to shed light on power dynamics in Singapore, particularly the relationship of an individual to a greater collective (such as family, government and society)¹.

The Institution of Money

Despite a chequered history of deep skepticism of communism, as shown in *The Accidental Nation*, I believe that Marxist ideas of the centrality of money or capital (through class) are informative in assessing, culture, history and society in Singapore. The five films show that money is immensely dominant in the Singaporean psyche, serves as a glue to coagulate family, nation and romance, and contradictorily emerges as a marker of ‘deserved’ status and a reservoir of ‘random’ luck.

Money as a Dominant Force

The Accidental Nation ascribes Singapore’s very foundation as an immigrant society to the reality that the mostly Chinese immigrants “came to make money”; they were only

¹ See Appendix for a brief overview of the five films.

accidentally “drawn into a ... national struggle.” Coupled with scenes of densely packed workers’ quarters, the film shows Tan Tai Yong, an academic, positing that the nascent formations of a political and national identity in Singapore (albeit a Chinese-centric one) started in the ‘crowded Chinatown.’ Interestingly, this is in stark contrast to accounts in *Diminishing Memories*, where self-employed businessmen (including Eng’s father) point to in sparsely populated lush-green *kampungs* as the sources of their identity formation. Community solidarity, shown in the account of the Neo Tiew family’s largesse, is given more importance than nationalistic fervour from far away China.

The Accidental Nation’s first scene juxtaposes the almost-proletarian (but ethnically driven) consciousness with the preeminently wealthy elite, particularly the Straits Chinese, who were politically inert but monetarily fertile. The film describes the island’s struggle between two systems of wealth distribution, capitalism and communism, as central to its post-war history. It embodies this tension in profiling Lee Kuan Yew (an English-speaking Straits Chinese) and Lim Chin Siong, shown to be a ‘radical’ who “dreams to turn Singapore into a pro-communist stronghold” despite his own fervent denials. The ‘radical’ portrayal of Lim and his associates entrenches a dominant notion of the ‘default’: that Singapore was (and is) ought to be a capitalist economy. This ‘default’ portrayal is opinionated; especially in the face of Lee’s concession that hat Lim (and his ideals) had massive ‘grassroots support.’ This is further problematized by the fact that Lim’s socialist party, the Barisan Socialis, was never able to prove its support (or lack thereof) at the ballot box, since a majority of the leadership was arrested prior to Singapore’s merger with Malaysia.

It seems that both the centrality of money (and the government) lie unchanged by the time we arrive at *Diminishing Memories*. The resettlement of *kampungs* is due to the government’s capitalist drive for industrialization and economic growth. The central question of Eng’s journey is defined in relation to money and economic prosperity: “Given a choice, would you rather put Singapore on a fast track to achieve today’s prosperity or otherwise so as to preserve some villages?” There is an implied tradeoff between money and the rustic life in a *kampung*, with varying evaluations by different interviewees. While Songfa feels that ‘personally, [I] think the government was right to resettle us, lots of families said its for the better,’ Eng’s father contends “What did I gain? Nothing. Victimization rather.” Ironically, Langshan holds that in modern Singapore, one needs money to purchased landed property and enjoy even the semblance of *kampung* life. Lixing challenges the value of money in

contending that *kampung*s are priceless: “one million is [not enough] to buy this environment.”

Both *Singapore Dreaming* and *Ilo Ilo* explicitly reveal (and question) the centrality of money in the lives of middle-class Singaporeans through their plots. Set in the context of the Asian Financial Crisis, *Singapore Dreaming* sees an indebted Poh Huat winning a two-million-dollar lottery and planning for a life of new-found luxury and status. He unfortunately dies due to a heart attack, and his financially strained children, Mei and Seng, are left to pick up the pieces. The depiction of their father’s funeral (50:04 – 54:23) is rather telling. Mei meticulously accounts for ‘condolence money’ which is presented by well-wishers as a token of sympathy to the bereaved family. The operationalization of sympathy partially in the form of money is an interesting testament to the latter’s influence in Singaporean culture and even religion. Mei is hardly given space to grieve - she is forced to settle bills with caterers, attend to her employer’s whims, and argue with her brother about what to do with their father’s money. This prompts a scathing remark, ‘with dad in the coffin, you’re making us look bad’ (55:41). The funeral is followed by Mei, Seng and their family friends gambling and playing what seems to be *mahjong*. The scene also shows a discussion of the Singapore dream of 5Cs: ‘cash, credit card, car, condo[minimum], and country club,’ which hints at why Mei and her husband attend a showroom for an expensive condominium, and only serves to underscore the importance of material wealth in Singapore.

Ilo Ilo continues the discussion of money, albeit in the backdrop of a different financial crisis: the Global Financial Crisis of 2008. Hwee Leng’s need to earn a constant living wage drives her to work “away from home;” this necessitates the hiring of a maid, Terry from far-away *Ilo Ilo*. Hwee Leng’s son, Jia Le, discovers the unspoken dominance of money when he asks why Terry: “left the [12 month old] baby to go away for work,” and digests Terry’s response: “Then why did your mom get a stranger to look after her son?” (1:18:03). Hwee Leng is painfully conscious of her predicament, and often gets jealous of Terry’s bond with her son. For example, Hwee Leng’s anger at Jia Le’s refusal to eat her congee (38:57) has more to do with Jia Le’s preference for Terry’s congee than his insolence.

Money as a Glue

Money also serves as a glue that binds families and couples. *Singapore Dreaming* offers many such examples. It opens with a petulant Poh Huat informing an old woman that her

belongings will be impounded by the court due to her *son*'s bankruptcy and mocking her for her son's sins. In turn, Poh Huat and Mei remind Seng that he ought to "get a good job" to repay them for paying for his education overseas so that Poh Huat can "move to a condo." Reputation is staked to the monetary value of one's job, and Poh Huat further warns Seng to not "make me lose face, [and] sell insurance like this [CK]." Seng's outburst after his father's death: "you blew all that money on me and it made no difference" is telling of the continued relevance of the unpaid debt to his father.

Irene is tethered to Seng by virtue of the money she has lent him, although she doesn't realize this until the film's climax. When Irene romantically speaks of marriage, wedding, and baby photos, Seng can only bizarrely respond with assurances that he will repay her (37:50). Irene holds that she would get married to Seng only once he gets a job. The intersectionality of wealth and gender comes to the fore when Irene, Mei and Siew Luan discuss Irene's lending to Seng. While Mei maintains that "women shouldn't be stupid" in unconditionally supporting their (future) spouses, the more old-fashioned Siew Luan claims that "it is right to support your husband." It is revealed that Poh Huat chose to fund Seng despite Mei's superior academic performance. Here, even the women holding more money (Irene and Mei) are socialized into sacrificing for their husbands. However, in the movie's ending, Siew Luan realizes a feminist understanding of her marriage:

"he [Poh Huat] promised that he would take care of me for life. It's because of his promise that I married him. But I don't know what happened to me. Ever since we got married, every morning I'd wake up and all I'd know is to wipe the tables, mop the floor, go to the market, cook, and make herbal tea. I never sang again It's as if I never sung to begin with."

Ilo Ilo incorporates glimpses of this representation of filial piety through money, especially when Hwee Leng asks her husband to include more money in the "red packet" for her mother's birthday (44:04). She thinks of filial piety as performative: "I don't want my siblings to think that we are stingy ... I am not going to argue with you." "That Girl" in *7 Letters* too, revolves around the ten-dollars (and the unrequited love) that Ah Shun owes to young Caiyun, and his attempt to ensure that they do not part with a lingering debt.

Contradictions in the Portrayal of Money

Perhaps paradoxically, money serves both as a marker that entrenches ‘deserved’ status, and a reservoir of ‘random’ luck. The paradox emerges because the films imply that a wealthy individual is to be considered ‘deserving’, successful, and superior to others simply because they are wealthy.

In *Singapore Dreaming*, hierarchies of wealth emerge when the maid (Pinky and the boss’ maid), the secretary (Mei) and the boss (and his wife) are compared. There is a chain of condescension and dehumanization throughout the hierarchy: where Mei suspects Pinky of theft instinctively, her boss forces her to leave her father’s funeral ceremony and instead perform menial work such as photocopying. When Mei’s boss gets robbed by their maid, the boss’ wife condescendingly tells Mei “don’t tell me how to treat *my* maid” (as if implying possession or denying basic human decency), and tells her “you’re just a secretary.” Language plays a role in entrenching this class-based hierarchy: employees speak to their employers exclusively in English even when both are conversant in the vernacular, as seen in the cases of Mei in *Singapore Dreaming*, and Hwee Leng & Teck in *Ilo Ilo*.

Yet money isn’t always gained (or lost) through ‘deserved’ labour. Lotteries and gambling are a common theme across the films. In *Singapore Dreaming*, Poh Huat, a veteran of the daily lottery, hits the jackpot when he asks Seng for ‘lucky numbers.’ In *Ilo Ilo*, Jia Le tracks lottery numbers in his scrapbook and essentially uses probable lottery numbers to bribe his teacher. Teck gambles on the stock exchange, and loses a hundred thousand dollars, while Hwee Leng falls victim to a million-dollar scamster. In “That Girl”, Ah Shun falls into debt with an organized ‘gang’ due to gambling, and tries to recoup his money by aiming to win a rigged ‘lucky tickets’ system at the local shop.

Power Dynamics in Singapore

The films also provide insights into the power dynamics in Singapore, and in particular the relationship between an individual and the collective, whether it is family, government or society.

Family seems to be the most fundamental unit of Singaporean society. The cinematography in *Singapore Dreaming*, *Ilo Ilo*, “The Flame”, and “GPS” always revolves around the family home, and most scenes where a family member ventures out alone are inextricably linked to

family duties such as breadwinning, or purchasing groceries, running errands, and the like. None of the adults ever seem to interact with their friends and acquaintances (even during emergencies or funerals).

Internal family politics comes to the fore in “The Flame”. “The Flame” shows the dilemma that a British Naval officer, Madhavan Nair and his family (his son Mani and his wife Leela) face when they are offered British citizenship by virtue of Nair’s lifelong service in the British military base in Singapore. Nair and his daughter-in-law operate in different domains in the household – the Anglophone old man in his study, and the lively, Tamil and Malay-speaking wife. Mani is an interlocutor for the two. Whereas Nair wants to live in Britain due to the guarantee of a job (‘the British will provide for us’), the pregnant Leela wants to stay in Singapore since she wants her child to be born in the same country she was born in. Leela repeatedly highlights her concerns for her unborn child to convince her husband and father-in-law to stay; it is interesting to see that she does not cite her attachment and assimilation into Singapore (evident in her interactions with her Malay helper) as valid justifications. This gendered notion of power is rather distinctive; it portends a male chauvinism evident in the absence of any woman (barring Queen Victoria) in *The Accidental Nation*.

The power that a government can wield is well explicated by Lee Kuan Yew himself in *The Accidental Nation*: “if you control by force and [their] life depends on you .. you can make them comply and change their attitudes to you.” While Lee makes this statement in the context of the Japanese occupation of Singapore, it is applicable to his own PAP government as well. In *Diminishing Memories*, Eng’s mother discounts her own trauma in being forced to abandon her *kampung*, and holds that “9 out of 10 people are better off [now], ... the government can’t take care of everyone” and stating that when there is a conflict of interest between individuals and the government, then the former tends to blame the latter unnecessarily. Similarly, in “That Girl”, Caiyun’s mother, who is short of ten dollars, exclaims that “the government won’t help us” in procuring medicines for their ill grandmother. Extreme distress is not absent in Singapore: we hear of *kampung* residents committing suicide in the past due to an inability to adjust to small public housing flats (and due to government oversight) in *Diminishing Memories*, as well as traumatic scenes in *Ilo Ilo* that burnish the actual sight of a man committing suicide as well (31:53).

Singaporeans exhibit a chronic lack of agency when discussing the government. There is often the supposition that the people have ‘no choice’ when the government takes decisions, despite Singapore being a democracy. For instance, as discussed earlier Eng asks questions of the form “*Given a choice*, would you rather put Singapore on a fast track to achieve today’s prosperity or otherwise so as to preserve some villages?” (emphasis mine). Tan Cheng Bock, a politician, answers saying that there was “no choice, we had to industrialize or get left behind.”

The government has quite literally changed the landscape of Singapore. The need for a makeshift set to mimic a jungle in the remake of the horror movie in “Sinema” is particularly striking here, as is the progression from *kampungs* in *Diminishing Memories* and “That Girl” and the concrete jungle in *Ilo Ilo*. In “GPS” we first see the grandmother, and then her grandson, narrating a laundry list of top-down changes from a rustic Singapore to one of shopping malls, car parks, and larger checkpoints, and the removal of the Tanjong Pagar railway station (alluded to in “Parting” as well). Further, the demolition of old flats to make way for shopping malls is in fact the multi-million-dollar project that Mei and her boss work on. Amidst the sea of change, the grandma seeks to not only position her impatient family geographically in Singapore, but also serves as the reservoir of memories to moor her family to the nation and inspire them to remember the lost spaces and histories. Her death also brings about a lapse in tradition, as her family now purchases offerings for ancestors in thermocol boxes rather than preparing them at home. Her family becomes more impatient to resume their daily routine (swimming lessons are now at 3pm instead of 4pm, 2pm viewings turn to 1pm viewings).

The government’s top-down approach, coupled with the rapid changes in the economy, seem to have wrought this lapse in tradition. While Tan Cheng Bock does posit that “now [2006] we are more settled, sense of belonging ... now we can afford it ... it the past it was a luxury,” it is prudent to ask whether a sense of belonging to ‘home’ can be rediscovered once lost.

Finally, power dynamics affect individuals and racial groups in society as well. As Lee Kuan Yew and the stories in *Diminishing Memories* make evident, Singapore relies heavily on the compliance of its population to make painful decisions to further the country’s economic growth. This compliance seems to be ingrained from young: Jia Le’s principal states that

“Discipline is an integral part of our education. Knowledge without discipline is of no value to our society” (1:16:53). Being caned in front of his schoolmates humiliates Jia Le, and we also see some children wincing at each blow.

In sum, the quintet of films shows common modes of money and power that in turn reveal insightful observations about Singaporean culture, history, and society, such as the contemporary acceptance of the salaryman structure, filial piety, the lapse in tradition, and the yearning for belonging. They also carry undertones of a possible lack of choice and a commensurate lack of power that Singaporeans feel in their relations to their government.

Appendix

Episode two of *The Accidental Nation*, titled “The History of Singapore,” chronicles the story of Singapore from its founding to its independence in 1965, by means of narration, interviews with lay Singaporeans, academics, and statesmen, as well as illustrative scenes enacting key events. The film’s narration and presentation is opinionated and often contested by plot points in the other pieces, as I will show later. *Diminishing Memories* is a deeply personal account of amateur filmmaker Eng Yee Peng’s experiences of being forced to resettle from a lush green village (*kampung*) to Spartan public housing. *Singapore Dreaming* and *Ilo Ilo* are widely acclaimed films that illuminate the struggles of the Singaporean middle class. ⁷ *Letters* is an anthology celebrating the 50th anniversary of Singapore’s founding, where each short film represents a directory’s ‘letter’ about, or to, home in Singapore.

Declaration

I acknowledge that this research essay is the product of my own work.

All materials consulted have been duly cited and credited.