Chapter 13: As the Wind Blows and Dew Came Down: Ghost Stories and Collective Memory in Singapore

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> I would like to take this opportunity to give readers, especially the "younger generation" of Singaporeans, a glimpse of what life was like in Singapore under Japanese military rule during World War II. I think it is important to try and understand the terror and desperation of the population; their constant fear of being arrested by the Japanese military/secret police (*kempeitai*), the inevitable torture they would suffer and the ever-present threat of death.[1]

In the introduction to the first chapter of a book entitled *There are Ghosts Everywhere in Singapore*, volume two, the author – whose pen name is John Ong – of "Six Selected War-Time Ghost Stories" appears to have given himself the mandate of educating readers about the trials of his fellow Singaporeans and of the British during the years of the Japanese Occupation. Four of the horror tales that constitute the chapter are presented as his own "true" experiences with "ghosts and demons," and two as being told to him by "others" he met in slave labor camps when he was a teenager. What particularly drew my attention to these tales is the fact that, for each one, the ghostly encounter itself is the segment that triggers the least feeling of horror. The writing is, in fact, poignant to the extent that when it comes to identifying the dreadfulness of private experiences under conditions of war, the boundaries between the living and spiritual worlds prove to be totally irrelevant.

In one of the stories, the narrator recounts the raping of his two teenage sisters and his mother in front of his father's eyes by a group of Japanese soldiers. Afterwards, all the family members (with the exception of the narrator) are killed, and the house is burned down. All together, three ghosts appear in the short story. One of them is the specter of his own father "smoking a long bamboo pipe" under a mango tree the latter had planted while still alive. The other two are the specters of a decapitated Japanese soldier and a young Chinese wearing "the blue uniform of the commando." They appear before him next to a path leading to the labor camps. The specter of the commando is walking behind the headless ghost of the Japanese carrying "a severed head which was dripping blood." The percipient deduced that the Chinese beheaded the Japanese soldier and was himself "shot dead" right after by other Japanese soldiers. The first ghost – his father's – is obviously reminiscent of the narrator's family's brutal massacre while the Japanese and Chinese ghosts do not seem at first glance to be associated in any way with his immediate ordeal. Despite the fact that these specters' sudden appearance in the text is absolutely unexpected, the level of horror generated barely measures up to the "real" event described earlier. In this

case, as in the majority of cases I will discuss later, ghosts not only scare individuals who encounter them, but, peculiarly, quite often reassure them as well, precisely because they are just ghosts. "As we began to back away on our trembling legs, the ghosts walked away," writes the author. How can the percipient not feel relatively safe when he finds out that he cannot be physically harmed by the dreadful figures, or realizes that it does not even appear to be their intention to do so in the first place?

Another story, "The Ghosts of Alexandra Military Hospital," begins with a brief but detailed account of the massacre of the British staff and the patients in Alexandra Hospital by the Japanese 18th Division, two days before the surrender of Singapore. The narrator claims that later on, he was part of the forced labor team that was ordered to clean up the areas around the hospital where "heavy fighting" had occurred. Alexandra Hospital was, by then, used for wounded Japanese soldiers. While on duty, the narrator and his mate had a ghostly encounter:

> We heard women calling out, "Please don't kill us! Have merci!" [*sic*] And the sound of shots being fired and the cries of people in pain. The shooting and screams went on until dawn. It was all so real that we expected to find dead bodies everywhere when we went to take a look – but there was nothing to be seen.

The massacre at Alexandra Hospital by the Japanese invaders is well inscribed in Singapore's social memory. What more then can these ghosts tell us about the tragic incident? Ong's short tales are particularly relevant to me because they are blatantly introduced as personal memories of the Second World War, and a part of these personal memories is encounters with ghosts, thus imposing *de facto* on texts that are supposed to be war recollections a sort of out-of-this-world aura. It should be obvious that a story, to qualify as a "ghost story," must refer to ghosts at some point. But in this case it seems that only when the story line absorbs both memories and the supernatural, can we talk about horror tales.

The memory of the Japanese Occupation haunts Singaporeans almost endlessly, through a multitude of means, and ghost narratives are among the most common. Haunting sites vary in popular literature, oral tradition, web sites and school textbooks – from parks, army camps, beaches and reservoir areas, to residential blocks, colonial buildings and so on. The significant number of popular locally published horror series that depict chilling encounters with ghosts rightly suggests that the living and the dead share a common space in the nation state.[2] When I first started digging into the vast repertoire of spiritual beings termed "ghosts" in Singapore, I stumbled onto a host of tales embedded with horrific qualities drawn from traumatic memories of the Japanese Occupation years, such as the ones mentioned earlier. Thus, I came across the specters of Japanese sentries, of victims of the *Sook Ching*, of British soldiers and their families – sometimes floating above the seashore, on other occasions, roaming around colonial buildings. Here were some of the atrocities of war packaged into cheap best-selling horror thrillers, along with fierce Indian or Malay mythological creatures and pitiful souls of the dead. The use of the broad category of "ghosts" to refer to any of the supernatural creatures haunting Singapore reminds us that the uncanny here undeniably mirrors the state ideal of cross-ethnic national loyalty. For many Singaporean youths, the Japanese Occupation exists as a mapping of

creepy haunting sites, at least as much as they reflect the detailed historical accounts they are compelled to memorize in school. In this article I will examine how popular cultural sites, together with the official historical discourse, interact in creating platforms where memories of the Second World War may be experienced over and over again outside the unequivocal sphere of commemoration.[3] I will thus visit briefly some of these sites, spending most of the time in trying to "capture" the specters reminiscent of war memories among a fantastic array of ghosts and mythical creatures. I will also examine the negotiation between the images of Japan provided by these sites and the current popular representations of the contemporary Japan of *manga* and boy-bands.

According to Bennet (1999), there are two basic types of hauntings by ghosts: some ghosts haunt persons while others haunt locations. Singaporean ghosts all belong to the second category. Even when structures are demolished or when the physical environment has been drastically altered over the years, ghosts continue to hang around. For instance, specters recalling the Japanese Occupation can all be found trapped in the last location they were alive, whining, menacing or engrossed in earthly tasks. In some respects, ghosts can prove to be extremely informative. They give us glimpses of history and, thus, can be associated with the collective memory as agents of remembrance or *point de repère*. Furthermore, hauntings can provide us with an important source of sociological information (Gordon, 1997); since ghosts make us a part of their story, they must speak to us in order to exist as ghosts. Ghosts are, in the sense conveyed by Bergson, "presence" (Matsuda, 1996). How do we interact with them? For nearly all the cases of reported hauntings in the local popular tradition, specters make themselves felt prior to their appearance. We interact with them by "knowing" beforehand that we can find them, by feeling the vibrations of their suffering or sorrow, or more simply their former existence as human beings, as it already appears in other realms of memory. Haunted sites are first of all performance spaces, where one can go on specific days and at specific times with an eagerness to experience some of the emotional remains of historical drama. The most popular haunting locations in Singapore are the ones that commonly bore witness to a dramatic and/or sudden death that can be associated with collective trauma.

FROM JAPANESE SOLDIERS TO J-POP: MEMORIES AND POPULAR CULTURE

The invasion of J-pop culture into Singapore plays a large part in drawing a clear-cut distinction between the Japanese who appear in ghost narratives and today's Japan, in the same way that young Singaporeans cut themselves off from past memories by revisiting sites of massacres as places of excitement. In ghost narratives, a "Japanese" is invariably a character emerging from the Second World War, essentially a mythical figure that has the potential to be as menacing as any dreadful legendary ghost can be. The Japan of today is deemed as "trendy" and "non-conservative" by young Chinese Singaporeans, who try to emulate the characters of Nippon TV series and J-pop stars. The androgynous look of boy-band members redefines the concept of male beauty among young Chinese Singaporeans; it is the fashionable "Asian look" that provides grounds for a powerful local identity in reaction to "Western" appeal. The appeal of the "sweet" look of Japanese idols such as Kimura Takuya or the Kinki Kids, as part

of Japan's "soft power" in the Asian region (Ching, 2001: 294) cohabits with memories of the Pacific war without ever interacting with them. Lisa, a 23-year-old female Chinese Singaporean explains:

> The Japanese Occupation belongs to the past. We learned about the Japanese Occupation through our history textbooks in primary school. For us, the Japanese Occupation is essentially a number of buildings, of sites, of commemorative monuments that we had to memorize. And then and after, we watched it over and over again on Channel 8 [the local Chinese TV channel] . . . Hundreds of drama series which always relate the same story, always convey the same stereotypes, same as in our textbooks: the Chinese are courageous, the English are a bunch of cowards, and the Japanese are cruel. The latter are in fact always portrayed as "macho," of short stature and with a bit of mustache under the nose . . . this image is a far cry from the *kawaii* [cute] look of J-Pop male artists.[4]

In my view, between the actual J-pop invasion and the public memories of the Japanese of the Second World War, there is not so much of a rupture as it would appear at first glance in the above quotation, but, instead, there is a state of mediation in which popular ghost stories play an important part.

The main contention of this paper is that specters may be viewed as emotion-laden memories that produce an alternative mode of dealing with official historical accounts. The emotions that we feel when visiting a haunted site, quite often, make a much stronger impact on us than a description of the historical facts supporting the haunting itself. The cognitive scenario that accompanies feelings of fear, anxiety and amazement usually includes a systematic validation of the haunting through already digested information. Interestingly, popular written ghost stories quite often include historical facts that highlight particularly gruesome and morbid details. It is also quite common to come across local horror tales that focus more on the account of "what really happened there years ago" than on the actual haunting account. Thus, searching for evidence that a haunting is really taking place somewhere should begin, interestingly, with reading history books; the percipients are not necessarily looking for phantoms as much as they are looking for tangible clues about the national past.

The years of 1942 to 1945 have left a legacy of an incredible number of haunted sites, mostly for reasons pertaining to Chinese tradition. Sudden and violent deaths, mass burials and non-performance of proper burial rituals are among some of the important causes for souls not being able to pass to the other world and, therefore, being forced to remain captives of these sites. However, the majority of ghost narratives pertaining to the Japanese Occupation in Singapore are also reminiscent of the official history in all respects. These narratives differ greatly from other accounts that depict specters that denounce – just by their incessant whining – the excavation of cemeteries, the expropriation of residential areas or the demolition of well-liked aged buildings.[5]

Ghost stories, drawn from the cultural world-view and cosmologies of the different ethnic groups officially recognized in Singapore, are also propitious sites for breeding public awareness on the need for unity and solidarity against impending and hidden threats. Each of the "ghost stories" books closely follows the CMIO (Chinese–Malay–Indian–Other) racial model. Each of these books, which bear blunt titles such as *Army Ghosts*, *Taxi Driver's Nightmare* or more simply

Singapore Ghost Stories, regroups short narratives depicting interaction between human beings and various supernatural characters. The editors of the most popular series claim to publish accounts sent by people who identify themselves as first-hand witnesses. In the *Singapore Popular Ghost Stories* collection edited by a team collectively and pseudonymously known as Russell Lee, the short stories are often published with the name, age and occupation of their contributors. Stories exposing various types of spiritual creatures are carefully put together in order to present a complete assortment. For example, each *Ghost Stories* book displays its share of *pontianaks,* ugly vampire-like spirits originating in Malay folk religion who transform themselves into beautiful women dressed in white. Interestingly, Malay spirits, known in Malay as *hantu-hantu*, are the most feared. They comprise a whole range of dreadful creatures, such as the *orang minya* (oily man) and the *pennungu* (a woman spirit that flies around village houses with her intestines exposed). These trickster spirits are believed to haunt particular public parks at night, as they prey on young drunken men or promiscuous unmarried couples. Although they are not the lost souls of dead people, their quality as rural spirits is also reminiscent of Singapore prior to urbanization, and even before British colonization. Due to their importance in both Malaysian and Singaporean haunting scenes, these spirits merit some mention. They form a necessary part of the ghost story corpus, and it is worth mentioning that they are the only spectral beings that remind us of pre-colonial times. Because of this broad category of "ghosts," memories of the Japanese Occupation – of the victims of the *Sook Ching* – are recalled along with non-human mythology, in the same way that the recollections of both victims and perpetrators of the Second World War massacres mingle together to provide a spine-chilling form of popular entertainment. At first glance, popular literature appears to disparage war memories. On the other hand, it is also possible to read these horror stories as moving historical accounts, standing miles away from the rigidity of history textbooks.

The popularity of local horror literature based on witness accounts is only one manifestation of the appeal of ghostly matters in Singapore. Ghost haunting is also a well-liked activity among Singaporean youth, and accounts of "field-trips" can be read on popular web sites, whose numbers are always growing. It is worth noting that the sites visited by organized or spontaneous ghost hunting excursions systematically exclude, at least in the cases I have encountered, all the favorite haunting spots of the dreadful *pontianak* and other essentially mythical numinous creatures. Does this mean that mythical creatures are deemed potentially more dangerous, and more "real" than war ghosts? Narrators of war ghost stories tend to regularly use the metaphor of time travel. Encounters with specters of Japanese soldiers appear to abruptly take them back in time. On the other hand, the *pontianak* shares with the vampire a timeless nature. The suggestion that emotions seem fundamentally opposed to the historical enterprise (Rosenwein, 2002) might help in explaining why popular literature seems to provide an appropriate terrain for the exploration of emotions and for the reconciliation between private feelings and historical facts.

HAUNTING AND REMEMBRANCE

Collective memory is extremely difficult to tackle in Singapore. Sites are vanishing regularly to give way to new, "clean" structures, and oral transmission between

generations is diminishing, especially among the Chinese population, the majority race in the country. This can be traced owing to a number of reasons, such as the lack of fluency in the grandparents' Chinese dialects due to the government's Speak Mandarin policies in mass media and education; and religious conversions that hinder the passing on of a number of cultural traditions. Without oral transmission, and without physical markers besides commemorative monuments, (I mean here structures old enough to "remember"), there is a decreasing number of voices that propose alternative histories. In a forum organized by the Singapore Heritage Society, a non-governmental organization dedicated to the preservation of the local heritage, an architect reminded us that:

> Because it persists locally in time, space and substance, architecture inspires us to remember, and to reconstruct events, and most importantly, our ancestors' events. It is hence an important link in any intergenerational ties. Moreover, architecture serves memory not because it contains memories, but because it insists that we remember. (Tan, 2001: 73)

This forum was organized in response to a state decision to demolish the National Library despite public concern. Architecture, in the Singaporean context, does not play much of a role in helping people remember, but often operates, instead, as an agent of forgetting. In fact, it provokes people to imagine the nation-building process, not in terms of historical continuity but in terms of a series of juxtaposed and disconnected periods and events embodied in selected preserved buildings, commemorative monuments and museum exhibitions. In contrast, specters engage us in a scheme of continuity, intertwining their own wandering with undifferentiated glimpses of recent and distant pasts. Haunted sites, thus, are often recently built structures, which, only by their quality of being new, should not convey any feelings of eeriness. In the local slang, Singlish, new buildings are coined as "clean." This alludes to being free of ghosts and spirits, in opposition to "dirty," which refers to being haunted. This "cleanliness," interestingly, is rarely taken for granted unless the site has already been "cleaned" through proper religious rituals, usually conducted by Taoist priests. New physical structures can possibly host ghosts whose origins date back many generations, and these spectral beings become a "presence" through rumors and word of mouth rather than through witness accounts – presence that conveys much about the specific historical trajectory of the location. Ghosts are trapped in specific locations, those locations that have "made" them, and never venture outside this space. Any particular location might embody a series of successive changes to its land use, most of them short term if we compare with other urban landscapes. For each layer of occupation, there is usually a ghost that helps us to remember a given use of the site – an individual who has committed suicide or whose corpse is buried there, the victim of a tragedy, a war martyr, a soldier killed in battle, and so on. Other times, there are no signs of an actual death, but simply the reminiscence of a presence, of someone who has once been there. To see them, or to feel the emotion they embody, one must visit the ghostly dwelling with the intention or, at the least, with some level of expectation that contact will occur.

As Halbwachs' significant concept details, ghost narratives often are the only *points de repère* or referent to past events and specific historical trajectories. Ghosts commonly outlast the demolition of buildings, when they are not

actually produced out of the annihilation of the same structure they are rumored to recall. In Singapore, memory is carefully organized in a manner that not only advocates state ideology – which would not be a sharp contrast to the logic behind official history in general – but is primarily concerned with forgetting, sometimes to the point of erasure. Questions of memory are always political (Waterson and Kwok, 2002: 367), so the overwhelming presence of ghosts borne out of the Japanese Occupation period compared to other important periods in the Singapore history certainly bear political attributes, reminding us of the prevalence of socio-cultural engineering of national amnesia (Wee, 2002: 148). Incidentally, one of the most dramatic periods in Singapore's short history, the three years of the Japanese Occupation, is constantly revived through permanent museum exhibitions, television series, popular literature and other aspects of the popular cultural scene. In popular ghost stories, Japanese sentries appear as frequently as the mythical *pontianak*, conveying the same disturbing sensation of creepiness. Is it possible, in this context, to still put a human face to some of the most brutal deeds perpetrated by the Japanese military during the Occupation? Despite almost two centuries of continuous Japanese presence in Singapore, most of the time non-military, the term "Japanese" in the jargon of local horror stories always refers uniquely to Second World War Japanese soldiers in uniform. I believe that this process of dehumanization of some of the actors of the War through popular culture is partly responsible for the lack of connection Singaporean youth draw between the Japanese of the Occupation and the contemporary Japan of popular culture. This despite the fact that, amazingly, some of the authors of popular ghost stories make a point of educating the population on the trauma of the war years as it was discussed earlier.

If we are to imagine ghost narratives as part of the nation-state's collective memory, certainly we would have to point to the Japanese Occupation as the founding myth of the actual Singapore. No ghost story whose eerie characters emerged from an earlier period – and, in a matter of fact, from a later period – is so openly positioned in a political context. The Japanese Occupation appears to be the only tragic period in Singapore that has produced historical ghosts. I have not once come across ghost stories that remind us of any other dramatic period in the nation-state's history, such as the ethnic riots of the 1960s and 1970s or the 1963 to 1965 *Konfrontasi* (the confrontation between Indonesia and Malaysia) for instance. It seems that all other specters that come out of this period are essentially the reenactment of private drama.

There is a dialectic at play between the ghost and its site of haunting, the site where the ghost is produced as well as where it reproduces itself (Hamonic, 1995). In the course of this dialectical process, ghosts lose their former human personality – just by the mere fact that we call them "ghosts" – at the same time that they become image-memories, not in the sense of Ricoeur and Bergson's pure image-memories, but repeated lessons about the unfolding of a particular dramatic historical trajectory at a particular location. Ghosts are collective *points de repère*. These collective *points de repère* help us to locate historical events in a group's trajectory; as Halbwachs states, these memories thus come back to us in an extremely simplified version. These *points de repère*, he continues, are states of consciousness that by their intensity struggle better against forgetting (1994: 125).[6] This signifies that remembering is, above all, a private experience, and the emotion generated by the expectation of a ghostly

encounter can only be recounted in personal terms. What seems to make ghosts so terrifying is not even, in fact, their ethereal quality so much as the representation they embody. In the cases of soldiers' ghosts, the awareness of seeing a "ghost" seems to be, in all the narratives I have come across so far, strangely, reassuring. Haunted sites provide a stage for experimenting with what fear would feel like if history were to repeat itself. Haunting means that the traumatic memories and the painful emotions ghosts carry transcend the ever-changing urban landscape, handing down awareness and reflections on the possibilities of waking up suddenly in a similar situation. We are, thus, talking about the encounter with an historical marker and a particular emotion, not with a threatening being. As is the case with one of Singaporean novelist Catherine Lim's ghostly characters, the terrifying aura originates from its former role as a living being, not from its numinous existence.

> I wish I could throw a romantic aura over this lonely, intense man who has been walking the earth these 40 years, consign him to the misty world of ethereal beings that mystifies, even charms. But the soldier seems only to want to terrify. He seems too tangible a presence, too powerful a force to be coaxed away by prayers and offerings. (Lim, 1983: 100)

For Lim, the ghost is a lonely, mysterious being, while the soldier triggers intense fear. This "powerful" force that Lim is referring to takes us back, essentially, to what a Japanese soldier represented in the specific conjuncture of the most tragic moments of the Occupation. There is no doubt that there is an intense connection between a building or a landscape and traumatic emotions that ghosts, as *points de repère*, help us to "feel." Halbwachs mentioned that he had felt the vibrations of an event that had occurred 100 years before his birth, that this past had been internalized to the point that it became his own private past. For him, memory is essentially a social phenomenon that always moves from the collective to the private. I would like to postulate, however, that in the cases I am concerned with, memory is not – or is rarely – internalized. On the contrary, it reaffirms its objectified quality. The experience of expecting a spectral encounter is ultimately private, and in concordance with Halbwachs' idea of "feeling vibrations of the past." Yet, there is also a clear awareness that the memory, as a ghost, remains outside the self and, thus, can be called or avoided almost at will.

The majority of the stories in the abundant popular literature put into play both spectral and human characters emerging from the different traditions that form the cultural landscape of Singapore. There are for example, *bomohs*, and Taoist and Hindu priests. These stories often translate the duality between "clean" and "dirty" into good and evil in extremely moralistic terms, loaded with reference to Christian and Islamic moral frames of conduct (incidentally, in Mandarin and some Chinese dialects a haunted place is referred to as a "dirty" place); however, narratives alluding to the Japanese Occupation depict experiences in which religious or moral sentiments are usually left out. Except on rare occasions – such as a narrative in which a Taoist priest is held accountable for the fall of Singapore by having attracted the devil while attempting to stop the Japanese invasion through magical means – these tales are essentially never-ending reenactments of traumatic events, charging the current Singaporean landscape with hologram-like images or recording-like sounds of Japanese

soldiers and of victims of the mass killings. Narrators commonly underline the fact that they enter the scene willingly, embodying and living through the fears of the victims. It is this overlapping of past and present that constitutes, in my view, the rapport to the past (*rapport au passé*). Through this process, traumatic events are acted upon, deeply felt and identified as part of one's own private historical trajectory:

> I heard stories from people who have been working there for years. Lots of things have happened, sometimes at 3am you can hear the army march, gun shots, ladies and babies crying and many eerie voices. When I first heard about it, I thought it was the squad or army training in early morning but later on I find it [*sic*] something fishy . . . I heard people talking in Japanese. I asked my self . . . am I back [*sic*] in year 1942?[7]

THE TEMPORAL AND SPATIAL SPECIFICITY OF SPECTERS

The following comes from an internet account of a night excursion organized at Punggol Beach by a society concerned with paranormal activities: "We walked near to the seashore . . . and mostly we wanted to sense about [*sic*] the dark ambience of the beach where innocent men where slaughtered." The ghostly occurrence reported in this account is the seeing of "ghostly orbs" by the members of the groups. Besides this mysterious encounter, the three web pages describe and question unusual religious offerings and physical evidence of the massacres. "One conclusion with high certainty that we can draw," the piece claims, "is that Punggol Beach is a very ghostly haunted place. Many were killed years ago and religious cults are still operating actively here." In addition, the web site offers an amalgamation of information in the form of historical facts, well-known eyewitness versions of the massacres, and descriptions of some of the most popular haunting locations.

Stories are always located both in time and space; sometimes, just an indication of the location suffices for the reader to grasp the whole context. Changi Beach, Sentosa, Pulau Ubin, Dempsey Road football field, Kent Ridge Park, Tanah Merah, and Punggol Beach are among the locations where one can expect Second World War spectral reenactments. Most of the beaches, reclaimed land, reservoirs, islands and parks in the nation-state are reputed to be haunted by Japanese soldiers and by victims of their atrocities. More important than "seeing" a ghost is the "expectation" of an eerie feeling. Haunted sites are places where one expects not only mystical occurrences, but also particular sensations charged with feelings of sorrow and disempowerment. This experience is lived through the expectation itself, through the fear – or pleasure – this expectation generates. Narratives describing this plunge into war memories are validated through the skill displayed by the narrators in conveying these feelings:

> As the wind blows and dews came down, I suddenly felt chill all over. I crossed my arms hoping to keep myself warm. What I heard next can never be erased from my mind. I heard footsteps at first coming closer to me. The footsteps suddenly stop right next to me. Then came voices, speaking in Japanese, from whispers, it turned to laughter followed by gunshots and screams. I shut my eyes tightly and prayed that it will stop. [There were] screams of children, women and men crying. I was really terrified and wanted to get up and run.[8]

> Everyone sat up in bed and listened, hearing a million panicking voices and gunshots. The sounds were loud and terrible and they knew that they were not just figments of their imaginations because the very ground itself was vibrating from the sound waves . . . It sounded as if a war had started outside the tent on the shore of the beach they were camped on.[9]

Army camps are, not too surprisingly, other significant sites of spectral encounters with Japanese sentries. For young Singaporean males, the prospect of having to cope with ghostly matters at one point or another during their two years of compulsory National Service are, in fact, quite high. Specters of Japanese are among the most common ghosts, together with old Chinese men and pretty young women that are believed to haunt these spaces. In all the stories I have come across so far, these ghosts walk alone or in twos, usually doing their rounds at night around the camp, or haunting the toilets. Rumors of apparitions and of other signs of haunting, such as cracking sounds near specific barracks and even direct attacks on persons, apparently foster order and discipline among the trainees, as an ex-National Service man explained to me:

> When I did my service both on Pulau Tekong and then in Jurong camp, I heard a lot of stories about Japanese soldiers waiting silently in the dark ready for ambush or else hiding in the toilets. These rumors were circulating around and we were all extremely nervous when it was our turn to perform night duties. I think today that these scary stories were an important part of our training . . . how to train our mind not to be afraid of anything. We were told also that, if our mind were clear all the time, if we were performing our duties correctly, all the chances were that we would never encounter any ghosts.

Ghosts wander about in army camps reminding the young NS man of the fact that they must be in control at all times for the history not to repeat itself. In order to defend the nation, they must be able first to eliminate their own fear of ghosts. This contrasts sharply with British soldiers in ghost stories who appear as desperate or as being totally taken aback by the Japanese invasion. It seems that, even decades after their death, they still cannot cope with the feelings of surprise and helplessness. An important number of ghost stories put into play British military characters (who are always portrayed as benevolent), such as high-ranking officers or their family members, soldiers and nurses who mingle incessantly with their own misery as war victims. It is this moment that is frozen; their own sorrow, fears and anticipation that are stuck in a given space, which haunts places:

> A British major, whose wife and two daughters were tortured, raped and killed, can still be heard weeping for his family. Sometimes, if you wait at the junction of Loyang Avenue and Changi Village Road, you can see this British family walking down Changi Village road.[10]

In many other verbal accounts, British children, most often girls, can be heard or seen at night crying for their mothers or fathers killed by Japanese soldiers. Others, such as the doctors and nurses who are known to haunt the surgery rooms of Alexandra Hospital, go about their own affairs without showing

any signs of despair. These spectral beings do not trigger a remembrance of the Japanese Occupation as much as they actually erase any traces of memory of the war by providing a sense of continuity between the period preceding the events that caused their deaths and what should have followed had the event not taken place. One will refer to an English surgeon or sergeant, a nurse moving about as living beings do, pursuing their activities without disturbing anyone: they simply are. It is, essentially, the suspicion of their perpetual presence that makes them ghosts. Interestingly, all the ghosts of British colonialists appear against the backdrop of the Second World War, almost as if the pre-war period has not produced any ghosts reminiscent of the colonial past before the war. Furthermore, British ghosts always appear as kindhearted and gentle, showing no trace of the distance, coolness and (sometimes) disdain with which they ruled Malaya, especially before the surrender to the Japanese. Mary Thomas, a former British nurse who was interned in Singapore during the three years of the Occupation, noted in her memoirs:

> In sharing the trials and troubles of enemy occupation with the local-born people of Malaya, we felt we were forging with them a link of friendship that could not be broken, since there is no bond closer than that of shared danger and oppression. (1983: 164)

As Thomas rightly suggested, the sharing of war oppression has erased any memory of previous ordeals imposed by the colonial masters. This is quite faithfully reflected in ghost narratives where the specters of British, military or civilian, appear. These ghosts are part of war memories, including the before and after, reinforcing the British image as benevolent rulers. Interestingly, however, I have not so far come across any narrative that depicts encounters with Indian or Gurka soldiers. In reality, they were important components of the British military. Their entire absence (or erasure?) from the corpus of ghost narratives is, no doubt, significant. Ghosts are the spirits of the ruled and the rulers, and foreign troops, even though they were from contemporary British colonies, do not belong to either group. Matsuda notes: "memory serves as a point of judgment not simply by recording the past, but by giving its re-speaking both language and gesture, creating the possibility for 'ideal speech acts' and their opposites to contest one another" (1996: 14). Ghost narratives are, in my view, the interaction between the living and the past reinvented – or reorganized – through a rhetoric of sharply defined oppositions that are already thriving in public discourse.

As with Catherine Lim's ghostly character mentioned earlier, there are ghosts whose existence is a never-ending reenactment of their last moments. Among the most well-known rumors are the ones that refer to regular "sightings" at Alexandra Hospital of English surgeons or nurses carrying out their duties as they most probably did hours before the massacre of staff and patients on the night of 15 February 1942, as if the dramatic event never occurred. "They just don't know they are dead because it happened too suddenly," a local Chinese woman who had been warded once at the hospital explained to me.

The city landscape of Singapore is a site for private memories: Japanese soldier specters that haunt buildings, such as the poor fellow trapped in the air

conditioning piping of the old Cathay Building, are often stripped of their fierce qualities through isolation. They do not trigger fear as much as sorrow or ridicule. In another popular story, three specters of Japanese soldiers reenact endlessly the performance of hara-kiri in the condemned room of a pricey hotel. These ghosts usually represent those vanquished at the end of the war, such as individuals who chose to end their lives rather than surrender. The memories they embody are absolutely private; they are disengaged from their former role as if their military authority had been vanquished within the city walls, condemned to haunt and to be haunted by their own losses. Japanese ghosts in city buildings always manifest themselves as isolated figures and in unthreatening ways, as if to signify that city buildings are no longer the target of their military power. In encounters with city ghosts of Japanese soldiers, there is no expectation of interaction; there is no fear of being suddenly involved in a dreadful situation where one has to react, when one's life will be challenged.

If Japanese soldiers and *Kempeitai* agents continue to haunt beaches and military camps, the urban space accommodates soldiers confronting their own morality, such as narratives depicting reenactments of hara-kiri in vacant houses or hotel rooms, or lost souls seeking redemption and mercy. One of the most eloquent stories in this respect, "The Campus Spirit," was written by Goh Sin Tub. In it, a Japanese university student who had read extensively on the atrocities of war while in Singapore is "visited" by the ghost of his great-grandfather which had been haunting one of the campus buildings for years. The contact with the specter is established in cyberspace. The great-grandfather pleads to be liberated from his torments and explains how he was compelled to perpetrate acts of brutality during the war, acts that he now regrets deeply.

In natural spatial environments, more specifically in the periphery of the city, spectral scenes bring an awareness, as well as the imagery, of collective suffering and despair: as if the war had never ended, as if the *Kempeitai* continue to prey on the civilians, aided by their post-mortem invisibility. The ongoing anticipation of these spectral scenes echoes the state's discourse about the necessity of a strong military defense. The display of military arsenal during National Day celebrations is one of the eloquent examples of how the state calls attention to the imperative for strong military power. But, the question remains: to protect Singapore against whom? This question is never openly tackled, while the shadows of Japanese soldiers continue to haunt bookstores and the mass media. In the trailer for a series on the Japanese Occupation on the English-speaking TV channel, we glimpse a battalion of Japanese soldiers making its way at night on bicycles along a bushy path. The fifteen-second trailer remains powerfully soundless, leading the viewer to imagine the enemy entering Singapore silently, sneaking through the island's uninhabited land or reservoir areas, unfolding in the audience's consciousness the dramatic turn of events that is already deep-seated in collective memory and official history. However, far from being imagined for this specific series, this mute, unexpected and unannounced penetration of Japanese soldiers onto Singapore soil, walking, cycling or even swimming across the Johor Strait, is in fact one of the key representations of the Japanese invasion into popular discourse.

The mapping of haunted sites is modeled on history textbooks – as sites that hold memories of atrocities of war rather than as being simply ghostly. Unlike other characters of ghost stories that are born through religious traditions and

cultural knowledge, ghosts of the Japanese Occupation come into awareness both through actions pertaining to the construction of national identity – such as the learning of modern history in schools and National Service – and through oral narratives (the style favored by ghost story publishers). Singapore's ghost stories rarely venture beyond the Japanese Occupation as if Singapore's past was converging itself to that specific point in time. The ghosts of the beheaded Malay regiment marching through Kent Ridge Park or floating above the Ayer Rajah Expressway on some nights are expected only by those who have already learnt, through official history or oral tradition, the tragic event that left the Malay regiment annihilated and massacred by Japanese invaders on a night in February 1942. The Malay regiment members are, no doubt, elevated to the rank of national heroes in Singapore's history. Nevertheless, as far as I know, only the massacre which is now commemorated in Kent Ridge Park has left Malay ghosts in legacy. Besides this event, Malay soldiers are absolutely non-existent in popular ghost stories, as are Indian soldiers.

GHOSTS, HISTORICITY AND MEMORY

We "know" that a place is haunted because we have already learnt about a particular event involving a tragic death at this same location. On an evening field-trip taken by forty second-year university students to the Ford Factory, all of them depicted the building as being one of the most haunted in Singapore. However, only two of them were able to recall a ghost story. But all of them remembered having seen this historic building, where Singapore surrendered in the Second World War, for the first time in their school textbooks. "Because of what happened here, it can only be haunted," remarked one of the students. Ghosts are memories that are located somewhere between official history and private remembrance.

Eerie experiences are ultimately private ones. In most stories, some see the ghost while others do not; ghost encounters are always privileged encounters, sometimes triggered by the simple desire to experience it, other times occurring because of the percipient's momentary moral weakness. Emotions such as sadness, fear and powerlessness surface in most of these stories. There are no "real" group encounters; emotional experiences remain private, although sometimes similar and ready to be shared.

We may ask the question: are these ghost stories sites of remembrance or of forgetting? Is the social trauma pertaining to the Japanese Occupation being dealt with through popular culture? Both ghost stories reminiscent of the Japanese Occupation and J-pop culture produce representations of Japan that resist historical and cultural frameworks of meaning. Ricoeur, drawing from both Bergson and Freud, argues that to repeat entails forgetting and thus, the compulsion of repetition hinders the possibility of becoming aware of the trauma (*prise de conscience*) (2000: 576). For young Singaporean adults, local history is engaged both through the mapping of sites from early school years and through media representation. Since it is rightly understood as being, essentially, an institutional product, history remains objectified, and so popular culture sites, such as ghost stories, may be understood as the product of this same objectification. It is possible that, through ghost stories, the trauma is continuous but never fully consumed.

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NOTES

1 *There are Ghosts Everywhere in Singapore*, Publishing Consultants, Singapore, 1999.

2 The term "ghosts" in Singapore may refer to any supernatural or mystical entity; it is not a term solely confined to the wandering souls of the deceased.

3 In this paper, I discuss both literary and "true" ghost stories, since both are almost indistinguishable parts of oral tradition in Singapore. I agree with Funicane when he writes, "it is arguable that made-up ghost stories are just as revealing of social assumptions as so-called authentic accounts" (1996: 3).

4 *Kawaii* is a Japanese term usually translated as "cute" in English. The term is part of the lexicon of J-pop fans in Singapore.

5 Many popular ghost stories and rumors refer to the haunting of places by the occupants of demolished buildings or excavated cemeteries. For example, the MRT station at Novena is believed to be haunted by the headless specters of the people previously buried in the Jewish cemetery that had been excavated before the construction of the MRT station. In another rumor, the specter of an Indian woman appears at the windows of the resident of a condo supposedly built on land once occupied by migrants from India.

6 "Ces points de repère sont des états de conscience qui, par leur intensité, luttent mieux que d'autres contre l'oubli . . .".

7 SFOGS.com.

8 SFOGS.com.

9 *Nightmares: True Ghost Stories*, "Camp Fire", (ed.) Pugalentii, Asura, Singapore, 2000.

10 Lee, Russell, *True Singapore Ghost Stories: Book Ten*, Angsana Books, Singapore, 1999.