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Title	The indigenised West in Asian multicultures: Literary-cultural production in Malaysia and Singapore
Author	C. J. W.-L. Wee
Source	<i>English in Southeast Asia Conference (2008), National Institute of Education, Singapore, 4 - 6 December 2008</i>

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C. J. W.-L. Wee

## **The Indigenised West in Asian Multicultures: Literary-cultural production in Malaysia and Singapore.**

PAPER PRESENTED AT English in Southeast Asia Conference 2008: The 13th International Conference on English in Southeast Asia, Singapore.

Abstract: This essay examines what happens to the cosmopolitan culture of the 'West' for postcolonial societies when economic and political power has shifted away from a geographical location to a less locatable planetary position in the 'globe'. The essay also investigates whether postcolonial Others in the semiperiphery ever effectively lay claim to a cosmopolitan Anglo-Asian multiculturalism that has a part ownership, no matter how fraught, of what can be called the global West. Is this West, or the relevant parts of it, ever indigenized? Effective dealing with the status of the global West and its various cultures within and without diverse postcolonial Asian societies requires historical and comparative dimensions because the history of the British (and increasingly the American) West cannot be the same history for every location. Even Malaysia and Singapore, despite common historical British colonial rule and shared cultural characteristics, display different post-independence manifestations of the global West. Malaysian and Singaporean literary-cultural production is the main subject to be investigated in relation to the issues articulated. A comparative culturalist examination via two indicative texts – Malaysian Huzir Sulaiman's play, Notes on Love and Life and Painting (1999), and Singaporean Tan Hwee Hwee's novel, Mammon Inc. (2001) – suggest that even in what might be described as our 'postmodern' moment in history when cultural identities seem to be in flux, the nature of this 'flux' in relationship to the West 'within' them is simultaneously revealingly similar and dissimilar in the way 'national culture' is articulated. 'Postcolonialism' is not about direct resistance to an 'outside' dominating West. The West clearly is in many ways a part – whether comfortable or not – of the Asian multicultures Sulaiman and Tan write about, where the local can clash with/negotiate with/manipulate regional cosmopolitanisms and the Anglo-American global West.

Keywords: Asian multicultures; postcolonial cultures; cosmopolitanism; global West

How are we to relate to the literary and artistic cultural legacies and current cultural practices of what might be called the 'global West' within which many seem to dwell? Are such cultures a part of a symbolic order of postcolonial multicultures that in the end, though, can only be a *negative* part-and-parcel of Western cultural and economic hegemony? While this is not a new issue, the question remains to be answered: is one ever only *possessed* by English or American literature – indeed, by the dispersed Anglo-American West – and not vice versa? Also, should 'resistance' be the main watchword as the cultural goal of the West's 'others', whether 'hybridised' or 'authentic'? Non-metropolitan claims to literary culture in

English still seem be limited to the category, for instance, ‘postcolonial, anglophone literatures’, or that older category, ‘New Commonwealth literatures’.<sup>1</sup>

Such nomenclature suggests a liberal inclusiveness, but one that also subtly turn one *out* of possessing and participating in the presumed cultural mainstream. As has been trenchantly observed, ‘overly innocent versions of liberal thinking ... [fail to confront present] raciology and their refusals to admit the humanity of the racial other’.<sup>2</sup>

Effective dealing with the question of the status of the global West and its various cultures within and without diverse postcolonial Asian societies, and to what extent they own or are owned by the global cultural West, I suggest, requires both historical and comparative dimensions – historical because the history of the global West in, say, East and Southeast Asia (and certainly in English or foreign language and literature university departments) cannot be the same history for every location.

Even Malaysia and Singapore, despite a common history of British colonial rule, display different if shared post-independence manifestations of the British West. For my purposes, Malaysian and Singaporean cultural production will be the main object to be investigated in relation to the issues just articulated. The period since the 1980s – one of rapid economic transformation – is the context pertinent to the postcolonial cultural production that I will bring up. A comparative examination will indicate that even in what might be described as our ‘postmodern’ moment in history, in which cultural identities seem to be in flux, the nature of this ‘flux’ in relationship to the West ‘within’ them – even if of similar origins – is, in a revealing way, not entirely the same in the two countries.

### **On ‘Discrepant Cosmopolitanisms’**

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<sup>1</sup> As we know, the so-called ‘New Commonwealth’ would refer to countries such as Nigeria or Singapore, while the ‘Old Commonwealth’ refers to the former settler colonies such as Canada and Australia.

A starting point may be, first, to engage with what it means when the economic processes of globalisation result in an increased presence of the Anglo-American West, and, second, to reconsider the idea of ‘discrepant cosmopolitanisms’ that has arisen within cultural theory as a means by which to address the question of how we own – or not – the cultural presence of the global West. Re-visiting that particular theorisation may help address the actual embedded discrepant cultures that many live with.

Anthropologist Fernando Coronil has observed that economic and political power has shifted away from a geographical location called the ‘West’ to a less identifiable position in the ‘globe’. Capitalism’s evolution in the ‘imperial present’ has led to the West’s ‘invisible reterritorialization in the elusive figure of the globe[, and this] ... conceals [the] diffuse[d] transnational financial and political networks that integrate metropolitan and peripheral dominant social sectors’.<sup>3</sup> The upshot is that ‘the image of a unified globe dispenses with the notion of an outside. It displaces the locus of cultural difference from highly Orientalized others located outside the metropolitan centers to diffuse populations dispersed across the globe’ (TCG, 368). Further, the ‘differences between [Western] centers and [non-Western] margins’ are effaced, with non-Western subjection appearing ‘as a market effect, rather than as the consequence of a Western political project’ (TCG, 369).

The question here for me is: what happens to the ‘cultural’ part of the global West that now occupies this less-identifiable planetary position, along with the cosmopolitan culture related to it, for postcolonial societies? This global West today is most often identified with the Anglo-American West, though it is still connected with older Eurocentric notions of cosmopolitanism. While a putative ‘citizen of the world’ need not be white, his/her

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 57.

<sup>3</sup> Fernando Coronil, ‘Towards a Critique of Globalcentrism: Speculations on Capitalism’s Nature’, *Public Culture* 12, no. 2 (Spring 2000): 353, 368, special issue on ‘Millennial Capitalism and the Culture of Neoliberalism’, guest ed. Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff.

cosmopolitan edge comes, to a fair extent, from a familiarity with European cultures – from being culturally impure in a *particular* way. He/she might have an assumption, as Paul Valéry (1871-1945) has put it, that

*most [of mankind's] astonishing and fruitful [achievements] have been the work of a tiny portion of humanity, living in a very small area compared to the whole of the habitable lands.*

This privileged place was Europe; and the European man, the European spirit, was the author of these wonders [emphasis original].<sup>4</sup>

While this understanding of Euro-cosmopolitanism in many ways still holds, in a world in which capitalism's connection with the arts that are one mark of cosmopolitan achievement has become much more pronounced since the Reagan-Thatcher years,<sup>5</sup> we need to include US mass-cultural and high-cultural knowledge as now part of a Euro-American cosmopolitanism.

The issue I want to return to is the idea that there is now no more 'outside' to the global West within the dominant economic order. The assertion that 'the locus of cultural difference' is displaced to diasporic and 'diffuse populations dispersed across the globe' leaves one wondering what happens to postcolonials living in actual decolonised and multi-ethnic territories located in the economic semiperiphery, such as Malaysia and Singapore, in this 'unified globe'.<sup>6</sup> Can 'highly Orientalized others' located in the 'actual' semiperiphery lay claim to a hybrid and discrepant cosmopolitanism that has a part ownership, no matter how fraught, of the global West (as, presumably, metropolitan Others have part possession)? Or do they implicitly remain in dyadic opposition to the now globally disseminated West?

The established postcolonial theorising itself on metropolitan migrancy and mobility

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Valéry, 'The European', in Valéry's *History and Politics*, trans. Denise Folliot and Jackson Matthews (New York: Bollingen, 1962), 311.

<sup>5</sup> Chin-tao Wu, 'Embracing the Enterprise Culture: Art Institutions Since the 1980s', *New Left Review* no. 230 (July/Aug. 1998): 28-57; Fredric Jameson, "'End of Art" or "End of History"?' in Jameson's *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998* (London: Verso, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> I am not ignoring the difficulties of diffuse populations working within postcolonial territories such as Indian migrant workers in the Middle East or Filipina maids in Southeast Asia, they who are indeed 'dispersed across the globe'. My purpose is to indicate that they cannot represent the full picture of postcoloniality and the relationship to the global West.

and their relation to cultural hybridity does not contribute to solving this conundrum. Pheng Cheah, for example, has acerbically commented that in Homi Bhabha's idea of hybridity,

postcoloniality *is* the hybridity of metropolitan migrancy. ... With the onset of decolonization, all the former colonial hybrids have become postcolonials. And it seems that to keep their hybrid powers and status intact, they have had to depart for the metropolis, following on the heels of their former colonizers, to torment them and enact moral retribution by subverting their cultural identity.<sup>7</sup>

'Cosmopolitan', as suggested, can be a suspect term of reference, smacking as it does of Euro-Americacentric notions of culture. Bruce Robbins has attempted to recover cosmopolitanism as a positive term, drawing upon James Clifford's idea of 'discrepant cosmopolitanisms'<sup>8</sup> to give it a more positive valence that can be used to address the issue at hand. He argues that a 'negative sense of "cosmopolitan" co-exists from the outset with more positive ones, such as the scientific sense of "worldwide distribution", and with the more general sense of "belonging" to parts of the world other than one's nation'; he adds: 'it seems reasonable to ... valu[e] ... a density of overlapping allegiances rather than the abstract emptiness of nonallegiance'.<sup>9</sup> It is here that Robbins draws upon Clifford.

Robbins' take on Clifford, it has been argued, 'lies in ... its insistence on multiple cosmopolitans partly rooted in local cultures, partly positioned in global networks. No longer conceivable as the prerogative of the West, cosmopolitanisms manifest themselves in *any* instance of sustained intercultural contact and exchange'.<sup>10</sup> This take on discrepant

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<sup>7</sup> Pheng Cheah, 'Given Culture: Rethinking Cosmopolitical Freedom in Transnationalism', in *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation*, ed. Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 301. While Cheah is correct about Bhabha, it is still important to recall how liberating his notions of 'hybridity' and 'the third space' were in the 1980s as ways to escape essentialist or totalised thinking on identity.

<sup>8</sup> James Clifford, 'Traveling Cultures', in *Cultural Studies: Now and in the Future*, ed. Larry Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula A. Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992). His well-known essay argues that 'the normative practices of twentieth-century anthropology' have 'privileged relations of dwelling over relation of travel' (99); this disregards the ways by which natives also travel and have complex intercultural connections with the others that surround them: 'In this emphasis we avoid, at least, the excessive localism of particularist cultural relativism, as well as the overly global vision of a capitalist or technocratic monoculture' (108).

<sup>9</sup> Bruce Robbins, 'Comparative Cosmopolitanisms', in *Cosmopolitics*, ed. Cheah and Robbins, 250.

<sup>10</sup> Amanda Anderson, 'Cosmopolitanism, Universalism, and the Divided Legacies of Modernity', in *Cosmopolitics*, ed. Cheah and Robbins, 273.

cosmopolitanisms would allow for the presence of the West in postcolonial societies, while not requiring a blunt (neo)colonised cultural commitment to the West.

Robbins, however, like Clifford, ends up making a case for a cosmopolitanism that primarily conjoins ‘others’ with other ‘others’, as it were. For all his generous intentions, he makes the ‘other’ cosmopolitanism only through its contact with what are *still* seen to be ‘other particularities’. Despite this, we do have a broad starting point to think through the intercultural connection of the capitalist global cultures of the West to the semi-periphery as a discrepant cosmopolitanism that includes various linked localisms.

### **Shared yet Differently Inflected Discrepant Postcolonial Cosmopolitanisms**

Malaysia and Singapore are two countries that were effectively one colonial society – given the complexities of colonial administration and governance<sup>11</sup> – under British colonial rule that have since gone separate ways. Both countries have fared well economically since gaining independence; by the 1990s, Singapore was considered to be a High-Performing Asian Economy (HPAE) and one of the Four Tiger economies, which included Hong Kong, South Korea and Taiwan, while Malaysia was thought of as a Newly Industrialising Economy (NIE), an economy occupying the band of capitalist development that is one-step down.<sup>12</sup>

Their similarities allow the examination of culture and cultural identity concerns and what this says of their postcolonial relation to globalised Western cultures. We here need both the comparative and historical dimensions alluded to in the introduction to ground the

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<sup>11</sup> See D. K. Fieldhouse, *Colonialism 1870-1945: An Introduction* (London: Macmillan, 1983), 11-41. British Malaya was organised into the Federated Malay States (protectorates which had British ‘Residents’), the Unfederated Malay States (which had ‘Advisors’) and the Straits Settlements of Penang, Malacca, Singapore, the Dindings and Province Wellesley (a Crown Colony answerable directly to London from 1867). In 1946, the British government tried to form (unsuccessfully) all of them, save Singapore, into the Malayan Union; the Federation of Malaya came about in 1948 and gained independence in 1957. See Barbara Watson Andaya and Leonard Y. Andaya, *A History of Malaysia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> The World Bank, *The East Asian Miracle: Economic Growth and Public Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

question of discrepant cosmopolitanisms. Differently inflected ideas and practices of nationalism, national cultural formation and economic development mean that despite a shared history of having the West within, the global West has different manifestations in the two places.

Malaya (now West Malaysia) became independent in 1957. In 1963, the other Southeast Asian colonial states of British North Borneo, Sarawak and Singapore joined Malaya to form the Federation of Malaysia. In 1965, the island-state was ejected from or chose to leave – depending on your analytical point of view<sup>13</sup> – the Federation and gained independence.

English is present in a way in the city-state that far exceeds that of Malaysia, save in the federal Malaysian capital, Kuala Lumpur, and there mainly with its more middle-class citizens. Malaysia has since independence downgraded the official and general use of English for the use of Bahasa Malaysia (‘Malaysian language’). In recent years, though, then-Malaysian prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad started to reverse this linguistic policy in the name of more efficient economic development.<sup>14</sup>

One Malaysian cultural and political commentator, Karim Raslan, has characterised Singapore’s post-independence development as one in which there is ‘a deliberate de-emphasising of the [peninsular Southeast Asian] region – in terms of language policies, culture and politics’. Karim is quite aware of city-state’s ‘global-city’ agenda and desire, and while he is somewhat dismissive of this ambition (‘Singapore will never be a great global city... . Singapore is thoroughly provincial though not as provincial as Kuala Lumpur or

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<sup>13</sup> See Michael Leifer, *Singapore’s Foreign Policy: Coping with Vulnerability* (London: Routledge, 2000), 30-31.

<sup>14</sup> As an aside, it might be noted that comparing the Philippines, a former American colony, to Singapore and Malaysia would be rewarding. The three locations within Southeast Asia have the strongest presence of the English language as a daily reality of their global Wests in their midst. Comparing all three would be instructive, allowing us to see the different relationship between capital, culture and the ‘older’ and ‘newer’ English-speaking powers at work; alas, this remains out of the scope of this essay.



Jakarta'), the consequence of this ambition is real enough:

The [state's] fixation with the global agenda has made many [younger] Singaporeans [especially] lose sight of the imperatives of geography, turning their backs on the region. The [regional] hinterland is steadily being forgotten... For example, less and less Singaporeans can speak Malay – even *pasar* [i.e., 'bazaar'] Malay eludes them.

While of course, he adds, the other urban centres in region have their own problems, a city like Kuala Lumpur 'enjoy[s] the benefit of an extensive hinterland, providing a greater depth of cultural and political diversity'.<sup>15</sup> Singapore under the post-independence People's Action Party (PAP) has effectively taken itself out of a regional cultural cosmopolitanism. They instead worked on homogenising its culturally diverse urban population so as to create the necessary economic culture to sustain rapid development. Certainly, more than any other postcolonial society, the PAP's attempts to erect a non-ethnic-based society is one that many liberal modern states could only have dreamt of undertaking.<sup>16</sup>

National-cultural development has taken a more predictable path in Malaysia than in Singapore. English in post-independent West Malaysian literary and theatre arts, became a weak second language. Inter-ethnic riots between Malays and Chinese on 13 May 1969 traumatised the nation, and the ensuing anxiety about Malaysian national culture further weakened the position of English.<sup>17</sup> During the 1971 National Cultural Congress, key intellectuals – the playwright Usman Awang; the director Krishen Jit; and Malay literati figures Rahim Razali and Syed Alwi – presented an important paper entitled 'Teaterku ... Di Mana Akarmu?' ('My Theatre ... Where are Your Roots?'). 'Malaysianisation' became the

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<sup>15</sup> Karim Raslan, 'The Singaporean Dilemma', in his *Journeys Through Southeast Asia: Ceritalah 2* (Singapore: Times Books International, 2002), 85.

<sup>16</sup> C. J. W.-L. Wee, 'Contending with Primordialism: The "Modern" Construction of Postcolonial Singapore', *positions: east asia cultures critique* 1, no. 3 (Winter 1993): 715-44, special issue on 'The Nationalisms Question'.

<sup>17</sup> The account that follows draws from Margaret Yong, 'Colonial, Post-colonial, Neo-colonial and, at Last, a "Post-national" Drama', in *World Literature Written in English* 23, no. 1 (1984): 234-42 (reprinted in *Malaysian Literature in English: A Critical Reader*, ed. Mohammad A. Quayum and Peter C. Wicks [Petaling Jaya: Pearson Education Malaysia, 2001]); and Jacqueline Lo, 'Arrested Development: Early Malaysian Theatre in English', in *Malaysian Literature*, ed. Quayum and Wicks.

watchword for theatre, and the important Malayan Arts Theatre Group (MATG) was criticised as being superficial, given that the modern theatre forms they worked with were derived from the West:

Theatre people who are said to be ‘Western oriented’ are actually people who do not think seriously. It is impossible that they can inherit original Western characteristics for they have never experienced a lengthy evolution process in English or American culture.<sup>18</sup>

We recognise the understandable national essentialisation of identity characteristic of a certain post-independence set of cultural-identity issues, exacerbated by a fraught historical moment. The net result was that Malaysian theatre in English ‘actively sought out Southeast Asian cultural traditions that apparently had been missing from its endeavours’.<sup>19</sup>

By the 1980s, though, Malaysia was no longer traumatised by May 1969 and was functioning in a more market-driven world; it was thus less anxious about national identity and inter-ethnic strife. Kuala Lumpur was a burgeoning city, and the ascendance of Dr Mahathir Mohammed as prime minister in 1981 marked the dawn of a new phase of national life which was less concerned with issues of rootedness and decolonisation, and more absorbed with becoming modern and globalised. Malaysia had begun to turn from the West and even ‘looked East’, primarily to Japan, for inspiration in development and industrialisation. There was more confidence in being Asian and more interest in being ‘uniquely’ Malaysian in the international arena.<sup>20</sup> It had become a more secure environment in which to investigate the area of national culture. Malaysian English-language theatre, while still drawing upon the diversity of its own cultures and history, is now more comfortable with English as a Malaysian language, one capable of expressing its plural identities that are,

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<sup>18</sup> Usman Awang et al., ‘Teaterku ... Di Mana Akarmu?’, *Asas Kebudayaan Kebangsaan* (‘Foundations of National Culture’) (Kuala Lumpur: Kementerian Kebudayaan Belia dan Sukan, 1973), 387; translated and quoted in Solehah Ishak, ‘The Emergence of Modern Malaysian Theatre’, *Tenggara* 19 (1986): 23.

<sup>19</sup> Yong, ‘Colonial’, 89.

despite everything, Malaysian.<sup>21</sup>

In contrast to the Malaysian case, Singapore firmly valorised English as the language of modernisation (as it was called in the 1960s) and later globalisation. Malay remained the official national language (*Bahasa Kebangsaan*), but English slowly replaced Malay as a *lingua franca*, and, increasingly, Mandarin-Chinese also became important. However, the ‘pragmatic’ (an adjective favoured by the ruling party), petit-bourgeois orientation and cultural policies of the PAP government has meant that many leaders believed that English could be stripped of its values or cultural content and instrumentalised as a scientific/business language, even while it carries the status of a first (if not quite native) language. The PAP state did not even pay much lip service to the arts as a means of building up national culture until the 1980s, when it increasingly started to recognise that capitalism seemed more linked to aesthetic culture than had been the case in the 1960s and 1970s – that is to say, not much attention was paid until it was rather late in the day.<sup>22</sup>

The result of such thinking has led to the decline of the teaching of literature in English at the middle-school level (until 2001, literature in English had been compulsory until the General Certificate of Examination ‘Ordinary’-levels examination for 16-year-olds), with the result that while a certain level of bilingualism has been achieved, it has created bilingual adults with no vocabulary of any depth in two languages. The result of an early post-independence anti-culture stance is that the city-state suffers cultural cringe and remains

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<sup>20</sup> For the move from ‘ethnicism to developmentalism’ and ‘cultural liberalisation’ policies in the 1990s, see Francis Loh Kok Wah, ‘The Limits to Democratic Discourse in Malaysia’, in *Democracy in Malaysia: Discourses and Practices*, ed. Francis Loh Kok Wah and Khoo Boon Teik (London: Curzon, 2000).

<sup>21</sup> Sumit K. Mandal, ‘Boundaries and Beyond: Whither the Cultural Bases of Political Community in Malaysia?’, in *The Politics of Multiculturalism*, ed. Robert W. Hefner (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2001). For a more sustained analysis of Malaysian English-language theatre, see Charlene Rajendran and C. J. W.-L. Wee, ‘The Theatre of Krishen Jit: Staging Difference in Multicultural Malaysia’, *The Drama Review*, in press; and Jacqueline Lo, *Staging Nation: English Language Theatre in Malaysia and Singapore* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004).

<sup>22</sup> C. J. W.-L. Wee, ‘National Identity, the Arts and the Global City for the Arts’, in *Singapore in the New Millennium: Challenges Facing the City-State*, ed. Derek da Cunha (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2002).

oddly in cultural thrall to the global West even while it had proclaimed an East Asian cosmopolitanism through its 1980s-1990's state discourse on the Asian values that were supposed to have underwritten economic growth.<sup>23</sup>

Despite the fact that the state did not have significant cultural policy that dealt with the arts, rather than with ethnicity and ethnic cultures, until the 1980s, English-language and indeed multilingual theatre developed vigorously from the early 1980s, more so than literature in English. The more adventurous theatre practitioners tended to rely on 'devised' theatre. It has become a genre that has forgotten or perhaps by-and-large ignores – for better or for worse – the legacy of the more traditional, high-cultural subtleties of English-language usage, even while it is acutely aware of advanced Western multimedia and interdisciplinary theatre experiments. This theatre becomes the sometimes-distorted reflection – given its attempt to negotiate an alternative cultural sphere counterpoised against the PAP's puritan modernity – of the city-state's long-standing desire to be a paid-up member of the market-driven world.<sup>24</sup>

Malaysian English-language theatre, in contrast, is oftentimes more text-based and creates subtler scripts in English – and this despite the fact that English usage is much less widespread. Arguably, the more 'standard' national development Malaysia went through, with both a fear of being neo-colonised by its British heritage and the need to foster an indigenised national culture, has conversely meant that it has preserved a *more* high-literary-cultural bent within its English-language culture than Singapore.

Malaysia's determination to become a developed society under Dr Mahathir's leadership from 1981 to 2003 has led to Kuala Lumpur becoming a more 'globalised' urban space than it used to be, and one that still maintains the cultural diversity of a national capital.

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<sup>23</sup> C. J. W.-L. Wee, 'Capitalism and Ethnicity: Creating "Local" Culture in Singapore', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 1, no. 1 (April 2000): 129-43.

<sup>24</sup> For a fuller account, see C. J. W.-L. Wee, 'Creating High Culture in the Globalized "Cultural Desert" of Singapore', *The Drama Review* 47, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 84-97.

Also, while Mahathir effectively remained open to the West, despite his anti-Western rhetoric, he simultaneously wanted to become a champion of an Islamised modernity that could speak to the less-economically developed South. As Karim Raslan suggested, a certain cultural depth is maintained in Kuala Lumpur urban culture. In contrast, Singapore is a territorially limited island-society that substantially homogenised much of its diverse cultures through socio-cultural engineering so as to attract and retain capitalist flows of foreign direct investment from the economically advanced North and from Japan. Kuala Lumpur and Singapore are now regional urban centres – with the city-state also being a transnational centre – that manifest related discrepant cosmopolitanisms inflected differently because of the way they were positioned in regard to overlapping but not entirely similar global networks.

### **Huzir Sulaiman, Tan Hwee Hwee and the Negotiation of Identities**

Two 30something literary figures are indicative of what I have been discussing of the contrasting discrepant cosmopolitanisms of Kuala Lumpur and Singapore. They are Malaysian playwright Huzir Sulaiman and Singaporean novelist Tan Hwee Hwee. They are *indicative* rather than representative as even in these two relatively small urban conurbations, there is enough going on in the name of ‘contemporary art’ that overly easy generalisations should be avoided. Nevertheless, they function as still-instructive illustrations.

I shall look at a monologue by Sulaiman called *Notes on Love and Life and Painting* (1999) and Tan’s second novel, *Mammon Inc.* (2001). Tan’s book won the first Singapore Literature Prize (2004). Both come from privileged backgrounds, though Sulaiman’s background is more so than Tan’s middle-class background. Sulaiman’s father is a well-known human-rights lawyer who was connected with the Islamic court. Sulaiman himself studied at the Kuala Lumpur International School before proceeding to Princeton. He now juggles life between Singapore, where he runs a theatre company called Checkpoint Theatre,

and Kuala Lumpur. Tan gained her BA from the University of East Anglia, followed by postgraduate work at Oxford and an MFA in creative writing from New York University. She is now a self-described ‘lifestyle journalist’.<sup>25</sup>

Sulaiman’s work, which gestures towards his ‘globalised’ status, remains firmly directed at a Malaysian audience, even while manifesting an elegant and in some ways oh-so-English turn of ironic and cool language usage. Tan’s work displays a similar English style of self-ironising distance, and, more than Sulaiman, is concerned with the surface of glittery, ‘happening’ globalised culture; but there is also an uncertainty as to the work’s audience, given the bizarre caricatures of various Singapore English ideolects and sub-cultures that appear in it. Revealingly, the networked Singaporean got her novel published first in hardback by Michael Joseph in 2001 and the paperback version by Penguin – a publishing coup by a writer from the cultural-economic semiperiphery. Sulaiman’s play appears in his collection entitled *Eight Plays*, published in Kuala Lumpur by Silverfishbooks.<sup>26</sup>

While the two texts examine conflictual cultural interaction, being post-independence writers, neither writer is really interested in the question of colonial or neocolonial domination and the transmutation of indigenous cultures that marked an earlier generation of anglophone writers such as Chinua Achebe or Ngugi wa Thiong’o. ‘Postcolonialism’ ain’t what it used to be, given globalisation, and it certainly is not about direct resistance to an ‘outside’ dominating West. The West clearly is in many ways a part – uncomfortable or otherwise – of the multiple worlds and the multicultures the characters they write about live in, where the local can clash with/negotiate with/manipulate the regional cosmopolitanisms and/or the Anglo-American global West; sometimes, the characters engage with a number of

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<sup>25</sup> The information about Tan, including the term ‘lifestyle journalist’, comes from the bioblurb in *Mammon Inc.*

<sup>26</sup> The page references to the two works will be given within brackets in the main text; the editions used are: Huzir Sulaiman, *Notes on Love and Life and Painting*, in Sulaiman’s *Eight Plays* (Kuala Lumpur: Silverfishbooks, 2002); and Hwee Hwee Tan, *Mammon Inc.* (2001; London: Penguin Books, 2002).

such levels simultaneously.

Both *Mammon Inc.* and *Notes* analyse the relationship between love, belonging, art/culture and the self. The difference is that the ‘self’ that comes through in the Malaysian work seems less *dispersed* than in the Singaporean one, despite the fact that the main characters in both texts negotiate multiple domestic and Western worlds.

### *Accepting a Multicultural Nationality*

*Notes* is a dramatic monologue that features a Malay lawyer in his 30s named Rashid Khalil, who has given up his glamorous law career for a less-materially rewarding life as a visual artist. The play is a reflection upon the possibility of genuine belonging and identity in contemporary Malaysia, given its political and communal realities. The context of the play itself is an attempt by Rashid to seduce a Chinese art writer interviewing him in his studio – the inter-ethnic seduction itself, one supposes, is a way of saying ‘belonging’ should be gained, regardless of race, class, language or religion within what is a national multicultural.

While the premise of the monologue seems a recognisably ‘standard’ cosmopolitan/liberal-humanistic position on individual self-fulfilment, that élite cosmo-West is dramatically ironised with several knowing winks and nods to the audience at the start of the play. A burglary at his flat that has led to Rashid’s reconsideration of the importance of what comes through as a postured worldly success: ‘All my classics of 20th century design that I had lovingly assembled: my Barcelona daybed, Bang & Olufsen stereo, kettle by Alessi, Thomas Pink shirts, shoes by Lobb, my goddam Philippe Starck toothbrush. Gone’ (126). What is the solution? To retreat to a Zen monastery in northern California – again, we get the self-sending up of one aware of some of the irrationalities of what has been internalised, which are in turn counterpoised against domestic irrationalities:

I went there [northern California] with a palpable sense of guilt, because I am Muslim,

and while I don't observe the tenets of my faith all that much, ... I'd always promised myself that if I was going to look into spirituality, I'd start with my own religion first, rather than do the Western thing, which I've always thought reprehensibly stupid, that '60s Western habit of seeking enlightenment in an alien culture, the more alien and remote and shaven-head the better. After all, if I wanted mysticism I could have done the KL [i.e., Kuala Lumpur] thing and explored Sufism. (127)

Long, extended, yet elegant and lucid syntax is the natural accompaniment to the knowing, undercutting parody going on here – a pointed farce partly in the mould of Oscar Wilde, one might say. However, it is not one that simply worships at the feet of the white master, as it is being performed for a domestic if culturally Anglo-Asian middle-class audience expected to understand the local insider jokes being made about clashing secular-modern and religious cultures in the homeland. What would 'Westernisation' imply if applied to the context and content of the play – always already something pejorative?<sup>27</sup>

The British West is even there for Rashid to exploit when he has the chance. His first political artwork that comments on the privileged status of the Malay above other ethnic groups closes avenues for his work being showed in Malaysia. He seduces an earlier Chinese journalist from the same art magazine of the present interviewer, and makes the cover story: 'Banned Malaysian Artist Reopens Political Wounds.' After that, a London gallery offers him a show, and given the importance of the former imperial metropole, Rashid gets his fame and artistic reprieve: 'Now, Elaine, you know that Westerners, the English in particular, they love this shit, they just lap it up, they love their nigger heroes fighting their nigger despots' (132).

Originality, or authenticity, becomes a ridiculous quality for Malaysian art and, for that matter, national life and culture. Why is Malaysian culture not cosmopolitan-universal, in any case? Rashid says, upon reflection, what is obvious: 'The problem is that we don't export our culture, whereas the West exports their culture with unceasing vigour. Country and

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. Abidin Kusno, *Beyond the Postcolonial: Architecture, Urban Space and Political Cultures in Indonesia* (London: Routledge, 2000): "'Westernization' or 'Americanization' ... may suggest ... a destination, a process of arrival, by replication, at some imagined place called the 'West'. But seen from the other [non-Western] side



western music astonishes me, for instance. It's totally unnatural that people all over the world should know country and western' (134). Indeed, here one only can but agree. To have the West in one's midst does not mean that the critical faculties cease to operate.

What about Rashid's 'Westernised' work then, critiqued negatively at times?

If I am a derivative artist, it is because Malaysia is a derivative country. Almost every facet of our culture is imported. Chinese came from China, Indians come from India, Malays come from wherever we come from.<sup>28</sup> ... I'm speaking English because of the British. I'm a Muslim because Islam came from the Arabs and was brought here either by the Indians or the Chinese or the Arabs, depending on whose theory you believe. ... Is painting indigenous to Malaysia? No. Is abstract art an outgrowth of weaving *mengkuang*?<sup>29</sup> Like fuck it is.

So why should anybody expect me to be original? All these things we bring in and graft onto whatever was there before. There's no shame in it. It's just the way our country is. ... Deal with it and grow up. (135)

Here the prose becomes forceful, and the syntax truncated, less elegant; Rashid is no longer undertaking self-parody. His Malaysian world is definitely local, but yet not static or particularistic, connected as it is, if unequally, with a Western-dominated technocratic and artistic world, multiple worlds through which Rashid literally and otherwise travels. He asserts the need to leave behind simplistic nativisms and accept 'adult' cultural complexity. 'Malaysia' itself is historically also of non-Western cosmopolitan origins, being part of a pre-colonial trading world that stretched from China to the Middle East, a world into which the Europeans came – and subsequently transformed – because they wanted to participate in the trade. The lack of originality is also indicative that a dynamic interculturalism has long been a part of the region's history.

In the end, the final divide that Rashid as an artist must cross is that of class linked with race. A lower-class Indian, looking 'like a sort of Brickfields gangster, dripping with

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of the globe, ... [i]t could point to a departure, an exit from something one wants to leave behind, which does not necessarily imply that one would then arrive at, or replicate, a particular place called the "West" (204).

<sup>28</sup> It might be noted that Sulaiman's family itself is Indian and was Hindu, but his father converted to Islam. That is to say, they were not in the first instance Indian Muslims from India.

<sup>29</sup> A form of traditional basket-weaving using leaves.

gold' (137), comes to him at a bicycle repair shop. The location of the Brickfields neighbourhood in the play is important. This is a part of KL that used to be populated by white-collar Indian civil servants connected with the railway service. As the neighbouring area of Bangsar grew, Brickfields started to decline, so that, for instance, cheap Tamil-Indian-run hotels appeared.<sup>30</sup> These urban changes led to class tensions, and Sulaiman in his play draws on these tensions.

Rashid thinks that the man is going to ask for money, when in fact the distraught man's sister had just died, and he had been going to the shop to get her bicycle repaired. He trustingly leaves it and some money for the repair work with Rashid as he dashes off to the hospital where his sister is. The result that Rashid's most recent artwork 'is about, in part, is the kindness that I should have had, from the beginning, unalloyed by my suspicion or my bigotry' (138).

What Rashid has learnt is that a discrepant cosmopolitanism with 'a density of overlapping allegiances' is possible, 'rather than the abstract emptiness of nonallegiance'. The national as a sphere of belonging need not be nationalistic or pro-government: local belonging that takes into account race and class is possible, if not easy; and the British West is always already there, the result of a colonial history and ongoing cultural-political dominance – and yet that too, along, with its contemporary artistic culture and language, need not be jettisoned. Admittedly, this type of discrepant cosmopolitanism is privileged, but it is, nonetheless, genuinely *not* a simplistic vision of an overly globalised artistic and/or technocratic monoculture. It is a move away from what I think can be called a fragmented cosmopolitanism towards one where the inherent tensions are held in productive balance.

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<sup>30</sup> Subsequently, the redevelopment of the railway service to include, in 2004, a direct link to Kuala Lumpur International Airport has led to the possibility of the area's gentrification.

*Multiculture and the 'Trancelike Moods of Contemporary Consumer Culture'*<sup>31</sup>

In contrast to Sulaiman's *Notes*, Tan's *Mammon Inc.*, while sharing the self-distancing irony and sharp self-parody with its multiple wink-wink, nod-nod elements of *Notes*, does not manage a similarly balanced discrepant cosmopolitanism. Instead the novel becomes an unaware parodic performance of Homi Bhabha's cultural theorising on the 'Third Space', in which 'the act of cultural enunciation – the *place of utterance* – is crossed by the *différance* of writing':

a willingness to descend into that alien territory – where I have led you – may reveal that the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an *international* culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the *diversity* of cultures, but on the inscription of culture's *hybridity*. To that end we should remember that it is the 'inter' – the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *in-between* space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture [emphases original].<sup>32</sup>

Literature follows theory as its master, rather than theory expounding on literature, it seems. Theory now has a place in the global marketplace of ideas and, certainly in the terms of this novel, in the free market itself.

The protagonist and heroine, Gan Chiah Deng, is a Chinese-Singaporean. Given her Euro-Americacentric cultural predilections – she discusses T. S. Eliot and J. D. Salinger in secondary school, despite hailing from a modest, Chinese-speaking family – she feels that her boyfriend and her, as he puts it, 'are freaks, mutant hybrids of East and West – like transcultural X-men' (53). The boyfriend himself is a white American boy brought to the city-state when he was one, and then (oddly) given the name of 'Tock Seng'; he speaks Mandarin-Chinese, but finds it hard being accepted as a white Asian. Chiah Deng spurns him for an Oxford scholarship, and after graduation is offered a position as an 'Adapter' for Mammon CorpS, helping culturally hybrid executives adapt to new host countries. She meets Tock

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<sup>31</sup> Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia*, 3.

<sup>32</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, 'The Commitment to Theory', in Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 36, 38.

Seng in New York City, and once again rejects him, given that his adventurous spirit has led him to become a sort of new-age, globe-trotting rolling stone: ‘I need to live in a community, and not just be an alien all my life’ (96). In the end, she also rejects the Christianity associated with her postgraduate supervisor for the community of similar cultural crossbreeds who work for Mammon CorpS. Chiah Deng also takes on the demands from her parents that in order for her to be filial in the ‘Chinese’ way, she must be successful and make their lives comfortable.

Unsurprisingly, there is no liberation in *Mammon Inc.* – for Tan, the in-between space of translation and negotiation carries her protagonist straight into the arms of commodified, globalised culture. It is emphatically clear in the novel that artistic and technocratic culture need not be a monoculture now; multicultural or interstitial cultures are welcome now. To have a hybrid identity is to reveal that culture’s meaning can only be dominated by capitalism. Tan’s novel unintentionally offers an object lesson in what can happen when cultural depth gets sacrificed in the name of over-rationalised economic development that takes instrumental rationality so seriously that the only culture that is valued is the industrial culture requisite for effective modernisation. Other forms of culture are fine, as long as capitalism remains paramount. This becomes Tan’s version of ‘postmodernity’.

The knowing cosmopolitan glance – like Sulaiman’s play – is present at the work’s onset. Chiah Deng’s housemate Steve rips open the letter that invites her into corporate hell:

Steve ripped open my mail ... and did a Blur-ish ‘Song 2’ yell – ‘Woo hoo!!! Break out the Bolly, you’ve hit the giant jackpot!’ He twisted his fingers like the National Lottery logo. ‘You’re going to be rich, young and beautiful. A money honey.’ (1)

A mass-cultural reference (Brit-pop group Blur), expensive and exclusive champagne (Bollinger), and the National Lottery logo indicate that the writer and her character Chiah Deng are self-conscious postcolonial-outsiders/quasi-insiders in the metropole of Tony Blair’s Cool Britannia. In contrast to Sulaiman’s luxurious, elegant and literary syntax, we have here a more mass-mediatised language usage, one that reads easily, well and quickly,

and is comfortable with the culture industry.

Chiah Deng, who feels displaced between the city-state and the England she has come to love, discovers now a genuinely transnational company who find this displaced or nether status useful. The invitation to become an ‘Adapter’ for Mammon CorpS, a subsidiary of Mammon Inc., offers an appointment that will catapult her to the front rank of interstitial cosmopolitans who can live anywhere, and have the salary to support a ultra-stylish lifestyle.

The letter she receives at the novel’s start informs her that the company

provides Adaption services for the modern international professional élite: those executives who grew up in one country, were educated in another, and are now working in a third.

These are the bankers, diplomats, lawyers and consultants we call the Global Nomads. When they relocate to a new country, they need help learning how to gain social acceptance, and Mammon CorpS helps them adapt. (2)

A detached playfulness signals that the novel will be a fun read about the call of a ‘Satanic’ worldliness – which, by and large, it is. In the end, the issue is really less about money than about where the in-between people of the world can belong, where they need no longer be considered exotic, and where they can be truly ‘international’, in Bhabha’s sense of that term.

Dr Draco Sidious, the CEO of Mammon Inc., puts Chiah Deng through three tests before she can be confirmed as a permanent staff member. In two tests, she has to adapt her *Ah Lian*<sup>33</sup> sister to a (seriously caricatured) ‘poncey’ Oxford lot, and her best friend Steve to fit into a (seriously caricatured) crass and vulgar *arriviste* Chinese-Singaporean family, one supposedly typical of the Ugly Singaporean. Chiah Deng seems to fail in the tests, but Sidious tells her that these supposed failures were also designed to show her something about herself:

And in that moment [of failure], you felt completely alone. Because you knew you could never be totally Singaporean, since you were so ashamed of their lack of culture and sophistication, so ashamed of their greedy *kia-suness*.<sup>34</sup> And you knew that you could never belong to England, because they would never accept someone as Chinese

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<sup>33</sup> Hokkien-Chinese, or *minnan hua*. A stereotyped, slightly uncouth, lower-middle-class or working-class Chinese girl or young woman, often with an outlandish dress sense.

<sup>34</sup> Adaptation of a Hokkien-Chinesese term – literally ‘scared to lose’.

as you (274).

But who are these Adapters to whom she can love and belong to? They are the ‘Gen[eration] Vexers’:

These Gen. Vexers were young, creative geniuses in glamour jobs, with nerd-high levels of education but a hip sense of humour. Like me they had no fixed identity. The Gen. Vexers were cosmopolitan citizens of the world, equally at home in a 212 or 0207 area code, equally well versed in the work of George Lucas and Joseph Campbell to be able to analyse the mythological archetypes in *Star Wars*. (143)

High culture, trendy mass culture; East, West; neither hither nor thither, or all one at the same time: interstitials can become an élite who no longer need the nation-state. Chiah Deng’s deep self-loathing in terms of her national and mixed cultural origins is apparently put to rest by the Faustian deal offered to her.

The novel’s ending is particularly nasty. If the deliberately mannered *Notes* ends on a serious, self-reflective note, so does the deliberately mannered *Mammon Inc.*, though of a negative sort. Sidious says to Chiah Deng: ‘This is the urban jungle, and everyone is either prey or preyer. ... Who will you be?’ (278). She had been attracted by a peculiarly medieval Christianity, rather than, say, a contemporary charismatic-pentacostalist religion comfortable with global culture. While, as in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, it is less easy for Tan to make ‘goodness’ more attractive than the call of a worldly wise evil, the novel decidedly does not try very hard to create a ‘relevant’ Christian faith.

In choosing the Gen. Vexers, she turns her postcolonial Singapore history of sustained intercultural contact into a technocratic hybridity that entirely capitulates to capitalist commodification and reification. The moral (if that is what is) of Tan’s novel is that transnational capitalism has room for the transcultural person. The choice Chiah Deng makes is not automatically necessitated by the global West in her midst, though having it there does facilitate her final choice, one already presaged in the first five pages of the novel. *Mammon Inc.* is so shallow that it becomes profound in its depiction of contemporary globo-culture as

Social Darwinian market effect in which a vacuous anti-identity politics are carried out in the name of a globalised elite.

## Conclusion

This essay functions as a minor starting point, at best, to think through what it might mean to relate to previous and present artistic and cultural components of the global West within which we all now seem to dwell – in economic terms, at the very least.

The immediate issue at hand – a revamped notion of discrepant cosmopolitanisms through which we can engage with the global West in our midst – could also be expanded to think through how we can engage with a sort of regional cosmopolitanism facilitated by the East Asian participation in global capitalism since the 1980s interacting interculturally with the global West. This would bring us into the realm of East Asian mass-cultural production.

Media and cultural critic Koichi Iwabuchi, for example, argues that:

The increasing intra-Asian cultural precipitates (asymmetrical) connections between people in Japan and those in modernized (or rapidly modernizing) ‘Asia’, not through reified notions of ‘traditional, authentic culture’ or ‘Asian values’, but through popular cultural forms which embody people’s skillful negotiation with the symbolic power of West-dominated global capitalism.<sup>35</sup>

This returns us to the ‘happening’, mass-cultural world of *Mammon Inc.*, which is linked to the commodification of high culture, but brings it to our doorstep.

One final point though: I do not think that whatever theorising one does, one escapes from the clutches of cultural essentialism or nativism, easily. The Taiwanese cultural critic Chen Kuan-Hsing has argued in his introduction to *Trajectories: Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* that the project of decolonization – as it should be worked out in postcolonial and cultural studies – now entails the throwing off of the shackles of a colonial cultural imaginary that was

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<sup>35</sup> Koichi Iwabuchi, *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002), 18.

historically produced. By this, he refers to the forms of thought – nationalism, nativism and civilizationalism – that have been the result of by a dichotomous ‘West’ and the ‘rest’ mentality. While Chen can see the place of such matters historically, he asks why some 30-40 years later, ‘we (who live in the (ex-)colonised globe) [are] still deeply shaped by the questions posed by our fore-runners in the critical tradition?’ His answer is: ‘Well, because of the neocolonial structure. We have been “made” to identify with intellectual formations coming from the (ex-)imperial centers, and hence have completely forgotten the powerful interventions made by [Frantz] Fanon, [Albert] Memmi, or [Ashis] Nandy.’<sup>36</sup>

In place Chen would like to see other, more democratic lines of thought come about, in which ‘Asia’ can think itself into being without being trapped by statist agendas of ‘Asian’ identity or values comfortable in many ways with the workings of transnational capitalism. He would like intellectuals in the intra-Asian world to attempt a ‘critical syncretism as political strategy (or ethics) that would move us beyond the identity politics of multiculturalism ... and towards a utopian mode of “postcolonial” identification or postcoloniality.’<sup>37</sup>

It must be stressed, though, essentialism – whether done by others to us, by ourselves to ourselves – is hard to evade, whatever theoretical position one may stand for. This is perhaps the one serious insight of *Mammon Inc.* Chiah Deng’s supposedly less-well educated sister perceptively says to her in her fractured English:

You think just because you read *ang mo*<sup>38</sup> books, then people will think you’re *ang mo*? What you do is not important. Only what you look like. You’re like banana. ... Inside, you can be really white, but people will still treat you like you’re yellow’ (189).

The use of the banana image is used both predictable but yet turned enough that it can also

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<sup>36</sup> Kuan-Hsing Chen, ‘The Decolonization Question’, in *Trajectories: Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, ed. Chen (London: Routledge, 1998), 1.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.



function as cultural critique. Even when we refine discrepant cosmopolitan thinking for one's own needs, and even when one isn't interested in (post)colonial mimicry, the socio-cultural forces of essentialisation-nativism are not so easily deflected.

**Acknowledgements:** This is a revised version of a plenary paper presentation at the International Conference on 'English Studies in an Era of Globalisation', English Language and Literature Association of Korea, Seoul, South Korea, 15-18 June 2004. I thank the ELLAK for their invitation and those who gave responses during the presentation. The paper benefited from discussions with Charlene Rajendran, Paul Rae, the late Krishen Jit, Chen Kuan-Hsing, Stephen Hazell, Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Philip J. Holden.

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<sup>38</sup> Hokkien-Chinese, or *minnan hua*: literally 'red hair', and here used as a substitute term for 'white' or 'European'; it is shortened version of the expression 'red-haired dog', used to refer derogatively to white people.