

**MULTICULTURALISM
THROUGH THE LENS:**

A Guide to Ethnic and Migrant Anxieties in Singapore

Multiculturalism through the Lens: A Guide to Ethnic and
Migrant Anxieties in Singapore

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CATHERINE GOMES

For Andrew

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Foreword

In an increasingly complex, globalized world, nations are now much more preoccupied with the issues and challenges we associate with the sense and notion of “multiculturalism”. Given also the large intellectual discussions and debates that have gone on in this arena over the past four/five decades the theme has not only attracted a huge number of scholars producing book after book but many among the lay public have also started to articulate their feelings and views through the many outlets provided for by the new digital media. Nowadays governments all around the world are on a kind of ‘standby alert’ keeping a keen lookout for any observation, comment or just straightforward posting of photographs or news reports over and in new media. There are also self-appointed ‘vigilantes’ who make it their job to show up (and occasionally shore-up) posts they find problematic or provocative. We are living in a world where the next second could see explosions taking place, and fights occurring in areas and communities we thought were peace-loving and stable.

What our author has incisively termed “anxiety” is now firmly grounded in our day-to-day experience. If the other does not wear what I wear, eat what I eat, dress the way I do, behave the way I do, then there must be something wrong and obviously the other is the one who needs to change! Such thinking is quite widespread, to the point, indeed, of near panic! I have many sharing with me their unease about those around them because, as one friend told me, ‘if we are not careful they are going to ruin this fragile fabric of harmonious living we have fashioned over the last few decades, often by agreeing to compromise on important issues’. Our nation’s journey towards establishing a

multi-x (multi-lingual, multi-racial, multi-religious, etc) ethos has not been easy—the path has been strewn with hard fought struggles and accommodations made in the ‘larger national interest’.

I grew up in the years when Singapore went through several riots, from the well-known and well-documented Maria Hartogh riots to the racial riots of the sixties which have not been so well-documented. I remember having in my own home in Jalan Mangga about a dozen Malays on one side and about a similar number of Chinese on the other side with me holding my two huge Alsatian dogs on a leash to keep the groups separate and yet under the same roof because we were all, really, neighbours but there had been reports of killings and other atrocities and both ethnic/racial communities were on edge and nervous and had sought a kind of safety under my roof because my late uncle—William Massa Singh—was generally respected as an educated man who had the leadership to galvanise and keep people bonded. That one night still stands out clear as sunlight because the government had declared a 7pm to 7am curfew and my Uncle had not been able to return home in time.

The current generation of Singaporeans, however, seems mostly unaware of these unpleasant times. History, while it does teach us many things, also sometimes becomes a challenge when different narratives are articulated. Hence the need to proceed with caution, sensitivity and understanding. It is telling that probably the worst riot in Singapore took place quite early in the nineteenth century when the Hokkiens and the Teochews fought street battles because, it was alleged, one had cheated the other over exactly what a chicken weighed and hence overcharged! It appeared that more than 450 people died in an ugly fight that lasted some ten days.

Our author has decided to examine Singapore’s multiculturalism through the lens of films. Filmic texts always prove intriguing because film has a kind of ‘pull’ which, say, poetry or even history doesn’t. What Gomes also does is to weave her own personal narrative/experience into the wider web of unraveling. This gives an authentic credibility to the underlying theme being scrutinized. As a scholar, our author’s credentials are beyond question; as a human being

her felt utterances concerning her own curious and mixed sense of identity help us better appreciate the complexity of contexts—whether Singapore or Australia where Gomes now resides.

This book will prove engaging to all Singaporeans and non-Singaporeans. As our author also casts questioning glances at the current debate about migrants and as she analyses films which situate themselves within the larger parameters of multicultural living we begin to fathom some of the major threads of this enormously difficult work-in-progress. To create a society and a citizenry where multiculturalism is not only seen to be functioning efficiently but also felt to be so is very tough and all of us know that the energies taken up working towards this frequently leave us exhausted. But the need is imminent and critically so.

The Wee Kim Wee Centre is proud to have been able to engage our author in serious conversation about this significant exploration of a challenge near and dear to all of us, and now very proud to be able to co-publish this book. I personally have no doubts that this book will be welcomed by scholars and the public at large because it treats a powerful subject with the attention it demands using a genre that is fast-becoming a norm for setting images and persuading responses.

Dr Kirpal Singh

Director, Wee Kim Wee Centre

Singapore Management University

Preface

In 2009 I enthusiastically submitted a grant application to a funding body for a project on Singaporeans living in Australia. One of the reviewers dismissed the project questioning why I was insisting on pursuing a topic that was quite uninteresting since Singapore is nothing more than ‘a government project’. Whilst the Singapore economy is no doubt the result of steadfast government planning and execution, I would like to think that Singaporeans – myself included – are more than just the result of an elaborate scheme orchestrated by an omnipresent government. Sure, the government may be a fixture in the everyday life of Singapore citizens and the prime mover in creating a largely patriotic and nationalist society, but Singaporeans have not altogether responded positively to governmental presence and dominance. Being a diasporic Singaporean living in Australia, I started to wonder how I could explore Singapore to (re)discover the place, its people and its culture. Likewise, being outside of Singapore forced me to rethink the lens I was going to use to disprove that my homeland, the society I came from and the culture I grew up in, were merely a government venture but something more remarkably fascinating. The use of screen – or more specifically, film – was a clear avenue for me in the pursuit of my quest. After all, my doctoral research was on Chinese cinema and I really do like Singapore-made films.

As I wrote, it became clear to me that this was not a typical project that fits neatly into the traditional Film Studies or Cinema Studies nexus. Rather, this project makes use of some locally made yet significant Singapore films by critically acclaimed film-makers to provide insights into Singapore. While I may not engage in long film analyses, I make use of the films as a window of opportunity to learn and discuss about Singapore

society and culture. This project thus blends various interrelated disciplines such as Cultural Studies, Media Studies and Sociology, together with Film and Cinema Studies to aid this investigation.

This project is a journey into my own Singaporean identity. I have always been fascinated by ethnicity primarily because I never fitted into any of the recognizable Singaporean ethnic groups (Chinese, Malay and Indian). People I encountered in Singapore often questioned my ethnicity and wondered aloud ‘what’ I was. The dissonance that my ethnicity caused prompted me to write Chapter 2 which deals with the discomfort of ethnic ambiguity. Being a diasporic Singaporean means that I keep in touch with the homeland through discussions with students from Singapore whom I meet, through social media chats with Singaporean friends and through a daily digest of Singapore news available online. Over time, the recurrent theme I discovered is the aversion to new migrants entering Singapore. The second part of this book is dedicated to analyzing why this is and how Singaporeans are coping with what they clearly view as a threat to the fabric of their society.

Singapore society is complex and this book only scratches the surface of this fascinating place. After all, this is a young country which has developed into a first world globalized nation within decades and a young society which is coping with the changes that come with globalization. This book thus attempts to unravel the way Singapore society is dealing with the challenges it faces on a daily basis. At the same time, this project is also a tribute to locally made Singapore films. It is an acknowledgement of how screen has become embedded in Singapore society and culture that it manages to successfully provide a parallel dimension of the everyday familiar in a subtle yet honest manner.

I would like to thank Kirpal Singh and the Wee Kim Wee Centre at the Singapore Management University for their enthusiasm in publishing this material and for warmly hosting me as a visiting academic while I did related research. This book would not have been possible if not for the six-months of research leave that was generously provided by the School of Media and Communication, RMIT University. I would particularly like to thank Stephanie Donald and Jo Tacchi for believing in this project. I also would like to thank Drew Roberts, Marsha Berry, Delphine McFarlane

and Olivia Guntarik for helping me make improvements on the text itself by providing much needed guidance on communicating my ideas. Thanks go out to Jenny Thomas for allowing me to go through her personal photographs which have contributed to the cover of this book. Thank you too to Hoe Fang Fong and Wee Chong Jian from Ethos Books for all their work bringing my words to print and to the public. I would like to thank filmmaker Tan Pin Pin for taking the time to read the chapter dedicated to her cinema, for her comments and for her encouragement. Finally I would like to thank Andrew Newlands for patiently reading this manuscript and for putting up with all the idiosyncrasies I displayed while in the throes of writing. This, my first book, is for you.

Parts of this book have appeared in other publications. Earlier versions of Chapter 5 and ‘The Everyman’ section in Chapter 2 have been published as Gomes, C. (2011), ‘Maid-In-Singapore: Representing and Consuming Foreign Domestic Workers in Singapore’, *Asian Ethnicity*, 12: 2, pp. 141-54 and as Gomes, C. (2012), ‘The Everyman Hero: Cinema and Identity in Singapore’, *Asian Currents*, June, <<http://asaa.asn.au/publications/ac/2011/asian-currents-11-06.pdf>>, respectively. Some parts of this book are extensions of work I have done previously in Gomes, C. (2010), ‘Active Remembering in Utopia’, in O. Guntarik (ed.), *Narratives of Community: Museums and Ethnicity*, Edinburgh: MuseumsEtc., pp. 290-316, Gomes, C. (2009), ‘Keeping Memories Alive: Maintaining Singapore Nationalism Abroad’, *Asia Journal of Global Studies*, 3:1, pp. 37-50 and Gomes, C. (2013), ‘Xenophobia Online: Unmasking Singaporean Attitudes Towards ‘Foreign Talent’ Migrants’, *Asian Ethnicities*, first published online on 8 April, <<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14631369.2013.784511#.UmSDVfmnoIQ>>.

Chinese names of persons in this book are written as family name followed by given name. For example in the name Tan Pin Pin, ‘Tan’ is the family name while ‘Pin Pin’ is the given name.

Introduction

*In a heartbeat, we will always be
Together, united; you and me*

‘In a Heartbeat’ (Ratonel 2011)

*One people, one nation, one Singapore
That’s the way that we will be for evermore
Every creed and every race, has its role and has its place
One people, one nation, one Singapore*

‘One People, One Nation, One Singapore’ (Monteiro 1990)

While I was working in a government department in my homeland of Singapore, a colleague once asked me if ethnicity mattered in my choice of a life partner. To her surprise, I answered that ethnicity was not an issue. She then blurted out: ‘You mean you like Chinese guys?’ I am not ethnic Chinese. On another occasion, a friend once commented that she felt uncomfortable whenever she saw a biracial couple as the sight of a fair person with a dark person was too challenging for her to comprehend. My ethnic heritage has layers of multiracial couplings. Whenever I opened the employment section of the local newspaper, I encountered numerous non-government job advertisements listing ‘able to speak Mandarin’ as one of the essential qualities required. *Bahasa Melayu* (Malay language) and not Mandarin is my second language. It is perhaps fair to say that ethnicity dominated a lot of my everyday experiences growing up and living in Singapore.

I am Singaporean born and bred, having spent all my childhood and some part of my early adult years living in the country of my birth. However, I have always felt a sense of dissonance in Singapore particularly with regard to ethnicity.¹ While Singapore prides itself as a multicultural nation with public policies in place that maintain racial harmony,² there are strong yet subdued tensions simmering below the surface of Singaporean society. Paranoia and anxiety over ethnicity in other words, are part of the Singaporean cultural landscape. However, Singapore maintains a happy facade of peace and harmony amongst a culturally and racially disparate population by successfully instilling a strong sense of loyalty and allegiance to the nation. Nationalism in other words, is very much part of everyday life in the nation-state. As a young adult, I found myself unable to fully understand Singaporean society’s cultural attitudes towards ethnicity particularly since Singapore brands itself as multicultural. My sensitivity to issues surrounding ethnicity in particular perhaps stems from my belonging to neither one of the major racial categories (Malay, Chinese and Indian) but to an essentially hybrid minority or biracial group born out of the European colonization of Southeast Asia known as Eurasian. Concerns over ethnicity, in other words, became personal issues of belonging and identity to the homeland. Singaporean society’s cultural attitudes towards ethnicity however, I have noticed, have now taken a new turn with the entry of permanent and temporary worker migrants into Singapore.

As part of Singapore’s blueprint for globalization, modernity and domination on the global economic and financial stages, it has looked beyond its borders for an international workforce that not only reflects this global outlook but also keeps the engines of progress running.³ Encouraging non-Singaporeans to take up skilled and non-skilled occupations is not a new phenomenon in Singapore as the backbone of this nation-state’s history is built on migrant labour. While Singaporeans trace their lineage to migrants, they consider new migrants those who have entered the country in the post-independence period, particularly the 1980s and beyond. However, the presence of these new migrants, who are colloquially referred to as ‘foreigners’ even though many have permanent residence and citizenship and hail from the very countries

most Singaporeans consider their ancestral home, are highly disliked by Singaporeans, many of whom have been taking their grievances online. Attacking both the new migrants and the government for facilitating their entry into the country, it is perhaps fair to say that Singaporeans are attempting to make sense of their significance and place in a homeland that many feel is changing rapidly both ethnographically as well as culturally.

Thankfully, I am not the only one who finds such dissonance in Singapore society intriguing. Singapore's film industry has long been fascinated by this dissonance, with thriving underground and commercial movements existing side by side that provide critical commentary through metaphorical expression. By film, I refer particularly to the works of well known, acclaimed, respected and intellectually stimulating independent and mainstream film-makers Eric Khoo, Tan Pin Pin, Kelvin Tong and Jack Neo and to the films which have done well at the Singapore box-office such as *Army Daze* (Ong 1996). Khoo, for example, is influential in both independent and mainstream local cinema as writer, director and producer particularly through his Zhao Wei Films studio while others such as mainstream film-maker Neo's productions have resonated well with the Singapore cinema-going public and dominated the box-office.

In this book I put forward the idea that while on the surface Singapore may seem like a successful multicultural nation where diverse peoples live harmoniously together, it is instead a country whose citizens are grappling with existing anxieties over ethnicity which are now compounded by the increasing numbers of new migrants (skilled workers who have the opportunity to become permanent residents and unskilled temporary guest workers) entering the country. Singapore's multicultural identity is primarily made up of three broad ethnic groups – Chinese, Malay and Indian – with the Chinese by far being the largest community. While there is an 'Others' category which allows for those Singaporeans such as Arabs, Armenians and Eurasians who fall outside the Chinese, Malay and Indian groups to be classified, they are not as culturally nor ethnically recognizable because of their relatively small numbers.⁴ I argue that communities or individuals outside of these

recognizable classifications are viewed with trepidation by Singapore society and that while the Chinese are the prevailing ethnic group, they do experience concerns regarding their identity and cultural traditions. I suggest that the new migrants entering the nation-state both permanently and temporarily – many of whom come from the ancestral homes of locally-born Singaporeans and from the surrounding Southeast Asian region – have created such unease and angst among citizens that it has led to many Singaporeans expressing themselves through xenophobic comments online. Yet the presence of the new migrants has curiously united Singaporeans like no other issue this society has encountered since independence.

My point of entry into mapping Singaporean anxieties of ethnicity and migration is through film. It is film that I use as a tool in various ways to understand and unpack this young yet disparate society. More than just a form of entertainment, Singapore films attempt to make sense of the Singapore-specific concerns which people are confronted with on a daily basis. These concerns take place against a thematic backdrop of high levels of cultural and linguistic diversity in this multicultural population, income disparity that defines and sometimes segregates the classes, an omnipresent government and a high influx of foreign workers. This book uses films to launch into an understanding of Singapore society, therefore allowing for an interrogation into the ways in which the community reacts to the related topics of ethnicity and migration.

Multicultural Singapore

One of the distinctive things I remember from my childhood in Singapore was my ability to belt out almost every patriotic song ever written. Each morning, I sang the national anthem with my fellow schoolmates. At most music classes and school assemblies I learnt the latest national song that expressed love to country and national unity 'regardless of ethnicity, language or religion' as stressed in the Singapore National Pledge. Today I can still sing the songs of my childhood, such as 'We Are Singapore' (Harrison 1987) and 'One People, One Nation, One Singapore' – of which the chorus is quoted above – on demand. This is in part because these songs are still actively broadcast through Singapore media, particularly in the run up to Singapore's National Day.

I recall that as a young adult in Singapore, my friends, colleagues and family always beamed with pride whenever they spoke of Singapore's achievements as a peaceful, prosperous and modern nation where everyone lived harmoniously together despite ethnic diversity. Patriotism through music obviously works. However, the same people also frequently complained about the government and often spoke unflatteringly about ethnicities other than their own. Moreover, while such Singaporeans revel in Singapore's modern global city-state status, they also hang on tightly to cultural traditions and organized religion as they aggressively oppose certain aspects of globalism.

Stemming from its history as a British colony and *entrepôt* trading centre, Singapore has a complex multicultural identity (Ang and Stratton 1995) that both unifies as well as divides ethnic communities (Gomes 2010). Multiculturalism takes pride of place in Singapore society. The country and its people are immensely proud of its achievements in establishing a seemingly peaceful and harmonious multiracial and multiethnic society. Singaporeans do revel in the products of multiculturalism which they strongly connect to and identify with such as an array of fabulous culinary delights and a unique hybridized local language known as 'Singlish' which boasts a combination of the different primary ethnic languages (Hokkien, Teowchew, Malay and Tamil) intermingled with English. At the same time, Singapore's version of multiculturalism where people are classified into the Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others (CMIO) categories are, as Chua Beng Huat (2003b) argues, highlights difference rather than integration and is a way in which the state controls its disparate population.⁵

Racial and ethnic tensions are a ubiquitous but largely hidden aspect of everyday experience in contemporary Singapore (Velayutham 2009). These play out in quotidian encounters between people on a subtle often subconscious level. Such intercultural anxieties are deeply entrenched in a history that Singapore is still negotiating and coming to terms with. For instance, some Singaporeans may harbor feelings of suspicion about people and ethnicities outside their own communal group because of the way Singapore officially remembers its history which emphasizes a fear of Malay nationalism through the remembering

of Malay-incited riots which took place in the 1950s and 1960s (Gomes 2010). The entry of new migrants who come to Singapore for work as unskilled or skilled workers, as international students or other reasons such as marriage, have challenged this society as it comes to terms with a rapidly changing ethnographic landscape which goes beyond their previously understood Chinese-Malay-Indian nexus.

Enter the 'Foreign' Migrants

Since the 2000s Singaporeans have been incredibly critical of 'new' migrants – the overwhelming majority of whom come as workers – entering their country and have been expressing their anger through xenophobic comments online. Despite strict laws against racial vilification, these comments can be seen in some of the more popular online forums such as those in *Asiaone.com* (<http://www.asiaone.com/A1Home/A1Home.html>), *The Online Citizen: A Community of Singaporeans* (<http://theonlinecitizen.com/>), *Sam's Alfresco Haven: Celebrating Singapore's Golden Period!* (www.sammyboy.com) and *The TR Emeritus* (<http://www.tremeritus.com/>) formerly known as *The Temasek Review*, in personal weblog entries and on social media platforms. Known as 'foreign talent', these migrants are professional arrivals from Mainland China, South Asia, the Philippines and beyond who have been entering Singapore in droves since the mid-1990s. Unlike the transitional foreign domestic workers and unskilled labourers who have been flocking into Singapore since the 1980s, foreign talent migrants are educated professionals who often take up permanent residence in their adopted country. The Singapore government sees foreign talent migrants as an investment in Singapore's economic future and argues that it has to open the country's doors to new migrants because Singaporeans are not reproducing enough in order to replenish the workforce and new migrants will help take care of the ageing Singapore population. With these reasons in mind, the Singapore parliament endorsed *Population White Paper: A Sustainable Population for a Dynamic Singapore* which would see the nation's population increase to 6.9 million by 2030 through migration in February 2013.

Singapore has also been attracting large numbers of international students into the country as well as part of its plan to become a

global education hub. In 2010 there are over 91,500 foreign students in Singapore (Yeoh and Lin 2012) with plans to increase numbers to 150,000 by 2015 (Davie 2012). The government has been making it attractive for these students to study in Singapore by providing them with government scholarships to study in public funded institutions as well as making permanent residence easy for them (Singapore Education 2006). Some foreign talent migrants might have been previously foreign students studying in Singapore who gained local employment.

The online xenophobic comments reveal that Singaporeans view foreign talent migrants with great suspicion as they anecdotally feel that they are threatening their livelihood and way of life. Moreover, the comments expose Singaporean displeasure at the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) whom they hold responsible for the influx of the foreign talent migrants as revealed by any online discussion by Singaporeans on the matter. Here Singaporeans note that they are no longer able to identify with Singapore due to the increasingly overcrowded and changing ethnographic landscape which they blame on government policies.

While Singaporeans have always grumbled about the PAP government and its policies in private, the rise of online forms of communication have allowed them to express their dissatisfaction with the government more prolifically and loudly. Doing so has created a space for Singaporeans to identify with each other on issues that they are concerned about which, most often, are caused by government policies: the cost of living, widening income gap and elitism of PAP members of parliament. However it is the presence of new migrants – transitional and permanent – that has dominated Singaporean online discourse like no other issue; uniting Singaporeans and functioning as a catalyst to push locals into greater political awareness. Singaporeans, fed up with the influx of these new migrants – whom they call 'foreigners' despite many overseas born professionals taking up permanent residence and citizenship – have progressed from being apathetic to becoming politically aware as demonstrated by the greatest withdrawal of electoral support the PAP has ever encountered at both the General Elections and Presidential Elections in 2011.⁶

Unpacking Singapore Society through Film

Singapore films provide an accessible art form available to mass audiences. This allows for more nuanced and layered readings of its films by different audiences. Like other creative industries in Singapore, film is a forum for the production and consumption of fictional and creative works of art in a country where the government features prominently in everyday life. Arguably, the creative industries provide a less inhibited forum more free from government influence and control than the economic and political spheres primarily because subtlety through creative license is allowed to flourish and therefore communicate everyday concerns. It provides a space for a critical appraisal of Singapore and the ubiquitous role played by the government in Singaporean society.⁷ Cinema's space, in other words, allows audiences to choose, identify and decode films (Hall 1973) at different levels of appreciation and understanding.

In his assessment of the film and television scene in Singapore, Kenneth Paul Tan (2008) suggests that Singapore productions struggle to honestly and openly provide critical commentary of Singapore because of the dominance of an authoritarian government and because of the consumption needs and patterns of the audience. He notes, correctly, that television shows in particular, while popular with local audiences, have to follow certain strictly enforced codes of practice that leave productions toothless and banal. A possible reason for their popular consumption in Singapore lies in their conventional character portrayals and seemingly inoffensive narratives that mirror everyday life in Singapore. Yet, as I point out throughout this book, the portrayal of everyday life in Singapore is a useful device for unpacking the layers of Singapore society.

Tan suggests that the ability of Singapore's most successful filmmaker, Jack Neo, to not only entertain Singaporeans with films about everyday life but also generate approval by Singaporean leaders is testament to the lack of aggression present in Singapore films (K.P. Tan 2008: 147-48). Even though Neo's films critique the Singapore government and its policies through political satire, as is the case in his 2002 production *Xiaohai Bu Ben/I Not Stupid* (*New Straits Times*

2004; Lim 2005), there is always resolution at the end with the message that government knows best and obeying government dictates leads to a successful Singapore and a prosperous self (K.P. Tan 2008: 147-48). While Tan's assessment is not incorrect, I suggest that while the Singapore film industry is bound by stern guidelines, it still manages to question hegemonic discourses that on the surface seem to champion active support of the status quo.

The prolific growth of the Singapore film industry has been slowly attracting academic scholarship (e.g. Khoo 2005, Leow 2010, Marchetti 2005a and K.P. Tan 2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2010 and 2011), as film studies scholars attempt to explore and comprehend the industry in terms of the challenges it faces because of strict censorship laws and also in terms of how it represents Singapore and what it means to Singaporeans. Recognition of Singapore films have become apparent through the local box office successes of commercial productions as well as the critical acclaim accorded to independently made films screened at local and international film festivals. At the opposition National Solidarity Party (NSP) charity screening of *The Blue Mansion* (Goei, 2009) on 13 November 2011, Singapore-born film-maker Glen Goei eloquently and passionately states during the question and answer session, available on YouTube, that although Singapore is highly developed, its people are unhappy. He says:

When I came back to Singapore [after living in Europe], I came back to a Singapore that is very different...[than what]...I grew up in. I grew up in Singapore in the 60s and 70s when life was more simpler but more happier. I came back twenty, thirty years later in the early 2000s...Singapore had changed beyond recognition. It was, on the surface, a richer Singapore, you know. A glistening sparkling, glass, cement, steel all over the place. Shopping malls and MRT stations. But I felt that people were significantly less happy. (Goei, 2011)

Goei also describes his role as a film-maker when he says: 'As an artist I try to, in my work, to be a mirror to that society that I live' [*sic*]. While Goei refers to himself here, his words perhaps express what many

film-makers in the local film industry also believe is their responsibility to Singapore society.

The Singapore film industry is comparatively young when compared to other significant and prolific Asian cinemas such as those in Hong Kong and India. In addition, Singapore films often look 'alien' to foreign audiences because they contain Singapore-specific cultural nuances. Some films, such as those by Jack Neo – including *Qián Bùgòu Yòng/Money No Enough* (1998), *I Not Stupid* and *Ah Boys to Men/Xinbing Zhengzhuan* – have found commercial success because they inject a quintessentially Singapore flavour through language, employing Singlish (Singapore English) and Chinese dialects such as Hokkien, as well as likable Everyman characters with whom most Singaporeans can identify.

These Everyman characters are often portrayed as 'heartlanders', as they are popularly known, take on the roles of heroes and heroines in these films, which deal with contemporary struggles affecting Singaporeans, such as wealth, income, education, immigration, position in society, health and social ills education and finance. Locally made art-house productions – for example, Royston Tan's *15* (2002), Eric Khoo's *Mee Pok Man* (1995), *Be With Me* (2005) and Ekachai Uekrongtham's *Pleasure Factory* (2007) – are also in demand by (niche) Singaporean audiences since they are able to capture the complex nature of Singapore society by the sheer nature of their experimentation in style and format. Such films also sensitively portray underlying, confronting and controversial topics such as sexuality (e.g. *15* and *Be With Me*) and the sex trade (e.g. *Mee Pok Man* and *Pleasure Factory*).

This book thus turns to some enigmatic Singapore films to provide not just a starting point but a deeper understanding of Singapore society. In their own way, Singapore films capture the heartbeat of local society by expressing some of the anxieties Singaporeans have concerning ethnicity and migration that paradoxically both unite Singaporeans with each other, even as they divide them. This book specifically looks at these anxieties through the overlapping topics of identity, memory and place which are played out through the strongly recurring theme of authoritarian leadership.

Singapore films, in other words, functions as a useful artifact as defined by E. Deidre Pribram, who suggests that it

conveys meanings beyond its tangible form, just as a more traditional archaeological artifact, such as an ancient shard of poetry, imparts a sense of or is open to interpretations about the past. An artifact is tethnicity evidence of other qualities: concepts, beliefs, meanings, times, and places. More than a material entity, an artifact is a means of expression and communication that absorbs aesthetic, social, and ideological concepts and practices. In other words, it absorbs histories. (Pribram 2002: 44)

National and state cinemas functioning as tools that document, reflect, unpack and critically appraise the societies that create them is nothing new to scholars, cinephiles and general audiences hungry to decipher any films that hint at social unrest or social ills. However, any cinema that does so in such a way that is coded for its own local audience is always worth a look. Singapore cinema falls into this category since it seems to exclusively be about Singapore and its people. To aid my investigation, I turn to other sources such as online comments by Singaporean netizens (people who actively use the Internet, particularly as a platform for commentary and discussion) who spiritedly discuss political and social issues openly on blogs, popular online forums and through social media.⁸ I also refer to government policies, public exhibitions and film reviews. In addition, I turn to history and historical narrative in my analysis. This book is not an exhaustive study of Singapore films, which writers Uhde and Uhde (2010) have already successfully done. Instead, this book explores some of the complexities of Singapore multicultural society – in terms of the struggles and paranoia that concern its people regarding ethnicity and migration – by looking at some of the more critically and commercially successful films by some of the most well-known Singaporean film-makers, including Eric Khoo, Tan Pin Pin, Kelvin Tong, Jack Neo and Ong Keng Sen among others.

Chapter 1 serves as an introduction to Singapore in terms of its cinema, its government and its people and to contextualize discussions of ethnicity and migration that follow. In this chapter I explore a few

characteristics of Singapore films such as the featuring of everyday Singaporeans through the ‘Everyman’ figure and local cultural traits such as language and food. By looking at Singapore film as the ‘heartbeat’ of the nation, this chapter exposes some of the growing pains afflicting this young and successful nation. This chapter provides an introduction into Singapore society’s relationship with its government and suggests that it responds to the PAP government in ways that are both conventional and innovatively rebellious as the proceeding chapters will show. Chapter 1 also serves as an entry into the focus of this book: using specific films to reflect and analyze the ways in which ethnicity and migration affect Singaporeans.

Chapters 2 and 3 examine anxieties on ethnicity while Chapters 4 and 5 are dedicated to the struggles Singaporeans have towards new migrants. Chapter 2 discusses locally made English-language films in Singapore such as *Army Daze* and *One Leg Kicking* (Koh 2001) which feature, unusually, a cast of mixed ethnicities. Most English-language films feature an ethnic Chinese cast usually speaking Singlish with splashes of Mandarin and Chinese dialects (Hokkien, Teochew and Cantonese). While such films celebrate the government’s idealized vision of multicultural harmony, with casts of characters seemingly colour blind to each other, they also rely on ethnic stereotypes for comedic effect. By looking at the ways in which the ethnic Chinese protagonist dominates the silver screen, as well as the portrayal of Eurasians in local cinema, this chapter suggests that Singapore may not be as multicultural in practice as it imagines itself to be.

Chapter 3 looks at the work of Singapore’s most well-known independent documentary film-maker, Tan Pin Pin by paying attention to the ethnic Singaporean-Chinese and their understanding and negotiation of culture and tradition in Singapore’s changing physical landscape. Here I suggest that Tan’s films ‘rewrite’ and ‘reclaim’ Singapore history while subtly questioning government discourse by challenging official remembering and revealing the price that has been paid for Singapore’s journey to modernity particularly on Singaporean-Chinese. Tan’s films do this by featuring the memories of everyday Singaporeans who are situated outside the official discourse of significant events in Singapore’s

history (e.g. the height of communism in colonial Singapore) and traditional everyday public events in the lives of ordinary Singaporeans (e.g. such as the cultural importance of burial rituals).

Chapter 4 moves the focus from Singaporean-Chinese to mainland Chinese migrants in Singapore. It is the first of 3 chapters dedicated to reflecting in the anxieties Singaporeans seem to feel with regard to the permanent and temporary migrants entering the country. By analyzing the film *Shier Lou/12 Storeys* by independent film-maker Eric Khoo, one of the most illustrious and significant individuals in the Singapore film industry, this chapter examines the unease and suspicion Singaporeans have of the mainland Chinese, many of whom they believe are taking advantage of locals and living off the resources of the country. As a film-maker Khoo is highly regarded for his distinctively pessimistic work featuring the lower working classes. This chapter suggests that while Khoo's films seem to highlight the social issues of a particular group of Singaporeans, in reality the films really present some of the everyday issues gnawing at the broader Singapore society. This chapter also provides an insight into the xenophobic attitudes expressed by Singaporeans online.

Chapter 5 looks at the 2005 Kevin Tong film *The Maid*, a Singapore-made horror production featuring a foreign domestic worker as its protagonist. Released to very favourable reviews in the local press, the film was used by critics to praise the development of the local film industry, while the social commentary on the foreign domestic worker experience in Singapore was ignored. This chapter aims to address this lack of commentary on the issues surrounding foreign domestic service raised in the film. Doing so reveals multilayered representations of social order in Singapore based on ethnicity and class, where the images of foreign maids are dramatized, reconstructed and consumed in various discursive forms by various social agents.

Chapter 6 brings the discussions of ethnic disparity and migrant worry together. Here I look at language in local films and observe the significance of Singlish (Singapore English) to unite and empower Singaporeans. This chapter suggests that Singlish in Singapore films not only captures the uniqueness of being Singaporean but it is a vernacular

that Singaporeans use as a non-political form of defiance against the ruling party and its unpopular new migrant policies. Here I re-emphasize the observation I make in previous chapters that the presence of the new migrants functions as a force for unity in a culturally and ethnically disparate population.

Chapter 1

Coping With Everyday Life: Singapore Films, Heartbeat of the Nation

In the past decade, Singaporeans have developed a fondness for local, particularly commercial productions, as seen in box office returns. Commercial productions by film-makers such as Jack Neo, Glen Goei, Royston Tan and Kevin Tong have enjoyed enormous local success because of their increasingly sophisticated high production values.¹ Likewise, independent and avant-garde films by other prominent film-makers such as Eric Khoo, Djinn and documentary film-maker Tan Pin Pin have been playing to packed, albeit limited, screenings at local and international theatres, events and festivals, even though their narratives and plots sometimes seem initially unclear. Films by independent film-makers that earn critical success are often less financially successful due to limited screenings at art-house venues. Since the renaissance of Singapore cinema in the early 1990s, the most successful Singapore films – such as those by the country’s undisputedly best known film-maker Jack Neo – almost exclusively feature the typical concerns of everyday Singaporeans such as wealth, income, education, immigration, position in society, health and social ills. These themes are successfully woven together by the Singapore-specific cultural traits of language and food. Language and food, after all, are the very elements Singaporeans feel passionate about principally in terms of national identity and belonging to the homeland.

Like other modern multicultural societies such as America, Australia and Hong Kong, Singapore uses cinema to portray, reflect and understand

the sociocultural effects and conditions of multiculturalism. Prolific Singaporean cinema studies commentator Kenneth Paul Tan (2010, 2011) astutely observes that locally made films provide a useful platform that allows Singaporean anxieties and struggles to be performed and played out. These struggles and anxieties are a result of Singapore’s in-between position as a post-industrial global city successfully chasing global capital (K.P. Tan 2011) with a value system that is flexibly connected to its Asian roots.

Film can offer insight into complex nationalist societies such as Singapore not only through readings of their films but also in terms of critical attention and box office receipts.² Even though Singapore is a global city state, its society is rooted in cultural values selected and promoted by the government in order to galvanize the fractured communal groups into a homogenous, patriotic and obedient entity that functions primarily to create a wealthier and more economically successful nation state. Singapore-made films that have had an impact on audiences such as scholars, film reviewers and general filmgoers alike have done so because they tap into Singapore society’s heartbeat – the everyday concerns of Singaporeans – exceedingly well.

A number of Singapore-made films such as those by Jack Neo (for instance his *I Not Stupid/Xiaohai Bu Ben* and *Money No Enough/Qian Bu Gou Yong* series made in the late 1990s and through the 2000s) manage to circumvent the strict policies that severely frown upon criticism of the government in the media, and at the same time celebrate Singapore society and its cultural identity.³ So while loyalty to nation equals loyalty to the ruling People’s Action Party’s (PAP) governance, Singapore films attempt to make full use of this phenomenon of patriotic nationhood by exploring and rejoicing in what it is to be Singaporean.

The local in Singapore films

Work by some key film-making industry figures – such as independent film-maker Eric Khoo, mainstream film-maker Jack Neo and other emerging yet prominent film-makers such as Royston Tan and Kelvin Tong – have garnered the attention of film studies and cultural studies scholars, cinephiles, Asian art-house crowds and local audiences who

have been seduced and intoxicated by the exclusively local content present in the work.⁴ The growing success of the local film industry amongst its home-grown audience is reflected in two significant consequences: the financial success some of these films enjoy, and the emergence of serious film appreciation societies dedicated to Singapore cinema such as the Singapore Film Commission and the online societies *Sinema* (2012) and *SINdie* (2012).

Moreover, a number of contemporary Singapore-made films have been enjoying increasing financial success and have been making it to the Singapore top ten charts since 1998. The table below shows the financial success of some local films with Singaporean audiences.

Film	Year	Top Ten Chart Position	Box Office Takings (SGD)
Money No Enough/ Qian Bu Gou Yong (Jack Neo)	1998	#2	\$5.8m
Liang Po Po: The Movie/Liang Po Po Chong Chu Jiang Hu (Bi Lian Teng)	1999	#3	\$3.03m
I Not Stupid/ Xiaohai Bu Ben (Jack Neo)	2002	#4	\$3.8m
Homerun/Pao Ba Haizi (Jack Neo)	2003	#10	\$2.35m
The Best Bet/Turan Facai (Jack Neo)	2004	#8	\$2.53m
I Not Stupid Too/ Xiaohai Bu Ben 2 (Jack Neo)	2006	#3	\$4.18m
881 (Royston Tan)	2007	#10	\$3.5m

Figure 1.1: Top ten chart positions and box office takings of Singapore films, 1998-2007 (Uhde & Uhde 2010: 321-22).

In 2013 however, Singaporean audiences warmed up significantly to another Jack Neo film – *Ah Boys to Men 2/Xinbing Zhengzhuan II* – by making it the most successful local production at the box office. Earning SGD\$7.9m (Ma 2014), the film about national service in Singapore, firmly secured Neo's position as the most successful local filmmaker the country has seen.

One of the Singapore-centric features in Singapore films which could perhaps explain the growing popularity of this cinema with its domestic audiences is the familiar and local. These include featuring the everyday Singaporean through the Everyman and the cultural traits of food and language. The Everyman is the everyday Singaporean whom local audiences would easily recognize. Almost always, the Everyman displays essentialised or imagined Singapore-specific behavior such as racial stereotypes and the over the top use of Singapore English (Singlish). Yet this figure is also able to represent and expresses the everyday concerns of ordinary Singaporeans.

The Everyman: Representing Singaporean concerns through film⁵

Singapore is a young nation. Like some other former Western colonies in Asia (e.g. Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak) and Africa (e.g. Southern Rhodesia and Kenya Colony), Singapore achieved independence from its colonial masters in the 1960s. In 1963 the British declared Singapore and Malaysia independent from colonial rule. Independence resulted in these former colonies forming a federation. However, 23 months later the federation with Malaysia dissolved acrimoniously and Singapore became a sovereign nation. Unlike other postcolonial nations at the time, Singapore lacked a strong precolonial history other than its links to Malay culture and specifically to the Sultanate of Johor. These links, however, were not rooted firmly enough to give Singaporeans an effective precolonial national identity because of the migration of different Asian and European peoples into Singapore during British colonial rule. The immigration patterns favoured the Chinese who emigrated from Southern China and whose descendants then went on to populate the island and emerge as the most dominant ethnic demographic in Singapore. Prior to migrating to Singapore in the 1800s and 1900s, both the Chinese and the Malays from the Malay Peninsula and the Indonesian Archipelago had very limited precolonial contact with Singapore, with the exception of the relationship between Imperial China and Sultanate of Kedah.⁶ This lack of a strong common cultural identity between the ethnic Chinese and the ethnic Malays posed challenges for a postcolonial Singapore government determined to create a unified national identity. It is against this background that