

FM4204: Time, Space and the Visceral in South East Asian Cinema

Hybridity in Singaporean Cinema: Othering the Self through Diaspora and Language Policies
in *Ilo Ilo* and *Letters from the South*

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爸妈不在家/*Ilo Ilo* is a Singaporean film directed by Anthony Chen and released in 2013. It recounts the unanticipated development of a relationship between a Filipina woman, Teresa, and a Chinese-Singaporean boy, Jiale, whom she is employed to look after. The story unfurls against the backdrop of the Asian financial crisis of 1997, showcasing the struggle of a very young country in maintaining its core values, its independence, and its dignity in the face of economic disaster. 南方来信/*Letters from the South* is comprised of six short films from Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Myanmar, released in 2013. Of these, I will be focusing on Sun Koh's film, *Singapore Panda*, which examines tensions between national and cultural identity in the Chinese diaspora in Singapore. This essay will aim to explicate how diasporic communities maintain (or fail to maintain) their cultural identity in Singaporean cinema. Using *Ilo Ilo* and *Singapore Panda* as a starting point, I will unpack how divergent cultural backgrounds colour the style of popular Singaporean films, particularly in their treatment of space. I will begin by providing a contextualisation of the films in terms of the Singaporean political climate: language policy, post-colonial policy, and how these contribute to conflict between the nation and the self. By applying Robert Stam's concept of hybridity and Trinh T. Minh-ha's theories of otherness to popular Singaporean cinema, I will pinpoint the reasons for the division of the self in cinematic representations of Singaporeans. I will introduce a number of other popular Singaporean films to support my argument. In doing so, I will situate the reasons for identity crises in a highly developed, economically successful, and culturally diverse country like Singapore – and moreover I hope to unearth a national voice that has been subdued through the multi-layered effects of colonisation.

In the biological context, hybridity means cross-breeding between two distinct species that then creates a new species – a hybrid. More generally, it is a cross between different phenomena: in sociology, hybridity has been applied to culture, language, identity and the

visual arts. In a multicultural and multilingual society, hybridity ‘acknowledges that identity is formed through an encounter with difference’¹, and therefore ostensibly encourages racial harmony through its globalising qualities. Robert Stam, however, identifies the detriment of hybridity, describing it as ‘painful, visceral memory’ to some, stressing that the ‘catch-all term, “hybridity”, fails to discriminate between the diverse modalities of hybridity’, including ‘colonial imposition... obligatory assimilation, political cooptation, cultural mimicry, commercial exploitation, top-down appropriation, or bottom-up subversion’.² This view coincides with the way language is treated in *Ilo Ilo* and *Singapore Panda*, in that its heterogeneity, its hybridisation, is a result of multiple factors including Singapore’s colonial history and multiculturalism. Singapore, a former British colony, is home to Chinese, Malay and Indian diasporic communities (not to mention the influx of migrant workers from the Philippines and Indonesia), yet the country’s language policy is devoted to the prioritisation of English. This tension between languages engenders sentiments of otherness and displacement, which Trinh T. Minh-ha describes as ‘having constantly to negotiate between home and abroad, native culture and adopted culture, or more creatively speaking, between a here, a there, *and* an elsewhere’.³ Singapore achieved independence in 1965, and is today a wealthy city-state with four official languages: English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil, reflecting the main ethnic groups as the Chinese, Malaysians and Indians. English is, however, given a privileged status as the language of the government and administration, as well as the language of instruction in all schools. Singapore’s condition as a post-colonial state has engendered a population struggling to make up for lost time, to maintain the cultural norms of each group’s ‘home’, while mediating between divergent notions of home that

¹ John Scott and Gordon Marshall, *A Dictionary of Sociology*, (Oxford University Press: 2009), <<http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095952517>>

² Robert Stam. “Beyond Third Cinema: The Aesthetics of Hybridity”, *Rethinking Third Cinema*, Edited by Anthony Guneratne and Wimal Dissanayake, (London: Routledge, 2003), p.33

³ Trinh T. Minh-ha, “Other than Myself/My Other Self”, *Travellers’ Tales: Narratives of Home and Displacement*, Edited by George Robertson, (London: Routledge, 1994), p.9

cannot seem to co-exist. Language policies are integral in any cultural setting because of language's inextricability from what individuals feel is home. Hence, government-endorsed language policy carries a great deal of weight as these effectively decide for a nation what their home ought to be – or, if there are several, which home is most important.

Indeed, language is a fundamental signifier of culture – the elocution, mannerisms and subtleties often point to one particular geographic culture. For Singaporeans this is a creolised language that encapsulates the multitude of cultures which have congregated in the country, resulting in regular codeswitching and translanguaging practices. Examples of this are ample in *Ilo Ilo*: Jiale says to Teresa, “I bring you go somewhere”, which is a direct translation from the Chinese sentence construction, “我帶你去一个地方”. Jiale’s mother instructs Teresa, ‘Don’t anyhow run, can?’ – again a direct translation from the Chinese. Adding ‘can’ is an interrogative construction, “可以吗?”, used to gain confirmation from the interlocutor. Teresa equally begins to adopt Chinese words into her English vernacular, asking Jiale to be more *guai* (乖), which is the Chinese word for well-behaved. In both *Ilo Ilo* and *Singapore Panda*, there is regular usage of the Chinese discourse marker, *lah* (啦), adopted into English for the same purpose of gaining confirmation at the end of a sentence. However, government-funded language and assimilation policies, such as the Speak Mandarin Campaign or Speak Good English Movement, counter the hybridisation of language in Singapore. Xiao Lan Curdt-Christiansen notes the disadvantages of Singapore’s government’s desire to ‘strike a balance’ between languages as this ‘political ideology places emphasis on discrete and separate notions of cultural and linguistic categorisation and thus downplays the significant influences from historical, political and sociolinguistic contexts in

which people find themselves'.⁴ We are left with the question, what is the essentialised ethnic identity that this state privileges? As Ying-Ying Tan and Irving Goh note, authoritative figures are those who are most intent on abolishing dialects – Goh Chok Tong, previous prime minister, established 'two types of Singaporeans: the 'cosmopolitan' Singaporean and his or her 'heartlander' counterpart'⁵, the former being one who speaks English and Mandarin and has the potential to succeed internationally, and the latter one who speaks either language poorly, or speaks Singlish, and will remain working menial jobs. This 'cosmopolitan' versus 'heartlander' conflict emerges in Singaporean cinema, showcasing the nation's identity crisis – should the mother tongue come before the language of economic success, or vice versa? Accordingly, the films exhibit systems of time and space, differentiating between what languages can be spoken where, or when codeswitching is acceptable.

This negotiation between sameness and difference becomes integral to the Singaporean identity. In *Singapore Panda*, the main protagonist struggles to create a radio show accessible to a mainland Chinese audience. There is an emphasis placed on the need for this to be a 'trans-media' product, a product that is able to transcend international borders and communicate to multiple communities. He and his radio partner devise a metaphor for the Chinese diaspora: a Chinese panda, who has come to Singapore, is shocked by the different culture, and though he 'longs for home... home is now a distant memory'. He is mocked for his accent, while the accents of the local 'orangutans' are strange to him. He attempts to pronounce the English letters using *pinyin* (拼音), the Chinese phonetic alphabet, for which he is ostracised. Scenes from home and the radio show flit in and out, slowly becoming one, so that it is finally made clear the panda and the main protagonist share one narrative. This

⁴ Xiao Lan Curdt-Christiansen, "Family Language Policy in the Chinese Community in Singapore: a Question of Balance?" *Multilingualism in the Chinese Diaspora Worldwide*, Edited by Li Wei, (London: Routledge, 2015), p.256

⁵ Ying-Ying Tan and Irving Goh, "Politics of Language in Contemporary Singapore Cinema", *Interventions*, Vol.13 No.4, 2011, p.613

short film exhibits the distinction between public and private spheres, with the main characters speaking Mandarin in front of their boss (public) and Hokkien when they are alone (private) – even putting on an accent during recording to sound more mainland Chinese (it is worth noting here that despite the language being the same, the Mandarin spoken in Singapore is called *huayu*, while that spoken in China is *putonghua*). This emphasises that the Chinese community in Singapore, despite sharing cultural elements with mainland China, no longer shares the same space. Moreover, the panda expresses an unfamiliarity with his grandchildren, who ‘are not really pandas, even though they are panda-like’ – here Koh splices in scenes of the main protagonist with his granddaughters, who refuse to speak Mandarin. This generational shift is present in a significant number of Singaporean films and communicates an anxiety regarding the security of the Singaporean cultural identity. The analogy continues as he explains his grandchildren speak the language of the ‘coyotes in the USA’ and eat the same food. This conveys the dramatic extent of the generational divide in terms of two elements fundamental to culture: language and food. Most poignant is the fact that he is part of the Chinese diaspora in Singapore, and is yet told by the Chinese executive that the show he has devised is not Chinese, or ‘trans-media’ enough.

小孩不笨/I Not Stupid (Jack Neo, 2002) is an example of a highly successful Singaporean film which, despite being a comedy, is unambiguous in its indictment of the Singaporean education and class systems that are largely unknown beyond the island. The film has a comic book-like aesthetic, using graphics to delineate a divide between how children are viewed and how they view systems of institutionalisation. The school divides students into EM1, EM2, and EM3 – the last being the ‘stupid’ (or indeed the ‘heartlander’) group, whose language proficiency is the lowest and who are thus treated with disdain. In the film, a young student defiantly explains to her Mandarin teacher that she wants to become a scientist so that she can invent a medicine that will make her Caucasian. When the teacher

asks why she wants this, she responds in English, 'Because if I am a Caucasian, I don't have to learn Chinese anymore', to which the class erupts in applause. This again demonstrates an anti-Chinese sentiment amongst the younger generation in Singapore, a result of modernisation being associated with the West and therefore English. On the other hand, in *Ilo Ilo*, a conversation between Jiale's father and a co-worker conveys a distaste for the use of English and its implications: the co-worker mutters under his breath, 'My new manager speaks almost only English. Westernised snob'. Interestingly he says this in Mandarin, but says the word 'English' in English, and the derogatory comment in Hokkien. It is moreover telling that English is valued above Mandarin in the workplace, yet in the family home Teresa's English does not promote her in any way, despite the fact that her English is better than Jiale's parents. Hence, this short sequence displays the politicisation of language, how it has become internalised in Singaporean culture, and how its uses and advantages differentiate according to space.

Ilo Ilo problematises Singapore's development above other South East Asian countries through its depiction of issues of class and ethnicity. In a multicultural country where Chinese speakers are higher in social status (than Malay, Tamil, Tagalog speakers), but English speakers are above all, it is no wonder that identity has become a dislocated and oddly prejudiced concept. The heterogeneity of languages and associated cultures results in a hierarchical system that prioritises some over others. It is thus worth noting Jiale's mother's frustration in the scene where Teresa brings back Filipino confectioneries – Jiale gobbles them up, implying both his interest in a lower class culture and his attachment to Teresa as a maternal figure. In a later scene, he refuses to eat the porridge that his mother has spent hours making, insisting that Teresa's tastes better. This re-establishes the importance of food in situating cultural identity, resulting in Jiale's mother's fear of being replaced. Trinh writes that 'home and language tend to be taken for granted; like Mother or Woman, they are often

naturalised and homogenised'⁶, which is a tension that can be seen between Teresa and Jiale's mother. This is due to the associations between mother and home: when Jiale's mother leaves the home, she passes on maternal duties to Teresa. This leaves Jiale in despair when his associative mother, or home (Teresa), is finally displaced. As Trinh writes, 'the source', home, 'becomes... an illusory secure and fixed place... yet, language can only live on and renew itself by hybridising shamelessly and changing its own rules as it migrates in time and space'.⁷ Though Jiale begins to view Teresa as his mother – occupying the same spaces as her and embracing her culture – his newfound hybrid identity is not enough to keep her with him. The time and space she (home, mother) represents inevitably shifts once again, mirroring constant transcultural movements to, from and through Singapore. Indeed, another recurrent theme in the films discussed here is the restructuring of the workplace by way of new management: in *Ilo Ilo*, Jiale's father's company is overtaken by a Westernised manager and he is made redundant; in *Singapore Panda*, the radio service is bought by a Hong Kong conglomerate that wants to redefine the show; in *I Not Stupid*, Mr. Liu's company is overtaken by an American who has little understanding of Singapore culture. Power dynamics are thus reworked through systems of governance, where foreign entities battling the conflict between English and Chinese come into play and the Singaporean identity is relegated to a position of subordination or even irrelevance – mimicking the country's colonisation some decades previously. Olivia Khoo explicates this as a cultural phenomenon, noting that 'local filmmakers [are] forced to negotiate competing pressures upon them – to be 'local' and yet enticingly 'foreign' (and therefore exportable)'.⁸ Hence, themes of displacement and otherness are concurrent in the majority of successful Singaporean films.

⁶ Trinh, "Other", p.14

⁷ Trinh, "Other", p.14

⁸ Olivia Khoo, "Slang images: on the 'foreignness' of contemporary Singaporean films", *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, Vol.7 No.1, 2006, p.82

Singapore's reliance on domestic workers from less developed countries in South East Asia is another facet of the culture that affects notions of identity. Michelle H. S. Ho establishes the dualistic nature of Singapore cultural conventions, outlining the terms of the "Singapore Story", a Southeast Asian version of the American Dream. Being able to afford a domestic worker from a less developed country, becomes a puzzle piece that fits into the image of the lived Singapore Story, but as Ho notes, 'it also elicits undesired perceived social problems, such as dysfunctional family relations, contaminated family values, poor childrearing practices... often attributed to workers' marginal status as foreign, lower class and belonging to the Third World'.⁹ The introduction of Teresa disrupts the normative family ideal, but her existence is largely disregarded by everyone besides Jiale – she sleeps on a mattress beneath him and is not invited to eat with the family. Ho goes on to explain the significance of the film's title: *Ilo Ilo* refers to 'a province and Teresa's hometown in the Philippines', symbolising 'Singapore's reliance on foreign labour for rapid economic development', while *爸妈不在家*, or *Mom and Dad Are Not At Home*, 'highlights discrepancies between the ideal nuclear heteronormative family'.¹⁰ Indeed, as previously touched upon, Jiale begins to see Teresa as a maternal figure, more so than his own mother – this is evident in the birthday scene where Teresa is asked to take pictures of the family, but Jiale instead insists on taking pictures with Teresa. Teresa has had to leave her son behind in the Philippines, only to become a substitute mother to Jiale. Her passport is taken from her upon arrival, so she is stranded without the possibility of movement. When Teresa speaks on the phone to her son's caretaker, a Chinese funeral ritual takes place in the background making it near impossible for her to communicate. This suggests the extent of the stress put on domestic workers to adapt to a new culture – while she attempts to maintain a connection

⁹ Michelle H. S. Ho., "Desiring the Singapore Story: Affective Attachments and National Identities in Anthony Chen's *Ilo Ilo*", *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, Vol.9 No.2, p.175

¹⁰ Ho, "Desiring", p.175

to her home in the Philippines, her current time and space in Singapore demands attention. Further, when she encounters the domestic worker in the neighbouring home, there is an expectation that the two will form a friendship. Instead, Teresa is abruptly told that ‘there is no room for God here’, before the door is shut. This takes place early on in the film, when Jiale has locked her out of the apartment, so that Teresa is left negotiating the space between what should ostensibly represent home and what is foreign, while both have rejected her. I would draw a parallel here between Singaporean cinema and Stam’s comments on Latin American cinema: national identity has been ‘officially articulated as hybrid’, but this is done through ‘hypocritically integrationist ideologies that have glossed over and concealed subtle racial hegemonies’.¹¹ Moreover, there is the implication that the younger generation of Singaporeans form affective attachments to things which do not coincide with their cultural identity, which is to say, the hybridisation of Singaporean culture has made it difficult for children to pinpoint one notion of what home is. As Ho points out, ‘Jiale has become too needy and... is unable to take care of himself’, which is ‘an ongoing issue... in a society of children raised by domestic maids’.¹² Though employing foreign domestic work appears to strengthen the economy and contribute to achieving the Singapore Story, the workers remain confined to spaces of otherness while children confuse them for mother, and thus home.

The most popular films to emerge from the Singaporean cinematic renaissance are works which present the side unseen, the reality hidden behind an exterior which boasts economic success. Khoo devises the term ‘slang images’ to refer to a ‘mode of cinematic narration that negotiates... Asian modernities... both in dialogue with, and in tension against the visions and versions presented by official discourses’.¹³ These images display the spaces that are otherwise hidden from Singapore’s public image. Khoo emphasises the ‘standard

¹¹ Stam, “Beyond”, p.33

¹² Ho, “Desiring”, p.183

¹³ Khoo, “Slang”, p.86

‘HDB shot’, which is ‘one static shot or pan upwards of the Housing Development Board (HDB) high-rise estates and then a quick cut inside’. These buildings are inhabited by low-income families and therefore hidden from Singapore’s public image, which has been curated to perpetuate an ‘official rhetoric of the nation’s economic successes’.¹⁴ This ‘HDB shot’ is seen in both *Ilo Ilo* and *Singapore Panda*, whose characters live in these complexes – thus situating them as from a lower class, or more accurately a class that is not embraced in political discourse. As Stam notes, a ‘common leitmotif’ in ‘hybrid bricolage aesthetics is... the strategic redemption of the low, the despised, the imperfect, and the “trashy” as part of a social overturning’.¹⁵ Though he is here referring to Latin American cinema, his findings are equally applicable to Sinophone cinema, in particular with regard to Khoo’s slang images.

Slang images are, however, placed in contention with censorship laws in Singapore. These laws contain the city state in a bubble of perceived safety, stability, and cleanliness, while the reality of the class divide, stemming from sentiments of loss, displacement and otherness, posits a national identity that is built on a crumbling foundation. Royston Tan’s internationally-acclaimed *15* (2003) delves into the underground world of Singapore’s gangster groups. The film is serious, tragic, violent – which is all the more affective with the knowledge that the characters are not actors, but playing themselves. Tan comments in an interview that one of the actors told him he ‘was threatened to be stripped and have cold water poured over him if he didn’t give the answers they [the police] wanted’¹⁶ – the film was heavily censored. Another filmmaker, Tan Pin Pin, similarly showcases this underground Singapore in her documentaries – in the ‘city of excellence’ Tan focuses her eye on the unheralded, the ignored and unproductive’.¹⁷ In *Singapore GaGa* (2005), she travels through

¹⁴ Khoo, “Slang”, p.88

¹⁵ Stam, “Beyond”, p.35

¹⁶ John Aglionby, “Police censor fly-on-wall tale of gang life”, *The Guardian*, (2004), <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/jan/05/film.filmcensorship>>

¹⁷ Jini Kim Watson, “Aspirational City”, *Interventions*, Vol.18 No.4, 2016, p.549

the city documenting the lower classes, buskers, hawker stall vendors, and in doing so captures an essence of the hybrid Singaporean identity that is marginalised by the government. Khoo explains that this style is not so much focused on language (as detailed above this is often divisive and posits one national language), but rather on voice – Tan’s filmmaking is ‘ventriloquial in this alternative sense, producing harmony out of various discordant voices by speaking on behalf of a Singapore that otherwise does not exist in official recordings’.¹⁸ *Singapore GaGa* was censored in Malaysia for being a ‘security threat’.¹⁹ Another one of her films focusing on Singaporeans in political exile, *To Singapore, With Love* (2013), was banned from being screened in Singapore by the Media Development Authority, for ‘undermin[ing] national security’.²⁰ As such, the notion of hybridity in Singapore is true inasmuch as language has been creolised and the space remains a cultural melting pot. However, official discourses maintain one elite hybrid image, relegating the remainder of Singapore’s society to a position of silence – literally.

The films discussed in this essay demonstrate Singaporean cinema’s attempt to negotiate harmony between sameness and difference, familiarity and foreignness, the nation and the self. The filmmakers show individuals internalising the government’s desire for one essentialised identity. Singapore is situated as a contact zone for people in transit, a hybridised home where the homeland’s ideologies can no longer be applied. *Singapore Panda* elicits the othering of the self through the main protagonist’s inability to accommodate modern China despite it being an intrinsic part of his identity. *Ilo Ilo* displays the othering of domestic workers and the displacement of the ideals of mother and home. Spaces continually

¹⁸ Olivia Khoo, “Singapore Sinophone, Nationalism: Sounds of Language in the Films of Tan Pin Pin”, *Sinophone Cinemas*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) p.86

¹⁹ “Singapore GaGa pulled from Malaysia event after film censored”, *Channel News Asia*, (2016), <<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/singapore-gaga-pulled-from-malaysia-event-after-film-censored-8208728>>

²⁰ Andrew Buncombe, “Have you heard about the film Singapore has banned its people from watching?” *The Independent*, (2014), <<https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/have-you-heard-about-the-film-singapore-has-banned-its-people-from-watching-well-you-have-now-9736530.html>>

shift in this small country that is always renovating, always striving to be more successful, and thus, from the post-colonial perspective, always prescribing the paradigm of Us versus Other: Us, the Singapore that is educated (speaks good English), modernised (Westernised), developed (affluent), and Other, the Singapore that is uneducated (speaks dialects or Singlish), old-fashioned (cannot keep up with renewed spaces) and under-developed (poor – living in HDB high-rises).

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