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Kuo Pao Kun's Zheng He Legend and Multicultural Encounters in Singapore

Rachel Leng*

This paper will examine Kuo Pao Kun's modern reiteration of the Zheng He theme in his 1995 Singaporean play titled *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral* 郑和的后代. The memory of Zheng He and his legacy rooted in an anomalous series of sea expeditions makes him unique in Chinese history and speaks to contemporary issues of multiculturalism, ethnic hybridity, and the geopolitics of migration and diaspora. Kuo reappropriates the Zheng He theme to re-present the eunuch admiral as an ancient paradigm of the modern multicultural man in an increasingly transnational world. Scholars have noted the way Kuo uses storytelling to prompt people in Singapore to show a greater willingness to live together as a multiethnic, multicultural, and multilingual nation. However, I argue that the play's text reveals more somber and personal undercurrents, where Kuo draws upon an intimate understanding of the classical Chinese Zheng He story to record shrewd observations and articulate concealed shafts of criticism about Singapore's bureaucracy, intermingled with philosophical reflections addressing contemporary Sinophone lived reality.

Keywords: Singaporean theater, Kuo Pao Kun, Zheng He, Sinophone, multiculturalism, multiethnic, migration, diaspora

Kuo Pao Kun's *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral* 郑和的后代 (1995) (hereafter *Descendants*) is a Singaporean play that provides intriguing perspectives on the impact of Zheng He's voyages to Southeast Asia and their relevance to the sociopolitical, cultural, and economic issues of an entrepot through a literary lens. By reappropriating the Zheng He theme, Kuo re-presents the eunuch admiral as the ancient paradigm of a modern multicultural man in an increasingly globalized and transnational world. Through storytelling, Kuo prompts people in Singapore to show a greater willingness to live together as a multiethnic, multicultural, and multireligious nation. Although recurring themes of plurality are sustained throughout the play, this paper argues that Kuo draws upon the Zheng He story to articulate disaffected critiques against the Singaporean bureaucracy and negotiate an ethnic Chinese Singaporean identity vis-à-vis Communist China in the 1990s.

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Kuo Pao Kun (郭宝崑, 1939–2002) is one of Singapore’s foremost cultural icons, renowned for his monumental contribution to Singaporean literature and theater. He wrote 24 bilingual and multilingual plays, translated 6, and directed 28.¹⁾ In the foreword to *Images at the Margins*, an anthology of his plays in English, Kuo describes unique multinational and cross-cultural life experiences as someone “permanently on the move” (Kuo 2000, 3).²⁾ Throughout his life works, one can ascertain Kuo’s sustained engagement with “invent[ing] vocabularies” to portray “images at the margin” and construct enlightening spaces located beyond the limits of racial, language, religious, and cultural segregation amidst environments marked by modernism, globalism, and capitalism (*ibid.*; Kwok 2003).

Kuo has won a unique position in the modern theater of Singapore not only for what he produced on stage, but also for what he practiced and advocated off stage for Singaporean society (Koh 2002; Quah 2005).³⁾ Krishen Jit comments that Kuo’s theater “is nothing if not purposefully persuasive about his social philosophy,” as Kuo himself saw “no sense in a theatre that is aesthetically exquisite but morally empty” (Jit 1990, 18). Indeed, Kuo consistently promoted the arts as a practice of “open culture” to celebrate the intermingling of cultures—both past and present, local and global—beyond the constraints of racial and linguistic origins (Kuo 1998; Devan 2000).

Descendants is unique in Kuo’s oeuvre as its focal theme draws upon a classical Chinese character to create a text riddled with cryptic historical references. To date, scholars and reviewers who have commented on the multilayered play point out its overt allusion to Zheng He’s maritime legacy in presenting the tensions between Chinese tradition and Sinophone⁴⁾ modernity; they emphasize the contemporary reappropriation

1) Kuo’s achievements as an artist have been recognized in Singapore and internationally: he received the Cultural Medallion in 1989, the ASEAN Cultural Award in 1993, the Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres from the government of France in 1996, and the Excellence for Singapore Award in 2002. A number of his plays, including *The Coffin Is Too Big for the Hole* (1985), *The Silly Little Girl and the Funny Old Tree* (1987), *Mama Looking for Her Cat* (1988), and *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral* (1995) have been pioneering works on Singapore’s art scene.

2) He was born in a poor village in Hebei and spent his youth in Beijing, Hong Kong, and Singapore before moving to Australia for university and then back to Singapore.

3) For example, *Mama Looking for Her Cat* (1988) pioneered the concept of multilingual theater as a means to represent the complex multiracial and multicultural Singaporean experience, investigating Singapore’s compartmentalization of diverse racial communities brought about by the government’s language policies (Chan 2003; Quah 2004).

4) The concept of Sinophone studies was coined by Shu-mei Shih in 2004 to describe “Sinitic-language cultures and communities on the margins of China and Chineseness” (2004, 25). The Sinophone as a field of inquiry provides an alternative to the paradigm of China-centered national literary studies, allowing for the plurality of cultural identities, ethnicities, and linguistic practices of Sinitic-language communities globally, particularly those arising from colonial and postcolonial influences.

of Zheng He to evoke themes of harmonious multiculturalism and Kuo's notion of an "open culture" in Southeast Asia, especially Singapore. However, more somber and personal undercurrents saturate the play; Kuo draws upon an intimate understanding of the classical Zheng He story to record shrewd observations and criticisms about the Singaporean bureaucracy, intermingled with philosophical reflections addressing geopolitical dimensions of contemporary Sinophone lived reality.

The Grand Eunuch as Modern Expatriate in Southeast Asia's Entrepot

A common starting point for discussion of Zheng He's influence in contemporary Chinese studies begins with the revival of the maritime theme with Liang Qichao (梁启超) and Sun Yat-Sen (孙中山) in the early twentieth century. Both men commented on the early Ming voyages in the context of tumultuous periods in modern Chinese history, marked by decay and imperialistic foreign aggression against China (Low 2005; Ptak 2007). In the perspectives of these two men, Zheng He was held in high esteem as a national hero, representing China's more prosperous times when the country stood out as a leading world power, enjoying peace and material wealth. Liang Qichao, in particular, became very interested in early Ming politics and saw in Zheng He's tale an exemplar of reviving the image of China as a wealthy nation in its golden age of exploration and international diplomacy. Subsequently, many "Zheng He Studies" research institutes have been set up in Nanjing and other places in China, publishing Chinese journals that commemorate the Grand Eunuch.

Zheng He's career at sea was a curious episode in Chinese history: his expeditions signify Ming China's attempt to project its power by sea over a great distance, where China as an imperial power had previously focused only on land-based and continental exploits. Indeed, scholars have pointed out that even in world history, there is no prior example of power projection by sea comparable in distance, scope, and duration to Zheng He and his fleet, as even the later European colonial empires were sustained by fleets composed of smaller and fewer ships (Chang 1976; Hsu 1988; Church 2004; Dreyer 2007). The most detailed outline of Zheng He's life is provided in a bibliographic note in Volume 304 of the *Mingshi* 明史 (Zhong *et al.* 1990; Dreyer 2007). However, firsthand accounts of his voyages were written by some of his followers, including Ma Huan's (马欢) *Fascinating Scenes of Foreign Lands* 瀛涯胜览 (1451), Fei Xin's (费信) *Enchanting Sights of Astro-Navigation* 星槎胜览 (1436), and Gong Zhen's (巩珍) *Record of Barbarian States in the Western Ocean* 西洋番国志 (1434). Modern scholars have conducted studies on Zheng He and his deeds based on these primary materials, but the man's background remains

inconclusive (Hsu 1988; Chee 2003; Cheng 2008).

Drawing upon the historical Zheng He figure, *Descendants* resonates with parallels to Kuo's own changing personal and psychological stance toward an ancestral Chinese cultural and literary tradition. Two key and interrelated subjects addressed in Kuo Pao Kun's *Descendants* are hybridity and expatriatism, along with a moral jousting with an excessively rationalistic bureaucracy and its pragmatic pursuit of capitalism. The play is divided into 16 scenes narrating the official history and speculating upon unofficial anecdotes about Zheng He's autobiography and personal experiences. From the beginning, themes of solitude, mobility, haunting dreams, and uncertain origins are emphasized. The contemporary Sinophone narrator begins with the statement that "dreaming has become the centre of [his] life," but although these dreams make him feel "alone, painfully alone, and floating away," the loneliness is "promising" as it allows him to "[dive] deeper and deeper into the stark loneliness of [him]self" to come to the discovery that he was "so closely related that [he] had to be a descendant of the eunuch admiral" (Kuo 1995c, 38).⁵ The link between a diasporic Chinese figure from the past and the contemporary Sinophone subject is emphasized as both concept and practice. Throughout the play, waves of images focusing on the "vast, seemingly endless" potential of the ocean and the liminal position of Zheng He "in the limbo between departing and arriving, between being a man and a non-man" presents displacement and wandering as productive for the "dreaming, hoping, searching, struggling" of an uprooted person (*ibid.*, 49, 68).

In commenting on *Descendants*, scholars have highlighted Kuo's cultural orphan mentality, which the playwright has conceptualized as a "condition of marginality" where one is unable to "return to [. . .] cultural parentages" or "be at home in the past" (*ibid.*, 16). Consequently, cultural orphans "can only grope for a way forward, to make his or her spiritual home in the midst of loss and alienation" and are compelled to accept multiple lines of parentage so as to "counter the cultural impurities already infused in [their] blood" (*ibid.*). As an alternative foundation for a common local identity and culture, Kuo suggests that cultural development "should be de-linked from the racial and linguistic origin of the individual" to build upon a generative practice based on structures of multiculturalism and racial diversity beyond the constraints of state governance (Kuo 1998, 60).

The narrator of *Descendants* ponders Zheng He's seven voyages across the Western Ocean during the early fifteenth century in comparison to the present-day experience of global mobility: "Maybe he was feeling what we would be thinking when we travel out

5) Page numbers cited from *Two Plays by Kuo Pao Kun* (2003) edited by C. J. W.-L. Wee and Lee Chee Keng.

of the country. In a state of limbo, but free from constraints and controls” (Kuo 1995c, 52). In this way, Zheng He is appropriated as an ancient example of the modern cultural orphan—a “nameless, sexless, rootless, homeless” figure who has to live a “rootless wanderer’s” life (*ibid.*, 56, 68). The eunuch admiral is believed to have been a prominent Muslim in Confucian high society, a Hui minority loyal steward in the Han-dominated imperial palace, and the primeval example of an overseas expatriate. Yet, Kuo’s play reveals how the “600-year old legend of a molested and incarcerated man” remains “a humble alien, a wandering slave, a worthless servant to all and sundry” (*ibid.*, 1, 9).

As a “faithful servant of the Ming Emperor and an imperial emissary to blaze a trail of glory for the Middle Kingdom,” the Grand Director was an expatriate, forced to create his own indefinable domiciliary zone, a home “across the ocean, on the seas” (*ibid.*, 60, 66). The play dramatizes the way Zheng He comprehended his own liminality:

To keep my head
 I must accept losing my tail
 To keep my faith
 I must learn to worship others’ gods
 To please my lord
 I must eliminate his enemy
 To serve his pleasure
 I must purge my own
 Allah knows my bitterness
 Buddha has mercy upon my soul
 Sea Goddess protects my fleet
 Voyages to the West fulfil my life
 Alone, I can stand up to any man
 Freed, I can scale any height
 “Cleansed,” I cling to but one thought
 My master’s will is my survival. (*ibid.*, 54)

Zheng He’s soliloquy highlights the currency of his marginality in the multiple spheres of ethnicity, gender, and religion as one making him “a loyal creature,” “highly marketable” and capable of assimilating distinct cultural environments (*ibid.*, 58). By invoking the blessings of Allah, Buddha, and the Sea Goddess, Zheng He exhibits a tripartite state of being in which he is able to turn the physical violence of being “cleansed”—i.e., castrated—to reinvent his identity and “survival,” one where he would “seep into the lives of so many people in so many places, through so many ways over so long a time . . .” (*ibid.*, 54, 60).

Framed in the context of a dream, *Descendants* exposes that, unlike Zheng He, the contemporary man seems not to have woken up to the productivity of his own liminal

state as a space of encounters, transcendence, and reflection. Instead, modern individuals are castrated by the pursuit of pragmatic economic gain and postcolonial capitalism that has led to the fragmentation of multicultural exchange. After Singapore's independence in 1965, the decolonization process posed significant challenges for the nation in harmonizing its conglomeration of ethnic cultures (including Malay, Chinese, and Indian Singaporeans) intermingled with the remnants of British colonial culture. The People's Action Party (PAP) led by Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew subsequently sought to construct a common identity uniting Singapore's multiethnic population (Bedlington 1978; Peterson 2001). In 1979 the government promulgated public policy that imposed English as the *lingua franca* and "first language" of Singapore, believing that a common language would allow people to communicate with relatively little conflict (Shepherd 2005). By transforming Singapore into a global village, the government aimed to promote international trade and develop science and technology (Bedlington 1978; Ganguly 2003).

Kuo, while recognizing the real gain in national wealth and the importance of overcoming language barriers for cross-cultural communication, lamented that privileging English formally marginalized all other languages. As he remarked: English as "the national first language relegat[es] all ethnic ones to second language status [. . .]. Has any other majority population ever committed such an extraordinary act of voluntary uprooting, preferring to its own language (a major world language) one which its former colonizer forced upon it?" (Kuo 1996, 168). In Kuo's view, it was incomprehensible that Singapore, as a multiracial and multicultural city-state inhabited by a majority population of Chinese (75 percent), with substantial Malay (14 percent) and Indian (10 percent) communities, would reproduce the colonial mentality after independence and display "a lack of self-reflexive, post-colonial consciousness" (Ganguly 2003; Quah 2006, 91; DSS 2013).

For the Chinese Singaporean community, the official appointment of Mandarin as a mother tongue was doubly limiting: the policy demoted Mandarin to the status of a second language and also discouraged other Sinitic dialects (Xu *et al.* 1998). This denied Chinese Singaporeans an important link to their ancestral heritage accessed through provincial dialects (Pan 1990; Xu *et al.* 1998; Rappa and Wee 2006). As such, the Singapore government's ethnic management policy to maintain racial harmony fundamentally divided cultural groups, leading to gulfs of interracial ignorance and indifference (Kwok 1998; Teng 2000; Tan 2013). Although the language policy successfully fostered racial peace, it restricted the development of cross-cultural exchange, impeding the emergence of a unified local identity (Rappa and Wee 2006; Gopinathan 2013). In *Descendants*, the amputating effect of a homogenous language policy is likened to the eunuch admiral's fate of being "cut and dried, plugged and exiled," wandering with a shriveled sense of self

(Kuo 1995c, 66). Yet, being an “orphan, wanderer, eunuch, admiral,” Zheng He not only reminds contemporary Singaporeans of the importance of being aware of one’s culture while assimilating others, but also prompts people to take advantage of their modern mobility and cultural liminality to fully appreciate the way “every land and sky and water is home” (*ibid.*).

Kuo’s critique of the Singaporean government’s approach to nation-building speaks to Ernest Renan’s canonical text on civic nationalism. Renan’s central argument proposes that the nation is a conglomerate of people who share a common past and have derived a strong bond anchored in an agreement to live together and be governed by mutual consent. He elaborates that it is neither race, language, religion, nor geography that creates a nation, but rather the “powerful link between men” that creates a “community of interest”: if people are willing to consolidate their past and perpetuate their unity to be governed together by consent, then they are a nation (Renan 1882, 204–205). The richness of creating such a nation through the transcendence of multiple physical and psychological frontiers is suggested in *Descendants* through the market exchange scene and the final pithy message “Departing is my arriving/Wandering is my residence” (Kuo 1995c, 66).

Descendants draws explicit parallels between the history of Zheng He and the modern Sinophone Singaporean to dramatize the tensions between service to the state, individuality, and capitalism. As Kuo notes in the 1995 performance program:

I am beginning to feel that affluence has produced enough frustration to make wondering an increasingly inevitable impulse. Zheng He is especially inspiring to Singaporeans on many levels and [. . .] dimensions. As a minority Chinese ethnically, religiously, culturally, and as a eunuch rising to the pinnacle of power and achievement, Zheng He mirrors [Singapore’s] existence in many ways. (*ibid.*, 1)

Being a major entrepot port of Southeast Asia, Singapore has been undeniably “rising to the pinnacle of power and achievement” as a global city-state representing bountiful trade and a burgeoning economy amidst a melting pot of multiple cultural, religious, and ethnic groups. Along these lines, the markets in *Descendants* are presented as spaces of prelapsarian capitalism and cosmopolitan contact zones for exchange of the carnivalesque (Wee 2004; Tan 2013). The marketplace becomes a site of active interaction for “a flotilla of people and goods” in an expansive Asian globalism (Pratt 1992; Kuo 1995c, 59). These contact zones are sites of transnationalism beyond “a simple homogenous idea of national culture within national boundaries policed by the nation-state” (Dirlik 2004, 15).

On the basis of a “great trading festival” facilitating the exchange of commodities such as metal, seeds, fabrics, and feathers, the marketplace then transforms into a car-

nivalesque space that embraces and celebrates cultural interactions of diverse forms and origins. The whole process involves competition, negotiation, and integration between global forces and local markets (Pratt 1992; Wee 2004). More than a mere display of distinct cultural features, all sorts of people gather at these markets, and there is “a show of mutual respect between the Muslims, the Hindus, and the Buddhists” that reveals the active and generative commingling of cultures in contact (Kuo 1995c, 59; Tan 2013). Such a festive space certainly invokes Mikhail Bahktin’s notion of the carnivalesque as a “celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order,” marking “the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions” with an “atmosphere of freedom, frankness, and familiarity” (Bahktin 1984, 153, 195).

It is intriguing that with these scenes of the marketplace, Kuo compares the Ming Dynasty and modern-day Singapore as going through similar modernizing processes in different eras: both experience periods of wealth and prosperity, where social life is marked by markets and a burgeoning consumerist culture. The portrayal of trading markets focuses on economic aspects that defined the Ming Dynasty and corresponds to Singapore’s own trajectory of recent economic development. Although foreign objects circulated widely during the Ming, Chinese people regarded them as fascinating but ultimately useless. This sentiment comes through in *Descendants*, where foreign objects—including “bulls that charge not at red but anything that is blue in color,” “acrobatic goats with green fleece,” and “dancing chickens as tiny and exquisite as pearls”—do not serve any functional purpose (Kuo 1995c, 59–60). Additionally, in Scene 11, the narrator provides a vivid description of polar bears “playfully amusing themselves in the imperial garden lake now richly covered with ice” (*ibid.*, 55). These polar bears reveal the way foreign animals are perceived as mere foreign spectacles. Kuo throws skepticism upon the lasting impact of markets to sustain cultural interaction and diversity, suggesting the need to turn to noncommercial engagements to achieve multicultural understanding.

Geopolitics of Cultural Identity and Self-Castration

When commenting on his inspiration for *Descendants*, Kuo explains that as he wrote the play, “a much darker and spiritually disturbing aspect of Grand Eunuch Zheng He began to grip and sting the deeper recesses of [his] being: His castration” (quoted in Tan 2013, 230). The narrator’s preoccupation with the experience of castration as such and his inexplicable fear of being castrated—“a removal of his manhood,” his *baobei*—is unnerving

for a play that concerns itself with the descendants of a castrated man. But what does it mean for the Grand Director of the Three Treasures to be permanently deprived of his “treasure,” to have his penis “cut, fried, and dried” and placed in a box to legitimize his status in the Imperial Palace’s eunuch service (Kuo 1995c, 40)? Kuo describes in detail how eunuchs had to show their *baobeis* as “their single most important document or article of qualification,” turning a commentary on the Ming Dynasty eunuch organizational structure into a critique of the modern world’s capitalist networks and commercial companies, stating that both organizations are “a network of pricks” (*ibid.*, 41).

The theme of castration is sustained throughout the play and is evocative of the symbolically castrated contemporary Sinophone subject. In Scene 5, the narrator initially imagines himself as a young boy, nicknamed “Doggie,” who made the life decision to become a eunuch and describes the discomfiting experience of being castrated by his father (*ibid.*, 44–45). This scene reveals that Kuo was aware that many men voluntarily submitted themselves to the literal and symbolic castration necessary for service in the imperial palace. In contrast to the voluntary eunuch, the narrator asserts that Zheng He did not have a choice: “He was summarily cut and cleansed by his masters when he was barely a teenager—because there was a need, a huge need for eunuchs. You see, eunuchs seem to have started fulfilling a very important aristocratic need since many thousands of years ago,” ranging from mundane bedside tasks to leading empire-building projects (*ibid.*, 45). Despite Zheng He’s castration, his voyages to foreign realms provided him with defining moments of transcendence.

The allegory of the castrated man is both a critique and a reminder for Singaporeans to appropriate their mobility and in-betweenness as contemporary subjects (Quah 2004). Kuo cautions that we should not be complacent that the days of eunuchs “are long gone with the demise of the imperial age. Indeed, castration has been recreated by modern man, and that castration is not always inflicted by others; there is now a modern version called self-castration which can be, and has been, effected simply by people permissively heaping affluence and comfort upon themselves” (Kuo 1996, quoted in Quah and Wee 2008, 229). The severed penis, a fundamental part of the male body for fertility and reproduction, is likened to the cultural sensitivity of the contemporary Sinophone individual. It is described as “a piece of something” that has been “deep-fried in oil to keep it dry and antiseptic” that a person has to sacrifice to “attain wealth and status” (*ibid.*, 45). The narrative here reflects criticisms of Singapore’s arts scene as a “cultural desert” during the 1990s, reproaching the modern Sinophone person for sacrificing their cultural identity and self-castrating artistic development in the myopic pursuit of material success (Wee 2003). Although the contemporary individual may have been unwillingly or unwittingly subjected to such forms of self-castration, the circumscribed reality of castration,

deracination, and entrapment by service to the state will remain as long as the pursuit of pragmatic economic gains continues to fragment local spheres (Koh 1989; Woon and Teo 2002).

As much as the play might have celebrated the appearance of harmonious multiracial relations, there is a much darker aspect of the Grand Eunuch Zheng He that reflects Kuo's personal narrative on the Singaporean experience. It is worth highlighting that the division of roles between author, narrator, and actor is blurred in the play, hinting that Kuo might have conceived of Zheng He as a sort of alter ego. At several points in the play, the narrator conveys suspicion about the glorious and unmarred story of Zheng He, his voyages, and the multicultural productivity of markets vis-à-vis foreign encounters. In Scene 9, the narrator explicitly addresses the intentions and actual history of Zheng He, whom he states everyone knows as "the cleanest and the most respectable" of all famous eunuchs (Kuo 1995b, 51). Yet, he questions: "Had he really done nothing evil or untoward as a trusted lieutenant of a powerful Emperor well-known for his cruel and scheming nature? [. . .] Was he more than the eunuch that we have generally imagined him to be, or less than the hero which the historians and legends have portrayed him to be?" (*ibid.*, 51–52).

What, then, is the purpose of Kuo making elusive references to tensions between eunuchs and civil officials, and how would such details be relevant to a contemporary Singaporean audience? The release of the play in 1995 is significant: in 1976, Kuo and his wife were interned without trial for allegedly being members of the Malayan People's Liberation League and "propagat[ing] leftist dance and drama" (*Straits Times* 1976, 30; Wee 2004, 775). Prior to Kuo's detainment, his radical theater practices overtly critiqued the displacement and exploitation that resulted from the Singaporean bureaucracy's blinkered focus on rapid modernization, with titles such as *Hey, Wake Up* 喂, 醒醒! (1968), *The Struggle* 挣扎 (1969), and *Growing Up* 成长 (1973).⁶ The PAP government released Kuo in October 1980 but did not reinstate his revoked citizenship until 1992—and then only after application (Wee and Lee 2003).

After four years and seven months in detention, Kuo moved away from a single-minded belief in drama as a means to reform society to a more complex understanding of art's relation to society as he continued experimenting with multilingual theater (Devan 2000). He described the detention as "a moment of humbleness" and "a very sobering experience—you get cut down, you know that you don't know enough" (Lo 1993, 138–139). *Descendants* was the only monodrama that Kuo himself wrote in both Chinese and

6) Notably, *The Struggle* (1969) was banned by the authorities as it overtly dramatized Singapore's social turmoil resulting from rapid urban reconstruction and inflow of multinational investment (Yu 2007).

English after being reinstated as a Singaporean citizen. The play's expressionism was a turn away from his previous works, which were more straightforward and culturally accessible staged dramas; as Lin Ke Huan comments, Kuo's earlier plays were "a little too eager in his social engagement. They were all like a tactless petition against social injustice and lacked the composure and cool detachment of a mature artist with the ability to rise above and transcend his material for the purpose of artistic creation" (Lin 2003, 140). Thus, Kuo's change in theatrical direction and narrative technique during the mid-1980s reflects a renewed questioning of reality, history, and social concerns (*ibid.*). On a practical level, the turn to expressionism also served to engage a wider multiracial Singaporean audience (Krishnan 1997; Koh 1998; Lo 2004).

The 1990s in Singapore corresponds with significant shifts in literary and cultural production, when racial and ethnic themes became an important aspect of the popularization of Singaporean literary production (Krishnan 1997; Peterson 2001). Beginning in the 1980s, against the backdrop of the dominance of the English language, the government also intensified its "Speak Mandarin" campaign (Ong 1991; Kwok *et al.* 2002). This campaign coincided with a "Confucianist" discourse of development that valorized a certain definition of "Chinese-ness" and Sinitic values as the foundation of Singaporean culture (Tu 1991; 1996; Wee and Lee 2003; Kim 2014).⁷

At the same time, the Singapore government also began plans to turn the nation into an international center of the arts by promoting an industry of aesthetic production (Nathan 1999). Although significant funds were provided by the Ministry of Information and the Arts for literary and dramatic productions, such activities pressured artists to commercialize their work to appeal to mass audiences for state sponsorship (Wong 2001). This move inevitably linked cultural production to state ideology, where literature and drama were incorporated in the government project of hegemonizing state ideology (Koh 1980; 1989; Wong 2001).⁸ The Singapore National Pledge of building a culturally open society "regardless of race, language or religion" seemed to be a rapidly fading vision

7) As a result of this discourse, literary texts were studied in school alongside colonial texts, producing a generation of young Singaporean consumers of local fiction. This radically altered the Singaporean arts audience, which now consisted of younger but less well-educated people perusing literary works for entertainment rather than enlightenment (Koh 1980; Holden 2000; Kwok *et al.* 2002).

8) Koh Tai Ann's work on cultural development in Singapore argues that the state's promotion of cultural activity is linked to the political agenda of developing national solidarity and shaping national culture so that both ethnic communalism and "over-Westernization" are contained (1980; 1989, 717–718). The government's ideological commitment to multiculturalism and a "democratic spirit that eclectically combines a socialist spirit with capitalism practices" means that cultural values and development are consistently, even insistently, linked to economic development and productivity (Koh 1989, 720; Wong 2001).

(Ong 1991; Wee and Lee 2003).⁹⁾

The discourse of the castrated man and intellectual exile sustained throughout Kuo's *Descendants* likely has personal significance. Although the author-narrator-actor attempts to speak out on behalf of contemporary society about issues of multiculturalism and the dangers of pragmatic capitalism, as a creative work the play reads more like an author's spiritual journey of self-doubt, self-debate, and self-actualization. The journey of the narrator from anxiety to acceptance and respect toward his roots—or lack thereof—is punctuated with satirical humor and absurd scenarios. As a Sinophone Singaporean artist always speaking from the margins and from a unique expatriate experience, Kuo may have found a foil in Zheng He as the fundamental paradigm of a hybrid and diasporic existence. The antithesis of purity, Zheng He is a man of (post)modern transnational times, yet also its opposite as a premodern legendary character. In Kuo's perspective, Singaporean society is one made up of “a body and history of uprooted peoples from different cultures, countries and races, living together, searching and struggling for something” (Kuo 1996, 172). Hence, Zheng He's emasculated, fragmented, and exilic Hui Muslim Chinese life—as fractured as the contemporary Sinophone Singaporean's cultural experience—fittingly comes through in *Descendants* as disjointed images.

The Modern Zheng He Figure

By positioning himself in the artistic role of a modern Sinophone eunuch, Kuo seeks to confront and overcome obstacles in his work put up by red tape and a mechanistic bureaucracy. Through this trying process, he gains a renewed respect for tradition, a newly gained perspective that leads him to a poignant recognition of his humanity, echoed in the concluding statement that “the eunuch admiral seemed never to have given up hope of finding an alternate life” (Kuo 1995a, 66). Kuo Pao Kun's appropriation of *Xiyang ji*

9) The public reception of literary texts was profoundly shaped and directed by the deep penetration of state ideological apparatuses. In 1994 Catherine Lim, a popular Singaporean author, wrote a social commentary on “The PAP and the People: A Great Affective Divide” published by *The Straits Times*. The article criticized the ruling party's political agenda as one based on “logic, precision, meticulous analysis and hard-nosed calculation and quantification. Their style is impersonal, brisk, business-like, no-nonsense, pre-emptive” (Lim 1994, 16). This provoked an aggressive response from then Prime Minister Goh, who asserted that the authority of the prime minister should not be undermined by “writers on the fringe,” singling out writers in general as a peripheral class, whose activity of cultural production was to be nonpolitical. He articulates that the arena of the cultural should be “sanctuaries” from the political fray, and that only politicians had the right to represent the nation. Hence, the Singaporean artist is forced to shrink from sociopolitical work (Lim 1995; Tay 2011).

and the Eunuch Admiral Zhen He's legacy in writing his Singaporean play therefore dramatizes an individual who holds on to a Chinese identity even while engaging with immersive multiraciality. The play engages the audience in what the narrator himself indicates as "dreaming all by [him]self" so as to be "able to look at [him]self, look inside [him]self, and look through [himself]" and into an encounter with the unfathomable depths of life together (*ibid.*, 38). Kuo sets up a dialogical relationship with the pre-modern tale in *Descendants*, responding to and negotiating with the classical tradition. Put another way, cultural and ethnic castration can serve as an impetus for producing new cultural identities that are drawn from a multitude of parental sources to develop an "open culture" that can extend beyond the shores of the city-state. However, in the end, *Descendants* seems to tell us that cultural identity and history are hard to extricate from the economic and political realms—even Zheng He ultimately heeds the call of the markets (*ibid.*, 67). Any person who is implicated in serving the state and the global markets must face the challenge of transcending the literal and symbolic violence done to the cultural sphere and aspire to flexible identities (Sim 2002; Wee and Lee 2003).

The theme of (self-)castration, read as a symptom, takes up the parameters of moral imperatives and reveals the inability and/or unwillingness of Singaporean Chinese writers to locate their ethnic identity in the flux of contemporary life. The severed and boxed-up penis that was once an essential part of a young man's body allegorizes the troping of a fundamental Chinese cultural identity as the "past" of Singapore—a reminder of the past within the present, as something that has been cut and dried, rendered anti-septic and dead. *Descendants* represents Kuo Pao Kun's yearning for a creative open culture and productive multiculturalism, but also directs an embittered critique at Singapore's bureaucracy and cultural policies in hegemonizing a multiethnic society and marginalizing artistic creation. Although castrated, the Grand Eunuch's corporeal non-productivity has been translated into textual and cultural Sinophone re-productivity as his legacy continues to sail on in the imaginations of many people. Artistic and cultural development is put forward not merely as an attempt to recapture a premodern past, but instead as a productive means to imagine a present moment of the past, and for proposing new directions toward a modernized and multiethnic Singaporean society.

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