

## Overseas Singaporeans and Their Uses

### *Population Aesthetics and Territorial Productions of Singapore's Global Asia Imaginary*

Singapore's transformation into a global and cosmopolitan site has entailed a refashioning of the diaspora as a desirable and important population for the nation. A key form that emerged to represent and aestheticize Overseas Singaporeans as Global Asia's main protagonists, typically highly professionalized and anglophone subjects, is what I describe as the demographic compilation: a middlebrow collection of journalistic writing that depicts a population. Rather than describe a discrete, standalone form, "collection" here is used loosely to mark a unity among short pieces. Frequently though not always nonfiction, demographic compilations draw on the anthological form by portraying a certain population through a compilation of short pieces, often first-person accounts and sometimes short biographies. Unlike other terms that name human collectives (i.e., communities, multitudes), "demographics" is not based in a sense of belonging, kinship, or political commitment. Instead, it is based on recurring characteristics within a population and uses an organizing principle that recalls the administrative logics of colonialism and biopolitical governance.<sup>1</sup> The bulk of demographic compilations begin to emerge in Singapore around the turn of the twenty-first century, often as popular, ephemeral institutional texts. This was especially the case during "SG50," when the state and other institutions published demographic compilations to commemorate Singapore's fiftieth year of independence in 2015. Demographic compilations also appear as features in periodicals and as standalone trade books.<sup>2</sup> Some popular demographic compilations also perform the anthological impulse of presenting the "best of" or "most influential" of their demographic (e.g., *The Naysayer's Book Club*). Demographic compilations, however, tend not to foreground the editor's curation function through rank or cataloging logics because its rhetorical aim is to establish a demographic.

That a population like Overseas Singaporeans is aestheticized in service of a state's socioeconomic project is somewhat counterintuitive considering that populations are typically the grammar of administration and discipline rather than the site through which to cultivate ideology or values. Partha Chatterjee writes:

Citizens inhabit the domain of theory, populations the domain of policy. Unlike the concept of citizen, the concept of population is wholly descriptive and empirical, it does not carry a normative burden. Populations are identifiable, classifiable, and describable by behavioral criteria and are amenable to statistical techniques such as censuses and sample surveys.<sup>3</sup>

Certainly, the administrative view of Overseas Singaporeans can be traced to a colonial inheritance of racialized, demographic logic that continues to shape governmental policy.<sup>4</sup> Though the "Overseas Singaporean" is not an overtly racialized category in the same way that the "Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others (CMIO)" label is, distinguishing Overseas Singaporeans as a population follows the colonial model of "differentiating between migrant groups."<sup>5</sup> Populations are not simply the stuff of colonial administration; they are also pertinent under the postcolonial governance of Global Asia. Aihwa Ong has observed the ways that populations in Singapore enable a system-level approach to neoliberalized governance: "Niches or nations of stabilized populations are drawn into flows; varied populations thus brought into interaction produce a baroque ensemble of diverse qualities."<sup>6</sup> Compared to the disciplinary control and statistical techniques of colonial-era or early postcolonial nationhood that approached governance with the fine-tooth comb of censuses, however, biopolitical governance is less interested in control through enumeration than in cultivating conditions so that various populations perform and produce certain outcomes.

Although the concept of populations is relevant under colonial and postcolonial governance, it has not figured significantly in aesthetic questions of how the nation is imagined. The population aesthetic in demographic compilations is a notable departure from the use of what Benedict Anderson described as the "national hero,"<sup>7</sup> the singular, exceptional protagonist in nationalist narratives. It follows that the Overseas Singaporeans' instrumentalist function in the demographic compilations in fashioning the national imagination complicates the idea of the national hero. Despite appearing as a deeply characterological genre, I argue that demographic compilations perform their ideological work through setting. This centering of setting stands in contrast to texts such as Lee Kuan Yew's *The Singapore Story*, where "character is crucial," as Philip Holden puts it.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, because populations are so conceptually attached to governance, we tend to forget that they have, as Emily Steinlight writes, "aesthetic force and narrative consequence."<sup>9</sup> Such forgetting is not helped, in this case, by the fact that state-produced texts such as the ones I examine here and in the book more broadly are typically read as transparently ideological rather than imaginative.

Later work of Anderson's "modern imagin[ing] of collectivity" in forms of "unbound seriality" and "bound seriality" offers some important critical terms through which to clarify how such ideologically straightforward texts can still do imaginative work.<sup>10</sup> Building on his work in *Imagined Communities*, Anderson explains in *The Spectre of Comparisons* that unbound seriality is typified by the newspaper while bound seriality is typified by the census.<sup>11</sup> Whereas Anderson's earlier *Imagined Communities* tends to be known for its discussion of how print capitalism acts as a mediating force for national imaginings, he gestures in this later work toward the aesthetic force to which Steinlight refers, insofar as seriality is an issue of arrangement and thus form. Further explicating the implications of these different styles of imagined collectivity, Chatterjee writes, "[Unbound seriality] afford[s] the opportunity for individuals to imagine themselves as members of larger than face-to-face solidarities, of choosing to act on behalf of those solidarities, of transcending by an act of political imagination the limits imposed by traditional practices. Unbound serialities are potentially liberating."<sup>12</sup> Bound serialities, on the other hand, "are constricting and perhaps inherently conflictual. They produce the tools of ethnic politics."<sup>13</sup> Bound serialities, in other words, perform the work of social control. State-produced demographic compilations, such as the "Singaporean Abroad" series under discussion in this chapter, operate at the nexus of bound and unbound serialities.

The assumptions underlying the (national) imaginary possibilities and limitations of serialities point us to a formal problem of character in demographic compilations, a problem articulated by the distinction of round and flat characters. Because it functions as an instrument of disciplinary power and control, the bound seriality of the census removes the full complexity of its citizens, reducing its subjects to empirical description, as Chatterjee puts it, which flattens them into simple, unchanging, and indistinct characters. Indeed, populations are often represented as faceless crowds and masses, reflecting the scale of perception that accompanies biopolitical logic. Presumably, it is easier "to make live and to let die," as Foucault puts it, or to treat populations as part of a greater economic calculus than if they were to each be identified as an individual, that paradigmatic Enlightenment figure of the rational, modern subject.<sup>14</sup> Representing collectives as indistinct populations—a crowd, a horde, a mob, a mass, or a caravan—has long been a dehumanizing aesthetic strategy.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, in the context of nationalist narratives and Holden's point that "character is crucial," flatness would hardly seem a desirable quality or one particularly amenable to cultivating deep attachments to the nation. Nonetheless, as I argue through my readings below, flatness can generate national imaginaries. The population aesthetic of these texts expands Singapore's Global Asia imaginary and in doing so illustrates how populations function as a conduit for ideological power and not simply as a classificatory instrument for discipline and policy. The logic of populations, in other words, is not simply the administrative grammar of biopolitics, but, as Robert Mitchell argues,

“the enabling frame for intense experience of hope and fear; fundamental judgments concerning what is beautiful and ugly, sublime and mundane; and our intuitive sense of how individuals are to relate to collectives.”<sup>16</sup> If interiority is the aesthetic emphasis of postcolonial developmentalism, seriality emerges as the aesthetic emphasis of Global Asia.

After providing an overview of the ways that diasporic Singaporeans have historically been regarded both as a problem and as a solution for the national project, I track in this chapter the ways that population aesthetics negotiate the politics of the non-Singapore world and work in service of claims to Global Asia. Two of these claims are made in locally circulated demographic compilations: “Singaporean Abroad,” a feature in the state-controlled *Straits Times* newspaper, and “50 Red Dots Around the World,” a commemorative issue of *be movement* magazine on the occasion of Singapore’s fiftieth year of independence. Both compilations feature Overseas Singaporeans in a far-flung and sometimes unexpected corner of the world, though they do so to very different ideological ends. As a cultural complement to the state’s biopolitical governance and Global Asia agenda, “Singaporean Abroad” rehabilitates Overseas Singaporeans from being a problematic population for the nation and uses them instead to transform the territorial basis of the national imagination. In contrast, “50 Red Dots” critiques and ostensibly rejects the state’s instrumentalization of Overseas Singaporeans for its Global Asia project. Ironically, such critique is made possible by the magazine’s Japanese benefactor, the Japanese Chamber of Commerce and Industry. However, the magazine issue still embraces and operates within the logics of postcolonial capitalism. This example demonstrates how forms of what Weihsin Gui describes as “critical nationality” can still function within the terms of postcolonial capitalism.<sup>17</sup>

The chapter closes with a discussion of two short stories from Jeremy Tiang’s collection, *It Never Rains on National Day* (2015), which features characters that perform exactly the kind of Overseas Singaporean ethos that the state seeks to develop among its citizenry. With its short-form narrative representations of Overseas Singaporeans, *It Never Rains* falls within the generic ambit of the demographic compilation. Like the others under discussion in this chapter, *It Never Rains* is a text that features Overseas Singaporeans in various locations around the world and is aimed at a Singaporean audience—even though Tiang is based in the United States, he published his collection with Epigram Books, a local press in Singapore. Loosely connected by repeated characters, the stories feature a number of different kinds of Singaporeans, such as a civil servant, a teacher, a writer, and an interracial couple, and the stories are set both in Singapore and abroad (e.g., in Zurich, New York, and Beijing). As I show, the story “Sophia’s Honey-moon” critiques the demographic compilation’s tendency to center on the climax of a capitalist success plot. Moreover, Tiang’s stories call attention to the limits of the Overseas Singaporean’s cosmopolitanism to overcome coloniality and to the

Eurocentric limits of readers who may interpret Global Asia's anglophone legibility as evidence of Westernized global capitalism.

### COSMOPOLITANISM AND STATE ANXIETY

Since independence, the Singaporean state's relationship with cosmopolitanism has been an ambivalent one. While the speech by Goh Chok Tong discussed in the introduction makes clear that Singaporeans who have left the nation are regarded as a problematic population by the state, his incendiary remarks were not entirely consistent with how the state has strategically invoked Singapore's long history as a port city with cosmopolitan subjects. As the historian Justin Tyler Clark writes, "In the late 1960s and 1970s, PAP leaders had already invoked the concept of cosmopolitanism as less a project than an existing tradition."<sup>18</sup> In this line of thinking, Singapore's cosmopolitanism is a feature to be celebrated because it proves the success of government policies that managed difference, as Brenda S. A. Yeoh further explains: "The sense here is that Singapore is, as a legacy of its past, *already* a cosmopolitan place, one that is home to a polyglot population and where the role of good government is to mediate between groups divided by race, religion and, increasingly, generation and technology as well."<sup>19</sup> This view of cosmopolitanism as an existing tradition stands in stark contrast to Goh's speech, demonstrating how cosmopolitanism's ever-changing function in nationalist discourse tracks with the different permutations of postcolonial capitalism. Such shifting sentiments shape whether Overseas Singaporeans are regarded as a problem or a solution for the state. This in turn has further implications for how the world outside of Singapore is understood. In consideration of the shifting role Overseas Singaporeans play in state narratives, I take on a geographic understanding of cosmopolitanism similar to Yeoh's. "Cosmopolitanism must hence imply the presence of a geography, of places which are different from others," she writes. "Would-be cosmopolitans must thus learn to navigate a non-homogeneous landscape."<sup>20</sup> Overseas Singaporeans, in other words, invite questions of how the presence of a global geography acts as a mediating force between state and subject.

Even as Singapore's cosmopolitanism has been heralded by the state, it has also been regarded as a challenge for establishing national legitimacy. When Singapore was first instituting self-governance in 1959, a functional state apparatus already existed in the form of the governing colonial infrastructure. Its nation was in a more precarious condition, however, because Singapore did not have citizens. "Singapore's population," as Michael Hill and Lian Kwen Fee write, "was made up of large numbers of immigrants who were non-citizens."<sup>21</sup> This was a problem for legitimizing an aspiring independent nation-state as well as a problem for governance. "It was simply not tenable," Seng Guo Quan comments, "to have a big group of immigrants in a state of limbo and thinking of another homeland."<sup>22</sup> One might say that the problem was that Singapore had the capitalists but not the postcolonial nationalists.<sup>23</sup>

To address the lack of citizens and, moreover, to mitigate the problem of *other* national attachments, the government ran a three-month campaign known as Operation Franchise to register foreign-born residents as citizens, so long as they met character and birth or residency criteria.<sup>24</sup> Singapore's cosmopolitan population required state intervention in order to build the nation; it was a problem that required a solution. Newspapers at the time describe volunteers for the citizenship campaign needing to "help promote enthusiasm" among potential registrants and the need for "how-to-become-a-citizen propaganda."<sup>25</sup> That a citizenship campaign was needed at all complicates depictions of decolonization as a revolutionary, organic formation—in this way, we see again that Singapore does not represent a "ideal type" nation for postcolonialism.<sup>26</sup> Operation Franchise is but one convenient instance among innumerable historical developments that exemplify how cosmopolitan, diasporic populations coming into Singapore have been a governance issue. In drawing attention to this historical moment, I mean to supplement Clark's and Yeoh's historical discussion of cosmopolitanism by considering not only how cosmopolitan subjects have been central to the Singaporean state's presentation of the nation, but also how they have been a disruptive force.

After independence, the nationalist discourse of loyalty and belonging changed from a persuasive mode of empowering cosmopolitan migrants (i.e., Singaporean citizenship will provide autonomy from empire) to one of disapproving of cosmopolitan citizens. Until the end of the twentieth century, foreign education was the main impetus for leaving Singapore. For some, seeking a foreign degree was a reflection of class privilege or of postcolonial desire for the metropole. For others, it was a response to the limited space available at local universities.<sup>27</sup> Some Singaporeans who left were beneficiaries of organizations like the Colombo Plan, which offered scholarships for students to study in Commonwealth countries, such as Australia, New Zealand, and Canada.<sup>28</sup> Despite the educational motive, Singaporeans who left were a major source of national controversy. Notably, one of the earliest public critiques of diasporic Singaporeans I found did not come from the Singaporean state. A scathing letter to the *Straits Times* editor written by trade union leaders in 1971 deems Singaporean boys who left for education abroad as "parasites" and "draft dodgers" because they were asking for exemptions from the national army service requirement. "And where would Singapore be," they ask, "if the workers of Singapore decided that ours was a Government of the rich, for the rich and by the rich, and that our children are only good as cannon fodder to keep Singapore safe for social parasites?"<sup>29</sup> In an earlier, equally blistering statement to the press, the authors declare, "If the rich think they can send their darling children overseas while the sons of workers sweat it out to make Singapore safe for these namby-pambies to return and make money, we strongly recommend that the Government take only one course of action."<sup>30</sup> That action, the article states, was to take "one-way tickets out of Singapore to some other place."<sup>31</sup> While draft dodging continues to be a controversy today (Kevin Kwan's avoidance of National Service

renewed such debates recently), these classed and gender-essentialist criticisms anticipate the ways that cosmopolitanism would be regarded as the “monopoly of [Singaporean] Anglophone elites.”<sup>32</sup> Moreover, the binary drawn between the citizen performing military service and the citizen seeking overseas education reveals how nationalist belonging is idealized through a masculinized physical presence rather than ethnicity or ideology. Physical presence is a qualification for immigrant naturalization procedures in many contexts and thus not in itself unusual; here it represents a loyalty standard for already present citizens and is amplified by the valorization of the military. That the critiques of diasporic Singaporeans were voiced by trade union leaders reflects the nation’s economic imagination at the time, which took on a more materialist emphasis because of industrialized manufacturing. Overall, critiques of cosmopolitan Singaporeans are also a rejection of the world outside of Singapore (“some other place”) as unimportant for the national project.

As labor and human capital concerns came to the fore in the late 1980s and 1990s, censure of Singaporeans abroad was at its height—strongly voiced at this point by the state. Emigration and a so-called brain drain was put to Parliament as a national concern in 1987,<sup>33</sup> amplifying anxieties voiced as far back as the 1960s in response to scientists being drawn to work in other countries, particularly the United States, which had expanded the immigration opportunities available to Asians and was offering better resources and higher pay.<sup>34</sup> When members of Parliament suggested initiatives in 1991 to encourage Singaporeans abroad to come home, K. S. Yuen famously retorted, “These people have betrayed their country and are ungrateful. If they want to go, let them go. We shouldn’t encourage them to come back.”<sup>35</sup> Yuen’s use of “ungrateful,” while indignant and paternalistic, also indicates Singapore’s changed economic status as a wealthier and politically stable nation. In contrast, Lee Kuan Yew’s 1969 discussion of Singaporean “quitters” in the context of recent decolonization (rather than the quitters of Goh Chok Tong’s 2002 speech) concedes that leaving for more economically secure nations was understandable even if it was not ideal from a governance perspective.<sup>36</sup> In other words, for Lee, the world outside of Singapore was regarded not only as a structuring force in terms of global order but as an extractive force in terms of Singapore’s purported main resource: human capital. For Yuen, the world outside of Singapore is instead understood as a competing force; those who leave are thus characterized as having given into some kind of temptation because they rejected the opportunities the state has offered them in its rise to economic success rather than maintain their obligatory ties to the nation. Yuen’s rhetoric aligns with the Asian Values economic ideologies of the time.

As I discuss in the next section, the state drastically shifts its view of diasporic Singaporeans in the 2000s. This change is marked by its formalizing of their identities as Overseas Singaporeans and its increasingly positive representations of them. Such celebratory depictions of Overseas Singaporeans as successful cosmopolitans certainly reflect Singapore’s transition to the neoliberal, knowledge



economy. However, these shifting representations are symptoms of how the nationals abroad are a problem to be solved and not simply the exuberant embodiment of the cosmopolitan, Global Asia ideal. Problem solving does not only operate through disciplinary or juridical power in this instance, but by recalibrating how Overseas Singaporeans are perceived.<sup>37</sup> This recalibration, I show, is part of the ideological work of population aesthetics.

#### THE CULTURAL PRODUCTION OF THE OVERSEAS SINGAPOREAN POPULATION

We must read state representations of the Singaporean diaspora as a mode of projecting ideals about cosmopolitanism as the state takes on a position of active production rather than belated capture with respect to its citizens abroad. This is not to say that the Singaporean diaspora is a complete fiction manufactured by the state. According to the 2020 census, there were 217,000 Singaporeans living abroad—about 6 percent of Singaporean citizens—up from 184,000 in 2010, which is about an 18 percent increase over a decade.<sup>38</sup> “Overseas Singaporeans” only became a formal term for state governance with the 2000 Census Act, however, which tracks all “persons who are not residing in Singapore,”<sup>39</sup> and it was first publicly reflected in state data in 2003.<sup>40</sup> Before 2000, the primary legal mechanisms for the government to trace Singaporeans who left was through exit permit regulations (a 1975 policy aimed at Singaporean boys and men for the purposes of ensuring their military service) and through the renunciation of Singapore citizenship.<sup>41</sup> State statistics and data before the turn of the century, in other words, present the diaspora in terms of loss, creating a scarcity narrative around its citizenry in the same way that natural, extractable resources often are depicted. In this way, the history of the Singaporean diaspora is quite distinct from other Asian diasporas in that it is not primarily read through presence, whether permanent settlements (e.g., Chinatown), established labor flows (e.g., plantation labor), or historical circumstances that lead to mass migratory movements (e.g., the Vietnam War).

Before the establishment of parapolitical structures and state agencies aimed at cultivating relations with Singaporeans living abroad, Singaporean students abroad often met in informal ways. For example, the Nonya Baba restaurant on Davie Street in Vancouver, Canada, in the 1980s and 1990s served as something of an unofficial community center.<sup>42</sup> It is in the 1990s that diasporic Singapore anglophone literature, as represented by the works of Boey Kim Cheng and Simon Tay, and diasporic community organizations also began to appear. Of course, diasporic community formation takes some time, which is perhaps why the Merlion Club in Melbourne was only established in 1990, even though student migration began after World War II. Internet communities were also key sites for diasporic Singaporean relations, as noted in works by Eunice M. F. Seng and Cherian George.<sup>43</sup> With the exception of these internet communities, Singaporeans living abroad were mostly identifying each other within localized, institutionalized pockets of



universities and cities rather than as part of a larger transnational community or state-formed network.

Besides the formal naming of Overseas Singaporeans, the state's attitudinal change toward those who had left is reflected in a dizzying array of working groups, policy recommendations, and new government agencies that sought to salvage the damage caused by the state's alienation of its citizens abroad. Despite Goh's firm stance against Overseas Singaporeans, other government officials expressed more sympathy. Parliamentary discussions in the aftermath of Prime Minister Goh's controversial "stayers and quitters" National Day Rally speech illustrate a burgeoning consensus that Singaporeans abroad were at once a reflection of the nation's increasing wealth and of the conditions of global capitalism that demand more mobility. The policy report *Changing Mindsets, Deepening Relationships* (2003), published by the Remaking Singapore Committee, encouraged a more opportunistic view of its citizens abroad: "The number of overseas Singaporeans has increased substantially over the years. These highly educated and experienced overseas Singaporeans should not be viewed so much as a 'brain drain,' but rather 'brain circulation.'"<sup>44</sup> During this time, a number of nonprofit organizations and government agencies either formed or gained greater visibility as a result of the state's changed perspective on their citizens abroad: the Singapore International Foundation, Majulah Connection, the Overseas Singaporean Network, and Contact Singapore, to name a few. In 2006, building on a number of structures, programs, and outreach efforts put into place by these various organizations that all attempted to articulate a nationalist agenda in a global context, the Overseas Singaporean Unit was established.<sup>45</sup> It is around this time that state representations of the Overseas Singaporean begin to proliferate in newspaper series, YouTube videos, photography, heritage festivals, social media, business brochures, and political ephemera. By articulating Overseas Singaporeans as a distinct population, the state not only confers a new, official status on a group of Singaporeans, but it also transforms understandings of the group from representing national loss to representing national presence.

#### REFASHIONING THE TERRITORIAL IMAGINATION

"Singaporean Abroad" ran as a weekly feature in the *Straits Times* from 2009 to 2012, totaling over two hundred articles, and was the first of many state-produced demographic compilations about Overseas Singaporeans. Notably, "Singaporean Abroad" ended about a year after the 2011 General Election, after which, as Clark argues, the Singaporean state quieted its cosmopolitan discourse.<sup>46</sup>

Like many such demographic compilations, "Singaporean Abroad" presents short biographical sketches and interviews with Overseas Singaporeans about the cities in which they now reside. The cities range from well-known metropolitan

centers (e.g., New York, Seoul, London, Mumbai, and Tokyo) to smaller and lesser recognized cities (e.g., Neuchatel, Switzerland; Astana, Kazakhstan; and Lappeenranta, Finland). Each article is a full-page story—and in some instances, even a double-page feature—complete with color photography. Though eight journalists wrote articles for the series, the structure and format of the stories were consistent. After each headline, the article begins with a small inset of what looks to be a self-selected headshot and a listing of the interviewee's name, age, occupation, and length of stay in the city where he or she now resides. Following a short blurb on the city and its history and how the featured Singaporean came to live there, each story moves into a transcript of interview questions and answers. The Overseas Singaporean is asked about the types of activities in the city that local Singaporeans might enjoy, the nightlife, the food, and how the city compares to Singapore. The "Singaporean Abroad" series draws on magazine and feature writing conventions and at times feels reminiscent of an alumni magazine's "see where they are now" section. As with the demographic compilation *Conversations on Coming Home* that I discuss in chapter 3, the language of "Singaporean Abroad" tends to be quite touristic—an effect that is amplified by the many advertisements for travel agencies and holiday packages that so often frame the articles.

In terms of its form, "Singaporean Abroad" typifies Overseas Singaporean representations produced by the state, although it is notable for appearing in a local, print newspaper aimed at an audience present in Singapore. For example, a number of features on Singaporeans living abroad appear online on the OSU webpage and social media feeds, either as links to the portal or as standalone stories. The OSU also distributed to its membership biographical pieces on Overseas Singaporeans in the digital magazines *Singapore Heartbeat* for Singaporean working professionals abroad and *Singapore Pulse* for Singaporean overseas students. Hypertextual, online publications provide a dynamic reading experience with linked references and interfaces that differs from the experience of reading print newspapers. Even while "Singaporean Abroad" manifests the new economic ideologies of Global Asia, that it appears in the "old form" of the newspaper—the very basis of Anderson's theorization of imagined communities—the series demonstrates how such old forms of nationalist imaginaries can continue to be revised and globally expanded.<sup>47</sup> Across the differences in media and audience, "Singaporean Abroad" and these other digital demographic compilations all instrumentalize a sentimental mode characteristic of nationalist texts to produce what Camilo Arturo Leslie describes as "map-mindedness," or "a multi-scalar sense of place that can be harnessed in the service of the political community."<sup>48</sup> This map-mindedness combined with sentimentality might simply seem to be another mode of reproducing the nation as an imagined community, but I argue that the flat aesthetic of "Singaporean Abroad" operates in service of producing the multiscale sense of place for the Global Asia imaginary.<sup>49</sup>



# Harbour and harbour

Sydney's harbour and outer reaches pack a wallop from wallah-watching to a night out at the opera

Deepika Shetty

Australia's oldest and largest European settlement, Sydney, is a vibrant city built around a spectacular harbour.

It is often called the Harbour City and has the reputation of being one of the world's most dynamic cities. Two of its most iconic structures are the Sydney Harbour Bridge and the Sydney Opera House. The city hosted the first Olympics of the new millennium, and continues to host major international events.

Sydney is surrounded by nature and national parks, which extend into the suburbs and right up to the shores of the harbour. It is a place where people almost always seem to be enjoying the outdoors.

"A lot of activity is on the harbour or on the beaches. In fact, some of the best places to chill out are at the harbour," says Mr Terence View, a commerce student studying for his master's at the University of New South Wales.

"Of course, you need to do other things too, like shopping in Paddington, exploring King's Cross and admiring the historic Rocks," he says.

## GETTING AROUND

The best way to get around the place is...

By taking the buses or trains. Sydney's public transport consists of an extensive rail network, buses and ferries, a single light-rail line and a tourist-oriented monorail. Public transport can get you to nearly all of the city's attractions.

If you plan to rent a car, note that parking in the Central Business District is quite expensive. You can end up paying A\$70 (\$885) per day or A\$25 per hour at some places.

The best time to visit the place is... All year round. Every season is special. Summer, from December to February, is the best time to enjoy Sydney's beachside outdoor lifestyle. Temperatures average 26 deg C and go up to a high of 40 deg C. In autumn, from March to May, you get clear warm days with mild nights. June to August is winter when it gets cool, not cold. At night, the temperature can dip below 10 deg C but during the day it is a pleasant 14 deg C.

Spring, from September to November, is a great time to explore the city's attractions, bushwalking, cycling and visiting the great outdoors.

Your favourite stop is... Rocks Market (for northern end of George Street, open Sat-Sun, 10am-5pm). You have to pass sandstone cottages and terraces with specialty shops, cafes and restau-

## SINGAPOREAN ABROAD IN SYDNEY WITH



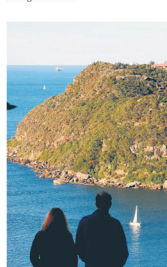
**Terence View**  
Age: 29  
Occupation: Student  
Length of stay: Seven months

rants to get to Rocks, one of Australia's most famous markets. Every visit here is an experience. You never know what you will find at the 150 stalls. I have picked up some exquisite metal and ceramic ware on my frequent trips here.

### Which places really excite you?

Several, including the historic Rocks and the family-friendly Taronga Zoo (Bradley Head Road, Mosman, tel: +61-2-9569-2777, [www.taronga.org.au/](http://www.taronga.org.au/)). Open daily 9am-5pm. At the zoo, you can come face-to-face with swimming seals as they peer through the glass windows of a simulated Submarine Rescue Station or a muring wallaby.

Children always love to watch the cute penguins. The viewing windows of the penguins are at the bottom of a custom-designed pool in which they glide playfully through the water.



On the outer reaches of suburban Sydney lies Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park (above left), one of many parklands earmarked for preservation. A female red-necked wallaby (above right) keeps watch as its five-month-old baby (called a "joey") soaks in the sun at Sydney's Taronga Zoo.



Puccini's opera Manon Lescaut is performed at the Sydney Opera House (above left), whose "sails" form the canvas for a light show.

## CULTURE

The entire city has so much to offer, where does one start?

The Museum of Contemporary Art is the city centre, near Circular Quay (open daily 10am-5pm, except Christmas). Australia's only museum dedicated to exhibiting, interpreting and collecting contemporary art from across Australia and around the world. It was covered with an "electric canvas" in May for two months as part of the Vivid Sydney festival. The museum facade was illuminated at night with an art display of lights.

## SHOPPING

One cannot leave without visiting... Paddington Bazaar, also known as Paddington Market (St John's Church, Oxford Street, Paddington, [www.paddingtonmarket.com.au/](http://www.paddingtonmarket.com.au/)). Open on Saturdays from 10am to 5pm. This is a busy churchyard bazaar with more than 100 stalls crammed with clothing, crafts, jewellery and souvenirs.

The best bargains are at... Bikenhead Point The Factory Outlet Centre (Roscoe Street, Drummoyne, tel: +61-2-9812-8800) is Sydney's largest factory outlet and offers the best of fashion, food and homeware. You shop in style at prices that are half what you would pay at a regular store.

The richest variety of products can be found at... Pitt Street Mall, which is the main shopping stretch in the city like Orchard Road.

Do not leave the place without... Trying Pancake On The Rocks ([www.pancakesontherocks.com.au/](http://www.pancakesontherocks.com.au/)). The chain of restaurants has been around since 1975 and is a favourite destination for those who crave pancakes and crepes. They have several outlets but my favourite is at The Rocks.

The best breakfast is at... Le Petit Crepe (118 Darlinghurst Road, tel: +61-2-9361-4780). Show up by 9am as the place gets packed around 10am. They serve the best eggs benedict in town, warm fresh brioche and an extra-tangy house-made hollandaise. I love the coffee here too.

The best lunch is at... Bills (411 Liverpool Street, Darlinghurst, tel: +61-2-9360-9631). You have to try its sweet corn fritters and roast tomato. My other favourite is the prawn and chilli linguine with garlic, ginger and lime. A meal for two here costs about A\$50.

The best dinner is at... Hurricane's Grill And Bar at Bondi Beach (130 Roscoe Street, tel: +61-2-9187-7101, [www.hurricanegrill.com.au/](http://www.hurricanegrill.com.au/)). It specialises in premium quality Australian beef, pork, lamb ribs and chicken, which are marinated in special basting sauces from South Africa.

## SUNDOWNERS

The best drinks are at... World Square Pub (Enslin & Young Street, corner of George & Gaulthorn Street, [www.worldsquarepub.com.au/](http://www.worldsquarepub.com.au/)). It has more

than 20 different kinds of international beers on tap, including Little Creatures, Tiger, Asahi, Bee Nee, Blue Tongue Lager, James Squire Golden Ale and Guinness. It is spread over four floors and is a great place for relaxing with friends.

## What is the one must-try drink in town?

Tooheys Extra Dry. Sydney's signature beer which was launched in 1994. I like its smooth and mild taste.

## What is the coolest place to chill out in?

Cockle Bay Wharf at Darling Harbour. Situated just minutes from central Sydney, this is one of the world's great waterfront destinations and one of Australia's major attractions. Several events and festivals are held here throughout the year.

The one place you always take your friends to is...

Lindt's Chocolate Cafe at Cockle Bay Wharf (Shop 104-105 Cockle Bay Wharf, tel: +61-2-9267-8064, [www.cocklebaywharf.com.au/venues/65-finds-chocolatecafe/](http://www.cocklebaywharf.com.au/venues/65-finds-chocolatecafe/)). Locals call this cafe a "chocolate heaven" and it lives up to its name. Do not miss its melt-in-the-mouth almond meringue which has a creamy chocolate-based filling.

Is there a Charkie Quay equivalent? Cockle Bay Wharf at Darling Harbour comes pretty close.

## FURTHER OUT

What is there to explore?

The forested hills of Blue Mountains, a UNESCO World Heritage Area, offers cliff-top views across gum tree valleys and craggy outcrops, as well as bushwalking and adventure activities. There are more than 200 tea-and-breakfast places in the various scenic towns here. From Sydney's city centre, it takes you less than 90 minutes to get there.

About 120km from Sydney are the Southern Highlands, where you will find Fitzroy Falls, a national park with little river inlets and cascading waterfalls.

One of Australia's finest surf locations is Newcastle, located on the north coast. It is also an industrial city. Newcastle Steelworks greets visitors driving into the area. An hour's drive north of Newcastle is Port Stephens, with its pristine beaches and bottlenose dolphins. This area is a dedicated holiday spot and resorts dot the white beaches with marinas offering boats for hire.

If you like wine, you should not miss Hunter Valley, an easy two-hour drive from Sydney. Fresh country air, old-world colonial guesthouses, 70 vineyards and some of the best restaurants in the state await you.

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FIGURE 3. A page from "Singaporean Abroad." Source: Straits Times © SPH Media Limited. Reprinted with permission.

One of the most striking characteristics of "Singaporean Abroad" is that it presents the Overseas Singaporean as ordinary. This effect is achieved, in part, by the headshot that every story features. The pictures are candid and likely from interviewees' personal albums. When juxtaposed to the larger and often higher-resolution professional stock photography of the featured city, the headshots appear starkly commonplace. For example, a feature on Sydney, Australia, shows Terrence Yiew casually posing in a green T-shirt with his arm resting on a handrail, with the Sydney Harbor Bridge in the background. The resolution of the shot is not particularly high and the photo is neither glamorous nor remarkable: it simply memorializes Yiew's visit to a famous Australian landmark. Above the inset of Yiew's picture is a photo of the Sydney Opera House during an evening lightshow and an action shot of a Puccini opera. Below is a long shot of Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park and a closeup of a wallaby and her joey. The photography is crisp and shows impressive detail, such as the beading on the opera performers' extravagant costuming and the animated expressions on their faces. In another example, a feature on Andrew Chen of Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, includes a small photo of him atop a snowy vista juxtaposed to wide-lens photographs of mountain ranges, the Chabysh festival, and a homestay in a yurt with locals. Again, the fairly plain, unsmiling picture of Chen dressed in black casually squinting into the sunlight stands in visual contrast to the photos of majestic landscapes and the deep reds and textures of Kyrgyzstani homes and fashion. Such visual contrasts between persons and places create the impression that Yiew and Chen are ordinary people, making such an elevated, noteworthy status seem attainable.

The elevated social status that Overseas Singaporeans enjoy in this series is emphasized by their function as tour guides for the cities in which they live. While the interview structure of the newspaper performs the effect of candidness, the respondents' answers are not especially revealing of their personalities. For example, in response to the prompt of "The best way to get around is . . .," Alinah Aman of Muscat, Oman, answers, "By renting a car. Another great way to see what the country has to offer is by renting a boat and seeing the coastline and the numerous islands and waves along the way. Visit [www.zaharatours.com](http://www.zaharatours.com) to pick a tour that suits your style."<sup>50</sup> John Tan of Marrakech, Morocco, tells readers that the best time to visit is "between March and August when it is warm and sunny."<sup>51</sup> Despite the rather generic answers and apparent editorial intervention, the series ultimately represents Singaporeans living abroad as citizens to consult for their knowledge of the cities in which they reside. While the subtext of their tour guide function for residents of Singapore suggests that such citizens are worthy repositories of cultural knowledge, the framework of the series positions citizens at home with the upper hand, insofar as it serves their needs as potential tourists. Rather than being marked by their absence, lack of loyalty, or elitism, the Overseas Singaporean population is thus integrated into the national imagination because they offer value to the Singaporean living at home as the enabling medium for comprehending

the world at large. Moreover, the Overseas Singaporeans in “Singaporean Abroad” facilitate the possibility of touristic pleasure, hailing the citizen-reader as consumers rather than politically interested subjects. Although such a transformation is consistent with Singapore’s history of postcolonial capitalism,<sup>52</sup> what is distinct about the series is how it positions citizens in a consumptive role with respect to each other rather than with respect to the state.

Although flatness is an aesthetic trait of demographic compilations, it is obscured by the exuberance and characterological aspects of the newspaper feature. Each full-page, color feature of an ordinary, though celebrated, Singaporean performs a liveliness apt for global travel. Moreover, the series seems to be invested in character development because biography sets up such a genre expectation and because of the use of the interview. The question-and-answer format performs intimacy by suggesting an interest in personality and subjectivity. Despite all the characterological appearances of the demographic compilation, readers do not have a sense of character depth because there is no character interiority.<sup>53</sup> In fact, when read in the aggregate—that is, when it is continually read—“Singaporean Abroad” reads far less remarkably because its formulaic repetition becomes increasingly evident. While formulaic narratives can offer aesthetic pleasure, there is no sense that “Singaporean Abroad” is attempting to cultivate such a pleasure, nor does the substance of the interview ever really exceed the dulling effect of structural repetition. Although the formulaic repetition of each feature creates a relation of relevance by establishing a pattern, each feature has no bearing or effect on the others. For example, no transitions (i.e., “to be continued” or “next week”) are built into the language of the articles. Flatness should not be mistaken for boredom or ideological insignificance, however. It is simply a different register that, in this case, generates map-mindedness by foregrounding space rather than time. Rather than a temporally organized progressive plot movement unfolding through the action or development of a major character—what we typically think of as narrative—we have a *spatially* organized narrative that relies on repetition through minor characters outside of Singapore. As the literary element that readers are affectively attached to, Anderson’s national hero still holds formal significance. While for Anderson, the national hero’s consolidatory function makes possible the imagining of simultaneous time within the bounds of the nation, the Overseas Singaporean as national hero serves as a device to map out Singaporean transnational connections in “Singaporean Abroad.” Character is indeed crucial, to repeat Holden’s observation about its formal role in producing nationalist narratives, but here character operates not through affective attachments, as often occurs with round characters. Instead, character is instrumentalized to facilitate consumerist attachments to space. The spatial and thus cartographic imagination that is created by “Singaporean Abroad” traverses vast geographic distances, from Askersund, Sweden, to Herrenburg, Germany, to Busan, Korea, extending the imagination of the nation beyond its state borders vis-à-vis the Overseas Singaporean. No longer



is the nation imagined within its delimited territory. Instead it is imagined as a base from which the world can be navigated.

While “Singaporean Abroad” elevates the sociopolitical status of Overseas Singaporeans and expands the territorial imagination of the nation, it also serves as an enabling frame for a biopoliticized cultural imaginary that views the world in terms of surfaces. This surface view is part of the Global Asia knowledge project. Representations of difference are a preoccupation of postcolonialists, who long have grappled with the consequences of European depictions of non-European cultures.<sup>54</sup> The touristic depiction of the world focalized through the Overseas Singaporean resembles the imperial project insofar as the narrative form of the demographic compilation promotes a cartographic understanding of expansion. “The systematic surface mapping of the globe,” Mary Louise Pratt writes, “correlates with an expanding search for commercially exploitable resources, markets, and lands to colonize, just as navigational mapping is linked with the search for trade routes.”<sup>55</sup> When we recall that the state’s eventual valorization of the Overseas Singaporean was prompted by the demands of global capitalism and a knowledge economy that depended on its citizens’ ability to navigate cultural difference in service of reaching new markets, we understand that “Singaporean Abroad” is also a knowledge project motivated by capitalism. But even though “Singaporean Abroad” operates on cartographic knowledge of the world, it does not hold the colonial impulse of “totalizing classification.”<sup>56</sup> For example, in an article about Copenhagen, Denmark, Ian Choo responds to the question, “Which places in the city excite you?” by saying, “Free concerts at the famous theme park Tivoli (Vesterbrogade 3, 1630 Copenhagen V, [www.tivoli.dk](http://www.tivoli.dk)) every Friday.” Choo’s answer appears generic because of how the language appears to erase his voice and how it does not perform insider knowledge. The editorial addition of an online information source further replicates the tourist markers that signify culture. Nationalist articulations outside the bounds of the nation, in this case, do not suggest a confrontational attempt to take over other sovereign places. Rather, they merely mark innocuous presence.

While we can certainly describe “Singaporean Abroad” as cultivating a “rootless” or “partial” cosmopolitan ethic in adherence to global capitalism, such an ethic also befits the perspective of biopolitical governance. Though populations are a central concept for biopolitics, Foucault calls attention to the significance of the “milieu”—nature, environment, and space—by illustrating how architectural design is the basis for manipulating populations to perform desired outcomes.<sup>57</sup> This is what Mitchell explains as the principle of a “plastic, sticky plane,”<sup>58</sup> or the malleable site onto which populations hold. Biopolitical governance treats the plastic, sticky plane as what Foucault calls “the target of intervention for power.”<sup>59</sup> Though “Singaporean Abroad” does not represent non-Singaporean sites as plastic—after all, they are not sites that can be manipulated by Singaporean governance—they *are* represented as sticky. For Mitchell, “sticky” means that populations

“can be embedded and held for some period of time” onto the plane.<sup>60</sup> Worked into Mitchell’s notion of the sticky plane is the condition of possibility (“can be”), which is where the aesthetic and ideological work of “Singaporean Abroad” enters. Stickiness is produced by the Overseas Singaporean’s touristic knowledge of non-Singaporean sites. “Singaporean Abroad” thus provides biopoliticized, cultural literacy to its audience by training them to know the non-Singapore world while also demarcating the Overseas Singaporean population’s functionality for Global Asia.

On top of revealing the aesthetic education in biopolitics that “Singaporean Abroad” provides, the demographic compilation’s flat representation of the non-Singapore world also offers insight into the rather middling cultural logics and power dynamics of Global Asia. Although the flatness of “Singaporean Abroad” might appear derivative of the colonial imagery of *terra nullius*, a significant difference is that the flat non-Singapore world is not imagined as empty. The demographic compilation is in fact well aware that the non-Singapore world is full. This distinction between viewing the world as empty and viewing it as full reflects very different capitalist perspectives. Rather than aspire to dominance, as with imperial ideology, Global Asia strategizes from a subordinated position within the global socioeconomic order and from a historical consciousness of colonialism. Instead of overthrowing existing sovereignty, this instantiation of postcolonial capitalism emphasizes a capacity to maneuver an already existing order of power. Whereas extractive capitalism relied on totalizing, classificatory knowledge to control non-Europeans, postcolonial capitalism emphasizes functional, surface knowledge to circumvent Eurocentric structures put into place by colonialism. By portraying the non-Singapore world as flat and maneuverable, the demographic compilation reassures its local readers that becoming part of the Overseas Singaporean population is not an uphill battle.

“Singaporean Abroad” expands the territorial imagination of the nation and trains local readers to view the world in terms of sticky planes. Furthermore, this reading of “Singaporean Abroad” also has broader methodological implications for how we read the power dynamics of postcolonial and contemporary capitalism. For literary and cultural critics, the significance of the milieu and plastic, sticky plane for biopolitical governance—not to mention the imaginings of the world outside of the nation—directs our attention to the element of setting. As a narrative element, “setting” typically refers to the social, historical, and geographic context in which action takes place. But when approaching setting as mired in and as an expression of power, we view setting as dynamic rather than inert. We can, in other words, read setting for its conditions of possibility. In the case of “Singaporean Abroad,” the goal is not simply to identify elements of setting, such as the where or the when, but also to ask how setting shapes already unfolding action. In this example, “Singaporean Abroad” uses other settings to cultivate future action; the series conveys to Singaporean readers that they too can become valued citizens. It further serves as a reminder that power is not only legible through its oppressive or generative effects on subjectivity and thus character. By revealing



how the aestheticization of setting is tied up in techniques of governance, “Singaporean Abroad” enables us to consider the representational politics of setting as well as its narrative function.

#### SINGAPOREAN CRITICAL NATIONALISM AND JAPANESE SOFT POWER IN “50 RED DOTS”

Since the publication of demographic compilations like “Singaporean Abroad,” popular and literary representations of Singaporeans living abroad have increased. Some examples are a feature in *Female* magazine, “Home Away from Home: 5 Singapore Creatives Abroad Share Their Ways of Living” (2020); a lifestyle feature on houzz.com, “This Is Home for These Singaporeans Abroad” (2017); a YouTube video by DBS Bank, “Living Abroad: How Different Is It from Living in Singapore?” (2018); and a book on Foreign Service Officers, *Footprints on Foreign Shores* (2021). Many of these popular demographic compilations are ephemeral rather than continuous, but their proliferation suggests that state representations of Overseas Singaporeans have produced a positive feedback loop, influencing the ways that Singaporeans view the nation.

One critically notable Overseas Singaporean demographic compilation is “50 Red Dots Around the World,” published on the occasion of Singapore’s fiftieth year of independence by the organization be movement. A social enterprise described “as a movement to celebrate the courage to be,” be movement maintained a “socially conscious publication” and a pop-up gift store that sold “a specially curated selection of artisanal, unique and creative products from around the world.”<sup>61</sup> Cassie Lim, herself an Overseas Singaporean, began the be movement brand after a decade-long career in the media industry.<sup>62</sup> Though now defunct, be movement published six issues of its “bookazine,” each focused on a particular city, with travel stories and features on people, businesses, and organizations deemed “inspirational.” While “50 Red Dots” as a publication is unremarkable insofar as it was not particularly influential, it is significant for the ways it uses the demographic compilation as a mode of state critique and for what it reveals about competing layers of postcolonial capitalism.

In the SG50 issue, interviews with Singaporeans living abroad cohere around a common critique of the Singaporean nation-state as overly focused on economic achievement and blind to the class privilege generated by its wealth, critiques that Weihsin Gui would describe as expressions of “critical nationality.” For Gui, critical nationality is a project of

critical rationality motivated by a national consciousness that reveals, resists, and reconceptualizes the hypostasizing effects of *instrumental* rationality expressed through the determinate constructions of national identities. . . . [C]ritical nationality [is] open to what is nonidentical to it as it becomes imbricated with cosmopolitical and transnational cultural forms.<sup>63</sup>

From the perspective of critical nationality, “50 Red Dots” clearly seeks to resist state images of Singapore as Global Asia even as it draws on the formal conventions of state-produced demographic compilations. The full-color issue is sizable at 210 pages and comprises biographies of and interviews with notable Overseas Singaporeans. The cartographic presentation of Overseas Singaporeans as “50 Red Dots”—with “red dot” referring to the way Singapore is often represented on world maps because of its small size—conflates the Overseas Singaporean character with its overseas setting, much like “Singaporean Abroad.” The interview questions put to the Overseas Singaporean in this case, however, are much more open ended and aimed at getting to know the person’s life experiences and opinions on Singapore. In other words, the questions demonstrate a clear investment in representing Overseas Singaporeans as round characters. The use of caps, emoticons, and parentheses in the formatting and the repetitiveness of the answers suggest that many of those featured were interviewed via email and offered a list of fill-in-the-blank-type prompts. None of the specific questions or prompts is actually presented in the publication, and the responses appear to be uninterrupted streams of thought. However, a number of answers begin the same way: “Since moving away from Singapore . . .” is prevalent, as are responses about whether Singapore is a First World nation. Readers can therefore deduce the use of standard interview questions.

While the form of “50 Red Dots” offers readers generic familiarity, there are some notable departures from state depictions of Overseas Singaporeans. For one, the Overseas Singaporeans are less sinocentric than those featured in “Singaporean Abroad,” at least in what can be discerned from their names and from crude observations of phenotype. Moreover, while “50 Red Dots” retains the structure of presenting multiple, minor characters, these national heroes of “50 Red Dots” are represented as exceptional figures whose life insights are valuable. Success is not signified by a flourishing corporate career, as is the case in *Conversations* discussed in the next chapter, but by the work of LGBTQ+, disability, and refugee rights activists; social workers and musicians; photographers and poets; disabled athletes; and social enterprise entrepreneurs living abroad. “50 Red Dots” veers away from depictions of success that only validate citizens who facilitate Singapore’s capital accumulation. The publication generally features those in occupations guided by altruistic principles rather than profitability.

My framework of critical nationality and my focus on this periodical’s various contrasts with respect to “Singaporean Abroad” might lead readers to believe that I am now focused on the ways that Global Asia has been resisted by Overseas Singaporeans. While this is partially true, this interpretation does not reveal the full picture because a binary structure of state/subject overly simplifies the power dynamic at work. What my reading of “50 Red Dots” instead reveals is the different modes of postcolonial capitalism layered against each other: the Singaporean state, its subjects, and a former imperial occupier of Singapore, Japan. Although it

is a local periodical, the “50 Red Dots” issue of *be movement* serves as a reminder that postcolonial capitalism is not particular to Singapore and, moreover, that it has transnational articulations.

The majority of the issue’s interviews discuss how experience overseas facilitates realizations about the idiosyncrasies of Singapore’s historical trajectory and governance. While it is not especially remarkable that such encounters with difference would lead to new sociopolitical perspectives, the interviews repeatedly critique Singapore as lacking empathy for the vulnerable. For example, Carol Tan comments:

Heart-wise, I also felt too comfortable back in safe, clean, prosperous Singapore to contribute to drafting practical solutions for problems I didn’t FEEL. . . . Many Singaporeans ignore the challenges that plague the majority of the planet’s inhabitants. Either we assume that the rest of the world leads similar lives to us, or we jealously guard what we think we’ve earned.<sup>64</sup>

Similarly, Adrian Yap remarks:

My concern for Singapore in the next 50 years is that if Singapore remains competitive, lacking genuine care for vulnerable groups, I fear that the gap in society will get wider and more people with special needs will never catch up with the majority. My hope is to see more Singaporeans show greater compassion and care toward our community members with their diverse needs.<sup>65</sup>

In interview after interview, the Overseas Singaporeans of “50 Red Dots” lament the lack of care Singaporeans have for others, a phenomenon that the interviews collectively locate in the emergence of Singapore’s wealth. Moreover, many of the interview responses employ language that points to how Singaporean governance cultivates a lack of relationality among its citizenry.<sup>66</sup> The language of unfeeling, in other words, is used as a mode of critique.

The critiques of Singaporean culture and governance in “50 Red Dots” employ affective language, drawing on both discourses of human rights and local critiques of state mandates that compel its people to tirelessly work in the name of the nation. On the one hand, the desire for care and connection with the less fortunate that many express in “50 Red Dots” performs what Joseph Slaughter describes as a “humanitarian sensibility.” As Slaughter writes, the notion of humanitarian sensibility, or “the voluntary assumption of responsibility to the other” as the “culmination of modern subjectivation,”<sup>67</sup> is tied up in ideas of human and personality development. Such ideas are very clear in the many interviews in the issue that narrate care for others as a moment of self-realization. While the critiques of Singapore as an unfeeling setting are generally apt for the humanitarian ethos of the Singaporeans featured in “50 Red Dots,” their representation of humanitarian sensibility as being learned from the non-Singapore world aligns them with orientalist renderings of technocratic Singapore as “sterile” and “boring” (see chapter 4) or of Asians as inscrutable. Insofar as the critique is performed from a position external to Singapore

using “techniques and a language borrowed from the occupier,”<sup>68</sup> and reproduces some of the orientalist discourse of unfeeling from the Asian Values era, we could view these Overseas Singaporeans as akin to Fanon’s colonized intellectual. Their critiques are further reinforced by objections from Singaporeans weary from the “hard work” imperatives of the manufacturing economy. For example, Tam Wai Jia comments: “If I could change one thing about Singapore, it would be for Singaporeans to slow down and take joy in the little, simple things in life. When I am trapped in the rat race working 90 hours a week, I realized that while I worked more, I had less to give.” Tam’s reference to the “rat race” refers to Singapore’s work culture and the state’s emphasis on unending, efficient work. The very ways that many of the interviewees plainly link personality development with overseas experience to form their state critique reproduce privileged attitudes that view subjects of postcolonial governance as ideologically deluded.

Ironically, even though “50 Red Dots” emphasizes personality development and humanitarian sensibility as the basis of critical nationalism, many of the interviews reveal instrumental uses of state discourses for their *own* capitalist purposes and self-representation. Geoffrey K. See, for example, declares that “choosing this idealistic line of work is almost a rejection of the conventional success story Singapore culture often espouses and celebrates.”<sup>69</sup> See’s critical nationalism positions itself as politically opposed to the state, yet the interview reveals how he deploys Singapore’s “Third World to First World” narrative for his social enterprise Choson Exchange: “How Singapore has developed its economy over the last 50 years is a story that underlies a lot of what we share with North Koreans.”<sup>70</sup> Given that See’s organization is essentially aimed at bringing capitalism to North Korea through cultural exchange, his use of the so-called Singapore Story is not surprising. In this simultaneous opposition to the institution of the Singaporean state and embrace of its discourse, See performs a contradiction that reappears in other parts of the issue. Darrell Ang, for example, strongly criticizes how Singapore’s technocratic approaches to socioeconomic policy have led to the neglect of “history, culture, art, literature, and music.”<sup>71</sup> Yet Ang still expresses regard for the ideologies that reinforce the very problems to which he calls attention, as illustrated by his self-representation using some of the language associated with the Asian Values era:

Singapore, with its emphasis on discipline, hard work, thriftiness, independence and obedience—as well as filial piety—has given me strong fundamentals with which to grow as an adult in an ever-changing world. As a classical musician, one certainly needs discipline and diligence, and capacity to rely on oneself is every Singaporean’s birthright.

Despite the issue’s resonance with the commentaries on the increasing economic disparity in Singapore and the dehumanizing effects of manufacturing work, “50 Red Dots” asserts its own version of postcolonial capitalism through claims of

exceptionality and oppositional politics—though in this case, that opposition is to the state rather than to colonialism and its legacies.

Further complicating a reading of “50 Red Dots” solely within a state/subject dynamic, however, is the way the publication is mediated by larger transnational forces and objectives. Notably, one of the key sponsors of “50 Red Dots” is the Japanese Chamber of Commerce and Industry (JCCI), Singapore. Like the many branches around the world, the JCCI in Singapore describes one of its main objectives as “promot[ing] and expand[ing] both trade and investments between Singapore and Japan.”<sup>72</sup> Although JCCI primarily works with businesses, it has a registered charity, the JCCI Singapore Foundation, whose primary aim is to “support the development of arts, culture, sports, and education in Singapore.”<sup>73</sup> Though such kinds of corporate philanthropy are not unusual, especially as JCCI is a guest organization in Singapore, the foundation’s aims align ideologically with what is known as the Fukuda Doctrine, or the Japanese diplomacy strategy in the Southeast Asian region after World War II. Following its commitment to peace and in recognition of the atrocities of the Japanese Imperial Army, Japan took a soft power approach to ASEAN member states by funding infrastructural developments and cultural programs. In contrast to the Singaporean state, which is known for its political censorship and for its general disregard for arts and culture, Japan via JCCI via “50 Red Dots” is presented as a state invested in self-/free expression and personality development—values that are the basis of the Singaporeans’ critical nationality in the *be* movement issue. An interview from “50 Red Dots” with Fumio Otani, JCCI president, reveals Japan’s investment in Singaporean culture. In response to the question, “Where do you think Singapore could improve as a country?,” Otani responds, “Since Singapore is quite young, there were not so many cultural activities that have taken root here in Singapore. So the culture part might be one area Singapore can grow a little.”<sup>74</sup> Although Otani is careful to commend the Singaporean state for various socioeconomic policies and successes, his language of maturity and development echoes Cold War-era ideas of culture and the arts as a significant and necessary site of (national) development. The presentation of Overseas Singaporeans as round characters, or individuals with deep interiority, critical capacities, and developing personalities, is crucial for building Japan’s appearance as a compassionate state facilitating critical nationality rather than as a patronizing, colonial state. The use of interviews with no clear interviewer further builds the impression that “50 Red Dots” is a publication supporting the free expression of Overseas Singaporeans. Moreover, among the interviews are features on the organizations that JCCI supports (the Singapore Disability Sports Council), the cultural exchanges they facilitate through study abroad initiatives, and Japanese companies (i.e., Nikon and Liang Court). When read alongside the interviews with Overseas Singaporeans, readers understand these Japanese organizations are working with and among Singaporeans, facilitating their needs and aspirations. Interestingly, in the features

about JCCI or Japan, the interviewer presence returns, reassuring readers of Singaporean editorial control and thus agency. Ironically, the magazine's expression of Japanese soft power transforms the symbolism of the red dot into an evocation of the Japanese flag.

"50 Red Dots" simultaneously performs a critical nationalism of Singapore and an instrumental nationalism for Japan, a nation that formerly occupied Singapore. Japan instrumentalizes the aesthetics of Overseas Singaporean critical nationality in order to set up a relation of indebtedness and gratitude between it and Singapore. One of the cornerstones of postcolonial capitalism is the way it negotiates the impact of colonial history. "50 Red Dots" reminds us that the formerly imperial and not just the postcolony must strategize against a history of colonialism and, in this case, the violence that it unleashed. Like the Singaporean state's strategy of postcolonial capitalism, the Japanese state avoids overt ambitions of regional or global dominance, as evident in the Fukuda Doctrine. For this reason, Japan asserted its influence through programs that assist in South-east Asian development and industrialization through their Official Development Assistance program, a strategy also evident in China's Belt and Road program. In other words, Japan facilitated Singaporean and Southeast Asian modernization, which was seen as part of national projects and not as colonial mandates. But now economic influence and assistance looks quite different, given Singapore's global economic standing.

While "50 Red Dots" does not go so far as to assert that Singaporeans should feel indebted or grateful to Japan and JCCI, it is certainly highly suggestive of this claim. The various features on JCCI-funded organizations in "50 Red Dots" emphasize opportunities accorded to Singaporeans that would otherwise not be possible, with the understanding that such opportunities are not simply about funding, but about state priorities. Japan, in other words, acts as the benefactor when Singapore does not. In this way, Japan sets up a relation of gratitude and indebtedness. Unlike the compulsory gratitude that might be demanded of new immigrants or of citizens (recall here Yuen's depiction of Overseas Singaporeans as "ungrateful"), "50 Red Dots" simply sets up the affective conditions for gratitude. These conditions are at once enabled by the reflective, critical nationalism of the publication and by the sentimentality of humanitarianism. In this way, the Overseas Singaporeans become the sticky plane on which Japan makes its power legible.

#### IMAGINING DENOUEMENT IN *IT NEVER RAINS* ON NATIONAL DAY

Like "Singaporean Abroad" and "50 Red Dots," Jeremy Tiang's short story collection, *It Never Rains on National Day* (2015), features a group of Overseas Singaporeans in various locations around the world (including some returned Singaporeans) and centers questions of nationalism, as indicated by the title of the

collection. One could easily imagine the Cambridge-educated, New York City-based Tiang, who also translates Chinese into English and writes novels and plays, in one of the demographic compilations. While *It Never Rains* is not strictly a demographic compilation, the short story collection is its literary cousin insofar as it too is a compiled form and, in this case, featuring a population. Like the other demographic compilations under discussion in this chapter, the composite parts of the collection are differentiated by setting: Switzerland, Norway, Germany, China, Canada, Thailand, New York City, Singapore. Because the demographic compilation tends to present itself as a realist, journalistic genre, it can elide questions of narrative form. In this way, the *fiction* of Tiang's stories becomes the mode of critiquing the demographic compilation's form. In the context of "Singaporean Abroad" and "50 Red Dots," the two linked stories of the collection, "Sophia's Honeymoon" and "Sophia's Party," present a critique of the climax-centered narratives that so often accompany representations of Overseas Singaporeans.

"Sophia's Honeymoon" centers on Sophia, a Singaporean Chinese woman, and Nicholas, her white British husband, who are in Zurich for their honeymoon. Sophia and Nicholas are not only the most frequently appearing characters in Tiang's collection, this transnational, married couple that settled in Singapore are figured as the paragon of Singaporean success, both as individuals and as a couple. By virtue of her US education, readers understand that Sophia is of the social and economic class idealized by the Singaporean state. Sophia's husband, Nicholas, also possesses the proper social and cultural capital as a result of his background: "Thanks to an adolescence of ski trips and inter-railing, Nicholas is already au fait with Europe. . . . He speaks French, he likes to boast, with a Parisian accent."<sup>75</sup> Like the Overseas Singaporean, Nicholas is cosmopolitan, "familiar with global trends and lifestyles" and "comfortable working and living in Singapore as well as overseas."<sup>76</sup> Unlike the migrant workers who are seen as potential economic burdens to Singapore, Nicholas represents the kind of population that contributes to Singapore's capital accumulation, whether in terms of economic capital or the social capital signified by his whiteness.

By settling in Singapore with her husband, Sophia, moreover, proves that she is not the kind of difficult woman that the state anticipates. Sophia's socioeconomic background recalls controversial remarks in 1983 by Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, who asserted that highly educated women were not as marriageable and were not producing enough babies for the economy. As a result, the Singaporean government instituted tax incentives and other monetary incentives for women with university educations to have children and for low-income and undereducated women to be sterilized before the age of thirty after one or two children.<sup>77</sup> Not only were highly educated women considered less marriageable and less procreative, as noted in the *Changing Mindsets, Deepening Relationships* report, they were viewed as another avenue of population loss as "more female citizens, especially the better educated, are expected to marry foreigners."<sup>78</sup> Sophia both assuages the Singaporean state's anxieties and checks all the boxes for fulfilling Singapore's Global Asia agenda.



The story's focus on Sophia offers subtle cues indicating the ways that Singapore's particular history of postcolonial capitalism has shaped her understanding of success. As with the demographic compilations discussed in this chapter, the story performs an enumerative and cosmopolitan logic through the "process of elimination" that the couple goes through to decide on their honeymoon destination: "Not America—Sophia went to college there. They covered most of Asia during their brief courtship. Africa and South America will be perused later at leisure. Australia is, of course, not even in the running. This leaves Europe, which to Sophia means expensive chocolates and the novels of Thomas Mann."<sup>79</sup> The tongue-in-cheek narrative voice performs class privilege by reducing Europe to a consumerist association and a cultural detail likely culled from her schooling. On the one hand, such sanctioned ignorance—as a performance of Singaporean power and success—affectively mimics colonial privilege. On the other hand, the way that Sophia belies her class affectation with crude symbolism and the basic touristic knowledge of the non-Singapore world that "Singaporean Abroad" espouses also calls attention to the hollowness of the cosmopolitan Overseas Singaporean.

The Swiss setting of the story is particularly significant not only as a generalized symbol of European colonialism but also because it recalls an idiosyncratic detail from Singapore's history of postcolonial capitalism. For many years, the "Swiss standard of living" was touted as the developmental ideal toward which Singaporeans should strive (according to former prime minister, Goh Chok Tong, such a standard of living was achieved in 1994). The effect of the Singaporean state's grand portrayal of Switzerland clearly looms large in Sophia's imagination when she finds herself "astonished to discover such power and influence reposing in a place smaller by a factor of ten than Singapore."<sup>80</sup> Even though "Sophia's Honeymoon" is ostensibly about Sophia coming to terms with her role in her marriage to Nicholas and the new class privileges it affords her, the story also is about Sophia's arrival, as a Singaporean, to the scene of global capitalism. After all, Switzerland is a country that has signified First World development in Singapore, and it is known globally for its offshore banking. Thus, when Sophia gleefully "feels that Europe has spread itself before her feet as if she were a Henry James heroine,"<sup>81</sup> because of her association with Nicholas, her postcolonial capitalist success becomes shaded with an "Empire strikes back" narrative underwriting the story.

A consciousness of the structuring effects of metanarratives, whether received from the Singaporean state or from neoliberal ideology, pervades "Sophia's Honeymoon," as underscored by the mechanical imagery of the wedding industry. For example, the determinative and structural language describing Sophia's wedding as having "coalesced around her" emphasizes Sophia's position of passivity.<sup>82</sup> The passage continues: "Sophia submitted to the cake-tastings and gown-fittings, starting a machine that would not turn off until it had deposited her, winded and flushed, at the altar—where Nicholas awaited her, startingly attractive in his new Hugo Boss suit."<sup>83</sup> What might have been represented as Sophia's agential actions are instead

portrayed as her yielding acceptance to wedding conventions, as illustrated by the use of noun forms ("cake-tastings" that Sophia submits to) rather than the use of active verbs. When combined with the imagery of automated machinery, the passive grammar presents Sophia as a mere outcome rather than as an agent of her own success. Much in the way that the Singaporean state has produced metanarratives about what global capitalist success should look like, so has the wedding industry produced expectations and thus conventions about weddings.

In contrast to the demographic compilations that present living abroad as the defining climax of an Overseas Singaporean's life, "Sophia's Honeymoon" centers denouement. The implicit critique that "Sophia's Honeymoon" presents of texts such as "Singaporean Abroad" and "50 Dots Around the World," in other words, is that they instrumentalize partial narratives to achieve their ideological goals. Tiang not only uses the gendered metaphorization of Singaporean success through Sophia's marriage to capture the ebullience and performance of state discourse; he also uses it to comment on the disappointment that follows even when all expectations have been fulfilled. Narratively, "Sophia's Honeymoon" is the denouement of the broader narratives of Singaporean success. In this way, the title, "Sophia's Honeymoon," refers not simply to the celebratory vacation that she takes after her wedding, but to the waning bliss promised by achieving such success. That is, the story captures the *end* of a honeymoon period.

Sophia's gendered routines are a way for Tiang to draw out a critique of the cosmopolitan education that the state advocates in the context of Singapore's knowledge economy and Global Asia project. At first, the story seems to characterize Sophia's exercise and attentiveness to her appearance as a matter of vanity:

She *knows* they make a handsome couple, and this is part of what draws people to them. . . . Sophia does forty-five minutes of Pilates every morning, and she never eats carbs after six. She *knows* what shades to wear to set off her honey-colored skin and straight black hair. They are the sort of couple one looks at and automatically begins imagining their beautiful children.<sup>84</sup>

Although Sophia is concerned about her body, the language indicates that the physical attributes she chooses to highlight are not only connected to her femininity, but to her coloring. Notable too is how Sophia frames her choices in terms of "knowing." Such declarative language would at first seem to connote Sophia's confidence in herself, but given how the story explores Singapore's image abroad, to "know" also signifies Sophia's ability to navigate her *audience's* desires. Sophia strategically aestheticizes herself to emphasize the interraciality of her and Nick's marriage, for that is what "draws people to them." With denotations of "striking," the descriptor "handsome" can also mean "contrast," or in this case, racial contrast. Although Sophia is, in her own right, a high-achieving Singaporean woman, she represents and expresses herself as the subordinated part of a couple, reassuring her audience that whatever power she holds is mitigated by white masculinity.

Tiang's story, however, also explores the limits of cosmopolitan education. Much in the way that Sophia's imagination of Switzerland is cut down to size during her honeymoon, so too is the assumed social benefits of Singaporean success. In another instance in which Sophia performs her postcolonial knowledge, she shares her prepared answers formed in response to European perceptions of Singapore. Sophia "is able speak glibly about the heat, the shopping centers, their adorable new flat in Tanjong Pagar with teak furniture imported from Myanmar. She is careful to emphasize how much of a financial hub it is, mindful that Nicholas suspects people of thinking he has relegated himself to a backwater."<sup>85</sup> Sophia's carefully constructed answers reveal that Singapore's economic success and rapid modernization have not afforded her social or cultural capital, and she must still perform her class privilege to signal her cosmopolitanism. Even though Sophia might be the exact kind of transnationally mobile, neoliberal subject that the Singaporean state so desires, Tiang illustrates how the Global Asia glamour of postcolonial capitalist success cannot easily overcome long histories of Eurocentrism.

Following Sophia's defensive encounters with Nick's Swiss colleagues who know little about Singapore, Tiang uses a metafictional technique to comment on Sophia's inability to decode the world that her cosmopolitan life was supposed to prepare her for: Zurich reveals the failures of her cosmopolitan education. Tiang first achieves this critique through the ekphrastic depiction of the opera Sophia and Nicholas attend. Though visually detailed in its description, because the narrative is focalized through Sophia, the reader has little sense of the opera's plot since Sophia herself does not know it ("She should have looked up the plot on the Internet,"<sup>86</sup> she chides herself). The description of the opera focuses on singers on the stage, but neither Sophia nor the reader understands what relations characters have to one another or how one moment leads to another. At best, Sophia can only triangulate meaning from the opera through audience reaction when, for example, "Nicholas nods appreciatively, as he does at a good volley at Wimbledon" or when her companions "are on their feet, applauding."<sup>87</sup> In a moment of frustration, Sophia decides to leave. Similar to her experience at the opera, Sophia is unable to interpret her surroundings enough to navigate the streets, which has the consequence that she is not able to find her hotel. She experiences slight relief when she stops at a McDonald's and finds comfort in the "universal" taste of the french fries.<sup>88</sup>

This is a subtle moment where Tiang also calls attention to the *reader's* inability to decode. While the story is sympathetic to Sophia, it also sets up a critique of her character because of her materialistic superficiality. One could imagine a reading that assumes the comfort that McDonald's offers Sophia as further evidence of her shallow cosmopolitanism, or even as evidence of her Americanization—after all, Sophia went to college in the United States. And though McDonald's is a well-known symbol of corporatization, it is also a nostalgic setting for a generation of Singaporeans that took advantage of the fast-food restaurant's tables and free

air-conditioning as students. Even though everyone can communicate in English, no one can help Sophia find her hotel. She is panicked and with little hope when Nicholas appears out of nowhere. The story closes with the definite knowledge that “this time tomorrow they will be in Vienna.”<sup>89</sup> As with the opera, Sophia’s inability to navigate the Swiss setting is the failure of cosmopolitan knowledge. The main thing that Sophia can decipher is a corporate symbol of the global. But more than a critique of Sophia or her state-sponsored cosmopolitan education, Tiang points to the potential failure of a reader to comprehend McDonald’s as a national symbol of home. One interpretation of “universal” taste can be read as the story’s comment on how Sophia has conceded to the globalized power of McDonald’s, as evidenced by the depiction of her shallow cosmopolitanism. Yet when Sophia marks fries as universal, she not only points to their global ubiquity; she also implies that fries are an experience she has had elsewhere. Given Sophia’s worldly experiences, one can assume that she has eaten at McDonald’s in many different countries. When also considering how Sophia is in a foreign country and her feelings of cultural alienation, we are to understand that the brief comfort she finds in the fries are somehow associated with the particularity of her home. Indeed, while wandering around lost, she makes clear that she desires the stability of being at home when she thinks that it is “as if she will never get back to the hotel, or Singapore, or anywhere that could be considered a place of safety.”<sup>90</sup>

When assuming that McDonald’s fries signifies a scale of identification operating outside of national particulars, readers are unable to fully grasp the depth of comfort Sophia finds in the throes of her panic. In this way, Tiang leads the reader toward an easy and potentially Eurocentric reading of McDonald’s and then disabuses that reader by calling attention to the obfuscatory power of global signifiers when assuming neoliberalism or the United States as stable referents for the global. Ironically, if readers come to “Sophia’s Honeymoon” for their own cosmopolitan education, one that is meant to train their imagination to make cross-cultural connections, we see how they can be limited in their education as Sophia is in hers.

If for “Singaporean Abroad” and “50 Red Dots,” setting is the literary element through which to assert Singaporean, capitalist achievement, for Tiang setting is a way of imagining the full arc of state narratives that make a claim to Singapore’s postcolonial capitalism. While it certainly leverages a broader political critique of Global Asia policies, *It Never Rains on National Day* also offers a formal critique: it repurposes the statist form of the demographic compilation to illustrate how state narratives are truncated. The remedy to the Singaporean state’s instrumentalization of short literary forms is not the novelistic form or a clear narrative arc. Though there is an overarching logic in the arrangement of Tiang’s stories, it is not one that is particularly obvious, nor is it progressive or linear. At times, some of the characters across stories appear to be the same ones, but we cannot always be sure. In one case, it is not initially clear whether the protagonist in the story is Singaporean, and we only figure out in a later story that he is. Thus, the population that

Tiang depicts in his story is one not simply defined by its status abroad or other demographic qualities, but by a readerly effort that draws connections between the various stories. Indeed, Tiang's collection calls for more accountability from the reader. Through the stories' arrangement, Tiang points to the claustrophobia induced by the Singaporean top-down model that shapes understandings of populations and instead advocates for a more organic connectivity that readers come to see on their own.

## CONCLUSION

Despite their ideological differences, "Singaporean Abroad" and "50 Red Dots" perform an expanded Global Asia imagination for nationalist purposes through their representations of cosmopolitan populations and the non-Singapore world. In doing so, diasporic Singaporeans, a demographic figure with historical ties to colonial-era governance, are deployed as politicized cultural figures in service of Singapore's Global Asia project of postcolonial capitalism. We see how transnational identification does indeed complicate the "inside-outside dichotomy on which the nation-state is predicated," as Robert Young puts it, as the "cosmopolitan idea" represented by the non-Singapore world is deployed by and against the state to influence internal nationalist dynamics.<sup>91</sup> Tiang's short story "Sophia's Honeymoon" puts the cosmopolitan idea into question by calling attention to the politics of knowledge production and performance and thus displays the limits of postcolonial capitalism. My analysis of these texts problematizes the Singaporean state and its instrumentalist approach to the Singaporean diaspora for its economic ambitions. While such critiques of the state are fair, texts like "50 Red Dots" that in fact take up a cosmopolitan aesthetic and politics similar to that of the Singaporean state to perform a critical nationalism remind us not to reduce state power to only the repressive or disciplinary. Moreover, such a critique of state nationalism implicitly suggests that there is an authentic nationalism.

By way of closing, I turn now to the final story of Tiang's collection, "Sophia's Party," which is linked to the opening story. In spite of the state critique presented in "Sophia's Honeymoon," this second story performs a reparative reading of the Singaporean state by calling attention to the fiction of authentic nationalism that so often underlies critiques of state nationalism. "Sophia's Party" brings the elements of Singapore in Global Asia home, so to speak: in her flat in Singapore, Sophia is holding a gathering for her friends (many of them former Overseas Singaporeans) on the occasion of National Day, an event that "seems almost an anticlimax."<sup>92</sup> Sophia's Filipina domestic worker has been dismissed for the evening so that "the guests can be sure it was Sophia who cooked,"<sup>93</sup> underscoring how the national project of Global Asia is built on the erased labor of migrant workers. National Day presents a stark contrast to the occasion of "Sophia's Honeymoon," which is presented as the climactic point of Sophia and Nicholas's new marriage.<sup>94</sup>

Indeed, “Sophia’s Party” acts as an inversion of “Sophia’s Honeymoon”: it is set at home rather than abroad, it is Sophia rather than Nicholas who shapes the power dynamic of the couple (in part because Nicholas has had heart surgery), and it is focalized through Nicholas rather than Sophia. Moreover, in this instance, Nicholas watches Sophia watch the National Day Parade, reversing how Sophia watched Nicholas watch the opera, and the story culminates in Nicholas’s ruminations over the state of the marriage. All these elements make clear that “Sophia’s Party” is to be read in relation to its opening counterpart. The final story is also understood as a cumulative point of the collection, not simply by virtue of being the concluding story, but because it brings together other Overseas Singaporean characters from other stories that have now returned. The final story connects the other characters from the seemingly unrelated stories in the collection through their friendship with Sophia.

Compared to the more tentative and vague description of the opera through Sophia’s eyes, Nicholas’s language in describing the parade appears precise despite his cultural outsider status; readers have a very clear idea of the scene that is unfolding. While Sophia was increasingly confused by not being able to follow the story of the opera, Nicholas *does* understand what is happening. Readers can thus comprehend what is happening by direct reference to what Nicholas is describing rather than having to triangulate meaning between Sophia and other characters as required in the opening story. Because Nicholas is presented as a sympathetic character to the reader by virtue of being the protagonist and having recently undergone a heart transplant, the narrative sets up Nicholas as reliable for his judgment. Although Nicholas’s depiction of the parade might seem relatively objective because of its precision, the language reveals his judgment, whether when describing the “perfectly made-up face” of the host, Diana Ser, or when describing Singapore’s multiculturalism as indicated by the “scrupulously diverse” performers.<sup>95</sup> That is, the National Day parade is overly curated and, therefore, inauthentic in the nationalist sentiment it represents. Nicholas’s critiques are not unique but represent a familiar liberal disdain for military display or “the shameless manipulation of expertly-designed proselytizing.”<sup>96</sup> Anyone with a healthy disdain for authority, the narrative suggests, should be skeptical like Nicholas.

Tiang’s story does not contest that the National Day parade is an obvious attempt at ideological coercion, but it does call attention to the patriarchal and Eurocentric knowingness of Nicholas’s various critiques. Nicholas finds himself bewildered by Sophia and her friends’ lack of skepticism and indeed their earnestness in celebrating National Day, wondering why “Sophia, global traveller that she is, looks moved by the display” and why “the Singaporeans in this room [who] have spent a few years abroad” are so happy to consume state messaging.<sup>97</sup> Yet for all of Nicholas’s cynicism—a sentiment that his readers might share—he admits that he finds aesthetic pleasure in the spectacle of National Day: “The camera picks out their firm arms, their rigid faces, and Nicholas feels his crisp European disdain

of military matters melting around the edges. He thinks of himself as a pacifist, above the tinsel pomp of soldiers on parade, yet there is something seductively virile about these men in uniform, the regularity of them.”<sup>98</sup> The passage suggests that the parade is so sublime that even the staunchest cynics give into the pleasures of the nation form. Moreover, it becomes clear that Nicholas’s criticisms are to be problematized for their Eurocentricity, much in the way Tiang subtly problematizes a Eurocentric reading of McDonald’s in “Sophia’s Honeymoon.” Nicholas’s cynicism stands in contrast to Sophia and her friends’ pleasure in each other’s company and in the performance itself. When Sophia explains to Nick that her earnest engagement with the parade is “ironic,” the story makes clear that she and her friends are not simply deluded nationalists. They are, in fact, quite clear-eyed about the ideological aims of the National Day parade. The story not only portrays Nicholas as unable to comprehend the fun Sophia and her friends are having with each other, but it also sets up critiques of state nationalism to ring hollow.

Moreover, “Sophia’s Party” returns us to the original national tension between stayers and quitters discussed in the introduction to this book. While most of my readings have focused on the ways that diasporic Singaporeans are aestheticized through demographic compilations, Tiang’s story draws attention to the ways that the stayers, as represented by the military, produce nostalgia as aesthetic pleasure for their viewers, the returned Singaporeans of “Sophia’s Party,” and even non-Singaporeans like Nicholas. National kinship in Tiang’s formulation is about taking aesthetic pleasures in or with each other. In the final lines of “Sophia’s Party,” Nicholas finds himself cautiously hopeful about the state of his marriage, suggesting that the aesthetic pleasures of the parade, whether earnest or “ironic,” are meaningful for the characters and not simply as an ideological force that stabilizes loyalty to the nation-state. Tiang’s story thus compels us to consider how the state is not simply a sociopolitical administrative force but also an aesthetically mediating one that can produce unexpected effects.