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Paper 3 – Covering Letter

The motive is that while Singapore often condemns Western values as decadent and materialistic, and claims to adopt “Eastern” values because they are supposedly moral and discourage materialism and greed, Singapore itself is largely a materialistic society. It pursues wealth and fame incessantly, even turning to superstitious beliefs in hopes of fulfilling their material needs. This use of “feng shui” to chase fortune is exemplified by the Fountain of Wealth at Suntec City.

The thesis is that the pursuit of wealth is not purely a Western concept, but very much inherent in the Asian (namely Chinese) culture. Thus, the West should not be summarily condemned as corrupt and materialistic, because very often the goals of the East and the West overlap.

In rewriting this paper I focused more on materialism in our “Chinese” culture, the metaphysical symbolism of fountains, as well as the superstitious nature of the obsession with wealth. I also included more details about the structure of the fountain and some photos. By a stroke of luck, the Sunday Times (2 days before the submission of this paper!) contained an article about Singapore’s obsession with breaking weird records. This essay thus underwent a final revision to include the latest comments in the news as well. Overall, writing this paper proved to be a very enjoyable experience indeed.

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Suntec City: the Best of East and West?

1. Suntec City is a classic example of East meets West in Singapore. A highly modern one-stop centre for business and entertainment, it “combin[es] high technology and metaphysical symbolism” and is designed like a giant left hand (Figure 4). Four 45-storeyed office towers form the “fingers”, and a fifth tower of 18 storeys is the “thumb”, while the Suntec Singapore International Convention & Exhibition Centre (SSICEC) forms the “wrist” of this hand. In the centre of the five office towers is the “palm” which holds a magnificent bronze ring structure: the Fountain of Wealth. The world’s largest fountain boasts of its “encompass[ment] of a perfect blend of traditional concepts and modern ideas” (Figure 2), aptly summarizing Singapore’s search for a national identity through the combination of what it deems the best of East and West: the culture and values of the East, paired with the modernization and progress of the West. The fountain serves not only as an ornament in the heart of the city’s largest shopping mall (until the recent opening of Vivocity), but more importantly, as a symbol of fortune flowing into the “palm” of Suntec City, where wealth is captured and retained. This use of Chinese geomancy in the architecture of Suntec City to bring wealth highlights a superstitious obsession with material gains among the Chinese; after all, Chinese metaphysics operates on a theoretical, invisible belief and has no scientific basis. This, then, presents an unsettling irony. In the creation of Singapore’s national identity, the government constantly warns against the materialism

associated with Western culture, but it fails to see, or accept, that materialism is very much inherent in Chinese culture as well.

2. Western culture is deemed decadent and selfish in many Asian societies because it apparently encourages individualism and “brings about unhealthy practices which lay particular stress on materialistic enjoyment”, resulting in the “pursuit of materialistic comfort and neglect of spiritual cultivation” (Lim 188). Since the spread of these undesirable attitudes would be detrimental to Singaporean society, the Singaporean government constantly exalts Confucian values which emphasize the importance of upright morals, hard work, and thrift. Yet, the use of Chinese geomancy in the design of Suntec City blatantly purports to bring wealth to itself, demonstrating that the desire for material gains is valued not just by the West but by all cultures in general, and that summarily stereotyping the West as corrupt and materialistic is thus unjust. Ultimately, it is essential to recognize that “East” and “West” are purely “imaginary entities constructed through a mutual symbolic mirroring” (Ang 179), and that the two entities are assigned opposing attributes simply to facilitate definition of their characteristics. Although “‘Asian’ and ‘Western’ cultures are portrayed as ‘primordial’ opposites which are permanently in tension with one another” (Ang 187), the goals and values of the “East” and “West” very often overlap, and these same values, when viewed from different perspectives, are deemed detrimental or beneficial to society.

3. To a large extent, the Fountain of Wealth is representative of Singapore’s goals. The claim that the Fountain of Wealth successfully combines modern technology with Chinese metaphysical symbolism demonstrates an artificial attempt to balance East and West, for while it indeed showcases the high level of technology associated with Western modernization, it does not capture the true Chinese culture. It relies selectively on the ancient Chinese belief of “feng shui” (风水, literally meaning “wind” and “water”) for the sole purpose of bringing good fortune

to Suntec City (Figure 5). Fountains are essential elements in “feng shui” because the moving water (“shui”) causes the movement of air (“feng”), and being in touch with these natural elements supposedly builds harmony with nature and hence brings good luck. Thus, the Fountain is open daily to the public for “touch water sessions” which shower good luck and energy to those who walk around the spring three times (Figure 2). But even the “lucky spring” is dwarfed by the formidable bronze ring structure of the Fountain, which weighs 85 tonnes and sits on four 14-metre tall bronze pillars, resembling a tripod, but with four legs. While the “perfect circle of the Fountain signifies unending completeness and unity”, the four pillars represent the Four Pillars of Destiny, one of the branches of Chinese astrology that maps out a person’s life and offers advice on what action to take during the various phases of his life.

4. This advice is displayed beside the fountain platform, on several posters offering descriptions of the twelve animals in the Chinese zodiac and advice on how people born in different years can improve their luck for the year using “feng shui” (Figure 6). The posters also state specific times of the day for people of different zodiac signs to touch the water and be blessed with luck and prosperity. It becomes evident, then, that Singaporeans generally possess a superstitious fixation with wealth, insofar as to perform baseless rituals (such as walking around the spring) with hopes of getting rich. In Tamney’s analysis of the modernization of Chinese culture in Singapore, he mentions two Taoist experts from China who describe locals as “more superstitious than religious, being interested in the use of fortune-telling and geomancy to attain wealth and good luck.” Tamney summed this up with the criticism that “Singapore is a materialistic society in which many people use fortune-tellers in their pursuit of wealth” (152). Hence, materialism exists not only in the “West”, but is very much inherent in “Eastern” culture as well. In fact, that the world’s largest fountain is named the “Fountain of *Wealth*” (italics added) reflects the people’s focus on acquiring and amassing wealth.

5. Thus it becomes clear that, like with the use of “feng shui” to bring prosperity, Singaporeans do not adopt the values of the “East” in its entirety, but select favourable aspects that they regard as useful in the context of modern Singapore. The government constantly emphasizes the importance of Chinese Confucian values through public education, but selects only those qualities that would produce a workforce equipped to contribute to economic development. As Tamney puts it, “while self-cultivation means primarily moral development for Confucianists, it means primarily job preparation for the Government” (182). He contends that the PAP “displays neither the reverence for tradition nor the commitment to moral development that are crucial aspects of Confucianism,” and that “while the Government does use aspects of Confucianism, it rejects the essential nature of the Confucian state and family” (183). This presents yet another irony: while Singapore valorizes the “East” as exclusively positive and inherently moral and condemns the “Western” culture as materialistic and decadent, “Eastern” values are not emphasized in their entirety. Values that would facilitate economic development and modernization (still a very “Western” notion) are specially selected and propagated, while the somewhat more conservative fundamental values of Confucianism, like familial harmony and selflessness, take a backseat to the more “valued” values. In sum, the national identity is created from elements of “East” and “West” based on their deemed usefulness in bringing wealth to the nation, which is a very materialistic principle indeed.

6. At the same time, the fact that the national tourist icon only combines elements of Chinese “culture” mixed with Western modernization reflects the Government’s ambivalence towards nationalism. While “the official approach to nation-building is aimed at the creation of a synthetic Singaporean identity composed of the ‘traditional’ elements of all the major communities” (Ang 184– quoting Jacqueline Lo), government policies often lead the minorities to “perceive what the Government calls ‘national’ as being Chinese” (Tamney 187). The obvious

reason for this is that the majority of the population is Chinese, but a second reason may be the reluctance of the other minority groups to make earning money a dominant goal (Tamney 187). Therein lies the dichotomy in creating the national identity: while the need for nationalism to build unity among the different races is unquestionable, policies favour the Chinese who value “Western” notions of materialism and economic progress more than the minority groups, leaving the national identity very much a blend of not “East” and “West”, but of “Chinese” and “Western” ideologies, which ultimately overlap in the pursuit of wealth.

7. As a tourist icon, the Fountain of Wealth reflects the status of Singapore as a developed state, where affluence permits large sums of money to be devoted to building non-functional structures like huge fountains; a luxury accentuated by the scarcity of land in Singapore. That a whopping US\$6 million was spent on building the 1683.07m²-large fountain is a sign of Singapore progressively moving towards a postmodern era, where people can afford to spend millions to fuel their superstitious belief in “feng shui”. This ornament used primarily for “feng shui” purposes, however, is not entirely non-functional; it serves also as an entertainment ground. Every night multimedia laser shows with free laser message and song dedications are played using sprays of water as a screen (Figure 7). This impressive display not only showcases the high level of technology in Singapore, but also engages the public and tourists in its activities, making the Fountain a truly impressive tourist icon. In addition, the Fountain is also marketed as an area for holding corporate and private functions. Posters around the fountain declare that the “Fountain of Wealth has become a *cool* (pun probably intended) place to hold...important function[s]” because of the recent upgrading of the existing air-conditioning system. As such, the multi-functional tourist attraction is highly commercialized, giving purpose to its existence.

8. A walk around the Fountain Plaza (one storey above the base of the Fountain) would reveal a number of posters presenting interesting facts about the Fountain. Surprisingly, most of these posters have weathered, and a few are complete eyesores with pieces of yellowed sticky tape adhered to them, appearing on first glance to be dead, shriveled lizards (Figure 8). Others are partially collapsed within their glass casings, making it difficult to read the write-ups about the landmark (Figure 9). From a very pessimistic perspective, the poor maintenance of the area surrounding the Fountain of Wealth may represent the start of Singapore's downfall to laziness and decadence. Being disciplined and "working tirelessly regardless of the nature of the work being performed" (Tamney 175) are highly valued in conservative Asian societies, and such qualities should be widespread in Chinese-dominated Singapore where the traditional values of the Chinese ought to be governed by Confucianism. Yet the lack of discipline is evident here, where little effort is made in the upkeep of the posters surrounding the national icon. What shows here is the shift in values from the more rigid traditional Confucian thought to one that is more lax, and presumably, more blamably "Western".

9. However, while Western modernization is often blamed for decadence, the poor maintenance of the Fountain Plaza (which lies on the rather inaccessible and thus less visited upper floor of the Fountain) cannot be blamed on the prevalence of "decadent" Western values in Singapore. Rather, the issue here may instead be the people's focus on only the best while ignoring what they deem less important (in this case it is the part of the Fountain hidden away from public view that is not as properly maintained as the main Fountain area). A look into the Uniquely Singapore website, which offers fun facts about Singapore, would demonstrate quite evidently how Singapore celebrates its successes. Aside from having the World's Largest Fountain as stated in the Guinness Book of Records, Singapore holds records for the longest human domino chain, the biggest-ever game of pass-the-parcel, the longest inline skating chain,

and the highest number of people wearing balloon hats, just to name a few. It is then fair to say that not only is Singapore “deeply committed to capitalist society, [which is predominantly] a Western invention” (Tamney 194), she is also fixated with achievement. However, most of these achievements are trivial, easily attainable, and “[do] not reveal a sustainable capacity for genuine firsts” (Straits Times 2). Above all, these records are constructed just for the sake of getting recorded. Singaporeans have a “fetish for firsts” because they are “very competitive and tend to construe success as outdoing other people and groups” (Straits Times 2).

10. The constant need for Singapore to prove its numerous capabilities, perhaps, can be attributed to the “sense of crisis [that] erupted from the very moment that Singapore was catapulted into the status of a fully independent nation-state after it was forced to leave the Malaysian Federation...and forced to fend for itself” (Ang 182). This involuntary gaining of national independence, as Ang and Stratton put it, explains “why the national narrative is suffused with the felt urgent need to struggle for Singapore’s survival”, not just economically and culturally, but in all social realms as well. This, then, might explain why the desperate need to prove one’s prowess is so deeply embedded in the Singaporean culture.

11. Suntec City’s slogan, “Step into the Future, Step into Suntec City” (Figure 10), then, quite befittingly describes Singapore’s desperate search for a national identity. Just as Suntec City fails to achieve the “perfect blend of traditional concepts and modern ideas”, so “generating a unified Singaporean identity must always be seen as something in progress, a Utopian dream” that is infinitely difficult to achieve (Ang 186). However, it might be easier to view the national identity in its totality, rather than select qualities in terms of “East” and “West” and attempt to classify them as binary opposites. Very often, the “assigned” qualities of “East” and “West” overlap and are merely given different names and meanings based on context. Perhaps, then, what sums up our national identity of extreme competitiveness and emphasis to be above the rest is a Hokkien

(traditionally Asian) term commonly used by Singaporeans: “kiasu” – where the worst of East and West converge.

(About 2210 words)

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Appendix



Figure 1: The Fountain of Wealth, a large bronze ring structure supported by 4 pillars. In the centre is the “lucky spring” around which people walk 3 rounds for good luck.



Figure 2: A poster found around the Fountain area boasting of the Fountain’s encompassment of a perfect blend of tradition and modernity.



Figure 3: Enlarged view of the “lucky spring”



Combining high technology and metaphysical symbolism, Suntec City is designed like a giant hand.

THE POWER OF WATER

One of the most powerful elements of nature, water symbolises wealth and fortune.

The inward flowing water of the Fountain of Wealth represents riches pouring in. Cascading water falling from over 14 metres creates an unmistakable magnetic aura while the 30-metre water jet serves to inspire the human spirit. The bubble jet located at the center of the fountain also provides for an invigorating experience.

Every evening the Fountain is open to anyone who wishes to experience its power.

Figures 4 & 5: Posters found around the Fountain area describe the “metaphysical symbolism” behind Suntec City and its Fountain of Wealth.

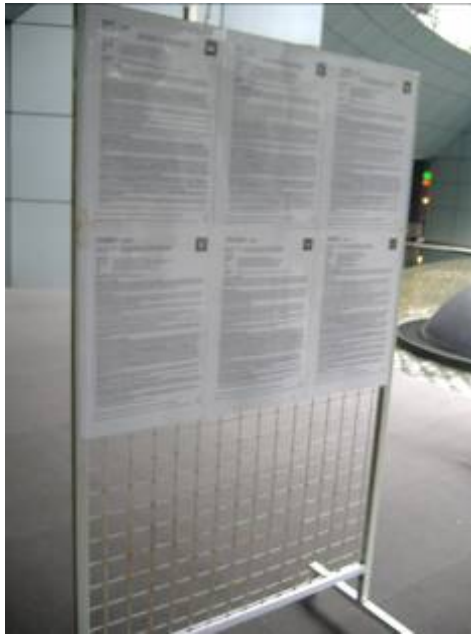


Figure 6: Posters placed beside the base of the Fountain offer advice on how people born in different years can improve their luck using “feng shui”.

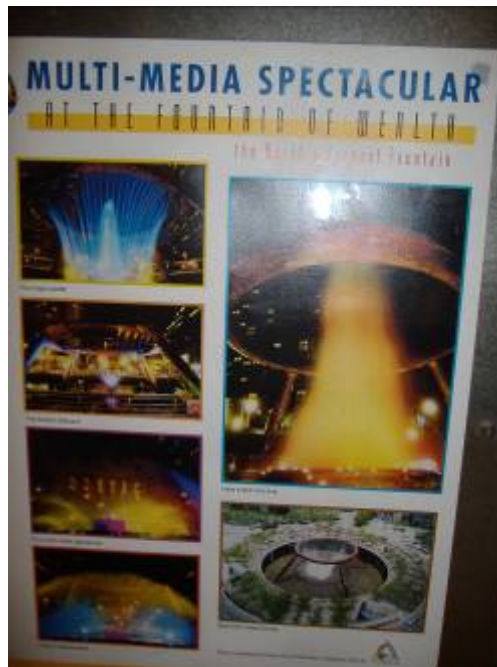


Figure 7: Commercialization of the Fountain to attract more tourists.

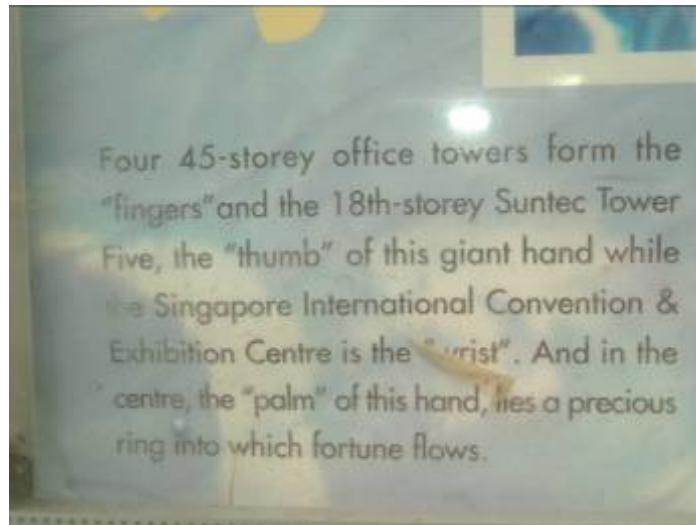


Figure 8: A poster found around the Fountain Plaza, describing the metaphysical symbolism behind Suntec City. Adhered to the surface of the poster is a piece of sticky tape resembling a dead lizard.



Figure 9: A poster found around the Fountain Plaza, collapsed in its casing.



Figure 10: Suntec City's slogan: "Step into the Future, Step into Suntec City".