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Oriental Purity: Postcolonial Discomfort and Asian Values

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Discomforting "Asian Values"

One of the issues that have defined East Asian political culture in the last decade is communitarian "Asian values." Academics read Asian values as the negotiation of local modernities and the universalisms of globalization in postcolonial societies but disagree in their evaluation, either critiquing the discourse for being a cynical rejection of universal humanism or giving it a sympathetic reading as a decentering discourse.¹ In either case, they situate Asian values in the contemporary global cultural field as fractured by localized variations of neoliberalisms and neoconservatisms, but they neglect its postcolonial genealogy in the murky depths of colonial discourse. Probably the most influential commentator on the emergence of Asian values in Singapore, Chua Beng-Huat sees the articulation of Asian values as the ruling elite's participation in a contemporary Orientalism that first raised Confu-

cianism as an explanation of successful East Asian development, wherein the elite embraced the prescribed Orient other as both positive self-definition and political strategy to conserve authoritarianism.² In a later article, Chua reads the discourse as an ideological articulation of the post–Cold War era, as a socialistic discourse with an Asian referent employed by developmental regimes holding out against neoliberalism.³ The discourse may thus be understood as an empowering strategic essentialism. While Chua’s analysis of Asian values as the self-Orientalizing strategy of the ruling elite alludes to its postcoloniality, his strategic redemption of Asian values raises the specter of postcolonial discomfort.

Chua acknowledges that his position is treacherous because it adjoins the same position assumed by the Singaporean ruling elite to serve their own interests. Importantly, Chua recognizes his own hybridity as a reflexive qualification: “As one who studied in Canada for his tertiary education, I am longer able to inhabit Singaporean political and cultural spaces without *discomfort*.”⁴ Chua’s registration of discomfort offers an interesting insight into the postcoloniality of Asian values that extends beyond the flagging of a caveat. It suggests that the strategic essentialisms of Asian values discourse express not only the postcolonial ambivalence between elite national hegemony and resistance against global hegemonies but also the contiguity of the hybrid spaces shared by Western-educated rulers of postcolonial societies and intellectual elites returning from the West. It points to a kernel of discomfort driving the articulation of Asian values. I do not doubt that Chua’s discomfort is qualitatively different from the ruling elite’s discomfort. At the very least, as a reflexive scholar aware that he is immanently positioned in the same postcolonial field, Chua turns his discomfort into a moment of intellectual critique and understanding. On the other hand, the ruling elite’s discomfort is one that is hidden under the discursive layers of Asian values and resolved, rather than transformed, in the articulation of Asianness.

In this essay, I take this postcolonial discomfort as the analytical focus to examine the genealogy of Asian values. I seek to conduct a “situated psychoanalysis” of the discomfort, which takes culture and the psyche as interwoven social systems driving the political articulation of Asian values.⁵ Chua’s point concerning elite discursive reversal of contemporary Orientalism raises the question of the elite’s relationship to colonial Orientalist discourse. This

is pertinent because the cultural life of the elite straddled the colonial, decolonization, and postcolonial periods, overlapping with the political and cultural life of the preceding local elite collaborating with British rule. Elite subjectivity was first formed in colonial discourse in the hybrid figure of the Anglicized Straits Chinese. An account of elite colonial hybridity is therefore necessary to the explication of the postcoloniality of Asian values. How did elite colonial hybridity influence their participation in contemporary Orientalism and their postcolonial discomfort? I begin thus by tracing the outlines of colonial hybridity in British Singapore. This hybridity produced several possible directions for postcolonial subject formation. Here, I focus on the desire for *Oriental purity* and its constitutive discomfort. Analyzing the careers of key members of the Straits Chinese elite, I discuss the psychic-cultural logic of the desire and the historical overdetermination of race, class, and gender that drove this desire.

The desire for Oriental purity and postcolonial discomfort are mutually constitutive of the postcolonial elite's subjectivity. This desire affected the trajectory of elite hegemony from decolonization to the articulation of Asian values, when the elite's anticolonial democratic socialist identity transfigured into a conservative Confucianist identity. This raises the question of continuity and discontinuity that calls for a nuanced tracing of the interaction between the desire, discomfort, and the changing discursive conditions of the postcolonial field in the historical trajectory of elite hegemony. In the subsequent sections, I show that, at the same time as desire and discomfort drove elite subject formation, they underpinned elite transposition of discursive strategies against political opposition and disciplining techniques of governmentality in different periods. In this respect, historian Tim N. Harper alerts us, by way of historiographies of diverse local engagements with colonial discourse, to the reactive articulation of Asian values vis-à-vis "the colourful hybridity of popular *mentalities*" set in motion by the momentary coalescing of elite and mass politics in nationalist movements.⁶ Thus the relationship between elite hybridity and the postcolonial disciplining of popular hybridities presents us with a good opportunity to critique the irony of postcoloniality in the national-developmental spaces of East Asia.

Colonialism, Hybridity, and the Anglicized Straits Chinese

Through the diasporic Chinese economic networks present in early Iberian and Dutch colonialisms in the region, creolized Chinese communities were formed in the Philippines, Dutch East Indies, and Malacca. In Malacca, Chinese settlers developed a uniquely hybrid, matri-focal Peranakan culture from the fifteenth century onward. The situation changed when the British incorporated Malacca with Penang and Singapore to form the Straits Settlements colony in the nineteenth century. The influx of Chinese immigrants after Singapore was established in 1819 led to the increasing settlement of successful merchants who became naturalized British subjects. The colonial regime conflated Peranakans and the new settlers as Straits *Baba* Chinese and distinguished them from the itinerant “alien” Chinese. Both groups became increasingly Anglicized by way of English education. Despite this convergence, the Straits Chinese dealt with their hybridity in multiple and complex fashions. The Peranakans retained their creolized practices but became a minority among recent immigrants. Most of the latter preserved their patri-focal Chinese culture and selectively adopted Western practices and, often, Peranakan cultural elements.

A number of highly Anglicized members of the latter group composed of both businessmen and professionals rose to become political leaders selected by the British to represent both the Straits Chinese and the larger Chinese community. Interpellated by the colonial regime and the ambivalence of Orientalist discourse, the elite confronted their hybridity as an acute cultural problem. Elite responses to hybridity were multifaceted, as exemplified by the four legislative councilors who founded the Straits Chinese British Association. Businessmen Seah Liang Seah and Tan Jiak Kim were dedicated to a conservative and modern Anglo-Chinese identity and saw China as a retrograde civilization. Lawyer Song Ong Siang was more nuanced in his conservative modernism. In his history of the Chinese in Singapore, Song chronicled the progress of the Straits Chinese under British rule. Significantly, Song began his genealogy by quoting Lim Boon Keng, a medical doctor and the fourth founder, on the development of Peranakan ethnicity through the hybridization of Chinese and Malay cultures in the centuries before British arrival.⁷ By tracing their lineage

to the Peranakans, Song and Lim, both third-generation Straits Chinese, claimed a local hybrid identity that distinguished them from both British rulers and Chinese masses. But while Song celebrated the modernization of this identity under British rule, Lim's more complex response presaged the postcolonial ruling elite's discomfort.

Lim was unique among the four because he identified with the alien masses. His vision of local hybridity was one of inclusive British imperial multiculturalism, in which "the sons of the Empire" would enjoy "the rights and privileges of free men." Thus he criticized the neglect of "tens of thousands" of aliens "who ought to belong to this country . . . to live the life of men," not as "mere machines."⁸ At the same time, Lim was a major figure in the local Confucian revival movement, which overlapped with the diasporic arm of the Chinese Reform Movement and sought to sanitize local practices with modernist interpretations of Confucianism. In the process, hybrid practices unique to the settlements were culled. For example, in 1906, the reformers successfully abolished two locally developed popular religious festivals they saw as vulgar depreciations of Confucian ancestor worship.⁹ Significantly, after his fourth term in the colonial legislature ended in 1921, Lim left for China to head Xiamen University to advance his reformist Confucianism.

The desire for social and cultural purity was not peculiar to colonial hybridity or Confucianism and could take many political forms. Neither was the Confucianist desire for Oriental purity the only direction to be taken in Straits Chinese postcolonial subject formation. Confucianization was only one response in the Straits Chinese's diverse cultural engagements with their colonial hybridity, but it is the most important because of its genealogical link with the postcolonial ruling elite. Two questions need to be answered to make explicit the historical and theoretical specificity of the Confucianist desire for Oriental purity. How was the desire for this Oriental purity culturally linked to British colonial discourse and Straits Chinese colonial hybridity? What psychic-cultural conditions aroused, deepened, and drove the desire?

For Lim and the other Anglicized reformers, the identification with Western modernism squared with their Confucianism through a creative self-Orientalizing move. Thus Philip Holden analyzes Lim's writings as an

ambivalent “reinscription” of Victorian masculinity as modernist Confucianism and of traditional Confucian virtues as modern Victorian values.¹⁰ This Victorian-Confucian mirroring effect alludes to the dialectic constitution of the identities of self and other in Orientalist discourse that was suffused with unequal relationships of power founded on the racial ontology of colonial bodies. Frantz Fanon locates the creation of the colonized subject in the extinction of its original culture and the twisting of its soul toward metropolitan culture. But this cultural whitening did not obviate the fact that his racialized body served as a constant existential denial of his subjectivity. The racialized body of the colonized served as the psychoanalytic object of collective catharsis, a “phobogenic object” on which the anxieties repressed by the Western superego were projected. Thus the same discourse that made possible the production of colonial subjects also fetishized the native bodies as thus-colored objects on which Eurocentric phobias were projected.¹¹

Colonial discourse fetishized the Southeast Asian Chinese as embodiments of social danger and perfidy.¹² This signification converged with the anxieties of colonial capitalism and was congealed in the notion of dirtiness. Because the Chinese in Singapore were heavily involved in the mercantile business, dirtiness was manifested in the filth produced in trading concentrations. In the Malay states, tin mining was closely linked with Chinese entrepreneurs and labor gangs based in the settlements, which further reinforced the dirt-Chinese association. Anne McClintock argues that dirt was a Victorian scandal because it expressed the “fetishized undervaluation of human labor,” the underside of commodity fetishism.¹³ Dirt reminded the bourgeoisie that labor, not the abstract market, created industrial wealth. In Malaya, dirt was a reminder of British dependence on Chinese merchants and labor for the extraction of colonial surplus. Imperial bourgeois anxieties led to the fetishization of material dirt and the Chinese body as social danger. Furthermore, the British initially depended on quasi-political Chinese organizations to regulate labor immigration and its associated social ills: opium smoking, prostitution, and gambling. These organizations were eventually suppressed as dangerous “secret societies,” but the British chose not to step into the vacated role of communal governance. Instead, they established the Chinese Protectorate to manage the population at arm’s length, after it was concluded that the recruitment of Chinese officers would

be “dangerous,” as they would bring in their “Oriental vices of bribery and falsehood.”¹⁴

It was in this discursive context that the British viewed the Anglicized Straits Chinese positively in contrast to the Chinese masses. The British misrecognized the cultural capital that afforded the Straits Chinese class distance from “dirty” primary political-economic activities as British civilization, making the leading Straits Chinese merchants and professionals *potentially* honorable and virtuous. The potentiality, “almost the same but not white,” was an attribute of colonial ambivalence. In the racial ontology of colonial discourse, the Straits Chinese were innately perfidious, while their Anglicization represented the desired suppression of social danger. For Homi Bhabha, the ambivalence was necessary for colonial control but yet was insurgent because the hybrid subjects were like imperfect mirrors, “part-objects of presence” splitting the colonizer’s identity into a schizophrenia of realism and fetishized desiring.¹⁵ But what became of the subjects who realized that they were imperfect mirrors because of the contingencies of race, class, and gender?

For sociologically astute colonial subjects such as Lim, this realization was a crisis of identity manifesting as postcolonial discomfort. Lim’s epiphany took place during his stint in Britain on colonial scholarship, where he witnessed racism against the admired backdrop of British national pride. He was then driven to learn Chinese culture and language by the shame that he knew little of these. In psychoanalytic terms, Lim’s experience revealed the gap between his symbolic identification with British civilization and the racial real of his objectified Chinese body, and this gap constituted the traumatic kernel driving his subject formation. Postcolonial discomfort refers to the unease with this traumatic gap. Subsequent subject formation was marked by the imaginary identification — “identification with the image in which we appear likable to ourselves” — with the Chinese nation and people, through whose eyes Lim saw his own virtuosity vis-à-vis British racist rejection.¹⁶ Thus a few years before he left for Xiamen, Lim increasingly showed his disappointment with imperial multiculturalism in the legislative council and even broke decorum by accusing the British of overt racism.¹⁷ One of his successors, Lim Cheng Ean, a lawyer who was also vocal about the rights of aliens, was more succinct in expressing the drive to identify

with imagined China, when he walked out in protest against antiimmigrant policies: “Do you want me to turn my eyes towards China?”¹⁸

Fanon writes that “every colonized people — . . . in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality — finds itself face to face . . . with the culture of the mother country.”¹⁹ Fanon’s gendered inflection offers an important psychoanalytic insight on the traumatic turn toward the imagined original culture. Cultural whitening distanced the native from his original culture to the extent that the latter became a primal memory, a paternal originality that was foreclosed in contrast to the culture of the “mother country.” This paternal originality is a symbolic cluster Jacques Lacan calls the “name-of-the-father,” which interpellates the subject and organizes its discursive system. Its foreclosure leads to psychosis. In Lacan’s case of a Frenchman who was an “extremely deracinated” West Indian “whose family history brought out the problematics of the original ancestor,” his hallucinations began soon after his female partner announced her pregnancy but did not know who the father was.²⁰ Likewise, the colonial subject faced the disconcerting realization of the foreclosure of paternal originality triggered by his symbolically significant other’s ambivalent recognition-rejection.

For Lacan, the “question of generation” is itself “a response by detour . . . to reconstitute what isn’t receivable for the psychotic subject,” creating the desire hiding the traumatic gap and the contextually overdetermined hallucinations to reconstitute subjectivity.²¹ In this light, Straits Chinese Confucianism was not a true recovery of foreclosed original culture but the fulfillment of a desired detour to reconstitute elite subjectivity overdetermined by the colonial conditions of race, class, and gender. First, as a discourse locating moral worth in the purity of the mind of the *junzi* (superior person) rather than his body, Confucianism disavowed the social danger that the Chinese body racially signified. Thus in contrast to the bodily focus in colonial racial ontology, Confucianism aimed, in Lim’s words, “to ennoble man’s mind and purify his character.”²² Second, Confucianism was suitably gendered, for it answered the question “who is my father?” in a patrilineal Chinese imaginary, which also suited the patri-focal culture of the recent immigrants. Peranakans therefore rejected Lim’s *Baba* identity on account of his sinicization.²³ Third, the Confucian *junzi* was a fetish that resolved

the anxiety of imaginary identification with the subaltern classes signified as “the people.” Thus Lim’s promotion of Confucianism in Xiamen, denigrated by Lu Xun, was partly due to his need as a privileged Anglo-Chinese for “the Confucian cloak of respectability” to legitimize his work with the Chinese people.²⁴

Postcolonial Discomfort, Chineseness, and Abjection

Like the Straits Chinese Confucianists, the postcolonial ruling elite were Anglicized Chinese colonial subjects who transformed themselves into Confucianists only in the later years. In the tumultuous years of decolonization, the elite, led by Lee Kuan Yew, held a left-of-center position that distinguished them from their conservative Anglophone compatriots, and were sympathetic to the pan-Malayan, multiracial socialist movement challenging Malay and British hegemony. In Singapore, the elite used their hybridity for strategic gain and joined the Chinese-speaking leftists, who enjoyed mass support from the Chinese making up three-quarters of the population, to form the People’s Action Party, but they also cultivated the British, who saw the elite as their own kind. Riding on leftist electoral support, the elite came to power under a decolonizing constitution in 1959. Then, through political maneuvers coordinated with London, the elite vanquished the leftists and consolidated their power.

One of the consequences of the struggle was that the elite realized the relationship between their political-cultural inadequacy and postcolonial discomfort. During the 1959 elections, a leftist leader sent Lee a Chinese dictionary with the inscription “Wishing you a great victory in the Kallang by-election.”²⁵ The medium was the real message: your strength depends on mine because you are almost Chinese but not quite. Lee, who later mastered Mandarin, depended on an associate to write his Chinese speeches. He recalled, “I tried to prove that I was Chinese.”²⁶ Lee also recalled, “Because of the standards of dedication [the leftists] set, we, the English-educated . . . leaders, had to set high standards of personal integrity and Spartan lifestyles.”²⁷ Lee saw the leftists’ righteous “lifestyles” as bound up with the Chinese culture the leftists held in the crucible of their Chinese language.²⁸ This admiring association of the leftists’ sociopolitical strength with their

Chineseness betrays the elite's postcolonial discomfort, which includes anxiety about their legitimacy with the masses. The elite's remembrance of the left's righteous Chineseness, which disavowed the colonial fetishization of Oriental perfidy, suggests that postcolonial discomfort deeply affected them during the decolonization struggles.

Although rooted in the Chinese-speaking milieu of Singapore, the leftist movement was an integral part of the pan-Malayan socialist movement, which promoted a postcolonial Malayan identity of multicultural hybridity transcending colonial racialism.²⁹ While outmaneuvering the left, the elite took up this identity. The identity promised the transformation of postcolonial discomfort, as its trans-ethnic thrust reduced the salience of Chineseness, and its disciplined socialist lifestyle repudiated the colonial fetishization of social danger. At this juncture, the elite postcolonial subject formation was not sinic, and the desire for purity was not Oriental in content; instead, it was characterized by postcolonial hybridity. The elite adopted white uniforms to symbolize their incorruptible purity and campaigned the 1959 elections on the hybrid Malayan identity. Soon after, the elite created the blood-red-and-white national flag to signify trans-ethnic fraternity and "everlasting purity and virtue," called for a "cultural revolution," and established the Ministry of Culture to eliminate "pornography and sleaze" and "promote cultural fusion and create a Malayan culture."³⁰ When Singapore joined the Federation of Malaysia in 1963, the elite challenged the Malay leadership in Kuala Lumpur, pitting their hybrid Malayan identity and ideology of racial equality against Malay hegemony and cultural primacy. But the ensuing political conflict escalated into communal riots and ended in Singapore's separation from the federation in 1965. The split made the hybrid Malayan identity untenable, and Singapore remained a colonial cultural artifact.

In the following decades, the elite successfully embarked on rapid development, attracting foreign investments and corporations while the state built up critical sectors through its own companies. But the crisis of postcolonial identity remained. In their imaginary identification, the elite saw themselves as leading a people on the threshold of leaving behind colonialism and becoming an independent subject. Stuck at the threshold, the elite feared modernization would create a nation of colonial subjects. Lee often

warned of deculturalization through English education, expressing the fear that it would lead to the foreclosure of paternal-original culture and debilitating discomfort. Lee said in 1967, “You and I instinctively want to keep something of the past because man does not live by bread alone. He needs that . . . lifeline that gives him some sustenance, some succour and comfort in moments of adversity . . . a knowledge that for thousands of years people like him . . . were able to survive.”³¹ Here, the imagination of ancestors, though not yet pictured as patrilineal, was already forming the imaginary outline of a virile Chineseness that could resolve postcolonial discomfort, but the gap between racial colonial objectification and symbolic identification with Western civilization remained.

Between being the fetishistic colonial object and becoming the postcolonial subject, the elite found the abject to be critically important for maintaining the corporeal boundaries of the collective self. Abjection is a prototypical process of self-formation that takes place at the threshold of presymbolic imaginary idealization and the speaking subject’s coming into being. The abject, expelled of unclean objects, performs the imaginary role of constituting the subject in the bodily instance. The expunged objects exist as images at the edges, constituting and maintaining thus the fuzzy outlines of the presymbolic subject.³² In our case, abjection serves both psychic-cultural and political functions. Abjection temporarily realized the imagined outline of a Singaporean nation in the absence of a postcolonial identity, while the elite achieved political dominance by establishing themselves in the role as guardian of the social body against the unclean abject. At the same time, abjection was culturally effective because its unclean imageries matched the social danger and dirtiness the Chinese body signified in colonial discourse. The expulsion of imagined dirty objects therefore served to temporarily fulfill the postcolonial desire for purity.

Abjection took place on two levels, one linked to the disciplining governmentality of industrialization and the other to the political imperatives of engineering rapid capitalist development against socialist resistance. As part of its program to discipline labor for industrialization, the regime ran social purification campaigns to root out spitting, littering, keeping long hair, smoking, and overbreeding, thereby inscribing social purity on individual bodies through the process of abjection. The regime transformed the

physical environment of the social body, cleaning up urban spaces, resettling the “squatting” population into public housing, and planting thousands of trees to create an Edenic “garden city.”

The “communist” abject was a political counterpart to the campaigns of nation building and social purification. Using the colonial-era Internal Security Act, the regime labeled leftists as “communists” and detained them without trial indefinitely. In detention, the “communists” never disappeared but became the abject, unclean objects removed from society but remaining at the margins to draw the outlines of the new nation. Julia Kristeva analyzes the horse figure in equinophobia as “a hieroglyph that condenses all fears, from unnamable to namable” and located in a proto-linguistic psychic system made up of “thing presentations linked to word presentations.”³³ Unto the “communist” hieroglyph, a thing-word presentation devoid of obvious symbolic meanings, the elite condensed their anxieties of postcolonial subjectification and imaginary identification with the people. In 1971, the elite organized a student seminar on “Communism and Democracy.” But communism here has an imaginary valence in the “communist” abject rather than a symbolic valence. Elite lecturers spoke of their cultural, economic, and political fears, but little substantively on “communism,” thus causing a student to protest, “But we have never touched upon communism.” To a student’s question concerning freedom and communist subversion, the elite replied with the proliferation of thing-word presentations of the abject, “There are many types of Communists. There are Chinese Communists, Russian Communists, Cuban Communists, local Communists, etc. Even if we do not open our doors they will come in if given the opportunity.”³⁴

The only symbolic valence given to the “communist” abject is closely linked to the elite’s postcolonial discomfort with Chineseness. The repression of the left is often represented in official history as the purging from society of sinister functionaries of the Malayan Communist Party, which was represented as a shadowy Chinese organization coordinating subversion from the dark jungles of Malaya. By representing these repressions using the colonial fetishization of the Chinese body as social danger, the elite silenced the alternative multicultural Chineseness that the leftists embodied. This historical erasure was a precondition for the rise of the elite’s own brand of Chineseness that better fulfilled the desire for Oriental purity.

Oriental Desire and the Confucian Junzi Fetish

At the 1971 seminar, Lee said, “We must discourage our youth from following western youths but we will need one generation in which to reorient our youth.”³⁵ The elite’s own reorientation was still indecisive. In the immediate period after 1965, the elite remained trapped in their colonial hybridity. Goh Keng Swee, deputy prime minister and economic architect, expressed that “Asia has produced a Mao Tse-tung; it has yet to produce its Max Weber” and advocated a “robust philosophical outlook” and a “demanding, narrow-minded, intolerant” protestant ethic to gird economic growth.³⁶ The notion that Asia has yet to produce its Weber shows an ambivalent orientation, a yearning for an authentic Asian copy of Western bourgeois ethics to counter the Asian copy of Karl Marx of the abject. At the same time, Goh’s desire for an Asian Weber expressed the elite’s search for an Asianness that could resolve their postcolonial discomfort. But this search was inconclusive. In 1977, a conference on “Asian values and modernization” was held to facilitate this search. Though the focus on Chinese culture as the centerpiece of Asian values was mooted, the conference ended inconclusively, with S. (Sinnathamby) Rajaratnam, a key elite member of non-Chinese ethnicity, casting doubt on the meaningfulness of Asia as a cultural entity.³⁷

The key obstacle to the elite’s Chinese reorientation was that Maoist China represented the “communist” abject the elite sought to expel from the social body. But at the end of the 1970s, China stirred to capitalism under Deng and embarked on its open-door economic reforms. Now free of the dangerous link to the “communist” abject, post-Mao China reoriented the elite, giving them the will to commit to a particular Chineseness that their Straits Chinese elite forebears had articulated in the previous era of Chinese reform. Singapore moved fast to formalize a bilateral trade agreement with China in 1978. New cultural policies immediately followed. First, the regime launched the annual “Speak Mandarin” campaign. Mandarin, the traditional and modern Chinese lingua franca, was already taught as a second language in schools, and the campaign sought to displace the popular use of regional Chinese languages in everyday life. Second, the regime reached out to local Chinese patrilineal clan associations to help in the preservation of Chinese cultural heritage and values, especially filial piety. Third, after

Lee described the education system as threatening to turn Singapore into a deculturalized “calypso society,” education reforms were launched, one of which was to create special schools for teaching Mandarin as a first language.³⁸ Fourth, as part of the reforms, Religious Knowledge was to become a compulsory school subject. Students would choose one of the major world religions or Confucian ethics. Eight scholars were invited to put together the ethics syllabus and set up the Institute of East Asian Philosophies. Confucianization was situated in the larger sinicization movement, which aimed to reconfigure not just the political-cultural field but also the psychic constitution of society. Lee said, “To have no emotionally acceptable language as our mother tongue is to be emotionally crippled. We shall doubt ourselves. We shall be less self-confident. Mandarin is emotionally acceptable as our mother tongue. . . . It reminds us that we are part of an ancient civilization with an unbroken history of over five thousand years. This is a deep and strong psychic force, one that gives confidence to a people to face up to and overcome great changes and challenges.”³⁹ Cast into the spotlight of this movement was the figure of the Mandarin-speaking Confucian junzi, who was to represent the elite and his imaginary identification with the people.

In psychoanalytic terms, the figure of the junzi is a fetish. McClintock combines Freud’s notion of fetishism as the projection of castration anxiety unto phallic substitutes and Marx’s commodity fetishism as the resolution of social contradictions to redefine fetishism as the displacement of social contradictions unto thus-fetishized objects of desire so that the individual can compulsively manipulate them to gain symbolic control over “terrifying ambiguities.”⁴⁰ The elite faced two anxieties. First, they had yet to remove themselves from the colonial condition. The “communist” abject was only a temporary resolution and one that ran the risk of becoming a history of perfidious elite betrayal of their leftist comrades. Furthermore, the elite were an integral part of the commodity fetishism accompanying rapid economic development because the state, the largest owner of domestic capital, participated directly in the economy through its own companies. Elite networks closely intermeshed elite members, technocrats, executives of state-owned companies, and local and foreign bourgeoisie. Through the developmental state, the elite “dirtied” their hands in production and trade. In the colonial discourse from which the elite had not divested themselves, this revealed

the traumatic gap between their symbolic identification with the West and fetishized Chineseness. Second, the elite were insecure about the fact that they were still seen as privileged Anglicized Chinese who were almost but not quite the people. On the level of political power, the elite saw their hegemony as evincing cultural incompleteness, which in their imaginary identification with the people translated to the lack of “organic” links with the body politic, producing the anxiety of being castrated from the people.

As a phallic substitute, the fetish also embodied the displaced desires for self-recognition, desire and anxiety being mutually constitutive. The first anxiety engendered the desire to recognize the self as a whole and pure subject instead of a split subject that existed as a fetishized “dirty” object in colonial discourse. The second anxiety engendered the desire for recognition through the gaze of the people, in the imaginary identification of the elite. Both desires stemmed from the traumatic drive to identify with the imagined original culture and, in the historical contingency of China’s liberalization, became fused in a singular Oriental desire and displaced unto the Confucian fetish. China, the distant land of one’s ancestors, the original cultural paternity from which the elite had been estranged, was also the imaginary cradle of a Confucian bureaucratic civilization to which the elite could relate through their learned Mandarin “mother” tongue. The Confucian fetish promised to pull the subjectification sustained by abjecting repression forward into a subjectivity that confirmed the “authentic” Chineseness of the elite, providing comfort on the personal level and hegemony on the political level. The fetishized “dirty” body identity of colonial discourse and the privileged Anglicized cultural identity were disavowed and transfigured into the body fetish of the virtuous Chinese junzi.

This disavowing transfiguration can be gleaned from a reading of *Confucian Ethics*, a textbook used in the Religious Knowledge program. It opens with an interpellation of the adolescent student: “Having grown not only in body but also in mind, you are ready for deeper thinking, understanding, and feeling about moral values.”⁴¹ From “body” to “mind” traces the movement from the expulsion of the abject from the body to the projection of mindful anxieties unto the fetish. In this fetish, the elite disavowed the two anxieties of colonial hybridity, while fulfilling the two corresponding desires. First, the fetish disavowed the Oriental perfidy of colonial discourse

and fulfilled the desire for Oriental purity. The textbook draws the contrast between the junzi, a person “with a moral, cultivated character,” and the *xiaoren*, the “small or petty person.” The junzi understands “what is moral,” but the *xiaoren* knows only “what is profitable.”⁴² Second, the fetish disavowed the distance between the Anglicized elite and the people and fulfilled the desire for authentic Chineseness. The elite embodied junzi rulers by a circular signifying fiat in the textbook. The textbook asserts that a benevolent junzi ruler is one that looks after the people’s moral and spiritual welfare: “The benevolent ruler should go beyond looking after the people’s material welfare. . . . More importantly, he should look after the moral and spiritual development of his people, and ensure that conditions in the nation are such that the people’s spiritual growth is encouraged.” Since the textbook itself, as part of the Religious Knowledge program, signified that the elite cared for the people’s moral and spiritual welfare, the elite were therefore junzi rulers, thus confirming the authenticity of their Chineseness in the auto-signification of the textbook. In turn, the textbook continues, the people must self-cultivate so that they can be loyal and make the right choice of leaders.⁴³ The inscription of Confucian morality upon the Chinese citizenry therefore “organically” linked them to the auto-signified junzi elite.

The Confucian fetish condensed the desire to clean up social and cultural pollutions: “Economic prosperity . . . has brought with it undesirable social traits and harmful lifestyles. Materialism, individualism, and the thirst for excitement and easy money are some examples. Though Confucian ethics may not be *the* answer . . . its stress on benevolence, social consciousness, and the pursuit of the moral life can help us find meaning in life.”⁴⁴ Individualism signified two unwholesome and dangerous desires for the elite: the demand for political rights and the desire for sensuous consumption. While the former resolved the anxiety of the organic elite-subaltern link by calling for a Confucian citizen morality to connect the majority Chinese population to the elite junzi rulers, the latter resolved the anxiety of the material state by disavowing the elite’s “dirty” participation in production and trade.

The elite’s disavowal of colonial hybridity in the junzi fetish carried with it the acknowledgment of their postcolonial discomfort. The textbook describes the junzi also as someone who “is easy of mind while the *xiaoren* is always full of fear and worry.” The text elaborates, “The cultivated person . . .

is always at ease with himself, 'Humane, he is free from worries. Wise, he is free from confusions; and brave, he is free from fear.' (Analects XIV: 30)" The text further elaborates, "The cultivated person corrects himself and remains unaffected even if no one takes note of him . . . unlike the petty person who is always anxious. (Analects VII: 36)"⁴⁵ This explicit contrast between the "at peace" junzi and the anxious xiaoren is the only quality elaborated in the textbook. Yet there is a complicit silence, as we are not told the source and content of the anxiety. The textbook acknowledges the anxiety but cannot substantiate it because the source has been disavowed. Instead, we find a general description of the "very dangerous" consequences of forgetting "moral values," in the example of "skillful and brilliant" criminals and the fact that "we would be quite lost, not knowing which direction to take" in life.⁴⁶ Without the fetish, the discomfort of Oriental perfidy reared its head, giving the image of social danger in brilliant criminals. The consequence was being lost, indicating the crisis of postcolonial subjectification faced by the elite after undesired independence. Compared to the unstable imageries of abjection, Confucianization offered the elite the fulfillment of their desire for Oriental purity with concrete symbolic content that, at the same time, matched the elite's political and economic reorientation toward a rousing China.

"Marxist Conspiracy": From Confucianism to Asian Values

While the elite were busy pursuing Confucianization, the opposition gathered momentum. In the 1984 general elections, the opposition parties broke the regime's parliamentary monopoly and siphoned off one-sixth of the ruling party's electoral votes. The electorate was responding to elite hegemony in two ways. The growing middle classes demanded democratization, and the working classes grew discontent about the widening income gap. The geopolitical situation was also shifting. Democratization was picking up in Asian countries. Images of Koreans, Taiwanese, and Filipinos seizing the streets wafted through censored media scapes. The Soviet Union had embarked on *glasnost*, and the Cold War was in remission. In Singapore, there were signs of an emergent opposition movement centered on English-educated activists who spoke of democracy and social justice. Some

were inspired by the ideas of liberation theology spreading through Asian churches. The ideas, transplanted and articulated also as an Asian identity, but one that expressed the transnational experiences of capitalist exploitation and developmental unsettling, challenged the Confucianism of the elite, especially in the linkage between plebeian dirt and an Asian proletarian-peasant unity rather than the disavowal of dirtiness.

In late 1986, the elite ominously warned that the communist danger threatened to emerge in new forms among English-educated Singaporeans who took after the New Left in Britain and the United States.⁴⁷ Soon after, the regime detained twenty-two professionals, activists, and church and social workers for being involved in “a Marxist conspiracy to subvert the existing social and political system in Singapore through communist united front tactics to establish a communist state.”⁴⁸ Under solitary confinement and the threat of indefinite detention, the “conspirators” were released only on confessing to be “communists” on paper and in heavily edited televised interviews interspersed with scenes of demonstrations in the past. The televised confessions linked the detainees to an English-educated student activist who went into exile in Britain in the 1970s, claiming he was the shadowy mastermind of the “conspiracy.” The local press dutifully ran elite reminiscences of the abjected Chinese-speaking left, thus giving the “conspiracy” an aura of historical reality.⁴⁹ In response to doubts, the elite evoked the abject condensed in thing-word presentations, warning of further invasions of the body politic by “cancer,”⁵⁰ “dangerous zombies,” a “hydra-headed monster,”⁵¹ and “ravenous wolves.”⁵²

The detentions sparked a two-year political crisis. Local resistance was quickly neutralized, but public skepticism persisted, sustained by international pressure on the regime. Nongovernmental organizations and legislators, both Asian and Western, protested the detentions. A subsequent diplomatic spat with the United States led to mutual expulsions of diplomats. International human-rights groups sent missions. International news-magazines ran highly critical articles and had their circulation restricted. Unlike in the preceding decades, the “communist” abject lost its political currency. But the elite were not wholly dependent on the abject, as their subjectivity was already anchored in Confucianism. The fetish appeared during the “conspiracy” when dissidents were sullied with accusations of

moral flaws that marked them as *xiaoren*, the antitheses of the *junzi* elite. For example, to expose the “moral duplicity” of a dissenting Catholic priest, the government stated that he was having an illicit affair, using “facts” based on surveillance and a defamatory letter from the woman’s brother.⁵³ The former solicitor general, released from detention so that he could contest the 1988 elections as a referendum on the “conspiracy,” was accused of financial corruption and having criminal acquaintances. The handling of the “conspiracy” was also presented as the work of the rising generation of elite leaders, who displayed the authenticity of their *junzi* status in Confucianism-inflected speeches emphasizing social reforms for cultured and gracious living.⁵⁴

Soon after the inconclusive 1988 elections, the elite announced the search for a national ideology. Aware that abjection was no longer a viable political move in the face of widespread skepticism about “communist” social dangers and that their Confucianism was too Chinese, the elite sought to rework the Confucian fetish into a public discourse suitable for Singapore’s multicultural context. The central idea remained that the *junzi* subjectivity, as embodied by the elite themselves, was the best defense against the social dangers now represented by the West with its human-rights liberalism. The motivation is best summed up by Lee Hsien Loong, Lee’s descendant and a rising political figure then, who said earlier, “Singaporeans must grow up with the right values, which will guide them through a purposeful and upright life, and vaccinate them against any strange and dangerous illnesses of the soul, which may drift into our society, particularly from overseas, from time to time.”⁵⁵ Lee was put in charge of the search of Singaporeans’ shared values for the construction of the national ideology.

After over two years of public discussion and a commissioned social scientific search for the values, in 1991, the ruling party tabled the Shared Values bill in parliament. The Confucian fetish cast its last official shadows in the bill, which stated that many “Confucian ideals were relevant to Singapore,” particularly the “concept of government of honorable men (*junzi*),” and that Singaporeans “must oppose venal groups who seek power for their own ends.” Parliament endorsed the shared values, the preeminent value being “nation before community and society above self.”⁵⁶ They were subsequently exported as Asian values to contest the universality of human rights.

Domestically, the transposition of Confucianism into Asian values prevents the exploitation of progressive elements in Confucianism against the elite. The privatization of the junzi fetish empowers the elite by securing their subjectivity while preventing subversive usage in the public arena. The elite could thus confidently perform their junzi identity to prescribe Asian values for the application of new technologies of the self in the shift in governmentality to deal with neoliberal globalization in the 1990s. Guided by the 1991 *Strategic Economic Plan*, the elite embarked on various reforms to “embrace the global socioeconomic space,” calling on Singaporeans to “endear themselves to the world.” Education was recalibrated with “a life cycle perspective for the individual, from cradle to retirement.”⁵⁷ Here, the disciplining of workers was couched in the strengthening of moral fiber, which firmly embedded workers in the national triad of government, labor, and business facing the disorienting flux of global economic, political, and cultural flows. The ideal was “openness to foreigners and foreign culture, without eroding Singapore’s own values.” Asian values meant more than developing a “strong work ethic.” More importantly, the elite sought to use Asian values to cultivate “personal values which emphasize the importance of national teamwork,” institute consensus-building processes, and discourage “class distinctions which tend to polarize groups.”⁵⁸

In this preemptive formula to deal with the social consequences of globalization, we find traces of the lesson learned by the elite during the “Marxist conspiracy.” Asian values, derived from the junzi fetish to deal with political challenges of the “conspiracy,” now forming the basis of new practices of governmentality, would be the moral inoculation against new social dangers posed by globalization. Chief among these dangers is the exacerbation of popular multicultural hybridization as individual groups absorb and adapt global cultural flows to create emerging new textures of life and form links to other communities around the world to forge transnational political-cultural identities. On the one hand, the elite celebrate the cosmopolitanism of neoliberal globalization and strive to co-opt the citizenry’s creative energies for a regionalizing knowledge-based economy marketed to transnational corporations as distinctly Asian in flavor. On the other hand, the elite frequently enact globalization-linked moral panics that simulate postcolonial discomfort, from “decadent” gay parties to “radical” middle-

class Islamism, all of which have the effect of realizing the moral resonance of Asian values. In this sense, Asian values, grounded in the elite's junzi identity, serve as both the ideological lodestone guiding the elite through the vagaries of "flexible citizenship" and the disciplinary thermostat controlling the extent of transcultural experimentation.⁵⁹

The primary beneficiaries of the regime's globalization program are English-speaking, middle-class Chinese Singaporeans occupying the cultural space contiguous to the elite's hybrid space. They are ardent believers in Asian values, as the discourse anchors their cultural identity while they engage the competitive forces of global capital and keep anxious watch on the disaffection growing in the multicultural lower classes. Their postcolonial discomfort will remain dormant, as long as Asian-values governmentality continues to hold together the economically stratified segments of society to prevent political challenges from social movements offering cultural alternatives, such as the multicultural Chineseness of the anticolonial left or the Asian liberationism of the "Marxist conspirators," that would disrupt the elite's imaginary identification with the people. For the masses living in the public-housing estates, the elite's junzi cloak barely covers the nakedness of their colonial hybridity, which many see but cannot find the voice or channel to articulate. It takes a poet of mixed ethnicity, Alfian Sa'at, to declaim the emperor's new clothes:

And how can you call yourself a country, you terrible hallucination
of highways and cranes and condominiums ten minutes' drive from the
MRT? . . .

Tell that to the pawns of The Upgrading Empire who penetrate their
phalluses into heartlands to plant Lego cineplexes Tupperware play-
grounds suicidal balconies carnal parks of cardboard and condoms and
before we know it we are a colony once again.

. . .

I have lost a country to images, it is as simple as that.
Singapore you have a name on a map but no maps to your name.
This will not do; we must stand aside and let the Lion
crash through a madness of cymbals back to that dark jungle heart
when eyes were still embers waiting for a crownless Prince of
Palembang.⁶⁰

Alfian connects the psychoanalytic vectors of elite hallucinations and phallic fetish-desire for recognition by the heartland citizenry to the modernity of Singapore's built environment. Beneath the clean and sterile spaces, Alfian sees social dirtiness, the carnality that expressed the postcoloniality of the spaces, and finds the country lost because of the foreclosure of the name-of-the-father. In the space of this lack, Alfian concludes with a desire to begin anew from the primeval wait for paternal originality. As legend has it, a fourteenth-century Malay prince of Palembang, Sang Nila Utama, discovered and named the island *Singapura* (lion city). Alfian's return to the precolonial era as the original moment of Singapore's birth challenges the elite's attribution to Stamford Raffles. In linking this mythic juxtaposition of two founding fathers, one native and the other white, to the psychocultural resonances of the plastic spaces, Alfian reminds us of modern Singapore's colonial hybridity and reveals the postcolonial discomfort that has profoundly shaped the country.

Conclusion

Academics have sliced through Asian values to explicate the discourse's emergence and diffusion in the political-cultural milieu of Singapore and East Asia. In most accounts, as authoritarian as they are portrayed, the Singaporean elite come across as rational and decisive agents. I have argued that the articulation of Asian values was driven by postcolonial discomfort with the crisis of subjectivity rooted in elite colonial hybridity. Historical and sociological contingencies played a major part. The postcolonial desire for purity became the Confucian desire for Oriental purity only when, first, the hybrid Malayan identity was made unviable by undesired independence, and second, post-Mao China reoriented the elite's desire. The eventual transposition of Confucianism into Asian values as the basis of a new governmentality for neoliberal globalization was made possible only after "communist" abjection of political opposition ceased to work during the "conspiracy." The point is not that Asian values discourse is an irrational discourse of madmen but that its articulation is rooted in the Westernized colonial subject's drive for self-recognition. The contemporary production and consumption of Asian values in East Asia is not a mere cultural and

political counterpart to the region's economic growth. The articulation of Asian values finds its nourishment in the psychic-cultural substrate of a colonial past still present in our hybridized but neoliberalizing modernities and in the discomfort contact zone, between East and West, of our desiring postcolonial subjectivity.

As a fellow returning graduate of Western education, I share Chua's reflexive discomfort in inhabiting postcolonial Singapore. Thus I am sympathetic to his rereading of Asian values as a socialistic strategic essentialism against the neoliberal cultural dominant, while feeling uneasy with sharing contiguous discursive space with the elite. As an academic, my discomfort also stems from being marked as an elite Chinese by English-educated students, many of whom hold onto Asian values with strong emotions and invoke "being Asian" when challenged with and discomforted by alternative views. In light of my analysis of Asian values as grounded in the elite's fetishistic desire for Oriental purity, we need to decouple the psychic resonances from our strategic rearticulations. Taking a page from Harper's observation of popular Asianist hybridities and adding my observation of alternative Asianisms repressed by abjection, the first step would be to render the "Asian" sign empty of its present significations, socialistic or not, before filling the empty signifier with new hybrid meanings that disarm both neoliberalism and the desire for Oriental purity. We have to displace the image of the pure and upright junzi with the residual subaltern "dirt" produced by the global circuits of capital. Then, residing in the limit space of our discomfort, standing face to face with the attribute of social peril and dirtiness, we can begin to recover the subversive possibilities of postcolonial hybridity.

Notes

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