

Theatre and the State in Singapore: Orthodoxy and Resistance. Terence Chong. New York: Routledge, 2011. ISBN: 9780415584487

As art proves to be a foundational component of culture, interrogating the institution of art sheds light on a culture's identity. In the detailed and focused cultural study, *Theatre and the State of Singapore: Orthodoxy and Resistance*, sociologist Terence Chong posits the theatre institution as a powerful—but seemingly unassuming—cultural and political edifice in order to understand the transformative synergy between Singaporean society and artistic moments within. Chong argues that the theatre, as a creative vessel and equally the means for economic capital, has been instrumental in building Singapore's local and national identity. It has worked in concert with the People's Action Party (PAP) government, Singapore's ruling political party since 1959 which is commonly attributed with Singapore's expansion, but it has also served as a subversive presence that has destabilized PAP's agenda. Theatre participants must negotiate their artistic and political expression with the state's hegemonic demands and censorship to assert ideology.

Chong prefixes that the attributes of the theatre in Singapore must be understood as being intrinsically connected yet independent of political moments. Chong's methodology effectively incorporates interviews with foremost theatrical practitioners and politicians into its extensively researched case studies surrounding the current state of theatre. Using the subjects' unique voices, these interviews provide a dynamic perspective on the tension between the theatre and politics and the continuing battle for autonomy and authority. The book examines the role of globalization, as epitomized in the prevalence of English-language theatrical productions, and how it influences the localized theatre

communities. Most of Chong's inquiries rest on the notion of *habitus*, which he explains as interrelating and interdependent structures complicated by history, education, class, ethnicity and language. The theatre in Singapore, therefore, is a paradigm to understand how the field is simultaneously a space filled with political repression, struggle, and revolution.

The book is arranged into seven distinct sections. The first is an overview of the arts during the majority of PAP's governmental ruling from 1965 to 2000 as it radically worked to use art as a site to propagate cultural ideals. This chapter is particularly beneficial for readers because it helps contextualize the role of theatre discussed in the subsequent chapters and its production processes within recent history. Next, Chong further maps the field of theatre and looks at how the theatre's English-language pervasiveness functions as a fulcrum for economic and cultural discrimination. After, he outlines how the government endorsed various efforts to instill a unified national identity. This section nicely articulates the ensuing complications that institutions reliant on state funds for subsistence face. Chong then transitions into a discussion on the roles and responsibilities of cultural intermediaries, such as the press, and how they regulate practices and accessibility for local theatre groups. In the final set of chapters, Chong looks at the development of destabilizing narratives, the astute circumvention of censorship within this sociopolitical environment, and how artists confront issues of representation. In one example, he explores the rising visibility of sexual minorities on stage while culturally homosexuality was understood as a kind of deviance. These discussions highlight middle-class theatre companies' tactics to concurrently capitalize

on their state-sponsored support while resisting PAP's ascendancy. This chapter, more illuminating and engaging than the preceding chapters, explains theatre affordances for marginalized groups of people; while still confronted with limitations, these groups of practitioners still utilize the theatrical and narrative space as a forum for subversion and expression. In the conclusion, Chong effectively meditates on the theatre field's ambivalence toward local and global pressures—that is whether to construct narratives that reflect Singaporean sensibilities or alternatively adhere to greater international interests.

Applying many of Bourdieu's conjectures—primarily the power and limitations of symbolic and economic capital—this highly theoretical and historically centered text will prove an edifying resource for pre-professional students and instructors interested in Southeast Asian cultural studies, particularly researchers invested in the complicated interface of art as an institution and politics. Perhaps the strongest elements of Chong's work are his focused arguments and investigations surrounding the myriad relations between various structures of both theatre and the People's Action Party. Chong's work is chiefly an ethnographic study of English-language theatre as an institution in Singapore, and does not delve into the nuances of artistic development and performance; for this reason it is important to note that this text does not serve scholars focusing on the ontology of theatre as an art form. Due to the book's close precision on specificity of each conjectured discussion and analysis, undergraduate students may find the text inaccessible. While each dense text deftly situates each specific example within the greater narrative, those without pre-existing knowledge of Singaporean culture, political

atmosphere, recent historical movements may find much of the book's examples intellectually demanding and may need to supplement their reading with other broader, more general sources.

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