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# Infusing local culture in Singaporean animation: Developing a framework of cultural specifics from a study of contemporary cinema in Singapore

## Keywords

animation
Singapore
identity
culture
media
cinema

## Abstract

*Notwithstanding a materializing Singapore cinema, research attention has not been paid to how animated cultural products can make an impact on the construction of a local identity. This can be considered detrimental to the cultural promotion of a local but heterogeneous mediascape. This practice-based research attempts to outline a practical framework of cultural specifics capable of producing an animated film that is identifiably 'Singaporean' to a global audience. Resistance against the Marcusian One-Dimensional Man theory, the premise of Kenneth Paul Tan's* Cinema and Television in Singapore *in 2008, will be the basis of this research to understand the emergence of contemporary Singaporean films. Alfian bin Sa'at's definition of the*

*'heartlander', a recurring and highly relatable element in Singaporean cinema largely due to the geographical statistic of the population percentage living in Singaporean public housing (referred to as HDB), provides the social semiotics needed by the research to understand Singapore culture. Films such as Ilo Ilo by Anthony Chen and Sandcastle by Boo Junfeng will be analysed according to five indicators – setting, characters, mise en scène, language and premise – as they manifest Singaporean traits in their attempts to integrate local culture. The same indicators are used to analyse films such as 'Tatsumi' by Eric Khoo so as to locate cultural deficiency within these local animated features. 'Flats' by Ervin Han and similar animated shorts are subsequently examined as examples of attempts at infusing local culture into an animated production. The practical result of the research is presented as a production journal of an animated short explicating the socio-political aspects of local identity.*

## Introduction

For several years, film and animation from Singapore have appeared on the global stage, be it in entertainment broadcasts or in international film festivals. In the light of a materializing Singapore cinema, the global audience might be starting to know what a 'Singaporean film' looks like. However, the notion of an authentic 'Singaporean animation' remains unfamiliar.

Only four animated feature films have been produced in Singapore. Albeit made locally, these films are not identifiably 'Singaporean' as there is no apparent Singaporean trait present in them. On the other hand, live action films such as *Ilo Ilo* (Chen, 2013) and *Sandcastle* (Boo, 2010) have been recognized by international film festivals such as the prestigious Cannes Film Festival as 'Singaporean films'. These films use local stories and themes to communicate a global message to the audience.

Referencing live-action films made locally, can the same attributes, including but not limited to – setting, ethnicity and nationality of characters, exposition of culture through *mise en scène*, language spoken and last but not least, narrative premise – make an animated film identifiably 'Singaporean' to a global audience? These attributes constitute the hypothesis of the research.

## Purpose of research

The lack of a research in the field of media and identity can be considered detrimental to the cultural promotion of a local but heterogeneous mediascape in Singapore. Research attention has not been paid to how animated cultural products can make an impact on the construction of a local identity. Hardly any qualitative analysis on the current landscape of animated films produced in Singapore has been published.

*Dream Defenders* (*Dream Defenders* Website n.d.) from Tiny Island Productions, for example, has been sold worldwide, primarily focused on the US market. *Spycat and the Paper Chase* (Suhali et al. 2011), a short graduation film from Nanyang Technological University (NTU), has made over 1,000

screenings in more than 30 countries and won seven awards. However, the absence of cultural identifiers in animated films such as these makes it tedious for the global audience to recognize their origin, rendering any success a limited one.

Singapore is a young nation and it is crucial to foster identity by establishing a cultural background with artistic products (Soon 2001). It is imperative for Singaporean animation filmmakers to seek a voice of their own rather than to mimic and add on to the sea of commercial productions driven by short-lived market interests. The 'cultural desert' (Tan 2008: 152) can be nurtured into lush plethora of new ideas if animators are willing to take risks in finding the path towards an authentic 'Singaporean' animation.

## Literature review

Although limited, similar research with the intent of infusing a particular culture in an animated product has been conducted.

### Attempt at 'Indonesian' animation

Hafiz Aziz Ahmad (2008) from the Graduate School of Computer Design, Woosong University, South Korea, published a thesis titled 'A thesis on implementation of culture and its visual representation in Indonesian animation – based on case study of Japanese and Korean animation'.

This thesis begins with an overview of cultural studies; identifying semantics and semiotics in culture and identity; providing a comprehensive introduction to animation in Asia; and categorizing culture and non-culture-focused themes in animated cinema. Examples of Japanese and Korean animated films are analysed, followed by the implementation of Indonesian culture in an animated film production, with the focus on depicting everyday life.

However, the practical component of the research is problematic. The inclusion of Korea as the setting may deviate from Indonesian culture. The research also lacks a conclusion on audience reception and is thus limited in empirical evidence.

### Exploring 'Singaporean' animation

Associate Professor Hans Martin Rall from NTU has published a book entitled *Singaporean Animation for the 21st Century* (2011). His research involved students developing artistic visions for stories from Asian folklores that will ultimately represent cultural identity through the animated medium. The research method offers students freedom in depicting their own culture through animation and has resulted in impressive and diverse art styles, such as the use of pastels for an adaptation of a folklore of Sister's Island. Rall focused on aesthetics to infuse culture into animation.

However, the title of 'Singaporean animation' (2011) is peculiarly elusive when only one out of six chosen text is Singaporean – *Two Sisters* is set in the 1800s, when Singapore was still a rural village, thus having no distinctive trait or identity representing current time. The twenty-first century timeframe (Rall 2011) is thus misrepresented without reference to present time stories and culture.

### Singapore: Authoritarian capitalism

To understand Singapore cinema, one must first be familiar with Singapore. Singapore operates on a free market with significant government intervention in the domestic economy. Government-linked companies (GLCs) such as Temasek Holdings forms the nation's investment front. Grassroots organizations (GROs) such as the People's Association (PA) serves to bridge different communities together. Health care is only subsidized for the lower and middle income class and all residents have to contribute to the Central Provident Fund (CPF) to prepare for medical emergencies, pay insurance premiums or even buy an apartment (Tan 2008).

The People's Action Party (PAP) has been the ruling political party of Singapore since 1959. Strict laws enforce forms of control on the citizens, restricting free speech through the Internal Security Act, the Sedition Act, the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act and the Societies Act. Anyone wishing to raise a social or a political issue has to apply for a permit to legally speak to the public in a designated area of the speaker's corner at Hong Lim Park. Other forms of control include national service (NS), procreation policies using monetary rewards, manpower policies attracting foreign talents, mass media control and education policies such as bilingualism (Tan 2008).

It is important to note that home ownership is common in Singapore, with 82 per cent of the resident population staying in public housing known as HDB, named after the Housing Development Board of the state. HDB apartments can range from one room to five rooms, each with a living room, bedroom(s) and kitchen. Typical HDB apartments are high-rise and high-density, with a serviceable lift, common corridors and void decks maintained by the Town Council (Public Housing in Singapore n.d.).

As of June 2014, the total population of Singapore stands at 5.47 million, of which 1.6 million are foreigners. The Chinese ethnic group makes up the largest proportion of residents at 74.3%, followed by Malays at 13.3% and Indians at 9.1%. Eurasians make up the other significant ethnic group (Department of Statistics Singapore n.d.). Languages spoken in the country are diverse, ranging from English, the main language of trade, to Chinese, Malay or Tamil, the mother tongue. Chinese dialects such as Hokkien and Cantonese are still common among pioneer generations. Singapore colloquial English, also known as Singlish, is a result of such a multilingual amalgam and widely used among Singaporeans.

With such systems in place, Singapore closely meets what American economist Christopher Lingle (1996) describes as 'authoritarian capitalist' society. The government has set a ground where justification of

> coercive powers to risk-averse, pragmatic, and materialistic Singaporeans who only desire to live in peace, safety, comfort, and affluence, preferring to believe that support for the incumbent government, with its consistently stellar record, remains the best guarantee of a safe and comfortable life becomes easy.
>
> (Tan 2008)

With the instilling of meritocracy, a consumerist society is formed, where citizens believe that hard work is rewarded by acquiring 'false needs' glorified by the system (Tan 2008). For instance, the *5Cs*, car, condominium, credit card, cash and country club membership, are widely accepted by the society to be indicators of success and happiness. Any obstacles towards fulfilling these indicators are deemed dangerous. This eventually leads to a totally administered lifestyle in Singapore.

Tan (2012) recognizes the authoritarian and patriarchal system of Singapore to echo what Herbert Marcuse (1964) describes as a one-dimensional society. A one-dimensional man refers to 'Individuals who identify themselves with the existence which is imposed upon them and have in it their own development and satisfaction'. With the repeat success of the ruling party in the 2015 elections, the majority of Singaporeans can be assumed to have their self-interests aligned with that of the government, opting for benefits such as HDB upgrading projects and higher property resale prices in areas governed by PAP. The utopian notion of 'Singaporeanness' is thus closely related to the notion of one-dimensionality.

### Imagined community: The heartlander

The term 'imagined community' was first coined by Benedict Anderson ([1983] 2006) to explain how and why members of a community may stand together irrespective of differences. People of dissimilar race, religion, language or birthplace perceive themselves as part of a group, negotiating differences and embracing similarities, ultimately recognizing themselves strongly with a common goal.

Singapore only gained independence in 1965 and has witnessed several racial riots. With such heterogeneity, nationalism has remained a delicate issue for the country. The problem worsens in the face of globalization as foreign workers continue to overpopulate the workforce. The Singapore government had to find a solution to prevent the resentment among citizens from intensifying.

In 1998, then-prime minister of Singapore, Goh Chok Tong, raised the term 'heartlander' in his National Day Rally in a bid to formalize identity among local citizens. As observed by playwright and poet Alfian bin Sa'at, the term 'heartland' is inspired from the term hinterland, which refers to 'a site where traditions could be preserved and maintained, geographically located at a remote distance from the city and thus isolated from its influence' (Tan 2008).

An ideal Singaporean heartlander is one who lives in HDB, speaks local languages such as Singlish, is communitarian and upholds conservative values and a sense of belonging for the country. This is a natural reaction against rapid globalization and economic progress where foreign talents are perceived as cosmopolitans, creating a heartlander-cosmopolitan divide in the society. Cosmopolitans are highly skilled and well-paid citizens with high social mobility, driven by economic interests and have a preference for Standard English as their language. They serve as a threat to the local culture with their global outlook (Tan 2008).

In the context of Singapore, the heartlander–cosmopolitan divide forms the driving force in identity formation. Heartlanders depend on cosmopolitans for economic gains while serving as moral markers for the society (Tan 2008).

### Singapore live-action cinema

Singapore cinema is stylistically discontinuous when one attempts to survey films from the 1950s to the 2010s (Millet 2006). To study Singapore cinema, live-action films produced between 1995 and 2015 are selected as they manifest two important traits of present-day Singapore culture. The respective film trailers can be retrieved from the references section. First, it is not the one-dimensionality of Singaporeans that shapes the voice of films from Singapore, but rather the refusal of repression against the hegemonic system. Characters alienated from globalized society become a common premise in Singaporean films, acting as an avenue of realistic expression against the authoritarian capitalist state.

The second common trait is the theme of heartlander struggle. While society paints an image where economy thrives with the success of governmental policies, the lower and middle classes gradually suffer from problems such as the rising cost of living. These citizens, often heartlanders, find themselves left behind by society, unable to cope with the endless pursuit of material. Filmmakers begin to find stories from the heartlander perspective more relatable to the local audience.

Besides the above-mentioned traits governing the premise of a film, what truly identifies a film to bear the Singaporean culture would be four other cultural indicators: setting the film in Singapore; using Singaporean characters consisting of various ethnic or national groups; having an HDB apartment *mise en scène*; and characters speaking Singlish, Chinese dialects or a mixture of mother tongues.

### Ilo Ilo *(2013) by Anthony Chen*

Being the first Singaporean film to secure the *Camera d'Or* at Cannes Film Festival and the Best Film at the 50th Golden Horse Award, *Ilo Ilo* serves as a hallmark of contemporary Singapore cinema – one with a local story communicating to a global audience. Set in 1997 Singapore, Jia Le's family hired a maid from the Philippines to take care of the young boy and their household chores. Soon after her arrival, problems such as the lack of mother's attention, a financial crisis putting the father out of a job, issues of pregnancy and job security for the mother and managing family relationships between one another in the family started to surface.

Completely set in Singapore in the 1990s, Chen demanded that the characters speak in natural Singlish and Chinese. He was also directly involved in casting the characters during pre-production to find the right local for various roles. Considerable care was taken to showcase the *mise en scène* of that time, such as the unique grill patterns of the HDB apartment window that the director himself calls 'Anthony grills' at one of the sharing sessions in Singapore. The audience also witnessed the 1990s office environment with the old IT equipment and coiled telephone cords. Hiring of maids has become a necessity to many in Singapore due to rapid economic progress, requiring both parents to work to sustain a living. Maids are also often seen at Lucky Plaza in Singapore during their off days, which was carefully captured in the film.

Fulfilling the five cultural indicators, *Ilo Ilo* allows us to appreciate the struggle against economic pressures that is affecting fragile family relationships from a heartlander's point of view.

### Sandcastle *(2010) by Boo Junfeng*

*Sandcastle* by Boo was invited to the *International Critics' Week* at Cannes Film Festival. It also managed to clinch the Best Feature Film and Best Director awards at the Vietnam International Film Festival. A copious amount of footage from the national archives on Singapore in the 1950s and the 1960s occupies the film, which centres itself on a nationalistic theme about the arrest of the alleged 'communist' in the history of Singapore. *En*, a young man about to be enlisted into National Service, progressively learns about the past of his father who died of cancer. His father was one of the student rebels against the national policy of converting Chinese schools to English.

The film opened immediately with national songs and archival footage of patriotism towards Singapore. It takes place in the 1990s and features a Singaporean setting and HDB *mise en scène*, and an old private estate. Characters spoke fluent Hokkien, English and Chinese. The inclusion of a girl from China having intimate relationships with En shows the diversity of nationality – a trend in globalized Singapore. The struggles of the heartlander, such as the problem of taking care of ageing

parents and the conflict of religious beliefs among the family members, are prevalent throughout the film.

By exploring coming-of-age issues, Boo had successfully resonated the teenager's troubles with troubles faced by a young nation such as Singapore. This is a reflection of the heartlander struggle against the authoritarian society of Singapore.

## Innocents *(2012) by Chen-Hsi Wong*

Bagging the Best Director Award at Shanghai International Film Festival and the Best Screenplay at Ourense International Film Festival, *Innocents* is considered more an art-house film with its slow editing pace. Set in 1980s Singapore, Syafiqah, a Malay transfer student, and Huat, a Chinese delinquent student, become friends at school, isolated from other children. Syafiqah gradually finds out more about Huat's broken family and his sister, who suffers from learning disabilities. She starts to neglect her studies. Huat eventually disappears after being punished for his repeated late-coming, leaving Syafiqah unable to move on with her life.

Although the film was largely shot in the forests, local audiences can still identify with Singaporean living spaces such as Syafiqah's shophouse apartment and Huat's HDB apartment, which has a very iconic kitchen sink and window grills. The local school experience that includes studying science and math and canteens selling curry puffs relates to the local audience in a nostalgic way. The orange-roofed bus stops, bus seats and KTM train service also induce nostalgia among Singaporeans who have been through those years in their childhood. The characters spoke largely Singlish, with Syafiqah speaking Malay at home. The school environment depicted students from different ethnic groups.

Although much of the film's cultural background was comprehended through nostalgia among local audiences, the film still managed to communicate emotionally with the global audience. Characters were brought together by a similar life experience – incomplete parental love, alienation from social circles and a common desire to seek an alternative reality. Audiences would be able to relate to the notion of having secret spaces that are only shared with the closest friend, which the director revealed to be peculiarly a pre-digital age experience at one of her sharing sessions. These are manifestations of resistance against the authoritarian capitalist society.

## Singapore Dreaming *(2006) by Colin Goh and Yen Yen Woo*

As the title suggests, *Singapore Dreaming* placed Singapore on the international stage for winning the Best Asian Film Award at Tokyo International Film Festival and the Moutblanc New Screenwriter's Award at the San Sebastián film festival. *Singapore Dreaming* is a film about a man named Poh Huat

and his material-oriented family. He managed to win a lottery and gain sudden purchasing power, motivating him to acquire the so-called 5Cs. While acquiring the country club membership, he passed away from a sudden heart attack at the car park, leaving his family in a predicament over money issues.

Completely set in Singapore, the film opened with a montage of tourist attractions such as shopping malls and the national icon of Singapore, the Merlion, with the backdrop of popular Chinese songs from the 1960s. Many shots of the heartland – hawker centres selling the *butterfly* (deep fried dough), coffeeshops with female promoters from China promoting beer – were prominently documented in the film. Languages used in the film were Hokkien, Chinese and English. The Chinese characters spoke Singlish most of the time.

A large proportion of the film took place in the HDB apartment. Huat's wife was seen mopping the floor and preparing herbal tea in the apartment. The HDB lift was seen with urine on the floor, which is a common public nuisance. The second half of the film mostly took place at Huat's funeral, with the elaborate showcase of paper offerings and religious processions at the void deck of a HDB. The *mise en scène* highlights strong Singaporean culture.

Having the pursuit of *5Cs* as the central theme, the film mirrors the one-dimensional society with heartlanders aspiring to move up the social hierarchy while dealing with relationship conflicts and financial struggles. A summary of the analysis of typical Singaporean live-action films is shown in Table 1.

| Setting | Singapore |
|---|---|
| **Nationality/ Ethnicity** | Multicultural, multiracial |
| *mise en scène* | Mainly HDB |
| **Language** | Presence of Singlish/Chinese dialect |
| **Premise** | Heartlander struggle against the authoritarian society |

Table 1: Summary of Singaporean live-action films.

## Singapore animated cinema

Little is known about animation produced in the history of Singapore. The only known dedicated companies producing animated content in the 1990s were Animata and Animasia (Soon 2001). Even then, feature films were non-existent till 2006, and animated content was limited to TV commercials and cartoons for overseas markets.

After the millennium, Singapore aimed to be a regional hub for media and had recently constructed a media cluster at One-North, home to multinational companies such as visual effects giant LucasFilm and games developer Ubisoft. State-owned broadcaster MediaCorp moved into the cluster in 2015, while film and television content provider Infinite Studios had been a notable resident. However, local animation companies barely form an industry, with only a few players such as Tiny Island Productions, Omens Studio and One Animation, largely due to the absence of a local market. As such, only four Singaporean animated feature films exist, and they bear little to no cultural traits that are identifiably Singaporean. Their trailers can be found in the references section.

## Zodiac: The Race Begins *(2006) by Edward Foo*

The story was adapted from the Chinese Zodiac mythology where the celestial *Jade Emperor* gave an order to the mortal world for the first twelve animals to ascend and form the *Zodiac* cycle through a race. This is to prevent a calamity from happening as human beings did not have a concept of time. The film is set in a fantastical environment and much of the *mise en scènes* are depictions of forests and Chinese architecture floating in the sky. The main characters are animals who spoke in Chinese and there are no indications of ethnicity or nationality. Overcoming obstacles and adversities from the point of view of anthropomorphic characters is insufficient to display any form of cultural identity.

## Legend of the Sea *(2007) by Benjamin Toh*

The film is another adaptation of a Chinese mythology involving the *Dragon King* that rules the sea. *Draco* the Dragon Prince tries to hide his father's powerful Luminous Pearl from him out of playfulness, but ends up finding out the evil plans of *Ocho*, an exiled Octopus who wants to seek revenge on the *Dragon King*. He gets caught by *Ocho* but fights his way out with the help of his friends. Being very similar in plot to *Pixar's Finding Nemo* (Stanton and Unkrich 2003), the film manifested no signs of Singapore culture. Sea characters of no known nationality spoke Chinese, and the *mise en scène* is all but an underwater galore.

## Sing to the Dawn *(2008) by Phil Mitchell*

*Sing to the Dawn* was adapted from a critically acclaimed literary text published in 1975 by Minfong Ho (an American author) and directed by a foreigner. The story is about a girl named Dana who lives in a village in *Batam*. She is forced by her father to marry the evil landlord's son, while the landlord is planning to turn the village into a bustling city by evicting the villagers.

The film is set in an Indonesian village with the Kampong environment as *mise en scène*. The characters were Indonesian but spoke English. The first four cultural indicators were hence unfulfilled. The premise revolved around the idea of resistance against the patriarchal system where a daughter's marriage is decided by the family. Dana tries to go against the system with her actions that helped saved the village. This briefly echoes a similar tone in 'Singaporean' films, but as the film barely fulfilled any cultural indicators, it is difficult for Sing to the Dawn to be identifiably 'Singaporean'.

### Tatsumi *(2011) by Eric Khoo*

*Eric Khoo* is a film director who brought Singaporean films to the global limelight with his films *Mee Pok Man* (Khoo, 1995) and *12 Storeys* (Khoo, 1997). These were the first films from Singapore screened at recognized international festivals. These films fulfil the cultural indicators, Singaporean setting, HDB *mise en scène,* multiracialism, multilingualism and resistance against societal pressures.

In contrast, *Tatsumi* fails to fulfil the same cultural indicators. The story is about Yoshihiro Tatsumi and his invention of the *gekiga* genre in Japanese comic history. It is set in post-war Japan, with the various street scenes, traditional houses, city area and the occasional illustrative backgrounds as *mise en scène.* Characters are Japanese and speak Japanese.

*Khoo's* motive for this film is no more complex than a tribute to the comic artist who was still alive at the time. Contrary to Teo's belief of Tatsumi as 'a model of anime transnationalism showing how it may be both Japanese and Asian through rubber resilience of the medium' (Teo 2013: 79), *Tatsumi* is in no way Singaporean even though it was directed by a Singaporean, judging from both its poor critical reception and its Japanese-dominated themes. A summary of the analysis of Singaporean animated feature films is shown in Table 2.

| Setting | Not in Singapore |
|---|---|
| **Nationality/ethnicity** | No Singaporeans |
| *mise en scène* | No scenes of Singapore |
| **Language** | Chinese or English or Japanese |
| **Premise** | Overcoming adversities |

*Table 2: Summary of Singaporean animated feature films.*

## Attempts at cultural authenticity

Conversely, non-commercial animated products mostly produced by students are able to portray the cultural indicators more closely as they do not bear financial risks. The films explore alternative cultures and a voice of their own, exhibiting sufficient fulfilment of the indicators for them to be appreciated with a cultural spectacle. They are analysed with supporting interviews with the directors. Transcripts are available in Appendix A, and the films are viewable online via the URL provided in the references section.

## Flats *(2011) by Ervin Han*

Through the eyes of two children, the film guides audiences through a multicultural HDB setting where corridors are filled with potted plants; void decks are occupied by a Malay wedding adjacent to a Chinese funeral; and lift lobbies are filled with graffiti by *loan sharks* that exposes the unpleasant side of Singapore. Han revealed that he was interested in telling personal stories by embracing childhood memories such as running around the HDB. The film was made as a pilot project for Scrawl Studios, of which he was one of the founders. He believes in the universal premise of the film – the simple event of kids running around the neighbourhood – and is positive that it will relate to a global audience despite the local elements. The film has no dialogue, representing the only shortfall in fulfilling all indicators of a 'Singaporean' animation.

## Foreign Plants *(2013) by Alex Ng*

Ng believes in light-hearted entertainment that is relatable immediately to his audience and thus chose humour to depict the social issue of foreign worker influx into Singapore. The animation begins with the prolonged dry condition experienced in 2013 where trees in Singapore are struggling with thirst. The child tree hopes to visit 'Gardens by the Bay', a tourist attraction in Singapore, only to find out from his father that the place only admits foreigners.

   Besides a Singaporean premise, products unique to Singapore, such as NEWater, a bottled reclaimed water produced by Singapore's national water agency, PUB, were clearly presented. However, the characters spoke English and did not exhibit any form of ethnicity, fulfilling only three out of five of the cultural indicators.

## 1997 *(2014) by Wei Choon Goh and Jiahui Wee*

Nostalgia stands at the heart of *1997* as Goh traced childhood memories of Singaporeans who had attended public primary education in the 1990s. The film is almost a visual documentary of objects,

sights and sounds that teases a resistance against the rapid progress of society, as highlighted by the significant depiction of toys in the pre-digital age.

Characters of different skin colour representing the different races in Singapore play together, forming the multiracial aspect of a 'Singaporean' film. No dialogues were used in the film. As such, four out of five indicators are fulfilled.

### Wrong number Singapore *(2012) by Colleen Cox*

Interestingly, *Wrong Number Singapore* was animated by a non-Singaporean based on a recorded local phone prank that went viral on YouTube. A Chinese character prank calls an Indian man, which quickly escalated into a furious exchange of expletives in multiple languages, including the Hokkien dialect.

Cox chose the *heartland coffeeshop* as the setting, with actual live-action footage as backdrop for the 2D characters, creating a comedic yet tangible sense of cultural authenticity. Albeit fulfilling all indicators, the animation is only a short video clip appearing as an incomplete film with the sole purpose of entertainment.

### Lak Boh Ki

*Lak Boh Ki* (Ang, 2016) is a Hainanese term that literally means 'drop nowhere'. A one-and-a-half-year-old baby who dropped his plush Merlion toy onto the ledge outside of his HDB apartment window tries to get it back, and in the palm-sweating process reveals the contemporary Singaporean residential landscape made up of foreigners.

The film is an exposition of the unspoken conflict in culture and identity between native Singaporeans and foreigners in Singapore. It is set in Singapore with a HDB *mise en scène*. A Singaporean housewife (Figure 1) speaks the Chinese dialect, Hainanese. Indian neighbours utter Tamil and a Chinese man shouts in Chinese. The baby represents the young nation in search of identity represented by the Merlion toy (Figure 2), surrounded by other non-native residents. Eventually, the toy falls off the tenth floor to the ground while the baby helps himself to a similar toy of a different colour from another apartment, signifying the acceptance of other cultures, which echoes how Singaporean culture was originally formed. A summary of *Lak Boh Ki's* cultural indicators is shown in Table 3.

Preliminary private screenings had revealed its potential as an authentic 'Singaporean' product as surveyed audiences can relate to the narrative and appreciate its cultural elements. Further feedback needs to be collected from its reception at international film festivals. The production journal containing notes about the story, design and still images are available in Appendix B, while the film can be viewed online via the URL provided in the references section.

*Figure 1: Still image of the housewife on the phone in the cooking scene (Ang 2016).*



*Figure 2: Merlion plush toy on the ledge (Ang 2016).*

| Setting | Singapore |
|---|---|
| **Nationality/ethnicity** | Multicultural/Chinese and Indian |
| *Mise en scène* | HDB |
| **Language** | Hainanese, Tamil and Chinese |
| **Premise** | Baby struggling to retrieve a toy in a multicultural neighbourhood |

*Table 3: Summary of* Lak Boh Ki*'s cultural indicators.*

## Conclusion

Film is undoubtedly a domain of cultural exposition through its ability to represent reality via sight and sound. It is never a singular transfer of thought from auteur to audience, but 'the result of meaning-making by its makers and viewers' and are 'discursively mediated' by audiences of different cultural background (Cahoone 1988: 248).

Through an analysis of Singaporean live-action films, we identify consistency in cultural traits through five indicators – setting, ethnicity and nationality of characters, *mise en scène*, language and premise. They tend to exhibit a passive but strong message echoing the resistance against a one-dimensional society by having the premise pivoted around characters struggling against the authoritarian system. Success attested by international awards and healthy distribution accompanies these films. The lack of Singapore culture in local animation will prove detrimental to both identity formation and survivability of the animation industry as success is comparably limited. By attempting to create an animation culturally identifiable to be 'Singaporean', fresh ideas are unlocked and market interests are challenged.

Animation directors interviewed in the research project have voiced concerns about global reception as audiences must have heard of Singapore to be able to identify and relate to Singapore culture. From a personal point of view, as long as the premise is universal, audiences will still appreciate an animated film infused with the culture unknown to them.

## Acknowledgements
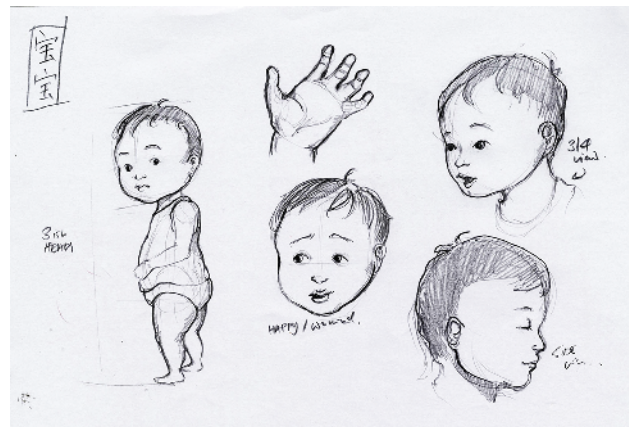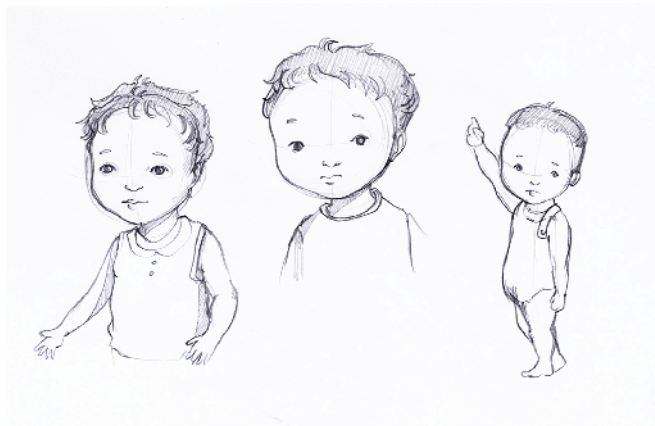
*Figures 3-4: Baby designs.*
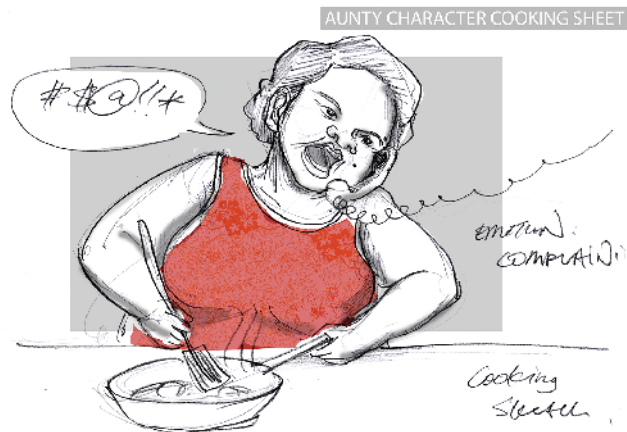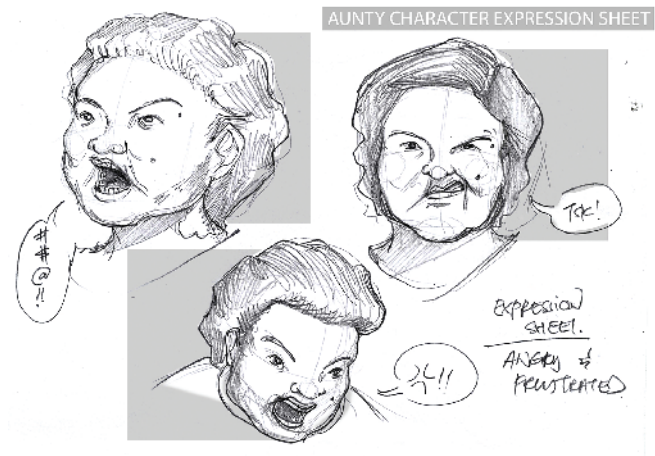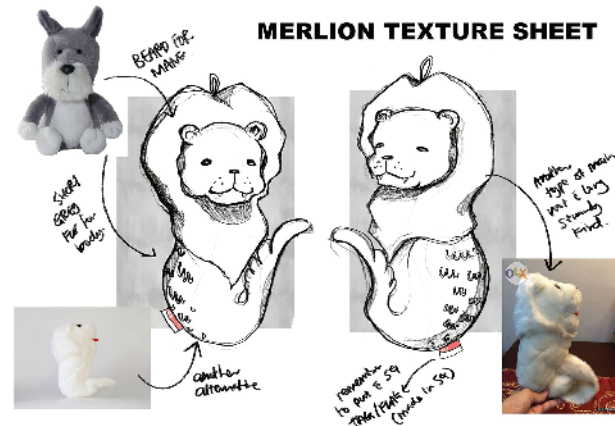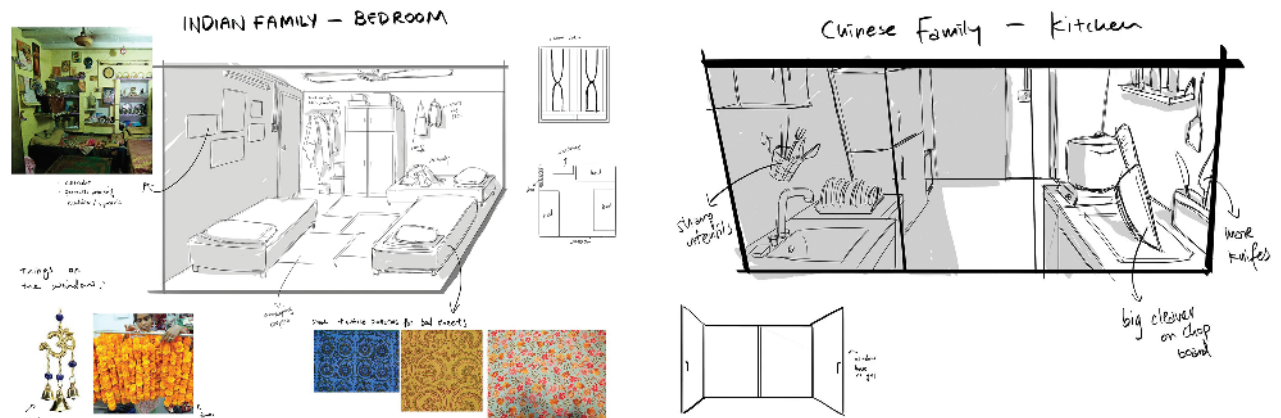




*Figures 5-6: Mother designs.*

*Figure 7: Merlion plush toy design.*



*Figures 8-9: Environment designs.*

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## Appendix A1: Interview transcript

The following transcript records a phone interview with Ervin Han, director of *Flats*.

**Qing Sheng Ang (QSA):** *Tell me a little more about yourself.*

**Ervin Han (EH):** I previously worked at the Media Development Authority in the Industry Development team for animation, then moved on to Scrawl Studios and eventually, Robot Playground Media.

**QSA:** *What motivated you to make an animated film that puts Singapore culture as a driving force?*

**EH:** It was more of a pilot project to test our pipeline, and to be a sample work to propose a bigger project that is something like an anthology of local short stories showcasing facets of Singapore. This is something the company can use as a portfolio to show what we can do.

**QSA:** *Tell us more about your film!*

**EH:** I had a desire to tell a personal story. I wrote the treatment and directed the art. This is not a commissioned project and we own the IP. I had others supervising the storyboard and animation. Making animated films is my passion, my avenue of creative expression. *Flats* relates to me as some kind of an early childhood memory. It is character-driven – two siblings playing in the HDB neighbourhood and the younger sister got lost. It will relate to the international audience as well because

this can happen anywhere in the world. There is a universal quality to the story. The film isn't complete due to financial challenges.

**QSA:** *What were the challenges met in the process of crafting the story?*

**EH:** Not much as it is more of a personal story which we as filmmakers excel at.

**QSA:** *In your opinion, what do you think are ingredients that would make an animated film distinctly 'Singaporean'?*

**EH:** The target audience of the film is important. Only Singaporeans or someone who have lived or worked here would be able to identify that. It needs to relate to them on a personal level.

**QSA:** *Are you working on any new projects that are related to Singapore?*

**EH:** We are working on a project that is a combination of four three-and-a-half minutes long animation that goes through the history of Singapore from 1930's to present time. Each has a little story that weaves through a particular time period. The project is funded by the Singapore Memory Project, titled *The Violin*.

## Appendix A2: Interview transcript

The following transcript records an email interview with Alex Ng, director of *Foreign Plants*.

**Qing Sheng Ang (QSA):** *Tell me a little more about yourself.*

**Alex Ng (AN):** I'm basically just someone who loves 2D animation as a hobby. It all started back then before YouTube videos existed, where Flash animation was popular. Although I studied animation at the Institute of Technical Education, my skills are mostly self-taught. My first job was in a small art studio where I learn a lot about the industry the hard way. My experience there was tough and harsh but rewarding. I worked there for around two years before leaving the company due to medical issues.

**QSA:** *What motivated you to make an animated film that puts Singapore culture as a driving force?*

**AN:** I was pretty much the only person producing online animation, so why not include Singapore culture to get more attention! Most local animation are in the form of demo reels while I believe in independent online entertainment. My first attempt was an animation of Hossan Leong's parody song 'We Live in Singapura'.

**QSA:** *Tell us more about your film!*

**AN:** Foreign plants was more or less an impromptu idea that I pulled off one day during the last weeks of the haze issue in Singapore. Seeing how bad the haze has affected everyone outdoors, I started realizing there are actually 'prestigious' plants being housed in a dome safe from the harsh environment. I tried to mock this 'huge class divide' on the plants here. Basically I just wanted to put a dash of dark humour for the ending.

**QSA:** *What were the challenges met in the process of crafting the story?*

**AN:** My major challenge was working with my Japanese friend for the voice-overs as he had a very tight schedule. The release was delayed, so the impact might not be as good as it could be as the haze was gone.

**QSA:** *In your opinion, what do you think are ingredients that would make an animated film distinctly 'Singaporean'?*

**AN:** It would probably be situations that Singaporeans can easily related to, like National Service, of which I produced *SAF Fantasy* showing our experience in army like a *Final Fantasy* game. I try to stay away from local accent as I want the international audience to catch the joke too. When there is a current affair worth animating, I would attempt to ride on the media attention with my perspective of the situation.

**QSA:** *Are you working on any new projects that are related to Singapore?*

**AN:** I've been trying to make an animation relating to the *Mass Rapid Transit* trains in Singapore. I also have another idea about an anthropomorphic local fruit working in Singapore.

## Appendix A3: Interview transcript

The following transcript records an e-mail interview with Wei Choon Goh, director of *1997*.

**Qing Sheng Ang (QSA):** *Tell me a little more about yourself.*

**Wei Choon Goh (WCG):** I am a Malaysian who has been studying in Singapore since I was 7 years old, so I sort of grew up in both Malaysia and Singapore. Malaysians think I'm very Singaporean-like and Singaporeans think I'm very Malaysian-like. I've always been struggling with national identity, constantly back and forth between two countries that are so similar but yet fundamentally different.

**QSA:** *What motivated you to make an animated film that puts Singapore culture as a driving force?*

**WCG:** I wouldn't say Singapore culture was a driving force for our film. For our Final Year Project, my partner Jiahui and I basically wanted to make a film that was honest and personal. We just started yammering about our childhood and decided to go deeper in that direction. We tried to emphasize those moments because honesty sometimes comes across universally, despite the very obscure superficial aspects of the narrative.

**QSA:** *Tell us more about your film!*

**WCG:** We initially wanted to make the sound design strictly diegetic, in an attempt to keep the honesty of the film. However it just didn't work, and we decided to let our composer from Germany mess around with it without any input from us. He gave us the exact opposite of what we wanted, but it worked incredibly well. We were struggling with the translation of the visual gags in our film, and while the gags did not work at one point, his sound design made everything work.

The song '细水长流' was a particularly easy choice to make. That song was an audial milestone for the generation, and had the exact vibe of carefree nostalgia that we felt underlined our film perfectly.

**QSA:** *In your opinion, what do you think are ingredients that would make an animated film distinctly 'Singaporean'?*

**WCG:** I think a film can be 'Singaporean' when it is about Singapore, made in Singapore, or made by a Singaporean. The term 'Singaporean' is already a tricky one to maintain because Singapore could either deal strictly with the geopolitical boundaries that defines the nation, or it could deal anthropologically or culturally with the people who live in Singapore. I think it's a very grey issue, and there are questions about the topic that I struggle to answer. Especially with the *SG50* initiative, there will be a lot of new animated works that are labelled 'Singaporean'. Whether they are appropriately so will be another question, but for now I think there are a good number of animated works that are 'Singaporean' (Like Ervin Han's *Flats* or this little motion graphics by *Crave FX* did for National Day), but I think films that are not about Singapore should be considered Singaporean as well, for example Mark Wee's film *The Animals*, though dealing with German Expressionist aesthetics, is made by a Singaporean, and I would absolutely consider his work 'Singaporean', even if he denies it.

## Appendix B: Production journal

The story was inspired from a conversation between my aunts about a toddler who climbed out of the HDB window as his mother went out of the house for a game of mahjong. The toddler went into

a neighbour's apartment the first time round, but fell to his death the second time, leaving the mother devastated.

HDB falling deaths and issues like noise nuisance from neighbours are common topics avoided by the media. These are ingredients that make up the film *Lak Boh Ki*. In order to capture the true essence of a Singaporean household, the mother character gossips in natural Hainanese in a kitchen that does not attempt to conceal any unglamorous arrangement of laundry and appliances. Ledges are filled with litter on certain floors to show the real side of Singapore plagued by litterbugs. A shot of the Singapore flag hung inverted reveals that the society is not as perfect as the authorities would like to make it seem.

The script was carefully crafted and revised several times to ensure that the film could communicate elements of Singaporianness besides the adventure of the baby. Details like 'Gas lighter fires 3 times, stove ignites' are included.

The film begins with a montage of Singapore HDB – an old man digging his teeth in front of a mirror and a woman putting out the laundry pole – and subsequently the mother talking on the phone while frying her dishes. She is disturbed by the noise from her Indian neighbours. We then focus on the baby holding his plush Merlion toy at the bedroom window. Someone from upstairs throws a cigarette butt down, distracting the baby and causing him to drop the toy on the ledge below. He climbs out and goes through a series of near-death situations to get the toy back, such as being caught by the air-conditioning unit bracket, the window sill and a pile of laundry.

Throughout his journey, he meets an Indian girl who gave him an uncomfortably long stare from her bedroom, a *Mynah* bird that bit his toy away, as well as a man from mainland China shouting into his phone at another apartment. When the baby finally retrieves his toy, red underwear wraps around his head, causing him to lose balance and he falls two floors down into the comforts of a huge blanket. The Indian girl manages to catch the toy, but lets it go, thinking that the baby below would catch it. The toy falls to the ground, but little does the baby know that similar plush toys in different colours can be found in the apartment right in front of him.

## Suggested citation

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# Taiwan By Design

## 88 Products for Better Living

### Edited by Annie Ivanova

ISBN 978-0-9751998-4-8
267pp | £34.50 $45.95
Paperback | 170 x 230mm
Published Spring 2017

The influence of Taiwan on contemporary design is strong and growing. Focusing on the vibrant and cutting-edge designs being created in Taiwan today, curator **Annie Ivanova** offers here the first comprehensive compendium of the elements and influences of the growing Asian design aesthetic emerging from Taiwan. Ivanova has chosen 88 objects that exemplify Taiwan's design excellence, in which centuries of craft traditions continue to be practiced alongside the latest developments in digital media.

Among the objects discussed are technological innovations such as the smart scooter, digital helmet and re-engineered skateboard, in addition to ecofurniture, Ming Dynasty-inspired objects and even a burial urn. Ivanova shows how Taiwanese designers are finding inspiration in the vanishing worlds of night markets and temples and how classical elements from colonial architecture are being reimagined for the home. *Taiwan by Design* showcases the best in Taiwanese product design, revealing that it is undoubtedly among the most interesting and innovative work in international design today.