

**Playwright with a Plural Consciousness:
Kuo Pao Kun. *Images at the Margins: A Collection of Kuo Pao Kun's Plays* (Singapore: Times Books International, 2001).**

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Our soul is full of a thousand internal contrarities’.

Plato, *The Republic*

Playwright, actor, director, Kuo Pao Kun is one of the most influential figures in Singapore theatre. For his many pioneering contributions and outstanding achievements in drama, he was awarded the Singapore Cultural Medallion in 1990 and conferred the *Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* (Knighthood of Arts and Letters) by the French Government in 1996. An immigrant from China who came to live with his father in Singapore in 1949 at the age of 10, Pao Kun started his dramatic career in the Chinese language. He wrote his first play, *Plan for the Day*, for the Mandarin Radio Drama Group in 1956. However, his bilingual education prompted him to venture into English language theatre as well in later years.

This aptitude of Pao Kun’s to express himself creatively in two languages, or swim in two unlike streams, is what constitutes his main strength. It gives him that rare identity of a cultural individualist and pluralist at the same time and the privilege to provide the vital bridge between the indigenous Chinese and Anglophone theatres in Singapore. It empowers him to dialogue with culturally divergent groups of people, who, as he explains in an interview, ‘think differently and have different experiences’. Paradoxically however, it also brings him into a kind of marginality – a fringe kind of existence that is experienced by one whose imagination is not anchored in any one

particular language or culture, and who habitually occupies a neutral ground between two seemingly incompatible worlds, acting as an arbiter of the diverse.

Images at the Margins brings together 10 of this unique playwright's best known plays, including his first English-language work, *The Coffin is Too Big for the Hole* (written in 1984 and first performed in 1985). The other well-known plays in the volume include *No Parking on Odd Days*, *The Silly Little Girl and the Funny Old Tree*, *Day I Met the Prince*, and *Kopitiam*. The final play in the collection, *The Evening Climb*, originally written in Chinese in 1992, reinforces how confidently and comfortably Pao Kun ambles between his creative mediums.

The book, moreover, contains several critical essays and reviews by notable theatre critics from the region. Of particular value are the two introductory pieces and the reviews by Krishen Jit and Max Le Blond. Perhaps these pieces, which provide an academic touch to the book, have been included with the hope, and legitimately too, that the book will gain access to academia and be used for classroom teaching and research.

In his Foreword, Pao Kun justifies the supplementary reading. 'Plays, by nature, do not always make for enjoyable reading, and to some, I am notorious for producing "difficult" works. The best decision the team made was to include the commentaries and essays; they are welcome alternatives when you the reader find the plays hard-going'. I fully agree that the skeletal script of a play, without the dynamics of performance, may not yield the highest pleasure to the reader, although, ironically, in most instances, scripts are what we have to be content with even with the best of the playwrights like Shakespeare, Dryden, Shaw, O'Neill, Ionesco and Beckett. Lest we forget there is also an advantage in reading rather than witnessing a play, and that is, while reading we can allow our own imagination to navigate and be in control.

As for whether the plays are 'difficult' or 'hard-going', I found them but stimulating and entertaining, charged with humour but morally enriching, satirical but not scathing, enigmatic but not tedious or taxing. Pao Kun's plays can be classified as social satires as in each of them he dramatises the destabilising and debilitating effects of modernisation on Singapore society. He shows how rapid industrialisation and technocratic advancement have diminished the frontier of imagination in the island-state and denuded the people of their moral and spiritual vitality; how economic propriety has made life more regimented, dehumanised and consumer-oriented. However, Pao Kun is not a cynical writer, nor does he criticise Singapore society in a harsh, indignant tone. His criticisms are couched in sympathy and mitigated by gentle, urbane, amiable laughter, which is characteristic of Menippean or Varronian satire.

Philosophically, Pao Kun is not a doctrinaire. He is not a writer with a singular passion; rather he is calm, tranquil, mediatory and centrifugal in his imagination. One can see that like the speaker in the monologue *The Coffin is Too Big for the Whole*, or the little boy in *No parking on Odd Days*, or the silly little girl in *The Silly Little Girl and The Funny Old Tree*, he is a sort of an idealist who likes to stand up for a cause and assert his identity in a world of vanishing moral values and diminishing personal identity. Yet he does not push his cause *ad extremum*, blindly, fanatically; neither does he demonise those on the other side of the fence.

His dilemma and dialogic vision are best represented in *Day I Met the Prince* and *Kpoitiam*. Really, his predicament is the predicament of the young prince: how to protect the rose without restraining the goat: how to protect the soul without denying the body,

the self without turning away from society, and tradition without putting a leash on modernisation?

The Prince has come all the way from another planet to find a solution to his problem, which shows how serious the matter is. However, the answer is simple: the rose can protect itself because it has thorns; likewise, soul, self and tradition can fend for themselves because of certain inherent mechanisms in them. Therefore, although it is important to embrace a *niao* kind of existence (as depicted by the Big One in *The Eagle and the Cat*) and refuse to compromise or 'sell out', or to keep a lookout for the Big Bird (which embodies the universal soul in *The Eagle and the Cat*), there is no reason to despair or be up in arms over the way things are but rather to retain one's composure and embrace life with all its inherent paradoxes and inconsistencies like a true friend of the human race.

This embracing of all contraries, which gives rise to the playwright's plural consciousness, is of course both ancient and modern, going as far back as the ancient Greek philosopher Plato, and the Indian mystical and moral treatises, the Upanishads.

Pao Kun's plural consciousness and symbiotic vision can also be found in his dramaturgy where he successfully brings together Eastern and Western theatre art forms. One can see that he has been influenced by the Western Theatre of the Absurd, in particular the minimalist tradition of Beckett. His monologues are directly reminiscent of those by the Irish playwright, yet one can find the Chinese oral story-telling and cross-talk performance traditions in his work.

All in all, I found *Images at the Margins* profoundly enjoyable. My only disappointment is in finding the many typographical errors in the volume, which I had least expected in a Times publication. I hope these will be rectified in future editions.