"We Tap Tradition and Modernity": Edwin Thumboo and the National Question

Shu-chen Chiang

ABSTRACT

Edwain Thumboo, national poet of Singapore, has witnessed the independence and modernization of his country, hence characterizing himself "post-colonial." Believing that English could be the "bridge language" to connect different ethnic groups in Singapore, he has endowed poetry in English with the mission of cultural writing with an aim to combining the past, the present and the future of the country. His notion that "we tap tradition and modernity," has been criticized, mainly by Western scholars, for keeping a vision too optimistic and therefore lacking self-criticism. This paper attempts to argue that Thumboo's belief in the functioning of tradition and modernity in a postcolonial condition can be understood by a postmodern logic of nationalism. In the perverse doubling of nationalism, things can be both the same and different, old and new at once in an on-going process. This reveals not so much a disabling flaw as the secret of the persistent and productive dynamism of nationalism.

KEY WORDS

Edwin Thumboo
English literature
Nationalism
Modernity
Singapore
national literature
postcolonialism
Robert Young

One thing that catches the immediate attention of anyone who starts interest in Southeast Asian literatures in English must be the different roles the English language plays in Singapore's and Malaysia's literatures. Considering the fact that both countries were undivided as a colony under British rule for over one hundred years, one cannot but feel fascinated by the present situation of English use in the two places: while English has been played down in Malaysia, it has achieved its prominence in Singapore.[1] Here I will not go into the complex historical details of the legitimacy of writing in English in the two countries but mention only one fact: as Singapore has gradually ceased to be the center of Malay literary activity and publishing, most of it having moved to Kuala Lumpur since 1965, Singapore is set to become the center of the literary activity in English. A personal observation of an event that took place during my visit to Singapore in late October 1995 has reinforced my conception that English is taking up the leading position in Singapore's national literature.

In that trip to Singapore, I attended a book launch ceremony held by National Arts Council. Sitting with many local writers of English, Chinese, Malay, and Tamil, I, even as an outsider paying her first visit to the city, could easily sense that the privileged positions were taken by writers of English. (Most of them sat in front.) It was a solemn event with an emphasis on introducing a new anthology *Journeys: Words, Home and Nation: Anthology of Singapore Poetry 1984-1995*. The title already implies the three issues that concern writers of post-colonial countries—language, tradition and nation-building. The readership of the anthology, therefore, would involve not only Singapore readers but, more importantly, international readers. The nation-

al poet, Edwin Thumboo, tall and bulky, gave a speech and then asked the President of Singapore, Ong Teng Cheong, to press a button that linked to a world wide web site, thus pronouncing the internationalization of Singapore literature. The significance of launching this anthology was further indicated by its publishing date: the year of 1995, when Singapore was celebrating its 30th anniversary.

The book has poems of all the four languages in Singapore, with the non-English poems translated into English. The major difference between this volume and the previous one, *The Poetry of Singapore* (Anthology of ASEAN Literatures Series) published in 1985, is the order of the four languages. In the earlier volume, the order is Malay, Tamil, Chinese and English with the Chinese poems largest in amount; while in the later anthology, English enjoys the most prominent position as well as the largest quantity.

Those who are familiar with the history of Singapore can understand the change of the order.[2] Between the ten years from the 1980s to 1990s, the English language in Singaporean literature has changed from an exclusive non-indigenous language of a minority who received English education to an important force in the local literary circle. And the prominence of the English language is apparently a result of national culture planning in which English was promoted to be a privileged language for the establishment of the national literature.[3] One might be tempted to say that it has achieved the original goal set by the earlier writers of English, Thumboo included, that English could be the "bridge language" which cross communal boundaries with its less stereotyped treatment of the various races.[4] Thumboo once said that "English is likely to be the first to produce a national literature" ("National" 29) and this viewpoint has the support of the younger generation now. Simon Tay, one of Singapore's leading young poets, expresses it thus:

> It would seem right to welcome the increasing use of English. It could be a medium to unite the ethnic diversity. It could be a means of expressing the modern Singapore. If it seems an artificial device, a colonial hangover at present, it

> need not be so: we can make this medium our own. And given time, I believe we shall. (56)

Looking retrospectively at the "vision" presented by both old and young poets, we have a clear picture of the contemporary Singapore literature with English as its leading role.[5] Not long ago, Lee Tzu Pheng, one of the prominent poets of English, still lamented the poor recognition of local writers of English in Singapore. She said that the state of Singapore poetry in English, or in general, the state of literature, had never been an important force in the history of Singapore. Writers had not played an effective part in the shaping of modern Singapore, and in the midst of rapid changes in society, their activities remained very much on the fringe (451-453). Lee's statement remains valid today in the broad sense; however, despite the writer's lack of status, the influence of Edwin Thumboo within the literary and cultural spheres is of great significance.[6] Shirley Lim has written about Thumboo's influence in the literary history of Singapore:

> The persuasion, over the course of three decades, of a segment of the educated world in Singapore and abroad of the validity and standing of local writing in English is a large achievement which, while it cannot be said to owe everything to Thumboo's critical work, must be said to owe a great deal to it. This validation has given the Singapore writer in English an assurance which allows for more confident writing and has created a climate of recognition which encourages even more writing such as is not available where writing in English is down-played as secondary or insignificant. (33)

Lim thus concludes that "Thumboo's real influence on Malaysia/Singapore poetry has been to forge, as the first-generation poetry, the legitimacy of poetry in English in the region and its place in the world writing in English" (34).

This literary father of Singapore has been reviewed repeatedly by local as well as Western critics.[7] Much of the criticism has focused on Thumboo's notion of history, which centers on his emphasis on cultural coherence and continuity in the context of nation-building. This sense of history is formed around the two cultures he inherited, and associated with their social, literary, historical and political parameters. Much of it was also a consequence of his personal history, and his pursuing various interests in the university over the History and English Literature majors and a Philosophy minor. This sense of the past and his awareness of the need to write as a Singaporean about Singapore in the present and for the future have been the guiding impulse in the development of his writing.[8] They come across in the range of symbol, image, metaphor and resonance in his poetry, and through them we come to an understanding of the multiculturalism in Southeast Asia. Both Ee Tiang Hong and Dennis Haskell have pointed out that his multicultural past is an asset he shares with some of his contemporaries. In comparing Thumboo and Yeats, both casting themselves as nationalist poets, Haskell observes that "[m]ulticulturalism represents the most significant difference between Thumboo's situation and Yeats's" (7). Thus, Thumboo's multicultural background offers him a language that is not exactly that of the former colonizer. He seemed to be conscious of writing in a language that had a powerful and creative tradition from which the literature he hoped for Singapore would differ through its own voice.

In his assertion of preserving tradition in the process of nation-building, Thumboo has been criticized for indulging in chauvinistic or shallowly optimistic vision. His well-known poem entitled "Ulysses by the Merlion," for example, has received negative comments from critics such as Jan B. Gordon, John Kwan-Terry, and Dennis Haskell, and even the defenders like Lloyd Fernando, Ee Tiang Hong and Yasmin Gooneratne can hardly convince the attackers. Fernando seems to apologize on behalf of Thumboo when he writes:

> Many poems make a strenuous effort to respond to a "new" Singapore. "Ulysses by the Merlion" is one of the

> best of this group, but it also keenly illustrates the hazards Thumboo faced in dealing with such themes as nation-building. His reference to Singapore's newly sculpted symbol, the "Merlion," as "this powerful creature of land and sea" must be seen as a response, partly evoked by the non-too-subtle demands made on public figures for clear demonstrations of loyalty.[9]

Compared with Fernando, Gooneratne is stronger in her support. In her essay "Edwin Thumboo—'Ulysses by the Merlion'," she reminds us that the reader needs to bring to this poem some perception "of those elements from a varied cultural inheritance that co-exist with elements from Western tradition in the modern poetry of Asia (15). What she means by the cultural inheritance is Hinduism and Buddhism, from which Thumboo has created the "Merlion." In the poem Thumboo lays out the theme of Singapore's development from an outsider's point of view; i.e., Ulysses'. Homer's Ulysses, on his journey home to Ithaca, encountered many monsters; among them are Poseidon's son the giant Cyclops Polyphemus; Scylla, a rock-dwelling horror who barked like a dog and possessed twelve feet and six long necks and heads, each of which contained three rows of sharp teeth; and Charybdis, who three times a day swallowed down the waters of the sea, and three times threw them up again. Yet the Merlion, this "powerful creature of land and sea," leads Ulysses to meditation, not to fear. The Western epic hero thus concludes that the Merlion is the latest addition to a pantheon of icons and totems which includes the dragon of China, the eagle of Indonesia, the cobra of India, and the horses of Apollo that symbolize the West. He sees the Merlion as "adding to" these earlier images. After experiencing wars and schemes, Ulysses meets Singapore's peaceful experiment in multi-cultural living in which immigrants "Explore the edges of harmony, Search for a centre." A new society rises phoenix-like from the old, yet what has taken place on this "brief promontory" of time and space is not destruction and burning but mutation, the sea-change that transforms Singaporeans to the rich in Southeast Asia.[10] When expressing

his deepest feelings of his country, Thumboo maintains his emotional balance by taking an outsider's viewpoint and hence to distance himself from the subject. Another reason for adopting this strategy is that the images and literary allusions that rise to the mind of Thumboo's Ulysses represent one of the many strands that make up Singapore's cosmopolitan inheritance: the intellectual background of the cultivated English speaker. Gooneratne praises Thumboo for selecting Ulysses for his persona and rejecting other alternatives such as an insider's point of view (who may express him/herself in "Singlish"). She believes that Thumboo by so doing avails himself of the freedom now possessed by Asia's writers in English to take (from their own traditions) what is useful and reject what is not.
She writes:

> What I find deeply interesting and instructive about it is the way such a development of a Western classical myth has been poetically managed in terms of a principle recognizable as Buddhist in origin: the concept of a universe governed by change and impermanence. Unlike many well-known Western poems, "Ulysses by the Merlion" does not deplore change: instead, it accepts and celebrates it. (15f)

Gooneratne's comment seems to assert that Asian people with Buddhist and Hindu cultural backgrounds are psychologically stronger than Western people, more capable of attaining "an authentic and healthy postcolonialism."[11] In "Ulysses by the Merlion," Thumboo juxtaposes the past and the present, tradition and modernity, nature and technology. He describes the Merlion—the lion and the fish-tail combined in a single icon—aglow with electric "power" and placed at the entrance to a world-famous harbor. And the people there,

> Despite unequal ways,
> Together they mutate,
> Explore the edges of harmony,

Search for a centre; . . .
They hold the bright, the beautiful,
Good ancestral dreams
Within new visions, . . .

Haskell, commenting on Thumboo for lack of self-criticism, attributes his arrogance of the present to his Asian background. He writes, "One substantial difference between the cultures and the governments of Asia and the West is the Asian tendency to ban, constrain or deflect criticism whereas the West tends to encourage it, and meet it head on. The latter provides more exciting possibilities for a writer; Yeats poetically admitted to bitterness and his poems often seethe with hatred, anger, rage and contempt, contributing to a far greater range of tone than is present in Thumboo's ouvre" (6). The other side of this statement, one can argue, is that Thumboo, unlike Yeats who rejects science in favor of the occult and mythology, finds no incongruity of tradition and modernity in his understanding of cultural change. Haskell has also noticed Thumboo's efforts to "forge" a national identity with his poetry. He quotes Thumboo:

> You have, on the one hand, the historical sense, a sense of the past, and on the other hand the need to construct an individual, constantly enlarging version of that past in order to provide the stance, the awareness to write as a Singaporean about Singapore but having within reach the range of symbol, image, metaphor and resonance that is available to us in Southeast Asia. *We tap tradition and modernity.* Ultimately, that is the most important gift of a sense of history. (12; Singh, *Writer's* 233; my emphasis)

If this forging effort is viewed as a kind of arrogance of the present, it can be understood in the theory of anti-colonial nationalism, in which two conflicting and yet mutually indispensable tendencies co-exist: anti-colonial nationalism wants to assert sameness and equality with the colonial power while, at another level, that of national identity and

national culture, it wants to claim difference from the colonial power (Young 6). Unlike the fundamentalist religious nationalism, anti-colonial nationalism welcomes modernity, promoting not only the technological part but also concepts like democracy, egalitarianism, anti-monarchy, and power coming from the people. When it comes to the conflicts and contradictoriness of tradition and modernity, one solution presented by Partha Chatterjee is to divide nationalism into two realms: the material realm of modernity and the spiritual realm of culture. It assumes that the categories of tradition and modernity can be kept completely apart.

Robert Young has refuted Chatterjee's viewpoint by citing Homi Bhabha's concept of the "pedagogic" and the "performative": "The production of a people must work through the pedagogic enforcement of an historical narrative from the past, while drawing the population into a performative process in which their daily life produces an identity in the present" (7). In other words, a nation-state must be both "new" and "historical" at the same time, or as Young calls it the "double-time of the nation." This is what I believe Thumboo has wished for the shaping of Singapore's national identity. He has once declared that his poetry aims at "strengthen[ing] the spirit, the thought, the substance" of his "part of the world" (Thumboo 1996: 23). The modernity he wants to "tap" has to be layered upon an older culture and thus become internalized at an ideological level as the form of political and psychological reality. Nationalism in this sense, according to Young, bears a "strange 'postmodern' logic," as he writes:

> Its perverse doubling, in which things can be both the same and different, old and new at once, makes it operate, we could say, as a kind of cultural *writing*. Its functioning as a form of writing that remains unwritten can allow us to characterise its paradoxical and oneiric logic that enables its uncontainable effects and allows it to survive despite its contradictions, to reverse itself at every refutation, to adapt and transform itself at every historical challenge. (14;

Young's emphasis)

This passage may remind us of what Thumboo has said about his concept of tradition characterized as myth, when he writes:

> I had experimented with myth, symbol—phoenix, dragon, garuda, merlion—and imagery that drew mainly upon the Chinese and Indian, but vivified in a context avowedly in Singaporean. Myths and symbols especially, must be an organic part of a poem and yet be accessible across cultures. This can be achieved by investing them with a sufficient persuasiveness so that, despite different origins, they belong together, form a pool to which we can add, but above all else, *tap*. (Gooneratne 9, note 2; my emphasis)

Thumboo here asserts, with confidence, that myths of different origins can be put together, re-arranged and re-invested. The word "tap" carries a heavy local significance as it can refer to tapping the rubber tree.[12] For Thumboo, tradition can function like a "pool," or more appropriately, like a rubber tree, for the poet to draw out liquid (or to cut for the sap) without destroying the pool/tree, the repository of racial memories.

A further reading of Thumboo can be done from the perspective of the relations between capitalism and nationalism. The fast speed of Singapore's modernization (in capitalist style) often leads to the poetic lament of the loss of tradition and the urgent call for retaining memory in order to be a Singaporean. Haskell has noticed that Thumboo, when discussing modern and technologized Singapore, often "draws on nature, myth and memory to sustain a sense of spiritual qualities and associated lyricism" (12). Nationalism here seems to side with tradition, or the spiritual realm of culture in Chatterjee's sense, in opposition to modern capitalism. However, as Young has pointed out that "a nation cannot be thought without being international product of a system," nationalism, like capitalism, "has no essential and absolutely necessary component beyond its contradictori-

ness" (14). Both define characteristic of modernity and legitimate inequality. The relationship between nationalism and capitalism can therefore be theorized as follows:

> Nationalism functions as a kind of supplementary excess within capitalism: nationalism is both more and less than capitalism, its indispensable supplement without which it cannot function and yet which is never able to make up fully the lack which it supplements. This lack at the origin marks the paradox that nationalism, like capitalism, can never fully succeed in realizing itself. This reveals not so much a disabling flaw as the secret of its persistent and productive dynamism. (14)

Based on Young's theory, we may read the national identity claim in Thumboo's work as a necessary road that has to be taken for a Third-World writer in this conflictual and unequal world system. "We tap tradition and modern" is perhaps not so much of an arrogant statement of Singapore's present; it could be read—full of pathos—as an inevitable fate faced by a postcolonial writer.

NOTES

[1] See Koh Tai Ann's "Literature in English by Chinese in Malaya/Malaysia and Singapore: Its Origins and Development," in *Chinese Adaptation and Diversity*, ed. Leo Suryadinata, 120-168.

[2] With the largest ethnic Chinese population (76%), the Singapore government never wished to assert the prominence of the Chinese in a hope to keep racial harmony. When the country just got her independence in 1965, Malay was the only official language, functioning as a symbol for the newly fledged country to keep peaceful relations in the Malay world. This may explain why Malay poems occupy the first place and the Chinese third in the 1985 Anthology. The English poems take the last because English was the colonial language.

[3] See Tee Kim Tong's article for a full discussion of the concept "culture planning." The Singapore case of culture planning is described in Koh Tai Ann's "Malaysia and Singapore 1990-1993."

[4] Regarding the legitimacy of writing in English, see Ee 1997, 6-9.

[5] See my article for the leading position of the writers in English and the responses of non-English writers (especially Chinese ones) about his change.

[6] There are two recent books on Thumboo: one is by *Responsibility and Commitment* by Ee Tiang Hong, and the other is *Ariels: Departures and Returns (A Festschrift for Edwin Thumboo)* edited by Tong Chee Kiong and others.

[7] Ee Tiang Hong has a long list of the criticism in his *Responsibility and Commitment*, 78-83. Added to the list is a new book *Ariels: Departures and Returns*.

[8] For a detailed exposition of the poet's own recollection, see Thumboo, "Notes on a Sense of History," *The Writer's Sense of the Past: Essays on Southeast Asian and Australasian Literature*, ed. Kirpal Singh, 223-233.

[9] Fernando wrote the item "Edwin Thumboo" for *Encyclopedia of Post-Colonial Literatures in English*, ed. Eugene Benson and L. W. Conolly, 1563-1565.

[10] This view is reinforced by the cover of the new anthology of Singapore poetry, in which the City of Singapore (with its old and new buildings juxtaposed together) against the bright sun is surrounded by tropical plants, and a phoenix-like bird is watching the city from above.

[11] I take this phrase from Robert Magliola's article, in which he discusses the late-phase Carl Jung and his transformation theory that could help to achieve "an authentic and healthy postcolonialsm" as well as "restructuring our institutions so they are neither colonizers nor colonized" (241). He also sees that because the First World nations of the West have for the most part lost adequate symbols and thereby the wherewithal for transformations, people are giving up the use of these symbols completely. And the substitute symbols, such as the collage-mythologies of sports, cinema, television, and the mythic

models generated by economic and political institutions—those traced so well by Roland Barthes—do not work.

[12] I thank my colleague Kien Ket Lim for this information.

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