Transnational media production from the margins of "Cultural China": the case of Singapore's media producers

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ABSTRACT

The rise of the PRC as a producer of mass culture marks a reconfiguration of "East Asian Popular Culture" as media producers are now actively seeking opportunities to enter the Mainland Chinese market. While the implications of this trend for the media industries of Taiwan and Hong Kong are well-documented, Singapore's participation in this cultural formation remains comparatively understudied. Often deemed by their Chinese counterparts as lacking in sociocultural capital and production niches, why and how do Singapore's producers navigate their ventures into the Mainland Chinese market? Drawing on interviews with key Singaporean producers situated in different locales (Singapore production companies venturing into China; Singaporean productions reproduced for the Chinese market; and individual Singaporean producers exploring such opportunities), this article teases out the processes of marginalization and power as understood and experienced by those residing in the margins of "Cultural China." By exploring what these mean for Singapore's producers as they navigate cultural capital, power and identity from the margins of an emerging cultural superpower, this article interrogates relations between global, national and regional forces as manifested in producers' subjectivities in the era of the "rise of China." My thesis is that the experiences of these transnational Singaporean media producers are characterized by a paradoxical combination of the de-nationalizing of production and re-politicizing of national imaginations, the everyday manifestations of which continually rehearse and further engender tensions between the self and the other.

Preamble

When I was doing fieldwork[1] on Chinese-language television production in Singapore between 2012 and 2014, I encountered many conversations about the wider Chinese-speaking media industries. These conversations happened quite regularly as part of the everyday work of the producers[2] I observed. I reproduce here one particular discussion that occurred in 2013 during a script meeting for a Singaporean mandarin drama targeted at the national broadcaster. As I sat in the corner of the room taking notes, the Writer (Wr), Executive Producer (EP) and Director (Dr) who were present in the room engaged in a heated discussion about their potential choices for actors to play the male lead in the drama. The conversation was in a mix of Mandarin and English, but I paraphrased it.

Wr:	Can we only consider Taiwanese actors?
Dir:	I am okay with Mainland Chinese actors.
Wr:	Chinese actors are expensive.
EP:	I am not ok with Chinese actors. They are expensive and no … Once you say China, people will switch channels.
Dir:	Every time it is a Mainland Chinese actor, it fails.
EP:	It will fail for sure.
Wr:	It is their mandarin accent.
EP:	When I accept that, perhaps it will be okay.
Wr:	How about Hong Kong actors?
Dir:	Singaporeans are weird. They would rather accept the Hong Kong mandarin accent.
EP:	We have watched it since we were young, so there is no sense of rejection. If you find an *ah tiong* (a pejorative term used by Chinese in Southeast Asian to describe mainland Chinese immigrants) you will die for sure. If you find a female, they will say you found a *xiaolongnv* (a derogatory term to describe stereotypes of mainland Chinese women who migrate to Singapore seeking married men for financial gains) …
Dir:	Those who watch China dramas will know the actors …
EP:	The small group of people who watch China dramas know … Even I watch some, but if you give me ten faces, I won't be able to recognize them. The sense of rejection/discrimination (*paichi*) is there.

There is much to unpack here regarding the producers' consideration of the differences in mandarin accents, relative familiarity, and the cultural stereotypes widely associated with Chinese actors from Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan in Southeast Asia. For the purposes of this essay however, it is suffice to say that these are not only reflective of the uneven flows of popular cultural products within what Chua (2001) called "Pop Culture China," but also testament to the differing migration histories of ethnic Chinese from these locations to Southeast Asia, and thereby "the pluralities of experiences, sentiments and meanings that reflect the differences of the localities that each segment of this dispersed population inhabits" (2001, 120). For me, the poignancy of this conversation that occurred in 2013 also comes from the changes that have taken place since.

In late 2018, the same Executive Producer (whom I shall rename as Michael[3] for the rest of this article) who had just five years ago been adamant against the use of Mainland Chinese actors in his dramas, told me excitedly over lunch about his plans to venture into the Mainland Chinese market. Speaking to my interlocutors sporadically between 2019 and 2021, I detected such shifts in sentiments even amongst those who were initially most resistant to Mainland Chinese content. These changing attitudes point to the larger changes occurring in both Asian media industries and global politics. This essay therefore hopes to achieve two aims. First, it maps out recent changes in the relationships between the Chinese-language production industries of Singapore and the PRC. Second, this represents my latest attempt at teasing out the implications of such changes in this present conjuncture—commonly described as the "rise of China"—for the subjectivities of a particular group of people: the Singaporean media producers located in the margins of "Cultural China" attempting to create media content for the Mainland Chinese market.

Introduction

In 2001, Chua Beng Huat (2001) coined the term "Pop Culture China" to explicate the complex popular cultural traffic across the PRC, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore; and to argue against the presuppositions of cultural proximity often underlying discourses about the Chinese media industries. Chua later expanded his conceptualization to encompass the wider region by examining

the unequal participation of different East Asian locations (and Singapore) within the cultural formation he called "East Asian Pop Culture" (2007). With the rise of the PRC as a producer rather than merely consumer of "pop culture China"; the "reintegration" of China, Taiwan and Hong Kong in the production of Chinese pop culture through co-productions and other means; and (cyber-)nationalism alongside the different states' promotion of "brand nationalism" to enhance national interests in the international arena, Wee has warned against the possible nationalistic reinforcing of monolithic notions of being Chinese that is detrimental to the region's plural Chineseness (Wee 2016). This raises questions on how that impacts on regional cultural production in relation to China.

The rise of the PRC as a producer of mass culture marks a reconfiguration of "East Asian Popular Culture" as media producers are now actively seeking opportunities to enter the Mainland Chinese market. The implications of this trend for the media industries of Taiwan and Hong Kong are well-documented, whether in terms of Taiwanese producers' strategies of navigating geopolitics in their transnational work (Lai 2018; 2020; Yang 2018; Zhao 2016); debates on whether Hong Kong-PRC co-productions have diminished Hong Kong cinema's unique style (Bettinson 2020; Chu 2015); or negotiations of identity politics in Hong Kong media (Chan 2020; Chow and Ma 2008; Liew 2012; Lo 2005; Ma 2005; Ng and Kennedy 2019). Despite being situated in Southeast Asia, Singapore is often included as part of "Pop Culture China" (Chua 2007) because of its predominantly ethnic Chinese population. However, compared to the more developed links between the media industries of Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Mainland China, Singapore's participation in this cultural formation mostly as consumer rather than producer also meant that it remains a comparatively understudied part of "East Asian Popular Culture" (exceptions include Chua 2012a; Liew and Yao 2019).

So how should we understand Singapore's role in "East Asian Popular Culture"? According to Chua, the project of "East Asian Popular Culture" investigates the "flows of finance, production personnel and consumers across linguistic and national boundaries in East Asian locations" (2007, 118). Chua himself had argued in 2012 that Singapore functions as "a signifier of the idea of an East Asian Pop Culture" (2012a, 147) because the

> asymmetrical combination of marginal production and primary consumption advantageously positions Singapore as a good vantage point from which to observe and analyze some of the industrial and reception processes at work within East Asian Pop Culture in one of its constitutive locations. (2012a, 70)

While I agree that Singapore presents as an interesting vantage point to consider the "possibility and realization of a transnational East Asian identity, facilitated by the production and consumption of popular culture" (2007, 136), this current formulation risks conflating processes of funding, production, distribution, reception and use. The complexity and temporality of each of these processes necessitate ethnographic examinations of how these work in practice. This essay wishes to focus on one particular aspect – how transnational Singaporean producers venturing into the Mainland Chinese market in this current conjuncture of the "rise of China" articulate and frame their motivations and experiences as transnational media producers.

The study of producers is not merely due to its relative neglect in existing East Asia Popular Culture literature's predominant focus on reception (e.g. Chen 2018; Chua 2012a; Chua and Iwabuchi 2008; Iwabuchi 2002; Jirattikorn 2018; Lee 2008). Changing geopolitical configurations and the rising dominance of digital platforms have enabled increasing numbers of Singaporean television producers to venture in recent years to create cultural content for the larger Chinese market. So what motivates these producers to venture into the Mainland Chinese market? As Chua (2012a) warned, the shared conditions of East Asian pop culture and pop

culture China constitute loose "cultural proximity" that facilitates the boundary crossing of media products and personnel, but not the engendering of a homogenous cultural identity. Iwabuchi (2014) also cautioned against nation-centered analysis that risk losing sight of sociocultural marginalization within regions. By focusing on the Singapore's transnational producers venturing into the Mainland Chinese market, this article hopes to tease out these processes of marginalization and power as understood and experienced by those residing in the margins of "Cultural China."

It is important to qualify here that the so-called "margins" where Singapore is situated also reflect the unstable boundaries of historically-constituted categories that are shifting in relation to the changing alleged "center." Set against the backdrop of changing configurations of popular cultural flows within East Asia in the past three decades, the consumption patterns of Singaporean audiences reflect broader trends of the dominance of Japanese, Hong Kong and Taiwanese popular culture in the 1990s to 2000s, followed by their decline and the rise of South Korean popular culture since the late 2000s. More recently, Singapore demonstrates a big demand for Chinese content and was the second largest receiver of Mainland Chinese media exports in 2019 (TC 2020; TNC 2020). In this sense, these transnational producers also provide an avenue for considering the impact of Mainland China's increasing export of media products to the rest of Asia as it manoeuvres itself towards the "center" of Asian geopolitics. However, as evident from the earlier vignette, there remain in practice differing degrees of adoption of Mainland Chinese content. Several studies have also argued that the success of China's "soft power" strategy through exporting its media remains limited (Keane 2019; 2016; Peng and Keane 2019). So what are the complex "elements of familiarity and foreignness/difference, and identification/distancing" (Chua 2012a, 153) involved in consuming Chinese media from the margins of East Asia Pop Culture and Pop Culture China? As audiences of East Asia Pop Culture themselves, these transnational producers therefore present as good sites to examine localized ideas about the "rise of China" through changing consumption patterns of East Asian media products amidst the increasing dominance of media exports coming from Mainland China to Singapore.

In the rest of this article, I first discuss the different approaches to framing the "rise of China" in East Asian Pop Culture, before giving an overview of the changing participations of Singapore in Chinese media industries. Following that, I draw on interviews with key Singaporean producers situated in different locales (Singapore production companies venturing into the Mainland Chinese market; Singaporean productions reproduced for the Mainland Chinese market; and individual Singaporean producers exploring such opportunities) but commonly engaged in making media content with the wider Chinese market in mind to assess how producers frame and articulate their motivations and experiences as transnational producers working with China. In existing literature, producers' motivations for venturing into the mainland Chinese market are usually attributed to financial gains and China's increasing soft power on the region. By exploring what these mean for Singapore's producers as they navigate cultural capital, power and identity from the margins of an emerging cultural superpower, this article interrogates relations between global, national and regional forces as manifested in producers' subjectivities in the era of the "rise of China." My thesis is that the experiences of these transnational Singaporean media producers are characterized by a paradoxical combination of the de-nationalizing of production and re-politicizing of national imaginations, the everyday manifestations of which continually rehearse and further engender tensions between the self and the other.

Studying the "rise of China" in "East Asian pop culture"

How should we study the impact of the "rise of China" on East Asian Pop Culture? Since the Chinese government started pursuing its internationalization strategy of its cultural products in the 2000s, a dominant way of framing the "rise of China" has been through the concept of "soft power." This is particularly since the Chinese state introduced the term "cultural soft power" (*wenhua ruanshili*) to its political agenda in 2007 (Vlassis 2016). Due to its loose usage in political, popular and intellectual discourses, however, the concept of "soft power" has been criticized for lacking in conceptual clarity, precision and consistency. In the first instance, most accounts rely on Joseph Nye's broad definition of soft power as "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion" (2004, x) and the "ability to shape the preferences of others" (5), which several scholars have argued is either too broad to function as a coherent theory (Keane 2016), or is in many ways incompatible with the Chinese state's understanding (Cao 2011). Furthermore, the analytical fuzziness of the soft power argument stems from its confusion between audience attention, feelings of attractiveness and persuasiveness, however each are defined (Womack 2005). Not only are each of these complex processes difficult to verify and substantiate (Chua 2012a, 131), it is also arguably impossible to establish clear links between the diffusion of cultural products and the exercise of soft power (Press-Barnathan 2012), which presumes the internal coherence of state intentions, and their consistent transmission from media production to reception (Lo 2012).

For the purposes of this essay, framing our study using the concept of "soft power" and its underlying organizational unit of the nation-state also risks obscuring more than illuminating the transnational phenomena that characterizes much of the work that Singaporean producers do when venturing into the Mainland Chinese market. The soft power argument's focus on the import and export of media produced and "branded" by the nation-state risks conflating "nation" and "state," thereby attributing state political intentions to all cultural products loosely associated with the nation. Even if we put aside the problematic linkage of national labels to media products, this also fails to consider the large numbers of cultural products in East Asia that are supervised by production teams from different parts of Asia (Keane 2016, 17). As Michael Keane argued, focusing on the mere exchanges of national products "do little to help us to explain the important ways in which personnel and production practices are moving across national boundaries, and how they are changing the way foreign workers engage with their colleagues in the mainland" (Keane 2018, xvii). Even in terms of collaborative work, restricting our framing to the nation-state also limits our analysis to co-productions (that involve participation between nationally separated companies) that risks obscuring the transnational productions where companies and personnel operate flexibly across borders, such as in the cases of many of the producers I spoke to. While the strong states of both Singapore and the PRC are indeed often conflated with ideas of the nation, the boundaries between the two are unstable and shifting. It is therefore more productive to unpack the complex interactions between nation and state as articulated and experienced by media producers under different circumstances. An obvious question is then whether, and when, producers think and articulate in terms of nation/state or not in their transnational production work, for what reasons and to what outcomes? The soft power argument is therefore inadequate as an analytical frame for studying what may exceed and trouble the order of the nation-state.

Going beyond the nationally-based model, China's development of its media industries through economic liberalization and media commercialization has often been understood through the lens of cultural globalization. Consequently, many scholars have argued that media producers in the

region are driven to venture into the Mainland Chinese market due to globalization's underlying logics of global capitalism and market "imperatives" (e.g., Chua 2012b; Zhao 2016). From this perspective, transnational media are organized primarily by market forces (seen as a force of nature) that are driven or impeded by national governments; and regional media can therefore be understood as the result of market "imperatives" shaped by broader forces such as cultural affinity (Berry 2014, 464–466). Writing about Chinese transnational cinema, Higbee and Lim have criticized this perspective as it "risks celebrating the supranational flow or transnational exchange of peoples, images and cultures at the expense of the specific cultural, historical or ideological context in which these exchanges take place" (2010, 11–12). If the differently authoritarian governments of Singapore and the PRC are often cited as either key driving forces or impediments to cultural globalization, and the pervasive states of both China and Singapore are strong proponents of national branding, how do producers from each location imagine and understand each others' states, industries and cultures, and how do these impact on transnational work processes and practices?

In response, it is perhaps useful to separate globalization as an ideology or rhetoric from the enormous variety of micro-processes linked to transnational cultural formations, the practices of which may not necessarily promote globalization as a unified or uncontested ideology (Berry 2014). While media producers' transnational production work may be enabled by forces of globalization, not all producers and projects that participate in the transnational market operate solely according to the principles of profit maximization and accumulation. Furthermore, the homogenization potentially enabled by transnational capital in these media productions take on the form of "mainlandization" rather than the "Westernization" processes traditionally associated with globalization. Regional geopolitics, history and "entangled racisms" (Ang 2022) resulting from more recent intra-region migrations therefore add a different layer of complexity to such homogenizing forces that may run counter to profit maximization. If the multitudes of transnational projects within East Asian Pop Culture cannot all be reduced to the logic of the market, how do we tease out the activities, forces and sentiments unleashed by globalization that may exceed the depoliticized rhetoric of global capitalism?

Rather than the logic of the system that underlies the nation-state and soft power, and the logic of the global network that underlies the concept of globalization, Berry (2014) proposed that the model of the transnational order should be understood in terms of the logic of assemblage, a continually changing "contingent ensemble of diverse practices … [that] give diverse values to the practices and actors thus connected to each other" (Ong 2005, 308). Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari (2011), Berry argued that the logic of assemblage underlying the transnational does not take for granted the presumed internal stability or coherence of nation-states, nor the homogenization associated with globalization. Instead, it involves seeing individual transnational productions as "temporal processes where various elements and agents are brought together across various borders to finance, produce, and then circulate and consume them" (2014, 463). Importantly, these constitute contingent and heterogenous practices that do not necessarily evolve from or lead to unified cultures and intentions (imagined as regional, ethnic, market or otherwise). This is particularly useful for the producers I write about in this essay, who operate without the backing of established regional networks and whose transnational endeavors are then necessarily chaotic, unstable and reactive to the changing contours of the region's cultural formations. The idea of the assemblage therefore enables us to explore the transnational phenomena that are made invisible by the boundaries of the nation-state or the homogenizing logics of global capital, but which characterizes much of the work that Singapore's transnational producers do.

Studying these Singaporean media producers and their transnational work that tend to be sporadic therefore entails going beyond traditional ethnography's extended and immersive observations of more or less stable field sites. Instead, the uncertain and inconsistent nature of such transnational work requires the flexibility that comes with what Murphy and Kraidy (2003) called translocal ethnography that involves multi-sited explorations where "comparison emerges from putting questions to an emergent object of study whose contours, sites and relationships are not known before hand, but are themselves a contribution of making an account that has different, complexly connected real-world sites of investigation" (2003, 305). My research for this paper involved following the networks of my existing informants within Singapore's Chinese-language media industry, who introduced to me the practitioners and projects at different stages of pursuing transnational work with Mainland China. I also attended the Asia TV Forum held in Singapore in 2019 and 2020, during which I observed their networking and pitching sessions, and spoke to various Singaporean producers pursuing projects with Mainland Chinese counterparts. I also interviewed the same informants between 2018 and 2022. Based on these observations and conversations, I map out the two broad types of Singapore-PRC transnational media production work occurring at this current conjuncture in the next section. In doing so, I hope to tease out the ongoing transnational production phenomena that are not captured by national statistics of import-export flows or co-productions, and what these may suggest about the links between media production, geographical specificities and negotiations of selfhood.

In addition, there is a certain amount of "patchwork" involved in examining the fragmentary data emerging from multiple short-term field visits and online research efforts that nonetheless "maintain long term commitments, language proficiency, contextual knowledge, and slow thinking that characterizes so-called traditional fieldwork" (Günel, Varma, and Watanabe 2020). When I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in 2013 on the producers mentioned in the opening vignette, I could not have predicted their turn towards the Mainland Chinese market a few years later. In this sense, by going beyond one-time instrumental encounters, and continuing to follow my networks and maintaining long term relations, this research takes on the logic of assemblage that characterizes the transnational work of my informants. This recognition of the ongoing and continually changing nature of the research resists the finality, fixity and certainty often demanded by the academic publication process. Nonetheless, this approach also yields opportunities to compare across sites and groups, and to examine changing sentiments over time.

The shifting attitudes I detected amongst my interlocutors therefore guide the questions I ask in the rest of this article: What spurred these producers to venture into the Mainland Chinese market? How do they frame and articulate their motivations and experiences, and what do these tell us about the implications of the "rise of China" for Singapore's participation in this regional cultural formation? I organize these broadly into two sections: the first section maps out key production strategies that Singaporean producers engage with in their ventures; while the second section focuses on their articulations of their motivations and experiences. I believe this approach of examining the cultural and political through the personal illustrates the subtle relations between media production, geographic specificities, and producers' cultural imaginations.

De-nationalizing production from the margins of "Pop Culture China"

Singapore had not always been situated at the "margins" of "Pop Culture China" in relation to the PRC. In the 1980s, almost a decade ahead of the PRC, Singapore's television industry co-opted the expertise and production capabilities of the Hong Kong media industry, the more

technically advanced media industry at the time. As a result, Singapore not only consistently exported drama serials to China but was also a sought-after co-producer for aspiring Chinese television stations in the 1980s and 1990s. However, a combination of moves towards hyper-localization in Singapore's television industry and China superseding Singapore's television production capacities since the early 2000s has brought an end to Chinese television stations' eagerness to co-produce with Singapore (Liew and Yao 2019), thereby relegating Singapore to mostly a consumer role in "Pop Culture China."

There are now more than 3000 TV broadcasting and relaying stations across the PRC, producing more than 3.5 million hours of TV programs and covering more than 99 per cent of the Chinese population (China Statistical Yearbook 2019). This presents China as a huge market for Chinese-language media. Since the relaxation of the rules by SARFT allowing foreigners to participate in the production of film and television programs in China in 2008, an increasing number of foreign producers, particularly those from Hong Kong and Taiwan, have ventured into the large Chinese market. Without the decades of experience in variety shows and idol dramas of Taiwanese producers (Zhao 2018); the above-the-line creative talents of Hong Kong's long-established film and media industries; or the regional star power of their celebrities, Singaporean producers have been slower in penetrating the new Chinese market. However, the rising dominance of digital platforms have enabled some Singaporean television producers to create cultural content for the larger Chinese market since mid-2010s. In this section, I give an overview of the two broad ways in which Singapore's producers are currently engaging in transnational work with the Mainland Chinese market.

The first involves Singapore's production companies selling their products to both Singapore's national broadcaster, MediaCorp, and platforms in China. Rather than the traditional nation-based model of selling finished (usually state-funded) products meant for local audiences beyond Singapore, some production companies are now pre-selling their drama serials to Mainland Chinese distributors before beginning the production process to enable the global simulcasting of programs facilitated by streaming platforms such as *youku* and *iQiyi*. This results in a fundamental change in the conception processes of projects as producers have to pitch projects to MediaCorp alongside their Chinese distributing partners. With an additional target market in mind when conceiving dramas,[4] producers operate with an acute awareness that the eventual sale prices of the dramas depend on what a producer called "the level of customization" one can offer to the Chinese market. This is particularly so if they want the project to be counted as a joint production to avoid Mainland China's foreign import quota. Meeting the demands of both markets while retaining creative control involves a delicate balancing act.

Conventionally, drama productions have appealed to the collective market in Greater China by drawing either on cultural nostalgia towards the past as manifested in historical, dynasty or swordfighting dramas; or on the smart images of modernization depicted in contemporary urban dramas from Hong Kong, Taiwan and increasingly Shanghai (Zhu 2009). However, without the production expertise nor the settings required by both genres, Singapore's transnational producers face difficulties in finding their niche. I spoke to Michael, the producer quoted in the opening vignette who later became one of the first Singaporean producers pre-selling projects to the Mainland Chinese market.

> It is very difficult for us to be very localized in our dramas since we cannot please both markets. So we often end up going for more fantasy-based themes or generic stories that we hope do not contain any specific local colours (*di fang se cai*) … I do not think this is a big issue for Singaporeans. Singaporeans watch dramas from all over the world online anyway. As long as your drama is good, it is not a big issue whether you treat it as a China or Singapore drama … I feel that in this day and age, this sense of

attaching a drama to a nation is slowly disappearing. So if we want to look towards the future, we have to be careful not to harbour these ideologies (*yi shi xing tai*) in our thoughts. (Personal communication, November 28, 2018)

Not unlike his Taiwanese counterparts (Chen 2008; Lai 2018; 2020), Michael feels compelled to employ production tactics of delocalization in order to appeal to viewers from both Singapore and Mainland China. Interestingly, by cautioning against the harboring of "ideologies" associated with the nation, he articulated this delocalization in terms of the ideological de-nationalizing of production philosophy. At the same time, this disassociation of production from the nation-state is interestingly accompanied by a retaining of the idea of national audiences due to the nation-based organization of funding sources. In this sense, in order to continue to tap on both the funding security that comes from MediaCorp (which necessarily serves Singapore's national audience) and the potentially huge profit margins that the Mainland Chinese market offers, trans-national producers employing this strategy of selling to both markets have to make careful separations between how they approach production and audiences.

This complication to the nation-based model of production also raises questions about its implications for imagined audiences. What was striking to me about the above interview was how Michael talked about Singapore's viewers, which is markedly different from how he described local audiences five years ago. Compared to the Singapore audience imagined to be resistant to Mainland Chinese actors or cultures five years ago, his current version of Singapore's audiences seems to possess cosmopolitan outlooks and a much wider acceptance or identification with global cultures. This shift in audience imaginary is, in my opinion, one of the key changes I noticed in these Singaporean producers. In other words, in order to cope with the simultaneous de-nationalizing of production and continued nation-based imagination of audiences, he has had to adjust and expand on his audience imaginary to accommodate the needs of the Mainland Chinese market.

The second type of transnational work that Singapore producers do involve working for Mainland Chinese media enterprises that set up production companies in Singapore. Even though these companies are technically established in Singapore to expand on their regional presence and ambitions, my conversations with producers who work with such setups reveal that their target market remains firmly on Mainland China. Without tapping into Singapore's state funding so far, these setups offer Singapore's production personnel the opportunity to work in transnational environments with production crews across the region, higher budgets and larger production scales made available by the flexible private investments coming from the Mainland Chinese market.

So far, drama productions that have emerged from this sort of arrangement have revolved around stories of Chinese migration to Southeast Asia in the pre- and post-World War Two eras. When I asked an Executive Producer working in one of these companies about their particular focus, she explained: "That's how they always think about Nanyang … They always talk about how to link up the Chinese coming from China into Nanyang. So it seems like this era is the correct time" (Personal communication, 6 March 2020). Unlike the delocalization strategies that the producers targeting both Singapore and the PRC employ, these productions appeal to the Mainland Chinese market by exoticizing Southeast Asia using the Sinocentric Chinese idea of "Nanyang." In this sense, this second type of transnational productions not only de-nationalizes production funding and ownership but also disassociates the geographical settings of its products from the nation-state. In other words, while the first group of producers removed associations of the nation and the local from their dramas, these Nanyang-focused dramas de-nationalize production by temporally fixing their imaginary of Southeast Asia to the pre-national era.

Dramatizing the "Nanyang" myth in these productions is not without its difficulties. My Singaporean interlocutors talk about their constant struggles with their PRC counterparts' more Sinocentric imaginary of Southeast Asia during various production processes, from production design to executive decisions around the terminologies and accents used by actors (Fong 2022b). To protect their work against Sinocentric misrepresentation, my interlocutors describe to me the extensive work they put into researching and presenting the cultural and historical elements of Nanyang to their Chinese team, whilst admitting that these resulted in highly detailed and exoticized representations of the food, costumes and practices of the era that exceeded Singapore's established national imaginary of Nanyang indigeneity. In this sense, this collaborative process forced producers outside of their national comfort zones to transnationalize representations of Nanyang beyond both Sinocentric and Singapore's national versions.

If Singapore's transnational producers had to employ strategies of de-nationalization (of funding; production philosophy; audience imaginary; and production practice) in order to overcome the difficulties of catering to the Mainland Chinese market, this raises the question of how they cope with the implications of these various forms of de-nationalization in production. In the following section, I examine how my interlocutors articulate and frame what drives them in order to tease out the tensions that emerge from their venturing into the Chinese market.

The reluctant Singaporean profiteer? money and the re-politicizing of national difference

One of the dominant arguments within scholarly work attributes the influx of East Asian production personnel to the Mainland Chinese market to financial incentives. Zhao (2016), for instance, wrote that Taiwanese producers are driven to pursue job opportunities in the PRC by the "larger structure of global capitalism" at the risk of being "Shanghaied" (2016, 5). Chua also argued that the financial incentives offered by the huge Mainland Chinese market means producers from the Greater China region are willing to be subjected to the Chinese state's power and control (2012b, 16–23). Underlying these accounts is the often-repeated assumption that capitalist principles of profit maximization leads to cultural homogenization such as through the de-nationalizing of production mentioned in the previous section. However, encompassing all transnational production activities under the logics of profit accumulation takes for granted the ideological rhetoric of capitalism as a force of nature divorced from human subjectivities, processes and practices (Simmel 2011). This risks explaining away the contestations related to capitalist forces amongst those who operate within these transnational networks, organizations and projects. Since forces of capital are situated in specific social contexts, what do these contestations tell us about the negotiations of geographical specificities, identity and capital from the margins of East Asian Pop Culture?

My interlocutors raised a range of reasons when I asked them about their motivations for venturing into the mainland Chinese market, including the usual local practitioners' complaints regarding the Singaporean television industry's stagnancy, the inertia of the broadcasters' bureaucracy and how their personalities craved more adventure elsewhere. In this sense, they framed their motivations for transnational work more to the local industry's push factors rather than their innate urge to join the more lucrative Chinese market. Upon revisiting my interview transcripts, it struck me how none of them associated their motivations to finances. Since it is a common assumption that the Mainland Chinese market offers higher financial returns, I often explicitly asked my interlocutors whether they earned more in their transnational work, to which their answers proved interesting. When asked explicitly about the financial aspects of their work, my

interviewees working in a Chinese production company based in Singapore seemed keen to explicate in detail how higher Chinese budgets resulted in more stability in hiring and better production value, before carefully suggesting that their new job scopes also deserved higher monetary compensation. Their reluctance to talk about their higher salaries came through clearly.

Having known me for more than seven years, Michael was initially more forthcoming about the financial incentives for selling his dramas to the Mainland Chinese market when we spoke in 2018. However, after patiently explaining to me about his financial arrangements in working with the Chinese, he then paused for several moments. Staring at me, he said, "Actually, this is sensitive." Nodding, I promised not to write about any of the details he told me. Nonetheless, this encounter stayed with me, and combined with the other producers' general aversion towards associating their transnational work to higher financial gains, raises questions about their perceived sensitivities towards talking about money.

What underlies these producers' sensitiveness around financial issues? My conversation with Michael after that encounter could offer a clue. Keen to move away from further discussing the huge profits the Mainland Chinese market offers, Michael went on to talk about what he felt were other potential benefits for venturing into China:

> If we have another market, our production budgets can increase, which will mean we can attract better people into our industry and we can use better actors. I feel that this will bring a positive effect to our entire industry … we can also improve our capability, improve our outreach. I feel that this is important. (Personal communication, 28 November 2018)

In bringing the discussion away from profit-seeking to how his transnational ventures benefit Singapore's industry, Michael clearly suggested that as what he deemed to be the more appropriate reason to be cited. This not only implies that Singapore's producers have the duty to contribute to the national industry but also pointed to the complex relationship between money and the state in Singapore's production industry. The antagonism between commercialism and nationalism underlying production in Singapore stems from the media industry's relationship with the government since its inception. Unlike its much more pluralistic and commercially-oriented Taiwanese and Hong Kong counterparts, Singapore's media production has always been intimately linked to the state.[5] In this sense, Singapore's media producers, the vast majority of whom still rely on state funding, are used to working in the intersection of state power and capitalist development. Considering the antagonisms between the public service and commercial imperatives that run deep within the way things work in Singapore's media industries (Fong 2022a), producers' habitual linking of funding to the state, and by extension to nationalist sentiments, is then not surprising.

Furthermore, the Singaporean government places importance on its state-linked media to continue its hegemonic work over the people while subjecting them to the capitalist forces of the free market. By being the largest funder of local production, the Singaporean state therefore disciplines the local media industry through financing. If funding sources are associated with nationalism and ideological discipline in Singapore, it is little wonder that Singapore's producers are reluctant to talk about seeking profits from Mainland China for fear of the suggested connotation that they might be subjected to the discipline of Chinese nationalism. The years of Singapore's state intervention in its media production industries has resulted in difficulties for Singapore's producers to divorce funding and state. In this sense, money works as a signifier in Singapore's production imaginary that evokes links with the nation-state. This abstract and symbolic character attributed to money goes beyond the more limited identification of participation in money exchange with economic self-interest (Simmel 2011).

Singapore's transnational producers' ambivalent attitude towards private funding is markedly different from their counterparts from the PRC who are used to dealing purely with the profit margins, since private capital accounts for about 80 percent of total investments in television production (Schneider 2012). This is a point of contention between the Singaporean and Mainland Chinese producers working in a Chinese production company set up in Singapore. The company is co-owned and run by businessmen from the PRC, Singapore and Taiwan. When I visited their Singapore office in 2020, its Executive Producer told me about her difficulties in managing the different expectations between her colleagues in Beijing and Singapore's Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA), whom she hoped to co-fund their projects. The crux of the issue appeared to lie with IMDA's demand for platform and release date guarantees before committing to funding support. These demands are, however, incompatible to the many uncertainties of Chinese broadcasting and censorship processes. The Executive Producer talked about her frustrations at length:

> They are big IPO companies and they're big giants in China, you see. Seriously, we are nothing, you know? And then they are like 'oh why do you need that? Oh huh, you mean you're only getting a few hundred thousand from them and they need this this this? Why do you need that?' So we are stuck in-between where we hope to get IMDA to come on board but they ask for a lot of very Singaporean things that are not easy to fulfil … For my TV series that cost maybe around $30 million, they're only willing to put in about $800k. How to fight? I mean if you put in $10 million out of the $30 million, I can argue for it. $800,000? Huh? So, there is this value that the IMDA is putting in that makes it very hard for me to argue … We have to use more abstract kind of reasoning such as 'working with the government gives the company a good image and good name' in order to talk to the others [refering to the Chinese] because they keep questioning why we bother about this. But my Singaporean boss is like 'No, we're Singaporean, we have to work with the government. If not, we are a very strange foreign company in Singapore doing a lot of Singapore products'. (Personal communication, 6 March 2020)

While this issue stems from the difference in levels of risk tolerance between the IMDA and Chinese investors, what is striking for me is the apparent discomfort these Singaporean transnational producers feel about not having funding from the Singaporean state despite not technically needing it. This need for government endorsement—which comes in the form of financial support—to prove that they are not "a very strange foreign company in Singapore doing a lot of Singapore products" points to the links between nationalism ("we're Singaporean") and money in Singapore. Underlying this sense of economic nationalism—their aversion towards complete commercialization through Chinese private investments—is the blatantly unequal standing of the two nations when it comes to funding proportions. The Executive Producer's comment "Seriously, we are nothing, you know?" therefore betrays her frustrations about having to navigate financial issues that constantly highlight the differences and inequalities between the two nations from what she perceived as the weaker geopolitical position. Despite protest from their Chinese colleagues, their pursuit of Singapore state funding not only reveal deep-seated anxieties about the potential or appearance of ideological discipline; these attempts also serve as everyday confrontations with national differences in economic prowess.

In this sense, contrary to the alleged homogenizing power of global capital, talking about money amongst my interlocutors served to "unearth and conceptually reveal incommensurabilities of all kinds" (Jameson 1999, 288), in the social reality of transnational collaborative media production as much as in grand ideas about media globalization itself. While these transnational producers wish to remove ideas of the nation-state from their approaches to production

and to reimagine themselves as regional producers, talking about money (whether in terms of higher salaries, profits or production budgets) constantly remind them of the vastly unequal standings between Singapore and the PRC, thereby reinforcing the geopolitical boundaries separating the two.

In his classic work *The Philosophy of Money* (2011), Simmel argued that the ceaseless mutual interaction between the economic and intellectual realms of money socializes people, producing values, beliefs and social relations. For my interlocutors, these socializing practices around money manifest as everyday contestations between the Mainland Chinese and Singaporean producers working in the same company that serve to remind them of their differences. Importantly, these differences are imagined to be organized along national lines. These are not restricted to differences in the amounts of investment – state or private – they bring to projects. When talking to my interlocutors about their experiences working with Chinese producers, they would often tell me animated stories they had heard or personally encountered that conveyed their sense of incredulity about their Chinese counterparts' relationship with money. One Singaporean writer shared with me the story of a Chinese investor who once forked out a million dollars to try out a new writer. Despite receiving nothing for his money, he still agreed to pay another 200 thousand dollars to the same writer to produce his script. Expressing his amazement towards that, my informant commented, "Only the PRCs are capable of that (*zhi you zhongguoren zuo de chu lai*)!" (Personal communication, 9 October 2020). Such stories that my informants share with me and amongst each other, are often told—usually unprompted—as examples to explicate the differences between Singaporeans and the Mainland Chinese. By telling (and retelling) such stories as peculiar tales, these producers are also clearly articulating that that is not how we do things in Singapore. In this sense, the issue of money then becomes an articulatory tool producers use to *other* Mainland Chinese work culture in order to re-establish the centrality of Singaporean production culture. This marks an important way in which producers conventionally understood as situated in the "margins" of "Pop Culture China" negotiate and attempt to shift perceptual boundaries between margin and center. Crucially, it also illustrates the ways in which the economic, ideological and affective aspects of money can traverse in the lived everyday to ambiguously conflate Singapore and China respectively as nations, states and cultures.

Arguing against dominant narratives that attribute transnational producers' motivations for venturing into the Mainland Chinese market solely to profiteering, this section examined the contestations surrounding the issue of money that exceed the rhetoric of profit accumulation. I argued that even though the logics of global capital supposedly removes national boundaries, money as a shifting signifier constantly re-evoke "the nation" and national sentiments in the case of Singapore's transnational producers. In other words, money matters bring forth a series of discursive processes that reproduce geopolitical boundaries and accompanying ideas of the nation-state. Whether associated with nationalism and ideological discipline; serving as a constant reminder of the vastly unequal standing between Singapore and the PRC; or as an articulatory tool for othering China, money as a pragmatic marker becomes politically charged insofar as it serves as an antagonism that simultaneously de-nationalizes production work while re-politicizing imaginaries of national difference.

Conclusion

This article examined the localized implications of the "rise of China" for a group of Singaporean producers venturing into the Mainland Chinese market. Against the homogenization thesis of the

globalization/regionalization rhetoric, I showed how these mainlandization processes are also productive of difference. I argued that through the contestations around funding, profits and production practice, the experiences of these transnational Singaporean media producers are characterized by a paradoxical combination of the de-nationalizing of production and re-politicizing of national imaginations, the everyday manifestations of which continually rehearse tensions between the self and the other. These producers' personal responses to the ongoing reconfiguration of transnational production in "Pop Culture China"—the changing perceptions of self, other and nation—offer insights into the subtle and complicated discursive processes that are sparked by the "rise of China" in regional media production.

Moving forward, this raises questions about situated transnational production practices and their relationships with broader categories of power. How are issues of nation, "race," marginality and sociocultural capital represented, silenced or re-articulated, as what, by whom under what circumstances for what purposes in which production phases? What is the role of affect in these practices? While this article aimed to provide perspectives of a group of producers from Singapore, I hope it invites further research into these questions that necessitate more detailed ethnographic examinations of production practices, particularly from other case studies that occupy marginal positions in this global phenomena called the "rise of China."

Notes

1. This was part of more than 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork I conducted between 2012 and 2014 during which I worked with different production companies in Singapore observing their daily practices.
2. I use the broad term "producer" to refer to all of my interlocutors and informants, and only switch to more specific references such as "director" or "writer" where it is relevant for the analysis. As most of my interlocutors prefer to stay anonymous, I refer to them via their job titles in the article.
3. This is not his real name. As my interlocutors prefer to remain anonymous, I only use pseudonyms where it makes the narrative easier to read.
4. Compared to other genres, drama serials travel across boundaries with most ease.
5. Despite its status now as a corporation, MediaCorp has deep connections with the state, first set up as a government department in 1963 and later transformed into a statutory board in 1980 before being corporatized in 1994. Since then, it ventured into commercialization while retaining its PSB role. Most of media production in Singapore is still funded by a series of block grants directly funded by the governing authority, Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA), and other government agencies, thereby strengthening the links between the state and broadcaster.

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