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<u>The Spectacularization of Chinatown</u>

The architectural spectacle of ethnic quarter, Chinatown, is designed in close alignment with Singapore's economic development and ideological narratives of nation-building vis-à-vis forging collective social memories (Chia, Lee, Naidu & Kwok 38). As a "representational system" of Chinese culture that "[reconstructs]…an elemental physical world" (Wigley 156) through the intensive abbreviation of iconic images, Chinatown has become "both the *meaning* and the *agenda* of our…socio-economic formation" (Debord 3; original emphasis). I will contend that this overarching function leads to the suppression of alternative imaginings, for insofar as Chinatown is a narrative expression of Singapore's visionary ideals, it is a preserved representation that offers excessively prescribed interpretations. As a site of visual mimesis attempting to authenticate its own construction of a past spatial-temporal realm, I demonstrate how Chinatown has at best, only presented the city-state with a realistic illusion of our own heritage by examining (i) how its role as a palimpsest of cultural history is constructed out of notions of excess and surplus (ii) the tensions that surface in its straddling of the quantitative and qualitative – between the old and the new, tradition and modernity (iii) how the architectural environment engineers a sanitized sentiment of nationality through the spectacle of calculated nostalgia.

<u>Excess, Surplus & the Palimpsest</u>

From the solemn façade of the pre-WWII shop-houses, to the bustle of coolie quarters and the forgotten trishaw puller, Chinatown is the site of amalgamated imaged scenarios seeking to preserve a heritage tradition that would reinstate "the *living presence* of the past" (Chia et. al 17; emphasis mine). It is a "convenient shorthand" (Chang 39), an abbreviated access into the Chinese culture and way of life, architecturally designed to "support [multi-faceted] spectacles through a collaborating array of…texts, rituals, music, speeches…processions…food, poetry and smells" (Wigley 155). The immaterial essence of this living presence has, in other words, been translated into "[h]yperconcentrations of image power" (Wigley 155), *materialized* for spectacular commodification and made *visual* for the ease of modern consumption for without which, it was believed that "records of the past [would otherwise remain as] *abstract notions, difficult* to understand and link to the present'" (Yeoh & Kong 130; emphasis mine).

This desire to simplify the abstract has consequently precipitated the phenomenon of excessive visual manifestation, which in turn, has had several impacts. If "[e]xcess in particular sites is broadcast across the planet to mask deficiencies" (Wigley 155), what Chinatown's array of images mask is the deficiency of *social memory* – the attempt to almost counterfeit by reconstruction, a cultural consciousness that insists upon a remembrance of the past even as urban (re)development encroaches on its very presence. Compelled too perhaps, to prevent such excess from becoming an uncontrollable surplus of competing representations, there has been a noticeable move towards "[compartmentalizing] Chinatown into functions, providing…a neat but simplified experience" (Chia et. al 39). This is achieved through "Street Furniture" (Chia et. al 39), material embellishments functioning as architectural appendages that stand in as "direct manifestations of…trades and activities" (URA 79), enhancing spatial ambience. Chinatown's cultural backdrop for instance, is enriched by the multiplicity of Street Furniture signage which more than providing navigational expression, *linguistically images* the traditional personality of each street. I suggest however, that their success in neatly retaining immaterial personality and associated historicity without compromising the integrity of its representation(s), is contentious.

Case in point: Sago Street, Chinatown. Its presence is delineated by three different signage: a conventional directional sign, a tourism-aimed picture signpost that promotes "Chinatown Night Market", and in almost immediate proximity, a heritage information board with a descriptive paragraph that is titled "Street of the Dead". Far from offering any simplified expression of personality, the competing voices here – of the practical, commercial, and historical – highlight a narrative disjunction that is product of the complexity of excess representation. Sago Street's historical authenticity (as a site of sago factories in the 1840s and early 19th century Chinese death houses) has been obfuscated under the mercantile liveliness of the Night Market. Its "[e]xcessive frills and Oriental kitsch [has frozen] the place in a mood of perpetual festivity" (Chia et. al 39), and has through aesthetic refurbishment, *masked* instead of retained the site's personality and its more solemn historical past. The problem then is this: heritage has not only been selectively framed through Street Furniture for purposes of easier marketing (Yeoh & Kong 140), but has too been disguised under a hedonistic celebration of the commodity that presents merely "an *idealized…artificial* kind of "Chineseness"" (Chia et. al 39; emphasis mine).

Therefore, whilst this spectacular landscape streamlines its own superfluity through selective architectural image-Furniture, its visual solidarity and conceptual consensus comes at the expense of its own procedural effacement and unconscious negation of historicity. Chinatown's desire to simultaneously accommodate excess and tame surplus has meant

that its eventual representations are but products of an inevitably *strained* balance between addition and subtraction (Wigley 158), offering only a palimpsest understanding of our past.

<u>Quantity-Quality Tensions in the *New* Old</u>

Wigley situates the criticism of the spectacle in quantity i.e. the "exponential increase in bandwidth" via the "escalating size of images…flow, density…and so on" (Wigley 155), and proposes that architecture undergo a *qualitative* moderation that will allow "the hesitation in daily life that makes reflection possible, [and] an opportunity to think" (Wigley 158). In other words, a site that harmonizes both quantity and quality should be one whose images and material structures *speak*, but still grant its viewer a *voice* of private contemplation. The Chinatown spectacle fails to do so. As an imagistic celebration of the old and the new, it integrates the relative minimalism of the past with the maximum of the modern to construct a future that valorizes the potentiality of the *new* old – a spectacle of juxtaposing but complementary interests. Rather than achieving this balance, cultural commodification in and of Chinatown, and the oppressive "language of the spectacle" (Debord 2), has "reduce[d] everything to quantitative equivalence" (Debord 8) i.e. a subtraction of the qualitative by eliminating "punctuated emptiness or brooding silence" (Wigley 160).

One of the most evident cases lies in Chinatown's shop-houses. As significant contributors to Singapore's urban architectural fabric, they are a reflection of the "prevalent economic and technological circumstances, tastes and fashions of the various periods" (URA 92), a testament to Singapore's changing human conditions. With conservation projects and heritage tourism efforts however, even these architectural documentations of national-biography have been revamped. While the shop-house form and façades were sensitively preserved for the tourist gaze, their interiors and functions were radically sanitized for the comforts of those within. It was the "taming" of the 'inside' while catering to the 'outside' (Chang 45), a process that left behind a cultural landscape nothing more than an "inauthentic "shell" with no "soul"" (Yeoh & Kong 139). In addition, with the accompanying rental hikes and increasing costs of sold goods and services, locals were not just *pushed out* to resettlement estates, but were also indefinitely *priced out* of their living spaces. With this dispersal of the traditional core – a result of the shop-house's changing status from *private home* to *national architecture* – population groups and traditional trades that were so crucial in sustaining the essence of Chinese culture became paradoxically squeezed out of their "rightful" niches (Chia et. al 28) to accommodate the modern tourist's penchant for the new old. What remains then, is a superficial, material façade so rich in ornamentative appearance but emptied of qualitative meaning because displaced from, and deprived of, its very centre.

Chinatown's subtraction of the qualitative is also manifest in its employment of hardware and software architecture (Chia et. al 46) – the former including "interpretive centre[s], better outdoor lighting and informative plaques to mark sites of significance", and the latter encompassing "cultural trail tour guides and…year round activities" (Chia et. al 46). The proliferation of these elements have transformed almost the whole of Chinatown into a paradigm of the museum, whose realms of layered presentation act as *imposing* sensory narrators of the site. Through the mediation of viewer response, these hardware and software architecture have reductively categorized and diluted the spectator's experience through designated systems of thought that instruct where to look, how to look and what to feel. In such an environment of theatricality that engineers its own desired sets of responses, there is no space for the agency of private contemplation. Rather than accommodating a two-way dialogue between architecture and its participant, the site presents instead a monolithic monologue that hastens the "alienation of the spectator", for the more he consumes and "identifies with the dominant images…the less he understands his own life and…desires" (Debord 7).

Chinatown consequently becomes some sort of ethnic theme park, more functional in its spectacularized reality "as the fount of Chineseness in popular imagination" (Yeoh & Kong 151) than in its preservation of "a predominantly residential landscape integral to the *everyday realities* of the majority of Singaporeans" (Yeoh & Kong 151; emphasis mine). It is, I suggest, in these collective tensions and failed optimization between quantity and quality that galvanises the social condition of *loss*, sparking the modern anxiety to both remember and recuperate a disappearing past within the spectacle of the nostalgic. It is to this point that I shall next turn to.

Architecturing Nostalgia, Sanitizing National Sentimentality

As an architectural repository of national culture and historical continuity, Chinatown has "the socio-political purpose of binding Singaporeans…to the city, and…to the nation" (Yeoh & Kong 135). It seeks to trigger, as a heritage landscape, the collective desire for remembering – a phenomena that is "an inevitable condition of the cycle of progress and loss [and] a deliberate strategy of forging the nation's future" (Yeoh & Kong 129). In other words, national progress depended upon a retrospective gaze i.e. the rhetoric of moving forward by looking back, and almost the only way to amplify this was to locate it within the publicly shared spectacle of the nostalgic. To illustrate this, Chinatown's Food Street is an imperative case example.

Architecturally refurbished to resemble a festival-like marketplace, Food Street is more than just a dining attraction, but also a retail environment designed with the "higher purpose of developing social relations and supporting cultural development" through an

"experience-related-system" (Fisker & Olsen 63) that will purposefully regenerate the urban economy (Fisker & Olsen 65). Publicized on its webpage as "Nostalgic Street Style Dining[1]", and portrayed on the guide map[2] as a "diverse spread of *local delights* and *iconic dialect dishes*" (emphasis mine), Food Street implicitly stages the backdrop for the nationalistic aspiration of unified diversity and multi-racialism through culinary synthesis. The noisy crowd jostle and close dining spaces set in proximity to the hawker stalls that dish-up home-cooked (read national) flavors on the spot gives the Street an alluringly haphazard jumble and its distinctive charm. In this public and yet informal space, overheard table conversations and the spontaneity of exchanges intimately harmonizes the modern divide of the public and private. It is a nostalgic revelry in the communal old, a subtle underscoring of the all too familiar rhetoric: A family (read nation) that eats together stays together. This commodity world of Food Street is not just an abstract reminder of national solidarity, but also "a general equivalent for what the entire society can be and can do" (Debord 12).

The nostalgic then, is clearly an origin of nationalistic sentiment and emotive identity, but even the sanctity of this has been adulterated through the heavy engineering of modern aesthetics. After a revamp in early 2013[3] to facilitate retail convenience, all-day activities and year-round festival celebrations, the Street saw high-ceiling glass canopy shelters, internal spot cooling systems[4] and the impressionistically rustic street furniture of homogeneous street-cart hawker stalls. The haphazard charm had become re-contained in an idealized modern environment "*standardized* in their spaces [with] the sensuality and messiness of food…*disciplined* by functionalist logic and order" (Esperdy 45; emphasis mine). By employing "anarchic and conflicting geometries" of architecture (Esperdy 47), the Street has eased usage and smoothened the juxtapositions between the old and new, refined and industrial. Whilst these reconfigurations have produced an articulate spectacle of spatial flexibility that negotiates with ease dynamic sentimentalities from opposing temporal spheres, it has more crucially compelled the unconscious alignment of present-day spatial-historical understandings with its hegemonic representation(s). This has not only become the consequence of a society that expedites cultural commodification, but also brings with it urgent implications on what the city-state values and remembers as "authentic" culture.

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[1] "Chinatown Food Street: Nostalgic Street Style Dining". Last accessed 22 October 2014 from http://chinatownfoodstreet.sg

[2] Published by Chinatown Business Association (2014). Retrieved from site.

[3] Sim, Walter. "Chinatown Food Street to get $4m makeover". *The Straits Times*. Published March 4th 2013. Last accessed 25th October 2014 from http://news.asiaone.com/News/Latest+News/SoShiok/Story/A1Story20130302-405821.html

[4] "Chinatown Food Street: Nostalgic Street Style Dining". Last accessed 22 October 2014 from http://chinatownfoodstreet.sg

Of course, this is not to propose that nostalgia and national sentiment be constructed through the *exact* replication of a past lifestyle. Instead, it is to underscore the necessity for a social consciousness that is more discerning of the re-imaging of local history into facile storylines that whilst on the one hand fail to give sufficient recognition to traditional practices, are on the other, passing them off as "real" in the discourse of heritage tourism and the ideology of the commodity.

Concluding Remarks

Through the overall framework of architecture and its associated forms and functions, the landscape of Chinatown precariously balances cultural commodification with heritage preservation. It is at once a socio-economic spectacle perpetuating ideologies of national unity and progress, and a simultaneous "locus of a cultural politics of nostalgia" (Yeoh & Kong 151). It has organized excess images and tamed its related surplus into an overly schematized coherence that produces the palimpsest. Halfway then, between the gradually effacing yesterday of old and the dynamic modern present, the spectacle of Chinatown struggles somewhat in a space of liminality to reconcile its own tensions between the quantitative and qualitative.

It seems more fitting therefore, that future discussions shift from "conservation to…retaining a "genuine" Chinatown that is treated with cultural integrity. Its importance…is nowhere more emphasized than in the public's worry that the existing Enhancement Plans will turn the area into a theme park. The fear is that in so doing, our heritage…becomes a spectacle for consumption and this works against the integrity of its history and culture" (Chia et al. 38). Chinatown's anxious efforts to recuperate and spectacularize the spirit of its lost past poignantly means having to lose itself.

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