

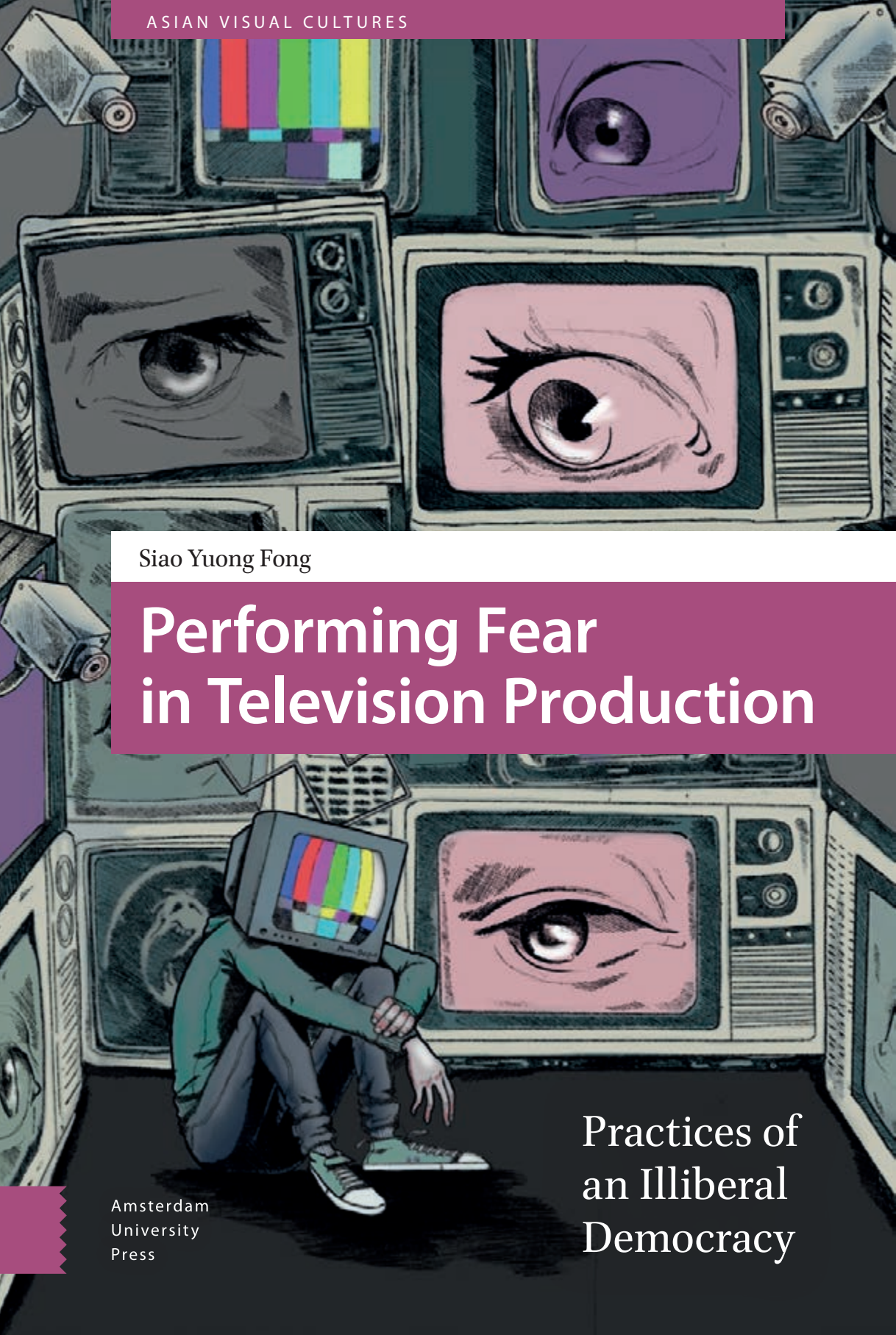
ASIAN VISUAL CULTURES

Siao Yuong Fong

Performing Fear in Television Production

Practices of
an Illiberal
Democracy

Amsterdam
University
Press



Performing Fear in Television Production



Amsterdam
University
Press

Asian Visual Cultures

This series focuses on visual cultures that are produced, distributed and consumed in Asia and by Asian communities worldwide. Visual cultures have been implicated in creative policies of the state and in global cultural networks (such as the art world, film festivals and the Internet), particularly since the emergence of digital technologies. Asia is home to some of the major film, television and video industries in the world, while Asian contemporary artists are selling their works for record prices at the international art markets. Visual communication and innovation is also thriving in transnational networks and communities at the grass-roots level. Asian Visual Cultures seeks to explore how the texts and contexts of Asian visual cultures shape, express and negotiate new forms of creativity, subjectivity and cultural politics. It specifically aims to probe into the political, commercial and digital contexts in which visual cultures emerge and circulate, and to trace the potential of these cultures for political or social critique. It welcomes scholarly monographs and edited volumes in English by both established and early-career researchers.

Series Editors

Jeroen de Kloet, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Edwin Jurriëns, The University of Melbourne, Australia

Editorial Board

Gaik Cheng Khoo, University of Nottingham, United Kingdom

Helen Hok-Sze Leung, Simon Fraser University, Canada

Larissa Hjorth, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia

Amanda Rath, Goethe University, Frankfurt, Germany

Anthony Fung, Chinese University of Hong Kong

Lotte Hoek, Edinburgh University, United Kingdom

Yoshitaka Mori, Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music, Japan



Amsterdam
University
Press

Performing Fear in Television Production

Practices of an Illiberal Democracy

Siao Yuong Fong

Amsterdam University Press



Amsterdam
University
Press

The publication of this book is made possible by a grant from the Asia Research Institute,
National University of Singapore.

Cover illustration: Miriana Del Gatto

Cover design: Coördesign, Leiden

Lay-out: Crius Group, Hulshout

ISBN 978 94 6372 457 9

e-ISBN 978 90 4855 560 4 (pdf)

DOI 10.5117/9789463724579

NUR 674

© Siao Yuong Fong / Amsterdam University Press B.V., Amsterdam 2022

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this book may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the written permission of both the copyright owner and the author of the book.



Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	7
Introduction	9
1 Fear and the Fragility of Myths	33
2 Playing Games with Heritage	63
3 Drama Writing and Audiences as Affective Superaddressee	85
4 Producing Art, Producing Difference	115
5 Making Reality TV: The Pleasures of Disciplining in a Control Society	141
Reflections	177
References	191
Index	209





Amsterdam
University
Press

Acknowledgements

This book has been a long time coming. When I started it, I could not have imagined the journey it would take me on and how many people I would meet along the way.

Firstly, I would like to express my deep-seated gratitude to Mark Hobart for his utter commitment and unwavering support throughout this journey. His determination and intellectual rigour guided me through the research and writing of this project. I thank him for teaching me so much more than just how to research, and for always bringing me back to thinking about this project as an intellectual endeavour, when the demands of the academic profession risked pulling me in other directions. I would also like to thank Manishita Dass for always asking the hard questions, and for pushing me to widen my perspectives both in scholarship and in life. Her gentle but critical mentorship played no small part in shaping my approach to academia and I continue to draw inspiration from her self-assured broad-mindedness in difficult times.

I thank the Asia Research Institute at the National University of Singapore for providing me with the institutional support that I needed to turn this research into a book. In particular, I am grateful for their funding dedicated to reviewing an earlier version of this book's manuscript under the FASS-ARI Book Manuscript Grant (2019/2020). My sincere thanks also go to Chua Beng Huat, C.J. Wee Wan-ling, and Jeroen de Kloet, whose intellectual legacies have inspired me greatly, for taking the time to review the manuscript. Their honest and constructive comments were instrumental in my reshaping of this project into the form that it takes now.

Many thanks to my editors at Amsterdam University Press for their support through this process and to Miriana Del Gatto for designing the artwork on the book's cover. Thank you also to the many colleagues and friends who have read and commented on my work throughout the years. While my memory is bound to let me down here, and I sincerely apologize for that in advance, they include John Ellis, Jonathan Corpus Ong, Audrey Yue, Jinna Tay, Tania Lim, Ivan Kwek, Aswin Punathembekar, Jonathan Grey, Adrienne Shaw, Shiori Shakuto, Sylvia Ang, Courtney Fu, Carola Lorea, Andrew Ong, the reviewers at *European Journal of Cultural Studies* and *Television & New Media*, as well as my colleagues at Lancaster University. For encouraging me and expanding my intellectual horizons in one way or another, I am truly grateful to all of them and I sure hope to thank every single one in person in due time. Finally, I would like to thank my two book



Amsterdam
University
Press

reviewers, Terence Lee and Liew Kai Khiun. It is an honour to have them read my work and refer to me as their peer when, for so many years, I looked up to their work for guidance. I will continue to stand on their shoulders.

As with any work of an ethnographic nature, I owe this project to the generosity of the many interlocutors I encountered during fieldwork, some of whom have become close friends and continue to inspire me with their resilience. It is because of their hospitality that this research was made possible. For extending themselves when they did not have to, I am truly thankful.

And finally, to my family to whom this book is dedicated. Mom, Dad, Sis, thank you for your unquestioning support throughout. It is your quiet but never-wavering backing that provided me with a safe harbour to rest and recharge whenever I needed to do so during this long and arduous journey. And to my partner Michel, your presence, sacrifices and endless belief in me kept me afloat during those times when my own belief risked faltering. Thank you for being my biggest cheerleader. This book is for you.



Introduction

Abstract

This chapter presents the theoretical and empirical puzzle of the book and argues for the Singapore case as instructive to understanding authoritarian resilience. Situated on the mercurial edge between state illiberalism and capitalist forces, the group of independent television producers I study embody the multiple subjectivities that navigate illiberal capitalist democracies. The book explores the work involved in ideologically sustaining such a social order through their lived experiences and practices. I provide a theoretical mapping of the book to elaborate on how the two senses of 'performing fear' – first the performative practices that instantiate fear as relational lens through which Singapore is to be understood; and second the affective meaning-making practices of producers that conjure and sustain audiences as anxiety-inducing – serve to perpetuate the existing social order.

Keywords: Illiberal democracy; Performativity; Fear; Affect; Television production; Singapore

It was one of those uneventful afternoons on the set of the 'live' Reality TV show I was interning for. Everyone went about their usual business. Stationed next to the Camera Director in the front-end of the panel room, I sat quietly staring at the dozens of monitors that observed the Reality TV show contestants around the clock in *Big Brother* style. Five metres behind me, the censor on duty watched the 'live' broadcast conscientiously on a separate monitor for anything that needed immediate censoring. A woman in her early twenties, she was one of the dozens of part-timers who were hired on an hourly rate to act as censors for the 'live' programme. The instructions given to her when she was hired were simple: blur or mute what you deem problematic; and record what you censored in a logbook. Outside the panel room, the Production Manager monitored our work by watching what the audiences would see – the post-censored 'live' broadcast on television.

Fong, Siao Yuong, *Performing Fear in Television Production: Practices of an Illiberal Democracy*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022

DOI: 10.5117/9789463724579_INTRO



Amsterdam
University
Press

The mood in the panel room was relaxed, almost sleepy. This was one of those afternoons when the contestants had no designated activities and were free to rest. With nothing in particular to focus our attention on, the Camera Director switched around the different cameras to capture what the different contestants were doing. We stopped at a CCTV shot of the girls' bedroom where two of the female contestants were casually chatting. The microphones picked up their conversation about their underwear, during which one of the contestants held up the underwear in question. I thought nothing of it as we quietly moved on to another room after a couple of moments. The peaceful quiet in the panel room was abruptly broken a few minutes later with the Production Manager running in.

"What did you censor? What happened?" the Production Manager yelled as she ran towards the young censor.

"Oh, erm," the young lady replied slightly surprised. "The contestant held up her underwear, I wasn't sure whether that was okay, so I blurred it." Clearly relieved that nothing serious actually happened on set, the Production Manager said, "You don't have to censor that. Don't do it again in the future, okay?"

The young censor nodded and turned back to her monitors, as everything went back to normal. She quietly fulfilled her duty by writing the incident down in her censor logbook.

'Underwear' must have been the trendy topic of that week because another female contestant held up her underwear on screen again two days later in a casual conversation. A different young woman was on duty as censor that day. Following her predecessor's footsteps, she blurred the image of the underwear. The Production Manager rushed into the panel room to find out what happened. To her frustration, the censor revealed that she decided to censor because she read in the logbook that the previous censor had blurred the image of underwear two days ago and so assumed that was the protocol.

This was my first ethnography. I had set out to do fieldwork on media production in illiberal Singapore following decades of widespread reporting of its authoritarian government's tough censorship measures. So naturally, instances of censorship on set attracted my attention. However, this was not what I had expected. My immediate reading of this situation was to attribute it to the inexperience of the censors, which raised further questions about why these young censors were hired in the first place. How could an authoritarian state like Singapore allow part-timers who were barely twenty years old to do its censorship work?



Underlying these questions I had in my head was, of course, my own assumption that media systems in authoritarian contexts were run like tight ships. I imagined that I would find fearful media workers cowering under draconian laws but instead witnessed a plethora of misunderstandings, confused practices and quibbling producers. Looking at the bumbling young censors, I wondered if I had gotten my questions backwards. Perhaps I should start by asking what made me assume that in the first place.

There were broad structures in place. The censors were meant to use the government-issued content guidelines as a reference, but these vague guidelines leave so much room for interpretation that they prove helpful only in very limited instances. Most of media work operate in the much larger grey areas potentially covered but not specified by the guidelines. On the ground, this translated into endless contestations regarding what was allowed or not, what to do in different circumstances and their potential consequences. Despite multiple producers' protests against what they called 'self-censoring' of the underwear on screen, avoiding showing underwear eventually became common practice during the production process. This book is my attempt at making sense of these arguments and practices, and how they worked towards authoritarian resilience in the media in the absence of state presence.

Alarm bells are ringing all over the world for liberal democracy. While the decline of liberal democratic capitalism has been predicted more than forty years earlier (e.g. Macpherson 1977), the recent political upheavals have caused some commentators to warn about the failure of liberal democratic capitalism as a social model (Han 2016; Tan 2018). Globally, renewed interests in searching for alternative social configurations present an opportune moment to explore other political and social possibilities. Speculating on the future of capitalist societies with the rise of China, Žižek (2015) has predicted that the Singapore model of state-interventionist capitalist democracy is the direction future capitalist democratic states will head towards. If we are to take Žižek's prediction literally, Singapore – as a non-liberal capitalist democracy efficiently run for the past five decades¹ – makes for an intriguing case of an alternative modernity² situated in between both the non-democratic and liberal democratic capitalist models. In the spirit of examining the Singapore model of illiberal capitalist democracy as an

1 George has argued that Singapore is the only country rated 'very high' on the United Nations' human development index (UNDP 2016) that has a 'not free' press freedom rating from Freedom House (2017) which makes Singapore the archetype of a high-income illiberal state (George 2019).

2 The term 'modernity' is used here as an analytic category following Grossberg who proposed 'modernity as an ongoing contestation, as something to be won, not merely in a struggle over interpretations, but in material struggles over power and the very becoming of reality' (2010b: 85).



alternative social order, I raise the broader question of what are involved in maintaining the ideological legitimacy of an illiberal state amidst the global hegemony of liberal democratic ideals? This brings our attention to the workings of the mass media.

So what goes into the ideological sustenance of an illiberal capitalist democracy? While much of the critical discussion of the media in illiberal or authoritarian contexts focus on state policy and practice,³ the emphasis on strong states is inadequate in accounting for the social imaginary that the everyday practices of those who negotiate these forces embody. Instead, discourses around state power tend to perpetuate misnomers about the media as mere tools of the state and sustains myths about the absolute power of strong states. Turning to the lived everyday of media producers in Singapore, this book seeks to critically evaluate how state-articulated 'fear' provides the conditions that enable an imaginary centred around an overdetermined social continually constituted through performative practices, that afford a self-perpetuating illiberal social order.

Performing Fear offers an ethnographic account of how power works in a politically stable⁴ illiberal capitalist democracy that appears like a closed disciplinary system of governance when approached structurally (Trocki 2006; Wong 2001; Lee 2010; Lingle 1996). While Foucault's disciplinary and governmental models of power are often used to frame authoritarian resilience in the media, I show how power in Singapore's media has moved beyond discipline or biopolitics to resemble Deleuze's societies of control (1992), whereby the logics of control has shifted away from the state's strategic intentions towards the unpredictability of imagined audiences, thereby rendering power decentralized, relational, and constantly changing. I do this by examining the practices that are largely absent from state- or text-centric accounts, including practices that do not typically conjure impressions of censorship or fear. Set in a context where 'fear' is the key discursive frame through which both state and popular accounts understand Singapore's social order, I seek to understand what power looks like in practice, even

3 The recent 'institutional turn' in the literature on authoritarian resilience has seen a returning focus on state policies and state practices that offer innovative explanations of the workings of authoritarianism within a variety of media realms. For instance, Repnikova (2017) examined the relationship between China's authorities and journalists to question the dichotomous categories of resistance versus control, while Roberts (2020) explained the Chinese state's Internet censorship strategies to ensure regime survival.

4 There have been several recent ethnographies of the media in politically unstable states, such as Bajoghli's (2019) ethnography of cultural producers of the revolutionary state of Iran and Samet's (2019) study of journalists in Venezuela.



when the subjects involved do not necessarily *feel* fear. This makes a separation between ‘fear’ as articulatory tool and as felt senses that emerge in social situations, and how the two interact in media production practices. In this sense, this is not a book about fear in its ontological sense but provides a sustained critical engagement with the cultural logics of ‘fear’ in the media of an illiberal state without centring on the realms of traditionally imagined censorship and its associations of state repression.

I approach the issue through an ethnography of the everyday practices of those who are tasked with mediating the relationship between the state and society – independent media producers largely doing Public Service Broadcasting work. Departing from state focus, *Performing Fear* offers an alternative account of the puzzle of authoritarian resilience by showing how audiences emerge as the central figure in the performance of democracy in an illiberal state, which perpetuates the status quo in the absence of state directives. I argue that while the state provides the conditions of possibility, audiences function as the central problematic for producers of mass entertainment media, through which they work out antagonisms of society and negotiate their anxieties. In managing the relationship between the state and society, media producers invoke ideas of audiences that engender anxieties and self-policing, which reproduce a vicious cycle of self-perpetuating fear.

Using the case study of Singapore, I pose a series of questions that explore what it takes to perpetuate authoritarian resilience in the mass media. How, in what terms and through what means, does a politically stable illiberal capitalist state like Singapore formulate its dominant imaginary of social order? What are the television production practices that perform and instantiate the social imaginary, and who are the audiences that are conjured and performed in the process? What are the roles played by imagined audiences in sustaining authoritarian resilience in the media? If, as I will argue in the book, audiences function as the central problematic that engenders anxieties and self-policing amongst producers, can the audience become a surrogate for the authoritarian state?

The Media of an Illiberal Capitalist Democracy

To say that Singapore is a modern disciplinary society in a Foucaultian sense would be an understatement [...] Singapore has in many cases worn out established theoretical paradigms of all kinds, while spinning life into higher states of unreality (Chun 2012: 684).



In many ways, Singapore's media production seems like an unlikely case study. While doing my fieldwork, I often encountered questions like 'why Singapore?' and regularly met with bewilderment from producers who were painfully aware of their small industry and audience size. The producers' frequent allusions to the Singaporean media industry being 'boring' or having nothing interesting for researchers to learn about are underlined by the state's seemingly exceeding stability. Conventionally, ethnographies of media production highlighting the role of politics are dominated by cases that focus either on coercion or moments of social change (see, for instance, Robert Samet's 2019 ethnography of how crime journalists in Venezuela transformed the state's approach to punitive security; and Narges Bajoghli's 2019 ethnography of the contestations among pro-regime cultural producers about how to define the revolutionary state of Iran). In contrast, scholars of illiberal or authoritarian capitalism have treated Singapore as an exceptionally instructive case study since no existing state can match its record of political stability and high socio-economic development (e.g. George 2007; Carney 2018; Rodan 2004). The ruling party of Singapore has never lost power since 1959 and Singapore's first Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, led the government for thirty-one years before his political successions. By focusing on Singapore as a politically stable illiberal state, I hope to highlight an important aspect that is missing from media ethnographies of authoritarian states – the often invisible everyday work that goes into maintaining regime stability in a context whereby political upheaval is far from the popular imagination.

Local production in Singapore is intimately linked to the state. It is dominated by MediaCorp, Singapore's monopoly free-to-air and national broadcaster, which delivers content over seven TV channels, eight FM radio stations and *MeWatch* – an Internet enabled application service accessible online. 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 Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) role. It is now fully owned by Temasek Holdings, the investment arm of the Singaporean state.⁵ Between 1994 and 2011, public service content was mainly funded via a Radio and TV License fee collected

5 There was a brief period of limited competition in the free-to-air broadcasting market between 2000 and 2004 during which a second terrestrial broadcaster, MediaWorks, was granted operational license. This disruption of MediaCorp's monopoly over the market proved commercially devastating for both companies and MediaWorks was shut down in 2005.

directly from the public. The public license fee was abolished in 2011 and replaced with 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. The IMDA still funds most of their PSB through MediaCorp because its mass audiences remain PSB's strongest reach in the local population.⁶

Several tensions run through Singapore's media industry, as evident through its funding structures. As an illiberal democracy, the Singaporean government places importance on the state-linked media to continue its hegemonic work over the people. Despite declining viewership of MediaCorp's TV channels, annual PSB funding from the state has increased over the years. For instance, IMDA spent S\$112 million on PSB funding in 2012 compared to S\$346 million in 2019 (*Media Development Authority 2013; Infocomm Media Development Authority 2020*). With this increased funding, the relationship between MediaCorp and the state has become more entrenched. MediaCorp's revenue of S\$505 million in the financial year of 2019 means IMDA's PSB funding, most of which still go to MediaCorp, constituted the majority of its revenue source (Temasek 2020). Apart from direct funding arrangements between the IMDA and MediaCorp, the IMDA also funds other major platforms through schemes such as the PSB Contestable Funds Scheme; and commissions independent production houses to create content. Adding more complexity to the state's funding role, several Ministries and government agencies also fund free-to-air programmes (see Chapters Four and Five).

At the same time, the government's privatizing of MediaCorp subjects them to the capitalist forces of the free market. In this sense, Singapore's media, the vast majority of which still relies on state funding,⁷ is in a vitally important but also precarious position. The antagonisms between the public service and commercial imperatives of local production are matters of great frustration to some of my informants. As one of them put it succinctly:

We have the fucking KPI of a corporation and we have the fucking limitations of a public service broadcast. It's fucking annoying.

6 The numbers are not made available, but my interview with the head of PSB in IMDA corroborates this.

7 This is markedly different to the case of the PRC where the vast majority of television productions deal purely with the profit margin (Schneider 2012). For instance, television stations primarily rely on drama programmes for advertising revenue, which account for 90 per cent of the total revenues. Private capital dominates television drama in the PRC by accounting for about 80 per cent of the total investment.



In this book, I explore the intersection of state power and capitalist development, as lived among a group of independent media producers situated on the mercurial edge between illiberalism and capitalist forces. The producers I discuss in this book reside at a most awkward intersection between the state and the people and navigate multiple subjectivities as representatives of the state, public service providers, as well as commercial entertainment producers. These producers spend most of their time making free-to-air programmes commissioned by MediaCorp under the IMDA's Public Service Broadcasting⁸ funding schemes. When I was doing fieldwork, MediaCorp outsourced roughly 40 per cent of local PSB productions to independent production companies per year and produced the rest in-house. These companies, which were responsible for the production of a large proportion of free-to-air television programmes in Singapore,⁹ had to bid annually for the projects. As a result of the industry structure, my informants were often subjected to the illiberal and disciplinary practices of both the state and the market.

As a case in point, in serving the state's paternalistic multiculturalist national agenda (see Chapter One), local production's clear segmentation of TV content along linguistic lines has not only limited regional expansionist efforts (Pugsley 2007) but also caused a decline in local viewership (Lim et al. 2019). Even though the tensions between the ideological and commercial obligations of media work are often presented as contradictions inherent to forces of illiberal capital in Singapore, there are a gamut of complex practices and understandings involved. In particular, this book focuses on a group of independent mass media producers who work on Chinese-language television in Singapore – the most watched locally – in order to explore the practices and processes of boundary-making amongst the seasoned producers of an established industry segment (Chapters Two and Three) and the newcomers attempting to challenge the status quo (Chapters Four and Five). In this book, I am interested in how such boundaries become stabilized and how they are understood and transgressed by media producers situated in a particularly unsettling position between the state, capital and society. These producers occupy a liminal space that requires them to constantly negotiate the discursive thresholds of public service and commerce, state

8 Between 2008 and 2012, IMDA provided about \$470 million in PSB funding, resulting in about 2,000 hours of original local PSB productions each year (*Channel NewsAsia* 9 July 2012). In 2013, MediaCorp fulfilled a total of 6,039.5 hours of PSB programming, out of which 2,439.5 were locally produced (*Media Development Authority* 2014: 70).

9 PSB programming accounted for almost 69 per cent of broadcasting hours in 2013.



power and market forces, the national and the global. The work that these producers do can therefore illuminate the intersections and permeations of these relations, how they are given meaning through their practices, and also how they may be implicated in sustaining the structures of power they live under.

A common explanation of how producers negotiate the complex state-media-politics nexus has been through the concept of 'OB Markers', a term in Singapore that refers to topics that are deemed 'out-of-bounds' or too sensitive for coverage in the media (Cheong 2013; Lee 2002). This framing of producers as self-censoring in line with state directives prove to be more complex in practice. The ideological work that the illiberal state requires its media to do has translated into limitations on media pluralism in favour of producers suturing over antagonisms to articulate some shared morality or value system in the name of consensus. At the same time, the Singaporean government's brand of conservatism, where policymakers repeatedly defer to what they represent as the conservative majority of Singaporean society as justification, has resulted in high intolerance towards diversity of opinion and a culture where complaints are taken extremely seriously.

These could be complaints filed with MediaCorp, with the authorities, or through online comments that are reported in mainstream media. 'It's so easy to write in, you know', the head of the compliance team in MediaCorp lamented to me in an interview. 'Just write something online, somebody picks it up, that's it. It goes viral [...] They may not be complaining to you. They just write what their opinion is about something and then IMDA will see it and then they will start to investigate as well'. Any complaint from the public could result in potential punishment for both the producers and the broadcaster, whether in terms of monetary fines from the authorities or internal disciplinary action. Beyond the hassle of having to write reports for every single complaint, these investigations have an affective impact on media workers. During the time of my main ethnographic fieldwork between 2012 and 2014, MediaCorp's compliance department was required to go through a mandatory interrogation process for any alleged breach of protocol that occurred on television. Those years were still traumatic for the head of the compliance team when I spoke to him in 2019. Despite the years that have passed, he recounted the details like they had just happened:

It can be very stressful [...] it's like an interrogation, a police interrogation. Two folks from the enforcement division will interview you [...] You have to sign a statement [...] [*Heaving a sigh of relief*] They stopped it. Thank goodness.



These complaints affected not just the compliance team. I found out later that by the time these incidents trickled down to independent producers doing the creative work, the content of the complaints were often not even specified. Merely the fact that there were complaints warranted serious attention from all concerned. This political climate where potentially anyone could get producers into trouble, even if unintentionally, resulted in a work culture where anticipatory paranoia about viewer complaints feature heavily in everyday production situations. Combined with the structural requirements of PSB in a monopoly free-to-air broadcaster, producers have to engage in the antagonistic practice of imagining audiences as 'mass' (by suturing differences) while anticipating and avoiding individual acts of departure from the mass in terms of complaints.

Producers therefore have multiple potentially antagonistic roles to play, including educating and challenging the audience as PSB providers; entertaining consumers for ratings; perpetuating state ideology; and avoiding sensitive issues. All of these entail different engagements with, and imaginations of, audiences. Insofar as attempts to imagine audiences are ways of trying to work out what, or who, are the masses, then examinations of how audiences work in production seem to be ways through which to try to frame what goes on in wider society. In this sense, the imagined audiences that producers struggle over are emblematic of the larger tensions inherent to the maintaining of ideological and electoral legitimacy of an illiberal democratic state in a globalized world.

For the producers who live through these tensions in their everyday work, abstract concepts such as 'illiberalism', 'capitalism' or 'democracy' involve a gamut of different, variously understood and partly unknown processes that risk being overlooked or taken for granted if subsumed under the term 'illiberal capitalist democracy'. A starting point for this work is therefore the suspension of conventional analytical categories in favour of the discursive and material processes for boundary and subject making. Like for the producers and censors I met on the set of the Reality TV show, the lines between the state and non-state are constantly remade in practice, at times intentionally emphasized or blurred for particular purposes, and on other occasions rendered redundant. By analyzing the lived experiences of television producers, *Performing Fear* offers an ethnographic account of authoritarian resilience in the media that opens up analyses into the ideological, processual, ideational and affective practices that emerge from the plurality of perspectives, arguments and struggles of those involved, and how these sustain, alter or perform certain ideas about authoritarian societies.



Performing Fear

While the underwear censorship incident seemed like just another minor mix-up at the time, I later realized its implications for an illiberal context like Singapore. For viewers at home, witnessing acts of censorship without knowing what was censored can lead them to assume, like the Production Manager did initially, that there were serious matters that required censoring. Repeatedly occurring over time, such incidents create the sense that this illiberal society has many issues that its state or its population should fear. In this sense, the censors performing their imagined roles enabled uncertainties about viewers (in the case of the first censor) to reproduce ideas of a censorious state-linked media, a conservative audience and an illiberal society with much to fear.

This book shows how media production practices that ‘perform¹⁰ fear’ enable the ideological perpetuation of the illiberal social order in the absence of state intervention. The performance of fear manifests in two interrelated senses and corresponds to two sets of practices, and the book explores how these two assemblages of practices can formulate a self-sustaining model of power using the case study of Singapore’s state-linked television. I argue that the overdetermined social – manifested in this case as ‘the audience’ – functions as the central problematic that affords this model of power.

‘Performing fear’ in the first sense refers to the producers’ work in continually constituting the social imaginary (Laclau 1990) of contemporary Singapore society. ‘Fear’ as a well-rehearsed narrative about Singapore is the key discursive tool and cultural lens through which state and popular discourse make sense of social order. In doing state-funded Public Service Broadcasting work, producers thereby regularly constitute the dominant social imaginaries of Singapore. Drawing on immersive ethnographic fieldwork conducted in several mass entertainment television productions (namely a Reality Television show, two game shows, a long form drama and a short form drama) in Singapore through a period of sixteen months between 2012 and 2014, repeated yearly visits after, in-depth interviews conducted between 2018 and 2020, and continuing conversations with my informants, I show how the different genres allow producers to perform – conceptualized as practices of reconstituting – various aspects of the social imaginary such as meritocracy, capitalism, ethnicity, etc. This first set of practices

10 I use performativity as theorized by Judith Butler in terms of performance as constitutive practices (Butler 1999).



are performative as they continually call upon and instantiate fear as the relational lens through which Singapore is to be understood.

Constituting social imaginaries entail a shared understanding of who the addressee is. While the different genres also afford producers different relationships with audiences, they conjure ideas of an audience that is linguistically organized but emptied of – and needing of protection from – other social antagonisms. The conjured audience resulting from this first set of practices is however incongruent to audience encounters as experienced by producers in their daily work, which manifests as unpredictable viewer complaints and the anticipatory paranoia and anxiety that emerges from producers' second set of practices – managing audience potentiality. I argue that producers make sense of and cope with this incongruity of imagined audiences and their excesses affectively. To borrow Ahmed's (2004) conceptualization, the anxiety associated with this incongruity 'sticks' to the 'bodies' of imagined audiences and is sustained performatively through further affective encounters. 'Performing fear' in the second sense therefore refers to the affective meaning-making practices of producers that conjure and sustain audiences as anxiety-inducing.

The two performances of fear come together through imagined audiences in production practice – conceptualized as 'affective superaddressee' (see more in Chapter Three) – which serve a crucial role in the model of power in Singapore's media. The power model proceeds as such. The producers' practices produce a vicious cycle whereby the vast amount of different ways viewers could react to their programmes reproduce the Singaporean subject as unknown, uncontrollable and unpredictable, which furthers uncertainties that then continually engender more anxieties and self-policing among producers. It is through these practices that ideas of the state as censorious and the Singaporean subject as infantile or conservative are reproduced. This then further perpetuates the need for producers to hide and contain the fragility of the state of things, which performatively sustains the image of a fearful and obeying media. Contrary to the often-repeated disciplinary model (in the Foucauldian sense) of power originating from state intentionality in accounts of authoritarian resilience in the media (e.g. George & Venkiteswaran 2019; Lee 2010), *Performing Fear* develops its model of power in conversation with ideas central to Deleuze's 'Societies of Control' such as the modulation of conduct based on unpredictable relationality (Deleuze 1992) and the literature on affect (Massumi 2002; 2015; Anderson 2014) that explore how affective flows operate in modes of continual variation and transformation, thereby enabling the function of power through modulations of potentiality. Through the case of Singapore,



I consider whether ‘the audience’ can – or indeed has – become a surrogate for the strong state in disciplining its media.

The main arguments in this book therefore revolve around three conceptual themes, namely myths and imaginaries, fear and affect, and audiences and power. As part of the aim of the book is to offer a different critical framework to think about power in authoritarian media, I briefly sketch out how I approach these themes theoretically in the rest of this introductory chapter.

Myths / Imaginaries

How are we to conceive of the ideological work that mass media producers in Singapore do? Criticizing traditional ideas about ideology as false consciousness, Althusser theorized it as ways of representing the Imaginary, which is the relation between subjects and their conditions of existence, and what interpellates (positions and addresses) them as subjects. While theorists differ on the technicalities,¹¹ they broadly agree that imaginaries connote a conscious, more or less institutionalized framework, which enables people to make sense of their social life as a coherent totality. However, these accounts largely deal with an ideal and require subjects to exist only in relation to the ‘imaginary’. Having to deal with multiple antagonistic roles and relations as well as unpredictable viewer complaints, my informants have to rather be conceived of as the support of a decentred complex of practices and statuses which have distinct conditions of existence. This is where Laclau’s theoretically sophisticated exposition of how imaginaries vary according to different practices and subjectivities becomes useful.

Ernesto Laclau (1990) theorized ‘myths’ as new ‘spaces of representation’ that are designed to make sense of and suture dislocations, which he defined as ‘the primary ontological level of constitution of the social [...] a dislocation is not a necessary moment in the self-transformation of the structure but is its failure to achieve constitution and is mere temporality in this sense’ (2015: 32–34). Myths, as surfaces on which dislocations and social demands

11 So how exactly do imaginaries work? Theorists differ. For Althusser, Imaginaries are related to class. For Lacan, they are founded on the Symbolic and the formation of the ego. From a different theoretical lineage, Foucault analyzed the mechanisms of power/knowledge strategies that function in the Imaginary. Taylor envisioned the role of social imaginaries in ‘modern societies’ as ‘what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society’ (2004: 15). He situated imaginaries as beyond structure and explicit doctrines, and within the realm of ‘practice that largely carries the understanding’ (2004: 54).

can be inscribed, transform into imaginaries when they successfully conceal social dislocations by inscribing a wider range of social demands. A collective social imaginary, according to Laclau, is

[...] a horizon: it is not one among other objects but an absolute limit which structures a field of intelligibility and is thus the condition of possibility for the emergence of any object [...] as modes of representation of the very form of fullness, they are located beyond the precariousness and dislocations typical of the world of objects (Laclau 2015: 48).

Laclau's theorization of the relation between myth and imaginary as 'radically hegemonic and unstable' (2015: 51) captures the temporal shifts that occur between the two and the work involved in mythical articulations. If we considered myths beyond the boundaries of nation-states, it also raises intriguing questions about how far the myths constituting Singapore's social imaginary are implicated in the global hegemony of liberal democratic ideals.

I find Laclau's theorization helpful in thinking about the ideological work of the mass media in Singapore because his account of how myths (as practices of representation) transform into Imaginaries offers a way to consider how issues manifest in practice. Chapter One's exploration of state narratives provide an overview of the myths of multiculturalism and capital that constitute Singapore's social imaginary, and captures the impossible unity and incomplete hegemonic closures inherent to modern capitalist societies; between the singularizing claims about the market, national identity or multiculturalism, and their heterogeneous configurations in practice. The ethnographic chapters then examine the types of production practices that go into suturing dislocations of myths as well as which of these myths, and when, structured producers' fields of intelligibility to move into the realm of imaginaries. While concepts like myths and imaginaries seem like abstract ways to frame what goes on in Singapore's media production, what was most interesting to me was how they manifested in a variety of ways in the lived experiences of my informants. In particular, Chapters Two and Four explore the ideological, ideational and affective implications of the state's use of language as its social order's key regulative idea (Sakai 1992: 326) for everyday production practice and how these shaped the status quo in different ways.

These myths of Singapore as illiberal capitalist democracy articulated by the state are carried by performative and affective practices of its media producers, as well as imagined audiences as invoked addressee. In the next sections, I elaborate on how I make use of fear, affect, and audiences in the book.



Fear / Affect

When the underwear censorship incident happened, my first thought was of the assertions I had often encountered over the years about how Singapore is plagued by fear and self-censorship. ‘This must be a symptom of the “fear” that these commentaries and journalistic accounts were referring to’, I thought to myself. But being present in the panel room as a member of the production team, I did not actually feel the so-called fear amongst those around me. In fact, the rest of those in the room barely seemed to have noticed anything unusual happening before the Production Manager ran in, an act which disrupted the affect in the room. To complicate matters, the multiple encounters between the Production Manager and the censors signalled anxiety about the act of censoring rather the issue of showing underwear itself. It did not feel right to encompass these intersecting and complex practices under the broad claim of ‘fear’.

It occurred to me then that my immediate reading of the situation had been clouded by the widely circulated hegemonic accounts that Singaporeans are fearful of the state, and that I had to be careful to separate the assumptions I brought from the actual encounters I witnessed in the field, which proved to be far richer in ethnographic and affective details. It is with this vigilance in mind that I clarify my use of fear and affect in this book.¹² I refer to fear in two distinct ways, the first as articulations and the cultural lens through which Singapore as social order is understood in most accounts; and the second as felt senses that emerge in the daily work of media producers, which I propose to study as affective practices.

Let me begin with fear as articulation. Ahmed (2004) proposed a model of sociality of emotion to understand textual representations of affect in state and popular accounts that highlights the importance of considering the cultural politics behind claims of emotionality. She argued that ‘emotionality as a claim *about* a subject or a collective is clearly dependent on relations of power, which endow “others” with meaning and value’ (Ahmed 2004: 4). The Cultural Studies concept of articulation as the linking of different discursive elements is central here (Hall 1996a). By linking various social

12 Since this book is not about fear as an inner state or coherent object of study, I will not rehash the well-repeated arguments among different approaches to emotions here. Sara Ahmed offers a comprehensive overview of the critiques of behaviourist, cognitive and biological theories of emotion, such as their reinforcing of the mind-body dualism, interior-exterior dichotomy, and assumptions of intentionality (Ahmed 2004: 5–12). There are further issues with regards to the problematic nature of universalizing what ‘fear’ means across languages and cultures (Needham 1981: 57).

phenomena with the concept of fear, these accounts are performative as ‘the loop of the performative works powerfully [...] [and] both generate their objects, and repeat past associations’ (Ahmed 2004: 194). Ahmed’s model is useful as a framework for reading how texts name, perform and instantiate emotions as an affective relationship between people, thereby forming affective economies. In Chapter One, I show how the state uses fear as its main affective tool to articulate the dislocations of its imaginaries, thereby justifying state intervention in much of Singapore’s social life. In response, popular discourse and critics impute fear on the imagined population. Fear as articulation is therefore the key discursive tool and cultural lens through which state and popular discourse make sense of social order.

In the second instance, I also approach fear (and other affects) as a felt sense that emerges in the daily work of media producers. This is where I depart from Ahmed’s account. Ahmed’s key claim is that affect does not reside in signs or commodities, but is produced in its circulation like a form of capital (2004: 157). However, this risks decontextualizing affect (Wetherell 2015) and conflating its ontological, conjunctural and lived contexts (Grossberg 2010a: 314). As I noted earlier with my initial understanding of the censorship incident, there are dangers in confusing more ontological theorizations of some sort of ‘fear’ underlying the Singaporean psyche with empirical observations. To sidestep these risks, Wetherell alongside others in Cultural Studies (Harding & Pribram 2002; Grossberg 2010a) proposed focusing our attention on affective practices that are grounded in what she called ‘multi-modal situated event(s)’ (Wetherell 2015: 159) that cannot be removed from immediate relationships and specific negotiations and activity. Contrary to tendencies in certain branches of affect theory¹³ to dismiss the discursive focus of mainstream practice theory, Wetherell proposed combining the analytical accomplishments of social science research with affect theory through studying what she conceptualizes as ‘affective practice [...] a figuration where body possibilities and routines become recruited or entangled together with meaning making and with other social and material figurations’ (2012: 19). Applied here, this would entail a study of

13 As Leys critiqued, much of the work in new affect theory worked as reactions against the dominance of rational consciousness by proposing instead that actions are determined by affective dispositions that are independent of consciousness and pre-discursive (Leys 2011: 443). In so doing, such works implicitly reinforce the false dichotomy between mind and body. By focusing on situated practices rather than some sort of isolated emotion as the unit of analysis, this book challenges the ‘split between a semi-conscious, automaton-like, reactive body and the reflexive, discursive, interpreting, meaning-making, communicating social actor’ (Wetherell 2015: 160).

the embodied affective meaning making practices of producers as they make sense of, debate or articulate claims during production situations.

In clearly separating fear as articulation in state and popular accounts from affective practices in producers' daily work, I examine the complex intersections between the discursive and lived dimensions of fear while keeping in mind that these are the analytical categories of the scholar. This cross-examination is also, in a sense, an explication of the complex relationship between the illiberal state and media production practices beyond directives or oppression. Ethnographic examination of affect – even if grounded in practices – is, nonetheless, tricky. Any analysis of the affective motivations or impacts within ethnographic encounters will necessarily entail a degree of my own reading of the situations as a participant. It is therefore important to me that my writing in this book clearly illustrates that distinction. I do that partly with the strategy of including both the original words of my informants and multiple translations in my writing, as I elaborate in the method section later in this chapter.

Audience / Power

Even though the uncertainty of audiences is by now a common assumption within production studies literature, these works that are mostly based on case studies in the West demonstrate how the industries are fuelled by anxiety because nobody knows what makes a hit (Gitlin 2004 [1988]; Caldwell 2008). Traversing how institutional imaginations of audiences interact with audience actuality in production practice to perpetuate illiberalism, this book speaks to wider audience studies literature by extending beyond market concerns to consider the relational ways in which audiences impact on television production.

In mediating the relationship between state and society, the producers I worked with regularly invoked audiences as an object of concern,¹⁴ with referents ranging from abstract notions (public, mass etc.) to different groups of audiences (according to gender, age, race etc.), to single persons (producers often talked about themselves or particular friends or family

14 Taylor (2004) emphasized the importance of a shared understanding of the addresser and addressee relationship in constituting modern social imaginaries: 'part of what makes sense of it is some picture of ourselves as speaking to others to whom we are related in a certain way [...] There is a speech act here, addresser and addressees, and some understanding of how they can stand in this relation to each other' (Taylor 2004: 45). In other words, the producers' ideological work requires some sense of whom they have to address.

members when imagining responses to their work), to the broadcaster or the authorities (as an abstract whole or as individuals they personally know), to sponsors or ratings. Drawing on the rich strain of writing in Media Studies on audiences as a 'discursive construct' (Ang 1991; Hartley 1992; Nightingale 1996), I am interested in how different producers discussed the issue with each other in various contexts.¹⁵ Audiences come to crowd the scene of production through this conjuring and shifting, which bring a multiplicity of perspectives into relevance, either sequentially or at the same time. So when do producers struggle over whom or what audiences are, and under what circumstances are such questions kept concealed? To what extent are these practices affective and how do they link to wider circuits of power?

For the producers I worked with, who exactly were watching what and in what numbers remained a mystery to them, as information about ratings was withheld by the authorities and broadcaster. This practice introduced uncertainty to the core of television production in Singapore. The shroud of secrecy surrounding audience matters had practical consequences for the producers. They relied, on the one hand, on an imagined audience they constructed through the myths and social imaginaries they constituted in their daily work. This was based on a particular idea of the social organized around linguistic (and ethnic) difference but emptied otherwise of all other antagonisms (see Chapters Two and Four). On the other hand, these ideas were constantly ruptured by audience encounters that manifested predominantly as viewer complaints. Empowered by a state system that takes any form of criticism very seriously, these viewer complaints were always potentially punishing, which had serious consequences for producers' daily work (see Chapters Three and Five).

To account for this incoherence between the two imagined audiences, I draw on a distinct, more philosophical branch of affect theory as a theoretical toolbox to develop the concept of audiences as 'affective superaddressee' in order to think about audience power in illiberal contexts. While I carve out the theoretical contours of the concept using ethnographic details in Chapter Three, briefly here, the concept of 'superaddressee' (Bakhtin 1986:

15 This raises a different set of questions. Who is representing what *as* audiences to whom, under what circumstances and for what purposes? Addressing the issue of representing as, Hobart argued that '[a]udiences do not exist purely in themselves as measurable objects [...] independent of the frameworks used to study them' (2010a: 203). Applied to audiences, the transformation in *representing as* is complex because it often consists of serial practices. In this sense, by studying these practices of representing audiences as, I aim to establish what sorts of practices which producers engaged in at different stages of their work, for what purposes, and what these suggest about their anxieties or concerns.



126) allows for the encompassing of often-contradictory imaginations of audiences that producers in illiberal contexts like Singapore are forced to evoke. Audiences as superaddressee work affectively in the first level by embodying the multiple and often mutually exclusive potentials that coexist within audience encounters (Massumi 2002: 32), modulating interactive possibilities but always exceeding attempts to control it. Sustained through affective practices, the potentials of the 'affective superaddressee' are not just delimited but also articulated within interactions, thereby undergoing perpetual transformation. On the second level, by embodying contradictory coexisting potentials, audiences as 'affective superaddressee' organize producers' practices around affective logic. Simply put, this concept considers audience power as residing, in large parts, in the excesses of any audience encounter – the potential responses that could have but did not occur, while always threatening to be a possibility – that feed back into producer-audience relations.

In the case of Singapore, this 'affective superaddressee' manifests as a constantly morphing and unaddressable audience, imagined in various instances as uncontrollable, infantile, conservative or 'other', empowered to punish, yet never predictable. In imagining audiences in many different ways but always presupposing their criticisms, producers are not dealing with an actual viewer or category of viewers, but an abstraction of the viewer as the instrument of censure, displeasure and complaint – one that engenders anxieties in multiple ways and works effectively to evoke self-policing among producers, as empowered by both the media system and subjects' own performative practices.

This account of imagined audiences has implications for how power works in the lived everyday of media producers in authoritarian Singapore. Literature on authoritarian media (and on Singaporean media) overwhelmingly frame power using Foucault's disciplinary, and biopolitical or governmentality terms. Under disciplinary models of power, authoritarian state institutions control the media through policy and legislation, which presumably result in individual self-censorship (Rodan 2004: 34; Trocki 2006); while biopolitics and governmentality work through mass-level regulatory techniques that shape individual conduct by defining how groups relate to each other. The biopolitics and governmentality of state policies in Singapore are well explored in academic literature (for e.g. Lee 2010; George 2005) but, more often than not, overemphasize the strategic intentionality and rationality of the state and tend to reduce everyday life and social relations to residual effects of initiatives emanating from dispersed but coherent concentrations of authority (Barnett et al. 2008: 624–653). While



biopolitics and governmentality are strong features of the Singaporean state's interventionist style of governing and imagining the social (see Chapter One), my ethnography of how are they lived, negotiated and contested by and among media producers suggests that how power manifests in lived experiences increasingly resembles Deleuze's society of control (1992: 3–7).

Since Deleuze's writing on it was brief, I outline what I understand as the key differences between control societies and Foucault's discipline and biopolitics, in conversation with how scholars have made use of Deleuze's analysis. The first difference lies in control society's departure from state intentionality as origin of power. Audiences as 'affective superaddressee' complicate how normativity works since audiences as a multiplicity increases the number of different ways in which their responses could discipline media producers' actions. This shift in where producers imagine the key problematic is crucial, since it means that power as manifested in the daily practices of production becomes 'ever more decentralized and is now no longer in any straightforward sense connected to easily locatable institutions and exerted by centrally placed actors but is rather spread out in extremely complex structures and networks where it is not possible to excavate the origin or place of power' (Rasmussen 2011: 1). Accordingly, the manner in which audiences' control at times moves beyond the moulding of actions according to normative standards in disciplinary power to resemble Deleuze's control societies where producers' actions are modulated according to relational, situational and constantly shifting standards (Chapters Three and Five). However, the power of audiences and its excesses is also always in a mode of continuous variation, undergoing perpetual displacements, re-compositions and transformations, thereby making it inherently temporal in nature. Ideas about 'audiences' are able to control producers' practices precisely because they are the highly uncertain, ambiguous and therefore mutable and transformable. Such a decentralized logic of control is effective because it is difficult to locate and constantly changing. This book shows the serious implications for producers' subjectivities and practices in daily life.

A Word on the Ethnography

Needless to say, I am indebted to the many incredibly generous people I met during fieldwork who extended beyond themselves to include me in their worlds. The majority of the encounters that appear in this book are from the sixteen months I spent in Singapore between June 2012 and October 2013 working for and observing different television productions.



The ethnography was based on participative observations from when I worked alongside the crew, supplemented by informal, or where necessary, formal interviews, and any other information gathered from following the productions. Fieldwork started with me working as an intern for the production companies. After establishing more trust with the producers towards the latter part of fieldwork, I was allowed to stay on solely as a researcher.

As much as possible, I followed the production process from pre- to post-production for each programme I worked on. However, the phases I could observe differed depending on the nature of each production and how much access I was given. As an intern, I was at the bottom of the hierarchy of labour and was often assigned odd jobs that ranged from transcribing to cleaning. However, I was also given more 'skilled' responsibilities due to my prior production experience and higher educational background. I also suspect that my dual role as PhD researcher prevented the producers from treating me in the same way they would regular interns who were usually much younger.

After the ethnographies came the challenge of writing up. The abundance of materials collected in the field created difficulties in choosing which materials to use and how to write them up. In selecting which practices to write up, I always start with the materials that show the primary concerns of the producers at the time before considering the implications of these concerns. In other words, I take my subjects' words as axiomatic, and this also applies to the choice of incidents or examples that I raise, as I try as much as possible to stick primarily to what were of concern to them. The chapters in this book therefore consist largely of arguments, contestations and discussions among the producers that I encountered during my fieldwork, during which they debated about issues that they did not agree on. While these may not be typical or average instances of media production, atypical or extreme cases often reveal more information because they activate more actors and mechanisms in those situations (Flyvbjerg 2011: 86). In this sense, these encounters work as explicit illustrations of the issues that mattered to them enough to deserve discussion and serve as instances of rupture that illustrate how practices work to articulate and constitute a constantly shifting work and cultural sensibility.

As my research subjects spoke a variety of languages – including English, Mandarin, Cantonese, Hokkien, some Malay words and Singlish – among themselves, I include the original phrases and words and their translation(s)¹⁶

16 I realized there was no straightforward way to translate the material into English. Both government and schools in Singapore lacked an official or consistent translation system. Different



for the terms I deemed important in this book. Often, you will find that there may be more than one translation attached to each word. I do this on purpose in order to 'stay close to the complexities and contradictions of existence', as Flyvbjerg (2011: 95) advised. While I will put forth my arguments about the materials in this book, my way of writing also leaves room for readers to make their own interpretations if they wish to do so. By not monopolizing the interpretive space, I hope that I demonstrate my empathy to my subjects with this approach to writing up.

Organization of the Book

What goes into the ideological sustenance of an illiberal capitalist democracy? The following chapters approach the puzzle of authoritarian resilience in the media from different angles.

Chapter One examines the myths – broadly capitalism and multiculturalism with all their antagonisms – that formulate the Singaporean state's construction of its social imaginary(s). Through this chapter, I argue two points. First, fear is the key discursive tool and affective logic through which state and popular discourse make sense of social order. Second, the multiple functions of fear centre around struggles over the overdetermined social. I discuss how the population as antagonism result in structural and practical consequences for how media producers can imagine and access their audiences.

Having set the structural and contextual scene, the rest of the chapters explore ethnographically the cultural politics of fear as manifested in production practices of different genres of television. Beginning with one of the most-made genres in Singaporean television, Chapter Two uses two state-funded game shows about heritage to examine the well-oiled practices and the mundane everyday work that goes into making infotainment in an illiberal capitalist democracy. Through the chapter, I show how these practices enable an ideological construction of audiences that continually condemn the Singaporean subject as a work in progress, and sustain a vicious cycle of perpetual to-be-upgraded-ness by denying and disarticulating the underlying antagonisms of Singapore society.

government agencies had different groups of translators working for them. To overcome the issue of translation in the book, I cross-checked relevant Mandarin terms across the major Chinese-English dictionaries sold in Singaporean bookstores. Cases where there were inconsistencies have been noted.



Extending the ideological emptying of audiences into a more detailed examination of the competing goals and demands of illiberalism in Singapore's media, Chapter Three focuses on how the multiple roles and relations of illiberal capital are embodied by producers in the struggles of scriptwriting a crime drama. These struggles centre around the audience as problematic. Developing the concept of audiences as 'affective superaddressee', I examine the ways in which the dislocations of illiberal capitalism manifest in anxieties engendered by imagined audiences that serve to perpetuate authoritarian resilience in the everyday media production.

If the old-timers of Chinese-language media production in Singapore had developed a set of established work practices that serve the status quo, what are the potentials for newcomers to change that? Chapter Four follows the journey of a new director who arrived with the explicit aim to challenge the state of affairs in mass media production. It demonstrates both the reliability and the incompleteness of ideological reproduction by detailing the processes of how contestations surrounding potentials for generating tears in the dominant social order eventually led to the reinforcing of categorical boundaries. Focusing on the affective ideational practices of producers when producing a state-sponsored art drama, I argue that what ultimately enabled this social imaginary were myths of cultural and linguistic difference in society.

I end the book with a genre that is uncommonly made in Singapore – Reality TV. What are the possibilities for disrupting the status quo in the absence of well-established conventions? Traversing from fear to anxiety to pleasure, Chapter Five focuses on how the affective practices of producers were productive in creating stage-managed affective spectacles emptied of any real controversy or social impact. I argue that what results is a form of power that operates similar to Deleuze's 'control societies' that moves beyond discipline to modulate producers' behaviour based on constantly shifting standards.

The final chapter accounts for the time that has passed since the ethnographies. Using materials from in-depth interviews conducted between 2018 and 2020, I reflect on the implications of how audience power is shifting from the background to the foreground in producers' articulations and revisit the idea of audiences as affective superaddressee in the context of increasing digitalization and audience fragmentation.