

## **Fashioning the Asian Identity: Ong Shunmugam and the Creation of a Sartorial Pluriverse**

### **Introduction**

In negotiating our postcolonial existence, most cultural analysis on decoloniality in Singapore has centred on art, architecture and pop culture. In the artistic domain especially, works by playwrights and artists such as Kuo Pao Kun, Ong Keng Sen and Ho Tzu Nyen have been instrumental in ushering in the notion of the Asian Modern<sup>1</sup> as conceptualised by C.J.Wee, where an “alternative modernity” to the Anglo-Saxon model that has been imposed upon us by the West can be enacted. What each artist shared was the recognition that while Asian practitioners are deeply influenced by the West through their culture and education, they nonetheless need to rebuild the Asian identity—however fractured and complex notions of identity have become—from the remnants of colonial inheritance. These sentiments have been manifested in cross-cultural and hybridised works that have a vision for a larger Asian culture while downplaying Western cultural influences. These are reflected in Ong’s seminal *Lear* (1997), an adaptation of William Shakespeare’s play that contained a rich variety of Asian artistic disciplines from Indonesian martial art to Thai traditional dance and Japanese Noh theatre as a kind of metaphor for how unity and cooperation can arise from the ethnic diversity of Asia. Ho’s intertextual film short *Utama: Every Name In History Is I* (2003), an exploration of the Singaporean identity, also featured Western high art and history (Shakespearean dramatic conventions and speech, Roman mythology and famous explorers) as well as Eastern art and culture (Malay *wayang* and language). In doing so, the artists’ approach reflects the decolonial aesthesis<sup>2</sup> advocated by Walter Mignolo, where creative practices attempt to de-link from the Anglo-Eurocentric creative paradigm to heal from the colonial wound, while also helping us to redefine ourselves as Asian. It is also, as Wee argues, a component of a larger desire by Asian nations to take their cultural

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<sup>1</sup> See Wee (2007), 16.

<sup>2</sup> See Mignolo.

place in the New World Order<sup>3</sup>.

Nonetheless, the promotion of an Asian sensibility and identity in cultural production is not limited to art. In recent years, Singaporeans' increasing sartorial literacy has meant that fashion has become a new platform for decolonial aesthetics, and its emotive power and popular reach make it a tool that can be harnessed to contribute to the creation of the Asian Modern. This paper will explore how local fashion label Ong Shunmugam is spearheading the initiative through its construction of a fashion pluriverse, which in turn facilitates visible performances of decoloniality via its products being worn. It will also demonstrate how this decoloniality, alongside a consistent channeling of nostalgia and the intellectual, is linked closely to the process of establishing oneself as part of the cultural elite in Singapore. However, through the problematising of this decolonial aesthetics, this paper will also contend that the label ultimately faces limitations in de-linking Singapore from the colonial matrix of power.

### **Modern Tradition: Ong Shunmugam's Fashion Pluriverse**

*"I didn't want to create a brand influenced by Western culture." – Priscilla Tsu-Jyen Shunmugam*

Only two-and-a-half years old, Ong Shunmugam is a fast-rising contemporary womenswear label that focuses on distilling a modern Asian identity by tapping on various sartorial influences across Asia. This is done by re-imagining traditional Asian apparel such as the cheongsam and sari in contemporary and experimental ways without losing sight of their historical heritage<sup>4</sup>, weaving together traditional textile techniques and fabrics sourced from various parts of Asia as well as technologically advanced fabrics like silk blends, organic crepe and soy fibre. Singapore-based Malaysian designer Priscilla Tsu-Jyen Shunmugam, a lawyer turned fashion designer of mixed Chinese and Indian heritage, claims that she wanted to "create a brand that knew at its core that it was Asian but was not afraid of going beyond that and questioning what it means to be Asian."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Wee (2004), 773.

<sup>4</sup> See Annex A.

<sup>5</sup> See *Life Inspired Tastemakers Featuring Priscilla Shunmugam* (1:02).

Certainly, other than reworking traditional Asian garments with modern silhouettes, her clothes also play up the Asian identity, with references to pre-colonial histories via garments that bear the names of legendary Asian figures such as Kangxi, Genghis Khan and Parameswara<sup>6</sup>. In fact, her debut collection in 2010 was named “Orientalism,” which could be read as a declaration of postcolonial awareness and intellectual intent but also the reclamation of the right to define the Orient on her own terms. Shunmugam goes further in underscoring this Asian-ness through the combination of Asian influences in her clothes—almost to the point of overemphasis—much like Ho and Goh do in their work. Indeed, Shunmugam herself is the ultimate hybrid, whose sensibility and self-conscious status as a modernised English-speaking Asian based in multiethnic Singapore and schooled in a myriad of cultural heritages is manifested everywhere in her label from her brand name to her concepts and designs. She remarks:

My culture and my heritage is [sic] a starting point for what I do, a starting point for what the label does. But the ironic thing is I don't have a culture, I don't have a heritage in a strict sense. My lineage stretches from China all the way to India, and yet I was born and raised in Southeast Asia. We want to understand and respect that that kind of diversity exists.<sup>7</sup>

This sense of not feeling that she belongs to a culture while being steeped in several thus puts Shunmugam in a unique position where her access to multiple cultural archives allows her to define her own version of Asian-ness even though she has clearly been shaped by the forces of Westernisation through her education and training<sup>8</sup>. Indeed, her hybridised products reflect Asia as a united, albeit ethnically diverse whole while also reflecting that the modern Asian identity is shaped by global and transcultural flows. In fact, these cosmopolitan clothes align well with the essential identity of Singaporeans, who are a unique blend of multi-cultural influences unlike other Asian counterparts from more ethnically defined Asian countries.

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<sup>6</sup> See Annex B.

<sup>7</sup> See *Life Inspired Tastemakers Featuring Priscilla Shunmugam* (3:20).

<sup>8</sup> Shunmugam read law at the National University of Singapore and upon graduation worked briefly as a lawyer before leaving the profession to spend a year studying dressmaking and pattern cutting.

More importantly, in her bold declaration that she does not want her work to be influenced by Western culture, Shunmugam questions the legitimacy and superiority of Western aesthetic categories when it comes to how we dress and represent ourselves. Indeed, while there are clearly some Western elements in her work in the form of the silhouettes and styles she uses, she chooses what she wants to incorporate into her designs instead of being influenced heavily by them. In doing so, Shunmugam's work manifests the decolonial response of epistemic disobedience, de-linking and reconstruction<sup>9</sup> outlined by Mignolo, creating a fashion pluriverse that straddles both the acknowledgement of colonial inheritance but actively moves forward from it to produce oneself anew.

### **The Problem With Hybridity**

Nonetheless, while Shunmugam's work seems to offer the way forward in conceiving an Asian identity in a postcolonial and transnational world, there are inherent problems in her execution of decolonial aesthetics. Indeed, hybridity—even if Western influence is downplayed and the multitude of Asian cultures emphasised—is essentially a colonial concept<sup>10</sup> at its core, as highlighted by Robert Young, a part of the invention and experimentation in social forms and the diverse construction of norms and forms to regulate what comes to be known as modern society. Thus, despite its subversive potential as defined by Homi K. Bhabha, where the creation of new cultural forms and realities resulting from colonial encounter<sup>11</sup> undoes colonial authority through its occupation of a liminal third space and opens the way towards conceptualising an international culture, the cultural syncretism inherent in Ong Shunmugam's decolonial aesthetics and its consolidation of an Asian identity becomes problematic—even naïve—as

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<sup>9</sup> See Mignolo.

<sup>10</sup> See Young, 164-165. Young contends that the analysis of colonial discourse has shown that no form of cultural dissemination is ever a one-way process, whatever the power relation involved. A culture never repeats itself perfectly away from home. Any exported culture will in some way run amok or threaten to turn into mumbo-jumbo as it dissolves in the heterogeneity of the elsewhere.

<sup>11</sup> See Young, 21-22. Bhabha contends that this hybridity may be in the form of retrieval or the revival of the pre-colonial past. This can be in either reviving folk or tribal cultural forms or conventions or adapting contemporary artistic and social productions to suit the present-day conditions of globalisation, multiculturalism and transnationalism, which is clearly what Ong Shunmugam does.

hybridity essentially originates in and perpetuates the unsettling of identities and is rife with potential miscommunication and intercultural conflict. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak also warned against triumphalist self-declared hybridity on the part of the postcolonialist who celebrates catch-all concepts of cultural difference without engaging sufficiently with cultural differences. She contends that it threatens to be oblivious to enduring racial prejudices, cultural biases and social hierarchies that continue to persist throughout much of the contemporary world, and these encounters can create new entanglements and reminders of differences rather than similarity.<sup>12</sup>

As a result, Shunmugam's production of hybridity as a way to participate in decolonial aesthetics only reinforces and reproduces coloniality just as it undoes it, which limits its efficacy. Furthermore, while the label exhibits a thoughtful approach to fashion design, it nonetheless parlays this into profit as it partakes in the capitalistic enterprise—yet another enduring remnant of colonialism<sup>13</sup>—even as it appears to resist it<sup>14</sup>. In doing so, it aligns itself with the colonial project of economic success set out by the colonial masters<sup>15</sup>. Therefore, given that Singapore's competitive advantage rests on our reputation as an Asian city with a

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<sup>12</sup> See Spivak, 361.

<sup>13</sup> See Young, 158. Young cites Edward Said's quotation of Lord Cromer's essay on "The Government of Subject Races" (1908) to assert that capitalism has colonial roots, and in the essay, Lord Cromer envisions "a seat of power in the West, and radiating out from it towards the East a great embracing machine, sustaining the central authority yet commanded by it. What the machine's branches feed into it in the East—human material, material wealth, knowledge, what have you—is processed by the machine, then converted into more power."

<sup>14</sup> See Wee (2007), 19. Wee contends that late capitalism may be propelling the world toward ever more ever more immaterial domains under ever more abstract forms of control, but the processes are not as abstract as it has been made out to be—and neither do developing societies see their subjection as merely a market effect, with their sense of postcolonial marginality or being semi-peripheral effaced. This reterritorialised West has become part of its Others, like it or not; but of course this does not mean that Others actually can exert direct ownership of this West, The now not-quite-Other in question possesses it enough to rework it—but even such resistance entails some potential collusion with the global West.

<sup>15</sup> See Young 160. Young contends that where capitalism operates through a double movement because it must first of all do away with the institutions and cultures that have already been developed. The basic need of capitalism is to engineer an encounter between the deterritorialised wealth of capital and the labour capacity of the deterritorialised worker. The reduction of everything, including production and labour, to the abstract value of money enables it to decode flows and "deterritorialise" the socius. Having achieved a universal form of exchange, it then reterritorialises institutes or restores all sorts of residual and artificial, imaginary, or symbolic territorialities' such as states, nations or families.

Western outlook and a capitalistic economy, Ong Shunmugam's performance of decoloniality appears limited in its usefulness.

### **The Performance of Decoloniality as an Intoxicating Concept**

What is also problematic about the label's attempt at decolonial aesthesis is that it has been instrumental in establishing Ong Shunmugam as an elite producer of culture in Singapore, which legitimises consumption and furthers its commercial goals. Indeed, other than underscoring Asian-ness and boasting intellectual cachet<sup>16</sup>, the label also exhibits cultural and social currency by engaging in hot-button issues in Singapore. By playing on the collective fantasy of decoloniality and the romance of nostalgia and authenticity that have swept Singapore in recent years as our modernisation project accelerates unabated, the brand positions itself as a purveyor of traditional craft as well as a creator of products that accrue cultural and intellectual capital, all of which create an intoxicating commercial concept.

Nostalgia is one of its biggest selling points. The traditional inspirations of its products aside, the label's store design channels the sensibility of the old world, with the words "old fashion" emblazoned on the wall alongside a plaque in Chinese ("光宗耀祖") that translates into "honour your ancestors."<sup>17</sup> In this, what the label does in peddling nostalgia, cultural pride and authenticity is paralleled in other commercial enterprises such as indie gourmet coffee joints like Forty Hands and Strangers' Reunion or bookstores such as Books Actually, all of which capitalise on the desire for authenticity and/or the preservation of cherished socio-cultural experiences that are increasingly threatened. Boasting such cultural cachet, the notion of consuming from these self-consciously hip shops has become a mark of cultivation and individuality that differentiates members of the ruling

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<sup>16</sup> On the "About" page on its website, it announces that it creates clothes for the thinking woman: "Ours are conceptual collections for the thoughtful dresser. We employ intuition and an exacting aesthetic, and we believe that clothing should be cerebral yet wearable."

<sup>17</sup> See Annex C.

class<sup>18</sup>—as outlined by Pierre Bourdieu—as those who identify with the independent spirit of small enterprises, appreciate artisanal crafts and are more interested in the pleasures of life instead of stressful urban realities and corporate values. On a larger scale, this obsession with nostalgia is paralleled in the aggressive gentrification of heritage districts and neighbourhoods like Tiong Bahru and Everton Park, which have come to embody the romantic appeal of the “rural”, “unspoiled” and “authentic” in our citystate and the appreciation of this has coalesced into a of measure of one’s worldliness and sophistication. Seen in relation to this wider context, it is easy to see how the consumption of Ong Shunmugam’s clothes is seen to attribute status and social legitimacy.

Furthermore, Ong Shunmugam’s strategy of selling nostalgia is enhanced by Shunmugam’s ability to tap into the palpable collective sense of loss exacerbated by the rapid destruction of national monuments, historical buildings and cultural memory in Singapore in the pursuit of modernisation, which Shunmugam channelled into her latest collection, *Whenever I Fall At Your Feet*<sup>19</sup>, which features garments inspired by various historical buildings and monuments in Singapore. Abstract amalgams distilled from ordinary people’s stories and historical details, the clothes showcase the “tensions between old and new, and particularly, between memory and money” through the “progressive use of vintage and traditional Asian textiles.”<sup>20</sup> They also pay tribute to the disappearing city by transforming women’s bodies—traditionally marginalised and subjugated in colonial discourse—into the sites of preservation, thus enacting visibly powerful and poignant performances of decolonial aesthetics in eliciting sadness, indignation and the determination to change things in the future.<sup>21</sup> In fact, the collection was showcased as an exhibition<sup>22</sup> at the National Museum of Singapore as part of the Singapore Heritage Fest 2013, and was graced by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong<sup>23</sup>, earning the label political credibility.

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<sup>18</sup> See Bourdieu, 14.

<sup>19</sup> See Annex D.

<sup>20</sup> See Ong Shunmugam homepage.

<sup>21</sup> See Mignolo.

<sup>22</sup> See Annex E.

<sup>23</sup> See Annex F.

To further consolidate her position as a socially aware cultural producer instead of one who is entirely ruled by hard economic logic, Shunmugam recently launched a capsule collection consisting of the label's classic and best-selling designs issued in limited editions to raise funds for the Law Society's Pro Bono Services Office<sup>24</sup>, with 50 percent of proceeds from the retail price of each piece being donated. Thus, what Ong Shunmugam offers is a very alluring combination that enables its consumer to feel that they are participating visibly in decoloniality through the allures of the old world, craftsmanship, preservation while also enjoying the simultaneous feeling of being progressive, socially responsible and cerebral.

There are, of course, ironies inherent in the allure of decoloniality in Ong Shunmugam's clothes. To begin, the brand essentially uses affect derived from decolonial aesthetics for commercial gain, feeding the pretensions and desires of those who wish to be seen as "liberated" from the cultural aridity and lack of political agency imposed on them as Singaporeans. In doing so, it reflects Bourdieu's claim that where intent infuses meaning, it transforms the ordinary into art by prioritising form and affect over function.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, from mere clothes that can be tailored by ordinary seamstresses, the emphasis on form and meaning turns objects previously used as curios or historical and ethnographic documents into wearable art and political statements.

Also, while it sells the fantasy of liberation and inclusivity in the form of a composite Asian identity, Shunmugam's label is undoubtedly elitist and is accessible only to a certain clientele given its prices<sup>26</sup> and the boutique's location in Singapore's central business district. This mainly consists of highly educated women who often have a large disposable income and who are—or aspire to be—fashion forward, culturally literate and politically aware and who wish to be seen

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<sup>24</sup> See Annex G.

<sup>25</sup> See Bourdieu, 21. Bourdieu contends that the product is essentially an enunciation and systemisation of the principles of a specifically aesthetic legitimacy.

<sup>26</sup> According to its online shop, Ong Shunmugam's apparel range from SGD \$249 to SGD\$888.

consuming culturally legitimate works.<sup>27</sup> These women, much like Shunmugam herself, reflect and enhance the brand's cultural quotient, according to Bourdieu, who posited that education and a bourgeois background tend to increase one's aesthetic disposition and cultural capital.<sup>28</sup> In fact, one of the label's fans is Janice Koh<sup>29</sup>, who is a Nominated Member of Parliament as well as a stage and television actress, and is known for her interest in the Arts. Her support, alongside that of other women with a similar profile, thus reinforces the legitimacy of the label and collectively identify it as an arbiter of style.

Furthermore, in selling the notion of refinement as well as foregrounding form and intention rather than function as opposed to the hearty and plain-speaking qualities of pop culture and consciousness, Shunmugam inadvertently holds those unschooled in her sensibility at arm's length, and alienates rather than includes, which has uncomfortable echoes of our colonial legacy. In linking this to Shunmugam's attempt to preserve the city and Asian culture through her clothes, it is ironic that they are only available to a select few. Indeed, Shunmugam is placed in the ambivalent position of the postcolonial intellectual, where she is positioned more closely to the colonisers and is culturally distanced from the majority of the people.

Therefore, the label's performance of decolonial aesthesis, upon closer inspection, reinforces colonialism through its fundamental entanglement with capitalism and elitism even as it attempts to preserve our culture and promote Asian-ness. Moreover, given that Singapore's fashion industry is still largely underdeveloped and that the fashion scene is still in the early stages of development and occupies only a peripheral position in our cultural consciousness, Ong Shunmugam's reach is still limited. Therefore, can it truly be emancipatory, or is it merely a triumph of savvy taste making and clever marketing?

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<sup>27</sup> See Bourdieu, 22. Bourdieu asserted that the apprehension and appreciation of the work also depend on the beholder's intention, which usually involves the wish to be seen legitimately consuming legitimate works.

<sup>28</sup> See Bourdieu, 14. Bourdieu asserted that cultural competence is not necessarily acquired by 'scholastic' labours...most often it results from the unintentional learning made possible by a disposition acquired through domestic or scholastic inculcation of legitimate culture. This transposable disposition, armed with a set of perceptual and evaluative schemes that are available for general application.

<sup>29</sup> See Annex H.

## **The Asian Modern: It's Complicated**

I would argue that despite the pitfalls that accompany its expression, the label's emancipatory effect outweighs what problematises it. To be sure, Ong Shunmugam shows that we are still very much colonial subjects despite its efforts to enact decolonial aesthetics, and while Singaporeans are possessed of a strengthening will for preservation and identity, our limited resources and land space consign us to prioritising the commodity economy and continuous global flows instead.

However, what Ong Shunmugam does is to initiate a thoughtful engagement with society that pushes us to think about rather than merely passively imbibe or be apathetic about influences that have long been inherited from the West, which far exceeds what a commercial—let alone a fashion—enterprise conventionally does. While it is mired in coloniality through its entanglement with capitalism and hybridity, it turns it into an opportunity to honour and assert a modern Asian identity—to both a local and global audience—while creating awareness of our postcolonial condition. As Dipesh Chakrabarty asserted, we are all products of world capitalism and the institutions, practices and ideas that have accompanied it.<sup>30</sup> The issue then becomes more about how a particular society has reacted to or what it has made of its modern colonial inheritance, whether wanted or not. Thus, what Ong Shunmugam really encapsulates is a creative enterprise navigating modernity at a particular stage of our cultural consciousness and should be interpreted as such, before the next wave of socio-cultural development brings us closer to a more evolved manifestation of the Asian Modern.

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<sup>30</sup> See Wee (2007), 19.

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