

Romancing Singapore:
Economies of Love in a Shrinking Population ¹

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Singapore confronts the reality that many modern, affluent societies face, that is, falling birthrates. A narrative of reproductive crisis, in which low fertility levels, particularly amongst university educated Chinese women, are inscribed as a threat to the family and the nation, has been circulating in the public discourses in Singapore for two decades. While sexuality has long been an issue for the ruling People's Action Party, increasing anxiety about the shrinking population, has, in recent years, made it a matter for even more intense public scrutiny. Sexual behaviour is increasingly problematized and politicized, and made the subject of public spectacle, appearing in the *Romancing Singapore* campaign, *a festival of love*, designed to get people married and procreating. In the decades since independence, Singapore has staged many such "campaigns", moments of public focus on some aspect of private conduct, as a way of influencing behavioural change, and to implement strategies for the policing and disciplining of the body.

This paper will focus on the *Romancing Singapore* campaign to examine the notion of "romance", as a privileged site for the fetishization of leisure and entertainment products, repackaged as love and intimacy. Under capitalism, romance is commodified and commodities are romanticized. Conceptions of intimacy and sexuality come to be defined and

understood through the consumption of self-enhancement products, and the narrative of the crisis of the body politic intersects with the narrative of romance and marriage.

As Giddens has pointed out, passionate love is a more or less universal phenomenon, but romantic love is much more culturally specific (Giddens, 1992:38). I am interested in romantic love as a cultural practice, in the culturally and historically specific articulations of romantic love as they have recently appeared in Singapore. In an ontological field dominated by the complex interrelated material interests of the market and the state, romance, intimacy, the meaning of love, the choice of life partner, the constraints of a shrinking population, the need to maintain class and race hegemony, and market-generated desires appear in overlapping discursive spaces. In Singapore, the life narrative of the individual is mapped onto the narrative of nation, and glued together by the romance of capitalist consumption.

The political economy of the nation is imbricated with a moral economy which promotes marriage and the family as a state agenda. Heng and Devan have spoken of the *phallic Confucian narrative* (Heng and Devan, 1992:195), a narrative which links the Chinese family to state interests. Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong has put it bluntly. For the nation, he said: "... we need 50,000 babies a year" (Goh, 1991:25).

It was during the 1996 National Day Rally Speech that PM Goh articulated what he saw as the existential dynamic of Singapore, that is: "Life for Singaporeans is not complete without shopping!" (cited in Chua, 2003). In recent years, technologies of power have intersected with technologies of self, made available and valorised through the market, to produce romantic sensibilities directly connected to forms of consumer capitalism. It is the link between technologies of the self, most notably in the leisure and entertainment industries, and the government's recent campaign to get people married, in particular, university educated Chinese to each other, as a matter of national priority, that is the subject of my paper.

The body is sexualised, as Bryan Turner (1996) and others have argued, and has become the object of politics. In modern consumer culture, especially in Singapore, as Chua Beng Huat (2003) demonstrates, the body is the locus for consumption. He puts it this way:

Twenty-something Singaporeans are on the make, impatient for success. Deprivation from car-ownership, contextually the ultimate success symbol, has made their bodies the locus of consumption. (Chua, 2003:32)

Singapore is commonly perceived to be a nation of success and status driven citizens who, due to the effort applied to achieving that success have little time for leisure, and it is

regularly reported, little time for sex. If shopping is regarded as the prime leisure activity, consumption becomes one of the prime sites for production of the sexual self.

The Singapore government's Public Education Committee on Family (PEC) was renamed Family Matters! Singapore and around St. Valentine's Day in February 2003, it launched its inaugural *Romancing Singapore* festival. Family Matters! Singapore calls it:

...a people-movement aimed at promoting the importance of marriage and family. It comprises representatives from the people, private and public sectors that maps out a set of public education strategies and initiatives aimed at promoting positive attitudes among Singaporeans towards the family.²

Its mission statement is consistent with strategies through which the boundaries of romance, marriage and procreation are set within the discursive space of the political economy of nationhood. The text on the *Romancing Singapore* website continues, and the field expands to encompass the role of private capital in the reinvigoration of love in the national interest, promoting a discourse of nation in which business is imagined as acting in the national interest:

Romancing Singapore has received encouraging support from all sectors of the community — media, grassroots organizations, all the CDCs³ in particular, the F & B,⁴ entertainment, hospitality and spa-sectors. This is an all-encompassing initiative with both the private and public sectors coming together to make it happen.⁵

It is not surprising to find global capital playing a role in the local. Pizza Hut is one of the many sponsors of the campaign.

The festival initially ran for the month of February, 2003, but is now a year long "campaign", the effect of which is to ensure that sexuality is kept in the public's gaze, and understood as instrumental to the nation's continued success. The campaign has produced the immense verbosity of utterances about sexuality, of which Foucault writes. The festival can be understood, in Foucauldian terms as a discursive intervention by government and private enterprise, into the biological processes, or as he puts it, "an entire series of interventions and regulatory controls: a biopolitics of the population". (Foucault, 1998:139).

The task force managing the campaign on behalf of "Family Matters! Singapore" is co-chaired by "sociologist and entrepreneur", Claire Chiang, and "venture capitalist" Dr. Finian Tan. (*Straits Times*, 14 February, 2003). In response to suggestions in an interview with the

Straits Times, that it was just another campaign to make Singaporeans perform the way the government wants them to, Finian Tan said:

We like to think of Romancing Singapore as more of a festival than a campaign. We don't tell people what to do. We hardly even organize the events ourselves. We leave most of it to our commercial partners, who, I think, have come up with very clever ideas to spin a little romance in their offerings.

“The Wheel of Fortune” and “The Weakest Link”, two popular game shows shown via Singapore's government controlled Mediacorp Channel 5, were absorbed into the campaign in February 2003. Both game shows, designed to create and satisfy consumer cravings by giving away prizes and money, featured dating couples and couples soon to be married. In a very public display of commitment to the idea of romance, one male contestant on the Weakest Link Couple Special proposed to his girlfriend, who said “yes”. It has been suggested that Asha Gill, the compere, put him up to it. Music companies saw a marketing opportunity and put out new and re-releases of romantic CD titles in time for the celebrations. One of these “Love is ... the Little Things”, the official jingle of the *Romancing Singapore* festival, was released on 13 February 2003. A public relations company came up with the theme, and Tan composed the song.

The *Straits Times* reported on 7 February, this year, a series of government and private sector initiatives to encourage couples to get together:

This year it will be a \$400,000 affair that will go on until December. There will be a dinner with eligible strangers this month, a mass wedding in May and to follow, tango parties and much more ... on the agenda is a five course dinner for 30 unmarried men and women ... The food will be provided by Halia Restaurant, which will have so-called aphrodisiacs — oysters, chocolate torte and a ginger and pumpkin broth are all on the menu ... The restaurant is one of Romancing Singapore's 80 “partners”, which include schools and grassroots organisations. One of the them, SingPost, which runs the 62 post offices here, has come up with a set of four postcards to encourage people to do that old fashioned thing; put their feelings down in writing. As encouragement, there is a chance to win a holiday in Bintan ... The cards are all in bright pink, each bearing a single word — I, Miss, U — or an image of a heart. They are free and can be picked up at any post office.

The official *Romancing Singapore* website, advertises dozens of products and events designed to get couples in the mood, including the *Romancing Singapore* Eau de Parfum and the *Romancing Singapore* Chocolate Truffle cake called “Aphrodisiac”.

One advertisement encapsulates the importance of the technologies of leisure for the campaign. The “Bed and Bubbles” Room Package at the Ritz Carlton, for \$450 plus per night, offers a:

One night stay in a deluxe room at the Ritz-Carlton, Millenia Singapore with magnificent views of the Singapore city skyline or the bay. Soothing butler-drawn Honeymoon bath, enhanced with Tuxedo strawberries, roses and therapeutic oils. Breakfast buffet for two persons at The Greenhouse with Complimentary use of the Fitness Centre. Late check-out privilege at 3pm.

Recognizing the problems Singaporeans reputedly have in trying to find the time for relationships in a fast-paced and competitive environment, O’Brien’s Sandwich Bar and Big O café, amongst others, will host a speed dating game where couples chat for eight minutes before the man moves on to the woman at the next table. Both these companies are quoted as saying that they hope the dating program will boost business and say they’re glad to play a part in bringing singles together.

At least three publications give tips on how to date and how to catch your man or woman. The government has published “When Boy Meets Girl. The Chemistry Guide”⁶, which advises that: “A date is very similar to a job interview. You have to sell yourself”. *Female*, one of the highest circulation women’s magazines in Singapore has published “The Dating Guide 2004” which offers expert advice on top places to dine, the best dating experiences, where to scout for men and how to change yourself, for example the way you laugh, to be more attractive to men. The government has also published a dating game “Dare to Date”, which offers a series of inspirations for creative dating.

The government also enlisted the help of Dr. Wei Siang Yu, a so-called “self-styled sex guru”, commonly known as Dr. Love.

Last year, in conjunction with the Singaporean government, he launched the “Baby Planning Camp” as well as Love Boat Cruises to an Indonesian resort, and also gained a following for a weekly radio program called “Sex in the Air,” where experts answer young people’s questions about sexual and reproductive health. He has left that show and is now involved in the production of “Dr. Love’s Sex Strategy Workbook”, and is hoping to launch “Love Airways”, a romance-themed travel package from Singapore to Phuket some time this year.

Wei has two television shows in the pipeline. One will be a midnight chat show with a difference. Participating couples will appear in bathtubs and will undergo tutorials conducted by Dr. Wei himself to learn how to massage each other in a bathtub. Wei was reported as saying:

We will have people come and talk about their love lives and private lives. We will also talk about their strategies on love ... We will not reveal the breast or the groin. Viewers will see only the back. This is not pornography, this is *edu-tainment* (education and entertainment).⁷

His second show will be a reality TV show called “Dr. Love’s Super Baby-Making Show” in which couples from all over the world will compete in an international baby-making contest. The competition will be won by whichever of the nine couples who take part can procreate first. The prize is 100,000 US dollars — and a baby.⁸

This show will be closely linked to Wei’s international business venture, Meggpower (funded by American and Asian partners). This company, which he calls his “bio-communication” company, introduced a wireless hormonal monitoring service that text-messages or e-mails a woman when she is due to ovulate. The show will use the technology to monitor the couple’s hormonal cycles and recommend changes to their diets to aid conception. Seduction strategies will also be featured. “It’s like a baby race,” he said.⁹

Dating agencies have become a substantial business prospect in Singapore. Replacing the family marriage arrangements of the past, they are now privatized, professionalized and credentialized. One such agency is a company called “Lunch, Actually”,¹⁰ which was launched at the beginning of April, 2004 from its offices in Raffles Place, the heart of Singapore’s Central Business District, to introduce couples over lunch. “Lunch, Actually” locates itself directly in the political economy, and in the economy of romance:

Our clients are single and successful professionals who are seriously looking for that special someone but due their hectic lives are unable to find them. Our database is full of managers, executives, directors, therapists, administrators, lawyers, accountants, doctors and entrepreneurs who are now looking to get more from life than just work ... We embody the entrepreneurial spirit, daring to dream and making our dream a reality.¹¹

I would like to conclude by considering a fundamental conflict which emerges from this scenario. Daniel Bell has long since recognised the contradiction in the social structure of capitalism. As he puts it:

On the one hand, the business corporation wants the individual to work hard, pursue a career, accept delayed gratification... And yet, in its products and its advertisements, the corporation promotes pleasure, instant joy, relaxing and letting go. One is to be “straight” by day and a “swinger” by night. (Bell, 1979: 71-72).

Citizens are required to order themselves through certain technologies of self-discipline to fulfil the demands of capitalist productivity. The desire for economic success and status is, in Singapore, underpinned by a commitment to hard work and competitiveness. They are, at the same time, required to abandon themselves to an alternative range of technologies dictated by irrational desires, whims, or “needs” created by global and local markets. Chua has contextualised this idea for Singapore:

Such is the inherent logic of capitalism: high savings and asceticism are necessary in the period of economic “take-off”, while hedonism is the necessary ethos of a mature economy. (Chua, 2003: 37).

Hebdige’s (1993) discussion of the post-modern consumer in Western society can be usefully employed to describe the transformation of the producing subject of the first decades after Singapore’s independence, into the consuming subject of twenty-first century Singapore. The producer under late capitalism becomes the hedonistic consumer who can produce him or herself in multiple ways:

The ideal consumer is not the ideal productive worker of an earlier epoch — a sexually repressed nobody alienated from sensual pleasure, subjected to the turgid, life-denying principles of the working week and the nuclear family. Instead, the ideal consumer ... is a complete social and psychological mess ... rather, it is ... the absolute decentred subject, the irresponsible, unanchored subject: the psychotic consumer, the schizophrenic consumer. (Hebdige, 1993: 82-83).

Through the *Romancing Singapore* campaign, the irrationality of falling in love becomes an instrumentally rational cultural practice linked to the commodification of romance as a consumer goal.

Singapore is ultimately confronted by the dilemma of love itself. It is a nation known for its smart people, its uses of instrumental rationality for successful nation building, and its extreme pragmatism. But romance and love, it must be recognized, are antithetical to reason.

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http://www.mcds.gov.sg/web/faml_supfaml_publicedu.asp?szMod=faml&szSubMod=publicedu (retrieved 26 April, 2004)

³ Community Development Councils

⁴ Food and Beverage

⁵ <http://www.romancingsingapore.com/pages/faq.asp> (retrieved 26 April, 2004)

⁶ http://bigbro.biophys.cornell.edu/documents/Singapore_Dating.pdf

⁷ <http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/B3AB1B68-9BEE-4DFD-A2F4-9B5959E46E11.htm>
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⁸ <http://www.cnn.com/2004/SHOWBIZ/TV/05/20/singapore.reality>

⁹ Aljazeera.net (retrieved 15 February 2004)

<file://C:\DOCUME~1\CHRIST~1\LOCALS~1\Temp\JVAXJMJ8.htm> (accessed 25 April, 2004)

¹⁰ The name is an allusion to the British film, “Love, Actually”, about people falling in love.

¹¹ <http://www.lunchactually.com/aboutus.htm> (retrieved 26 April, 2004)

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