Fear of Falling: Existentialism and Class Consciousness in Goh Poh Seng's *A Dance of Moths*

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Introduction

For some time now commentators have remarked on the puzzle represented by Singapore's socio-political development. Against the dictates of modernisation theory and bucking observable trends in other parts of Asia, rising living standards have not instigated significant changes to its authoritarian political set up. For Lam Peng Er, Singapore is an anomaly – a "rich state" with an "[i]lliberal [r]egime" (255). Although recent years have seen the emergence of a large middle class sector voicing demands for liberalisation, its impact is limited by its status-quo conservatism and preoccupation with "material gains," features which Lam ascribes to the "migrant nature of Singapore society" (274, *sic*). In a separate study, Mak Lau-fong argues that as Singapore middle class denizens move up the "needs" hierarchy one might expect a change in behaviour (57); nevertheless, there is little evidence of a shift to a "post-materialist" valorisation structure, as opposed to a widespread disposition towards mammonism and "familism". For Mak, retreat into the consolations provided by the private/familial domain "restrains" the middle class from "sliding further into alienation"; such a move allows subjects to "remain addicted to materialism" (33, 57). Paradoxically, therefore, we might add, that retreat plays a key role in the disciplining process in Singapore. Because it acts as a bulwark against the atomising tendencies of wholehearted mammonism (and also because it compensates for the lack of a civil society), familism allows capital accumulation to continue apace.

In consonance with the above analysis, Leong Choon-Heng highlights the "contentment," docility and political "passivity" of the middle class and argues that these attributes stem from its totalisation of its historical experience of disenfranchisement (208). Immersed in a non-participatory environment, it finds that it has no appetite or imagination for change. For Leong, the Singapore middle class is "neither conservative nor liberal. It is apolitical" (208). Garry Rodan on his part observes that the middle class revolt against the perpetuation of autocratic rule in Taiwan and South Korea followed a pattern of "cross-class alliances" and incumbent-regime policies that had "radicalis[ed] the masses," factors which are substantially absent in Singapore (67). For Hing Ai Yun, in contrast, accounts

which stress the enervating impact of a pervasive state apparatus may inadvertently "reify power relations as somehow beyond the control of human agency" (80). In adopting what amounts to a statist perspective, Hing argues that the varied ways in which Singapore wage workers "produce new modes of surviving under hostile and repressive structures" may be overlooked or ignored, and this would include the resistance activities of both middle and working class echelons (113).

This essay augments our understanding of the issues raised above through an analysis of Goh Poh Seng's 1995 novel, *A Dance of Moths* (henceforth abbreviated to *Dance*).[1] The novel is pertinent to the issues raised because of the way it mobilizes and negotiates contending class subjectivities. It features two protagonists, one a member of the professional/managerial class (PMC) and the other, the working class. While also set at loggerheads, the two are used to advance universalist motifs, and thus can be read as indicative class actors placed in a position of conflict over the social surplus. Ultimately, I argue, *Dance* contributes to the inscription of an imaginary that aids the reproduction of capital. In that sense it fosters a socially stratified itinerary. Yet it also registers trenchantly the atomism and anomie caused by a harsh competitive environment. Taken as a whole, the novel provides useful insights into the processes of social class formation as well as tension, antinomy, and contradiction.

In many advanced formations, the space between family and state is filled by elements of civil society. As suggested above, an authoritarian set up in Singapore means that this space is largely a vacuum. Commenting on this issue, one prominent social theorist suggests that, for many Singaporeans, the invocation of the term "civil society" may denote not just "absence" but also an "aching void" (Chua 72), and given that context, the provocative exploration of existentialist thought in *Dance* may be read as both symptom *and* diagnosis. As an attempt to re-code experience in existentialist terms, the novel facilitates a familiar enough withdrawal from the public realm, from any attempt to impact the status quo: it conceivably sanctions an evacuation of society's discursive and historical constitution through an ahistorical focus on the philosophical problems of humankind's existence in the state of the absurd. But at the same time *Dance* also puts in place an aesthetic transmutation of affect, of that encounter with disenfranchisement. Its very attempt to "convert" feelings of powerlessness into an absurdist register ("meaninglessness" and cosmic "indifference") renders eloquently, if obliquely, its critique of an inhospitable environment, of the alienation that it fosters.

In the discussion below, I will recount the main features of *Dance*, concentrating on its exposition of existentialist thought. I point to the poser set up by its ending, which I read as an enactment of existentialist philosophy as well as a clash of rival class wills. These attributes are traced to a wider social-political environment and involve the retreat into familism mentioned above. Overall, I read

the novel as driven by multiple and contradictory impulses: it is both a complex protest against an impoverished social domain and unwitting contributor to a specifiable marginalization of subaltern and proletarian experiences.

First movement

Dance is told in the third person and features two protagonists who embark on a quasi-spiritual quest. The first, Ong Kian Teck, is the creative director of an advertising agency. The other, Chan Kok Leong, works in the same company as an accounts clerk. The book devotes alternating chapters to the two men, elaborating first Ong's experiences and then Chan's. Ong appears to epitomize conventional bourgeoisie respectability. He has a good job, owns a private apartment and car, has a well-matched relationship with a wife who loves him and has two healthy sons. Nevertheless, a feeling of inauthenticity haunts him. Reacting against middle class conformism, he embarks on a short-lived affair with an American woman named Jay, gambles away his money on the stock market and forms an unlikely friendship with an elderly park-keeper named Old Ho. At the nadir of his fortunes, his wife leaves him, taking the children with her. At this point it occurs to Ong that he hasn't met Ho for a long time and searches for Ho. He finds him dying from a serious illness in a grubby tenement flat, ministers to Ho and checks him into a hospital. Subsequently Ong's wife, Li Lian, agrees to take him back. He sells off their property to pay off his debts and they move in with Li Lian's mother. Through the logic of association, *Dance*, it would seem, rebuffs mammonism while re-enacting the Good Samaritan parable, positing that fellow feeling helps to raise humankind above the mire. What saves Ong is the social solidarity that he articulates for Ho, shorn of self-interest. Such action sets the scene for his reconciliation with Li Lian and return to the deep shelter provided by his family.

In its closure, however, a more sombre aspect predominates. Ong's defining trait is a contemplative deportment underlined in the opening when he spots a handsome bird flying out to sea and laments that he is "disqualified from this grace" (3). His demeanour so exasperates Li Lian that she berates him at one point, asking why his head is always "somewhere in the clouds" (192). Chan in the interim is also shown to have a meditative streak. His rejection of consumerism is underscored when he goes out on a date with Ong's secretary, Emily. Just as it is for Emily, the occasion is Chan's first experience of dining in a chic hotel restaurant, but conspicuously he doesn't share her social-climbing aspirations. Instead he privileges in his encounters "an indelible, authentic moment" as when he espied a hunchback from the balcony of his flat (51-52). Chan ponders the elemental distance, the "[l]oneliness" that separates man from man. Such efforts to fathom the bigger picture, so to speak, set him and Ong apart – they buttress the existentialist

climate of the text (52). Put differently, both men seek a "post-materialist" focus to life; they pursue meanings that go beyond ceaseless capital accumulation.

What contributes to the grimness mentioned earlier is that while the two protagonists are used to advance the novel's thematic concerns, they are also set at loggerheads. And this leads to an ending that is provocative and affecting. The imbroglio stems from mistaken identity, although that is only part of the picture. Emily is coincidentally old Ho's estranged daughter, and when Ong discovers this (with Ho already on his deathbed) he tries to initiate a reconciliation between the two. Although he fails, he accompanies Emily at Ho's funeral and she begins to form an attachment to him. Shortly after the funeral, Chan asks Emily to marry him, but she refuses. When Chan presses her asking if there is another suitor, Emily lies saying that it is Ong. The text doesn't delineate her motives for lying or even her full awareness of her actions. Several readings fit the situation, among them that Emily rejects Chan because she doesn't want to marry beneath her level, because she fancies Ong, or because she isn't ready for marriage. It could also be that she lies out of sheer willfulness (a trait that she shares with Chan). By itself the rejection might have had little impact. But subsequently Chan is beaten up by a group of Chinese thugs (who mistakenly believe that he is staring at them). As the novel closes, Chan loses his self-possession and becomes unhinged. He stabs Ong to death in the office elevator and commits suicide by jumping off the top of a nearby building.

In crafting a bleak ending, Goh presumably seeks to foster an epiphany regarding a cosmic indifference to man's fate. For all their star-gazing, Ong and Chan are met with silence. Such an ending dovetails with an earlier scene highlighting the plight of Chan's family that insists on what Sartre calls man's "abandonment" by the gods (Sartre 352). After a childhood accident that had led to Chan's sister becoming a retarded quadriplegic, his mother adopted ecumenical ways, going "from temple to mosque to church" to pray for her recovery (*Dance* 30). Her pleas unanswered, Chan's father – who works as a toilet attendant – in a fit of promethean rage one day, went up to the family altar and swept to the floor the items arrayed on it. Chan recounts that this act made him "proud" of his father: it was the only time he "felt any respect" for him (31). *Dance*'s promotion of a this-worldly rather than other-worldly allegiance is also underscored after Ho's burial when an eagle appears and circles the grave. Ong during the funeral had sought to redeem his "sense of loss"; a Taoist priest fails to provide relief and tellingly it is the eagle's appearance that gives the benediction or sense of "affirmation" that Ong had been seeking (325).

Furthermore, the universality of death is stressed by the book's title, which can be read as a secularization of the medieval *danse macabre*, a masque-performance stressing that no matter one's station in life or the weightiness of one's affairs,

mortality is ubiquitous. While the allegory originally stressed the importance of repentance, Goh gives it an earthly slant by making it a commentary on the alienation fostered by urbanization and a commodity culture. In Goh's version of the allegory, the title of the book stems from a story that Jay tells Ong. It appears that at a certain time of the year in Dacca, jute moths will emerge in large numbers, approach lit lamps, dash themselves against them and get burnt to death as a result. The next morning entire floors of buildings are littered with their remains. Ong opines that human beings are "just like" these moths engaged in an unthinking "death-dance" (208). We are entranced by "brightness" or by things "symbolic" of it, including

> The neon lights of the cities, the strobe lights of the discos, the fun palaces, the shopping centres. ... It is because our souls are dark, because we have no light within us, that we propel ourselves towards these external lights. … We fly around them like moths, driven by hunger and passion, prepared, like the moths of Dacca, to live only for the duration of the dance, and then finally to die – for, near the flame … we have no knowledge of, and hence no fear of, death. (208)

Humankind's immurement in elemental blindness thus necessitates a highlighting of our essential finitude in order to provoke deliberation: the certainty of death puts the onus on authentic choice. *Dance* in addition sports an epigraph taken from Albert Camus's book, *The Rebel*, from a section where Camus, paraphrasing Nietzsche, states that "Damocles never danced better than beneath the sword" (Camus 63).[2] Even without the consolations provided by deism, therefore, Goh proposes that there is no need to surrender to nihilism. The dance of life can be equally glorious.[3]

Dance of the Rebel

If we follow the lead provided by the epigraph, it is not surprising then that *Dance* develops another argument pursued in *The Rebel*. In this book-length meditation on the limits of transcendence, Camus insists that revolt is necessary. Faced with manifest injustice, man must "rectify in creation everything that can be rectified" (267). But rebellion must not become intoxicated by its own splendour or will to power (basically what happens to Chan). Revolt itself turns nihilist unless inspired by "the only system of thought . . . faithful to its origins; [namely the] thought which recognizes [that there are] limits" (258). In this regard, Ong's return to his family appreciates that the existentialist call to arms entails the articulation of self-imposed limits.

Unlike his peers, Peter Low and Gopal Nair, Ong *has* revolted. Low, a friend from Ong's student days in London, is a lecher whose surname indicates the non-

answer the novel finds in hedonism. Nair, another friend from Ong's university days, is a Member of Parliament who has become a glorified yes-man. Unlike them, *Dance* suggests, Ong moves beyond a fixation on "external" lights that signify inner darkness. After his reconciliation with Li Lian, the novel presents the Ong family enjoying themselves one day in the garden of Li Lian's mother's home. In contrast to the artificial lights mentioned earlier, the light source here is natural. Ong enjoys the "liquid green peace," the "abundant light that . . . portended deliverance" (312, 316). By giving an Arcadian ambience to the scene, the text asserts that the only attainable "paradise" is earth-bound, to be sought in fellowship and communion.

Most importantly, Ong achieves regeneration because he steps back from the abyss. As Neil Cornwell helpfully explains, one of Camus's chief concerns in *The Rebel* is to interdict killing and suicide. In the context of the present discussion, this suggests that Chan's homicidal behaviour is set up as a negative counterpoint to Ong's positive trajectory. Explaining the stance taken by Camus, Cornwell[4] observes that his absurdist logic

> incorporates a final turn against killing and against suicide, in that human life must be recognised as "the single necessary good", for "without life the absurdist wager could not go on" – that is to say, "persistence in that hopeless encounter between human questioning and the silence of the universe" (see *Rebel*, 13-14). This must override, in Camusian absurdist logic at least, the (nihilistic) conclusion that "it is a matter of indifference to kill when the victim is in any case already condemned to death" (ibid., 247). (Cornwell 117)

All this suggests that Chan is an extreme version of Ong. Before they break up, Ong tells Jay that whenever he leans over "precipices," he likes the "queasy" feeling that he gets in the stomach (153). Subsequently he confesses to Li Lian that at one point during his troubles he wanted to "end it all" (298). But even so, Ong doesn't violate the transcendental value that existentialist thought gives to human life. Camus in *The Rebel* adds that, in the same way in which murder and suicide are prohibited, falsehood is also proscribed because it "kills the small part of existence which can be realized on this earth through … mutual understanding" (247). Emily's lie is thus another facet of a wider intellectual project to rationalize traditional (i.e. religious) strictures. The little bit of good achieved by Ho's and Ong's "mutual understanding" is unraveled by her lie. On pragmatic grounds therefore falsehood should be shunned.

That Goh seeks to assimilate European high culture to a Southeast Asian setting should by now be clear. And in fact that aspiration is sign-posted early on at a lunch date between Ong, Low, and Nair. Making fun of a serious turn in the conversation, Nair berates his companions for sounding like "French intellectuals"

such as "Camus" and "Sartre"; he pronounces Sartre as "*Satay*" because he "wanted it known that he had read the Existentialists and all their ilk, too" (36, italics original). Satay is a popular dish of skewered grilled meat in Singapore, so the novel avows early on its desire to indigenize Euro-American intellectual and cultural motifs.

Second movement

At the same time, we can also discern another broad dynamic in *Dance* indexing certain socio-historical pressures, shared horizons, tensions and cleavages – one that goes beyond the universal "fable" it ostensibly offers (207). As suggested in the introduction, Ong can be grasped as a figure for the PMC while Chan represents the working-class (taken to include those engaged in low-wage white-collar positions). The devoting of alternate chapters to the two men, read in the light of the example made of Chan, sets up the possibility that *Dance* enacts a deeper logic, that it presents a clash of rival class wills.

For my purposes, this reading is warranted by Edward Said's observations concerning the "climate of the absurd" developed in Camus's 1942 novel, *The Stranger* (Said 219). Said allows that this book has been read as underscoring the "universality of a liberated existential humanity facing cosmic indifference … with impudent stoicism" (224). Nevertheless, he argues that it is at bottom driven by an "interrelationship between geography and … political contest" (219). The "unsentimental obduracy" of the protagonist Meursault expresses the "structure of feeling" of a community with "nowhere to go" (223-24). Read as a "heightened form of historical experience," therefore, its absurdist riffs are discernible as a "superstructure" built upon the contradictions of the French-Algerian colonial situation, contradictions "unresolvable by rendering … [Camus's] feelings of loyalty to French Algeria as a parable of the human condition" (224, 219).

In the same way, it could be said, *Dance* pursues an abstract rather than concrete universalism. While Ong and Chan are variations on the same theme, it is arguable that Goh found inspiration for his closure from the notorious episode in *The Stranger* where Meursault shoots and kills an Arab. Although Said doesn't put it this way, as political contest the shooting operates as a form of altericide (the racial "Other" is dispatched), and broadly that term might be applied to Chan, the difference being that in *Dance* it is class rather than ethnicity that predominates. *Dance* thus distills contradictions pursuant to the Singapore modernization experience. Chan's behaviour is shown to be "meaningless" or absurdist,[5] and in that sense *Dance* confirms and consolidates middle-class priority even as it presents its "Other" as an ever present threat.

Of note is the question whether the novel's emphasis on the criminal disposition of certain characters operates in conjunction with anxieties about social class position and status. More specifically, the question is whether these anxieties underpin the divergent valences given to different enactments of cross- and intra-cultural interaction in the text. At one point mulling over his apartment – which is furnished in an eclectic mix of Chinese, Indonesian, and European styles – Ong recounts that an acquaintance had once "sneered that this common culture of the Singaporean professional was *neither here nor there*"; all the same, Ong was "never upset by jibes like this, nor when he was labelled a 'wog' … He was a product of his history, and if that made him a pariah, so be it" (44, emphasis added). Read at a meta-narrative level, Goh appears to defend the grafting of European ideas on to a non-European setting. But even so, it is striking that, set against such unexceptional transculturation, the novel presents Singapore's main ethnic groups as being prone to criminality, indeed as quasi-existential threats. At one point, Ho is racially insulted by a group of "five Malay boys" after he had stopped one of them the day before from stealing from his bicycle (77). Chan's best friend, Sundram, who is of Indian ancestry and who works as a night janitor, supplements his income through burglary. In the second half of the novel, he is caught and imprisoned. The group of Chinese thugs who beat up Chan at the climax are shown swearing in dialect, an indicator of lower-class status, and, moreover, the beating functions as the proximate cause of Chan's unravelling.

In other words, there is a hint of essentialism in the textual depiction of ethnic being (as being prone to criminality), and overall these features suggest that on one level, *Dance* is animated by fears about becoming déclassé in a newly wealthy, avidly consumerist society. As a base for the penetration of capital into Southeast Asia, facility in English in Singapore ensures access to high-status jobs (the medium of instruction in the education system is English). The Singapore middle-class stratum is, as Chua and Tan point out, "of very recent origin"; it isn't well-entrenched (141). Given the anti-welfare orientation of the state, it also operates in an environment where there are minimal social safety nets. As one commentator notes, "there is almost no redistribution of any kind and a very minimal commitment of the state to provide social services and benefits. In Singapore, there are no civil rights that guarantee social welfare" (Aspalter 169-70).

Obliquely but perceptibly, that deficiency is registered in conjunction with the existentialist motifs of *Dance*. In the episode rebuffing the other-worldly allegiance of Chan's mother, the text states archly that, for all her supplications, only once did the gods "shower" on her their "largesse" – when she won "a consolation prize of a hundred dollars in the Social Welfare Lottery" (29). Before Ong reconciles with Li Lian, his ministration to Ho is positively glossed: he achieves self-understanding. After leaving Ho's lodgings, Ong surveys his environs, enlightened it seems about the importance of fellow feeling. In that lofty state, he bemoans the fact

that – as evidenced by a peddler selling cigarettes, sweets, cheap toys and "Social Welfare lottery tickets" (281)[6] – life continues apace despite human suffering. The indifference of the gods puts the burden on temporal authority to help with difficulties; but the state in its mediation between capital and labour favours an MNC- friendly environment. As one of the ruling party's old guard explains, state policy prioritizes "the accumulation of wealth through economic growth, rather than a more equal distribution of existing wealth and a proliferation of state welfare services" (Goh Keng Swee, quoted in Liew 52). Implicitly, therefore, *Dance* registers its disquiet with the minimalist welfare arrangements of the city-state.

In light of the above, it is understandable why certain characters (Chan and Ho) are portrayed as being close to the most degraded sector of society, to what Marx calls the lumpenproletariat, and indeed Sundram is shown transforming into the last. Fretfulness about the lack of social security appears to stoke the perceptible defensiveness of Ong's self-ascription as a *wog* and pariah. The concern is that in a harsh environment, cultural capital accrued through education and transculturation will maintain its fungibility. The characterisation strategy of *Dance* expresses a concern that there is no check on how far one may fall, and also perhaps a fear of the "mob," of revolution from below. Chan's paraplegic sister figures the netherworld that potentially awaits everyone not ensconced in a secure upper stratum. She arguably represents what Giorgio Agamben calls *zoe* or bare life.[7] Almost as a talismanic necessity, therefore, some way must be found to assert one's distance from (and the radical "Otherness" of) working class characters such as Chan and Sundram, for fear of being dragged down to their level. The "absurdism" of Chan's actions in the closure facilitates that goal because it shores up what are essentially porous social barriers.

Fear of falling

All this is to say that *Dance* is animated by considerations that the social theorist Barbara Ehrenreich tracks in her book, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class*. While Ehrenreich addresses the situation in the US, her insights are applicable to other advanced economies, and in this connection, the psycho-social dynamic underwriting *Dance* expresses arguably the Singaporean professional's situation of being neither here nor there. Ehrenreich observes that while the middle class represents a kind of elite it is also an "insecure and deeply anxious" social stratum

> It is afraid, like any class below the most securely wealthy, of misfortunes that might lead to a downward slide. But in the middle class there is another anxiety: a fear of inner weakness, of growing soft, of failing to strive, of losing discipline and will. Even the affluence that is so often the goal of all this striving becomes a

> threat, for it holds out the possibility of hedonism and self-indulgence. Whether the middle class looks down toward the realm of less, or up toward the realm of more, there is the fear, always, of falling. (15)

Something of the same "fear of falling" appears to animate the staged confrontations and shared horizons of *Dance*. Ong's turn to hedonism generates anxieties about growing soft and is short-lived. Chan's suicide plunge is arguably a projection onto the *Other* of one's fear of coming down in the world. The danger that he signifies reminds one of the need to strive, to maintain discipline.

At the same time, the novel underscores trenchantly the plight of its protagonists. The emphasis on cosmic indifference dovetails with a Social Darwinist environment marked by minimalist welfare arrangements. In a formation which prioritizes familism as salve for the atomism generated by market society and a state-dominated existence, that option is accessible for Ong but not for Chan. Like Ong after his ministrations to Ho, Chan attains a measure of edification when he watches his family tend to his sister. However, his marriage proposal is rebuffed by Emily. Dance in this regard registers a limit to the dream of ceaseless capital accumulation. Its existentialist riffs proclaim that material success is an empty game, and in that sense it refuses to be an instrument for profit and power. But even so, the solipsistic nature of the solution that it proffers – Ong taking succour from the "solitary" eagle that appears at Ho's funeral (325) – militates against the force of its critique and insights.

In a period of reaction, Singapore style authoritarianism has attracted interest from conservative commentators and ideologues. The mainstreaming of what might once have been shunned is attested by a recent issue of National Geographic, which lauds what it calls the "Singapore Model" – "a unique mix of economic empowerment and tightly controlled personal liberties" (Jacobson 137, 140, capitalization original). For the most part, Dance may not contribute substantially to a rekindling of the radical imagination. But to the extent that it renders unflinchingly the anomie and fragmentation generated by its putatively exceptionalist environment, it may invite greater wariness about the exemplarity of the social landscape it dissects and evaluates.

Notes

[1] Set in 1974, *Dance* – Goh's third novel – has a long genesis, with selections from it appearing in 1979 in the journal *Pacific Moana Quarterly*. In the interim, the author also left Singapore and settled in Canada. It is arguable that in the *longue durée* encompassing inception, production and publication, Goh had a chance to track an extended period of Singapore's modernization experience. While set near the beginning of that period, *Dance* is, as I read it, summative or evaluative in its address.

[2] Camus develops an argument that Nietzsche makes in paragraph 770 of *The Will to Power*.

[3] A Nietzschean style affirmation of existence similarly animates Goh's fourth book, *Dance with White Clouds*. The novel recounts the experiences of a man who gives up his job and family, takes a train up north (to a place that appears to be Malaysia), and builds a new life similar to the one he left behind. In this way, the text replicates aspects of Nietzsche's theory of eternal recurrence.

[4] Cornwell's quotes and page references to *The Rebel* are preserved *in full* in the indented passage below.

[5] Goh has stated that he wanted sexual jealousy to play a large role in the denouement of *Dance*. He appears to have amended that aim to stress the existentialist theme (see Goh, "Selections" 77).

[6] Between 1950 and 1990, Malaysia ran an official lottery of that name which helped to boost government coffers.

[7] Humanity reduced to its most basic level is a recurrent motif in Goh's work. In *If We Dream Too Long* the protagonist's dreams of advancement are dashed when his father gets a stroke. In *The Immolation*, the protagonist's encounter with a beggar in the closure is imbued with quasi-spiritual significance.

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