Fabricating History through Folklore in Ming Cher's *Spider Boys*

Angela Frattarola

How do we read Ming Cher's 1995 novel *Spider Boys*? Do we completely trust the dust jacket when it claims that Cher wrote the novel "to explain his past to his twelve-year-old son," and consider the work autobiographical? Do we read the novel as "exotic," as Jay McInerney suggests in his quotation on the book cover, and thus risk interpreting the author as a "native informant"? Or, do we focus on the "dazzling magical realism" and "street-slang English" of the novel, both of which are promoted in the dust-jacket blurb? Firstly, we must recognize the fact that this is a novel and not a memoir, and hence, has been crafted and fictionalized to a certain extent. Although the novel does indeed give a glimpse into "the real lives of the street kids of the Third World" (another dust-jacket tout), it is not meant to be an autobiography or a strict historical account. Rather, it allows the reader to follow, through a third-person narrator, the subjective insights and concerns of a few children (mainly living in Bukit Ho Swee before the fire of 1961), who sometimes attend school, but mostly fight spiders for cash and glory. The novel charts this community of "spider boys" who, by the end of the narrative, must grapple with the possibility of moving into the adult world of the secret-society influenced gangs of 1950s Singapore.

In her linguistic analysis of the non-standard English found in *Spider Boys*, Anthea Fraser Gupta finds the dust-jacket's claim that the characters speak "street-slang English" problematic for two reasons: firstly, in the 1950s, "Chinese children playing in the street would have been more likely to use a range of Chinese dialects (especially Hokkien and Cantonese) and would have used principally Malay in speaking to non-Chinese" (152); and secondly, the English used throughout the novel "is better described as a learner variety than as the 'authentic' street voice of Singapore" (Gupta 163). I will return to this point later in the essay, but for now, I would like to add to Gupta's analysis a helpful observation made by Rajeev S. Patke and Philip Holden, who briefly mention the novel in their survey of Singapore Literature in English. They assert that the novel "is written in a non-standard English that to an extent mimes the syntactic structure of Chinese 'dialects' the characters speak in the fictional world of the narrative" (160).[1] They conclude that "this approach is more radical than that of other writers, who will use 'Singlish'

simply in characters' speech, but not in framing narration" (160). Indeed, Cher's narrator and characters use a non-standard English, which, while not historically accurate or Singapore Colloquial English, give the novel what Catherine Lim has called (in reference to her own work) "local flavour" (qtd. in Tan 8). Cher's choice to translate Chinese dialects and Malay into a non-standard English opened the novel to a wider English-speaking readership, a choice reinforced by the fact that the novel was published with Penguin and the American publishers, William Morrow and Company. While we can argue that the novel advertises itself as "exotic" reading for a Western audience, anyone who takes the time to read the novel closely can easily deduce that such a label is a facile stereotype.

This leaves us asking, however, where do we situate *Spider Boys* within Singapore Literature? Surveys of Singapore Literature often emphasize the need for a national literature. For instance, the editors of *Writing Singapore*, an anthology published in 2009, state: "A comprehensive anthology that gives a historical account of the emergence of Singapore Literature in English, in the manner of other anthologies of national literature in English, is urgently required in the early years of a new millennium" (Poon, Holden, and Lim xxi). More specifically, in her examination of a few "dissenting" Singaporean novels, Leong Liew Geok explains that while works may criticize the authoritarian tendencies of the early policies of the PAP (People's Action Party), a "narrative engagement with history and politics is indicative of the realism underlying much of the fiction of Singapore" (101). *Spider Boys*, however, despite the vivid historical picture it gives of Singapore in the 1950s, is not explicitly preoccupied with politics, nationality, or history, and even trespasses the boundaries of the realist novel into magical realism. In their brief overview of *Spider Boys*, Patke and Holden astutely write:

> the novel's representation of the past is not mediated by nationalistic historiography: politicians and secret society members, for instance, are both seen by the characters as gangsters. While, as commentators have noted, attempts to market *Spider Boys* as an authentic fictional representation of Singapore's past are clearly problematic, it is equally clear that Ming Cher's is a unique voice in Singapore fiction. (160)

Because Cher's novel takes place entirely before Singapore's independence and before the PAP came to power, it does not explicitly engage in the "dissenting" Leong charts or the question of national identity. Instead, as this essay will argue, the novel subtly reveals how its central characters forge a sense of identity that is both shaped by and resistant to the two dominant forces that impinge upon their lives: British colonialism and Chinese secret societies.

The narrator of *Spider Boys* observes: "The history of Singapore is fabricated by two lawmakers: the Chinese secret societies who use knives and fists among

themselves and the British who rule with guns and wits since 1819" (49-50). While we cannot presume to know the intentions behind Cher's use of the word "fabricated," the word choice suggests to this reader a self-consciousness about the constructed nature of historical narrative. Recognizing that history is "fabricated" by those in power, Cher presents an alternative narrative for the history of Singapore through his novel. To do this, he draws upon the folklore of Singapore—the unrecorded traditions that unite a people through shared oral tales and a common way of living.[2] We see this attention to folklore in the content of the novel, as it repeatedly demonstrates the pervasive influence of Chinese and Malay folklore in Singaporean culture. Indeed, the daily lives of the novel's characters are infused with rumours of the supernatural as well as proverbs and myths passed on through oral traditions. Yet we also can discern elements of folklore in the form of the novel. Because the novel is written in non-standard English, it registers aurally for the reader, making it feel part of an oral tradition. Moreover, the novel presents its own folk heroes and supernatural tall-tales, as it participates in fabricating a specifically Singaporean unofficial historical narrative.[3] This essay will explore how Cher's references to folklore and his formal deployment of the folk genre allow him to bend the boundaries of the realist novel, while still making *Spider Boys* a significant contribution to the informal recording of Singaporean history and culture.[4]

In one of the opening scenes of *Spider Boys*, the central character and dedicated spider fighter, Kwang, proclaims that he wants, "'Freedom from mother's rule!'" (6). In this same passage, the narrator describes Kwang as having "small and mean piercing black eyes" with "anger, scared from crying within, crying freedom" (6). One could argue that Kwang is typical in his rebellion against his strict mother, and indeed, that is the most obvious way to interpret his cries for freedom. Yet Kwang's scorn for his mother goes beyond adolescent rebellion, as he defines himself against her, stating: "what my mother hates is what I like" (17). Although his mother could be associated with his mother tongue and motherland, a connection to his Chinese heritage, she is associated more explicitly—odd as it may seem—with British colonialism. His mother's biggest concern is that Kwang be "a star at school" (19). Although she does not read or write English, she canes him because she wants him to attend school and learn English. Aside from her single-minded focus on school and learning the English language, the fact that she moves away to work as a cook in a "rich man's mansion" further establishes her link with Western modernization and upward mobility (20). Thus, in his rebellion from his mother, Kwang is not rejecting ethnic bonds, but the learning of the English language and curriculum—a symbol of imperialism and the beginning of the modernization of Singapore. Instead, Kwang (and thus the novel) values his street education, a form of folk tradition that is passed to Kwang unofficially as he collects, sells, trains and fights his spiders.

This subculture of "spider boys" creates a kind of folk mythology throughout the novel for both the characters and readers. The spiders and their fights are described in inflated detail, making them reminiscent of the grand battles of folk legends. For instance, in a scene that is devoted to a blow-by-blow recount of a spider fight, the narrator likens the spiders to "warriors in psychedelic armour" doing a "hypnotic war dance" (41). It is this mesmerizing and magical quality that turns this seemingly simple game into a type of folklore for the young characters and readers. Moreover, the instinct and pluck of the spiders are mirrored by the children of the novel, who must battle one another to ensure their survival on the streets. Yet spider fighting also offers the children a sense of community. In fact, if we follow the general definition of folk as "any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor," we can regard the community of "spider boys" as a folk group (Dundes 2). As Kwang wins spider matches, we are told that his "fame [...] spread further to other corners of Singapore"; "His house without mother rule turn into a community center for more spider boys hanging around to court friendship" (64). Resisting the formal education system associated with "mother rule," the folk-group shares stories of spider battles and Kwang becomes a hero to the group because of his ability to pick and train spiders.

The novel itself partakes in the same circulation of stories as the characters, recording the folk life of Singapore.[5] Although the fighting spiders are the central form of folk life represented in the novel, there are also significant references to food—laksa and "fine coconut chips marinated in brown sugar with pandan leaves" (10, 27)—"kite fighting," called "cross sword in the sky" (56-7), and herbal medicine, each of which can be considered aspects of folk life in 1950s Singapore. The rest of this essay, however, will concern itself with folklore, generally defined as "'verbal art'—that is, the aesthetic use of spoken words" (Oring 14). This form of storytelling takes central stage in the narrative during the Hungry Ghost Festival, when "Chinese temples in every part of Singapore were busy organizing their annual opera shows of ancient stories to appease the lost souls set free by the King of Hell for a month holiday" (120). As part of this festival, the "blind man" who runs the local temple warns the characters that "'Ancestor worship is a must'" (120). Indeed, Jan Knappert lists ancestor worship as one of the central aspects of Southeast Asian folklore, summarizing that ancestors "are loved, they are prayed to, the people speak to them, sing hymns for them, they put food and other offerings ready for them, often every day, and many peoples have priests or shamans to perform mediating services in order to keep the ancestors happy and satisfied with the living" (10). In *Spider Boys*, food preparation, joss stick burning, and coin tossing accompany the opera and ritual performances of "hired nuns and tankies (mediums)" (121). Although most of the "spider boys" are preoccupied with scrambling for coins, they are all the same attentive to the stories performed.

The narrator lavishly describes the "smoky incense and glowing oil lamps,

sounds of bells, cymbals, gongs, and chanting" that take place "before the main altar of life-size Kuan Yin, Goddess of Mercy, and her half-dozen, half-life-size demigods, caste in bronze" (122). Cher's choice to include a reference to this particular goddess is perhaps significant in a novel where the protagonist's mother is despised and mothers, in general, are absent.[6] *The New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology* explains that "Kuan-yin, the goddess of mercy and compassion, was one of the best loved of all Chinese deities and representations of her featured in every home. She was sometimes portrayed as the Gentle Mother, carrying a child in her arms" (389). This popular goddess of unconditional love and protector of children seems a fitting reference in a novel where adults are marginal and children, some of whom have been orphaned as a result of the Japanese invasion, are forced to survive on their own.[7] In this case, folklore potentially offers a comfort to the children that they, for the most part, lack in real life.

According to Elliot Oring, folklore must at its root reflect "ordinary humans living their everyday lives," and stress "the human and the personal as opposed to the formal and institutional" (16). The folklore of *Spider Boys*, which is informally passed to the children by word of mouth and ranges from the practical to the fantastical, fits within Oring's definition, as it reflects their daily concerns and relationships. The Blind Man of the local temple, for example, tells them a story about how to make a wild tiger run away with only the aid of an umbrella (21). The story of the "Three War Gods of Blood Brotherhood," on the other hand, is less explicit in its application and usefulness. Ah Seow reflects on the Blind Man's story, which relates that "Black face Chang Fei is full of brawls with little brains. Red face Kwan Kung has brain and brawls but not cunning. Pale face Lu Pei is less brawls but very cunning brain to become King of the Chu Dynasty through their great blood brotherhood spirit" (29).[8] This description resonates with the three "spider boys" who are central to the novel: Chai is all "brawl" as he loses spider-fighting matches to Kwang and instead becomes Chinatown Yeow's muscle; Ah Seow is book-smart and well-built, but is not street-smart; and Kwang, the hero of the novel and winner of the "Spider Olympic Games," is the most cunning character, as he is able to outsmart Yeow by the end of the narrative. Although the children may not consciously connect such fantastical folklore to their mundane lives, readers can decipher the subtle influence of the lore on their personalities and roles. The folklore communicated to the children, thus, is not idle chatter but relates to their real-life situations. Consequently, the stories and legends orally passed on by the Blind Man are one of the outlets for expression and self-reflection offered to the characters of the novel.

Cher demonstrates how the supernatural beliefs inherent in the folklore of the Hungry Ghost Festival influence the characters of the novel, permeating their everyday life beyond that of their formal (English) school lessons. To make this point explicit, Cher has the most studious of the "spider boys," Ah Seow, also be the

one that is most prone to supernatural experiences. We are told from the start that Ah Seow "has a psychic sense developed from ghost and fairy tales in the village" (21); and twice we are reminded that he keeps a "six-inch coffin nail" to defend against Pontianak spirits—a type of vampire found in Malay and Indonesian folklore (21, 124).[9] Ah Seow's sense and fear of the supernatural becomes part of the plot of the novel when he has an out-of-body experience during the Hungry Ghost Festival. As Ah Seow and a younger "spider boy," Sachee, look over a moonlit pond, "Ah Seow's psyche felt something wrong. Ghost looking for replacement touches him on Halloween night. Spooky feeling squeezes out unknown sensitivities" (126).[10] The boys find the source of this "spooky feeling" when they see that one of their friend's grandmothers—Ah Paw, a "living legend" (130)—has hanged herself in a nearby tree. Ah Seow's spirit then leaves his body and floats above them all:

> He black out into a blinding darkness illuminated by multiplying stardusts, stardusts disappear into total darkness, darkness evaporates into nothingness, nothingness becomes vacuum and voids into an inexhaustible whirlpool, sucking his consciousness into bottomless space. Like the essence of his inner spirit were draining away forever and ever into eternity, haunted by the eternal torture of no control, yearning to stop, yearning to be touch by something, anything! Vegetables, minerals, something to give sensation back, even a dust particle is desirable....Into the realm of untouchable desires yearning to be touchable. Into a mystery trip of ghost world control by fiends. (127-8)

Ah Seow's "astral consciousness" floats away, watches the temple performances and then takes a peak at the actresses changing clothes (128). It is only when Sachee tugs at the hanging-woman's corpse that a stench is released, which allows Ah Seow to return to his body. With this scene, the novel explicitly shifts from a realist novel that *represents* the influence of folklore on the characters, to a novel that *participates* in generating and circulating folklore. Ah Seow's experience allows Cher to describe the world of ghosts, who long to return to earth. In the above quotation, Cher's prose becomes abstract and slightly awkward as it breaks the boundaries of the otherwise realist novel. The passage is clearly not meant to be a figment of Ah Seow's imagination, but is described as an event as real as the spider matches of the novel.

As Ah Seow re-enters his body, it is first "freezing cold," but then "burns like dry ice sizzling, mist steams up around it" (130). The mist then turns into water, and he sees "two big carp fishes swimming with their mouths open, singing, 'Human flesh is divine, divine....!'" (130). This is not the first time carp have spoken in the novel. When Ah Seow first meets Chai's grandmother, a feisty old woman who likes to fondle young boys, she introduces him to her two beloved three-foot-long carp. The narrator relates: "Their relationship spellbounded a fairy tale into the mystic and carry Ah Seow away into the watery world, as if he heard the fish

speaking" (31). This is followed by a brief conversation among the fish, in which the female carp wonders what Ah Seow thinks of them, and the other fish tell her to "relax" (31-2). The narrator calls this a "mystical experience," leaving it to the reader to decide if the scene is merely the result of a frightened boy's over-active imagination. What is significant here is that, once again, Cher's prose becomes awkward, as he bends the realist form to include the supernatural elements of the folklore genre. Furthermore, the inclusion of the talking carp resonates within Chinese folklore, reminding the reader of the legend of the carp that persevered in its arduous swim through the gorges of the Yellow River to Lung Men (Dragon Gate) in order to be transformed into a dragon (Volker 24). Although the carp are depicted in a humorous light, rather than as a serious symbol of the boys' ambition and drive, they nevertheless play a significant role in Ah Seow's journey to maturity and respectability.

Ah Seow is not the only character of the novel to have a supernatural experience. When Chai, a "spider boy" turned gang member, and Chinatown Yeow, the head of a gang of street children, encounter No Nose, an old kite maker who had his nose cut off during the Japanese occupation, No Nose sees "the image of a killer creature jump out of Yeow, lunge at him. Like guarding angel or whatever from the unexplains" (60). No Nose "twist[s] sideways to avoid direct contact" with whatever it is that projects from Yeow, assuring the reader that what he sees is very real to No Nose. This scene demonstrates how certain characters have the ability to sense what is beyond the natural, and how this ability has practical applications. Aside from No Nose's ability to "hypnotize" Chai momentarily, his vision of Chinatown Yeow's "guarding angel" warns No Nose to avoid a confrontation with him (59, 61). This scene foreshadows Yeow's character, as it is revealed that he wants to manipulate the "spider boys," particularly Kwang, into working for his gang.

These supernatural elements of folklore are intertwined with historical realism, and it is through Cher's development of the character of Chinatown Yeow that the reader glimpses the significant role of the Chinese secret societies during this period. Yeow's real-estate, cash, and roots in Penang, one of the "earliest Malayan headquarters of the Triad Society," indicate his involvement with the secret societies (Comber 28). As he is trained by the former financial advisor of the "Hon Moon (Red Gate)," Yeow's ambition is to build a "new Hon Moon" (Cher 134). Although the name and its English translation are not in Leon Comber's extensive list of Singaporean secret societies in the 1950s, its description in the novel aligns with Comber's historical study. The narrator recounts that "Hon Moon (Red Gate) was created by the Kuomintang in China with a mission to raise funds from overseas Chinese for Sun Yatsen to topple the Manchu dynasty" (Cher 134). Similarly, Comber relates a "connection between the Triad Society and the first Kuomintang Government of China headed by Dr. Sun Yat-sen," who visited

Singapore and Malaya repeatedly to solicit support for his cause and eventually set up headquarters in Singapore (40). These secret societies constitute a folk-group among themselves, as their customs, rituals, and rules were mainly "handed down by word of mouth" (Comber 121).

The narrator of *Spider Boys* attests that while Hon Moon no longer exists, its influence is still felt: "Although Hon Moon extinguish itself and Wong retire when China turn red under Mao, Chap Jee Kee resurface under control of faceless people" (135). It is the Chap Jee Kee lottery that Yeow wants to take over with the aid of Kwang and his "spider boys". This take over by "faceless people" and the aspiring Yeow illustrates Comber's point that "as a result of the [1890] policy of total suppression, [Chinese secret societies] went underground and eventually degenerated into dangerous criminal gangs" (37). Comber and the narrator of *Spider Boys* echo one another in their assertion that secret-society battles were a regular part of life in 1950s Singapore.[11] *Spider Boys* affirms Comber's description of the "Westernized" secret-society gangs, which, while influenced by "the cinema, comic strips and cheap detective novels," still maintained "some links [...] with the ideals of the old Triad Societies" such as providing unemployment relief and welfare for its members in exchange for their devotion to the gang (Comber 79).[12] Yeow financially supports the loyal members of his gang, while enforcing a strict code of conduct among them. While the young gang members see films and read comic books, they do not fit the profile of the more colourful gang members that Cher briefly mentions in his novel, who mimicked Elvis Presley or listened to rock music (Cher 50). The young characters that associate with Yeow, specifically Big Mole and Sachee, seem more innocent in comparison, and in the end, only one of the "spider boys," Chai, remains loyal to Yeow. While Yeow has committed robbery and even murder, the main "spider boy" characters of the novel do not transgress such social boundaries. Although Cher depicts the important role of the secret societies in 1950s Singapore, the "spider boys" predominantly trust their own community, cultivated through spider fighting, and resist joining Yeow, who symbolizes the Triad presence in Singapore.

Aside from the elaborate descriptions of spider fights, the oral transmission of Chinese folklore, and the inclusion of supernatural experiences, the novel formally resonates with the folklore genre in two important ways: by relating characters to animals and in its use of proverbs. The main characters of *Spider Boys* are often associated with animals that in someway exemplify their personalities: Yeow is repeatedly referred to by the narrator as a "wolf" or "lone wolf" because of his dangerous background and solitary life (46, 47, 80, 133, 143, 144-5, 188, 198); Chai is called a "bull" because of his strength (143, 144-5); Sachee is called a "monkey" at one point, since he is small and feisty (189); and Kwang is called a "sharkhead," suggesting his power, cleverness, and fortitude (190). Such animal associations, on the one hand, resonate with the Triad custom of naming leaders after the animal

whose traits they most embody.[13] They also, however, more generally merge the novel with folklore, where animals commonly take on human qualities and vice versa.

The last form of "verbal art" I will discuss in the novel, the proverb, constitutes its own subgenre within folklore.[14] Most of the proverbs that are orally transmitted between characters in *Spider Boys* follow a "dipodic" structure, meaning that the proverb is "broken in the middle, so that it consists of two balanced parts" (de Caro 184). Some of them are "a direct statement of a presumed truth," while others use the more common "metaphorical" form (de Caro 186). For example, "Dragon Wong," a father of one of the "spider boys," relates the direct proverb to the boys, "This world is make for people to see. Money is make to be use," while Chinatown Yeow recalls a "popular saying in secret societies, 'Nobody is born brave. If you want to come out to roam, you must be, dare to be'" (47-8). Metaphorical proverbs, however, are more frequently found in the novel. Waiting for the right time to lure Kwang into his gang, Chinatown Yeow, foresees that "the fish must grow by itself before he net it" (133-4). Right before this proverb, we are told that Yeow "think like an old man, who has a vision," emphasizing the notion that "when we use [a proverb] we are appealing to the authority of the ancients and the ancestors" (Cher 133, de Caro 189). It is for this reason that most of the proverbs come from the few elder characters of the novel, such as Yeow's mentor, Cheong Pak, who, referring to Kwang, tells him, "'Good horse is not easy to catch, be flexible with him...Bend like bamboo against the wind'" (134).

At the start of the novel, Kwang recalls a metaphorical proverb told to him by the Blind Man. He tells Ah Seow, "'Remember the Blind Man always say in his stories? After a fire, if anything live again, it is very strong" (7). We can apply this proverb to the ending of *Spider Boys*, when, after smoking opium, "Dragon Wong" accidentally knocks over a kerosene lamp, setting Kwang's village alight (218). Although we do not know that all the characters survive the fire, we know that Kwang does, leaving us to gather that while we cannot predict his future, Kwang has come out stronger for all of his struggles.

Thus far, I have examined the ways in which folklore influences the characters of *Spider Boys*, as well as how the novel itself participates in creating a sense of folklore—mainly through its representations of spider fighting and supernatural experiences. Before concluding, I would like to return to my earlier point about the non-standard English of the novel and consider how it registers aurally for readers, making it sound out like orally transmitted folklore. Although Gupta, in her rigorous comparison between the language of Rex Shelley's *Island in the Centre* and *Spider Boys*, observes only minor elements of Singapore Colloquial English in the dialogue of the novel, ultimately concluding that "neither the narrative nor the dialogue is using Singapore Colloquial English," the novel is nevertheless

written in a non-standard English that draws the reader's attention to sentences at a linguistic level (161).[15] For the reader accustomed to reading standard English, the occasional "lah" (twenty-one in total) and irregular grammatical structures cause one to stumble over the prose and slow down the reading process. Because the entire novel, narrative framing and dialogue, is written in a non-standard English that is more commonly associated with speech, the reader's attention is continually drawn to the auditory quality of the prose. The text thus engages what Garrett Stewart calls the "reading voice"—the voice we listen to within our auditory imagination when we read.[16] This aural dimension of the English dialect makes the novel approximate the spoken word, highlighting its connection with folklore, which has its roots in verbal transmission. But what could be Cher's purpose for doing this; what does the novel gain from its associations with folklore?

As Singapore modernized at an accelerated rate, folk values, folklore and folk life undoubtedly took on an enhanced role. Writing on the history of folklore studies, Simon Bronner attests:

> Folklore represented the hidden roots from which modern life sprang. Yet folklore and folk life consisted of materials commonly collected in the midst of modern life. They were part of yet apart from modern life. They therefore raised questions of the state of the times and its progressive standards; they were both the basis and the antithesis of modern life. (xii-xiii)

The hero of *Spider Boys*, Kwang, rebels against learning English and attending school, as well as following Chinatown Yeow and the Chinese secret societies that he represents. Through his rebellion, we can determine that the novel rejects the "fabrication" of Singaporean history (and hence, identity) offered by both the British and the Triads. Instead, the novel suggests that in the midst of modernization, the folk life of spider fighting, along with the predominantly Chinese folklore of supernatural experiences, deities, ghosts and proverbs, consistently remind the children of values such as showing respect for one another while maintaining self-respect, standing together in the face of adversity, and following a general code of ethical behaviour. Although the children go to the movies, read comic books, buy denim jeans, and explore the bustling city, the folklore and folk life of the novel allows them to resist being completely and unquestioningly swept up in the rush of modernization.

Notes

[1] In a footnote on Cher from a different essay, Holden reiterates this claim: "Some studies of the accuracy of representation of Singapore English in fiction have been unsophisticated, in that they do not allow the possibility that the writer is using a synthetic interlanguage to represent speech in languages other than English as, for example, Ming Cher attempts in his novel *Spider Boys* (1995)" ("Histories of the Present" 9).

[2] Folklore, according to M. H. Abrams, is "the collective name applied to sayings, verbal compositions, and social rituals that have been handed down solely, or at least primarily, by word of mouth and by example rather than in written form. [...] It includes legends, superstitions, songs, tales, proverbs, riddles, spells, and nursery rhymes; pseudoscientific lore about the weather, plants, and animals; customary activities at births, marriages, and death; and traditional dances and forms of drama which are preformed on holidays or at communal gatherings" (70). In *Spider Boys*, we see examples of folklore in the superstitions and supernatural tales of the characters, recited proverbs, and ceremonial drama of the Hungry Ghosts Festival. Spider fights also become legendary through the course of the novel.

[3] In applying the word "fabricated" to Cher's novel, I do not mean to question the authenticity of his account. Rather, I want to draw attention to the novel as a crafted, aesthetic object. While some representations of reality are better or worse than others, depending on one's motivation and audience, my assumption is that all narrative is fabrication. The British and Chinese Secret Societies have their versions of history, and Cher's narrative presents yet another – one that I believe merits attention.

[4] I would like to thank Koh Tai Ann for recommending several of the secondary sources used in this essay, as well as her generous feedback for revision.

[5] Folk life is defined as "the traditional way of life shared by peasant and ethnic communities" (Bronner xi).

[6] An exception to this would be Ah Soh, more commonly referred to as the "cigarette woman," who, along with her husband, gives Chinatown Yeow advice and helps him with financial matters. It is worth noting, however, that when she speaks in a "motherly" way to Kwang and Kim, their reaction is described: "Both of them don't like mothers and be treated like kids, felt uneasy" (78).

[7] While there are some adults who play material roles in the novel, they are not developed as characters and tend to be seriously flawed in some way. For instance: Cheong Pak, Yeow's mentor, was the financial advisor of the Hon Moon secret society, and is therefore associated with the authority and illegal activities of the Triads (79); San's father, Wong, who is the most helpful adult of the novel, saving Kwang's life with herbal medicine when he steps on a rusty nail, is also the most destructive, as he smokes opium and accidentally burns the kampong

down; the kite maker, No Nose, is described as having a "sun-season sunken opium face" and "scarecrow figure no more than five feet tall" in comparison to Yeow's "handsome," "neat," "very well trimmed,' and "expensive" appearance (58); and the oldest character of the novel, Ah Paw (Chai's grandmother), molests Ah Seow before committing suicide (30).

[8]   This does not exactly follow other representations of the blood brothers. Describing the Hsing T'ien Temple in Taiwan, Jonathan Chamberlain writes: "Kuan Kung, the red-faced God of War, occupies the central altar at the back. He is the most powerful God of the Chinese pantheon. He owes his position to the fact that he embodies to the fullest extent all the virtues of a warrior and knight. He had a strong right arm and acted with utter rectitude at all times. With two blood brothers, Chang Fei and Liu Pei, he carved a place for himself in the history books during a time of great upheaval" (39-40).

[9]   In his essay on Singaporean horror movies in the 1950s and 1960s, Timothy R. White defines the *pontianak* as "a type of vampire who becomes a beautiful woman when a nail is inserted into the back of its neck" (3).

[10]   Halloween would not have been a commonly used word in 1950s Singapore, and is a good example of Cher catering to a Western readership.

[11]   Cher writes, "Open gang clashes among secret societies happen every day (50), while Comber attests, "Gang fights [...] were almost a daily occurrence in Singapore in the 1950s" (55).

[12]   In Singapore in 1956, police recorded the existence of 360 secret societies, and claimed that seventy-five percent of all robbery arrests were "secret society members" (Comber 61, 48). Comber mentions "Chap-Ji-Ki" as one of the three illegal gambling games that grossed "up to $M50 million a year" as of 1957 (51). Controlling the contractors and labourers of the waterfront, prostitution, and extortion of "protection money" from hawkers are other criminal activities that Comber attributes to Chinese secret society gangs in Singapore (52, 54).

[13]   I am indebted to Koh Tai Ann for pointing this out.

[14]   A proverb is defined as "a traditional statement passed on in fixed form by oral transmission and assumed to convey some ethical or philosophical truth (or some other wise observation about life, the world, or human nature)" (de Caro 184).

[15]   Gupta argues that contrary to the dust-jacket's portrayal of *Spider Boys* as an example of a "purely Singaporean" voice, the novel "is in part the product of a much-travelled writer who has not mastered Standard English and in part, probably, the work of editors who have decided to allow some of the non-standard features to remain to create a spuriously authentic voice" (154, 167).

[16]   I borrow the term "reading voice" from Stewart, who in his provocative study holds: "When we read to ourselves, our ears hear nothing. When we read, however, we listen" (11).

Works Cited

Abrams, M. H. "Folklore." *A Glossary of Literary Terms* 6th ed. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, 1993.

Bronner, Simon J. *American Folklore Studies: An Intellectual History*. Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1986.

Chamberlain, Jonathan. *Chinese Gods: An Introduction to Chinese Folk Religion*. Hong Kong: Blacksmith Books 2009.

Cher, Ming. *Spider Boys*. New York: William Morrow and Co., 1995.

Comber, Leon. *The Triads: Chinese Secret Societies in 1950s Malaya & Singapore*. Singapore: Talisman and Singapore Heritage Society, 2009.

De Caro, F. A. "Riddles and Proverbs." *Folk Groups and Folklore Genres: An Introduction*. Ed. Elliot Oring. Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1986. 175-97.

Dundes, Alan. "What is Folklore?" *The Study of Folklore*. Ed. Alan Dundes. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1965.

Gupta, Anthea Fraser. "Marketing the voice of authenticity: a comparison of Ming Cher and Rex Shelley." *Language and Literature* 9.2 (2000): 150-169.

Holden, Philip. "Histories of the Present: Reading Contemporary Singapore Novels between the Local and the Global." *Postcolonial Text* 2.2 (2006): 1-11. Web. 14 June 2011.

Knappert, Jan. *Mythology and Folklore in South-East Asia*. Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia: Oxford University Press, 1999.

"Kuan-yin." *The New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology*. Hong Kong: Hamlyn Publishing Group, 1959.

Leong, Liew Geok. "Dissenting Voices: Political Engagements in the Singaporean Novel in English." *Singaporean Literature in English: A Critical Reader*. Ed. Mohammad A. Quayum and Peter Wicks. Serdang: Universiti Putra Malaysia Press, 2002. 100-11.

Oring, Elliott. "Folk Groups and Folk Genres." *Folk Groups and Folklore Genres: An Introduction*. Ed. Elliot Oring. Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1986. 1-44.

Patke, Rajeev S. and Philip Holden. *The Routledge Concise History of Southeast Asian Writing in English*. London: Routledge, 2010.

Poon, Angela, Philip Holden, and Shirley Geok-lin Lim. General Introduction. *Writing Singapore: An Historical Anthology of Singapore Literature*. Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2009. xxi-xxvi.

Stewart, Garrett. *Reading Voices: Literature and the Phonotext*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.

Tan, Peter. K. W. "Speech Presentation in Singaporean English Novels." *World Englishes* 18. 3 (October 1999): 1-20. *EBSCOhost Discovery Service*. Web. 14 June 2011.

Volker, T. *The Animal in Far Eastern Art and Especially in the Art of the Japanese Netsuke with References Chinese Origins, Traditions, Legends, and Art.* Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1975.

White, Timothy R. "Pontianaks and the Issue of Verisimilitude in Singaporean Cinema." Web. 16 February 2011. <http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/elltrw/History/Pontianaks%20&%20Verisimilitude.doc>.