An alien among aliens: Translating multicultural identities in Singapore's contemporary theatre

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the conflated roles of translator and playwright embodied by Kuo Pao Kun (1939-2002), a doyen figure acclaimed as the embodiment of Singapore's contemporary theatre. As a Singaporean arts activist born in China, Kuo reformulated the state identity of Singapore through his self-translated play *Descendants of the eunuch admiral* (1995a), which examines his perceptions regarding the perils of a homogenised national theatrical realm and the tensions emerging from modernisation — an intriguing standpoint for an ethnically Chinese art activist. This lyrical episodic play unfurls the representation of the self-discovery of Zheng He, the Chinese admiral and court eunuch during the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644). Stratified into prose and verse, it weaves tales and metaphors that highlight the dissolution of cultural identities, and the societal challenges faced due to emasculation. This study focuses on Kuo's translator intervention in the bilingual versions of the play, one staged in English in June 1995 and the other in Mandarin Chinese in August 1995. It reveals Kuo's proposition of multiculturalism as a counternarrative to the official discourse of multiracialism propagated by the authorities, uncovering how playwrights represent as translation agents within multilingual narratives.

KEYWORDS

Theatre translation, identity, multiculturalism, Kuo Pao Kun, Singapore theatre performance; translator intervention; translation representation.

The true paradises are the paradises that we have lost (Proust, 1931).

1. Introduction

The theatrical oeuvre of Kuo Pao Kun (1939–2002), the late iconic Singapore playwright, spanned roles as a dramatist, theatre director and arts activist. Widely perceived as a rebellious and audacious figure who stood in opposition to the regime since the 1970s, Kuo's work not only irritated and startled the theatrical landscape of Singapore but also transformed it. This intricate connection was deeply entwined with the nation's evolving sociopolitical fabric, mirroring a significant alignment with the island's economic and cultural transformation post-independence, starting in the mid-1960s amid the Cold War era (Wee, 2003a). In this period, Singapore evolved from its colonial entrepôt origins into a thriving city-state, where the government's multiracialism (i.e., Chinese, Malay, Indian, and others) policy was a pivotal framework regulating multilingual socio-cultural life, where English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil languages hold official status (Pak & Hiramoto, 2023). Starting in the 1970s, (multi-)cultural products became instrumental in shaping and, at times, enforcing nationalist discourses for the nation's collective identities.

During the late 1980s, at a time of burgeoning economic and national confidence (Kwok & Low, 2002), Singapore transitioned from its initial perception as a "cultural desert" (Wee, 2003b, p. 83). This transition spurred the exponential expansion of theatre, with performances emerging as the predominant form of public discourse and acting as a tool for cultural navigation that extended beyond its immediate linguistic and cultural boundaries. Notably, Singaporean multilingual theatres epitomise varying

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national and cultural ideologies (Langenbach, 2004) that play out in a specific manner between the government's ideology and a minority of progressive artists and intellectuals. Exploring Singapore's multilingual theatre performance requires an examination of the interactions and refrains between the authority and artists in contesting cultural territory, where conflicting visions for modern society and identity clashed and converged.

In the parlance of Translation Studies, previous decades have seen a heightened scholarly interest in translation within theatrical contexts from different angles (Bigliazzi et al., 2013; Marinetti, 2013, 2022). For instance, some scholars advocate conceptualising translation as a mechanism for negotiating cultural contacts amid social conservatism in theatrical practices (Baines *et al*., 2010; Zatlin, 2005). In this instrumentalist view, translation has been perceived as a conduit for constructing and disseminating perceptions of foreignness and cultural appropriation in receptive cultures (Curran, 2007). Other strands highlight the aspect of activism in translation when it comes to challenging prevailing ideologies and calling for societal and political transformations (O'Leary, 2018). This evolving perspective signifies a shift from perceiving theatre drama as merely representational (*signifying something*) to acknowledging its performative essence (*transforming the existing regimes of signification*) in sociolinguistic and ideological dimensions (Marinetti, 2013).

Nonetheless, there is a conspicuous dearth of scholarly inquiries specifically addressing the influence of translation on Singaporean theatre. Sporadic attempts have been made to explore the intriguing transition from idealised portrayals of national identity to the emergence of fragmented and multifaceted cultural identities in the theatre of postcolonial Singapore. Moreover, existing scholarship on Kuo Pao Kun, a doyen figure acclaimed as the embodiment of Singapore's theatrical landscape, predominantly hinges on his English works (Leng, 2016; Philip, 2008, 2009; Wee, 2020a). With few exceptions (e.g. Lee, 2013), the majority of research to date has neglected how the Chinese-origin Singaporean playwright's (self)-translation practices have significantly shaped the trajectory of theatrical performances within multilingual society. To remedy this deficit, in dialogue with the themes of this special issue, this article seeks to illustrate how Kuo's entrenched views on Singapore's ethnicity and cultural identity find expression within his multilingual theatrical performance. Kuo's seminal bilingual play, *Descendants of the eunuch admiral*, with both its English (1995a) and Chinese (1995b) versions premiering in 1995, serves as a focal point for examining Kuo's theatrical translation practices.

At first sight, the play portrays the historical persona of the 15th century Chinese admiral Zheng He (1371–c.1435), who was dispatched by the Ming emperor to explore regions extending from India to Arabia. It intricately depicts his encounters with marvels, the harrowing loss of his masculinity and a palpable sense of isolation, deftly contrasting the opulence of the court's eunuch with his significant physical and psychological anguish. As the title hints, the play juxtaposes the legendary figure of Admiral Zheng He with contemporary Singaporeans, tangentially referencing Singapore's maritime history and the city-state's (multi-)racial identity (Philip, 2009). This lyrical piece also functions as a contemplation of the island country's rootlessness, displacement and the experience of cultural isolation, which is in line with Kuo's (2000, p. 13) portrayal of Singaporeans as "cultural orphans", a concept that characterises a diasporic community lacking a clear national identity or cultural belongings. It offers a

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compelling theatrical metaphor for the subjugation and dislocation embodied by the contemporary Singaporean individual, echoing academic critiques of Singapore's pervasive nationalist discourses of unified multiracialism as "one of the nation's founding myths" (Benjamin, 1976, p. 116; Kwok, 2001; Rocha & Yeoh, 2021; Teo, 2022).

This article explores Kuo's translator intervention in the narratives featured within the bilingual theatrical production *Descendants*. My aim is to uncover the playwright's enduring yet subtle role as a translation agent in Singapore's theatrical landscape. I contend that Kuo's self-reflexive translation transcends identity loss among ethnically Chinese intellectuals or mere critique of cultural assimilation; it serves as a corrective lens, advocating for voluntary and inclusive multiculturalism and countering the increasing dominance of nationalist ideologies in capitalist societies. In the subsequent section, I will explore existing research on Kuo Pao Kun's multilingual identity and its influence on the play's production, followed by a comparative analysis of the play's bilingual versions and a reflection on the findings it yields.

2. The (mine)field: Kuo Pao Kun's multilingual plays in Singapore's theatres

Born and having spent a significant part of his formative years in China before relocating to Singapore, Kuo Pao Kun's artistic journey can be divided into two distinctive phases — the Cold War era and the subsequent period in which the economic prosperity of the city state was achieved (Wee, 2020). The initial phase reflected the ideological and political tensions between the West and communist factions. During this period, Kuo adhered to social-realist theatrical practices, which clashed with the authorities' Internal Security Act, resulting in his four-year and seven-month period of detention without trial arising from accusations of communist affiliations in 1976. Kuo entered the second phase of his trajectory upon his release in 1980, assuming the role of an archetypal figure transcending linguistic, cultural and ethnic boundaries in Singapore's contemporary theatre. This phase unfolded amid an era in which cultural works were often in conjunction with pro-regime or politically sanctioned content. Kuo strategically employed theatre translation to challenge the prevailing nationalist discourse, albeit in a more subtle manner compared to his activist roots in the 1970s.

Kuo ascended to eminence in Singaporean theatre during a time when cultural and economic transformations went hand in hand; yet largely, the state's narrative prevailed (Kong, 2000; Kwok & Low, 2002). In Singapore, culture is widely constructed through an industrial and commercial lens, with a materialistic portrayal forming the collective foundation of social life deeply ingrained in the Singaporean psyche (Wee, 2003a). Through his artistic endeavours, Kuo offered critiques of Singapore's transformation into a robustly capitalist society, driven by its pursuit of economic progress, which consequently underwent sociocultural engineering to ensure national stability (Quah, 2020). In an attempt to question the uniform identity and urban modernisation that the state aspired to have, Kuo and his like-minded local artists frequently explored themes of ethnicity and social transformation, whose own personal experiences fed into candid confrontations with ideas around identity and cultural conflicts (Kong et al., 2015). Significantly, Kuo and his fellow artists emerged from less privileged, predominantly non-English-speaking social backgrounds, setting

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them apart from English-language theatre practitioners, such as Stella Kon, who were more closely affiliated with the authorities (Wee, 2015; Peterson, 2001).

Multilingual theatrical practices pioneered by Kuo have functioned as "an alternative, subversive discourse" and a form of resistance against official narratives, contributing to the construction of an alternative imagining of multilingual Singapore (Lee, 2013, p. 9; see also Diamond, 2012; Quah, 2004). Kuo's earlier detention without trial by the Singaporean government granted him substantial moral authority and political influence. This empowered him to engage in a compelling and provocative public discourse that extended beyond the artistic realms to intertwine significant social concerns, particularly the authority's ethnic management policies designed to maintain social stability and racial harmony in an ethnically and linguistically diverse Singapore (Lee, 2013). Kuo's theatre translation explores themes such as cross-ethnic issues, the erosion of culture and the fading of cultural belongings amid a statist modernity (Wee, 2015). Conspicuously, he challenged the conventional approach of single-language theatre and ventured into writing multilingual plays, such as *Mama looking for her cat* (1988), incorporating multiple languages spoken in Singapore.

Kuo's multilingual dramatic texts and self-translations embody a translational "third space", a term coined by Homi Bhabha (1994), where the power relations between English as a lingua franca and the dominant language, and other community languages (Chinese, Tamil, and Malay), are dynamically negotiated (Lee, 2003). More specifically, Kuo confronted the concept of "extraterritorial theatre practice" (Wee, 2020, p. 251), challenging a capitalistic-driven national identity and, consequently, the state's official narratives rooted in "narrow nationalistic self-interest" (Kuo 2008 [1997], p. 243), i.e., Singapore's postcolonial multiracialism. His criticism of nationalism as a potent tool for uniting people during conflicts (2008a, 2008b [1998]) reflects his stance on expanding cultural identity beyond national and linguistic borders — a point to be explored in the following section.

In addition, the collaborative role of playwrights, directors, performers, producers and cultural authorities, constitutes a network of agents capable of exerting a nuanced and profoundly impactful form of "polymorphous" control (Billiani, 2007, p. 3; Marinetti, 2022). Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of "structural censorship", Billiani (2007, p. 22) has delineated this as an encompassing influence that imposes *implicit social control*, which also influences the playwright-translator's choices. Baker (2005, p. 12; see also Baker, 2006) advocated a narrative approach to understanding the censorship and politicisation of translations within social movements, claiming that ethical translators act as activists aiming to provoke political or social change. Nevertheless, this activist viewpoint may not fully elucidate the intricate translator intervention within the political spectrum of multilingual societies. Intellectual dissent does not solely adopt oppositional discourse to delegitimate the narratives supporting governmental allegiances; instead, it often favours a stance of "moderate participation" (Banks, 2005, p. 52), presenting modified narratives to negotiate a consensus between authorities, different stakeholders and dissenting voices. The following section will explore how Kuo's disillusionment with the regime's racial and language policies manifested in translational interventions in his multilingual theatrical practices.

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3. The play

Using Kuo's *Descendants of the eunuch admiral*, which is contextualised in contemporary multilingual Singapore's postcolonial miracle narrative, I conduct a comparative analysis between Kuo's (1995a) English rendition and his self-translated Chinese version (Kuo 1995b), focusing on the nuanced interventions made and textual asymmetry assigned by the playwright-translator. Triangulating with the reception of key stakeholders (including the English version's director, actors, theatre practitioners and critics) in the forms of interviews, commentaries and reviews, I aim to uncover how the visual and theatrical elements in Kuo's bilingual plays contribute to a deeper understanding of his intervention as a translator.

Kuo's *Descendants* broke the mould of conventional theatre practices in Singapore upon premiering. As a unique and unconventional theatrical piece, *Descendants* eschews a traditional linear narrative devoid of a clear conventional plot. Structurally, the text blends prose and verse, which are reminiscent of classical Chinese literature, presenting a stylistic alien for contemporary Singaporean readers. Comprising 16 scenes of varying lengths, it presents monologues of narrators (or conceivably just one, as they were meant to be alike) recounting Zheng He's epic exploits. Thematically, presenting an abstract and lyrical piece inspired by Admiral Zheng He's voyages, the play pivots towards contemporary Singapore, forging delicate connections between Zheng He as the main actant and modern Singaporeans as narrators, showcasing Kuo's infallible sensitivity to subliminal social currents. At times, the contemporary Singaporean narrators intertwine Zheng He's tales and anecdotes with their own lives, while at other times, they step into Zheng He's role. In Scene Three, a narrator alludes to 'the organisational chart of our companies or departments' (Kuo, 2003, p. 41), hitting at the narrator's corporate ties. In Ong Keng Sen's 1995 production, these narrators are explicitly portrayed as *Shentonites*, denoting Shenton Way, Singapore's premier financial district — a symbol of the city-state's work culture and economic might. Ong (in Mok, 1996, p. 17) further described them as "archetypes of the successful Singapore" during an interview with TheaterWorks. The play is more than a reflection of historical reality — it crafts exotic scenes that evokes a sense of transcendence. For Kuo, theatrical art had the upper hand over mundane reality; through their narratives, the narrators — and the audience — uncover a profound Freudian kinship with Zheng He.

The play, garnering the Critic's Choice for Theatre award, was produced by the Singaporean group TheatreWorks and premiered in English under the direction of Ong Keng Sen, a former student and disciple of Kuo, at the Victoria Theatre during the biennial Festival of Asian Performing Arts in June 1995. Interestingly, just two months later, Kuo directed his own Mandarin Chinese adaptation of the same play. It was later restaged in English and featured at the 1996 Theatre Festival in Cairo, where it won the Critic's Choice for Best Acting award and received a nomination from the International Jury for Best Staging. The reviews — largely based on their staging in English — praised the playwright's compelling fusion of art and sociopolitical symbolism. *The Straits Times* remarked on the play's "beautiful desolation", while former *Life!* arts writer Suhaila Sulaiman (2002, cited in Tan, 2016) was captivated by its "unforgettable whirling dervishes-inspired scene".

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As a Chinese-born arts activist, it is intriguing that Kuo chose to initially write and stage the play in English before later translating and adapting it into Chinese in 1995. This choice of language highlights his trade-off negotiation between cultural roots and political considerations, especially considering his active involvement in championing strong leftist values to advocate Chinese culture and ideologies in the early 1970s. Chinese-language drama held significant cultural sway and was a cornerstone of the Chinese community's identity in Singapore from the 1920s to the mid-1970s (Peterson, 2001). Numerous amateur theatre and cultural groups were established during this period, drawing participation primarily from those educated in Chinese-language high schools and their alumni associations [*huaxiaosheng*] — a milieu that resonated with Kuo's background, alienating him from the English-educated elite [*yingxiaosheng*]. Since these initial forays, Chinese-language drama in Singapore has been intricately linked to sociopolitical engagement, tied by an umbilical cord to the island's journey towards independent sovereignty after its breakaway in 1965. Numerous Chinese theatre practitioners, often aligned with left-leaning perspectives, have found resonance with oppositional political factions and activists advocating for societal transformation. This alignment played a pivotal role in propelling the emergence of Chinese drama amid periods of political and intellectual turbulence. This political significance inevitably led to frequent prohibitions of performances by authorities and the shutdown of several Chinese-language theatre groups (Oon, 2010).

Kuo's personal and political experiences deeply influenced his artistic repertoire. In the 1990s, with the rise of economic nationalism, Kuo initially adopted a strategic approach by staging plays in English initially and then translating them into Chinese with a lower profile. This echoed Tymoczko's (2008, p. 26) argument that translations may offer an "alternate place of enunciation", enabling "subversive texts and ideas" to be presented "in ways that are difficult for the censor to object to". Kuo's self-translation was employed to uphold the playwright's own agenda concerning sociocultural implications while circumventing censorship. The linguistic asymmetry and divergence led by translator intervention between the English performances and subsequent Chinese renditions is apparent. In *Descendants,* this disparity did not merely stem from the inherent differences in genre and meaning between the two languages but also from a desire to mitigate risks. One notable example is the ambiguous setting of *Descendants*. Originally conceptualised as unfolding within a prison setting, where inmates engage in the re-enactments of Zheng He's narrative before their release, this prison framework was omitted from and remains undefined throughout the English version. However, Kuo reintroduced this structure in the Mandarin rendition, while the English iteration retained a more generalised and open-ended backdrop (Tan, 2015). The risk-conscious approaches in the bilingual versions are discussed in the following sections.

In what follows, I will analyse Kuo's language decisions in shaping the play, and emphasise the impact of his translator intervention on critical themes, such as alienated identity, power dynamics and positioning in the Singaporean context. This will focus on the contrasts between the English version and Kuo's self-translated Chinese rendition, specifically exploring how translation serves as a tool to offer alternate narratives against official discourse and navigate censorship risks within his bilingual play.

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4. Isolated echoes: Translating 'cultural orphans'

In *Descendants*, Zheng He is the personification of Singapore, akin to a seafaring saga etched in its alienated identity. The city-state, historically bound more to the waters than to the land, is predominantly Chinese and is nestled among larger Malay-Muslim neighbours, which has charted its influence through global trade and financial connections (Phillip, 2009). Within the play's lyrical tapestry, unnamed narrators navigate fluidly among poetic introspection and haunting stories of vibrant depictions of voyages. Vergès (2003, p. 250) envisaged the ocean as a "cultural space", layered with narratives of power, where identities and territories converge. In the eyes of Kuo, Singapore's enduring gaze outward finds resonance in Zheng He, a trailblazer of the Indian Ocean's trade routes (Philip, 2009), signifying the city-state's cultural and geopolitical imagination and fear for isolation.

An illustration of isolation surfaces in Kuo's postmodernist narratives, characterised by an ever-present sense of indeterminacy, notably visible in Zheng He's deeply introspective and emotionally melancholic monologue echoed by the narrators. In Scene One, the yuppies, a satirical parody of materialistic youth, seek entry into a realm described as "endless, haunting [and] unknown" but "promising" and "seemingly reachable" (Kuo, 2003, p. 38). Their ambivalent stance towards this *unknown* space — simultaneously wary and drawn to it — serves as a symbolic parallel to Zheng's audacious voyages. At first glance, one might easily attribute the suffering of isolation and uncertainty to Singapore's heavy reliance on global trade and geopolitical ties (Phillip, 2009). However, Kuo illuminates another perspective, one that underlines cultural detachment and a sense of diasporic belonging. In his preface to the collection of plays, 'Images at The Margins', Kuo (2000, p. 13; see also Kuo, 2008 [1996], p. 172) emphasises the concept of "cultural orphans" — a sentiment reflecting "loss and alienation", accompanied by an intrinsic "anxiety in the search for self". This consciousness resonates with the identity of Singaporeans as "people at the margins" (Kuo 2000, p. 30), a post-modernist reality experienced by many (Harper, 1999).

In rendering the theme of self-alienation and of the formation of an alienated identity in his bilingual plays, Kuo strategically navigates a fine line to mitigate risks in response to potential censorship. One poignant example emerges in Scene Fourteen of the play. In the Chinese version, Zheng He is explicitly labelled as *自由漂游的孤儿大帅* ['a free-drifting orphan admiral'], exiled on the vast sea in search of an idealised paradise. Notably, the term *orphan* is more of a cultural reference than a historical reality. Due to the explicit portrayal in the Chinese version, Kuo's criticism of the post-independence Singapore government's handling of pluralism, which underlined racial coexistence in favour of national capitalist discourses, is beyond doubt. What is striking is that this *orphan* metaphor is absent from the English version. This omission diminishes the emphasis on historical identity and cultural memory (Siddique, 1989; Wee, 2020).

It would be simplistic to suggest that Kuo's self-translation merely glorifies China as a nostalgic ideal of the old country. The crux of cultural detachment lies in the fact that Kuo and fellow Chinese-educated Singaporean arts activists grappling with isolation within elitist Westernised cultural circles were simultaneously disillusioned by the Red Communist regime in the late 1970s (Kwok, 2001). Over time, particularly in the 1990s, the quest for a subjective identity became paramount for bilingual (if not multilingual)

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Singaporean intellectuals in the wake of Singapore's burgeoning economy. Although Kuo holds an affinity for the Chinese language and cultural heritage, which has left a lasting imprint on him, the playwright consciously avoids aligning himself, especially in the English versions of his plays, with overt ideological affiliations that might restrict individual freedom. This is particularly significant considering that the *Chinese-educated* cohort in Singapore was often associated with leftist radicalism and carried implications of ethnic chauvinism, which posed a challenge to the Singaporean authorities' official model of *multiracialism* (Kwok, 2001).

Amid the fixed dichotomy of Chinese leftist ideology and the prevailing nationalist discourse of the state, the playwright gravitated towards a multilingual ethos that championed unrestricted communication across diverse cultures. Kuo made it clear that inalienable cultural freedom and individual agency can only be achieved by voyaging beyond circumscribed boundaries. This is evident in the concluding verse of the play *Descendants*: 'I cannot tarry/I must hurry/The sea, the land, the sky is waiting/The Market is calling me!' In the Chinese version, it states, '*我又要告别了，我又得上路了/无涯的地，无边的天/两际之间无穷的空间/恢宏万变的市场在呼唤*' ['I bid farewell again, I must hit the road again/Endless land, boundless sky/Infinite space between two horizons/The vast and ever-changing market calls out', my literal translation].

The English version conflates the sea, land and sky, portraying the market as an apparition made from light and shadow. In contrast, Kuo's Chinese rendition explicitly introduces an 'infinite space' between 'two horizons', hinting that Zheng He or the city-state is not confined to a binary choice between Chinese cultural roots and Western ideologies. Instead, it favours an expansive, albeit 'ever-changing' realm filled with uncertainties. As articulated by Wee and Lee (2003, p. 25) in the introduction to the English rendition of *Descendants*, the central enquiry for the play is the exploration of collective cultural memories that transcend beyond *Singapore's cultural fragments*. Ong, the director of *Descendants*, interpreted being a cultural orphan as "liberating" (Tan, 2015), which is more tangible in Kuo's Chinese self-translation.

5. Translating Singapore's 'castrated' power

Kuo's recurring critique hinges on the city-state's overemphasis on materialism, transcending a mere disdain for opulence and wealth to reveal a deeper societal void. Singapore's economic prosperity is often attributed to its practice of state capitalism, a system that prioritises economic advancement at the expense of civil liberties (Peterson, 2001, p. 9). Birch (1993, p. 75) delineated this mechanism as a 'rhetoric of containment and control', constituting a "discourse of crisis" (p. 73) fostering "necessary illusions" (p. 75) for social governance. This discourse serves as a cautionary tale reminding citizens of the potential for regression into turbulent historical conditions.

Kuo presents the state's sovereignty in intricate ways by parallelling Zheng He, who ostensibly stands as the central protagonist with the imposing influence of the Ming emperor. Throughout the play, the emperor's pervasive and immense authority over Zheng He remains evident. Despite the emperor directing Zheng He's voyage with commands such as "power, authority, and peace" (Kuo, 2003, p. 39), any power bestowed upon the eunuchs, including Zheng He, is entirely at the emperor's

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discretion; Zheng He's influence during the expedition is castrated by the emperor's will (Philip, 2009).

In rendering the power dynamics, Kuo's Chinese translation accentuates Zheng He's subordinate status, while the implicit narratives in the English play stand out. For example, when the admiral addresses himself as '*奴才*,' an 'ackey or slave', a disparaging pronoun used by Manchu officials addressing the emperor, this pronoun is interestingly omitted in the English version. In addition, in Zheng He's monologue in Scene Ten, the English rendition concludes with the statement, "My master's will is my survival" (Kuo, 2003, p. 54), implying a sense of resentment. In comparison, the Chinese self-translation explicitly states, '*苟延残喘，主人的意思我得唯命是从*' ['Living on borrowed time to survive, I have to follow the master's orders', my translation], emphasising a more direct sentiment of resignation and survival.

Castration sets the seal on Zheng He's existence, offering deeper insight into the identity of the Chinese diaspora and the asymmetrical power relations involved. As a recurring motif throughout the play, transcending mere historical trauma, it serves as Kuo's critique of consumerism and an ironic portrayal of materialism. As Philip (2008) posited, Kuo uses Zheng He's physical anguish as emblematic of the sacrifices made in pursuit of affluence, authority and distinction. Distinct framing techniques were used in the bilingual versions to guide the reader's interpretation of the castration. In the English rendition, Zheng He's own narration implies that his castration was a voluntary decision due to family poverty: "It was my own decision to become a eunuch, because our family was very poor" (Kuo, 2003, p. 44). Zheng's father was portrayed as affectionate and sorrowful about his son's choice, further suggesting a narrative of voluntary sacrifice for the family's welfare.

Conversely, the Chinese translation highlights a more explicit depiction of longing for wealth and power, as the Zheng family barely subsisted on the brink of destitution. The text portrays a more resigned and rueful Zheng He, depicting a figure who is stripped of freedom and grapples with repentance. In the Chinese version, power relations loom large, as Zheng states, '*其实，也没有多少选择*' ['actually, there weren't many options available'] and '*前途看不见一丝一毫的希望*' ['our future appeared utterly devoid of hope']. For Chinese-speaking readers, it is clearer that the admiral is not the decision-maker, emphasising the individual's complete lack of power and Zheng He's longing for an ambiguous, politically linked *future*.

The hierarchical power relations between Zheng He and the emperor resonate deeply with the narrators, suggesting the castrated nature of contemporary Singaporeans. As the narrator states, "I am convinced that we were related, closely related — so closely related that I had to be a descendant of the eunuch admiral" (Kuo, 2003, p. 38). Notably, in the Chinese version, the phrase 'related, closely related' was rendered as idiomatic terms '*休戚相关、一脉相承*' ['intertwined success and failures, sharing the same bloodline'], indicating a more apparent shared fate and cultural lineage, making the Chinese translation more vividly conveys Kuo's resentment towards the authoritative regime and the suffering that comes with a castrated identity.
In portraying asymmetric power dynamics, what is implicit in the English play becomes more overt in the Chinese translation, as Kuo alludes to the parallels between the authoritative rule of the Chinese emperor and the governing party of the city-state

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(Philip, 2009). In the Chinese version of the play, Kuo more palpably exposes the state control and advocates for a journal towards a larger world, one of freedom.

One notable example can be found in Scene Two. In the Chinese version, Kuo inserted an additional passage: '*域外世界新鲜事/皇天后土少听闻/只恨天下如此大/竟然处处有阉人*' ['Beyond our realm, new tales unfold, seldom heard within the Imperial Court. The world is vast and grand; regrettably, eunuchs are found ubiquitous'], lamenting the widespread presence of oppression. Strikingly, the metaphor of ubiquitous eunuchs is omitted in the English version, which simply portrays Zheng He's voyages into exotic lands, culminating in praise for the extension of "peace and friendship" along his journey (Kuo, 2003, p. 39). The fear of the authority remains submerged below the waterline. The omission in the English original implies risk management (Pym, 2015), possibly aiming to evade authority censorship, making it more acceptable for the English-speaking public. The risk mitigation strategy employed in the bilingual versions could partly account for the varied receptions of the play. B. P. Koh, a critic who reviewed the English play before the release of the Chinese version, interpreted the drama as drawing parallels between the power struggles of court eunuchs and the challenges faced by modern office workers, employing the metaphor of castration to illustrate the extent of their sacrifices in pursuit of career advancement (Koh, 1995a). This perspective, however, simplifies Zheng's castration and neglects the suffering of Singaporeans, who are politically disillusioned, reducing it to a compromise of conspicuous consumerism and materialistic pursuits.

It should be noted that the limitations of the English version are partly offset by on-stage performances. Janice Koh, who later emerged as a notable figure in Singaporean theatre and served as a nominated member of parliament advocating for the transparent censorship of theatre, participated in the inaugural English rendition of *Descendants* in 2005 at the age of 21. In the 1995 English production, the actress delivered a lengthy speech while spinning on the spot 300 times, portraying the joy and exhilaration arising from engagement with multiple cultures. This scene, as described by Koh (1995b), elicited "uplifting exhilaration" from the audience, resulting in spontaneous applause. Interestingly, this spinning gesture suggests a paradox: while conveying immense joy, it also signifies constraints, perhaps symbolising the limits imposed by one's surrender of personal identity to the state. In a later interview, Koh related the staging design to Kuo's poetic portrayal of the Singaporean condition, reflecting the experiences of marginalised individuals (Tan, 2015). Joy, while evident, is always within confined boundaries.

6. Positioning Singapore in a multicultural realm

Positioning forms a malleable self-identity that, when confronted with self-perceptions by embracing fluid, multi-cultural identities during interactions (Davies & Harré, 1990; van Langenhove & Harré, 1999), seeks conformity and belonging. Kuo's positioning is vividly illustrated when he uses culturally specific repertoires to craft (different) narratives in bilingual play. For instance, in Scene Two, Zheng He's voyages and valour take centre stage, framed by explicit references to the Ming emperor and a distant "Western land" in the English version (Kuo, 2003, p. 39). For English readers, the paean distinctly portrays Zheng He navigating through "savage waters to explore the Western lands" that "stretched as far as Africa" and venturing across "the exotic from Tenggara, India to Arabia" (Kuo, 2003, p. 39). In Kuo's Chinese self-translation,

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however, the Ming emperor is simply alluded to as '*中华使者* ['the Chinese missionary'], while the 'Western lands' are simply rendered as '*列国*' ['other nations'] and 'Tenggara, India to Arabia' is generalised as '*黑人*' ['black people'], revealing the playwright's distinct stances when addressing a broader English-speaking Singaporean audience and the more culturally connected Chinese intellectual community. These discrepancies between the original and the self-translation underline Kuo's fluid positioning and more profoundly reveal the discord between Chinese elites and Westernised Singapore. Written during a time of opposition to China within the state's narratives, the play depicts a sense of identity loss, encapsulating collective longings and fears. While acknowledging the necessity of forming identities amid diverse cultures for contemporary Singaporeans in the English version, the Chinese translation underscores his intricate emotional connection to an elusive China. This presents Kuo's somewhat controversial Sinocentric stance by oddly juxtaposing China with *others*.

In addition, the Chinese self-translation critically illustrates the intrinsic complexities and potential danger associated with Singapore as a multiracial nation, particularly in relation to religious syncretism. In Scene Eleven of Kuo's Chinese self-translation, he (2003, p. 55) explicitly underscores Zheng He's identity as Muslim, highlighting that "Ma He, though Hui Muslims, has lived among Han people since he was young." The name *Ma* means *horse* in Mandarin; it is commonly used as a surname among Chinese Muslims. The narrative constructs the emperor as an all-powerful, overseeing patriarch, revealing his complete authority over the admiral with a humble origin, evident when the emperor decides to change his loyal servant and eunuch commander's surname. However, such a detailed anecdote that shapes the admiral's rise to fame is entirely absent in the English version. The playwright's omission reflects a deliberate risk avoidance of addressing ethnic identities and race — a longstanding and sensitive issue in Singapore[i] — in the English version.

In Kuo's Chinese self-translation, his concerns about Singapore's *highly de-culturalised population* and the potential pitfalls associated with Singapore's multiracial creeds are articulated more explicitly. Rather than adopting the dominant discourse of multiracialism, which is often interpreted as merely 'cultures co-existing', Kuo sought to re-position the city-state as a liberated soul, autonomous and free, by reconnecting with the past, symbolising both personal and collective reclamation. Kuo's articulation of Zheng He's decades of travel serves as a case in point. Scene Thirteen is replete with Zheng's trading mission that bursts with lavish splendour, camaraderie and cultural exchange. The admiral and his emissaries are warmly received, leading to a 'joyous journey' characterised by a friendly exchange and passionate farewells upon departure (Kuo, 2003, p. 60). In the play, Kuo presents Zheng He's trade mission as a pathway to "an expansive Asian globalism", which exceeds "the confines of alienated life in the modern nation" (Wee & Lee, 2003, p. 34). Zheng He embodies a transitional existence, actively engaging in a state of transpositioning across cultures and eschewing a fixed identity. For Kuo, multiculturalism is positioned as a forward-thinking and partially anticipatory response to the uncertainties of modernity and nationalist narratives on multiracialism. Rather than seeking a complete historical restoration of cultural wholeness for the uprooted, it advocates for an expanded cultural identity in a world where cultures interact intensely. Kuo's optimism shines through in his assertion that when a "de-culturalised people" yearn for culture, they are more concerned with the inspirational value of new cultures and "less discriminating" about their origins;

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consequently, they can embrace multiple cultures that offer new knowledge, insights and wisdom (Kuo, 2008b [1998], p. 255).

Kuo's self-positioning as a free agent is evident in the fact that the play does not end up in a stalemate but concludes with an ambiguous note, stating, "The Market is calling me! [capitalisation in the original]" — a line that draws a compelling parallel between Zheng He and the yuppie narrators (Kuo, 2003, p. 66). It reflects their shared anticipation and unease regarding postmodern uncertainty, tinged with irony. Zheng He, bound by duty to the emperor, is compelled to respond to the market's call through the trade routes he charted with his treasure fleet. Beaujard (2005, p. 412) posited that trade possesses the capacity "to unify, create, and transform cultures." In Kuo's depiction, the market becomes a symbolic construct. Singaporeans, much like Zheng He, are culturally distant from their Chinese heritage, finding it challenging to fully disengage from the material world that reshapes their national identity as an independent city-state while recognising that cultural exploration suggests an inherent inclination towards change amid uncertainty (cf. Li & Lee, 2024).

In the context of discussions on *liquid modernity* in contemporary cultures, Bauman (2012[2000], p. viii) astutely observed that modern life embodies traits such as "fragility, temporariness, vulnerability, and a predisposition to constant change." Instead of maintaining a fixed identity, the idea of a perpetual "becoming" is an integral aspect of (post-)modernity (Bauman, 2012 [2000], p. viii). For Kuo, Zheng He's voyage suggests that (multi-)culture is not static but contingent, perpetually open to shifts and transformations as it interacts with diverse cultural representations. The playwright's default view is telling: Zheng He is not merely presented as a historical figure but as someone navigating contemporary challenges, always in a state of "departing and arriving", persistently "dreaming, hoping, searching, [and] struggling" (Kuo, 2003, p. 66). Kuo's narratives aim to counter the authority's nationalist multiracialism and the curbing of civil liberties by adopting a "humanistic" approach (Wee & Lee, 2003, p. 25). Despite power residing elsewhere and the potential for syncretism through the pursuit of multiple cultures, Kuo advocates living with a focus on cultural exchange and communication to counter the void that haunts contemporary Singaporeans. In Kuo's vision, liberated multilingualism becomes the pinnacle of his aspirations.

7. Conclusions

When examining both the English and Chinese translation of the play *Descendants of the eunuch admiral* on a contemporary stage, I focus on Kuo Pao Kun's translator intervention in navigating issues of race and identity in Singapore's multilingual theatre practices. The Chinese-born, Singaporean playwright, who galvanised Singapore's Chinese language theatre, authored the original play in English, employing implicitation and omission to airbrush his ideological differences and medicate and mitigate the risks associated with censorship. In contrast, in Chinese self-translation, the playwright's cultural and ideological agenda becomes more palpable and effectual by using translation strategies such as explicitation and addition. These disparities between the bilingual versions are not simply linguistic variances; they signify deliberate translator intervention, imposing considerations of risk management between self-censorship and political and cultural conscientiousness during translation.

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The play's translation trade-offs seem to have been the elixir of Kuo's artistic life. As an expatriate, Kuo's cultural and linguistic ties to China and his position as a Singaporean activist advocating for multiculturalism were at times in conflict. His self-translation into Chinese can be viewed as an act of subversion and resistance, challenging prevailing nationalist narratives aiming for a single, cohesive national identity through multiracialism in contemporary Singapore. For Kuo, it is only when an individual is adrift, seeking other cultures beyond the authority's control, that they sense a degree of autonomy. These conflicting impulses are intrinsic to Kuo and his contemporaries' cultural identity, creating rhizomatic spaces within translation that serve to instigate sociocultural identity building in the multilingual theatre landscape.

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Data availability statement

Due to copyright restrictions, data related to the play, including the original videos and published bilingual versions of the scripts, cannot be shared. However, supporting data for the analysis and results of this study, such as publicly archived news reports and the play program, are available upon request from the corresponding author.

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Notes

[i] Islam is the third largest religion in the state, with Muslims constituting approximately 15.6% of the population (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2020).

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