For her essay from Christine Malvasi’s “Writing the World Through Art,” Sim explores the nuances of political censorship of the arts in Singapore, using a controversial local film as a starting point, To Singapore, with Love. By examining key historical contexts and breaking down assumptions, Sim complicates and questions this seemingly straightforward topic.

VELVET HANDCUFFS

Sim Yan Ying

The security forces came to arrest [my husband]. Me, being such a respectable young Singapore [sic] doctor, never thought that when they couldn't get him, that they would get me a month later. As I came out of prison, I went into exile with him. And that’s 35 years of not going home until I brought his ashes back,” Ang Swee Chai, 64, recounts as she sits on a porch in Kuala Lumpur (To Singapore, with Love). She and her late husband were two of the many political exiles who fled Singapore in the sixties, seventies, and eighties to escape the prospect of detention without trial carried out by the Singaporean government under the leadership of former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. During this period that Ang refers to as a “black chapter in Singapore [sic] history,” the government cracked down on several student activists, socialist politicians, former communists, and others whom it deemed a threat to national security—or to its political power (To Singapore, with Love). Ang’s husband was a prominent defense counsel for student activists and workers who rioted in the seventies, and he escaped to London after sensing that the Internal Security Department would soon come to arrest him—which, sure enough, they did (Gordon). Failing to find him, they arrested Ang a month later, and only released her after she falsely promised that she would attempt to lure her husband back to Singapore. As Ang recalls it now, her eyes reflect a deep-seated longing for her husband and her
home country, and her face reveals an aching pain as she recalls this
dark episode in her life.

*To Singapore, with Love* is a collection of film interviews with
Singapore’s political exiles currently living in England, Malaysia, and
Thailand. The exiles explain the reasons for their departure from
Singapore, describe their lives today, and share their present feelings
towards their home country. The documentary is thoughtfully curat-
ed, factual at times and emotional at others, and not overly sentimen-
tal or sensational. In a statement, the producer and director Tan Pin
Pin expressed her hope that the film will help us “understand how we
became who we are by addressing what was banished and unspoken
for” (“Statement by Tan Pin Pin”). The film has been screened in
countries such as Taiwan, the Philippines, Germany, and the United
States, and has won awards in several film festivals, including the
Busan International Film Festival and the Freedom Film Festival.

Despite its international acclaim, the film was given the Not
Allowed for All Rating (NAR) classification on September 10, 2014
by the Media Development Authority (“MDA has classified”) in
Singapore, the statutory board that issues ratings and licenses for all
works of art. The NAR prevents the film from being shown in public
or distributed in the country; only private screenings are allowed, for
example in tertiary institutions where permission has been granted
(Khoo). The MDA stated in a news release that the film “[under-
mines] national security” and that the “individuals in the film have
given distorted and untruthful accounts of how they came to leave
Singapore and remain outside Singapore” (“MDA has classified”).
The MDA’s position was reinforced by the current Prime Minister
Lee Hsien Loong (former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew’s son), who
asserted that the political exiles in the film should not be given a
chance to air their “self-serving personal account, conveniently inac-
curate in places, glossing over facts in others” (Salleh “Exiles”). He
was joined by the Minister for Communications and Information,
Yaacob Ibrahim, who stated that allowing the public screening of the
film “would effectively mean condoning the use of violence and sub-
version in Singapore, and thus harm our national security” (Salleh
“Parliament”).
The censorship of this film led to a nationwide controversy. Some members of the public, especially those in the arts community, felt that the MDA and the government were once again using an iron fist to clamp down on alternative voices and that the ban, though carried out under the guise of national security, was obviously enacted to protect the reputation of the Singaporean government. According to Kenneth Paul Tan, the main issue that the government possibly had with the film was its “sympathetic portrayals of political dissidents,” as it presented “a fundamental challenge to The Singapore Story . . . the regime-legitimising official account of Singapore’s history” (236, 233). To a much lesser extent, there were those who believed that the MDA and the government had the right to ban the film, for they were certain that the political exiles were rebels and liars whose presence would have a destabilizing effect on the country.

Interestingly, a government seeking to protect its legitimacy might actually undermine itself, for it is possible that the more it attempts to suppress a particular artistic work or message, the more attention that work or message might receive. Ironically, the more the Singaporean government tried to prevent Singaporeans from watching To Singapore, with Love, the more eager people were to watch it—a classic example of the Streisand Effect. As Evgeny Morozov states, “adopting a militaristic posture against a tech-savvy mob of civil libertarians is not going to be of much help,” for a ban only draws attention to the artwork being censored, and people can certainly find ways to access the film in this day and age. Shortly after the censorship of the documentary, a flurry of discussions took place across various social media platforms, people signed online petitions appealing to MDA to reconsider its decision on the rating, and hundreds of Singaporeans travelled to the neighbouring country, Malaysia, to watch a screening of the film out of curiosity and as a “gesture of civil disobedience” (K. Tan 242). As sales manager Louis Khoo puts it, “I didn’t know about the film before MDA made its decision. And now that we’re told we can’t watch it here, everyone wants to watch it” (Salleh “Interest”).

However, this notion of censorship drawing attention to the artwork being censored assumes a public that notices or cares—and they might not. The majority of Singaporeans, for instance, were oddly
apathetic about the situation with *To Singapore, with Love*, for they believed that it did not directly concern them. The people involved in the conversation were mostly artists, academics, politicians, the political exiles, as well as arts-related statutory boards such as MDA and the National Arts Council (NAC). Those outside these communities seemed largely content with the status quo when it came to freedom of speech and expression (K. Han). This might appear to be a strange phenomenon, but perhaps one might be able to understand this if one views it in the context of Singapore’s political landscape.

The People’s Action Party (PAP) is the ruling party that has had political dominance in the country since the nation’s independence in 1965, and it does not seem like the existing state of affairs will shift in the near future. In the 2015 elections, the PAP won a landslide victory as usual—83 out of 89 seats in parliament, and close to 70% of the votes (T. Wong). The PAP’s monopoly on political power is a product of “domination by consent,” in contrast to “direct forms of domination such as force, persuasion, coercion, and intimidation” (O’Reilly). Singapore conducts free and fair elections every five years, and its citizens have, without fail, voted the PAP into power in each one. Nonetheless, there are persisting arguments that the elections are skewed in favour of the PAP—there are always accusations of gerrymandering right before each election takes place, and the PAP government has a stronghold over the mainstream media (Slater), which is possibly the most vital channel for the inculcation of the party’s beliefs and ideas in their constituency.

The main reason, however, for their continuous wins at the polls is undoubtedly their “active and positive approach to constructing history for ideological mass control” ever since the seventies, or, in other words, their meticulous construction of “The Singapore Story” (K. Tan 236). This Story is a carefully curated one. The PAP repeatedly “justifies its regime by excavating historical episodes of ethnic violence and social disharmony” (Chong “Embodying Society’s Best” 296), most notably the 1964 racial riots that left 36 dead and 560 injured (J. Han). It constantly reminds its citizens that Singapore is a small nation-state that is particularly vulnerable to attacks not just from its neighbouring countries, but also, given its multiracial and multi-religious nature, from within. This persistent emphasis on the need for
social cohesion and national security breeds a “culture of anxiety,”
leaving most Singaporeans afraid to do anything to disrupt this appa-
rent state of peace and harmony (K. Tan 236). The PAP also con-
vinces its people of its legitimacy by “appealing to economic priori-
ties,” repeatedly proclaiming that it has transformed Singapore from
a Third into a First World country in a mere 50 years to make the
point that Singapore’s economic future is safe in its hands (Chong
“Embodying Society’s Best” 296). Thus, it is apparent that the cen-
sorship of particular art pieces is often a consequence of—or even a
part of—a long history of a government carefully crafting a national
narrative that most supports its agenda.

While this might be met with protests in other countries, partic-
ularly Western liberal democracies, most citizens in Singapore toler-
ate the limitations on their freedom of speech and expression and are
more than willing to entrust the PAP with the task of governing the
country as well as maintaining order and stability. In some cases, cit-
izens might explicitly or implicitly agree to a certain level of censor-
ship because of the benefits they perceive a particular government can
bring them. In “Censorship! Or Is It?” Klaus Petersen states that “we
enter into power relationships,” in this case voting the PAP into
power, “not only for certain advantages they may offer us, but also
with full knowledge and agreement that by doing so we forgo some of
our rights and freedoms” (15). Hence, the majority of Singaporean
citizens condone the limitations on their speech and expression as
they recognize that this is a necessary trade-off in exchange for eco-
nomic stability, national security, and administrative efficiency—
which the PAP has an impressive track record of providing, and thus
use all things as their velvet handcuffs. There certainly are never-end-
ing complaints about this, reflecting an unhappy hegemony, but the
“managerial rationalism” of the people and their valuing of good gov-
ernance is clear at the end of the day (Jones and Brown 86). The PAP
has been so successful in fostering a pragmatic culture in Singapore
that people are even beginning to adopt the view that art is a waste of
taxpayers’ money—money that could be channelled more effectively
into areas such as healthcare and education.

Of course, censorship is not only an explicit ban on something; it
may also be implicit, underhanded, and subtle—which can be even
more effective, as it does not attract as much controversy but still achieves its goal of preventing a message from being heard. Hence, the general population may demonstrate a lack of resistance when it comes to censorship simply because they are unaware of its pervasive-ness. Unlike the explicit ban on *To Singapore, with Love*, the curbing of artistic freedom in Singapore today is exercised through under-handed means—another way in which the PAP subtly conditions the minds of the people while creating the illusion of a just and fair democratic society. This can take the form of limiting the “administration, funding, promotion, housing, hosting, curating, regulating and censoring of artworks” (“Problems of Censorship”). In recent years, blatant forms of censorship have only been imposed in extreme circumstances when the PAP government perceives the work of art to be a serious threat to their political legitimacy after taking into account the its potential outreach and influence. For instance, films are at a higher risk of being censored than theatre performances, as they can be widely circulated and preserved for a significantly longer period of time (K. Tan 239). There is undeniably a “progressive loosening of long-held restraints on cultural expression” (C. Tan), as the PAP government has come to realize that the “public show of state censorship will invariably undermine the government’s moral authority” (Chong *The Theatre and the State* 136), resulting in both local backlash and international criticism. It also hurts their efforts to promote Singapore as a Global City for the Arts, a project established in 1992 to position Singapore as an artistically vibrant city on the world stage (Chong “Singapore’s Cultural Policy”). In addition, unlike in the sixties, seventies, and eighties, information is no longer filtered solely through the state-controlled media. The widespread usage of the Internet and social media over the last decade has led to an exponential increase in the accessibility of information, providing the vocal minority with several avenues to express their grievances and indignation, which can potentially influence the views of the apathetic majority. As such, the Singaporean government has come to recognize the need for the “invisibilization” of censorship, or, in other words, the exercising of censorship in covert ways (Chong *The Theatre and the State* 136).

The multilevel and multifaceted nature of censorship in Singapore is possible because the “power advantage” of a government
“enables it to introduce regulations, codes, and standards in such a way that infringements on free expression and information will occur in a much more subtle—but not less effective—form than through bans or confiscation” (Petersen 16). Cutting off the resources of an artist does not alarm the public as much as a direct ban on an artwork does, thus maintaining the façade that the country promotes freedom of artistic expression, even as it becomes increasingly challenging for an artist to create his or her work. This illusion of freedom makes the general public less inclined to fight for artistic liberty in Singapore—and such is the insidious nature of implicit forms of censorship.

One example of an indirect mode of regulation is the biased selection of artworks to be funded—or to withdraw funding from. In May 2015, NAC withdrew an $8,000 grant for the comic The Art Of Charlie Chan Hock Chye by artist-illustrator Sonny Liew the day before its launch in Singapore. According to Khor Kok Wah, the senior director of the NAC's literary arts sector, “its sensitive content, depicted in visuals and text, did not meet our funding conditions” (Yong). The graphic novel makes references to controversial events and people in Singapore’s history, such as Operation Spectrum—the alleged Marxist Conspiracy in 1987 where 22 people were detained by the PAP government (Kaur)—and Lim Chin Siong—Lee Kuan Yew’s comrade-turned-foremost-political-opponent, detained from 1963 to 1969 under Operation Cold Store (H. Wong). Khor’s vague and arbitrary explanation for the withdrawal of funds was not accepted by members of the arts community, and he was later pressured into clarifying that “the retelling of Singapore’s history in the graphic novel potentially undermines the authority of legitimacy of the Government and its public institutions” (Yong). By evoking a dark chapter of Singapore’s history where people were presumed to be wrongfully detained, the novel calls into question the PAP’s moral legitimacy. There appears to be an ongoing paranoia about the need to keep under wraps historical accounts that might adversely affect the reputation of the PAP government, whether through a direct ban that inevitably attracts more attention (a last resort), or through more covert forms of censorship that often go undiscovered or undebated. Here we see censorship with an obvious political agenda, used in service of the powerful and elite members of society.
While the graphic novel was fortunately able to sell enough copies to break even, other art groups are not as lucky. In the theatre industry, state grants are the primary source of funding for theatre groups, which leaves most of them beholden to the demands of the state. These are often communicated through “private telephone calls or face-to-face meetings,” and frequently made just as a show is about to open “as a means to prevent directors or playwrights from conceiving alternative solutions to objected scenes, thus resulting in clean and straightforward cuts” (Chong The Theatre and the State 140, 161). Protesting against these demands would effectively mean giving up the state funding, hence that is rarely ever done even if the situation seems unreasonable, unless it severely compromises on the integrity of the artwork. Artists are admittedly at the mercy of the government when it comes to the possibility of producing and presenting their work, and funding is evidently the foremost velvet handcuff that the PAP government uses on the artists.

In an effort to balance the desire to continue to frame the national story with the desire to maintain the appearance of artistic liberty, a government could attempt to outsource the responsibility of censorship to none other than the artists themselves. The PAP government has taken efforts to encourage artists to self-regulate—or self-censor. In an attempt to institutionalize self-censorship, MDA launched a public consultation on its proposed Term Licensing Scheme on 12 May 2014 (“MDA to forge”). Under the scheme, registered arts organizations would have been able to classify their own performances, or those of their fellow artists, under the following ratings: G—content suitable for a general audience; Advisory—content that may not be suitable for a general audience; Advisory16—content more suited for persons 16 years and above; and R18—restricted to persons 18 years and above. In their press release, MDA stated that “arts entertainment event organisers may send their representatives for training at MDA to become registered content assessors, or tap on other registered content assessors in the industry to do so”; any wrongful classification would result in “composition fines” (“MDA to forge”). On the surface, this might seem like a well-intentioned move by MDA and the PAP government to liberalize the arts sector by empowering arts groups to make their own classification decisions.
However, this could also be an insidious way in which they try to outsource the burden of censorship and even normalize this practice.

Had the scheme been allowed to pass, it might have led to a regression in terms of the freedom of artistic expression. This is because the classification guidelines that were previously dictated by MDA have not changed, and they include several conditions that the majority of arts practitioners in Singapore do not agree with, such as the need for an R18 rating when “occasional sexual gestures (e.g. kissing and caressing) in a homosexual context” are depicted in a performance (“Arts Entertainment Content Standards and Classification”). Besides having to classify their own works or their fellow artists’ works in adherence to the guidelines laid out for them, which are not necessarily in line with their values and beliefs, the artists also face the risk of “a fine of up to $5,000” should they incorrectly classify their performances (C. Tan). This could result in artists mistakenly opting for a stricter classification than what is necessary in order to avoid the penalty. It might also lead to self-inhibition during the process of creating their works, or an unhealthy practice of policing their fellow practitioners’ works, eventually resulting in a stagnation of creativity and a culture of cautiousness in the arts industry. As a result, 45 arts groups, including prominent ones such as the Singapore Repertory Theatre and the Singapore Dance Theatre, signed a position paper to reject the scheme, and MDA eventually released a statement to announce that they would drop the proposal (“Arts Engage Position Paper”).

In reaction to the overt and covert forms of censorship that have persisted over the decades, artists have developed ways and means to skirt around them. One way was to “[engage] with allegories and abstraction,” as evidenced in the play *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral*, written by the late theatre doyen Kuo Pao Kun about cultural displacement and the loss of identity (Chong *The Theatre and the State* 81). Another way was to “[highlight] . . . the personal and human plight of the characters . . . as implicit criticism of policies and politics” (Chong *The Theatre and the State* 81). This is reflected in works such as *Good People* by the playwright Haresh Sharma, which is, on the one hand, the story of a terminally ill patient getting caught for smoking marijuana to relieve her pain, and, on the other, a criticism
of Singapore’s strict drug laws and uncompromisingly harsh penalties. Sharma does not explicitly critique the laws or the penalties; rather, he expresses his reservations through the struggles of the protagonist when faced with an unreasonable and unforgiving system. Hence, strangely, there could be a silver lining here: censorship forces artists to be more creative in their political criticism, no matter how painful and grueling the process, and the industry as a whole may come much closer to mastering the art of subtlety. In a certain sense, creative and ever-adjusting forms of censorship result in creative and ever-adjusting artistic responses.

More interestingly, Sharma stated in an interview that another way he subverted the system was by loading his plays with expletives, which might seem like a counter-intuitive choice. Before MDA was formed in 2003, the task of censorship lay with the Public Entertainment License Unit (PELU), a part of the Singapore Police Force. Due to a lack of artistic sensibilities, the officers took a mechanical approach to censorship, simply crossing out any expletives and any discernable homosexual, political, or racial and religious references. Sharma said, “If you want to say something really subversive, you just put a lot of ‘fuck,’ ‘fuck,’ ‘fuck’ . . . They’ll go into a cancelling frenzy. Meanwhile you can write a really critical script and they would be too distracted to notice” (Chong The Theatre and the State 157). Through understanding exactly what the censorship bodies would pinpoint and find issues with, playwrights and other literary writers often leveraged on their cultural intelligence and sensitivities to distract and work around the system.

Of course, there are also instances of more blatant rebellion that are just on the edge of crossing the government-imposed line. An example is Royston Tan’s Cut (2004), a 12-minute musical spoof on censorship in Singapore. This was Tan’s retaliation after the Board of Film Censors imposed twenty-seven cuts on 15, a film he made about teenage gangs in Singapore (Freedman 138). Cut shows a film aficionado badgering the former chairman of the Board of Film Censors, Amy Chua, as she shops in a supermarket. While the film is campy and exaggerated, it nonetheless asks astute and thought-provoking questions: “being our so called ‘nanny’, you yourself are exposed to all these censored and controversial scenes. What I really
want to know is, who looks after your moral welfare?” (Addicted 21). Questions such as these interrogate the logic of censorship and suggest that it is worth further discussion and exploration. Cut won Best Short Film in the Vladivostok Pacific Meridian Film Festival in 2005, and its eventual success represents how a fun and innovative approach can also be an effective way of rebelling (“Royston Tan: Awards”).

While censorship has undeniably led to the inhibition of artistic growth and expression in Singapore, it has ironically harnessed creativity by cultivating a generation of artists who are able to create works on controversial issues in a subtle and skillful manner. One could still criticize them for condoning the system, as they are nonetheless responding within the boundaries set by the PAP government, but they have evidently resisted state censorship in a productive way and preserved their artistic integrity in the process. Yet it is also true that we will never know for sure how much more the arts in Singapore would have flourished without the excessive and oftentimes politically motivated censorship over the past fifty years.

The works of artists are, as eloquently described by the poet Robert Frost, “a lover’s quarrel with the world” (Frost). They shine a light on things that may be unpleasant and hard to accept, if only for the betterment of society. This results in a conflict with the government when it includes political criticism; as such, the existing mutual distrust between artists in Singapore and the PAP government is inevitable. Ironically, both parties hold the same motivations and ideals—envisioning a better future for the country, and then working towards it—but the problem lies in their seemingly irreconcilable values and beliefs. The case of censorship in Singapore shows us that a country’s particular and varied forms of censorship often arise out of its unique history and the desire to preserve a government’s legitimacy. Furthermore, the nature of censorship is not always as explicit as we tend to think, and while its ever-evolving forms are increasingly effective in suppressing contentious works of art, they also result in the creation of new works that still critique—just in more proficient and nuanced ways.
WORKS CITED


