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The feeling of being watched: lived Confucianism and theatricality in Kuo Pao Kun's mid-1980s monodramas

Paul Rae 

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ABSTRACT

The first plays Kuo Pao Kun (1939–2002) wrote after being released from detention in 1980 coincided with a concerted effort by the Singapore government to formalise the Confucian basis upon which it claimed that Singapore society and its increasing economic success were built. Kuo was no traditionalist, but *The Coffin is Too Big for the Hole* (1985), and *No Parking on Odd Days* (1986) can be interpreted as expressing — and producing — the lived experience of the ordinary in ways that are informed by a Confucian sensibility. In this article, I contextualise these plays with reference to the Singapore government's "Confucian turn" in the 1980s, and then demonstrate how they provided an intermediate domain between the state and the individual for exploring the classical Confucian concerns of moral action and ritual within a rapidly modernising society.

[Kuo Pao Kun](#)[Confucianism](#)[monodrama](#)[political theatre](#)[Singapore drama](#)[← Previous article](#)[View issue table of contents](#)[Next article >](#)

Notes

1 The Shared Values are: Nation before community and society above self; Family as the basic unit of society; Community support and respect for the individual; Consensus, not conflict; Racial and religious harmony (Lim and Tan [2015](#)). For a Confucian critique of the Confucian basis of the Shared Values, see Tan ([2012](#)).

2 In terms of Anglophone scholarship, see, for instance, the collection in which Tamney's own claim appears (Yang and Tamney [2012](#)), as well as Bell ([2008](#)), and the essays collected in Hammond and Richey ([2015](#)) and Billioud ([2018](#)).

3 "Make sure you are not being dishonest with him [your Lord] when you stand up to him" (The Analects 14: 22). Hereafter, I will follow convention in referencing cited Analects only by the relevant chapter and section.

4 The baldest articulation of this hierarchy in The Analects states: "Let the ruler be the ruler, the minister the minister, the father father, and the son son" (12: 11).

5 See, in particular, the Tables outlining mourning wear for various family members, as determined by their relation to the deceased, in *The Sacred Books of China* ([1966](#), 209). One further notes that funeral rites take up 50 per cent of Chu Hsi's Family Rituals ([1991](#)).

6 Kuo's play *The Eagle and the Cat* (1997) reiterated the point through a telling inversion, when the unnamed narrator states near the beginning of his fantastical story that "It should have been a dream. Because something like that couldn't have happened in this world. And yet it was definitely not a dream" (Kuo [2012](#), 115).

7 A distinguished exception is Stella Kon's *Emily of Emerald Hill* (1986). A Singaporean monodrama written contemporaneously with *Coffin* and *No Parking*, its narrative of a resourceful female protagonist operating within the rigid networks of a Peranakan (that is, Straits-born Chinese who are the descendants of Chinese immigrants who came to

the Malay archipelago) family unit and social world represents a crucial — if ultimately fatalistic — corrective to the explicitly patriarchal biases of much Confucian thought.

Additional information

Notes on contributors

Paul Rae

Paul Rae is Associate Professor of Theatre Studies at the University of Melbourne. He has published widely on contemporary theatre and performance theory, with a focus on the Asian region. He is author of *Theatre & Human Rights* (2009) and *Real Theatre: Essays in Experience* (2019), and a former editor of the journal *Theatre Research International*. He is at work on two new books: *Performing Islands* and *Mousetraps: Adventures in Theatrical Capture*.

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