Philip Smith: Chinoiserie, Caning, and Code-Switching: Finding Serenity in Singapore

In Whedon's Firefly universe the great powers of the United States and China collectively propelled humanity to the furthest reaches of the stars. The mise en scène reflect this union; Firefly and Serenity's visual and auditory palate is a meld of the American Western and Chinoiserie (plus a great deal more). There have been various attempts to locate Firefly's aesthetic in the modern world, perhaps most persuasively in the work of Tara Prescott, who finds Firefly's intercultural patchwork in San Francisco, Shanghai, and Shenzhen. In my talk I seek to offer an alternative local for Firefly; Singapore. I seek to ask what Singapore can teach us about Firefly, and what Firefly can teach us about Singapore?

Modern Singapore was the product not of American and Chinese territorial expansion, but a base of the British empire on Malaysian soil, populated by a large immigrant community from China and India. Singapore's economic and social divisions rhyme with Firefly's core-periphery relationship; it is a city of modern brilliance driven by a largely invisible underclass of foreign laborers. Singapore was described by William Gibson as 'Disneyland with a Death Penalty', where the polished surface of modern capitalism and 'guided democracy' are kept in check by a draconian system of punishments and a selective state narrative. Singapore's local creole, Singlish, is, like the speech of the characters in Firefly, a meld of English and various Asian languages. As in Firefly (as has been documented by Susan Mandala and Kevin Sullivan), Singlish speakers can code-switch, shifting to different linguistic systems depending on their situation. The ways in which they do so has several key implications for the social movements (of lack thereof) which occur in Firefly.

Perhaps most profoundly for the ways in which we view Firefly, Singapore famously presents, both in its internal search for a cohesive 'Singaporean identity' and its outward-face as tourist magnet, a manufactured and consumable version of Asian identities (or 'Asia lite' as it has been variously described). We must ask, then, as we view Firefly and Singapore side by side, what relationship does the city-state, the series, and we, the viewers, have to concepts of Asian culture?

Works Cited

