

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

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