

**A Political Reading of Home and Family in
English-Language Singaporean Novels
(1972–2002)**

**Submitted by
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ABSTRACT

Homes and families feature in many post-independence, English-language Singaporean novels. They also have pronounced importance in Singaporean politics. In state discourses 'home' symbolizes the Singaporean nation and 'family' society. In addition, government policies are renowned for extending into the private domain. Furthermore, the national value of 'family as the basic unit of society' has been ratified by Parliament.

A few published essays link portrayals of home or family in this fiction to national politics (Koh Tai Ann 1989, Philip Holden 1998 and Shirley Lim 2003). These studies often consider depictions of home or family relations in relation to whether they ultimately affirm or shake the status quo.

This thesis is the first extended study to examine the potential political meanings or connotations of portrayed homes *and* families in over a dozen English-language Singaporean novels. It provides a thematic analysis of housing, the overlap between home and nation, inter-class and inter-racial relationships, 'filial' strains and paternalistic behaviour in a politico-historical context. The identified stances in the texts are then related to the long-ruling People's Action Party (PAP) Government's positions on these subjects.

The analysis demonstrates that depictions of home and family in the selected texts can be meaningfully related to the hegemonic PAP government's policies, values, ideologies, and forms of authority. The multiple perspectives that emerge from the narratives can present more varied arguments than are commonly found in state discourses. In raising or gently alluding to different viewpoints, the novels may affirm, modify, question to the point of moral interrogation, present alternatives to, and/or critique state stances. In doing so they provide ideas for debate in a society where politics is deemed to be for politicians and where there is censorship and self-censoring.

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Abbreviations

Abbreviations of Literary Texts

Frequently cited fictional texts are abbreviated as outlined below. Full publications details are listed in the bibliography.

Abraham's: *Abraham's Promise* (1995) by Philip Jeyaretnam

Adventures: *The Adventures of Holden Heng* (1986) by Robert Yeo

Dream: *If We Dream Too Long* (1972) by Goh Poh Seng

Fistful: *Fistful of Colours* (1993) by Suchen Christine Lim

Following: *Following The Wrong God Home* (2001) by Catherine Lim

Foreign: *Foreign Bodies* (1997) by Hwee Hwee Tan

Mammon: *Mammon Inc.* (2001) by Hwee Hwee Tan

Peculiar: *Peculiar Chris* (1992) by Johann Lee

Raffles: *Raffles Place Ragtime* (1988) Philip Jeyaretnam

Ricky: *Ricky Star* (1978) by Lim Thean Soo

Sin-kheh: *The Sin-kheh* (1993) by Goh Sin Tub

Abbreviations Relating to Singapore

CMIO	Chinese, Malay, Indian or Other
HDB	Housing and Development Board
ISA	Internal Security Act
NAC	National Arts Council
NBDCS	National Book Development Council of Singapore
NCMP	Non-Constituency Member of Parliament
NMP	Nominated Member of Parliament
NUS	National University of Singapore

PAP	People's Action Party
SDP	Singapore Democratic Party
SDU	Social Development Unit
URA	Urban Redevelopment Authority

General Abbreviations

<i>CED</i>	<i>Collins English Dictionary</i>
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
NGOs	Non-governmental Organizations
<i>NFDMT</i>	<i>The New Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought</i>
<i>OED</i>	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i>
<i>OCDT</i>	<i>Oxford Concise Dictionary of Politics</i>

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Home and family are prominent features of post-independent fiction and political discourses in Singapore. Homes are often set on the island and family life is frequently depicted (Koh Tai Ann 1989b: 280) in English-language Singaporean novels.

On a symbolic level, the long-ruling People's Action Party (PAP) government invokes the images of the national territory as 'home' and the Singaporean citizenry as 'family'. These symbols are not politically neutral. The metaphor of home helps to make the concept of such a geographically small island being a nation more natural and fosters a shared sense of national belonging. The symbol of family projects a communal image on Singapore's population, which is socioeconomically varied and multi-racial (76.8% of the resident population are classified as Chinese, 14% as Malay, 7.7% as Indian, and 1.3% as 'Others', including Eurasians).¹ Political leadership is also referred to in paternal terms, the first two Prime Ministers of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew (1959–1990) and Goh Chok Tong (1990–2004), sometimes being referred as 'fathers'. This paternal mantle is reinforced through their positioning of Singapore as an, as yet, 'maturing' nation, which needs firm leadership for its sustained prosperity and racial harmony. In addition, government policies and thinking also extend into the private domain. The sociologist, John Clammer (1993: 34)

¹ Diane K. Mauzy and R.S. Milne (2002:99)

comments that politics 'penetrates' into every area of everyday life in Singapore, such as family and housing. Indeed, over four-fifths of Singaporeans live in state-subsidized flats and citizens are legally required to support their elderly parents. Furthermore, parliament has decreed one of Singaporeans' main values as, 'family as the basic unit of society'.² In this way, the political domain meshes with the private sphere.

Some literary scholarship hints at, and even refers to, the post-independence political symbolic significance of various references to home (Koh Tai Ann 1984; Eddie Tay 2007) and family (Koh 1989b; Philip Holden 1998) in fiction (see Chapters Three, Five, and Six).³ To date, however, there has been no extensive, published study that considers the political significance of portrayals of home *and* family exclusively in post-Independence, English-language Singaporean novels. To fill this gap, this thesis asks what political meanings and connotations can be interpreted in a variety of fictional depictions of home and family. To address this question, it thematically examines portrayals of the private domain in thirteen English-language Singaporean novels, published

² The five values articulated in the *White Paper on Shared Values* are:

1. Nation before community and society before self;
2. Family as the basic unit of society;
3. Community support and respect for the individual;
4. Consensus, not conflict; and
5. Racial and religious harmony.

(Mauzy and Milne 2002: 63). The White Paper was presented to Parliament in 1991 and was ratified in 1993.

³ Other criticism that argues more generally that fictional portrayals of private lives can have political resonance includes that by Ruth Morse ([1992-1993] 2002; Tamara Wagner (2005) and George Watt (2005).

from 1972-2002, in light of the national political context since full independence in 1965.

Such a study is warranted because political interpretations of novels are particularly important in a country where the avenues of public debate about political matters are limited. The PAP government argues that politics is for politicians alone (see Chapter Six). The government's voice dominates the public domain. The media, which is seen by the PAP leadership as having an educative function, is tightly controlled. There are also restrictions on non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

In addition, it is notable that other art forms in Singapore make associations between representations of home and of family and the political environment. For example, Robert Yeo uses metaphor of home in his plays and poetry (see Chapter Three). In the popular and acclaimed Singaporean film, *I Not Stupid*,⁴ written and directed by Jack Neo (2002) a schoolboy says that if his authoritarian mother is 'like the Government', his sister who was always arguing with her, is 'the opposition'. The white clothing of the mother resembles that worn by the PAP to symbolise purity. The play *Mergers & Acquisitions* by Eleanor Wong (2005) uses the national symbolism of the family to appeal for the social inclusion of homosexuals in Singaporean society. In it a gay character parodies a national song called 'We are family' by plaintively singing the refrain.

The texts considered in this thesis span the thirty-year period (1972–2002) from the publication of the first post-independence novel in English. Those

⁴ The film, at the time of its release was the second-highest grossing movie in Singapore. It was later nominated for Best Asian Film at the 2003 Hong Kong Film Awards.

considered most frequently or in greatest detail are *If We Dream Too Long* (1972) by Goh Poh Seng; *Ricky Star* by Lim Thean Soo (1978), *Raffles Place Ragtime* (1988) by Philip Jeyaretnam, *Peculiar Chris* (1992) by Johann S. Lee, *Fistful of Colours* (1993) by Suchen Christine Lim; *Abraham's Promise* (1995) by Philip Jeyaretnam; Colin Cheong's *tangerine* (1997); *Foreign Bodies* (1997) by Hwee Hwee Tan; *Heartland* (1999) by Daren Shiau; *Mammon Inc.* (2001) by Hwee Hwee Tan and *Following the Wrong God Home* (2001) by Catherine Lim. In addition, over a dozen other thematically relevant novels are also mentioned.

In this study some terms occur regularly and, for the purposes of clarification, their usage is explained. The word 'home' refers to domestic premises and, as the *CED* specifies, can also indicate a person's country. 'Familial depictions' are those that involve characters related by blood or marriage. In addition, courtship and love are also considered in this study because they can culminate in marriage. 'English-language Singaporean novels', in the context of this thesis, refer to texts written by Singaporean novelists who have homes in the city-state.⁵ The term is used, in this study, with exclusive reference to post-Independence novels. In the colonial era, and then during the Malay Federation, only a very few English-language novels written by locals in Singapore were published. These included *Ma-rai-ee* (1952) by Chin Kee Onn, and *Sugar and Salt: A Novel of Malayan Life* (1964) by Johnny Ong. These

⁵ Although Hwee Hwee Tan wrote both her novels whilst as an overseas student in England and then in New York, her parental home was in Singapore. Tan came back to the island for summer holidays from England (personal communication, November 2006) and America (email communication, 27 May 2008).

novelists tended to become Malaysians after the Separation of Singapore from Malaysia (Karamjit Kaur Bhathal 1984).

The 'political domain' includes reference to the process of government and to the government's discourses, values, ideologies and policies. The 'public sphere' refers to spaces where citizens can discuss political issues and the 'private domain' to peoples' personal lives.

The rationale for the study is further discussed immediately below, after which the analytical approach, methodology, and structure of the thesis is outlined, as well as its limits.

Research Rationale

It is argued here that English-language Singaporean novels have only attracted only limited literary research and warrant greater political interpretation. Further analysis of the political significance of home and family would not only take forward current scholarship (as is detailed in the thesis) but would, as indicated above, also have specific cultural pertinence.

Limited Analysis of English-Language Singaporean Novels

There is a widely acknowledged lack of research into the new field of post-independence, English-language Singaporean novels, even though the amount of such research is increasing.

Given that Singapore is a fairly new nation-state, post-independence English-language Singaporean novels form a relatively new area. The first post-independence English-language novels written by Singaporeans appeared in 1972. Since *If We Dream Too Long's* publication, the number of English-language novels by Singaporean writers has grown to over sixty-five titles.

Whilst English-language Singapore novels have received increasing recognition from Singaporean and overseas publishing houses, reviewers, and audiences, in general they have attracted little scholarly criticism (Shirley Lim

1985: 83; Koh 1989b: 274; Kirpal Singh 1998a: xi, xii; Rajeev Patke 1999:53; and Serene Tan and Brenda S.A. Yeoh 2006:153). Singh observed in 1986 that book reviews seem 'to provide the only genuine discussion of fiction whatsoever' (Yap et al. 1986: 486). This critical paucity, which was particularly acute in the 1970s and 1980s, has been attributed to the higher profiles of Singaporean poetry (Lim 1985: 83; Koh 1989b: 273, 1990: 97), drama in English (Koh 1990: 97) and the popularity of the short story and biography (ibid. 97–98). It has also been linked to some of the early fiction's questionable quality (Yap et al.1986: 481; Koh 1989b: 274). Other reasons include Singaporean scholars' personal connections with writers, sometimes leading to a reluctance to be critical (Koh 1993: 54) and their interest in other literatures in English (Patke 2005).

The amount of literary scholarship has increased since the late 1990s, which is probably in part due to greater literary production in that decade. The *Interlogue* series on Singaporean literatures, under the editorship of Singh, includes volumes on fiction (1998),⁶ authorial interviews (2002), and a profile of the novelist, playwright, and poet, Robert Yeo (2005) that is considered, in part, in Chapter Two. Other author-specific studies have been published on novelists and short story writers such as Catherine Lim (Lim Yi-En: 1999) and Gopal Baratham (Ban Kah Choon: 2000). Tamara Wagner's recent book (2005), on novels set in Singapore and Malaysia from 1819 to 2004, encompasses a broad range of texts and is frequently referred to in this thesis.

⁶ The volume on Singaporean fiction (1998) in the main comprises essays on novels, but also encompasses biography, autobiography, and short stories.

There has been increasing importance given to literary scholarship about English-language Singaporean novels. In 2002 the first reader on Singaporean Literature in English was published (Mohammad A. Quayum and Peter Wicks), which included a variety of republished articles on Singaporean fiction. This was a significant departure, although it did not add commentary to the material.

Nevertheless, Singh's comment about the lack of criticism still has some relevance. Paul Tan reported in the *Straits Times* (18 January 2006) that the lack of criticism was even deterring the Ministry of Education from including more Singaporean fiction (such as Hwee Hwee Tan's novels) on school syllabuses. He stated that this was because literature teachers needed material to help them 'navigate' texts.

Need for the Political Interpretation of Singaporean Fiction

There are literary and political reasons for further interpreting Singaporean fiction in light of the political environment, and different views about the political significance of Singaporean fiction have been put forward.

Views on the political significance of the fiction

A variety of perceptions about the political significance of the increasing number of English-language Singaporean novels can be identified since the 1980s. These are considered chronologically.

Shirley Lim argued in 1989 that that Singaporean literature, including fiction, was largely apolitical. However, her textual analysis principally relates to poetry, and the bibliography includes few novels. At about this time, some other academics (Koh 1989b; Ruth Morse [1992–1993] 2002) argued that a selection of novels from the 1980s and/or the 1970s ultimately support the government. Koh's analysis of six novels of the 1970s and 1980s argues that, despite some protest, particularly in the cases of *If We Dream Too Long* and *Rice Bowl* (1984) by Suchen Christine Lim, all the works reaffirm the values of the status quo in their endings. Morse examines three 'novels of national identity' published in the 1980s (2002: 84). These are *The Serpent's Tooth* (1982) by Catherine Lim, *Rice Bowl*, and *The Scholar and the Dragon* (1986) by Stella Kon. Morse (ibid. 85) notes that, although her selected novels are 'predominantly about private lives ... all three consider the values by which Singaporeans are to live'. She (ibid. 96) argues that they are not politically dangerous, complying with 'the government agenda of forging national identity through what appears, on the surface, to be responsible and courageous questioning'.

More recent criticism identifies novels from the late 1980s and 1990s that are found to challenge or destabilize the status quo (Laurel Means 1994; Holden 1998; Leong Liew Geok ([2000] 2002). For instance, Holden (1998: 4) argues that *Abraham's Promise* attempts to 'shake' the ideological connection between nineteenth-century notions of masculinity and national destiny (see Chapter Six). Leong (2002), in her essay entitled 'Dissenting Voices: Political Engagements in the Singaporean Novel in English' (2002: 101), highlights the resistance to the

state in literature including *A Candle or the Sun* (1991) by Gopal Baratham, *Fistful of Colours* (1993) by Suchen Christine Lim, and *Abraham's Promise*.

However, the contemporary criticism of Eddie Tay (2007:142) asserts that there is 'slippage' between 'critique and affirmation' in fiction about the nation:

As political critique by non-politicians is not welcome, it is the government that sets an unchallengeable agenda for the populace. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that literary works that depict Singapore as an imagined community are necessarily ambivalent. Often slipping between critique and affirmation of the discursive formation of the nation, they display the vexed condition of the nation as circumscribed by the state's discourse of nationalism and nation as articulated by the ordinary person.

By extension, Tay (ibid. 158-9) questions Leong's 'optimistic' reading of *Abraham's Promise* and *A Candle or the Sun*, arguing that the degree to which these political novels of the 1990s critique the status quo should not be overstated. This is because, given the novels' endings, they 'are forthright only about their inability to bring about political change'.

Hence, there is some consensus that a variety of the early novels of the 1970s and 1980s largely confirm the status quo. However, there are differences of opinion as what degree some of the more outspoken texts of the 1990s challenge it.

The call for more political analysis of fiction

Some high-profile writers, interviewed for this thesis, argue that reviews of English-language Singaporean novels can often neglect political allusions. In addition, some academic criticism of fiction makes comments about the political significance of the fiction without elucidating or expanding on the texts. This sometimes creates gaps that require further research.

Philip Jeyaretnam observes that there is a lack of political commentary in reviews of English-language Singaporean novels. He comments:

Sometimes in Singapore it's very difficult to say things directly about political issues because of concerns about censorship and governmental reaction so that some writers certainly do try and say things in a fairly subtle way [However] they don't generate debate.... [P]erhaps the reviewers themselves don't want to express a view ... or draw [it] out ... [or] perhaps they just miss it. (Personal communication, December 2005)

Here Jeyaretnam indicates a need for political allusions in Singaporean fiction to be identified for debate outside the texts. In making this comment, he also indicates that he sees considerable political subtlety in some Singaporean fiction.

The Singaporean poet and academic Kirpal Singh also observes that reviewers and academics tend not to highlight some novels' political dimensions (personal communication, October 2006). Writers whom he feels are under analysed include Lim Thean Soo, Daren Shiau, Hwee Hwee Tan, and Catherine Lim. He attributes (personal communication October 2006) the lack of criticism in part to the subtlety of the fiction itself:

my main quarrel with my fellow writers is that we stop short of really going deep because that journey requires a blatant honesty which for one reason or another we are not prepared to be. There are always allusions but ... the trouble when you just keep alluding ... the fiction does not make the same kind of impact ... it has to be blatant at some points ... But in Singapore I think there is still this trepidation, this fear.

In addition, it is notable that some pieces of criticism make brief or allusive political interpretations. For instance, Wagner (2005), in her study of Occidentalism, sometimes makes intriguing political comments relating to multi-

racialism or urban policies (see Chapters Four and Two). This brevity may be because the main focus of her study is not political.

The academic, Rajeev Patke (1999: 53) has argued that criticism of Singaporean fiction has generally been of questionable quality partly because of the tendency to 'treat the texts at hand as pretexts for the expression of the critic's own social anxieties and concerns about the relation of the narrative to social reality'. Here he raises the issue of subjectivity, which is hard to comment on without knowing the critics personally, and a lack of analysis.

Political limitations on public debate in Singapore

Political innuendoes in fiction are significant in a country where political comments in the public domain are limited. Political perspectives that diverge from state discourses and are presented in forums outside the political domain are less common in such an environment. In addition, it should be noted that, within the political domain, the PAP's voice is dominant.

Although freedom of speech is enshrined in the Singaporean constitution (Simon Tay 2004), the public sphere is restricted. The lack of civil society is an issue with regard to restrictions of NGOs and on the media. NGOs are only eligible for registration if they have apolitical remits. Controversially, the gay advocacy group 'People Like Us' has repeatedly been refused registration. The media are controlled through the government's licensing of news organizations, the state's right to imprison journalists without trial if they are deemed to have acted against national interests and the government's appointment of newspaper

companies' board members. In addition, there are forceful libel laws (Cherian George 2000: 65–66). The degree of compliance with the state exhibited by the widely read, English-language *Straits Times* is a matter of debate (see George 2000: 67). Certainly, the 'Forum Page' of the *Straits Times* provides an important, albeit filtered, outlet for the airing of opinions, but this is only one section of the publication. Opposition figure, Joshua Jeyaretnam (2000: 6) refers to press 'that slavishly repeats everything that Government has to say and put out'.

Whilst the government has argued that politics is for politicians and not for individual citizens (as is detailed in Chapter Six), opposition politicians can find it hard to get across their viewpoints. Veteran opposition politician, Joshua Jeyaretnam, highlights the amount of time that Parliament does not sit (2000: 1) and the speed at which bills can be passed (ibid. 9). Even elected politicians need to obtain licences to hold outdoor public gatherings.

Novelists' political awareness

Several Singaporean novelists have publicly stated that they like more political debate. In addition, it is not uncommon for them to be civil servants and therefore familiar with the political environment.

In the mid-1960s Goh Poh Seng sought to foster diversity of opinion in his literary magazine, *Tumasek*. Goh's first editorial (1964a: 3) stated that one of the magazine's principal functions was to 'to stimulate consciousness in our readers and ourselves [the writers] about life within the context of our environment.' Speaking of the media in Singapore, Goh stated (1964b: 4) 'No doubt the

English-educated lack a platform where they can openly discuss issues because there is only the *Straits Times* and the *Malayan Times*, and the less said about these papers the better.'

Both Catherine Lim and Philip Jeyaretnam advocate greater openness. Lim, who describes herself (2005: 5) as a full-time writer and 'part-time political commentator' in her imaginative book about her own funeral, has contributed political think pieces to the *Straits Times*. Most famously, in her infamous article in the *Straits Times* (20 November 1994) she discussed authoritarian influence of the then Senior Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, on his successor (see Chapter Six). In what is now referred to as the Catherine Lim Affair, the government publicly reprimanded Lim. The severity of its response made international news and is still recognised as a significant incident in Singaporean politics. Although Catherine Lim publicly apologized for having caused the government offence, she conspicuously did not take back what she had said in her public apology in the *Straits Times* (7 December). In addition, in 'An Open Letter to the Prime Minister' on her website she makes a plea for 'the long-standing issue of political openness'. Philip Jeyaretnam, who describes himself as a Liberal with a capital 'L' (Hiebert, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, January 18 1996), champions freedom of expression in his non-fictional writing (1990) and passionately advocates rule based on 'reasoned' debate rather than imposed by government (1989). When asked by the *Straits Times* (1990, 25 September) what single thing would improve the quality of his life, he responded 'No more censorship'.

Some novelists are active or former civil servants, including Catherine Lim, Suchen Christine Lim, the late Lim Thean Soo, and the late Goh Sin Tub. These authors may be not only be politically aware but in addition, they may have a sense of how far they can go in challenging the status quo through their fictional writing, despite the Catherine Lim incident referred to earlier.

Analytical Approach

Contextualization

A contextual approach to Singaporean fiction is advocated by some commentators on the national literature and is warranted by the Singaporean focus of this thesis's core texts.

Koh (1989b: 275) and George Watt (2005: 22–23) both argue for a contextual approach. They respectively question the application of the related, and continuingly influential, fields of practical criticism (Koh 1989b: 275) and new criticism (Watt 2005) to Singaporean fiction and Robert Yeo's literature. Notably, both these schools of criticism view the text in isolation and therefore as devoid of social context. Koh (1989b: 275) succinctly and persuasively argues that, given modern theories such as Marxism, structuralism, and post-structuralism, it is:

difficult to hold views innocent of an awareness of the cultural and historical circumstances of text production; how ... writers (and) critics ... are constituted by structures of power, 'coded' by language and culture or influenced by ambient social, economic or ideological values.

In addition, Philip Jeyaretnam comments:

I do think that any reading of Singaporean literature has to include an understanding of the political history of Singapore because so much of [it is] ... boxed in by the political context. [This context] ... is probably the one source of anger coursing through much of Singaporean literature It's a kind of rage [that] the writer never seems to be able to do much about. And so I think that ... it's impossible to read Singapore literature without looking at political history. (Personal communication, December 2006).

In this thesis, which makes a political interpretation of texts, comparisons are made between perspectives that can be identified in selected passages and government discourses, ideologies, values, policies, and processes of power. This process is fundamental in identifying the political perspectives in the novels in relation to the status quo. Where novels seem to contradict state discourses, no attempt is made to test whether or not the depictions are realistic, as this study is principally literary.

The largely Singaporean setting of most of the core novels (see Table One below) makes the Singaporean contextual analysis of the texts important. Whilst *tangerine* is set in Vietnam and *Mammon Inc.* in multiple locations, the protagonists reflect on their Singaporean homes. Biographical references in the paratexts of Goh Sin Tub's *The Sin-kheh* and Johann Lee's *Peculiar Chris* further suggest that these novels are inspired by Singaporean experience. Goh tells his readers that his historical tale is loosely based on his immigrant grandparents' life stories (see Chapter Three). From a visual perspective, the front cover of *Peculiar Chris* is a photograph of the author posing as the protagonist. Johann Lee states that he agreed for his image to be used because he wanted to show solidarity with the cause of homosexuality that he represented in his novel (personal communication, April 2005).

The importance of political context is indicated by the fact that several of the core texts make specific references (as will be indicated in the thesis) to existing Singaporean laws, government campaigns and initiatives, and/or actual politicians. For instance, Lee Kuan Yew is explicitly named in *If We Dream Too*

Long (67), *Fistful of Colours* (296, 319), and *Heartland* (211). In addition, as Wagner points out (2005: 277), Lee, who is commonly referred to as LKY, is alluded to in *Following the Wrong God Home*. This is through a character that is known by his 'awesome initials' MTC and that is introduced as 'the Founder of Modern Singapore' (5).

The post-independence period is the focus of contextual attention because, as is outlined in Table One below, nearly all of the texts are principally set in this era. Three of them include historical passages dating back to the colonial period or before it, and one, *The Sin-kheh*, is completely set during the British regime. Whilst the novels that have historical scenes could be related to the periods in which they are set, they are also likely to have some relevance to the time in which they were written, for novelists, like historians, are unlikely to be able to detach themselves completely from their own age and, on a more conscious level, may feel safer commenting on a previous political era. On this latter point, it is noticeable that a few of the core texts set in post-independent Singapore are also historical, in that they situate the narratives a decade or more before the novels' publication dates. This will be discussed in relation to Robert Yeo's *The Adventures of Holden Heng* in Chapter Two.

Table One: Narrative settings and temporalities of core texts

Novels	Primary Narrative Location(s)^a	Secondary Narrative Location(s)^b	Subsidiary Narrative Location(s)^c	Primary Narratorial Period^d	Periods Spanned in Novel^e
<i>If We Dream Too Long</i> (1972: Singapore)	Singapore	None	None	Mid 1968	1950s-1960s
<i>Ricky Star</i> (1978: Singapore)	Singapore	South China Seas	Rome	1960s	Early 1900s and 1960s
<i>The Adventures of Holden Heng</i> (1986: Singapore)	Singapore	N/A	N/A	1970s	1970s
<i>Raffles Place Ragtime</i> (1988: Singapore)	Singapore	N/A	N/A	1980s	1980s
<i>Peculiar Chris</i> (1992: Singapore)	Singapore	Sydney	Airspace from Singapore to London	Late 1980s–early 1990s	1970s–1990s
<i>The Sinkheh</i> (1993: Singapore)	Singapore	China	N/A	1894–early 1990s	
<i>Fistful of Colours</i> (1993: Singapore)	Singapore	Malaysia, Scotland, China	China	1980s	Early 1900s – 1980s
<i>Abraham's Promise</i> (1995: Singapore)	Singapore	None	England, Colombo, Malaysia	Late 1980s	1930s–late 1980s
<i>Foreign Bodies</i> (1997: London)	Singapore	England, Holland	China	1990s	1960–1990s
<i>tangerine</i> (1997: Singapore)	Vietnam	Singapore		1990s	1970s–1990s
<i>Heartland</i> (1999: Singapore)	Singapore	Thailand		Mid 1990s	1990s
<i>Mammon Inc.</i> (2001: London)	Oxford, New York, and Singapore	London	None	1990s	1990s
<i>Following the Wrong God Home</i> (2001: London)	Singapore	China	Hong Kong, America, Thailand	1984–5	Pre-independence–1985

^a 'Primary location(s)' are defined as those where the main narrative affecting the central characters of the novel occurs.

^b 'Secondary narrative locations' are those, additional to the primary locations, where scenes are depicted.

^c 'Subsidiary narrative locations' are those additional to those above, where narrative events are described.

^d 'Primary narratorial time' refers to the period in which the narrator(s) convey the story.

^e 'Periods spanned in the novel' refer to eras in which scenes take place.

The Relative Authority of the Author, Text, and the Reader

Literary criticism that identifies meaning generally takes articulated or implicit positions on the relative authority of the author, the text, and the reader. This thesis draws on all three approaches, with most emphasis being given to the text and to the reader.

The view that the meaning of a piece of literature can be ascertained through deference to an author, which was popular in the nineteenth century, found a strong advocate in E.D. Hirsch ([1960] 1976a, [1967] 1976b). Hirsch argued that the author is the authority on his or her texts. However, this view restricts literature to a single meaning and, if adopted today, ignores the entire field of post-structuralism. Conversely, the New Critics propounded looking exclusively at the text, W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley ([1949] 1976) famously warning against the fallacy of accepting authors' intentions. The post-modernist Barthes ([1968] 2000) influentially argued that the author is 'dead' and announced the birth of the reader.

The defenders of these various approaches may seem to hold uncompromising positions, yet Hirsch ([1960] 1976: 47) states that the meaning of a text resides with its author and that the reader has to make assessments about the author's meaning. This therefore gives the reader an important role.

Similarly, Seán Burke (1992) points out that, after Roland Barthes wrote his seminal essay 'The Death of the Author', Barthes went on to refer to writers in his scholarship.

More moderately, more recent critics such as Terry Eagleton (1996) and Frank Palmer (1992) argue that the texts' creators warrant some attention, although they are not to be treated as the ultimate authority. Yet this multiplicity of approach is not always recognized by theorists. Seán Burke notes (1992: 26–27) that Barthes's critique of the glorification of the author does not take into account more subdued opinions of authorship. Barthes, 'in seeking to dethrone the author, is led to an apotheosis of authorship that vastly outpaces anything to be found in the critical history he takes arms against'.

Notably, some literary criticism defers to all three sources of authority. For instance, Koh considers the nationalistic motivations of authors in Singapore (1990:103), analyses the contents of texts (1989b) and interprets the novels in relation to societal values (1989b). Likewise, Holden (1998), in his analysis of *Abraham's Promise*, considers the author's biographical background, the text, and the Singaporean political context.

In this thesis all three sources of authority are drawn on to varying degrees. The texts are considered of primary importance, as is the reading of them in a political context.

Methodology

Contextualization in Post-Independent Singapore

Each of the specific themes concerning home and family are related to the post-independence national political environment of Singapore at the openings of each chapter. This contextual background makes reference to relevant PAP government discourses, strategies, ideologies, values and policies. As the period of literature under review ends in 2002, the premiership of Lee Hsieng Loong (2004–present) is not included. Therefore, the political contextualization of the literature is historical.

Both primary and secondary sources are drawn on. Primary material includes political speeches, politicians' biographies, Singaporean legislation, reports and newspaper articles. There is also considerable reference to secondary texts about Singaporean studies, politics, history, sociology, culture, geography, and architecture. These studies, spanning several disciplines, often make reference to PAP government policies and outlooks, because of the government's directive approach. Notably, they often give much less attention to the stances of opposition parties.

The Selection of 'Core' Novels

Thirteen novels have been chosen for their thematic relevance to one or more chapter topics concerning home or family. As this is a relatively large number of texts to be considered in a thesis, the pertinent passages are exclusively analysed with regard to the themes of each thesis chapter.

Together, the texts span all decades of the nation's post-independence literary production, so that in some cases the themes may be evaluated over time. The period under review begins in 1972 with *If We Dream Too Long* by Goh Poh Seng this novel being one of the first post-independence English-language Singaporean novels. It finishes in the new millennium with *Following The Wrong God Home* (2001) by Catherine Lim. Two novels from the 1970s, 1980s, and millennium are included, and six from the 1990s. This imbalance occurs because a greater number of Singaporean novels were published in the 1990s, some of which had particular topical relevance to the thesis's themes.

Most of the selected novels have secured national recognition and therefore are of perceived relevance to Singaporeans; their national receptions are outlined in Table Two below. A few of these novels were published in London: *Foreign Bodies* (1997) and *Mammon Inc.* (2001) by Hwee Hwee Tan, and *Following The Wrong God Home*. Whilst they have been targeted at an international audience, their popularity in Singapore testifies to their relevance in the authors' home country.

Table Two: National reception of the 'core' selected texts

Date	Title	Reception in Singapore ^a
1972	<i>If We Dream Too Long</i>	Winner of the National Book Development Council of Singapore's (NBDCS) Award for English Fiction in 1976. The Government gave the author the highest arts award, the Cultural medallion, in 1983.
1978	<i>Ricky Star</i>	The Government awarded the author the Public Service Star for Authorship in 1979.
1986	<i>The Adventures of Holden Heng</i>	The novel was reprinted in 1988.
1988	<i>Raffles Place Ragtime</i>	The novel generated 13,000 sales in Singapore and Malaysia. ^b
1992	<i>Peculiar Chris</i>	A best seller in Singapore. The novel was adapted into the play <i>Happy Endings: Asian Boys Vol 3</i> by Alfian Sa'at in 2007,
1993	<i>Fistful of Colours</i>	Winner of the inaugural Singapore Literature Prize in 1992. ^c The first Singaporean novel to be included in the 'A'-Level syllabus (set text from 2007).
1995	<i>Abraham's Promise</i>	The novel has been on 'O'-Level (for fast-track students) and NUS syllabuses.
1997	<i>Foreign Bodies</i>	Bestseller in Singapore.
1997	<i>tangerine</i>	Winner of the Singapore Literature Prize 1996.
1999	<i>Heartland</i>	'O'-level set text, 2007 and 2008.
2001	<i>Mammon Inc.</i>	The novel was adapted into a play for the 2002 Singapore Arts Festival and won the prestigious Singapore Literature Prize in 2004. In addition, it has been on the undergraduate cultural theory syllabus at Singapore's National Institute of Education between 2004 and 2006.
2001	<i>Following the Wrong God Home</i>	Sold at least 5,000 copies in Asia. ^d

^a Novels that achieve sales of over 3,000 copies in Singapore are high volume.

^b Personal communication from Joo Sin, Manager, Distribution Sales & Marketing Marshall Cavendish International (Asia) Pte Ltd, August 8, 2005.

^c The prize incorporated the publication of the novel a year later.

^d Orion marketing data by personal communication (2 November 2005).

The core novels have not been selected because they are politically renowned per se, or because of their authorship. Consequently, the study does not include some texts that are commonly regarded as being political, such as Suchen Christine Lim's *Rice Bowl* (1984) and Gopal Baratham's *A Candle or the Sun* (1991), although it does analyse Philip Jeyaretnam's political novel *Abraham's Promise* (1995) because of its strong emphasis on fatherhood. Nor have novels been selected according to an author's ethnicity. This is in part because there is a limited choice of such texts, most English-language Singaporean novels being composed by ethnically Chinese writers. In particular, a post-independence English-language novel written by a Singaporean Malay writer is a rarity. However, two novels by Philip Jeyaretnam, who is officially of Indian descent, are selected for their thematic relevance and novels written by Malay and Eurasian authors are mentioned in Chapter Three.

Authorial Interviews

Singaporean novelists have been interviewed about their writing. Face-to-face interviews and/or e-mail correspondence was conducted with Colin Cheong, the

late Goh Sin Tub, Philip Jeyaretnam, Stella Kon, Johann S. Lee, Catherine Lim, Suchen Christine Lim, Darren Shiau, Hwee Hwee Tan and Robert Yeo.

These communications formed part of the background to this research. The authors provided some contextual information about writing in Singapore that is included in this introductory chapter; about their own backgrounds; and about the novels, for instance, when the texts were written and, in some cases, the backgrounds in which the texts were situated. Authorial comments are rarely considered in the analysis because the political interpretation of the texts in this thesis is that of the researcher's alone. Furthermore, during interviews, it often did not feel appropriate to ask the authors about their political stances on their work, given the sensitivities of making political comments in Singapore.

Thesis Structure

The first two themes concern the home. Chapter Two contextualizes the fictional landscape of housing – including representations of largely bygone villages, historically precious houses and modern high-rise blocks of public housing – in light of the government’s urban policies. Then, in Chapter Three, representations and wordplay concerning Singaporean ‘homes’ are related to the government’s nationalist discourses. This contextualization is supported with theory that links literature with nationalism (Benedict Anderson and Franco Morretti) and, to a lesser degree, concepts of migration.

The three other themes are related to the family. Chapter Four looks at the pre-familial state of courtship. Budding relationships are considered in relation to their treatment of class and racial differences within the national family. The relationships are linked to the government’s de-emphasis of class differences, as well as to its promotion of the value of racial harmony and its multi-racial policy of categorizing citizens according to their races. The contextual background is supported with references to sociological studies of class in Singapore. The last two chapters politically analyse different aspects of family life. Intra-family tensions that juxtapose individual needs with group interests are examined in Chapter Five. They are linked with the Singaporean government’s advocacy of communitarianism and its denigration of excessive individualism. This contextual approach is supported with reference to communitarianism and liberal notions of individualism. The last chapter focuses on portrayals of paternalism. This is

related to government leaders being referred to as fathers and to appellations of the government as paternalistic. The concept is considered in light of Confucian thought, which encompasses a paternalistic outlook, and with regard to liberal critiques of the behaviour.

Chapters Two and Three, which cover the widely portrayed topics of housing and the overlap between home and nation, both involve the analysis of about half a dozen novels. Additionally, they also draw on some other English-language Singaporean novels for supplementary material. In the remaining chapters, fewer novels are examined. This is because Chapter Four looks at the more limited topic of courtship and because Chapters Five and Six, which address communitarianism and individualism, are the most conceptual parts of the thesis.

The Study's Focus and Boundaries

The political interpretation of portrayals of home and family in a selection of post-independence English-language Singaporean novels provides rich material for analysis. Even within this framework, the number of themes relating to home and family cannot be exhaustive and are therefore limited and selective. Furthermore, not all the potential aspects of a particularly expansive theme such as home and nation can be examined, as doing so would dilute the depth of analysis or lead to an unwieldy chapter.

The thesis focuses on the political significance of portrayals of family and home in relation to the government of post-independent Singapore. Although a minority of the core texts have colonial settings and could also be related to the former British regime, this is outside the remit of this thesis. This is because the texts were written after independence and therefore are coloured in part through the authors' awareness of Singapore's subsequent nation status, and because the historical political contextual framework would be substantively different.

The English-language novels analysed (1972–2002) do not extend to those on Singapore by diasporic, Malaysian, or expatriate writers.⁷ This is because these writers are based in, or come from, non-Singaporean political environments. Notably, Lau Siew Mei, author of the politicized novel, *Playing*

⁷ Novels set in Singapore by expatriate writers include *Saint Jack* (1973) by Paul Theroux and *The Singapore Grip* (1978) by F.G. Farrell; those by Malaysian writers encompass *Scorpion Orchid* (1976) by Lloyd Fernando and *The Eleventh Finger* (2000) by Marie Gerrina Louis.

Madam Mao (2000),⁸ has acknowledged that she had an enhanced sense artistic freedom after she left Singapore in 1994, to live in Australia.⁹ Lau informed the *Courier Mail* in Queensland (Karen Milliner, 17 June 2000) that when she was in Singapore 'there was not the artistic freedom ... everything was controlled'. She later commented in *The Straits Times* (Ong Sor Fern, 3 September 2001), 'I'm a creative artist. That's why I left [Singapore].' Dennis Haskell (2005) cites her reflection 'I was often intimidated when I was in Singapore ... that's part of why I'm in Australia now, at least nobody tries to squash me.'¹⁰

Neither does the literature examined in this thesis stretch to the substantive field of post-independence, English-language Singaporean short stories. Nor does it broaden into Singaporean fiction written in Tamil, Chinese, or Malay since 1965.¹¹ Gwynne Siau Wey Yap (1997/1998: 1)¹³ aptly notes that, as little of this prose has been translated into English, its inclusion is not a 'viable' option for literary scholars working exclusively in English.

Furthermore, as this study is not comparative, it does not consider political dimensions to portrayals of home and family in other national literatures.

⁸ *Playing Madam Mao* (2000), is renowned for its political content (Wagner 2002b and Haskell 2005), mixing aspects of the Chinese Cultural Revolution with the so-called Marxist conspiracy that occurred in Singapore in 1987, when the Singaporean authorities imprisoned twenty-two people accused of being Marxists under the Internal Security Act (ISA).

⁹ Lau Siew Mei left Singapore in her early twenties, having graduated at the National University of Singapore (NUS) and worked on *The Straits Times* as a journalist (Wagner 2002a; Haskell 2005).

¹⁰ See 'Unpublished Materials' section of Bibliography.

¹¹ For surveys of scholarship about Singaporean literature written in Chinese, see Wong Yoon Wah (1986, 2000); in Malay, see Liaw Yock Fang (1986) and Shaharuddin Maaruf (2000); and in Tamil, see Elangovan (2000).

Hence, it can be seen that home and family have acknowledged political significance in Singapore, being used not only as metaphors in political discourses but also in other artistic mediums. The subjects of home and family in English-language Singaporean novels have surfaced in literary criticism, and there is now a need to explore the topics more fully, as a topic in its own right. How can depictions of home and family be interpreted politically in the fiction? For instance, are portrayals of housing significant in any way, given that the vast majority of Singaporeans live in public housing?

CHAPTER TWO

HOUSING AND THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT

What happened to the old neighbourhoods, the houses, streets and fields that hugged the curves and folds of the earth? How have I ended up here, standing in one concrete box among thousands identical to it, my position within the grid of Singapore fixed by the coordinates of street, block and apartment number?

Philip Jeyaretnam, *Abraham's Promise* (59)

Residential accommodation features in many English-language Singaporean novels. Home settings include kampongs (villages or settlements), period terraces, and modern, high-rise, Housing Development Board (HDB) flats. HDB estates are so engagingly portrayed in Daren Shiau's *Heartland* (1999) that literary scholar, Peter Wicks (2003: unpaginated) suggests that they are 'the real characters' of the novel, whilst Wei-Wei Yeo (2004: 26) comments that the novel's attention to the blocks, and life in them, is 'curious' given 'the lack of representation of other [commercial] public spaces'. This chapter examines the political significance of the fictional, Singaporean, residential landscape.

Such an investigation is warranted, in part because of gaps in current literary criticism. There is no published study that systematically interprets depictions of different types of residential accommodation in light of the PAP Government's urban policies. More specifically, portrayals of kampongs or period housing have attracted scant political interpretation. Tamara Wagner (2005: 188) raises the political significance of various bleak descriptions of HDB flats (see

below); however, there has not yet been any response to her observation in published literary criticism.

The literature itself invites political interpretation. There are textual references to the state body responsible for urban renewal, as is expounded below. The specification 'Housing Development Board' – or its abbreviation, HDB – is commonly used in descriptions of apartments. As such, individuals' flats are not simply being described; instead, accommodation subsidized by the state is being clearly identified and commented on. Such specifications occur, for instance, in *If We Dream Too Long* (1972: 38) by Goh Poh Seng and *Abraham's Promise* (1995: 59) by Philip Jeyaretnam.

A political interpretation is also warranted because accommodation is an area in which the public domain of politics affects the private lives of individual citizens. The majority of Singaporeans live in public housing; and the Government has actively managed land: for instance, building some HDB estates on the sites of former urban kampongs that lay around the city's periphery. Housing and urban development is politically significant in Singapore – the PAP Government's reputation is associated with its housing policies and the country's national economic development, which has been allied to the reconstruction of much of the city's centre.

This study analyses fictional portrayals of kampongs, period housing, and HDB flats in the context of the state's public housing and urban renewal programmes, and critiques of them; and of pertinent government discourses. It principally draws on seven topically relevant novels that span the period under

review. These are: *If We Dream Too Long* (1972), by Goh Poh Seng; *Ricky Star* (1978), by Lim Thean Soo; *The Adventures of Holden Heng* (1986), by Robert Yeo; *Fistful of Colours* (1993), by Suchen Christine Lim; *Abraham's Promise* (1995), by Philip Jeyaretnam; *Heartland* (1999), by Daren Shiau; and *Following The Wrong God Home* (2001), by Catherine Lim.

In this chapter, it is argued that housing and the redevelopment of Singapore is such an important political topic that portrayals of residential accommodation, when read in this context, may have political significance. In particular, it is posited that portrayals of kampongs can be related to urban policies and political leadership; period housing to urban renewal; and public housing to state discourses and strategies concerning housing construction.

The political context is of such importance to the textual analysis that it is referred to in different parts of the chapter. First, the government's housing policy is outlined. Later on, further information is provided about the demise of kampongs, urban renewal, and the construction of public housing.

Housing in Post-Independent Singapore

The Singaporean landscape has been transformed since national sovereign independence (Rodolphe De Koninck 1992: 36). The relatively low-lying architecture built in the colonial era has given way to a high-rise cityscape. New housing has been a central feature of this modernized urban landscape, which has also included the construction of modern transport systems, land reclamation (ibid. 38), the sanitization of waterways (ibid. 46), and the commercial development of the city centre.

When the PAP came to power in 1959, there was an acute shortage of housing (Jon Quah 1984: 121; Michael Hill and Lian Kwen Fee 1995: 119) and its standard was 'low' (Diane K. Mauzy and R.S. Milne 2002: 90). Many of the old houses in the centre of town were overcrowded; sometimes ten families or more lived in premises designed for one family (Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation 1965).

The HDB was set up by the PAP Government in 1960. Its initial focus was to re-house Singaporeans of lower socioeconomic groups. The HDB constructed radically modern tower blocks (C.J.W.-L. Wee 2007: 77), in what Leo van Grunsven (2000: 109) describes as a uniformly 'high-rise high-density form'. It resettled people who lived in urban kampongs or 'squatter colonies' around the centre's periphery; and those in overcrowded, old shophouses in town, leaving sizeable areas of the centre of Singapore open for economic development (Kian Koon Choo 1988: 245–246).

Within a decade of the HDB's existence, about a third of the population had been re-housed (Hill and Lian 1995: 119); by 2000, 86 per cent of Singaporeans lived in HDB flats (Mauzy and Milne, 2002: 90). The HDB built both 'small-scale estates' and the new satellite towns that each housed between 150,000 and 350,000 citizens (van Grunsven 2000: 109), such as Queenstown and Toa Payoh, which enhanced the PAP's international standing.¹²

Public housing provision has political significance. The Singaporean sociologist Chua Beng-Huat (1997a: xi) observes that public housing is the 'foundation stone' on which the PAP has built 'its legitimacy among Singaporeans'; Mauzy and Milne comment (2002: 90) that it gives 'visible proof' that the PAP keeps its promises. HDB accommodation is widely regarded to have given the PAP competitive advantage over opposition parties (e.g. C. Paul Bradley 1965: 307; Hussin Mutalib 2005: 249). Although the HDB is administratively independent of the government, it is nevertheless a statutory body:¹³ its board members are government appointees (Teh Cheang Wan 1975: 7), and it follows government policies (Mauzy and Milne 2002: 92).¹⁴ Home-building has been a powerful and visible component of the PAP's nation-building (Peggy Teo et al. 2004: 92). Chua (1997a: xi) asserts that, for Singaporeans,

¹² Lim Kim San, who played a pivotal role in the provision of HDB housing in the early 1960s, was honoured with the Philippine-based Magsaysay Award for community leadership in Asia (Hussin Mutalib 2005: 249). In 1995 the Asian Institute of Management awarded the HDB the Asian Management Award in Development Management (Lily Kong and Brenda S.A. Yeoh 2003: 95).

¹³ The HDB was set up under the Housing and Development Act.

¹⁴ Van Grunsven (2000: 108) states that 'The government has assumed a dominant role in the provision of urban housing through its agent, the Housing and Development Board'.

'high-quality public housing is the single most important tangible material benefit derived from the impressive national macroeconomic growth'.

The introduction of modern HDB housing provided inhabitants with good sanitation and often more space than in previous accommodation. Many public surveys have shown satisfaction with the dwellings (Liu Thai Ker 1975: 179-181; Cedric Pugh 1989: 852). In addition, the housing programme has won international acclaim. However, some sociological studies on the lives of HDB dwellers are more sceptical about improvements in poorer residents' quality of material lives. T.J.S. George (1984: 107) notes that, Iain Buchanan (1972) 'pointed out that squatter resettlement, whilst successful in some respects, did not reach the heart of the matter because the slum system was only transferred from one physical setting to another'. This perspective contrasts with state discourses, which differentiated the slums from modern HDB living. For example, the HDB stated, in 1963, that an area in Bukit Ho Swee 'had been completely changed from one of the most congested slums in Singapore into that of a healthy housing estate with modern community services and amenities'.¹⁵ In addition, as will be discussed in this chapter's final section, there has been debate about issues such as the breaking up of old neighbourhoods in the city centre and kampongs, and the height of public housing. With regard to the former, James C. Scott (1998: 59) notes that one purpose of the 'vast' public housing scheme was 'to supersede the older forms of settlement that were the

¹⁵ Cited by Loh Kah Seng (2008: 16) from the HDB Annual Report 1963: 28.

most politically opaque and resistant to PAP control. Thus local Malay kampung areas ... were explicitly targeted for dispersal.'

Strong legislation was passed to support the Government's urban developments. For example, the 1966 Land Acquisition Act, as Chua (1997a: 20–21) explains, enabled the government to buy land at 'excessively low prices' in the 'interest of national development'. The Act, he comments, made 'every land holding ... constantly vulnerable to government acquisition' and 'violated common laws governing property rights'. Yet Chua (ibid. xii) also refers to the PAP's 'democratisation' of property and observes that it, 'undoubtedly binds the people, in gratitude, to the government.'. Through such legislation, the government increased state ownership of Singaporean landmass from 26 per cent in 1968 to 75 per cent in 1985 (Christopher Tremewan 1994: 53).

Kampongs and their Demise

Kampongs and/or their widespread disappearance from the Singaporean residential landscape are represented in several English-language Singaporean novels published in the period under review. Yet there is scant published literary criticism that politically analyses these portrayals. This section newly considers, and politically interprets, portrayals of kampongs in *Ricky Star* (henceforth *Ricky*), *Fistful of Colours* (henceforth *Fistful*), and *Heartland*. In addition, the study also identifies a possible allusive association to a kampong hut in *Following The Wrong God Home* (henceforth *Following*).

The study encompasses depictions of urban kampongs. Political sensitivities about the urban, crowded, low-lying settlements that formerly mushroomed around the periphery of the city centre after the Second World War are evident in the divergent terms used to describe these areas. They are often called 'squatter colonies' and 'squatter settlements' in state discourses, as is shown below. Similarly, a variety of academics use these terms (e.g. Chua 1997a: 52; Hill and Lian 1995: 114). On the other side, the historian Loh Kah Seng (2007a and 2007b) refers to these 'densely-built wooden housing' settlements as urban kampongs. He argues that the term 'squatter' wrongly implies a lack of rights to reside on the land (see Loh 2007b: 7). Whether or not fictional portrayals of kampongs use the state's terminology or not will later be identified in the texts.

In this section, portrayals of kampongs are considered in light of state discourses about the need for the clearance of urban kampongs and of some critiques of the kampongs' demise. Drawing on this context, it is posited that diverse responses to the government's resettlement strategy, and discourses that justified it, can be identified in the fiction. To facilitate this politico-historical approach, some background to the government's resettlement programme is outlined below.

The State's Role in the Demise of Kampongs

By the 1990s, kampongs had largely disappeared from Singapore's landscape (Chua 1995b: 240). The government's resettlement of kampong dwellers was politically important and sensitive, and required clear communication. Loh (2007a: 23) comments that the 'removal of the urban ... kampongs was integral to the self-belief of the PAP Government'.¹⁶ The British regime had tried and had not uncommonly failed to re-settle urban kampong dwellers particularly in the post-war period from 1947-1959 (Teh Cheang Wan 1975: 4; Loh 2008: 7-9). Lee Kuan Yew (2000: 120) recalls that, 'there were enormous problems' in resettling people in the early years, in part because of the low rents in 'squatter settlement[s]' (ibid. 118). Loh (2007a: 22) states that urban kampong dwellers were 'frequently' relocated against their will in the 1960s and 1970s but that it

¹⁶ For clarity, it should be noted that Loh (2007b: 8) refers to two types of kampong: urban settlements around the centre's periphery and more rural communities.

was hard for them to mount sustained resistance to the policy as, after the 1963 election, the PAP dissolved some organizations that campaigned on their behalf.¹⁷

The state promoted the resettlement programme by promoting the comforts of modern flats (Teo et al. 2004: 102) and emphasizing the squalor of urban kampongs (Loh 2007b: 6–8). Teo et al. (2004:102) note the HDB's successful strategy of socializing people who lived in dwellings without modern facilities 'into the idea of living in modern high-rise homes provided with modern sanitation, tap water supply and electricity'. Loh asserts that urban kampongs were represented by the government as dangerous and filthy: this is well-illustrated by the HDB's statement (1967) that Kampong Bukit Ho Swee was as 'an insanitary, congested and dangerous squatter area'.¹⁸

Loh infers that the state rhetoric about poor living conditions in the urban kampongs has had historical impact. He argues (2007b: 5) that, whereas rural kampongs or villages are considered with nostalgia in Singapore, 'the urban kampong is largely forgotten in the historical memory. It is only recalled, vaguely, as a social blight to highlight the achievements of the institution which eradicated it, the Housing and Development Board (HDB).' Indeed, it is notable that the secondary-school history book, *Understanding Our Past* (1999: 221), published by the Ministry of Education, displays a photograph of a dilapidated hut in a 'squatter' settlement.

¹⁷ Loh (2007a: 1) refers to organizations including the Rural Residents' Association and the Singapore Country People's Association.

¹⁸ Loh cites (2007b: 8) this quotation from Housing Development Board, *Bukit Ho Swee Estate* (1967: 39).

To facilitate the redevelopment of Singapore, the state purchased kampong land. In some instances this occurred after fires broke out on urban kampongs. Loh (2008: 18) states that the causes of kampong fires were commonly treated with suspicion by kampong dwellers,

*As development projects increasingly encroached onto areas of unauthorised wooden housing in the 1950s, kampong dwellers commonly considered fire as an act of arson committed by hostile landlords, **the government**, hired secret society hands, or simply a spiteful neighbour' (emphasis added).*

The largest fire was the 1961 Bukit Ho Swee blaze, which made nearly 16,000 individuals homeless. Loh (2008: 19) details rumours of arson that were reported in the press, and cites *Sin Chew Jit Poh's* conclusion that 'there is every possibility that the recent biggest fire was caused by some wicked elements'.¹⁹ HDB housing was built on the scorched land and within only nine months. Loh (ibid. 20) comments that the 'rumours of arson have left an indelible imprint on the relationship between the government and the population' and, quoting a controversial piece of commentary by Catherine Lim, states that government has 'not created an "affective" relationship between the PAP and the citizenry'. In 1968, there was another fire in the residual area of the kampong. T.J.S. George (1984: 102) reports rumours of there having been 'fires of convenience'.

Given this background to the demise of the kampongs, the thesis suggests that fictional portrayals of these settlements, and even hut fires, can be open to political interpretation. As an example, it is suggested that portrayals of these settlements in *Heartland* and *Ricky* may be regarded as being largely

¹⁹ Loh cites the publication date as 14 June 1961.

supportive of the government's policy; that *Fistful* presents varying perspectives and that a depicted fire in *Following* can be read as being possibly subversive.

Fire and Re-housing

Heartland is set in the mid 1990s and is renowned for its lyrical descriptions of the modern public housing that comprises the HDB heartland. One little-noted aspect of the novel is its brief, historical account of the aforementioned 1961 fire in Bukit Ho Swee, which destroyed much of Kampong Tiong Bahru. It is suggested here that the passage indicates the need for re-housing and, overall, positively presents setting up home in HDB accommodation.

The protagonist's mother (Madam Lee) was, in her youth, a 'rescue volunteer' during the historic 1961 fire. Notably, the kampong is only mentioned in connection with the disaster. At that time, Madam Lee 'had been living in the attap hut squatter colony in Kampong Tiong Bahru with her family' (52). The narrator states that, after the fire, Madam Lee moved with her parents to a new HDB estate in Macpherson and that 'Life then seemed more idyllic, less stressful' (52).

Acceptance with the government's resettlement policy may be indicated through the account's vocabulary, focus, and brevity.

Notably, the 'squatter colony' is primarily referred to in terms that resonate with state discourses.²⁰ In the passage, kampong accommodation is introduced in the context of its destruction. No description of the family home is given and nor is any scene set in the abode; only the fire that destroyed a large part of the settlement is represented. In this way, the kampong is effectively marginalized in the text. Once the then young Madam Lee is installed in new HDB accommodation, there is no indication that she missed her former kampong abode. The provision of housing is conveyed in progressive terms.

Nevertheless, there are some ways in which the passage is less strident than some government discourses about urban kampongs. The text does not, to use Loh's words, represent the kampong as a 'social blight'. Nor does it portray a crowded, vice-ridden, or unsanitary environment. In addition, there are ways in which the account may be regarded as politically neutral. For instance, the passage recalls the 1961 fire, and also makes reference to a fire in 1968, without noting that the latter blaze took place in the same kampong. The fire is described but its cause is not considered.

Hence, *Heartland* marginalizes an urban kampong through a brief description that focuses on the settlement's destruction. In contrast, resettlement into public housing is referred to in progressive terms. In this way, the

²⁰ See, for instance, the language used by the PAP MP Seah Mui Kok after the later 1968 fire in the kampong at Bukit Ho Swee. The *Straits Times* (25 November 1968, cited in *The Emergence of Bukit Ho Swee Estate: From Desolation to Progress* 1983: 82) reported that he 'appealed to all squatters and people living in other slum areas in Singapore to apply for Housing Board flats. He said: "This fire should be a lesson to them. The government's offer of flats to them is still open and they should seize this opportunity before a fire breaks out in their squatter colony and causes them more hardship"' (emphasis added).

government's resettlement policy seems to be largely supported in the text, although there is no emphasis on deriding *attap* housing.

The Presentation of Kampong Life as Redundant

Whereas *Heartland* only mentions a kampong very briefly, in *Ricky* a kampong is more fully described. Although this latter text does not portray the resettlement of kampong dwellers, it can nonetheless be interpreted politically. The novel depicts kampong life as outmoded and as such may implicitly offer a rationale for the government's resettlement strategy.

In the narrative, an orphan and bargirl-cum-prostitute called Fanny Chin is found murdered in her 'shanty' (103). Fanny is a minor character. Prior to the discovery of her body there is only one passing reference to her *in absentia*. This effectively creates an association between a marginalized, deceased character and a kampong dweller.

The late Singaporean woman's kampong is described but is not specifically located, making it almost illustrative. The settlement's former rural character is indicated through its residents' childhood recollections, which include the chasing of hermit crabs on the nearby seashore. However, the kampong is said to be:

acquiring an urban outlook, as the new concrete buildings crept close to it and the young talked of going modern. They liked to hear music loud and pulsating. The kampong no longer brought peaceful solitude for the weary as it did so many years ago. (102)

The changing environment and attitudes of younger residents implies that the rural kampong is a past phenomenon.

The settlement is portrayed as an anachronism through other descriptions of its fading attractions. The kampong's long-standing multi-racial population is 'on the whole a cohesive community' who help each other (101). Although they fared better than city dwellers during the Japanese Occupation, that was 'the situation nearly thirty years back. But the times had changed.' (102). The narrative also indicates that safety in the kampong is less assured. A few years before, the headman effectively organized a vigilante force that policed the boundary during some riots to keep out dangerous outsiders. Yet a non-resident murders Fanny in her home. Furthermore, it is the police who solve the crime, this being a state organization rather than a community body of the kampong. Hence, the text conveys the kampong as outmoded in several ways: by setting a character's death in the settlement, by describing the modern transport and architecture encroaching into its space; and by showing the diminishing quality of life in the community. This infers that kampong life is not suited to modern life in Singapore. As the government posited public housing as modern accommodation, there is the implication that kampong life was becoming redundant.

Mixed Responses to the Demise of Kampongs

Fistful is known for its colourful portrayal of Singaporean life through its ethnically diverse characters and their family histories. A little-noted aspect of this historical novel is its portrayal of kampong life in Geylang Serai prior to the Second World War. In this analysis it is argued that the multiple accounts of kampong life in the narrative and a brief reference to the passing away of the kampongs can each be interpreted politically. Considered as an ensemble, they present a mixed view on the demise of kampongs.

Descriptions of kampong life

The narrative is set in the 1980s and presents analeptic accounts of the kampong through the residential family history of a Singaporean Malay character, Zul Hussein. His grandfather, Abdullah Rahman, and father, Haji Hussein, lived in the kampong. Accounts of their life there are voiced by Janice Wong, Zul's Singaporean Chinese fiancée, and by Haji Hussein.

Janice describes the kampong in primarily squalid terms, whereas Haji Hussein represents it more naturalistically. In addition, Haji Hussein also gives an account of the kampong's political organization. These accounts, it is argued here, have political significance.

Squalid yet natural depictions of the kampong environment

*Rahman lived with his family in a kampong in old Geylang, within a maze of thatched huts, attap houses on stilts, and muddy lanes crisscrossed with **rotting** planks and coconut tree trunks. Straggly bushes and creepers hugged the shallow ditches of **frothy stagnant** pools. Scrawny chickens scratched among the **rubbish heap** of discarded boxes, cartons and **rusty tin cans**, and ducks with bristly tails poked their beaks into the grey pools for **slimy scraps** of food. **Dirty little urchins**, brown with the sun, crouched near the ditches, oblivious of the **flies and filth**, giggling and pointing to the thin **curls of turd** oozing out of their little brown bottoms! (152, emphasis added)*

In this account by Jan, relayed to friends in 1980s Singapore, the seedy description of the pre-war kampong Geylang Serai is surprising: overcrowding occurred in the kampong *after* the Second World War (Kenangan Abadi 1986: 25).²¹ Jan's emphasis on filth and debris, in a period not highlighted for congestion, may indicate the character's absorption of some of the PAP's discourses about urban kampongs.

Haji Hussein's journal highlights some aspects of the natural environment.

*I can imagine a warm breeze rustling among the **coconut palms** and **lallang grass**. My father must have looked out at the kampong of attap houses on stilts, crowding along the bank of the stream of malodorous mud, meandering into **Geylang River**. This was home to him and our family (153-4, emphasis added).*

The association between 'home' and the landscape of the Geylang River may infer Rahman's sense of being nationally rooted to the natural landscape of Singapore. Singaporean readers would know that the landscape to which Rahman attaches such significance has subsequently been re-engineered by the state into a more linear and sanitized canal.²² This could hint that urban

²¹ For a description of the high population growth in immediately post-war Singapore and the effect on informal housing, see van Grunsven (2000: 99).

²² In 1963, the Geylang River was redeveloped into a canal and its banks reshaped.

alterations may affect Singaporeans' sense of belonging. It is notable that changes to the landscape are described and debated elsewhere in the novel, and in one instance are associated with the '*dictatorship* of the human will' (119, emphasis added).

Political organisation in the kampong

Haji Hussein's journal also portrays a meeting of kampong elders. This is politically significant because it portrays the political autonomy of such a community at that time. Readers in post-independent Singapore might compare this independence to a later lack of such community autonomy.

In addition, the political process is described in detail and is portrayed as valuable. The discussion at a meeting is depicted; only at the end of it does the headman, a 'father figure to all the villagers', having listened to diverse views, speak and make a decision (325). This is a lesson that 'he who listens as he governs will grow in knowledge and wisdom' (326). Here, the kampong's political process provides a lesson for a modern Singaporean. It could be inferred that this passage carries a hint for the fathers of modern Singapore. The government states that it values consultation but it is regarded as paternalistic by several commentators, as is further discussed in Chapter Six.



Presentation of the kampongs' demise

Jan states that 'Such kampong scenes have passed away with time; we do not have such kampongs any more.' (152). She then comments that Rahman dreamt of moving out of the kampong to 'a better place'.

Jan's opening sentence may be regarded as politically ambiguous. National loss is conveyed through the words 'we', 'passed away', 'not', and 'any'. The negatives and the conveyed sense of bereavement could be read as an inferred criticism of the state's resettlement of kampong dwellers. On the other hand, the sentence's concluding phrase, 'passed away with time', conveys natural expiry. This resonates with the portrayal of the redundancy of kampong life in *Ricky*. Notably, Jan does not mention the state's intervention in Geylang Serai: its purchase of land in 1962 and in the 1970s; its resettlement of kampong dwellers to public housing estates; and the construction of HDB housing on the acquired land (Abadi 1986: 27–41). The political will behind this is evidenced by Lee Kuan's Yew (1965b) early comment that, 'in ten years, Geylang Serai will be another and better Queens town all the shacks will be demolished (sic)'. Nor does Jan refer to some of the resistance to these measures.²³ Therefore, Jan's comment about the kampongs having simply 'passed away' may be regarded as sidestepping the state's intervention and the response to it, which leaves the state unaccountable in the text.

²³ Abadi (ibid. 32) states, 'Resettlement resulting from the rapid urban renewal scheme and the speed in which blocks of flats were being built were seen by the Malays, particularly those living in Geylang, as threats to their established way of life'. This contributed to a sense of 'tension'.

Jan's following comment, about Rahman's ambition to leave the kampong, associates moving out the kampongs with progress and therefore in accord with the state policy.

A possibly subversive allusion to a hut fire

No kampong is portrayed in the romantic novel *Following*, by the popular novelist and political commentator Catherine Lim. Nevertheless, there is a depiction of a hut on some undeveloped land that is destroyed by a fire.

Whilst the novel is recognized for its political commentary (e.g. Sally Lui Sha-Lee, 2003: 118; Robin Gerster 2002: 1443), the fire has attracted scant published literary criticism. In this analysis, the shelter is read as being a possible allusion to a kampong-like *attap* hut and its destruction is suggested to have some potentially subversive undertones.

In the narrative, the heroine (Yin Ling)'s elderly family maid, called Ah Heng Cheh, owns a small plot of land, 'covered with *lallang* grass and still bearing the remnants of a disused well' (73). The property suddenly becomes immensely valuable when it forms part of a larger site earmarked for commercial development by a petrochemical company. As the old woman believes that her plot is the 'permanent' home of her god of love and compassion (286), she declines the company's lucrative cash offer and builds a hut as a shrine for her god. The potential economic loss caused by her decision becomes a matter of

national interest.²⁴ Yin Ling's politically ambitious husband, Vincent, acts on the government's behalf during the affair. He promises Yin Ling that Ah Heng Cheh will not be harassed on her property. However, shortly after his pledge, aggravating pest control officials spray 'some vile-smelling chemical' on her tree (301), ostensibly in the interest of public health. Both Ah Heng Cheh and the foreign press believe that they intervene to prompt her into vacating the land. At the climax of the novel, a fire breaks out as Ah Heng Cheh is praying to her god in the hut. The cause of the incident is not specified but its description hints at the possibility of foul play. The incense spews out, 'angry billows' of 'evil smoke, not the smoke of the blessed joss-sticks' (324). Afterwards, the fictional government states that the burning joss sticks and candles on the altar 'probably' caused the fire, whereas a foreign newspaper implies arson and an opposition leader calls for an investigation (325).

Importantly, there also some parallels that may be drawn between the fictional incendiary incident and the kampong fires that led to the redevelopment of the Bukit Ho Swee. On a general level, Ah Heng Cheh's plot bears some similarities to a kampong: it is untended land in an initially undesirable location with wild grass growing on it. The hut is comparable to an old *attap* construction. More specifically, the 1968 fire at Bukit Ho Swee was said to have broken out in an *attap* hut next to a temple; a report in *The Straits Times* (24 November 1968)

²⁴ Ah Heng Cheh's refusal to sell her land can also be interpreted politically in light of land legislation. The protagonist's brother comments that 'the government can seize the property and pay her whatever compensation they think fit. Probably a very tiny fraction of the present offer. There's a law they can invoke' (283). He is probably referring to the aforementioned Land Acquisition Act.

included the subtitle 'Temple on fire'.²⁵ In addition, in both cases a foreign commentator raises the possibility of arson.

Nevertheless, the novel does differ from the Bukit fires in several substantive ways, including the lack of other huts on the land, the displacement of a god rather than thousands of people and the small size of the plot. However, the novel is full of political allusions rather than unambiguous references. For instance, the fictitious Prime Minister is called MTC, an abbreviation that alludes to the habit of naming Lee Kuan Yew as LKY (see Chapter One). The title of the fictitious national university journal, *Dialogue*, in the narrative alludes to the National University of Singapore Society's (NUSS) publication, *Commentary*.²⁶ Therefore, an allusive reference is in keeping with tone of the novel.

To recapitulate, given the political sensitivities associated with the rehousing of kampong dwellers, it has been argued in this section that a politically neutral portrayal of kampong life rarely occurs. Some novels, such as *Heartland* and *Ricky*, overarchingly support the status quo in their dismissal of kampong life. Nevertheless, *Ricky* presents the government's case with considerable subtlety and does not use derogatory vocabulary to portray kampong life. *Fistful* presents a granulated view of kampong life through varied perspectives. In one

²⁵ A copy of *The Straits Times* article, 'Chaos as homes go up flames', by Philip Khoo, Abul Fazil, and Judith Yong, is reproduced in Kim Seng Citizens' Consultative Committee et al. (1983).

²⁶ In the narrative, *Dialogue* suspends one of its issues in 1984, in deference to the PAP. Similarly, an issue of *Commentary* was aborted, although a decade later in 1994, according to Gary Rodan (1996:112), in part because it 'contained critical examination of the limits to cultural and artistic expression in Singapore'.

voice it presents a kampong in squalid terms and in another as offering a lesson in government. In *Following*, a politically subversive interpretation of the clearance of the kampongs is possible, but only if it is read as an allusion.

It is notable, too, that these four texts give varying textual importance to the descriptions or possible allusions to kampongs. Those that are most supportive of the government's stance give kampongs less importance. In *Heartland*, Wing's mother's kampong days are referred to in passing; in *Ricky*, it accommodates a deceased, marginal character, although there is one detailed description of the settlement. Contrastingly, in *Fistful*, there are three descriptions of kampong life. In *Following*, the fire comes at the climax of the novel and therefore is of structural importance.

A very different form of housing is now considered. Terraced period housing, unlike kampong accommodation, was located in the city centre and was dwelt in by more affluent Singaporeans. Do similar diverse stances appear with reference to the state policies that affected it?

Period Housing and Urban Renewal

The desirability of preserving, conserving, and/or renovating period housing and the potential, or actual, destructive impact of urban development is raised in several English-language Singaporean novels. The subject is brought up in a pointed aside in *The Scholar and the Dragon* (1986), by Stella Kon (henceforth *Scholar*); and, more substantively, in *The Adventures of Holden Heng* (1986), by Robert Yeo (henceforth *Adventures*). Given the topic's unequal weighting in the two texts, this section concentrates on *Adventures*. In the analysis that follows, it is argued that the theme can be related to the state's management of urban renewal and redevelopment, and therefore is politically significant.

For the sake of clarity, the terms 'preservation', 'renovation', and 'conservation' in this section need definition. Following the *CED*, 'preservation' refers to the protection from 'dissolution'; and 'renovation' means to 'restore something to good condition'. The word 'conservation' is variously defined, according to different perspectives on the level of change envisaged.

The *CED* states that conservation involves 'keeping from change' and 'loss', and 'careful management'. Lily Kong and Brenda Yeoh (1994) point out that the Singaporean state views conservation as accommodating 'a strong element of change towards what is perceived to be an improved environment'. The variations in definition are of relevance to *Adventures*, as will become apparent.

Prior to the textual analysis, some relevant aspects of the State's urban renewal and redevelopment programme are outlined. This background does not go beyond 1986, the year in which *Adventures* was published.

Urban Renewal and Redevelopment

The Urban Renewal Department became part of the HDB in 1966 (Kong and Yeoh 1994) and was principally responsible for redeveloping the Central Area. This involved a considerable amount of demolition. In 1974, it was reconstituted as a separate statutory board called the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) and was given additional responsibilities for conservation (Kwek Mean Luck 2004: 115). Nevertheless, as Kwek explains, the URA's early 'primary focus remained the demolition of old buildings, the clearance of slums and the resettlement of the population from the city centre'. Kong and Yeoh (2003: 131) note that the state's programme of urban renewal and redevelopment in at least the first two decades of the nation's independence was 'dominated by a demolish-and-rebuild philosophy'. Acquired land in the town centre was used for construction of transport, commercial, industrial, housing (public and private), and leisure facilities (Kong and Yeoh 1994). Choo (1988: 244) comments that urban renewal (UR) was 'regarded by a whole generation of technocrats as nothing less than a heroic tool in nation building and consequently UR planning has been totally subservient to the city-state's national economic plan'. Kong and

Yeoh point out (1994) that an exception to this philosophy of modern redevelopment was the setting up, in 1971, of the Preservation of Monuments Board, which 'intermittently identified one or a few buildings as national monuments'. Some academics have identified and criticized the state's top-down approach in its urban planning. Choo (1988: 247) comments that Singapore's urban renewal 'is not a particularly equitable process. It has proceeded with a high degree of coercion with near total exclusion of affected citizens and interested professional groups from the decision-making process.'

During the early 1980s, there were few outlets for the public to respond to preservation issues. Notably, The Heritage Society, whose remit extends to concern for historic buildings, was not formed until 1986 (Joan C. Henderson 2001: 13). The author Stella Kon recalls that, when she wrote *The Scholar and the Dragon* in 1982, there 'wasn't any debate and there wasn't any conservation. The old city streets were being pulled down like anything.' Nevertheless, there was debate amongst some of the intelligentsia, who also sought to influence the public. Robert Yeo recalls (e-mail communication, 25 July 2008) the work of an independent discussion group called SPUR (Singapore Planning and Urban Research). Founded in 1965, its figureheads included the architects William Lim and Tay Kheng Soon. SPUR organized seminars and produced publications. According to one on-line article about William Lim, 'some ... of the views expressed by SPUR were not always well received by authorities'.²⁷

²⁷ *Cities on the Move's* article on William Lim (www.rama9art.org).

However, conservation became a greater priority for the URA from the mid 1980s. The Emerald Hill area was converted into a pedestrian area by 1984 and the URA's Conservation Master Plan, which included a focus on conservation districts, was made public at the end of 1986 (Kong and Yeoh 1994).²⁸ The URA's conservation strategy has been 'adaptive reuse' of historic buildings (Heng Chye Kiang 2004: 246).²⁹ Kong and Yeoh note (1994) that, whilst the government's increasing efforts to conserve buildings are appreciated by the public, there is some criticism of the commercial reutilization of old buildings.

Before, analyzing the theme of urban renewal in *Adventures*, it is worth noting that this policy is briefly, yet significantly, raised in *Scholar*.

Fleeting yet Pointed Reference to Urban Renewal in *The Scholar and the Dragon*

In the novel, the narrator describes a row of houses on Neil Road and makes the aside, 'You can see those houses still, if Urban Renewal hasn't got them yet' (4). This brief aside has a prominent position at the opening of the novel. Its soliciting of readers' interest gives the historic buildings national significance; the reference to 'Urban Renewal' links the possible loss of the period property to the state; the

²⁸ The decline in tourism was one of the principal reasons for this shift (e.g. Kong and Yeoh 1994; Chua 1997a: 41). Indeed, T.C. Chang (2000: 38) notes that the state's first tourism master plan of 1986 aimed to make some places of colonial heritage into mass attractions.

²⁹ For example, Heng (2004: 246) points out that Jinrikisha Station (the former rickshaw transport centre) has been 'transformed into a seafood restaurant'.

phrase 'got them yet' suggests an acquisitive and aggressive force.

Nevertheless, the 'if' also implies that the building's preservation is a possibility.

The digression is followed by a detailed description of the house's architecture that spans eight lines. The building's features are said to include the 'flower-patterned tiles half-way up the walls' and the 'two carved wooden door-leaves, over-hung by a little skirt of green roof-tiles' (4). The length and precision of the description indicates the house's architectural significance, thereby indicating the importance of the preservation of this residential building.

Urban Renewal in *The Adventures of Holden Heng*

In this section, it is argued that *Adventures* primarily presents a largely critical perspective on the state's urban renewal and redevelopment programmes, through the portrayal of private lives. It is posited that, whilst different perspectives are articulated in the novel, the URA's adaptive conservation strategy, which was being developed in the 1980s, is questioned and also that there is criticism of the demolition of buildings.

The theme of urban renewal in *Adventures* has been little considered. The novel's reception has primarily concentrated on the bachelor protagonist's sexual and romantic life (George Watt 2005: 175–218; Koh Tai Ann 1989b: 280). Nevertheless, Tamara Wagner (2005: 43) observes that 'the story is firmly set against the background of a large-scale development, with the sound made on

Sunday morning by “the blasted developers”. Whilst Watt (2005: 183) notes that developers want to ‘demolish’ the protagonist’s patrimonial family property, and Wagner (2005: 43) refers to the ‘threat’ of the property being pulled down, neither scholar focuses on this aspect of the novel, nor on the topic’s associated political dimensions. The analysis below seeks to address this gap.

A political interpretation of the novel’s treatment of urban renewal and redevelopment is warranted not only by the text but also by the author’s background. The novel names the statutory ‘Urban Renewal Department’ (150); in addition, there are several references to the re-development of the town centre. As the state oversees urban renewal and redevelopment in this inner area, these references warrant political analysis. For example, the novel begins with the irritating sound of the developers demolishing shophouses off Orchard Road. Later, the protagonist, Holden Heng, argues about the previous demolition of the centrally located, original Raffles Institute building. Importantly, the Hengs’ ancestral home is situated in Cuppage Road, a location in the heart of the town.

Yeo, a renowned political poet (Ismail Talib 2002: 322) and playwright (Watt 2005: 26; Chitra Sankaran and K.K. Seet 2003), has addressed urban renewal in a political manner elsewhere in his *oeuvre*. In his play *The Eye of History: A Historical Fantasy in Three Acts*, the ghost of Sir Stamford Raffles questions Lee Kuan Yew about the demolition of the Raffles Institute in an imaginary dialogue that portrays the two statesmen meeting. Notably, Watt (*ibid.* 23) usefully reports that Yeo views his work as ‘an attempt to change the personal into the social and, conversely, the social into the personal’.

The theme of urban renewal is of such importance to the novel that specific references to it can be used to specify the temporal setting. Watt notes that the narrative is situated in the 1970s (ibid. 175). The demolition of the Raffles Institute is mentioned: as this occurred in 1972, that is the earliest year in which the novel could be set. At the climax of the novel, Holden receives a letter from the Urban Renewal Department, which ceased to exist in 1974. Therefore, it may be deduced that the novel is set sometime between 1972 and 1974.

In this section, it is argued that urban renewal and redevelopment is a major theme in the novel, largely raised through thoughts, conversations, and events that happen in Holden's private life. The subject is prefigured in early passing references; conservation strategies are subtly raised in a household situation; and the demolition or preservation of buildings is brought home through Holden's personal experience.

Prefiguring of urban renewal issues

Three seemingly inconsequential allusions to urban renewal, in the early pages of the novel, indicate that urban renewal affects individuals' lives.

Holden's waking ruminations about his girlfriend, Leong Siew Fung's, rejection of his wedding proposal, are interrupted by the intrusive 'POM! POM!' of 'blasted developers' demolishing a row of shophouses and piling for the 'Plaza Singapura shopping complex'. Hence, redevelopment intrudes on his private world. Holden likens its sound to 'loud, mocking echoes of Siew Fung's rejection' (3). This simile gives urban renewal negative personal connotations.

Holden reflects that Siew Fung could not have rejected him on financial grounds. There is no significant 'wealth discrepancy' between them, given his father's income from building small housing estates (24). As indicated in the political background above, private developments were officially sanctioned. Thus, although Holden disapproves of 'blasted' developers, his socioeconomic status is founded on the profitability of urban development.

Later that day, whilst watching television at home, Holden learns that the national female suicide rate is rising. A seminar on *Urbanization and Women in Singapore* indicates that this is primarily due to the deceased women's 'inability to cope with a broken love affair' (12). This interconnects urbanization, change, and personal tragedy in Singapore.

All three references indicate the pervasiveness and inescapability of the state's urban redevelopment and its impact in the private domain. Overall, urban renewal is presented negatively, although the financial benefits of urban development are significantly, yet fleetingly, recognized. Given this background, how is conservation, an important aspect of urban redevelopment, treated in the novel?

Conservation at home

The subject of conservation can be discerned in the minutiae of managing home improvements. Conservation issues that are relevant to urban renewal can be identified in an inter-generational disagreement, and its resolution, about an adaptation of the Heng home.

Holden had wanted his father to install a lock so that he could enter the premises easily without shouting for someone to unlatch the door. However, his father refused to do so, stating that this would damage 'the intricate flowers on the [door's] teak-wood'. The wrangle pits young Holden's drive for modernization against his father's 'love for old things, for leaving things very much as they were' (52). The disagreement could simply be read as a contrast between modernity and tradition.³⁰ However, the debate also raises the distinction between two aforementioned types of conservation: one that gives precedence to modern adaptation and the other that strives to conserve as authentically as possible. Notably, Holden's standpoint can be seen to resonate with URA's advocacy of 'adaptive reuse' of historic buildings, whereas his father's would seem to be in greater sympathy with a different conservation approach.

A compromise is reached, which leaves the door carvings intact and which accommodates Holden's needs. Specifically, a doorbell was installed 'on the wall with a thin wire leading through a small opening in the window' (52). In this way, the functionality of the house's entrance is improved whilst 'the decorated door' is 'left untouched'. This may indicate that function can be improved without as radical a change as is sometimes first envisaged. Notably, paternal authority ensures that the aesthetics of the house are not spoilt through modernization. Interpreted metaphorically, this may suggest that the drive to modernize needs to be disciplined by the 'fathers' of Singapore.

³⁰ Alternatively, Watt (2005: 182) argues that the father's preference for leaving the lockless door relates to his patriarchal attitude to the institution of family and to his 'use of women as objects'.

In this way, the novel significantly and symbolically raises a central issue pertaining to state conservation through a debate about a small household device. The seemingly innocuous debate facilitates different viewpoints, and presents a solution that seems to differ from the URA's strategy that was being developed in the 1980s. In addition, it indicates that functional improvements can be incorporated without drastic change. The attention given to the episode makes the subject of how buildings are conserved important.

Preservation or demolition

Whilst conservation issues touch Holden's life, concerns about preservation or demolition are more forcefully depicted in the text. This occurs through a debate that Holden has when on a Saturday-night date with a woman called Kim, and later at the novel's climax, when the state acquires Holden's terraced house on Cuppage Road.

Debate about the preservation or demolition of buildings

Holden and Kim argue about the preservation of the Raffles Hotel and the former demolition of the Raffles Institute. Although their debate concerns non-residential buildings, they raise and juxtapose different viewpoints about preservation and demolition of buildings. Their argument warrants consideration because it anticipates the state's subsequent acquisition and planned demolition of Holden's period house.

Holden argues that the Raffles Hotel deserves preservation because of the authors that have stayed in it, the building's outstanding nineteenth-century architecture, and its 'unique' position of being a hotel that is 'not high-rise' (76). Kim counters Holden's position by questioning his sentimentality about the past and his assertion of the building's architectural worth. Eventually, Holden wins Kim over by talking about the importance of age-old tradition in a building's charm.

Holden and Kim also discuss the former demolition of the Raffles Institute.³¹ Holden questions whether this destruction is 'destroying *our* heritage' (76, emphasis added), stating that it is '*Our* oldest school. And what's to take its place?' (76, emphasis added). The pronoun 'our' refers to a shared Singaporean heritage. However, Kim argues that the school building 'was not worth preserving. It's old and architecturally, it had no value. It wasn't even pretty. And besides, the Government knows its sits on valuable land' (77). Holden agrees that it was not pretty and that it had functional issues, and feels that he is 'not exactly getting the better of the argument'.

The discussion has pertinent political significance.³² It makes preservation and demolition a matter of everyday debate rather than a matter for experts.

³¹ The modern Raffles City complex now stands on the site.

³² There are other ways in which this passage can be politically interpreted. First, in relation to the economics of urban renewal: Holden does not give any credence to economic arguments for demolition. Notably he does not advocate the 'preservation' of the Raffles Hotel for any reasons pertaining to the tourist industry (76). Secondly, the fate of the Raffles Hotel was topical at the time of the novel's creation and publication. There was a proposal to redevelop the hotel in 1980 (Henderson 2001: 16); this would have involved restoration of the historic buildings and the erection of a thirty-two-storey hotel (ibid. 16–17). However, given the decline in tourism, in the mid 1980s, the plan was 'abandoned' (ibid.17). In 1987, a year after the novel's publication, the hotel was awarded the status of a National Monument. Some of the criteria for this award

Notably, the state's actions are not challenged through the outcomes of the debates: Holden takes the high ground in the discussion about an existing historic building, whereas Kim gets the better of Holden in the discussion about a construction that has been demolished.

The effect of urban renewal on the Hengs' ancestral home

A less equivocal stance on the demolition of an historical property is evident in the narrative about Holden's father's house. The property is 'home' to Holden, even though he has not lived there since his parents' separation (51). The older Mr Heng refuses to sell the family heirloom to the evil-sounding private developers, Sin Sin Realty, instead leaving it to Holden. On inheriting it, Holden plans to fund the building's renovation through renting it out. However, the state suddenly announces that it is acquiring the property for demolition. Holden is informed by the Urban Renewal Department that the house is to be:

acquired for the Government and demolished to make way for re-development. He [Holden] consulted a lawyer friend about fighting the decision but was told that it was futile. He was saddened by the decision. He did not care if the compensation was meagre but he wanted so much to be able to live in it. (150)

Shortly after receiving this devastating news, Holden decides to take up a professional course in London.

(ibid. 17) can be identified in the above fictional argument. These requirements as noted by Henderson, included the stipulation that the building was 'representative of vernacular or classical architecture', exhibited important features of colonial architecture, and reflected Singaporean culture from an historic period.

The appellation of the ancestral house as 'home' has national connotations and is therefore significant. Notably, Yeo refers to home in a domestic and national sense elsewhere in his *oeuvre*.³³ The word infers that Holden's sense of affinity with the property is linked to a national sense of belonging. 'Severance' from the property, amongst other former attachments, later leaves Holden 'free to think of himself alone ... to go away for a change' (151).

The Heng's house is described as worthy of preservation through the portrayal of its invaluable personal and national heritage. The property's familial significance is indicated by the father's reference to it as Holden's 'grandfather's house' (137). Not only does the father refuse to sell it but he also tells his son never to do so because of the family connection. Through the state's intervention, Holden is forced to renege on his promise to his father. This is ironic, given that the state promotes filial responsibility (see Chapter Five) yet prevents the protagonist from practising this virtue. The planned demolition of the historic home is thereby linked to filial disrespect. Interpreted metaphorically, it can be read as a form of national disrespect to the country's architectural ancestry.

³³ For example, his play *One Year Back Home* (2001) portrays the repatriation of three overseas Singaporean graduates and their subsequent involvement in Singaporean politics. Much dialogue about politics at 'home' is set in Singaporean living rooms. In addition, the character who stands as an Opposition candidate is arrested in his home. Yeo also elides the notions of home and nation in poems such as, 'Leaving Home, Mother' (1999c), and 'One Side of the Seventies' (1999d).

The property's architectural value is conveyed through a detailed description of its decorative features and the reference to its 'Chinese baroque' façade. Local architects' mounting recognition of such beautiful frontages are said to make such houses 'worthy of preservation in a city where the rapacious development appetite had led to the destruction of beautiful, history-filled houses' (51–52). Here, expert authority is invoked to put a case forward for preservation not only of the Holden family house but also of Peranakan buildings of its type. The significance given to Singaporean architects in the novel may be politically important because it contrasts with Choo's aforementioned comment that professional advice could be ignored by the state at this time. The addition, the speed of urban redevelopment is critiqued.

The authorship of the letter from the 'Urban Renewal Department' politicises the text because it cites the former statutory unit. Nevertheless, the organization's defunct status implicitly modifies the seeming relevance of the reference. The wording of the letter conveys the power of the state. There is an implicit difference between the previous private company's offers, which could be refused, and the state's action. The announcement is final, comes with no warning, and offers no realistic chance of appeal. Holden's lack of any effective individual choice in the future of his property may infer that the state, in this fictional text, is somewhat authoritarian. The repeated reference to 'the decision' emphasizes Holden's disenfranchisement from the process. It is as if the state's urban renewal policy is being bulldozed. This portrayal can be linked to Choo's non-fictive critique of the top-down management of urban renewal in Singapore.

Although the 'meagre' compensation is said not to matter to the protagonist, it is nonetheless raised. It is a politically significant point because the issue of low reimbursement was taken up by some opposition politicians. However, it did not prove to be a vote-winning issue. As Chua explains (1997a: 134) land acquisition for public housing was so popular among the 'overwhelmingly propertyless electorate' that the government was immune to landlords' resentment.

Holden's idea of renting out the property to fund renovation has some significance. First, the term 'renovate' conveys Holden's revised approach to the management of the historic building; from adaptive conservation to authentic restoration. Secondly, his plan indicates that some landlords were not excessively wealthy. Whilst the text ignores the country's problems of overcrowded housing and the need for more residential land, it presents a more humane view of the owners of older properties and in this way may be seen to put forward a case for them.

Holden's ambition to restore the property proves unrealizable. Whereas, earlier in the narrative, the owner of the property could determine the form of the property's maintenance, after the state's intervention, the proprietor's views are redundant.

In conclusion, urban renewal is such an important topic in *Adventures* that references to it can help to determine the text's setting between 1972 and 1974. This was at a time when there was rapacious development of the town centre

and little commitment to conservation. The text variously links the domain of private property to the public policy of urban renewal and overall portrays urban renewal negatively with regard to Holden's personal experiences.

Strategic issues concerning conservation may be identified in the dispute about the installation of a small household device. The limited adaptation made by Holden's father appears to give greater priority to authenticity than perhaps the URA's evolving strategy, in the 1980s, of adapting buildings to modern commercial usage. This aspect of the novel may therefore be seen to relate discernibly to the 1980s rather than to the text's 1970s setting. This may account for the subtle use of metonym.

Contrastingly, the topic of preservation and demolition is explicit in the text. This may be because it is easier to link with the retrospective early 1970s setting of the novel. Holden and Kim debate the subject in relation to monuments, and a variety of perspectives are voiced in the text. This makes the topic important and infers that ordinary Singaporeans take it seriously. Notably, in the personal domain, where rational arguments are not formally presented, a less balanced picture emerges. No argument is presented in favour of the demolition of the Hengs' ancestral home. Instead, it is inferred that the acquisition is bulldozed through without regard to the architectural worth of the property, identified by local architects. Hence, whilst multiple perspectives are presented in the novel, there are overriding pleas for authentic conservation and the preservation of period housing. In this way, urban renewal is debated and critiqued in the novel.

Whilst period housing is an important subject in *Adventures*, the Heng's ancestral house almost becoming a character in the novel, public housing generally has a more dominant presence in English-language Singaporean novels. So what is the political import of these depictions?

Public Housing

Towering HDB accommodation has a marked presence in the landscape of Singaporean fiction. Wagner argues (2005:189) that negative depictions of HDB estates 'creatively criticise the city-state, offering insight into urban policies, ideologies and social realities'. She specifically comments on ideologies when she observes that high-rise blocks can be 'short-hand for social criticism of modernisation' and that portrayed 'drawbacks' of HDB flats are iconic of 'the human costs of economic progress' (ibid. 192–193). These ideological findings will not be re-iterated in this analysis.

This section further politically interprets portrayals of HDB life by considering two commonly portrayed aspects of public housing: HDB neighbourhoods and high-rise blocks.³⁴ It relates these facets of the HDB environment to the state's design of estates, discourses, and/or policies. These topics are raised in novels that span the period under review including: *If We Dream Too Long* (1972) by Goh Poh Seng (henceforth *Dream*); *Abraham's Promise* (1995) by Philip Jeyaretnam (henceforth *Abraham's*), *Heartland* (1999), and *Following The Wrong God Home* (2001). From the literary analysis, it is argued that the varying viewpoints on these subjects presented in the texts provide responses to state discourses. As such, they may be read as endorsing

³⁴ There are other aspects of fictional descriptions of HDB life that could be analysed in the context of the state's construction of the housing and of policies concerned with it, including the size of flats, the standardization or not of apartments and blocks, and ownership of the flats.

or challenging, to varying degrees, one of the most visible aspects of government policy.

HDB Neighbourhoods

Various levels of affinity to HDB neighbourhood environments can be identified in the fiction. In this section, it is argued that these different affinities are politically significant when read in the context of the PAP government's housing policy, which led to the break up of former communities, and in light of the state's public housing design.

The state's influence on neighbourhoods

The government's expansive public housing programme resulted in the resettlement of thousands of Singaporeans. This led to the breaking up of settled communities in the kampongs and town centre that were, as James C. Scott (1998: 59) eloquently puts it, 'reshuffled' into the public housing estates.

The state has sought to foster new HDB neighbourhoods through architectural design. HDB new towns are subdivided into neighbourhoods (Chua 1997a: 118), all blocks of flats being 'within 400 metres from a neighbourhood centre where all the daily necessities can be obtained' (ibid. 121). In 1975, the CEO of the HDB, Cheang Wan Teh, stated that 'the promotion of the neighbourhood principle' was intrinsic to the design of HDB estates and involved catering for the 'recreational and social needs of residents' so that 'communities'

had a degree of self-sufficiency (1975: 10-11). Since then, the HDB has increasingly sought to make visually distinctive neighbourhoods to foster senses of community.

In the early years, the Singaporean sociologist Riaz Hassan (1977: 200) found 'little sense of "neighbourhood"' amongst low-income families in HDB estates. He stated that social interactions were often characterized by a

highly ritualized type of greeting behaviour which is superficial and transitory. This type of interactions hardly transcend to any effective social relationships in which any meaningful social exchange could take place. The intimate social ties which exist are limited to a very small circle of neighbours.

Given the state's removal of old neighbourhoods and creation of new ones in HDB estates, how are HDB neighbourhoods portrayed in fiction? More importantly, how can these depictions be interpreted politically?

HDB neighbourhoods in fiction

A variety of protagonists in English-language Singaporean novels are HDB residents. Their differing levels of belonging to their HDB environments can be distinguished, from feelings of alienation to a strong sense of community. In this section it is posited that the government's housing policies are implicitly questioned through representations of isolation within the HDB environment. It is also suggested that the policies are shown to have positive results when characters are portrayed as having meaningful interactions with their neighbours, and when they use communal facilities. For example, the protagonists of *Abraham's*, *Dream*, and *Heartland* show different levels of affinity to their HDB

neighbourhoods. In *Abraham's*, the elderly, disgruntled protagonist lives an isolated existence, whereas in *Dream*, the central character feels some level of community, which diminishes with his personal circumstances. Contrastingly, in *Heartland*, the main figure has a strong sense of local community.

Dislocation

The elderly protagonist in *Abraham's* displays no affinity with his HDB habitat. Abraham is portrayed as living in Toa Payoh in the early 1990s. His pronounced sense of detachment within his public housing environment jars with state discourse about HDB community facilities in his HDB estate. In the quotation that opens this chapter of the thesis, Abraham specifically laments the loss of 'the old neighbourhoods', linking their demise with his residence in 'this new town of Toa Payoh' (59). In doing so, he implies that the neighbourhoods have not been adequately replaced.

Abraham is never portrayed using neighbourhood facilities in Toa Payoh. Whereas a Singapore government press release (1964) about the 'development' at Toa Payoh highlights the satellite town's 'markets, clinics, theatres, restaurants and community centres', Abraham appears to confine himself to his room where he delves into his trunk to retrieve old letters and photographs. Although his recollections link his personal history with national events (Eddie Tay 2007), his reminiscing is a highly individualistic activity. As Gaston Bachelard ([1964] 1994: 85) observes, when a casket is opened 'the dimension of intimacy – has just opened up'.

Abraham refers to no other characters in the neighbourhood outside his flat: neither neighbours nor local vendors. In addition, he has no meaningful social interactions with the couple from whom he rents his room. He avoids sharing meals with them and does not even specify their names, impersonally referring to them as the 'boy' and the 'girl' (59).

Limited neighbourly connections

Unlike Abraham, the protagonist of the earlier-published novel, *Dream*, does develop a meaningful friendship with an immediate neighbour. The novel is set in the 1960s and its protagonist, Kwang Meng, lives with his family in the new HDB housing estate at Tiong Bahru.³⁵ Whilst he too is not portrayed using any local community facilities he does get to know his neighbour, Boon Teik, when using the communal lift. However, as Kwang Meng faces financial hardship he withdraws from this social contact.

Kwang Meng's social interactions with Boon Teik, and his wife, Mei-l become meaningful as they get to know each other, progressing from conversations in public areas to shared meals in Boon Teik's flat. Boon Teik inspires Kwang Meng to read literary classics and gently encourages him to date Mei-l's cousin, Anne Tan. The effective socializing has some political significance in that it shows neighbourly interaction but also social mixing amongst people from different types of jobs. In the 1960s and 1970s, in particular, the state

³⁵ This estate is described in greater detail in the next chapter.

encouraged social cohesion through the allocation of flats in the same vicinity to households of different incomes (see van Grunsven 2000: 121). Whereas Boon Teik is a teacher and resides in a flat with just his wife, Kwang Meng works as a probationary clerk and lives in an identically sized flat to his neighbour's with his parents and numerous siblings. This depiction gives a positive social dimension to the portrayed public housing environment.

However, at the novel's close, Kwang Meng is forced by his father's stroke to support the entire family on his meagre salary. He feels overwhelmed with the pressure, and his life constricts. Depressed, he no longer shares meals with his neighbours, nor reads, and he stops dating Anne. This may also be interpreted politically. Instead of relating neighbourhood to building design, it links households' financial security to neighbourly interactions. This resonates with Hassan's research (1977: 199), published after the novel, which indicated that the poor in HDB tended to hide their poverty 'by keeping themselves aloof from their neighbours'. It also shows concordance with Buchanan's finding, published contemporaneously to the text, that poverty could be hidden within the HDB environment.

Strong neighbourhood affinity

In contrast to Abraham and Kwang Meng, the protagonist of *Heartland*, Foo Wing Seng, has a strong sense of belonging to his HDB neighbourhood in the Ghim Moh estate. He uses communal facilities, and has meaningful local social interactions with neighbours and vendors. Furthermore, he refers to the

'kampong air' when in his neighbourhood. Interpreted politically, his behaviour and sentiments convey the success and realization of the state's neighbourhood approach.

Wing avails himself of, and has a sense of fond familiarity with, the neighbourhood facilities. When he meets his girlfriend Chloe at the estate, he has a strong sense of local connection, fondly regarding the 'iron stand erected for songbirds' and recognizing other inhabitants (84). Later, after the pair has an irresolvable argument, in which Chloe expresses repulsion about his HDB environment (see Wagner 2005: 194 and Chapter Four), Wing distracts himself from the pain of their separation by staying up all night in the void decks.³⁶ Playfully using the leisure facilities, he is 'fascinated by the freedom that he had' (92).

Neighbours are also important to the young man. Wing goes out of his way to help a distraught, socially isolated, Filipino maid who lives above him. Some of the local food hawkers tease him, having known him since his childhood. These are not superficial, ritualized, relationships but meaningful interpersonal rapports. Nevertheless, the novel also indicates some neighbourhood tensions. Wings feels uncomfortable with his former 'neighbourhood' playmates that now work as labourers to whom he no longer speaks and is concerned about crime on his estate. Overall however, a positive view of the neighbour is presented in the novel.

³⁶ Void decks are empty communal areas on the ground level of HDB blocks.

Wagner (2005: 193) describes the phrase 'kampong air' being used to convey a 'village atmosphere' in the HDB environment. Wing, when noticing a neighbouring child in the lift in her pyjamas, reflects:

The kampong air, carried over from the early settlement villages to the heartlands, had endured – the residents still went about their daily lives in an informal manner, treating public places as an extension of their abodes. (112)

Notably, Wing has these thoughts whilst moving around his neighbourhood. The image creates a link with the former kampongs, not only endorsing the HDB's 'neighbourhood principle' but also creating a sense of continuity from kampong to HDB accommodation that deftly sidesteps any notion of the population being 'shuffled' and dispersed in the new estates. As such, it contrasts with the loss of 'neighbourhoods' portrayed in *Abraham's*. Nevertheless, it is notable that Wing's mother, who formally lived in the kampong at Tiong Bahru, does not return to the HDB estate that was built on the site, but initially moves to the new estate at Macpherson (to the East of Tiong Bahru) before settling in Ghim Moh (to the West of Tiong Bahru). Her residential history thereby subtly indicates a lack of geographical continuity when moving from kampong to HDB living.

Hence, a variety of levels of affinity to HDB neighbourhoods can be discerned in the fiction. Abraham's alienation from his dwelling ~~To~~ Payoh can be construed as being critical of the government's housing policy. A more mixed response is indicated in *Dream*, in which social mixing is portrayed alongside the withdrawal of someone who becomes increasingly financially constrained. A strong sense of belonging is conveyed in *Heartland*, which would seem to present government policies overall in a positive light. Can such a variety of

response be identified in portrayals of the elevated structures of HDB blocks and, if so, should they be viewed politically?

High-rise HDB Architecture

The height of public housing is a pronounced feature of the fictional, as well as the actual, Singaporean residential landscape. In this section, it is argued that the elevation of HDB structures can be portrayed negatively, neutrally, and positively; and that such portrayals can be interpreted politically when considered contextually.

The Singaporean architect William Lim (1980: 88) defines low-rise housing 'as buildings from which a mother can recognise the face of her own child in the street below from the uppermost floor. By this definition, low-rise housing should not be more than four-storeys high.'

High-rise HDB architecture is politicised by debates about the effects and necessity of its elevation.³⁷ The HDB argues that land and cost constraints in Singapore necessitate high-rise housing (Ching-Ling Tai 1988: 277) and that social problems associated with such architecture in the West are less relevant in a more disciplined Asian society (Cedric Pugh 1989: 852). However, a case for

³⁷ In addition, the transformed elevation of the city centre has also been critiqued (see Choo 1988). Whilst the majority of these buildings are not housing, they still raise the issue of the strategy of height being used to manage landmass.

high-density, low-rise housing has also been presented by Singaporean architects (see Lim 1980: 81–96). Lim (1980: 94) notes that for the HDB to reverse its practice of high-rise housing into low-rise would be a 'delicate' issue, in part for political reasons. He concludes (ibid. 95) that 'If the present policy is not changed and we continue to build high-rise public housing, the long-term psychological and sociological consequences may be serious.' HDB tower blocks have been associated with suicide (Hassan 1983: 91). In 1984, the Singaporean political scientist, Jon Quah (1984:121–22) argued that there was insufficient research into suicides in public housing, and that this impeded the evaluation of the impact of the government's housing policy.

The reluctance of some Singaporeans' to live in high-rise public housing has been an issue. In 1965, a biographical feature on Lim Kim San (Minister For National Development), by the Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation, noted that 'difficulty arose' over getting residents 'to accept flats on higher floors' but that after Lim spoke to 'many [residents] personally ... [g]radually people came to accept and even to prefer the higher floors'. However, ten years later, Stephen H.K. Yeh and Tan Soo Lee (1975: 220), from the HDB, noted that HDB residents did not like living in higher than eleven-storey buildings. In addition, the sociologist Ching-Ling Tai (1988: 276-77) found that the 'majority' of respondents 'preferred' living in low-rise to high-rise housing and refers to their lack of choice about high-rise living.

Negative associations with elevated HDB flats

Portrayal of high HDB flats can be negatively associated with suicide jumps, and low social status. Wagner (2005: 196) identifies a propensity for suicidal protagonists to hurl themselves 'from high-rise buildings ... with disturbing regularity' and comments that the rate of suicide in novels from high-rise buildings is higher than that which occurs in reality. She mentions that there is a gruesome incident in *Foreign Bodies* (1997), by Hwee Hwee Tan, when a maid falls to her death; and that a suicidal teenager jumps to his death from high-rise private property in *Following*.

Building on this observation, it is also notable that specifically *high* HDB flats are associated with suicide and/or murder in these two novels. In a sub-plot in *Foreign Bodies*, a maid called Marissa is reported to have mysteriously and fatally fallen from a *fifteen-storey* HDB apartment. The physical impact of the descent is graphically evoked through the description of her neck, which twists at one hundred and eighty degrees. The character is never portrayed alive, her whole persona being centred on her premature death.

In *Following*, the fact that the heroine, Ying Lin, comes from an HDB estate is introduced to readers in the morbid context of her high apartment block's suicide record: 'tall Housing Development Board buildings – what hadn't they seen in their time? In her own block of flats, there had been two suicides' (14, emphasis added). Ying Lin recalls that one of these fatalities was caused by a jump from the *twelfth* floor and the other from the *eighteenth*. Tellingly, the heights of the flats are specified but the names of the residents that take their

own lives are not given. Yin Ling thinks about this as she stops at a particularly old, dilapidated, 'multi-storey' estate on her wedding day and picks up the corpse of an abandoned baby. Looking onto the 'decaying flats' she imagines the future of the children, some of whose dashed dreams would later hurry them 'towards that moment of fatal decision by the railings, that desperate plunge down *ten* storeys to the ground below' (13–14, emphasis added). Although a suicide from a private property is also portrayed in *Following*, suicidal descents are more numerous portrayed from HDB accommodation in the novel. In addition, the suicide from a hotel (of Justin) does not specify the storey level.

These suicides have political connotations given the government's close association with public housing. Such dismal deaths present grim images and associate high-rise living with danger. They provide Singaporean and overseas readers with the antithesis of state discourses (and international plaudits) about the progressive attributes of its public housing policy and improvements to residents' quality of life.

In addition, low social status is associated with HDB flats by Holden in *Adventures*, as Tamara Wagner (2005: 44) usefully identifies. She points out that Holden, after having an important sexual experience in an HDB block, tries to convince himself that 'he was not ashamed to admit to himself that he learned from a girl who was considered low in his society ... on the *tenth* floor of an apartment block (164, emphasis added)'.³⁸ This juxtaposes low social status with the height of HDB flats.

Neutrality to height

Notably, the height of an HDB block is presented in less dramatic and more neutral terms in *Dream*. Kwang Meng resides on the seventh storey and his use of the lift accentuates the fact that he resides in high-rise accommodation. Given the neutrality of this reference, there is not an extensive passage to analyse here.

Positive associations with the height of HDB blocks

Contrastingly, the height of HDB housing is championed in *Heartland*. There are no references to suicides; instead the pinnacle of Wing's block provides a viewpoint (Tamara Wagner 2005: 196). Furthermore, the loftiness of HDB housing is given regal status. Wing reflects that former Asian and Western royalty typically located 'their castles on high ground with spires reaching towards the sky'. He comments that in Singapore there has been a 'strange reversal' as the rich 'find their niche in small, exclusive properties close to the turf'. He imagines that if 'people from the past' came to contemporary Singapore, 'They would marvel at the sheer magnitude of homes [HDB estates], disbelieving the suggestion that the more powerful were condemned ... to the earth and soil' (121).

The celebration of the height of HDB blocks in *Heartland* may be regarded as being politically significant because the state has been responsible for the strategy of high-rise public housing in Singapore. Nevertheless, the imaginative

'reversal' of attitudes to height may also be read to imply that the Singaporean elite do not choose high-rise housing for their own accommodation.

The treatment of high-rise HDB housing is conveyed in ways that are critical, neutral, and affirmative of architecture designed for the public. These differences between fictional texts reflect the controversy in wider public discourses about the height of the architecture and are linked to the government's housing policy, which has won it elections and international acclaim.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided the first systematic political interpretation of fictional depictions of kampongs, period housing, and HDB accommodation.

It has found that portrayals of different features of the Singaporean residential landscape can have political significance when examined in an historical political context. Portrayals of kampongs can be related to the state's resettlement policy, terraced housing to urban renewal and redevelopment, and public housing to state strategies relating to construction.

Portrayals of kampongs indicate a variety of responses to the demise of these settlements. Narratives in *Heartland* and *Ricky* may be regarded as being implicitly supportive of the government's resettlement policy, although less damning of settlements than in some state discourses. *Fistful* presents varying perspectives. It conveys some sympathy with the modernization programme in some ways, through its portrayal of squalid living conditions, a resident's ambition to move out and the disappearance of such settlements as natural rather than state driven. Nevertheless, it also indicates the value of some of the natural features of kampong landscape and the traditional form of community leadership. Conversely, a depicted fire in *Following* can be read as being possibly subversive.

Adventures links private home life to the public policy of urban renewal; most pointedly through narrative events concerning the family's terraced property. Multiple perspectives are presented in the novel, which allow for the

presentation of different stances on conservation, and demolition or preservation. Nevertheless, at a time when there were few forums for public debate on these issues, the novel presents overriding pleas for authentic conservation and the preservation of period housing. In this way, urban renewal is debated and critiqued in the novel. It is particularly striking that the critique is most strident when focused on past state actions (demolition that characterized early 1970s urban renewal) and that it uses the metonymic device of a household lock when challenging adaptive notions of conservation that were more seemingly relevant to the 1980s, when the novel was written and published.

The study also finds that, as Tamara Wagner notes, critiques of HDB accommodation can critique government policies. Nevertheless, it is also argued that some more affirmative portrayals of HDB architecture can be seen to affirm the government's policies. In particular, it is argued that controversies in the public domain about the reconstruction of neighbourhoods and the height of HDB blocks are visible in the texts. As such, the fiction may be read as endorsing or challenging, to varying degrees, the government's politically significant housing policy.

CHAPTER THREE

HOME AND NATION

*'I was thinking of leaving **home**.'*
'There's a room here for you anytime.'
'That's kind, Audrey, but I was thinking, you know, of a real change. Perhaps going abroad for while.'

(Philip Jeyaretnam, *Raffles Place Ragtime*, 145)³⁹

The ideas of nation and home commonly overlap in English-language Singaporean novels. This conflation can occur when homes are emphatically located on the island and/or when the word 'home' is used to convey both a dwelling place and a nation.

Notably, in the political sphere, the PAP government has consistently positioned Singapore as 'home' to its citizens, as is expounded below. This gives the word 'home' particularly strong national connotations in Singapore, albeit that one meaning of the standard English word 'home' is 'nation'.⁴⁰ Given this context, what is the political significance of some of the portrayed interconnections between home and nation in English-language Singaporean novels in English?

A small but growing body of literary research has considered some aspects of the concept of 'home' in such novels politically. The physical location of homes in Singapore has received little attention in published scholarship.

³⁹ Emphasis added.

⁴⁰ The *CED*'s fourth definition of 'home' is 'as person's country'.

Shirley Lim (2003: 214) notes Singaporean fiction's preoccupation with city-state and the frequent Singaporeans settings, although she does not specifically trace the location of homes. Lim (ibid. 205 and 219–220) attributes this focus in part to the influence of the government's 'discourse of home'. The state, she notes, has positioned Singapore as home since the 1990s, in its determination to deter Singaporeans from emigrating to the West. This influence, she says (ibid. 219), 'may have resulted in the narrow confinement of a singular Singapore character in ... English narrative'. In making this tentative association, she links Singaporean fiction that addresses concerns about the island with state nationalist discourses that position Singapore as home.

The play on the word 'home' has been little considered. Koh Tai Ann (1984: 188–189) interprets the word in a domestic and national context in her analysis of the closure of Goh Poh Seng's *If We Dream Too Long* (1972), as is outlined below.

The Singaporean poet and literary scholar Eddie Tay (2007) uses the idea of home in his thesis *Not at Home: Colonial and Postcolonial Anglophone Literatures of Singapore and Malaysia*. Tay makes a valuable distinction between state nationalist discourses and individual citizens' sense of belonging to the nation. In part of his study, he takes two post-independence novels concerned with the nation.⁴¹ He mentions that, in them, homes are set in Singapore and then argues that the protagonists are figuratively not 'at home' with the dominant state nationalist discourses (see below).

⁴¹ The novels that he considers are Philip Jeyaretnam's *Abraham's Promise* (1995) and Gopal Baratham's *A Candle or the Sun* (1991).

This study adds to that research. First, the preponderance of fictional homes located in Singapore is traced, and read in light of state nationalistic discourses that position home as Singapore and of government policies. Secondly, various narratives in which characters chose to remain in, or depart from, their Singaporean 'homes' are analysed in light of state nationalist discourses and government nation-building strategies. Thirdly, on a more conceptual level, having a say in the national home is considered in relation to democratic participation and to political discourses about the management of the Singaporean home. Fourthly, and again more abstractly, political analysis of imagined national communities is given, using the lens of home. The theme of home and nation is so pronounced in Singaporean novels in English that not all its manifestations can be analysed in a single chapter. Other aspects of the topic, not scrutinized here, that sometimes dovetail with material included in this chapter and with each other include: transnationalism and cosmopolitanism;⁴² the return, or not, of Singaporeans living outside the island (see Ismail Talib: 1997);

⁴²Transnationalism and cosmopolitanism are pronounced themes in Hwee Hwee Tan's *Mammon Inc.* (2001), as Eddie Tay analyses in his thesis (2007: ch. 8). In addition, novels that portray immigrants' arrivals and setting up of homes in Singapore could also be related to transnationalism. These texts would include Stella Kon's *The Scholar and the Dragon* (1986) and Suchen Christine Lim's *Fistful of Colours* (1993).

ethnic minority characters' sense of belonging to the Singaporean home,⁴³ and Singaporean characters' sense of the Malaysian home.⁴⁴

This chapter's politico-historical approach is supported with reference to theoretical models that draw on fictional portrayals of national space (Benedict Anderson [1983] 2006 and 1998; Franco Moretti 1998), as well as with geographical concepts relating to migration.

The principal novels considered are: *If We Dream Too Long* (1972) by Goh Poh Seng; *The Sin-kheh* (1993) by Goh Sin Tub; *Abraham's Promise* (1995) by Philip Jeyaretnam; *tangerine* (1997) by Colin Cheong; and *Heartland* (1999) by Daren Shiau. In addition, there is also reference to and some limited extent, discussion of other topically relevant novels.

⁴³ This is touched on to some degree in this chapter's analysis of Philip Jeyaretnam's *Abraham's Promise*, in relation to the protagonist of Jaffna Tamil descent. Other pertinent novels would include Derik Mosman's *A Modern Boy* (1996), and Rex Shelley's *The Shrimp People* (1991) and *People of the Pear Tree* (1993).

⁴⁴ The relationship with Malaysia is considered in part in this chapter's interpretation of Goh Poh Seng's *If We Dream Too Long* (1972). Other relevant texts would include Suchen Christine Lim's *Fistful of Colours*, Colin Cheong's *tangerine* (1997), and Daren Shiau's *Heartland* (1999).

Home in Singaporean Political Discourses

The metaphor of Singapore as home is a feature of Singaporean political discourses. Surprisingly, it has been the subject of little research. Notably, it is not included in Ong Siow Heng and Nirmala Govindasamy-Ong's study (2006) on the PAP government's metaphors, perhaps because of the variety of symbols that the party deploys (Ban Kah Choon 2004: 2). Shirley Lim (2003) usefully outlines how the state, in the 1990s, used the image of home to deter emigration.

It should be noted that the metaphor of the Singaporean home has been used by the PAP government since at least 1962.⁴⁵ The metaphor's longevity is particularly noteworthy given Ban's study (2004: 1) on the shifts in PAP imagery. Its endurance may be attributed to the PAP's practice of fostering nationalism. Significantly, Benedict Anderson, ([1983] 2006) suggests that the term 'home' makes the idea of a nation seem natural. The metaphor's deployment in Singapore may be used to compensate for the aforementioned awkward birth of the independent Singaporean nation state and to nurture the imagining of a natural site of territorial identity. An illustrative comment about the unnaturalness of the Singaporean nation, which interlocks with the compensatory concept of the national home, is in a speech by Goh Chok Tong, reported by Warren Fernandez et al. in the *Straits Times* (19 November 1996). Singapore, it is stated, 'was *not a*

⁴⁵ On National Day in 1962, the then Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, referred to Singapore as 'home' to its relatively recent Chinese and Indian immigrants.

natural nation and its people had only begun to view it as their *home* in the last 30 years' (emphasis added).

The metaphor of Singapore as home has been used in a variety of contexts, which include Singapore as the permanent home of Singaporeans, the island's national independence, and the internal running of the Singaporean home. In addition, opposition politicians have also adopted this image.

Singapore as Home to its Citizens

Two years after sovereign independence, the Foreign Minister, S. Rajaratnam declared:

*For well over a 100 years, the bulk of our people did not regard themselves as a permanently settled community. Of course things have changed very much. Singapore is now our permanent **home**. We must live and die here.*⁴⁶
(Emphasis added).

A generation later, Goh Choh Tong used very similar language in his maiden speech as Prime Minister in 1990, when he said, 'Every Singaporean, whatever his race, language or religion, should feel: "Singapore is my *home*. I have a place here. This is where I belong. This is where I will live and die."' (Cited by Alan Chong 1991: 24, emphasis added.)

The emigration of well-educated Singaporeans has been an issue. This outflow of talent was particularly pronounced in the late 1980s. The government

⁴⁶ Cited by David W. Chang (1968: 767) from *The Mirror*, 1967 (27 March, 1).

has tended to stress the lure of attractive financial packages rather than 'push' factors relating to life in Singapore. Until the mid-1990s, the government sought to deter well-educated Singaporeans from leaving 'home', as their departure was regarded as an economic loss (see Shirley Lim 2003). Since the mid 1990s, the government has encouraged Singaporeans to work abroad to boost the national economy, whilst urging them to consider Singapore as home (Serene Tan and Brenda S.A. Yeoh 2006: 151).

The PAP's Running of the Independent Singaporean Home

Just a few days after Singapore's separation from the Malay Federation, the then Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, used the image of the Singaporean house to assert Singapore's independence from her large neighbours, Malaysia and Indonesia. Lee Kuan Yew (1965) described Singapore as 'my little own *home*' (emphasis added). He also conveyed his authority in relation to his neighbours when he said, 'I want to be able to say that the furniture in my house [is] the way I order it ... And what is more: most important, the master bedroom is mine.'

The image of the PAP running the independent Singaporean home has endured and has been adaptively used in relation to, and by, opposition parties. At the PAP Party Conference in November 1996, the then Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong, stated, 'It is the PAP which has created Singapore as a sovereign state ... and bonded us [Singaporeans] with a strong sense of belonging. It is the

PAP that will give us Our Best *Home*, not [non-PAP politicians such as] Chee Soon Juan, Jeyaretnam or Chiam See Tong' (emphasis added).⁴⁷

Conversely, the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) has critiqued the extent of the PAP's authority in the home that it perceives. The former SDP leader, Chee Soon Juan (1995), in the 'Preface' to his book, *Singapore, My Home Too*, argues that the PAP alienates him from his home because the ruling party 'doesn't want my mind to feel at *home*' (emphasis added). He continues,

Singapore is my home and a home is what one decides it should be – place, space and how things are arranged. It not a place where one lives in fear... The PAP does not have a monopoly of what is best for Singapore. Only Singaporeans have. (emphasis added).

The government has increasingly referred to running the Singaporean home with Singaporeans. Goh Chok Tong, in his high-profile 1996 National Day Rally speech, said:

I say to all Singaporeans: you have to feel passionately about Singapore ... We live, work and raise our children here. We will fight and, if we must, we will die to defend our way of life and our *home*.... Here we will have a bright future, where Singapore becomes our *home* of choice. Let us work together to make Singapore our best *home*.' (Emphasis added).⁴⁸

The Government's report on the future of Singapore in the millennium, *Singapore 21: Together, We Make The Difference*, (1999: 11) articulates five new ideals in the pursuit of 'a vision of a *home* that we as Singaporeans will build together' (emphasis added). These include encouraging an 'active participation in civic life' (ibid. 14). However, some academics (e.g. Kenneth Paul Andrew Sze-Sian Tan

⁴⁷ The quotation appears in Warren Fernandez et al.'s aforementioned article in the *Straits Times* (19 November 1996).

⁴⁸ (Government of Singapore 1999: 5)

2003) argue that participation in civic affairs is apolitical and not the same as civil society.

Nation Building

In 1959, when the island attained self rule and the PAP came to power, there was an emergent sense of nationhood. This sentiment manifested itself in the creation of the Singaporean flag and national anthem. Nevertheless, it coincided with, and was under the broader shadow of, Malayan nationalism.

Then, at full independence in 1965, after Singapore had joined, and was then ejected from, the Malay Federation (1963–1965), Lee Kuan Kew, famously cried rather than celebrated (Philip Holden 2001). Kwa Chong Guan (2002: 109) observes that, at this point, Lee had to ‘disprove several hundred years of history’ because Singapore had long been part of larger political entities through which it had ‘related to the world’. These included the British Empire for over a hundred years, and the Malay peninsular during Singapore’s pre-modern, colonial and independent eras.

The difficulties of making the island a nation are frequently noted (Lee Kuan Yew 2000). The challenges included: the island’s small land mass (it is about the size of the Isle of Wight); its paucity of natural resources; its diverse ethnic immigrant citizenry; and the lack of a *lingua franca* (the Prime Minister’s National Day Speech is delivered in English, Mandarin, and Malay). National survival depended on economic success and political stability. Some of the ideologies that the PAP government pursued to build the nation included elitism (see below), multi-racialism (see Chapter Four) and communitarianism (see Chapter Five).

Economic Development

Although Singapore has no natural resources, its economic success has been phenomenal. Unemployment was at about 14 per cent in 1965 (Lee Kuan Yew 2000: 22-23) but had been reduced to 2.7 per cent by 1984 (Chua Beng-Huat 1997a: 135). The economy was even resilient during the Asian Crisis of 1997 and, by 1999, Singapore's gross national product per capita gave it seventh ranking in the world (Gavin Peebles and Peter Wilson 2002: 9). Chua (1997a: 131) states, 'The overriding goal of economic growth is the single criterion for both initiating and assessing all state activities.' He points out that so important was the practical need to 'earn a living' that some scholars describe the pragmatism of the government as an ideology. Stephen McCarthy's view (2006: 204) that Lee Kuan Yew and the PAP have 'grounded their legitimacy in Singapore's economic success', resonates with much political commentary about the PAP's sustained electoral achievements (see Cherian George 2000: 85).

Whilst the PAP's successful economic stewardship of the country has received wide praise and is regularly articulated by government spokespeople, the extent of the PAP's emphasis on material development has been criticized. Chee Soon Juan, then leader of the Singapore Democratic Party claimed in 1994 (11), that the government justified 'all its decisions in terms of economic progress. It cannot be denied that the spirit of Singapore has been dampened by

an obsession with consumerism and materialism.' The late President of Singapore, Devan Nair, who ended his life in exile,⁴⁹ stated in 1994 (xi) that the economic success of Singapore had become an end rather than a means. Furthermore, he referred (ibid. xiii) to Lee Kuan Yew's 'egregious penchant for referring to fellow-citizens as "digits"' and alleged (ibid. xvii) that GNP was 'the only measuring rod Lee knows'.

Political Stability

The Communists were regarded as political extremists by the British, who declared Emergency Regulations to control them in 1948. When the PAP came to power in 1959, it released communist detainees. The PAP initially had two wings, one that was pro-communist and one that was moderate. By 1961, the moderates had taken control of the PAP. Lee Kuan Yew's (1998 and 2000) concerns about the threat of Communist-incited unrest are documented in his memoirs.

The PAP's strong controls, ostensibly to ensure political stability, are a matter of some controversy. Han Fook Kwang, Warren Fernandez, and Sumiko Tan, indicate the differing views on the former Prime Minister's style. Whilst they declare (1998: 127) that the 'hallmarks' of Lee's political leadership are firmness,

⁴⁹ Devan Nair resigned in 1985, after what Mauzy and Milne (2002: 126) refer to as a 'scandal'. He lived in exile in Canada.

decisiveness, and farsightedness they also note that 'some' other people call his style 'authoritarian, even autocratic'.

Commentators who have referred to Lee as authoritarian include Devan Nair (1994: xv) and the novelist Catherine Lim (*Straits Times*, 20 November 1994), who referred to Lee's authoritarian influence. Mauzy and Milne (2002: ch.10) identify authoritarian aspects of the PAPs rule. These include measures that allow for arrest without warrant and detention without trial, such as the Misuse of Drugs Act and the Internal Security Act (ISA). Whilst the ISA is currently little used, the fact that it still exists means that it can be invoked at any time, as with the detention of twenty-two so-called 'Marxist conspirators' in 1987. Mauzy and Milne (*ibid.* 134-5) also refer to the use of the law of defamation against political competitors, such as Singapore's first opposition MP, J.B. Jeyaretnam in 1988 and 1997. They quote (*ibid.* 135-6) Amnesty International's belief that 'civil defamation suits are being misused by the Executive to intimidate and deter those Singaporeans holding dissenting views'.⁵⁰ In addition, they refer to the aforementioned controls on NGOs and the media. They note (*ibid.* 131) the Societies Act (1967, amended in 1988) 'that requires most organizations of more than 10 people to be registered'. They observe that the state 'has a near monopoly of the media'. The government believes that the mass media should inform, educate and entertain and 'does not allow media that assume an adversarial "watchdog" position' (*ibid.* 137). They observe that the government 'insists it does not control the editorial policy of newspapers, but that it will

⁵⁰ Mauzy and Milne cite 'J.B Jeyaretnam – the Use of Defamation Suits for Political Purposes' *Amnesty International News Release*, October 15 1999 on <http://www.amnesty.org/news/1997/33600497.htm>.

censure them if they print editorials that are inappropriate and not in the national interest' (ibid. 138).

Elitist Ideology

The government's nation-building has also been associated with an elitist approach (Mauzy and Milne 2002: 52) since the early 1960s. Chua (1995a: 36) notes that the government's communitarian ideology, expounded in Chapter Five, is 'unavoidably elitist' because it is predicated on a honourable government making decisions for the population. Lee Kuan Yew has referred to society as being a pyramid being managed by those in its apex. In 1971 (28 April), he famously predicted that, if the three hundred leading male figures on whose 'shoulders' the country depended, 'were to crash in one Jumbo jet' then the nation would 'disintegrate'.⁵¹ Stating the number of such key people needed to be enlarged he said:

It is strange, but true, that the fate of millions often turns around the quality, strength and foresight of the key digits in a country. They decide whether a country gains cohesion and strength in orderly progress, or disintegrates and degenerates into chaos.

⁵¹ Lee Kuan Yew included in this group 'key men in the PAP' and 'outstanding men in [the] civil service, the police, the armed forces, chairmen of statutory boards and their top administrators' who had 'risen to the top by their own merit, hard work and high performance'.

Geography and Nation in Literary Criticism

Geographical reference points in fiction are associated with nationalism by scholars such as Anderson (2006) and Moretti (1998). In this chapter, it is argued that they can be applied to portrayals of homes and their environs in Singaporean fiction in English, and thereby support political historical interpretation of the literature.

In *Imagined Communities*, Anderson ([1983] 2006: 6) famously defines the nation as 'an imagined political community' that is sovereign and 'inherently limited' within a national territory. The community is imagined because 'the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members'. Anderson (ibid. 25) suggests that the novel provides 'the technical means for "re-presenting" the *kind* of imagined community that is the nation'.

Anderson (2006: 27–33) suggests that, in nationalistic fiction, the national community can be imagined in settings on the national horizon. These locations may represent national types of place, such as villages, or institutions, such as prisons (ibid. 30). They may also present a 'familial landscape' to the reader through recognizable, specific place names (ibid. 27 and 30).

The novels that Anderson uses to illustrate his argument about the imagined communities on the national horizon are those that are 'inextricably bound to nationalist movements' (ibid. 26). Such nationalistic texts can confirm 'a single [national] community' through the shared nationality of their characters,

authors, and readers (ibid. 27). When characters exhibit differences, these can represent divisions within the nation (1998: 357).

Anderson reflects in his later work, *The Spectre of Comparison: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World* (1998: 334), that his argument

led to the unstated assumption that the deep original affinity between nation-ness and novel meant that they would always be adequate for one another: that the nation would continue to serve as the natural if unspoken frame of the novel, and that the novel would always be capable of representing, at different levels, the reality and the truth of the nation.

He explains (ibid. 334-335) that this assumption 'is rather easy to make for the [novels of the] nineteenth and early twentieth centuries' and has relevance in some recently decolonised parts of Asia. However, he states (ibid. 335) that the affinities between the nation and the novel in the latter half of the twentieth century 'have become visibly strained'. He acknowledges, therefore, that the association between the novel and the nation is not automatic. In doing so, he implies that nationalistic literature represents 'the reality and truth of the nation'.

Moretti (1998), in his study of European novels, traces narratives on maps. Using this cartographical device, Moretti (ibid. 17) agrees with Anderson that there can be 'a strong affinity between the novel and geo-political reality of the nation state' in some novels. Moretti highlights the national significance of Jane Austen's novels through mapping the settings of narratives, which, he finds, form a constellation around central England.

Hence, geographical tools of analysis can be drawn from Anderson's and Moretti's scholarship: images of the national community on the national horizon, the precise named places that unambiguously link narrative location to nation,

and the mapping of narrative action. Furthermore, Anderson gives some indications of what he perceives nationalistic literature to be. In the following analysis, these lenses of analysis are applied to portrayals of homes and their environs in Singaporean fiction in English.

Fictional Homes in the Nation of Singapore

An English-language Singaporean novel that incorporates no home in Singapore is a rarity.⁵² Singapore dominates the fictional landscaping of home in the texts primarily considered in this thesis: the vast majority of Singaporean protagonists in these novels reside on the island.⁵³ An exception to this pattern is Chiah Deng in *Mammon Inc.* who lives abroad. Nevertheless, she does have a family Singaporean home. In all the core texts, the central characters' Singaporean homes are either specifically mapped or are simply referred to as being in Singapore (see below).

In this section, it is argued that Singaporean residences reinforce nationalist state discourses about 'home' being in Singapore. Nevertheless, passing social comments from home bases and their environs can offer some critiques of the nation.

⁵² A novel that exceptionally does not include a Singaporean home is *The Immolation* (1977) by Goh Poh Seng.

⁵³ There are many other protagonists' who are characterized as having homes in Singapore in additional English-language Singaporean novels that are not focused on this thesis. They include Ah Leng in *Son of a Mother* (1973) by Michael Soh; Angela Toh in *The Serpent's Tooth* (1982) by Catherine Lim; Boon Yin in *Scholar and the Dragon* (1986); Mui Ee in *The Teenage Textbook or the Melting of the Ice Cream Girl* (1988) by Adrian Tan; Wings in *The Stolen Child* (1989) by Colin Cheong; Hernie Perera in *A Candle Or The Sun* (1991) by Gopal Baratham; Joe Samy in *Sayang* (1991) by Gopal Baratham; Colin in *Glass Cathedral* (1995) by Andrew Koh; Richard Young in *seventeen* (1996) by Colin Cheong; Rizman Dukar in Derik Mosman's *A Modern Boy* (1996); Han in *The Bondmaid* (1997) by Catherine Lim; and Timothy Wong in *The Man In The Cupboard* (1999) by Colin Cheong. In addition, historical novels set in Malaya that depict homes on the mainland Peninsular tend to include Singaporean abodes. For instance, Rex Shelley in his quartet tends to depict characters moving between Singapore and the Malayan mainland.

A Precisely Mapped Home and its Environs

Protagonists' homes are set in specific Singaporean locations in several novels. These include the abodes of Kwang Meng in Tiong Bahru (*If We Dream Too Long*); Holden Heng in Cuppage Road (*The Adventures of Holden Heng*); Abraham Isaac in Katong, followed by Teo Payoh (*Abraham's Promise*); Suwen in the Cluny Road neighbourhood (*Fistful of Colours*); Foo Wing Seng in Ghim Moh (*Heartland*); and the married residence of Yin Ling in affluent Rochester Park (*Following the Wrong God Home*). Does such precise mapping have any political significance?

These clearly located homes have national significance. They often indicate housing type. As shown in the last chapter, such portrayals of housing can be related to the state's management of land and to government housing policies. Precisely situated homes have other national significance. They are recognizable to readers familiar with Singapore and can provide the base from which journeys around the nation occur.

In this section, a novel that firmly grounds the protagonist's home and escapades in recognizable areas and streets of the newly independent island nation is examined. In *If We Dream Too Long* (henceforth *Dream*), Kwang Meng's home and his many jaunts from it are described in such detail that they can be traced on the *Singapore Street Directory* (2002). Yet, surprisingly, published literary scholarship about the novel has given little attention to the

textual references to Singapore's landscape. In the following analysis, it is argued that location of Kwang Meng's home and his trips around the island nation facilitate social and political commentary. It is also suggested that the variety of geographical reference points largely affirms the new national territory of Singapore in a novel published only seven years after Singapore become fully independent.

At the time of the novel's publication, the Tiong Bahru estate was one of the recent 1960s high-rise constructions subsidized by the government. The flagship development's national profile is indicated by its later inclusion in the memoirs of the former Prime Minister (2000: 119) and in Lily Kong and Brenda Yeoh's history of the national landscape (1995: 95). Kwang Meng's response to his accommodation type is ambivalent. When he visits a neighbouring couple's flat and sees their tasteful creation of a 'home' (129), he recognizes such a flat's 'potential' to be nice (Wagner 2005: 43). Yet he also feels that his family's apartment is a '[pig]sty' (129) to which he can invite his neighbours. This ambivalence, which can be identified through his different reference to 'home', is neither a ringing endorsement nor a critique of the state's nationalistic home-building programme. It therefore presents a picture of the nationally typical accommodation without being nationalistic.

The location of Kwang Meng's home, and some of his trips, are likely to be, to use Anderson's terminology, 'familiar' to readers cognizant of Singapore. The Tiong Bahru estate is even specified to be near the General Hospital, a recognizable landmark for people who have lived in Singapore. Kwang Meng's

journeys from home to other parts of the island include Changi Beach (on the East Coast); MacRitchie Reservoir (to the centre); and the docks at Tanjong Pagar (south). These destinations, which situate the narrative on different compass points of the 'national horizon', are also 'familiar' places to any Singaporean resident. The former two locations are popular leisure destinations and the latter is an economic hub. Such familiarity with the national geography may create a sense of national space.

Some of Kwang Meng's itineraries are closely described, which is curious given the small size of the island and its consequent accessibility. The notion of distance, within a national framework that Moretti (1998: 22) identifies in the trips portrayed in the novels of Jane Austen, may have relevance to *Dream* here. Moretti notes the measurability of the journeys in terms of miles and time, and relates them to national space. In *Dream*, a sense of distance across the geographically small entity of Singapore is conveyed through the descriptions of Kwang Meng's modes of transport and of routes detailing road names. In addition, the widespread Singaporean locations in the text firmly ground the novel in the new island nation. The strong sense of Singaporean location in the novel helps to make the alienation that Kwang Meng cannot shake off at the end of the novel (Philip Holden: forthcoming) closely linked to Singapore as well as to urban modernization in general.

Kwang Meng's meanderings from home also facilitate descriptions of 1960s Singapore. These accounts can combine both social and political observations. For instance, when he starts a trip to Changi beach he notices the

distinctive rods of washing hanging out of residents' windows. Later, when on the bus heading for the coast, Kwang Meng becomes aware of political prisoners working in Changi Prison's vegetable plot 'in the blazing sun'. He sees the 'tiny grey figures' stop to watch his bus move past, and thinks:

those fierce young men, refusing to recant, sticking out six, seven years for some idea, some ideal; don't they know it's useless? Their people, the people whom they believe they were fighting for, going to prison for, have forgotten them, are on their way to the sea. (71-72)

Here he alludes to the imprisoned left-wing leaders and politicians who were arrested without trial in the 1960s, until they confessed to having Communist allegiances. By mentioning them, readers are quietly reminded of these 'forgotten', little-publicized, incarcerated figures. The text builds a sense of connection with the nameless prisoners as Kwang Meng observes them and they, in turn, stop to look at the bus. The description of them is ambiguous. The adjective 'fierce' could be read as meaning that the men are dangerous or that they are brave, whilst the adjective 'useless' might refer to their misguided belief in Communism or, conversely, justice, if their innocence is assumed.

When Kwang Meng has a day trip to the Malaysian coast, the national border of Singapore is described. Kwang Meng goes through the customs and immigration 'barriers' after he crosses the Causeway (102). The vivid description of the landscape that he notices on the other side, including the 'virgin land' that gives off the 'smell and sight of pioneering' (103), indicates his excitement. This sentiment at the crossing resonates with Moretti's description (1998: 35) of international borders as sites of 'adventure'.

However, the ties with pre-independent Malaya are also conveyed.

Kwang Meng refers to the Causeway as the 'umbilical cord connecting Singapore to the mainland of Malaya' (102). This image of a nurturing mainland is at odds with Lee Kuan Yew's image of the independent Singaporean house. It also goes against the idea of the birth of the Singaporean nation in 1965. Goh Chok Tong later (1986),⁵⁴ later reflecting on Singapore's unplanned sovereign status at Independence, uses metaphors that imply the severed umbilical cord:

Singapore's birth was ... a painful Caesarean operation done without anesthesia. Older Singaporeans were convinced that the newborn Singapore was not meant to survive. But, like a Spartan baby left overnight under a cold open sky, it did... it did.

In addition, Kwang Meng's friend, Hock Lai, implies that Singapore is still joined to Malaysia when he refers to the jaunt as going 'up-country' (10).

In this analysis of *Dream*, it has been shown that the specific location of Kwang Meng's flat makes the central home in the text recognizably Singaporean, thereby effectively affirming political metaphors linking Singapore with home. In addition, the detailed descriptions of Kwang Meng's trips mark out recognizable national terrain from this home base. Nevertheless, some ambivalent sociopolitical comments undermine various state nationalist discourses concerning housing, the need to inter communists for national security, and the PAP's independent management of Singapore. Thus, the mapping of home both affirms and gently probes a variety of state discourses through the lens of home and its environs.

⁵⁴ The speech 'The Second Long March' was delivered at the Nanyang Technological Institute, August 1986 and is reproduced in Alan Chong (1991:124).

Singaporean Homes Without Addresses

There are several characters' homes that are emphatically set in Singapore but are not given addresses. These include the abodes of Ricky Tay (*Ricky Star*), Vincent Tan (*Raffles Place Ragtime*), Chris Tan (*Peculiar Chris*), Mei (*Foreign Bodies*), Nick (*tangerine*), and Chiah Deng (*Mammon Inc.*). Can such vaguely located homes have political significance?

In many cases, homes that are set on the island without specified addresses make pointed references to the Singaporean location. In this section, it is argued that homes generally located in Singapore can be used to raise nationally relevant issues. Although only *tangerine* is analysed immediately below, the Singaporean homes mentioned in many of the other novels are considered later in this thesis (for example, the protagonist's residence in *Peculiar Chris* is analysed at the end of this chapter and that in *Mammon Inc.* in Chapter Five).

The national award-winning novel *tangerine*⁵⁵ is considered here because no scene is set in the protagonist's home. There are only fleeting recollections of 'home' as the protagonist, Nick, travels in Vietnam. The actual locations of his various childhood homes, and his current abode in Singapore, are not specified.

There are more than forty references to the word 'home' in the novel. Whilst, in a few instances, Nick refers to Vietnamese people's abodes, he most

⁵⁵ *tangerine* won the Singaporean Literature Prize in 1996.

commonly uses the term to refer to Singapore: be it his domestic life in the city-state, Singapore itself, or a dovetailing of his abode and nation. On the one hand, the frequent associations between home and Singapore resonate with state discourses of Singapore as home. On the other hand, the references that he makes to the national home can hint at disjuncture with public facilities and state policies. He recalls that 'years ago' as a teenager he would go to the beaches near Changi at 'home' (57). 'But *he had outgrown*' sitting, listening, and watching the waves and jets coming and going 'or perhaps he had not – simply not having the luxury of time anymore' (emphasis added).⁵⁶

More politically, a distinction occurs between Singaporean citizens and the state when he recalls watching national television news at home about the bombing of Vietnam during the Vietnamese War. The national and domestic home materially intersects through his memory of the broadcast of foreign affairs through a domestic television set. In the Vietnamese War Crimes Museum, Nick reflects that the journalism he was exposed to from 'reading dispatches from one party in the conflict, seeing things through the eyes of American media men and through the door frames of American-built helicopters' (44). He also attributes his pro-American attitude to his failure to avert his eyes from the broadcast. With this recollection, he gently questions Singapore's pro-American stance during the war and his own unquestioning attitude. Furthermore, he remembers his grandmother's unspoken dissent from it, for, as she watched the bombs being released from the crafts, she was 'shaking her head in pity' (40).

⁵⁶ East Coast Park, on East Coast Parkway, is the largest park in Singapore on the east coast of the island.

In summary, the dominant fictional landscape of home is Singaporean in the principal novels considered in this thesis. This resonates with the territorial focus on Singapore highlighted by Shirley Lim (2003: 214). Similarly to Lim, this study finds that the location of many protagonists' dwellings in the nation-state home indicates some concurrence with the government's rejoinders that Singapore is home. However, whilst homes are often located in Singapore, social commentary about the home and its environs can put forward alternative viewpoints, be it about political prisoners or about the government's support of America during the Vietnamese War. Having considered the mapping of home in some English-language Singaporean novels, the significance of remaining in or departing from the Singaporean home will now be considered.

Singaporean Homes as Places to Stay or Leave

Staying in, or leaving, the Singaporean 'home' is a reoccurring theme in English-language Singapore novels in English. The decision to remain or go is often given prominence in novels by being placed at beginnings, midpoints, or closures of the narrative structures. It can also be given emphasis by being the subject of family discussions or arguments. Does this accentuated type of personal decision have political significance?

This choice of remaining in, or departing from, the Singaporean home has attracted scant consideration in existing published scholarship. However, there is good reason to politically analyse portrayals of this decision. First, these depictions can be read in the context of state-nationalist discourses that, until the mid 1990s, urged Singaporeans to live and die in Singapore. Secondly, characters often conflate the idea of remaining in, or departing from, a personal dwelling and the nation of Singapore. As such, the reasons for their decisions may raise national issues. Nevertheless, some analysis of individual books sometimes includes references to characters staying or leaving Singapore. Such commentary is included in the analysis of the novels considered in this chapter.

The idea of staying or leaving Singapore occurs in a variety of English-language Singaporean novels. Those considered in this chapter include *If We Dream Too Long* (1972); *Raffles Place Ragtime* (1988); *The Sin-kheh* (1993); *Fistful of Colours* (1993); and *Foreign Bodies* (1997). In this section, the depicted decisions are principally read in a political historical context. They are read in

light of the aforementioned government discourses about home and of pertinent aspects of the state's nation-building programme, which were outlined in Chapter One.

This contextual analysis is also framed with references to some concepts used in the fields of migration and geographical studies, which are highlighted by Lynellyn D. Long and Ellen Oxfeld (2004). First, the concept of voluntary and involuntary departure (ibid. 11) is drawn on. Secondly, push and pull factors (ibid. 6) that motivate or determine characters' movements to and from Singapore are considered.

For clarity, decisions about remaining in, or going away from, the island are arranged separately in this section. In some texts, one character remains on the island and another leaves. However, the division between the two options is not always as definitive. A character may imagine leaving Singapore but stay on the island. In addition, a trip away can carry with it the notion of return. These complexities are incorporated within the analysis.

Staying in the Singaporean Home and its Relationship to State Nationalism

There are novels in which characters consider leaving Singapore but remain, either out of positive choice or because they cannot leave. In this section, it is argued that these varied portrayals of staying in Singapore can be related to

state nationalism and nation building, in some instances endorsing the new nation state and in others undermining or critiquing it.

Choosing to remain in Singapore related to state nationalism

A character that decides to stay in Singapore, when presented with a choice to leave it, is Mah Cheng in *The Sin-kheh* (henceforth *Sin-kheh*). In this section, it is argued that the reasons for this choice, and the enactment of it in the novel, can be read as endorsing state nationalism.

Sin-kheh has received little published criticism. Whilst it has been noted for its semi-biographical content (Hannah Pandian in *The Straits Times*, 14 April 1993), and analysed in light of the protagonist's Chinese identity in Lynn Ang Ling-yin's PhD thesis (2001), it also celebrates a character that chooses to remain in Singapore. This, it is argued in this analysis, has political significance. It effectively pre-figures the emergence of the Singaporean nation. In addition, it is relevant that the novel was published in 1991, at a time when the Singaporean government was encouraging Singaporeans to live and die on the island.

The historical novel, which is loosely based on the author's grandparents' lives, is presented as having metonymic national significance in the concluding paratext. The author comments that 'the story of our immigrant grandparents touches at the very roots of many Singapore families here [in Singapore] today' (168). The novel opens with the arrival of the protagonist, the Chinese immigrant Sin Kay, in Singapore in 1894. Its mid-point climax is the punitive deportation

order that Sin Kay receives from the British authorities, his and his wife's subsequent decision that she remain in Singapore with their children, and the protagonist's forced departure back to China. Near the narrative's close, Sin Kay, who by this time has re-married in Amoy, clandestinely returns to Singapore for a short visit to hold his first grandson.

Significantly, there is a description of why Sin Kay's wife, Mah Cheng, remains in Singapore:

*Raising their family there [in Amoy] would be an impossible burden. They would be going back to nothing but hardship and starvation as their **China** mail made so clear.*

*As for the children, the future was definitely better for them here in this **land of opportunity**. Sin Kay had had the foresight to send his boys to an English school ... and so they were going to do well Oon Song, the eldest boy, was picking up English very smartly Once he finished school he would no doubt ... earn a good income. (113, emphasis added.)*

These reasons for Mah Cheng's continued residence in Singapore relate to national factors: the problems of the Chinese economy and, conversely, the opportunities in Singapore. Returning to China is imagined in negative, regressive terms, in contrast to the positively portrayed educational and employment openings in Singapore. Whilst the novel is set in colonial Singapore, the emphasis given to education can also be related to post-independence political discourses that highlight the importance of the state's provision of education in Singapore.

The pair then decide that their adored, dumb child, Eh Kow, will depart with Sin Kay. This is because 'City people are more cruel' to such handicapped children, and Sin Kay envisages that the boy will be 'happier in the countryside' (114). In this more critical excerpt about the Singaporean home, national

differences are not highlighted. Instead, a distinction between town and rural life is made. However, there may be an inference about a lack of compassion in Singapore. Whilst the word 'city' could signify any urban conurbation in the world, it is used by the Singaporean government to describe the nation. Whilst this lack of compassion could be related to the colonial government, given the temporal setting of the novel, it may make a more contemporary allusion. Oppositional voices have critiqued the PAP government's focus on the economy and lack of compassion (Hussin Mutalib 2005: 135). Illustrative of this latter point was the Workers' Party campaign slogan, 'Towards a Caring Society', during the 1976 General Election (ibid. 134). When Goh Chok Tong took over the premiership, he accentuated the importance of compassion in some of his speeches. Therefore, the reference to a lack of care, although not explicitly related to post-independence Singapore, touches on a politically sensitive issue.

Mah Cheng's continued residence in Singapore is celebrated in the text in almost nationalistic ways, although it is set prior to the existence or even imagination of the Singaporean nation. First, once Mah Cheng decides to stay, her characterization is given regal status. Sin Kay, on his departure, tells her 'Be the Empress Dowager. The Queen Victoria' (116). This image, which is reinforced with the following chapter's title, 'Victoria's Reign' (117), in part associates a Singaporean character with a leading national role, although it also alludes to Mah Cheng's matriarchal authority, to the loss of her husband, and to the author's own grandmother's adopted name (168).

Secondly, Mah Cheng's continued presence in Singapore is ultimately presented optimistically at the close of the narrative. When the family sees off Sin Kay at the end of his one and only visit, Mah Cheng despondently feels that her separation from her husband and their dumb son, Eh Kow, is 'the end' (164). Yet her mood shifts immediately after his departure, when she says:

*Come, boys, let's go **home**. She had a daughter-in-law to work on, a grandson to raise. And more to come. Family awaited her – her Singapore family. This was the beginning, not the end ...* (165, emphasis added)

The word 'home' is emphasized here by its placement in the penultimate paragraph of the novel. It combines the notion of a national and domestic home. Whilst this closure prepares for an unrealized sequel to the novel, it importantly conveys a sense of hope about the domestic and national home.

Hence, staying in Singapore can be related to positive attributes of the pre-figured nation, such as the education system and opportunities for employment. Nevertheless, these positive associations are also qualified with hints about a lack of compassion in the city. A sense of nationalism is also conveyed through Mah Cheng's continued residence in Singapore even though it is set decades before Singaporean independence. Furthermore, it presents staying in Singapore in a heroic light that has contemporary political significance.

Resigned and reluctant residence in Singapore

Singapore is not portrayed as a land of opportunity when protagonists feel resigned or frustrated at having to stay on the island. Such disenchantment is

depicted when central characters of both Goh Poh Seng's *Dream* (Kwang Meng) and Hwee Hwee Tan's *Foreign Bodies* (henceforth *Foreign*) (Mei) imagine departures from the island that are not realized.

Kwang Meng dreams of a sea-faring vocation, be it as a sailor, fisherman, or pioneer. As he thinks of the sea as 'universal' and as 'the mother of everything' (2), all these jobs would effectively take him outside his Singaporean home. He envisages that, as a sailor, he would live on the sea, visiting ports around the world and that, as a pioneer, he would work in Southeast Asia.

His stultifying, clerical job acts as a 'push' factor. When he sits 'sentenced to his small desk' wondering whether his salary justifies his toil, he muses about alternative occupations. He imagines 'carefree escapades' at ports around the world (30-31). Whilst the soul-destroying nature of the tedious work presents a critique of economic modernization in Singapore, Kwang Meng's dream of being a sailor is 'punctured' when a crew member of a ship, informs him that the job is 'dull' and, 'Routine, routine, routine' (93). This perspective indicates that the modernized world of work does not only constrain human spirits within Singapore's shores. Hence, the push factor is removed when it is found elsewhere. Consequently, Kwang Meng decides against this possible overseas life.⁵⁷

At the end of the novel, Kwang Meng refers to his 'home' dispiritedly. He has to support his family on his meagre salary after his father has an incapacitating stroke. When he walks along the seafront, the cargo boats in the

⁵⁷ In addition, he decides that he does not have the contacts to become an overseas entrepreneur.

distance 'were no longer beckoning. No, he shall not go. He shall not go. He shall only go home' (177). As Koh Tai Ann (1984: 188–189) astutely notes, 'home' here refers to Kwang Meng's domestic and national home. Notably, the word 'only' implies a sense of lack that infers a negation of life in the Singaporean home.

In *Foreign*, Mei's dream of studying abroad is emphasized through satire. Mei dramatically and humorously recalls that 'Going Abroad was the core motivating principle of my life' (137). The opening phrase, with its accenting capital letters, is prominently placed in the text at the opening of a new chapter section. Mei attains the good grades that her parents made conditional for 'the Chance to Live Abroad' but her parents renege on their promise. The anger that Mei feels about the broken promise dramatizes the loss that she also feels (140). Mei's parents fear that, if Mei goes to London, she will not come back to live in Singapore. Her mother justifies this, in part, by citing Mei's frequent complaint: 'Singapore so boring' (139). Here, a push factor about the nation is highlighted in a domestic scene.

In summary, decisions to stay in Singapore can convey a variety of responses to state nationalist discourses. In the historically set *Sin-kheh*, Mah Cheng's voluntary decision to stay positions Singapore as a land of opportunity, with strong educational and economic pull factors. The benefits of living on the island are emphasized through the personal sacrifices that Mah Cheng makes. Contrastingly, in *Dream* and *Foreign*, Kwang Meng and Mei do not desire to remain in Singapore. They feel both feel the push factor of tedium. However, in

Dream, the constraints of modernization are also found to be elsewhere, which neutralizes this push factor.

Departures From Singaporean Homes

In this section it is argued that the departures of individual characters can be read in the context of nationalism and in light of the national issues that they raise. Departures that are considered in this section are the forced exits of characters in *Sin-kheh* (Sin Kay) and *The Bondmaid* (1997) by Catherine Lim (the families of Wu and Chang); and a voluntary decision to leave, in *Raffles Place Ragtime* (Connie Lim).

Forced departures in relation to nationalism

Obligatory departures from Singaporean family homes, in historical novels such as *Sin-kheh* and *The Bondmaid* (henceforth *Bondmaid*), set in the 1950s, position Singapore as the characters' residential place of choice. This affirmation of the desirability of living in Singapore is portrayed in these novels prior to the island's independence. It is argued in this section that, in so doing, the texts largely convey a nationalistic focus.

In *Sin-kheh*, the British regime's punitive banishment of Sin Kay to China gives the guest worker no choice but to go. Sin Kay had settled in Singapore prior to this event, although he had retained a sense of attachment to his

ancestral homeland. His dual loyalty was indicated when he symbolically placed the ancestral plaque from his village in Golden Hill, Amoy, over his front door. This both honoured his ancestral village and 'proudly' proclaimed that he had 'arrived' (86). In *Bondmaid*, the Wu and Chang families also have 'no choice' but to uproot themselves from Singapore (342) to dispel a curse.

Considerable textual space is given to the events leading up to these characters' departures from Singapore. This textual preoccupation focuses attention on the Singapore setting. In *Bondmaid*, the Wu and Chang families are reported to have left in the 'Epilogue'. In addition, in *Sin-kheh*, the forced departure of the protagonist presents the colonial regime unfavourably by portraying the dispensation of British justice as fallible and uncompassionate. The police do not detect that Sin Kay's 'crime' is a set-up by a gangster group, in revenge for Sin Kay's previous co-operation with the police about an earlier murder perpetrated by one of the gang members. The British men who preside over Sin Kay's court case are said to be 'unsympathetic', the sentencing judge banging 'his hammer like an auctioneer disposing of chattel' (112).

The return of these characters to their ancestral family homes is not described in either text. There are no rituals of reunion or depictions of overseas kin in either novel. Once the characters leave Singapore, it is as if they cease to exist. When Sin Kay briefly returns to Singapore, he does not bring back any souvenirs and only talks of Eh Kow. This leaves Singapore firmly in the foreground and as such gives precedence to the island prior to its national status.

Nevertheless, the ancestral homelands provide a place of refuge in both texts, even though they are marginalized and though in *Sin-kheh* the harsh economic conditions of China are stressed. This portrayal of an ancestral homeland safety net is politically significant because all three novels were published in an era in which the government has urged Singaporeans to think of the island as their only home.

Hence, these forced departures, which present Singapore as the residential place of choice and which give such strong emphasis to the Singaporean locale, convey a nationalistic bias even though they are set in the colonial era prior to Singapore's separation from the Malayan mainland. Nevertheless, they do indicate that ancestral homelands provide a safety net, albeit it in a less desirable location.

Willing departures

Characters who proactively plan to depart from their domestic and national home in post-independent Singapore are often, partly prompted by push factors that relate both to their personal lives and to Singapore. In this section, it is argued that, when this occurs, it can be politically significant. This is first because the rationale can raise a national issue; and secondly because such an account can diverge from the government's attribution of emigration to pull factors.

This section concentrates on a concordance between personal and national push factors that can propel departures, and focuses on those, which occurs in *Raffles Place Ragtime* (1988), by Philip Jeyaretnam. This parallel

between the rationale that drives a flight from the domestic and national home can also be discerned in *Fistful of Colours* (1993), by Suchen Christine Lim. In it, Suwen's artistic trip to Malaysia is prompted by her sense of suffocation by the Asian values proselytised by her mother and in the Chinese media.

Nevertheless, it should be acknowledged that there are other portrayed types of voluntary departure in the fiction that do not have explicit national resonance. For example, in *Peculiar Chris* (1992), by Johann S. Lee, no reasons are ever stated for the protagonist's plans to study in London. In *Abraham's Promise*, the protagonist's childhood sweetheart, Rose, emigrates to England for purely personal reasons, to set up home with her British husband-to-be.

In *Raffles Place Ragtime*, economic pragmatism effectively drives the female protagonist, Connie Tan, away from 'home'. At the narrative's close, Connie rejects the pragmatics of materialism in her personal life and in society. She plans to leave 'home' to work philanthropically in Papua New Guinea or India.

The young woman's decision follows her painful discovery of her father's adultery and her deduction that he married her mother for money. Connie has just escaped from a similar fate herself, having broken off her engagement with the ambitious Vincent, who exploitatively saw their prospective union as a form of career advancement (see Chapter Four for an examination of this relationship). After the separation, Vincent, in an interior monologue, remorsefully acknowledges that his calculating behaviour towards Connie was 'cruel' (103). He attributes it to societal pressures: 'Each man for himself, he had thought,

believing in it because that was what society had seemed to expect' (103). In taking responsibility for his actions, his previous materialistic focus is portrayed as immature and irresponsible. Here, Connie's rejection of her former fiancé's and her father's economic pragmatism is given emotional dimensions through the trope of home, through which it is shown to be morally flawed.

On a societal level, Connie feels drained by the rat race and 'suffocated' by the pragmatic imperatives of life in Singapore: the rush for 'degrees, jobs, careers, spouses, houses, children' (144). The ungrammatical itemization of these pressures resembles a functional shopping list. Connie's response may be read as a critique of some central planks of state nationalism, given the government's focus on economic development and its promotion of marriage, amongst affluent youngsters, to regenerate human resources for the economic well-being of the nation.

Nevertheless, Connie's departure is put in patriotic terms, for she declares that she wants to develop skills abroad that she can then contribute to the nation. This ambition is counter to state discourses of the late 1980s and earlier, which urged Singaporeans to remain in Singapore to contribute to the Singaporean economy. Here there is a fissure between her patriotism and state nationalist discourses.

Home and Having a Say

A sense of having a 'home' in Singapore is indirectly associated with having a say in public affairs in Philip Jeyaretnam's political novel, *Abraham's Promise* (1995). So what is the political significance of this allusion?

Although there has been a relatively large amount of scholarship on the novel, only Eddie Tay has analysed it in the specific context of 'home'. Tay (2007: ch.6) reads Abraham's liberal humanist ideology and actions against state nationalist discourse and argues that, whilst Abraham's home is in Singapore, ideologically Abraham is not 'at home' on the island. Tay therefore uses the figurative term 'home' to comment on the text. However, no scholar has considered Abraham's place of home in Singapore and his use of the word 'home'. In this section, it is posited that, when this lens is used, a link between home and democratic participation in debate emerges, which challenges the status quo.

Abraham, as an idealistic young man in the mid 1950s, is questioned by his prospective father-in-law, Mr Supramaniam, about the wisdom of his involvement in union politics given that, as a member of the Singaporean Jaffna Tamil community, Abraham is a member of an ethnic minority. Abraham replies, 'Perhaps we have to make up our minds where we belong. Wherever we belong we must get involved' (104). Here Abraham, as a member of the Jaffna community, makes participation in political debate integral to his sense of belonging to a place.

At this time, when Singapore is on the cusp of independence, Abraham's sense of belonging to Singapore is reflected in his pride in his home in Singapore. When Rose, his childhood sweetheart, visits him in 1958 from her new marital abode in England, he is excited about what 'glory the future held in store, for Singapore and for me' and imagines that she must regret the loss of her 'home' in Singapore (111). This period where he feels he belongs coincides with a time of vigorous political debate in Singapore and of his own active part in society, through his work as a teacher and on the Teachers' Union newsletter and through his letter on the politics of multi-racialism that is published in *The Straits Times*.

After the PAP comes into power in 1959, Abraham's efforts to participate in public discourse are crushed. He writes a 'blistering defence' (117) of a civil service union leader, who he thinks has been unfairly treated by the government, in the trade press. He is promptly asked – and refuses – to retract his critique by the authorities. Consequently, a rigged Board of Governors' Committee deprives him of the right to teach at school, on trumped-up charges. As a result, Abraham loses his livelihood, professional status, and, in the long run, his wife to his best friend, Krishna, who is an MP.

Abraham's subsequent downward mobility is reflected in his accommodation. Having had a home in the fashionable Katong area, he descends, as an elderly man, to a rented room in an HDB estate in Toa Payoh. As discussed in Chapter Two, his sense of dislocation from where he resides is acute.

After his punishment, the impoverished and silenced Abraham loses his sense of home in Singapore with regard to his own lodgings and to those of his son, Victor. When Rose visits him in the late 1980s, he no longer wishes her to come to his abode 'as I did on her last visit, for that room does not count as a *home*' (170, emphasis added). By this time, he no longer participates in politics. In addition, he does not consider Victor's luxurious apartment as a 'home', but rather as 'a display of his [Victor's] arrival in the world'. His son's abjuration of politics, he comments, has 'paid dividends, for he has, at his young age, been able to afford a professional decorator to do up his apartment, located on the fringes of one of Singapore's best residential areas' (54). Whilst Abraham also states that the lack of a woman in the household stops it from being a home, he nevertheless makes a link between his unease in the accommodation and his son's non-participation in political debate.

Abraham's lost sense of a domestic home can also be linked to his dented sense of being Singaporean. In a dialogue with his private pupil, Richard Yeo, he explains that he has lived exclusively in Singapore because:

'I wanted only to be a Singaporean.'
'But you are.'
'I'm just an old man.' (122)

Here, Abraham disconnects living in Singapore with calling himself a Singaporean. Whilst the boy counters him, Abraham refuses to accept the description 'Singaporean'. This can be read in the context of his earlier statement as a young man that belonging to a country involves participation in it.

At the close of the novel, Abraham stops resenting his son's political conformity, acknowledging that Victor 'may never change the world, hardly wants to, but still, head down, he will hold his ground' (178). He also accepts his son's homosexuality. Looking round his son's 'room', where he previously felt uncomfortable, he is 'at peace' (177). Nonetheless, he does not refer to it as a 'home'.

In addition, there is a single episode in which Abraham leaves a Singaporean home because his participation in political debate is restricted. When Abraham attends a cocktail party at Richard Yeo's parents' house, he speaks to other guests about the deplorable focus on money and power in Singapore. At this point, the hostess who looks like Imelda Marcos (72), firmly separates him from his audience, and takes Abraham aside to talk with her son. Richard is in a group listening to an MP. This politician, it can be deduced, represents the PAP (see Philip Holden 1998). Abraham engages in the conversation and raises the issue of the lack of political consultation in Singapore. The MP instead of rationally responding to Abraham's arguments mocks his Indian accent. Here, the issue of participation is obliquely linked to that of ethnicity, as Abraham's Tamil pronunciation is used to invalidate his participative discourse. Feeling ostracized by the group's laughter because of his 'other' Tamil accent, Abraham chooses to leave the room and the house. Notably, he is followed out by his idealistic, Singaporean Chinese pupil. Richard stands outside the house with Abraham and, through his demeanour and action, Abraham feels that 'The world is not yet lost, nor I with it' (76).

This reading of *Abraham's Promise* has gone further than Tay's. For, whilst it is true that Abraham lives in Singapore all his life, and is not 'at home' with the PAP's management of the country, there are times when Abraham does not feel he has a home in Singapore. This makes participation in democratic debate conditional to a sense of national belonging. In addition, when his interaction with an MP is ridiculed, he chooses to leave the homely space where this occurs. Abraham's outlook counters a number of government positions. The state effectively encourages Singaporeans to consider Singapore as home unconditionally. In addition, it states that politics is the preserve of politicians, as was outlined in Chapter One. Abraham's stance might also be read as supporting the Social Democratic Party's criticism of the degree of the PAP's command of the Singaporean home.

Imagining National Community from Home

Homes can provide a base from which communities in the nation are imagined, be they the national community of Singapore, as in *Heartland* (1999), by Daren Shiau, or, more subversively, a marginalized national community, as in *Peculiar Chris* (1992), by Johann S. Lee (henceforth *Peculiar*).

This section asks whether the portrayals of national communities in these two novels, viewed through the lens of home, can be regarded as being politically significant. Both *Bildungsromane* have a national focus in that the homes portrayed in them are set in Singapore, their authors are Singaporean, and they are intended for Singaporean audiences.

National Community Envisaged in *Heartland*

It is posited in this section that the majestically described, high-rise home estate of *Heartland's* protagonist, Wing, provides a focus for imagining the national community in a way that gives emphasis to citizens living in non-elitist, HDB accommodation. It is suggested that the lyrical descriptions of the HDB cityscape endorse state nationalism but that the anti-elitist strain of the novel is not in harmony with the aforementioned state discourses that assert the importance of the elite in nation-building.

The national significance of the urban domestic landscape portrayed in the novel has been discussed in academic works and in press reviews. Tamara Wagner (2005: 198), in her analysis of HDB housing in the national fiction that was outlined in the last chapter, argues that novels like *Heartland* 'depict Singapore as a city, as an urban environment, and only secondarily as a nation' (emphasis in original). However, this comparison is problematic, given the government's branding of the country as a Global City.⁵⁸ Hence, the urban landscape is typical of the city-state. In addition, Wagner importantly highlights the portrayed socioeconomic divisions between Wing, who lives in an HDB flat, and his first girlfriend, Chloe, who comes from more affluent surroundings, and this divide is one of national significance (see Chapter Four).

Ong Sor Fern's review of the novel in *The Straits Times* (7 August 1999) presents the novel in nationalistic terms. Ong states that the book creates 'a literary space that is indubitably and quite vividly Singaporean'. She says that it celebrates 'all things Singaporean' and recommends it for being 'true blue Singaporean'. Whilst she mentions that 'Shiau captures the ambivalent feelings that the younger generations of Singaporeans sometimes harbour', she does not elaborate on more questioning aspects of the novel to which she alludes.

Notably, *Heartland* is framed in a national context. It opens with the protagonist, a 'young Singaporean male' (3), returning to his home at the end of a day. Characteristically Singaporean abbreviations mark the description of

⁵⁸ Singapore was first positioned as a Global City in 1972 by Foreign Affairs Minister, S. Rajaratnam (Kian Koon Choo 1988: 3).

Wing's day and route home, such as 'NS' (National Service), 'JC' (Junior College), and 'MRT' (Mass Rapid Transit). In addition, specific Singaporean places are named and described, such as Bugis Junction and Commonwealth.

When Wing arrives back at his local MRT station, he observes 'thousands of heartlanders spilling out into the estates' (5). Here, he imagines citizens, too numerous to be identified individually, going to their dispersed residences. He then focuses on the returning residents to his home estate, who:

made their way up lifts, onto landings and into hundreds of flats. Wing could almost hear the symphony of iron gates being unlocked and slammed resonating throughout the blocks, of TVs being turned on, the sizzles as fish were thrown into woks and the metallic quivering of aluminium bathroom doors. The sounds repeated themselves like a pulse of life echoing through the corridors and void decks, the heartbeat of the estate rushing into a sustained crescendo over the evening hour. (6)

The reader is invited to envisage the synchronized, and thereby 'homogeneous', human activity of the unnamed inhabitants. The beauty and naturalness of the community's unison is conveyed through the unitary musical and biological imagery. Nothing in the description differentiates the estate from other HDB residences; it is typical of the rhythm of life in the heartlands across the national horizon.

Reviews of the novel view the authenticity of such descriptions varyingly. This is significant, given Anderson's aforementioned argument that nationalistic fiction should come across as 'realistic' and 'true'. Reviews published in Singaporean media received them as plausible representations of national life. For instance, Sian E. Jay, in *Esplanade: The Arts Magazine* (November–December 1999), states that 'It is one of the few books that paints a picture of

what the real Singapore is like ... Wing ... lives a very ordinary life in the “heartland”, ie HDB and MRT land.’ Ong Sor Fern asks readers of *The Straits Times* (7 August 1999) if they have looked at HDB flats as closely as Shiau, who has ‘paid close attention to those concrete structures and those who live in them’. In contrast, Wagner’s study (2005: 44), published outside Singapore, more sceptically refers to the novel’s ‘most positive rendering of a rather turgidly romanticised life in a concrete block’. The ‘idolising’ to which she refers (ibid. 44) infers a degree of falsification. From these contrasting responses it can be deduced that the lyrical descriptions of the HDB blocks can be regarded to some degree as supporting a nationalist perspective.

The novel images the nation by portraying different strata of Singaporean society. Wing has an elitist girlfriend, Chloe Tam, who lives in private accommodation (see Chapter Four). Different socioeconomic tiers of HDB residents are also depicted. These include first Wing and his JC friends who come from other HDB estates, such as Audrey and Joshua Nonis.⁵⁹ Secondly, Wing’s less-educated subsequent girlfriend, May Ling (see Chapter Four), and her brother, Yong, also live in his HDB estate. Thirdly, some of his former childhood friends who come from his residential area are mentioned in passing. He no longer speaks to them and they are portrayed as having less education, being in manual employment, and of behaving antisocially.

⁵⁹ Whilst it is explicitly stated that Audrey comes from an HDB estate, it is implied that Joshua resides in public housing. Joshua lives in Hougang, which is a New Town and which mainly comprises HDB flats. Furthermore, Joshua praises the government for having provided accommodation that his parents can afford.

Heartland's depictions of home lives geographically marginalize the upper echelon of society. Whereas the novel depicts the homes of Wing, Audrey, Joshua, and May Ling and her brother, and the shared estate that Wing, May Ling, and the protagonist's gang of former friends live in, the home and neighbourhood of Chloe, who is an important character, is not described, nor is any scene set there: Wing only meets Chloe's parents in the impersonal space of an expensive restaurant. This absence therefore keeps the heartlands in the foreground. This is somewhat unusual given that other novels, such as *Dream* and *Raffles Place Ragtime*, that have affluent characters (Cecilia Ong and Connie Tan), set scenes in the women's families' luxury abodes and describe their accommodation. Given the importance that the government ascribes to the elite in Singapore, this absence could be construed as carrying a hint of resistance to the dominance of this group.

Furthermore, Chloe exhibits extreme hostility to the HDB environment. She refers to a communal toilet as 'filthy' and 'disgusting', thinking that 'even animals know how to be more hygienic!' (85). Here she shows no empathy with HDB residents, considering them as sub-human. She declares that she is 'not used' to the surroundings and 'can never get used to' them (86), thereby showing no openness to the evidently alien environment. This scene positions a member of the elite as having little understanding or even curiosity about the way in which the vast majority of Singaporeans live, and as being out of touch with the majority of the population's daily existence.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ For a discussion of Chloe's hostility to the HDB environment, also see Chapter Four.

It is notable that those of Wing's friends who come from the heartland show sincere social commitment. Wing discovers that Yong, whom he had thought was a rebel, has a Singaporean flag displayed in the most intimate space of his HDB home, his bedroom. In addition, when Wing visits his terminally ill friend Joshua at home, he finds that Joshua sustains his position about not rebelling against the government, even though he is dying because of a lack of dialysis provision. However, privately housed Chloe, who campaigns, in Singapore, against animal testing, and who is a vegetarian, is later revealed to have given up vegetarianism. The shock that Wing feels about her *volte face* dramatizes the presentation of her lack of moral fibre.

Therefore, through the trope of home, the novel fundamentally imagines the national community as heartlanders. The estate is described in unitary terms, despite a lack of communication between its residents and the many differences between them. In this way, the novel glorifies the government housing schemes. Yet it also questions and undermines the place of elitism by depicting no affluent home and by showing a privileged member of society's detachment from, and even hostility to, HDB life.

The Gay Community and the Home

Peculiar Chris (henceforth *Peculiar*) was the first English-language Singaporean novel to portray the coming out of a gay Singaporean protagonist (Chris Tan).

Unlike the nationalistic novels highlighted by Benedict Anderson, the narrative does not project an image of the nation as a whole. Instead it focuses on a marginalized group within the city-state, raising a nationally important and politically significant issue.

In this section, it is argued that this groundbreaking text imagines a multi-stratified national gay homosexual community in the Singaporean home. The novel, through its portrayal of mainly gay characters asserts the place of gay family members in the Singaporean home. In doing so, it effectively challenges state restrictions on gay male consensual sex at home.

When *Peculiar* was published, there was little celebration of gay culture in the country (Johann S. Lee, personal communication, April 2005). Lee, who left Singapore just after the novel was published, and who has resided in Britain ever since, says he 'ran away' because of lifestyle reasons. The Singaporean state has a variety of restrictions against homosexuality. For example, male homosexuality has been illegal throughout the period under review in this thesis (1972–2002).⁶¹ This is even though the government became increasingly open to homosexuality; in 1998, the Senior Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, said that the government did not want to 'harass' anyone about the issue (David Birch 2003: 7). In addition, censorship is applied to gay media and there are restrictions on

⁶¹ Section 377 of the Penal Code states that 'carnal intercourse is against the order of nature' and is punishable by imprisonment for life or for a period that may extend to ten years and is also 'liable to fines' (Baden Offord 1999: 304). Section 377(A) criminalizes consensual male homosexual acts of 'gross indecency' in public or in private (Offord 1999: 304).

specifically homosexual advocacy groups.⁶² Despite these restrictions, a gay community has gradually evolved (see Russell Heng 2001).

The relative significance of the novel's Singaporean setting is debated. Shirley Lim (2003: 215) asserts that the novel 'begins with the closed world of Singapore prejudices and is able to break out of it only through [Chris's] deterritorialized flights to a Western global space, first to Sydney and finally to London'. Paul Yeoh (2006: 122 and 128) disagrees with her, convincingly arguing that 'Queemess does not automatically mean exile, with protest from a distance as the only option'. Yeoh (ibid. 124) observes that the novel's development of gay love is 'closely aligned with Singapore's national ideals Chris consistently privileges the order, rationality and civilized comfort which Singapore strives to represent over the chaotic, intractable forces of the body and nature.' Importantly, Yeoh (ibid. 123) notes that Chris's homosexuality develops '*in situ*', although he does not examine this within the trope of home.

Peculiar Chris's national status

Peculiar was the first English-language Singaporean novel to portray the coming out of a gay Singaporean protagonist. Not only does it have a place in national literary history, it is also revered amongst Singapore's gay community.

The novel's opening paratext (iii) introduces the topic of homosexuality in a national context. Readers are informed that the novel touches on, 'the finer aspects of homosexuality hitherto unexplored in Singapore fiction'. In the

⁶² For example, the Singapore gay and lesbian group that focuses on advocacy and public education, People Like Us, was refused registration by the state Registrar of Societies in 1997.

Foreword, Lee (v) refers to a lack of liberty in 'our country'; the possessive pronoun indicating that the novel is written by a Singaporean for Singaporeans. Although Lee (vi) states that the novel 'does not aim to represent the entire cross-section of Singapore's gay society', in making this statement he imagines such a grouping.

Whilst the novel makes inter-textual references to gay fiction published outside Singapore, such as *Maurice* (1913–14), by E. M. Forster, and *The Swimming Pool Library* (1988), by Alan Hollinghurst (Shirley Lim 2003; Wagner 2005; Yeoh 2006), it departs from them and has a distinctive place in Singaporean fiction according to Yeoh (2006).

Peculiar is celebrated in the gay community. Lee reports that the renowned Singaporean writer Alfian Sa'at, who read the book as a youngster, later told Lee that it was part of his coming out and his growing up (Lee, personal communication, April 2005). Sa'at subsequently adapted the novel into the play *Happy Endings: Asian Boys Vol 3*, which was performed in Singapore in July 2007. Sa'at told Lee that, in his research about the novel, he found library copies of it that had pager numbers of gay men written on the back covers, indicating that copies of the book were used for networking in the pre-email era. Whilst the novel is celebrated in this way in Singapore, Lee has also received some foreign fan mail (Lee, personal communication, April 2005) but there is not the same sense of overseas readers communicating amongst themselves about the novel.

The narrative: a gay identity evolved in the Singaporean home

The narrative charts the development of Chris Tan's gay identity. This principally takes place in his national home of Singapore and is latterly portrayed in his own abode.

Chris has his first sexual experience in Singapore, his first love being his fellow Junior College student, Ken. The relationship ends when Ken, who is Indonesian, decides to get married according to the wishes of his family in Jakarta (see Chapter Six).

The young Singaporean then goes into National Service. After he openly declares his sexual orientation, the army discriminates against him by putting him in a lowly administrative post with other gay Singaporeans and by not allowing him to sleep on army premises. After being physically assaulted, Chris goes on a holiday to Sydney where he meets his second lover, Jack. Whilst he has a significant relationship with Jack, they consummate their relationship in temporary accommodation rather than in Jack's home.

On Chris's return, he sets up with home with his superior, Lieutenant Samuel Lye, being encouraged to do so by Samuel's happily domesticated friends, Dominic and Paul. The relationship between Chris, and fellow Singaporean Samuel, is firmly situated in their Singaporean home. This is in contrast to the previous love scenes between Chris, and the Indonesian Ken and Australian Gary that were depicted in the transitory locations of student lodgings or hotel bedrooms.

Dominic's sister, Brenda, helps Chris to become a presenter on a military radio programme. She lives happily with her lesbian partner, Callie. These relations portray a close-knit gay Singaporean community.

After Chris and Samuel have set up home, Samuel has a blood transfusion, from which he develops AIDS and dies. Chris only decides to take up his university place in London after Samuel's death.

Home and the imagining of gay communities in Singapore

The gay community is imagined through the trope of home in the novel. There are shadowy gay characters who meet in illicit transitory locations without a home base, happily settled gay people in their homes, and homosexuals in seemingly heterosexual homes. At the beginning of the novel, Ken shows Chris's covert gay community life, which operates through nightclubs that are regularly closed down by the authorities and by coded soliciting among gay men along the Singapore River at night. This is an ephemeral, bleak facet of the homosexual community. Kenneth dreads becoming a part of this unhomey set up, yet sees no alternative to it. This, in part, leads to his decision to marry.

A contrastingly stable, transparent aspect of homosexual life is depicted through the Singaporean homes of Chris, and Dominic and Paul. Chris decides, at the age of sixteen, to 'make a home' for himself (91) by living in a flat, independent of his family, who have migrated to America. When Chris entertains his transsexual friend Nicholas at his home, the latter says, 'People like you and I. If there's one thing we have, it's one another' (81). Here a community of gay

people is envisaged who are mutually supportive. This alternative community is at odds with government discourses that present the family as the 'basic unit of society' (see Chapter Five).

Later in the novel, Chris is inspired to settle down with Samuel when he visits the idyllic home of Paul and Dominic. Whilst there, his inner voice says, *'Live Have a hand in life... You don't have to be alone'* (143). The italicized font emphasizes the message that it is worth taking the risk of trying to establish a settled relationship and home. In this way, the novel shows the importance of being able to set up home; yet at the time in Singapore this was difficult because, in the early 1990s, the government did not allow single Singaporeans to move into HDB flats under the age of thirty-five years, thereby effectively discriminating against homosexual residence.

Nevertheless, this portrayal of a homely gay life in Singapore defies credibility at times. Chris's independent, private accommodation at the age of sixteen is highly unusual. The author notes that it was somewhat 'unbelievable' but that it was a device to facilitate the portrayal of Chris's coming out (Lee, personal communication, April 2005). In addition, Dominic and Paul's lifestyle would be unattainable to the majority of young gay Singaporeans living in HDB flats. These unusual situations indicate that the novel presents a way of life that would, in reality, have been hard for most gay Singaporeans to realize in the city-state, at the time of publication. In this way, the fictional text shows a lack of social reality thereby defying the status quo.

In addition, homosexuality is portrayed in seemingly heterosexual homes. Sinisterly, several characters were homosexually abused as children. Samuel was 'very badly' sexually abused by his father and consequently battles with frigidity (155); Nicholas was raped by a neighbour in the latter's home; and Dominic was abused by his uncle. The multiplicity of these incidents may hint at the dangers of a homosexual orientation being driven underground.

In sum, national communities imagined from home can be political. *Heartland* glorifies public housing in its lyrical, unitary imagining of the national community based in HDB estates. At the same time, it marginalizes a member of the elite, showing her to be out of place in the ubiquitous HDB heartland. This has political significance given that elitism is widely recognized as one of the PAP ideologies.

Peculiar imagines a minority group and, in so doing, gives the gay community national visibility in its gentle assertion of the place of gay family members in the Singaporean home. The national importance of the novel is not only indicated through its originality within Singaporean fiction but also its reception within the gay community. The self-fulfilment of *Peculiar's* protagonist occurs in a home setting that encompasses personal and national space. Nevertheless, such a portrayal is optimistic rather than realistic in that it presents an idealized version of easily established domestic gay life in Singapore. The narrative is set apart from state nationalist discourses that give primacy to family life, legislation that makes male consensual sex at home illegal, and HDB regulations that discourage the setting up of homosexual homes. Through the

lens of home, the disadvantages and dangers of restricting homosexuality may be discerned in the novel. The frequently closed-down nightclubs encourage a transitory lifestyle amongst some members of the gay community and, in Kenneth's case, the rejection of a gay identity. In addition, the multiple incidents of homosexual abuse in heterosexual homes may indicate the dangers of a culture where homosexuality is driven underground.

Conclusion

This chapter, in its exploration of some of the connections between home and nation, has demonstrated that locations of, portrayals of, and wordplay concerning 'home' can carry political connotations that can be related to state nationalist discourses, ideologies, and policies.

The frequent location of homes in Singapore resonates with the PAP's emphatic representation of the country as 'home' and thereby with state nationalist discourses. Furthermore, the mapped Singaporean setting of homes, and excursions from them, can facilitate the marking of national territory, such as the border at the Causeway, and the names of Singaporean streets and landmarks. However, whilst homes are often set in Singapore, be they in specified or non-located districts, they often facilitate commentary about the national home. In questioning the status quo, they can hint at alternative viewpoints, be it about political punishment of so-called Communists or about the government's support of America during the Vietnamese War.

Decisions about staying in or leaving 'home' also raise issues associated with the nation. Commitments to stay and reluctant departures can be interpreted as being nationalistic and, in some historical novels, prefigure the birth of the Singaporean nation. Contrastingly, resigned or resentful residence in Singapore and willing departures can raise national issues that can be related to the PAP government's nation-building strategies, such as the drive for economic success and regulation of society.

Subtexts relating to democratic process, elitism, and the place of gay people in the Singaporean home can also be identified in relation to portrayals of home. In *Abraham's Promise*, an association is made between having a home and having a say in national affairs. This association is subversive, because it does not equate residence simply with belonging to country. Instead of the state deciding who can have a home in Singapore, it is the protagonist who states whether he feels he has a home or not. In *Heartland*, a non-elitist subtext may be identified that effectively questions the relevance of the elite in the national community. *Peculiar Chris* presents a Singaporean home where a settled gay community is accommodated. This representation subverts the status quo that regulated against homosexuality and promoted family values.

Interpreted in this way, the trope of 'home' is used in English-language Singapore novels to respond to the government's nation-building strategies, policies and discourses. In doing so it uses the PAP's metaphors. On the one hand, the novels are nationalistic in their absorption in matters Singaporean. On the other hand, they can present alternative perspectives to those of the government concerning policies, processes of power, and ideologies.

CHAPTER FOUR

INTER-CLASS AND INTER-RACIAL LOVE AND COURTSHIP

They had never quarrelled like this before Two people, in love Educated and rational! ... How could he let the prejudices and cock-eyed beliefs of others mar his feelings ...?

Suchen Christine Lim, *Fistful of Colours* (333)

The power of prejudice is conveyed in this passage, in which a Singaporean Malay character reflects on an acrimonious argument that he has just had with his Singaporean Chinese fiancée about familial resistance to their match. Whilst inter-racial relationships feature in *Fistful of Colours* (1993) by Suchen Christine Lim, matches between characters of different socioeconomic backgrounds are particularly prominent in a variety of other English-language Singaporean novels. These texts include: *If We Dream Too Long* (1972), by Goh Poh Seng (henceforth *Dream*); *Raffles Place Ragtime* (1988), by Philip Jeyaretnam (henceforth *Raffles*); and *Heartland* (1999), by Daren Shiau.

This chapter considers portrayals in inter-class and inter-racial love and courtship in these four novels. The words 'love' and 'courtship' are used because the possibility of marriage is raised in a number, but not all, of these relationships. This chapter asks how the mixed race or class love affairs can be related to state discourses, policies, and values concerning socioeconomic stratifications and multi-racialism. To do so, it considers the profiles of romantic

protagonists, attitudes towards differences in these characterizations, and the outcomes of the matches.

To date no published academic study has focused on inter-class *and* inter-racial love and courtship in English-language Singaporean novels. Consequently, there has been no published, systematic, political interpretation of these relationships. Nevertheless, some literary criticism has identified political meanings associated with narratives concerning inter-class *or* ethnic relationships. Shirley Lim (1994: 150) notes that the personal ambitions of the male protagonist of *Raffles* 'are often elided with national ideological aspirations'; Tamara Wagner (2005: 303) astutely argues that episodes of racial prejudices in *Fistful* intimate a racist 'underbelly' within the 'founding myths' of multi-racialism in Singapore; whilst Laurel Means (1994: 969) mentions that inter-racial marriage in *Fistful* undermines 'social and political institutional structures'.

There are a number of reasons for politically analysing mixed socioeconomic or racial relationships that have potential to culminate in family formation and home-building. Social cohesion amongst citizens from different socioeconomic backgrounds and of various races is of particular political significance given the government's communitarian ideology (see Chapter Five) and its multi-racial policies (see below). Citizens from different socioeconomic and racial groups are referred to inclusively in government discourses about the Singaporean home and family. For example, Goh Chok Tong (1994b), said that Singapore was run like 'one big family' and that although the abilities and earning power of each member varied, everyone benefited from working together. Goh

has also used domestic images in relation to race. As noted in Chapter Three, Goh in his 1990 maiden speech as Prime Minister told Parliament (Alan Chong 1991: 24), 'Every Singaporean, whatever his race, language or religion, should feel: "Singapore is my home."' He also inclusively, yet separately, referred to the Malay community 'as an important member of our multi-racial family'. (Government of Singapore 1995).

Tensions between different classes and races are politically sensitive because they undermine the political stability with which the long-standing PAP government is associated. Chua Beng Huat and Tan Joo Ean (1995: 12) observe 'negative comparisons of life conditions across class lines are labelled and chastised as inciting the "politics of envy", for which opposition parties are often blamed'. This both asserts the opposition's disruptiveness and positions the PAP as the party that fosters social cohesiveness. In addition, the government refers to the lack of racial riots since the 1960s, using this in part to demonstrate the effectiveness of its rule (see below).

This chapter provides a systematic political interpretation of love matches that largely traverse class or race through setting them in a political context. It argues that the profiles of romantic protagonists, responses to their relationships, and the relationship outcomes have political significance. This is when they are read in light of the post-Independent government's de-emphasis of class differentiations and tensions, assertions of meritocracy, and multi-racial policies.

Inter-socioeconomic and inter-racial relationships are largely considered separately in this chapter. This approach reflects their largely distinct portrayals within specific characterizations in the four novels.

The first half of this chapter considers socioeconomic differences between Singaporean Chinese characters in the central love stories of *Dream*, *Raffles*, and *Heartland*. The second half analyses three inter-racial relationships in *Fistful*. One of these relationships (between Zul and Jan) does encompass an explicit class difference and this is explored in the analysis.

Social cohesion is relevant to both parts of the chapter. The Singaporean anthropologist Lai Ah Eng (2004: 3) states that a cohesive society is characterized by 'strong social bonds' and can be measured by factors such as trust, reciprocity, and abundant associations that bridge social divisions. She suggests that a cohesive society is 'not without social divisions such as income/wealth inequality, [and] racial/ethnic tensions' but that such divisions are not numerous or 'deep' and that 'any conflict arising from these divisions' are 'infrequent and not fundamentally damaging'.

Couples who Traverse Socioeconomic Differences

Dating couples from different socioeconomic backgrounds feature in a variety of post-Independence English-language Singaporean novels, including *Dream* (1972); *Ricky Star* (1978), by Lim Thean Soo; *Raffles* (1988); *Glass Cathedral* (1995), by Andrew Koh; *The Teardrop Story Woman* (1998), by Catherine Lim; *Skimming* (1999), by Claire Tham; *Heartland* (1999); and *Following the Wrong God Home* (2001).⁶³

This chapter compares inter-class relationships in three novels that span the period under review. It considers the main relationships of love and courtship in *Dream* (Hock Lai and Cecilia, Kwang Meng and Lucy, and then Kwang Meng and Anne); *Raffles* (Vincent and Connie, and Vincent and Veronica); and *Heartland* (Wing and Chloe, and then Wing and May Ling).

Some literary criticism of *Dream* and *Raffles* has aptly highlighted the national symbolism of ambitious characters who marry up for material gain. Koh Tai Ann (1984: 183) associates one such figure (Hock Lai) in *Dream* with 'the voice of the materialistic new Singapore', whilst Shirley Lim (1994: 150) observes that the ambitions of the calculating male protagonist of *Raffles* are 'often elided with national ideological aspirations', The novel, she says, 'satirizes the national

⁶³ There are also several novels in which unhappy marriages are portrayed between characters that happen to have come from different backgrounds. These include: *Ricky Star*, whose protagonist, Ricky, physically and emotionally abuses his more socially elevated wife until she divorces him; *Abraham's Promise* (1995), by Philip Jeyaretnman, in which the protagonist's sister, Mercy, marries into a wealthier family and subsequently becomes so unhappy that she commits suicide; *The Man in the Cupboard* (1999), by Colin Cheong, in which the protagonist, Tim, considers murdering his wife, Marcia, who comes from a more comfortable background and who outshines him professionally. They also include some novels by Catherine Lim, such as *The Teardrop Story Woman* and *Following the Wrong God Home* (2001), in which the dutiful protagonists marry wealthy husbands to support their families but later leave them.

drive for success at the same time as it satirizes the individual who dramatizes it'.

These findings do not need to be reiterated in the analysis here.

In addition, literary scholars have identified class differences between several romantic figures in *Dream* (Koh 1984; Shirley Lim 1994) *Raffles* (Koh 1994; Shirley Lim 1994) and *Heartland* (Wagner 2005). They have also noted pronounced class division and differences in Jeyaretnam's fiction (Koh 1994: 733; Shirley Lim 1994; 150-151) and in *Heartland* (Wagner 2005: 194; Serene Tan and Brenda S.A. Yeoh 2006: 157). However, there has been no systematic attempt to identify the class types of the charactersizations considered here. This contextual analysis is important given the importance of social cohesion and the government's communitarian ideology.

This chapter newly politically contextualizes and compares seven inter-class relationships from *Dream*, *Raffles*, and *Heartland*. There are several reasons for comparing the trio of texts. Class is an important theme in each novel: the word 'class' is repeatedly used in *Dream* and underpins a climatic argument between two lovers in *Heartland*. All three can be classed as *Bildungsromane*. In each, the young male protagonist has two girlfriends: one of higher and the other of lower socioeconomic status than his own. In addition, the texts are of comparative historical interest as they are respectively set in the late 1960s, 1980s, and mid 1990s.

The mixed socioeconomic relationships are read in light of the post-Independent government's de-emphasis of class differentiations and tensions, and assertions of meritocracy. From this analysis, it is argued that the mixed socioeconomic

relationships highlight a broader range of socioeconomic differences than has previously been identified; portray class tensions; and raise questions about the existence of meritocracy in Singapore.

Government Stances on Class

This section outlines how the post-Independence PAP government has tended to de-emphasize 'class' differences, sought to minimize class tensions, and advocated and asserted meritocracy.⁶⁴

Class differences

The cultural scholar C.J. W.-L. Wee (2007: 94) notes that the government tends to 'shy away from direct class ascriptions'. As the sociologist Tan Ern Ser explains (2004:5):

Ideologically, the class perspective does not sit comfortably with the nation-building project superimposed upon a capitalist economy, as the class inequality and conflict associated with capitalism must somehow be reconciled with the idea of citizenship; and national identity, solidarity, and unity – captured by the slogan 'one people, one nation'.

⁶⁴ Lee Kuan Yew entered office as a socialist in 1959. Whilst Lee made reference to different classes in the early years of his premiership he emphasized the shared economic interests of the population. For instance, Lee stated in 1960 that the PAP was a 'revolutionary' movement, which would share the fruits of the economy with the 'mass of the workers' and that would improve education. In caring for the economy 'the interests of the whole community' would be served without 'a major shift in the relations between social classes'.

Government policies and values that distract attention away from class differences have been noted by sociologists. These include the policy of delineating society by race (John Clammer 1998: 17 and 73; Chua Beng-Huat (2003: 9) and the *White Paper on Shared Values* 1991 (Clammer 1993: 41). In addition, Chua (2003: 8) observes that meritocracy 'veils' socioeconomic differences.

Some government discourses in the first decade of Independence limited the importance of class differences. In 1968, the year *Dream* was written, Lee Kuan Yew told the trade union body, NTUC, 'We are a young community with no deep social or class divisions' (1 May).

As the economy developed, statesmen positioned Singapore as a predominantly middle-class society. Lee stated in 1987 (14 August, *The Straits Times*) that 80 per cent of the Singaporean population was middle class, primarily on the grounds of their home ownership. In 1990, Goh Chok Tong told Parliament that Singapore was 'a middle-class society' although he noted that there would 'always be an underclass'.⁶⁵ However, opinion is more divided among academics. Whilst some argue that Singapore is a primarily middle-class society (Peter Chen 1974; Chua and Tan 1995; Tan 2004), others state that it is not (Iain Buchanan 1972; Stella Quah et al. 1991; Garry Roden 1996).

Despite the government's lack of focus on class divisions, it has more recently acknowledged the increasing socioeconomic stratification of the population. Nevertheless, in doing so, it has tended to avoid segmenting the

⁶⁵ See Goh's Parliamentary speech, 'My Priorities', reproduced in Alan Cheong (1991: 156–7).

population into different 'classes'. In 1994 (27 August), Goh distinguished four categories of family 'income groups' and, in keeping with previous statements, positioned the majority of Singaporean families in the middle segments (Government of Singapore 1994b). Importantly, in 1999, Goh identified a divide in society, again without referring to class. In his high-profile – now famous – National Rally Day speech he noted the emergence of two 'broad categories' of people in Singaporean society: 'cosmopolitans' and 'heartlanders'. The first were professional, internationally savvy, bilingual English speakers and the latter were locally based Singlish speakers. He cautioned that, if the two groups ceased to identify with each other, 'our society will fall apart'.

The minimization of class tensions

The PAP government has used varied strategies to minimize the perception or existence of class tensions. First, it has de-emphasized class differences. In 1993 (9 March), Goh linked political discourses about wealth differences with the agitation of Singaporeans. He accused the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) of exaggerating the gap between 'the better-off and the rest ...to arouse jealousy and *class resentment*' (emphasis added). This, he warned, fostered a 'politics of envy' and could tear society 'apart'. When talking about the potential threat of this conflict, he used class terms (although without reference to the 'working class'). 'The middle-class *will* envy the upper class. The poor *will* envy everyone else' (emphasis added).

Secondly, Chua and Tan (1995: 28) importantly point out that the government 'encourages individuals to compare their own present circumstances with their past rather than across groups'. Here, Chua and Tan allude to, and thereby associate government discourse with, the sociological concept of 'intra-generational' social mobility. As the sociologist Peter Saunders explains (1990: 68), this is when movement between class positions occurs 'within one individual's lifetime'.

Sociologists working in Singapore have not identified major class tensions. In 1985, Clammer warned that they could emerge, given the income disparities, thereby referring to their potential rather than to their actuality. Although Chua (2003: 9) notes the increasing rigidity of social class structures, he predicts (ibid. 15) that an 'eruption of class conflict' is unlikely given 'the government's successful effort to maintain a relatively high level of the basic standard of living for the entire population'. Tan suggests (2004: 84) that the only potential, or 'even' present, class tension is that lower class Singaporeans 'are more likely to believe that "successful people in Singapore tend to look down on the less successful ones"'.

Meritocracy

Meritocracy is a major part of the PAP government's philosophy (Mauzy and Milne 2002: 52), which, according to Hill and Lian (1995: 33), contributes to 'the conceptual apparatus for creating a national community'. The term meritocracy literally means 'government by those regarded as possessing merit' (*NFDMT*,

s.v. 'Meritocracy'). On a societal level, Mauzy and Milne (2002: 55) define it as 'the idea that each individual's social and occupational position is determined by individual achievement, not political or economic influence; not race, class or parentage'. Such individual achievement is underpinned by the notion of equal opportunity (Saunders 1990: 43).

Hill and Lian (1995:101) state that the PAP government did not 'fully' articulate its ideology of meritocracy until early 1969.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, some of Lee Kuan Yew's earlier political statements reflect a meritocratic outlook and assert the realization of equal educational opportunities. In 1968 (10 May), Lee stated that 'In Singapore, irrespective of your father's wealth, background or status, you enjoy the same opportunities from primary school to university.' Political assertions of a meritocratic society were also made after 1969. When Lee Kuan Yew praised the calibre of the three hundred leading figures running the country in 1971 (28 April), he said, 'Singapore is a *meritocracy*. And these men have risen to the top by their own merit, hard work and high performance' (emphasis added). Decades later, his successor, Goh Chok Tong referred to Singapore as a '*meritocratic society*' and said (27 August 1995), 'Success depends on how able you are, not how much money you have. Talented people rise to the top regardless of family background.'

Mauzy and Milne (2002: 56) observe that 'Singapore's leaders believe that the meritocratic system, which ideally is blind to race and class, has helped the

⁶⁶ Hill and Lian succinctly cite R. Betts' unpublished thesis (1975: 140) 'Multiracialism, Meritocracy and the Malays of Singapore' (Boston, Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology).

brightest students rise to the top, and has made a major contribution to the establishment of a corrupt-free and efficient civil service.' However, Chua (2003: 9) comments that,

During the years of rapid economic growth, there [was] ... a very high rate upward mobility across the entire population. However, quietly, a class structure that is more determining of an individual's long-term achievements has emerged.... As social class structure rigidifies, official efforts to insist on the ideology of 'meritocracy' may intensify but the determining effects of class differences will increasingly erode the 'reality' of meritocracy for many if not most.

Here, Chua effectively notes that, in Singapore, there has been what sociologists term 'absolute social mobility', whereby many people in the population shift socioeconomic position. Significantly, he also infers that there is an increasing issue with the 'relative' rate of social mobility. As Saunders (1990: 80) explains, relative social mobility is 'the chances of individuals in different classes ending up in higher class positions than they start from'. Chua then associates this situation with a reduced likelihood of meritocracy in the future.

This political background has outlined the Government's de-emphasis on class, minimization of class tensions, and promotion of meritocracy. It will now be used in the analysis of fictional inter-class relationships. For how do character profiles match the state's emphasis on socio-economic similarities or lack of specific 'class' differences? To what extent do love stories indicate social cohesion or destructive class tensions? Furthermore, do characters' experiences confirm or undermine the portrayal of Singapore as a meritocratic society?

Socioeconomic Differentiation: Character Profiles

In this section it is argued that the varied backgrounds of the romantic protagonists illustrate more diverse or divided socioeconomic profiles than conveyed in state discourses contemporary to the novels' creation. Notably, *Dream*, *Raffles*, and *Heartland* were respectively written in 1968, 1987–1988,⁶⁷ and 1995–1998.⁶⁸

Socioeconomic distinctions between the romantic protagonists are mapped out. These distinctions relate to their backgrounds (family housing and parental employment history); and individual achievements (such as educational qualifications and/or employment status). Nevertheless, there are limits to this information. Unsurprisingly, the novels do not specify characters' salaries, a key sociological measure of socioeconomic level. In addition, whilst the word 'class' appears in *Dream* and in *Heartland* (see below), individuals' class types are not ascribed.

Class differences are also indicated and emphasized through comparisons between the characters. These distinctions have political significance because, as noted above, the government encourages the positive contrast of lifestyles with the past, or internationally, rather than across different Singaporean socioeconomic groups. Given the divergent socioeconomic

⁶⁷ Jeyaretnam wrote the novel during his pupillage (Ronald Klein 2001: 288), which was between 1987 and 1988.

⁶⁸ E-mail from Shiau to Garsten, 10 January 2007.

stratifications found by sociologists and the associated different definitions of them, the identification of fictional characters' classes is complex and risks being arbitrary.

If We Dream Too Long's socioeconomically varied romantic protagonists

There are three romantic pairings in *Dream* that bridge socioeconomic differences. At first, the protagonist, Kwang Meng, who works as a probationary clerk, loves a bargirl-cum-prostitute called Lucy but is ultimately rejected by her. Secondly, Kwang Meng's ambitious former schoolfriend, Hock Lai, secures the hand of the well-heeled Cecilia Ong. Then, towards the end of the novel Kwang Meng starts dating Anne Tan, who is Cecilia's friend and co-incidentally is also a relative of a neighbour (see Chapter Two). However, the relationship ends after Kwang Meng's father suddenly has a debilitating stroke, which compels the young man to take responsibility for his family.

Some literary criticism refers to Kwang Meng as working class (Shirley Lim 1994: 147) and to Anne Tan as middle class (Cheah Boon Keng in *The Straits Times*, 4 December 1972; Koh Tai Ann 1984: 180; Shirley Lim 1994: 148). It is argued here that, when Buchanan's (1972) contemporaneous research is applied to the characters, a more diverse, shifting, socioeconomic picture emerges, and that some deep divisions are portrayed between classes.

Kwang Meng's household could qualify as lower middle class through the father's status as a long-serving clerk (Buchanan 1972: 216). However, after the father's stroke and consequent retirement, the family loses his salary. At the

novel's close, the family may be regarded as lower working class because of their dependence on one impermanent salary (Kwang Meng's) (ibid. 222) and their closeness to poverty (ibid. 223).

Lucy could be regarded as being working class given her stigmatized job (Quah et al. 1991: 248) and her lack of education. On another level, Anne Tan has lower-middle-class credentials as a trainee teacher, which, with teaching experience, would rise to intermediate middle-class status (Buchanan 1972: 216 and 210). Hock Lai makes a comparison between these two women, stating that Anne Tan is a 'nice girl' and that Kwang Meng has more 'in common' with her than a bar girl like Lucy (22), whom he refers to as a 'thing' (23).

Hock Lai has lower to intermediate middle-class status as a salesman (Buchanan 1972: 216–217). The use of the pointed *former* 'classmate' of Kwang Meng (149), invites socioeconomic comparisons between the two young men. When Hock Lai borrows a Morris 1100 from a 'colleague' for a date, Kwang Meng feels excluded from his former classmate's work world. He articulates his sense of separation and exclusion from it succinctly, 'Apart. No part' (23).

The materialistically driven Hock Lai identifies Cecilia Ong's principal attribute as 'Class. That's what she's got: class.' (34). Cecilia's abundant resources are conveyed through a poetic description of her eyes. These are said to sparkle 'at all the world like beautiful ripe apples. The world's my orchard. My, my, my, my, my, my' (47). This image is reinforced by Kwang Meng's subsequent references to her as 'apple girl' (104, 153). The Ong family has discernable upper-class credentials. These include Mr Ong's important banking position

(Buchanan 1972: 202), his role in the Chinese Chamber of Commerce (ibid. 203) and the family 'mansion' in the Tanglin area (ibid. 64 and photograph 6). Hock Lai recounts that, when he sees 'at close range how the rich live', his 'own world crumbles into dust' (64).

*Where **the other half** lives, Kwang Meng thought. 'They really know how to live,' Hock Lai recounted. **They** have the means, **they** have the dough, Kwang Meng said to himself. (64, emphasis added)*

Here, the rich are 'they' and 'the other half'; it is as if they inhabit a different planet. This pronounced division has political significance, being at odds with the government's unitary, communitarian discourses.⁶⁹

Hence, the novel's three romances (Kwang Meng and Lucy, and then Anne, and Hock Lai and Cecilia) bring together five characters from different socioeconomic backgrounds. The relationships between them facilitate comparisons between the lovers' backgrounds, and in so doing go beyond the state's encouragement of intra-generational comparisons.

⁶⁹ The Government's communitarian ideology is examined in the next chapter.

Socioeconomically differentiated trios in Raffles Place Ragtime and Heartland

In both *Raffles* and *Heartland*, the male protagonist has two significant relationships with young women. In both novels, one of the women has higher status than the central male character and the other lower.

Raffles Place Ragtime

The upwardly mobile male protagonist of *Raffles*, Vincent Tan, is simultaneously involved with two women: his affluent fiancée, Connie Lim, and his mistress from the office secretarial pool, Veronica. Vincent cavalierly ends the relationship with Veronica because of the imminent public announcement of his engagement to Connie. However, as he tries and fails to hide his infidelity from Connie, his life spirals out of control. Connie breaks off the engagement prior to its announcement and, by the close, Veronica and Vincent reunite.

In literary criticism, the different family backgrounds of Vincent and Connie are stressed. Shirley Lim (1994: 150–151) aptly ascribes Vincent's family background as working class and Connie's as upper class. Indeed, Vincent Lim is said to come from a 'humble' background (32). If Buchanan's measures are used, the double-income family of food hawkers may be specifically regarded as 'upper working class' (1972: 220), especially as they support his education through their earnings. Individually, Vincent has middle-class credentials at the start of the novel, as a graduate financial analyst (see Tan Ern Ser 2004: 11–12).

Connie is a lawyer. She may be classified as upper class or rich (see Buchanan 1972; Chua and Tan 1995).

Differences between the pair's lifestyles are explicitly and implicitly compared. Vincent sleeps in a shared bedroom in his family's HDB apartment, which reeks of his mother's cooking, whereas Connie has her own 'delicately scented' bedroom in her parent's detached house in the prestigious District 10 area. He uses local taxis, whereas she drives the family's Mercedes. As Chua and Tan (1995: 6–7) explain in their study on social stratification in Singapore, cars are 'coveted objects and displayed ... icons of success' that are harder to attain than private property. They associate the Mercedes brand with 'the rich' (ibid. 15). At the end of the novel, after the separated pair both resign from their 'yuppie' jobs, Connie decides to go abroad, whereas the less affluent Vincent stays at home.

Veronica's administrative work and upper secondary school education gives her lower socioeconomic status than Vincent. She emphasizes this when she states that he looks 'down on' her because she is not a graduate (14). Vincent denies this but later refers to her lack of education as a 'problem' that precludes him from being 'serious' about her (103). She, like him, lives with her family in an HDB flat. At the end of the novel, when the pair reunite, their common experience of living in HDB households is presented as being a significant common denominator. Hence, educational difference is presented as a less important distinction than housing type.

These comparisons between Vincent and his two girlfriends, published and set in the 1980s, indicate different tiers of society and undermine the government's contemporary tendency to avoid making socioeconomic comparisons between different segments of Singaporean society. The trio of profiles also undermine contemporary state definitions of class. At the time *Raffles* was published, Lee Kuan Yew was defining the middle class as families who *owned* property, be it HDB or privately constructed. However, in the novel, Veronica and Vincent's families' *ownership* of their HDB homes is not indicated. Socioeconomic distinctions that *are* made between characters include housing type (HDB flat or private detached house), parental employment status, educational level, transport modes (private car or the less prestigious taxi hire), and funds to travel.

Heartland

Similarly, in *Heartland*, the protagonist of modest means has a wealthy girlfriend (Chloe Tam) and subsequently, a less affluent one (May Ling). The class differences between the teenage protagonist, Foo Wing Seng, and his 'wealthy' girlfriend have been noted by Tamara Wagner (2005: 194).

In this section it is argued that when Shiau wrote *Heartland*, from 1995 to 1998, the government was discussing the different income streams in Singapore and the potential class antagonism being stoked by the opposition. Whilst the novel does not identify a broader range of differences than are necessarily indicated in state discourses, it situates class tensions in the present.

Like Vincent, Wing has working-class roots (his single mother works as a cleaner) and rising status, through his place at the country's 'top college' (12). Wing is attracted to the 'sophisticated air' of Chloe Tam, who comes from an affluent family. When they date, comparisons are made between the pair's lifestyles: he lives in an HDB apartment, whereas she lives in private accommodation; he uses public transport, whereas she uses the family Fiat. Significantly, he sees these differences as relating to 'class', as is discussed below.

After this relationship finishes, Wing starts dating May Ling, who lives in the same HDB estate and who is less educated than him. Wing compares the two women, stating that he feels less judged by May Ling. Nevertheless, May Ling distances herself from Wing when she says to her brother, in Singlish, that Wing is, 'not the same as *us* lah. *People* tak chek kia [an educated young person]' and that his friends are, '*all* very different from *us*' (159, emphasis added). She thereby differentiates less-educated heartlanders from more literate residents in the collective language of 'us' on the one hand, and 'people' and 'all' on the other, thus making the specifically identified social gap metonymic of a more common divide. The pair gradually drift inconclusively apart.

In summary, this analysis has identified that diverse strands of society are depicted through the characterizations of the lovers. In doing so, this study distinguishes a broader socioeconomic picture of these novels than has been identified in previous literary criticism.

Distinctly varied lifestyles and backgrounds are portrayed, which can be interpreted to challenge implicitly the state's minimization of 'class' differences at the times in which the novels were written. In *Dream*, the Ong family is a 'world' apart from Hock Lai and Kwang Meng's backgrounds. *Raffles* portrays socioeconomic disparities and makes no reference to home ownership, thereby not presenting a predominantly home-owning middle-class society. In *Heartland*, the issue of 'class' is raised. Importantly, in all three novels comparisons are made between characters that undermine the government's inter-generational focus.

The next section asks whether, in the love affairs, significant class tensions are portrayed or if social cohesion prevails.

Social Cohesion, Social Mobility, and Class Tensions

The love stories in all three novels offer the possibility of social cohesion and social mobility through the coming together of socially diverse characters. Yet class tensions can also be portrayed, to varying degrees, through descriptions of strained situations that can lead to arguments and/or separations. It is argued that the lack of familial mixing in all three novels indicates a lack of social cohesion, and that affiliations and ruptures depicted in them progressively show lower social mobility and more class tensions. Whilst the government has

acknowledged the increasing stratification of society as the economy has developed, it is posited that *Dream*, *Raffles*, and *Heartland* portray greater class tensions than are suggested in both the aforementioned state discourses or in the earlier reviewed sociological studies contemporaneous to the creation of the novels.

Social cohesion and class tensions in If We Dream Too Long

The love lives of Hock Lai and Kwang Meng in *Dream* convey social mobility and class tensions, and the possibility of some social cohesion. Some social bonding occurs with Hock Lai's engagement to Cecilia: no familial resistance to the match is portrayed and the betrothal is celebrated in the Ong mansion. Nevertheless, the novel portrays Hock Lai's entry into the Ong family rather than the coming together of two families. The ambitious young man talks about Cecilia's father but not his own, and his family is not depicted at the engagement party. Thus, Hock Lai's own social mobility is depicted rather than social cohesion that involves multiple relationships.

The possibility of social cohesion is more discernable in Anne Tan and Kwang Meng's serious relationship. They meet through mutual friends and through Anne's family. Kwang Meng has a meaningful relationship with Anne's cousin's husband, as has been noted in Chapter Two. Nevertheless, Kwang Meng does not invite Anne's family over to his home for a meal because he considers his abode to be like a 'pigsty', nor does he introduce Anne to his family. At the climax of the novel, the protagonist's withdrawal from all social

contact following his assumption of family responsibilities (see Chapter Two) indicates how financial worries can inhibit social interaction and thereby cohesion.

Class tensions are also depicted in relation to the Ongs' prosperity and with regard to Lucy's marginal status. When Hock Lai describes the other 'world' of the Ong mansion to his former 'classmates' Kwang Meng and Portia (64), he blackly refers to his world irreversibly turning to 'dust'. Here there is a tension between what Hock Lai has and what he wants. Portia refers to class war with his proclamation, 'On with the revolution!' This presents rebellion as possibility, whilst the exclamatory punctuation diffuses such a suggestion. Kwang Meng's feelings, however, are 'too ambiguous to be classified as envy, or lack of envy. More probably in between' (65). The deepest sense of division is therefore felt by a character who manages to marry into this world, thereby alleviating the tension. Nevertheless, the novel does in this scene make a link between aspiration and class tension.

Hock Lai and Portia's attitudes to Lucy also provoke tensions. The comfortably off Portia, goaded by Hock Lai, offers to pay for her services. They know that she is dating Kwang Meng but not that the pair have consummated their relationship. Lucy, who is insulted by Portia's offer given her relationship with Kwang Meng, declines the business and, consequently, loses her job. She later decries the young men's 'low class' behaviour to Kwang Meng, thereby challenging their disregard for her humanity and ends her relationship with Kwang Meng because he did not stop Portia from approaching her. Here, the

trust that Lai refers to as a component of social cohesion has been breached.

The class divisions between Lucy and the young men may be considered 'deep' because of Lucy's upset and its dramatic consequences.

Social cohesion, social mobility and class tensions in Raffles Place

Ragtime

Limited social mobility, a lack of social cohesion, and class tensions are portrayed in *Raffles*. Class divisions in *Raffles* are noted in literary criticism: Koh Tai Ann (1994: 733) states that Jeyaretnam's work in general can suggest 'serious class division'; whilst Rebecca Chua, in *The Straits Times* (30 November 1988), declares that *Raffles'* closure is 'unduly pessimistic' in its 'homily ... that the Vincents and Veronicas of this world belong together'.

Although Vincent and Connie's engagement can be seen to represent the possibility of social cohesiveness, few inter-class social bonds are portrayed. Her family offer Vincent chilly hospitality; simultaneously, Vincent does not take his fiancée home and distances himself from his parents.

Underlying class tensions are portrayed during the short-term betrothal, which does not last long enough to be formally announced. Vincent finds his weekly meals with the Lim family an ordeal and feels 'tested' by Connie and her family (73). Tensions mount. Vincent, in a pre-dinner clash with his prospective brother-in-law, makes an angry comparison of their circumstances: 'It's easy for you You've got everything already But for me it's different. If I want to get anywhere I have to work, and work hard. I need to keep my head down and work

hard' (29–30). The interruption of this argument allows Vincent's resentment about a lack of equality not to be countered. It also prevents the development the of topic. Class antipathy is exposed at the climax of the novel, when Connie, breaking off the engagement, tells Vincent, 'Get back to your HDB flat. Mother always said you weren't good enough for me' (90).

In contrast, after the separation, class tensions are absent when Vincent has a relaxed and satisfying meal with his parents and Veronica. Hence, class tensions arose when Vincent aspired to elite social mobility. In this way, there is a link between class friction and hunger for success. This infers a critical link between the government's drive for economic improvement and the development of class tensions. Although, as Chua and Tan (1995: 12–13) point out, the government both encourages individual ambition and acquisition, and in more recent years has sought to curb a purely materialistic outlook: the 'middle class mass must not be allowed to become contented readily because this could lead to decline in national competitiveness which the economy can ill afford'.

Class friction in Heartland

The possibility of social cohesiveness is also presented in *Heartland*, through Wing's social interactions with Chloe and then May Ling. However, little harmony is portrayed, the relationships largely concentrating on incompatibilities. The first relationship climatically ends after a clash about class and the latter fizzles out.

Wagner (2005:194) states that the 'class divide' between Chloe and Wing 'is shown to be unbridgeable'. This section takes Wagner's observation further by

arguing that the way in which the word 'class' is raised in their arguments has political significance. Wagner also looks at the power relations in the couple's separation, and argues that Wing rejects Chloe for her condescending attitude to his HDB estate.

The main source of tension between Wing and Chloe relates to class. Chloe criticizes Wing's informal attire, his inability to drive, and his comportment with her friends. Wing feels 'assessed' by Chloe and her father (54, 55). When Wing is given unsought advice by the latter, he feels 'pricks of humiliation' (55). Significantly, the couple argues about her father's behaviour and about 'class':

*He explained that he felt her father was giving him a hard time and patronizing him. Chloe blamed Wing for having an inferiority complex. Her point was that if he was confident of who he was, he would have been able to rise above whatever pressure he was made to experience by her family. When Wing brought up their **class** difference, she blew up. 'Where do you think this is?' she asked. 'India? China? It's Singapore! It's a free country.' He remembered her words: 'There's no such thing as **class** or caste or whatever. It's all in your mind. And frankly, I'm getting tired of the tricks your mind plays on you.'* (62, emphasis added)

In this passage, Chloe absolves her kin of any responsibility in Wing's feelings of having been patronized. Instead, she makes it Wing's psychological problem. Her refutation of class disparities is given political dimension by being framed in a national context. Whilst it contradicts state discourses about Singapore being a primarily single class society, it nevertheless creates an association between a member of the elite and an assertion that class is not important in Singapore. Somewhat pointedly, her viewpoint lacks credibility, given the divergences in the couple's lifestyles that have already been described.

Chloe's denial of class disparities is a cause of tension in itself, reportedly causing Wing 'hurt' (63). Her dismissive attitude is emphasized when, a week

later, she has forgotten the subject of their quarrel. That the issue of class is important to the less affluent character but is dismissed by the more elitist one could be read as indicating that class differences are identified in some sections of society, if not by the elite.

Class differences prompt Chloe to mention the relationship's end. Chloe rejects Wing's HDB estate; and his inability to drive, 'paranoia', and comportment with her friends (85). Wing responds to her complaint by asserting the possibility of his upward or downward social mobility: 'you don't have to like the way I live ... one day, I will move. Maybe to a better place. Maybe to a worse' (86). However, she envisages no such fluidity, categorically stating, 'You can *never* change even if you wanted to. You've grown up in a certain way and that *cannot* be altered by time alone'(86, emphasis added). After this statement, Wing 'was at a loss for words' and from this point stops trying to save the relationship. He does not respond after she 'decides' that they should split up (86). In this way, he rejects this elitist young woman's notion of his social immobility. Notably, more than one hundred pages later, the narrator reiterates Wing's perspective with the statement 'People change in time' in a prominently ordered piece of text that is positioned in the first sentence of a new chapter in a new section (165).

Thus the possibility of social cohesion is not realized in any of the relationships, although it is offered as a strong possibility in Kwang Meng's abortive relationship with Anne. Social mobility is depicted through Hock Lai's plan to marry up, yet it does not result in tangible social cohesion.

Class tensions are portrayed in all the novels to varying degrees.

In both *Dream* and *Raffles*, ambitious characters feel class differences and inequalities keenly as they strive to materially improve their lives and, in Vincent's case, acquire a measure of influence. This may imply that the government's encouragement of material improvement may risk fostering resentments about class disparities. In all three novels, characters with lower social status resent the dismissive attitudes of those with higher standing. This occurs with Lucy's hurt at Portia's inappropriate offer. It is also evident when Vincent and Wing feel tested by their upper-class girlfriends and their families. The young men's discomfort with the elite is at odds with the PAP government discourses that praise this group (see Chapter One). In *Heartland*, a member of the elite is critiqued for her insensitivity about class issues and her lack of belief in social mobility.

As outlined above, social mobility in Singapore is associated with meritocracy. The next section considers whether or not Singapore is portrayed as a meritocratic society through the inter-class relationships.

Meritocracy Questioned

In this section it is argued that the existence of meritocracy is questioned to some extent in the three novels. Characterizations of lovers, and/or the portrayed professional influence of potential in-laws, can present situations where meritocracy is not evident or is undermined.

Characterizations of lovers

The three novels may be seen to question the existence of meritocracy, to varying degrees, through the characterizations of some of their romantic protagonists. In *Dream*, Kwang Meng is reported to have secured the qualification for a non-scholarship university place but is unable to go because his father is not able to fund him. Politically contextualized, this situation is at odds with Lee Kuan Yew's statement, made only five months before Goh finished the novel, that fathers' financial circumstances did not influence their son's university opportunities.

In *Raffles*, Vincent is a graduate who has risen from a modest background. This would seem to indicate a meritocratic society; however, by the close of the novel a different picture emerges. Shirley Lim (1994: 151) notes that Vincent does not have the *savoir faire* to manage office politics nor his personal relationships. It is almost as if his education can only take him so far.

In *Heartlands*, Wing attends *the* top junior college in Singapore, which Singaporean readers would know as Raffles Junior College. There, he is part of a minority that come from neighbourhood secondary schools, who feel more like 'migrants' than insiders (12). Whilst his sense of being a minority is stressed, the reasons for the disparity in the intake are not discussed.

The impact of wealthy prospective In-laws

The influence that ties with wealthy families may bring is depicted in *Dream* and *Raffles*, and is marginally inferred in *Heartland*. These fictional representations of Singaporean professional life that are linked to personal relationships may be regarded as political in that they undermine some assertions of the existence of meritocracy.

In *Dream*, Hock Lai works as an insurance salesman. He appears to be doing well in that he dresses smartly, organizes social meetings in expensive Westernized bars and cafes, and joins the Junior Chinese Chamber of Commerce. However, there is no reference to any office promotion. Contrastingly, when he gets engaged to the affluent Cecilia Ong, his prospective father-in-law promises him a job in the bank. In this way, his personal and professional lives become 'settled'. This prospective appointment prefigures Kwang Meng's later, more provocative reflection that:

Singapore is very much a Chinese city, and the Chinese are notoriously clannish and communal people.

They would give jobs first to their relatives, then to close friends' families, then to people who spoke the same dialect, and so on and so on down the line. So what real chance was there for a Malay? (150)⁷⁰

In *Raffles*, Vincent, is a hard-working graduate with a prestigious job as a financial analyst but believes that he can 'only' obtain 'Wealth, a small measure of influence, a home of marble floors and rosewood chairs ... through Connie'

⁷⁰ In this passage, the 'discrimination' that Hock Lai and Kwang Meng's former Singaporean Malay 'classmate', Assiz, feels is intimated (149). Notably, Assiz is marginalized at the engagement party. As a driver of one of the guests, he eats with the staff rather than with his former 'classmates'.

(24). Whilst his assumptions could be dismissed as misguided, at the close of the novel Vincent's broken engagement is shown to be to his professional disadvantage. When Vincent tells his superior, Chan, that he cannot be fired, the latter responds, 'Why not? You think Connie's father can protect you. Audrey said Connie was through with you. You can't pull rank with me' (114). Chan's response infers the benefits of personal connections. The importance of Connie's influence is re-emphasized when Connie later hears of Vincent's departure from the firm and regrets not having intervened to present Vincent's case for him to Chan.

In *Heartland*, there is no hint that Wing might rise through Chloe's family's contacts. Nevertheless, her later boyfriend, Donald Ho, introduces himself to Wing in relation to Chloe's father rather than to his girlfriend. 'I'm a legal assistant at Chloe's dad's firm. Boss's daughter. Must be careful, you know what I mean' (203). The implication is that he perceives his relationship with Chloe to have a bearing on his career prospects. However, in contrast to *Dream* and *Raffles*, this calculating wooer is a marginal character who only appears in this scene. In addition, there is no evidence that the relationship gives him any benefits.

From this analysis, it is posited that the existence of meritocracy is undermined in *Dream* and *Raffles* through the narratives of love and courtship in the novels. Familial background is shown to influence access to university education in *Dream* and thereby can be read to challenge state discourses about youngsters' independence from their fathers' circumstances. Furthermore, in *Raffles* and *Dream*, upper-class girlfriends can influence survival in the

workplace or facilitate career progression. Meanwhile, in *Heartland*, the existence of meritocracy is more softly questioned.

Having argued that inter-class relationships can highlight considerable socio-economic diversity, depict some trenchant class tensions, and question the existence of meritocracy to some degree, the political significance of inter-racial relationships will now be considered.

Inter-racial Love and Courtship In *Fistful Of Colours*

The national significance of the multi-racialism portrayed in *Fistful* is signalled on the back cover: 'Through family histories, the novel weaves a rich tapestry which celebrates the multi-ethnicity of Singapore'. However, in this section it is argued that the novel's presentation of multi-racialism through relationships of love and courtship is more complicated than a simple 'celebration' and that it raises a number of politically significant issues.

Fistful was one of the first English-language Singaporean novels to focus on inter-racial love and courtship.⁷¹ Its three central female characters (Suwen, Jan, and Nica) all have significant relationships that traverse racial differences. In addition, one of them Nica, who is born of a mixed-race marriage, has an economically and then an artistically exploitative relationship with two men of different races. Furthermore, the increased level of racial-intermarriage in post-independence Singapore is praised by a visiting Singaporean émigré. In the second half of this chapter, it is asked how a trio of inter-racial relationships portrayed in the novel can be related to the government's multi-racial policies.

The terms 'race' and 'ethnicity' are referred to interchangeably: as Yasmin Gunaratnam (2003: 4) explains, race originally evoked 'a biological and genetic

⁷¹ Mixed-race relationships in earlier novels tend to have less thematic importance than in *Fistful*. For example, in *Rice Bowl* (1984), by Christine Suchen Lim, the Singaporean protagonist is engaged to an American. However, the couple's subversive political activities are given more importance than their emotional relationship. In *Raffles*, two mixed-ethnicity relationships between Singaporeans are mentioned, neither pair appearing in any of the novel's scenes. The mixed-race nature of the relationships is indicated through characters' names (Bee Lin and Ashok), and through a Chinese mother's disparaging reference to 'that Indian girl' (137).

referent', whilst ethnicity referred to 'cultural and religious difference and kinship'.

Moving forward, Stuart Hall (2000: 223, cited by Gunaratnam 2003: 4)⁷² identifies intersections between the two terms:

Biological racism privileges markers like skin colour, but those signifiers have always also been used, by discursive extension, to connote social and cultural differences The biological referent is therefore never wholly absent from discourses of ethnicity, though it is more indirect. The more 'ethnicity' matters, the more its characteristics are represented as relatively fixed, inherent within a group, transmitted from generation to generation, not just by culture and education, but by biological inheritance, stabilized above all by kinship and endogamous marriage rules that ensure that the ethnic group remains genetically, and therefore culturally 'pure'.

Furthermore, the terms are often alternated in 'official and public discourse in Singapore' (Lai 2004: 2).

Multi-racialism in Singapore

Multiracialism, according to Hill and Lian (1995: 247) is a 'central tenet of PAP philosophy'. Government multi-racial policies that both highlight racial differences and promote the value of racial harmony are outlined in this section. Notably, the combination of these two arms of the government's multi-racial approach has attracted comment. The social scientist Joseph Tamney (1996: 96) finds 'a seeming inconsistency' between them.

⁷² Stuart Hall (2000), 'Conclusion: The multi-cultural question' in B. Hesse (ed.), *Un/settled Multiculturalisms: Diasporas, Entanglements, Transruptions* (London: Zed Books), 209-41.

The state's policy of racial differentiation

The PAP government implements multi-racialism by delineating society into four major racial groups, as outlined below. The multi-ethnic population, it declares, is not 'a melting pot' of different races.⁷³ Every citizen has to carry an identity card that ascribes his or her race as Chinese, Malay, Indian, or Other (CMIO). As race is 'defined by patriarchal descent' (Beng-Huat Chua 1998: 190), children from inter-racial marriages are not officially mixed race. Clammer (1998: 173) states that this 'banishes the possibility of large-scale ethnic assimilation and the eventual achievement of a "post-ethnic" society based on shared history and common identity'.

The government's multi-cultural policy goes in tandem with this approach (Chua 1998: 190). Different races have designated 'mother tongues': for example, Mandarin for Chinese citizens and Malaysian for Malay. Chua (1998: 190) notes that religion is associated with some races. He comments that 'all Malays are by constitutional definition Muslims' and that 'Hinduism is identified with "Indians"'. Chua (1997b: 112) finds that this multi-cultural approach has had 'the effect of perpetuating racial divisions' in Singaporean society. Such specific cultural associations may mask the diversity of the population's religious affiliations. For example, Laurent Metzger (2003) points out that whilst the vast

⁷³ For example, President Wee Kim Wee told Parliament in 1989 (January 9) that Singapore 'is not a melting pot of different ethnic groups blending into one homogeneous population. It is a multi-racial nation, composed of distinct communities, each wishing to preserve its separate cultural identity.' (Government of Singapore, 1989).

majority of the Muslim population is from the Malay community,⁷⁴ there are other Muslim communities in Singapore, such those that are Pakistani, Indian, or Arab.

Drawbacks of racial differentiation and cultural policies linked to different racial groups are identified by some commentators and critiqued by opposition politicians. The Singaporean sociologist Nirmala Purushotam (1995) argues that the four racial categories enclose identities. Chua observes (1997b) that the CMIO policy hardens racial divisions and may also contribute to the building up of stereotypes. Then SDP MP, Chiam See Tong, told Parliament (Government of Singapore, 1989, 17 January), 'I would advocate a melting pot of our cultures. For successful nation building, our guiding principle must be to cut down as many differences and divisive factors as possible.... We are all Singaporeans. We are not Malay, Indian, Chinese or Eurasian Singaporeans.' He has also asserted (Government of Singapore 1991a, 15 January) government measures that 'heightened racial awareness in Singapore', such as the Speak Mandarin Campaign, could not be seen to 'wholly practise the Shared Values'.

Whether or not the state has achieved relative equality between the delineated races – and offers parity of support for their cultures – is debated. Lee Kuan Yew reflects (2000: 12) that the government's determination to build a multi-racial society 'that would give equality to all citizens, regardless of race, language or religion ... was an article of faith which guided our policies'. Chua (1997b: 108) believes that the government's multi-racialism has enabled it to stand above the four races. He states, 'That there has not been any inter-racial

⁷⁴ Metzger (ibid. 13) specifies that, whilst about 68 per cent of the Muslim community is Malay, it encompasses other groups, the largest of which is the Javanese (over 17 per cent).

conflict since 1964 may be read' as the effect of 'equal treatment of the racial groups' (ibid. 109). A variety of sociological studies noted such equality in the first decades of independence (Sharon Siddique 1989: 564; Geoffrey Benjamin 1976: 115). However, the government's promotion of Asian Values in the late 1970s has led to criticisms that there was an over-emphasis on Confucianism and Chineseness. Clammer (1998: 185) observes that, since 1983, race has been identified with biology and genetically determined characteristics, which has been 'an argument for Chinese superiority'. Notably, Lee Kuan Yew has been quoted (Han Fook Kwang et al. 1998: 181) as stating that, if Singapore 'were 100 per cent Chinese, we would do better. But we are not and never will be, so we live with what we have.' Clammer (1998: 69) asserts that many Malays and Indians feel that Singapore is a 'Chinese state'. Similarly, Lily Zubaidah Rahim (1998: 56) argues that the PAP leadership has promoted 'Chinese cultural superiority' and 'Malay cultural inferiority'. Rahim notes (1998: 57) that negative stereotypes about Malays typically include references to unremarkable intelligence, a lack of motivation, poor educational status, drug addiction, and divorce. However, Laurent Metzger (2003) points out that the inclusion of ethnic minorities is a problem found throughout the world.

Racial harmony in government discourses and as a value

Racial and religious harmony is promoted and asserted in Singapore. As early as 1968, the then Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew stated (19 December), that in Singapore, 'tolerance and respect for the values and beliefs of other communities

have become second nature.' The *White Paper on Shared Values* (Jon Quah 1999: 109) includes 'racial and religious harmony' as a national value. It reports that, 'We have enjoyed racial and religious harmony since Independence'. Similarly, a government statement on the shared values after the 1993 amendments to the White Paper notes (ibid. 120) that 'Racial and religious harmony have been the distinguishing trait of Singaporean society since Independence'.

Nevertheless, some questioning of the extent of racial harmony can be inferred from the White Paper (ibid.120) and from state discourses. The official document (ibid. 20, 116) notes that the values in general are 'ideals' that need to be 'inculcated' into Singaporeans. In an earlier parliamentary debate about the Shared Values, Lee Hsieng Loong, then Minister of Defence raised a question about Singaporeans' internalization of the value:

The very least we have achieved after all these years of nation building is that the form of words – multi-racial, multi-religious tolerance and harmony – is conceded, and nobody says, 'I'm going for my race.'
Whether that is deep is not clear. But at least, in polite discourse, you do not take the opposite, disastrous line.' (Government of Singapore 1989: 17 January)

The former Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong, has referred to the threat of racial tensions developing as a reason for restrictions on the freedom of the media (Bernard Krisher and Seth Meixner 2003). The spectre of the old riots recurring is used to stress the importance of racial harmony. However, Lai (2004:34) argues that there is a 'need to go beyond rituals and riots, into the deeper and wider world of multiculturalism that requires trust, respect, understanding and appreciation to thrive'. She also argues the sensitivities about race make it a difficult subject to debate.

In this chapter it is argued that both aspects of the Government's multi-racial policy – racial delineation and the championing of racial harmony – may be related to the stories of love and romance in *Fistful* that are summarized below.

Narratives of Inter-racial Love and Courtship in *Fistful of Colours*

The novel's three central characters, Suwen, Jan and Nica, all experience significant inter-racial relationships.⁷⁵ The thirty-nine-year-old protagonist, Suwen (a Chinese Singaporean), and her expatriate friend, Mark Campbell (an Irish-Italian-Scot), love each other but do not pair off. After Suwen frigidly rejects Mark, the relationship cools. Mark is then seduced by their mutual friend Nica Sivalingam (a Singaporean Indian of mixed race, whose mother is Straits-born Chinese). Nica, an artist, engineers a situation in which she can use Mark as a nude model. She draws his arousal and post-tumescence to avenge men and 'whites' who 'exploited us, Asians' (347). Suwen sees the sketches and, overwhelmed by sexual jealousy, paints an erotic abstract picture that wins a British Council art competition. She feels betrayed by Mark and Nica, and refuses to return Mark's telephone calls.

⁷⁵ One of these relationships, the romance between Suwen and Mark, could also be read on a post-colonial level as being symbolic of a transformed relationship between the former colonizer and the colonized. However, occidental relations are not the subject of this chapter.

Whereas Suwen and Mark never commit to each other, Suwen's best friend, Janice Wong (a Singaporean Chinese), is engaged to Zul Hussein (a Singaporean Malay of noble descent). To integrate into his family, she promises to convert to Islam. Her father rebukes her for giving up Christianity and disowns her when she sets up home with Zul. Concomitantly, Zul's parents fear that the couple's mixed-race progeny may face discrimination in Singapore. These parental responses put strains on Jan and Zul's otherwise robust relationship.

The third relationship goes back to 1966 and concerns Nica's first love, Ti Lung. A Hokkien-speaking stranger interrupts the couple by shouting out that Nica is 'a filthy Kling' (73). Ti Lung promptly drops Nica's hand and walks on ahead. Nica considers this a cowardly response: she decides to let the relationship fizzle out without telling Ti Lung that she is carrying his child, whom she subsequently aborts.

There are two main reasons for comparing these three love affairs that traverse racial differences amongst Singaporeans and between a Singaporean and a Westerner. First, restrictions on portrayals of race in Singaporean literature invite the comparison. The law applying to novels, the *Undesirable Publications Act* (1998: 2), maintains that a publication is 'objectionable' if it provokes 'ill will or hostility' between different racial or religious groups in Singapore. A text falls into this category (*ibid.* 3) if it 'represents, directly or indirectly, that members of any particular community or group are inherently inferior to other members of the public or of any other community or group' (Nicky Garsten 2007: 316–317). Unflattering descriptions of Western visitors' white skin fall outside the Act;

through them, openly racist attitudes can be articulated.⁷⁶ Whilst such representations can be interpreted with reference to Occidentalism, they may have other significance.

Given the regulatory environment, racist attitudes about Westerners may have pertinence to racism in general.⁷⁷

Secondly, there are textual reasons for comparing the three mixed-race relationships. They are all located in Singapore. Racial prejudice affecting each couple arises in specifically named areas of the island, such as the Chinese cemetery, Geylang and China Town. In addition, a link between Suwen's and Jan's relationships is implied through a close piece of textual sequencing within the 362-page novel. Suwen concludes her confessional interior monologue about her 'prejudice' against Mark by declaring how much she admires Jan: 'she was filled with shame, ashamed that she, Suwen, was capable of such prejudice against one colour and one race. It did not make sense. She was an educated woman. How she admired Jan!' (140). Here, although her prejudice is explicitly confined to a Caucasian, she indirectly compares her attitude to Jan's through the exclamatory reference to her.

⁷⁶A description in *Raffles* is illustrative of this. Vincent, when on a blind date, feels his 'desire ebbing' at the sight of an Australian girl's peeling red nose (69). 'Nausea' grips him as he imagines 'the debris of dead skin littering the sheets after their lovemaking. No thanks.'

⁷⁷ Indeed, William Peterson (2001:223) identifies the allusive significance of portrayals of Westerners in the Singaporean play, *Six of the Best*, by Tan Tarn How, and performed in 1994. This piece was about the caning of Michael Fay. As Peterson (ibid. 219) explains, Fay was a foreigner who was caned in Singapore, in 1994, having been convicted of, 'spray-painting eighteen cars and of possessing stolen property that consisted largely of road signs'. Peterson (2001: 223–227) observes that the play offers the caning of the expatriate, American Michael Fay, 'as the starting point for an exploration of racism in contemporary Singapore' even though the play 'completely avoids the ways racism can manifest itself between the country's three largest ethnic groups'.

Fistful of Colours's characterization of multi-racialism

Fistful's characterizations are drawn with references to racial features, names, and/or socio-economic status. They may be read in the context of the state's CMIO policy and with reference to some political discourses about Singapore's 'Malay brethren'.

The novel's resistance to the state's tidy categorizations of races and 'mother' tongues has already been identified by other commentators (Leong Liew Geok [2000] 2002: 102; Wagner 2005: 173). In this section it is argued that the novel both stresses racial differences whilst also undermining such categories on a variety of levels. The novel's structure and characterizations refer to biological differences: 'Part 4', entitled 'Yellow, White and Brown Reveries' principally refers to Chinese, Caucasian, and Malay characters. This heading makes skin colours significant rather than an irrelevance.

There are characters, such as Suwen, Mark, and Nica, who are described with reference to distinctive racial features including size, eye shape and colour, and shade of hair. Notably, these descriptions tend to be made by racially conscious characters such as Suwen and Mark. In one instance, Suwen gazes at Mark's 'Dark brown hair. Almost black. Quite unusual. Must be the Irish-Italian-Scots genes in him' (129). Here, Mark's racial features are the subject of four sequential sentences. This passage comes just eleven pages before Suwen

rejects the thought of intimacy with Mark, discriminating against him as a white man in her grotesque fantasy of him (see below). Contrastingly, the physical appearances of Zul and Jan are absent from the text, with neither of these characters commenting on the other's physique. There is therefore an unstated alliance of racial distinction with discrimination, and/or a lack of definition with cross-ethnic commitment. Extrapolated onto a political level, racial distinction is associated with a lack of harmony, and therefore reflects Tamney's observation of a seeming inconsistency between the concepts of separate races and racial harmony.

The racial identities of the principle characters are swiftly indicated through introducing them by their full names: Mark Campbell (10), Veronica Sivalingam (10), Zul Hussein (23), Janice Wong (23), Robert Lim (23), and Ti Lung (72).⁷⁸ These racial signifiers seem to affirm the government's delineation of society by race. However, these racial distinctions are also destabilized through the racially hybrid characterizations of Mark and Nica, whose mixed heritages are reiterated.

The central figures in the love stories have middle-class credentials. They are said to be well educated (Ti Lung) or graduates, and have occupational status as school teachers (Jan, Suwen, and Mark), an artist (Nica), and a journalist (Zul). The characterization of Zul's family has attracted little attention in literary criticism yet defies some stereotypes of Singaporean Malays. Zul not only comes from noble Malay descent but also has the status of having studied in

⁷⁸ Exceptionally, Suwen is not introduced with her surname.

America. In addition, his five siblings include two college teachers, an art director, and a sister who, prior to her marriage, worked in the National Library. This family profile differs from state discourses that highlight the 'Malay problem'.

In addition to these characterizations, the relative importance of race and upbringing is debated in a dialogue between Nica, who argues that a person cannot 'forget his colour and language' (72), and Suwen, who wonders if nurture can make ethnic identity an irrelevance. The discussion in itself undermines any absolutist argument about the intractability of racial identity through its presentation of different viewpoints.

In summary, ethnicity is far from an irrelevance in the novel. Racial differences are indicated in the narration but also through descriptions by characters that do not succeed in maintaining or developing harmonious multi-racial relationships. Conversely, characters who are in committed inter-racial relationships do not make these distinctions. This may hint that racial harmony is not built on identifying racial differences. In addition, mixed-race characters defy simple categorization and some characterizations undermine some nationally proclaimed racial stereotypes. In this way, the novel sets up a racial framework only to dismantle it and thereby undermines the state's strategy of differentiating races.

Having considered differentiation of characters politically, inter-ethnic relationships will be further politically analyzed by studying them in light of the national value of racial harmony.

Racial Prejudice

Racial differences are shown to elicit racial prejudice in the intimate relationships of the three Singaporean women. Tamara Wagner (2005: 302) notes that Suwen's private thoughts about Mark, described below, dramatize 'the limits of tolerance and the potency of racism'. She also mentions that 'racists', including Jan's father and the colonialists who abandoned Euroasians to whom Zul's father refers in the context of his concern for Jan and Zul's future progeny, are 'closer to the exposures of multiculturalism's dark underbelly ... than to celebrations of multi-ethnic founding myths'.

This section builds on Wagner's observation. It takes her work further by specifically examining racial prejudices portrayed in the tales of love and courtship. It demonstrates that racial prejudices are emphasized in the novel by being explicitly named. These prejudices are shown to be covertly harboured. They are particularly associated with Chinese characters and are shown to be damaging. It is posited that these portrayals have political significance because they can be related to the government's multi-racial ethos, which asserts and promotes the value of racial harmony.

The specific words 'prejudice' and 'racist' are used in the novel and therefore these terms are repeatedly referred to in the analysis of the text. The social scientist John F. Dovidio's definition of prejudice (2001: 829) as 'an unfair negative attitude toward a social group or a person', resonates with the use of

the term in the novel. As he explains the term 'racism' surpasses individual incidents, involving a broader, racist ideology.

The naming and critiquing of racial prejudice

Racial prejudice is both portrayed and named in the narration of the three love stories of Nica, Jan, and Suwen. In this way it is both *shown* and *stated* to exist in Singapore. As such, the novel pointedly portrays incidents where racial harmony is not in evidence. Whereas racial prejudice is not commonly raised in state discourses (Peterson 2001: 227), the naming of it in *Fistful* makes it an inescapable, voiced issue.

After Nica describes Ti Lung's complicit response to the racist heckler about twenty years before, in 1966, Suwen comments, 'We are still very racial and very prejudiced' (74). Here, her response to an analeptic event is in the present tense, the adverb 'still' giving a pronounced sense of continuity and no sense of progress. Furthermore, the word 'very' intensifies the issue of racial prejudice.

This problem is specifically identified in Jan's report of a family argument. Jan tells Suwen that, in it, her father refused to meet Zul (142). She also categorically states, 'He's a racist'(143). Here, the single word 'racist' in noun form characterizes her father as a person. The present tense also signals that his racism extends beyond the reported argument.

Later, when Jan is having another argument with her father, and Zul is waiting to take her to their new home, he looks at the Geylang landscape and

reflects that 'age-old prejudices, cock-eyed perceptions and irrational fears' change less fast in the personal domain than in the 'marketplace' (164). This could be interpreted in the light of Lee Hsien Loong's speech about the government not knowing if prejudices exist at an individual level. Here the text may be seen to respond to his comment, indicating that they do exist. Nevertheless, it also confines such prejudices to the private sphere.

On a more interior plane, Suwen is privately aware of her 'innate Chinese snobbery' and her 'irrational' racial 'prejudice' against Mark (140). Deploring her involuntary feelings of intolerance, she 'was filled with *shame, ashamed* that she, Suwen, was capable of such prejudice against one colour and one race' (140, emphasis added). Shame can be interpreted as a feeling that occurs when a group standard is not lived up to. Her pronounced sense of 'shame' in this excerpt may indicate that racial toleration is a gold standard that is hard to realize.

Therefore, in all three relationships, prejudice is *stated* and/or *shown* to exist in Singapore. Thus, racial prejudice is portrayed as a pervasive and recurrent problem in the private sphere. From these depictions it may be inferred that racial harmony is not yet realized in the private domain. Whilst this would seem to contradict some political statements that attest to the existence of racial harmony in Singapore, it is firmly limited to the private sphere.

Covert prejudice

Hidden racial prejudices are repeatedly portrayed in the private domain. They are *shown* and *stated* to be held against Mark. More obliquely, Jan's father's prejudices against Zul are indicated through pointed textual absence. This latter case of prejudice against a compatriot is at odds with the national value of 'racial harmony'.

Hidden racial prejudices directed at Mark

Racial prejudice is repeatedly, unobtrusively directed at Mark. On at least four occasions, Singaporeans are shown to harbour prejudices against this foreigner. Whilst these could be interpreted in light of Occidentalism, they may also be metaphorical for the way in which racial biases can be hidden.

First, covert prejudice is *shown* when Mark's fellow teacher mutters outside his earshot that he is 'not the same colour' as Suwen. It is then *stated* three sentences later, when the omniscient narrator reports that Suwen is acutely aware of the 'hidden prejudices' of her conservative colleagues (124). Secondly, a discrepancy between Suwen's tolerant persona and her private attitudes also becomes evident. Suwen's mother states that her daughter would mix, 'with all sorts' (190). However, Suwen's grotesque interior monologue about Mark (see below) reveals her underlying racial prejudice. Thirdly, when on a date in the Chinese cemetery with Mark, Suwen seems influenced by the prejudicial presence of invisible Chinese ancestral spirits. In the graveyard, Mark kisses Suwen by a banyan tree (222). In Chinese culture, ancestral spirits are thought to

dwell in the aerial roots of banyan trees.⁷⁹ Suwen then breaks away. Mark subsequently regrets his action under the 'gaze of her ancestors' and Suwen's subsequent painting of the scene prompts an art critic to observe 'an underlying sense of anger and unease among the tombstones' (222). Fourthly, when Mark is seduced by Nica, he is oblivious to her racist artistic agenda. In this way, hidden prejudices are repeatedly exposed in relation to a Caucasian.

Racism that is named but not fully shown amongst Singaporeans

Importantly, Jan's father's racial bigotry is reported but not articulated. The text tells readers that Joseph Wong is racist or prejudiced, yet does not articulate Joseph Wong's interior thoughts and his statements of racial superiority. Furthermore, it alerts readers to this textual absence.

Joseph Wong's opposition to his daughter's mixed-race engagement is conveyed through his attempt to hit his daughter; his disowning of her; and his refusals to meet Zul and to attend the forthcoming marriage. However, Mr Wong's attitudes about Zul's race are not voiced in the two arguments that he has with his daughter. The pointed absence may be attributable to the aforementioned restrictions on portraying hierarchical intra-Singaporean race relations.

Jan tells Suwen about the first clash in a summarized description. When Suwen asks her 'Exactly what did your father say?' Jan replies, 'Rubbish! He talked rubbish! He's a racist. *That's all I can say*' (143, emphasis added). Here,

⁷⁹ Personal communication with Suchen Christine Lim, October 2006.

Jan does not directly answer Suwen's question by using the single word 'rubbish'. In addition, by categorizing her father as a 'racist', she conveys his sense of racial superiority yet does not give it voice. Suwen reflects on Jan's account and comments, '*And that was all Jan would say about her father that night*' (143, emphasis added). Here, both participants in the conversation acknowledge the absence of his comments.

Jan also reports that her father perceives that she is marrying 'below' her (145). She contests this referring to Zul's successful family, thereby in relation to his class. In this case, Mr Wong's perception of Chinese superiority is hinted at but camouflaged in the context of class.

Another absence occurs, and is noted, in the second argument between Jan and her father. In it, Mr Wong's insults appear confined to his 'spineless' daughter's changing religion (176). Over one hundred pages later, Zul reproaches Jan for her summary of her father's viewpoint in her account of the dispute. He tells her that her father 'must have said more than' the issue of conversion (332). When she refuses to answer him, he angrily responds, 'I'm not blind. I know how people like your father feel about *us*. You don't have to tell me *They don't say it, but it's there!*' (332, emphasis added). Jan then acknowledges that her father has prejudices but does not expand on them. Here, deep divisions between Chinese Singaporeans, such as Joseph Wong, and Singaporean Malays are indicated.

Chinese racial intolerance

Sinicized racial prejudice is markedly pronounced in the three love stories of the protagonists. Although racial prejudices are also shown to exist in other communities, and among variously educated characters, there are more incidents of prejudice amongst Singaporean Chinese characters.⁸⁰

This prevalence may simply be attributed to the larger number of Chinese characters in the narrative; but the pattern may also have political undertones. As noted above, Chinese culture was promoted by the government in the 1980s, this being the period in which the novel was set and written. Furthermore, in 1983, Lee Kuan Yew urged graduate women to marry (see Hill and Lian 1995: 151). As the majority of this population segment was Chinese, some commentators have argued that this was an attempt at maintaining Singapore's Chinese majority.

In *Fistful*, the intolerance of Chinese characters is portrayed as biologically determined and thereby as hard to escape. When Suwen asks Nica if 'a hawk can forget its hawkness and a man his race', Nica argues that this is impossible and cites the aforementioned behaviour of Ti Lung as evidence. She 'didn't think a person, however highly educated, could forget his colour and his language. "My first boyfriend was a Chinese"' (72). In the sequencing of the passage, 'a Chinese' exemplifies, and therefore is metonymic of 'a person' who cannot forget their race. This association between race and biology is later reiterated when Suwen reflects that her 'innate Chinese snobbery' prevents her from going to

⁸⁰ For example, racial prejudice in other communities is displayed by Nica's grandmother's hostility to her Peranakan daughter-in-law; through Nica's vengeful racism towards Mark; and through Zul's sense of ancestral resistance to his match with Jan.

'bed with a white man' (140). This stance contradicts her earlier theoretical supposition that race can be neutralized through nurture.

The three love stories, viewed collectively, portray Chinese chauvinism across different sections of Singaporean society. When thinking about Mark, Suwen refers to herself and her Singaporean friends as 'new Asians', and to Mark as 'the foreigner among them' (140). However, when daydreaming about Mark, this cosmopolitan graduate who studied at Durham University in England distinguishes herself from him in relation to her Chinese identity:

*She liked Mark, she quickly told herself. But she was afraid of her own irrational feelings. Once. Only once, she had allowed herself to imagine what Mark might look like stripped of his attire. A white nude male, white as death, with a thick fat organ dangling between his white hairy thighs. And at this point, she had turned resolutely away and stopped her mind from fantasizing such nonsense. She **could never** go to bed with a white man, she told herself. She was too much of a Chink. She put it down to her own innate Chinese snobbery, an irrational memory of the race which inhabited Chung-kuo, the Middle Kingdom. So, she **would never** dream of marrying outside her own race. She simply could not see herself locked in copulation with a white hairy body. (140, emphasis added).*

Here, Suwen's attraction to Mark clashes with her own emphatic sense of racial distinction. As this discussed elsewhere, (Garsten 2007: 324), Suwen's desire, indicated by the phallic imagining and conditional 'coulds' and 'woulds', is instantly retracted with the crushing 'nevers' and 'nots' of impenetrable racial boundaries. By calling herself 'a Chink' she both ridicules and articulates her sense of Sinicized difference. The pejorative term may also betray some self-loathing at her inescapable sense of race.⁸¹

Other Chinese characters from varied social strata include Jan's English-speaking father of modest means, the working class Hokkien heckler who

⁸¹ I am grateful to Ruth Maxey for this point (personal communication, September 2006).

barrages Nica, and the 'highly educated' Ti Lung (72). This broad profiling of Sinocentricness is at odds with the popular association between chauvinism and a lack of education.

These portrayals of 'innate' prejudice amongst Chinese characters, which affects a diverse range of Singaporean Chinese types (English speaking, non-English speaking, highly educated, and poorly qualified) may infer that Sinicized prejudicial attitudes are widespread and may even be found amongst Singapore's Chinese elite.

Racial prejudice shown to cause suffering

The serious, destructive power of non-violent prejudice is indicated through the three love stories. Intimate, joyous instances experienced by couples contrast with the pain brought about by racial prejudices.

The racism that Nica experiences on her date with Ti Lung proves fatal. The romance conveyed at the start of the outing, with the 'idyllic peace' and the light 'splashed with gold from the setting sun' (73), is destroyed when Ti Lung lets go of her hand. The relationship's irretrievable loss is symbolized by the abortion of their child. The lingering psychological pain is apparent in Nica's repeated references to the abortion (61, 73, and 341) and her reflection that an unborn child 'never quite departs' (61).

A pronounced sense of loss also characterizes Suwen's unfulfilled relationship with Mark. A rare prolepsis announces that the happiest year of

Suwen's life was when Mark came to Singapore. This intensifying literary device warns readers that Suwen's happiness will be transitory.

Notably, after Suwen rejects Mark at the Chinese cemetery, her life immediately feels 'bare' and 'empty' (226 and 227).

In addition, racial prejudice hurts Jan and Zul, albeit to a lesser degree. Jan is emotionally distraught after her first argument with her father. Although she reports that 'he would've hit me if my mother had not pushed him away' (143), the violence does not occur, and is not directed at someone of a different race. Jan's father's later refusal to attend the imminent wedding and his renunciation of Jan creates further unhappiness. She expresses sorrow at the loss of her relationship with her father and cries about falling out with Zul about it. Meanwhile, Zul chides himself for letting the father's prejudices 'mar' his feelings for Jan (333).

Hence, the power of racial prejudice is conveyed in the love stories without violence being portrayed between characters of different races. Whereas the government refers to racial riots as almost the benchmark of racial problems in Singapore, these portrayals indicate that non-violence can also be devastating.

In summary, the text portrays racial prejudice to be widespread, which is at odds with the national value of 'racial harmony'. Prejudice is stated and shown to affect all three women's relationships. Furthermore, it is also shown to be a hidden attitude. This is subtly demonstrated in the text through pointed absences

and Mr Wong's racist discourses against a fellow Singaporean. The text highlights the pervasiveness of racism amongst Singapore's ethnic majority, the Chinese, and the existence of racism amongst even the educated.

In these ways the issue of racial prejudice is problematized in Singaporean society, although confined to the private domain. Whilst the government refers to racial friction being a potential problem that it has managed through its policies, problems in these fictional relationships nevertheless portray racial prejudice as a real problem, albeit hidden. Furthermore, there may be an implication that a lack of physical violence is far from the only indicator of racial tensions.

The Outcomes of Inter-Ethnic Relationships

The three relationships have divergent endings: separation (Nica and Ti Lung), drifting apart (Suwen and Mark), and engagement (Jan and Zul). In this section it is argued that Jan and Zul's union can be considered in relation to the government's policy of racial differentiation. It is also posited that, when comparing the relationships that Nica, Jan, and Suwen have, different factors can be identified that contribute to their divergent endings. These factors relate to the establishment, or not, of racial harmony between the couples and therefore may be considered in light of political discourses about the Shared Values.

The bonding of Zul and Jan

Laurel Means (1994: 969) mentions that, in *Fistful*, interracial marriage undermines 'so-called social and political institutional structures'.

She may be referring here to the state's policy of racial differentiation, which provides a societal framework. Alternatively, Wagner argues (2005: 303) that the novel shows some unease about 'hybrid's potential' in the prejudices that are raised, including those in relation to Zul and Jan's impending marriage. Both Means's and Wagner's seemingly contradictory points are valid. Jan and Zul do plan to cross racial boundaries by getting married, and Zul's father does have concerns about the prejudices that their mixed-race children may experience.

In this section it is argued that, whilst Jan and Zul traverse racial boundaries, their relationship largely maintains multi-cultural distinctions. Jan's conversion plans prompts her father to criticize her for being a 'spineless bitch' (176), whilst her friend Suwen feels uneasy about the number of compromises that Jan is making. In this relationship there is not a merging of cultures: Jan adopts Zul's culture. This portrayal may be read against Lee Hsien Loong's critique of a melting pot in Singapore. He told Parliament in 1989 that, 'If you seriously want a melting pot, I will first ask you, all right, what flavour soup are you looking for? Do you want a Muslim soup, a Christian soup, a Hindu one, or one in which there is no religion, because we cannot agree, so we all abandon?' (Government of Singapore 1989: 17 January 1989).

In addition, there is not a full merging of families. Jan loses her relationship with her father: he not only disowns her but also refuses to meet Zul and attend their wedding. Jan's sadness emphasizes this loss, whilst her conviction that the fissure is permanent indicates the irreconcilability of the division.

Factors that contribute to, or hinder, racial harmony

Factors that are associated with the three relationship outcomes include stereotyping or looking for points of similarity; and discussing prejudices as they arise or not. In these respects, Jan and Zul's relationship often stands in contrast with Suwen and Mark's, and Nica's and Ti Lung's.

Finding similarity or stereotyping

Jan and Zul's committed and largely harmonious inter-racial relationship is not associated with stereotyping. Contrastingly, Suwen and Mark's uncommitted friendship is plagued with stereotypes.

Jan identifies similarities rather than differences between the Chinese and Malays. She refers to her previous, faulty, assumption that only Chinese parents are educationally ambitious for their children as 'stupid' (153). Commenting on her former attitude, she says, 'You see how myopic *we* Chinese can be? ... When *we* really ... think about it, *our* feelings whatever *our* colour or faith are essentially the same, aren't they?' (153, emphasis added). The rhetorical pronoun 'we' is addressed both to her textual audience of Suwen and Mark and,

indirectly, to the novel's Singaporean readership.⁸² Interestingly, her racially inclusive statement, marked by the repeated determiner 'our', is not presented as a widely accepted idea. It requires 'really' thinking about and is also formed as a question rather than a statement. Perhaps Jan cannot presume that her audience will agree with her. In focusing on likenesses, Jan abandons stereotypes.

Conversely, stereotyping acts as a barrier in Mark and Suwen's relationship. Mark allows himself to be seduced by Nica partly because he incorrectly assumes that Nica has 'Asian values' (345). After the affair, Suwen does not respond to Mark's telephone messages because she thinks that, as a Westerner, he will not understand her Asian values.

Suwen only tests her stereotypical assumptions about Mark's physique involuntarily and indirectly through Nica's sketches of him (Garsten 2007: 326). At first she reacts ambivalently to the sketches of an anonymous Caucasian. However, as she identifies Mark as the model, her previous depersonalized image of his white, hairy body becomes redundant. She discerns and responds to his individual traits: the spinal arch is 'his' and is part of 'the' man she loves. As she sees Mark 'for the first time' (349), her image of him is transformed. The stereotypes of her previous fantasy are absent from the text and there is no mention of her Chinese heritage.

The importance of dismantling stereotypes and identifying commonalities is therefore indicated through these romances. Such stereotyping is linked to the

⁸² The novel was aimed at a Singaporean readership in that it was submitted as a manuscript for the Singapore Literature Prize, the prize being the text's publication in Singapore.

attribution of racial difference and so can be associated with the state's CMIO policy. This therefore subtly implies a critique of such differentiation.

Discussing racially sensitive issues or not

The importance of communication is apparent in all three romances. In Jan and Zul's relationship such communication is present, whereas in the other two it is largely absent.

Such discussions about racial issues can be related to the political sphere. Whereas racial prejudice receives generally little comment in state discourses, it should be noted that, when *Fistful* was being written in the late 1980s, racial issues were being discussed in relation to HDB flat allocation; a new constituency system, which involved the representation of ethnic minorities, that was introduced in 1988 (see Hill and Lian 1995: 111); and the shared value of racial harmony. In parliament, the PAP Malay MP Abdullah Tarmugi said (Government of Singapore 1989: 16 January) that 'brought up in an atmosphere where open discussions of race were taboo' he 'found recent statements on racial issues at first unsettling'. He then called for sensitive discussion of such matters.

Jan both dismantles her stereotypes through contact with Zul's family and also has a heated argument with Zul about her father's resistance to their match. Her conversations with Zul's father facilitate a 'journey of discovery' (153) and are therefore positively portrayed. More complex is Jan and Zul's acrimonious

argument that occurs once they have moved in an HDB flat together. The disagreement causes upset but not separation. It may indicate that heated debate about racial issues is part and parcel of living together in the Singaporean home and that such conversations have to be handled sensitively and carefully.

In contrast, Suwen and Mark do not explore their preconceptions. Only readers have access to them and this privileged knowledge highlights the characters' lack of communication. The absence of open communication about their own attitudes to race can be associated with their separation. Suwen privately discriminates against Mark. Whereas she debates many political, historical, and cultural topics with her friends and Mark, she does not discuss her own bigotry. Furthermore, Mark wonders about the mysteries of Suwen's Chinese heart but does not probe her on the matter.

Similarly, Nica and Ti Lung do not talk about the damaging incident of racist verbal abuse. As this racist incident causes Nica to withdraw from the relationship, the lack of communication about it precludes any chance of reconciliation.

Collectively, these depictions, when extrapolated to a national level, could be read as a call for open discussion about racial prejudice in order to neutralize or dismantle it. Notably, when Suwen reads a history book that conveys previous colonialist prejudice, she describes the inclusion of these attitudes in history as 'real' (132). This may be politically nuanced for, whilst the government stresses the values of racial harmony and religious tolerance, as noted above, there is little discussion of prejudice in the public domain. Therefore, the novel may hint

that such discussions could help create harmony, although they would need to be handled carefully.

In summary, the love affairs that Suwen, Nica, and Jan experience can be interpreted in light of two important facets of state multi-racialism: racial differentiation and racial harmony. The relationships tease out issues pertaining to these two features, thereby providing multiple perspectives that can both affirm and challenge the state's approach.

The novel's structure is, in part, built on colour distinctions. Racial identities are conveyed through characters' names. They are also signalled through various descriptions of physical features, which range from deathly images of white flesh to more neutral descriptions of eye shape and hair colour. However, names can camouflage hybrid identities. The identification of biological features is implicitly discredited when characters that make pronounced racial distinctions are shown to harbour prejudices. As these characters do not have successful inter-racial relationships, this links racial differentiation with disharmony. As such, the novel may hint that differentiating race and calling for racial harmony are not necessarily compatible.

The outcomes of the relationships can be further linked to the government's multi-racial and multi-cultural approach. Whilst Jan and Zul's future children will be mixed race, Jan adopts Zul's culture. Theirs is not a relationship in which there is a 'cultural melting pot'; a choice is made in which one culture is

favoured over another. In this way, the state's multi-cultural approach is maintained.

Racial prejudices are shown to be a pervasive, hidden force in the intimate domain. In this way, the novel can be read as an answer to Lee Hsien Loong's question about the extent of racial harmony in the private domain. More subversively, the widespread portrayals of racial prejudice undermine assertions of racial harmony in Singapore. Furthermore, the extent of Chinese prejudices raises questions about the intolerance harboured amongst even the elite.

The outcomes of the texts indicate that the chances of long-term racial bonding, and racial harmony, are enhanced by finding similarities rather than differences that sink into stereotypes; and with sensitive discussions about racial issues.

Conclusion

In four English-language Singaporean novels, spanning the period under review, love and courtship lay bare honest and raw reactions that are politically charged and provide a conduit where politically sensitive topics of class and race can be explored. As such, they indicate that class differences and racial prejudice have been important issues within the 'family' of Singapore at least since independence.

Socioeconomic and racial distinctions have different political significance. As noted above, the Singaporean government de-emphasizes class differences whilst segmenting Singaporean society according to racial differences.

In *Dream*, *Raffles*, and *Heartland*, socioeconomic stratifications are emphasized through explicit comparisons and are hardened through arguments and separations. In the latter two novels, not only are social gulfs depicted between the cosmopolitan rich and the more locally bound HDB-housed, but also less dramatically, among better and less well-educated heartlanders. More fractured images of Singaporean society, or more deeply entrenched divides, appear in all three texts than are apparent in government discourse contemporaneous to the novels' creations. Such depictions are politically significant because they depict a less unitary society than is conveyed in some state discourses.

Racial differentiation is portrayed in *Fistful* but is often undermined. Family names that instantly signal race types can, in the cases of Nica and Mark,

camouflage hybrid identities. Characters who harbour racial prejudices notice racial features, whereas the more open-minded do not. This indicates that racial differentiation can lead to disharmony and thereby hints at an inconsistency between the state's two approaches to multi-racialism.

Attitudes to differences of class and race in all four novels also have political significance. Class tensions are indicated in *Dream*, *Raffles*, and *Heartland* that result in deep divides conveyed through separations. In this way, class is shown to fracture social cohesion. Similarly, racial prejudice is shown to be pervasive, hidden, and destructive. Although these prejudices result in no violence, they cause considerable pain and thereby also threaten social cohesion.

The importance of acknowledging and discussing prejudices is indicated through the outcomes of several relationships. In *Heartland*, a member of the elite's denial of class causes tensions in the relationship. In *Fistful*, relationships in which racial prejudices are not discussed do not survive. Extrapolated onto a national level, these texts may hint that there is a need for prejudices to be discussed, to help prevent deep divides that threaten cohesion. *Dream*, *Raffles*, and *Heartland* question the status quo by emphasizing class differences, hinting at significant racial tensions, and, to varying degrees, hinting that meritocracy may not always be practised. However, *Fistful* presents a variety of perspectives on multi-racialism. The novel indicates that differentiation can have consequences that inhibit harmony; pointedly portrays deeply held prejudices in the private domain; and indicates the importance of communication.

Nevertheless, it does not present a future, as envisaged by the SDP, of a multi-cultural 'melting pot'. Nor does it indicate that all communication about prejudices is unproblematic.

CHAPTER FIVE

'FILIAL' STRAINS: INDIVIDUALISM VERSUS COMMUNITARIANISM

Asian values are all about sacrificing the life of the child for the parent, and I don't want any part of that any more ... I'm sick of being a host for my parents, just standing there and watching them suck the blood out of me while my life passes by.

Hwee Hwee Tan, *Mammon Inc.* (215)

Tensions between individual desires and demanding 'filial' duties are a dominant theme in English-language Singaporean novels.⁸³ Such strains arise when young adults feel burdened by, or resist, their families' material, marital, or religious expectations. This chapter asks what political dimensions there may be to these depicted strains in the private sphere.

Individual characters' responses to the pressures of 'filial' piety have been politically contextualized by Koh Tai Ann (1989b) and Laurel Means (1994). Koh argues that the closures of six novels published in the 1970s and 1980s give precedence to the family over the individual. Family order is maintained in these novels' endings even though in some, such as *If We Dream Too Long* (1972), by

⁸³ Novels where characters feel constrained or burdened by duties of 'filial' piety include: *If We Dream Too Long* (1972), by Goh Poh Seng (Kwang Meng); *Ricky Star* (1978), by Lim Thean Soo (Ricky Tay); *Rice Bowl* (1984), by Suchen Christine Lim (Ser Mei); *The Serpent's Tooth* (1982), by Catherine Lim (Angela); *Peculiar Chris* (1992), by Johann S. Lee (Kenneth); *Glass Cathedral* (1995), by Andrew Koh (James); *The Teardrop Story Woman* (1998), by Catherine Lim (Mei Kwei); *Mammon Inc.* (2001), by Hwee Hwee Tan (Chiah Deng); and *Following The Wrong God Home* (2002), by Catherine Lim (Yin Ling).

Goh Poh Seng and *Rice Bowl* (1984), by Suchen Christine Lim, there is protest against the 'power' of values that 'repress and thwart individual lives' (Koh 1989b: 286). Koh (ibid. 282) importantly points out that these conclusions are synergistic with the then Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew's, advocacy of two basic values: that the interest of Singaporean society takes priority over the individual and that the institution of the family is the building block of society. Notably, these two maxims later became inscribed in the *White Paper on Shared Values* (1991). Thus, Koh draws a parallel between fictional portrayals of family life and dominant political values in her argument that the novels' closures ultimately affirm the status quo (ibid. 280).

Laurel Means (1994: 962–973) argues that portrayals of filial piety in the novel *Differences* (1992), by Jonathan Khoo, undermine Lee Kuan Yew's promotion of this Confucian value. This is because the protagonist only accepts his "Confucian" responsibility' to his mother 'reluctantly and with bitterness'. She quotes the son's statement:

I don't remember any story that showed parents had to treat their children well so that, in turn, they would return the kindness and love. I think that Confucianists' [sic] and communists' intentions are similar in that they brain-wash their young to serve the needs of the old.

Means (ibid. 973) uses this portrayal of resentful filial piety to support her argument that authors of the late 1980s and early 1990s were 'loudly and clearly' expressing the 'nation's concerns'. Unlike Koh, she finds that Lee Kuan Yew's stance is undermined rather than ultimately endorsed in an ending where the protagonist complies with his family's wishes.

Following Koh and Mean's research, this chapter reads portrayed tensions between families and individuals in a selection of English-language Singaporean novels in light of the national political context.

Like Koh, it considers the political significance of these tensions with reference to officially declared Shared Values that give precedence to the group over the individual and that refer to the family as the building block of society. This analysis attempts to move scholarship forward by interpreting the texts in relation to the government's underlying ideology of communitarianism and its forceful critiques of excessive individualism, which underpin these values. It also considers an array of government policies that many regarded as essentially communitarian, most notably that promoting filial piety. Similarly to Koh and Means's research, there is consideration of the extent to which novels 'protest' against or 'affirm' the status quo.

This analysis examines three novels that span the period under review: *Ricky Star* (1978), *Peculiar Chris* (1992), and *Mammon Inc.* (2001). Given the publication of Koh's and Means's research in 1989 and 1994, it thereby extends the publication period over which filial piety has previously been considered.⁸⁴ From the chapter's contextual and ideological interpretation of these novels' depictions of filial piety, it is argued that the texts' portrayals of tensions between individuals and their families have connotations that can be related to government stances on communitarianism and individualism, and to state

⁸⁴ Means looks at Singaporean post-colonial literature, from Independence to the early 1990s. She considers the portrayal of filial piety in late 1980s and early 1990s fiction, specifically considering two short stories and Khoo's aforementioned novel.

policies, as well as to the Shared Values. From this analysis, it is posited that the texts when viewed as an *ensemble*, take various politically significant positions.

Ricky Star can be seen to critique individualism from a communitarian perspective; *Mammon Inc.* to juxtapose these ideological standpoints; and *Peculiar Chris* to celebrate individualism and to undermine communitarianism.⁸⁵

To facilitate this analysis, some contextual background is provided immediately below. The government's communitarian ideology is outlined in so far as it is relevant to the textual analysis that follows. This is then put in the framework of the links between individualism and liberalism, and of political philosophical debates that juxtapose individualism and communitarianism.

⁸⁵ As previously indicated, these novels will be referred to by the shortened titles of *Ricky*, *Mammon*, and *Peculiar*.

The Singaporean Government's Communitarian

Ideology

The PAP government's communitarian ideology is recognized by both scholars (e.g. Chua Beng-Huat 1994, 1995a and 2003; Michael Barr 2002: 33; Souchow Yao 2007: 5) and PAP statesmen (see below). Government advocates communitarian values, and applies them in its policy and initiatives that promote filial piety.

Communitarianism, as Chua (1995a: 191), explains 'is the idea that collective interests are placed above individual ones.' Souchow Yao (2007: 6) comments that communitarianism helps the Singaporean state to be positioned as 'a moral order, or even more evocatively, a "moral being" that devotes itself to the care and welfare of the people.' According to Yao (2007: 5) the ideology, 'urges that people should find their happiness and fulfilment in the larger social body – in the family, the ethnic community, and, at the apex, the nation-state'. The related issue of the relative importance of state, community, and family is raised by Joseph Tamney (1996: 94-96). He observes that the Singaporean government positions the state, and then family, interests as taking precedence over those of individuals.

Singaporean Prime Ministers have repeatedly declared that the Singaporean state, whilst respecting the rights of individuals gives precedence to the interests of Singaporeans as a whole for the national good.

The PAP often defines these collective interests in terms of economic priorities (Melanie Chew 1994: 935). The government's strong economic focus is reflected in its appellation of the country as 'Singapore Inc' (e.g. in Goh Chok Tong's speech in Parliament on 9 March 1993), the nation's entire identity being positioned as a corporation. In addition, the happiness of the population tends to be referred to in collective, rather than individual terms. Han Fook Kwang et al. (1998: 130) quote Lee's aim to find solutions that would 'produce the maximum happiness and well-being for the maximum number of people'. This privileging of the nation, over the individual is often presented in moral terms.

Communitarian Values Promoted by Government

The PAP government's emphasis on community is communicated in its discourses about Asian values and shared national values.

In the rhetoric about Asian values, Singapore is associated with a strong Eastern familial culture, and the West with degenerate, selfish individualism.⁸⁶ The Singapore Democratic Party has critiqued the PAP government's stance on the dangers of selfish individualism. In 1994, the then leader, Chee Soon Juan (1994:18), asserted that 'Contrary to indoctrinated beliefs, individualism is not necessarily a bad thing to have in our society'. He distinguished two types of

⁸⁶ Asian values first emerged in some of Lee Kuan Yew's speeches of the early 1970s (Barr 2002) and became a dominant feature of political rhetoric in the 1980s to mid 1990s.

individualism. The first, 'negative individualism', he defined as a 'me-first syndrome', commonly referred to as 'kiasuism' in Singapore. *Kiasu* is a Hokkien term literally meaning 'afraid to lose', which he says (ibid: 14,18) is 'a form of greed and covetousness that governs behaviour etiquette'.⁸⁷ The second, 'positive individualism', he defined as when members of society 'think autonomously, create their own goals and contribute to humanity' (ibid.18).

The Shared Values came out of an expressed government desire to create a national identity, within an Asian framework, that resisted the drawbacks of excessive Western individualism. Two markedly communitarian values enshrined in the *White Paper on Shared Values* (1991) are 'Nation before community and society before self' and 'Family as the basic unit of society'. When BG Lee Hsien Loong, then Minister of Trade and Industry and Second Minister for Defence, spoke about the first value in 1989, he explained:

Western ideals emphasise the rights and privileges of the individual over the group, and particularly over the state. Western societies prize individual fulfilment – what the American Declaration of Independence called 'the pursuit of happiness', and order their affairs accordingly. Oriental societies believe in individuals fulfilling themselves through the greater identity of the group. The Chinese call it ... sacrificing the smaller self, to achieve the greater self. This emphasis on other-directed values – communitarian values – on duties above rights – is one of the distinguishing features of the NICs. (11 January 1989)

Here, he implies that, if an individual makes a sacrifice out of communal interest, everyone benefits.

The imbalance between the importance of the individual and the group in this value was a matter of some controversy during the discussions about the

⁸⁷ David Chan (1994: 71) defines being '*kiasu*' as taking, 'whatever you can secure even if you are not sure whether you really want it'.

values, prior to the White Paper's adoption. This debate prompted the inclusion of an additional value, 'Community support and respect for the individual'. This maxim largely recognized concern about less affluent individuals' needs. The wording inferred that assistance to such individuals should come from ethnic groups rather than the state. In addition, the existence of communitarianism in Singapore was challenged when the political scientist Jon Quah (1999: 93) noted that 'the reward system is still based on individualism rather than communitarianism'.

Policies Reflecting the Government's Communitarian Stance

There are various policies that resonate with the government's communitarian ideology. These include certain laws that are not in accord with international human rights' decrees, state regulations pertaining to the allocation of HDB flats, and policies promoting filial piety.

Donald G. McCloud (1995) points out that an emphasis on community over self affects Asian societies' positions on human rights. Singaporean legislation that is challengeable on the grounds of human rights includes its anti-homosexual laws and punitive measures such as the death penalty and flogging. The aforementioned official outlawing of consenting homosexual relations in Singapore is relevant to *Peculiar*.⁸⁸ Baden Offord argues (1999: 305) that the

⁸⁸ See Chapter Three.

government has positioned homosexuality as an 'outcome of the individualistic West' and cites the statement by the Minister of Singapore at the World Conference on Human Rights in 1993 that 'Homosexual rights are a Western issue'.

The state also operates a communitarian housing policy. As Chua (1995a: 141) remarks, 'Public housing is only available to households.' The HDB stated in 1985 (252) that it operated:

on the general principle that a family unit is in more need of housing than an unmarried individual. At the same time, for many social and practical reasons, it would not wish to encourage individuals whether young or old, to live on their own.

In the 1960s, flats were only allocated to families and married couples. Whilst the policy was modified to allow single people deemed to be too old for marriage (men aged over fifty years and women over forty) to rent or buy HDB property with others, young single people are still excluded (see Chua 1997a: 141).

The government has encouraged the 'filial' practice of caring for the older generation since the late 1970s, when it became concerned about the increasingly aged population.⁸⁹ Filial piety is of enormous significance to the country's economy. M. Ramesh (1992: 1101) observes that the 'archstone' of the national social security strategy is 'encouraging families to assume greater responsibility in looking after their less fortunate members'.

⁸⁹ M. Ramesh (1992: 1101) points out that the *Report of the Committee on the Problems of the Aged 1984* published by the Ministry of Health 'recommended family as the main social security mechanism for the elderly and urged the Government to make a "concerted effort ... to preserve and strengthen the traditional family system", and that all its recommendations were accepted'.

Whilst 'filial' piety in classical Confucianism includes characteristics such as the obeying of one's parents and bringing glory to one's ancestors (Kenneth Traylor 1988: 12), in Singapore the concept is increasingly associated with financial support (Kristina Göransson 2004: 20; Chew Soon Beng et al. 1998: 14).

The government has promoted 'filial' piety or 'filial' responsibility⁹⁰ through the *White Paper on Shared Values* (specifically through the value of 'family as a building block of society'), national family values, the education system, laws, and state discourses. The state identifies 'filial responsibility' as one of the five *Singapore Family Values* (Government of Singapore, Ministry of Community Development 1994).⁹¹ On a pragmatic level, the government encourages families to live together, or near each other; and has enforced familial care of the elderly, through the *Maintenance of Parents Act* of 1995, which enables the elderly to sue negligent children.

Notably, the state associates filial piety with moral conduct. The 1984 Ministry of Health report on the problems of the aged (cited by Ramesh 1992: 1106 from page 15 of the document, emphasis added) predicted that '*moral concepts* of filial piety ... are likely to be eroded'. Since 1994,⁹² Family Values

⁹⁰ The linguist Anna Wierzbicka (2003: 348) notes that the government has 'reportedly been trying to replace the Confucian ideal of "filial piety" with the less "Chinese" alternative of "filial responsibility".'

⁹¹ The other four Singapore family values are: love, care, and concern; mutual respect; commitment; and communication (Ministry of Community Development 1994: 4).

⁹² This refers to the period 1994–2002.

have been taught in the compulsory Civics and Moral Education course at primary and secondary schools (Ibrahim, 21 March 2003).

The government's strategy has been effective. 'Filial' piety is now part of the Singaporean psyche, as is reflected in the characteristic Singaporean adaptation of the terms 'filial piety' or 'filial responsibility' into the adjectival expressions, to be 'filial' or 'unfilial' (Wierzbicka 2003: 347). Given the common use of these terms in Singapore they are used in this chapter.

The unceasing acceptability of 'filial responsibility' by younger Singaporeans is of importance to the state. For instance, Ms Irene Ng Phek Hoong MP (Government of Singapore 2003) told Parliament that she was 'concerned' that there might be a trend 'in which children ... are looking to pass on the responsibility of caring for their parents to the State'. The political importance of the issue is also indicated by the amount of social research that considers young people's commitment to looking after their parents (Chew Soon et al .1998).⁹³

The importance and virtue of 'filial' piety is often incorporated into state discourses that highlight the importance of communitarianism over individualism. The government's communitarianism is therefore of importance to the topic and is outlined below.

⁹³ This correlation is made because, in Singapore, academic sociologists are not uncommonly encouraged to look at issues highlighted by the state.

Liberalism, Individualism, and Communitarianism

This section touches on how individualism has been associated with liberalism, and on some of the political philosophical debates that juxtapose individualism against communitarianism. This is intended to provide necessary background for the textual analysis that follows, and not as philosophical exploration in itself.

Autonomy, privacy and self-development, and are tenets of both individualism and liberalism (Stephen Lukes 1972: 52,62,67), thereby connecting the two notions. Lukes states that liberalism 'presupposes' that privacy is 'essential' to people who have lives of their 'own to lead' (62). He (ibid. 64) also notes the father of liberalism, John Stuart Mill's, famous statement, 'The only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good in our own way'. Mill therefore advocates individual autonomy in so far as it does not harm others. His thinking on the autonomy of individuals will be returned to in the next chapter's exploration of paternalism. Mill also advocated the self-development of individuals in a society where, according to the *OCDP* (s.v. 'Individualism'), 'people are unconstrained by conformity and are able to advance civilization by the freest possible development of their own ideas and forms of expression'.

Debates about individualism and communitarianism arose in the late 1970s and early 1980s, at a time when the concept of Asian Values was gaining momentum and theories of communitarianism were emerging in political philosophy. Two key differences between the outlooks concerned identity and morality.

Firstly, communitarians such as Shlomo Avineri and Avner de-Shalit (1992: 2) place individuals' identities in their 'social, cultural, and historical contexts'. They claim that liberal theory treats individuals' identities as being independent of social relations. Secondly, communitarians believe that individualism gives 'rise to morally unsatisfactory consequences', including 'the impossibility of achieving a genuine community' (ibid: 2). Communitarians further argue that atomism (extreme individualism) can lead to selfishness, whereas liberals argue that the individual has the freedom to decide what is a good life. Communitarians state that morality is defined by communities and that therefore it is culturally specific, whereas liberals favour more universal rules about what is right and wrong, and argue that human rights should be applied regardless of cultural context.

Within the confines of political philosophy, this debate subsided in the late 1990s with liberals' acknowledgement of the individual's role in society. Nevertheless, the Singaporean government has continued to juxtapose the 'hyper-subjectivity' of individualism (Yao 2007) with collective identity. Therefore, the debate has continued relevance to Singapore. In this chapter it is posited that the different arguments concerning communitarianism and individualism can be seen in English-language Singaporean novels. To begin, a novel is considered that indicates a pro-communitarian standpoint.

Critique of Individualism in *Ricky Star*

When *Ricky* was published (1978) there was political and public consternation about increasing individualism in Singaporean society (Chua 1995a: 27–28; Eddie Kuo 1992: 4). Koh Tai Ann (1989b: 280) observes that its protagonist, Ricky Tay, ‘individualistically, selfishly seeks to satisfy his own desires and ambition (hence “Star”) at the expense of his family, filial duties and society’. As such the novel is ‘a moralistic tale about the complete dissolution of a family unit’ through Ricky’s behaviour (ibid. 284).

In this section, it is argued that the characterization of the selfish and ‘unfilial’ anti-hero, Ricky Tay, effectively critiques individualism from a largely communitarian perspective. The protagonist’s individualism is vilified and is portrayed not to be in his or his family’s interests. Furthermore, the text effectively questions the credibility of individualism *per se* by portraying Ricky as character who has been influenced by his family background and broader social environment.

In the narrative, a tension between Ricky’s self-seeking nature and the needs and expectations of his family is portrayed. When these situations occur, Ricky repeatedly behaves in an ‘unfilial’ manner. His mother becomes clinically depressed when his father, Ah Kwang, is unfaithful to her. Ricky is aware of the situation, yet, as the narrator points out, does nothing to support his mother. On her suicide, Ricky renounces his grief-stricken father, telling him that they have ‘no further link’ (87) instead of giving him sympathy. Shortly afterwards, the old man suddenly goes bankrupt and is forced to sell the family home. Planning for

the family's future welfare, he asks Ricky to accommodate his underage daughter, Debbie, and their long-serving family maid. Ricky refuses to do so. This 'unfilial' response is given considerable prominence in the narrative, being the subject of an argument between the two siblings and commented on by other characters. Ricky shows further 'filial' disrespect when he is unconcerned by his father's plans to move to an old people's nursing home. He subsequently refuses to contribute to the costs of the home and then, when the old man dies, does not help with or attend the funeral. The analysis that follows largely concentrates on the political implications of Ricky's refusal to take in his sister.

The Vilification of Ricky's 'Unfilial', Individualistic Behaviour

The anti-hero's 'unfilial' decision not to shelter his sister in his luxury apartment and its consequences are portrayed as immoral. Furthermore, Ricky's neglect of his sister is set against the more virtuous responses of his girlfriend, Amy Ng, and business acquaintance, Graham Loo. Hence, Ricky's behaviour is thereby essentially critiqued from a communitarian perspective.

Ricky refuses his sister lodgings in a familial context and in a morally reprehensible manner. The siblings' argument about the matter comes to a climax when Ricky gives Debbie 'a tight slap' and tells her to 'Shut your mouth I'm sick of all of you' (96). The 'all' in the last part of the sentence refers to their family. Here, Ricky's anti-familial response is physically brutal. The

unacceptability of his having struck her is emphasized: not only does Ricky write Debbie a note of apology but Amy also questions him about the matter.

Ricky, on apologizing to Debbie in writing, justifies his decision on the grounds that he 'had to lead his own life' (96). Here, he asserts the liberal principal of autonomy. However, this argument's articulation through the channel of the letter negatively associates it with Ricky's brutish physical behaviour.

Ricky's refusal to house his sister attracts unanimous condemnation from his community of family and friends. When Ricky explains to his sweetheart, Amy, that he made this choice because he does not want his family living with him, he puts forward the essentially liberal and individualistic tenet of privacy. However, Amy opposing his rationale stating, 'No, it's a question of right and wrong.' Ricky is also said to be 'selfish' by his sister (96), father (112), and Graham (116). The word 'selfish' has moral undertones, as indicated by the philosopher Ayn Rand's comment (1964: 5) that it is 'a synonym of evil' in popular usage.

The protagonist's resolution not to shelter Debbie has harmful consequences and as such is shown to be wrong. First, the boredom of living alone causes Ricky 'to brew revengeful ideas' against others (118), which in turn lead to harmful consequences. This morally undermines Ricky's earlier articulated desire to lead his 'own life' because, when he does so, he becomes a worse person. This destructive outcome may also hint at perceived drawbacks of living alone and, as such, implicitly lends support to the state's communal housing policy.

Secondly, Ricky's decision forces Debbie to live with her elder brother, Robert. As Ah Kwang had envisaged, this arrangement proves unsatisfactory. Debbie runs away and moves into to a shack inhabited by (criminal) drug addicts. In this way, Ricky's autonomous decision ultimately endangers his sister. Whilst these two portrayed harmful consequences effectively present a communitarian critique on liberal notions of privacy and autonomy, they do not accord with the writing of some liberal thinkers. As noted above, Mill argued that individuals should have the right to act without interference *so long as* their actions do not harm others. Hence, the novel presents a form of individualism that even Mill could not justify. In this way, it puts forward a forceful case against some central tenets of liberalism and individualism.

The narrative effectively contrasts Ricky's immorality with the virtuous and socially responsible behaviours of Amy and Graham Loo. Whereas Ricky abandons Debbie and then shows no concern when she runs away from his brother's flat, Amy and Graham rescue his sister from the shack and thereby prevent her arrest by the police. Furthermore, they are both willing to accommodate her, Graham eventually doing so.⁹⁴ Graham deplores not only Ricky's selfishness but that of a broader group of young Singaporeans.

*Graham and many other people feared that the **nobler virtues** of life would be forgotten. They were concerned that family ties would be eroded by the new social values. They were worried that the new generation of youths would become **selfish, aggressive and money-orientated**. (165, emphasis added)*

Until the climax of the novel Ricky lacks scruples about his antisocial behaviour. Representative of this is his lack of contrition when Debbie reminds

⁹⁴ In addition, whereas Ricky neglects his father in a nursing home, Graham supports his parents.

Ricky of how she helped him woo Amy. This amorality contrasts with liberal thinking on individualism. Liberal thinkers state that the individual should be free to assess good in their decision-making (*NFDMT*, s.v. 'Individualism'), yet Ricky shows no concern about good.

At the end of the novel, the terminally ill and alienated Ricky has an epiphany. He reflects on his '*immoral* ways', recalling that he 'had not taken care of his sister as a model brother should have done so' (253, emphasis added). The adjective 'model' makes his contrition seem somewhat half-hearted, as it implies that exemplary rather than normal behaviour was required. Nevertheless, Ricky associates his former action with wrongdoing.

In summary, the novel effectively critiques individualism from a largely communitarian perspective. It portrays Ricky's 'unfilial' and autonomous decision not to house his sister as immoral. The arguments put forward for his decision, which resonate with tenets of liberalism and individualism, are invalidated through the narrative and also condemned by Ricky's community of family and friends. This vilification of individualistic behaviour resonates with the Singaporean government's aforementioned negative and moral association of individualism with selfishness.

Excessive Individualism Harms Self and Family Unit

Ricky's unfilial behaviour is shown to be damaging not only to his family (Koh 1989b: 284) but also to himself. In addition, the effects are shown to be irredeemable. It is posited here that these outcomes are politically significant. This is because they present a communitarian perspective and/or negate liberal ones.

Extreme individualism damages self and family

The 'unfilial' behaviour of Ricky results in family breakdown (Koh 1989b). His sister lives outside the family, and the family servant is absent from the text after Ricky refuses to shelter her.⁹⁵

Ricky also suffers as a consequence of his 'unfilial' behaviour.⁹⁶ Prior to his inhospitality, Debbie addresses him as 'brother' (59, 61, 71). However, once he refuses to house her she informs him that he is 'no brother of mine!' (96). She asserts that he has 'no right to address' her as 'sis' because he has not 'treated' her as one (141). He finds it upsetting that she does not inform him of or invite him to her wedding. In addition, unbeknown to Ricky, his father is so shocked by

⁹⁵ Other parts of the narrative also portray this breakdown that results from Ricky's 'unfilial' behaviour. Unaided, his mother commits suicide. In addition, the neglected Ah Kwang dies without any family member by his side.

⁹⁶ In addition, Ricky's violent and unfaithful behaviour to his wife is punished by divorce. His neglect of his daughter causes her to reject him, which he finds painful. 'She had been the sole apple of his eye.... He longed intensely to see her... the yearning to see her seemed overpowering' (260).

his behaviour that he does not pray for his release from a curse on the family.

Hence, not all drawbacks of individualistic actions may be immediately apparent.

Conversely, the decent and dutiful Graham Loo in the main reaps rewards. After he takes Debbie into his familial home, she agrees to marry him. Then the couple, to their delight, have a son. Here, there is also an alignment between dutiful individual behaviour and long-term happiness.

Hence, it is notable that honourable characters are, in the main, punished or rewarded according to their sense of familial duty.⁹⁷ This resonates with state discourses that encourage Singaporeans to help themselves by putting the community first. Philosophically, this is a complex issue as, in strict communitarian thought, helping the community is enough in itself. For example, in the tales of 'filial' piety, the heroic protagonists attain fulfilment from sacrificing themselves for the benefit of others. However, this less individually appealing side of communitarianism is not represented in the text.

Hopeless consequences

At the end of his life, Ricky acknowledges his past transgressions. Terminally ill with venereal disease, he regrets his 'vindictive, revengeful and intractable' former behaviour (253). 'It was *too late* to do anything about it, *too late* to regret. The clock could not be reversed' (254, emphasis added). Sitting by the sea,

⁹⁷ Similarly, Ah Kwang is rejected or neglected by his children as a consequence of his costly affair, which resulted in his inability to fund Ricky's further education and in his wife's suicide. Ah Kwang's consequent individual suffering is indicated by the social worker Reggie, who attends to the lonely old man in the last hours of his life. Reggie observes, 'The past had crucified the old man' (233).

Ricky observes, 'the tide had set in *fully*' (254, emphasis added). There is no hope of redemption. Not one scene of reconciliation is portrayed; Ricky simply suffers from the consequences of his actions. In liberal thought, individuals have freedom to learn from their mistakes, as will be discussed in the next section. However, here Ricky's mistakes are punished and, although he recognizes his failings, there is no hope of development as an individual.

In summary, the narrative associates self-interested, undutiful behaviour with family breakdown, long-term individual suffering, and unrelenting and irreversible punishment. In doing so, it presents a communitarian perspective that is at odds with liberal notions of the importance of individual self-development.

Identity Shaped by Family and Social Environment

The narrative effectively undermines the conceptual credibility of individualism by portraying Ricky as a character who has been influenced by his family background and broader social environment.

Whilst Ricky thinks that of himself as a 'free-thinker' and does not 'at all believe that he was predestined to lead the life that he was leading' (255), his fate is linked to a family curse. His grandfather, Tay Kok Keng, transported 'presentable, young virgins' from China by sea for their sale in Singapore (26). On board, he treated one so cruelly that, prior to her suicide, she cursed Tay and his descendants. Her words prove powerful. The old man's business fails. Then,

in the next generation, Ricky's father suffers bankruptcy, his wife's suicide, and familial abandonment. Furthermore, Ricky's uncle contracts syphilis and becomes a murderer. Ricky's identity is tied to theirs. He too experiences eventual business failure, contracts the same venereal disease, and is alienated by kin.

The structure of the narrative reinforces this interdependence between Ricky and his family, by sandwiching the narrative concerning Ricky with that of his forebears. The novel's title and 'Prologue' focus on Ricky, then the first three chapters concentrate on Kwang's life, after which Ricky is the central subject. Tellingly, the novel's front cover displays an illustration of Ricky, his father, and his grandfather.

The narrator also frequently points out that in Ricky's parents' household 'There was not much of a family life' (40). Illustrative of this is the lack of family meals. There is the implication that this has an influence on the protagonist's individualistic behaviour.

Importantly, Ricky's individualism is also associated with *society's* materialistic values. At the climax of the novel, Ricky recognizes that his selfish behaviour has been a mistake. He attributes his self-centred conduct to his earlier mistaken perception that Singaporean society expected him to be materially successful. His recollection raises a possible association between Singaporean society, materialism, and individualism, even though it is subsequently dismissed. This differs from government rhetoric that makes individualism 'other' by attributing it to Westernization.

Overall, this examination suggests that the novel presents distinctly discernable communitarian arguments against individualism in moral terms. A selfish, 'unfilial' character is a morally reprehensible one. Such an anti-hero's actions cause irreversible family breakdown as well as self-inflicted terminal misery. Hence, the novel seems largely to endorse the government's critiques of excessive individualism as bad, and not in the long-term interests of the community or individual. Furthermore, it can even be read as questioning the conceptual validity of individualism, thereby implicitly discrediting the concept. Nevertheless, Ricky's selfish individualism is not primarily attributed to Western influences.⁹⁸ This differs from state discourses of the 1970s that made individualism 'other' by attributing it to the West. Ricky is said to have *mistakenly* perceived Singaporean society as encouraging his acquisitiveness, thereby raising this possibility that such ruthless materialism is not 'other'.

Whereas *Ricky* rebukes and undermines the individualism of its central 'unfilial' character, its forceful communitarian perspective is not found in many other English-language Singaporean novels. A more complex presentation of the topic is found in *Mammon Inc.*. This occurs through the 'filial' dilemma of the protagonist, which will now be analysed.

⁹⁸ Although Ricky goes on some foreign business trips, and buys a Matisse print, these journeys are not central to his characterization.

Clashes Between Individualism and Communitarianism in *Mammon Inc.*

Although filial piety is a pronounced theme in the acclaimed *Mammon Inc.*, published academic scholarship has tended to examine other cultural aspects of the internationally set and published text.⁹⁹ In this section, it is argued that the protagonist's dilemma concerning filial piety warrants attention because it raises politically significant issues about communitarianism and individualism.

Communal concerns and individual desires compete against each other in *Mammon*. This tension is central to the narrative, in which the protagonist is under moral pressure to be 'filial'. Her dilemma has political significance when read in light of the Singaporean political context. Pertinent features of this include the PAP government's advocacy of communitarianism for the good of the nation, the state's promotion of dutiful filial responsibility, and its association of individualism with selfishness and decadence.

The novel's protagonist, the Singaporean Oxford graduate Chiah Deng, is presented with three alternative life options. The two most prominent ones can be related to communitarianism or individualism. As she samples and deliberates over each choice, she uses criteria that can be associated with individualism and communitarianism. Notably, each option is described in moral terms relating to religious imagery and doctrine, and to selfishness.

⁹⁹ For example, the text is examined in light of: Occidentalism by Tamara Wagner (2005a); cosmopolitanism by Serene Tan and Brenda S. A. Yeoh (2006: 159); and cosmopolitanism and transnationalism by Eddie Tay (2007).

The Options' Communitarian and Individualistic Attributes

Chiah Deng is presented with three alternatives, which are essentially orientated towards group belonging, individual fulfilment, or coupling. The novel opens when Mammon CorpS, a subsidiary of the world's largest firm, Mammon Inc., headhunts Chiah Deng for a job interview. Chiah Deng likens this to an invitation to join 'Corporate Hell' (3). Shortly afterwards, she is offered her dream job, an academic research post in the field of mysticism. Then, her childhood sweetheart, Tock Seng Edwards, proposes lifelong travel together and marriage.

The company of Mammon Inc.

The Mammon CorpS alternative has various group associations that can be discerned. These include the group-oriented nature of the recruitment tests; the communal benefits of the salary; and, as the narrative progresses, puns on the word 'company'. In this section, it is argued that these connections with group belonging can be related to communitarianism, but that the Singaporean Government's communitarian accent on nation and then family is, at times, subverted through the internationalism of the groups involved.

The CEO of Mammon CorpS, Draco Sidious, entices Chiah Deng to join the company through designing three recruitment tests that encourage a cosmopolitan sense of community (Eddie Tay 2007). The first test nurtures an international sense of affiliation. Chiah Deng has to gain entry into a Gen Vex

party at Utopia, an exclusive New York club. She succeeds, and initially feels that she belongs to the glamour cosmopolitan set of Gen Vexers who frequent the club.

The remaining two tests coax Chiah Deng's disengagement from her transnational affiliation to Singapore and England. When, in her second challenge, she has to make her non-academic sister acceptable to a clique of elitist undergraduates at the University of Oxford, she feels contempt not only for the Oxford snobbery she witnesses but also for the 'stupidity and cultural cluelessness' that she sees in Singaporeans like her sister (197). At this point, she feels alienated from both the English elite and Singaporeans. In the third test, she is charged with making her English friend Steve fit into a Singaporean family dinner party. Although Steve gives an adequate performance, Chiah Deng feels that she has 'corrupted' this 'artsy bloke' into a 'greedy, uncultured git' (269). Here, once again, she criticizes Singaporean culture.

After the tests, Dr Sidious tells Chiah Deng that she had felt 'completely alone' in these latter two exercises. During them she 'knew' that she could never be totally Singaporean and that she would 'never belong' in England (274). He then reminds her of her sense of belonging during the first test, using this to entice her to join Mammon Inc.'s company of internationally savvy executives. Hence, joining Mammon is associated with a cosmopolitan form of *group* belonging.

Mammon CorpS's lucrative remuneration package has other communitarian potential, as it would enable Chiah Deng to support her

community of family and friends. She has 'filial' obligations to her Singaporean kin. Her parents urgently need financial support because her father is becoming occupationally incapacitated through visual disability, and her poorly paid sister is unable to support them. The corporate position would enable Chiah Deng to realize her filial responsibilities. Taking up the position would be consistent with the government's aforementioned communitarian advocacy of filial piety. In addition, Chiah Deng could sponsor her English best friend, Steve's, film. Thus, in aiding her inner circle of family and friends, she would be supporting a community, albeit a transnational rather than a distinctly Singaporean one.

The word 'company' reinforces Mammon's association with group belonging. The corporate invitational letter refers to Mammon as a 'company' three times (1–2). By the end of the novel, the word conveys dual meanings of corporation and assembly of like-minded people. In a moment of doubt about the job, Chiah Deng reflects, '*Maybe I don't need a tribe, don't need the **company** of Mammon*'¹⁰⁰ (273, emphasis added). Only two pages later, Dr Sidious tells her that her Gen Vexer colleagues 'can come and fill your life, hundreds of them, *all over the world* – you can go anywhere and find *company*. You need *company*, and Mammon Inc. is the *Company* you want to keep'¹⁰¹ (275, emphasis added).

Hence, this option has strong associations with communitarianism. Nevertheless, the internationalism of the community differs from state discourses that urge cosmopolitan Singaporeans working abroad to think of Singapore as 'home', and of their Singaporean family and friends. This option can therefore be

interpreted to subvert what Tamney describes as the state's communitarian hierarchy of the national community before that of family.

Academic mysticism and individualism

The opportunity to study mysticism is presented as a distinctly more individualistic alternative. The research concerns Richard Rolle's *Incendium Amoris*, a mystical text that teaches Christian individuals how to experience the fire of divine love. Chiah Deng relates the job to her own spiritual development,¹⁰² yearning as she does to be 'ravished by the love of God' (23), and does not discuss the work in light of contributing to collective scholarship.

Her potential supervisor, Professor Ad-oy, encourages her to accept the post by helping her to pray. Although he tells that through prayer she will lose herself by 'being soundless in God' (201), she has a highly individualistic experience. Notably, she sees a vision of Christ when she is left to meditate 'alone' (202). Chiah Deng reflects, '*my* soul was filled with sepulchral silence, empty of the voices of those I loved' (206, emphasis added). She experiences Christ's divine, unconditional love for her as sublime and sees in Christ's sad tear 'the reflection of *myself*. He was there on the cross because of *me*, for *me* In those shining eyes of pain, I saw *my* Paradise' (206, emphasis added). Therefore, not only is having the vision an individual experience but what she sees in it relates specifically to her.

¹⁰² Notably, the mysticism expert Evelyn Underhill (1997) considers Richard Rolle as 'one of the most subjective of the mystics'.

The binary state of marriage

Tock Seng offers Chiah Deng the opportunity to have a 'soul-mate' (96). He proposes to Chiah Deng twice and she rejects him each time. His proposition is neither communitarian nor individualistic as is discussed below. Nevertheless he denounces communitarian values, when he states that it is 'worth chucking ... friends and family' for his nomadic lifestyle (85).

This alternative is notably the least explored in the text (Garsten: forthcoming). Chiah Deng repeatedly argues with her sister about the first two choices, the third not being mentioned. This unequal weighting between the alternatives is reflected in several short reviews of the novel that do not mention this aspect of the plot, including those in Britain's *The Observer* (Simon Beckett, 14 July 2002) and *Asiaweek* (Andrew Sun, 21 September 2001). Hence, the novel primarily focuses on the communitarian and individualistic options.

Therefore, communitarianism and individualism are associated with Chiah Deng's most significant life options. In the next section, it is argued that the discernable contest between individualism and communitarianism in the novel is intensified by the communitarian and individualistic values that Chiah Deng uses to assess these three alternatives.

Chiah Deng's Communitarian and Individualistic Values

Chiah Deng discusses and experiences all three of her life choices before making her final decision. She samples them through the Mammon CorpS tests, a divine vision, and a date with Tock Seng. Some of the measures that she uses to assess them give primacy to group belonging and therefore can be aligned with communitarianism. Others are more individualistic, such as her desire for self-fulfilment and happiness.¹⁰³ Consequently, values associated with both communitarianism and individualism are portrayed and prioritized as Chiah Deng makes her final choice.

Communitarian values: filial responsibility and belonging

Chiah Deng has two major communitarian considerations: first, her 'filial' duty to support her family and secondly, her desire to belong to a 'tribe'.

Filial responsibility

The sought-after protagonist at first gives importance to her 'filial' duties. These affect her assessment of all three options. Chiah Deng greets the academic option with enthusiasm until she learns that it comes without full scholarship funding, which means that it would not enable her to support her family in Singapore.

¹⁰³ Priorities that fall into neither category include her desire to be part of the elite and her hunger for knowledge.

When she has doubts about participating in Mammon's recruitment tests, her sister, Chiah Chen, tells her 'but we got no choice. You need to make big money, especially now Daddy's eyes so bad' (76, emphasis added). Through the pronoun 'we', the decision is put in collective terms. Chiah Chen explains that the family unit is dependent on Chiah Deng. Their father's night blindness is stopping him from working as a taxi driver. 'Mummy *only* know how to be housewife, and I *only* at the supermarket. If you become a Professor assistant, make so little money, and Daddy *can't work* any more, how are we going to eat?' (76, emphasis added). Chiah Deng resentfully associates this demand with the sucking out of her blood.

Nevertheless, Chiah Deng finds the need to feed her family a persuasive argument. A few pages later, it can be seen to affect her assessment of Tock Seng's invitation to join his nomadic, unmaterialistic, Generation X lifestyle. She tells him that she cannot 'abandon' her parents and 'just leave them to starve' (85).

The repeated references to Chiah Deng's family's inability to survive without her support can be interpreted politically in a number of ways. On the one hand, it presents a moral argument for filial piety. As such this resonates with state discourses that associate filial responsibility with moral rectitude. On the other hand, it may infer that there is a dangerous lack of a social security safety net in Singapore.

In addition, the strong image that Chiah Deng uses of the sucking of her blood by her family may also be interpreted politically. Provocatively, it

associates filial responsibility with the sapping of individual strength. This is far from some political discourses about the topic. For instance, the PAP MP Peh Chin Hua, speaking about the shared value of 'family as the basic unit of society' in Parliament (Government of Singapore 1991a), said: 'Paying due respect and taking care of the needs of our elders, such as parents and grandparents, will be the responsibility of the young. These make the essence of a blissful and happy family.' Notably, in *Mammon*, it is not a number of youngsters that care for older family members; instead it is one, who shoulders the burden individually with little relish and with associated limitations on her individual career choice.

Belonging to a tribe

A sense of belonging to a tribe is crucial to Chiah Deng and is reiterated throughout the text (53, 96, 143, 216, 274, 275). Accepting the position at Mammon CorpS allows Chiah Deng to maintain the affections of those closest to her. In addition, a Mammon Inc. test gives Chiah Deng access to the community of the glamorous Gen Vex set. Initially, she feels part of their 'tribe' (143). However, as the evening wears on, she decides that the group is 'shallow' (150). Yet Dr Sidious later reinforces her inceptive experience of them, persuasively asking her, 'do you remember that *one moment* during the Tests when you didn't feel alone?'(274, emphasis added). The Gen Vexers, he tells her, 'were the only *tribe* you've met that you loved and that loved you back'. This wins her over.

Chiah Deng reports, 'He knew what I really hungered for ... love. I saw the feast that he offered me. I would no longer be alone Mammon offered me eternal Communion with a *tribe* who loved me. How could I resist the bait?' (275).

Whereas accepting the job at Mammon Inc. would connect Chiah Deng to her family, friends, and the community of Gen Vexers, conversely, the mystical research post and the life with Tock Seng would entail the loss of family and friendship. She predicts that, if she were to convert to Christianity and work for Professor Ad-oy, 'my family will disown me. They'll curse me. Then I'll have to go through the Third, Fourth and Seventh Courts of Hell before I can be purified and rise to Heaven' (27). She decides that, if she sought her salvation in Christianity, it 'would make me as solitary as the man who hung from the cross, cursed and abandoned by all he loved' (276). This association of individualism with loneliness is essentially communitarian.

Chiah Deng rejects Tock Seng's second marriage proposal on the grounds that life with him would leave her feeling 'alien', without a community. Remembering Dr Sidious's arguments about the importance of group belonging, she tells him, 'I need the whole *tribal* unit – friends, relatives, neighbours. I need to live in a *community*' (96, emphasis added).

Yet Chiah Deng's communitarian need for her kith and kin is invalidated when she refers to it as a weakness. She repeatedly says that she does not have the 'strength' to bear the cross of losing her family and friends (200, 276). This unheroic positioning differs from government discourses that laud filial piety.

Values associated with individualism: self-fulfilment and happiness

Self-fulfilment

Chiah Deng gets a pronounced sense of self-fulfilment from her vision. She sees in Christ's tear, 'the reflection of *myself* I saw *my Paradise*' (206, emphasis added). Ignited with Christ's love, she feels 'fully' herself (207) and proclaims she is 'a transformed individual' (208). This resonates with liberal arguments about the importance of self-fulfilment.

However, the self-realization portrayed in this passage is undermined by communitarian allusions. First, Chiah Deng's name means 'light of the family'. Lit up by the vision, she reports, 'Finally, I was fully myself, Chiah Deng, the lamp, the fire of my family' (207). However, her name gives her a communal identity that is specifically abandoned in the meditative experience. For, prior to having the vision, she focuses on a biblical passage (Luke 14: 26) in which the Lord says:

If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple. (202)

Happiness

Chiah Deng appears to feel greatest contentment from her mystic experience. When she is accepted by the Gen Vexers, she feels 'the surge of triumph'. However, she immediately feels 'a seeping of unease' about the superficial credentials of this glamorous crowd (149). Notably, this quick shift from a sense

almost immediately, within about one page of text.¹⁰⁴ Chiah Deng feels greatest contentment from her divine vision. Yet, there is something distinctly narcissistic about her individualistic bliss at the sight of herself reflected in 'the pond' of one of Christ's sad tears (206). This allusion to narcissism (Garsten 2008: 153) resonates with the aforementioned communitarian criticism of selfish individualism. Measured in textual space, Chiah Deng's spiritual elation is sustained over ten pages. After seeing 'Paradise' (206), she experiences a 'wave of ecstasy' and becomes, she repeatedly asserts, 'a puff of bliss' (208, 210). Feeling radiant, serene, and 'virtuous' (208–9), she tells her sister, 'For the first time in my life I've found something that makes *me*, and not my parents, happy' (214, emphasis added). She uses this argument of individual happiness to counter her sister's demands for 'filial' piety.

Significantly, when she feels this elation after her spiritual vision, Chiah Deng seems to forget her family's survival needs. She tells her sister, that 'Asian values are all about sacrificing the life of the child for the parent, and I don't want any part of that anymore' (215). She then tells her that 'I'm sick of being the host for my parents, just standing there and watching them suck the blood out of me while my life passes by'. Here, the potential loss of happiness and self-fulfilment makes her resentment about the demands of filial piety more trenchant. However, she is eventually convinced by her sister that she cannot separate herself from her ancestors. She decides that she can 'never become a Christian' because she cannot 'belong to the Laura Ashley *tribe*' in middle England. Thus,

¹⁰⁴ Specifically, in thirty-seven lines from the lower half of page 94 to that of page 95.

whilst the spiritual option is shown to give her the greatest and most sustained sense of satisfaction, it cannot supersede her communitarian need to belong to a group with whom she identifies. This has political significance because her choice eventually is not decided by her family's needs and her sense of duty. Instead, it is determined by her need to belong.

Therefore, Chiah Deng's views are coloured by values that can be associated with both communitarianism and individualism. Here, the tension between self and collective interests operate within one person, giving it complex, schizophrenic undertones. Whilst the communitarian values ultimately take precedence those orientated towards individualism, they do not always affirm the state's communitarian, nationalistic stance. On the one hand, Chiah Deng takes filial responsibility seriously and hankers for group belonging. On the other hand, she resents having to support her parents and has a sense of being part of an international tribe. Furthermore, the advantages of individualism that are portrayed do not tend to be included in state discourses. Individual happiness is celebrated, although its narcissistic associations are also highlighted.

Having considered the communitarian and individualistic aspects of the options, and the values that Chiah Deng uses to prioritize her decision whether to be filial or not, the moral dimensions associated with both will now be explored.

Competing Moral Associations

The tension between Chiah Deng's individual inclination to research mysticism and the more materially ambitious expectations of her family and friends are put into a moral framework through powerful images of good and evil, citations of doctrines, and references to selfishness.

Moral images

The corporate option and, to a lesser degree, the mystic alternative are described in highly symbolic terms, pertaining to religion or popular culture, which often have pronounced moral associations.

Many of the religious allusions to the conglomerate firmly associate it with immorality and excessive materialism. Mammon, derived from the Aramaic word for 'wealth', is associated with sin in the Bible. This is when Christ says (Matthew 6: 24 and Luke 16: 13) that no person can serve God and money. Chiah Deng's family's expectations of her return are likened to fanatics' anticipation of 'the second coming of Christ'. They are said to have 'fantasies' of her 'descending through the clouds on a silver jet, with a pocket full of platinum cards that they could charge to their hearts' content' (24). After Chiah Deng goes through Mammon CorpS's recruitment tests, she feels that her soul has been 'charred' by the Red Dragon (206). Finally, her reluctant decision to work for company is conveyed in calamitous religious terms: denouncing herself as Eve, she falls into the corporate 'viper's pit', where she will be required to be 'The spreader of original sin' in her role at Mammon CorpS (276–277).

In addition, there are allusions to *Star Wars*. Dr Draco Sidious's name alludes to Darth Sidious, the evil First Galactic Emperor, whilst his foil's surname, Ad-oy, is an inversion of Joda, the virtuous coach to the Jedi Knights. Here, once again, the corporation is associated with evil.

Nevertheless, some of the images associated with Mammon Inc. allow for different cultural interpretations. For instance, the dragon that graces its corporate logo is a symbol of Satan in some Biblical passages but is also 'the sacred emblem of the Chinese Emperors' (65). This imagery infers that the conglomerate at worst is evil, and at best is simply a Neo-Confucian fusion of 'Eastern traditions with Western commercialism' (65). However, such dual images are in the minority.

Therefore, the option that is favoured by Chiah Deng's community is principally and strongly associated with evil. It is also linked with materialism. Whereas *Ricky* fleetingly hints at some societal endorsement of materialism, *Mammon* firmly links the evils of materialism with the communitarian option. This may be seen to critique the government's communitarian decision to give precedence to the economy.

Contrasting doctrines

Ethico-religious tension between individualism and group orientation are conveyed through different interpretations of the Biblical story of human creation and through juxtapositions of Christian individualism with Confucian and Buddhist notions of filial piety.

Different interpretations of the Biblical story of human creation

Contrasting interpretations of Genesis indicate divine approbation or condemnation of solitary, marital, or communal lifestyles.

Dr Sidious links the need to belong to a tribe with Adam's fall from Paradise. He asserts that the human desire to be in a community emanates from when, 'God looked at Adam and said, "It is not good for man to be alone"' (63). However, Dr Sidious seems to misread the Bible because there is no human community in Paradise. God, after making his decree, only creates one other person, Eve (Genesis 2). The couple do not have children until after the Fall. Yet Dr Sidious's argument is shown to influence Chiah Deng insidiously for, when she refuses Tock Seng's second marriage proposal, she remembers Dr Sidious's words and tells the young man that she needs a community.

Tock Seng responds, stating that Chiah Deng is 'wrong' about needing a tribe because, in Paradise, Adam had a single soul mate in Eve (96). Thus, it is hinted that community living is linked to man's fall and therefore is not a perfect state of being. This has political significance. Although the Singaporean government does not base its communitarianism on Christian theology, nevertheless, it morally elevates the concept of communitarianism. The theology in the novel therefore undermines the moral connotations of the concept of communitarianism.

Christianity versus filial piety

Chiah Deng implicitly or explicitly contrasts the virtue of caring for parents espoused in the classical Confucian text *The Twenty-Four Paragons of Filial Piety* with the aforementioned biblical passage that urges followers of Jesus to abandon their families (25, 214–215) and the joys of working on *Incendium Amoris*. Chiah Deng tells her sister that she wants to study this text rather than emulate the heroes of the classical tales of ‘filial’ piety, thereby comparing the two philosophies.¹⁰⁵ Here, Christian and Eastern Confucian teachings rub up against each other in sequential sentences, juxtaposing subjective desire against duty to the group.

Interpreted in the context of Singaporean politics, this clash of Christian and Confucian texts can be likened to the Singaporean government’s polarization of Asian communitarianism with Western individualism. However, in contrast to the government, Chiah Deng associates filial piety with self-sacrifice and doing ‘shit work for ... family’ (214). Furthermore, through references to both doctrines she implicitly associates virtue with both individualistic mystic experience and the practice of filial piety. This differs from the state discourses that laud filial piety and decry selfishness.

Selfishness

Chiah Deng is repeatedly charged with behaving like a ‘selfish’ Westerner by her sister, Chiah Chen (38, 76). This occurs when Chiah Deng asserts her desire to lead her own life and not to support the family. Chiah Chen then informs her that,

as she is Chinese, she cannot give preference to 'personal fulfilment' (77) and points out that, without Chiah Deng's assistance, the family will not have enough money to eat.

However, there is an inference that Chiah Chen and the family are also somewhat manipulative and selfish in their demands. Chiah Deng recalls a 'propaganda' tale of 'filial' piety that her parents read out to her as a child, and thinks that they recounted it 'so often because they expected me to do the same for them' (76). Importantly, Chiah Deng's family buy luxuries on credit in anticipation of her lucrative career. These extravagant purchases range from expensive holidays to a top-of-the-range DVD sound system. Chiah Deng comments that she would not have bought such highly sophisticated electronic goods as she 'could do a million more philanthropic things' if she was comfortably well off (37). Here, her family's consumerist self-indulgence is contrasted to her altruistic ideals. Therefore, Chiah Deng's family is portrayed as being selfish in its materialistic demands. Pointedly, these unnecessarily profligate procurements are placed sequentially in the text, immediately before each instance in which Chiah Chen accuses Chiah Deng of having become selfish whilst being in the West. This textual ordering undermines Chiah Chen's condemnations.

In addition, the job that helps Chiah Deng support her family is portrayed to be anti-humanitarian. Once appointed at Mammon CorpS, Chiah Deng's first assignment is to recruit a brilliant young scientist working in Third World

Development. Chiah Deng sees from this task that Dr Sidious plans for her to 'be a mother of a generation of tainted children. The spreader of original sin' (277).

As this analysis of *Mammon* has suggested, communitarianism and individualism are juxtaposed on multiple levels in *Mammon*. They can be discerned in Chiah Deng's two occupational openings and in the values that she uses in making her choices.

Although Chiah Deng ultimately chooses the communitarian option by joining the *company* of Mammon Inc., she implicitly challenges some state discourse about communitarianism. First, she does so out of her own need for love rather than out of a pure sense of duty. Secondly, she puts her family and friends first, and by the end of the novel shows little affinity with Singapore.

Chiah Deng's eventual choice to work for Mammon Inc. is ethically complex. In caring for her family and friends, she chooses the option that is primarily associated with evil and that acts against humanitarian work. This association between the communitarian option and greed and evil stands in contrast to *Ricky Star*, in which individualism is linked to materialism and immoral conduct. As such, the economic communitarian focus of Mammon Inc. may gently make reference to that of Singapore Inc.

The text also complicates moral distinctions that are made in state discourses between individualism and communitarianism. Different doctrines indicate that there is moral validity to both personal fulfilment and the practice of

filial piety. It is inferred that selfishness can be found in the individual pursuit of spiritual self-fulfilment as well as in communal materialistic demands.

The protagonist's overarching need to belong and her 'filial' decision is associated with spiritual and moral compromise. Supporting the tribe is not celebrated at the close of the novel; rather it is lamented. The protagonist says that she does not have the 'strength' to become a Christian because she 'couldn't imagine being without the love of my loved ones for the rest of my earthly life' (276). This associates the option of supporting and belonging to a tribe with weakness. As such, it could be interpreted as challenging the government's rhetorical elevation of the group above the individual and its lauding of filial piety.

Whilst the practice of 'filial' responsibility is upheld in the novel through the ultimate decision of the protagonist, unappealing aspects of it are identified and denounced. Furthermore, Chiah Deng's comment, that without her support her family would 'starve', may hint at a critique of the city-state's lack of social security provision. In addition, the novel, through Chiah Deng's sustained dilemma, makes 'filial' responsibility an option, whereas the government, through *The Maintenance of Parents Act*, makes it mandatory. This questioning of 'filial' piety contrasts with sociological studies on the topic that show continued support for it and provides an additional perspective on Singaporean society. Hence, although the practice of filial piety is upheld in the novel, state policies concerning it are undermined.

So far, this chapter has identified that *Ricky* effectively puts forward communitarian arguments against individualism. Contrastingly, *Mammon* presents a more complex picture, in which communitarianism and individualism are pitted against each other. Although the communitarian option is chosen by the protagonist, its value is undermined by the reluctance with which it is adopted, and the evil connotations attributed to it. However, in the next text to be analysed, *Peculiar Chris*, individualism is supported.

Advocacy Of Individualism in *Peculiar Chris*

Peculiar is acclaimed as the first Singaporean gay novel, as was outlined in Chapter Three. Its focus on the protagonist's self-development can also be seen as validating, and promoting, individualism. In doing so it highlights, be it consciously or unconsciously, certain liberal tenets such as the importance of individual happiness and freedom of expression; and it makes reference to the importance of human rights. It is notable that the author contextualizes the creation of the novel in relation to restricted freedom of expression in Singapore. In the text's 'Foreword', Johann S. Lee (1992: v) states that he has written no more than a 'coming out' novel, because of a lack of liberty in Singapore. Conversely, the novel stresses the limitations of 'filial' duty, thereby effectively undermining communitarian ideology.

The central character, Chris, in asserting the right to be gay, states that individual happiness takes priority over family expectations and constraints. The portrayed absence of Chris's family provides the space for his sexual exploration; his boyfriend, Kenneth's, concessions to family expectations are condemned; and Chris's later resistance to family restraints is lauded.

Absence of Family

The gay relationship between Chris and his fellow junior college friend, Kenneth, evolves in an environment where the couple's families are absent. Whilst Paul Yeoh (2006: 123) perceptively points out that Chris's gayness can be interpreted symbolically as an expression of his 'desire for contact with his dead father', the pair's freedom from familial restrictions allows Chris to start exploring his gay identity. Kenneth's relatives, and their traditional expectations of him, are far away in Jakarta; and Chris's mother, sister, and stepfather have migrated to the United States. With no familial intrusion, the pair seem to develop an easy-going, natural, and happy relationship.

Chris emphasizes his separation from his family. He reports that, at sixteen-years-old, '*I moved out to live on my own, and to make a home for myself*' (91, emphasis added).¹⁰⁶ This was a positive choice, he indicates. Once installed, '*there was nothing that could make me go back on the decision that I had made*' (92, emphasis added). Chris associates separating himself from his kin with self-determination. Once in the flat, he relishes '*the peace and liberty*' and makes '*a dedicated effort to be reborn*' (91). This is more akin to liberal thinking about the individual than to a communitarian social sense of self. Whilst his connection with his family is not completely severed, he expresses a desire to be independent. He reflects, '*as hard as I tried to detach myself, I failed, because as a financially dependent minor, I was still relying on sums of money that were sent by the people I left.*' (91).

As discussed in Chapter Three, the affluent, independent situation of Chris would be highly unusual in Singapore. Therefore, the text makes space for the individual in a way that is unrepresentative of Singaporean life. When Johann S. Lee was asked why he absented the family from Chris's daily life he replied that it would have been 'too difficult' to include them (personal communication, April 2005). The inference here is that there is a tension between portraying an individual coming out and setting them in a familial environment in a novel set in Singapore.

Critique of Ken's Accommodation of Family Concerns

Family intrusion ruptures Chris's first gay relationship. Ken ends the otherwise fulfilling relationship when he bows to familial pressure and agrees to marry. Chris is highly critical of Ken's decision, which privileges family over individual happiness.

Chris's outrage at Ken's concession to his family is repeatedly put in ideological terms that juxtapose individual rights and autonomy against collective family will. Ken, 'who believed in human rights, civil rights, equal rights and personal freedom, was going to let his family choose his life partner for him' (38). Only six pages later, Chris again reflects that Ken, despite his crusade for, 'the rights of the individual ... couldn't even stand up against the unbending will of his

parents' (44). In these passages, a painful personal situation is related to broader liberal political concepts.¹⁰⁷

Ken's justifications for his actions can be interpreted as communitarian and are critiqued by Chris. The Indonesian explains that arranged marriages are practiced in Jakarta and that this system is 'the way' his 'family runs' (38). As indicated above, moral cultural relativism can be regarded as being communitarian.

Notably, Ken's conformity to his family's wishes is portrayed as weak, passive, and inauthentic from Chris's more liberal perspective. Chris asks himself, 'Didn't he [Ken] have the strength to pursue his own happiness?' (38). He is also shocked that Ken 'was going to let his family choose his life partner for him'. In addition, Chris has misgivings about Ken's potential fiancée being misled. This again gives importance to another individual whom Kenneth's dutiful actions are going to affect. Consequently, he thinks of Kenneth as a 'coward' (39). Nothing heroic about Ken's self-sacrifice for his family is conveyed. His parents are absent from the text and thus their needs are not communicated or validated.

Furthermore, Chris is concerned about Ken's loss of happiness and personal fulfilment. Chris's prioritization of individual happiness resonates with liberal democratic values. During the affair, he reflects that their relationship is above all 'happy' (27). Contrastingly, when the pair meet again, two years after their separation, Chris sadly observes that Ken has '*No sparkle*', the words being

¹⁰⁷ Although human rights have international status, some Asian statesmen refer to them as being essentially American.

visually emphasized through italics. This loss of vitality is reminiscent of the 'listlessness' that the liberal philosopher Bertrand Russell ([1949] 1995: 31–33) warns can be generated by centralized states that constrain individual initiative. The fictional description may hint that restrictions on sexual expression can profoundly affect individual family members. Kenneth's lost vivacity gives Chris, 'the urge to grab him by the shoulders, shake him, and tell him to start learning to live for himself' (173). This impulse undermines the political mantra of 'community before self'. At the end of the reunion, Chris simply tells Ken, 'Be happy' (173). Notably, at the end of the novel, when Chris's partner, Samuel, is dying of AIDS (contracted through a blood transfusion), the latter is said to have retained his 'faint but dauntless sparkle' (224). The word 'sparkle' indicates a self-fulfilment that can be attained through self-expression and realization.

Resistance to Familial Pressure

Chris 'resolutely' resists familial pressure against his homosexual way of life (163), championing the rights of the individual. In doing so, he implicitly undermines the government's assertions that rights concerning homosexuality are only of relevance in the West and thereby undermines the status quo.

When Chris's American-based sister, Tammie, visits him shortly after their mother's death, she is shocked to find him living with his homosexual partner. She uses a variety of hostile responses to try and get him to abandon this

lifestyle, including confrontation, blame, instruction, threat, rejection, and then concern. Each reformulation of her stance is prompted by Chris's refusal to shift his position. At one point, Tammie instructs Chris to evict his partner, Samuel. However, Chris refuses, stating that Tammie has 'no right' to 'tell' him 'what to do' (163). Tammie then threatens to leave and to her surprise is not deterred. As Tammie departs, she tells Chris 'to stay out' of her life, punishing him through rejection. Through these actions Chris autonomously puts his life choice over family relationships, defines himself by his own wishes rather than those of his family. In addition, he decides how he organizes his living space. Notably, his domestic arrangements have political significance, as they resist the state's promotion of family life and laws against homosexuality. As such, they challenge the status quo by providing an alternative image for public consumption.

Chris's stand proves successful. A week later, Tammie's position softens when she telephones Chris, warning him that homosexuality is 'a very sad way of life'. Finally, she writes Chris a reconciliatory letter, in which she accepts him and acknowledges that 'only' he can 'decide what's best for' him (164). In this way, Chris's resistance to Tammie's homophobia soon wins his sister's respect for his self-determination. Notably, in Johann S. Lee's original draft of the novel, Tammie's rejection of Chris was not resolved. However, Lee rewrote the passage incorporating reconciliation, in part because he wanted to give 'hope' to readers (personal communication, April 2005).

Furthermore, Chris's response is portrayed to be strong and virtuous. Chris notes, during his confrontation with his sister, that he has '*enough strength*

to do this' (163). This emphasis on the strength required for individual resistance to the family resonates with Chris's earlier comments about Kenneth's weakness. Nevertheless, it is noticeable that Chris's resistance is to one family member only and not to a collective family group. By this time, both his parents are dead. Therefore, there are limitations to the scope of his ability to withstand family demands. Samuel associates Chris's action with good conduct, reflecting:

*we cannot and must not, ever, be ashamed of who we are and what we believe in; we cannot and must not allow our dignity to be compromised. Without our dignity, in the truest sense of the word, in the sense that it entitles us to a **moral right** and inclines us towards a **moral** virtue to be intolerant of unjust devaluation and disparagement, we are no more human. (164, emphasis added)*

This comment is given considerable prominence in the text: not only is it placed in the final paragraph of the chapter, but it is also emphatically prefaced with Chris's proleptic comment that it 'was destined to remain foremost' in his consciousness.

Therefore, this novel presents an alternative vision to state portrayals of the family. Chris's desire to live a homosexual life is put in terms of individual rights and is juxtaposed against the traditional demands of family life: here, there is implicit rejection of homosexual legislation and therefore of government policy. On an ideological level, the text also endorses the importance of individual rights and individual happiness, regardless of the familial group and contrary to the government's association of gay rights with the West.

Conclusion

This chapter builds on literary criticism that has linked tensions between individual desires and the familial pressures of filial piety. It addresses some literature that post-dates existing research on the topic. It goes further in its political analysis than either Koh or Means by interpreting the strains between individuals and families in light of the PAP government's stances on the ideologies of communitarianism and individualism, and an array of communitarian state policies concerning homosexuality, housing, and filial piety.

The study argues that different stances on communitarianism and individualism can be interpreted in the three novels examined. *Ricky* can be seen to critique individualism from a communitarian perspective. The self-interested, undutiful behaviour of the anti-hero results in family breakdown, long-term individual suffering, and unrelenting and irreversible punishment. This bleak narrative is at odds with liberal notions of the importance of individual self-development. *Mammon* repeatedly juxtaposes individualism with communitarianism, thereby probing different aspects of both ideologies, rather than just accepting communitarianism. Contrastingly, *Peculiar* celebrates individualism and undermines communitarianism. Chris 'resolutely' resists familial pressure against his homosexual way of life (163), thereby championing the rights of the individual.

These varied perspectives are apparent in the varying treatment of the concept of happiness. In *Ricky*, the protagonist's individualism causes him

unhappiness. Conversely, in *Mammon*, Chiah Deng's individual bliss is given serious consideration, even though it is not shown to supersede the psychological imperative of group belonging. In polar opposition to *Ricky*, the protagonist of *Peculiar* finds happiness in following his own sexual orientation. He puts enormous value on such a feeling, his parting words to Kenneth being 'be happy' (173). These have political significance, given Lee Hsien Loong's parliamentary speech on the Shared Values, in which he related a focus on individual happiness to Western individualism.

The arguments that can be discerned as for or against individualism in all three novels are associated with morality. In *Ricky*, the protagonist's selfish behaviour is vilified, and is shown to be in part misguided and in part the enactment of a curse. Conversely, *Mammon* and *Peculiar* characterize communitarian behaviour as weak. In *Mammon*, communitarian and individualistic options are considered in relation to classical Confucianism and Christian doctrine, as well as with regard to selfishness. This undermines clear-cut moral distinctions that are made in state discourses between individualism and communitarianism. The references to the different doctrines indicate that there is moral validity to both personal fulfilment and the practice of filial piety. It is inferred that selfishness can be found in the individual pursuit of spiritual fulfilment as well as in communal materialistic demands. Meanwhile, in *Peculiar*, individual rights are given moral authority. These different stances on morality may be seen as effectively responding to the government's positioning of communitarianism as good. Whilst the texts do not always accord with the state's

stance, they nevertheless respond to it in the same language of right and wrong. *Peculiar*, in its assertion of the importance of individual rights is at odds with the government's association of gay rights with the West.

Overall, the various perspectives provide some alternatives to those presented by the government in discourses. Whilst *Ricky* largely endorses the government's communitarian stance, it also fleetingly links materialism to Singaporean society, whereas the government tends to link the problems of excessive individualism with liberal Western countries. *Mammon* associates the communal option with sin and greed, thereby portraying an evil association between materialism and communitarianism. This contrasts with the government's focus on material progress for the good of the national community. Although Chiah Deng ultimately chooses the communitarian option by joining the *company* of Mammon Inc., she does so out of her own need for love rather than out of a pure sense of duty. In addition, she puts her family and friends first and, by the end of the novel, shows little affinity with Singapore.

The textual tensions concerning filial piety also raise issues about legislation that is related to the government's communitarian ideology. Anti-homosexual legislation, although not explicitly referred to in *Peculiar*, is challenged through the novel's narrative, which traces a young gay man's development of his homosexual identity.

Ricky and *Peculiar* present stances on living alone in Singapore. In the former, Ricky's decision to live by himself is portrayed to be dangerous, in that it gives him time to make vengeful plans, and is also socially disadvantageous in

that he feels lonely. Importantly, his decision to live alone is also shown to be at the expense of his family and the cohesion of the family unit. Conversely, in *Peculiar*, Chris likens living without his family to being 'reborn'.

The government's advocacy of filial responsibility is responded to in *Ricky* and *Mammon*. The anti-hero's 'unfilial' actions in *Ricky* can be seen to endorse the policy that was emerging in the late 1970s. Whilst the practice of 'filial' responsibility is upheld in *Mammon* through the ultimate decision of the protagonist, unappealing aspects of it are identified and denounced.

Furthermore, Chiah Deng's comment, that without her support her family would 'starve', may hint at a critique of the city-state's lack of social security provision. Nevertheless, both novels present filial piety as an option, although one that is mitigated by social exclusion. *Peculiar* effectively undermines the Shared Value 'community before self' by demonstrating that giving precedence to family needs can result in an erasure of self-identity.

Hence, the political concepts of communitarianism and individualism can be traced in seemingly innocuous depictions of domestic dramas. In addition, there are also allusions to an array of government policies that can be linked to its communitarian outlook. This deeply political aspect to several pieces of fiction indicates that ideological issues can be debated through fiction. When different works are examined together, multiple perspectives emerge and create a political debate within the creative realm of storytelling.

The exploration of the liberal notion of autonomy is not confined to portrayals of filial piety in fiction. They are also intrinsic to depictions of paternal

authority in some particularly renowned Singaporean novels, which will be analysed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER SIX

PATERNALISM

They psycho you out so much at ... school' Eugene said, 'make you think that you have to obey your parents in everything'.

Hwee Hwee Tan, *Foreign Bodies* (146).

Paternal authority comes in various forms in single novels and across the corpus of English-language Singaporean novels. One particularly striking type of authority that can be discerned is paternalism.¹⁰⁸ This can be identified in the renowned novels *Abraham's Promise* (1995) by Philip Jeyaretnam and *Foreign Bodies* (1997) by Hwee Hwee Tan. In these texts, fathers are depicted exercising, endorsing and/or establishing paternalistic behaviour in the home. Furthermore, the theme of paternalism is implicitly reinforced in these novels through allusions or references to state paternalism. In this chapter, the political significance of portrayals of paternalism is explored.

Paternalism, according to the political scientist Andrew Reeve (2003) is 'The exercise of power or authority over another person to prevent self-inflicted harm or to promote that person's welfare, usually usurping individual responsibility and freedom of choice'. The term most strictly applies to fathers (*ibid.*), although it is more broadly relevant to parents. Paternalism involves

¹⁰⁸ Another form of authority that is portrayed in a variety of texts is patriarchal in nature, as for example in Catherine Lim's *The Teardrop Story Woman* (1998) and *Following The Wrong God Home* (2001).

interference with individual choice and is exercised with benevolent intent, 'for the guidance and support of those below' (Andrew Heywood 2007: 32).

Term 'paternalistic legislation' in this thesis refers to laws that are aimed to protect individuals from self-harm and which may be regarded as paternalistic, such as those that deter suicide, drug consumption, gambling, and homosexuality (Gerald Dworkin 1983: 20-21).

This chapter newly identifies the theme of paternalism in *Abraham's Promise* and *Foreign Bodies* (henceforth *Abraham's* and *Foreign*). In doing so, it also brings to light this theme in Singaporean fiction in English. Paternalistic decisions are made in homes in *Abraham's* and *Foreign*, against individual characters' wills, though supposedly for their benefits. On a literal level, these incidents can be made sense of as domestic tensions and do not need to be read exegetically for comprehension. On another level, the decisions are demonstrably paternalistic. In addition, paternalism is not just confined to the private domain in these novels. The topic of paternalism is reinforced by characters' responses to paternalistic legislation. These references further emphasize the importance of paternalism in the texts, implicitly relating the narrative of individuals' private lives to the political sphere.

There is reason to evaluate the possible political symbolism of this fictional paternal conduct. First, the term 'paternalism' is associated with politics. The general definition of it in the *CED* is as 'the attitude or policy of a government or other authority that manages the affairs of a country, company, community, etc.,

in the manner of a father, esp. in usurping individual responsibility and the liberty of choice’.

Secondly, in Singapore there is an accepted and shared metaphorical association between political leadership and fatherhood. Lee Kuan Yew, whose political memoirs compound his personal history with that of the nation (Philip Holden 2001), ‘is the great paternal figure in Singapore’s popular imagination’, according to Kenneth Paul Tan (2001: 106). His influence as a father of Singapore has continued beyond his premiership, as is indicated by his guiding cabinet positions: Senior Minister (1990-2004) and then Mentor Minister (2004-present). Alan Chong (1991: 42) reports that Goh Chok Tong likened Lee to being a critical parent who, ‘was very disciplined, very demanding, very impatient of faults and wanting to improve these faults very quickly. “I would think I am more of a nurturing parent. That means I would give more positive strokes and be a little tolerant of mistakes.”¹⁰⁹ The inferred paternal status of both statesmen is also conveyed through their instructive rhetorical styles.

Thirdly, literary scholarship in Singapore has referred to the figurative significance of fathers. As indicated earlier in this thesis, Koh Tai Ann(1989b) suggests that Singaporean families may be read as metonym of the state. In her analysis of Michael Soh’s *Son of a Mother* (1973), she (ibid. 283) suggests that a ‘parallel seems indicated’ between the patriarchal family and the state. She bases this on the protagonist’s desire to understand his late father’s wishes and the statements of the Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew.

¹⁰⁹ Goh Chok Tong interview broadcast by the BBC on 23 November 1990.

However, Koh, somewhat elusively, leaves the possible metonymic patriarchal association here. Nearly ten years later, Philip Holden made a strong ideological connection between state leadership and fictional depictions of masculinity in his study of *Abraham's*. Holden (1998) argues that Lee Kuan Yew's 'equation of disciplined body and disciplined nation' is destabilized in the text. Whilst the protagonist Abraham resists the state, his person life is 'founded' on principles of discipline and rationality that Lee Kuan Yew espouses. Conversely, his implicitly gay son Victor, is outwardly conformist yet privately 'breaks Lee's equation between state and patriarchal family.'

Fourthly, there is some official sensitivity to commentary on the PAP statesmen's leadership styles, which might prompt coded references to a form of authority like paternalism in the fiction. Government sensitivity was demonstrated in the 'Catherine Lim Affair', in 1994, when the novelist and political commentator was reprimanded by the Prime Minister after she suggested, in a think-piece in the *Straits Times* (20 November), that there were 'tensions' between the authoritarian style of then Senior Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, and the promise of a more consultative approach by the then Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong. Lim was deemed to have attacked the authority of the government in making this argument (*Straits Times*, 5 December). The government's response indicated that only politicians were entitled to comment on such political matters. The Prime Minister's Press Secretary, Chan Heng Wing, stated (*Sunday Times*, 4 December) that the Prime Minister 'cannot allow journalists, novelists, short-story writers or theatre groups to set the political agenda from outside the political

arena'. Furthermore, Chua Mui Hoong reported in the *Straits Times* (5 December) that Goh Chok Tong was letting it be known that, 'Those who wanted to comment regularly on politics and set the political agenda should become politicians themselves and take responsibility for their views.' He also said that the Prime Minister 'made it clear that political commentators should expect a strong response from the Government if they attacked specific politicians or policies.' Soon afterwards, the Prime Minister announced that Lim's article had gone 'Out-of-bounds' (*Straits Times*, 17 December).

Fifthly, and importantly, the PAP leadership is strongly associated with paternalism, as is discussed in detail below. Therefore, there are many reasons for investigating the political significance of portrayals of paternalistic behaviours that are portrayed in the domestic sphere. In this chapter, it is argued that these depictions have political connotations when examined in light of the national political context and with reference to relevant political theoretical issues about paternalism. Furthermore, allusions to and discussions about state paternalism expand the depiction of paternalism into the public sphere.

The Issue of Paternalistic Government in Singapore

The PAP Government of Singapore is widely characterised as paternalistic. Politicians apply the term, as do academics from different fields, such as the sociologists John Clammer (1993: 38) and Beng-Huat Chua (1995a); literary scholars such as George Watt (2005: 175) and Paul Yeoh (2006: 127); political scientists such as Denny Roy (1994: 232) and Neil A. Englehart (2000: 558); and economist Habibullah Khan (2001: 20). The government's paternalism is alleged to take a variety of forms and is also a subject of political debate.

Alleged Forms of PAP Paternalism

Paternalism is often applied with respect to its decision-making processes, ideology, identification of values, and/or to some of its policies.

The upper echelons of the PAP tend to make decisions on behalf of citizens. This practice was particularly pronounced in the early 1980s. The Singaporean political scientist Kenneth Paul Tan (2001: 106–107) observes that, in the:

*government **paternalism** of the earlier decades of independence, Lee [Kuan Yew], the authoritarian father figure, knew best. He declared that his government had to formulate policies on rational, long-term principles, eschewing pressures that arose from the short-term interests of an **immature** citizenry He monopolized national decision making, practicing only a very selective consultative politics. (emphasis added)*

The government became more consultative after it lost the Anson by-election in 1981 to the leader of the Worker's Party, J.B. Jeyaretnam.¹¹⁰ However, the degree of this change is widely perceived to be limited. Illustrative of this is Tan's comment (2001: 112) that the government controls the consultation process: framing the agenda of problems, selecting from whom to seek feedback, and making the final decisions.

The government's paternalism is associated with its elitist outlook (Diane K. Mauzy and R.S. Milne 2002: 54). Michael Barr (2000: 14) states that Lee Kuan Yew characterized the elite as having a 'paternalistic concern' for subjects' welfare. The leaders of the government position themselves as having the wisdom to act on behalf of Singaporeans. Prime Minister, Goh, stated:

*[I]n Singapore, government act more like a trustee. As a custodian of the people's welfare, it exercises independent judgement on what is in the long- term economic interest of the people and acts on that basis. Government policy is not dictated by opinion polls or referenda.*¹¹¹

Singapore is also referred to as 'nanny' state. Regulations include the prohibition of food and drink consumption on trains and compulsory toilet flushing in public buildings. They also encompass the government's promotion of marriage to increase the birth rate among affluent and educated Singaporeans. In the mid 1980s, the government not only introduced financial incentives for graduates to have children but also set up the Social Development Unit (SDU) to encourage

¹¹⁰ The loss was significant to the PAP as Jeyaretnam senior became the first opposition MP for over a decade.

¹¹¹ Englehart (2000: 554) cites Goh's statement from Bilahari Kausikan (1998), 'The "Asian Values" Debate: A View from Singapore' in Larry Diamond and Mark F. Plattner (eds.), *Democracy in East Asia* 17, 20.

courting among university-educated Singaporeans.¹¹² Government campaigns range from those promoting courteous behaviour to cleanliness. Mauzy and Milne (2002: 11) observe there is criticism of government campaigns 'because they are said to be based on the premise that ordinary people (their target) "are immature"'. They also point out that sometimes such public advertisements are warranted.

Paternalistic government as a subject of contention

PAP politicians who refer to the government's paternalism, justify it on the grounds of the population's welfare. Lee Yiok Seng (6 October 1979), then Parliamentary Secretary for National Development, said, 'As Government is responsible for the welfare of its people, we have no choice but to assume a paternalistic role.'

As indicated above, the government implicitly justifies this policy with assertions of PAP politicians' moral and intellectual authority and with claims that the country is not yet fully mature or developed. Even so, the degree of paternalism is a point of discussion inside the PAP. For instance, in 1990, the then PAP MP Mr Lew Wyn Pau told parliament (Government of Singapore 1990) that 'The Government can meet the people's needs for self-esteem by being *less paternalistic* and giving them a greater say in running the country' (emphasis added).

¹¹² For detailed explanation of this policy see Saw Swee-Hock (2007).

Political opponents of the PAP criticize state paternalism. For example, the former leader of the Singapore Democratic Party, Chee Soon Juan (1994, Preface: unpaginated) warns that 'the present system of *paternalistic* control and over-regulation will lead to a regression of our society' (emphasis added). The former leader of the Worker's Party, Joshua Jeyaretnam (2000: xi), argues that people 'should determine collectively the good of the society and not have [it] determined for them by anyone above them, however benevolent'.

Therefore, paternalism is a contentious political issue in Singapore. This is significant, given that the paternalism portrayed in *Abraham's* and *Foreign* is set on the island-state. To facilitate conceptual analysis of these textual references, some relevant political philosophical concepts are discussed below.

Political Philosophical Concepts Associated with Paternalism

Paternalism can be related to Confucianism and liberalism. Not only do these political philosophies ground paternalism in broader conceptual dimensions but they also have national contextual relevance. The Singaporean government associated itself with Confucianism whilst distancing itself from liberal Western thinking during the Asian Values debate that was at its height from the late 1970s to the mid 1990s. Consequently, these broader concepts provide nationally relevant political frameworks through which to analyse fictional depictions of paternalism.

The Association of Paternalism with Confucianism

Paternalism is comfortably accommodated in classical Confucian thought, the Singaporean sociologist Eddie Kuo (1992: 13) observing that, when Confucianism was promoted in Singapore, it was 'compatible with the dominant political culture' in Singapore that included paternalism. In this philosophy, benevolent men have the knowledge, moral integrity, and competence to rule and look after the welfare of others. Neil Englehart (2000: 558) notes that the concept of *junzi*, or rule by virtuous men, in the Singaporean government's White

Paper on Shared Values 'allowed the PAP to salvage its elitist and paternalistic posture'.

Beng-Huat Chua (1995a: 36) comments that the PAP has 'Confucianised itself'. Its leadership's 'self-perception as a group of honourable men governing with the best interests of Singaporean in mind is, significantly, an image accepted by the majority of Singaporeans'.

Liberal Philosophers' Concerns with Paternalism

Locke's argument that children grow up

Sir Robert Filmer's theory of patriarchalism, published in seventeenth-century England, positioned the divine king as the actual father of the nation (Carole Pateman 1988: 24). The early liberal thinker John Locke challenged this theory of godly, fatherly rule in 1689. One of the arguments he made was, according to the political scientist Geraint Parry (1978: 80), that 'the object of paternal authority is to look after children and to bring them up in such a way that they can assume responsibility for themselves in adulthood'. Locke's argument is relevant to the concept of paternalism because, as the philosopher N. Fotion (1979: 191) notes, 'the concept of paternalism is concerned ... with the special family relationship of father to child'. Fotion (ibid. 192) comments that 'the paternalistic model leaves open the possibility ... that in time the "children" of the state may mature, and the state's father role will therefore alter, perhaps to

something like that of a retired grandfather'. This view – that paternalism is of only temporary value – is relevant to debates about this form of authority in Singapore. As indicated above, the 'maturity' of the population is discussed and used in arguments about the government's decision-making. The limited maturity of the nation has been used in PAP discourses.

Notably, Philip Jeyaretnam's non-fictional essays that urge reform repeatedly make reference to the 'maturity' of the population. Advocating non-interference in culture, he points out (1994) that participation 'will not occur unless Singaporean are treated as *mature* adults, entitled to make their own cultural choices.' (Emphasis added). When arguing for a piece of electoral reform, he states (1997: 101, emphasis added), 'We must find the courage and the *maturity* to insist on change.' This reference to maturity indirectly draws on Locke's aforementioned argument that government by parental figures is unsustainable, given the fact that children grow up under the guidance of their parents.

Consternation about intervention in individual liberty

Liberal philosophers have moral concerns about interference with individual liberty. Consequently they find paternalism 'problematic' (John Kleinig 1983: 18). They are concerned about when, if ever, paternalism is justified (e.g., John Stuart Mill 1974; Donald VanDeVeer 1986: 12) and according to Hugo Bedau (1995: 647) seek to limit paternalism 'to the minimum'. Given this stance, VanDeVeer asserts (1986: 12, 16) that paternalistic acts 'ought' to be 'controversial' and that

they warrant evaluation. In addition, Bedau notes (1995: 647) that liberals broadly regard paternalistic legislation that creates 'crimes without victims' as unjustified state interference in consensual private conduct.

Frequently, philosophers with liberal outlooks base their arguments on John Stuart Mill's 'anti-paternalistic principle' (Rolf Sartorius 1983: ix), expounded in his seminal text, *On Liberty* ([1859] 1974). Furthermore, Fotion (1979: 194) observes that paternalism is 'often' discussed in the context of this work. Mill (1974: 68) states that an individual should be free to act so long as he or she does not harm others and that the individual's 'own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant' for interference. Mill (*ibid.* 69) asserts that this doctrine applies to people 'in the maturity of their faculties' and not to children or young people 'below the age which the law may fix as that of manhood or womanhood'.

Such philosophers highlight a variety of specific drawbacks with paternalism. For instance, Kleinig (1983: 201) maintains that 'Where paternalists frequently misfire is in thinking that their ordering of priorities is identical to that of those on whom they impose'; and Joel Feinberg (1983: 3) warns that 'Even children, after a certain point, had better not be treated as children; otherwise they will never acquire the outlook and capability of responsible adults.' Liberals also argue that paternalists do not always act in their dependents' interests (Andrew Heywood 2007: 32). In addition, they posit that individuals have the right to make their own mistakes and that, furthermore, they can learn from them (*ibid.* 32).

Nevertheless, liberal thinking on paternalism is not homogeneous. For instance, Richard Arneson (1980: 471) rejects Gerald Dworkin's argument that 'paternalistic restrictions on liberty may be justified in order to heighten a person's ability to lead a rationally ordered life', on the grounds that it departs from Mill's more categorical rejection of paternalism. In addition, when Dworkin and other liberal philosophers list the exact criteria of paternalism, important differences of opinion emerge. One particular issue that has relevance to the textual analysis below is the will of the acted-upon individual. Dworkin (1983) and Arneson (1980) state that a paternalistic action is, by definition, against the consent of the individual. In contrast, VanDeVeer (1986) argues that it is against the initial position of the individual and that they may be pressurized into consent. The political scientist Andrew Heywood (2007: 82) accommodates both positions in his definitions of 'hard' and 'soft' paternalism. The former he refers to as operating 'regardless of consent, and thus overlaps with authoritarianism'. The latter, he states, is characterized 'by broad consent on the part of those subject to paternalism'.

Mill's texts are particularly relevant to *Abraham's Promise*. The protagonist repeatedly refers to reading John Stuart Mill, firstly in relation to *Utilitarianism* (86) and secondly in general (141).

Paternalism in *Abraham's Promise*

In this section it is argued that issues pertaining to paternalism can be identified in *Abraham's*. The paternalism that will be identified resonates with Philip Jeyetnam's evident concern about state paternalism, which is expressed in his other fictional and non-fictional writing. Some of the PAP's paternalistic measures are alluded to and ridiculed in his earlier novel *Raffles Place Ragtime* (1988). Illustrative of this is Vincent's mockery of the government's graduate dating organization, the Social Development Unit (SDU). He critically observes a party hostess who 'wore too much lipstick and was beginning to dress in the painstakingly sexy way of the graduate woman doing her weary best to achieve the procreative goals set by the Social Development Unit' (85). Jeyaretnam (1997: 95) infers criticism of PAP paternalism when he writes in an essay that 'Our leaders are ... too insistent on pushing the solution that they have decided upon'.

In *Abraham's*, the protagonist's father, Mr Isaac, is demonstrably paternalistic when he makes decisions on behalf of his children against their wishes. In particular, he reaches conclusions about his daughter, Mercy's, life, before and after she has, to use John Stuart Mill's language, reached 'womanhood'. In one of Abraham's flashbacks to his childhood, Mr Isaac settles the question about the potential evacuation of Abraham or his sister, Mercy, to Colombo during the Second World War. In another, later analeptic episode, Mr Isaac is resolved about the need for the adult Mercy to marry.

Paternalism Exercised at Home

Paternalism for the protection of youngsters

On the eve of the Japanese Occupation of Singapore, the teenage Abraham learns from his sweetheart, Rose, about the possibility of his and Mercy's evacuation to Colombo with Rose's family. On hearing this news, Abraham reflects that it is not worth his forming an opinion about the option, given that his parents will make the decision on his behalf. Here, the implication is that, were he to form an opinion, it would not affect his parents' decision, and that it might be overruled. Therefore, his anticipation of paternalism inhibits him from making decisions about his own life. This abdication of self-responsibility resonates with Feinberg's aforementioned argument against paternalism on the grounds of infantilization. It also resonates with the Singapore Democratic Party's comment that the practice of paternalism can have regressive consequences.

In the event, Mr Isaac is only able to get one ticket for the boat and the parents therefore have to decide which of their offspring to evacuate. Mercy articulates a 'will' to stay in Singapore (35). Notably, her opinion is not given serious consideration, no one enquiring about why she desires this option. By this time, Abraham wants to be evacuated so that he can be with Rose.

However, he is not asked for his opinion and he does not voice it.¹¹³ His mother predicts that the advancing Japanese soldiers may be aggressive with their daughter. Mr Isaacs then declares, 'Amma [mother] is right. Mercy will go' [35]. In this short, declaratory sentence, he effectively makes a decision against both his offspring's wishes. In doing so, he exercises what Heywood defines as 'hard' paternalism.

The decision can be considered justified given the impending Japanese invasion and Mr Isaacs's moral authority to protect his daughter. However, from historical hindsight, it can be postulated that Mercy would have been an unlikely target of Japanese abuse. The renowned historian Mary Turnbull comments (1989: 196) that 'orders were given to treat the Indian population with consideration as allies of the new regime'. Nevertheless, given that Mercy's father acted on the basis of his knowledge at the time, the decision could be deemed justifiably protective.

Mr Isaacs's choice, based on the notion of welfare, can be related to Mill's exceptional justification of paternalism on the grounds of age. The reader can deduce that, at the time of Mr Isaacs's decision, Mercy was about fourteen or fifteen years old.¹¹⁴ Therefore, she was probably not quite at the 'full age' that Mill ([1859] 1974: 142) considers the boundary for unjustifiable paternalism.

¹¹³ Specifically, Mr Isaacs asks Abraham if he is ready to go, which is different from asking him whether he would like to go or not.

¹¹⁴ Mr Isaacs buys the boat ticket just after the Japanese have sunk the British battle cruiser *Repulse* and the battleship *Prince of Wales*. A reader might know that this event occurred in December 1941. Abraham comments that, 'immediately' after the war, Mercy was eighteen or nineteen (56). As the war with Japan ended in August 1945, four years previous to this Mercy was about fourteen or fifteen. These two ages are only approximate, given that her birth date is unspecified.

Nevertheless, her situation is a marginal one, particularly as there was not a legal age of consent for women in Singapore at this time.

In the narrative, Mercy retaliates against her father's decision with an 'oppressive' sullen silence (35). Years later, after her return from Colombo, she continues to be pointedly non-communicative. Mercy's sustained resistance to the paternalistic decision foregrounds it, rendering it, to use VanDeVeer's term, 'controversial'. It makes the judgement questionable. David Roberts (1979: 5), in his study of paternalism, observes that the moment dependents 'claim that they know what is best for themselves, the paternal relation gives way to a relation between equals'.

Abraham finds his sister's response incomprehensible, but nor does he try to understand it: 'Why she was not happy to be delivered from the hand of the Enemy I did not try too long to understand ...' (35). On the one hand, the inference that Mercy's reaction is irrational can be related to the liberal debate about the justification of paternalism when an individual is not rational. On the other hand, Abraham's lack of understanding of her viewpoint is an aforementioned liberal objection to paternalism.

Therefore, it has been demonstrated that the decision about Mercy's evacuation is a paternalistic one and that, when analysed, it is replete with coded references to different liberal perspectives about the validity of paternalism. Mr Isaacs's decision about Mercy's evacuation is given some credibility because it is rational given the wartime situation and because of Mercy's minor status. Mercy never gives a reason for her stance and subsequent resistance. This makes her

case less convincing. However, the decision is made 'controversial'. It is pointedly against the will of an individual on the cusp of being an adult who feels that she can determine her own life. There is no attempt to understand her viewpoint. In addition, paternalism is shown to inhibit Abraham's self-determination. Therefore, in this episode, a paternalistic decision made on behalf of two young people is given some validity, although it is still rendered controversial.

The concept of paternalism is of indisputable relevance in Singapore as indicated above. However, the topic of evacuation has no direct relevance to post-Independent government policy. It is notable that a part of the narrative that gives paternalism some credibility, despite its flaws, is put in a pre-PAP historical context.

Paternalism determining an adult's future

Mercy's parents decide that she should marry, despite her counter-cultural wish not to wed until she is ready. Initially, Mercy resists her parents' concerted 'cajolery and anger' about the topic (56).

Despite Mercy's clear stance on not being ready to marry, her mother organizes for her to meet a potential husband and his family, with the enrolled matchmaker. Mercy sabotages this intervention by, supposedly, accidentally spilling hot tea over the young man's trousers. The guests flee as her roaring laughter takes on the sound of a rattling 'machine gun' (64). The scandalous incident becomes 'the talk of the town' (65). Abraham confronts her about it,

asking 'How could you do this? Why did you agree to meet him in the first place?' To which she replies, 'Was I asked?' (65). In identifying that she was not consulted about the event, she implies its imposition upon her. Hence, she alludes to paternalism and indirectly refers to it to partially justify her behaviour. The paternalistic conduct, by association, is thereby enrolled in the controversy of the incident.

The source of paternalistic authority in this instance is Mercy's mother rather than father, but is endorsed by the male members of the household. Mercy, through her behaviour, effectively resists her mother's paternalism. However, she is unable to sustain her defiance when her father takes charge of the situation. He does so in a conciliatory yet, nevertheless, paternalistic manner. Abraham secures his father's intervention. This is because he is worried about the effect that his mother's anxiety about her unmarried daughter is having on her health. He advises his father to consult Mercy about the matter; Mr Isaac agrees to do so. However, Mr Isaac's tone is directive rather than consultative. With the family at his side, the father speaks to Mercy of the 'plans' to find her a husband (68). He 'explains' that marriage is for her financial security and part of God's purpose. Mercy, who is working as a teacher by then, disagrees, pointing out that she can support herself and that St Paul has a different view. However, Mr Isaac ignores her financial and theological arguments. Mercy then concedes to marriage on condition that her spouse is a 'modern-minded' man (68). Whilst this scene could be simply read as one of resolution, it also exhibits the

aforementioned 'soft' form of paternalism, where the intervening force extracts consent.

Some coded liberal critiques of paternalism can be identified in the scene. The 'plans' are presented to Mercy as being for her benefit. Yet they are prompted by a concern to alleviate Mrs Isaac's upset and therefore indirectly give precedence to the elder woman's needs. In the conversation, the adult Mercy rationally presents arguments to support her perspective that address her father's specific concerns. However, her independent views about her own life are ignored.

The contrast between Mercy's and her father's assessment of her future happiness may be considered with reference to the later narrative events. Mercy's subsequent marital distress leads her to commit suicide. This outcome can be read against Mill's argument that individual adults have the best insight into their own interests.

Paternalistic intervention to promote marriage in the narrative has some broader political relevance. As indicated above, the state's promotion of marriage in Singapore has been regarded as paternalistic. There is therefore a link between the two. In addition, the depiction of Mr Isaac's consultation with Mercy may also have symbolic significance. The Singaporean government asserts that it is consultative, yet tends to invite discussion on how its policies are implemented rather than on the policy formulation itself. In the same way, Mercy is able to negotiate the terms of her marriage but the actual 'plan' for her to marry

is non-negotiable, even though she presents rational arguments against it and does not want to get married.

In this analysis it has been demonstrated that paternalistic authority is exerted over the adult Mercy. The portrayal indicates that paternalism exercised by a weaker authority can be countered; it also provides a more biting critique of paternalism. The form of authority is shown not to be in the long-term interests of this particular individual, and it is implemented to help the well-being of a higher-status member of the family, Mrs Isaac. Furthermore, issues of what consultation entails are also raised.

Overall, the textual analysis of *Abraham's* has shown the portrayal of different types of paternalism in the home: what Heywood refers to as 'hard' and 'soft' paternalism. The coded issues raised by the portrayals of the paternalism can be related to political philosophy and are therefore relevant beyond domestic confines. Whilst these issues could be associated with any paternalist government, the novel is firmly located in Singapore and therefore is the most immediate political context in which to read the novel. It is perhaps ironic that the subject least relevant to the Singaporean government – concerning evacuation – is the most credible exposition of paternalism in the text. Conversely, the topic of marriage, which is relevant to the Singaporean government, is given less credibility in the text. Having analysed the portrayals of paternalism in the home, characters' responses to some allusions to legal paternalism are considered below.

Legal Paternalism in *Abraham's Promise*

Legal paternalism is alluded to in the text through, for instance, the suicide of Mercy in the 1950s, and the implicit homosexuality of Abraham's son, Victor, in the 1990s. Singaporean readers would know that Mercy and Victor contravene Singaporean laws that prohibit suicide and homosexuality between consenting male adults, even though this legislation is not referred to in the fictional text. Through these implicit references, the characters' private lives are linked to paternalism in the public domain.

Mercy's self-determined death may be interpreted as the embodiment of her wish for autonomy and her successful defiance of paternalism. Whereas the novel could have included a rescue scene, it does not, and this absence allows Mercy to enforce her will. The young woman is more powerful when she is dead than when alive. Immediately after the event, Abraham revises his formerly dismissive views of her opinions. Furthermore, the elderly narrator makes repeated supplications to her spirit (e.g. 43, 59, 60, 175). Therefore, Mercy's resistance to paternalism is associated with some empowerment.

Both Mercy, and Victor a generation later, have no immediate wish to get married. Abraham draws a parallel between their similar stubbornness on this issue. Mercy's sexual orientation has some ambiguity. After the incident in which she spills hot tea over her prospective husband's trousers, the fleeing matchmaker is said to look back 'unable to tear her gaze from this personification of Sodom and Gomorrah' (64). Although, in the Bible, Sodom does not refer to

the offensive term 'sodomy' (W.R.F. Browning 2004: 354–355), the place name nevertheless carries homosexual inferences, the link between the two being discussed in Browning's explanation of Sodom (ibid.) Later, Mercy shows physical anxiety about becoming pregnant, which may be related to frigidity. On her wedding day, when the groom 'puts his arms around her waist' and refers to their having a child, Abraham wonders why 'blood ... fled' from her sister's lip (69).

Unlike Mercy, Victor does not submit to his father's pressurizing him to marry. Here, he not only defies his father's wishes but those of the state. Whereas Mercy can only successfully resist paternalism at great personal cost, decades later, Victor does so without personal tragedy. Read symbolically, this contemporary character represents the possibility of surviving and resisting paternalism in modern Singapore.

In sum, this analysis of *Abraham's* identifies portrayals of paternalism in domestic settings. Mr Isaac's paternalistic conduct is shown to have some validity when directed at a girl but not at an adult. Furthermore, it is associated with a failure to be consultative. A variety of philosophical liberal arguments that critique the practice of paternalism can be identified in the text, and undermine the validity of that practice. That this type of authority is an acknowledged characteristic of the Singaporean state renders the subtle and arguably coded portrayal of paternalism in the text politically significant.

Figuratively, it is noteworthy that fathers who make decisions on behalf of their sons become increasingly impotent. The death of Mr Isaac senior is referred to and Abraham cannot enforce his will over his son, who resolutely refuses to marry, unlike his late aunt. It could be argued that *Abraham's* is a well-acknowledged political novel and that any implied references to paternalism in it are likely to be exceptional. However, as evidenced below, paternalism is also a discernable theme in *Foreign*.

Paternalism in *Foreign Bodies*

In *Foreign*, paternalism is effectively ridiculed in the home. The underlying theme of paternalism in these domestic scenes is reinforced through its portrayals of legal paternalism. The validity of specific paternalistic laws and legislation in Singapore is discussed and sometimes debated by central characters. Whereas different arguments pertaining to liberal philosophy are identifiable in *Abraham's*, both the Confucian concept of the wise *junzi* and liberal philosophical concerns can be discerned in *Foreign*.

Deviant Paternalism at Home

Paternalism is implicitly sent up through generational and gender subversion. In a striking inversion of familial roles, Mei protectively refuses to give her mother entrepreneurial seed money from family funds. The young woman thereby prevents her mother from embarking on various business initiatives. Mei insists that she is stopping her mother from making mistakes, asserting that the schemes are 'never quite thought through' (152). The tension that arises between the two women about the issue can be read as a debate about the validity of paternalism.

The reversal of the roles undermines the paternalism. When Mei's mother effectively rebukes her daughter for paternalism, she says, 'I'm your *mother*. Why

I have to ask you for permission [for money]?' (155, emphasis in original). The italicized font reinforces the daughter's subversion of the parental role, making it a point of contention. As such, an issue is made of it, which raises questions about its validity.

Mei's paternalism is inherited from the male head of the family. Her father leaves her 'everything', including the family flat, and instructs her to 'take care of her mother because the latter is 'absolutely terrible with her finances' (83). The mother repeatedly remarks that her daughter's attitude towards her parallels that of her late husband. She says that both claim or claimed to take full 'care' of her whilst desiring to 'control' her (84,155).

Of the two women, Mei is characterized as the more elitist. She predominately talks in more formal-sounding standard English, whereas her mother uses colloquial Singlish. Mei is a university-educated professional; in contrast, her mother's entrepreneurial schemes are home-based ideas that require no professional training.

Mei repeatedly justifies her behaviour on the basis of her benevolent, judicious, responsible financial management. She tells her mother that she takes 'charge of ... [Daddy's] money to protect you, make sure you don't waste it, make sure you got enough to last you until you die' (84). Furthermore, she lectures her mother that money is 'a great responsibility' that the latter is not capable of bearing (84). Since the paternalistic discourse might be less striking were it uttered by an old man, its articulation by a young woman sharpens its patronizing tone.

The mother undermines Mei's assertions of financial superiority. When she persuades the latter not to use the flat's title deed as security for a jailed friend's bail, she protects the main family asset. Just seven lines after Mei tells her mother that she completely takes care of her, the mother retorts, 'You really want to *protect* me then you don't take away the deed' (84).

In addition, Mei's mother reveals that the apartment was secured through her entrepreneurial success. She discloses that she formerly ran a successful baking business and used the profits to buy a flat in Malaysia. However, her husband surreptitiously secured control of the apartment, sold it, and then used the money to buy the family flat in Singapore in his name. The revelation simultaneously discredits both the accusations of financial incompetence levelled against her and the assumed superiority of the father and daughter. Importantly, the disclosure also discredits the father's moral authority and any claims that he makes about benevolently looking after her. This is significant because, as the anthropologist Grace Goodell (1985: 247) explains, benevolence is a major ideological justification for paternalism. The mother angrily tells Mei that the inherited money is, in fact, '*my* money. He bought the flat with *my* money. The flat is *mine*' (154, emphasis added). Her sense of being robbed rather than protected undermines the foundations on which Mei's paternalism is built.

The mother characterizes her husband's and daughter's behaviour as disempowering rather than as protective: 'you want me to always depend on you' (155). The loss of autonomy that she identifies here effectively presents a liberal argument against paternalism. It also indicates that paternalism can be exercised

for the self-aggrandisement of the intervener, rather than in the interest of the supposedly protected individual. As noted above, the risk of self-interested paternalistic authority is a liberal concern. Mei, on hearing her mother's story, reforms her behaviour and provides her mother with the funds for a business initiative, although she still has some misgivings. This may indicate how deeply entrenched paternalistic attitudes may be.

Therefore, the mother is able to successfully challenge her daughter's paternalism to a significant degree, largely through an assertion of her skills. However, although she refers to her late husband's will as 'unnatural', she was not able to prevent it. Therefore, successful resistance to male paternalism is not portrayed in the novel.

Does the paternalism that is so creatively satirized in the narrative have any political symbolism? As shown above, it certainly addresses an array of political philosophical concerns about paternalism. It also portrays a form of authority that is strongly associated with the Singaporean government. Nevertheless, there is no immediate parallel for the subversion of gender roles, Lee Kuan Yew being succeeded by men in the role of Prime Minister. This indicates, that metaphorical links between the Government and the private sphere are not simply fixed to fathers, this fluidity being part of the subtlety of the coding.

Legal Paternalism

The theme of paternalism that can be discerned in the domestic arena is further established through the text's many allusions to paternalistic initiatives and legislation in Singapore. These include remarks about the SDU, the prohibition of refreshments on train station platforms, the illegality of drugs, and legislation against betting outside football and horse-racing stadia. Some of the legal restrictions are referred to in dialogues between Mei, who is a Singaporean lawyer, and her English expatriate friend, Andy, in which different viewpoints are presented in an Eastern/ Western dichotomy.

The most fully developed reference to legal paternalism in the novel concerns gambling, which is therefore the focus of analysis here. The Betting Act is both debated by the pair and plays a central role in the narrative because, under it, Andy is falsely convicted and imprisoned.

After Andy is wrongly charged under the Act for heading a gambling syndicate in his flat, he and Mei discuss the rights and wrongs of the law. Andy tells Mei that the Act is 'stupid' (68 and 69). This is because it differs from English legislation that he is used to, inhibits individual enjoyment, and lacks internal consistency, in that betting is allowed in sporting venues. On the other hand, Mei defends the law. She asserts that 'Gambling is addictive, it's a waste of money' (68), thereby arguing that it protects individual welfare. Here, the moral validity of paternalism is being debated. In addition, the boundaries of paternalism are also raised when Andy asks:

'Can you imagine if a government tried to ban alcohol? Can you imagine being only allowed to drink water?'
Mei did not look distressed at all. (68–69)

Here, Mei's lack of consternation, is observed from Andy's British liberal point of view, and wryly indicates her openness to paternalistic regulation. In the scene, the character who behaved paternalistically towards her mother in turn defends state paternalism. As such, this links the theme of paternalism in the private sphere to that in the public.

The fact that Andy is wrongly convicted under the Act also has some significance. It effectively portrays a piece of legislation that is aimed at protecting people resulting in the unwarranted suffering of an individual. Whilst this might be a coincidence, it is somewhat ironic. Andy's consequent imprisonment and fine demonstrate the power of the legislation. The injustice of his conviction associates the paternalistic legislation harshness.

Notably, the subject of the state's regulation of betting was topical at the time *Foreign* was being written (the mid 1990s) and published (1997).¹¹⁵ *Foreign's* focus on individual liberty through the voice of Andy gives it some distinction. In a feature on the topic published in *The Straits Times* (16 July 1994), the paper's editor, Leslie Fong, discussed 'the pluses and minuses of legalising more forms of gambling' without raising the issue of individual liberty that is raised in *Foreign*.¹¹⁶ Therefore, this debate in *Foreign* can be seen to

¹¹⁵ The legislation was amended in 1999 (David Willis, BBC News, 1999).

¹¹⁶ The advantages of changing the legislation that Fong includes are: setting up other gambling systems that could be taxed for the benefit of Singapore; bringing gambling that is occurring

supplement other discussion in its presentation of alternative, politically significant perspectives.

anyway under control; and lowering the probability of match fixing. The principal disadvantage that he identifies is the antagonism from Singaporeans who see gambling in 'moral' terms.

Conclusion

In this chapter, paternalism is newly identified as an important theme in two renowned Singaporean novels. In both texts, paternalism is distinguished in the home. Moreover, in *Abraham's*, 'hard' and 'soft' paternalism can be differentiated. Both novels also explicitly refer to or allude to state paternalism. This weaving together of paternalism in family life and in the state not only makes it thematically important but also invites portrayals of the behaviour in the domestic sphere to be considered in a broader political light.

The depictions of paternalism in homes have possible symbolic political significance when analysed contextually. The government's leadership is often likened to being like a father and is widely described as being paternalistic. Fathers in these two Singaporean novels, and their successors, also behave paternalistically. Whilst these characters' actions do not replicate those of the government, there are some striking similarities between them, be it in the way that Mr Isaac senior, and his son, pressurize offspring to marry, or in Mei's control of her mother's enterprise. Hence, the paternalism in these texts can be interpreted as metaphorical of the Singaporean state's exercise of power. This builds on Koh Tai Ann's suggestion that family depictions may be symbolic of the state, and confirms Philip Holden's finding that male behaviour in *Abraham's* may be read as being metaphorical of that of the state.

When depictions of paternalism in families are analysed in light of political philosophy, they raise issues about the validity of the behaviour, thereby possibly

putting its practice in Singapore under scrutiny within the seemingly innocuous microcosm of a family home. The very questioning of this mode of authority is arguably a political act in itself. Justifications of paternalism are effectively examined in the two texts. A case for it on the grounds of welfare is made in both. In *Abraham's*, this is given some validity in the event of Mercy's evacuation but not in the case of the young woman's marriage. In *Foreign*, Mei and her father claim to protect the mother. However, these assertions are dismantled through the daughter's intention to use the flat deeds as surety against a friend's bail and through the revelation of the father's devious security of the flat and of the mother's hidden competence. Through the different points of view articulated in both novels, readers are left to decide whether or not Mercy was wrongly sent away to Colombo and whether Mei's treatment of her mother is appropriate. This multiplicity of outlook differs from government discourses, which generally justify paternalism on the grounds of the people's welfare and do not point out liberal critiques of the practice. The novels raise demonstrably more substantial issues about paternalism in Singapore than some newspaper articles that refer to paternalism or to paternalistic legislation.

Both texts contain substantive philosophical critiques of paternalism. The conduct is made controversial through Mercy's and Mei's mother's resistance to it in the domestic sphere; and, on a state level, through Mercy's suicide, Victor's inferred homosexuality, and Andy's innocent gambling.

Powerful characters who make decisions on behalf of others often do not understand the perspectives of their charges. Paternalism is shown not always to

be in the interests of these affected individuals, be it in the miserable marriage that Mercy suffers, Mei's mother's stifled entrepreneurial initiatives, or the unjust treatment of Andy. There is the implication that both Mercy and Mei's mother are 'mature' enough to manage their own lives, although Andy's immaturity is stressed. Mercy outgrows the need for paternalism, and Mei's mother is shown never to have needed it, being 'mature' at the time her husband started taking control of her affairs. In these instances, paternalism is sometimes exerted on bodies that are mature and that do not need it. If this is interpreted metaphorically, then the body of Singaporean citizens may not need the paternalism that is sometimes directed at them. In addition, the wisdom and the motives of those using paternalistic authority are challenged in both novels.

Consequently, portrayed paternal, and paternally inspired, conduct in the home can be read on multiple levels. It can be interpreted as purely a family tension. However, analysing these incidents in the context of paternalism gives the texts an additional and politically significant dimension. The philosophically nuanced portrayals of paternalism in both novels indicate that fictional representations of domestic life in English-language Singaporean novels can have coded meanings. Such subtleties may be attributed in part to the PAP's sensitivity to public discussion about political process in Singapore, and in part to authors' artistic ambitions and skills. In addition, the power of the imagery of the political figureheads as leaders may be rooted in the psyche of some Singaporean writers.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

This thesis identifies a wide variety of political connotations and meanings in fictional portrayals of the private domain in over a dozen post-independence, English-language Singaporean novels published over a thirty-year period. It offers the first extensive study to politically interpret home *and* family depictions exclusively in English-language Singaporean novels. In doing so it builds on previously identified links between portrayals of the private domain and the national political environment (Koh Tai Ann 1989; and Ruth Morse [1992–1993] 2002; Philip Holden 1998; Tamara Wagner 2005; George Watt 2005; and Eddie Tay 2007) and shows these undertones to be more pervasive in the selected fiction than has been previously recognized.

Although fiction produced in Singapore is little censored, there is a general wariness in the country of upsetting the government. This, as Philip Jeyaretnam indicates, may encourage authors to carefully weigh words and, at times, to use coded language. It is important to consider English-language Singaporean novels in a political context, in part so that alternative voices are not drowned out and so that some of the rich, underlying subtle dimensions of texts are not overlooked. Yet it is easy for some of the political connotations and meanings in texts to be left unexplored given the limited amount of academic criticism on Singaporean

fiction and a tendency for press reviews in the *Straits Times* to skirt over political aspects of novels.

This thesis's thematic analysis of housing, home, inter-class and inter-racial love and courtship, 'filial' strains, and paternalistic behaviour, in a post-independence, politico-historical context, allows for the identification of perspectives in the texts that can be situated in relation to the PAP government's positions on these subjects.

The analysis demonstrates that portrayals of home and family, in a sizeable selection of English-language Singaporean novels, can be meaningfully related to the hegemonic PAP government's policies, values, ideologies, and forms of authority, when analysed thematically in a politico-historical context. Responses to the status quo can be discerned in a variety of forms: for instance, through imagery, descriptions, portrayed clashes of opinion, and narrative events. The multiple perspectives that emerge from the narratives often present more varied arguments than are commonly found in state discourses. In raising or gently alluding to different viewpoints, the novels can affirm, modify, question to the point of moral interrogation, present alternatives to, and/or critique state stances, thereby encouraging debate in a society where there is censorship and self-censoring.

Wide-ranging National Political Relevance

Depictions of domestic life can indirectly provide responses to diverse PAP policies. These include the resettlement of kampong dwellers, urban renewal, and public housing provision; foreign affairs such as the pro-American stance during the Vietnamese War; restrictions against homosexual behaviour; racial categorization; and family provision for the welfare of the elderly. They also address values such as nationalism, meritocracy, and the 'shared values' of racial harmony, family as the building block of society, and community before self. On a more profound level, portrayals of the private domain offer different viewpoints on PAP ideologies such as elitism, multi-racialism and communitarianism. Reactions to forms of government authority can also be discerned in portrayals of paternalism and in Abraham Isaac's refusal to call his abode 'home'.

Despite this diversity of subject matter, it is also notable that some issues recur in the fiction over several decades, including housing, decisions concerning leaving or staying at 'home' in Singapore, socioeconomic stratification, and the demands of filial piety on the individual. From this finding, it is suggested that the selection of novels do not necessarily get progressively more political. The implicit affirmation of communitarianism in *Ricky Star* (1978) is as politically significant as the championing of individualism in *Peculiar Chris* (1992). Whilst some of the fiction from the 1990s may be overtly political in the issues that it

raises about the ISA or censorship, portrayals of home and family life have consistently had political import.

Narrative Devices that Accommodate Political Nuances

Political connotations and meanings in domestic depictions have been discerned in imagery, descriptions, interior monologues, arguments between characters, and narrative events. Metaphors, metonyms, allegories, allusions, and wordplay are all used in portrayals of home that can be related to the political domain.

Philip Holden's convincing identification of a metaphorical association between 'familial operations of masculinity' and 'the role of masculinity in the state' in *Abraham's Promise* highlights an important device. For example, metaphor between authority in home and state is apparent in the paternalism portrayed in *Abraham's* and *Foreign Bodies*. In addition, this study indicates that metaphors may be fluid. Although Mei's father is paternalistic, so too is his daughter. Therefore, metaphors about the fatherly statesmen of Singapore may not just be restricted to fathers in the texts. Metonyms are also deployed. A particularly subtle example is the debate about the front door in *The Adventures of Holden Heng* that raises different issues about conservation through the minutiae of home improvements.

Allegory is used in *Raffles Place Ragtime*, as Shirley Lim points out, where Vincent's inhumane materialistic ambition parallels that of the state, and

also in *Ricky Star* where the protagonist's selfish individualism is illustrative of individualism in society. This use of allegory adds a moral dimension to the issues being raised, *Raffles* implicitly positioning the PAP's economic pragmatism in a negative moral light and *Ricky* associating communitarianism with virtue. Allusions are also identified in this thesis. These range from the hut fire in *Following The Wrong God Home*, which can be related to newspaper reports and to Loh Kah Seng's socio-historical account of kampong fires, while racist discourses which are pointedly absent in *Fistful of Colours*. In addition, wordplay about 'home' is used so frequently in the novels analysed in this thesis that it is a characteristic of this body of texts.

Descriptions can also convey political meanings and connotations. Some asides slipped into descriptions can be particularly bold. This occurs in *The Scholar and the Dragon*, with the fleeting swipe at the state's 'Urban Renewal' department in the middle of a description of a terraced house. On a more subtle level, representations of landscapes or family situations also facilitate the visual descriptions that allow for unspoken dissent to be explored. For instance, in *If We Dream Too Long*, the protagonist conveys an ambiguous response to the political prisons that he sees on a trip from home by describing their distant appearance, while in *tangerine*, a grandmother's dissent from the government's position on the Vietnamese War is communicated through reference to her tears.

Descriptions also allow narrators to make judgements about the Singaporean environment – be it through the lyrical passages about the magnificence of HDB

blocks in *Heartland* or about the beauty and historical architectural value of period housing in *Adventures*.

Interior monologues facilitate the development of arguments. This occurs in *Fistful* where Suwen confesses her racial prejudice without divulging it to another character in the text, so demonstrating that the widely portrayed prejudices in the text run deep in society.

Arguments at home can present different points of view that relate to the political domain. This occurs, for instance, in *Foreign*, when Mei and her mother dispute the reasons for and against the young woman's control of the family finances. In doing so opposing viewpoints about the need for paternalism are implicitly brought out. Whilst such polarities initially present different perspectives, they allow one person to have the last say, and sometimes to be proved right or wrong. For instance, in *Abraham's*, the extended argument about whether or not Mercy should marry ends with Mr and Mrs Isaacs winning the argument and thereby managing their daughter's life. However, Mercy's eventual suicide indicates that she knew her own needs better than her family did. This implicitly discredits paternalism and adds moral dimension to the exercise of such authority. Interrupted arguments are a means for points to be hinted at and not developed, whilst still presenting the opportunity for someone to have the last word on the undeveloped subject. For example, in *Raffles Place Ragtime*, Vincent's assertion that he has to work harder than his affluent prospective brother-in-law is cut short. He implicitly laments his lack of relative social mobility

without developing the point. Yet because the discussion is broken off this view is not countered.

Prominent narrative events that affect characters' private lives can be seen to illustrate the impact of government policies, values, and ideologies, and characters' responses to them. For instance, the government's acquisition of a family home for demolition robs a young man of his heritage in *Adventures*, whilst a graduate who reluctantly financially supports the community of her family and best friend does so at great personal sacrifice in *Mammon Inc.*

The Presentation of Multiple Perspectives

These varied narrative vehicles can accommodate a diversity of political perspectives. There are several subjects with respect to which diverse views are presented either in a single novel or across a variety of texts considered in this study. Multiple views are presented on the demise of kampongs: *Ricky* positioning them as redundant, whereas *Fistful* both refers to their loss in terms of natural expiry and also highlights some treasured aspects of landscape and autonomous decision-making. Divergent views are also presented about individualism and communitarianism across several texts, and even within a single novel such as *Mammon*.

Whilst there are some topics such as conservation that are strongly conveyed through an aside or through the dramatic narrative event of the loss of a home, the subject of the government's modernization of the non-housing urban environment is nevertheless debated in *Adventures* which allows for different points of view to be expressed. Similarly, in *Foreign*, Mei's paternalism to her mother is shown to unfairly restrict the elder woman. Nevertheless, Mei puts forward arguments in favour of it and does not retract them even when she reforms her behaviour towards her mother. Thus, although different points of view are presented, they are driven home through the narrative action concerning the private sphere.

As a consequence of the varied views presented, many novels convey an array of political connotations and meanings. For example, whilst a novel such as *Ricky* advocates a pro-government communitarian perspective, it also mentions, and then retracts, a comment that Singaporean society encourages a materialistic outlook. In addition, whilst it presents kampong society as outdated, it does not denigrate the living conditions in them. Similarly, whilst *Heartland* is known for its poetic descriptions of the HDB estates, it also marginalizes the place of the elite in the Singaporean home. This is politically significant given the role of the elite in Singapore. *Fistful* both raises the issue of racial prejudice but also keeps in line with parliamentary debates that question the degree to which citizens privately hold racial prejudices.

Potential Areas of Further Research

This study has considered a variety of political dimensions to portrayals of home and family in English-language Singaporean novels. Other aspects of home and family could also be investigated for their potential political significance. Those relating to home could include the transnationalism of Singaporean immigrants and emigrants in relation to state discourses that encourage citizens to think of Singapore as home; ethnic minority characters' sense of belonging to the Singaporean home in light of PAP politicians' speeches about the place of these groups in the Singaporean home; and Singaporean characters' perception of having a Malaysian home or not, in the historical political context of the countries' separation and the complexity of some senior PAP politicians' feelings about this situation. Other relevant topics relate to kinship. For example, portrayals of sexual abuse, in texts such as *Abraham's* and Catherine Lim's *The Teardrop Story Woman* (1998), could be considered in light of Singaporean legislation concerning family violence and with regard to patriarchy. The notion of a brotherhood of school friends is explored in Colin Cheong's *The Stolen Child* (1989). This could be considered in light of fraternity and patriarchy.

Furthermore, the political significance of domestic depictions found in this thesis could be thematically compared to Singaporean novels in Chinese, Malay, and Tamil, to diasporic English-language fiction about Singapore, and to other world literatures in English.

In summary, portrayals of home and family have been shown to touch on many different facets of the political domain through varied narrative devices. They often provide multiple perspectives on issues. The diversity of views expressed is significant in a country where debate in the public sphere is limited. Whilst Morse and Koh have criticized the lack of radical visions in some of the novels from the 1970s and 1980s, and the texts' questioning approach, novels from these early decades do provide material for public debate. Whilst some novels, particularly from the 1990s, are known for being political, when portrayals of home and family are contextually scrutinized in the selected novels published both before and after the 1990s, they have demonstrable political import. Hence, this thesis demonstrates how pervasive political meanings and connotations are within a sizeable body of English-language Singaporean novels. It indicates how any understanding of these texts is incomplete without a politico-historical contextual exploration of portrayals of home and family.



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4. Cited Interviews

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Interview with Johann S. Lee, author

- April 2005, in London.

Interviews with Suchen Christine Lim:

- October 2006, in Singapore.

Interview with Kirpal Singh, academic, poet and short story writer

- October 2006, in Singapore.

Interview with Hwee Hwee Tan, author

- November 2006, in Singapore.



LIST OF ERRARTA

CHAPTER ONE

- Page 3, paragraph 2, line 8: replace the play name 'Mergers and Acquisitions' with that of 'Jointly & Severably'.
- Page 4, paragraph 1: insert *The Sin-kheh* (1993) by Goh Sin Tub
- Page 16, second line of quotation from Koh: replace '...writers (and) critics... are' with 'writers... [and]critics, are'.
- Page 24, Table 2: insert a row for *The Sin-kheh* (1993) and state that it had 'little reception'.

CHAPTER TWO

- Page 72, paragraph 2, sentence 3: add the names Daren Shiau and Catherine Lim.

CHAPTER THREE

- Page 94, paragraph 2, line 4: replace the in-text reference 1965 with 1965a.
- Page 95, last paragraph and footnote 48: the 1999 reference to read 1999a.
- Page 107, paragraph 2, line 9: replace 'can' with 'cannot'.

CHAPTER FOUR

- Page 156, paragraph 1, line 4: replace 'Government of Singapore 1994b' with 'Goh 1994b'.
- Page 158, paragraph 2, line 12: replace '(27 August 1995)' with '(1995b)'.

CHAPTER FIVE

- Page 218, paragraph 3, line 5: change the page number from 18 to 17.
- Page 225, paragraph 2, line 4: delete the reference '(Yao 2007)' and remove the quotation marks from 'hyper-subjectivity'.
- Page 240: delete footnote figures 100 and 101.

LIST OF REFERENCING ADDITIONS

A. ADDITIONAL IN-TEXT REFERENCES FOR INSERTION

Chapter One

Page 3, paragraph 3:

line 8: after 'purity' add the reference '(Soh Yun-Huei)'.

line 10: after 'In it', add the reference (2005: 239).

B. ADDITIONAL BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES FOR INSERTION

Other Published Materials

Garsten, Nicky (forthcoming) 'Hwee Hwee Tan' in David Smyth (ed.), *Dictionary of Literary Biography: South East Asian Writers* (Columbia, SC: Brucoli Clark Layman)

Goh Poh Seng (1964a) 'Editorial' *Tumasek*, 1, 3-5.

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Gabrielpillai, Matilda (1997), 'Orientalizing Singapore: psychoanalyzing the discourse of "non-Western modernity"', Ph.D Thesis (University of British Columbia).

Tay, Eddie, insert 'Ph.D Thesis'.

LIST OF TYPOS

THOUGHTOUT THESIS

- Replace 'post-independent' with 'post-independence'.
- Replace 'The' with 'the' in the novel title *Following The Wrong God Home*.

CHAPTER ONE

- Page 1, footnote 1: insert one space before the page number 99.
- Page 2, spacing between footnotes 3 and 4: delete one line of spacing.
- Page 3, third paragraph: i) second line, delete the word 'of' before the word 'family'; ii) third line, insert 'the' before 'metaphor', and iii) ninth line, replace the word 'symbolism' with 'symbol'.
- Page 4, paragraph 1: i) line 5, add '(sic)' after the title *tangerine* and ii) in line 7 add a comma after 'Hwee Hwee Tan'.
- Page 7, paragraph 1, lines 1-2: add a space before the page numbers 53 and 153.
Footnote 6: replace 'biography' with 'biographies' and 'autobiography' with 'autobiographies'.
- Page 11, paragraph 2, first line of quotation: replace 'my' with 'My'.
- Page 13, paragraph 3, line 2: after 'to' add 'be'.
- Page 14, paragraph 2, line 5: put 'Straits Times' in italics and insert the word 'the' before 'authoritarian'.
- Page 24, Table Two: in fifth row, replace 'into' with 'for'.
- Page 25, paragraph 1, line 6: insert 'the' before novels.
- Page 26, paragraph 1, line 2: replace 'Darren' with 'Daren'.
- Page 30, paragraph 1, line 1: insert 'of' before artistic.
Paragraph 2, line 4: delete footnote 13.
Paragraph 3, line 2: after 'dimensions' replace 'to' with 'of'.
Footnote 9: after the word 'graduated' replace 'at' with 'from'.

CHAPTER TWO

- Pages 32 and 33: replace 'Housing Development Board' with 'Housing and Development Board'.
- Page 41, paragraph 2: i) line 8: delete 'as' and ii) line 9: after 'insanitary' add '(sic)'.
- Page 42, paragraph 1: four lines from end of paragraph insert 'the' before government.
- Page 46, paragraph 2, line 4: delete the 'i' in 'faired'.
- Page 49. In title. replace 'organisation' with 'organization'.
- Page 53, paragraph 2: i) line 1, after 'Bukit' add 'Ho Swee' and ii) in last line of paragraph insert 'the' before 'tone'.
- Page 59, paragraph 2, line 1: replace 'analyzing' with 'analysing'.
Paragraph 3, last line: replace semi-colon with a comma and the word 'and'.
- Page 74, paragraph 1, line 2: replace 'senses' with 'a sense'.
- Page 80, paragraph 1, line 1: make 'response' plural.

CHAPTER 3

- Page 124, paragraph 2, last line: delete 'it'.

CHAPTER 4

- Page 149, paragraph 3, line 2: after 'have' insert 'the'.
- Page 153, third line from page end: indent.
- Page 188, line 4: raise to line 3.
- Page 174, line 5: indent.
- Page 184, paragraph 1, line 14: Replace 'Rahim' with 'She'.
- Page 188, line 4: move up to line 3.
- Page 192, line 5: replace 'Euroasians' with 'Eurasians'.
- Page 198, footnote 80: replace 'Peranakan' with 'Peranakan'.
- Page 203, paragraph 2, line 7: insert one space between 'in' and '1989'.

CHAPTER 5

- Page 215, paragraph 1: move sentence two up onto line 3.
- Page 217, paragraph 2, line 5: replace Yao with Souchou.
- Page 218, paragraph 1, line 2: at end of line insert 'in'.
- Page 224, paragraph 1, line 4; delete comma and 'in itself' and after 'as' insert 'a'.
Paragraph 2, line 1: after 'self-development' delete ', and'.
- Page 226, paragraph 2, line 5: after 'as' insert 'a'.
- Page 233, paragraph 4, line 1: delete 'that'.
- Page 240, paragraph 1, line 1: replace 'to subvert' with 'as subverting'.
- Page 248, paragraph 2, line 5: after the word 'precedence' insert the word 'over'.
- Page 250, paragraph 1, line 3: after 'work for' insert 'the'.
- Page 253, paragraph 3, line 5: put 'buy' in plural.
- Page 254, paragraph 2, line 4: replace 'Development' with 'development'.
- Page 257, title: replace 'Of' with 'of'.
- Page 258, paragraph 2, line 1: replace 'at' with 'as a'.

CHAPTER 6

- Page 270, paragraph 1, lines 2-3: after full stop at end of line 2, insert 'The' and replace 'Term' with 'term'.
- Page 271, paragraph 3, line 2: after 'Ann', add one space.
- Page 283, paragraph 1, line 3: in first word, insert 'ar' into author's name.
- Page 286, paragraph 3, line 3: delete the ellipsis after 'understand'.
- Page 288, paragraph 1, line 2; after the full stop, add one space.
- Page 297, paragraph 3, line 7: put the 'g' of 'Government' in lower case.
- Page 299, paragraph 2, last line: insert 'with' before 'harshness'.

CHAPTER 7

- Page 308, paragraph 1, line 7: replace 'while' with 'to'.

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Other Published Materials

- Cheong, Colin: replace 'Tangerine' with 'tangerine' and add 'sic'.
- Koh Tai Ann: insert year 1993 before article entitled 'Pessimism and Optimism: Artistic Practice in Singapore'.
- Rodan, Garry: exchange positions of 1996 and 2006 bibliographic details.
- Yao, Souchou: reclassify as Souchou Yao.

Unpublished Sources

- Bathal, Karamjit Kaur: reclassify as Karamjit Kaur Bathal.