

**FROM STORY TO REALITY: A STUDY OF SELECTED
LIFE WRITING NARRATIVES IN SINGAPORE**

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“This M.A. Thesis represents my own work and due acknowledgement is given whenever information is derived from other sources. No part of this M.A. Thesis has been or is being concurrently submitted for any other qualification at any other university.

Signed -----”

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ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to study Singapore auto/biographies written since Independence, how they have shaped the “social imaginary”,¹ and their participation in processes of nation formation.

In this thesis, I will argue that Singapore auto/biographies can be found to reiterate and support the prevailing state ideology, especially during the 1980s when Asian Values were very much dominant in the social imaginary, although I will also show that there are cracks in and challenges to this script, which become more apparent in the 1990s and 2000s. This thesis is divided into two parts: Chapter One will look at auto/biographies written in the 1970s and 1980s and Chapter Two will look at auto/biographies written after the 1980s.

In Chapter One, I will focus on how many of the pioneer narratives rehearse nationalist tropes or scripts. Pioneer figures such as Yeo Tiam Siew, Wong Ah Fook, Tan Chin Tuan and Ho Rih Hwa took pride in identifying with and adhering to the national script – the narrative of attaining success through hard work, discipline, and caring for the family/community. I will show how these pioneer figures discipline both their lives and life stories to fit into the framework of Asian Values and how these pioneer figures reinforce internalized messages through what Foucault termed as technologies of the Self. These pioneer narratives therefore endorsed in a powerful way the Asian Values that were being championed by the state.

¹ A term coined by Charles Taylor to connote “the way ordinary people ‘imagine’ their social surroundings” (23).

Chapter Two of this thesis will show how many of the narratives written in the 1990s and 2000s invariably pose a challenge to the uniformity of the national story laid out so seamlessly in the pioneer narratives. The hold that Asian Values had over the social imaginary was no longer as trenchant as there were many other new competing concerns in the 1990s/2000s, coupled with the disenchantment with Asian Values after the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. This was also in part brought about by the acceleration of globalization, which meant that Singaporeans were exposed to more trans-national influences. These factors resulted in less coherent narratives, as compared to the narratives written earlier. The increase in auto/biographies written by people who are in the margins – such as political opposition leaders, members of ethnic minorities, disabled people, and homosexuals – in the 1990s and 2000s, can also be observed to negotiate with the main narrative.

Introduction

In *Making Stories* (2002), Jerome Bruner discusses the social, cultural, legal and political importance of the processes of story-making and story-telling. Stories are never innocent, he writes: they always have a message, most often so well concealed that even the teller does not quite know it. Although seemingly innocuous and often not examined closely, stories have the power to shape everyday experience; narrative gives shape to things in the real world and often bestows upon them a title to reality. An in-depth study of auto/biographies¹ or stories that one writes about one's/another's life can thus give us insights into the processes of self-representation as well as the specific moments in history and culture that they participate in.

However, not much critical work has been done on auto/biographies that have been published in Singapore, even though a search through library records shows over two hundred auto/biographies to date. The few studies that have attempted to do so include Arthur Yap's *A Brief Critical Study of Prose Writings in Singapore and Malaysia* (1971), which, as its title suggests, is brief and does not take into account more recent auto/biographies. Another study done by Hamimah Binte Abu in 1988 – *Singapore Memoirs* (Honours Thesis, National University of Singapore) looks specifically only at three of the earlier memoirs: John Bertram van Cuylenburg's *Singapore: Through Sunshine and Shadow* (1982), Mamoru Shinozaki's *Syonan – My Story: The Japanese Occupation of Singapore* (1975) and Janet Lim's *Sold for Silver* (1958).

¹ In this thesis, I will be using the term “Auto/biographies” to refer to both autobiographies and biographies.

A more up-to-date discussion of auto/biographies in Singapore is clearly needed, especially one that takes into account the developments of the 1970s – 2000s, in order to gain deeper insight into Singapore society. Autobiographies and stories form part of the “social imaginary” of a nation, a term coined by Charles Taylor to connote “the way ordinary people ‘imagine’ their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms, but is carried out in images, stories and legends” (23). They can also show how the everyday life of a people can either serve to reinforce or to challenge the national ideology or script, since Alvin Gouldner, in studying the concept of everyday life played out in Western thought, has suggested that it is often used as a counter-concept, and hence as a critique, of political life (qtd in Chua 79).

Furthermore, Paul John Eakin has argued that autobiographies are narratives of self-fashioning where the self is constantly constructed and performed through the process of writing. This process is coterminous with nationalism, which, since it is concerned with the construction and fashioning of a nation, can be seen as a set of myths that make people cohere and form “imagined communities”; that is, a people with a distinctive national identity. As theorists such as Timothy Brennan have shown, nationalism is not only a narrative, but is constructed out of narratives such as novels: the rise of the nation-state coincided with the rise of the novel and print capitalism allowed for the easy dissemination of national ideology.

However, nationalism as a narrative could only succeed if people participated in it and echoed the dominant myths and ideologies, such that each citizen fashioned his/her own nationalist narrative and exercised

ownership over it. In essays such as “Technologies of the Self” and “Panopticism”, Michel Foucault discusses how the subject might be made to police himself and is therefore complicit in the processes used to exercise control over the self. D.A. Miller uses Foucault’s theories and applies these to narratives, arguing that narratives themselves act as agents of enforcement and shape behaviour.

In this thesis, I will argue that Singapore auto/biographies can be found to reiterate and support the prevailing state ideology, especially during the 1980s when Asian Values were very much dominant in the social imaginary, although I will also show that there are cracks in and challenges to this script, particularly in the 1990s and 2000s.

Autobiography as Self-fashioning

Before proceeding to Singapore auto/biographies, it is first necessary to look at some of the theoretical perspectives on life writing. Auto/biography criticism has a rather long history, which has been traced by Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith in their book *Reading Autobiography* (2001). These include some of the work of earlier theorists such as German philologist Georg Misch, whose *History of Autobiography in Antiquity* was first published in the 1910s, to more recent work, for example, James Olney’s *Metaphors of Self* (1972), which considers more theoretical approaches to autobiographies, to yet more recently, theorists such as Paul John Eakin, who take into account interdisciplinarity and postmodern theories about selfhood when studying autobiographical writing.

Eakin, in his book *How Our Lives Become Stories* (1999) shows how the act of writing about one's life is in fact a form of self-invention. Many of the earlier theories on life writing were predicated upon a sense of self as something that is stable and presumed that all the autobiographer did was to represent that self as accurately as possible. In George Gusdorf's discussion of the distinction between autobiography and biography in "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography" (1956), he writes that "[the biographer] writes of someone who is at a distance [and] remains uncertain of his hero's intentions... On the other hand, no one can know better than I what I have thought, and what I have wished" (35). Implicit in this statement is the assumption that the autobiographer is somewhat closer to the truth or the naked self and that this truth is being represented in autobiography.

Eakin's main departure from such earlier theories – which centred on whether autobiography was to be classified as truth or fiction, and further problems of definition and classification (into autobiography, biography, or memoir) – was to show how the act of writing and structuring the story of a life is really a much more discursive and performative process: the self is not a stable category to be represented, but is itself produced through the act of telling stories about the self. This is what he terms *narrative identity*, concluding that the self and the story are part of the process of identity formation – we tell ourselves stories about who we are and what our lives are going to be like, and we live out these narratives based on internal scripts. Thus, life writing is part of an ongoing process of identity formation. Furthermore, this sense of self is not only dynamic and plural (98) but also socially constructed and deeply relational: "*all* identity is relational [...]. In

forming our sustaining sense of self, we draw on models of identity provided by the cultures we inhabit” (43; 46). Thus, a study of an autobiography also sheds light on the culture (as well as the stories, legends and anecdotes) that it comes out of.

Coming from a slightly different angle, scholars such as Hayden White, in “Introduction to Metahistory” (1973), have shown how people impose structure and meaning on historical events by way of emplotment – that is, they shape them into recognizable modes of narrative such as tragedy, romance, comedy, and so on. Events and data are selected and arranged from the unprocessed historical record in the interest of rendering that record more comprehensible to an *audience* (444-449) of a particular kind. What Eakin and Bruner argue is that not only do we chain together historical facts and events to form a story, essentially we are also doing the same thing to the events and occurrences in our lives – events may be coincidental or unrelated, but we impose meaning on them by linking them up to form a story.

One may notice a tension between this idea and the idea of individuality that is so often discussed in autobiographical studies. The very suggestion that an individual repeats or forms his/her own story by structuring it according to certain principles is antithetical to the idea of individuality. In “Autobiography and Historical Consciousness” (1975), Karl Weintraub expounds on the idea of models, or the innate striving toward an ideal: “The power of models had dominated self-conceptions and thus also autobiographic form for a long time...And yet, the most dominant personality concept of Western man [referring to individualism] does not fit the model type; it is even antithetical to the very thought of a model.” (838). However, it seems that it is

precisely this tension or play between the perception of one's individuality and the striving to fit in that is critical to the writing of autobiography and is in line with what Eakin has argued. The autobiographer/biographer may think that the story he/she is telling is unique and individual; however, on closer examination, it might very well share common traits with other stories.

The way people tell and structure their life stories is as important as what is being told. As Eakin and others have observed, stories that are told often replicate cultural structures and norms: “[the] child internalizes the culturally available narrative forms for recounting and for representing past experiences” (1999; 111). Children learn very early on what is permissible or not permissible and how they should structure their tales to gain acceptance – later on, this process becomes so ingrained and natural as to go unquestioned. Through stories and narratives – both listening to the stories of the community (and implicitly, the values and culture) and learning how to verbalise their own desires in accordance with these values – they are socialised into being part of the community.

Therefore, there are important links between individual, story and community; autobiographies reveal a lot about the community they are part of. They are part of an individual's process of self-fashioning and negotiation between competing narratives. They also perpetuate certain cultural norms, whether a writer is conscious of this or not.

Narrative and Social Control

As I have shown, recent theories and autobiography criticism have made the link between narratives and self-fashioning. Theorists have also shown the social and cultural importance of stories: autobiographies tell us about the cultures they inhabit since storytelling and stories are deeply embedded in culture and everyday life. Frederic Jameson has argued that “the very structure of language itself shows a deep functional vocation for storytelling, which must then be seen, not as some secondary pastime, to be pursued around the fireside when the *praxis* is over, but rather as a basic and constitutive element of human life” (qtd in Nakagawa 144). Theorists such as Michel Foucault would take this a step further and argue that such stories or narratives operate within a web of power and can serve as a means of social control or policing by reiterating cultural norms and ideologies.

In “Technologies of the Self” (1988), Foucault studies pre-Christian and early Christian practices in the history of the knowledge of the self and concludes that there are four main technologies: the technologies of production, technologies of sign systems, technologies of power and technologies of the self. It is the last two in which he is most interested. Foucault defines technologies of power as the determination of “the conduct of individuals [which] submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectivising of the subject” which is similar, but also paradoxically antithetical to technologies of the self “which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being, so as to

transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality” (18). These technologies of the self include practices such as reflection, confession, writing, cultivating the art of listening, purification rituals, self-examination and the act of meditating on what one would do in hypothetical situations.

This essay came after Foucault’s earlier writings on knowledge and power and shows a move away from the study of how institutions exercise control over individuals to how individuals themselves may be found to be complicit in such systems of control. He became more interested in the “interaction between oneself and others and in the technologies of individual domination, the history of how an individual acts upon himself” (19). This shows the exercise of power to be much more dynamic.

What is important to note about the self, according to Foucault, is that it is not something which is natural but rather something which is produced through systems of knowledge. There is no one true self but instead, different selves are produced according to the systems they are subjected to such that “[as] there are different forms of care, there are different forms of self” (22). This is very similar to Eakin’s proposition that there is no one true or innate self – these selves are constantly evolving and performed in order to suit the external script or situation.

The writing and study of the self, in early forms of autobiography or autobiographical writing, which frequently consisted of reflections on one’s life, was of course crucial to the knowledge and the production of the self. Foucault observes that as writing became more important and predominant, taking precedence over oral culture, “[t]aking care of oneself became linked to

a constant writing activity....[With writing,] introspection becomes more and more detailed. A relation developed between writing and vigilance” (27-28). Writing thus became crucial not only to the production of the self, but also the examination and scrutiny of that self.

Wherever there was a culture of silence, it was paradoxically accompanied by “strong incitations to speak” (16) but in such a way that what was told, and in what ways, was deeply regulated by conventions. This resulted in a system where one is both the judge and the accused and the self becomes its own censor. The system of judgment and examination was internalised in the mind of the subject, largely expressed and regulated through the process of writing.

Similarly, in Part Three of *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault describes the Panopticon and the concept of self-surveillance. The Panopticon functions in such a way that “the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary” (208). Thus, according to Foucault, the most effective, pervasive and powerful forms of surveillance comes from within – being sure that we are constantly watched, we police ourselves, even when no one is actually watching. The idea of surveillance that acts from without, such as the government actually peering over our shoulders, or a security guard watching over prisoners to make sure that they do not misbehave, becomes obsolete.

Applying Foucault’s theories to fiction, D. A. Miller in *The Novel and the Police* (1988) looks specifically at how literary texts do the work of surveillance and argues that narratives “as a set of representational techniques

– systematically participate in a general economy of policing power” (2), by regulating desires and ascribing due punishments and rewards to various actualisations of these desires. Popular narratives, then, have the power not only to perpetuate themselves but the internalisation and wholesale absorption of these narratives could also mean that these narratives act as policing and socialisation agents, geared towards the creation of docile bodies.

According to Miller, it was in the nineteenth century that the English novel first started to feature a massive thematisation of social discipline with the realist and sensation traditions (ix), especially with the rise of detective fiction and Newgate fiction. Apart from the ostensible presence of the police or detectives in such novels, they participate in the economy of power covertly “within the same culture of less visible, less visibly violent modes of social control” (viii). The explosion of the novel – into the novelistic or the narrative – makes it even more pervasive, reaching into the private and domestic sphere” (ix) since the death of the novel “really meant the explosion everywhere of the novelistic, no longer bound in three-deckers, but freely scattered across a far greater range of cultural experience” (x). The experience of the novelistic – perhaps referring to the ways in which we think about and scribe our lives according to novelistic structures – allows for social control on a large scale, which means that its influence is not only confined to those who read these novels.

Carrying on from Miller, in *Narrative and Social Control: Critical Perspectives* (1993), edited by Dennis K. Mumby, various critics examine the relationship between narrative modes and/or storytelling and how they may reproduce certain power structures in the work place, internment camps and

even in the family, since control is exercised not directly but through cultures which maintain and perpetuate systems of power relationships. Narratives have the power to “set forth powerful and pervasive truth claims – claims about appropriate behaviour and values” (Witten 105), which can then provide models of behaviour and implicit sets of rules which people are expected to abide by. This is very similar to Foucault’s notion of power – and I will show how this works in the Singapore system – which shows how power is much more insidious than coercive in its actual workings.

Therefore, narratives can act as means of social control. They police populations by ways such as inscribing and reiterating cultural norms, offering models of socially correct forms of behaviour, reinforcing the status quo, thus leading to a less direct and more self-regulating form of surveillance.

Nationalism as/and Narrative

In order to locate the insights regarding the social role of narrative as a mechanism for control within the context of Singapore autobiography, we also need to consider the links between nationalism and narrative. Nationalism and autobiographies share a natural affinity on a basic level – both can be seen as stories/narratives; the first a story about a people and a nation which the people accept and internalise, the second a story about an individual which a person comes to believe about his/her own life.

The social significance of narratives is explored by Homi Bhabha and others in *Nation and Narration* (1993), which studies the relationship between nationalism as a kind of narrative and the kinds of stories that are being

generated to form that “imagined community”. Just as children tell stories via internalised norms, so do people tell stories about themselves via internalised structures or typologies that are in their collective memory or psyche. National narratives form part of this collective bank.

In “The National Longing for Form”, collected in *Nation and Narration*, Timothy Brennan writes that the rise of the modern nation state was accompanied by and was inseparable from the forms and subjects of the novel, which provided the nation with its myths. He argues that “it was especially the novel as a composite but clearly bordered work of art that was crucial in defining the nation as an ‘imagined community’...Nations, then, are imaginary constructs that depend for their existence on an apparatus of cultural fictions in which imaginative literature plays a decisive role” (48-49). Print capitalism allowed for “ideological dissemination on a large scale, and created the conditions where people could begin to think of themselves as a nation” (Anderson, qtd in Brennan 52).

In his book on national autobiography, Philip Holden shows how print technologies in the modern world work hand in hand with what Foucault terms “technologies of the self” (25). Holden defines national autobiography as “autobiographies in which the growth of an individual implicitly defined as a national father explicitly parallels the growth of national consciousness and frequently proleptically, the achievement of an independent nation-state” (2). Building on the notions of Foucauldian technologies of the self discussed above, Holden discusses the workings of nation-states. He points out that Foucault writes elsewhere, in *The History of Sexuality* that there is a second form of power directed not towards the individual but the “species body” (26).

Other than the notion of individualised “technologies of the self” whereby people discipline themselves, this notion can also be extended to a group or community of people who constantly tell themselves a certain narrative and participate in this narrative (27-28) and act according to internalised rules and regulations.

Each nation-state can thus be seen to undergo a form of collective self-fashioning that is not unlike the process the individual undergoes. The written narratives or autobiographies of the people can be seen to participate in and mapped onto the national story. This can be said to be particularly true in the case of Singapore, a relatively young nation, where it is not inconceivable that an individual’s life (of about forty years) can be seen to parallel the development and maturity of the nation. Therefore, the practice of life writing, because of its participation in national stories, serves a function that may be different from other kinds of stories and thus auto/biographies are worth examining in relation to nationalism, narratives and forms of social control.

The Nation State of Singapore

In order to understand Singapore culture and auto/biographies, we must first look at the historical background and ideologies which underpinned the formation of modern Singapore, as well as the ways these changed.

The transformation of Singapore in just a few decades (from the 1950s to the 1980s) was dramatic. Firstly, the physical space was reorganised: trees were pruned and transplanted; land was reclaimed, and public housing estates took the place of kampongs. In the economic sphere, new jobs were created

and restructured. The people, too, had to be transformed. This was especially important to Singapore, a country which relies heavily on its human resources. For Singapore to develop economically, a “massive cultural transformation was necessary to bring the population in line with the cultural requirements of capitalist industrialisation” (Chua 1). In this last process of transformation, narratives, ideology and politics were to play a very large part so as to gear the whole society towards economic development.

(i) The ideology of survival in the 1950s and 1960s

In the 1950s and 1960s, the government relied heavily on what has been called an “ideology of survival”. Chan Heng Chee’s *Singapore: The Politics of Survival 1965-1967* (1971), one of the earliest books on the subject, argues that “[w]ith the future of the small island in mind, the PAP launched what it referred to as a ‘survival exercise’ where the range of survival problems were discussed and analysed” in order to build a “rugged society” (v). The concept of the need for survival as a nation was constantly drummed into the hearts and minds of the people. In the early days of Singapore’s independence, then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew described the nation as a “poisonous shrimp” (qtd in Sandhu and Wheatley 1102) which was meant to portray it as a country that would be ready to ward off would-be aggressors despite its small size.

Internally, the government crafted a rhetoric which reminded the people of the need to survive and the consequences if this aim were not met. Lee has often emphasised the difficulty of building the nation:

[I]t was as well that we did not realize how daunting were the problems of building a nation out of peoples of totally different races, languages, religions and cultures. I would be appalled if I am asked to start all over again. (qtd in Siddique 563)

The newly independent state also had to rely on itself: as Lee Kuan Yew reiterated, “the world does not owe us a living” (qtd in Sandhu and Wheatley 1103).

Echoing this “crisis mentality”, accounts of immediate post-independence Singapore are often couched in the language of survival. John Drysdale’s *Singapore: Struggle for Success* (1984) narrates the history of early Singapore in a very dramatic, progressive way which makes it seem almost like a popular novel. The titles of the chapters – “Lee Well Astride the Tiger” (Chapter 16), “Survival at Risk” (Chapter 33), “The Path to Prosperity . . . and Excellence” (Chapter 34) – amply illustrate this. The struggle for success is thus illustrated with imaginative metaphors culled from popular fiction. “Lee Well Astride the Tiger”, in particular, recalls the popular Chinese story of Wu Song defeating the tiger. The metaphors the People’s Action Party (PAP) used as well as those which occupied the popular imagination casts Singapore’s immediate post-independence years as a life and death struggle.

Furthermore, as Chua Beng Huat writes in *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore* (1995), this “survival of the nation” served as “a basic concept for the rationalization of state policies that extend beyond economics to other spheres of social life” (4). The population was encouraged to do whatever it took to survive – endure hardship and sacrifice, co-operate with the government, get along with one another, acquire the necessary skills

and a spirit of pragmatism designed to cater to the needs of rapid capitalist growth.

The constant generation of a crisis mentality serves to justify the government's top-down and sometimes repressive intervention. Many political scientists have noted that governments thrive on crises that have to be overcome, that make people dependent on the government, thinking that the government is their only hope in finding the way out of the crisis. In Singapore, a siege mentality was created by Lee and his government, by manufacturing numerous ongoing crises and challenges that had to be faced and nipped in the bud, including the recent warnings against terrorism, dramatised by docu-dramas, videos and advice on how to prevent terrorist attacks. Geraldine Heng and Janadas Devan rightly note that “[p]ostcolonial governments are inclined, with some predictability, to generate narratives of national crisis...by repeatedly focusing anxiety on the fragility of the new nation, its ostensible vulnerability to every kind of exigency, the state's originating agency is periodically reinvoked and ratified” (196). This crisis mentality has been around since Independence, which was a period when the government faced many internal as well as external threats to national and political survival. External threats included possible antagonism from neighbours such as Malaysia and Indonesia and the Communists. Internally, there were racial tensions and riots. New threats to national survival were constantly played up in the following years, thus helping to generate a sense of helplessness and dependence on the government.

Economic development was seen as the solution to survival, as well as the means to fending off threats. The differences between the four races could

pose problems, as they did in the race riots. Lee Geok Boi writes that “[t]he Japanese Occupation had ended with racial strife coming out into the open, often erupting in violence. Post-war economic hardship and competition for scarce resources increased the tension between the different races” (37).

Coupled with the economic instability of Singapore in the 1960s, the course the PAP chose to take was to champion economic ‘progress’ since it cut across racial lines: “[t]he social engineering imperative of the PAP...[has] brought into existence a supra-ethnic culture which all ethnic groups share...that is, the values of an urban, modernised, commercial and industrial society” (Siddique 574-5). Against both internal and external threats, the government gave the one solution of economic development and prosperity. According to Lee Kuan Yew, “[h]igher wages as productivity increases, and workers educated by their own leaders in the realities of our economic position will [...] produce a solid and secure situation which the communities cannot easily exploit” (qtd in Josey 430). Thus, the government relentlessly championed economic development and prosperity as key to the survival of the nation.

For the sake of Singapore’s survival, the population had to be transformed into a tightly organised and highly disciplined citizenry all pulling in the same direction with a sense of public spiritedness and self-sacrifice in the nation’s interests. The government tolerated no less than continuous support from the electorate, which voted them back to power again and again in the subsequent years after Independence. This power was exercised in an overt way. In a sub-section titled “Generalised Social Discipline”, Chua Beng Huat notes that “the underlying instrumental rationality extends beyond these areas of social life, into a significant part of what is conventionally assumed to

be private spheres of life in a democratic society” (66). He shows how bills have been passed, in congruence with the paternalistic role of the Singapore government, which acts as both custodian and disciplinarian (67), and how the government also seeks to regulate private sectors of private life, for example, sexuality and marriage, through its policies (68). The justification for what could be seen as over-active involvement in the ordinary lives of citizens, even in the areas of sexuality and marriage, was that all these efforts were for the sole grand purpose of economic growth, which would have made sense to a population suffering from material deprivation.

(ii) The emphasis on Asian Values in the 1970s and 1980s

The new crisis, once the economic problems had been dealt with, was what Lee saw as cultural deracination. Lee, who had always been deeply concerned about what he saw as a population devitalised by “a completely English set of values and ideals” (qtd in Barr 144), said in 1971 that “the cultural ballast, the values patterns, the social discipline, the organisational framework of effective government” were crucial to national success (qtd in Barr 152). Individualism, which had been crucial to capitalist economic growth, became something of concern to the PAP after 1980 (Chua 27), because of the fear that an English-educated population would fall prey to the ills of Western individualism, especially after “the Government maintained a propaganda war against foreign hippies, who were seen as promiscuous, anarchic, effete, drug-addicted, and self-indulgent” (Tamney 25). Thus, in the

1970s, the PAP further developed the idea of “cultural ballast” and embarked on a process of self-strengthening.

Lee saw the survival of the nation as closely dependent on a strong, resilient and socially responsible class of men: his speeches often used metaphors concerning youth, vitality and masculinity. He was often contemptuous towards what he regarded as the effete English-educated elite. Thus, the PAP embarked on a process of Sinicisation and the Asian Values campaign. Moral education, Confucianism, and religious studies were introduced into the school curriculum to provide students with what the government considered to be lacking in its citizens. However, towards the end of the 1980s, Religious Knowledge and Confucianism were phased out, as the government found that religious beliefs might not be in sync with the values that the government was trying to promote and religious differences could also pose a potential problem to inter-ethnic, inter-religious harmony in future (Chua 31).

Although Religious Knowledge and Confucian Ethics were eventually scrapped from the schools, the government continued to champion Asian Values, quoting the success stories of the Asian Tigers (Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan and Korea) and endorsing what they saw as crucial ingredients in these countries’ recipe for success: hard work, willingness to delay gratification, and an emphasis on family values. The new Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong, who took over the position from Lee in the late 1980s, was also greatly influenced by Lodge and Vogel’s *Ideology and National Competitiveness* (1987) which argued that a nation’s economic competitiveness was affected by whether its people were relatively more communitarian or individualistic. Its authors also

argue that East Asian capitalist economies tend to be more communitarian in nature and that this has enabled them to catch up economically with the West (Chua 31). In 1988, Goh noted that “[l]ike Japan and Korea, Singapore is a high-performance country because we share the same cultural base as the other successful East Asians, that is, Confucian ethics” (qtd in Chua 32), thus showing his support for Communitarianism and Asian Values.

Confucianism, or at least the form that it took in Singapore, shifted the focus from the governmental enforcement of power to “self-cultivation and social responsibility – or, in Confucian terminology, ‘self-discipline for the governance of men’” (Tu 12). Confucianism or Asian Values as a narrative had the power to shape and police the minds of Singaporeans.

(iii) Changes in the 1990s and 2000s

By the 1990s, however, there was an embarrassed disillusionment with Asian Values, after the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, which had hit many ASEAN countries, including Singapore. The secrets of Asian economic success, which had been part of many governmental speeches in the past two decades, had to be re-evaluated or shelved.

In addition to the changes in the national consciousness which were associated with the gradual disillusionment with Asian Values, the PAP, along with the second generation of political leaders, led by the new Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, also realised that there needed to be a change in the way Singapore was to be governed. The changing attitude of the people was reflected in the results of the 1984 elections. For the first time since

Independence, the people had chosen two opposition candidates to represent them in parliament (Vasil 125), and this was reflective of some dissatisfaction with the PAP. Furthermore, members of the new generation of Singaporeans were also richer, better educated and more mobile – they could migrate to other countries if they were unhappy with the government. This resulted in the government of the second generation changing their leadership style to one that was more consultative, conciliatory and approachable (Vasil 159). Among the changes was the introduction of a Feedback Unit, which served as a forum for Singaporeans to voice their opinions on government policies.

In order to deal with the changing demands of the population, there was also a new emphasis on the quality of life in Singapore and on what would make life meaningful and fulfilling beyond material wealth for the average Singaporean. Not long after assuming office, Goh Chok Tong talked about the holistic development of the Singaporean and added that the government was

[t]rying to give Singapore a more rounded personality. In the past...we emphasised primarily the basics, relating to economic...Now, having succeeded in fulfilling the basic needs, we have got to address the question: how do you make life more fulfilling for Singaporeans, what is it that they want? [...] We are embarking on [...] greater emphasis on conservation, cleanliness, environment, graciousness. (qtd in Vasil 170-171)

The move towards a more gracious society also saw efforts made by the government to become more aware of those who had hitherto been marginalised – for example, homosexuals, and the disabled. This resulted in a greater number of auto/biographies written by these groups of people being published and read by the larger society.

However, material success and greater emphasis on inclusiveness and a better quality of life did not necessarily mean a more anxiety-free society. The concern with survival as a nation did not disappear once Singapore was more economically stable; the ideology of survival simply evolved. In the early years, the government concentrated on building up the economy as a stalwart to both internal and external threats. As the economy grew, new challenges such as cultural deracination and brain drain as a consequence of excessive individualism were emphasised. In the years after the slow demise of Asian Values, threats to national security included terrorism, competition from neighbouring countries, all of which led to a greater emphasis on greater trans-nationalism, entrepreneurship and the need to look beyond the region. However, as we will see in auto/biographies written in the 1990s/2000s, examined in Chapter Two, new challenges after the 1980s, whether real or perceived, could not be as easily displaced or resolved as compared to previous challenges, and this resulted in less coherent narratives compared to auto/biographies written earlier.

Singapore Autobiographies

Auto/biographies can serve to reinforce or challenge the dominant ideologies in a nation. One of the most common accusations made against the Singapore government is that it cultivates a “culture of silence”² However, the

² As sociologists such as Chua Beng Huat have observed, the continuing presence of the ISA (Internal Security Act) is not an actual tool of political repression but in effect, casts a shadow which generates fear and anxiety, causing many to remark that the system is repressive and that one cannot speak freely. This is not unlike the function of the Panopticon, as described by Foucault. Chua quotes an incident where, “in a public forum, a first-year undergraduate stood

more effective and interesting ways in which power can be observed to be exercised is in how auto/biographies participate in or resist the processes of self-censorship, self-policing and adhering to given ideological messages. As Noam Chomsky points out, “[i]n a democratic system, the necessary illusions cannot be imposed by force. Rather, they must be instilled in the public by more subtle means” (qtd in Birch 74). The way that these “necessary illusions” are internalised and reiterated can inform us about why and how people discipline their narratives so as to fit in to a dominant script, and what happens to narratives which cannot fit into a certain mould.

Chapter One of this thesis will focus on how many of the pioneer narratives rehearse national tropes or scripts, especially at a time when the discourse of Asian Values was very popular, in the late 1970s and 1980s. Pioneer figures such as Yeo Tiam Siew, Wong Ah Fook, Tan Chin Tuan and Ho Rih Hwa took pride in identifying with and adhering to the national script – attaining success through hard work, discipline, and caring for the family/community. It can be seen that these pioneer figures discipline both their lives and life stories to fit into the Asian Values that the government was trumpeting and which had caught on in the social imaginary. I will show how these pioneer figures reinforce cultural messages through what Foucault termed as technologies of the Self, through acts of self-censorship, insertions of reminders, elisions, meditations on hypothetical situations and the right way to act.

These pioneer narratives therefore endorsed in a powerful way the Asian Values that were being championed. Although it is commonly believed

up and espoused such a sentiment, whereupon he was reminded that there are not enough ‘secret police’ to go around tailing everyone, yet in his mind ‘they’ are everywhere” (180).

that the pioneer figures attained success because of the Asian Values that they espoused, the narratives were written when many of these pioneers were of retirement age, and when Asian Values had caught on in the social imagination. It cannot be ascertained whether they achieved their successes because of the practice of Asian Values, or whether they attribute their successes to Asian Values because of the popularity of Asian Values at the time of writing. However, in some cases where it is obvious that Asian Values are a superimposition, the way that the narratives are shaped to suit the purposes of the present illustrate how the narration of events that happen in the past can have a “self-sealing effect” (Bruner 1993; 39), and that the stories we tell and perpetuate become more and more seamless, so as to be taken as truth or fact, when in fact they may be products of specific historical-cultural moments and reflective of certain ideological processes.

Chapter Two of this thesis will show how many of the narratives written in the 1990s and 2000s invariably pose a challenge to the uniformity of the national story laid out so seamlessly in the pioneer narratives. The hold that Asian Values had over the social imaginary was no longer as trenchant as there were many other new competing concerns in the 1990s/2000s, coupled with the disenchantment with Asian Values after the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. The narratives became more complex, both in terms of form as well as subject matter. This was also in part brought about by the acceleration of globalisation, which meant that Singaporeans were exposed to more trans-national influences. These factors resulted in less coherent narratives, as compared to the narratives written earlier. Some, such as *Living the Singapore Dream* (2007) are remarkably similar to the narratives studied in Chapter One,

but the complexities and anxieties inherent in the 1990s and 2000s, which could not be as easily resolved as they were in the previous generation, cause this group of narratives which were written later to be more complex, incoherent, as well as fragmented. The plurality of these narratives can be seen to challenge the uniformity of the national script. The increase in auto/biographies written by people who are in the margins – such as political opposition leaders, members of ethnic minorities, disabled people, and homosexuals³ – in the 1990s and 2000s, challenge the “pedagogic” or main narrative, but also to a certain extent, end up reinforcing it in some ways.

Due to the scope and nature of this study, as well as the sheer number of auto/biographies that have been written and published in Singapore, this thesis will not attempt to be exhaustive, but will aim to be representative, keeping in mind the political, social and cultural developments in the 1970s-1980s, and in the 1990s-2000s. Each Chapter will include a sub-section, which will contain a more in-depth case study of one text, and which will exemplify how points observed in different texts are illustrated in a single text.

³ For the purposes of this thesis, I have chosen to focus on the auto/biographies of disabled people and homosexuals/transsexuals, out of the many groups of marginalised narratives. This is because the number of auto/biographies written by these two groups of people is more substantial compared to the number of auto/biographies written by the other marginalised groups.

Chapter One: Pioneer Narrative Re-examined

In the essay “Narrating Imagination”, Ban Kah Choon argues that despite its reputation for being dull and stodgy, Singapore is in fact a nation founded upon myths and narratives. The predominance of narratives can be found in areas such as defence, control of the population, as well as nation-building. However, because the “stories we tell become more and more complex, and more and more seamless as if they had no origins” (1), they are often taken for granted as truth or fact when we are no longer conscious of their origins.

By the 1980s, the ideology of survival that had been so much a part of the formational years of the nation had given way to a new narrative, what Chua Beng Huat terms “communitarianism” (5). The economic success of Singapore and of the new East Asian economies had been attributed to what was known as Asian Values, which were deemed to be more communal and less individualistic, and this had a strong hold on the imagination of the nation. This coincided with the time that most of the pioneer figures of the nation, such as Yeo Tiam Siew, Lien Ying Chow, Tan Chin Tuan and Ho Rih Hwa began to tell their stories.

In this chapter, I will show how the auto/biographies of those whom we commonly regard as the pioneer generation of Singapore bear particular inflections of Asian Values – family/community, Chinese-ness, enterprise, social discipline and masculinity, which were resonant during the time that these narratives were produced. I will also show how they apply these concepts through Foucauldian technologies of the Self. In the specific texts, some of these – acts of self-censorship, insertions of reminders, elisions,

meditations on hypothetical situations and the right way to act in various situations – can be observed.

The Development of the Asian Values discourse

Before we can look at how the auto/biographies participate in the national narrative, we need to understand the rhetoric of Asian Values which played a major role in national discourse in the time period (1980s) that most of these auto/biographies were produced and how it represented an evolution from the ideology of survival as outlined in the Introduction to this thesis.

In his book *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore*, Chua Beng Huat shows that the concept of communitarianism and Asian Values became increasingly popular in the 1980s (5). Two decades after Independence, the values behind capitalist growth – individualism and consumerism – became cause for concern. To the PAP, individualism was a worrying trend because it implied self-centeredness and an unwillingness to sacrifice one's self-interest for the greater good of the nation; in other words, it was antithetical to nation-building, which was increasingly seen as important. Chua notes that ironically, there was a certain "intentional amnesia" suffered by the PAP government in their criticism of individualism since Lee Kuan Yew had "lauded Singaporeans as essentially individualistic achievers" (*Straits Times*, 1 May 1981) because as immigrants, they might have developed a keen self-confidence which motivated them to work hard in their struggle to survive" (qtd in Chua 27). Individualism, which was being

promoted in the early years of nationhood, became something which was seen as being increasingly negative.

In 1982, Lee Kuan Yew penned an expository piece entitled “Assessment of a Man”, which was published in the Straits Times on 23 December 1982. It went: “I have learnt how to judge a good man with a good mind and his heart in the right place. I study his past records: what has he done, at what age did he do what. Not simply the examinations he took and how he passed them, but what has he achieved since. How did he manage people? How did he interact with people? Has he inspired his fellow workers and subordinates? Has he good judgment? Has he strength of character? Is he selfless? Is he committed to any cause beyond his career?” The successful individual now not just had to be successful economically, but also to show concern for the community and be mindful of the way that he acted towards the people in his life. The process or the journey towards success was seen as equally important as success itself and was the object of constant self-examination.

The government saw a need to inculcate cultural values in the population, for fear that increasing Westernisation and individualism would lead to deracination. Asian Values were promoted and Singaporeans were encouraged to take part in cultural activities, something which was not given much emphasis in the earlier days of nation-building.⁴ This cultural assertion was in part a reaction to the 1960s and hippieism in the West. In 1978, Goh Keng Swee acknowledged that “[with] the large-scale movement to education

⁴ The titles of books written on Asian values such as Michael Barr’s *Cultural Politics and Asian Values: The Tepid War* (2002) and Joseph B. Tamney’s *The Struggle Over Singapore’s Soul: Western Modernisation and Asian Culture* (1996) reflect the cultural emphasis of the Asian values campaign, that distinguished it from the earlier “ideology of survival” delineated by Chua Beng Huat.

in English, the risk of decentralisation cannot be ignored” (Vasil 69). The rise of Asian Values was not an isolated phenomenon; rather, it was a movement which involved many other Asian countries. In 1981, Mahathir bin Mohamad, then Prime Minister of Malaysia, launched his ‘Look East’ campaign, which upheld Japan, South Korea and Taiwan as models of successful economies based on East Asian work ethics and cultural values (Barr, 2002, 27). Similarly, Lee Kuan Yew looked to these same East Asian countries, which he felt had a “common cultural base, Chinese in origin”, derived from Confucian ethic (Vasil 83).

The ideology of Asian Values was somewhat different from the ideology of survival which had emphasised pragmatism, individual effort and success. It was more communitarian in nature, emphasising social responsibility and consideration for others. The opposite of the Confucian *junzi* was the *xiaoren* or mean person, petty in mind and heart, narrowly self-interested, greedy, superficial, or materialistic. Asian Values rather than self-centred achievement was seen as a viable national ideology which would ward off the negative effects of individualism. It would encourage self-reflection and a sense of responsibility towards the family and community.

Asian Values and the particular form that they took in Singapore were very much influenced by Confucianism. At the basic level, Confucianism is a set of beliefs governing people and relationships. The five fundamental relationships in Confucianism are between father and son, elder and younger brother, husband and wife, friend and friend, sovereign and subject. A person becomes a “cultivated person” by learning how to perform these roles properly. This produces a highly structured and hierarchical system where role

expectations are articulated very clearly: the subject/son is expected to give his ruler/father obedience and respect and the ruler/father is expected to undergo a process of self-cultivation in order to be a *junzi* or gentleman and to govern by example rather than coercion. In the Confucian tradition, the process of self-cultivation involves a particular kind of writing: Confucian scholars spent hours practising and perfecting calligraphy. This was thought to have a similar effect to meditation: it was believed that calligraphy and self-reflection would help the subject develop patience and other moral values. This was not dissimilar to the practice of discipline that Foucault describes in “Technologies of the Self” where one “retire[s] into the self to discover [...] rules of action, the main laws of behaviour” (34). In this case, calligraphy was supposed to be a method through which one develops patience and the ability to reflect upon one’s life.⁵ The incentive in cultivating these values was that one could gain the moral right to be part of the elite.

Although Asian Values were not simply Confucianism, but a reinvention of Confucianism within a social order that was specifically Singaporean and representing a translation of Confucianism into bourgeois modernism, Asian Values in practice still retained the concept of the elite and of the process of self-cultivation that promised certain benefits. Even though what exactly Asian Values are differ somewhat in different contexts, the most important and consistently recurring values include “a respect for learning, the

⁵ It is also interesting to note that although Foucault was speaking about the process of reflection through journaling when he says that “[t]aking care of oneself became linked to constant writing activity. The Self is a [n][...] object (subject) or writing activity” (27), produced through specific ways of examination or care, calligraphy, while not a process of writing in the sense of written reminders, reflections or notes on correct behaviour, can also be seen to produce the same effect.

willingness to work hard, a sense of duty and responsibility, social discipline, group loyalty and co-operation” (CDIS 1986; 124, qtd in Tamney 39).

Institutionally, the move towards Asian Values was supported by the Speak Mandarin campaign, the establishment of Special Assistance Plan (SAP) schools which took in only Chinese-speaking students and offered these students the opportunity to study the Chinese language and culture at a higher level; students in these schools were also exposed to a wider range of Chinese cultural activities, for example, the practice of calligraphy. There was also the introduction of Confucian ethics into the school curriculum in 1982. Confucian ethics were given a lot of attention and resources. The government founded the Institute of East Asian Philosophy (IEAP), set up in the National University of Singapore in 1983. Various Chinese organisations such as the Chinese Chamber of Commerce sponsored seminars on Confucian ethics and reasoning. The Chinese media and the Nanyang Siang Pau played active roles in trying to promote Confucian ethics and even the Straits Times had long pages devoted to Confucian debates and published articles by Confucian scholars.

However, a national ideology which was imposed by the government would not have worked without the participation of the people. Foucault writes about the workings of power in *The History of Sexuality*, noting that

power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organisation; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallisation is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the Law, in the various social hegemonies. (273)

Texts do not merely echo what is stated in the dominant national ideology but react to dominant discourse in complex and myriad ways. One of the reasons why Asian Values was so readily accepted was because it coincided with a time when there was a re-emerging sense of pride in the Chinese community. Previously, during the 1960s, the PAP had been very wary of Chinese chauvinism or excessive identification with and pride in the Chinese culture as many of the Chinese-educated had supported the Communists. By the 1980s, the threat of Communism had died down considerably and the government no longer had to be on its toes. The promotion of Confucian values and ethics was welcomed by the Chinese-educated community; they must have felt a sense of pride that the Chinese culture was being promoted and valued. This was especially so when bearing in mind that the Chinese-educated in Singapore had long felt that the Chinese culture had been undervalued and unappreciated under a multi-racial, multi-cultural Singapore, and where only the English-educated had access to well-paying jobs in the Civil Service, although the Chinese community had contributed so much to the growth and development of Singapore.

Furthermore, by the 1980s, there was the beginning of a sense of nationhood and the existence of a national narrative. Singapore had been independent for about two decades and was economically prosperous, and unexpectedly so. There was a sense of national pride in the Singaporean economic miracle, one which was enhanced by accolades from other countries which acknowledged the successful transformation of Singapore, and the similar economic boom in Asian countries such as Hong Kong and Taiwan. The economic successes of these countries were attributed to similar cultural

values. Mahathir bin Mohamad argued that Malaysia needed to develop a “culture of discipline” since some theorists have tried to establish a correlation between East Asian economic performance and high levels of economic discipline (Jayasuriya 77).

This is not to say that all Singaporeans subscribed to the rhetoric of Asian Values. The campaign was not without its detractors. For example, in 1977, then Foreign Minister S. Rajaratnam made the following statement at a conference on “Asian Values and Modernisation”: “I have very serious doubts as to whether such a thing as ‘Asian Values’ really exists” (qtd in Barr 31). Some Singaporeans, especially the non-Chinese population, were uncomfortable with the ideology of Asian Values as they were suspicious that it was really an attempt to promote Chinese-ness in disguise. However, these objections were in the minority and were generally ignored.

Discipline and Asian Values

In the essay “Self-Writing” (collected in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* ed. Paul Rabinow 1997), Foucault lists down acts of self-examination which include abstinence, memorisations, self-examinations, meditations, confessions, silence, listening to others, and writing (208). Writing as a form of self-examination came rather later but served as an essential state in the process in which accepted discourses were recognised as true and fashioned into rational principles of action (209). This writing acts upon the self and becomes more important than the mere act of recording. What is written becomes constitutive of reality: “writing transforms the thing seen or heard

‘into tissue and blood’. It becomes a principle of rational action in the writer himself” (Foucault 213). Although Foucault does not write about the reader’s response, we can see how the description of the process the writer goes through could also be applicable to the reader.

Interesting parallels can then be observed between Foucauldian technologies of the self and the practice of Asian values. Foucault has shown in his study of ancient Greek and Roman cultures how the individual subject constantly disciplines himself through exercises such as meditation and confession. Similarly, Kanishka Jayasuriya argues that one of the main defining concepts behind Asian Values is a “culture of discipline” (77), which all aspects of life can be subject to. Both Confucianism and Asian Values give emphasis to learning (as part of the process of discipline and self-improvement) and the cultivation of the self so as to achieve the goals of the greater community.

According to Foucault, there are two particular kinds of writing that served to fulfil the purpose of self-discipline. One was the *hupomnemata* which could consist of account books, public registers, or individual notebooks serving as memory aids, used as books of life, as guides for conduct (Foucault 209); the other was correspondence. Foucault defines the *hupomnemata* as writing that “ought not to be understood as intimate journals [...] do not constitute a ‘narrative of oneself’; they do not have the aim of bringing to the light of day [...] the oral or written confession [...] the intent is not to pursue the unspeakable, nor to reveal the hidden [...] but on the contrary to capture the already-said, to collect what one has managed to hear or read, and for a purpose that is nothing less than the shaping of the self”

(211). Auto/biographies appear to be written about the self but may be instead a record of learnt responses; thus they can be considered as similar to the *hupomnemata* that Foucault writes about. In the autobiographies examined in this chapter, we will see that many contain words of advice given to the protagonist: these are recorded down so as to serve as memory aids, a record of what has been learnt, and are also part of the technologies of the self. The memory aids usually take the form of Chinese proverbs (translated) such as “when you drink water, think of its source” (Owyang 73).

This shows how, although discipline/power is commonly thought of as being enforced on the subject, Foucault actually shows how it is much more insidious, subtle and self-enforcing. Joseph B. Tamney, in *The Struggle over Singapore’s Soul* (1996) describes workings of the Confucian Studies program in schools:

Appropriately the Confucian textbooks that had been used in Singapore discussed self-realisation. Students were told to examine themselves continually in order to be able to develop their abilities. However the point of self-cultivation is to maintain the Confucian social order. “The ideal Confucian society is one where everybody fulfils a role faithfully. In such a society, people always ask ‘What is expected of me?’ but seldom ask ‘What can I get out of this?’ (CDIS 1985: 83). A true sage would queue up waiting for a bus, give a seat to the elderly (CDIS 1985: 33,40). [...] Self-cultivation involves learning self-control in order to develop the abilities needed to carry out one’s roles successfully. (104)

It is assumed that these values did not come naturally but had to be learnt and “permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies, souls and thoughts, conduct and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality” (Foucault 1988; 17). Students were taught self-cultivation techniques such as questions to keep in mind such as “What is expected of me?” when faced with situations. This

self-regulation echoes what Foucault describes in “Technologies of the Self” when monks would meditate on hypothetical situations in order to act in a disciplined way when the situation arose in reality, and which is more concerned with the self-examination of one’s own thought life rather than with action (1988; 29).

A Foucauldian understanding of power and social control also needs to take into account the complicity of its subjects. In 1983, Lee Kuan Yew, when speaking on the issue of child-bearing, said that “women will not stand for [overt measures]. Instead they will have to be provided with incentives, not disincentives” (qtd in PuruShotam 328). The subjects under the control of power are the instruments of the exercise of power over themselves:

“power...is not the privilege...of the dominant class, but the overall effect of its strategic positions – an effect that is manifested and sometimes extended by the position of those who are dominated” (Foucault 1979: 26-27). The autobiographies provide incentives for the processes of self-discipline that each individual has to undertake. Discipline – not giving in to one’s flesh but to constantly train one to think of others, delay gratification, etc. – is shown to yield results. It is also portrayed as being necessary for success. For example, in *The Barefoot Boy from Songwad* (1996), there is a quote from Mencius which says “When Heaven is to entrust heavy responsibility in an individual, it will first dampen his spirit and toil his bones and starve his body” (epigraph to chapter three). This reminds the reader to endure hardship and discipline in anticipation of greater rewards in future.

Pioneer Narratives

In *Pioneers of Singapore: A Catalogue of Oral History Interviews* (1984), the editors define pioneers as those selected

based on age, business achievements, Singapore experience and public services. Our interviewees are generally above 60 years old, well-established in their own lines of business, philanthropic and they arrived in Singapore before World War Two” (vi)

For the purposes of this chapter, I have adhered to the same definition when I refer to pioneer narratives. These are the narratives of a special group of people who are pioneer figures in their respective trades/businesses in Singapore, migrants, generally well-respected and above sixty years old.

In this chapter, I have chosen to look closely at the auto/biographies of Ho Rih Hwa, Chi Owyang, Kwek Hong Png, Yap Pheng Geck and Lien Ying Chow. From the way that I have chosen to define pioneer narratives, most of these pioneer figures were migrants from China, Chinese-educated and by the time of their retirement, had become prominent in Singapore society, having made their fortunes in business. This pioneer generation had been held up as a model/example during the period of Asian Values: the younger generation was advised to learn from them, from their hard work, discipline and traditional values, which contributed to the economic success of Singapore. Because of this definition, not only adopted in this thesis, but by the Oral History Department as well as the government in discourse about the pioneer generation, women have largely been excluded. Interestingly enough, the only two biographies about women who can be considered as pioneers, those of Elizabeth Choy and Constance Goh, do not reflect an emphasis on Asian

Values. In the case of Constance Goh, the narrative that her actions are attributed to is that of her Christian faith. This could be because narratives by women pioneer figures did not gel easily with the narrative of Asian Values, due to its emphasis on masculinity, which will be explained in detail later in this chapter. Auto/biographies by/about non-Chinese during this period are also non-existent.

Part of the reason why this specific group of pioneers was selected and given recognition by the government was due to their contribution to the nation-building effort after the 1960s. In most of the auto/biographies, there is the construction of a model or example for the reader to follow. Quoted in Hsuan Owyang's biography of his father, *The Barefoot Boy from Songwad* (1996) is S. Rajaratnam's eulogy to Chi Owyang in the Straits Times entitled "A model of the Ideal Singaporean": Owyang was "a modest man [who] made money not by demeaning himself but honourably [...] only to do good. [...] He had served his duties to his family and career, and now wanted to serve his country" (19). Hsuan Owyang also starts his narrative by relating the moment when he receives the news of his father's death and then his father's funeral, with eulogies and accolades from politicians, friends, family members and business partners. He concludes by saying that "old-fashioned and traditional values enabled [his father] to triumph over early setbacks and live a life worth remembering" (11). Similarly, Lim Yew Hock's *Reflections* also starts with the event of his father's funeral. When interacting with the mourners and guests, he comes to the realisation that his "father was indeed rich although robbed of his material wealth by circumstances" (13). In both of these reflections, the writers, while meditating on the father's death, come to similar

conclusions: that reputation/name, values and the goodwill of others matter more than material wealth. By starting their narratives with the funerals of their fathers and the eulogies from others,⁶ both pose an implicit question to the reader: “How do you want to be remembered?” which thus serves as a meditative device to cause the reader to reflect on his own life, values, and his relationship with his community. The process of writing serves as a device not only to remind the writer to act in accordance to these values, but also to encourage others to act in the same way.

Many of the values that success is attributed to seem to be a retrospective superimposition on the text. Some of the auto/biographers, such as Yeo Tiam Siew, Ho Rih Hwa and Kwek Hong Png, map their narratives unto the success story of Singapore. Yeo notes that Singapore’s only natural assets are a deep-water harbour, hardworking people and a determination to succeed (ix). This narrative success of Singapore is something that was possible only when one looks back on the journey from 1965 to the 1980s. However, this national story of hard work and success becomes so popular that it is superimposed unto the telling of other narratives. Yeo attributes his success to hard work, determination and his Chinese values, and even imagines his own father’s “arduous” journey from China to Singapore (3) even though his father did not speak of it at all. Narratives of the nation are commonly woven into the auto/biographies, and these are not commonly expected of or found in auto/biographical writing.

⁶ Owyang’s biography also takes a circular form: it ends off exactly where the beginning of the narrative starts – with the moment when Owyang receives the phone call informing him of his father’s death. By the end of the narrative, however, having become acquainted with the older Owyang’s life and works, the reader is more likely to join in the procession of mourners mourning the passing of Chi Owyang and to appreciate his values and advice to his son.

The Family as Disciplinary Mechanism

Many of the auto/biographies written in the period of the 1980s-1990s reflect an emphasis on the family, under the influence of the Asian Values discourse. Those protagonists who were good at cultivating relationships are shown to prosper; this creates incentives for readers to imitate their examples. The self-disciplinary mechanism inherent in the institution of the family also worked very much to the advantage of the nation-building project.

The main difference between the ideology of survival and the construct of Asian Values was the emphasis on the family or community, which the government saw as important in warding off the decadent, liberal attitudes of the West. Michael Barr notes that “[t]he family is also given a special place in the ‘Asian values’ argument, both because it provides the prime conceptual basis of a relational view of society, and because it is a natural and self-sustaining mechanism for providing nurture, socialisation and social services to the population” (7). Thus, the institution and idea of the family became a very important part of the Asian Values campaign. The success of the four Asian tigers was attributed to the value of family, relationships, sacrificing oneself in order for one’s own family/community to advance and giving back to the community after one has succeeded.

All of the auto/biographies studied in this chapter similarly mirror this emphasis on relationships; those who spend time and effort in cultivating relationships are shown to prosper. Lien Ying Chow’s autobiography *From Chinese Villager to Singapore Tycoon* (1992) credits Lien’s ability to build relationships and accumulate vast networks of friends as one of the keys to his

success.⁷ He is portrayed as “a master at cultivating allies” (21). His ability to network is described as a “priceless” asset (20). The “Asian way” of doing business is to give “face” to others by attending social events (23) and this is opposed to the coldly impersonal Western capitalism. While Lien’s own family life is largely glossed over (he was married four times and divorced twice),⁸ and he attributes part of his success to the fact that his company was not run by his family members, so as to avoid conflict, his business relationships are repeatedly given emphasis. As Singapore’s ambassador to Malaysia, his friendships with Tunku Abdul Rahman and with the Sultan of Johore are emphasised and episodes attesting to the strength of the friendship are related at length, so as to show the importance of relationships at a level that is greater than the self.

Under the Asian Values banner, individual activities also had to be subordinated under the value of family ties. Kwek Hong Png’s autobiography, *A Lifetime with Hong Leong* (1987) deliberately gives emphasis to the “Asian” way of doing business: “[Kwek] emulates the virtues of Confucian teaching [...] He sent for his brothers from China to assist him in his business. Subsequently, he gave away some of his shares to them, a reflection of his selflessness, his care and love for his brothers” (68). This is supplemented by the Chinese proverb “when tackling a tiger, one needs the help of one’s brothers” (81). Values such as brotherly love and family loyalty are shown to be rewarded in this autobiography, thus subtly influencing the reader to adopt

⁷ Ironically enough, after the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997, many have criticised what they called “crony capitalism” to be one of the contributing factors (Tan, 2000; 95) to the crisis.

⁸ There is not much mention about his family, other than general statements. Also omitted are accounts of his first, second and third wives, and his relationship with his immediate family, except for a brother, who was tortured by the Japanese in the Second World War when he could not reveal Lien’s whereabouts (82).

these ascribed values. In the writing of the auto/biographies, the helping of one's family is emphasised. For example, in *Father of Charity and My Father* by Theresa Ee, the story of Ee Peng Liang lending books to his niece is written in mimesis rather than diegesis, even though it is a relatively minor episode.

Alliances with other “family” members, such as the East Asian economies, are also shown to be rewarded. Eakin has argued that all autobiographies are relational,⁹ and this is perhaps particularly so for the auto/biographies studied in this chapter since they deliberately emphasised the relationality of their auto/biographies. Lee Kuan Yew has claimed that Confucian ideas of family loyalty have fostered a sense of discipline and individual responsibility that has created strong incentives for hard work and thrift in East Asian societies (Jayasuriya 85). Throughout the Asian Values campaign, the story of Singapore's success has always been narrated in relation to the other East Asian economies. The auto/biographies reflect this sense of a being part of a larger community: Lien Ying Chow is described as exemplifying the “ceaseless drive of the overseas Chinese” (20). He is frequently described in relation to other overseas Chinese and each can be seen as a synecdoche for the entire community: “This resilient minority of some 50 million spread through Southeast Asia, Hong Kong and Taiwan dominates trade and industry in the region [...] these Chinese embrace remarkably similar fundamental beliefs in hard work, strong family ties, constant reinvestment, adapting to local conditions and education” (21) and “Linked by a loose network of personal relationships, Lien and fellow Chinese entrepreneurs easily move goods, capital and economic intelligence across

⁹ What is interesting about this set of narratives is that most of them show a sense of self that is closely related to being part of the overseas Chinese community, instead of an alignment with a Malaysian/Singaporean consciousness.

national frontiers” (21). He is also likened to other overseas Chinese such as Li Ka Shing and Y.C. Wang, who make a lot of money and give a lot of it away (21). Pains are taken to emphasise Asian Values and to write the narrative into the main narrative present in the 1980s/1990s. Lien Ying Chow is described as “a legendary Asian success story” (11) by his co-writer. This emphasis on the collective is informed by the Asian Values discourse which linked Singapore to other Asian countries such as Taiwan, South Korea and Hong Kong.

The metaphor of the East Asian economies as family may have been consciously cultivated by the Singaporean government in order to increase feelings of security.¹⁰ Yeo Tiam Siew’s autobiography, *Destined to Survive* (1993) shows how the “ecological self” may have led to a sense of vulnerability and crisis. Almost every event in Yeo’s life is framed as a sort of crisis to be survived or surmounted (97). Each chapter is also prefaced by a short historical overview of what happened during the time that events in his life took place. These not only include the historical events of Singapore but also the world beyond Singapore. This is enhanced by a sense of vulnerability: in Yeo’s worldview, one can only react to the things that are happening around the self and make the best out of the situation. In fact, this is also found in other auto/biographies such as Tan Kah Kee’s *The Memoirs of Tan Kah Kee* (1994). The inclusion of historical information is certainly very strange for a person who is writing his own autobiography and not a historical account. This perhaps reflects a certain perception of Singapore; one that is always

¹⁰ The psychologist Ulric Neisser attempted to distinguish between different aspects of the self in the paper “Five kinds of Self-knowledge” (1988) One of these registers of self was what he termed the “ecological self”, the “self as perceived with respect to the physical environment” (qtd in Eakin 22).

impacted by world events. This common sense of Asianness across the Asian economies – specifically economies with large Chinese populations – was encouraged in the Asian Values period to reduce feelings of vulnerability by the creation of a larger psychological space and for the Chinese to feel a sense of belonging to a larger Chinese community by constructing this community as a sort of family.¹¹

The concept or metaphor of family was a pervasive one and did not just refer to the nuclear family but also to companies, the nation and the other East Asian economies. This imagined kinship is crucial for nation-building; according to Benedict Anderson, nationalism encourages citizens to imagine themselves as a community regardless of inequalities and injustices. This metaphor or construction of the nation-state as family meant that the patriarch/father-figure of the family/nation could exercise power over his sons/subjects without having to justify himself as long as he believed a course of action to be for the best interests of the family/nation – what Foucault describes as a “culture of silence” (1988; 23) thus develops. With such a notion of the nation as family popularised, the citizens would also accept discipline, policies and even intrusions into private life as normal, since father knows best. In 1976, Chan Heng Chee lamented that if one is critical of governmental power, “such an intellectual is vilified on the grounds that his claim to the right of criticism is an alien tradition borne out of Western liberal thought” (qtd in Trocki 131-132). This parallels the construction of the West as individualistic and disrespectful of authority, whereas an Asian is supposed to be subservient and respectful to authority. Within the context of the family,

¹¹ One of the fears of the PAP government was that the English-educated elite would migrate to other countries because they lacked a sense of belonging to Singapore, thus resulting in a brain-drain.

self-disclosure is also encouraged. One is accountable to other members of the family and concepts of privacy can be regarded as individualistic.

The family can thus be seen as a kind of regulating/disciplining mechanism. Harmony of family and state are seen as coterminous and the foundation of a well-governed state is the well-disciplined family, where each member of the family performs his duties and obligations to other members of the family. The father-figure of the family has to (according to Confucian ethics) lead by example and to perform his duties to the family. Many of these narratives contain some kind of seduction scene in which the protagonist (Ho Rih Hwa, Arthur Lim, Othman Wok) is presented with temptation, in the form of a beautiful woman. Each manages to resist temptation. The purpose of narrating such episodes seems to be for the sake of exemplifying the strong value system and discipline of the protagonist, rejecting the licentiousness of the West, and above all, an attempt to uphold and protect the family, in accordance with Asian Values. Such scenes, which bear echoes of the temptation of Christ, seem to be initiation tests in which the protagonist has to prove himself worthy to lead. It also recalls Foucault's description of the Stoics, some of whom disciplined themselves by placing themselves in front of many tantalising dishes and then renouncing these, in order to "establish and test the independence of the individual with regard to the external world" ("Technologies of the Self" 37). By writing about such situations, the auto/biographer disciplines his mind and reminds himself about the correct codes of behaviour.

The subject's obligations to his family also serve as a restraint on behaviour. In *The Barefoot Boy from Songwad*, Hsuan Owyang tells the reader

how he worked harder at his studies because of the guilt he felt towards his father, illustrating the effectiveness of his father's Asian parenting style: the father did not cane the son but instead spent an hour with him every day, reviewing his school work: "the additional hour [...] meant that [father] actually had no time for rest and relaxation. This gave [the son] a sense of guilt and strengthened [his] determination not to fail [his father]" (48).

Similarly, Kwek Hong Png notes that he worked very hard to succeed because he did not want to face his family with news of failure (75). The concept of the family and the particular emphasis on duties and obligations to other family members (which could also be extended to encompass other members of a community which one belongs to) under the influence of Confucian values thus gives rise to a particular form of social discipline.

Hard Work

Apart from the emphasis on the family, hard work/discipline was very much of the Asian Values rhetoric and was deeply embedded in the collective imagination of Chinese migrant societies, although unlike other values such as the emphasis on the family, it was also a continuation from the "ideology of survival". In the preface to *The Singapore Story* (1998), Lee Kuan Yew writes that it was "this drive in an immigrant Asian society that spurred [Singapore] on to fight and win against all odds" (9). The myth of the poor Chinese boy who achieves success through hard work is reflected in many of the titles of the autobiographies such as "From Chinese villager to Singapore Tycoon" or

“From Third World to First” or “The Barefoot Boy from Songwad”, reflecting a kind of progressive narrative that rewards and values hard work.

The narrative of the penniless Chinese immigrant who arrives in Singapore with nothing more than dreams and an ability to work hard again acts as a disciplinary mechanism in many of the autobiographies. Some of the pioneer figures, when writing their narratives, took pains to emphasise their humble beginnings, or, in the case of those who were born to well-off families, to adroitly conceal the fact. In *Son of Singapore* (1972), Tan Kok Seng attributes his success to his willingness to learn and work hard: “If you’re prepared to use your two hands, you’ll never starve to death” (121). Lee Kuan Yew neglects to mention his advantageous connections, preferring instead to emphasise his ability to work hard. He was in fact well-connected with the affluent Straits Chinese upper class (Turnbull 246). In order to maintain coherence with the myth of the hardworking Chinese immigrant, a lot of the action of the autobiographies is reworked and made subservient to the aims of the larger narrative. In Lien Ying Chow’s *From Chinese Villager to Singaporean Tycoon* (1992), curiously enough, even entertainment and going to nightclubs is described as hard work; he writes that “[there] was a lot of entertainment, but it helped us. I remember we entertained one of the Dutch banks in Jakarta. And in the end, they felt that we worked hard and switched their agency to us” (94). Entertainment is classified as work and not as pleasure since under the Asian Values campaign, pleasure was constructed as being inimical to the culture of discipline and hard work one supposedly had to impose on oneself if one were to succeed. There was thus a real fear of

pleasure in the 1980s/1990s which would explain why entertainment is being reframed as work here.

A discourse of vigilance and discipline is constantly generated in these narratives. Great pride is taken in emphasising one's ability to work hard as well as in detailing punishing work schedules. In his Foreword to *The Singapore Story*, Lee Kuan Yew recounts with some delight how his assistants wondered if the time stamp on his computer was faulty as he returned his drafts to them at 3 or 4 in the morning. He assured them that it was correct. There is also a fear of excess, which could lead to a lack of self-reliance and a decline in discipline/vigilance. In *Destined to Survive*, Yeo Tiam Siew describes his first impression of Penang:

In fact, to my mind, the place had almost too much of everything. Soon after we arrived on the island, I noticed what a bad effect the plentiful wealth and indolent lifestyle appeared to have upon the children of the rich [...] They were undisciplined, pampered and spoiled and despite the advantages of their parents' wealth, many of them were growing up ill-equipped and under-educated to face the harsh realities of the world (96).

This reads as a kind of cautionary tale to the reader: inherited wealth is impermanent and it is better to trust in one's own abilities. The children of the rich are portrayed as spoiled and indolent and are thus constructed as a kind of negative example.¹²

¹² This is not to say that there are no moments in the text which slip out of the disciplinary mechanism. For example, in *A Lifetime with Hong Leong* by Kwek Hong Png (1987), the cover photo is that of Kwek against the backdrop of a skyscraper and a luxury car, even though thrift (as opposed to excess) is supposed to be one of the key Asian Values.

Masculinity

Although masculinity was never mentioned in official discourse on Asian Values, they were implicitly coded as masculine. Lee Kuan Yew had said that if a person loses his cultural backbone, he risks being “a weak digit” and becoming a soulless, enervated creature. The metaphors used in the Asian Values debate, and before (during the push for a “rugged society”) were always associated with masculine energy. Furthermore, in Confucianism, an individual aspired to be a gentleman or *junzi* responsible for taking care of weaker members such as women.

Most of these pioneer narratives were written by men and enforced notions of masculinity. Under the banner of Asian values, many of these pioneer figures fashioned themselves as Confucian gentlemen. Confucianisation of one’s identity meant the adoption of a certain outlook of oneself and of one’s companions. One of Confucius’ most quoted sayings is that one should not offend “women and pernicious men”. By grouping women and pernicious men together, there is an implicit value judgment placed on women: women are seen as incapable of reason and morally inferior to the reasonable, placid and far-sighted Confucian gentleman. Even though Confucianism in Singapore took on slightly different properties, the bias towards authoritative males still remained.

In *The Barefoot Boy from Songwad*, Owyang writes that “they [referring to the pioneer generation] emerged from the baptism of adversity much stronger and better individuals, who, with a singleness of purpose and a determination to succeed, went on to make something of themselves” (21).

The plural form (“they”) used immediately connotes commonality, suggesting an implicit assumption that all members of the pioneer generation acted in this certain way. What is also interesting is that “baptism of adversity” is also associated with the phrase “baptism of fire” and warfare, thus lauding the courage of this group of pioneers, who are being portrayed as soldiers.¹³ There is also a frequent mention of the disciplined masculine body, which is described as “lean”.

Enterprise

Linked to the concept of masculinity, there was an emphasis on self-reliance and entrepreneurship. Many of the pioneer figures who wrote their narratives were either entrepreneurs or bankers. This is likely to be because Asian Values placed emphasis on enterprise and entrepreneurial activities and had a commercial side to it. However, because Asian Values differed from the earlier ideology of survival/pragmatism, all commercial activities still had to be subsumed under the greater narrative of community/family.

Since enterprise was something that was encouraged, most auto/biographies contain episodes on how protagonists made use of the opportunities inherent in their lives in order to thrive and prosper. This was especially so during the Second World War when the protagonists did not just survive the war but even prospered. Lee Kuan Yew profited from the black

¹³ The word “baptism” is associated with renunciation, putting off the old in order to lead a new life. It implies that men are essentially fallen creatures,¹³ and have to undergo a process in order to be purified and lead new lives. Unlike other Chinese philosophers such as Mencius, Confucius did not state whether man was born good or evil, but stated that even though men may be similar at birth, they may be poles apart in later life due to the differences in environment and self-cultivation.

market, learnt Japanese so that he could work as a translator and sold homemade gum, eventually earning enough to pay for his further education in Britain (92). Yeo Tiam Siew bought over a rubber mill when the post-war demand for rubber was high, thus enabling him to make major profits (148). Lien Ying Chow fled Singapore with diamonds, started his bank business while hiding from the Japanese in China because many bankers, industrialists and entrepreneurs were also in Shanghai during the war (37). This sort of narrative was only possible in retrospect (in narratives written many years after the war, during the 1980s when most of the narratives were being written) because of the value given to entrepreneurship and capitalist activities in post-independent Singapore. In the years following the war, people would not have talked about such activities because it would have been seen as profiteering or collaborating with the enemy for one's personal gain. This could also only have been possible in the particular slant that Asian Values took in Singapore in the 1980s/1990s because Confucius frowned upon trade and the making of money, believing that it led to greed. However, Singapore could not afford a wholesale adoption of Confucian values; the result was a rather curious mixture. Businessmen took pains to emphasise their integrity and values in the midst of money-making and the showing off of their wealth – the cover of Kwek's autobiography shows him posing against a brand-new car and a tall skyscraper (symbols of arrival) and many of the pioneer narratives include a photograph of the narrator's house and sprawling premises.

There was, however, an implicit system of checks and balances: it was not right for one to make money at the expense of other people. There was thus an attempt to portray the making of money as something that is natural in

some texts: in *The Barefoot Boy from Songwad*, the older Owyang is quoted as saying “Banking is like a tree. It can only grow so much a year. You cannot force it” (39). The nature of this metaphor causes the reader to link business with something that is natural and organic, and not something that one has to strive for or use underhand means in order to succeed. Business people were also portrayed as philanthropists who made money in order to give it away and not for their own selfish or greedy consumption.

When two values, such as enterprise and morality are in conflict, morality is always preferred over enterprise. In some cases, morality or sacrifice for a higher purpose is used to justify the lack of enterprise and success. In Ho Rih Hwa’s *Eating Salt* (1991), he recalls that some students bought parcels of vacant land and hoarded them so as to make money from the investment. However, he did not. In justifying his actions, he writes that “they were much brighter than [he] was and needed these to combat inflation, but [he] had no business sense then, neither did [he] think what they did was justified. At that time, [he] was a true patriot and [he] felt that all people should unite to contribute to the war effort and not look out for one’s own interest” (80). Because of the pernicious effects of inflation, Ho ended up having to borrow money from his aunt for his studies. Being a “true patriot” seems to be a retrospective justification since what is mentioned first is that he seems to have forgotten about the need for guarding against inflation. However, in order to maintain the coherence of the narrative – being someone who is good at enterprise, and someone who is able to care for the needs of the community, and also to justify his mistake – Ho’s narrative subordinates personal gain under obligations to the community.

Chineseness

Since Chinese values and the Chinese language were very much on the rise during the Asian Values campaign, many of the auto/biographies reflect their support of Chinese culture and values. Even the English-educated Dr. Yap Pheng Geck (who was one of the members of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce), laments his lack of “an adequate education in Chinese” (25):

My life would have been greatly enriched and my public activities more effective if I had been able to read and write and speak properly in Chinese which I consider one of the greatest and most expressive languages in the world. ‘Livelihood above culture’ had been the stumbling block in my [career].

We can see that English is constructed here as the language of commerce (“livelihood”) whereas Chinese is coded as the language of culture/heart. Bearing in mind what Lee Kuan Yew has said about Chinese providing cultural rootedness, we see that there is a change regarding public perception of the Chinese language. Instead of something that was regarded as useless, impractical (during the immediate post-independent period), it is now regarded as essential, something which would enable a person to become more effective and efficient in the new world where Chinese was becoming more important.

More positive examples are also abundant, in which the Chinese culture, especially proverbs and idioms are shown to have a positive impact on the writers’ lives. In *The Barefoot Boy from Songwad*, Owyang

highly recommend[s] the study of Classical Chinese to anyone [...] it incorporates several thousand years of Chinese wisdom and philosophy. [...] It helps to sharpen one’s analytical ability and improve one’s understanding of the laws of nature and behavior. [...] Both my father and I benefited immensely from the philosophy and teachings of Classical Chinese scholars [...] The subject matter was normally self-discipline, self-improvement and ways of dealing with people. An example of this was the quotation: “Do not

get carried away by emotions. Avoid too frequent meetings with friends.”
(52)

The active promotion of the Chinese culture is made much more effective by the real life testimonies of the narrators, which causes the reader to reflect on the benefits of a Chinese education without being overly conscious of the fact that the Chinese culture is being promoted to them. Furthermore, the reader-writer performs a reading of the text – in this case, classical Chinese texts/proverbs and becomes transformed in the process. The reader witnesses this transformation – “into tissue and blood” (Foucault 213) and may also see the need for discipline – weeding out any form of excess.

Even though Chinese-ness was constructed as the language of the heart/culture, there was also, almost paradoxically, a sense of pride in the ability of the Chinese, a kind of cultural superiority that would translate into business superiority. In the biography of Lien Ying Chow, given prominent space is this endorsement: “Lien fits comfortably into the worldwide overseas Chinese community, which investment banker Barton Biggs of Morgan Stanley terms ‘the most dynamic group in the world.’ Biggs adds, ‘No one is more entrepreneurial or intensely commercial.’ In every nation of Southeast Asia, where overseas Chinese are only about 6% of the 300 million total population, they are the most predominant force in business” (28). In this statement, the preciseness of the figures is calculated to lend weight to the statement’s credibility. Also, the fact that a non-Chinese, Barton Biggs, uses superlatives to describe the Chinese business community would also boost the Chinese community’s sense of pride, leads to the formation of a cultural self in the text, which others can identify with.

Eating Salt: An Autobiography

In order to show how these auto/biographies can act as policing agents as well the specific ways in which they do so, I will look at Ho Rih Hwa's autobiography *Eating Salt* in greater detail. *Eating Salt* is ostensibly a straightforward narrative about a Singapore-born boy who becomes a rich and successful businessman and ambassador. Ho constructs his autobiography as a romance or Bildungsroman, telling the story of a poor boy who achieves success through hard work. He "had always thought of [himself] as a poor boy from the boat yard of Tanjong Rhu, who, through luck and hard work, had become a fairly successful businessman" (254). On closer examination, however, we see that Ho puts himself through a process of self-examination and discipline that is very much like that described by Foucault in "Technologies of the Self". We see that Ho is very much influenced by Confucianism and self-discipline.

Asian Values are consistently extolled over Western ones and Ho's narrative is shaped according to the superimposition of the Asian Values narrative. Even in the Publisher's note, we can see this happening. Ho's life is fashioned according to certain cultural norms. He is described as an "Asian entrepreneur" who held on to "traditional Chinese tenets of behaviour" (4), an example of "a simple, hardworking and successful son of the Chinese immigrant society, the kind of man who helped build Singapore into what it is today" (6). We see that from the above two quotes, Asianness and Chineseness are repeatedly emphasised and have become implicitly coded as good and valuable. These sentences recall how, in the Asian values- rhetoric, there was

a conscious effort made to retain the putatively Chinese roots of the Chinese in the midst of modernisation and industrialisation. In Ho's own narrative, Asian values are formulated in oppositional terms to Western values, enforced on a narrative level by Eakin's notion of relational subject formation. When in Japan, Ho describes how he was so impressed by the simple and hardworking Japanese way of life that he studied very hard, day and night and seldom went out at all (43). In contrast, he portrays the way of life in America as wasteful (108-109) and undisciplined, something that is *other*. Discipline is constantly preferred over a more leisurely, less painful way of life, therefore constructing repeated patterns of choice constitutive of an implicit value system which the reader assumes to be morally superior.

The narrative of Asian values, consisting of elements such as communitarianism, thrift, hard work, enterprise and the family repeatedly appear in the narrative and function as a form of self-regulation, shaping the narrative. Ho attributes his reasons for doing certain things to the above values. Communitarianism is repeatedly brought up and preferred, as opposed to individualism, which is vilified. Even in the sporting arena in school, Ho attributes his participation in Asian sports such as team sports rather than Western sports such as tennis or golf (30) to communitarianism. He claims that he feels Western sports were individualistic since they concentrated on the performance of the individual. The emphasis on sporting activities is also important as sport becomes an exercise to discipline the body and not merely a pleasure activity. Pleasure, as opposed to discipline, in the Asian Values discourse has become coded as Western, degenerate and hedonistic, and these are cited as the reasons for the decline of the West. Narrative becomes reality

in Ho's case as he acts to realise what he has read, "fashioning [...] accepted discourses, recognised as true, into rational principles of action" (Foucault 209); he actively prefers that which is coded as Asian and belatedly justifies his actions according to Asian Values such as discipline and communitarianism.

Text also becomes constitutive of reality and shapes the self (Foucault 211) through the process of writing. Ho practises the act of recording his expenditure down to the exact cent (130).¹⁴ Bearing in mind that thrift/self-control was an important part of Asian Values, this act of recording forms part of the *hupomnemata* that Foucault discusses in "Self-Writing" – a record of accounts that serves as an aid and a reminder to the writer not to overspend. In this act of writing (more specifically, recording), the writer is exercising discipline on his life by his writing. Because the narrator knows that he will have to give an account of his spending (and his life) to himself and to the would-be reader later, the imagined gaze of the judge (himself) becomes an act of surveillance that polices his actions, causing him to spend very little even though nobody is actually watching him.

Furthermore, he also records what he ate and what he did not eat with an amazing degree of precision and detail. As a student in Chengdu, the food that the school provided was very poor and one could not get enough to eat. Initially, he bought supplements such as pig's liver noodles and eggs. However, when he saw that his classmates (some of whom were war refugees on government scholarships) were surviving on the bare essentials, he stopped eating the extra meals and did not spend any money at all (81). Here, we see

¹⁴ This practice brings to mind Benjamin Franklin's plan to cultivate his character by a list of thirteen virtues in his *Autobiography* (1771-1790). He creates a book with columns for each day of the week, in which he marks with black spots his offenses against each virtue.

that Ho acts as a kind of reader-figure: the text that he consumes is the example of his fellow students who survive without extras. This text thus becomes a kind of disciplinary mechanism which acts upon Ho, who enforces discipline and privation in his own life, inflicting physical hardship and weight loss upon himself, even though nobody actually checks on him and he has enough money.¹⁵ This is reinforced by the other texts that he has read in his life: having internalised the Chinese proverb that “[t]he more one can endure salty food, the better the man” (32), Ho exhibits a strong preference for salty food in his life. The text thus acts as an instrument of discipline: it serves as a constant reminder and causes Ho to act in a particular way which is not spontaneous or natural.

Ho’s form of discipline is a particularly Confucian one.¹⁶ Ho claims that he was heavily influenced by Confucian ethics, especially the values of “loyalty, filial piety, kindness, love, faith, honour, benevolence and peace” (18). When remembering his father, he writes that “[l]ike many Chinese, my father followed the golden rules upheld by traditional Confucian schools of thought. [...] He believed firmly in work and self-help [...] Taoist priests and Buddhist monks, to him, were unproductive and thus no better than beggars” (34). We can see that he associates Confucianism and agnosticism with masculine self-reliance and rationalism where one relies on the self and one’s own sense of right and wrong is influenced by Confucian ethics and not reliant

¹⁵ Eakin has shown how one’s self and identity are constructed through narratives, following certain narrative conventions. These narratives may come from a common cultural fund of stories, proverbs, cautionary tales or myths. In this autobiography, Ho’s own life narrative is constructed according to culturally prescribed norms and his life can be observed as actually beginning to replicate the narratives that he reads.

¹⁶ By this, I am referring not to the original teachings of Confucius but to the particular form it took when it was propagated as part of the Asian Values discourse in Singapore in the 1980s/1990s.

on an external source of help (from gods), whereas he associated Buddhism with feminine superstition; his mother is described as praying to gods as if “she were buying insurance” (34). This act of worship is portrayed as frantic, unthinking and irrational. Therefore, Ho’s concept of Confucianism is very much tied to Asian Values – Confucianism in Singapore continued to take on a very pragmatic face as Asian Values evolved from pragmatism and the ideology of survival before the 1980s.

The imagined gaze of the reader and his/her would-be response to his narrative act as a restraining function on the process of self-telling. Ho imagines his father-in-law’s approval at least three times in the narrative (121, 141, 193), seeing it as a test (of his character), even though the father-in-law did not actually say anything. He imagines what the father-in-law might have said: “Down in his heart, I think he admired our spirit and our willingness to rough things out” (141).¹⁷ This creates a kind of self-censorship in the narrative: perhaps wary of the reader’s judgement, he over-compensates by repeatedly emphasising the hardship that he had to go through. When this narrative of hardworking but poor scholar comes under siege by another competing narrative (poor boy marrying into rich family and becoming rich through marriage), Ho emphasises that his father-in-law had said at various points that he would not be given a privileged position in the company just because Ho was his son-in-law. The father-in-law is characterised as frugal, shrewd and conservative, who made Ho start from the bottom as a delivery boy (122). All this evidence was collated to prove Ho’s point that his father-

¹⁷ We know that Ho married Li Lien-Fung, whom he met at Cornell University and that Li’s father, K.C. Li was a very rich man who had made his fortune in America. Subsequently, K.C. Li placed his businesses in Asia under the care of Ho, after Ho failed to get a steady job in America after graduation. Because of his sense of inferiority, Ho records that he and his wife had many fights over finances early in their married life (119).

in-law did not favour him just because of their relationship, but that he had had to earn this approval.

The act of writing is thus a disciplinary mechanism. Ho's life is shaped, via alignment with the larger discourse, into the particular product that it is when it arrives in our hands. We see that there is a conscious effort on the part of Ho to align his narrative to the discursive construction of Asian Values of hard work, thrift, education, family and discipline. Because the constructed self constantly has to strive to fit into the narrative, the narrative performs a policing and restraining function. Although there are moments in the text which slip out of policing – for example, Ho recalls that he sabotaged a dance because he felt that it was frivolous (48) at a time when China was at war with Japan but went to Kuala Lumpur with his family to watch a football match soon after (60) – the disciplinary mechanism in Ho's text functions in such a way that it governs the formation of self and the telling of his narrative.

The goal of the Asian values campaign was to produce moral subjects, in a way that was much subtler and did not involve actual institutions of power such as the police, but was just as crucial in enforcing social discipline. As Lee Kuan Yew said, "No child should leave school after nine years without having the software of his culture programmed into his subconscious" (qtd in Tamney 26). This statement shows how each citizen who had gone through the programme was to act in a certain way befitting the values that had been ingrained in him/her, believing these values to be natural. An autobiography can be seen as a particular form of text that is particularly amenable to achieving this result. According to Foucault, a text is a mechanism for producing docile subjects. It encourages wholesale consumption and

absorption due to the form of the narrative: a recognisable mode, a beginning, middle and end. It produces certain effects on a reader because it professes to be factual and therefore urges the reader to take it as real or at surface value. We can see that Ho's narrative subtly brings out and champions Asian values, in a factual, seemingly objective and artless way that makes it appeal to the reader. Autobiographies work in a different and much more insidious way from government speeches or a Moral Education lesson precisely because most readers do not suspect autobiographies of containing ideological messages.

Furthermore, it is clear that just as Ho and his narrative are influenced and policed by internalised messages about a leading a Confucian, disciplined life, Foucauldian technologies of the self are also incipient in Ho's autobiography and work on the unsuspecting reader. The binaristic constructions in the book provide both a role model and a negative example are set up in order to guide the reader to make a correct choice as to which model he will follow. Ho constructs a certain kind of reader and addresses him intermittently, thereby writing him into the narrative. When narrating the story of how his elder sister took care of him in his younger days, he adds that he does not see this kind of selflessness in the younger generation, who are "too selfish to think of anyone but themselves" (16). Since in the Author's note, he states that he wrote this book for his children, his implied audience (his children's generation) is assumed to be self-centred, not at all like the "older generation" who were supposedly less individualistic. The factual nature of the statement – *all* members of the younger generation are necessarily more individualistic since they have not gone through as much in life – makes the

reader accept it unquestioningly as truth. In “Self Writing”, Foucault shows how the act of imagining the disapproval of others has a very powerful function: “it palliates the dangers of solitude; it offers what one has done or thought to a possible gaze” (207). When describing the act of correspondence, in which the writer *addresses* the reader, the sensation that the reader feels is akin to being in the physical presence of the writer, to whom he is accountable. A reader who is reading this statement is naturally constructed as a child who is being criticised by an elder, thus he is likely to adopt a pose of humility and remorse and in a position to accept the advice of the mentor/narrator. The result is that the reader is likely to accept the truth of his individualism, reflect on and examine his own life, admire the older generation for their self-sacrifice, and seek to be more communal – one of the governing tenets of Asian values.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that Asian values had a major influence on the narratives that were written in the 1980s/1990s by the pioneer figures. These narratives perform a policing and disciplining function; those who did not endorse the values of hard work, family and thrift could be seen as antithetical to Asian values and to the national ideology and therefore excluded.

The form of the autobiography, in concealing choice and in putting forth the values of a particular worldview, gives the impression that this is the way that things are or should be and shapes the worldview of the

unquestioning reader. In *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life* (2002), Jerome Bruner describes the act of writing and self-formation as a process that is “outside in” (65); we constantly construct and reconstruct our selves to meet the needs of situations that we encounter; similarly, in autobiography, we tend to express what we think others expect us to be like, according to social codes that constitute “appropriate public self-telling” (66). These cultural and social codes also provide interpretive devices (Eakin 1999; 120) with which we make sense of experience.

The fact that these are narratives of the pioneer generation of Singapore creates the impressions that certain values have always been a part of Singapore’s culture and were behind the reasons for the success story of Singapore. When reading about these narratives that form part of the social history of Singapore, readers are led into believing that a certain kind of narrative had always been present since the early days, a narrative that “suits circumstances so comfortably that it even conceals the possibilities of choice” (Bruner 1993; 39), without considering how certain events in the past may have been narrated in a particular way so as to suit the needs of the present.

In the next chapter, we will examine how, in the next generation, new narratives had to be found when the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis dealt a severe blow to the Asian values that the Singapore Economic miracle had been attributed to and how later auto/biographies evolve compared to the auto/biographies studied in this chapter.

Chapter Two: Auto/biographies written in the 1990s and 2000s

In Chapter One, the auto/biographies of those who had arrived in Singapore, settled down, made their fortunes, and started to write their stories in the 1980s were discussed. I have also shown how the auto/biographies studied in Chapter One seem to reflect the cultural messages inherent in Asian Values and how writers exercise discipline on their narratives in order to “take stock” (Foucault 1988; 33) of one’s life in accordance with some of the narratives they have adopted – in this way, story becomes constitutive of reality. In this chapter, I will show how, as compared to the auto/biographies in Chapter One, there is a move away from Asian Values in the auto/biographies written in the 1990s and 2000s. However, it is also equally apparent that there is still a need for coherence and fit and the need to find new narratives. In the construction of new narratives, Foucauldian technologies of the self can still be observed although there is also a negotiation with previous modes of story-telling.

Although Asian Values did not disappear entirely from the national consciousness, many of these narratives that are studied in this Chapter were written after 1997, when the Asian Financial Crisis had dealt a severe blow to the doctrine of Asian Values (which comprised values such as hard work, family, thrift, and social networking) that was so influential in the 1980s. The Financial Crisis meant that there was a move away from the virtues of Asian Values and their importance to the economy at a time when the Asian economies were doing so embarrassingly badly.

In January 1991, a White Paper on Shared Values was published and subsequently institutionalised as national ideology. These Shared Values were

(1) community over self, (2) upholding the family as the basic building block of society, (3) resolving major issues through consensus instead of contention, and (4) stressing racial and religious tolerance and harmony (qtd in Chua 35). The grip that these Shared Values had on the social imaginary, however, could not be seen in such a palpable way in the auto/biographies written in the 1990s and 2000s, compared to those in the earlier chapter, suggesting that the power of these Shared Values was significantly weakened.

At the same time, the acceleration of globalisation since the 1990s also caused deep-seated anxiety over the possible fragmentation of the country. In 1997, the Singapore Public Service created a Scenario Planning Office (SPO) in order to think about and prepare for the future. They published an article entitled “The Year 2020: A Home Divided and Hotel Singapore” (Sunday Times, 14 September 1997), in which they imagined that in 2010, either “in the face of an economic downturn in 2010, social fragmentation worsens and a sense of vulnerability prevails” or “by 2020, the best and brightest Singaporeans who lack strong ties to the country, have left for greener pastures” (cited in Kwok and Ali, 114). No longer could the smug self-sufficiency of Asian Values serve Singapore in the new millennium. Moreover, the September 11 2001 incident, the subsequent War on Terror and the outbreak of SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) in 2002 also had important implications on the national psyche. There was an added sense of vulnerability and the recognition that changes would have to be made.

Furthermore, in an increasingly globalised world, there can be observed more of a move away from a static alignment with one’s racial/familial group and values. With more and more Singaporeans exposed

to the Internet and spending prolonged periods of time abroad in the course of work and study, coupled with the rapid changes in the 1990s and 2000s, there would understandably be a process of negotiation and change when formulating one's own identity, as opposed to the past i.e. migrant Chinese. Anthony Giddens describes how "the modes of life brought into being by modernity have swept us away from all traditional types of social order, in quite unprecedented fashion" (4). The process of disembedding, the movement away from the fixities of tradition (53) and kinship ties (100-1), and consequently, the alignment of the individual with other groups which they feel more akin to, resultantly produce a set of auto/biographies which challenge and react to the previous set of narratives in very interesting ways. Even in the more mainstream auto/biographies such as *Living the Singapore Dream* (2007), and Jannie Tay's *Time to Live* (2002), which still champion the success story, there are stark differences from the earlier auto/biographies.

In facing and negotiating with the new challenges of the 1990s/2000s and finding new ways of narrating the self, self-policing techniques are still evident, and yet the auto/biographies written in this period are to a certain extent less coherent. Fissures and departures from the norm can be observed to be more common. There are also more instances in some of the texts in which the persona shows an awareness of the lack of fit between his narrative and the mainstream narrative but makes no effort or is unable to reconcile the two. Most of auto/biographies are also more unconventional in form, reflect global influences, and many lack the steady self-assurance of the first group of auto/biographies. There are also many more auto/biographies written in this

period than before, and many of these are written by women and marginalised groups of people, for example, transsexuals, homosexuals and the disabled.

Most of these auto/biographies which were written later are less linear or straightforward than the ones studied in Chapter One. Sim Wong Hoo's *Chaotic Thoughts from the New Millennium* (2000) is certainly unconventional in form. It is spiral-bound, like a notebook, contains odd typefaces, random paintings and PowerPoint slides. At the left hand side of each page, there is a column containing "links" to other pages, resembling the navigation bar, and reflecting the influence of non-traditional media such as the Internet and hypertext fiction. Dick Lee's *Adventures of the Mad Chinaman* (2004) also bears inflections of the changing times. The language used, such as "hyper rewind to 1773" (22) and "fast forward to 1870" (23) is heavily influenced by technical terms and reflects how our experience of time seems to have been altered by the appearance of new media – the narrative is non-chronological and skips back and forth in time. It is also a lot more fast-paced, as compared to the narratives written by the previous generation.

The Policed Self and the Singaporean Success Story

In "Technologies of the Self", Foucault writes that "technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality [...] implies certain modes of training and modification of individuals, not only in the obvious sense of acquiring certain

skills but also in the sense of acquiring certain attitudes” (18). In dealing with the changing and more uncertain times of the 1990s and 2000s, there is still an emphasis on acquiring certain attitudes in the auto/biographies; however, certain values seem to have gained in importance.

This can be seen most explicitly in *Living the Singapore Dream* (2007), which is a collection of stories compiled by Tan Yong Soon, currently Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Environment and Water Resources. It is a collection of twenty-four of the success stories of his former school mates and National Service mates. In this collection written in the third person, these people share their success stories and lessons they have learnt along the way and the book is organised according to themes and values that are deemed essential for success. In the Foreword to *Living the Singapore Dream*, Goh Chok Tong, Senior Minister, praises the book for its illustration of certain principles and values such as “hard work, willingness to learn, triumph over life’s imperfections, passion and persistence in the pursuit of goals, courage to take risks and seize opportunities” (13). Values such as the courage to take risks and seize opportunities are relatively new, as compared to hard work. The inclusion of this value is mainly due to the sense that in order to survive in an increasingly unpredictable world, one must be constantly able to adapt and change.

In recounting the past, Tan stresses the importance of mental preparation for hardship and overcoming of adversity. In talking about National Service, he writes that

[the] physical training was initially very tough, especially for someone who was not particularly athletic or active in sports. But mental preparedness was even more crucial. To the recruit, the camp is akin to the total institution described by sociologist Erving Goffman, where all aspects of life are

controlled and regulated by the authorities. I learnt that as long as one adopts the right attitude and is mentally prepared, NS need not be a miserable experience or a waste of time. I survived and even won a marksmanship badge. And we all grew tougher. (33)

In this narration, Tan shows the reader that mental preparation is more important than actual, physical discipline.¹⁸ A kind of training – that of learning to see opportunities in the midst of difficult situations – is taking place here, and it is what Tan deems to be more important than actual, physical discipline. It is also important to note here that learning to see opportunities, while lauded as a valuable skill in the changing times, is not just a top-down imposition by the government. It is practised by the subject himself. As opposed to Goffman’s total institution, the narrative emphasises the importance of the subject’s own attitude in governing the self. As Foucault writes, the way that discipline works is never through “the primary existence of a central point, in a unique source of sovereignty from which the secondary and descendent forms would emanate” (273); it is instead polymorphous. So even though the authorities dictate that the soldier participate in National Service, or go through some other hardship, the subject participates in it because he deems it to be beneficial to the self. In the process of writing this narrative, the writer disciplines his own thoughts. In the process of reading this narrative, the reader is also brought through the process of disciplining the mind so as to adopt a more positive attitude towards hardship.

In the same way, setbacks or difficulties are not portrayed as negative, but as something positive. In the Foreword, Goh writes that “[i]n the early years, our nation’s future was uncertain. Against the odds, Singapore

¹⁸ In a similar instance, Tan recalls “walking with fellow school mates from the school compound at Bras Basah Road [...] It wasn’t far, just over two kilometres, and the exercise kept [them] fit” (25).

prospered because of the vision and courage of its leaders, and commitment and hard work of its people” (14). This constant reframing of adversity would cause those who want to be identified with the success of the nation to re-examine their thoughts and attitudes regarding circumstances which were not so ideal.

The telling of Tan’s story is also constructed in such a way as to constantly reflect on the necessity of checking one’s thoughts and actions. Tan sets up a parallel between himself and two other friends, one from Iran and another from Britain on pages 37-38. The Iranian student is mentioned very briefly, and it is the repressiveness, corruption and excesses of his country which are foregrounded. The British student, who was one of two students from Trinity College to be awarded a First Class in Engineering (the other one being Tan himself) was found dead in a drain in the winter of the second year at Cambridge. Tan posits that he might have been mugged or might have fallen into a drain after a late night of partying. Whichever the case, both of these students seem to have been brought up as points of contrast – even though they were brilliant students, the lack of discipline, either in their home countries or in themselves, led to their ultimate downfall.

The structure of the book also helps to illustrate a larger didactic point to the reader. The stories are grouped according to various messages, for example, “Pursue your Goals and Passion and Perseverance” and “Venture out of your Comfort Zone”. The grouping of three or four narratives together in one such chapter subsumes the individual narratives to the larger policing power or message of the chapter. The narratives are rather uniform in terms of the number of pages and the similarities in their endings – every chapter ends

up with the persona attaining some form of success. The book reads like the same story repeated twenty-three times, even though it supposedly contains the stories of twenty-three different individuals.

The highly structured nature of the book points to a need to make the narratives fit into some kind of framework or fixed pattern. In *Making Stories*, Jerome Bruner observes that narratives are means of ordering experience and dealing with uncertain outcomes, coping with uncertain scenarios by spinning possible ones and conventionalising forms of human mishaps into recognisable genres (23) as an attempt at domesticating human error and surprise. In *Living the Singapore Dream*, the difficulty of forcing the stories into the same success mould, especially in the face of economic uncertainty, is side-stepped by expanding the notion of success, for example, service to the community. We can thus see that there is still a need to make meaning and coherence through the process of narrativisation; telling new stories is a means of ordering and making sense of the new times, while taking into account what has changed. The existence of the many framing devices – from endorsement messages to a foreword to a prologue, acknowledgements, and epilogue – also shows a strong need to embed these stories within many authorising discourses and to exercise control over the reception of the text.

The narratives also reflect global influences that have taken the place of some of the Asian Values. While still reminiscent of Asian Values – values such as hard work are trumpeted, *Living the Singapore Dream* also shows a move beyond Asian Values by quoting from more diverse sources. For example, in Chapter One, Epicurius, Confucius and the Spanish Baroque writer Baltasar Gracian are quoted. Even the movie “The Matrix Revolutions”

is quoted on page 163, reflecting openness to different types of media and influences. Passion and choice also seem to be more important than familial obligations. In the Chapter on “Pursue your Goals with Passion and Persistence”, Tan writes about the importance of passion and choosing one’s own path, even if it deviates from the wishes of one’s parents, which is clearly different from the emphasis on filial piety under the tenets of Asian Values. Less reliance on conventional or tried and tested methods of doing things is also something which is highlighted – Tan advises the reader to question authority (46) and to think for himself.

Negotiating Identity

Whereas some of the auto/biographies produced such as *Living the Singapore Dream* show the ability of the writer to exercise discipline on his life through the act of writing, other narratives utilise Foucauldian technologies of the self in a different way. In Josephine Chia’s *Frog Under a Coconut Shell* (2002), a semi-autobiographical account of a daughter who has to come to terms with her past, her migration to the U.K. and her mother’s Alzheimer’s disease, we can see that the writer constantly exercises discipline on the narrative in order to come to terms with her feelings of guilt because of the conflict between the opportunities afforded by the changing times and traditional role expectations.

In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault discusses the workings of power and writes that “it is not simply in terms of a continual extension that we must speak of this discursive growth; it should be seen rather as a dispersion of

centres from which the discourses emanated, a diversification of their forms, and the complex deployment of the network connecting them” (272).

Narratives, especially in the context of the 1990s and 2000s, are not simply an extension of the dominant discourse. Some tension is created in texts between the individual’s story and the larger narrative. In Chia’s narrative, one can see a constant negotiation with social norms and conventional narratives such as the Singapore Dream, while at the same time her awareness of her departure from it.

The narrator expresses her anxiety over role expectations and the confusion/instability of modern life, especially over her inability to fulfil her roles as daughter and mother in a traditional way, having had to migrate to England and married a foreigner. Compared to the previous generation, identities and roles are not as rigid and there is more fluidity in the construction of one’s identity. The increasing prevalence of group narratives, such as *Living the Singapore Dream*, *A Life Less Ordinary*, *Chicken Soup for the Singapore Soul*, *SQ21*, and *Singaporeans Exposed*, suggests an attempt to deal with the process of “disembedding” (cf. Giddens) and to find security and identification with others both inside and outside of the nation, not necessarily within one’s own family or racial group. Whereas in the auto/biographies discussed earlier, where people seemed to be provided with stable traditional/social roles (e.g. being part of a family business, or being part of a community), in the 1990s/2000s, there was no longer this stability.

On the one hand, the narrator claims to be grateful for the possibilities that have opened up to her because of education – from a village girl, she becomes an award-winning author and eventually leaves her first husband, re-

marries, and migrates to the U.K. On the other hand, she craves the stability of her past, noting that it was “simple and straightforward [...] in [her] grandmother’s and mother’s time, their roles so clearly defined” (24). The difficulties of creating a new life for herself overseas, having to deal with the guilt she feels at leaving her mother and children behind in Singapore – to the extent that she almost wishes personal voices and consequence were obliterated – are expressed intermittently throughout the text. She wishes half-seriously that her father, who had “always threatened to arrange a marriage for [her]” had done so, and says that “[p]erhaps things would have turned out better then” (27).

She judges herself rather harshly throughout the text, imagining the gaze of her detractors. The narrator compares herself rather unfavourably to her sister, as if to pre-empt any such criticism by first noting it herself: “[my sister] prides herself on being a sensitive, successful businesswoman. Rich, has a stable marriage and a stable family. Not like me. A failure. A broken marriage. Wounded children. Rescued only by an ang mo, a foreigner” (30). The fragmented sentence structure is a reflection of how she views her life and what she perceives other people think of her – as imperfect and deviating from the typical Singapore success story. Here, the process of examination and reflection produces not something which is positive or an exercise in self-improvement.

Her constant comparisons of herself with other people also reveal an unstable sense of self. Writing to silence real or imagined critics, she calls attention to the closeness of her relationship with her husband in order to deflect claims that she might have married him for his money and takes pains

to show that she is not profiting from her second marriage by mentioning that she flies economy class (32) and earns her own money. She also emphasises the retention of her Asian identity by saying that she never eats bread for breakfast (221), perhaps because bread is coded as Western food in the traditional Singaporean context, and does not speak with a British accent (9) even after migration, unlike her sister who picks up an Australian accent after a brief romance with an Australian boyfriend. While trying to forge a new identity for herself, she is very anxious about not conforming to the stereotype of the Asian woman who marries an older white man for his money: as a result, her identity seems to be based on what she does not want to be seen as, rather than something which is positive.

The narrator also does not seem to have a stable or rooted sense of self because it seems that her identity is constantly dependent on what other people think of her. For example, when talking about her skin colour, she says, “with my brown face unmade-up, I always look like a poor relation [...] It is interesting how I can be both beautiful and ugly at the same time. In the West, people admire my tanned complexion; in the East, the colour of my skin makes me out as a peasant” (32-33).

Dick Lee’s *Adventures of the Mad Chinaman* (2004) deals with the complexities of modern identity in a different way by challenging the norm and the terms of reference. The text shows the protagonist in elaborate get-ups and costumes and an awareness of the self as construct. There are also photographs of Lee performing his “Asian” identity and problematising it. This is in sharp contrast to the narratives discussed in Chapter One, where Chinese-ness/Asian-ness was taken as a given, something that was treated as

stable and essentialist. Lee, however, realises that identity in the modern world is a lot more complicated, especially when he goes to Japan for the first time. He “learnt a lot about modern Japan and the way the Japanese saw the world, particularly Asia [...] generally backward [...] still very traditional [...] The most shocking thing said to [him] was ‘You are Asian, we are Japanese!’” (225). This causes him to rethink previous classifications and what it means to be Asian or Chinese. He also realises the discrepancies between his experience growing up in Singapore and the predominantly British stories that he was reading in his childhood. The way he responds to the anxieties of forging his own identity, however, is markedly different from that in *Frog Under a Coconut Shell*. Throughout the text, we also see that there is a lot of emphasis on hybridity and mixing. On page 56, we can see that the music he listens to ranges from Tommy James to Sakura Teng to local groups. In his songwriting, he uses Singlish. His Peranakan identity – neither wholly Chinese nor Malay – is also played up.

Adventures of the Mad Chinaman exhibits a lot of confidence and optimism. There is more emphasis on change and daring to try new things, in alignment with the government’s encouragement of enterprise and innovation in the 1990s/2000s. For example, Lee writes: “I thought about the wonderful adventures I’d had, and the difficult period I had just come out of, and knew that everything would be fantastic from here on. Things really couldn’t get any better” (314).

There can therefore be observed a range of responses to the changing times. *Frog Under a Coconut Shell* shows more pessimism while *Adventures of the Mad Chinaman* revels in the opportunities proffered by the changing

times. One reason for this could be due to the different role expectations of men and women. While both move out of their comfort zones, take risks to pursue their dreams and achieve creative success, Chia seems to have been judged more harshly or rather, she perceives herself to be judged more harshly by societal norms because of her failure to be a good mother and daughter. We can see that the notions of success in the social imaginary e.g. the Singapore Dream, have progressed to give credence to creativity, perseverance and the spirit of change, but perhaps had not changed that much in terms of the unspoken norms by which society assesses women. Moreover, Chia herself does not respond to change in the same way that Lee does, choosing instead to stick to others' pre-scribed notions of identity and which she imposes on herself.

Narratives by Marginalised Groups

In addition to narratives written by fairly affluent, able-bodied and heterosexual individuals, in the 1990s and 2000s, there was a sharp increase in the number of auto/biographies written by people on the margins of society. As seen previously in Chapter One, Asian Values and the concept of the Confucian gentleman focussed heavily on masculinity, Chinese-ness, the family, and the physical fitness or ruggedness of the body. This inevitably excluded disabled people, homosexuals, transsexuals, and, to a certain extent, women. These groups of people were excluded from the mainstream both in terms of being represented in the national story and in real life, and thus these

narratives seem to embody the writers' desires to be written back into society, as well as to be recognised for their contributions to the nation.

Since the 1990s/2000s, however, there have been narratives published about the gay community in Singapore, such as Ng King Kang's *The Rainbow Connection* (1999), a study which looks at the links between the Internet and the Singapore gay community. Other narratives which look closely at gay identity include Johann S. Lee's semi-autobiographical novel *Peculiar Chris* (1992), Ng Yi-Sheng's *SQ21* (2006). Literature about homosexuals in Singapore before these publications was virtually non-existent except for a small number of research papers produced in the Sociology Department at the National University of Singapore, which spoke of this group of people. Narratives by transsexuals and transvestites have also increased. 1997 saw the production of *Bugis Street*, Singapore's first major commercial film, which featured real life transvestites and transsexuals (Offord 140). In 2003, Leona Lo, a transsexual, compiled *My Sisters, Their Stories*, a collection which contains the stories of different transsexuals, their processes of self-discovery and the difficulties they encounter while trying to deal with both their identity as well as adapting to mainstream society.

There was also a significant increase in the number of narratives written by disabled people in the 1990s/2000s. People became more willing to write about mental illness: in *Back from the Brink of Insanity* (2005), Rita Goh writes about her long struggle with schizophrenia. Others, such as David Lim and William Tan, both disabled athletes, write about their attempts to overcome their disabilities and break sporting records. Thomas Chua Chee Siong's *Beyond the Fall* (2005), is a narrative of his attempt at making the

most out of his situation when an accident left him a quadriplegic at age nineteen. These writers attempt to write themselves back into the mainstream by creating awareness of illness and disability and by showing how they can contribute to the Singapore society and economy. Many, like David Lim and William Tan, struggle to improve their physical fitness and stamina by disciplining their bodies and undergoing tough training regimes. At the same time, they can also be seen to be disciplining their narratives, by highlighting certain segments such as perseverance and diligence, in order to gain alignment with the mainstream narratives. What is also interesting is that in the earlier auto/biographies, narratives of disability and illness were non-existent because of the emphasis on the ruggedness and fitness of the body; in the later generation, these kinds of narratives became popular because of the emphasis on triumphing over obstacles.

The telling of these narratives was permitted and even encouraged by changes in the socio-political climate. There was an acknowledgement that with the increasingly affluent, liberal and well-educated middle-class, Singapore could not be ruled the same way as it had been before. The government needed to adopt a more consultative and inclusive approach. In *The Next Lap* (1991), Goh Chok Tong, then Prime Minister of Singapore, called for the involvement of every single Singaporean, because “[to] succeed, this programme needs the support of all Singaporeans [...] Success depends on every Singaporean putting in his best, and building together what none of us can achieve individually” (13). Along with the increasing emphasis on areas such as the quality of life, the arts, sports, creating a green city and a more international outlook, there was also an increasing emphasis on helping the

disabled, the low-income and the destitute, and on building a more gracious society.

One might think that the very difference inherent in these narratives would prove potentially destabilising to the mainstream narrative. Challenges to the mainstream narratives abound in the narratives of those who are different, especially those who are sexually deviant. Some challenge conventional notions of success, for example, the accumulation of material wealth, having children and having a good career. There are also attempts to move away from the State by aligning their narratives with larger narratives, which are more global in nature.

Because of the very nature of the narratives, the divergence from the norm can be seen to challenge the main narrative. This difference can already be found in the title of *SQ21: Singapore Queers in the 21st Century* (2006), written by Ng Yi-Sheng and edited by Jason Wee, a cheeky allusion to Singapore 21, a government initiative or vision for what Singapore was to be like in the 21st century. Singapore 21 called for a society which would “make every citizen count”. The repetition, in this case, however amplifies the difference between the two titles: Singapore 21 and Singapore Queers in the 21st Century. The title SQ21 is at the same time a reference to Singapore Airlines, or SIA, since SQ21 is an SIA flight number; thus, by making SQ stand for Singapore Queers, the title appropriates a national icon and makes it stand for something else, a subtly subversive act which poses a challenge to mainstream society by its very difference.

This difference can also be seen when one of the interviewees describes her previous attempt to conform. Despite her being aware of same-

sex desire, she says that “at age 15, [she] made a plan [to] get a career, something enough to finance [herself]. [She] would get a house and a car [and] have a family, with kids [...] There was no room in this plan for liking girls. So [...] [she] decided [...] to get a boyfriend” (64). This plan that she had is reminiscent of the “Singapore Dream”. As discussed in the Introduction, narratives have the power to “set forth powerful and persuasive truth claims – claims about appropriate behaviour and values” (Mumby 105), which can then provide models of behaviour and implicit sets of rules which people are expected to abide by. However, in this case, the power of the narrative, a recognisable version of the Singapore Dream, to shape lives is eventually disrupted by this individual’s decision to break away from the narrative.

The layout of *SQ21* also poses a challenge to more conventional narratives. Paragraphs or segments are arranged differently on the page; some pages contain a single paragraph which is surrounded by a lot of space. Quotes are pulled out and placed starkly against a yellow-colored page. For example, on page 85, the moment when Dominic Chua first “comes out” to his students is repeated on a separate, yellow-colored page: “Before we start our lesson today, I have something to tell you.” Such arrangement of the text imitates the layout of print media, for example, the Straits Times, where important quotes or quotes by important people are pulled out, to give emphasis. However, in the case of *SQ21*, such moments in the text represent dramatic moments of rupture, both visually (since some of the words are in bold and the colour of the page is different) and in terms of the departure or deviation of the protagonist from “normal” behaviour. Thus, we can observe both the conscious imitation of and departure from mainstream narratives.

Furthermore, such texts call into question all of the stable, essentialist qualities such as masculinity, Chinese-ness, exhorting by Asian Values in the 1980s. Like other Singaporeans who ventured abroad to work or study, Leona Lo faces immense tension and anxieties in the creation/consolidation of an identity. Apart from her gender identity, she has to grapple with the issue of racial identity. When she is studying in the United Kingdom, the fact that she reads poetry with a different accent from her classmates causes her to realise “English was not [her] language” (87), prompting her to wonder whether she should be studying Chinese Literature and History instead. Her difficulties in fitting into society also cause her to become acquainted with others who also cannot fit into ascribed roles in Singapore society. After a failed suicide attempt, she ends up in Ward 12, where she meets a scholar whose education at Cambridge was interrupted when her boyfriend jilted her and a mother of three who found it too stressful to become a housewife (50). Her own parents are also shown to deviate from the Singapore Dream; her father “embrace[d] the Singapore work ethic wholeheartedly. He believe[d] that the foundation of great wealth is hard work and a good education” (13). However, even though he worked “like a donkey” (13) selling pork ribs, he was eventually forced out of business. The existence of such narratives, which to some extent mimic the Singapore Dream – Lo studied at Hwa Chong Junior College, and was offered an overseas scholarship; the jilted genius was studying at Cambridge, on scholarship, which was considered a sure path to success in the Civil Service; the housewife had all the material trappings of middle class life; her father believed that hard work would eventually allow him to rise from a nobody to someone successful – pose a challenge to the easy correlation between hard

work, intelligence and success that narratives such as *Living the Singapore Dream* propagate.

However, as Foucault writes, “where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (*The History of Sexuality* 275). The title of *SQ21*, which can be seen as a challenge to those in power, is also at the same time reflective of a desire to be accepted by the Singapore community because the word “queer” is inserted behind the word “Singapore”. By naming the book *SQ21*, it is also a reminder to the committee behind Singapore 21, a reminder that in order for a more inclusive society to be a reality, gays should be given legal recognition, such as in the decriminalisation of “unnatural sex” (226).

A conscious effort which is made to portray gay identity as normal also reflects a negotiation with the mainstream. By attempting to interview homosexuals from all strata of society and cultural and religious backgrounds, *SQ21* aims to show that gays are “everywhere, and in another sense [...] everyone [and] in every demographic category and occupation” (227). Deliberate attempts are also made to encourage the reader to identify with this group of people. For example, even though the stories are written by Ng Yi-Sheng based upon interviews that were conducted with their subjects, all the stories are told in the first person.

In other narratives, writers from marginalised groups code their stories in recognisable forms and reiterate narratives present in the social imaginary in order to gain acceptance and resonance. For example, in *A Life Less Ordinary* (2005), the marriage/romance plot is foregrounded in the telling of

Johnny Ang's (one of Singapore's most well-known quadriplegic and mouth artist) story, perhaps to help readers relate to his story.

Narrative can also be seen as a means of rehabilitating lives and writing back into the folds of society in order to gain acceptance. David Lim's *Against Giants: the Life and Climbs of a Disabled Mountaineer* (2003) uses narrative as a means to reframe personal tragedy into something more positive. It starts with the account of Lim leaving the hospital after being admitted due to Guillain-Barré Syndrome, a neurological disorder he was diagnosed with after he came back from the first Singapore Mount Everest expedition. His leave-taking of the hospital is couched in language that is suggestive of being born again: the wheelchair will "propel" him "into the outside world" (1) and he is "entering a brave new world" (2). Writing his story thus enables him to re-imagine the episode of leaving the hospital, in the first chapter titled "Farewell", as an ending as well as a beginning. This immediately frames his disability more positively: it is simultaneously an end to his former life as an able-bodied athlete and signals a new beginning filled with possibility. Furthermore, writing enables Lim to imagine alternatives. He imagines his fellow hospital mates as a "gang" of Harley owners" (1). In the telling and re-telling of his story, Lim becomes the leader of a motorcycle gang, a hero, a dragon-slayer, instead of simply a disabled person. In this way, Lim's narrative constructs and produces the self.

Lim also employs the conventional framework of the "quest" narrative in the telling of his story. The title "Against Giants" and the various references to quests such as "I had slain another dragon in my head" (20) shows an attempt to align his narrative with larger narratives so as to give his experience

meaning. More importantly, the metaphors of mountain-climbing and dragon-slaying adhere to the national story of triumphing over one's circumstances, and of surviving despite the odds. By portraying his disability as a metaphorical giant or obstacle to be overcome, Lim ensures his story then resonates with other Singaporeans.

In auto/biographies of disability and illness, there is also a strong need to prove one's worth and usefulness to society. Robert F. Murphy writes in *The Body Silent* that "[d]isablement [...] is a pre-eminently social state [...] at one and the same time a condition of the body and all aspects of social identity" (195). Disability affects the disabled person's social relationships with other people and the disabled person has to think of how to fit back into society again. Even in quasi-autobiographical works such as Tan Guan Heng's *My Love is Blind* (1995), a fictional story about a blind protagonist by a blind author, the author taps into conventional notions of success. He invents a more glamorous fictional life whereby the protagonist, through sheer hard work and resourcefulness, manages to acquire wealth and fortune. He becomes a respected entrepreneur/bookseller, is chauffeur-driven, lives in a big house and has a secretary – all the material trappings of upper-middle-class society. Eventually, the woman who spurned him upon receiving news of his blindness returns to his side after being badly treated by the rich man she gave him up for. In this case, the ex-girlfriend can be seen as a stand-in for society. The same society which rejected him because of his disability and whose attention he so desires eventually accepts and loves him once he has managed to prove himself worthy. Scripting his story in the form of a quest narrative – overcoming the odds in order to attain success and love – which is a

recognisably conventional form, and his pursuit of the elements of the Singapore Dream (car, cash, respectability) thus enables him to normalise his story, and by extension, his protagonist.

Similarly, Leona Lo's story in *From Leonard to Leona: A Singapore Transsexual's Journey to Womanhood* (2007) echoes the language of progress. "From [...] to" and the metaphor of a journey not only reminds the reader of the quest narrative but the linear nature of the journey also emphasises the point that Lo has overcome many obstacles and is now better off. Lo writes in the Preface that "[the] darkest moments were but opportunities for the light to shine brighter. And now, [she is] stepping into a wonderful, abundant life" (iii). By using language that is reminiscent of rebirth – "light", "stepping into", "abundant" – and of self-discovery, growth and maturation, as well as Christian terminology, she also taps into the familiar mode of the Bildungsroman.

Since such narratives are coded in recognisable form in order to write their way into the national script, they are also frequently co-opted by larger organisations. William Tan, disabled marathoner, becomes a kind of spokesman for a new era which is seen as more uncertain, due to his championing of certain values – triumphing over obstacles and uncertainty. Tan's book *No Journey too Tough: My Record-Breaking Attempt to Race in 10 Marathons in 65 Days Across 7 Continents* (2006) is published by the National University of Singapore (NUS), which was also one of his sponsors in his record-breaking attempt, and Tan's achievements are used to enhance the image of NUS. In the Introduction, Tan writes that "[he is] sure NUS will continue to produce graduates who embody the same spirit of adventure and

perseverance in the face of formidable odds” (17). Tan’s narrative, then, fits neatly into the new ethos and is thus endorsed by various organisations, in a way that would not have been possible just twenty years earlier. The power of narratives to shape lives and to perpetuate themselves is still illustrated in these stories; however, the disciplinary mechanism of Asian Values does not have that much hold in the telling of the stories and seems to have been displaced by other kinds of narratives.

Therefore, although some of these narratives seem to threaten the mainstream narrative by their very difference, the very form of the narrative, in demanding closure and resolution, and also in perpetuating similar sorts of stories such as the quest narrative, ends up domesticating difference.

Jannie Tay’s story: *Time to Live*

Thus far, I have shown that while the auto/biographies in this Chapter show a move away from the Asian Values rhetoric, there is still a struggle to find coherence and meaning, to varying degrees of success.

Although Jannie Tay’s story is similar to the auto/biographies in Chapter One because of its focus on business, entrepreneurship and family – the Hour Glass, a leading timepiece business in Singapore, which Tay and her husband founded, grew from a family business, and its growth forms the background to Tay’s personal story – yet, because of Tay’s gender identity, Tay’s auto/biography is riddled with much more tension and fragmentation compared to those we have seen in Chapter One, even while there is a recognisable effort to fit into conventional success stories.

Firstly, what can be observed is that *Time to Live* is different in form from the more traditional auto/biographies studied in Chapter One. In contrast to the typical birth to old age narratives, it is not chronologically organised. The chapters are organised according to themes or messages – “Change”, “Entrepreneur”, “Transcendence” and “Being a Woman”. Furthermore, we see the influence of newer forms of media such as PowerPoint slides. There are also variations in typefaces and the use of asterisks.

What is interesting about Tay’s auto/biography is that there is a move away from traditional female roles such as housewife to newer roles that women start to play in the marketplace such as entrepreneur. However, while negotiating with societal expectations of women which are still changing, Tay falls back upon the unspoken codes of tradition. While celebrating her successes as an entrepreneur, she takes pains to discipline her narrative in such a way as to highlight her successes as a wife and mother.

For example, the choice of photographs seems to reflect Tay’s apprehension over how she is seen. Most are posed, formal shots of family and friends, accompanied by a careful selection of photographs representing Tay as wife, daughter, scholar, mother and businesswoman. Some also contain captions that direct the “reading” of the photograph: one, which shows Tay bending over her new-born handicapped daughter reads: “[s]trength in adversity: Jannie caring for her daughter, Sabrina (1982)”. Another, showing Jannie with baby son Michael in a watch shop, reads “[m]otherhood and work – Jannie and her son Michael (1976)”, which aims at illustrating Tay’s dexterity in managing both roles equally well.

Understandably, a lot of anxiety was involved in the construction of a new identity as a businesswoman, wife and mother in a time when gender roles and expectations were changing. In the Appendix, Tay addresses these expectations in a rather ironic way. Under “A successful man”, she notes, “is one who has achieved a certain status in society [...] whether he has a family, is married or divorced does not matter. The issue of whether he is a good father is unimportant” (130), whereas a “woman who has made a certain contribution to the field she is in and has achieved a certain status in society is often queried, such as whether she is married, single or divorced” (130) and she is then judged or stereotyped based on how well her marriage or children have turned out. What is odd about this is that Tay sounds almost bitter about the way that society has double standards for judging men and women; however, she still subscribes to it and exercises discipline on her narrative accordingly. In her Introduction, Tay states with optimism that she “believe[s] a woman can have it all and be a wife, a mother, daughter, sister, grandmother, professional and be involved in the community – if she should wish to do so. The choice is hers” (xiii).

Much of the conflict within the narrative seems to stem from the fact that while Tay is trying to break out of conventional stereotypes, she is at the same time paradoxically trying to subscribe to both traditional as well as changing social expectations and socially constructed roles. On the one hand, she wants to be known as someone who is unconventional, who dares to think out of the box, reflecting an entrepreneurial mindset that the government was

promoting in the 1990s/2000s.¹⁹ Tay seems to be proud of her enterprising, unconventional spirit and writes that “[t]he way [she] was brought up gave [her] confidence, some would say over-confidence” (15). On the other hand, there is a strong need to conform to societal expectations of what a woman should be in order to be socially accepted. Tay repeatedly states that “[she] never wanted to be in business; all [she] wanted was to be a mother” (12, 33, 56), even though it is apparent that she spends much more time on her business than she does on mothering. Starting off the auto/biography with the stories of her handicapped children, Sabrina and Michelle, also shows us that she wants to portray herself first as wife and mother and a strong, caring, and nurturing one at that. She also seems to accept socially constructed roles for women and gives advice to other women on how to “set priorities and to allocate time for each of these roles” (133), such as wife, mother, and working woman.

Furthermore, it can be observed that there exists, throughout the text, what Foucault termed “self-surveillance”. Tay is very conscious of public perception and there is a strong need to vindicate herself. In responding to the imagined gaze of the reader, on page 56, a matter-of-fact voice reports that “[in] the media, Jannie Tay has been dubbed ‘iron lady’, ‘dragon lady’, ‘woman of substance’, etc. and other labels to describe her business prowess. The media has also had a field day about the way she raised her children” (56). In order to deal with this perception, the story is crafted in such a way as to

¹⁹ In his essay “Singapore of the Future” (part of a collection of essays entitled *Singapore: Re-Engineering Success*, published by the Institute of Policy Studies in 1998, which delineated the various challenges in the 1990s and the ways Singaporeans would have to change their mindsets), Lee Hsien Loong writes that “[in] a rapidly changing world, we either adapt or become irrelevant” (2) and that “entrepreneurship and innovation will be key ingredients of economic success” (3), as Singapore strives to differentiate itself from its competitors.

portray Tay as a person who simply had her life shaped by natural forces instead of something she actively fought for, most probably because it is more socially acceptable for a woman to be passive rather than aggressive. Thus we are told that “[t]he transition from being a wife and mother into being a visionary leader in business came naturally to Jannie” (57) and that her husband was “naturally supportive”. There is also a strong emphasis on Fate in the narrative and “[f]ate [had] different plans for her life” (57). The shaping of the narrative, with the repeated emphasis on Tay following a prescribed and organic path, is thus a deliberate attempt to write against the stereotype of the “dragon lady”.

Aware that some might criticise her unconventional style of motherhood – her children were sent abroad to study in boarding schools from a young age – Tay includes a section in which her children, Audrey and Michael, are quoted in support of their mother’s decision (66). The narrative gives much justification as to why Tay chose to put her children in boarding schools (63), how it was a painful but “right” choice, and how they turned out well in the end (62-67). As is apparent in other parts of the narrative, Tay is portrayed as somewhat girlish, unthinkingly making good decisions borne out of good instincts; other people are then used to authorise her decisions and the consequences they had. This enables Tay to be portrayed somewhat passively and shields her from criticism.

There are further efforts made to address critics and detractors, which show that Tay is very conscious and anxious about what other people think or may think about her. In the Introduction, Tay writes that “[she] accept[s] that we cannot be perfect and will always be subject to judgment in the eyes of

others” (xiv), showing her awareness of the criticism that other people and the media have dealt her. In *Time to Live*, these are addressed both directly and indirectly. There are quotes from friends and associates littered generously across the book, which are targeted at these criticisms. This is subtly done because it is not part of the main story; yet, it helps to shape and change perception. For example, on page 26, Ong Joo Kin, one of Tay’s friends, writes that she “has great business acumen [and] because she is so successful, she attracted jealousy and enemies.” The criticism that has been targeted at her is thus explained away as mere resentment on the part of others.

Tay’s decision to move out of the family business, a case in which her ambitions as a businesswoman conflicted with the role expectations of being a good daughter-in-law, is framed in such a way as to make the decision seem the only logical and courageous choice. In Chapter Two, “Change”, the circumstances behind this decision are narrated in third person – “Even her in-laws recognised that a business opportunity existed [...] However, getting Lee Chay to change business tack was no easy task” (17) – to lend the account more objectivity and credibility. The chapter ends with a cliff-hanger: “Jannie realised that if she were to capitalise on this [business opportunity which her in-laws were not in favor of], she and Henry would have to move fast – and on their own” (18), giving the narrative a sense of urgency and inevitability. In the next Chapter, this episode is further developed and framed as something positive, with the subheading “Dare to be Different” (21) and prefaced by two quotes which support individual action and courage.²⁰ What others might criticise her for – turning away from the family business and taking the son

²⁰ “If you do not know where you are going, any road will take you there” Cheshire Cat (in *Alice in Wonderland*) and “Whatever you do or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it” Goethe (qtd in *Time to Live* 21).

away from the family home – is subsumed under another story plot – that of daring to venture out and try new things. One generation earlier, with the emphasis on family and neo-Confucian values, this would have been considered unacceptable behaviour for a daughter-in-law. However, the new emphasis on entrepreneurship and creativity is used to justify her way of doing business and of dealing with her family.

In this way, *Time to Live* is very different from narratives that were influenced by Asian Values, such as *Eating Salt*. There is less emphasis on family and more emphasis on the journey of the individual. Henry Tay, Jannie's husband, is frequently left out of the narrative, even though both of them built the Hour Glass together. He is given a token mention and thanked for his "support", even though we do not see much tangible evidence of this support in the main narrative. This could be due to Tay's anxiety not to be seen as someone who relied on others, especially her husband, who came from a well-to-do family. In this way, Tay's own story and efforts are foregrounded.

Although on the surface Tay's narrative seems to champion the values deemed necessary for survival in changing times – entrepreneurship, courage in the face of adversity (especially when two of her children were born with disabilities) – and she seems to be a successful woman by her own standards, the narrative is ironically fraught with insecurities and anxieties.

Conclusion

In "Forgetting to Remember", Janadas Devan argues that Singapore's history rose out of a realm of forgetting (22) and the reconstruction of an ideal

history. While this is true for narratives examined in Chapter One, with the creation and internalisation of a “Confucian heritage”, later narratives show a much more dialogic engagement with the global and these auto/biographies are therefore much more plural in nature. This is reflected in terms of subject matter, but also in form and structure. Narratives written by those who have ventured abroad or who have to grapple with identity issues in the midst of global influences vary in their responses – some manage these changes positively while some are nostalgic for earlier times.

Marginalised groups of people also began to tell their stories, partly due to changes in the socio-political climate. They may seem to challenge earlier narratives and types, such as the Confucian gentleman-ruler, or the self-made businessman, since many women, disabled people and homosexuals began to write their auto/biographies in this period. All these narratives deal with changing social roles and expectations and trying to find one’s place in the community. The negotiation that can be observed between resistance and fitting into mainstream narratives such as the Singapore Dream give rise to interesting tensions in the texts.

Conclusion

Auto/biography is a popular genre for both writers and readers because each auto/biography represents a solution or a remedy by generating recognisable narratives and presenting problems in a manageable and comforting way. The story of how Singapore was ejected from Malaysia and forced to become independent in unfavourable circumstances but still eventually managed to survive and become successful because of its hardworking, disciplined workforce who also had a heart for serving the community, has been repeatedly dramatised, so much so that it has become a part of the social imaginary. This same narrative appears in varying but still recognisable forms: from the success stories of entrepreneurs who have succeeded despite their humble beginnings to later narratives written by disabled athletes who would tell of their struggle to attain success despite the odds. As Singapore became increasingly affluent and a model success story for developing countries to emulate, Singaporeans began to take pride in and identify with the national story. Chua Beng Huat notes that “[s]ubsequent economic success has injected itself as an element of self-definition and pride in the people of Singapore, boosting their sense of national identification [...] indeed, the term success has become symbolically synonymous with the history of the past three decades since Independence” (104-5).

However, the longevity and pervasiveness of certain narratives, does not mean that they are to be taken as fact or truth. In Chapter One, I have shown how Asian Values became central to the social imaginary long after the

pioneer generation had become established in their careers; others began to believe that these values were indeed responsible for the success of Singapore, when in fact, these narratives might have been shaped retrospectively, as products of specific historical-cultural moments and reflective of certain ideological processes.

Existing narrative constructions may fail to gain popularity when the circumstances of life do not fit in so comfortably within the framework of the conventional success story. The auto/biographies studied in Chapter Two illustrate how the changes in the process of self-fashioning at a time when past certainties were in question caused narratives to become more incoherent and fractured. The hold that Asian Values as an ideology had over the social imaginary slowly diminished, and even though some narratives such as *Living the Singapore Dream* attempt to reinstate certain aspects of Asian Values, success and the means of attaining it were redefined and modifications made. The vastly different challenges in and after the 1990s led to more complexity in individual's processes of self-fashioning and greater negotiation between competing narratives than in the earlier auto/biographies. Furthermore, the auto/biographies written after 1990 are more diverse in subject matter as well as type, compared to those written just twenty years earlier, largely due to the influences of globalisation.

Whatever form they may take, I have shown in this thesis that the study of auto/biographies is important to our understanding of the social and cultural construction and evolution of a nation. Nationalism as a narrative can only succeed if people participate in and echo the dominant myths and ideologies, and if each citizen fashions his/her own nationalist narrative and

exercise ownership over it. This narrative construction of self becomes cultural construction – as Singaporeans rehearse nationalist tropes and messages in the telling of their lives and stories, their auto/biographies are in turn read and consumed by other Singaporeans, who in turn may use these models or frameworks to construct their own stories. These stories thus form an important part of the social imaginary.

Bruner argues in “The Autobiographical Process” that “the shape of life comes first from imagination rather than from experience” (55). The study of auto/biographies thus gives us important insights into “idealised cultural patterns” (40) – they are never simply stories. Studies of narratives have become increasingly important in areas such as communications theory, management studies and psychology; it is all the more useful and important to study them with regard to nationalism and cultural construction. In *Imagining Singapore*, Ban Kah Choon and his co-editors attempt to study “the way [...] imaginative energies are deployed, invested and used in creating the notion of Singapore” (1), through looking at the representation of historical events and government rhetoric. While this is useful in teasing out the strands that shape the idea of what Singapore is, a study of the relationship between narrative and cultural construction must also take into account the everyday stories that people tell, not just narratives that are told by historians and those in power.

The impact of globalisation and the impact on the formation of community will also be useful in the study of future auto/biographies written by Singaporeans. In “Self-Making and World-Making” (2001), Bruner points out the common resistance to the conception of the Self as something that is open to influence and negotiation because it is marked as “private” (34), when

in fact the Self is made up of the people one comes into contact with or the ideas that one has been influenced by. In such a porous city as Singapore, open to influences from all over the world, it will be interesting to look at how future narratives will reflect negotiations between the construction of the self/nation and the world beyond.

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