

## **EXPRESSIONS OF SELF-CENSORSHIP: AMBIVALENCE AND DIFFERENCE IN MALAYSIAN AND SINGAPOREAN CHINESE WOMEN'S PROSE WRITINGS IN ENGLISH**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the idea of “individual freedom and expression” in the English-language writings produced by Chinese women in the censorial and patriarchal nation-spaces of Malaysia and Singapore. Writers in general are subjected to the political injunctions of censorship, but for Chinese women writers, there is the added complication of culture, which produces its own set of gendered prohibitions and barriers. However, I perceive that women writers do not necessarily respond to the discourse of censorship through resistance; instead, I argue that they are ambivalent and conflicted subjects whose notion of “individual expression” has been shaped by the specific historical, socio-political and cultural conditions that have evolved in postcolonial Malaysia and Singapore. Hence the varying “expressions of self-censorship,” which capture the ambivalence and tension experienced by Malaysian and Singaporean Chinese women writers, who are themselves caught between the contesting forces of nation and culture, Asia and the West.

Be it man or woman, the writer located in the plural contexts of Malaysia and Singapore has always been highly aware of the censorship apparatuses operating within the nation-space. S/he has learnt to treat with caution the subjects forbidden in these countries — namely race and religion — due to the historicized national memory of the 1964 ethnic clashes in Singapore and the 1969 racial riots in Malaysia; both tragic events revealed the inter-communal fragmentation that had occurred along racial, religious, cultural, and linguistics lines. National policies on race were duly established, and reinforced by authoritarian measures that included surveillance units, media censorship, and draconian laws. By limiting civil liberties, the repressive measures also enabled the governments of Malaysia and Singapore to promote the importance of the collective community over the individual and establish state sovereignty. Consequently, a culture of censorship has developed in both countries; this culture, which includes self-censorship and the censorship of others, stems from the entrenched censorship apparatuses operating in the national discourse as well as the less visible practices of silencing and being silenced at work in the social spaces. Malaysian and Singaporean writers have been affected by the climate of caution, having, on the whole, mastered the strategies of self-censorship by avoiding where possible the socially-tabooed and politically-enforced subjects of race, religion, and even the government itself.

At the same time, Malaysian and Singaporean policies on race invariably involved national debates on language, mainly the role played by English in the postcolonial order.<sup>1</sup> As a non-native language, English was viewed with some amount of hostility as an “alien” language during the early years of nation-building, while nationalist zealots went a step further in denouncing English as a threat to core Asian cultural values and identity. Such

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negative nationalist articulations towards the English language peaked in the 1970s when many English language writers suffered due to their perceived “betrayal” of native and mother tongues, a perception that persisted right into the early 1990s.<sup>2</sup> With the changed status of the English language, both Malaysian and Singaporean English language writers suddenly found themselves relegated to the margin as linguistic outcasts in the national narratives on race and culture. Even worse, self-expression in English became almost an insurmountable obstacle, not just due to the revised policies on language, but also in view of the culture of censorship at work in the nation-space.

For the English language Chinese woman writer located in the censorial spaces of Malaysia and Singapore however, the material complexities encountered in the socio-political space of the nation-state are multiplied by entrenched gender structures and attitudes found within the cultural domain. Unlike their male counterparts, Malaysian and Singaporean Chinese women writers are subjected to the patriarchal discourse of culture, which produces its own set of prohibitions and barriers based on prescribed traditional gender roles and functions. Already circumscribed by race and language in the nation-space, these writers are further confronted by gender and sexual discrimination in both cultural and social spheres. Constituted by the male gaze, both Malaysian and Singaporean Chinese women writers are inexorably located in the fringes of power and knowledge hierarchies; this marginal subject position rings with multi-layered connotations since it is located in an essentially phallogocentric history on which current discourses of culture and politics are premised. The woman writer experiences far more constraints than her male counterpart; at the end of the day, she has to contend with double sets of prohibitions that stem from both political and cultural injunctions of censorship, as well as her “doubly marginalized” status within the paternalistic systems of nation and culture. In this sense, both Malaysian and Singaporean Chinese women writers occupy an ambivalent double position as insiders and outsiders, whether in the nation-space or the cultural domain, since they are marginalized by the very system in which they are situated as gendered subjects.

However, my readings lead me to believe that Malaysian and Singaporean Chinese women writers do not necessarily respond to the tropes of censorship or the patriarchal tone of culture and nation through resistance. More often than not, they are ambivalent about the liberal call to freedom (which is intimately linked to the idea of individual expression) as it also means a reassessment of national identity, ethnic and cultural roots, and the revered institution of the family. And despite modernizing attitudes towards gender relations, the Chinese female subject’s identity and body are bound largely to the demands of cultural and family life. Caught in the growing conflict between cultural and state narratives of family and social responsibility, and the liberal ideals of individual freedom and expression, the gendered subject finds herself in a difficult position of negotiating identity and voice from the inherently phallogocentric systems supported at social, cultural, and political levels. The title, “expressions of self-censorship,” thus captures the ambivalence and tension experienced by Chinese women writers within the changing and hybrid socio-political landscapes of postcolonial Malaysia and Singapore, where the idea of individual freedom and expression is constructed under different political terms and conditions.

Within the liberal worldview, the concept of freedom is rooted in the discourse of democracy and the individual right, while censorship is dichotomously positioned as the enemy of freedom. Under this definition, censorship is closely associated with the

Althusserian notion of “repressive state apparatuses,” whose operations serve to perpetuate and maintain state power by curbing political dissent and opposition voices.<sup>3</sup> With this definition in mind, I do not deny that Malaysia and Singapore constitute censorial spaces where the overt infringement of civil liberties has led to the loss of democratic freedoms and the disempowerment of individuals. At the same time, the climate of fear generated by the repressive apparatuses in place has also resulted in the long-term psychological effects of self-censorship and the censorship of others. Nevertheless, I believe that stereotyped and polemical ideological positions cause more damage in the long run. For one thing, current definitions of censorship as “bad” and freedom of speech as “good” by liberalists and human rights discourse fail to consider the material complexities engendered within specific historical, cultural, and socio-political contexts in which women’s experience of freedom and agency is situated. For another, such essentialist arguments inherently overlook the implicit structures of silencing and being silenced that take place through the embodied practices and the signifying rituals of culture and society.<sup>4</sup>

It is this point which bears particular relevance to the situation of the Chinese woman writer in Malaysia and Singapore, since it is the less visible alignments of power that govern women’s lives in the cultural sphere. Moreover, there are striking similarities between the state-endorsed censorship discourse and the cultural production of power within the family institution that merit closer scrutiny. The discursive tropes of nation and family not only construct subject-identities and hierarchies through a hegemonic ideology, but both also perpetuate censored subjects through their self-reproductive roles in the order — subjects who are self-censored and who willingly endorse the censorship of others; these insidious and implicit forms of censorship travel along covert lines, but with the same goal — to preserve authority and dogma. As gendered subjects, Malaysian and Singaporean Chinese women experience power not only through centralized state authority, but also through the prohibitions demanded by cultural and social rites and taboos. Since the notion of freedom espoused by both Malaysian and Singaporean Chinese women writers emerges from the very boundaries that constitute gendered identity and subjectivity, the analysis of female expression has to take into consideration the coercive and indirect ways in which state, social, and cultural productions of ritual prohibition, as well as other disciplinary structures, regulate and monitor the gendered subject within the trope of self-censorship. As a discursive product, freedom does not only remain at an ideological level, but must also be seen as a form of ingrained bodily behaviour, interaction, and practice in the social spaces of Malaysia and Singapore.

As the geo-political and cultural locations of the subject of my analysis, both Malaysia and Singapore are significantly positioned as counterpoints to each other. Both countries once shared a common history as British colonies and Singapore was, in fact, regarded as part of Malaya (as Malaysia was then called).<sup>5</sup> This close historical bond also means that both nations have inherited the same British legacy, including a plural, multilingual society that comprises Malays, Chinese, Indians and Eurasians<sup>6</sup>, the British democratic system of parliamentary governance, and the English language. After independence, both countries separately developed policies on race relations. Today, Malaysia’s politics is dominated by the Malays who form the majority, while the reverse is observed in Singapore, where the majority Chinese rule. As a result, definitions of nationality, ethnicity, culture and sexuality have evolved under distinctive sets of political boundaries and markers in these two countries. By the mid-1990s, there are already

established differences between the Malaysian Chinese woman writer's position and her Singaporean counterpart, since the latter does not face political and racial discrimination as the minority Chinese do in Malaysia.

Unlike Singapore, there are clear-cut communal divisions among Malaysia's multi-ethnic population. According to Collin E. R. Abraham (1997), these divisions are rooted in the British colonial "divide and rule" practices that were aimed at controlling the Chinese and Indian immigrant labour at the turn of the twentieth century. Due to the separation of race, culture, religion, and class under the British rule, relations among the different ethnic communities were often uneasy and strained. By the mid-1900s, a racially-polarized society had already emerged, with the British colonizers occupying the top of the socio-economic hierarchy. Tension among the Malays, Chinese and Indians continued even after independence was achieved in 1957, while economic imbalances further widened the rift. Perceived injustices, especially between the two major ethnic groups of the Malays and the Chinese, led to an escalation of hostilities and eventually culminated in the tragic race riots on May 13, 1969.<sup>7</sup>

For the non-Malays, May 13 marked the beginning of their political disenfranchisement and marginalization. The displacement of the non-Malay took effect with the implementation of two critical political reforms established in the early 1970s: the National Education Policy and the New Economic Policy (NEP). Under the former policy, the Malay language was "vigorously implemented as the medium of instruction right through the university" (Ahmad, 1989, p. 363), while the NEP played an instrumental role in addressing the inequities suffered by the Malays through economic restructuring. The NEP was designed to raise the socio-economic standing of the Malays so that they can be on a more equal standing with the financially powerful Chinese. By reasserting Malay dominance in language, politics, and economy, both policies imposed a homogeneous, monocultural vision on an essentially heterogeneous multiracial population. In the years following the establishment of economic and political reforms, the politicized identity-label *Bumiputera* ("Son of the Soil") was widely used to affirm the special position and privileges of the native Malays<sup>8</sup>, while "non-*Bumiputera*" highlighted the "immigrant" and thus subordinated status of the minority races of the Chinese and the Indians.<sup>9</sup> Repressive laws and censorship apparatuses<sup>10</sup> were also established to curtail opposition voices and silence political dissent, and in the process, reinforced the Malay/non-Malay divide at the societal level.

By muzzling the voices of the other ethnic groups, the national policies on race only served to heighten the non-Malay ambivalence and discontent which lie simmering beneath what Malaysian writer K. S. Maniam (1988) describes as a "superficial Malaysian peace" (p. 169). Deprived of a viable political space for discussion and negotiation, race relations have since deteriorated to the extent that even social attitudes and behaviours are affected. According to an anonymous "journalism teacher," there is "a deep cultural entrenchment in groupism and stiff hierarchy in social interaction" for the "Malaysian communication behavior and thought patterns — right from within the family environment to the schools, the community and the government — were never built on a tradition of free expression or open discourse" (as cited in Eng, 1999, p. 21). As Kahn and Loh (1992) noted in the title of their work, the vision of Malaysia is a "fragmented" one, for the "imagined political community" (Anderson, 1983, p. 6) that defines Malaysia as a nation

state is deeply riven by the discursively drawn racial, religious, cultural and linguistic lines between Malay and non-Malay.

Hilary Tham, a Malaysian poet and writer, makes a critical observation in her memoir, *Lane With No Name: Memoirs & Poems of a Malaysian-Chinese Girlhood* (1997):

I did not know there was an uncultivated grass field in my mind, a place I avoided, a place covered with sharp-edged *lallang* that repelled thought, a subject marked “taboo,” not to talk about, not to think about; until my publisher pointed it out. He noticed that I write about Indian immigrants, about the Chinese I grew up with, but that I barely mention the Malays who make up the majority of Malaysia’s population. . . . Strange to realize that I met and talked with Malays in Malay, almost daily, yet this part of my life was sealed off from my thinking and my writing. It was a habit trained into me from early days. I had become unaware of its existence, so deeply had I been conditioned.

*Do not talk about the Malays.* (pp. 173-4)

The passage above, remarkable for its insight into the mechanisms of self-censorship functioning in the subjective interior, also reveals the psychological conditioning that is the result of Malaysia’s censorship system and practises. By avoiding the subject of the Malays, Tham unwittingly reinforces the hegemonic state discourse and construction of the racial/cultural/religious hierarchy between the Malays and the non-Malays. Of more interest to me though, is the unconscious manner in which Tham had internalized *and* reproduced the state-defined “taboo” on race relations through self-censorship. The example above stresses that her subjective state is an ambivalent one, for the writer too is interwoven into the systems of signification produced by her material reality. As Koh Tai Ann (1989) reminds us, “poets and writers, like the rest of us, including critics, are constituted by structures of power, “coded” by language and culture or influenced by ambient social, economic and ideological values” (p. 275). As the discursive construct of localized socio-political and cultural conditions, the Malaysian Chinese female writer and her expression of the self is necessarily “coded” by the prevailing systems of censorship.

Not all Malaysian Chinese women writers are ambivalent about their position in the revised state narratives on race and language; some are unequivocally clear about Malaysia’s political treatment of the Chinese and the English language, and their perspectives invariably gave rise to a different kind of “expression of self-censorship,” in the form of exile. In her memoir, *Among the White Moonfaces: Memoirs of a Nyonya Feminist* (1996), Malaysian Chinese writer-poet Shirley Lim recalls her reasons for not returning to Malaysia after completing her studies in the United States:

I had chosen not to return to Malaysia, because, among many other reasons, a new government had implemented a Malay monolingual constitution. To confess to an attachment to the English language and its literature . . . is to open oneself today to the scrutiny of the tough-minded and the incredulity of materialist philosophers. . . . After the disillusionment of the May 13 riots, however, I had no nationalist idealism to imagine. The cultural parochialism that took shape in the aftermath of the riots in Malaysia, which includes race-based quotas, communalist politics, and separatist race-essentialized cultures, was absolutely anathema to me. (p. 279)

Marginalized by race and by language, Lim chose exile to express her censored position in the nation-space, and at the same time, underscore her emotional subjective state of “non-belonging” and displacement. Until today, Malaysian Chinese women writers

located either in Malaysia or abroad continue to dwell on the issues of displacement, marginalization, loss, and exile in their works. For instance, both Chuah Guat Eng's *Echoes of Silence* (1994) and Shirley Lim's *Joss and Gold* (2001) have been influenced by the tragic events of May 13. In *Echoes of Silence*, Ai Lian the Chinese protagonist suffers disillusionment and enters into exile after the race riots, while *Joss and Gold* explores the complex issues of race, gender, language and class through the events that occurred before and after the riots.

Due to the inhospitable environment for English language writers, coupled with the culture of censorship in the nation-space, there has been a visible lack or absence of writings in English in the last three decades. As local columnist Amir Muhammad (2001) observes: "There are so few outlets for English-language creative writing in this country that you'd be forgiven for thinking that there are no writers around." One major reason for this lack is attributed to the political institutionalization of the national language, *Bahasa Malaysia*, which meant that only works produced in the Malay language are considered as national literature, while literatures written in other languages are excluded from national status; worse, they are labelled "sectional" or "communal" literatures. The political marginalization of literature according to language has further discouraged non-Malay Malaysian poets or authors writing in the English language, many of whom are Chinese in origin, and who decided to migrate overseas. Among the Malaysian Chinese women writers who have published abroad are Shirley Lim, Hilary Tham, Beth Yahp, and Ooi Yang May.<sup>11</sup> The creative and literary drain from Malaysia not only contributed to the dearth of locally-produced English language writings, but it has correspondingly resulted in the rise of literary writings in English by Malaysians located overseas. The lack of local English language writings in Malaysia highlights a troubling pattern — not only does it reveal the censorship mechanisms at work in the socio-political fabric of the country but it also reflects the writers' subjection to the state discourse and its politically-drawn boundaries.

Across the border in Singapore, the performance of censorship took a very different form due to its sinicized landscape; in the reversal of racial roles, it is the Malay who is relegated to minority status while the Chinese occupies a higher economic and socio-political rank. Despite the socio-political and economic clout wielded by Singaporean Chinese, Singapore's leaders have also recognized the potential dangers that might arise from this racially-imbalanced situation. As the smallest Chinese-dominated country in an essentially Indo-Malay Islamic region, Singapore was, geopolitically speaking, in a sensitive position, since its treatment of the native Malays was subjected to close scrutiny by neighbouring countries. As a result, Singapore decided to employ a corporate-style of management to control racial, cultural and religious differences, as well as to preserve social cohesion and national harmony. Using meritocracy and competition as the underlying principles, Singapore's ruling party, the People's Action Party (PAP), actively championed the rhetoric of multiracialism and multiculturalism, which countered Malaysia's race-based politics. One of the policies established was that of "pragmatic multilingualism" (Kuo & Jernudd, 1994, p. 28); under this policy, the four languages representative of the country's plural society — Malay, Mandarin Chinese, Tamil and English — have been given equal status in Singapore. To date, the Singaporean author or poet who writes in any one of these four languages is officially recognized as a national writer.

In the past, Singapore's relationship with the English language had been, like Malaysia's, characterized by tension and ambivalence. However, the 1980s saw a shift in the Singaporean government's attitude towards the role of English when the political leaders realized its "instrumental value both from the societal perspective of economic growth, and from the individual perspectives of social mobility and economic gain" (Kuo & Jernudd, 1994, p. 29). Thanks to the government's more liberal views towards English in Singapore, the local English language writing scene has flourished dramatically, especially from the mid-1980s onwards.<sup>12</sup> Since then, the government has been actively promoting literary and artistic productions through incentives that include literary awards, grants, writing competitions, and through campaigns like the Singapore Arts Festival. Unlike her counterpart in Malaysia, the Singaporean Chinese woman writer whose language medium is English enjoys formal recognition as a national writer as well as strong support from local audiences.

During the transformative decades of the 1980s and 1990s when cultural diversity was emphasized in the arts industry, Singapore must truly appear as a literary haven for budding local artists who were encouraged to express themselves, regardless of race, gender, or language. However, the socio-political reality that emerged revealed a much more complicated picture simply because 77% of the population is Chinese in origin. From the start, the national ideal of racial equality has been undermined by Chinese hegemony in politics and economy, a feature that was reinforced through the state rhetoric of "Asian values" during the 1980s and 1990s. The term "Asian values" was used to emphasize social cohesion and communal order while decrying the dangers of individual rights, a "decadent" Western discourse that has no place in an Asian society.<sup>13</sup> By providing the people with "a hybrid Asian ideology of resistance to Western domination" (de Bary, 1998, p. 2), the concept of "Asian-style" democracy has, at the same time, offered the people a sense of national and cultural pride by returning them to their cultural traditions. But more than that, the concept of "Asian values" was also meant to appeal to historical and cultural notions of Asian leadership and authority.

In his analysis of Asian political cultures, Lucian W. Pye (1985) argues that the concept of political power in Asian countries differs from that of their Western counterparts. Asian political cultures, he observes, have premised the idea of the nation-state on notions of power that are traditionally rooted in community-oriented and patriarchal cultures. As Pye points out, varying articulations of a "new, and powerful, form of nationalism based on paternalistic authority" (p. vii) have appeared across Asia in the past few decades.<sup>14</sup> By adopting historically-legitimized cultural tropes on authority, these Asian political cultures have also endorsed authoritarian and patriarchal rule at the state level. In this sense, the administrative systems in Malaysia and Singapore share one overriding trait — they are structured according to paternalistic figures of authority. The authoritarian forms of leadership as embodied by national figures such as Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew<sup>15</sup> and former Malaysian Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad,<sup>16</sup> have contributed to the deterioration of democratic ideals by strengthening repressive mechanisms already in place.

In Singapore then, the understanding of Asian power and authority is mainly rooted in Chinese cultural precepts of the Confucian discourse. This can be seen in the manner in which the Confucian bonds of loyalty and duty to the family have been appropriated by the nation-state, with the authoritarian figure of Lee acting as its "father." Known as the

founding father of the nation, Lee and his paternalistic authority reflected the position of the dominant ethnic group, the Chinese, whose Confucian traditions formed the basis of the state's vision and rhetoric of "Asian values" during the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>17</sup> By endorsing Asian values in the nation space, the government not only reinforced Chinese culture and language (one example is the annual "Speak Mandarin" campaign) at a socio-political level, but this all-inclusive male-centred rhetoric also reified women's inscribed roles within social and cultural domains.<sup>18</sup> The patriarchal trope of Asian values thus bears serious implications for the Singaporean Chinese woman who uses English as her medium of expression, for both cultural and national demarcations of gendered identity are intricately linked to language in Singapore. Since the polarized "Asia versus West" rhetoric involves the role of language, English language users, especially if they were of Chinese descent, invariably met with resistance, and even censure.

In *Fistful of Colours* (1993), Singaporean writer Suchen Christine Lim explores the psychological impact of Asian values on self-expression and identity construction in 1990s' Singapore through the female protagonist, Suwen. Although deeply critical about her country's revisionist narratives on identity and language, Suwen finds her opinion affected by the views of other Singaporean Chinese who have eagerly embraced the nation's neo-Confucian vision; there are those who desire to reclaim the "five-thousand-year-old history and civilization" (p. 9) of the Chinese. As an English-speaking Singaporean Chinese woman, Suwen is criticized for being a "pseudo-Westerner or geh angmo" (p. 9). The critic then proceeds to lecture her on the "dangers of Westernization," and that she "should not adopt Western practices which contradict our Oriental moral concepts" (p. 8), which include "dress[ing] outrageously" and "speaking English or Singlish" (p. 9). Furthermore, since she is of Chinese descent, Suwen is also expected by others to have knowledge of her "Chinese identity and history" (p. 9) as well as have the ability to speak Chinese. Suwen's failure to speak Chinese and thus, her failure to conform to the rules prescribed by the identity-label "Singaporean Chinese," is regarded as deviant behaviour. Such a biased perception also makes her a target of the censure of other loyal Chinese subjects.

The discourse of Singapore as a modern nation-state has always maintained that individual deviance is unacceptable. The PAP's intolerance of deviant behaviour is so well-known that even Mark, Suwen's Scottish friend and colleague, is warned against remarking on "sensitive" issues when he entered the country: "Politics, race, language and religion, particularly politics, were things one would do well to keep out of" (p. 305). He also finds out that the state employs "draconian measures" (p. 305) to ensure that citizens toe the line. Such overt apparatuses of defining misbehaviour or naming "undesirable" elements are further reinforced by hidden, in-built social mechanisms that seek to normalize and regulate the individual gendered body in the public arena. For instance, the insidious properties of the collective Confucian gaze are communicated to the gendered subject via indirect and subterranean modes of subject-formation.<sup>19</sup> As a Singaporean Chinese woman, Suwen is not only bound by the state discourse on race and language, but also by cultural narratives that define her gender role and duties in the Chinese community; these duties traditionally meant having to guard her feminine virtues and maintain racial purity. Suwen's social interaction with Mark, a Caucasian Other, is thus frowned upon by the male members of her own ethnic community.



Even though “[n]othing had actually been said in her presence” (p. 124), Suwen nonetheless senses an undercurrent of “disapproval” (p. 127) that is conveyed by the “innuendos” (p. 86), the “mutter-mutter” (p. 87), and “sidelong glances” (p. 124) whenever she is with Mark:

But once, she had heard Peter Kong mutter under his breath, “Not the same colour, man.” But when he saw her, he had stopped talking immediately and the men around him would not meet her eyes. She knew what they . . . must be thinking about her: thirty-nine, single and desperate, fishing for an angmo husband. She saw how she must appear to others, and she was upset. (p. 124)

Disciplined by the tropes of culture and nation, Suwen’s doubly-marginalized status is projected by her double-positioning as subject and object; she watches others and at the same time, watches her self through the eyes of others: “She saw how she must appear to others.” This two-way view of the self speaks of an ambivalent gendered subjectivity that is torn between challenging the authoritative tropes of identity and conforming to the social collectivity. Although a rational part of Suwen is detached enough to perceive the “hidden prejudices around her” (p. 124), she is unable to ignore the underlying message conveyed by the social body. Hence the constant act of self-surveillance: “Used to observing others, she now observed herself” (p. 124). Hemmed in and inhibited by the censoring apparatuses that operate both from without and within, Suwen feels that she is unable to escape the relentless forces of social conformity surrounding her: “But it’s not always possible to break free of the forces which shape and mould our lives. You might not even be aware of what they are” (90).

For the English language Chinese woman writer in Singapore, the idea of individual expression is given a slightly different interpretation due to the Confucian culture of censorship that has evolved there. Unlike in Malaysia, where Chinese women writers’ concern with freedom is shaped by the legally-sanctioned divisions on race and language, the notion of freedom in Singapore is discursively produced by the all-inclusive ideological racial-linguistic boundaries imposed by the state. In an interview, Singaporean Chinese writer Lau Siew Mei recalls that the “Singapore she grew up in was one of repression” (Wu, 2001, p. A21), for there were “a lot of things that they don’t want to hear; you can’t explore, or think or analyse or be critical” (as cited in Wu, 2001, p. A21). Unable to accept the censorial climate, she migrated to Australia in 1994. In her first novel, *Playing Madame Mao* (2000), Lau recreates the claustrophobic socio-political conditions of 1980s’ Singapore through the allegorical figures of Chairman Mao and his Red Guards. At the same time, she also criticizes Singaporean citizens for capitulating to the culture of censorship to the point where they have lost sight of their civil liberties:

We are living in a chicken coop society . . . Even if the door of the coop were to open, we would remain because here we are given food and shelter, we have grown fat. We have traded in our freedom for bread. We are kept people. We let the government do our thinking for us. (p. 20)

Within the censorial and ambivalent yet transformative and plural socio-political contexts of Malaysia and Singapore, the idea of individual expression is inextricable from the questions of identity and identification processes that emerge from the discursive patriarchal practices of political and cultural agents of censorship power. The quest for identity has never been as difficult or as challenging as in this postmodern age, for the dichotomous global economic relations between Asia and the West are increasingly

fraught with tension premised on the need to strike some kind of equilibrium between conflicting transnational and national views on economic development, political security, cultural identity, and individual rights. Yet both the West and the East are neither separate nor polarized entities in the Asian imagination; rather they share a competitive space for vocalizing different representations, identities and subjectivities through new and powerful re-inventions of womanhood. Since the 1960s, traditional gender roles, relations, and experience have undergone dramatic transformations in Malaysia and Singapore due to the global pressures of modernization and economic development. The huge advancements made in the fields of economy, industrialization, and scientific technologies have correspondingly wrought changes in almost all areas of women's lives, especially in health, economy, and education. At the same time, women's rights movements in the West have had a huge impact on women's consciousness and imagination in Malaysia and Singapore, and the growing awareness of civil liberties in these countries has led to a significant improvement in women's rights.<sup>20</sup>

In Singapore, the Women's Charter was enacted in 1961 to equalize women's status with men in the areas of marriage and divorce, custody of children, and inheritance. In 1997, another milestone was achieved when the Family Violence Bill was included in the Women's Charter. It took Malaysia much longer to legally rectify some of the inequalities faced by women, but a few major breakthroughs were made since the 1980s; these included rape provisions that were amended under the Penal Code in 1987, and the implementation of the Domestic Violence Act 521 in 1994. In 1999, the Ministry of Human Resources launched the Code of Practice on the Prevention and Eradication of Sexual Harassment in the Workplace, but since the Code is only applied on a voluntary basis, women's non-governmental organizations have been fighting to enact it in the Constitution. Although the importance of women's rights is increasingly recognized and addressed in Malaysia and Singapore, women are nonetheless subordinated to an essentially patriarchal political culture, and subjugated by the repressive political framework that endorses self-censorship and restrictive state mechanisms. Furthermore, the paternalistic tone borne by the authoritarian leadership in Malaysia and Singapore has contributed to the enforcement of traditional gender hierarchies and attitudes within society and culture.<sup>21</sup> This phenomenon is most clearly seen in Singapore, where the promulgation of "Asian values" has led to a renewed attention on the family as an ideological stronghold in Asian cultures. By focusing on the family as a cohesive force, the state invariably placed women's traditional roles as dutiful daughter, wife, and mother under the spotlight.<sup>22</sup> The rhetoric of civil rights, while so vital to women's vision of equality and freedom, has remained largely in the realm of the imaginary. For as long as female marginalization is reproduced through the roles of care-givers or "nurturers (nurses, teachers, lovers, mothers, what is called the helping professions)" (Lim, 1994, p. 9) through widespread social and cultural practices, the struggle between family/communal duty and individual freedom will remain a pressing issue for women in Malaysia and Singapore.

Without doubt, the liberal notion of woman's emancipation has been complicated by women's complicit status in patriarchy. While the paternal forms of state authority have further sanctioned women's secondary status in the socio-political sphere, it cannot be denied that the female body is very much interwoven into cultural systems of signification and meaning. Cultural constructions of the gendered subject have figured largely in feminist discourse; not only is culture defined as "a powerful shaper of social attitudes

about women, including how women think about themselves, their bodies, intellectual capabilities, expected social roles, and opportunities for self-expression and fulfilment” (Peach, 1998, p. 4), but it also informs gender relations “according to prevailing assumptions and ideologies about the role of women, the nature of the family and the proper relations between men and women” (Moore, 1988, pp. 128-9). To understand the traditional and cultural contexts from which the gendered identities of Malaysian and Singaporean Chinese women emerged, a brief overview of Confucianism is necessary.<sup>23</sup> Confucianism, identified by scholars of Chinese history as the key to Chinese culture and civilization, posits the family and the authoritative figure of the father as central symbols in its ideology. In the Confucian vision, the family is the “microcosm of the socio-political order” whereby “the wise father was a model for the wise ruler or minister, and dutiful children were the models for properly submissive subjects who knew their place, their role, and their obligations to others” (Wright, 1964, p. viii). The hierarchical and patriarchal family institution exalted by Confucius also signifies the exclusion and subjugation of Chinese women who play subservient roles of dependence on the men they serve.<sup>24</sup>

Within this male-oriented world, woman’s primary duty is to produce sons to ensure the continuity of the patrilineal line; her value and position in the family are validated only by the arrival of the much-cherished son. Such gender-biased rhetoric also means that place and position in the family are spaces reserved specifically for men. As Kay Ann Johnson (1983) points out, the “patriarchal-patrilineal-patrilocal configuration . . . made women marginal members of the entire family system.” (p. 9). At the same time, Chinese women’s experience was irrevocably “bound up with gendered definitions and allocations of space” (Croll, 1995, p. 24), in which they “lived limited and enclosed but safe lives within a framework fixed by female generation and seniority” (p. 25). The Confucian dictate that “a woman was to take no part in public affairs” (*Book of Rites*, IX: 24, as cited in Croll, 1995, p. 13) also meant that traditionally, Chinese women were simultaneously excluded from dominant discourse, and confined within the domestic realm. Chinese women are thus seen as inseparable from the family institution, a view that is reinforced by the gender-biased ideology and spatial segregation. Not surprisingly, in her analysis of the autobiographical works by migrant Chinese women writers, Elisabeth Croll (1995) discerns an ongoing internal conflict, a psychological “tug of war . . . between the ‘I’ of the individual and the ‘we’ of the family” (p. 63), for “in Chinese households, the ‘I’ is different because it is circumscribed by the family order: ‘not me but us’” (p. 64). The We/I dichotomy displaces woman as peripheral in its discourse. In this unequal relationship of power where man and family dominate, the Chinese woman as an individual self has no place or voice in the Confucian discourse. The gaze that subdues her is not only inherently masculine, but also the collective gaze of the family.

In the diasporic Chinese communities such as those found in Malaysia and Singapore, the traditional customs of disciplining and regulating the body, as well as the cultural indoctrination of one’s gendered place and role in the family hierarchy, are still very much in evidence. In *Lane with No Name*, Tham recollects the strict traditional training she received as a child so that she could fulfil a role pre-ordained by the family order:

I had been raised in a rigid society where one’s behavior was dictated by birth order and family position. From the age of five, a Chinese child is taught its place and the responsibilities of that place within the family hierarchy. At meals, I learned to set the table and to wait for permission to

eat. It became second nature to always invite my grandmother and parents to eat their rice and wait for them to lift their chopsticks and rice-bowls before I could touch mine. I learned the proper tone of voice (respectful always) and the correct words to use in speaking to my elders. I learned not to say what I thought. Children were expected to be respectfully silent and to listen to their elders (and betters) always, but especially at mealtimes. (p. 2)

In order to know her “place” and “responsibilities” in the “family hierarchy,” Tham’s body is submitted to learning what is “proper,” “correct” and “respectful.” Behavioural control, which is memorized and internalized by the gendered body, results in verbal restraint and self-censorship: “I learned not to say what I thought.” Through behavioural rules and regulation, the young individual female body is inscribed as inferior within the multi-layered hierarchies of gender, family, and society. Disciplined by the family order, the child’s body learns at a young age the meaning of duty and filial piety, and through the body, his/her sense of identity is experienced as inseparable from the network of family and community surrounding her.

As the primary site where gendered subjectivities are shaped and articulated, the cultural space of the Confucian Chinese family is vital to our understanding of the implicit processes of discipline, regulation, and socialization involved in the construction of gendered positions and subjectivities.<sup>25</sup> These less visible structures of power — reflected by the internalized mechanisms of self-censorship and the censorship of others — underpin the ambivalent “expressions of self-censorship” that take place within the discourse of culture. It is also through such discursive forces that the notions of Chinese femininity and expression are shaped and produced. In *The Scent of the Gods* (1991), Singaporean writer Fiona Cheong describes the Confucian disciplinary forces surrounding the young Chinese female narrator, Esha, who grows up in her Great-Grandfather’s house under the watchful eyes of her Grandmother. As the youngest female child in the family, Esha occupies the lowest rank in the family order in terms of age and gender, and is thus expected to conform to stereotyped gender roles. Unlike her male cousins who are given the liberty to play in the rain, or “walk around wearing only their shorts” (p. 4), Esha is made aware that such simple physical pleasures are forbidden to Chinese girls, especially once she has reached pubescence. Fearful of the dangerous, “in-between” transitional state of Esha’s sexually maturing body, the family subjects her to ritual forms of discipline and punishment to mould her into an ideal Chinese girl. Subjected to a set of prohibitive rituals, the disciplined gendered body also learns to voluntarily produce its own barriers. As Iris Marion Young (1989) suggests, the “more a young girl assumes her status as feminine, the more she takes herself to be fragile and immobile, and the more she actively enacts her own body inhibition” (p. 66).

From young, Esha realizes that her body is not hers to do and use as she pleases. Instead, she is taught to conceal her body and confine her physical movements by the older female figures in the household. Esha is told that “Chinese girls did not play in the rain” (p. 38), admonished for taking off her T-shirt (p. 4), and learns “the proper graces” by keeping her “hands folded in her lap, neatly” so that “people would know that I was a proper young lady” (p. 9). Restraint even extends to speech: “No one expected me to say anything. Chinese children were not expected to say much, girls even less so than boys.” (p. 11). The distinct lack of a female voice in Great-Grandfather’s house is accentuated when Esha, faced with her own image in a pail of water, fails to “tell if it was a pretty face or an ugly face,” only that she has “very short hair” (p. 158). During this symbolic encounter with her

self-image in the water, Esha's failure to recognize her self as an individual is made emphatic when she drags her "fingers through the water and made the face in the pail disappear" (p. 158). This involuntary body gesture — which can be understood as an emblematic act of erasure as much as it is an effect of self-censorship at work — reaffirms that Esha does not possess a clear sense of an individual identity and self.

In Shirley Lim's *Among the White Moonfaces*, the psychological ramifications of internalizing the cultural tropes of self-censorship are expressed through the conflicted female subjective interior. In the following passage, the writer speaks of the inextricable bonds between the individual female body and the family, primarily her father, to whom she faithfully writes "bank drafts" every month from the United States; these bonds of filial piety are made explicit through the "lived" experience of the body, whose hunger cannot be assuaged until the needs of the family are first met:

For Chinese, eating is both material and cultural. We feed our hungry ghosts before we may feed ourselves. Ancestors are ravenous, and can die of neglect. Our fathers' children are also ourselves. The self is paltry, phantasmagoric; it leaks and slips away. It is the family, parents, siblings, cousins, that signify the meaning of self, and beyond the family, the extended community.

In writing the bank drafts I remained my father's daughter, returning to Father the bargain we had made. This is the meaning of blood — to give, because you cannot eat unless the family is also eating. For years, I woke up nights, heart beating wildly. Oh Asia, that nets its children in ties of blood so binding that they cut the spirit. (p. 251)

Even with the distance in place and time, Lim's anguish and ambivalence belie the strength of the blood ties that bind children to the family. Within the patrilineal hierarchy of the family, the female individual self is experienced as non-material and non-corporeal for it "leaks and slips away;" it is unreal, dreamlike, and "phantasmagoric." Only the family, the "father's children," can provide the individual self with a concrete sense of identity, a "meaning of self" that is inscribed by the family genealogy — "Ancestors," "parents, siblings, cousins" — and the "extended community beyond." Through the writings of Tham, Cheong, and Lim, we find that the all-inclusive We/I configuration perpetuates cultural patterns of self-censorship, whereby the materiality of the individual self and voice are effaced or subjugated by the collective body of the family. These examples also stress that the individual female self is constituted within the collective body and identity of the family.

As a central metaphor for cultural struggle, expression, and communication, the female body delineated in the textual passages above is closely associated with images of anxiety, ambiguity, and ambivalence that underpin the imagination and expression of the female individual self. Indeed, there is often a pervasive sense of conflict or ambivalence that informs the prose writings of Malaysian and Singaporean Chinese women; almost all of them reveal, to varying degrees, female characters who are caught in the struggle of negotiating voice, identity, and subjectivity by juxtaposing the traditional contexts of family and culture, and the progressive tropes of female liberation and agency.<sup>26</sup> Part of the baggage of ambivalence involves the exigencies of expression, since the disciplinary forces surrounding the female body in the cultural sphere act as a powerful suppressant on the individual voice. According to Wong Soak Koon (1999), this is the reason why, in the family-oriented societies of Asia, women writers traditionally abstain from writing autobiographies or memoirs. Wong further argues that the lack of autobiographical writing underscores the "uncertainty and prohibition" stemming from cultural restrictions: "In

many cultures, especially in Asia, women are seen as repositories of valorized family histories and idealized communal myths, often voicing these when sanctioned to do so. To break the silence independently and, above all, to tell tales of family dysfunctions and communal tyrannies is to risk loss of reputation and societal censure” (p. 149). Wong’s perception is borne out by Tham, who observes that among the Malaysians, there is “the unspoken belief that individuality must be subjugated to the communal good” (1997, p. 2); hence to “speak of personal feelings was to put one’s desires ahead of being a quietly working cog of the family, the clan; it was regarded with horror, like a cancerous cell in a wholesome body” (p. 2). Such an explanation also helps us understand Tham’s discomfort and anxiety during the writing of her memoir: “The idea of writing my memoirs goes against the grain of my upbringing. Though I had breached the taboo with my poems, prose feels like a greater violation” (p. 3).

As the hybridized gendered product of the spaces that intersect local and global, Asia and the West, old and new, Malaysian and Singaporean Chinese women voice different ways of imagining censorship and freedom, and of responding to patriarchal power discourses. If the textual selections in this essay can be taken as an indication of the writer’s frame of mind, then they certainly constitute varying “expressions of self-censorship,” for both Malaysian and Singaporean Chinese women writers, whether consciously or unconsciously, have evoked experiences and subjectivities that are not necessarily located within the liberal understanding of freedom. Instead, the Chinese female individual self is perceived and represented in ways that depart from conventional readings of empowerment, liberation, and resistance that dominate feminist theories and discussions both in the Western hemisphere and the postcolonial world. This difference in subjectivity and viewpoint stems from the writers’ ambivalent negotiations between the liberal ideology of individual expression and freedom, and the material practices of freedom that have emerged in the complex multiracial realities of society, community, and family. Freedom is thus a discursive product, and as such, the notion of “individual expression” is subjected to the prescribed boundaries of dominant narratives of censorship at work in the social spaces of nation and culture.

## END NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Among the third-world commonwealth nations, the English language constitutes a source of ideological contention and ambivalence as it resonates with paradoxical implications; for despite its inevitable historical association with colonial exploitation and oppression, there can be no doubting the importance of English as a language of global commerce and trade. English was and still is vital to the economic development and modernization of postcolonial nations. As ex-British colonies, both Malaysia and Singapore shared this ambivalent attitude towards the English language after independence.

<sup>2</sup> According to Shirley Lim (1993), “English language writers are faced with this bilingual ideology — English cannot be a “mother tongue;” it expresses debased Western values and is useful only for international trade and technological purposes . . . . They are also told that not having mastery of their mother tongue (whether Mandarin, Tamil or Malay) signifies inadequacy, deprivation and deculturalization. These writers, consequently, face a severe handicap in legitimizing their place in the national culture” (p. 23).

<sup>3</sup> Louis Althusser (1971) theorizes that state power, which ensures complete subjection to state ideology, is experienced in two ways—through repressive state apparatuses (police, military force and surveillance units, etc.) and ideological state apparatuses (family, religious institutions, schools, etc.).

<sup>4</sup> By deconstructing the binary codes that underpin the polemics of censorship and freedom, the notion of expression as a positivist trope of liberation and empowerment is invariably called into question. This liberal trend is reflected in the discourses of postcolonialism and liberal feminism, where the tropes of silencing and

being silenced are heavily associated with the oppression and disempowerment of the native and/or female Other. This insistence on speech and voice as indispensable factors for emancipation and empowerment has further complicated the situation of Chinese women writers in Malaysia and Singapore, for within the Confucian realm, silence is a cultural means of acquiring information and conveying subjectivity. This is also why I find the liberal position unsustainable for critiquing female silence, since it does not take into account the cultural specificities of expression. As King-Kok Cheung (1993) argues, silence “carries other functions and meanings that vary with individuals and with cultures” (p. 3). I share her view that writers from Asian backgrounds “must simultaneously interrogate the ethnocentric and logocentric perspectives that still inform much of mainstream feminism, perspectives that result in attributing silence solely to patriarchal constructions of womanhood and in eliding the issues of silencing and being silenced” (p. 3).

<sup>5</sup> The intimate relations between both countries appeared to be firmly cemented when Singapore joined the newly formed Malaysia (comprising Malaya, Sabah and Sarawak) in 1963; this union was short-lived as Singapore seceded from Malaysia in 1965 due to irreconcilable differences over communal issues. See Lee (1998) and Barr (2000) for details.

<sup>6</sup> The British brought in Chinese and Indian immigrants into Malaya as cheap labour for tin and rubber production at the turn of the century; the infusion of foreign labour force into the local Malay populace also created the multiracial society that characterizes Malaysia today. Malaysia has a culturally, racially and linguistically diverse population made up of Malays (60 percent), Chinese (27 percent) and Indians (8 percent). The rest of the population comprises Eurasians and the indigenous tribes of Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak. Singapore also supports a similarly plural society, but its communal and ethnic relations take a different form. Historically, Singapore’s value was not derived from rubber or tin, but from its strategic location that straddled the shipping routes between the east and the west. Massive numbers of Chinese labourers were brought in to service the vibrant entrepot, and by the early twentieth century, Singapore was already supporting an overwhelmingly huge population of Chinese immigrants who made up about 77 percent of the population, a feature that is maintained until today. Read Abraham (1997) and Vasil (1995) for further information.

<sup>7</sup> Although the Malays gained political power after independence, they realized that they were economically dispossessed in their own land. The Chinese on the other hand had prospered financially, but their perceived political marginalization had led to the rise of Chinese chauvinism and the call for equal rights and privileges. The growing tensions between the Malays and the Chinese finally erupted on May 13, 1969. For further information, read Clutterbuck (1985) and Gagliano (1994).

<sup>8</sup> When Malaysia achieved independence in 1957, the special position of the Malays was safeguarded under the Federal Constitution, Article 153. Elsewhere in Article 89, provisions were made for Malay land reservations. When Sabah and Sarawak joined the Federation of Malaysia in 1963, the special position of the Natives in these states was also legislated under Article 153. The “special position” of the Malays meant that they enjoyed special privileges that included government postings, business permits, professional licenses and scholarships. Refer to Clutterbuck (1985) and Gomez & Jomo (1997) for details of these privileges.

<sup>9</sup> Until today, this identity-label still functions to define the hierarchical relations between the Malays and the non-Malays. For details, refer to Munro-Kua (1996) and Lee (1986).

<sup>10</sup> Refer to the Malaysian Constitution for full details of draconian laws that include the Internal Security Act (ISA). The ISA provides special powers that allow for an array of preventive measures against acts of subversion, including detention without trial for up to two years. Another law that addresses the issue of race is the Sedition Act (1948), which was amended in 1970 to restrict public debate on ‘sensitive issues,’ mainly those “which might arouse racial emotion, in respect of Malay, the National Language, the special position of Malays, citizenship rights and the sovereignty of Malay rulers” (as cited in Munro-Kua, 1996, p. 60). Media censorship, applied to both local and foreign press, falls directly under this Act, the ISA, the Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984 (PPPA) and the Official Secrets Act (OSA).

<sup>11</sup> Both Lim and Tham migrated to the USA during the 1970s. Today, Lim is a prolific poet and writer who has won numerous literary awards. Her collections of poetry include *Crossing the Peninsula* (1980), and *What the Fortune Teller Didn't Say* (1998), while prose writings include her memoir *Among the White Moonfaces* (1996), a collection of short stories, *Life's Mysteries* (1995), and two novels, *Joss and Gold* (2001) and *Sister Swing* (2006). Tham too, is a noted poet who has produced, besides her memoir *Lane With No Name* (1997), numerous collections of poetry, including the award-winning *Bad Names for Women* (1989), and *The Tao of Mrs Wei* (2003). More information about her work can be found on her website: <http://www.hilarytham.com/>. Beth Yahp migrated to Australia, where she published *The Crocodile Fury*

(1992), while Ooi Yang May published *The Flame Tree* (1998) and *Mindgame* (2000) in the United Kingdom.

<sup>12</sup> Seet Khiam Keong (2001) provides an overview of Singaporean writers and poets who made an impact on the literary scene from the 1960s to the 1990s. Singaporean writers who first established their names in the 1960s and early 1970s were Edwin Thumboo, Lee Tzu Pheng, Arthur Yap, Robert Yeo, and Goh Poh Seng. Catherine Lim, Christine Su-Chen Lim, and Gopal Baratham emerged during the 1980s, while writers associated with the 1990s included Rex Shelley, Hwee Hwee Tan, Eddie Tay, Claire Tham, Philip Jeyaretnam, and Colin Cheong.

<sup>13</sup> The refusal to comply with Western doctrines of power and freedom is made emphatic by the events that occurred during the Vienna World Conference on Human Rights in 1993. Asian countries, including Malaysia, Singapore, China and Indonesia resisted Western efforts (particularly Washington's) to implement strong statements on human rights. They argued instead that an "Asian-style" administration would ensure stable conditions for economic growth and national development. In their view, Western democracy was also incompatible with the community-oriented Asian cultures. Read Tamney (1996, pp. 62-3) on the implementation of Asian values in Singapore; for the development of Asian values in Malaysia, refer to Milne and Mauzy (1999, pp. 137-9).

<sup>14</sup> Examples of national "Father" figures include India's Mahatma Gandhi, China's Mao Zedong, Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew, and Malaysia's Tunku Abdul Rahman. Refer to Pye (1985) for details.

<sup>15</sup> Singapore's first Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, has never been seen as an advocate of democracy. His strong-armed political tactics were laced with double-edged connotations, for while his authoritarian brand of leadership eroded democratic ideals, it was also he who brought about Singapore's transformation from a third-world island with few natural resources into a fully-industrialized first-world nation. Under Lee's administration, the island-state saw a rise in authoritarian trends with the implementation of draconian laws. Under Singapore's Constitution, laws that allow for arrests to be made without warrants include the Internal Security Act (ISA), the Criminal Law (Temporary Provisions) Act (CLA), the Misuse of Drugs Act (MDA), and the Undesirable Publications Act (UPA). The ISA, the CLA and the MDA also allow for preventive detention without trial for up to two years. Freedom of association is controlled by the Societies Act, while freedom of speech and the press is curtailed by the ISA and the UPA. Freedom of speech and the press is also curbed by the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act, 1986; this act enables the government to restrict the circulation of foreign publications that are perceived to have interfered with Singapore's internal affairs. In the past decade, the PAP's favourite method of limiting opposition voices, foreign critics, and the international media has been through expensive defamation suits. A number of opposition candidates, including J.B. Jeyaretnam and Tang Liang Hong of the opposition Worker's Party, were bankrupted in this manner. The independence of Singapore's judiciary has also been questioned by international human rights organizations such as Amnesty International, and Asia Watch. Refer to Singapore's Constitution, Part XII on "Special Powers Against Subversion and Emergency Powers" for details. Lingle (1996), Haas (1999), and Gomez (2000) also provide accounts on Singapore's authoritarian rule.

<sup>16</sup> Many political scholars had observed an increase in authoritarian trends since Dr Mahathir Mohamad assumed the mantle of leadership in 1981. During the infamous 1987 "Operasi Lalang" (weeding operation), Mahathir felled most of his political foes in one swoop through mass arrests of opposition leaders and other critics of the government under the ISA. Publishing licenses were also revoked from two dailies, *The Star*, and the *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, a Chinese paper, and two weeklies, *The Sunday Star* and *Watan*. In 1988, Mahathir made constitutional amendments that allowed him to directly interfere in, manipulate and control the judiciary powers, thereby effectively crippling the independence of the legal system. Not only did Mahathir take full advantage of existing state machinery to his benefit, but he also made sweeping changes to a wide array of laws to further curtail civil liberties and human rights. Under the Mahathir regime, the parliamentary democratic institutions that were once safeguarded by the separation of powers deteriorated rapidly. For details, read Crouch (1992), Munro-Kua (1996), and Milne & Mauzy (1999).

<sup>17</sup> In Malaysia, "Asian values" were similarly implemented; however, they were shaped according to the Malay-Islamic worldview.

<sup>18</sup> According to Heng and Devan (1995), the emphasis on women's traditional roles is not only restricted to the cultural domain, but also endorsed by national narratives. They also argue that the "trope of father and daughter" is seen in the relationship between "PAPa" and Singapore, which is represented as a "female child, or at best, an adolescent girl or 'young lady'" (p. 209). At the same time, political pressure has been placed



on women's reproductive value as a "patriotic duty" (p. 201), a notion which stems from the paternalistic government's neurotic fear of the future, a "future which finds its representation and threat . . . in a race-marked, class-inflected, ungovernable female body" (p. 203).

<sup>19</sup> The Confucian gaze illustrates Michel Foucault's theory of disciplinary power. Using Jeremy Bentham's prison model of Panopticon, Foucault argues that through spatial segmentation and surveillance structures, the inmate is individually "fixed in his place" (1979, p. 195) and subjected to surveillance power. The trope of surveillance privileges those who see; this one-sided view creates a "state of consciousness and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (p. 201) within the disciplined, regulated bodies of the inmates whose objectification results in obedience and submission. The individual is therefore disciplined not through violence or overt oppression, but through subtle power that associates guilt with deviance from the norm. And as the individual becomes more attuned to the strategies of normalization, he loses sight of the repressive and prohibitive practices in society.

<sup>20</sup> For an overview of the effects of modernization on Malaysian women and how their rights are protected by the Malaysian laws, refer to Ariffin (1992), Stevens (2000), and Aziz & Marrison (2001). For discussions on the development of women's rights in Singapore, read Wong & Leong (1993) for details of the Women's Charter, as well as other forms of legal provisions such as citizenship laws, and work conditions for women under the Employment Act. Chan (2000) offers a slightly more up-to-date account of women's movements in Singapore through her analysis of women's changing social status in the patriarchal state.

<sup>21</sup> Malaysia's Women and Girls Protection Act, for example, is subjected to blatant gender discrimination. Aziz and Marrison (2001) describe the Act as a "coercive tool to control young women" for it stipulates that any woman under 21 "may be detained for up to three years if it is believed that she is being trained or used for the purposes of prostitution or any immoral purpose." Furthermore the Act has, in practice, "been used to round up and detain women in karaoke lounges and bars, while their male companions are untouched" (Women and Girls Protection Act section). The Act ironically undermines the rights of those it seeks to protect. By punishing the unruly female flesh, it indicates that the women are at fault, while the men are merely victims of female sexuality. In this way, state policies in Malaysia do reinforce cultural conceptions of 'femininity' and 'masculinity.'

<sup>22</sup> Chan (2000) examines the manner in which the PAP has reinforced women's subordinate status in society: "Women's issues and demands are considered within [the PAP's] patriarchal framework. Where necessary, women's rights may be subsumed for the 'greater good' of society" (p. 40).

<sup>23</sup> Heng (1988) points out that in Malaysia and Singapore, the Chinese communities' sense of "Chineseness" can best be described in terms of the Confucian values and world-view that formed the basis of the immigrants' political behaviour in Malaya" (p. 3). It is true that Confucian values and traditions still thrive in the Chinese communities in both countries, so much so that Ryan (1971) made the remark that the "Malaya Chinese culture is more like that practised in China before the Revolution and is certainly very different from that authorised by the Chinese government today" (p. 77). Although his book was published over 30 years ago, Ryan's observation is still valid. Ancestral worship, and other major traditional celebrations such as Qing Ming have long been abolished in communist China, but are still practised in Malaysia and Singapore. For an overview of Chinese customs and traditional practices in Malaya, read Ryan (1971).

<sup>24</sup> Often cited as an example of Chinese women's subordination, the "Three bonds of obedience" subjects Chinese women to a life-long series of male authorities; she obeys her father as a daughter, she must submit to her husband as a wife, and when widowed, she bows to her son's authority. Other Confucian texts such as *Nu Jie* (Precepts for women), *Nu Lun Yu* (Analects for women), and *Nu Fan Chieh Lu* (Short records of exemplary women) also exhort Chinese women to be silent, docile and submit to male superiority in the hierarchy. Phrases such as "a husband, he is Heaven", "Heaven is unalterable it cannot be set aside" (*Nu Jie*, chap. III, as cited in Croll, 1995, p. 13) and "[i]f the wife does not serve her husband, the rules of propriety will be destroyed" (*Nu Jie*, chap. III, as cited in Lewis, 1919, p. 8) helped to construct and define "correct" female conduct and behaviour in feudal China.

<sup>25</sup> For details of social behaviour and training in the Chinese community, refer to Bond (1991); for details of specific gender roles and spaces, refer to Wolf (1970) and Croll (1995).

<sup>26</sup> Singaporean and Malaysian works that capture this sense of conflict include Catherine Lim's novels, *The Serpent's Tooth* (1982) and *The Teardrop Story Woman* (1998), Christine Su-Chen Lim's *Rice Bowl* (1984) and *Fistful of Colours* (1993), Hwee Hwee Tan's *Foreign Bodies* (1997), Chuah Guat Eng's *Echoes of Silence* (1994), and Shirley Lim's *Joss and Gold* (2001). However, the recurring "We/I" motif is by no means restricted only to texts produced by Malaysian and Singaporean Chinese women writers, as it is also a

familiar theme in diasporic Asian literatures. For instance, many Asian American writings delineate the tension between the discourses of American individualism and Asian family duty, as illustrated in texts such as Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976), Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club* (1989), and Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone* (1993), among many others.

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