

Complete Citation: Wicks, Peter (2004). Emergent voices in Singaporean fiction in English. *Asian Profile*, 32 (1), 31-40. ISSN 0304-8675.

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EMERGENT VOICES IN SINGAPOREAN FICTION IN ENGLISH

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A paper prepared for the Third International Convention of Asian Scholars, Singapore, August, 2003.

INTRODUCTION

Singaporean Literature in English is plentiful, vibrant and diverse, reflecting the central role of the English language in the public discourse of the city-state. Although English is but one of four official languages in Singapore, in practice it is the predominant linguistic medium in a city-state committed to modernisation, economic growth, and social integration. For Singapore's political elite, English serves as Singapore's 'working language,' as well as an essential bridge between its Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Eurasian inhabitants.

This healthy condition owes much to generations of literary pioneers since the late 1940s, after the foundation of the then University of Malaya in Singapore.

(1) However, a national literary tradition cannot rely

forever on the efforts of pioneers, even when most of them are still productive. The consolidation of a tradition and establishment of a distinctive literary genre now depends on the emergence of new, younger voices. Fortunately, there are many now writing in Singapore, including Daren Shiau (*Heartland*), Alfian Sa'at (*Corridor*), Claire Tham (*Skimming*), and Tan Hwee Hwee (*Foreign Bodies*). This paper examines principal social and cultural themes in the fiction of these emergent voices, and makes particular reference to their preoccupation with youthful identity, their irreverent style, their views of the Singaporean urban landscape, and their sense of a Singaporean future. This analysis also draws on the key basic assumptions set out by Altick and Fenstermaker in *The Art of Literary Research* (1993), firstly that to understand the meaning of a text, it is necessary to know as much as possible about its creator, the author, and secondly that authors and texts are products of particular social and historical contexts.

(2) The works of all four young authors, all of them born since Singapore's independence in 1965, are testimony to the continued hybridity of contemporary Singapore beneath the sheen of globalisation.

DAREN SHIAU

Daren Shiau's first novel, *Heartland*, was published by SNP Editions Ltd under their Raffles Imprint in 1999, and won a Commendation Award in the Singapore Literature Prizes the same year. *Heartland* was also voted one of the best reads of the year by *The Straits Times*. In one respect, the novel is a standard account of the coming of age of a teenage Chinese Singaporean male. Wing Chen is an innocent, good-natured fellow who stumbles on to a path of experience. "What did he want to do?" Wing ponders at the tender age of eighteen. "He never really thought about the future..." (3) Throughout the narrative, Wing falls in love, then falls out of love, he loses old friends and makes new ones, he studies at Junior College and then enters the earthy, vindictive realm of National Service, he cares for his aging mother and witnesses personal tragedy for the first time when a friend perishes in a traffic accident. Whilst enough to keep the narrative engaging, none of these elements in the plot make Daren Shiau's fictional debut especially distinctive.

What is remarkable is the author's reverence for the Singaporean landscape that permeates the text. Shiau's novel is replete with dense, accurate descriptions of Singaporean scenes, from Haw Par Villa to Zouk discotheque. Which resident of Singapore has not

experienced the torrential flooding along Bukit Timah Road? Undoubtedly, the plethora of local references conveys the author's "true blue Singaporean heart." (4) In particular, Shiau grants the HDB heartland a status that verges on the mythological. It can also be argued that the real characters of *Heartland* are not Wing Chen, Sham, Audrey, Eugene, May Lin, and Yong, interesting in their range that they are, but rather the ubiquitous housing estates that accommodate the vast majority of ordinary Singaporeans. The blocks of HDB flats inhabit Shiau's prose as a living, and generally benign force. One evening, Wing looks up at the estate in Ghim Mo where he has stayed for most of his life:

"The blocks were like resting giants, their faces sullen and dark with repose. The estate was deep in sleep." (5)

But then morning comes to Singapore and "with the coming of the light", Wing marvels, "the estate was crowned with a new and simple relevance." (6) Later Wing directly links the housing estate to Singaporean achievement.

"Silent as a painting, the estate spoke in its own voice ...it was the common man who lived in homes in the sky." (7)

Singapore may not quite yet be a proletarian utopia, but it comes close. As another character in *Heartland* assures Wing Chen that, "although things are expensive here, the big issues are taken care of." (8) Shiau's passion for place is offered as a counterpoint to the author's underlying perception of Singapore as historically recent, nationally arbitrary and strategically vulnerable.(9)

Such a literary celebration of Singapore accurately reflects the life-experience of its author. For more than two decades, Daren Shiau's family lived in the same five-room flat in a public housing estate facing Holland Village on Holland Drive.(10) Shiau exhibited an interest in literature and creative writing very early. When he attended secondary school at Raffles Junior College as a Public Service Commission Humanities Scholar, he won the yearly writing prize. During his tertiary education at the National University of Singapore, he won prizes in prose and verse in the NUS Literary Society Competition in 1993/94, prior to graduating in Law. He now works as a corporate lawyer. In 2000, Shiau won the Tangerine Award for short fiction,

and also published the collection of poems entitled *Peninsular*.

An active conservationist, he founded the 'Water for Somalia' project with NUS Students in the Against the Violation of Earth (SAVE) group. The project earned him the first Singapore Green Leaf Award from the Ministry of Environment in 1993. Shiau has subsequently chaired the Youth Environmental Network of Singapore (YEN), and he has served on the Singapore Environment Council (SEC) and the committee to review the Singapore Green Plan. His handbook, *Communication and the Environment*, was issued in 2000. Shiau was awarded the Singapore Youth Award for Community Service in 2000, and was officially recognised as the Outstanding Young Person of Singapore that same year.(11)

Shiau's environmental activism is echoed in this text, not only when he has the protagonist, Wing Chen, publicly oppose the vivisection of a dog at college, but in his aesthetic approach to his Singaporean surroundings. However, no such valorisation of the HDB estates occurs in the first published short story collection by another young Singaporean author, Alfian Sa'at.

ALFIAN SA'AT

In the title story of **Corridor**, Alfian Sa'at's first published collection of short stories, an HDB estate is the home of the main character of the story, an old Malay woman. The estate is also the scene of a murder involving no less than seven stab wounds. The grandmother learns of the grisly event whilst away on holiday in Jakarta. Further, because the old woman's family does not get along with its Eurasian next-door neighbours, the estate becomes a scene for a variety of anti-social behaviour. The neighbours urinate on the doormat, place cow-dung through an open window, and their children disturb the water supply by mischievously playing with the pipes. Slippers are stolen from outside the old woman's door, and the neighbours also go away for extended periods without explanation. People scream at each other a lot, and another neighbour practises occasional prostitution. These 'small, bitter annoyances" (12) effectively crush any illusion that the HDB estates are always clean, tranquil, congenial dormitories. It can fairly be said that Alfian's stories give voice to people who dwell in the shadows and on the non-conformist margins of life, away from the upwardly mobile social mainstream.

Born in 1977 into the Malayo-Muslim family of a Police officer with the Port of Singapore Authority, Alfian Sa'at was educated first at Tampines Primary School, then attended secondary schooling at Raffles Institution and Raffles Junior College. There his literary interests were manifest when he chaired the Raffles Players Drama Society and received the Kripalani Award for Outstanding Contribution to Creative Arts. He went on to tertiary education in medicine at the National University of Singapore. Alfian has written and published plays and poetry since 1994, winning the Prime Minister's Book prize three times. When in 1998, Alfian published his first collection of short fiction, called **Corridor and Other Stories**, he received the Singapore Literature Prize Commendation Award.

Neither Islam nor Malay ethnicity overtly intrudes into Alfian's published fiction to date, but an awareness of human frailty certainly does. Thus, the HDB estates return as locale for another of Alfian's stories, starkly titled "Duel" but which turns on a very petty matter indeed. The unnamed male narrator likes to sleep during the day and stay up late into the night, watching American programmes on television. Much to his indolent chagrin, someone on the eighth floor of an adjacent block of flats also stays awake until the early hours. With

demonstrably little else going on in his life, the narrator tries to take up the challenge and keep his light turned on longer. However, his opponent in this strange 'duel' turns out to be a chronic insomniac who cannot be bested. Their ostensible contest pales in significance as the narrator recalls the painful yet courageous death of his beloved mother from ovarian cancer. Now *that* was a duel worth having.

Futility and waste characterise the lesbian affair between the characters of pretty Michelle and plain Maylin that takes place in public toilets and is the rather tawdry theme of the story called "Cubicle." Another sad portrait of same-gender relationships gone stale occurs in "Pillow", where a self-centred young homosexual relates the end of a relationship he has had with a 50 year old male, the former friend of his father. The relationship has been completely one-sided. For all his wealth and commercial success, the older man is lonely, weak, vulnerable, and pitiful, an object of disgust to his young companion. Youth, readers are reminded, can exercise such power over age. The narrative in "Pillow" is a chilling portrait of calculated, contemptuous cruelty.

In "Witness," there is a portrayal of marital disillusionment between a married Chinese couple, after the husband decided early in the marriage not to have children, whilst male selfishness also threatens the relationship of a young, well-nourished couple in the story called "Orphans." Here the woman named Karen compassionately responds to a news report over the car radio about AIDS in Romania by suggesting that she and Teck How adopt a baby with the disease. Karen tries to reassure her mortified fiancée:

"I don't think there's any risk, Teck How. I don't think we can get AIDS from babies. It's not something that happens. They're innocent."(13)

Karen quickly abandons the notion in the face of Teck How's hostility, but the dispute underlines a void between the two of them, and by the end of the story, Karen is contemplating an escape from the relationship.

"Bugis" offers a reflection on the gap between appearance and substance, not so much in an ironic sense as in a profound awareness of the futility of pretence. Irony is more evident in the case of Salim, a young student and the main character in the story called "Project", who

refuses to protect a frightened boy from another ethnic group from a harsh beating by his mother. Somehow, the school project that preoccupies Salim and his cronies, as well as their enthusiasm for coke and french fries, pales in significance when compared to the mistreatment and suffering of a fellow young Singaporean.

The theme of sexual ambiguity returns in the final story of Alfian's collection, just entitled "Disco." However, Alfian Sa'at is not the only young Singaporean author to pursue issues of ennui, social divergence, and unconventionality in his fiction. So, too, does Claire Tham, indisputably one of Singapore's brightest and best.

CLAIRE THAM

A very private person, not much is publicly known of the details of Claire Tham's young life. Born in 1967, she was educated at the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus, at Hwa Chong Junior College, and then at Oxford University in Britain, where she read Law. Though now employed as legal officer in a bank, she began writing fiction at a very early age, and once hoped to write "the ultimate rock and roll story"(14), an ambition that was not, of course, unique, but still proved elusive. Literary recognition, too, came early. At the tender age of

seventeen, she won two second prizes in the National Short Story Writing Competition of 1984, followed by the Commendation Award for Fiction from the National Book Development Council of Singapore in 1992, and the Highly Commended Award for Fiction from the same body in 1995. In 1999 and again in 2001, Tham won a Golden Point Award for the SPH-NAC Short Story Writing Competition, organised by Singapore Press Holdings and the National Arts Council. She has prepared literary reviews for *The Straits Times* newspaper, and is considered in detail here because her first novel, *Skimming*, published by Times Editions, appeared as recently as 1999. "I'm a very, very slow writer," Tham told Ong Sor Fern in November, 1999, and says she rewrites "a lot". (15) In the debate about Singaporean identity, Claire Tham's prose conveys a very dim view of official exhortations to revere authority, uphold the community above the individual, practise family values, prosper, and conform, matters that she explores with what Helmi Yusof calls 'her deliciously sardonic humour.' (16)

The First Collection

Bored, restless, cosmopolitan youngsters populate the pages of *Fascist Rock: Stories of Rebellion* (1990), Claire Tham's first published collection of short

stories. Brilliant, opinionated, and irreverent, Claire Tham has a capacity to capture the mood and manners of twenty-year-old Singaporeans with given names like Patsy, Chris, Alphonsus, James, Jeanne, and Irwin, who typically inhabit cars, arcades, and condominiums, and who convey sentiments about as deep as an alcoholic drink, a half-smoked cigarette, a pop song, or an evening drive past grey ghostly HDB flats.

The title is about the only ambiguity in this book. It could refer to a place, to music, or to an attitude, or all three.

For the characters in the story, "Baby, You Can Drive My Car", life is brittle, hedonist, narcissistic, escapist, 'a fake magazine existence.'"(17) The past is dead, and a friend's death brings merely a futile shrug of the shoulder. Says the story's female narrator:

"I want to have a good time. I'm sick of being like everybody else. I hate school. I want to die young. That's about all."(18)

Tham's terse, spare prose sears up out of each story as her characters express their frustration at life on an island "no longer than a peanut"(19), at official

recollections of thousands of years of Chinese history which do not translate to Singapore, and at conformist practices like university initiations. Even a classic Chinese immigrant success story can go sour when, in the story, "Homecoming", a Singaporean university student returns from London to confront the solitary loneliness of a recently-deceased father, who "did nothing but stay in his flat all day, re-reading the papers and waiting for the day his son would come home." (20) Behind every educational achievement, Tham indicates, there is an enormous private cost. The contrast of generational opportunity in this story is profound.

Older Singaporeans are allowed some, albeit brief, say in Tham's literary vision. In the story just called "Lee", it is left to a Singaporean Chinese father to explain to his Americanised, street-wise daughter that any former colony full of comparatively recent immigrants has to try doubly hard to matter and to be respected in a competitive world. On a car ride through downtown Singapore, Lee almost concedes the point:

"I thought it was going to be like Indonesia", she remarked. "This looks like parts of downtown LA. Glitzy." (21)

However, at least by comparison, a measure of acquiescence is possible, even for restless youth caught in a "milieu of work and pragmatism." (22) The story called "Pawns" is set in June, 1989. The events of that time in China sent shockwaves throughout the rest of Asia, and indeed the world. "Pawns" vividly shows that the Lion City is more than preferable to a Celestial Middle Kingdom that can silence the cream of its educated younger generation at Tiananmen Square.

The Second Collection

Saving the Rainforest and other stories (1993) continues a literary exploration of particular kinds of non-conformity amongst an outwardly successful, materially preoccupied, formerly immigrant community. As the undoubted pick of the collection, "The Forerunner", shows, Tham has a remarkable capacity clearly to delineate deterioration in human relationships, as between wife and husband, parent and child, or one generation and another. There are no prim Confucian success stories here, no manuals on successful leadership, and no slogans for social improvement. Thus, an older Chinese woman forms an intense, futile romantic relationship with a younger, illegitimate Eurasian male, thereby providing the actual, subtle, unexpected theme of

the title-story "Saving the Rainforest". "Sundrift" traces the short-lived marriage between a starry-eyed young Singaporean Indian woman and an American expatriate whom she never really gets to know. A fleeting physical liaison between two men of very different ages occurs in "Deep Sea Sloth", resulting in the end of the older one's career. The suicide of a naked, drug-ridden teenager in "Forerunner" effectively conveys the terminal state of his parents' marriage.

In all, the seven stark stories in this volume offer sombre insights into the Singaporean story, out of the mainstream, into the shadows, along the margins, or just below the surface. Claire Tham's characters are truly Lee Kuan Yew's social nightmare.(23) Yet an inclusive and mutually satisfying definition of Singapore surely has to embrace the multiplicity of its people's experience, including that of its younger members.

The First Novel

Tham's first novel, *Skimming* (1999), is a significant technical achievement. The motif of a lovers' triangle is, of course, not new.(24) But, by consciously adopting three vantage points, those of the young woman and the two men who love her over time, Tham manages to convey

the depth and complexity of the complex, triangular relationship in a fresh, vivid and intelligent way. Tham's characteristic prose style is evident from the outset, including her clear, crisp choice of words, short, economical sentences, and pointed dialogue. This distinctive style sustains her in her employment of the longer, capacious literary form of the novel.

The plot begins in the bleak, spare residential colleges of Oxford where three of Singapore's young achievers named Li, Wai Keong, and David are reading for their degrees. Their academic successes mask some profound personal and social differences. Li and Wai Keong, the initial lovers, come from a similar, conventionally upper middle class background of wealth and private apartments. The seemingly unconventional David, who gradually wins Li's affections away from Wai Leong, is from rougher stock - working class, HDB flat, large family. Although she is reluctant to acknowledge the truth, it is this significant social difference that attracts Li at first, especially in the unconstrained environment of an English university. Later, when married and returned to Singapore, the social difference comes to matter much more, and helps drive Li and David apart. What at first attracts soon begins to repel, though the brittle fickleness of Li's persona means not for long. Again,

Tham is informed and sophisticated in her capacity to delineate the disintegration of a personal relationship. Unusual for a Singaporean author, it is not place, landscape or scenery that primarily matters to Claire Tham, but as critic Mohammad A Quayum points out, characterisation. (25)

HWEE HWEE TAN

Called by *Asiaweek* in 2001 "an Asian writer to watch" (26) and "Singapore's novelist of the moment." (27), Hwee Hwee Tan was born in Singapore in 1974. She wanted to be a creative writer from a very early age, but she told Toh Hsien Min in October, 2001, "as I was growing up I was very, very bored, living in Singapore.." and recalled 'just being very frustrated at the lack of opportunities for excitement and also for culture".(28)

At the tender age of 15, Tan travelled overseas with her parents to Holland, where she lived for three years but also found 'really boring."(29) On a scholarship to study in Britain, she attended the University of East Anglia, taking out First Class Honours in English Literature, and postgraduate study at the University of Oxford, where she obtained her Master's degree, and where she also wrote

her first novel, *Foreign Bodies*. "I'd write huddled up in a sleeping bag because Oxford dorms are so cold," she recollected in an interview with David Bowman. (30) After some tutoring in English Literature at the University of Oxford, she received *The New York Times* Fiction Fellowship at New York University in 1997, and moved to the USA. Then, after more than three years in New York, where she obtained another Master's degree in Fine Arts (Creative Writing), she returned to Singapore to live and work, and miss New York. Currently, she is an Arts correspondent for the *Business Times* newspaper.

Tan's short stories have been broadcast frequently on the BBC, and published in serials such as *Pen International*, *Critical Quarterly*, and *New Writing 6*, edited by A.S. Byatt. Her stories have also won numerous awards, including the Ian St James Short Story Award and the BBC Radio 'First Bite' competition.

From 13 years of age, Tan is a convert to Christianity who is acutely aware of "the responsibility to be a good steward, to use those words for the service of Christ." (31) Apart from religious faith, the crime writer, Raymond Chandler, has been a significant literary influence.

Tan is the author of two published novels, *Foreign Bodies* (1997) and *Mammon* (2001), both published by Penguin.

The first novel

Tan's novel, *Foreign Bodies*, appeared in 1997 to much critical acclaim internationally. The *New Internationalist* called the novel 'a fresh and witty look' at cross-cultural tensions (32), while Janis Williams in the *Library Journal* praised its "fast-paced and totally unpretentious " prose (33). Peter Nazareth, writing in *World Literature Today*, remarked on the author's 'maturity beyond her years" (34), whilst James J Uebbing in *Commonweal* held the 'narrative of loss and redemption" in *Foreign Bodies* to be 'a striking debut." (35)

As these commentators suggest, there are several, layered dimensions to this lively narrative. Ostensibly it is, at one level, about three young people trying to solve a crime of gambling, but without legal success. More substantially, it is a vehicle for the author to reflect on growing up in Singapore, on the tortured relationship between a bright, irreverent female child and her face-conscious parents, and on the hidden evil of child sexual abuse. Some of the irreverent yet poignant tone is

conveyed by the protagonist, Mei's, observation that her father 'looked like a walking buttock.'" (36) Although her father showered her with gifts, Mei never liked him, but this dislike turned into burning hatred when, in an episode replete with Christian symbolism, her father nails her to a tree at Bukit Merah at the age of five, and rapes her. Mei can never respect either of her parents again.

Then the novel is a portrait of changes in Singaporean culture and society from earthy immigrant trading milieu to clean, green, cosmopolitan city-state. When lawyer Mei goes to Central Police Station to help her friend Andy, she reflects that "this place reminded me of a clinic." (37) Although part of the action takes place in Britain, the novel is overwhelmingly Singaporean in its sights, sounds, and smells.

Foreign Bodies is also a recognisably confessional work in the Christian tradition. At crucial stages in the exposition, the author outlines the bases of her deep faith, though more with a sense of wondrous good fortune than any heavy didacticism and with an acute awareness of the cultural sensitivities at work in conversion. Mei's beloved grandfather tells her at one point, "You Chinese - how can you become a Christian?", and "You want to go

to Chinese Heaven or Christian Heaven?" (38) Yet her father's abuse has turned young Mei away from Buddhism forever.

The Second Novel

Set in Oxford, New York, and Singapore, Tan's second novel is superficially much lighter in tone than her first. Entitled *Mammon Inc.*, it offers a delightful, clever, satirical romp through the boardrooms and managerial practices of a rather sinister, overwhelming multinational corporation.

The novel can fairly be read as a comic protest against the insidious seduction of Western consumerism for contemporary Singaporeans. A talented young Singaporean female at Oxford University named Chiah Deng Gan is approached by the chief executive of the firm called Mammon Inc. to join the company with the prodigiously paid position of Adapter (or cross-cultural liaison officer). To attain this status, however, Deng Gan must satisfactorily complete three tests. As with much comic fiction, a serious purpose lies underneath, and this purpose continues to reflect the author's Christian commitment. Here the author's faith is manifest in the parallel between the plot of *Mammon Inc.* and the

temptation of Jesus of Nazareth by Satan in the wilderness as recorded in the New Testament. There are, however, no intense experiences of conversion to anchor this narrative.

A Singaporean living in Britain at the start of the narrative, Deng Gan wants desperately to belong somewhere, and so is drawn to the opulence of Mammon Inc. like a moth to a flame.

“When you bought a mcProduct, you weren’t just buying a commodity, you were buying an identity. All you had to do was drink mcCola, and you would become like those rich poseurs, part of a new global community of pretty people who glided through life with a bright, clean smile.” (39)

Singapore was the place of Deng Gan’s third and final ‘test’, and this part of the novel has an undeniably authentic ring about it. The author adroitly juxtaposes two sets of views of the city-state, one held by Deng Gan herself and the other by her English flatmate, Steve. To the visitor, Steve, Singapore is “clean and sterile” (40) and “like one giant giftshop in a hospital.” (41), but

for Deng Gan, Singapore is an "ultra-modern city state" (42), a place of food, shopping, education, examinations, and *kiasu*.

Mammon Inc. zips along in sharp, vivid language, replete with witty quips and earthy, even scatological references. Indeed, Tan's use of language this time is so clever and fluent as to be almost slick. Yet the brisk language also enables the author to raise sensitive cultural and ethnic issues without provoking undue offence amongst her readers. Thus, even as she passes each of the hurdles set for her by her potential employer, Deng Gan becomes disillusioned with its cultural corrosion and contemplates the rather different and difficult step of conversion to Christianity, much to the horror of family members like her sister, who chides:

"You're Chinese, you can't be Christian. You have to worship your ancestors, not Jesus."

(43)

In the face of such negative pressures, Deng Gan eventually succumbs to recruitment by *Mammon Inc.*, thereby hoping to avoid loneliness and anonymity. Yet, somehow both author and reader are left less than

convinced that she has, in truth, found earthly happiness.

CONCLUSION

The four authors and their principal texts as discussed above provide ample testimony to a continued, vigorous, and multi-phonic tradition of Singaporean fiction in English amongst the '3G', or third generation of Singaporeans since independence as identified by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong in his National Day Address last year. When compared to an earlier generation of Singaporean authors, they are less concerned to observe the canons of English literature and more concerned to explore its creative possibilities and its adaptability. Not all of them may openly share Daren Shiau's infectious enthusiasm for Singapore as place, but all are nonetheless recognisably *Singaporean* writers, willing to take up controversial issues and explore dissonant themes. Even when they find their homeland to be less than exciting or stimulating, they exhibit, at least in the works analysed for this paper, an underlying affection for Singapore and acknowledge its achievements. Above all, they articulate significant viewpoints about national and personal identity, about cultural tensions and perils in a dynamic urban centre in transition, and

about the future of their country. "In all of my works," Alfian Sa'at affirmed recently to the Singapore Internet Community, "I have struggled to articulate what it is to be Singaporean ...", though, in fairness, he also spoke of now feeling some fatigue and disillusionment. (44) Thus he and other young authors continue to distil the flip side of Singapore's remarkable prosperity.

NOTES

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