

**NANYANG
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**HIDDEN CULTURE: EXCAVATING SINGAPORE'S PAST
THROUGH THE BOOKWORM SHORT STORIES,
1985–1995**

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SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES
2021**

**Hidden Culture: Excavating Singapore's Past
Through the Bookworm Short Stories, 1985–1995**

LIM JIA YI REBEKAH

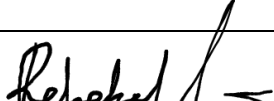
School of Humanities

A thesis submitted to the Nanyang
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fulfilment of the requirement for the
degree of Master of Arts

2021



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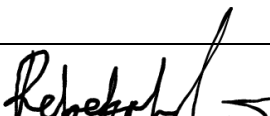
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SUMMARY

The *Bookworm Short Stories* are a series of children's books produced between 1988 and 1995. This period lies sandwiched between the 1983/4 recession (which sparked the post-industrial shift in Singapore's economic landscape and policy), and the years leading up to and following the new millennium. The *Bookworm Short Stories*, as literary texts, and as material objects produced and consumed in Singapore provide a unique view of this time; of expressions and distinct ideas which elude official histories and accounts of the past, yet which might be drawn together to articulate new historical perspectives. Specifically, this thesis identifies a burgeoning shared culture which, moreso than the decades prior, underwent a process of formation and diversification specific to the local environment and identity during this period. And, as the product of a distinct period before the codification of "Singaporeanness," this culture is foundational to the years that would follow – as lingering layers which undergird the shared structures and ideologies which continue to change alongside Singapore.

This thesis' findings specifically emerge through analysis of the *Bookworm Short Stories* as children's literature, drawing on theories and concepts from children's literature scholarship. The child and childhood (as defined, conceived, expressed, and situated in Singapore) within the *Bookworm Short Stories* illuminates wider patterns, and draws together sites of interaction which might be otherwise seen as disparate. Revealed through the text and paratext is a Singaporean culture which emerged both from concerted, state-led nation-building efforts, and through cultural, private processes of experiencing and negotiating Singapore during a time of accelerated social, political, and economic change. This thesis finds embedded across the series expectations, ideals, and anxieties that reflect those processes, and which might be located and interrogated as interconnecting and interacting strands within a Singaporean culture - such as between legislation, morality, and consumption.

This thesis posits that the shared culture it identifies was the subject of dynamic diversification, while nevertheless shaping itself around core preoccupations which impacted how that culture chose to construct and articulate its priorities, consensus, and actions. Those core preoccupations were, firstly, the creation and focus on an ideal (defined specifically against an unideal), and, secondly, a preoccupation with potential futures. This thesis further contends that even as this distinct Singaporean culture expanded to incorporate new meanings and complex dynamics, it also, ironically, contracted and began to restrict itself. In deconstructing and making complex how these preoccupations might condition both past and present, this thesis argues for a view of the past that eschews static, homogenous versions of Singapore's trajectory, suggesting that reframing the past is vital to negotiating Singapore's present.

Chapter One: Introduction

Two decades ago, as a child in primary school, a piece of information embedded itself firmly within my memory. The knowledge that items thrown down garbage chutes in Singapore's public housing flats might hit and injure waste-collectors has endured, even as its source faded. Since then, I have refused to throw anything made of glass, nor anything uncovered down the chute in the kitchen – hoping fervently each time that my bag of trash would not maim or kill, and lecturing my parents on the pressing dangers it posed to public safety. Now, even an adult who understands the unlikeliness of this occurrence (and has watched the waste-clearing process proceed without rubbish hurtling out at top speed) a tinge of anxiety over this deeply rooted information remains. In the process of reviewing material for this thesis, I came across a story which immediately reanimated hazy memories of a thoughtless boy flinging glass bottles down his rubbish chute and striking the waste-collector. It became clear that the subject of this thesis, *the Bookworm Short Stories*, was entirely responsible for my over-cautious waste-disposal habits. A throwaway action occupying a single page altered how I (both as a child and into adulthood) lived in public housing and perceived my responsibility towards others in society.

However, reading that particular story in 2002 as an eight-year old, I was unaware that the Singapore depicted existed ten years prior. Written in 1992, this story reflected concerns and infrastructure of the time. I was not to know that, by 2002, systems of waste collection had already been altered such that even a glass bottle tossed down the chute would pose no danger at all. Yet, the story and depictions of Singapore and Singaporeans were familiar enough that I could absorb the information about rubbish chutes as analogous to my reality. It is at the identification of this time difference – slight yet distinct – where this thesis arrives at its premise. My experience of the *Bookworm Short Stories* demonstrates to an extent how they are firmly

situated within a certain time and place; unremarkable elements of the Singaporean experience were written into texts which capture and reflect that specific time and place. This thesis proposes that, as a subject, the *Bookworm Short Stories* are a means through which a dynamic history of Singaporean culture might be written. It further proposes that the foundations of a shared Singaporean culture might be specifically located, described, and deconstructed using the *Bookworm Short Stories* as a textual and material source.

The *Bookworm Short Stories* existed within a specific, underexplored decade in Singapore's past. This period, between 1985 and 1995, is historically interesting because it lies sandwiched between Singapore's emergence from the 1983 recession (and subsequent push towards a post-industrial, neo-liberal free economy) and a pre-millennium codification and articulation of Singaporean progress and national identity that was written into education, legislation, and political rhetoric. By situating its analysis within this pocket of time, I demonstrate how disparate historical events, legislation, and environmental and demographic change might be seen within the context of an increasingly complex, shared Singaporean culture. Through the *Bookworm Short Stories*, this thesis not only asserts and identifies that a shared culture existed, but also critically interrogates how that culture was articulated, conflated, re-written, and altered. This is facilitated specifically through the *Bookworm Short Stories*' position as children's literature.

As a historical subject, the series provides a perspective outside of official state rhetoric and sources such as public discourse in local media. Instead, its position as children's literature in Singapore - deeply concerned with representing the world around it (to teach and appeal to children) but unregulated and largely unvarnished - allows this thesis to access a wider spectrum of positions within Singapore. As a literary subject, the text can also be approached

as a means of revealing dynamics within society which might otherwise be obscured and unlinked. Through his analysis of 18th century children's literature, Andrew O'Malley offers a view of how middle class identities formed and were contested in Britain, using children's literature to reveal broader battles over class, gender, and morality, and to identify how those texts construct a shared notion of the child specific to certain groups during that time.¹ In doing so, he further demonstrates the active and significant role of children's literature as a socio-cultural arena which directly interacts with the experience of middle-classness, as different actors expressed their desires and anxieties over class through children's literature. This thesis similarly approaches the *Bookworm Short Stories* as a means through which different impulses and contestations across Singapore might be revealed - in order to extrapolate historical insights about shared characteristics and the contradictions which emerged alongside a new Singaporean culture.

Several key questions guide the analysis in this thesis. Firstly, what material and intangible expressions of a shared Singaporean culture might be extracted from the *Bookworm Short Stories*, and how might they be situated in 1980s and 1990s Singapore? Secondly, what specific findings emerge about the nature of that culture? Finally, how does the above alter or complicate existing assumptions about Singapore's past and present?

¹ Andrew O'Malley, *The Making of the Modern Child: Children's Literature and Childhood in the Late Eighteenth Century*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011).

1.1 Situating Bookworm in Singapore

The Bookworm Short Stories

The Bookworm Short Stories are a series of children's books aimed at a target demographic of primary school-aged children. They follow the lives and hijinks of a group of friends who call themselves the Bookworm Gang. The gang originally included eight children, with two new characters added in 1990 and 1994 respectively. The image in **Figure 1.1** represents all ten members of the Bookworm Gang, with short descriptions produced by the publisher for marketing purposes.

Each 76-page volume comprises between four to six illustrated stories – each story self-contained and roughly 15 pages long. While not referencing previous storylines or plots, the stories rely heavily on established character traits for their jokes and premises. Although they only settled into a more uniform, consistent style and tone after 1990, the books are presented as a series in design, size, and numbering. Set in Singapore, the stories can be specifically located through cultural references and locations within the late 1980s and early 1990s; for instance, referencing the 1992 chewing gum ban shortly after legislation was introduced. The series portrays in text and illustration many distinctive features of urban Singapore – from HDB blocks and hawker centres, to shopping malls and bus rides on double-decker buses (first introduced in 1993). While not always explicitly structured around a moral or learning point, the *Bookworm Short Stories* tend to also feature its character's learning life lessons or the consequences of antisocial and immoral behaviours – from dishonesty, to littering.



Figure 1.1 A marketing image featuring the Bookworm Gang illustrated alongside short descriptions

The *Bookworm Short Stories* were first published in 1988, comprising 75 volumes of short stories in all. The final volume was published in 1996, but the series remained in print and circulation by its publisher at least until the end of the decade as their popularity waned. They were published alongside multiple spin-off series which also featured the Bookworm Gang and are entangled with the main *Short Stories* – particularly as the same characters appear in both – with similar writing and illustration styles. While some are less story-based, they all involve the Bookworm characters, and involve some form of story-telling that adds to or builds on the characterization and context of the Bookworm universe. These spinoffs were both part of the Bookworm canon, and usually separate from the contained version of Singapore which characterised the main short stories.

The company responsible for the conception and publishing of the series will be referred to as “Bookworm Publishers” for clarity. However, the company, Far East Trading Co., began as a wholesaler of children’s stationery and books, before founding a reader’s club for children named the Bookworm Club in 1984.² Under the same management, the company then branched into the production and publication of children’s books in 1986. The short stories series and format was their second foray into publishing; the first being two successful magazine series, *Bookworm Digest* and *Bookworm Family*, where early iterations of the Bookworm characters were first introduced alongside a range of other features. These early versions of the Bookworm characters were not yet fully fleshed out – only including Porky, Mimi, Edison, Smarty and Sam Seng. Louie appeared shortly after, followed by Simone and Fat Ani. By 1988, however, this looked set to change, and would do so at a rapid pace over the following five years. In particular, by that year, the Bookworm characters were expanded beyond their dedicated comic strips into many different parts of the magazines – in advertisements, illustrated informative pages, and in separate spin-off storylines. The image to the right from a *Bookworm Digest* issue published in 1987, features Bookworm Characters used to advertise potato chips. [Figure 1.2] When the short story books were launched in the years to come, the Bookworm characters were naturally included in some stories – similar to how they appeared as recognizable, consistent characters in the magazines and comics.



Figure 1.2 Bookworm Digest page published in 1987

² Manjit Kaur, "Club to Introduce Books To Children", The Straits Times, 1984.

The bridge between magazine and book was the first volume of *Bookworm Classics*, a heavy, hardcover compilation of short stories illustrated in a hand-drawn style, and often featuring young children or animals as main characters.³ Bookworm characters appear in 2 out of the 19 stories in this book, which featured a scattered range of stories – with different themes, writing styles, and genres – in a similar style to two-page illustrated short stories that appeared regularly in *Bookworm Digest*.⁴ Published in 1987, *Bookworm Classics* was the precursor to *Bookworm Classics II*, published in early 1988, and featured members of the Bookworm Club in at least 17 of 39 stories.⁵ This volume also contained short profiles of the Bookworm Gang characters and was even more similar in layout and style to the first volumes of *Bookworm Short Stories*. [see Fig 1.3]

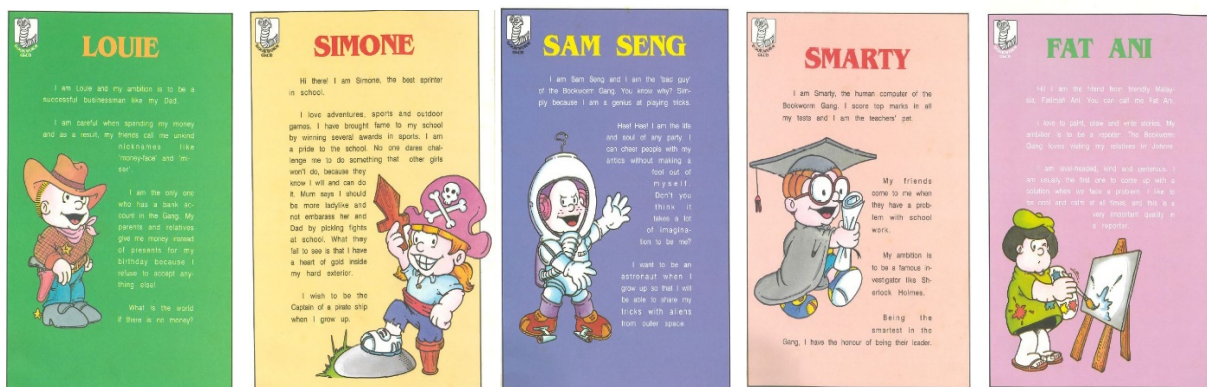


Figure 1.3 Short Profiles of Bookworm Gang members in their earlier iterations, from *Bookworm Classics II*

Later that year, the first two volumes of the *Bookworm Short Stories* were published. Like *Bookworm Classics II*, the two volumes contained stories without the Bookworm characters. According to early marketing of the books, these long-form, narrative stories were meant to mirror those published in the *Bookworm Digest* issues – usually two per issue – as a form of reading entertainment to tie in with the club’s own “reading is fun” initiatives – rather than specifically as a vehicle for a Bookworm Gang series. The first volume did not

³ *Bookworm Classics* (Singapore: Far East Services, 1987).

⁴ Five different authors, and six different illustrators are credited in *Bookworm Classics*.

⁵ *Bookworm Classics II* (Singapore: Far East Services, 1988).

prominently feature the Bookworm Gang members (as the later volumes would all do), even matching its cover illustration to another short story about monkeys.⁶ [Fig 1.4] The publication of shorter volumes continued into 1989. In total, nine short stories were published, and several spinoff series were created that year. This saw a sharp increase in the three years that followed, with 20 short stories volumes published in 1990, and even more spin offs introduced. By 1992, another 15 volumes had been released, along with at least 6 more spin-off volumes in total. This was matched by at least 30 books published in 1993. However, this then saw a sharp decrease in 1994 and 1995, with only 10 books published over those two years – last volume of Short Stories, volume 72, and published in 1995.⁷ However, the period between Bookworm Publisher’s first foray into publishing and its final short story in 1995 saw a rapid ascent to popularity and widespread distribution of the books across Singapore.

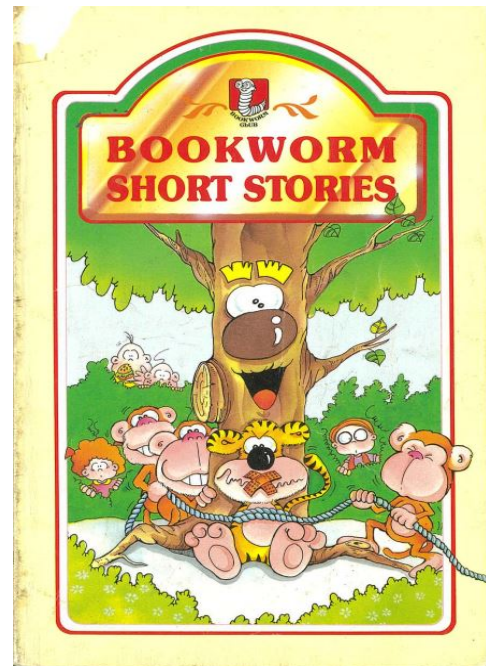


Figure 1.4 Volume 1 of the Bookworm Short Stories

The *Bookworm Short Stories* stand out from their contemporaries as their publishers also were responsible for their creation – from writing, to illustrating, and editing. By 1990, the company was mainly trading on the Bookworm books as their key publications. And, by 1993 the *Bookworm Short Stories* was noted as one of the most commercially successful local children’s series in Singapore.⁸ The same company, operating under the name Bookworm

⁶ *Bookworm Short Stories Collection*, vol. 1, Bookworm Short Stories (Singapore: Bookworm Consultants, 1988).

⁷ *Bookworm Short Stories 72* (Singapore: Bookworm Publishers, 1995).

⁸ Laina Ho, ‘Of Morals, Misguided Writing And Commercialism – The Essence Of Children’s Literature In Singapore’, *International Review Of Children’s Literature And Librarianship* 8, no. 3 (1993): 184.

administrators is attested to in recollections of former students in oral history archives such as the Singapore Memory Project, and in the frequent and specific job advertisements placed by the company; as pictured in **Figure 1.6 and 1.7**.

Congratulations. It's a great opportunity for you to join us as one of our aggressive

SALES EXECUTIVES (Temporary or 30 days assignment/ Full-time)

The Bookworm Club, one of the biggest children Club in South East Asia with 300,000 members motivates young Singaporeans with healthy activities (Reading Is Fun).

We specialise in Direct Marketing, Wholesaling & Advertising. Due to our expansion, we have vacancies for the above position.

- Age: 18-30, Male/ Female
- Salary: **\$800 - \$1200**
- Bonus: Quarterly issued
- Basic Sales & Marketing
- Seminar will be provided for the right candidate.

Please come personally on Wednesday & Thursday or write in to:

Bookworm Consultants Pte Ltd
 # 11-275 Selegie Complex
 Tel: 3383419

BOOKWORM CLUB

with 150 staff, due to expansion requires:

10 FEMALE SALES ASSISTANTS

- 3 months/ full-time
- No experience required
- Seminar provided
- Salary \$600 to \$800 p.m. (plus incentives & bonus)

Interview at:
#11-275 Selegie Complex

Figure 1.6 A job advertisement placed in the Straits Times for "10 Female Sales Assistants"

Figure 1.7 A job advertisement placed in the Straits Times for "Sales Executives"

The *Bookworm Short Stories* were frequently sold through school fairs and events, with student readers given the opportunity to select and purchase the books themselves. The company also rented several physical spaces – one serving as the main Bookworm Clubhouse, and another by 1991 which served as a storefront for their products. Two other significant areas the books were distributed in were school libraries, which were sent copies of books by the company, and in larger, commercial book fairs. While the *Bookworm Short Stories* were not carried in large bookstores such as MPH or Borders, nor in local chains such as Popular, the company reported in 1993 to have sold at least 10,000 copies since the series' inception.¹¹ And, the company's CEO and managing director David Chong claimed that it was turning profits of

¹¹Bookworm Consultants, "Bookworm Journey," The Bookworm Marketing Network, last modified 2005, <http://www.bookworm.com.sg/index.htm>

at least 6 million dollars annually that same year.¹² The saturation of second-hand copies available today on resale markets similarly speaks to Bookworm's ubiquity across the reading lists of Singaporean children during this time. This widespread consumption is, perhaps, surprising when one considers the price of each volume. The price of each book stayed fairly consistent throughout the years of publication – \$5 per 76-page volume. Adjusted for inflation, this would translate to roughly \$6.20 in 2020.¹³ Even in the 1990s, this was costly – particularly relative to other similar publications of comparative length and target market.¹⁴ Recollections of the series in public forums similarly recall the costliness of each volume – several noting their personal experiences of saving up for new releases, or begging their parents to purchase it for them.¹⁵

It is possible to situate this price within the context of the Bookworm brand. The Bookworm magazines, publications, and services all operated under the same logo and branding – managed by the same private company. Recognition of this brand grew alongside its increasingly popular publications and characters, with the Bookworm Gang coming to represent the brand almost entirely; used for memorabilia, as mascots, and in advertising. This brand recognition established the company within the local publishing industry, and in consumer education markets. While the Bookworm brand is something this thesis will refer to again, there is a distinction to be made between the brand and the narrowed focus on the *Bookworm Short Stories*, which this thesis maintains. Similarly, this thesis henceforth will continue referring to the *Bookworm Short Stories* as such – with the understanding that this

¹² 'The Worm Behind The Club Prefers The Shade', *The New Paper*, 2003.

¹³ According to the Monetary Authority of Singapore, and assuming the books fall under the "Educational Good and Services" category. Under the "General Goods and Services" category, inflation would account for an even higher difference – roughly \$8 instead of \$6.20.

¹⁴ A Mr. Kiasu book, for instance, cost \$6, and was four times the length of a single volume of Bookworm Short Stories.

¹⁵ Tan, H, 'Bookworm Short Stories', *Singapore Memory Project*, 2012, <https://www.singaporememory.sg>.

includes only the volumes within the original series. Bookworm spinoffs and other publications such as *Bookworm Family* and *Bookworm Digest* will similarly be specified and seen as separate, although related, subjects. Finally, this thesis uses the term “Bookworm” as a general way of referring to the brand and company.

Both brand and books maintained a strong presence in schools, commercial markets, and with both adult and child consumers. This might further be linked to another key characteristic of the *Bookworm Short Stories* – their longevity and popularity as a series. Beyond their appeal to parents as reading material for their children, the stories appealed to the child reader as books to be collected and anticipated. And, their association with public education gave them access to the school as another site of distribution and access. What the above suggests is that the *Bookworm Short Stories* were, beyond being present during the 1980s and 1990s, *prominent* during this time. Given that by 1990, more than 95% of Singaporean and Permanent Residents were registered as enrolled in the education system, the ubiquity of these books is difficult to overstate and, as this chapter will elaborate, important to their critical significance.¹⁶

Local Children’s Literature

While no concrete statistics exist to produce a definitive ranking, the *Bookworm Short Stories* were arguably one of the most well-known (if not lauded) local children’s series when considered next to their contemporaries – if for no other reason than the lack of much competition at all.¹⁸ Two prominent examples of the serialised, short story format in local

¹⁶ Ministry of Education, ‘Combined And Gross Enrolment Ratio For Primary, Secondary & Tertiary Education’ (Singapore: Ministry of Education, 2015), <https://data.gov.sg/dataset/combined-and-gross-enrolment-ratio-for-primary-secondary-tertiary-education>.

¹⁸ Similarly, few statistics or sources are available through which to establish a direct conclusion about the series’ popularity and prominence with parents and adult buyers.

writing were the *Mr Midnight* series published by Angsana Books from 1998, and *True Singapore Ghost Stories* which was published from 1989 and read by both adults and children.¹⁹ While both were located in Singapore, neither comprised a consistent roster of characters, nor were they specifically located in a consistent time period. Young readers such as the “Spider Series” published and commissioned by Henniman Asia from 1990 – authored by Jessie Wee, and the “Cactus Series” by Bessie Chua in the 1980s were two other examples of local series.²⁰ The stories follow the adventures of several children as they navigate life in rural Singapore – through nature, traditional games, and kampung life. As with a large proportion of other local children’s literature, this did not engage with the changing Singapore of the late 1980s, instead reflecting the author’s nostalgia and confrontation of change; and, often, the author’s romanticism of the past over the “dangerous” present.²¹ The *Bookworm Short Stories* stood out amongst these other series, with no other local series filling a similar gap in both content and structure.

This might be situated partly within the context of a sparse local children’s literature scene in Singapore. It was only in the 1980s that a “local” children’s literature scene began to form.²² For the purposes of this thesis, “local children’s literature” refers to children’s literature both produced and set in Singapore. While children’s literature written by Singaporean authors or published in Singapore exist (for instance Ho Minfong’s three volumes set in Thailand), this falls outside the scope of this thesis’ research.²³ Sandra Williams notes that the body of English–language works might be divided into three broad categories – “Oral Tradition,”

¹⁹ James Lee, *Mr Midnight #1*, *Mr Midnight* (Singapore: Angsana Books, Flame Of The Forest Publishing, 1998); Russell Lee, *The Almost Complete Collection of True Singapore Ghost Stories*, 26 vols, True Singapore Ghost Stories (Singapore: Angsana Books, Flame Of The Forest Publishing, 1989).

²⁰ Lily Tay Lily Kong, ‘Exalting the Past: Nostalgia and the Construction of Heritage in Children’s Literature’, *AREA* 30, no. 2 (1998): 113–43.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Lily Kong, ‘Exalting the Past: Nostalgia and the Construction of Heritage in Children’s Literature’.

²³ Minfong Ho, *Sing to the Dawn* (Singapore: Lotus Book House, 1979).

“Pedagogical,” and “Commercial.” – with pedagogical texts comprising the bulk of literature produced up to the 2000s.²⁴ As both Williams and Laina Ho have observed, there is a “dearth of children’s literature in Singapore.”²⁵ In this, they are articulating a lack of quality or locally distinct children’s literature. In her 2007 annotated bibliography of children’s literature in Singapore, Williams records only 55 texts of note, written by a small pool of local authors.²⁶

Jessie Wee’s *Mooty the Mouse* series, published throughout the 1980s, comprises ten books, and is considered a milestone in creative local children's literature.²⁷ The Mooty series and Wee’s subsequent titles draw on local motifs and imagery, in particular using the landscape of non-urban Singapore – most prominently pre-HDB housing – and exclude features of “modern” contemporary life in the Singapore of the 1980s and 1990s.²⁸ Other notable works of that period include Catherine Lim’s *The Valley of Golden Showers*, *Little Ironies*, and *Or else, the lightning god* published in 1979, 1979, and 1981 respectively, which were aimed at older, secondary level readers.²⁹ And, works such as *Grandma Chew of Emerald Hill*, *The Scholar and the Dragon*, and *At Grandmother’s House*, were set at various points in Singapore’s colonial past.³⁰ Finally, David Loy’s short story collection *Frogs and Fairies* and

²⁴ Sandra J. Williams, *An Annotated Bibliography of Singapore Children’s Books* (Singapore: National Book Development Council of Singapore, 2004).

²⁵ Ibid,105; Laina Ho, "Of Morals, Misguided Writing And Commercialism – The Essence Of Children's Literature In Singapore", *International Review Of Children's Literature And Librarianship* 8, no. 3 (1993): 181.

²⁶ Sandra J. Williams, *An Annotated Bibliography of Singapore Children’s Books*.

²⁷ Lily Kong, ‘Exalting the Past: Nostalgia and the Construction of Heritage in Children’s Literature’.

²⁸ Jessie Wee, *The Adventures of Mooty Series*. (Singapore: Federal Publications, 1980).

²⁹ Catherine Lim, *The Valley of Golden Showers* (Singapore: Educational Publications Bureau, 1979); Catherine Lim, *Little Ironies: Stories of Singapore/ Catherine Lim*, Repr, *Writing in Asia Series* (Singapore: Heinemann Asia, 1989); Catherine Lim, *Or Else, the Lightning God & Other Stories*, *Writing in Asia Series* (Singapore: Heinemann Educational Books (Asia), 1980).

³⁰ Colleen Robertson, *Adventures at Grandma’s House*. (Place of publication not identified: Lulu Com, 2012); *Grandma Chew of Emerald Hill*. (Gardners Books, 1986); S. Kon, *The Scholar and the Dragon*, *Singapore Classics* (Singapore: Epigram Books, 2011).

the two volumes *The Animal Bushes*, *The Last Troll in Singapore* employed local settings with magical and fantastic plot elements experienced by local characters.³¹

The volume of children's literature published and set in Singapore picked up as the 1990s progressed, and has continued to do so at pace. However, at the time Bookworm began to establish itself and peak, bestsellers from the UK and America were most prominent in local markets; for instance, Roald Dahl books, the Nancy Drew series, and Archie comics. In 1990, Roald Dahl books topped local bestseller lists (both adult and child), with 49,250 copies sold in total of 24 different titles.³² According to a newspaper report published in 1988, these books were prized over local publications for their textual and illustrative and creative qualities.³³ This too was the case with older books and series such as Enid Blyton's short stories and Famous Five series, C.S Lewis' Narnia books, and the Just William series by Richmal Crompton.³⁴ For younger children – below the age of 9 or 10 – books such as the Lady Bird Series of fairy tales and short stories dominated the market.³⁵ Memories of Bookworm material often reflect the coexistence of Bookworm texts with these non-local classics, and more broadly, memories of children's literature in the 1980s and 1990s – existing in snippets of interviews or mentioned in asides in recollections of childhood – also feature a range of local and non-local books.³⁶

³¹ David Loy, *Frogs and Fairies* (Place of publication not identified: Federal Publications, 1981); David Loy, *The Last Troll in Singapore* (Singapore: Federal Publications, 1983).

³² Buck Song Koh, 'It's Roald Dahl In Singapore', *The Straits Times*, 1993; 'Titles to Take You down Memory Lane in Singapore', *Straits Times*, 2 September 1989.

³³ Sandra J. Williams, 'The Struggle To Develop A Distinctive Children's Literature In Singapore', *New Review Of Children's Literature And Librarianship* 12, no. 1 (2006): 103–15.

³⁴ Crompton Richmal, *Just William*, Just William Series 1 (Macmillan Children's Books, 2015); C. S. Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, 1st American ed (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2001).

³⁵ Laina Ho, "Of Morals, Misguided Writing And Commercialism – The Essence Of Children's Literature In Singapore", *International Review Of Children's Literature And Librarianship* 8, no. 3 (1993): 181 Pattarin Kusolpali et al., "Why Do Children In Singapore Read? An Exploratory Study", *Malaysian Journal Of Library & Information Science* 18, no. 3 (2013).

³⁶ Tan, H, 'Bookworm Short Stories'.

Educational texts produced by the Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore, which published material specifically focused on English language readers to supplement education reform from the Ministry of Education, existed alongside local and non-local commercial publications.³⁷ The Primary English Programme basal readers produced under the CDIS reading scheme featured short stories set in an ambiguously Singaporean environment – although without much colloquial language or references to contemporary events and experiences. Sandra Williams points out the lack of “a strong Singaporean setting,” with racially ambiguous children illustrating the text and a notable lack of cultural markers.³⁸ Similarly, the form and structure of many local texts (both pedagogical and not) drew heavily from popular non-local sources. The *Heinemann Spider Series* has been critiqued by Laina Ho, who notes that plot, characterisation and setting “...seem imitative of Enid Blyton.” The motif of the school story and ‘gang’ of child protagonists in particular can be seen replicated in the *Bookworm* texts as well. Williams observes in her discussion of children’s literature the proliferation of phrases and expressions found in British texts that would not be found in common local English use, but which draw on language used in Blyton or Dahl texts. For instance, “my word!” or “golly!” as ejaculatives.³⁹ While this characterised a great deal of local children’s literature of the time, and the *Bookworm Short Stories* itself drew on non-local sources in a variety of ways, they stand out amongst their contemporaries in their depiction of local environments as part of the stories’ main settings – with references to local motifs and specific landmarks that were completely localised to Singapore.

³⁷ Saravanan Gopinathan, *Towards a National System of Education in Singapore, 1945–1973* (Singapore; London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 54.

³⁸ Many illustrations appear to be inspired by Disney and the characters usually resemble Caucasians. In addition, animals that appear are not equatorial, and neither does the landscape reflect either urban Singapore or jungle. Ethnicity is depicted when the text is a retelling of a folk tale but not where there is a contemporary setting. This contrasts with a strong sense in Singapore of the need to inculcate a notion of national identity

³⁹ Williams, ‘The Struggle To Develop A Distinctive Children’s Literature In Singapore’.

This educational and pedagogical leaning as part of the local children's literature scene up to the turn of the millennium manifested in several areas – influencing both texts and market demands. For instance, the *Spider* series featured additional material at the end of each book which focused on reading comprehension questions and learning points, mirroring questions one might find in a textbook. The 1980s also saw a number of publications enter the market that, although not storybooks, were marketed to consumers as at least partially educational. Many records of local children's literature do not account for a number of “lower” forms of literature; for instance, graphic novels, magazines, and comic books. These products saturated the local children's market in Singapore – and had done so since the previous decade. A 1979 survey of children reading habits showed that 61% of child readers mostly read magazines and comic books.⁴⁰ Indeed, although these forms of literature were seen as less edifying and value-adding, many local publishers responded to the popularity of magazines and comics.⁴¹ While the *Bookworm Short Stories* retained a more traditional narrative structure, several of their spin-off series did not. The *Mysteries* and *Investigators* series were formatted like the Short Stories but drew on the tradition of mystery fiction like the *Famous Five* and *Nancy Drew* series – with the characters solving crime, and mysterious problems. A comic spin-off series based around different themes also received several volumes – one featuring the gang as superheroes in a graphic novel format. Other series – particularly the *Folklore* series was set in Singapore and was more explicitly focused on cultural differences and traditions – in both distant and recent pasts. And, series like *Brain Boosters* invited readers to fill in blank spaces and had activity pages similar to both textbook and magazine page. Publishers such as the Pan Asia Publishing Company produced short, weekly magazines such as *Student Times*; sold at newsstands and school bookshops next to monthly magazines such as *Young Generations* by

⁴⁰ Shaheen Majid and Venus Tan, ‘Understanding the Reading Habits of Children in Singapore’, *Journal of Educational Media & Library Sciences* 45, no. 2 (2007): 187–98.

⁴¹ ‘Book Fair Best-Sellers’, *Straits Times*, 12 September 1990.

SNP Publishers and *Young Scientist*, alongside *Bookworm Digest* and *Bookworm Family*. Most had stories and sections meant to entertain, while also including informative sections explicitly meant to educate. Although not a new phenomenon, this period also saw the marketing of yearly subscriptions to such magazine increase.⁴² This typically took the form of a one-time fee paid by parents to either commercial vendors or through schools for a monthly delivery of magazines.

Local Publishers and Markets

Entangled with the growing local children's literature scene described above was similarly a demand for both children's products and educational material. Within this landscape, Bookworm arguably straddled all three categories. Direct competitors within the children's market included subscription magazines and educational readers, as well as more entertainment-skewing children's literature like fictional adventure or mystery stories. This extended to the publishing and market landscape in which the series existed. When Bookworm began publishing its own material in 1986, it entered a growing market. From the previous decade, international publishers such as Penguin and MPH had begun forming a strong presence in Singapore and elsewhere in the region. For instance, by 1979, Penguin publications were being distributed in Singapore and local distributors brought in non-local publications from American and European bestsellers which found popularity in the local market.⁴³ The local publishing industry in Singapore in the 1980s was just beginning to grow and establish itself.⁴⁴ Current mainstays of the local scene such as Epigram and Ethos books would only appear in the new millennium, while established publishing houses such as Asia Pac and Times

⁴² Sandra J. Williams, 'The Struggle To Develop A Distinctive Children's Literature In Singapore', *New Review Of Children's Literature And Librarianship* 12, no. 1 (2006): 121.

⁴³ The Straits Times "Page 5 Advertisements Column 1", 1965.

⁴⁴ Williams, 'The Struggle To Develop A Distinctive Children's Literature In Singapore'.

Publishing, had only just begun business. These new publishers, including companies such as Pan Pacific, Eastern Publishing, and Educational Publishing House (a subsidiary of the larger Popular Holdings) began to take hold of the market share.⁴⁵ In particular, several imprints of the Times Publishing Group had begun to accept and publish work by local writers in greater numbers – for instance Federal Publications Pte Ltd which published *The Adventures of Mooty* in 1980.⁴⁶

By the 1980s, Times and Popular had opened several bookstore outlets across the country. Borders and Kinokuniya similarly had branches located prominently in the main shopping districts, stocking a range of international children’s literature such as those described above. While the *Bookworm Short Stories* were not stocked in these larger bookstores, other local publications were. The other significant location where books were bought and sold were Book fairs, which had achieved a notable increase in traffic by the mid–1980s. By that time, larger fairs such as Festival of Books were recording record attendances of over one million visitors across several days.⁴⁷ These records also provide useful information about the types of books reaching bestseller lists, and about the demographics of fair goers.⁴⁸ They reflect a growing demand for reading tools and educational material, alongside an increase in the number of parents and families visiting the fairs in search of good deals, and new literature. Bookworm Publishers maintained a significant presence in Book Fairs such as the Festival of Books and Book Fair and World Book Fair by the 1987, where adult and child consumers were presented with the option to purchase books and subscriptions to Bookworm publications.⁴⁹ As

⁴⁵ Singapore Book Publishers Association, *Directory of Members* (Singapore Book Publishers Association, 2019).

⁴⁶ Jessie Wee, *The Adventures of Mooty Series*.

⁴⁷ ‘Visitors to Book Fair Likely to Reach 1m’, *Straits Times*, 9 September 1989.

⁴⁸ ‘Book Fair Best–Sellers’; Rav Dhaliwal, ‘Local Books Net \$1m in Sales at Nine–Day Book Fair’, *Straits Times*, 18 September 1992; Sandra Pearce, ‘Horror, Ghost Stories Take a Back Seat at Book Fair’, *Straits Times*, 6 September 1993.

⁴⁹ Koh Buck Song, ‘Fair Offerings’, *Straits Times*, 31 August 1991.

one advertisement shows in 1990s, the publishers occupied five booth spaces at the Festival of Books – a significant number given that during this time the fair had become popular enough to turn away other publishers due to lack of space.⁵⁰

It is possible, then, to locate the *Bookworm Short Stories* within its publishing and literary surroundings, yet at the same time possible to see how they did not fit into a single category. Rather, they straddled a variety of genres, purposes, reading encounters, and markets. For one, *the Bookworm Short Stories* could be marketed variously as educational, morally instructive, and as entertainment – according to the target consumer. Its content similarly reflected a range of influences, while not having any direct competitors within its own primary markets. So too was the company unique in its explicitly economic marketing ambitions, and centralized control over the book's conceptualisation, content, and distribution – therefore reflecting different sets of preoccupations outside of strictly social or educational or political ones.

Bookworm as Source, Bookworm as Approach

The *Bookworm Short Stories* present themselves as interesting subjects on several different levels: as self-contained artefacts, when compared to other contemporary subjects, and as prominent parts of this particular period in society. As texts, the *Bookworm Short Stories* are valuable in their depictions of Singapore, and of children within Singapore. The contained, consistent universe which was written to mirror the actual contemporary surroundings of post-industrial Singapore stands out amongst other works of the time. As a series, and as fictional books, the *Bookworm Short Stories* also stand out for presence and ubiquity; both during their publication, and as sources accessible for analysis several decades later. This sustained

⁵⁰ '22nd Singapore International Festival of Books and Book Fair 1990', *The Straits Times*, 1990.

popularity across the period under consideration suggests, if not complete accuracy or resonance with the text, at least a significant measure of social currency across Singapore at the time. They are widely read fictional, serial texts which represent a version of the Singapore they were written in *and* also products that reveal consumption patterns, motivations, and anxieties in educational, moral, and social spheres.

And, as this chapter will elaborate, the *Bookworm Short Stories* resonate particularly with the time period explored in this thesis because they existed at the crossroads of several different public and private arenas in Singapore during the 1980s and 1990s. This thesis posts that those arenas – chiefly education, popular consumption and moral instruction – critically parallel the preoccupations of Singapore’s shared culture. Finally, the *Bookworm Short Stories*’ significance in the context of this thesis extends to their role in its approach. Beyond serving as artefacts of the 1980s and 1990s, their position as lesser explored subjects – children’s literature – outside of official legislation and official histories of the period position them as critically interesting.

This thesis’ analytical approach to the *Bookworm Short Stories* focuses on what they are: children’s books. As children’s literature, they might therefore be analysed using approaches from the field of children’s literature studies. As the following section elaborates, this thesis does so through an approach which specifically draws on several interlinked fields, theoretical ideas and vocabularies – focusing on interdisciplinary, material perspectives within the field, as well as on the layered concept of the child.

1.2 The Child and Children’s Literature

Bookworm as Children’s Literature

Children's literature is distinct as a field and category of literature not because of any particular consistency in structure or genre, but because of its intended subjects and purposes which in turn imbue those works with certain characteristics and critical interest. Children's literature has been studied critically by scholars from a variety of fields; across literature history, psychology, sociology, pedagogy, post-colonial studies and gender studies. While there remains a variety of definitions and ways of conceptualising children's literature, the existing body of work demonstrates that critically examining these works is a fruitful endeavour. As Kimberly Reynolds notes, children's literature "straddles domestic and institutional, official and unofficial, high and mass cultures," and reveals much about children and wider social and ideological conditions.⁵² This is while simultaneously resonating in richly material ways with actual readers and actors; implicating the formation and conception of childhood and social values in return. In examining children's literature, it is therefore not only possible to examine the past, but to interrogate the present.

In Singapore, children's literature scholarship is not a well-populated field. Geographers Lily Kong and Lily Koh's 1998 article, *Exalting the past: Nostalgia and the Construction of Heritage in Children's Literature*, examines how local children's literature set in nostalgic and rural versions of Singapore's past reflects the tension of changing landscapes and the vast differences between its past and present.⁵³ However, despite its brevity and limited scope, this remains the most critically developed work on the subject. Kong and Tay specifically note the potential for further exploration of the works produced in the 1980s and 1990s — particular in the context of Singapore's nation-building.⁵⁴ Bookworm publications are only identified and discussed briefly in two short articles – both by Laina Ho, who has

⁵² Kimberley Reynolds, *Children's Literature: A Very Short Introduction*, Very Short Introductions 288 (Oxford [England]; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁵³ *Exalting the past: Nostalgia and the Construction of Heritage in Children's Literature*

⁵⁴ *Ibid*,

written on children's literature and herself is an educator and author of children's books.⁵⁵ This therefore leaves a gap in local scholarship which this thesis fills; the *Bookworm Short Stories* particularly embodying the straddling of arenas that characterises children's literature more generally. It also draws on the dynamic between adult and child inherent in children's literature to explore how former child readers and memories of the *Bookworm Short Stories* complicate present day structures and categories.

Within the wide range of children's literature, a significant section is meant for beginner or younger readers – and is therefore characterised by simplistic or unsophisticated text. While this distinguishes them from adult literature, there remains a great deal of critical value in works which are not textually dense and rich, nor traditionally aesthetically valued as literature. In this context, the *Bookworm Short Stories* are both children's literature *and* excluded from the local canon of valuable children's literature. Sandra Williams in her 2004 compilation of "Singapore Children's Books" states that she collated books "primarily meant to entertain" and employed a "recognisably local setting."⁵⁶ Throughout, the volumes listed in the bibliography are described and lauded in terms of their literary quality, illustrative beauty, and sometimes the complexity of the text. While even several educational texts made it onto the list, not a single Bookworm publication can be found. This stands in stark contrast to its widespread distribution in the previous decade, but at the same reflects how the *Bookworm Short Stories* occupy spaces that are marginal and therefore potentially unique. Further, as scholars such as Perry Nodelman have articulated, the lack of literary distinction does necessarily diminish the critical value and potential of the children's text.⁵⁷ Despite works such as the *Bookworm Short Stories* being simplistic and direct in form and purpose, this thesis contends through its analysis

⁵⁵ Laina Ho, 'Of Morals, Misguided Writing And Commercialism – The Essence Of Children's Literature In Singapore'.

⁵⁶ Sandra Williams, *Singapore Children's Literature: an Annotated Bibliography*,

⁵⁷ Perry Nodelman, *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature* (JHU Press, 2008).21.

that the simplistic, repetitive, consistent nature of the series, and the didactic forms employed might be interrogated as a richly complex historical and literary source.

Finally, the material turn of children's literature scholarship broadly involves a focus on material, perceptible elements (and portrayals of those elements) in children's literature. This recent material turn brings together existing analysis of intangible meaning within the text with new perspectives from the materiality of actual actors, bibliographies, or marketplaces (among others).⁵⁸ As Clémentine Beauvais and Maria Nikolajeva put it, the very nature of the material turn necessitates an interdisciplinary slant and has the potential to reflect the “complexity, plurality and ambiguity of our understanding of childhood and its representation in fiction produced and marketed for young audiences.”⁵⁹ For one, the *Bookworm Short Stories* and their active participation and engagement with market forces and the contemporary, urban Singapore around it facilitate this thesis' approach, which roots its literary analysis firmly in historical interactions and artefacts. The *Bookworm Short Stories* might also be mined for intertextual and paratextual characteristics which have both literary meaning, and hold meaning as objects and experiences.

This thesis further finds a useful shared vocabulary in the use of materiality in children's literature. Thinking about the material in historical terms looks beyond the ideological to explore how intangible cultures are manifest or translated to material cultures and experiences – observable in actions or events. Just as its literary analysis seeks to look beyond the text, this thesis' historical approach similarly focuses on how ideals and ideologies were represented and existed in 1980s and 1990s Singapore.

⁵⁸ Clémentine Beauvais and Maria Nikolajeva, eds., *The Edinburgh Companion to Children's Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017).3–9.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*,3.

Power and the Adult

A key premise within Children's Literature scholarship is that children's literature articulates a relationship between the adult and child characterised by an imbalance of power – often as perceived and demonstrated by the adult. Jacqueline Rose's important (and contentious) text, *The Case of Peter Pan*, declares that children's literature is a means through which adults construct and disavow their lack of completeness. For Rose, children's books do not speak for children — no matter how much they claim to — and they are, therefore, impossible.⁶⁰ This is echoed in Perry Nodelman's influential article on the "colonised child," which identifies imperialist tendencies that run through all children's literature — adults the colonisers, and children the colonised.⁶¹ Nodelman's *The Hidden Adult* expounds further on the notion that it is adult conceptualisations of power, and adult anxieties which are embedded in children's texts and can therefore be revealed through critical analysis of those texts. What this also reveals, as scholars such as Karin Oberstein–Lesnik and Maria Nikolajeva have described, is a construction of childhood that reflects wider identities within society – through the lens of adult negotiations and experiences.⁶² This is significant when considering how Bookworm clearly and consistently depicts a fictional Singapore which mirrors the real Singapore – and chiefly comprise child characters written and produced by adult authors. As this chapter will elaborate, the structures of power in Singapore similarly might be illuminated

⁶⁰ Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan, Or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993).

⁶¹ First in Perry Nodelman, 'The Other: Orientalism, Colonialism, and Children's Literature', *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*. 17, no. 1 (1992). Later in a more nuanced articulation of his view in Perry Nodelman, *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).

⁶² Karin Lesnik–Oberstein, *Children's Literature: New Approaches*, ed. Karin Lesnik–Oberstein (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 10–14.

by a critical approach which considers both adult and child experiences of power – critically approaching texts and books as works embedded with meaning by adults can illuminate how ideologies and power dynamics are disseminated, articulated, entrenched, and normalised.

However, recent scholarship has problematised the notion of the powerful adult/powerless child dynamic, offering alternative ways of writing and analysing those same texts. While the adult-written text has intended meanings, it is nevertheless conditioned by a variety of blurred lines – between the adult and their own experiences of childhood, and by the multiplicity of meanings which the child reader might derive from that same text.⁶³ Merah Gubar illustrates how child-generated fan letters and reviews offer a more nuanced perspective of *Peter Pan*.⁶⁴ She proposes the idea of “a kinship model,” wherein the flexible and blurred degrees of separation between adult and child are emphasized rather than their innate differences.⁶⁵ For Gubar, the adult and the child are “akin to one another” – their differences marked also by their similarity – the child inevitably grows to become an adult through a process of mental and physical change which is neither uniform nor consistent in nature.⁶⁶ The adult’s power over the child – whether pastoral, instructive, coercive, or protective is also tied to their own memory of childhood and positionality in relation to the child – within which there is an immense amount of variation and difference, even in a relatively small context such as Singapore. This might be seen in the enduring sense of nostalgia surrounding the Bookworm series; heavily conditioned not only by the adult-written text, but by the child reader’s active

⁶³ David Rudd, "Children's Literature And The Return To Rose", *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (2010): 290–310; Merah Gubar, "On Not Defining Children’s Literature", *PMLA* 126, no. 1 (2011): 209–216.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 291–310.

⁶⁵ Merah Gubar, ‘On Not Defining Children’s Literature’, *PLMA* 126, no. 1 (2011): 209–16.

⁶⁶ Merah Gubar, ‘The Hermeneutics Of Recuperation: What A Kinship–Model Approach To Children’s Agency Could Do For Children’s Literature And Childhood Studies’, *Young People, Texts, Cultures* 8, no. 1 (2016): 291–310.

experiences of purchasing and interacting with the series through fan-mail, live readings, and owning merchandise.

Therefore, to think about power in the context of the *Bookworm Short Stories* is to first acknowledge the strong presence of political rhetoric, education legislation, and the powerful cultural impulses towards certain constructions of the child present in the text and its paratext. This must be followed reflexively engaging with how experiences of childhood at the time in turn impacted the series. The above allows this thesis to extrapolate alternative and unseen ironies and negotiations of what the child could/should be in Singapore during the 1980s and 1990s. The arguments put forth by scholars such as Claire Bradford, who emphasise the importance of recognising intersectional forces (such as gender, post-coloniality, and systemic racism) that interplay with those adult/child power dynamics, also benefit this thesis.⁶⁷ This thesis therefore recognises that the subjective experiences of readers, writers, and societies mingle with universal, “globalised” conceptualisations of power, values, and impulses in children’s literature.

Delightful Instruction

The dual imperatives to delight and instruct have characterised children’s works since their conception. This stems from the identification of children as biologically and cognitively distinct from adults; defined against the adult – both as less developed, less capable, less knowledgeable, and as a group to be protected, nurtured, and treated with affection. On one hand, this produces the didactic element – the need to instruct and impart knowledge; often as a means of shaping the child into the ideal adult. This sits next to the need to capture attention

⁶⁷ Clare Bradford, ‘Multiculturalism and Post-Colonialism’, *Children’s Literature Studies: A Research Handbook*, n.d., 162–69; Clare Bradford, ‘The Case of Children’s Literature: Colonial or Anti-Colonial?’, *Global Studies of Childhood* 1, no. 4 (2011): 271–74.

and to entertain. On one hand, this dynamic might be seen as one between disparate elements; didacticism characterised as the absence of delight. However, these imperatives interact with each other and are manifest in children's texts differently – sometimes contradicting each other, other times co-existing, other times outshining each other – depending, not as Mitzi Myers notes, on a trans-historical concept of childhood, but rather a "culturally conditioned ideology" and "tissue of assumptions, preferences, and perspectives."⁶⁸ What this further suggests is that works categorised as purely didactic, or not seen as containing complex messages and literary meaning nevertheless contain internal dynamics which reveal historically contextual layers and negotiations within those cultural visions of childhood and wider society. Myer's analysis of texts written by women authors in the 18th century excavate meaning beyond that of simple, "unimaginative" moral lessons, finding complex articulations within those texts of social critique and visions of the future. For instance, she points out that the desires, values, and aims in the works of Mary Wollencroft might be articulated as distinct from dominant contemporary pedagogical treaties (such as those by John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau).⁶⁹ In doing so, Myers and scholars such as Matthew Grenby suggest that the didacticism of works previously categorised and dismissed as inferior, un-delightful, and excessively instructive might be complicated and analysed as fruitful critical subjects.⁷⁰

As the previous section has explored, the *Bookworm Short Stories* sit between the crossroads of delight and instruction; functioning both as popular texts used as entertainment, and as texts with moral teaching points that were read and distributed in educational institutions

⁶⁸ Donelle Rae Ruwe and Mitzi Myers, eds., *Culturing the Child, 1690-1914: Essays in Memory of Mitzi Myers* (Lanham, Md.: Children's Literature Association and Scarecrow Press, 2005).

⁶⁹ Mitzi Myers, 'Wise Child, Wise Peasant, Wise Guy: Geoffrey Summerfield's Case Against the Eighteenth Century', *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (1987): 107–10.

⁷⁰ M. O. Grenby, *Delightful Instruction? Assessing Children's Use of Educational Books in the Long Eighteenth Century, Educating the Child in Enlightenment Britain* (Routledge, 2016); Mitzi Myers, 'Wise Child, Wise Peasant, Wise Guy: Geoffrey Summerfield's Case Against the Eighteenth Century', *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (1987): 107–10.

alongside being marketed as language readers by their publisher. The series is, further, excluded from present day discussions of children's literature - having faded from view and been dismissed as works of poor quality, and as one-dimensionally instructive and moralising. However, as the following chapters discuss, this leaves space to reassess the *Bookworm Short Stories* as subjects containing unique representations of social desires within their didactic structures and goals.

The Child

Finally, children's literature scholarship provides specific terms and vocabularies which structure how this thesis engages with *Bookworm Short Stories*. It contends the shared Singaporean culture of the 1980s and 1990s is embedded within the *Bookworm Short Stories* – specifically within the critical child of the series. It therefore focuses on two key forms of critical “child” within its analysis; the imagined child and the implied child reader. The child as a critical concept represents both the broad notions of child/childhood (held by both adults and children), and the material child tied to actual lived change, experience, and expectations of specific groups and actors.

The Imagined Child and the Adult

Critically, the Imagined Child in children's literature might represent a number of things: the child as written in the texts, the general construction of childhood in the texts, and the adult negotiation and articulation of desires, anxieties, and broader social contexts through the written child. Clémentine Beauvais writes in *The Mighty Child* that the figure of the child constructed in texts for children by adult authors is a “symbolic construct” that occupies a

“symbolic childhood.”⁷¹ These are produced by various enmeshments of “beliefs, values and fears associated with the perception, both by adults and by children, of what it means to be a child in a given context.”⁷² The nuances of these constructions can reveal the specific and temporal fears, ironies and ideals of a society – and, as Beauvais notes, analysis of it can “add to our understanding of the existential condition, just as much as it can add to our understanding of children’s literature itself.”⁷³ Yet as the existing scholarship on children’s literature has revealed, it is also the case that the imbalance of power is not an easy, uncomplicated one of adult dominance over the child.⁷⁴ That is, although childhood is imagined as a lesser, pre–adult state, it does not necessarily mean the child is disempowered, and the adult all–powerful.

This thesis builds on the notion that the imagined child also reveals a blurred and complicated image of both adulthood and childhood which is inherent in the temporal relationship between adult and child. And, expressions of this in texts can be read beyond adult desires alone, instead used to illuminate the fears and uncertainties of adulthood – and the role of real children in creating and producing those fears. In the context of Bookworm and Singapore, this construction of the imagined child considers the anxieties of childhood, society, and adulthood written into the Bookworm gang characters. As serial texts, the *Bookworm Short Stories* represent a further opportunity to examine a wide range of interactions involving those same child characters in a variety of situations, contexts, and locations over time. Through the following chapters, this thesis uses close–reading as part of its analysis in order to articulate how the imagined child in the Bookworm Short Stories reveals adult, society and child – as conceptualised by the adult. However, it further complicates this by examining the complex

⁷¹ Clémentine Beauvais, *The Mighty Child: Time and Power in Children’s Literature* (John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2015), 10–12.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Beauvais, *The Mighty Child*.

⁷⁴ Nodelman, *The Hidden Adult*.

and contradictorily formed motivations behind that imagined child – the product of the adult memory of childhood alongside entanglement between the child and national identity in Singapore; rather than just the imposition of adult ideals onto the child.

The Implied Child Reader

The implied child reader as a theoretical tool represents the intended reader or readers of Children’s literature.⁷⁷ This might be extended to include a child or group of children specifically, or more generally the idea of what a child needs. This necessarily implicates the text and book – with assumptions written into the text about the needs of the child, and the text itself being crafted with the aim of fulfilling those needs – for instance through intertextual references, entertainment, or presentation. John Stephens highlights the implied reader’s role in how the text constructs its meaning and message. He notes the implied child reader identified and written into the text is constructed based on a range of assumed experiences and subjectivities. Just as the imagined child might reveal ideals of childhood and childness, so too does the implied child reader reveal specific ideals and desires for the child.⁷⁸ However, the key difference between imagined and implied lies in the potential “realness” of the implied child – as readers and potential barometers of the text’s success and effectiveness.⁷⁹ It is possible to identify tensions between the imagined child and implied child reader – in how the imagined child differs from the implied child reader, and how the realities of the implied child’s context reflect dissonances or cultural/social ambivalences about childhood.

In the context of the *Bookworm Short Stories*, this thesis examines how change over time within the texts and books represented a shifting of the implied child reader – and

⁷⁷ Neil Cocks, ‘The Implied Reader. Response and Responsibility: Theories of the Implied Reader in Children’s Literature Criticism’, in *Children’s Literature: New Approaches*, ed. Karin Lesnik–Oberstein (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 93–117.

⁷⁸ John Stephens, *Language and ideology in Children’s Fiction*, 1992.

⁷⁹ Cocks, ‘The Implied Reader. Response and Responsibility: Theories of the Implied Reader in Children’s Literature Criticism’.

contradictory narrowing and widening of who the implied child reader was. This thesis also explores both differences and similarities between the Bookworm characters and the implied child readers, drawing a number of findings from the ironies and tensions which undergird the two. The dual impulses of delight and instruction are also useful critical considerations when approaching the implied child; who often reflects wider assumptions about didactic impulses and about the needs and desires of children in a given society or cultural context. This is pertinent in the context of the *Bookworm Short Stories* given its presence in the education system, physical spaces of education, and in the experiences of students. This thesis considers the implied child readers constructed by the *Bookworm Short Stories* particularly in the context of its producer's motivations, and the embedded cultural and moral assumptions being made about the implied child readers.

1.3 Change and the Child in Post-Industrial Singapore

A Shared Culture

This thesis posits a shared Singaporean culture that is both identifiable through critical analysis, and a historically useful perspective through which the past and present might be understood. Its critical premise proposes that a distinctive Singaporean culture existed and became more complex during the years between 1985 and 1995. It defines “culture” as a set of shared ideologies, behaviors, and imperatives through which Singaporeans processed, reacted to, and constructed themselves as individuals, as a society, and in relation to the state. For instance, this encompassed shared values and desires, widely held assumptions about others and oneself, and adherence to social structures and boundaries. This Singaporean culture can be deconstructed and interrogated; different ideologies, behaviors, and imperatives identified and specifically located within political, economic, social, and environmental events and

changes. It further argues that the Singaporean culture of the 1980s and 1990s was not merely a set of unrelated individual elements, nor was it static or uncontested. Rather, in interrogating that Singaporean culture, new insights about how the past was experienced, negotiated, and layered into the present emerge. Specifically, the *Bookworm Short Stories* serve as repository and reflection of how that Singaporean culture was a set of interconnected elements which conditioned, produced, and were predicated on each other. This was the result of accelerated change around it, new tensions which emerged from change, and from the inevitable need to process those changes and tensions into the experience of being Singaporean.

In *Hard Choices: Challenging the Singapore Consensus*, a “popular consensus” is identified by its contributors – one which, they posit, lasted largely unchallenged up till 2011, slowly fraying with the advent of the internet and new generation of Singaporeans coming of age.⁸⁰ They further identify within that popular consensus, a foundation of shared ideologies – “vulnerability, meritocracy, elite governance, economic growth, and technocratic rationalism,” make up the core of the state’s political and moral legitimacy.⁸¹ Across the volume, the authors point out that the popular consensus and its ideologies are rooted deeply in the “assumptions, values, beliefs, and ultimate goals,” surrounding broader legislative, rhetorical, and political environments.⁸²

This thesis positions those “assumptions, values, beliefs, and ultimate goals,” as constituent parts of a shared Singaporean culture which can be deconstructed, and seen as entangled, dynamic, and tangibly manifest in actions, reactions, and experiences alongside being ideological forces. If, as scholars such as David Low, Cherian George, Michael Barr,

⁸⁰ Donald Low et al., *Hard Choices: Challenging the Singapore Consensus* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013).

⁸¹ Concerned, ‘Discipline Is Also Part of Education’, *The Straits Times*, 24 August 1983.

⁸² Low et al., *Hard Choices*.

and Lily Rahim have argued, a distinct popular consensus has been a consistent and shared presence in Singapore, it becomes necessary to critically question what underpins that consensus, and how and why it came to be.⁸³ This provides fresh perspective to the facets of entrenched ideologies such as “meritocracy, elite governance, and economic growth,” revealing their internal logics and the forces/conditions that contributed to their resonance and position within Singapore. This further fills a gap within existing histories of Singapore’s recent past – giving nuance and dynamism to the people who are often written as submissive, docile or apathetic recipients and reproducers of state–mandated ideologies. Even *Hard Choices*, which deconstructs those ideologies, pays little attention to the unseen processes of negotiation which made those ideologies complex and uniquely Singaporean (and therefore critically and historically valuable to understanding Singapore’s past). Alongside illuminating and revealing the complex past, this thesis approach further allows for present day discourse, structures, and the present–day Singaporean culture to be re–examined with more context. The present might be seen as more than the continuation of enduring ideologies, but rather a result/product of different layered ideologies, behaviours, and imperatives

The Singaporean culture described and interrogated in the following chapters is, therefore, a dense and complicated subject. It is this thesis’ argument that an internal coherence bound the Singaporean culture together during the time period under consideration – and that the *Bookworm Short Stories* provide a means of identifying both the key foundations of that coherence, as well as the competing and occasionally conflicting impulses which the coherence constantly functioned to resolve.

⁸³ Ibid.; Cherian George, *Air–Conditioned Nation Revisited: Essays on Singapore Politics*, 2020; Lily Zubaidah Rahim and Michael D. Barr, *The Limits of Authoritarian Governance in Singapore’s Developmental State* (New York, NY: Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2018).

1985–1995; Establishing Time and Space

This thesis further asserts that mid–1980s to mid–1990s is a critically interesting period when considering a shared Singaporean culture. The shift from post–war, to industrial, and then post–industrial, ‘cosmopolitan’ Singapore is documented in a variety of fields; ranging from economics and political science, to sociology and history. In these works, the “Singapore Story” often emerges – a linear story of progress and upward mobility. The Singapore Story is, broadly, a narrative of Singapore’s history from “sleepy fishing village” to “prosperous, modern, first–world economic hub. Hong Lysa points out the intense and powerful pull of the Singapore Story and its ideological premises in the context of scholarship – colouring how change in Singapore is framed, written, and experienced.⁸⁴ The officially sanctioned (and widely internalized) Singapore Story is consequently one which structures itself around political battles, triumphs, rhetoric of progress, and the associated economic growth. This, although comprehensive, efficient, and very often interesting, results in limited focus on arenas which do not appear to have direct or significant impact on political, economic or major social changes. For instance, this includes popular culture, class stratification, and the dissonances or conflicts which did not greatly impact Singapore’s “successful” present.

A number of excellent works already offer alternative histories – problematizing, and deconstructing the ironies and inconsistencies in the Singapore Story structure. Most significantly, Hong Lysa and Huang Jianli’s *The Scripting of a National History* deconstructs the historical narratives which dominate how Singapore constructs its past.⁸⁵ Work such as

⁸⁴ Hong Lysa, *The Lee Kuan Yew Story as Singapore’s History*, 2002

⁸⁵ Lysa Hong and Jianli Huang, *The Scripting of a National History: Singapore and Its Past* (Aberdeen, Hong Kong: Hong Kong Univ. Press, 2008).

Michael Barr's *Paths Not Taken*, Timothy Barnard's *Nature Contained*, Loh Kah Seng's *Squatters into Citizens* and Lee Kah Wee's *Las Vegas in Singapore* also chart complex histories of post-independence Singapore through environmental history, obscure archival documents, casinos, and architecture.⁸⁶ Similarly, this thesis aims to approach the more recent past; premised on the notion that a history of Singapore can – and should – be revealed through multiple arenas within Singapore's past that existed alongside the dominant zeitgeist of political and rapid economic change. Through its approach of the Bookworm Short Stories as both texts and material sources, this thesis continues to engage with complicating how Singapore's past can be written. It is also through such an approach that fresh ways of understanding how the intersections of the past produce the present; reframing discourses on contemporary issues and realities. For instance, in *Las Vegas in Singapore*, Lee argues that the trajectory of gambling in Singapore is one concerned with capital and control through the intersecting arena of morality, legality, and space. Therefore, the continued expansion of casinos across Asia should be seen not as liberalization, "but instead as a continuation of the project of concentrating power by modern states and corporations."⁸⁷

This thesis has identified the years between 1985 and 1995 in particular (with allowances on either side) as its focus of study. Not only do these years span Bookworm's rise, peak and decline, they represent a specific period of change, transition, and negotiation in Singapore's history which is often left unexplored. Bookworm, as the previous sections have already noted, serves as a useful subject which straddles and therefore reveals specific arenas

⁸⁶ Michael D Barr, 'Lee Kuan Yew and the "Asian Values" Debate', *Asian Studies Association of Australia*, n.d., 26; Timothy P. Barnard, ed., *Nature Contained: Environmental Histories of Singapore* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2014); Kah Seng Loh, *Squatters into citizens: the 1961 Bukit Ho Swee fire and the making of modern Singapore* (Singapore: Asian Studies Association of Australia in association with NUS Press and NIAS Press, 2013); Kah Wee Lee, *Las Vegas in Singapore: Violence, Progress, and the Crisis of Nationalist Modernity* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2018).

⁸⁷ Lee, *Las Vegas in Singapore*, 8.

within this period – such as education, consumption, and urban Singapore. The rest of this chapter establishes the years between 1985 and 1995 as distinct; drawing preliminary connections between the child and specific areas of notable change, showing how the child straddles those areas.

A New Economy

In years immediately following the 1984 economic downturn and global recession, industries foundational to Singapore’s rapid post-independence growth like agriculture and industrial production were no longer sustainable.⁸⁸ The slump in industries within Singapore led to significant job loss, and the overall global market slump hit Singapore’s growth hard. In 1985, a total of 80,000 jobs were lost, and records show a GDP slump for the first time in two decades.⁸⁹ However, as many economic studies have noted, in the grand scheme of things, this recession was a brief blip in Singapore’s upward economic trajectory.⁹⁰ The relatively short length and effects of the recession were quickly overshadowed by its rapid and sustained resurgence from 1987, which saw Singapore alter its course and adapt its economic policy to deal with the issues laid bare by the recession.

Chiefly, the PAP government shifted its economic policy towards commerce, “high technology” manufacturing, and finance rather than formerly strong industries such as agriculture, “low technology” manufacturing, and construction.⁹¹ And, the private sector moved to the forefront of the economy as the main engine of growth, with a large number of

⁸⁸ Cheah Hock Beng, ‘Towards A Sustained Recovery In The Singapore Economy And The “New Capitalism”’, *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 1990, 317–34.

⁸⁹ Linda Low, ‘The Singapore Economy in 1987’, *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 1988, 253–65.

⁹⁰ Pang Eng Fong and Linda Y. C. Lim, ‘Labor, Productivity and Singapore’s Development Model’, in *Singapore’s Economic Development*, by Linda Y C Lim (WORLD SCIENTIFIC, 2016), 135–68, doi:10.1142/9789814723473_0007; Andre Gunder Frank, *ReORIENT: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (University of California Press, 1998).

⁹¹ Henri C. Ghesquière, *Singapore’s Success: Engineering Economic Growth* (Singapore: Thomson, 2007).

government-linked companies being privatized in the mid-1980s. By 1987, it had lifted all remaining restrictions of free trade, repositioning itself as an urban hub for commerce, research, finance and business within Asia. This resulted in its GDP steadily climbing post-1987, as these new sectors flourished, and the government implemented measures to shore up slumps in the construction and retail industries.⁹² As the table below shows, Singapore's growth was significant between 1985 and 1989 – with much of this growth bearing fruit for its citizens, as its policy of foreign labour was, although more relaxed than pre-recession, still fairly restrictive.⁹³ [Fig 1.8]

TABLE 1
Growth in Real GDP/GNP among Selected Countries, 1985–89
(In percentages)

Country/region	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989*
USA	2.8	2.5	3.4	3.8	2.0
Japan	4.5	2.3	4.3	5.8	4.8
OECD	3.0	2.6	3.3	4.0	3.2
South Korea	5.0	12.2	12.0	11.5	6.5
Taiwan	5.0	10.8	11.6	7.1	6.8
Hong Kong	0.8	6.5	13.0	7.2	5.0
Singapore	-1.6	1.8	8.8	10.9	8.0

Figure 1.8 Table reflecting Singapore's GDP growth amongst other countries between 1985 and 1989

As scholars such as Linda Lim and Chua Beng Huat have noted, the role of the economy in Singapore is significant not only as a marker of growth, but as the PAP government's main source of legitimacy and defence against its naysayers.⁹⁴ Singapore's economic stability and the general perception of the PAP's role in its success is fundamental to the notion of a distinctly Singaporean pragmatism and philosophy of development and governance. It is therefore possible – and useful – to see the economic shifts in Singapore described above as the key force behind the far-reaching changes which engulfed Singapore in the late-1980s and

⁹² Beng, 'Towards A Sustained Recovery In The Singapore Economy And The "New Capitalism"?'

⁹³ Daljit Singh, ed., 'Singapore 1991: Towards New Horizons', in *Southeast Asian Affairs 1992* (ISEAS Publishing, 1992), 281–98.

⁹⁴ Beng Huat Chua, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore*, Politics in Asia Series (London ; New York: Routledge, 1995); Bee Chin Ng and Francesco Calvarro, 'Between Status And Solidarity In Singapore', *World Englishes* 28, no. 2 (2009): 143–59.

1990s. While the basic narrative of Singapore’s economic shift towards a neo-liberal, “new capitalist” economy remains, it is also the case that it heralded a sea change in society – one which demanded a great deal of ideological adaptation and negotiation by its people.

Social Structure and Demographics

For one, the shift towards new industries outside of manufacturing and blue-collar work produced an entirely different workforce demographic – the white-collar workers, who were English-educated, “skilled,” and subsequently formed a large portion of the growing middle class.⁹⁵ While industrial Singapore saw a large proportion of local workers filling jobs in the blue-collar sectors – within industries such as manufacturing, agriculture, and construction – the change in the local markets necessitated the workforce shifting as well.⁹⁶ The rise of the managerial middle class was indicative of a new society – one which was majority middle-class, and which became a representation of the model Singaporean citizen.⁹⁷ This class occupied places in both the public and private sectors. As the offices of civil service sectors expanded, so too did the number of jobs available for administrative and managerial professionals. The push towards acquiring skills for white-collar jobs such as English proficiency and certificates of higher education defined the formation of this class. And, the steady and significant economic growth post-recession meant that this class were able to see and equal rise in their income and spending power. So too did the advent of affordable public housing allow home ownership and the acquisition of personal wealth and assets. This meant that individuals who had been living in the lower-middle or working classes in the previous decade had the opportunity for rapid upward mobility, which brought with it an entirely new

⁹⁵ Department of Statistics, ‘Census of Population 2000: Demographic Characteristics’ (Singapore: Department of Statistics, 2001); Department of Statistics, ‘Household Expenditure Survey 1987’ (Republic of Singapore: Department of Statistics, 1988).

⁹⁶ Tan, *Does Class Matter*.

⁹⁷ Chua, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore*.

experience of living and consumption. This shift was so rapid that, by 1987, then–Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew was able to observe that Singapore had “become a middle–income society.”⁹⁸ He emphasized that 80 percent of society, by virtue of their home–ownership (through the HDB schemes) and regular participation in the work economy, had become middle–class.

Economic growth resulted in a standard of living which was both improved, and expanded – spending power affording new material experiences and opportunities that changed how society functioned and communicated. David Chan observes in *50 Years of Social Issues in Singapore*, the post–industrial middle–class was characterized by a drive towards constant and continued upward mobility – one which mirrored Singapore’s upward push within the global economy. The notion of hard work as a Singaporean citizen leading to the “Singapore Dream” was tied to the acquisition of class–marking assets and actions.⁹⁹ And, that in particular, the drive towards class and social mobility was pushed by individual desires to move beyond “public” assets like HDB flats and public transport to “private” assets such as condominiums and personal vehicles. The demand for these grew as their social currency grew – alongside consumption of non–essential luxuries such as consumer goods and consumer technology.¹⁰⁰ The detailed (and historical) study of class in Singapore has been relatively barren next to broader studies of inequality, social structure, and economy. In particular, there is a lack of work which describes the complex intersections between race, class, and religion which serve as powerful entangled forces in the stratification and structural foundations of difference in Singapore.

⁹⁸ Kuan Yew Lee, ‘Speech By Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew At The Tanjong Pagar National Day Dinner’ (Speech, Tanjong Pagar Community Centre, Singapore, 13 August 1987).

⁹⁹ David Chan, *50 Years Of Social Issues In Singapore* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2015).

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

In sum, what this decade saw was, in large part due to wider economic change, a similar change in social structure. Beyond the establishment and rapid filling of the new middle-class, this involved different categories through which Singaporeans were organised – of income, of occupation, and of spending power and assets. This differed from the social structures of the previous decade, and, as this thesis will explore, would be a significant part of how Singaporeans negotiated their shared identities, imperatives, and ideologies.

Social Regulation

Alongside the changing social structure and legislation and policy surrounding social issues were being implemented and passed by the state. These entangled with economic forces and necessarily conditioned the social experiences and expectations of this decade. For one, a rash of social policies regulating population growth, public spaces and public behaviour were implemented throughout the 1980s – crafted reactively and reflectively to changes in local demographics and social structure.

Public housing altered the ways in which different groups within society interacted with each other – and created new communities of residents. The building of “middle-class HDB apartments,” and the enclaves of residents amongst smaller, cheaper flats further created stratification within the social landscape.¹⁰¹ Alongside this, the nuclear family as the ideal unit was facilitated by the HDB flat – family units were given priority when it came to purchasing flats, and the norm of working parents providing for their children and family through steady, regular employment was made necessary by the long-term instalment payment plans under HDB.¹⁰² This way of living was framed as the ideal by ministers such as then-Deputy Prime

¹⁰¹ C. Tremewan, *The Political Economy of Social Control in Singapore*, St Antony’s Series (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1996), doi:10.1007/978-1-349-24624-3.

¹⁰² Chua Beng Huat and Charles Tremewan have both described in detail how this new system of home ownership made it a base-line necessity for the majority of Singaporeans to have steady and regular incomes from

Minister Lee Hsein Long in 1995 as part of a good, educated citizen's role in society – to demonstrate to the world that Singapore's workers were the best and most productive, for the purpose of building a “better Singapore for everyone.”¹⁰³

A number of these social stances began to focus more on the parent and child as a means of performing ideal citizenship.¹⁰⁴ Parents were expected to take on new parenting roles and expectations; beyond producing children who would contribute to the continued security and prosperity of the nation. From the late 1980s and into the 1990s, emphasis was placed on the active involvement of parents – extending specifically in their “nurturing” duties, while seemed to be both educational and moral.¹⁰⁵ Other social initiatives involved campaigns to correct behaviours, practices, and cultural norms which were deemed detrimental to public good and nation-building. For example, campaigns against smoking, promoting courtesy and discouraging the use of mandarin dialects and Singlish.¹⁰⁶ Many of these initiatives were carried out through the People's Association (PA) – a government run organization focused on grassroots and community improvement – introduced multiple activities from the 1960s – speeding up throughout following decades.¹⁰⁷ Branches of these associations were established across different constituencies and offered a variety of services – from kindergartens to language classes, with the overarching aim of promoting “racial harmony and social cohesion in Singapore.”¹⁰⁸ What these new social initiatives suggest are an increased preoccupation with

“long-term fulltime wage labour”. Instead of seasonal or temporary employment, long-term employment was more rewarding under this new system – where the average home-owner made long-term monthly repayments through their CPF in order to secure the 99-year lease over their homes. This changed the complexion of the workforce, and, in the 1980s began to solidify and entrench as the norm.

¹⁰³ Hsein Loong Lee, ‘Singapore’s Stake in the 21st Century and the Role of Undergraduates’, 10 February 1995.

¹⁰⁴ Lee, ‘A Comparative Study : How Class Matters in Shaping Parent-Child Relationship in Singapore’, 12-14.

¹⁰⁵ Ai Mee Seet, ‘Speech by dr seet ai mee, minister of state (community development) and (education), at the people’s association kindergarten graduation ceremony’ (Speech, Singapore, 19 November 1988).

¹⁰⁶ H Pan, *National Campaigns – a Way of Life. In Legacy of Singapore: 40th Anniversary Commemorative 1965–2005*. CR Media, 2005, 104 (Singapore: CR Media, 2005).

¹⁰⁷ Chee Meow Seah, *Community Centres in Singapore: Their Political Involvement* (NUS Press, 1973), 10-35.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 40.

the role of the parent not only in the private context of the nuclear family, but also the public context as part of a shared national identity and contribution to society.

Education Policy

While social programs and reform schools existed to deal with young offenders, it is in the school system and education policy where this intense focus on the child can be most clearly seen. Education policy was, by 1985, heavily favouring English-medium schools. By 1987, Non-English medium schools had been completely phased out (in part due to a lack of demand).¹⁰⁹ And curriculum changes made after the 1979 *Goh Report* that altered education goals (towards effective bilingualism, cultural awareness, and economic productivity) were being implemented across Singapore.¹¹⁰ This saw the increased stratification of the education system – with streaming introduced at Primary three level; sorting students by capabilities and intelligence by the age of nine.¹¹¹ As Linda Low points out, the state's actions in Education reform were heavily associated with economic growth and the creation of optimum human capital to facilitate and maintain that growth. This involved not only the concerns of education and acquisition of skills and knowledge, but also that of ideologies and identities which are vital to ideal citizenship and productivity.¹¹² Demonstrating this intersection between language, knowledge, and morality in 1977, then-Minister of Education Tony Tan said of his ministry:

“The main aim in education is to strengthen moral and civics education, to raise the effectiveness of the education system. This means we have to improve the teaching

¹⁰⁹ Keng Swee Goh and Education Study Team, ‘Report on the Ministry of Education 1978’ (Singapore: Ministry of Education, 1979).

¹¹⁰ John Soon Kwong Yip and Wong Kooi Sim, eds., *Evolution of Educational Excellence: 25 Years of Education in the Republic of Singapore* (Singapore: Longman, 1990).

¹¹¹ Gopinathan, *Towards a National System of Education in Singapore, 1945–1973*, 54.

¹¹² Linda Low, Mun Heng Toh, and Teck Wong Soon, *Economics of Education and Manpower Development: Issues and Policies in Singapore* (Singapore ; New York: McGraw–Hill Book, 1991).

and the learning of languages and raise the standards of technical education... While pupils will learn and acquire more and more knowledge of science and western technology and be proficient in the English language, they will be taught not to adopt the life styles and values of the West that are alien and pernicious to Singapore society, Nation building through moral and civics education is in fact one of the main aims of my Ministry."¹¹³

This was pushed further by curriculum changes made after recommendations by a report in 1980 on Moral Education in Singapore by then–Minister of Trade Ong Teng Cheong.¹¹⁴ By 1984, the short–lived Religious Knowledge programme was implemented in schools. This aimed to teach students in various non–English, “mother tongue” languages to maintain connection with their “Asian values.”¹¹⁵ Excelling in a Singaporean school – and thereby moving up through the meritocratic system – therefore meant not only intellectual brilliance, but also learning and internalising a specific value system and national identity. This entangling of language, culturally specific “values”, and education strategies would continue throughout the decade into the 1990s.

Nation Building and Change

The above changes in economic landscape, consumption culture, social structure, social regulation, and education policy happened within an incredibly short time period – less than a decade – during which time Singapore of the post–war and industrial years saw significant change in almost every public and private sphere. As one minister put it in 1991, Singapore

¹¹³ Yeow–Tong Chia, *Education, Culture and the Singapore Developmental State: ‘World–Soul’ Lost and Regained?*, 2015.

¹¹⁴ T.C. Ong and Moral Education Committee, ‘Report on Moral Education 1979’ (Singapore: Ministry of Education, 1979).

¹¹⁵ Charlene Tan, ‘13. From Moral Values to Citizenship Education: The Teaching of Religion in Singapore Schools’, in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, ed. Ah Eng Lai (ISEAS Publishing, 2008), 321–41.

was “characterized by change,” and by the need to respond promptly, productively and pragmatically— as instructed and defined by the government.¹¹⁶ The PAP government of this period was similarly in a position of having to adapt to rapid change and had not yet formulated the rhetoric of nation–building which would solidify by the new millennium. Singaporeans therefore had to reckon with their society changing rapidly before their eyes (and having to reconcile their individual economic realities with political rhetoric, cultural and societal impulses, and other desires and new material possibilities) while *also* having to negotiate the shifting demands of citizenship under the government – who had begun to stress the importance of the individual’s debt and obligation to society and the necessity of striking the “correct” balance between East and West; Globalization and Nationalism. As-then Acting Minister for Information and the Arts and Senior Minister of State for Foreign Affairs George Yeo articulated in 1990, this asked Singaporeans not only to experience this rapid exposure to new combinations of east and west, but to adapt to both the political and social permutations of what was acceptable and not acceptable.¹¹⁷

As Jochen Hippler theorises, “successful” nation building consists not only of state–building and social integration, but ideological legitimacy.¹¹⁸ Key to ideological legitimacy is the internally formed sense of commonality and shared ideology. In Singapore, the role of the state in that building process – through policy and political rhetoric – cannot be understated. However, this thesis contends that the changes laid out in the above sections might be seen both as heavily state–mandated, and also changes experienced by Singaporeans who, as part of living in Singapore and identifying as Singaporean, were also internalising those changes and

¹¹⁶ George Yeo, ‘Civic Society - Between the Family and the State’ (Speech, NUS Society Inaugural Lecture 1991, World Trade Centre Auditorium, 20 June 1991).

¹¹⁷ George Yeo, ‘The Next 25 Years’ (Speech, Kallang Theatre, Singapore, 8 June 1990).

¹¹⁸ Jochen Hippler, *Nation–Building: A Key Concept For Peaceful Conflict Transformation?* (Pluto Press, 2005),

imperatives in ways which were never fully within the state's control. A shared Singaporean culture served as a binding force during the nation building process in a country without a long and rich ethnic or linguistic culture and history. It produced consensus, it produced new structures and systems and stratification. It also expanded and became more complex – new assumptions needed to understand and properly continue to fit within it – for its internal coherence to continue. To be Singaporean in Singapore during the 1980s and 1990s meant having to negotiate what exactly it meant to have a shared national identity and culture in a politically and economically stable landscape which increasingly began to depart demographically, structurally, and culturally from the decades before. This thesis suggests that the *Bookworm Short Stories* were a product of this time, and specifically contribute nuance to the idea of a shared culture by revealing conflicting impulses and tensions within it, whilst also exemplifying the processes through which those tensions were harnessed.

Chapter Two: The Imagined Child

This chapter begins to unpack Singapore's shared culture through its analysis of the imagined child in *Bookworm*. Chiefly, it employs textual analysis across the series to identify and describe how the imagined child (constructed in the texts) lives, acts, thinks, and functions. And, how the imagined child's actions, thoughts, and experiences resonate with historical changes. In doing so, it specifically identifies several key areas within Singapore during the 1980s and 1990s where many different ideologies, actions, and imperatives arose – showing how those preoccupations were met and processed by the imagined child. This chapter first begins by identifying a specific presentation of the imagined child. The following sections then

highlight three specific arenas through which layers of a newly formed, shared Singaporean culture mingle and are refracted that imagined child – class, the future, and morality.

2.1 The Imagined Child

As the previous chapter has noted, the imagined child might be critically understood as a construction of a child within the children’s text. The imagined child might be understood to be imbued with adult desires, fears, and ideals – not only for the child, but for themselves. Across *the Bookworm Short Stories*, child characters take up a large majority of space and dialogue. Some stories contain no adults at all, while a similar number only feature adults in the final pages. The main recurring adult characters are limited to the Bookworm Gang’s parents, and their teacher, Miss Goon. Alongside the Bookworm Gang, other child characters make occasional appearances – largely one-off classmates and schoolmates. As the data shows, the *Bookworm Short Stories* are focused squarely on the Bookworm Gang – their personalities, actions, and visual depictions fleshed out and elaborated on in much more depth

and detail than other characters. [Table 2.1] This thesis, therefore, regards the Bookworm gang as key depictions of the Imagined Child. It will examine them in detail – focusing on the Bookworm Gang as a collective group of Singaporean children, who exist in a version of urban 1980s and 1990s Singapore.

	% of total volumes
Adult Final Pages Only	36%
Children Only	78%
Other Child Characters	29%

Table 2.1

A key element of the *Bookworm Short Stories* is their seriality, which imbues the text and readings of the text with qualities not always found in non–serial texts. Despite the relatively short length of each story, over 72 volumes and 430 stories in total they foster a sense of familiarity through repetition and slow elaboration (from establishing each character’s favourite items or sore spots, to revealing more about each character’s home and background). This also allows the Bookworm children to be presented in different settings, environments, and situations, which expands the range of possible insights and provides a more complex cross–section of Singapore during this time period. As Victor Watson notes, the serial children’s text, although often simplistic and repetitive, retains an “ambiguity of purpose” that resists specific categorisation, and which seeks to tell new stories while maintaining the need to repeat itself.¹²⁰ This thesis identifies within this repetition a constant imagined child; one who retains several central characteristics that give the series an overarching logic and set of boundaries, rules, and assumptions.

Tracking the Changing Imagined Child

Examining the series as a whole further allows this thesis to identify how and when the imagined child emerged and became consistent. In tracking how the text and books changed, this thesis identifies a specific presentation of childhood within the *Bookworm Short Stories* which emerged and endured as the books began to grow in appeal and marketability. This took place between 1988 and 1990 – just before the series ramped up production, with at least 45% more books published in 1992 and 1993 than in 1990 and 1991. During this period (particularly between volumes 1 and 15), the Bookworm Gang’s characterisations, depictions, and behaviours changed significantly, before being maintained over the next thirty volumes.

¹²⁰ Victor Watson, ‘Series Fiction’, in *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children’s Literature* (London: Routledge, 2014), 532–33.

Identifying this change reveals the process through which the imagined Singaporean child was constructed and written into books.

Firstly, this involved a decisive and marked shift away from overly negative or irredeemable characteristics and actions – both in the plots and narratives of the text, and in the character’s depictions over subsequent books. Secondly, the change encompassed how the children were situated in a Singaporean environment and clearly marked out as Singaporean children – part of specifically Singaporean environments, storylines and futures. Finally, this major change included consistent characterisation and portrayal of each child (and the gang more generally). They were given distinct personality types which were, unlike the earlier iterations, consistent and intentionally varied to fit a range of familiar tropes, social positions, and specific moral qualities.

Bad, to Not–So–Bad

A short story in Volume 1 clearly demonstrates the initial use of overt and implied negative traits when writing the Bookworm characters. Early stories in the series and short comic versions in *Bookworm Digest* and *Bookworm Family* tended to depict the characters as rule–breaking, mischievous, and sometimes mean–spirited children. Neither did the children conform to a rigidly specific character type. In this particular story, *The Emergency Toilet*, the characters partake in a fairly serious infraction (vandalism), with several acting extremely out

of character when contrasted with stories from volumes produced after 1990. An excerpt from the story is reproduced below.¹²¹ [refer to Figure 2.2]

Sam Seng is the main character whose perspective the reader hears in third person. During a football game taking place in the communal space below a HDB flat, a combination of laziness and peer pressure leads him to urinate twice in the communal lift – an act also repeatedly carried out by the other characters – Smarty and Porky among them. Since its inception in 1966, the Vandalism Act in Singapore has been enforced in a variety of circumstances. It encompasses a spectrum of offences; from political graffiti and theft of public property, to the intentional disruption to public property – all brought together under the same name as a serious social ill.¹²²

After the passing of the Environmental Public Health Act in 1987, urinating in public spaces such as HDB lifts was legislated further, with specific fines and charges enforced.¹²³ In public health campaigns, the issue of cleanliness in public housing was a particular concern –

¹²¹ “*The Emergency Toilet*,” *Bookworm Short Stories Volume 1*, Bookworm Consultants, 1987.

¹²² Ping Tjin Thum, ‘Independence: The Further Stage of Colonialism in Singapore’, in *The Limits of Authoritarian Governance in Singapore’s Developmental State*, ed. Lily Zubaidah Rahim and Michael D. Barr (Singapore: Springer, 2019), 49–69.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

"Who said? It's Sam Seng. He scored the most!"

While they were talking excitedly, the lift moved up slowly. The ceiling light flickered. Suddenly the lift jerked violently and stopped. The light went off. It was pitch dark.

"What's happening?" Sam Seng asked nervously.

"Oh goodness! The lift must have broken down again!" Louie cursed. "Lousy lift!"

"Aye ya! Why at this time? I'm so hungry and thirsty now!" Porky grumbled. He reached out his hand to feel for the 'ALARM' button. His fingers were stuck to something sticky.

"Yee...yak! Whose bubble gum?" he exclaimed.

"Ah Seng's la," Louie said, "He was just chewing just now."

Finally Louie found the 'ALARM' button. He pressed on it persistently. The alarm sounded loudly and repeatedly like their empty stomachs crying for food. Many people ran out of their flats to see what had happened. Someone rang up the Lift Maintenance Unit for help.

Inside the lift, the three boys felt weak. They could not sit on the lift floor although their feet were numb. Though they pinched their noses hard, the 'aroma' made them feel like vomiting. Sam Seng felt

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choked and coughed. He felt like fainting from the lack of fresh air. He felt several stars rotating round and round his head. He could not stand up any longer. He ...BONG!! He collapsed on the lift floor. He could not care about the 'aroma', the wet floor, the

"Sam Seng! Sam Seng!" Porky screamed.

"Hey! What's wrong with you?" Louie too felt like fainting. He shivered with fear.

Just then the lift door suddenly opened.

"Come on! Out!" A man in uniform instructed.

"Our friend has fainted," Porky mumbled.

"Don't worry, we'll help him out," the man who was a technician of the Lift Maintenance Unit replied. With his help, Porky climbed slowly out of the lift. It was jammed in between the fifth and sixth storeys.

"Yee.... What a smelly lift?!"

"Oh! Why so dirty?"

"Look! The boy's shirt is soaked with urine!"

"These boys must have been playing a fool here!"

"Serve them right!"

"Should have let them stay inside longer!"

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Figure 2.2 Excerpt from *The Emergency Toilet*

with the term "vandalism" specifically used to describe such acts as well.¹²⁴ That the Bookworm characters repeatedly carried out these acts without displaying awareness of its wrong-ness is characteristic of their early depictions. In the story, both Smarty and Porky explicitly encourage and participate in this behaviour, while Sam Seng is motivated by a combination of laziness and peer pressure despite his reluctance. It is, however, a reluctance motivated not by his conscience, but by embarrassment. When Sam Seng ends up stuck in the lift with "steaming" puddles of urine and ultimately faints in a puddle, he is explicitly shown to be moved by his discomfort and embarrassment (rather than guilt) to never commit the offence again. Smarty, Porky and the other child characters are left without having to face

¹²⁴ Jothie Rajah, 'Punishing Bodies, Securing the Nation: How Rule of Law Can Legitimate the Urbane Authoritarian State', *Law & Social Inquiry* 36, no. 4 (2011): 945-70.

similar physical consequences, and are never shown to learn their lesson or reflect on their behaviour.¹²⁵ This lack of self-reflection and contrition alongside the seriousness of this particular wrong doing in the context of Singapore of the time shows marked differences from the dynamics that would characterise the bulk of Bookworm stories to come.

The depiction of bad behaviour is much more explicit and malicious in nature than, for instance, this excerpt from a story from volume 61, published in 1994.¹²⁶ [Figure 2.3] *Got a Smoke?* shows Sam Seng giving in to peer pressure from a gang of students who illicitly smoke – a similar social ill. However, his fellow Bookworm Gang members all serve as clear foils to the negative influences of the other children, and Sam Seng himself is torn between his own conscience (which clearly articulates his understanding of smoking as morally and socially wrong) and his desire for acceptance.¹²⁷



Figure 2.3 Illustration from *Got A Smoke?* picturing Sam Seng being pressured to smoke and skip class

More generally, Sam Seng as a character is a clear example of how the Bookworm characters behaviours and motivations softened, or were reframed over time. *Samseng* is a colloquial term for “gangster”– drawn from the Hokkien dialect.¹²⁸ This was an association which would have been widely recognised and understood by children of the 1980s and early

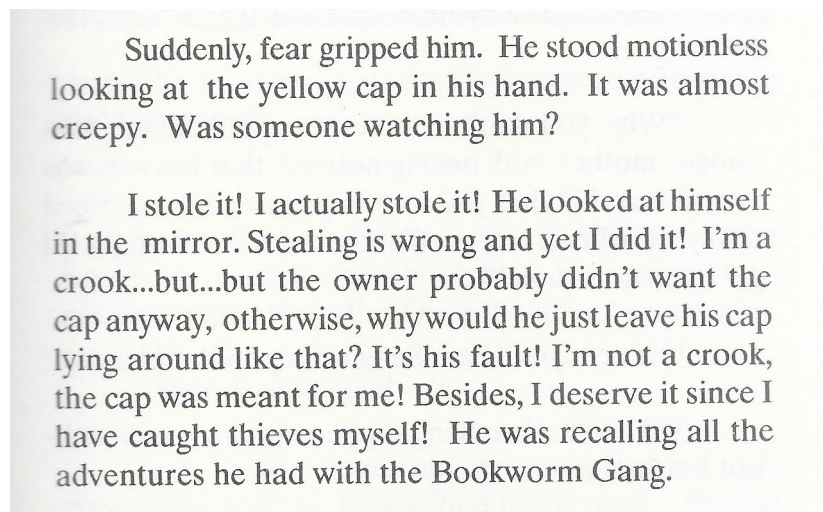
¹²⁵ ‘The Emergency Toilet’, in *Bookworm Short Stories Collection*, vol. 1 (Singapore: Bookworm Consultants, 1988), 54–66.

¹²⁶ ‘Got a Smoke?’, in *Bookworm Short Stories 61*, vol. 61 (Singapore: Bookworm Publishers, 1994), 30–45.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹²⁸ ‘Samseng’, in *Singlish Dictionary* (Singapore), www.singlishdictionary.com/samseng.

1990s. In the text, he shifts from being the main troublemaker and wrong'un, to the mischievous, yet well-intentioned boy who, as per later marketing, has a "heart of gold." This transition took place significantly between 1989 and 1991 – where the meanness of his words and his role as a bully faded. While Sam Seng remains the naughty joker throughout the series, the language and descriptions of his negative thoughts are tempered; extenuating circumstances which give rise to his behaviour are introduced, and his inner monologue and conscience make frequent appearances. For instance, in the excerpt below from volume 40, Sam Seng articulates his guilt over taking a lost cap for himself bubbles to the surface.¹²⁹ [Figure 2.4]



Suddenly, fear gripped him. He stood motionless looking at the yellow cap in his hand. It was almost creepy. Was someone watching him?

I stole it! I actually stole it! He looked at himself in the mirror. Stealing is wrong and yet I did it! I'm a crook...but...but the owner probably didn't want the cap anyway, otherwise, why would he just leave his cap lying around like that? It's his fault! I'm not a crook, the cap was meant for me! Besides, I deserve it since I have caught thieves myself! He was recalling all the adventures he had with the Bookworm Gang.

Figure 2.4 Excerpt from "Yellow Caps"

While Sam Seng still carries out pranks and makes cheeky, teasing jibes, his actions and behaviours are filtered through the softened lens of the harmless, "mischievous," comic relief. And, he is shown to receive firm rebukes from his peers – such as in the following excerpt where he is made to apologise or made to recognise his mistakes.¹³⁰ [Figure 2.5]

¹²⁹ 'The Yellow Caps', in *Bookworm Short Stories 40*, vol. 40 (Singapore: Bookworm Consultants, 1992), 1–16.

¹³⁰ 'Samseng's Own Medicine', in *Bookworm Short Stories 36*, 36 (Singapore: Bookworm Consultants, 1992), 20; 'If Only I Were Thin', in *Bookworm Short Stories 20*, vol. 20 (Singapore: Bookworm Consultants, 1990), 75.; 'Mimi in Trouble', in *Bookworm Short Stories 20*, vol. 20 (Singapore: Bookworm Consultants, 1990), 22.

“Actually, I wanted to apologise to you. I shouldn’t have commented about the way you ate,” she replied.

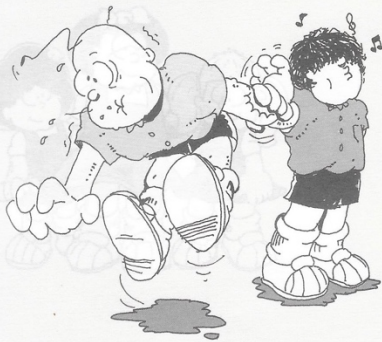
“We were very mean to you, as well,” said Edison. “We’re sorry, right, Sam Seng?”

Sam Seng looked towards the sky, whistling away.

Edison twisted Sam Seng’s arm. “I said, RIGHT, SAM SENG?”

“YEOWCH! RIGHT! RIGHT! WE’RE SORRY!!” shouted Sam Seng.

“Thank you, all of you. I had a dream last night. I dreamt that I was thin and all of you couldn’t stand me because of it. I promise from now onwards, no more talk of diets or being slim... and no more teasing Porky’s size,” Fat Ani said with determination.



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Bookworm Short Stories 20

Figure 2.5 Excerpt from "If Only I were Thin"

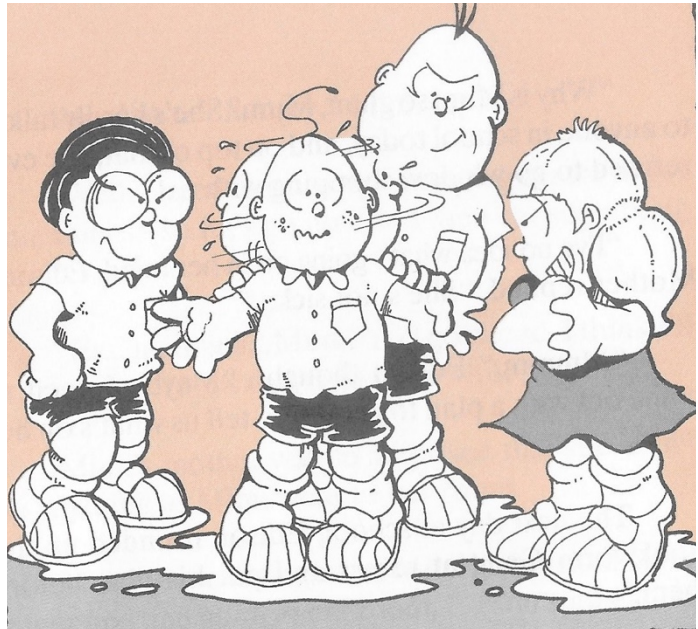


Figure 2.6 Illustration from "Mimi in Trouble" picturing Sam Seng taken to task by the other Bookworm characters

In other cases, some stories such as *The Racket* from volume 27 flip the narrative altogether, with the Bookworm gang mistakenly assuming Sam Seng was extorting money from younger students when he was actually helping them with a different problem.¹³¹

Mimi also displays a subtle shift away from her initial characterisation as entirely vapid and flirtatious. Mimi’s “boy-crazy” characterisation was an early sub-set of her broader “vain” personality. She would initially express romantic interest in (particularly wealthy) other characters – or, frame her dolling up in the context of appeal to the opposite gender.¹³² However,

¹³¹ ‘The Racket’, vol. 27 (Singapore: Bookworm Consultants, 1990), 30–50.

¹³² “Mimi’s Makeover,” *Bookworm Short Stories Volume 8*, Bookworm Consultants, 1989; ‘Beautiful Girl’, in *Bookworm Short Stories* (Singapore: Bookworm Publishers, 1994), 15–27.

this was heavily toned-down over time, with new aspects of Mimi’s personality introduced. Mimi’s central characterisation of vanity was retained, but her motivations and desires was altered in a more socially acceptable and wholesome direction. Her career goals, for instance, went from “famous movie star” (something coded as delusional and laughable given her lack of talent) to being a successful part of the entertainment industry; such as a designer or fashion editor.¹³³

The same might be observed with Louie, who, while fundamentally remaining the stingy, money-loving character, had his stinginess attributed to aspirations of becoming a businessman. [Figure 2.8] This specific aim was not introduced until the Volume 31 of the series, published in 1992.¹³⁴ Previously, Louie functioned as a negative, and occasionally even antagonistic character – his selfish,

miserly, get-rich-quick traits reflected in the types of adventures, scrapes and plot-points centred around his character. For instance, the early stories *The Hundred Dollar Wish* and *Louie’s Nightmares*, which both see Louie losing money due to

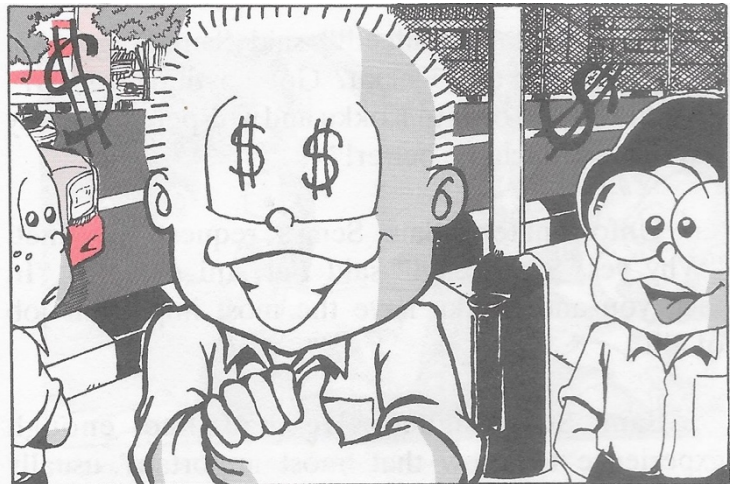


Figure 2.8 Louie illustrated in typical fashion; loving money

his initial greediness and cheating his friends out of money.¹³⁵ Later volumes, however, stress his entrepreneurial nous, and extend his money-loving attributes to business-savviness as well.

¹³³ ‘Dealing with Failures’, in *Bookworm Short Stories 17*, vol. 17 (Singapore: Bookworm Consultants, 1990), 54–65.

¹³⁴ ‘Louie’s New Gadget’, in *Bookworm Short Stories 31*, vol. 31 (Singapore: Bookworm Consultants, 1990), 46–64.

¹³⁵ ‘Sticky Business’, in *Bookworm Short Stories 43*, vol. 43 (Singapore: Bookworm Consultants, 1992), 1–18; ‘Louie’s Pager’, in *Bookworm Short Stories 18*, vol. 18 (Singapore: Bookworm Consultants, 1990), 14–31; Louie money Face image, ‘Best Seller’, in *Bookworm Short Stories 65*, vol. 65 (Singapore: Bookworm Publishers, 1994), 61.

The changes in Mimi and Louie both reflect the shift towards reframing the children’s personality and character types away from being purely negative or malicious. Outside the text, this shift might also be observed in how the characters were illustrated over time.

Porky has consistently been the “fat” character – it is written into his name, and remains his defining characteristic over the course of the series. However, he underwent a marked shift from overtly obese and dangerously gluttonous, to harmlessly greedy, and slightly chubbier compared to his peers. This is illustrated iterations over time, and in how his overeating and greed is described; the consequences of this overeating; negative behaviour softened into something more harmless and correctable. Take the notable difference between the iteration of Porky pictured above in **Figure 2.9** and of the depiction in **Figure 2.10**. In early versions, Porky is practically bursting out of his shirt – his girth nearly double that of the other characters. Later, he is instead shown to be more proportionally aligned to a primary school student – noticeably chubbier and taller than his peers, but not exaggeratedly and concerningly so.

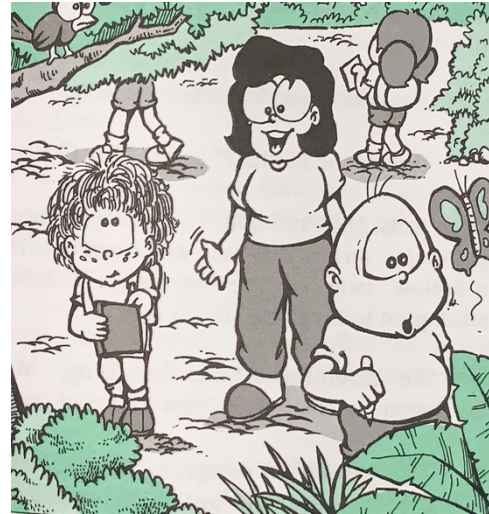


Figure 2.10 Porky (bottom right) depicted in a 1992 volume with a rounder belly, but more proportionate to the other children



Figure 2.9 Porky depicted alongside other Bookworm Characters in a 1989 issue of Bookworm Digest.

Children in Singapore, to Singaporean Children

After this first significant shift, the Bookworm Gang would see one more notable change, which took place in 1992 and 1994 – the addition of two new characters. These characters, Kokku and Dollah, were both male and non-Chinese. Kokku is an Indian boy, who comes from a Hindu family, while Dollah is Malay, and specifically from Malaysia.¹³⁶ Their addition saw the Bookworm Gang’s demographics more closely resemble the makeup of Singapore; lining up with the official categorisation of “races” (also known as the CMIO Model) in Singapore which were adapted by the PAP government from existing colonial categorisations.¹³⁷ This also aligned the Bookworm Gang’s demographics more closely to the ethnic ratios of Singapore at the time.¹³⁸ In particular, the addition of Kokku meant that the Chinese–Malay–Indian racial categories were fulfilled after Volume 31, more closely conforming to, and reflecting the distinctions of race being established and pushed for in nation–building efforts within Singapore.¹³⁹

More generally, this situatedness in Singapore extended to how the Bookworm Gang was written into their surroundings, and the markers of urban Singapore. Rather than isolated stories, they were bound together in a shared universe which mirrored closely the norms and structures of Singapore of the time. They were increasingly drawn as children who not only happened to be living in Singapore, but also were situated specifically within a time and space and engaging with the surroundings of 1980s and 1990s Singapore. It is further important to emphasize that these changes were not entirely being unconsciously written into the Bookworm

¹³⁶ ‘Dollah Saves the Day’, in *Bookworm Short Stories 65*, vol. 65 (Singapore: Bookworm Publishers, 1994).

¹³⁷ Beng Huat Chua, ‘Culture, Multiracialism, and National Identity in Singapore’, in *Trajectories: Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, ed. Kuan Hsing Chen and et al (London; New York: Routledge, 1998), 191.190.

¹³⁸ Sharon Siddique, ‘Singaporean Identity’, in *The Moulding of Modern Singapore*, ed. Kernial Singh Sandhu and Paul Wheatly (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1989), 570.

¹³⁹ Michael Barr and Zlatko Skrbis, *Constructing Singapore: Elitism, Ethnicity And The Nation–Building Project* (Singapore: NIAS Press, 2008).

Short Stories. Rather, they were simultaneously intensely ideological and consciously focused on the marketability and appeal of the Bookworm characters as products – for advertisers, adult buyers, child readers, educators, and retailers. This too, however, allows a glimpse into the desires of the market – as interpreted by the producers or demanded by the buyers/societal norm – it reveals how the acceptability of children’s material was changing in standards, requirements, and nature.

Consistent Characters

The following image was produced by the publishers and posted on the Bookworm Website (which was set up after 1998). [Figure 2.11] The Bookworm Gang are made up of ten children – three girls, and seven boys. They are primary school students, most probably aged between nine and twelve years old, attending a local public school in Singapore. The following brief introductions summarise each Bookworm character as they were written across the series - characteristics, visual descriptions and features will be referenced throughout this thesis’ further analysis.



Figure 2.11 A marketing image featuring the Bookworm Gang illustrated alongside short descriptions

Smarty

Sometimes referred to as the “leader” of the gang. Smarty is ethnically Chinese, and portrayed consistently as book-smart and studious. He is the character who dispenses facts and who provides information as part of the plot. Smarty is drawn wearing a distinctive pair of large spectacles and has neat slicked back hair. While he has been variously written with both positive and negative traits, Smarty is most frequently a neutral character; serving as a voice of reason or a side character providing the voice of reason.

Mimi

Mimi’s enduring characteristic is her vanity. Her girlish-ness is consistently emphasized – more often than not in negative and derisive ways. Her concern with her looks, the acquisition of “pretty things,” and about her popularity remains a key element of Mimi-centric stories. Mimi is consistently drawn wearing dresses and wearing bows in her hair. Across the series, she is the character who frequently provides appropriate and typical “girly” reactions to plot occurrences – screaming at a mouse, disliking dirt and sport, and cooing over male celebrities.

Edison

Edison is Mimi’s twin brother. While his main character traits are also intelligence-based, he is defined more specifically as “science-smart.” Often pictured in a lab coat, Edison is a character given more adult traits and storylines relative to his supposed age; for instance, a child his age would not likely have cause to wear a lab coat or experiment with chemicals. Edison is drawn with a distinctive mop of Einstein-esque hair, and is often pictured holding a magnifying glass.

Fat Ani

Short for Fatimah Ani, Fat Ani is also often coded as a smart character; sometimes fulfilling the same role as Smarty in dispensing facts and information, and often being the voice of reason and kindness. She is specifically written as having language-based intelligence; aspiring to become a journalist and being involved in the school newspaper. She is drawn to be slightly larger than the other girls, and is pictured with a pencil and notebook. Fat Ani is ethnically Malay, and, before the introduction of Kokku in volume 31, was the only non-Chinese Bookworm character.

Sam Seng

Sam Seng is a character who features extremely frequently across the stories – if not the main character, then often being prominently present nevertheless. With a distinctive single strand of hair, Sam Seng is drawn scruffier than his friends – school shirt half untucked and often in slippers rather than shoes. In the image above, he is the “joker with a heart of gold.” Within the gang, he functions both as prankster, comic relief, and instigator. However, he is more generally shown to also possess a conscience – this duality becoming his defining trait.

Louie

The main focal point of Louie’s personality is his fixation on money – both in itself, and as a means to acquire material goods and luxury products. He is depicted in his attempts to access both the above through being miserly and through get-rich-quick schemes which often fail and end in embarrassment. This money-mindedness is central to his aspirations and how he is characterised – as selfish and self-centred. While Louie is drawn with brown hair throughout the series, both his parents have been presented as ethnically Chinese, which

suggest that the illustrations might be more for visual contrast (against the four other male, ethnically Chinese characters).

Simone

Often contrasted against Mimi, Simone is the “Tomboy” who frequently laments her gender, and expresses a desire to either be one of the boys, or to beat them at traditionally male-dominated activities such as sport. Often at odds with Samseng, Simone is strong-willed, impulsive, and sometimes forceful in her communication with other characters. Visually, Simone is the most ethnically ambiguous character of the Bookworm Gang. Her hair is consistently coloured reddish or light brown, although her parents have both been drawn as ethnically Chinese.

Porky

As his name suggests, Porky’s defining characteristic is his love for food. From Porky-centric stories, to almost every line of dialogue he has in other stories, food is central. Although all the characters are essentialised down to their key characteristics to a degree, Porky is the strongest example of this in the Bookworm gang. Other accompanying traits which are also part of his characterisation are laziness (usually associated with a lack of fitness or a desire to sit and eat), and sometimes generosity. Porky is ethnically Chinese, and is clearly depicted as much chubbier than the others.

Kokku

In contrast to Porky, Kokku (although introduced later) is a character with a wider range of character traits. Aside from his height and penchant for Basketball, Kokku is characterised as helpful and accommodating and unable to refuse requests from friends. His good-

naturedness and enthusiasm are emphasised in the texts, although his “sportiness” remains a dominant visual trait - as emphasised in the promotional image above. In illustrations, Kokku is often depicted in sports shoes and basketball clothes.

Dollah

Dollah was introduced as part of the Bookworm Gang in volume 65, and was therefore not part of the majority of the stories in the series. Consequently, his character remains broadly essentialised down to “soccer player” and his ability to draw. Dollah is an ethnically Malay Malaysian, who recently moved with his family to Singapore.

2.2 Locating and Describing the Imagined Child

The above changes were emblematic of a shift towards a specific and consistent presentation of the child and of childhood that might be critically analysed as the “Imagined Child”. Collectively, the Bookworm Children might be seen as representing a specific constructed child in Singapore. The following examination of the imagined child in the contexts of their class, their futures, and their morality, draws specific links between those arenas and the different strands of Singaporean culture within the text.

The Imagined Child and Class

Beyond awareness of a new class structure emerging from the post-industrial turn of the local economy, the middle-class emerged within Singaporean culture as the subject of varied assumptions, associations, and imperatives, moving far beyond an economic category. It further became entangled with strands of political rhetoric which continued to make class a

contested and complex part of how Singaporeans conceived themselves and constructed social relations.

The Bookworm Gang as Middle-Class

Articulations of middle-classness in Singapore might be found, as described in the previous chapter, within political rhetoric and within discussions of Singapore's new economic landscape. As then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew noted in 1984, the middle-class was a growing majority class which would come to represent and propel Singapore itself as the backbone and core of nation and economy.¹⁴⁰ They were, specifically, a group which contributed directly to the economy through their work – which by the late 1980s was skewing heavily towards white collar and high-skill occupations.¹⁴¹ Within this configuration the middle-class in Singapore was significantly predicated on one's position within the local economy – not just in terms of income, but in terms of perceived value to Singapore and in terms of their expected returns as Singapore continued to grow economically. The state's desire for Singapore to have a large, majority, productive class was, by the mid 1980s, coming to fruition, and the middle-class in Singapore was increasingly marked by identifiable boundaries.

Most intuitively, the middle-class might be identified through household income and associated markers of consumption and access. The Bookworm children are not shown to be wealthy, or belonging to the upper-class, instead occupying local spaces within the series' version of Singapore. They are shown to take public transport and interact in spaces such as hawker centres and public sports facilities. And, perhaps most significantly, they are shown to live in public housing – HDB flats rather than condominiums or landed properties. This is particularly indicative of their position within Singapore's class structure, given that by 1987,

¹⁴⁰ Lee, 'Speech By Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew At The Tanjong Pagar National Day Dinner'.

¹⁴¹ Tan, *Does Class Matter*.

74% of Singaporeans had been housed in public housing, with a median income of \$3800, which stands right at the economic middle-class average.¹⁴² It is in the story *That's what friends are for* that the children are most specifically written as outside of the upper-class.¹⁴³ In the story, Simone is introduced the daughter of her mother's "wealthy friend," Tiffany. The story describes that family's large house along Orchard Road with servants, a swimming pool, and Tiffany's wealth of toys and material goods. Simone and the Bookworm gang are unfamiliar with, and awed by this new environment.¹⁴⁴

Conversely, the Bookworm children are also clearly positioned above the "less fortunate" and the "poor" – being in positions to help or learn to appreciate this group. Several stories specifically refer to the gang raising funds, and "doing their part" to help those in need.¹⁴⁵ Beyond this, they are shown to receive adequate pocket money, are able to purchase occasional luxuries such as sports shoes and video games. This correlates to statistics in Singapore of the time which track household expenditure. In a survey conducted by the Ministry of Home Affairs, it is also established that the consumption of consumer goods in the middle income range in Singapore increased sharply between the mid-1980s and early 1990s, with amenities such as computers, electrical appliances, and fashion items finding popularity in local markets.¹⁴⁶ It is possible to see these gradually reflected in the households of the Bookworm children. For instance, earlier depictions of the children's houses featured standing or ceiling fans in most rooms – as was common in public housing at the time. However, by

¹⁴² Department of Statistics, 'Household Expenditure Survey 1987'; Department of Household Affairs, 'Results from the Annual Household Expenditure Survey 1995', Survey (Republic of Singapore: Department of Household Affairs, 1996); Department of Household Affairs, 'Results from the Annual Household Expenditure Survey 2002/2003', Survey (Republic of Singapore: Department of Household Affairs, 2003).

¹⁴³ 'That's What Friends Are For', in *Bookworm Short Stories 31* (Singapore: Bookworm Consultants, 1990), 33–35.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁴⁵ 'Hearts of Gold', in *Bookworm Short Stories 17* (Singapore: Bookworm Consultants, 1990), 66–77.

¹⁴⁶ Department of Household Affairs, 'Results from the Annual Household Expenditure Survey 2002/2003'.

volume 45, some of the children's rooms were described as having aircons rather than fans.¹⁴⁷

This is similarly reflected in the survey of consumption in Singapore – with air-conditioning increasingly becoming a staple in middle-class households.¹⁴⁸

Beyond direct examples of financial middle-classness, the Bookworm children also conformed closely to an image of the middle-class in Singapore which was economic *and* based on several other associated markers. Implicit in state rhetoric was the idea that the new middle-class Singaporean was educated, engaged with public institutions and structures, and invested in social and national progress.¹⁴⁹ As Lee also proposed in the same speech, middle-class identity was tied to three things: property, education or occupation, and “perception of one's own position”; which he defined as “having a stake in the stability and prosperity of Singapore and her future.”¹⁵⁰ These multiple characteristics of the new middle-class in the 1980s were, beyond tangible economic positions and official labels, also a range of socio-cultural positions and awareness. The new image of the middle-class was a skilled individual earning a good income (reaping the benefits of the economy as they contributed to it) – living in the new public housing flats, speaking English, and conforming to social norms such as living unproblematically within a nuclear family unit.

All of the Bookworm children are shown to be part of conventional, two-parent households. With the exception of Dollah and siblings Edison and Mimi, they are also shown to be only children, rather than part of a larger family. Although the state's “stop at two”

¹⁴⁷ “A Room to Spare,” in *Bookworm Short Stories Volume 40*, Bookworm Consultants, 1992; “State of Emergency,” in *Bookworm Short Stories Volume 45*, Bookworm Consultants, 1992

¹⁴⁸ Antonio Leopold Rappa, *Modernity And Consumption: Theory, Politics, And The Public In Singapore And Malaysia* (World Scientific Publishing Company, 2002), 77.

¹⁴⁹ Hong Lysa, ‘The Lee Kuan Yew Story as Singapore's History’, ed. Michael D. Barr et al., *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 33, no. 3 (2002): 545–57;

¹⁵⁰ Lysa, ‘The Lee Kuan Yew Story as Singapore's History’.

campaigns for population planning in the 1970s had been replaced by the “three or more if you can afford it” campaign in 1987, this depiction of the Bookworm children seemed to conform more to the reality of Singapore’s lowering birth-rates, instead of reproducing the official ideal family sized being pushed for middle-class families.¹⁵¹ Given that



Figure 2.12 Sam Seng's parents depicted as well-dressed, clean-cut characters in illustrations

the Bookworm children were not actively part of the working middle-class, but instead born into households considered part of that class, it is also significant to note how their parents were depicted. A survey of the different parents as they appear in the texts suggest that they fall into that category of middle-classness; conforming to the norms of marriage, at least one working parent (always the father). While some parents appear more frequently – notably Edison and Mimi’s parents, and Sam Seng’s Mother – all are presented as well-dressed, English-speaking, and without any noticeable flaws or departures from the image of the middle-class. [Figure 2.12]

The use of language by the Bookworm Gang more generally across the series further reflects the relative values of different languages in Singapore. By 1992, it was common to see English as a hallmark of the modern, middle-class shift. This was conditioned in no small part by Singapore’s adoption and continued use of English as its lingua franca in business,

¹⁵¹ P. T. Straughan, ‘Population Policy and Reproduction in Singapore: Making Future Citizens By Shirley Hsiao-Li Sun Routledge. 2011. 208 Pages. \$145 Cloth’, *Social Forces* 93, no. 2 (1 December 2014), 45.

government, law, and education.¹⁵² Significantly, the association of English with better quality education and tertiary institutions was, by the 1980s, strengthened by the shift away non-English medium public schools, and with the close of the Chinese-medium Nanyang University in 1980.¹⁵³ Although the use of standard English and conventional sentence structure in the texts must be contextualised within their role as English books to encourage reading and literacy, it is also the case that subtle differences are present in how the English spoken by the Bookworm children and characters belonging to a lower-class are written. While Singlish is rarely reproduced directly in the texts, colloquialisms are frequently used by characters who are coded as less educated or carrying out unskilled labour. And, the children appear to be steeped in an English speaking environment – thinking, communicating, and having been brought up with English as their first language. This too adds to a collective presentation of the Bookworm Children as middle-class children.

Middle-class as ideological

While the middle-class was economic, entangled with social awareness and lifestyle, it is also the case that a unquantifiable element of middle-classness in Singapore is its aspirational quality. Alongside the population being pushed by wider economic forces into this new class structure, movement into this class was also framed as the ideal trajectory for the Singaporean. The middle-class was the ideal state – a state which would provide financial and social benefits, and which was explicitly held up as a model of ideal citizenship. More than a economic position, it was idealised as an aspiration, and formed another strand within Singaporean culture. This is visible when considering the historical context of the time, and when placing the imagined children as middle-class children born into their position.

¹⁵² Jock Wong, *The Culture of Singapore English*, Studies in English Language (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 47.

¹⁵³ Lionel Wee, Anne Pakir, and Lisa Lim, *English in Singapore: Modernity and Management* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2010).

The middle-class child represented the first generation born into security and comfort of Singapore's new post-industrial economy. The child born in and after 1980 would have no meaningful experience of life outside the structures of public housing and education, nor the uncertainty of economic change and internal instability. The Bookworm children were middle-class; born into middle-class households without themselves having achieved upward mobility through their own contribution to the economy. As children, their position in society was assumed and assigned from birth – so too were markers of their class (such as English as a first language or their material possessions) products of their upbringing rather than their own intentional acquisitions. It is here that an expanded conception of the middle-class began to emerge; one of continued, intergenerational upward mobility. In the case of the middle-class child, they were at once expected to maintain their position while retaining the aspirations of upward mobility. It is therefore useful to frame Singapore's developing class identity through what the imagined child represents – a symbol of intergenerational aspiration for their parents and other adults towards economic, social, and cultural categories. How this imagined child was written within the context of middle-classness therefore might be understood as part of Singaporeans' complexifying sense of what class symbols and ideals were in relation to the new post-industrial landscape.

This thesis notes particularly that the intergenerational nature of class – and the transmission of class markers and ideals between generations – are significant in the context of the child. On one hand, the very existence of a middle-class necessitates a working-class for whom notion of upward mobility for all is theoretically possible. In this case, the imagined child was the subject of class aspirations and expectations. Yet, this existed alongside a new meritocratic contradiction: the children of parents who had achieved social mobility through talent and hard work represented both the potential of continued mobility and maintenance of

that social class. The ideology of eugenics continued to play a role in how middle-class children were perceived and positioned with society; expectations of innate qualities from their educated parents, and good parenting from those same, model citizen-parents. This was a key anxiety over the child – and one which this thesis will return to often in following chapters. Similarly, parenting became an imperative – not only explicitly encouraged by the government, but also one which formed across society because of these changes in social structure, social currency and demographics. Not only did parenting become something which could be seen reflected in their children, it could also be purchased and performed.

The Imagined Child and the Future

The future – specifically future success and achievement – features heavily in how Singapore culture became more complicated over time. The future could be seen not only as part of being middle-class, but further became associated with a set of expectations and conditions. It also was entangled with the emerging meritocratic system.

As established above, the imagined child of the *Bookworm Short Stories* was squarely located within the middle-class, rather than possessing aspirations towards it. Examining how the *Bookworm Short Stories* depict the characters' visions of the future reveals how aspiration towards success and social mobility was entangled with both class identities, and a set of assumptions about merit, expectations, and status. Part of being middle-class or having achieved middle class is the assumption of having succeeded through the meritocratic process. Meritocracy is the notion that individual upward mobility is achieved through merit (a combination of hard work and innate brilliance) regardless of birth and access.¹⁵⁴ Within this

¹⁵⁴ R. Quinn Moore, 'Multiracialism and Meritocracy: Singapore's Approach to Race and Inequality', *Review of Social Economy* 58, no. 3 (1 September 2000): 339–60.

understanding of meritocracy in nation-building Singapore, members of the new middle-class had established themselves through that combination of hard work and ability, while simultaneously benefitting from the rapid economic growth, available jobs, and housing boom of the 1970s and early 1980s.¹⁵⁵ Yet, their success was not entirely about their current class and its associated benefits, but also directly correlated with their active and on-going contribution specifically through their work.

This must be seen in the context of how meritocracy was being presented in Singapore at the time – bound within specific, sanctioned forms of success, and the expectations of continued, linear progression. This version of meritocracy drew direct and almost exclusive links between merit/success and economic productivity through work. And, it was specifically tied to middle rather than upper-class success. The imperatives of survival as a nation, and the role of the middle-class was tied to the economy – the middle-class citizen was situated within that economy as a unit of productivity. Scholars such as Linda Lim have fruitfully noted how the understanding of citizens as units of productivity has permeated legislation and the education system.¹⁵⁶ This might be further seen reproduced in how meritocracy was articulated in the 1980s and early 1990s.

Survival was dependent upon constant improvements and continued hard work along an upward trajectory. This was entwined ideologically with the rhetoric described in the previous chapter – of survival as a national imperative, and the direct and important association between survival and continued economic growth on a global stage.¹⁵⁷ The imagined middle-

¹⁵⁵ For a more complete discussion on the historical context Singapore's early systems of meritocracy see: *Multiracialism and Meritocracy: Singapore's Approach to Race and Inequality*, R. Quinn Moore and Nadira Talib *Is It Time to Let Meritocracy Go? Examining the Case of Singapore*

¹⁵⁶Fong and Lim, 'Labor, Productivity and Singapore's Development Model'.

¹⁵⁷ Linda Y. C. Lim, 'Singapore's Success: The Myth of the Free Market Economy', *Asian Survey* 23, no. 6 (1983): 752-64.

class citizen within this context therefore occupied two positions simultaneously – the successful merit-achieving individual, and the cog in the larger wheel of national progress whose continued maintenance of their position directly impacted national survival, and upon whom the expectations of continued improvement rested. This expectation was not borne of social expectation or legislation, but instead a part of how the meritocratic process was conceived of in the 1980s and 1990s – as an implied transaction or contract between citizen and country. Meritocracy as a system was implemented by the state through the excellent education system, implementation of scholarships, through access to opportunities regardless of birth, and those who benefitted from the system were obliged to “give back” to society and the state.

The beneficiary of meritocracy, then, existed not only tangibly, but as a set of different assumptions and pre-existing expectations. It was a conditional meritocracy in which the individual’s hard work and talent was expressed in and through the education system, recognised by the state, and only worth merit by virtue of its value to the nation and society. However, it is possible to see how the middle-class, as it grew and developed as a social group impacted that conception of meritocracy. While financial and economic success might be how meritocracy was tangibly measured, the awareness of the middle-class as an aspirational category suggests that access into a social structure and community itself became part of a wider experience of ideal meritocracy. These ideals were mapped not only onto the middle-class child, but generally upon the imagined Singaporean child.

Bookworm Children and their Futures

It is assumed by the text that the Bookworm Children are destined for jobs that are traditionally seen as productive, successful and essential to the nation. This is embedded into how the stories frame, describe and situate the children within their surroundings, and, in one particular story explicitly written into the plot. The story *Forever Young* depicts the Bookworm Characters as adults and specifically assigns them ideal jobs. In it, Edison potentially invents a “chemical formula” which would prevent him from ageing.¹⁵⁸ In a dream/premonition of the future, he sees his friends and sister twenty years into the future – all grown up while he remains a child.¹⁵⁹ They are all established in their careers, and take turns describing their jobs and lives to Edison. Porky is a restaurant owner, Mimi is a beauty consultant to the rich and famous, Louie is a stockbroker at a stockbroking firm Smarty owns, Fat Ani is a “star reporter,” Kokku a sports medicine specialist, Simone a sergeant–major in the air force, and Sam Seng a

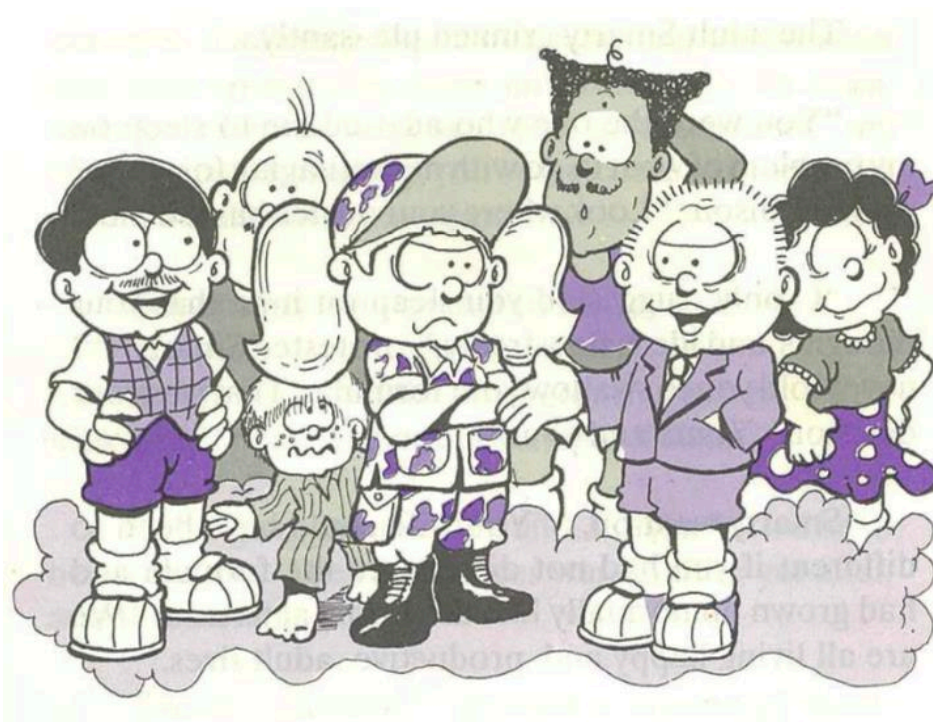


Figure 2.13 The Bookworm Gang Aged up in the story Forever Young

¹⁵⁸ ‘Forever Young’, in *Bookworm Short Stories 35*, vol. 35 (Singapore: Bookworm Consultants, 1992), 15–27.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

policeman. [Figure 2.13] All these occupations are, notably, either directly, economically productive, or contribute to the national/societal strength and function.

Firstly, what stands out in this story are the assumptions made that each character, flaws and all, would become successful in their chosen fields in a mere twenty years. Working on the assumption that the characters are between nine to twelve years old, in this story, each character has clearly followed the path of success in a trajectory lauded by the meritocratic framework. That is, they were students who studied hard, grew up and entered university before progressing towards a chosen profession at which they excelled, staying in Singapore and flourishing. Without exception, they possessed the ability to make it on what appears to be the first try – meeting, and in some cases surpassing, their starting position in society. By their thirties, they all appear to have achieved excellence and rapid career progression. While it is clear that they “work hard” as part of their trajectory – and indeed something explicitly mentioned by Mimi, these aged-up versions of the Bookworm Gang display the result of that hard work in the context of Singapore, but also the assumption that their hard work infallibly produces success in a linear, ideal manner.

Secondly, it is also clear that economic productivity a big part of how their adult positions are framed – and the kinds of occupations chosen for the characters. Smarty stresses that Louie is not just a stockbroker, but a “a very rich one,” and that he had considered becoming a professor but switched to business specifically because it “made more money.”¹⁶⁰ This suggests that alongside the productivity of their jobs in the context of society and the local economy and growth, the ideal future also begets personal success and acquisition of wealth and status. Not only have the characters achieved their goals, but they are also shown to have

¹⁶⁰ ‘Forever Young’, in *Bookworm Short Stories 35*, vol. 35 (Singapore: Bookworm Consultants, 1992), 15–27.

received acclaim or excelled personally within those fields – for instance Fat Ani as the “star reporter.”¹⁶¹ This reflects the notion that beyond the role of self within economy, a hallmark of such success and meritocracy was personal aggregation of wealth and status. And, that money was an important factor in how such futures were conceived. This similarly might be located within the rhetoric of getting back what you put into the country –as then–prime minister Lee Kuan Yew put it, “having a stake in the stability and prosperity of Singapore and her future.”¹⁶²

It is possible to see, therefore, how the individual as a unit of productivity was reflected and articulated through the Bookworm children – the imagined middle–class child being specifically on the route towards not only productivity but a version of productivity which reflected an ideal image of both social and individual success. Not only are they expected to continue the middle–class route of upward mobility and entering the meritocratic system, the imagined Singapore child is also not meant to fail, nor move backwards in perceived productivity and class–status.

Beyond *Forever Young*, it is implicit in how the stories are written that the Bookworm characters are not destined for blue–collar, “unskilled” jobs or for a life of poverty. For instance, in the story *Unsung Heroes*, Smarty learns to appreciate the work of blue–collar workers such as trash disposal men, bus drivers, and cleaning ladies.¹⁶³ Initially, he expresses disdain and contempt when discussing those jobs – feelings at least partially shared by his classmates. In particular, he says, “how can you compare a road sweeper to a doctor who saves lives?”¹⁶⁴

[Figure 2.14] This specific mention of value and contribution to society is telling in the context

¹⁶¹ Ibid..

¹⁶² Fook Kwang Han, Warren Fernandez, and Sumiko Tan, *Lee Kuan Yew: The Man and His Ideas*, Paperback edition (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2015).

¹⁶³ ‘Unsung Heroes’, in *Bookworm Short Stories 39*, vol. 39 (Singapore: Bookworm Consultants, 1992), 21–39.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, 25.

of how specific jobs tied to middle-classness were beginning to be assigned varying levels to economic and societal value. While the consequences of his snobbery come back to haunt Smarty, and he resolves to appreciate and respect the “unsung heroes,” it is clear that Smarty himself is not destined for such occupations – that (no matter how respectful) he will be in a position from which he *might* look down on them.¹⁶⁵ This too might be observed in how Miss Goon, his teacher, does not base her rebuke of Smarty’s words by suggesting that Smarty might end up in one of those “unsung” jobs – nor does she challenge his easy assumption of his future high-flying occupation.

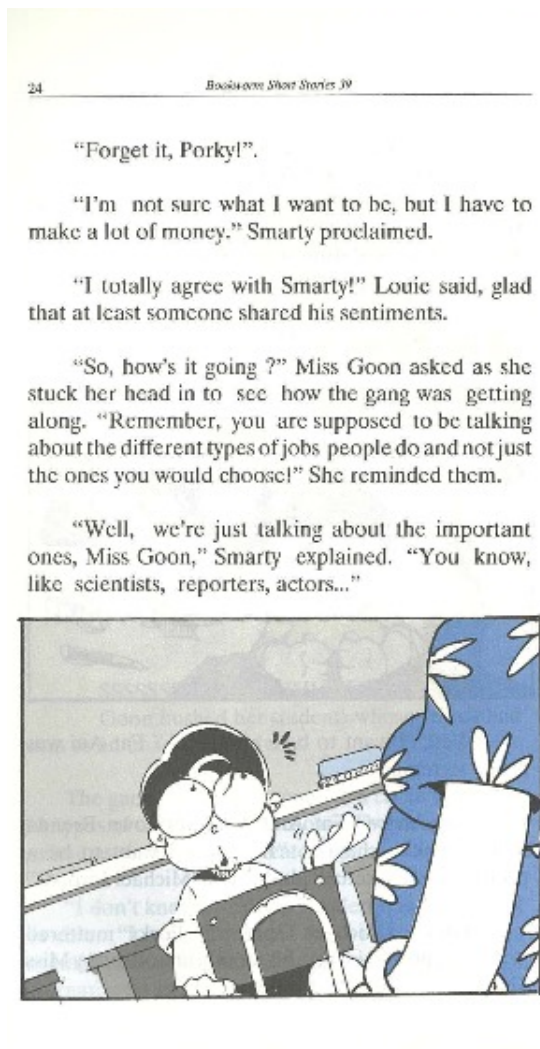


Figure 2.14 Excerpt from the story *Unsung Heroes*

¹⁶⁵ *Unsung Heroes*,” Bookworm Short Stories Volume 39, Bookworm Consultants, 1992, 25–30.

What this suggests is not only an expectation of the middle-class child, but an assumption – which was immediately assigned to that child on the basis of their middle-classness, exemplifying that expansion of what it meant to be middle-class. This mindset is not only written into the characters’ futures and assumptions made about the characters by the authors, but also in how the characters gave voice to those assumptions through expressions and articulations of their future. As the above examples from the texts reflect, the characters display easy assumptions about their own place within society. There is an understanding not only shared by readers of the text, but by the ideal children as written into the *Bookworm Short Stories*.

This extends not only to their description of the future, but in how they voice fears and anxieties about their future should they fail. In the excerpt below from *The Case of the Missing Tutor* Sam Seng articulates his fears for his future – one which loomed large in his imagination.¹⁶⁶ As the excerpt shows, his panicked imagination of his uneducated future was as follows: “As he had very little education, he would have to do odd jobs like washing cars, be a coolie, or even a dish-washer in some coffee shop or maybe even a maid. Then he’d be poor, lonely, with no friends, living all by himself, and then he’d grow old and friendless. Poor Stupid Sam Seng would die alone, nobody would care and nobody would know.”¹⁶⁷ **[Figure 2.15]**

None of these assumptions are challenged or shown to be incorrect – instead, the story is resolved when Sam Seng works harder to pass his maths test. Sam Seng’s conceptualisation of an uneducated person’s fate within Singapore remains, then, as a representation of his

¹⁶⁶ ‘The Case of the Missing Tutor’, in *Bookworm Short Stories 38*, vol. 38 (Singapore: Bookworm Consultants, 1992), 46–62.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

assumptions about success and failure in Singapore. The specific list of jobs listed also paint a picture of who was included and excluded from the image of educated workers. That is, although Sam Seng draws distinct correlations between success and education, it is clear that he understands educational success within set of rigid terms. For Sam Seng, education functions as a straight and direct upward path towards his adult future. A lack of education eliminates paths towards success, and renders his

his classmates would throw paper planes and shoot rubber-bands at him! And all because Sam Seng could not pass his exams!

Sam Seng would then have to leave school. As he had very little education, he would have to do odd jobs like washing cars, be a coolie, or even a dish-washer in some coffee-shop or maybe even a maid. Then he'd be poor and lonely, with no friends, living all by himself, and then he'd grow old and friendless. Poor stupid Sam Seng would die all alone, nobody would care and nobody would know. All because Sam Seng could not pass his Maths test!

“WAAHHHHH!!!”



Figure 2.15 Excerpt from the story *The Case of the Missing Tutor*

entire identity unstable. This might also be contextualised in the introduction of vocational education during and after secondary school – which focused on identifying students who were less academically inclined within the public school system and redirecting them to vocational courses which specialised in blue-collar skills.¹⁶⁸ This had the effect of creating distinct lines between different possible paths in society – and different groups of occupations which Sam Seng articulates an awareness of in the excerpt above.

¹⁶⁸ N. Varaprasad, *50 Years of Technical Education in Singapore: How to Build a World Class TVET System*, World Scientific Series on Singapore’s 50 Years of Nation-Building (New Jersey: World Scientific, 2016).

The imagined child was, then, not only defined by the state and structures that arbitrated merit, but by the processes of internalising and interpreting those structures carried out by other Singaporeans in society, and by themselves as they grew up within that society. This social awareness of upward mobility and its ideological association with class and social communities demonstrate how broad ideals were given tangible associations, and translated into imperatives, expectations, and internalised into personal, individual identities. Adult desires for the child were, therefore, not only contingent on the children being a certain way, but adapting to, and buying into the Singaporean culture – their imperatives and identities being understood and internalised.

Meritocracy and Eugenics

If the imagined child assumed these expectations and outcomes for themselves, the question becomes *why* and *how* these children would have these assumptions – what the children were meant to believe, and what the author’s mindset was when hoping for the children to believe those things. There are parallels between the children’s articulations of their futures and emerging dynamic between meritocracy and eugenics rhetoric of the 1980s and early 1990s. The entanglement of different ideals conditioned how Singaporeans responded to/conceived of meritocracy, and resolved dissonance surrounding expectations and opportunity.

On one hand, the Bookworm children’s imagination of their futures conform to the Singaporean meritocratic ideal of middle–class children working towards and achieving success in society. Already, as the previous sections demonstrate, it was clear that the expectations of the imagined child were not merely the result of their innate and overwhelming talent, but were instead interlinked with their position as middle–class alongside the

expectations and assumptions of the middle–class role in society. The imagined child who lived within this system was expected to engage with, and absorb the concept of meritocracy as part of their self–conception; to take on the notion that future was contingent on their excellence and ability. Yet, at the same time, this exists in tension with how exactly merit was tested for and observed. If the Bookworm children were expected to uniformly achieve success according to the meritocratic path afforded by their class and access, how does this fit into the system of meritocracy according to no other factors apart from talent and ability? If not all about the child’s education, then what? It is certainly the case that class figures within this tension – particularly when considering the context of eugenics ideology in Singapore – one which figured prominently in the 1980s and 1990s.

This was in no small part due to then–Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew’s enduring belief in eugenics – specifically focused on the production of children (future generations) who were genetically predisposed towards intelligence, literacy, and a middle–class work ethic.¹⁶⁹ Aside the prominence of this rhetoric in Lee’s speeches and interviews, this ideology was written into legislation that aimed to directly impact the population and demographics. The 1984 Graduate Mothers Scheme was met with backlash from both the electorate and prominent commentators before being withdrawn by the following year.¹⁷⁰ Under that scheme, significant financial and housing priorities were given to educated women (university graduates) who had children. This was specifically to encourage educated women to give birth to more children, with incentives increasing with each child. While this policy was quickly abandoned, policies which did not favour educated women, but instead targeted uneducated women existed concurrently and for

¹⁶⁹ Kuan Yew Lee, ‘May Day Rally Speech’ (Speech, Singapore, 1 May 1983).

¹⁷⁰ Cheolsung Park, “‘Population Policies and Programmes in Singapore’”, by Saw Swee–Hock’, *The Singapore Economic Review* 51, no. 01 (April 2006): 103–4; Shirley Hsiao–Li Sun, *Population Policy and Reproduction in Singapore: Making Future Citizens*, 2014.

much longer.¹⁷¹ For instance, incentivised sterilisations were offered to women with low incomes, or without O-Level qualifications. These incentives were considerable, particularly given the women's economic status; up to \$10,000 cash incentive, and paid leave after the procedure.¹⁷²

This was rooted in a fear not only of a lack of ideal children, but of an excess of inferior children. In Lee's words, "...we will regret the time lost if we do not now take the first tentative steps towards correcting a trend which can leave our society with a large number of the physically, intellectually and culturally anaemic."¹⁷³ In particular, Lee saw problematic potential even in the coupling between one educated and one uneducated parent, positing a trend where male graduates had a preference for "less highly educated wives."¹⁷⁴ In pushing for specifically educated Singaporeans to marry and procreate, the ideology of eugenics in Singapore was rooted firmly in the idea that it was possible to boost national productivity for national good through producing better children – better parents produce better children.¹⁷⁵

These views were contested and debated in local media and by political commentators, revealing varied reactions to Lee's rhetoric and demonstrating the range of opinion surrounding the innate qualities imparted by parents. Some acknowledged the social and cultural and financial elements which might prevent children born to uneducated parents from becoming upwardly mobile, and others pointed out the unsubstantiated nature of Lee's logic, and raised

¹⁷¹ Sun, *Population Policy and Reproduction in Singapore*.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Kuan Yew Lee, 'The Prime Minister's Speech on the Abortion Bill' (Speech, Singapore, 29 December 1969), <https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/lky19691229.pdf>. See also: Han, Fernandez, and Tan, *Lee Kuan Yew*.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, 52.

¹⁷⁵ Theresa Wong and Brenda S. A. Yeoh, *Fertility and the Family: An Overview of pro-Natalist Population Policies in Singapore* (Singapore: Asian MetaCentre for Population and Sustainable Development Analysis, 2003).

moral and ethical questions about the population policies.¹⁷⁶ Yet there was support for Lee's stance by other commentators, who argued that pragmatism and productivity outweighed complete fairness or morality.¹⁷⁷ It was certainly the case, therefore, that the ideas which comprised the eugenics rhetoric were circulating and being discussed during the time, and had become a part of the broader discourse on Singapore's future and society.

When considering how the Bookworm children were written, the enmeshment of meritocracy and eugenics might be observed in the texts and in how the characters articulate their futures. That is, the imagined child in the *Bookworm Short Stories* bore the strain of both meritocratic and eugenic ideals. On one hand, the Bookworm children were coded specifically as children expected to succeed and fulfil their roles in society through education and through hard work. Yet, the understanding that these children were destined to do so permeates the text and the children's own voices – that failing was an abnormal occurrence which would result in isolation from their community. The imagined child fulfilled the meritocratic expectations of maintaining and succeeding, but their very existence precluded the entry of other children into its secure sphere. It is in this tension that this thesis identifies how the Singaporean conceptualisation of success and the future was developing. When the characters express their surety about their future, they affirm not only their expectations of achieving success, but also innate potential to do so by virtue of their birth and position within society. These assumptions are shown to be embodied and represented by the imagined child, who exists within the dual and dissonant expectations of Singaporeans during this time – that is, being able to benefit from their middle-class positions, while easily fulfilling expectations, and correctly assuming their

¹⁷⁶ 'Children of Grads Will Be Judged on Merit', *The Straits Times*, 23 April 1984; 'Students Asked View on Graduate Mother Plan', *Business Times*, 22 June 1984 edition.

¹⁷⁷ Han, Fernandez, and Tan, *Lee Kuan Yew*.

own innate abilities and social superiority over others (who also accept and reinforce this difference).

The Imagined Child and Morality

Finally, the Singaporean morality also expanded and broadened in meaning – particularly as a morality specific to Singapore was being negotiated by both state and citizens. This involved new ideological foundations of a shared morality forming – that were entangled with political pronouncements on “shared values,” and further implicated by the development of boundary lines which arbitrated moral qualities. The imagined child of the texts conformed to a specific ideal Singaporean articulation of morality. This might be seen more broadly in the context of a national, shared morality which was emerging, *and* specifically as a morality which was conditioned by how childhood was conceptualised.

A Singaporean Morality

The Singaporean morality of the texts is one which had not yet taken on the codified and ideologically loaded “Asian Values” of the late 1990s. Instead, it drew heavily on Confucian ideologies as part of a shared local value system, and was (as with middle–classness) tied to the concept of translation of self into productivity through ideal morality. It was, this thesis posits, an active morality which required both moral fortitude and sustained tangible action, while simultaneously being entangled directly through ideology with one’s position within society. This might be seen reflected in how the *Bookworm Short Stories* construct a version of morality within the texts and *vis a vis* the *Bookworm Children*.

The morality of the *Bookworm Short Stories* is one which eludes strict definition. Specifically of note is the completely neutral, non–religious slant adopted by the series.

Morality is presented as a shared, common-sense set of beliefs untethered to any religious doctrine or specific moral code. Good and Bad as it exists within the Bookworm universe is rooted in a shared Singaporean and social ethic presented as an intuitive understanding of right and wrong. There is no appeal to a moral authority – for instance, lying is not bad because of a religious text or an awareness of a religious power which arbitrated right and wrong. Rather, the morality of *the Bookworm Short Stories* is based on a universally broad notion of morality interwoven with localised legal rights and wrongs. This resonates uniquely with the time period under consideration – in that the Singaporean morality was characterised by its lack of a fully-formed rulebook; while nevertheless simultaneously having rules and boundaries and expectations enforced.

On one hand, the state attempted to incorporate cultural and religious codes into its definition of Singaporean morality, introducing Religious Knowledge to the public school curriculum in 1984 with the aim of maintaining an ordered society rooted in local religious ideologies. This was part of a new curriculum reform introduced in 1984 which was altered by 1989 and completely phased out in 1991.¹⁷⁸ Students were allowed to select a religion to study in detail from the following choices: Bible Knowledge, Confucian Ethics, Islamic Religious Knowledge, Buddhist Studies, Hindu Studies, and Sikh Studies.¹⁷⁹ While the potential for religious and social disharmony was cited as the reason for withdrawing the Religious Knowledge Programme, scholars such as Gopinathan have posited that a combination of other factors, such as the unenthusiastic response to the government's preferred Confucian Studies, were also involved.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁸ Gopinathan, *Towards a National System of Education in Singapore, 1945–1973*.

¹⁷⁹ Charlene Tan, 'From Moral Values to Citizenship Education: The Teaching of Religion in Singapore Schools', in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, 2008, 321–41, doi:10.1355/9789812307552-023.

¹⁸⁰ Gopinathan, *Towards a National System of Education in Singapore, 1945–1973*.45.

Religious Education was replaced by Civics and Moral Education (CME) in 1991, a general course which focused on values directly related to society, bringing together elements from each as needed with a focus on Confucian ethics and moral structures.¹⁸¹ CME incorporated the newly minted “Shared Values,” which was the product of a state-led push to define a set of Singaporean values specifically in relation to the individual and society.¹⁸² The shared values were a direct response to a perceived threat of “Westernisation” and “Individualism.”¹⁸³ This threat was, as then-Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chock Tong put it in 1988, directly against national productivity and survival – following the breakdown to society.¹⁸⁴ The Shared Values were: Nation before community and society above self, Family as the basic unit of society, Regard and community support for the individual, Consensus instead of contention, and Racial and religious harmony.¹⁸⁵

However, within Singapore, the dynamic of various intersecting religions needing to co-exist and cohere together meant that the Shared Values and their ideological roots were intentionally left vague and broad. One could not, for instance, refer to a book such as the Bible as a widely shared source of morality, neither was it possible to draw on a source of moral authority beyond the state – indeed, the state was the arbitrator of this value system. Rather than strict moral definitions, right and wrong was defined by their positive or negative impact on society and social cohesion. Significantly, what these Shared Values relied on was their outcome. The outcome of following and adhering to these values across society was national

¹⁸¹ Ministry of Education, ‘Civics and Moral Education Syllabus: Primary’, 2007, <http://www.moe.gov.sg/education/syllabuses/aesthetics-health-and-moral-education/files/civics-and-moral-education-primary-english-2007.pdf>; Ministry of Education. (n.d.). Civics and moral education syllabus: Secondary: 2007, pp. 6–7.

¹⁸² Singapore Parliament, ‘White Paper on Shared Values’ (Republic of Singapore: Singapore Parliament, 1991).

¹⁸³ Chock Tong Goh, ‘Speech by Mr Goh Chok Tong, First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence, at the PAP Youth Wing Charity Night’ (Speech, PAP Youth Wing Charity Night, Neptune Theatre Restaurant, Singapore, 28 October 1988).

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Singapore Parliament, ‘White Paper on Shared Values’.

survival. The broadness of the Singaporean morality also allowed different interpretations of it – incorporating other values, inserting them into other value systems, and identifying it with other impacts and consequences.

For instance, public discourse and early political rhetoric reflects the mix of values and introduction of ideas that had expanded in the 1980s and 1990s with increased education, language access, and technology such as television. Appeals to a universal value systems were still part of how local discourse conceived of possible shared values even as the danger posed by the “West” was beginning to enter political rhetoric. On one hand, the morality of the *Bookworm Short Stories* does not include specifically the state as moral authority, but specifically appeals to social responsibility. However, it also falls back on the more common, universal tropes of right and wrong, expressing it in terms of liberal values. This thesis identifies the version of Singaporean morality depicted in the texts as an ideal in itself – a version of morality contained and consistent within the Bookworm universe which represents an ideal negotiation of different value ideologies, while giving tangible expression to moral actions and consequences. Within this, the imagined child’s relationship with morality needed to fulfil the ideology of social responsibility, while also displaying an understanding and ability to internalise and perform that morality despite its lack of structure.

One key element of the Singaporean morality which might be seen as a tangible function and expectation of that broad value system was the notion of a moral work ethic. For one, this work ethic involved assigning moral value specifically to the middle-class endeavour of productivity. Not only was being a functioning and moral part of society vital to the individual, it was also part of national progress. This can be seen written into the National Day

Rally speeches across the years – examples here 1979 and 1993.¹⁸⁶ These quotes exemplify the combination of broad, general language which drew on the unspecified notion of a local value system with the qualities of the ideal Singaporean and the notion that strong morals might be equated to productivity and hard work. Given the established links between hard work and productivity as a part of the imagined middle-class citizen's remit, it is possible to see morality as an important part of how Singaporeans might have conceived of themselves in relation to society and success.

Another element of the moral work ethic was the relationship between ideal morality and the process of ideal childhood. The imagined Singaporean child in the *Bookworm Short Stories* is/becomes productive at least in part due to their morality; the implication is that moral learning is part of the ideal child's childhood – one which serves as preparation for their lives as productive adults. Returning to the story *Forever Young*, what stands out is the translation of the character's key flaws into productive careers. For instance, Mimi's vanity becomes a career as a stylist, Porky's gluttony leads to him owning a popular restaurant, and Louie's love of money is translated into a stockbroking job that involves handling large monetary transactions.¹⁸⁹ In this way, the children represent the ideal product of such a childhood – never succumbing to the more negative elements of their habits while learning enough to enter into society as a social and productive part of its fabric. Part of them understanding and fulfilling their expected trajectories towards success and the future is, then, also possessing and performing their work ethic – which was both about working hard *and* existing within the moral boundaries of society and their class.

¹⁸⁶ chok Tong Goh, 'National Day Rally Address By Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, August 1992', (Speech, 1992). "Forever Young," *Bookworm Short Stories Volume 35*, Bookworm Consultants, 1992.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 43.

The Other Child

The above might also be understood within the context of existing ideas about innate qualities. What stands out about the imagined child within the texts is their seemingly innate position as “good children,” and their understanding of the shared Singaporean morality of the Bookworm Universe.

While the Bookworm characters have moral compasses and consciences, they are susceptible to “bad” behaviour; with their own assigned characteristics ranging from gluttony to miserliness, and which remain part of the series narratives until the final story. The imagined child was, then, an imperfect one – who retained traits coded as negative to be corrected, and to kickstart the plots of stories, but always softened by good intentions or strength of character. The child is both inherently teachable, yet constantly fallible; self-correcting and imbued with the ability to change, yet in constant need of correction and learning. Bound by the need to both learn and fail. Both innately flawed and innately good – something this thesis posits as characteristic of how childhood was viewed in Singapore. The Bookworm characters were neither perfect, nor morally flawless or invulnerable to bad behaviour. However, what is noteworthy is how they were bounded within a specific range of acceptable flaws within a specific moral spectrum which was coded as the norm within the Bookworm universe – that is, they were always contrite, aware of their wrong-doings, and willing to learn and express acceptance of the established morality as correct. Part of being the imagined child, therefore, was possessing a specific Singaporean morality. The imagined child possessed not only an ability to learn and grow and escape the permanent consequences of their mistakes, but also demonstrated an awareness and buying into the shared Singaporean morality.

The shared moral characteristics of the imagined child stand out when considered against child characters who were not part of the Bookworm Gang. After the main characters shifted into models of ideal children, new characters were needed to exist in contrast to them. Significantly, the unsubtly named Hoo Li Gan took Sam Seng's place as the bad influence – replacing the “*samseng*” with a “hooligan” encapsulates how the books negotiated the need to introduce “bad” ideas while preventing the Bookworm children from being the source.¹⁹⁰

[Figure 2.16] Hoo Li Gan is similar to Sam Seng in some respects, both use slightly coarser and less refined sentences (particularly next to characters such as Smarty and Fat Ani), and are drawn with similar markers of the “young delinquent” – slippers and untidy uniform. Both have been shown to jeer or goad other characters in order to mock and provoke. However, Hoo Li Gan's actions are written and drawn in far more malicious ways.¹⁹¹ Over the

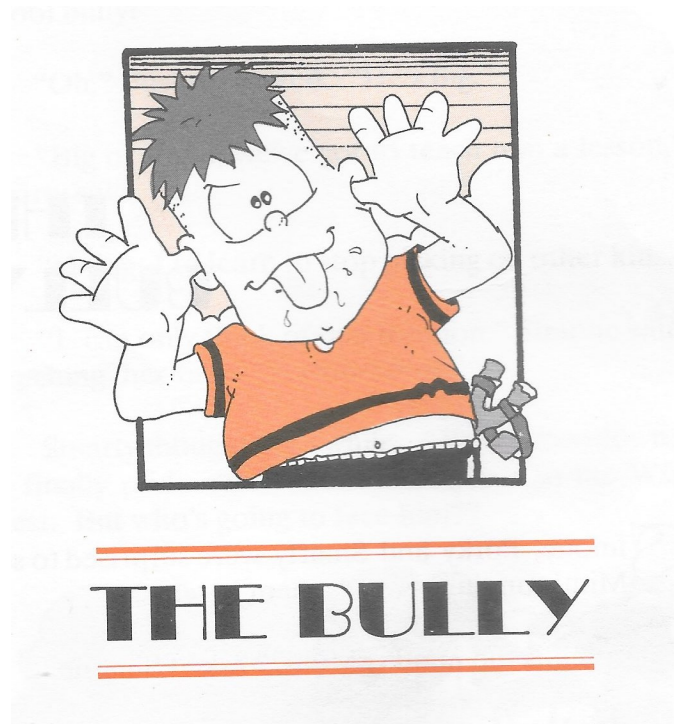


Figure 2.16 Illustration from the “The Bully” of Hoo Li Gan

course of the series, Hoo Li Gan and a range of other bad influences (usually also students in the same school), served as antagonists, introducing egregious wrongs such as gambling and smoking. [Figure 2.17]

¹⁹⁰ A version of Hooligan first appears in Volume 7, reappearing more consistently after Volume 15.

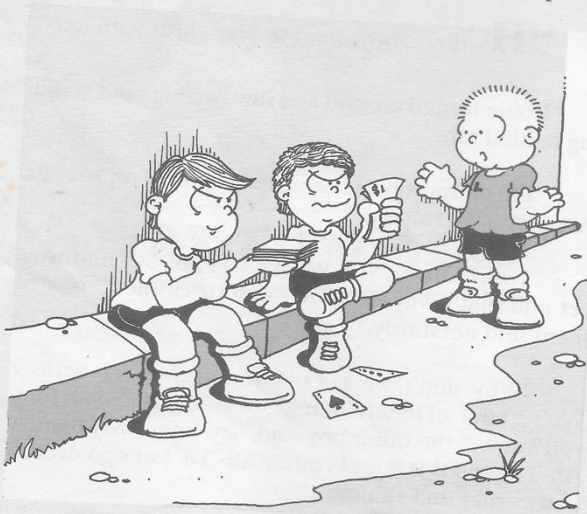
¹⁹¹ Hoo Li Gan Introduction (plus image), ‘The Bully’, in *Bookworm Short Stories 7*, vol. 7 (Singapore: Bookworm Consultants, 1989), 65.

Louie, being the helpful and friendly person that he was, of course agreed immediately. "My name's Louie!" he introduced himself.

After getting comfortable, Ah-Tee produced a pack of cards from his pocket and Ah-Tu took out a bundle of one dollar notes, making Louie's eyes bulge. Money always had a strong effect on Louie.

"Let's play a few rounds of Black Jack, Louie," Ah-Tee said as he shuffled the pack expertly.

"But I don't know how to play it!" Louie replied.



Want To Bet

Figure 2.17 Excerpt from "Want to Bet" showing two bad influences introducing Louie to gambling

Pen - Pal

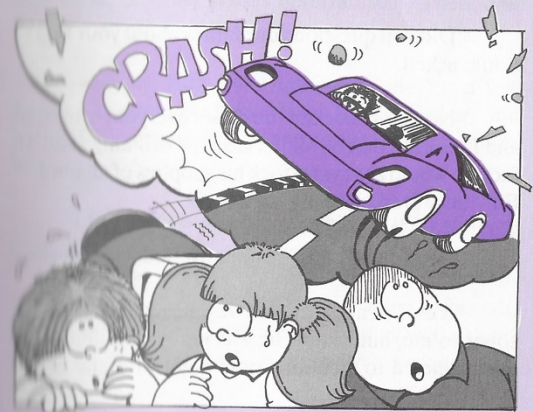
24

"Yes, I told you I was the top student in class but I lied. I was afraid you would stop being my friend if you learned of the truth."

"You know, I don't judge you, or anyone for that matter by their academic performance. What actually happened?" Simone asked.

"It's a long story, and it started when I lost my legs in an accident, the same one that killed my mother..." Having said that, Billy's tears rolled down his cheeks and he quickly wiped them away. He continued, "After my mother died, my father took to heavy drinking and soon, he became an alcoholic. Whenever he was drunk, he would vent his anger on me..."

"Did he hurt you?" asked Porky.



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Bookworm Short Stories 26

Figure 2.18 Excerpt from the story "Pen-pal" where Billy relays his difficulties to the Bookworm Gang

There were also other characters introduced who, if not always necessarily malicious, served as examples of negative consequences or broken social rules. For instance, characters struggling with poverty, characters in a delinquent gang, and characters stuck in bad family situations. For example, the following excerpt shows the gang being introduced to Billy, whose life circumstances are completely outside their own experience. Not only does he have a physical disability, his mindset of defeatism and lack of strength to challenge his circumstances are specifically articulated.¹⁹² As **Figure 2.18** shows, these circumstance not only involved

¹⁹² 'Want to Bet?', in *Bookworm Short Stories 15* (Singapore: Bookworm Consultants, 1990), 42–46; 'That's What Friends Are For'; 'Got a Smoke?'

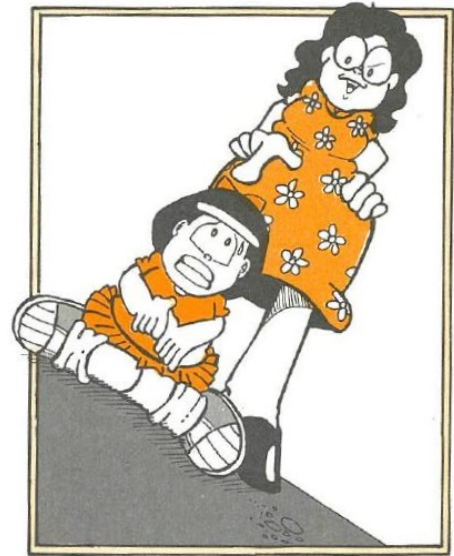
parental neglect, but abuse as well – with an alcoholic father and deceased mother. The story concludes with the Bookworm characters counselling and convincing Billy to become resilient – offering him friendship and support.¹⁹³

While the text is sympathetic, and might not even ascribe fault to the child directly, they are framed within the context of their inherent weaknesses, lack of knowledge, willpower, or lack of resourcefulness – something a Bookworm character inevitably displays in contrast. These other children were more than just foils for the Bookworm gang – they were also representations of children who were not – or could not – be the imagined child. What is conveyed across the series is that the Bookworm children are not the same as these other child characters – the main characters might be influenced or pressured into properly bad behaviour, but are never the sources. They might face similar temptations or negative situations, but would not ultimately become victims or perpetrators themselves.

The stories demonstrate how the Bookworm Characters have the moral fortitude to decide against doing wrong, or to self-correct and make amends while other children specifically do not. The Bookworm characters' ability to learn from their mistakes and not become those other un-ideal children – are central to this presentation of the Singaporean morality. Rather than being well-behaved and flawless, the Bookworm children are specifically shown to make mistakes such as lying, over-indulging, and being selfish. However, these mistakes are presented as a negativity introduced from external sources, or as mistakes made reluctantly by a guilty child. Key to their position as fulfilling and embodying moral expectations is that the Bookworm characters always see where they went wrong – displaying

¹⁹³ 'Pen-Pal', in *Bookworm Short Stories 26*, (Singapore: Bookworm Consultants, 1990), 17–32.

an understanding and awareness not only of their wrongdoings, but of those wrongs in relation to the social fabric of Singapore. The children are aware of that shared, assumed morality often enforced by adults or conveyed through negative consequences. In this way, the child never exceeds the adult dispensing moral lessons and discipline – in the case of the Bookworm Short Stories, characters such as parents and Miss Goon, the children’s teacher. They represent the most important element of the shared Singaporean morality – ultimate acceptance of social responsibility.



JUST A KID

Figure 2.19 Miss Goon illustrated in the Bookworm Short Stories

Thinking through the concept of aetnormativity as described by Maria Nikolajeva, it is possible to situate the Bookworm children within a larger universe where they never transgress the boundaries of appropriate behaviour.¹⁹⁴ No matter what their characters do, they eventually submit to the voice of authority – either an adult, or a set of adult-created rules. In understanding this morality, the Bookworm children are set apart from characters like Hoo Li Gan. This morality goes beyond recognising their wrong doing, but also accepting it and accepting consequences – while resolving to improve and continue learning. On one hand, this resonates with the Confucian worldview which was prominent particularly in the 1980s – wherein the child remains subordinate to the teacher and father; constantly in the process of learning. Yet, the notion of innate qualities resurface when considering how the children are portrayed as completely familiar with, and wholly cognizant of this Singaporean morality. They are forced to learn and re-learn, while simultaneously

¹⁹⁴ Maria Nikolajeva, *Power, Voice and Subjectivity in Literature for Young Readers* (Routledge, 2009), 7.

possessing innate qualities which enable them to do so – innate qualities which are heavily coded as part of their “idealness” in relation to other children who are coded as coming from a lower class or fail to meet the expectations or ideal conditions of middle–classness.

2.3 The Ideal Child in Ideal Singapore

This chapter has discussed how the Bookworm children in the Bookworm Short Stories collectively were constructed as an “Imagined child” – embodying and reflecting the myriad ways in which Singaporean culture existed during the 1980 and 1990s. It finds that the imagined child not only reflected Singaporean culture, but in particular a specific ideal embodiment and enactment of Singaporean culture. The imagined child within the texts was, this thesis argues, an ideal Singaporean child who represented broader ideals and desires of Singaporeans living and negotiating existence in Singapore.

The Bookworm children all possessed the qualities required for them to flourish as ideal Singaporeans. On one hand, the texts might be read as them possessing those qualities innately – their ability to negotiate moral hurdles, and their predisposition towards replicating the successes of their parents. However, it is also the case that they are steeped in the mindset of achievement and aspiration – the same texts might be read as them displaying personal growth and achieving success through an ideal childhood. What these competing possibilities reveal are emerging dissonances in how structures such as class, morality, and status were being seen in Singapore at the time. While the government defined middle–classness in terms of economy and hard work, the texts reflect a more complex version of middle–classness which was concerned with identity, wealth, and social relations. Similarly, while a shared morality might be identified in 1980s and 1990s Singapore, the texts reveal multiple conceptualisations of morality – variously contingent on perceived class and productivity. Finally, while the notion

of success and the future could be articulated in terms of survival and economic prosperity, the texts suggest that such success was also directly correlated with maintaining one's place within society and fulfilling intergenerational potential which was assigned at birth.

This thesis posits that the ideal Singaporean child might usefully serve as proxy for the ideal Singaporean more generally. These qualities and dynamics surrounding the ideal Singaporean child – class, morality, success – might be seen in parallel to broader ideals. That these ideals were filtered through ideals and desires for the child reflect the critical potential of the child in interrogating the historical past. The imagined child being constructed as ideal is pertinent because of what it reveals about the desires of Singaporean culture. It reveals that Singaporean culture needed to be cohered as a set of ideologies, imperatives and actions which together, and desired certain outcomes from their actions and shared assumptions. *Bookworm* reveals Singaporean adults writing Singaporean characters set in a version of fictional Singapore coded as resonant with actual Singapore. It suggests that the analysis put forth of those characters in this chapter firstly serves to identify key elements of shared culture, and set up the following chapter's interrogation of how the ideal imagined child was impossible, and therefore reveals divergent and complex changes to Singaporean culture.

In the context of children's literature theory, thinking through the children's text allows for a dynamic view of the adult-child relationship. That is, the adult as a former child remains connected to the child even as they create new imperatives and expectations for them. The child, ideologically, is both a future adult, and occupying the same present as the adult. For instance, in believing in the innate qualities of the child, the adult asserts that belief in themselves and their position within society.

Chapter Three: *Behind the Ideal*

This chapter builds on the elements of Singaporean culture which emerged from the analysis of the previous chapter. It interrogates how the *Bookworm Short Stories* also reveal hidden differences between the ideal children and within their Singapore. And, asks how and why those differences were specifically emerging over time in reaction to the world around it. These differences are, across this chapter, manifest in three forms. Firstly, as instabilities and stratifications within the Imagined Child's relationship with society, state, and itself. Secondly, as ambivalences and ironies within established assumptions and desires, structures and ideologies – which meshed when considered through the ideal child, but when considered as historical change could also clash and fail to reach the ideal. Finally, this chapter shows how difference was manifest in specific changes to Singaporean culture – in the form of new negotiated positions, added facets to established structures and systems, and new imperatives and actions established as tangible expressions of Singaporean culture.

Together, these differences embedded within the *Bookworm Short Stories* reflect how existing assumptions, values, and behaviour patterns within Singapore moved and were contingent upon each other through a process of change and renegotiation which can be rooted in the 1980s and 1990s. It further reflects the capacity of Singaporeans to process and reformulate the many imperatives of the state alongside and atop its developing conceptualisations of self, society, and the reality of how those imperatives needed to be understood tangibly as – actions, specific boundaries, and specific constant active processes. These insights are made possible by examining the *Bookworm Short Stories* text as well as its structure, its didactic impetus, and its position as a material subject.

3.1 Stratification and Boundary-making

The previous chapter puts forward an already multi-dimensional understanding of class in Singapore. The middle-class was both an economic, social, and behavioral lived reality, and a set of expectations and assumptions about the future. This is clear in how the Bookworm children consistently interact and express themselves. However, when considering the embedded details within the *Bookworm Short Stories*, the consistency of the Bookworm children's class cultures is belied by identifiable differences and boundaries which mark new constructions of class.

A Middle-Class Spectrum

Firstly, the texts reveal subtle markers within the Bookworm children which suggest that the middle-class was no longer a shared, consistent reality for all those within it. Instead, the middle-class was a spectrum of experiences which, in the texts, were contingent on markers of consumption, and extended into markers of future potential.

In the *The Case of the Missing Tutor*, where Samseng articulates his understanding of his role in society, it is clear that he sees himself as part of a specific social group (which this thesis identifies as middle-class).¹⁹⁵ [See Figure 2.15] Sam Seng sees his education level and future occupation both as part of fulfilling expectations of his class *and* retaining acceptance and relationships within that class. The relationship between education, success, and class (enmeshed into an ideological position/construction of self within society) can be seen through this story, in which the middle-class is a broad category encompassing a range of characters while specifically excluding other groups – the uneducated, the blue-collar workers, the poor,

¹⁹⁵ “*The Case of the Missing Tutor*,” Bookworm Short Stories Volume 38, Bookworm Consultants, 1992.

and the unemployed. While the previous chapter notes the demarcations between classes and boundaries being drawn not only officially but ideologically to create groups of “others,” it is possible to further examine how stratification emerged *within* the middle-class. This articulation and depiction of difference – written into the texts as an intuitive social understanding – reveals how new stratifications in turn produced new ways of constructing and understanding difference. It further produced new expectations, desires, and manifested in new consumption patterns, new rhetoric, and new symbols of class; mingling with existing ideologies about success and meritocracy.

The imagined ideal Singaporean children represented by the Bookworm gang display a consistency and ideal-ness in relation to the world around them and to each other through their middle-class position, and their fulfilling all the expectations/buying into the ideologies of middle-classness. Across all the stories, the children never enter into specifically class-based conflict which would see them articulating difficulties of status or class within their own group. Instead, they interact as a group without tension – demographically mixed in terms of gender and race, representing the ideal reaction to, and lived experience of 1980s and 1990s Singapore. Yet, just as the ideal child was written to be aware and assured of their position within society, it is also possible to see how other subtle assumptions are written into the children and the Singapore they inhabit. These assumptions belie the initial appearance of social cohesion, and unproblematic interaction across those ideal children, suggesting instead a range of differences not only reflected directly in the stories, but incorporated into and refracted materially through how the children were drawn, written, and situated within Singapore and their future.

While this thesis places all the Bookworm Gang children squarely within the middle-class in 1980s and 1990s Singapore, it further identifies a range of positions occupied by each child within a spectrum of middle-classness. Although it is possible to identify the Singaporean middle-class through official statistics or economic surveys, theory suggests different complex processes surround how class becomes an entrenched and complex category to the people who inhabit it. That is, class is a highly contextual set of positions which might encompass economic position, localised status symbols, cultural ideals and identities which shift and vary over time.¹⁹⁷ While broad symbols of middle-classness in the context of Singapore such as language use and consumption are clearly reproduced in the texts, the Bookworm children are also a reflection of different groups within that class and the stratifications which were forming around them. This is also part of Singapore's rapidly expanding middle-class, which was growing even across the years between 1985 and 1995. As had been observed more broadly of class expansion, to this new social group, what it meant to be middle class (relationships to work, success, national identity, and society) was expanding.¹⁹⁸ Rather than a homogenous group, this majority group in Singapore who fell within the economic middle-class and fulfilled the conditions of upward mobility and consciousness of nationhood, nevertheless had to reconfigure their position in society based on other factors – such as race, gender, relative wealth, and future potential – developing new symbols and categories within that class.

¹⁹⁷ J. K. Gibson-Graham, Stephen A. Resnick, and Richard D. Wolff, eds., *Class and Its Others* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000). For a similar discussion in the context of Singapore see: Ye Junjia, *Class inequality in the global city : migrants, workers and cosmopolitanism in Singapore*, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. Ye's work on class demonstrates that class in Singapore can be usefully conceived of as subjectivity "inhabited through the categories of race, gender, nationality" – mutually constituted by the desires of "the people" and individuals, and by economic and social forces. Ye argues that studying the mechanisms which generate and maintain class difference cannot simply be limited to an analysis of economic production and the division of labour, as class is also expressed through cultural and aspirational dimensions and intersects with gender, race, citizenship and other sociocultural stratifications.

¹⁹⁸ Wendy Bottero, 'Class Identities and the Identity of Class', *Sociology* 38, no. 5 (2004): 985–1003.

The ten Bookworm children are brought together through being classmates in the same primary school – ostensibly in the same neighbourhood or area as public schools in Singapore allocate places according to systems of distance and neighbourhood.¹⁹⁹ While they share similar experiences of public education and living conditions, there are subtle differences written into the backgrounds of each character. While class differences are rarely mentioned out-right, a comparison of Louie and Kokku reflects the differences in how their class is portrayed. Louie is clearly part of the upper-middle class. Over the course of the series, he is shown to have occasional access to experiences only becoming available to households with higher incomes – some examples include his family hiring a domestic helper, a mobile phone borrowed from his father, and being the first character to experience air travel.²⁰⁰ Louie’s father is a businessman – whom Louie hopes to emulate in the future. The excerpt below of the children discussing their holiday plans clearly shows how Louie has access to more experiences and consumer goods. **[Figure 3.1]**

On the other hand, Kokku and his family are positioned on opposite end of the middle-class spectrum. Kokku’s father owns a prata stall in a hawker centre, which Kokku occasionally works at after school. While Kokku’s family is generally shown to be comfortable financially – for instance being able to purchase sought-after sports shoes for Kokku – they are the only family who come close to financial difficulty throughout the entire series. In *The Prata Stall Problem*, Kokku’s father has trouble finding funds to pay for equipment at his prata stall.²⁰¹ Although their problems are, at the end of the story, resolved easily with a bank loan, it stands out as the only time any such problem arises. Equally, what stands out is that *only* Kokku and

¹⁹⁹ Sumit Agarwal et al., ‘School Allocation Rules and Housing Prices: A Quasi-Experiment with School Relocation Events in Singapore’, *Regional Science and Urban Economics* 58, no. C (2016): 42–56.

²⁰⁰ “Happy Holidays,” Bookworm Short Stories Volume 38, Bookworm Consultants, 1992; “The Maid,” Bookworm Short Stories Volume 38, Bookworm Consultants, 1992; “Ring Ring!,” Bookworm Short Stories Volume 38, Bookworm Consultants, 1992

²⁰¹ “The Prate Stall Problem,” in Bookworm Short Stories Volume 38, Bookworm Consultants, 1992.

Louie's parents ever have their occupation specifically identified (although other parents are sometimes illustrated in office-wear, which suggests them skewing more white-collar).

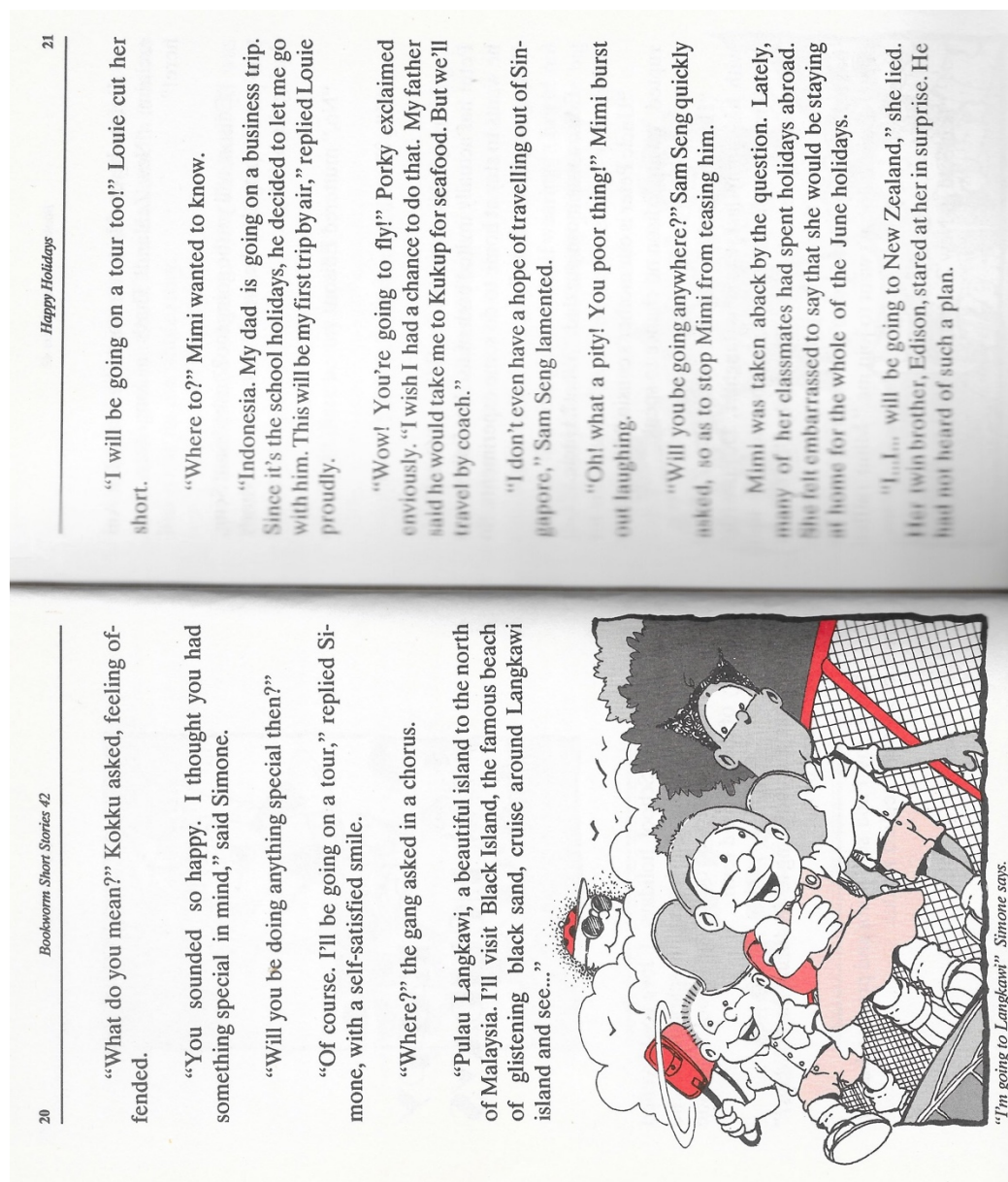


Figure 3.1 Excerpt from "Happy Holidays"

The varied constructions of possible middle-class children by the writers suggest, firstly, that such stratifications were present – that a range of groups and individuals were considered middle-class, or at least considered to fulfil the conditions of middle-classness. More specifically, they suggest that representing that range was considered important when

creating a group of relatable, Singaporean characters – and that this range would be familiar and intuitive to the reader. This suggests that by the time the *Bookworm Short Stories* were published, it was possible to identify and reproduce those differences in tangible ways. That is, in ways that meshed with recognisable stereotypes and social norms – in visual depictions, manifest in exclusions, and specific expectations. In identifying and incorporating Kokku into its positioning of the Bookworm gang as middle–class, this thesis suggests that the spectrum of middle–classness was understood outside of strictly economic or financial terms; fluid and contingent on other markers and ideals. That, although the ideal Singaporean child was middle–class, this middle–classness was also understood and defined in terms of intra–class identity and shared social understandings. And, that even between the ideal children, some were more ideal than others.

The intersection of income, social currency, and talent

Alongside new distinctions within middle–classness, other associations might be identified between how the Bookworm characters were coded as slightly different from each other. As the examples in the previous chapter shows, the Bookworm characters were assigned projected futures which corresponded to their abilities, qualities, and characteristics. Porky becomes a chef, Louie a stockbroker, and Simone an army sergeant.²⁰² The previous chapter has also elaborated on the upward–slanted nature of these futures – with the children’s innate qualities translated into occupations which were considered particularly valuable and successful. This might be taken a step further – to critically examine how these different occupations themselves held various values and social meaning within a spectrum of the ideal.

²⁰² “*Forever Young*,” *Bookworm Short Stories* Volume 38, Bookworm Consultants, 1992.

Through the period under consideration, the state was careful to stress the importance of rounded education, and the need to balance the amount of value assigned to each field. In 1985, then–Minister of Education Tony Tan noted the importance of acknowledging equal value to different educational paths – in order to promote social harmony – saying, “it remains imperative that we do not fall into the trap of believing some paths are more worthy than others.”²⁰³ However, implicit in political rhetoric and education policy was also an emphasis on, and dedication of resources to certain aspects of education – from which certain talents and associated careers gained social currency and symbolic value. Speaking in 1988, Tan noted in particular that what Singapore needed were not only educated (which, in the context of the bookworm children, all would be) citizens, but specifically those who fulfilled Singapore’s specific requirements – in finance, research, and management. As one state–affiliated political commentator put it in 1992, “We may value the arts and humanities, but the priority must always be technology , mathematics and science to provide the essential knowledge to keep us competitive.”²⁰⁴

The institution of programs and learning centres related to science, technology, and mathematics far exceeded that of humanities based fields – apart from the role of language acquisition in order to form a strong English foundation necessary to remain competitive internationally.²⁰⁵ Between the years 1987 and 1995, three different scientific research institutions were commissioned by the government (most notably A*STAR), and the 1980s saw heavy curriculum research and reform in the optimised teaching of mathematics.²⁰⁶ The

²⁰³ Tony Tan, ‘University Education and the NUS’ (Speech, Welcome Convention For New Nus Students At the National Theatre On Wednesday, Singapore, 2 July 1980).

²⁰⁴ Arlene Bastion, *Singapore in a Nutshell: Nuggets* (Singapore: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2005), 12.

²⁰⁵ Eng Soon Tay, ‘Opening Speech at the Seminar on the Teaching of Mathematics in Primary School’ (Speech, Seminar on the Teaching of Mathematics in Primary School, The Singapore Science Centre, Singapore, 21 November 1981), <https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/tes19811121s.pdf>.

²⁰⁶ National Research Council, Division on Engineering and Physical Sciences, ‘Singapore’, in *S&T Strategies of Six Countries: Implications for the United States* (National Academies Press, 2010), 74–78; Tk|Ti Ti Edward Sw, *Singapore And Asia – Celebrating Globalization And An Emerging Post–Modern*. (Xlibris Corporation, 2012),

focus on STEM (Science–Technology–Engineering–Math) as a core group of important subjects was, therefore, written into education policy and given emphasis to a far larger degree than subjects in the humanities or arts.²⁰⁷ These foci were associated not only with Singapore remaining competitive and as part of the new, modern world economy, but with specific occupations as well. Excellence in STEM subjects would lead to higher education and paths towards fields such as finance, scientific research, engineering or medicine. According to career and market surveys conducted in 1990, 1992, and 1996 by the Ministry of Finance and the Department of Statistics, occupations in the field of engineering and medicine, and business were the most highly sought after and aspired to amongst university students.²⁰⁸ The currency held by these jobs was both national and social – its value derived from its potential boosting of Singapore’s growth, interlinked with a related symbolic status within the social class structure. It is here where the conception of self in relation to society began to see specific shifts and expanded meaning.

What the career surveys also suggest is that income played a significant role in how different jobs were conceived of and valued. According to the 1996 Household Expenditure Survey, the disparities between groups in the middle percentiles of household income were steadily increasing – contributing to different levels of consumption and access to consumer goods.²⁰⁹ What this suggests is that social currency was not only based on one’s duty to society being fulfilled, but also increasingly based on the financial returns associated with an occupation. However, the texts also reveal a layer within this notion. Returning to the excerpt from *The Case of the Missing Tutor*, Sam Seng lists a number of jobs as representative of the

²⁰⁷ Khoon Yoong Wong, ed., *Mathematics Education: The Singapore Journey*, Series on Mathematics Education, v. 2 (New Jersey: World Scientific, 2009).

²⁰⁸ Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Trade, ‘Economic Survey of Singapore’ (Republic of Singapore: Ministry of Finance, 1992); Singapore Department of Statistics, ‘Income, Expenditure, Saving and Investment of the Household Sector’, Occasional Paper Series (Singapore: Singapore Department of Statistics, 1999).

²⁰⁹ Singapore Department of Statistics, ‘Income, Expenditure, Saving and Investment of the Household Sector’.

poor, lower-class, and uneducated future: “washing cars...a coolie, or even a dish-washer in some coffee shop or maybe even a maid.”²¹⁰ It is notable that these jobs are marked as such not only because of their low-income (although this is a key defining feature), but also because of their labour-intensiveness (in opposition to skilled, educated labour). Yet the low social currency Sam Seng assigns to these jobs is also premised on an assumption about value which was rooted in *who* typically performed those jobs.

Within the Bookworm characters’ worldview, is also the case that other labour-intensive jobs such as being a firefighter, policeman, or even someone in the army exist as commendable, aspirational jobs. This assignation of value and symbolic currency to certain jobs goes beyond just education and skill-levels, given that similar qualifications are required to become, say, an entry level maid and soldier. These jobs are so dreaded by Sam Seng because they represent for him – as a middle-class child projected for success and upward mobility immediate failure and potential expulsion from his class altogether. Sam Seng is shown to be keenly aware of how a lack of money and personal wealth, alongside his lack of a good job and education, would leave him outside of his social group. For one, he imagines himself isolated and friendless directly as a consequence of being poor and uneducated – the assumption being that once he no longer occupied the same class/jobs/environment as his friends, they would abandon him.²¹¹ This further suggests that he saw these categories as almost indistinguishable – that his conception of self was based on a specific mix of his social position, income, and occupation – this amalgamation becoming a specific marker in itself, which marked out new boundaries of same-ness and difference.

²¹⁰ “*The Case of the Missing Tutor*,” Bookworm Short Stories Volume 38, Bookworm Consultants, 1992.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

In this context, stratification was emerging not only from change, but through existing conceptions of value and existing expectations of upward mobility. While the shared Singaporean culture was preoccupied by awareness of self in society (through contributions, shared norms and goals), this was expanded to include one's sustained sense of community and acceptance in society, and specifically one's income and perceived social currency through employment. From here, different material and legislative changes were incorporated into this expanded understanding – made into markers of social identity and status.

Singaporean-ness itself was not only a present state, but highly concerned with the future as well; particularly preoccupied with imagining (and actively trying to impact) both positive and negative potential futures. As the previous chapter has discussed, this was true not only of class and intergenerational paths, but in thinking about linear futures and the meritocratic structure. In the context of education, a further layer of difference was being written into the public school system to identify excellence and potential. In particular, the Gifted Programme introduced in 1987 reflects the dual preoccupations of rewarding hard work, and identifying the innately talented – both specifically for national productivity.²¹² The programme identified gifted students through a process of testing, offering those chosen the opportunity to be taught at a higher level, with lessons crafted specifically for their abilities (which might be limited or stifled in a class of less gifted children).²¹³ While this functioned as part of Singapore's meritocratic system it was also a material way in which difference was marked and categorised within the educated population of middle-class, and potentially middle-class Singaporeans. The Gifted Programme was offered every year, with thousands of applicants and hopefuls

²¹² Singapore and Ministry of Education, *20 Years of Gifted Education: From Promise to Flow*. (Singapore: Ministry of Education, 2004), 12.

²¹³ Liang See Tan and Maureen Neihart, 'Critical Assessment of Gifted Education in Singapore', in *In D. Dai & C. K. Ching, A Critical Assessment of Gifted Education in Asia: Problems and Prospects* (Chinese American Educational Research and Development Association, 2015).

aiming for a spot – itself representing an aspirational category rather than a means to an end.²¹⁴ Potential – a specific, academic form of potential which would lead specifically to productivity – could then be marked out tangibly and publicly through a child’s position within the education system and status within society.

If the ideal in the previous chapter was preoccupied with an intuitive and expected upward trajectory, the actual Singaporean experience suggests that within that expected trajectory, new legislation and social expectations produced new shared standards and motivations. The new, more specific and exclusive expectations of success and upward mobility within (and as part of fulfilling the conditions of) the middle class was, therefore, not only contingent on changing education policy, but on the assumptions which stemmed from those changes. To achieve success as a middle-class Singaporean, then, was expanding beyond fulfilling the ideological goals of shared moral work ethic and achieving economic positions through housing and occupations, but rather was marked by distinct markers such as occupation, specific contributions to Singapore, and symbols of markers such as income and one’s future potential; both within society, and as an individual.

Difference within Bookworm

While all the stratifications described above are not necessarily unique to Singapore, they do describe specific contexts within which the Bookworm children must be understood and interrogated. Beyond Kokku and Louie, it becomes increasingly obvious that the Bookworm children’s projected futures and their places on the middle-class spectrum are entangled. While their present economic positions are, aside from Kokku and Louie, largely

²¹⁴ H Alfred and J. Tan, ‘How a Child Is Picked’, *The Straits Times*, 4 September 1983; J Tan, ‘Pupils Who Sat for Gifted Programme Tests Being Ranked’, *The Straits Times*, 20 September 1983; Chee Keng John Wang et al., ‘Impact of the Talent Development Environment on Achievement Goals and Life Aspirations in Singapore’, *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology* 23, no. 3 (July 2011): 263–76.

similar to each other, their projected futures demonstrate a difference in how ideal each character was. This projected future was contingent not only on the nature of their innate qualities but, this thesis finds, highly reflective of the new created boundaries and ideals and visions of difference. It is in this visible difference that a wider picture of difference in Singapore can be observed – difference based on gendered and racial boundaries which, although not all-encompassing or outright exclusionary, was clearly part of how social roles and boundaries and structures were further imagined and idealized.

The difference between Kokku and Louie might be a coincidence – a Chinese character being on the higher end of the spectrum, and an Indian character the lower end. However, it is also the case that the characters positioned on the higher end of the potential spectrum are all Chinese characters. While, again, there are enough Chinese characters for there to be a spectrum, it is also telling that it is the only two non-Chinese boys who excel at sport, rather than academics. Smarty and Edison are the only two characters explicitly given STEM-intelligence as their defining traits – in “studying” and “science.”

As scholars such as Hussin Mutalib have pointed out, by the 1980s, a mix of assumptions, political rhetoric, and structural elements contributed to an assumption that certain races in Singapore were less educated and less likely to fulfill the conditions of middle-classness.²¹⁵ By 1980, the statistically confirmed disparity in education levels between racial groups in Singapore was the subject of government research. In particular, a study commissioned in 1984 found that Malay students at both primary and secondary levels had a much higher failure rate than the national average, along with a significantly lower university

²¹⁵ James Gomez, ‘Politics and Ethnicity: Framing Racial Discrimination in Singapore’, *Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies* 28, no. 2 (2010): 104–18; Hussin Mutalib, *Singapore Malays: Being Ethnic Minority and Muslim in a Global City-State*, Routledge Contemporary Southeast Asia Series 45 (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2012).

entrance rates compared to Chinese and Indian students.²¹⁶ In 1988, statistics showed that local universities produced 679 Malay graduates compared to 3519 Indians, and 31,286 Chinese.²¹⁷ Beyond the statistics, however, what is significant in the context of this research is how these issues were framed and incorporated into shared assumptions; racial difference and disparity was framed as a national, social problem – for which there must be a solution – under the wider imperative of progress and success. Within this framing, the Chinese Singaporean was positioned as the goal, for other races to catch up with in order to access the social position, wealth, and identity they had as part of the Singaporean national development and growth.

Middle-classness was being increasingly associated with the Chinese majority; not only economically, but because they were seen as being able to fulfil the establish ideals of devotion to society at large and internalizing the (Confucian-influenced) qualities of their cultural heritage – most significantly hard work. This was further racialized when considering the influence of Chinese-centric ideologies on political rhetoric. For one, the political construction of the ideal Singaporean was a Chinese male – English speaking, but engaged with his locally-rooted moral and cultural values, while being committed (both ideologically and through hard work) to the good of Singapore.²¹⁸ The Chinese-ness of this figure both mirrored the majority ethnically Chinese population, the Chinese-ness of the PAP government's key leadership and, specifically, the figurehead of Lee Kuan Yew.²¹⁹ While the creation of the Asian Values, and the insertion of Confucian rhetoric was an intentional (some might argue cynical) melding of ideals under which to create the citizen rooted in productivity and devotion to nation, what is key in this context is how this rhetoric was articulated, framed, and internalized within society.

²¹⁶ Hussin Mutalib, *Singapore Malays*.

²¹⁷ Ibid, 52–54.

²¹⁸ Hong and Huang, *The Scripting of a National History*.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

Confucian values prize the benevolent, wise, male, paternal authority figure, who emerges as the natural leader. This was explicitly held up as the ideal – with the potential tricky dynamics negotiated by specifically tying those ideal traits to income, success, and ideal productivity. What this produced, as seen in the texts, are casual and intuitive depictions of difference amongst the child characters – all conforming to the wider expectations not only for their class, but of their race. Not only are Smarty and Edison specifically the intelligent ones, it is Louie who also attains a high-paying, prestigious job, while the other characters are positioned a step down. Smarty too, is made the Bookworm Gang's leader – without any justification given.

Within the wider notion of the ideal child and their goals, income and productivity might be identified, then, as a shared ideal through which differences or inadequacies were filtered. The emerging image of the ideal Chinese Singaporean was not presented baldly as a comparison between children in the texts – rather, it was written into the Chinese character's innate talents and assumed futures, fitting within existing conceptualisations of ideal Singapore. That is, the assumption and expectation that certain characters would naturally be better at STEM subjects and be destined for high-income jobs was incorporated into broader expectations of the ideal which those characters also fulfilled and represented – hard work, meritocratic upward mobility, and middle-class values and ideologies.

These stratifications were themselves separate assumptions and ideologies and actions, but existed within and in the context of broader class cultures. This subsumed these stratifications and their nuances within the wider preoccupations with class, thereby having them become part of Singaporean culture rather than a challenge or subversion of it.

3.2 Ambivalences and Ironies

A further examination of the different elements of Singaporean shared culture in the context of a range of changes and realities further reveals how Singapore's shared culture and its component parts did not always fit seamlessly together. Instead, different ideologies, expectations and desires clashed. This section explores several collision points, which demonstrate a more complex Singapore culture which found coherence in ambivalence.

The Dissonant Female

There was also a sense of gendered difference in how the Bookworm characters were described. Across the female characters, two of three, Mimi and Simone, are defined by their gendered characteristics – “vain” and “tomboy” respectively. This stands in contrast against their male counterparts who receive a range of possible characteristics, and traits – none of which were based on their gender. Even Fat Ani, who is often seen as a brainier character, is assigned a specifically non-STEM talent – writing and language. This might not only be contextualized within more universal gendered differences between the STEM/arts gender divide, but within Singapore's preoccupations with gender, and the unstable role of the ideal woman in particular.²²⁰

On one hand, the worldview, and male-dominated, paternalistic outlook of the Confucian value system is clearly reflected in how the female characters are positioned in relation to the male characters. Traditionally, Confucianism places the woman within society as daughter,

²²⁰ Jacob Clark Blickenstaff, ‘Women and Science Careers: Leaky Pipeline or Gender Filter?’, *Gender and Education* 17, no. 4 (2005): 369–86.

wife, and mother – conceived of in relation, and subordinate to the male figures in their lives. While the Singaporean articulation of Confucianism in the 1980s was not so explicit in creating divisions between male and female, political rhetoric of the time was clear in focusing on the woman as the key “nurturing” figure – whose importance to society was chiefly found in her child-bearing abilities.²²¹ If the male position was in the workplace and in positions of authority and leadership, the female position was in the home. This is clear in how the woman was framed in terms of Singaporean society and the imperatives of progress and survival. As Lee Kuan Yew put it in his 1983 National Day Rally speech: “Equal employment opportunities, yes, but we shouldn't get our women into jobs where they cannot, at the same time, be mothers...our most valuable asset is in the ability of our people, yet we are frittering away this asset through the unintended consequences of changes in our education policy and equal career opportunities for women. This has affected their traditional role ... as mothers, the creators and protectors of the next generation.”²²² As the previous sections have described, the woman was also the subject of policy targeted at population control – her body and choice of partner, and when to give birth made a public issue – her choice to get education also made a public issue – one which concerned the state.²²³ Gender was explicitly tied and bound up with duty, social imperatives.

Yet, this conception of the woman existed in conflict with the realities of the workforce during that period – as well as with the state’s economic policy and imperatives. The new economic landscape of the 1980s in particular saw a number of jobs available for the female

²²¹ Lenore Lyons-Lee, ‘The “Graduate Woman” Phenomenon: Changing Constructions of the Family in Singapore’, *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 13, no. 2 (1998): 309; Jean L. Pyle, ‘Women, the Family, and Economic Restructuring: The Singapore Model?’, *Review of Social Economy* 55, no. 2 (1997): 215–23.

²²² Kuan Yew Lee, ‘Talent for the Future’ (Speech, National Day Rally, Singapore, 14 August 1984).

²²³ Wong and Yeoh, *Fertility and the Family*.

workforce, both in white and blue-collar jobs.²²⁴ By 1984, the state was also conducting research with the goal of encouraging female participation in the workforce.²²⁵ The political rhetoric surrounding economy and the need for increased workforce and units of productivity similarly involved and necessitated women – particularly as a steadily increasing number of women were achieving tertiary and above education.²²⁶ Alongside, local media increasingly deprecated popular cultural motifs of the working woman and the career woman – in television and advertising, for instance. Drawing not only on the women’s rights movements and equality internationally – local acknowledgement as well and awareness of gender issues – as seen in the prominent protests against the Graduate Mothers scheme – protests mainly made by educated woman who chafed at being told when to marry, who to marry, and being defined as chiefly child-bearers within society.²²⁷

What then, of the ideal female child in this context? The spaces between the ideal female child of the Bookworm texts, other female characters, and the existing ideologies surround gender roles reflects the unstable and dissonant position occupied by the middle-class female in Singapore. None of the female characters demonstrate any aspiration towards motherhood and wifehood – instead, expression in strong terms their desires for the future, for success, social status, recognition of excellence in their fields, and of personal wealth. Mimi, for instance, yearns for personal recognition and fame, while Simone specifically articulates her dreams of the future in terms of personal status; as a capable, independent female on the same

²²⁴ Linda Lim, ‘Women in the Singapore Economy — The Inequalities Continue’, in *Our Lives to Live*, World Scientific Series on Singapore’s 50 Years of Nation-Building (Singapore: World Scientific, 2015), 149–54.

²²⁵ Ministry of Social Affairs, ‘Report on National Survey on Married Women, Their Role in the Family and Society’ (Republic of Singapore: Research Branch, Ministry of Social Affairs, 1984).

²²⁶ Christine Doran and Jim Jose, ‘Globalization, the Patriarchal State and Women’s Resistance in Singapore’, *Gender, Technology and Development* 6, no. 2 (July 2002): 215–32.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*

level as the opposite sex.²²⁸ The female characters conceive of their futures in the same way the male characters do; embodying the aspirations of their class as described in the chapter above, while never expressing consciousness of tension and structural limits placed on female ambition.

This is in contrast to the Bookworm children’s mothers, who, while often portrayed as working women, are simultaneously and clearly positioned as caretakers of the house – cooking, cleaning, and “mothering” as a typical housewife might. [Figure 3.2] This is presented as an intuitive depiction of the Singaporean nuclear household – with the mother fulfilling the conditions of middle-classness in her education, career, and markers such as language, while also taking her natural place within the home.



Figure 3.2 An Illustration depicting Mimi's mother doing the laundry

On one hand, it is possible to read in the texts an assumption or expectation that Mimi, Simone and Fat Ani will maintain their mother’s role of childbearing and nurturing and taking charge of the home, even as their reach their career goals. Yet this exists in contrast with the

²²⁸ “Mimi the Star,” Bookworm Short Stories Volume 38, Bookworm Consultants, 1992; “The Love Letters,” Bookworm Short Stories Volume 38, Bookworm Consultants, 1992; “Just a Kid,” Bookworm Short Stories Volume 38, Bookworm Consultants, 1992.

realities of a full-time job on an equal level to that of their husbands. Neither do their projected futures include motherhood or children – even in their thirties in *Forever Young*.²²⁹ This particularly stands in contrast to the state’s desire for educated women to have children as early as possible – heavily incentivized through “baby bonuses” such as tax rebates.²³⁰

Femaleness then, existed as an uncertainty within Singaporean culture. On one hand, gender is emphasized, and the texts place limits on female ambition; specifically writing them outside expectations and career paths with the most social currency. Yet they display and possess ambitions and desires for their future no different than the male characters – both fulfilling the economic imperatives for educated, working women and eschewing the state’s desires for women to simultaneously reproduce and be bound to the home. These dissonant positions embedded in the texts – even amidst the lack of dissonance expressed by the imagined child – reflect the uncertainty and instability of the ideal. They reflect how women in Singapore had to actively negotiate different expectations and assumptions being made about their role in society – even as other social, class, and economic changes were providing new material and ideological ways of being and living. They further reveal how the future as a concept featured heavily in how a shared culture of Singaporeanness was conceived – conditioning how acceptable certain things were. The position of woman in society was complicated precisely because of their role in potential success and potential failure – the ideal balance embodied in the imagined child, but the ironic positions possible outside the child nevertheless laid bare.

Authority and the State

Another collision point occurs in how authority – and conceptualisations of authority is written and conveyed in the *Bookworm Short Stories*. It is possible to identify intense

²²⁹ “*Forever Young*,” *Bookworm Short Stories* Volume 38, Bookworm Consultants, 1992.

²³⁰ Wong and Yeoh, *Fertility and the Family*.

ambivalence and tensions in how authority was conceived, received, and consequently associated with either private or public arenas.

Deconstructing Authority

Within the texts, authority – be it legislative, moral or didactic – is always obeyed and submitted to. This regardless of how that authority was conveyed and enforced, and of the motivations and meanings behind that authority. If the child is proxy for the citizen, it is possible to see the adult as proxy for the key source of moral, social, and legislative authority in Singapore – the state. As this thesis has explored, although the state was a prominent factor in the economic, legislative and ideological changes during this period, the texts also suggest deviations from the state’s version of the ideal, and expansions and rearticulations of the state’s rhetoric and logic. Examining different facets of the state’s authority in Singapore – as it was experienced and depicted offers the critical opportunity to see how that authority was fraught with tensions.

The state was undoubtedly a strong, and firm source of authority on various fronts. For one, it did not shy away from offering and pushing heavily strong stances on moral and social issues – from behavioural, to ethical, to cultural – regardless of whether those issues were public or private matters. As described in the previous chapter, the state was a key source at least part of the Singaporean morality’s internal logic – codifying the shared values and in doing so deciding what exactly was good and ideal for society (and what was not). This was extended to a range of frequent, nationwide social campaigns which covered a similarly broad range of arenas – again ranging from social ills such as vandalism, littering, and drug-use, to

encouraging “good” behaviours such as courtesy, kindness and workplace productivity.²³¹ There were also social campaigns which specifically outlined ideal forms of family planning and healthy living.²³² The state’s role in arbitrating and reinforcing a particular version of moral and social good places it firmly in a position of moral authority.

The monopoly held by the PAP was, by the 1980s and 1990s, well-established. The PAP government had, by then, enacted and instituted a number of significant policy decisions and directions – particularly to do with housing and the economy. In doing so, they established and demonstrated their ability to carry out their vision for Singapore unchallenged. Their role as authority figures in this context extended to their authority over Singapore’s wider trajectory – its economic paths, and its new geographical and urban landscapes.

This was extended to the conceptualisation of the state’s representatives – PAP leaders and politicians – themselves as authority figures. The PAP were, in their own rhetoric, lionised and held up as uniquely capable and ideal – intellectually superior, morally devoted to social good, and able to make “unpopular decisions” for the population (framed as them “knowing what is best”).²³³ In sum, the state dominated local experiences of authority – and indeed the impacts of authority being enforced and enacted were also characteristic of that experience in the 1980s and 1990s. This might be seen paralleled in the Bookworm children – both child and citizen fitting within the structures of being constantly taught, disciplined, and “nurtured” to absorb specific elements of right, wrong, acceptable, ideal, shameful, dangerous. This while

²³¹ Jon S.T. Quah and Stella R. Quah, ‘The Limits of Government Intervention’, in *In Kernal S. Sandhu and Paul Wheatley (Eds.), Management of Success: The Moulding of Modern Singapore* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1989), 116; Pan, *National Campaigns—a Way of Life. In Legacy of Singapore: 40th Anniversary Commemorative 1965–2005. CR Media, 2005, 104.*

²³² Pan, *National Campaigns—a Way of Life. In Legacy of Singapore: 40th Anniversary Commemorative 1965–2005. CR Media, 2005, 104.*

²³³ Chua Beng Huat, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore*, Routledge, 2002, 35.

also being given a set of expectations – following linear paths and adhering to the wider moral and social systems. However, in its depictions of authority, the *Bookworm Short Stories* suggest a varied and inconsistent understanding of authority, and ambivalence over what authority should be concerned. This conditioned how the authority was responded to, and how authority being enforced and displayed was received and processed within Singaporean culture.

The Parent and the Teacher

Throughout the Bookworm texts, the parent is an inconsistent presence. Given the increasing call for parental involvement and the emphasis on parental duty, the parental presence in the Bookworm texts is oddly limited. During the 1980s and into the 1990s, the role of the parent was increasingly the subject of ideological shifts and fluctuations in political rhetoric and public discourse. This was particularly conditioned by the dual role of the adult Singaporean – as a full-time worker in the local economy, while also producing and nurturing future generations within the nuclear family to similarly contribute to society. This might be seen in fears being articulated in public discourse and political rhetoric surrounding the absent parent, and the potential for the child to fall prey to bad values – developing bad traits as a direct result of insufficient parental guidance. Good parenting in this context meant, aside from the prerequisite physical care, emotional and psychological parenting. Parenting and the authoritative intent of the parent was, under these assumptions, one which was loving, intimately concerned with the individual child's well-being – dispensing lessons with the intention of guiding solely for the good of the child. However, even as this form of parenting was present in Singapore during 1980s and 1990s, the parents of the Bookworm texts, while never causing any potential issues directly through their actions, are absent. The role of discipline and regulation instead falls to the school and the teacher.

Surveying the entire series, parents appear in only 21% of stories, with other authority figures such as teachers appearing more frequently. This specifically stands out when considering how early stories would involve the character’s parents in extended scenes, with affection and familial dynamics being main plot points. For instance, the following excerpt shows Louie resolving his fear over losing his father’s love. **[Figure 3.3]** The shift away from this – concurrent with the shift of the Bookworm Children more broadly into consistent ideal children – saw parental figures appear sporadically to deliver rebukes at the end of the texts, or as passive subjects witnessing the plot unfold. They are rarely active participants in the storylines or in the children’s minds, nor are they portrayed as they main sources of moral instruction. Rather, it is Miss Goon who functions as the clearest source of moral authority, along with

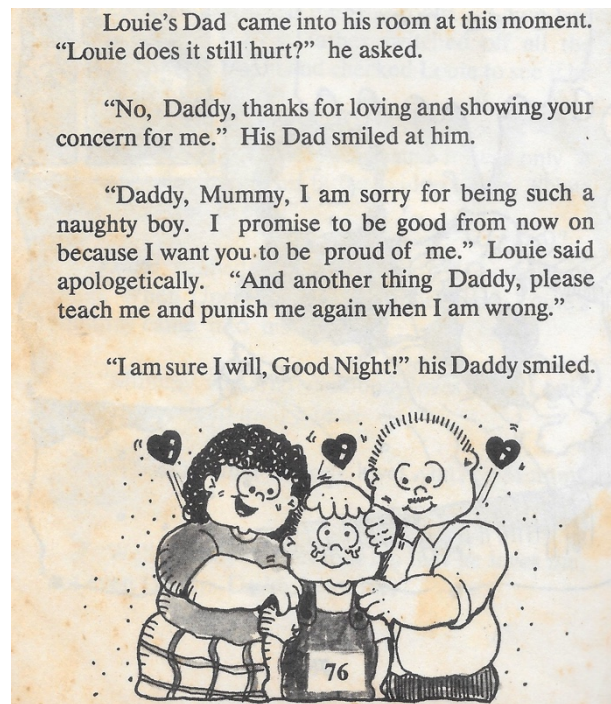


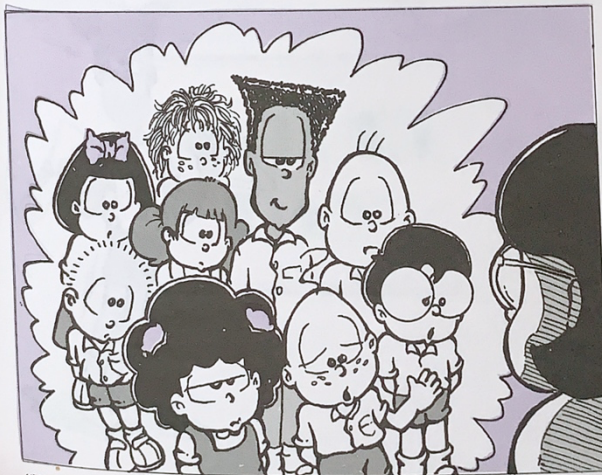
Figure 3.3 Excerpt from “Who Loves Me”, where Louie’s parents are the key figures throughout the story

the children’s own internal sense of conscience. Across the series, she delivers the most clearly articulated dialogue about specific moral values and rules in relation to society. For instance, in the excerpt from the story *Kokku’s Tall Tale*, where she identifies the children’s exact offence – lying – and relates it directly to larger consequences.²³⁵ **[Figure 3.4]**

²³⁵ “Kokku’s Tall Tale,” Bookworm Short Stories Volume 59, Bookworm Publishers, 1993.

“Children,” repeated Miss Goon. “I’m very happy that you’re all so helpful and loyal to one another. But sometimes, helping a friend under the wrong circumstances will only harm him and bring trouble upon yourselves. I would most certainly have given Kokku more time to finish his project if he had told me the truth at the beginning. I hope you understand now that a lie, no matter how small, will lead to more and bigger ones.”

There was a long silence as the children thought about what Miss Goon had said.



“We truly wanted to help Kokku,” Sam Seng says earnestly.

Figure 3.4 Miss Goon delivers a gentle rebuke to the Bookworm Gang after catching them doing wrong.

Throughout the texts, Miss Goon is the active representation of authority – establishing rules, discipline, and functioning as the authority figure whom the children fear, obey, and appeal to. While Miss Goon is a benevolent presence, she nevertheless does not express parental love, nor particular investment in the children as individuals. Rather her exertion of authority serves to educate and redirect the children towards the correct behavior as members of society.

It is possible, then, to fit the state-as-authority within two separate conceptualisations – as parent, and as teacher. Both fit within the state’s own view of itself – as ideal Confucian leaders; who were fundamentally paternal, while also possessing the qualities of a knowledgeable, disciplinarian educator. Yet, on one hand, parenthood also carried separate assumptions – of individual investment in the child and of their nurturing role, while the notion of the impartial teacher figure – disciplinarian and pragmatic – existed alongside. This speaks to the differences in how the state’s authority was conceived in different, sometimes overlapping ways – as benevolent and fiercely dedicated specifically to the good of its people or impartially focused on the rules and structures which would produce productivity and economic growth. The diminished role of the parent in the Bookworm texts suggest that while the state conceived of themselves as paternal, benevolent

figures (and the citizenry as grateful, children to be moulded and governed), the citizen's conceptualisation of the state's power was in terms of an authority which was less nurturing and more pragmatic; more about rules, structures and consequences than a response to feelings of parental love and devotion; transactional rather than familial. Conceiving of themselves less as children, and more as students – constantly being tested and evaluated as part of their lifelong role as Singaporeans. This reveals an ambivalence and dissonance surrounding the nature of authority in Singapore – which comprised conflicting imperatives, conflicting associations with private and public action, and resulted in different expectations about how authority should be fit within one's life and subsequent change.

3.3 Constant change, New Dimensions

Finally, in concert with the stratifications and tensions from the sections above, the Bookworm Short Stories reveal how Singapore's culture was expanding – specifically to accommodate and fit those stratifications and tensions within its internal logic. Firstly, this is manifest in how the Bookworm Short Stories embody a specific construction of Singaporean morality – which was acted out through constant self-regulation. Secondly, the ideological underpinnings of meritocracy expanded and found new negotiated foundations, imbuing it with further ideological legitimacy and coherence within the existing strands of Singaporean culture.

The Implied Reader and Didactic Intent

The implied reader is the reader for whom the books are written and intended – this possible, intended, and constructed reader is a significant part of how the series was

produced.²³⁶ The implied reader functions as the target consumer, the subject of knowledge transmission, and the audience to be amused and captured. In children's literature analysis, this serves a useful way of reading adult messages and assumptions about children and childhood – particularly surrounding how children should or could be taught and socialized.²³⁷ In the context of this thesis, the implied reader of the *Bookworm Short Stories* was not necessarily the ideal child – nor did they necessarily fulfil all the conditions of middle-classness, innate talent/morality, or aspirations towards successful citizenship. Rather, the adult author had aspirations for them to either become that ideal or a version of it – and for the child to themselves understand that ideal and the importance of their own role in achieving/maintaining it. Built into the assumptions made about the child were fears over, and reactions to society, change, and imperatives surrounding how one should live within that society as an individual and a Singaporean. In interrogating these aspects of the implied reader, this section identifies that the implied reader of the *Bookworm Short Stories* was the recipient of social discipline, which was more complex than that of the existing, broad Singaporean morality, and was similarly reflecting both dissonances with, and new ideological interpretations of that ideal.

The implied reader of the *Bookworm Short Stories* is, explicitly, a child. While some children's literature might be critically examined to find the multiple intended readers (some of them adults for whom layered meaning exists within the text and in the mind of the author) the *Bookworm Short Stories* were marketed, written, and structured for child readers. Not only was the implied reader a child, they were, specifically, a Singaporean child. Both the text and paratext actively invite the reader to identify with the *Bookworm Children*, while

²³⁶ J. A. Appleyard, *Becoming a Reader: The Experience of Fiction from Childhood to Adulthood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 16; Cocks, 'The Implied Reader. Response and Responsibility: Theories of the Implied Reader in Children's Literature Criticism'.

²³⁷ Perry Nodelman, *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 185–187.

simultaneously assuming their familiarity with the familiar motifs, structures (such as public school timetables, types of public transport, and public housing) and environments in Singapore. The ages of the children are never explicitly mentioned – rather, context allows the reader to place them intuitively within an age-range. Neither do the texts spend much time on descriptive, scenery-establishing passages which detail distances between places, types of buildings, or the local surroundings. Instead, not only were the implied readers invited to relate to the characters, they were specifically pushed to identify with them as *Singaporean* children – to recognize the world the Bookworm Gang inhabit as directly analogous to their own. The concept and special awareness of a Singaporean neighborhood, for instance, would be intuitive to a Singaporean child growing up in such a neighborhood – with communal spaces, a fairly standard layouts and footpaths, proximity to others, and certain shops providing context to the stories and the background of the stories.

The implied reader being a Singaporean child becomes important when considering the nuances of the series' moral positions, didactic messages, and other references. The Bookworm characters both represented ideal children and were intended as a point of familiarity and relatability to the implied child reader. As an extension of this, the lessons and morals of the stories (as learned by the characters) were positioned as lessons for the readers as well. The didacticism of the series is clear – beyond what has been discussed in the previous chapter. Apart from the shared, assumed morality and work ethic of the ideal children, the texts are also imbued with specific lessons which might specifically be situated within Singapore.

On one hand, the implied reader was, to an extent, assumed to be cognizant of the shared Singaporean morality of the Bookworm universe – that non-religious, unstructured morality which relied heavily on universal values and the consequences of an individual's actions on

Singaporean society (both legally, and economically). This represents not only the desire to teach these ideals to the reader, but reflects certain assumptions being made about the readership – that this would be logical to them – that it fits into what is being absorbed, taught and observed elsewhere. However, the didactic structures which characterise how the texts impart and reinforce the shared Singaporean morality reveal further implications which were being conveyed or encoded into how exactly that morality should and could be regulated, enforced. And, about the boundaries and categories of morality and their consequences (to both self and society).

Across the series, it is frequently articulated explicitly when a character does something wrong – and equally so when the character corrects, or learns from that wrong. The following three excerpts from three different stories all end in similar ways; where the characters or an authority figure explicitly articulate the moral of the story – as the following passages reflect: “Louie learned that greed never pays,”²³⁸ “Mimi resolved never to let vanity make her selfish again,” and “Smarty decided to work hard from now on rather than playing the fool.”²³⁹ Another common ending features the characters “learning their lesson” – expressing regret, or having to atone for their mistakes. There is little moral uncertainty or ambiguity – and the ways in which the texts impart this might be defined as a something this thesis will refer to as a “consequence-based structure” across in a significant majority of the stories.

Consequence and Punishment

In this structure, there is a clear narrative arc – where a character or characters end up doing wrong or causing a problem directly through their actions. Following the problem, a

²³⁸ “*Oh Louie*,” Bookworm Short Stories Volume 38, Bookworm Consultants, 1992; “*Sticky Business*” Bookworm Short Stories Volume 38, Bookworm Consultants, 1992.

²³⁹ “*The Star*,” Bookworm Short Stories Volume 38, Bookworm Consultants, 1992; “*The Magic Pen*,” Bookworm Short Stories Volume 21, Bookworm Consultants, 1990.

consequence is introduced which directly results from the bad action and is resolved – either with the consequence as punishment, or a punishment for the consequence as resolution. Sometimes, this takes the form of a softer punishment, with a happy resolution, while other times it ends with regret and remorse. Based on analysis of a sample group of stories across the 76 volumes, at least 77% of the stories conform to this consequence-based narrative arc.

What this demonstrates is the establishing of a moral structure and wider universe in which wrong-doings inevitably beget negative or retributive consequences – often in the form of a punishment meted out either by an authority figure, or as an immediate result of that negative action, with escaping consequences not figuring in the dynamic of this universe at all. This particularly makes sense when considering how the ideal Singaporean morality was similarly characterised by an understanding of outcome and consequence – on a broad scale in the context of society. Returning to existing ambivalent conceptualisations of authority, different constructions of authority made different understandings of consequence possible – in terms of either benevolent correction or a pragmatic action to maintain society. This necessarily forms a strand within wider understandings of how one should respond, and how invested one might become in preventing those consequences.

It is also possible to situate depictions of consequence and punishment across the series alongside how discipline and punishment were being conceptualised within society during the 1980s and early 1990s. The 1980s saw the state implement several changes to the judicial system aimed at increasing punishment for a wider range of crimes. In 1984, additional mandatory minimums for caning were enforced for more offences.²⁴¹ This was to prevent the

²⁴¹ Despite small pockets of opposition, the mandatory minimums bill was easily passed in parliament in 1984, and came into effect later that year.

possibility of leniency by “soft hearted” judges, and to ensure that harsh punishments would deter even the mildest of crimes.²⁴² As then–Minister for Social Affairs Ahmad Mattar noted, the mandatory minimums made crime a “great deal costlier and more painful to the criminal.”²⁴³ Within this judiciary system, the protection of society was paramount – above even potential wrongful presumptions of guilt.²⁴⁴ As political rhetoric had it, this was strictly to maintain an orderly, safe, and harmonious society; something national stability and progress itself was contingent on. This bled into how society began to conceive of punishment and consequence more broadly – and might be seen in how the wrong–doing child was conceived.

In parallel, discourse on corporal punishment in schools and in the home emerged. One prominent view was that corporal punishment served as deterrent to the child, while also preparing them for the realities of consequences in society – introducing the child to the concept of punishment for their actions was seen as a key part of producing moral, socially–adept children. As one parent put it: “we must make sure they are prepared to be part of Singaporean society, and to follow the laws of our society.”²⁴⁵ This meshed with the existing awareness of the child’s importance and significance for the future – and the need to educate the child in the most efficient, linear way possible. What this produced was a view of a local value system – both legally, and socially – which was based on real, tangible consequence – and awareness of those consequences. When returning to the texts, it is possible to see how the imperatives of the society were focused on the child being able internalise the system of consequence – and understand that existing in Singapore entailed participating in that system.

²⁴² Mark Lim, ‘An Appeal To Use The Rod Sparingly: A Dispassionate Analysis Of The Use Of Caning In Singapore’, *Singapore Law Review* 15 (1994): 20–96.

²⁴³ Ahhad Mattar, ‘Speech By Dr Ahhad Mattar, Minister For Social Affairs, At The VPO Nite ’84 At 8.00 Pm’, Press Release (Dynasty Hotel Ballroom, Singapore: Information Division, Ministry of Culture, 28 July 1984), <https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/am19840728s.pdf>.

²⁴⁴ Michael Kor, ‘Singapore Criminal Law: Examining The Etiology Of Exception’, *Hong Kong Law Review* 2 (2010): 81–98.

²⁴⁵ Concerned, ‘Discipline Is Also Part of Education’, *The Straits Times*, 24 August 1983.

However, it would be a mistake to frame the consequence-based narratives in opposition to dry, or unenjoyable lessons, nor was there sense that the realities of corporal punishment were part of the Bookworm character's catalogue of punishments.²⁴⁶ Instead, there is an identifiable use of humour threaded through these lessons in a very specific way; producing another layer to consequence-as-punishment.

Humour and Social Consequence

This takes the form of sanctioning and encouraging laughter as a unified expression of/against social shame and disgrace. In the examples below, either the consequence of, or punishment for a bad action is being laughed at or made a laughing stock. Shame, embarrassment and ridicule are tied closely to laughter – where spectators “burst out laughing” and the wrong-doer “goes red with embarrassment.”²⁴⁷ Not only do the characters laugh, the reader is invited to laugh too – this laughter is sanctioned as an acceptable and sometimes expected punishment. This laughter is sometimes tied to the wrong-doers' comeuppance, sometimes, they specifically laugh at a character's embarrassment or disgrace – for instance, the gang laughing at Hoo Li Gan's failure to beat Simone at a competition as he slinks off.²⁴⁸

²⁴⁶ Although this must be seen in the context of the texts aiming specifically to be enjoyed by their child readers.

²⁴⁷ “Ha Ha Ha,” Bookworm Short Stories Volume 21, Bookworm Consultants, 1990; “Porky's Mistake,” Bookworm Short Stories Volume 21, Bookworm Consultants, 1991.

²⁴⁸ “The Challenge,” Bookworm Short Stories Volume 25, Bookworm Consultants, 1990.



Figure 3.6 The Bookworm Gang laugh, as Louie is tricked into admitting a lie

The consequences of morally ‘bad’ and anti-social behaviour being tied to shame, loss of “face,” and being made a laughing stock are clear in how the texts presents the above. The encoded messages in this humour

– a shared joke that the imagined reader is meant to be in on – laughing also at the wrong-doer with the other characters – is apparent. This is visible in the phrasing and writing of this laughter — “they laughed in unison” or “they burst in laughter” or “they roared,” being common phrases that, firstly, sanction the laughter as a group response, and secondly invite the reader to laugh as well. It embeds the idea that laughter, mocking, and specifically singling out an offender is both acceptable and expected – that such responses are natural – that the imagined reader should find it funny as well, rather than feeling sympathy for the wrong-doer. This is further enabled by the offending character in question laughing along – sanctioning the laughter on yet another level. This specifically can be observed in multiple stories across the volumes – and are often followed by the



Figure 3.7 Image from the final page of *Porky on TV*, featuring the Gang laughing at Porky's embarrassment.

“ARRGH!!!” Sam Seng screamed in frustration, stomped on the ‘Singapore Enquirer’ and left his friends, who were laughing uncontrollably.

Figure 3.8 Samseng's prank is foiled by the gang

offending character's articulation of regret – and acknowledgement of their specific offence.²⁴⁹

The pictured excerpts, for instance, end with group laughter, as the offender either suffers from embarrassment, or joins and laughs at themselves. [Figure 3.8, 3.9]

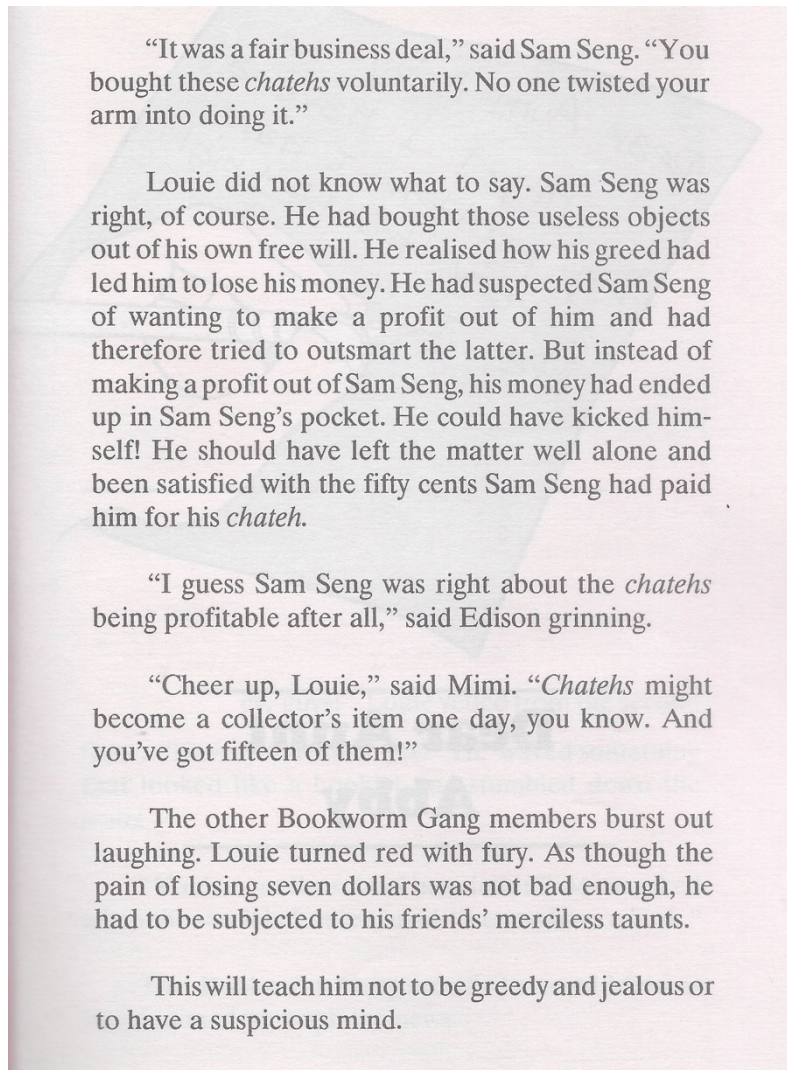


Figure 3.9 Excerpt from "the Chateh Collection"

What is revealed through the texts is, therefore, that consequences might be tangible *and* intangible; shame, loss of status, and embarrassment amongst one's peers and social group. Alongside physical punishments – for instance loss of material luxuries, opportunities, or

²⁴⁹ “*The Chateh Collection*,” Bookworm Short Stories Volume 41 Bookworm Consultants, 1991; “*The Prankster*” Bookworm Short Stories Volume 17, Bookworm Consultants, 1990.

immediate harm to self/others – the texts introduce the concept of how society or groups within society react to transgressions of their shared morality. This is rooted in social responsibility, yet also highly individual – not only does the wrong-doer fail to perform ideal citizenship through their mistakes, but further might be subject to personal loss of “face” and public shaming by others in their community. Chua Beng Huat writes that the concept of social standing – as a fragile, precious awareness of one’s place within society – was enhanced in Singapore – not only through the changes in economy, but the creation and development of the middle class.²⁵⁰ Status symbols extended to behaviour and acceptability – where license was given not only socially, but sometimes in political rhetoric to shame and disgrace those who stepped out of line.²⁵¹ This can be seen replicated in the Bookworm texts – although without some of the harshness – a preparation for society and ideals which govern social conduct and status.

The normalisation of this throughout the texts fits neatly within the wider structure of the consequence narrative both as a way of conveying a form of consequence, and of introducing the dynamics of social and self-regulation. This might be drawn from how the character’s laughter is coded specifically as in response to embarrassment, or being the source of embarrassment and shame itself. The characters are shown to do this unprompted – their laughter (and shaming of the offending characters) is depicted as a natural and justified reaction. I posit that this both reflects the existing social awareness and imperative of regulation – of self, and of others within society. In particular, others within the same social groups. It reflects the active negotiation of existing moral structures – the formation of this self-regulation through shame and embarrassment suggests the creation of another moral authority and

²⁵⁰ Chua Beng Huat, *Communitarian Democracy*

²⁵¹ Ibid.

outcome. Beyond morality as key to national survival and harmony, within this conception, the other outcome of morality was maintaining one's place in the social order – appearing to others to be moral and thereby maintaining class and social identity.

So too were the kinds of acceptable punishments being negotiated; incorporating the realities of harsh judicial punishment, the ideals of sustained morality and the focus on self; and self-status within a more stratified class system. This further places self-regulation outside of the legal system, sometimes on top of the existent punishment. It was, like the Singaporean morality itself, an ongoing process of constant and sustained self-regulation – which protected the individual's own place and status in relation to others within society, alongside protecting the child from future consequences which were, in the context of Singapore, harsh judicial penalties. The imagined reader of the *Bookworm Short Stories*, then, is not only invited to laugh, but is simultaneously invited to internalise and understand the broader social imperative to self-regulate.

Consequence and the Ideal Child

Yet, as the previous chapter has explored, although consequences exist within the Bookworm universe, they are never lasting, severe consequences which would render the ideal children's position and sense of self unstable. Neither are the children the source of wrong-doings, or the worst offences. Instead, consequences within the texts are melded with the ideal child's ability to understand their mistakes, and their negative impacts to self and society. The ideal child at the end of each Bookworm story expresses this largely through accepting the consequences and learning from them – sometimes joining in with laughter at their expense, other times resolving firmly to alter their behaviour. Within the Bookworm universe, what this produced was an ideal child who could always be forgiven – who seemed to possess immunity

to the worst consequences of their actions, and an innate conscience which meant that their relationship to wrong-doings was different to others in intent and action.

What this suggests is a further dynamic which fitted within Singapore's culture as a departure from the norm which is nevertheless internalised and accepted into the culture's coherent view of itself. That is, that certain Singaporeans might escape any consequences of their failed adherence to the established Singaporean morality. This might be located within the ideal child who was seen in terms of their assumed successful future *and* assumed understanding of right and wrong with an allegiance to the existing moral system. If the ideal child would always self-correct and move on to a bright, productive future – they are positioned as more forgivable – moreso than a child with no potential for success, who was assumed to be less intellectually capable, and not adhering to the rules of the shared Singaporean morality. This produces a further tension surrounding who in society was deserving of the harshest punishments, and who deserves constant second chances and the opportunities to learn and improve – one which was, in this case, decided by the individual's fulfilment of other imperatives within Singaporean culture – for instance being poised to potentially contribute to the economy. Given the entanglement of morality with class position (both in the sense of shared values, and work ethic), it is possible to see this entanglement in new boundaries drawn between classes – that certain people deserved second chances – not only children, but in society more broadly. Not only because of their remorse or social shame, but because of their other innate qualities and potential achievements and contributions to Singapore in the future. As the following chapter will discuss, this is key to understanding the internal logic behind present-day discourse on the judicial system. For instance, recent debates on the use of the “bright future” argument for the lesser punishments of university students.

A New Meritocracy

The meritocratic ideology stands out as one which bears the weight of wider tensions. That is, while the meritocratic structure in Singapore leaned heavily on the notion of hard work and adherence to the specific systems and structures of meritocratic linearity, the parallel assumptions that certain groups of people had innate moral qualities and talents made it an unstable, shifting concept. The meritocratic *expectation*, too, hovers over this conception of meritocracy. Rather than a meritocracy available as an option and possibility to anyone, it was also something expected of a certain group of children – because of their innate work ethic, predisposition towards excellence – or their innate ability to self-correct and negotiate their social role. The fundamental tenet of meritocracy – that innate talent should be identified and rewarded was expanded to involve the assumption of innate talent in certain children – preempting the actual displays of merit. As the previous chapter has discussed, the notion of eugenics also lingered within the background of social policy – under which the progeny of two educated parents (likely middle or upper class) were assumed to be innately be predisposed to intelligence. When this is entangled, as the previous sections have discussed, with racial and gendered markers, what is produced is a meritocracy which retains a sense of coherence, while simultaneously creating new boundaries in order to sustain it

When the ethnically Chinese child, or the middle-class child, or the male is the one expected to succeed, a two-fold tension is produced. Firstly, that of the unattainable ideal, which emerges when children outside of this ideal nevertheless have expectations and desires to follow that meritocratic path – an imperative of ideal citizenship and being Singaporean. Secondly, that of the children who theoretically fit within the ideal but end up failing or being

in danger of failing to meet those expectations. These tensions might be seen conditioning how meritocratic ideology in Singapore was being reinterpreted and incorporated into the lived experience of the child and the adult – for instance in how markets and new consumption trends emerged during the 1980s and 1990s.

This must be seen not only in the context of the Gifted Education Programme, but in the institution of Independent schools from 1987, who were given increased autonomy and flexibility in staff deployment, finance, management, and curriculum.²⁵² These schools were to serve as role models for other schools in improving the quality of education. The schools selected were already established as prestigious and had a history of producing students who had moved on to succeed within the Singaporean framework.²⁵³ The nature of the independent schools meant that they could be selective for academic brilliance – resulting in a concentration of high-performing students within those few schools, while also asking a significantly high tuition fee – creating yet another entrance barrier. In 1990, monthly school fees for Independent schools ranged from \$50 to \$100, in contrast to the \$10.50 fee for non-independent schools.²⁵⁴ Among other implications, what this produced was a view that the natural meritocratic path would, ideally include gaining access to particular institutions – both as a material symbol of merit and potential, and as a way of receiving better resources and conditions for continued success. And, that better education might be obtained by paying for it.

The rise of the private education market has been widely observed by local scholars, journalists, commentators and politicians, while household expenditure surveys reflect the

²⁵² Jason Tan, 'The Marketisation of Education in Singapore: Policies and Implications', *International Review of Education* 44, no. 1 (1998): 47–63.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 54.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

notable and steady increase in household spending on education across the 1980s and 1990s.²⁵⁵ This included educational materials such as books and magazines, alongside extra classes, and tools such as computers and other learning aids.²⁵⁶ According to the Household Expenditure Survey conducted in 2003, the average percentage of household expenditure on Education jumped from 4.7% in 1988 to 7.8% in 2003.²⁵⁷ While the concern over education and the desire to help the child seemed to remain consistent percentage-wise across income groups, growing income disparity meant that a great deal more money could be (and was) spent on the child – in 1997, for instance, a household with an income of between \$6000–6999 would spend an average of \$259.6 on their child or children’s education a month, while a household with an income of \$1500–1999 spent \$99.5. According, to the same survey, the odds of these income groups belong to the managerial middle class was significantly higher.²⁵⁸

The exam paper “black market” in Singapore also began during this time – where parents clamored for access to past-year examination papers to use as teaching materials.²⁵⁹ These were obtained illegally by vendors, and priced high – for instance, a bundle of primary one-level past-year papers costing \$75 in 2003.²⁶⁰ The private tuition industry was, similarly, an industry which emerged and continued growing exponentially during the late 1980s and 1990s, specifically as a product meant to supplement school lessons, and to enhance the child’s

²⁵⁵ Kok Hwa Brigitte Sie, *Singapore, a Modern Asian City-State: Relationship Between Cultural and Economic Development* (Katholieke Universiteit Nijmegen, 1997). Also see: Michael D Barr and Zlatko Skrbis, *Constructing Singapore: Elitism, Ethnicity And The Nation-Building Project* (Singapore: NIAS Press, 2008), p116.

²⁵⁶ Department of Household Affairs, Results from the Annual Household Expenditure Survey 1995, Republic of Singapore, 1995

²⁵⁷ Department of Household Affairs, Results from the Annual Household Expenditure Survey 2002/2003, Republic of Singapore, 2003.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

²⁵⁹ Michael D Barr and Zlatko Skrbis, *Constructing Singapore: Elitism, Ethnicity And The Nation-Building Project* (Singapore: NIAS Press, 2008), 117–118.

²⁶⁰ Ibid, 125.

chances of doing well in examinations.²⁶¹ This reflects not only pre-emptive action, but also how consumption was a way to ensure, protect, and maintain the potential success of the child. Rather than meritocracy being a self-regulating system through which the best would “naturally rise to the top,” new education markets offered the opportunity for hard work to be tangibly improved and boosted. This specifically in order to attain the markers of merit – entrance into certain schools, certain scores in particular subjects, and the further appearance of hard work and effort. What this reinforced was narrowing boundary lines between different income groups, where certain income groups had increasing means to stack cards in their favor, and others had less.

Yet, this growing inequality fit into the existing shared anxieties about sustaining economic productivity and national survival – subsumed as a consequence to be solved, rather than an issue in itself. Casual shared assumptions about class, and the boundaries which separate class are imprinted and enable this subsumption – the wider ideal that certain groups are more likely to succeed, and that inequality is acceptable within the wider imperative of progress and the need for talent. Yet, it is also the case that consumption of and expenditure on educational material rose across all income groups – to a similar percentage of income – reflecting a shared desire for the benefits of spending on education. This reflects the embedded nature of this ideology – within not only the middle-class person aiming to maintain, but as a key part of the *Singaporean* aiming to succeed within the terms of the ideal. Those marked as less ideal or with less potential bought into the idea of consumption as a way of both accessing and performing their class and social identity.

²⁶¹ Mark Bray and Chad Lykins, *Shadow Education: Private Supplementary Tutoring And Its Implications For Policy Makers In Asia* (University of Minnesota: Asian Development Bank, 2012).

In this context, consumption in particular was contingent on one's income and seen as a natural extension of working hard within Singapore's competitive economy. The education market's key consumer was the parent, who held the spending power, and often made the final purchasing decision rather than the child. If the desire for intergenerational upward mobility and sustained success was a key element of the shared ideal trajectory, it is possible to see how the parent's role becomes important. Consumption was tied not only to tangible results, but the performance of one's desire and acceptance of the wider system – performance of work ethics and the imperatives of parenthood as being enforced and emphasized by the state. In this way, the child embodies not only the parent's future, but is a proxy through which the parent conceives of themselves and their actions in Singapore.

Understanding meritocracy as a shared ideal specifically contingent on the future, one's sustained social identity, and on the active pursuit of the meritocratic path might produce a more complex picture of how and why Singaporeans bought into and internalized the meritocracy system as an ideal. It further contextualizes the dynamics of present-day debates surrounding systemic inequality, and the structures which have sanctioned and enabled them. The child was emblematic more broadly of this wider shared ideal and culture in Singapore – seen not only through the parent, but the child as proxy for the adult citizen. In the context of children's literature theory, thinking through the children's text allows for a dynamic view of the adult-child relationship. That is, the adult as a former child remains connected to the child even as they create new imperatives and expectations for them. The child, ideologically, is both a future adult, and occupying the same present as the adult. For instance, in believing in the innate qualities of the child, the adult asserts that belief in themselves and their position within society.

Chapter Four: *Conclusion*

This thesis has sought to interrogate how a shared Singaporean culture emerged in the 1980s and 1990s in Singapore. It has examined how Singapore's post-industrial shifts (in economic, political and social spheres) conditioned the ebbs and flows of this shared culture in both deeply ideological, and clearly tangible ways. These shifts are clearly reflected in the *Bookworm* texts, which also reproduce a range of responses to those shifts which sit outside the construction of Singaporean culture and citizenship as a one-way flow of instructions and nation-building initiatives from state to citizen. Singapore's shared culture as seen in the *Bookworm Short Stories* was an increasingly defined and processed set of positions and behaviors which involved Singaporeans drawing together different parts of both public and public life into how they came to conceive of self, society, and state. Yet the *Bookworm Short Stories* also reveal how those positions and behaviors were not uniformly shared, and themselves produced contradictory desires and actions. It is this thesis' contention that this period in Singapore's past was therefore distinctly and structurally formative - the basis (however contradictory or tense) on which the nation continued to build itself.

This thesis posits that the shared culture it identifies was the subject of dynamic diversification, while nevertheless shaping itself around core preoccupations which impacted how that culture chose to construct and articulate its priorities, consensus, and actions. Those core preoccupations were, firstly, the creation and focus on an ideal (defined specifically

against an unideal), and, secondly, a preoccupation with potential futures. This thesis further contends that even as this distinct Singaporean culture expanded to incorporate new meanings and complex dynamics, it also, ironically, contracted and began to restrict itself; the preoccupations which gave it coherence also serving to create new contradictions and barriers of entry.

This concluding chapter discusses how the previous chapters might be drawn together towards several historical findings. Firstly, it presents a shared Singaporean culture of the 1980s and 1990s and the key qualities of this culture which make it historically interesting and distinct. Secondly, it explores the conditions which produced the end of this period and how this might further display dynamic historical change across Singapore society – suggesting new perspectives on several key events. Finally, this chapter explores how its conclusions on the shared Singaporean culture impact its view of the present.

Writing a Shared Singaporean Culture

Chapter two has argued that the shared culture in Singapore during the 1980s and 1990s produced an “ideal.” That is, the ideal child written into the *Bookworm Short Stories* reflects, acts out, and embodies a set of common ideologies, imperatives and ideals, which this thesis posits were shared by Singaporeans. Chapter two shows how the shared culture’s different preoccupations might be situated within a range of historical events, actions, and changes – for instance, class shifts, a broad yet specific moral code, political rhetoric which prized productivity. These all impacted how the Singapore culture constructed its desires, and how disparate elements conditioned each other – for instance, how fears over the uncertain future (part of the survival narratives) translated to new intergenerational expectations being incorporated into how middle-classness was experienced and identified.

The shared Singaporean culture was shared for several reasons; firstly, historical context reveals a strong preoccupation with fulfilling state–mandates, which heavily conditioned the ideal. Many strands of that culture arose as a result, or in response to state legislation and rhetoric – for instance the middle–class morality and work ethic arising in response to the early meritocratic structure (that prized economic productivity). However, the *Bookworm Short Stories* as a source provides access to cultural nuances which exist outside of the state’s control. The ideal embedded into them might be positioned as one constructed by Singaporean adults who, while aiming to sell, educate, and entertain, constructed an ideal which also reflects more complex facets of the shared culture. Given the popularity of the books, and their resonance with their audience, it is possible to suggest that the ideal of the *Bookworm Short Stories* was one which was, if not uniformly shared, a reflection of how state–led change was being negotiated and rearticulated into the lived experiences of Singaporeans.

The ideal child of chapter two reproduces and clearly situates itself within key arenas of the 1980s and 1990s, serving as a framework of interlinked ideologies and imperatives – showing how class identities, visions of the future, and morality were produced by specific interactions within Singapore’s shared culture. However, the ideal represents the perfect enmeshment, without tension and clashes; different strands together unproblematically producing an ideal who could exist, succeed, and maintain in the Singapore of the 1980s and 1990s through their perfect execution and reflection of the shared culture. The ideal child was not a static figure, but rather had the ability to embody and express the shared culture and its different concerns over time.

Building on chapter two, chapter three probes Singapore's shared culture by deconstructing and problematizing it against the ideal. It suggests that the ideal became a preoccupation of the shared Singapore culture – even as it continued to change over time. This might be seen in how wider legislative changes such as education reform were internalized and translated into stratifications marked by specific qualities and achievements – for instance entry into certain schools, or natural talent at certain subjects. Awareness of the ideal – and its impossibility in the context of 1980s and Singapore – produced new negotiations surrounding how to act, how to think, and how to situate oneself within the shared Singaporean culture. As chapter three has discussed, this was visible firstly in a number of dissonant and ambivalent positions within the shared culture – for instance in how race and gender was constructed and fit into the middle-class. Secondly, the shared culture itself produced new ways of performing its desire for the ideal – producing a new internal structure of self-regulation, drawing together a fear of moral consequence, with the new conceptualisations of social consequence, and of punishment culture in legislation.

The analysis in chapter three reveals that Singapore's shared culture altered the complexion of certain structures, standards and concepts – for instance meritocracy and the public relationship with authority. It further reveals that Singapore's shared culture was not a static set of actions and beliefs which justified and replicated political and economic forces. Neither, this thesis argues, was the shared Singaporean culture a set of differing and dissonant positions. Rather, it was characterized by an awareness of its need to internalize and interpret differences and perceived conflicts within a wider, shared culture, and might specifically be identified as a “shared” culture because of two central preoccupations through which the elements discussed in chapters two and three were all filtered. This thesis finds that Singapore's shared culture might be describe as holding to two specific concerns. They appear as key

figures across the analysis of the previous chapters, and together underpin the logic of, and condition changes within the shared Singaporean culture during the decade under consideration. Specifically, the range of tensions revealed through the *Bookworm Short Stories* are resolved

Unideal/Ideal

The first preoccupation is that of the Ideal and the Unideal. Just as the ideal was a constant state of being and thinking rather than just a position, the unideal similarly grew alongside the ideal – incorporating new nuances, and markers – as a constant and ever-present spectre. And, just as the ideal was desired, the unideal was feared. This is particularly visible in how the “other” or a negative opposite was introduced and articulated against the ideal – as both chapters discuss. For instance, in creating the other unideal child, the unideal path to success, the unideal results of failing to remain middle-class, and even the less ideal within the ideal.

It is this preoccupation with negotiating one’s ideologies and behaviors specifically in relation to an ideal and avoiding the unideal which this thesis identifies as key to understanding why Singapore’s shared culture in the 1980s and 1990s saw its definitions of success narrow rather than broaden. It puts into perspective how the survival narrative was internalized, and why even dissonant qualities – innate vs earned – were subsumed within ideal and unideal – instead of being challenged. The fundamental concept of ideal vs unideal is the arbitrator when deciding what to prize, and how certain status quos should be kept. It was also the spectre of potential unideal-ness which conditioned how morality became defined by negative consequences.

Potential Futures

Secondly, the unideal and ideal were entangled with a specific view of the future. A shifting future which always had the potential to be ideal or unideal. The value assigned to potential, then, conditioned how Singaporeans might situate themselves in society – how class was conceived, how consequence was unevenly applied, and how the “merit” within meritocracy came to include assumed or potential merit. This tendency of Singapore’s shared culture to think in terms of the future meant that the present experience of that culture could also become dissonant and confused – this is the case with how the women’s role in Singapore became – and remains – a divided concept. This preoccupation further illuminates how Singapore’s culture was highly contingent on sustained internalization and constant negotiation over time – specifically into the future (as seen through the child being thought of and given expectations in terms of their future adulthood). And, how it similarly was conditioned by fears of the future – fears which loomed large because its future centric orientation.

When these preoccupations are met and resolved, the internal logic holds, and the shared Singaporean culture functions within that logic. These preoccupations condition how certain new changes are perceived, how new anxieties develop, and how new identities and social structures form. By identifying and deconstructing these preoccupations, this thesis shows that reframing structures such as meritocracy, class inequality, and moral values as arenas blanketed by a shared culture gives critical depth and context to how and why those structures have changed. It posits that the notion of consensus – and of a Singaporean electorate with common desires and reactions – might be both acknowledged and further complicated. The ideologies and values and assumptions which now exist as an identifiable consensus are not just a series of independent demands by the state or singular responses to change. Instead, they are a unique product of Singapore’s past.

Into a New Singapore

This thesis has contended that the above preoccupations existed and were themselves complicated during the 1980s and 1990s in Singapore. The conditions which precipitated their existence would not remain the same towards the end of the 1990s and into the new millennium. Instead, it is possible to see the shared culture of the decade under consideration as one which would be altered by a new set of conditions, environments, and ideological structures. The preoccupations of the previous decade might still be observed in the following years, and in the Singapore of the present, however, the specific conditions which produced it (and also allowed it to be embedded within the Bookworm Short Stories) would end.

It is possible to articulate several new perspectives relating to how Singapore's culture changed over time, and how it specifically conditions present day views of inequality, perceived injustices, and entrenched ideologies such as meritocracy, state authority, and the primacy of pragmatism. Similarly, change of the present might be seen in the context of a shared Singaporean culture in flux – which because of its central preoccupations, finds itself increasingly limited, yet unable to change.

Codification, New Environments, and New Ideals

For one, it is possible to identify what this thesis describes as concrete codification and articulation of several key ideologies and values as “Singaporean” – a departure from the previous decade, which was characterized by more general, mixed, and uncertain compositions of “Singaporeanness.” This movement towards new, explicit codified ways of conceptualizing

a shared Singaporean culture necessitate some ideologies, imperatives, and beliefs being left behind or excluded.

Most prominently, this might be seen in the term “Asian Values,”²⁶² entering into the discourse as a specific phrase in 1993, used as a broad catchall term in a variety of contexts to both frame and assert the range of shared ideals, imperatives, cultural ideologies, and moral/social norms or expectations existing in Singapore – incorporating some, and leaving others behind. For one, this involved emphasis on the value of communitarianism and the powerful state, alongside a de-emphasis on the explicitly Confucian slant of those values. The Asian Values were an intentional amalgamation of values specifically identified as “Asian” in opposition to “Western.” It was broad enough to envelope the existing mass of ideologies and cultural ideals under its umbrella, while itself becoming an ideological structure of its own – symbolizing Asian excellence and economic progress on its own terms. The Singapore Story narrative which broadly took root and expanded in 1997 with the publishing of Lee Kuan Yew’s *A Singapore Story*, and the incorporation of a specific narrative of Singapore’s past in school curriculum. This culminated in “Singapore Story” which conformed to a set of key moments, involved a specific cast of actors, and depicted a linear, neat line of progress of Singapore’s post-colonial trajectory under the PAP. This framed the 1970s and 1980s as key stepping-stones towards Singapore’s successful growth and progress – incorporating the recent past into while simplifying it and removing the layers of core ideals and assumptions which held the past up. While none of the elements within the Singapore Story are ahistorical – they constitute a tangible articulation of the past which asserts and establishes who is Singaporean – and values which are fundamental to Singaporeanness and codifies the importance of the

²⁶² Barr, ‘Lee Kuan Yew and the “Asian Values” Debate’; Michael Barr, *Cultural Politics And Asian Values* (Hoboken: Taylor & Francis, 2012).

state.²⁶³ This produced a narrative which became the historical truth in political rhetoric and the popular consciousness – something which had to be proven wrong, rather than a version of past. This Singaporean Story narrative also served as a tool in the changing political rhetoric surrounding Singapore’s goals and survival – an example of how past progress was achieved, and a justification and moral authority on which new ideals could be built and based.

Alongside the codification of Singaporeanness, the late 1990s was characterized by a new set of imperatives being introduced which emphasized the need to improve and exceed what already existed. This particularly concerned education reform and new parameters of success and excellence. Education reform after 1997 saw the implementation of “Thinking Schools, Learning Nation,” which emphasized critical thinking, non-traditional pathways towards academic merit.²⁶⁴ It also was promoted as a refreshment and improvement of the existing academic system which was test and result-oriented, was no longer producing the best, most competitive and productive Singaporeans.²⁶⁵ Alongside, Singapore’s survivalist narrative also began to require new skills and set new ideals for its citizens. Not only was economic productivity the primary goal, but “creativity” and “competitiveness” were introduced as new expectations, altering the realities of Singaporeans who has to change in order to renegotiate their position in Singapore.

Finally, the late 1990s and early 2000s in particular saw immigration numbers in Singapore rise exponentially. From a migrant population of just over 600,000 in 1985 (and around 500,000 sustained over the past two decades), the migrant population jumped to nearly

²⁶³ Kah Seng Loh, ‘Within the Singapore Story: The Use and Narrative of History in Singapore’, *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 12, no. 2 (1998): 1–21.

²⁶⁴ V Saravanan, ‘Thinking Schools, Learning Nations’ Implementation of Curriculum Review in Singapore’, *Educational Research for Policy and Practice* 4 (n.d.): 97.

²⁶⁵ Ministry of Education, *Learning to Think, Thinking to Learn*. (Singapore: Ministry of Education, 1998).

one million in 1995 and had more than doubled by 2010.²⁶⁶ This precipitated a new demographic and social layout in Singapore; the old social structures had to incorporate new, large groups actors – from domestic helpers, to foreign construction workers, to white-collar expatriates entering the workforce and social landscape. Rather than Singaporean culture being the province of mainly Singaporean actors, it has to allow for new actors – carrying new ideals and representing new anxieties and assumptions.

The above changes collectively meant the shared Singaporean culture had to rapidly expand on several fronts, while also being subject to codification and narrowing in meaning. These dueling forces impacted how Singaporeans could adapt and internalize new changes; how old ideologies became harder to cohere within the culture. As more forces were applied to the internal logic in order to secure a sense of shared Singaporean culture, the more that culture ironically became rigid and less flexible. Old negotiations of the previous decade, which, for instance, produced specific entangled assumptions of class and social currency had to incorporate new classes, and new status markers – such as Singaporean sense of superiority over certain foreign workers. However, as Singapore’s reliance on foreign talent became part of the survivalist imperative – and part of lived experience – old nuances such as the key relationship between class and hard work were tempered.

While the central preoccupations of ideal/unideal and the potential future remained, they too facilitated the continued narrowing of meaning within the Singaporean culture – as they had been doing in the previous decade. In doing so, the previous Singaporean culture – as discussed in this thesis – has been papered over – rearticulated, and sometimes eschewed. However, in peeking behind the new constructions of Singaporean culture, it is possible to

²⁶⁶ ‘Singapore Immigration Statistics 1960–2021’ (Macro Trends, 2020), <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/SGP/singapore/immigration-statistics>.

better understand how and why the present came to be, and to identify specific points which might alter present day discourse and conflicts.

The Past in the Present

This thesis concludes by offering several brief perspectives.

Firstly, the plurality inherent in the Singaporean culture of the 1980s and 1990s suggests a range of possible nuances which might be applied to current important structures in Singapore. For instance, in asking how and why systems of inequality exist – and the specific preoccupations which undergird that system. When considering criticism of the “bright future” argument recently discussed in relation to university students receiving light sentences because of their potential, it is possible to draw on this thesis’ analysis to identify this argument in the context of meritocratic ideals. And, those meritocratic ideals are rooted in both a fear of an impoverished future (contingent on merit and intelligence being prized) and in the wider placement of certain Singaporeans within an ideal – based not only class, but race as well. The “bright future” argument is not, then, as public discourse frames it, an independent issue – nor is it even a judicial issue. Rather, the key to challenging it lies in breaking down how it is rooted in ideals which are no longer directly resonant with the present, but nevertheless exist as layers and preoccupations in Singaporean culture.

Secondly, the Singapore culture of the present presents itself as a useful framework through which social change in the present – such as elections, new challenges to Singapore’s economy, as well as education policy shifts and new legislation surrounding censorship. The framework this thesis has undertaken – identifying the underlying preoccupations of Singaporean culture and how they present themselves – sheds light on how Singaporeans in the 1980s and 1990s engaged with the world around them. Similarly, in interrogating the new or dominant

preoccupations of the present, there remains critical space to ask how Singaporeans in the present are entangling new sets of ideologies with old ones, and what combinations of assumptions or imperatives or ideals are producing our responses to a Singapore still in the process of nation–building, and still encountering new periods of accelerated change.

End.

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