Singapore women’s writing in the global market: Hwee Hwee Tan’s *Foreign Bodies*

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In her 1990 survey of the Singapore novel, Koh Tai Ann remarked on the scarcity of good Singaporean novels and noted that the development of the Singapore novel had lagged far behind local developments in poetry and playwriting. The picture a decade later is quite different as the nineties has seen a burst of novels from established writers such as Gopal Baratham, Christine Suchen Lim, Philip Jeyaratnam and Catherine Lim as well as younger newcomers Fiona Cheong and Hwee Hwee Tan.¹

Examining the publishing routes of these writers reveals a bifurcated path. Some have published with local publishers and others have landed themselves deals with international publishers. With the exception of Gopal Baratham, it has largely been women novelists such as Catherine Lim, Fiona Cheong and Hwee Hwee Tan who have taken the latter route and their success in pursuing this path is something I wish to explore here. Why have Singaporean women writers met with greater success in landing international publishing deals and achieving

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¹ As in most Asian names, Tan’s surname should come first. Thus her name, Asian-style, should read as Tan Hwee Hwee. However in publishing in Britain, Tan’s name has been rendered in the usual Western style of surname last, hence Hwee Hwee Tan. I will use this form in this paper as this has become Tan’s chosen writing moniker in the international arena and as a reminder of the negotiations and compromises necessary in being an Asian writer in the West.
an international presence? How have they negotiated the delicate balance between the specificities of a local identity with the task of appealing to a general, largely Western reading public? In this paper, I would like to suggest that these Singaporean women novelists have been quick to position representations of local female subjectivity in the international arena by exploiting certain publishing trends in America and Great Britain. The increased interest in memoirs and fiction from Mainland Chinese and Asian American women, focused on issues of history, identity and female subjectivity (usually oppressed), has no doubt contributed to the America-based Fiona Cheong’s success in landing an American publishing deal with her part-historical, part-autobiographical novel of girlhood in turbulent 1960s Singapore. Similarly Catherine Lim’s novels can be seen as taking advantage of this Western interest in the position of the Oriental woman in Asian society, though her works also shade into the ever-popular feminine genre of the romance with their stories of forbidden love. These writers have come to prominence by inserting their writing into literary categories familiar to a Western audience and, certainly in Lim’s case, by pandering to Western tastes for exoticism and expectations of beautiful Oriental women oppressed and victimised by Asian society.² I would like to argue though that despite being interpellated and bound by seemingly overdetermined expectations of how Asian women are to be represented, for some women writers the process of writing within these very same expectations offers a means of appropriation and resistance. It offers the opportunity of what Bill Ashcroft has called ‘interpolation’, a process counter to interpellation which allows access to ‘counter-discursive agency’ and involves ‘the capacity to interpose, to intervene, to interject a

² It is not merely a matter of generic location but also geographic location that has been important to the success of these women writers. Fiona Cheong is based in America and is seen as part of the Asian American community. Hwee Hwee Tan was based in Britain at the time her first novel was published and is sometimes referred to as a British-Singaporean writer.