

Michael Soh. *Son Of A Mother*. Writing in Asia Series. (Singapore: Heinemann Educational Books, 1977) 117 pp., \$4.50 paper.

Three-quarters of this short novel chronicle eldest son Leng's thoughts, conversations, and actions in endeavoring to fulfill his dying father's charge: "Ah Leng, you're grown up now and I expect you to nurture your character, be a man responsible for bringing up a family of your own. Offspring are very essential to carry down the ancestral line, you know. Of course in so bringing up your own family you must not forget your own parents for they are the ones who brought you up."

I was struck by the persistent negative development of the women as the main character's story unfolded. Leng's sole and elder sister, Hong, had been married to a construction worker. Hong, never sent to school, was consequently thought simple. Unaccustomed to fashion, she worked devotedly, with good humor, for long hours every day side-by-side Leng in the family orchid nursery and was "invaluable, if not indispensable" in her work. She had known enough not to wear a "mini" for her legs were too unshapely. Besides, her mother would gravely disapprove of such a wedding dress. Additionally, in her mid-twenties, Hong's face was showing her advancing years and match-maker Auntie Song could not have bargained for a higher status husband for her. Old Mother Huay gave a parting bit of advice, "Be a good daughter-in-law and respect his parents, Hong," and "...come home whenever you can." About to leave the family compound "the sight of the nursery finally made her burst into tears."

Hong's world will be as proscribed as her mother's. She will yearn for the day when she will have daughters-in-law to do the myriad tasks of keeping her husband's household functioning in the vital minutiae of ritual, behaviors, and practical affairs of the traditional Chinese extended family. Leng's life is similarly restricted by the grinding work at the nursery on a reclaimed mangrove swamp on the outskirts of Singapore, by his illiteracy, by his relentless drive to make life easier for his two youngest brothers as they struggle through the British-style educational system, and by his attempt to fulfill his father's charge. Old Huay runs the household on the receipts from the nursery turned over by Leng. Her obsession is to have grandsons to carry on the family line.

Buffeted by Western technology, consumerist pressure, and personal and commercial competition imported to modern Singapore, the Song family clings to its Chinese past for stability and guidance. The clash of cultures may make for a better Singapore of the future, but it is very hard on individual pioneers like the Songs.

The women are the carriers of both water and tradition. They have no identity or meaning in their lives other than credit for everything. Leng

eventually marries, but has no children. He rejects the idea of adoption because “an adopted son is not a son at all.” It does not occur to Leng that he may not be fertile; his wife must be barren as Old Mother Huay insists. The women of the household, including a parasitic brother’s wife, turn against each other time and time again over the division of household chores, over money, and, always, over sons. Be they sons, husbands, or grandsons, they are all important to the women. They are the voices of the ancestors and the only path into the future. The results of current population control measures in China and Singapore, if effective, must be so profound as to turn the world up-side-down for both women and men. This book illustrates by its obsessions and its omissions the tenacity of tradition and the lure of the new.

Soh’s novel won the National Book Development Council of Singapore Award in 1973. The award must have been given to it as a Chinese language edition and for the overall image that the author related to a Singapore audience because this English version is very badly edited and poorly translated. The dialogue is wooden. Whole sections are redundant, seemingly without reason. The love scenes are written in laughably “bodice-ripper” style that contribute nothing to the story. The subject matter is profound, and a murky picture of the slice of modern aspiring Asia can be discerned. However, the rushed closing of the story with Leng’s discovery of his own adopted status, making his parasitic brother the true first-born son, spoils the intended revelation as the key to his dying father’s words, “...for they are the ones who brought you up.”

— Dennis Stewart
Davis, California

John Tateishi. *And Justice for All: An Oral History of the Japanese American Detention Camps.* (New York: Random House, 1984) xxvii, 259 pp., \$18.95.

In one of the blatant injustices in American history, 120,000 West Coast Japanese Americans were evacuated from their homes by military authorities just after the outbreak of World War II and interned in concentration camps. This episode was the culmination of decades of anti-Asian agitation and more immediate pressures by politicians, newspaper editors, farm and labor organizations, nativist groups, and military officials based on false accusations of Japanese American disloyalty and fifth-column activity by Japanese Americans.