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## **Re-invention in a Globalized World: (Mis)reading and Metafictional Strategies in Tash Aw's *Five Star Billionaire***

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### *Abstract:*

*In his third novel, Five Star Billionaire, writer Tash Aw presents an account of globalization that ostensibly proclaims China's accelerating economic might and wealth in the new millennium with Shanghai as the global city par excellence as he traces the lives of five Malaysian Chinese characters seeking success there. Through the use of metafictional strategies and a satirical play on the self-help genre however, Aw uses his novel to interrogate the possibility of re-invention as a fundamental implication of globalization. He undermines the idea of re-authoring and re-inventing one's identity by emphasizing instead the impossibility of total control as a result of the contingent nature of reading as well as the precarity and plurality of meaning. In this way too, Five Star Billionaire disrupts linearity and future-oriented subjectivities in favor of other temporalities that serve to counter the world of neoliberal globalization it deliberately invokes.*

**Keywords:** Tash Aw/ globalization and literature/ metafiction/ Malaysian literature

If the heady exuberance surrounding globalization in the 1990s has given way to a more tempered and sober awareness of its gross inequalities especially after the global financial crisis of 2008, it remains the case that a globalized world still represents powerfully to many the possibility of identity-transforming mobility and re-invention. The entrepreneur striking out in a new land, the emigrant uprooting and making a new life elsewhere or the rags-to-riches story attendant upon the transmigrant's rural-to-urban journey--these are narratives of growth, development, and alteration with which we are familiar, and for which writing and authorship have often served as the dominant tropes used to make sense of the experiences narrated. The idea of self-authoring and re-invention is the very one that the latest novel by Tash Aw, the hyperbolically-entitled *Five Star Billionaire*, seems to court. The blurb on the back cover of the Fourth Estate paperback version of the book reads: "Welcome to Shanghai. A restless city where old traditions collide with new ambitions—a place where anything can happen and anyone can become somebody." With Shanghai as the global metropolis *du jour*, this description taps into a recognizable discourse about globalization that valorizes entrepreneurial energy, endless possibility, and re-invention. Yet these are the very ideas about globalization, I argue, that the novel seeks to critique. In

this article, I propose to show that Aw inflects the idea of authoring the self by metafictionally and ironically drawing attention to processes of (mis)reading as a lens through which to understand and complicate expectations of self-fashioning in our current historical moment of neoliberal globalization. Despite their efforts at scripting their own lives, the characters in Aw's novel struggle to fully re-invent themselves and are repeatedly seen to be vulnerable to misreading. In addition, they often misread others around them as well, thus contributing to an overall atmosphere of ambiguity and unpredictability. Taking specific aim at the self-help genre with its tantalizing promise of renewal and renovation, the novel undercuts the future-oriented subject of self-help to suggest the impossibility of total control through its pre-occupation with and illumination of partial perspective, the contingent nature of reading and the precarity of meaning. At the same time, Aw also discloses the determining influence of the past through the use of retrospective narratives which trace personal motivation and storytelling momentum back to an originary moment, thus interrogating the very possibility of re-invention.

Humanities and social science scholarship reckoning with globalization in the new millennium has sought especially to maintain a critical distance from globalist discourse to avoid complicity with a globalized vision of neoliberal capitalism. Anthropologist Anna Tsing for example has consistently argued for the need to adopt a critical stance towards the “charisma” (330) of globalist projects. She writes how “we can investigate globalist projects and dreams without assuming that they remake the world just as they want” (330). Further emphasizing the non-monolithic nature of globalization, she adds, “The task of understanding planet-wide interconnections requires locating and specifying globalist projects and dreams, with their contradictory as well as charismatic logics and their messy as well as effective encounters and translations” (330). Thus we might do well to question the futurism implied in globalization, for example, and examine what modes of thinking the attendant assumption of newness enables and disavows rather than simply accept its ‘truth’. Seeking to articulate the relationship between globalization and literature,<sup>1</sup> James Annesley has argued in his book, *Fictions of Globalization*, how we should read literature about globalization not simply in terms of its representation of the phenomenon, as

registering its reality however complex, but for the way it “offers an insight into the shape and character of concerns that have a key bearing on the interpretation of contemporary cultural, social and political life” (6). Literary texts like *Five Star Billionaire* in other words exist in a dialectical relationship with the phenomenon of contemporary globalization and are as much the cultural and aesthetic expression of the latter as they are crucial to our continued imagining, problematizing and shaping of globalized processes and subjectivities. *Five Star Billionaire*’s distinctive contribution, I argue, lies in its complication of understandings of globalization and the global subject not just through its fictional content but by its metatextual focus on processes of writing and reading which speak fundamentally to the nature of the literary text itself. Additionally and more specifically, Aw’s text has particular resonance for contemporary globalization in an Asia increasingly dominated by the economic powerhouse that China has become in the space of only three decades. Mindful of what Peter Kalliney has called a “teleological” account of globalization which would “read imperialism as a lower stage or first step in globalization’s evolutionary ladder” (306), I nevertheless want to briefly bring back into the picture the history of colonial connectivity and an imperial globalization in South East Asia which Aw’s novel takes as its largely unspoken history in order to avoid valorising the present and the notion of re-invention so premised on an erasure of the past. I make this detour now by considering Aw’s non-fictional memoir, *The Face: Strangers on a Pier*, in order to frame the subsequent textual exegesis of his novel.

Born to Malaysian Chinese parents in Taiwan, raised in Kuala Lumpur, and based in London, Tash Aw has, over the span of a decade, published a non-fictional work and three novels—*The Harmony Silk Factory* (2005), *Map of the Invisible World* (2009), and *Five Star Billionaire* (2013). He has won numerous literary awards for his fiction and has been twice longlisted for the Man Booker Prize. These achievements have burnished his credentials as a global Malaysian writer and serve indeed to reinforce his novels as “transnational commodities” (Holden 57) with different resonances for Malaysian and non-Malaysian audiences. Aw’s biography hints at the plural cultural worlds he and indeed many of his fictional characters navigate. That plurality—a result of historical migration, mobility, linguistic diversity

and cultural hybridity—is part of the ancestry which Aw explores in his non-fictional work, *The Face: Strangers on a Pier* (2015), published two years after *Five Star Billionaire*.<sup>2</sup> In this essay-memoir, which begins ostensibly as a meditation on the pan-Asian, chameleon-like nature of his own face, Aw recounts his grandfathers' journeys from Southern China to Malaya, part of Nanyang or the Southern Seas, in the 1920s to escape poverty and political turmoil. They belonged to an earlier period of globalization under European imperialism when labor and capital were drawn to particular nodal points in a world-wide commercial and trading system like the British port cities in strategic parts of Southeast Asia. As immigrants to a new and different land, Aw imagines how his grandfathers must have felt when they first set foot on this part of the world as “[s]trangers, lost on a pier” (18). In contrast, Aw as a third-generation Malaysian Chinese possesses a different language, cultural compass, and privileged trajectory into the future as well as other parts of the globe from his grandfathers. He ruminates over and laments how his migrant forefathers had shed their past so quickly in their pragmatic and matter-of-fact acceptance of their new lives and ethnic minority status in their multicultural adopted country, bequeathing him with only scant fragments of knowledge about his family history. He is frustrated not only by what he sees as the older generation's willed and wilful amnesia but that of the entire nation--for anything from the unruly past that might sully the official narrative of progress must be elided. He writes:

In the story of modern Asia, these messy blotches don't sit well with the clean lines of our reinvention. We apply it to national narratives too, wiping out difficult relationships and entire periods of our history that make us feel uncomfortable because they disrupt the plotlines of our rise to middle class-ness, a status the World Bank calls 'Higher Middle Income,' soon to break into the realms of High Income. (37)

Yet Aw feels the past viscerally, in his body, and even on his face, knowing full well that “[s]omewhere beneath the polished surface of our narrative, the messiness still remains; we carry it with us,

unexpressed, unacknowledged” (41). The same acute consciousness of the deterministic influence of the past is found in *Five Star Billionaire* even if the past here is a different one from *Strangers on a Pier*.

In his novel, Aw specifically explores how the past might constrain efforts at re-invention and the re-writing of the entrepreneurial self. Fully appreciative of the historical irony of things, Aw describes a migratory trajectory in reverse: where once in the nineteenth century, southern Chinese migrants had left their homeland in the thousands for colonial British Malaya in search of economic opportunity, their descendants now journey to a rejuvenated China in the contemporary historical moment of the novel. The erstwhile ancestral land has become a new land of opportunity for all manner of modern, postcolonial and neoliberal Malaysian Chinese including ‘old money’ capitalists, newly rich entrepreneurs, and less privileged, working-class subjects. This mixture of Malaysian Chinese from different socio-economic classes and not necessarily all speaking the same languages is significant as it points to the wealth and income inequality that Aw—in *Strangers on a Pier* and other writings—sees as a neglected reality of postcolonial Malaysia all too conveniently obscured by the narrative of migrant success most hold as the unquestionable norm.<sup>3</sup> Yet the text is by no means interested in registering this new line of movement nostalgically as a return of diasporic Chinese subjects to an ancestral and cultural ‘home,’ as an embrace of authenticity or indeed a coming into one’s own as a subject of double consciousness. Indeed the characters barely register any sense of linguistic or cultural homecoming, merely, like their ancestors before, pragmatically fitting in. If Aw cannot do anything about amnesiac forefathers in *Strangers on a Pier* who have relinquished their pasts but register the aporia as a function of incommensurable generational difference, in *Five Star Billionaire*, he answers the desire to learn about the past (the reader’s desire and perhaps his own) not by satisfying it in a straightforward fashion but by playing with his fictional characters’ attempts at re-invention, discombobulating and disorientating characters and reader with the instability of reading and meaning, and with the possibility of yet another narrative lurking around the corner in this interconnected world.

Differing from his first two novels which were situated in a more distant time in the past, *Five Star Billionaire* is Aw's most audaciously contemporary work—set in a recognizable fast-changing present world which sees an increasingly dominant China on the global political and economic stage of the new millennium. It is perhaps no coincidence that between 2013 and 2014, two other similarly and hyperbolically-entitled novels besides Aw's, were also published—Mohsin Hamid's *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* and Kevin Kwan's *Crazy Rich Asians*. Satirically styled, all three are novelistic accounts of globalization and capitalism that ostensibly proclaim Asia's accelerating economic might and wealth in the new millennium. All three books--set variously in Pakistan, Singapore and China—foreground Asian cities as the dramatic spaces of novelistic possibility about dynamically-evolving social relations and forms of individual subjectivity at this historical moment of late capitalism, seemingly in line with much non-fictional sociopolitical, economic and historical discourse that has for some time been enamored by the trope of a Rising Asia. Despite differences in style and intended audiences especially between Hamid and Aw's novels, on the one hand, and Kwan's popular fiction on the other, the texts identify hyper-consumerism, materialism, and mobile finance capital as some of the most striking features of today's globalization, and engage to differing extents with the implications of the neoliberal order structuring different parts of Asia. In particular, *Five Star Billionaire* and *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* specifically reference and parody the self-help book genre formally and in terms of thematic content in order to interrogate self-proprietorship, neoliberal subjectivity and the problematic of market rationality on individuals and society.<sup>4</sup> Although less studied by scholars interested in contemporary writing and neoliberalism who have hitherto tended to focus on novels set in the capitalist Anglo-American West, these Rising Asia texts nonetheless also underscore the ubiquity of neoliberalism, disclosing, as Wendy Brown has argued, that neoliberalism is more than a “bundle of economic policies with inadvertent political and social consequences” (38). It is instead a “political rationality that both organizes these policies and reaches beyond the market” (38). “Neoliberal rationality,” Brown adds, “involves extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action, even as the market itself remains a distinctive player” (39-40).

In a special issue of *Textual Practice* focused on the relationship between neoliberalism and the novel, Emily Johansen and Alissa G. Karl also address the way neoliberalism suffuses and saturates all aspects of life when they describe the “neoliberal novel” as specifically enabling a more thoroughgoing investigation into “the enmeshment of culture and economics” (207) than, for example, scholarship viewing the contemporary novel through the analytic lenses of transnationalism and cosmopolitanism. Texts which fall under the label of “neoliberal novel” disclose a “self-conscious reliance on the conditions that the texts might themselves trouble” (207). What makes the neoliberal novel distinctive too, they argue, is the way it “is as much (if not more) about methods and priorities of reading as it is about mimesis, thematics or content” (207). With its self-conscious and metatextual interest in the process of reading and the instability of meaning, *Five Star Billionaire* would seem to fit well into this category of the neoliberal novel. At the same time, Aw’s novel also appears to corroborate Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith’s periodization in *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture* where the pair identify literary fiction roughly starting in the late 1990s to the still evolving contemporary moment as a distinct phase of writing focused on investigating the ontological aspects of neoliberalism. Huehls and Greenwald Smith aver that “[a] neoliberalism invades and suffuses the sociocultural sphere in the early 1990s and as market rationalities extend to the daily human interactions that literature comprises, literary culture begins channeling, and challenging, neoliberalism’s ascendance” (15). One could easily situate *Five Star Billionaire* within this context of literary culture given the text’s concern with investigating human relations and individual subjectivities unmoored from community and shaped by a neoliberal ethos in relentlessly capitalist Shanghai.

*Five Star Billionaire* presents the reader with an interlacing, multi-strand narrative structure about five different Malaysian Chinese characters whose stories unfold in Shanghai, itself ironically a city “re-invented”, and living its role as the modern financial center of Asia once again after its renewed engagement with world trade and finance in the 1990s as part of China’s economic reforms which ended three decades of communist isolation.<sup>5</sup> Shanghai is the quintessential “entrepreneurial city” where urban

sites “are now being reimaged and “imagineered” (to borrow the term from Walt Disney Studios) and transformed into conspicuous landscapes of hyperconsumerism, centered on extravagant commodity displays, seductive urban spectacles, and symbolic consumption” (Pow 404). The novel’s characters include Phoebe, a one-time factory worker hoping to strike it rich; Walter, the enigmatic self-made tycoon she milks for economic advantage who turns out to be the author of self-help books and a man hell-bent on revenge; Yinghui, the entrepreneur with a string of lingerie shops in China running away from family scandal in Malaysia who hires Phoebe to work in her spa; Justin CK Lim, the disillusioned scion of a wealthy Malaysian Chinese family and heir to its dynastic legacy who is in love with Yinghui; and Gary, the burnt-out Mando-pop star whom Phoebe befriends online. All these characters seek re-invention in some form or other and we are made privy to their constant scripting of their persons and lives, propelled by their belief in self-determination. At the same time, *Five Star Billionaire* also assumes the guise of a self-help book. Walter Chau, the eponymous Five Star Billionaire, serves as the first-person narrator of several ‘how to’ sections which are interspersed throughout the book. In these autodiegetic parts of the novel, he dispenses advice directly to the reader, addressing the latter by using the second person pronoun ‘you’. As the novel progresses however, he also begins to disclose more of his personal history as he presents his life experience as a “case study.” He confesses, “I write [self-help books] not to make money, you understand, but to share the map of my success with ordinary people in search of inspiration” (84). The process of reading thus requires the reader to first meet Walter as a rich, mysterious figure before slowly and cumulatively learning of his past and the motivation behind his actions. In this reading protocol typical of realist fiction, whatever Walter does is hence framed and understood overwhelmingly in relation to his past.

The rest of the novel comprises heterodiegetic narrative, focalized through the four characters of Phoebe, Gary, Justin and Yinghui. Here, the stories of the various characters including Walter’s are presented as illustrating and illuminating the Chinese axioms and their English translations which headline each chapter. Most of these chapter titles are Chinese proverbs; on the one hand, Aw deploys

them to pithily and playfully connote universal and timeless ‘truths’ yet the sense that they may be nothing more than platitudes on the other hand is never far away and adds to the overall satirical effect of the novel. As rhetorical devices, the titles appear at once as self-help like pieces of exhortation as well as situational summaries. The bifurcated but braided structure of the novel means that the reader is in effect reading both a self-help book as well as a novel in which the self-help book author/ narrator features as a character. It is a two-in-one experience that is at once a self-reflexive and tongue-in-cheek reflection on the process of consumption and compression in globalization. In this way, operating within several genres and cultural vocabularies, *Five Star Billionaire* exemplifies Rebecca Walkowitz’s observation that “contemporary literature in an age of globalization is, in many ways, a comparative literature” (529). In the novel, the autodiegetic chapter “Case Study: Human Relations” is probably the section which most strikingly offers the reader an example of metalepsis or a blurring of the two main narratives as Walter the first-person narrator teases the reader here with a scene of possible seduction, flirting and advantage-seeking behavior between two archetypal figures in capitalist society—the rich man and the avaricious younger woman, who could easily also be himself and Phoebe. He says, “I shall describe the situation and leave it up to you to decide how best to resolve it—a small test to see how much you have learnt and observed thus far” (284). This direct invitation to the reader is an example of the novel’s metafictionality which deliberately sets up a tension between the processes of writing and reading. That all the Malaysian Chinese characters should find their lives intertwining in Shanghai is a result of both deliberate design by the mysterious and arch-manipulator Walter, as well as sheer coincidence, presented rather slyly as an unremarkable fact of the interconnectedness of globalization. While Walter is the mastermind of an elaborate revenge plot, as a character he is nevertheless also subject to developments beyond his control within the heterodiegetic narrative sections of the novel. It is the novel’s emphasis on how the present is overdetermined by the past as well as its investment in metafictional elements which repeatedly underline the instability of meaning—even the state of unknowing—as well as the contingent, unpredictable nature of reading, which provide, I argue, the basis for countering the trope of re-writing the self.

Of all the Malaysian Chinese characters in the novel, the one most desperate to re-invent herself is Phoebe. Phoebe Chen Aiping begins her life in Shanghai as an “invisible” subject, indistinguishable on one level from so many other young Chinese women in the teeming factories and cities of New China who have left their rural homes in search of work.<sup>6</sup> To improve herself and increase her value in the competitive, materialistic space of Shanghai, Phoebe avidly consumes self-help books and videos, her favorite being the one written by Chau in his persona as the five-star billionaire. Luring the reader with the goal of personal enrichment and economic success, self-help fuels or creates in subjects the desire and need for constant renovation and improvement, based either implicitly or explicitly, on a normalizing idea of competition and advantage-seeking behavior. The seeming openness and wide availability of self-help to those who only have to desire it ignores, however, the complex role differences in class, gender, age and ethnicity may have, for example, and elides the inequality and privileging of elites that global capitalism tends to entrench. The facility for self-invention and change epitomized by the self-help book positions the reading subject as a writer and gears her constantly towards the future. Indeed the fundamental temporal assumption of the self-help genre is that the past is eminently erasable.

Besides her diet of self-help materials, Phoebe also keeps a diary in which she castigates and exhorts herself, literally writing a new self into existence:

*Forget who you were, forget who you are. Become someone else. (85)*

*I must improve my appearance, I must dare to dress like a slut.*

*I must exercise my body, to be fat is not acceptable.*

*Sleep—five hours a day is enough.*

*I must improve myself always, I must practise my English. (135)*

In line with this disciplinary regime, she plans how to script her every move and assert control over how others read her. From the start of the novel when Phoebe is first introduced studying intently a rich young

man buying coffee in “a Western-style coffee bar just off Huaihai Lu” (6), the reader enters a claustrophobic world where intensified practices of looking and reading are presented as part of the process of striving to get rich. Of her noticing his material possessions, we are told: “It was strange how Phoebe noticed such things nowadays, as swift and easy as breathing” (5). This “habit” (5) reflects her desire to partake in high-end consumption and explains her presence in the café, dressed—she hopes insouciantly enough--the part of an affluent young woman. Yet habit is hardly *habitus* and Phoebe’s deficiency is rendered embarrassingly apparent when she mis-identifies bossa nova, the music which the young man was listening to, as Spanish. Always appraising herself through the eyes of others, Phoebe imagines the young man giving her “a you-are-nothing look, the kind of quick glance she had become used to since arriving in Shanghai, people from high up looking down on her” (5- 6). She also describes his girlfriend casting her a half-glance, in such a way as to show off her “fine cheekbones” while also appearing “uninterested” (8). Luckily for Phoebe, the episode does not quite end in self-cancelling humiliation as she pockets the identity card accidentally left behind by the young man’s girlfriend and uses that to escape the invisibility of undocumented migrant poverty.

Indeed, in the novel, Phoebe’s script for getting rich is presented in terms of a continual struggle for social visibility. Unlike her room-mate Yanyan, a young woman worn out by work who makes no effort to improve herself for the rat-race of getting a better job or marrying a wealthy husband, Phoebe energetically embraces every chance to re-make herself and be noticed. This is clearly seen for instance in her efforts to create an online identity to attract the right and appropriately rich man in cyberspace. Her strategic attempts at a carefully calibrated visibility involve selecting the right photograph for her profile. Eventually, she picks one taken in a park in Guangzhou with trees and lakes in the background so that “no one would look at the picture and made the link: Guangzhou, factory worker, immigrant” (80). Tempted to remove the picture after it seemed to attract unwanted male attention, she hesitates: “She could not bring herself to delete this image from her profile. When the rest of Shanghai looked at her, she did not want them to see just a grey shadow of a nobody; she wanted them to see her, Phoebe Chen Aiping” (83).

Yet, far from signifying a definite identity, Phoebe's insistence on stating her full name here, as well as the other times when she does so in her *Journal of Her Secret Self* to chide or encourage herself, merely belies instead the essential hollowness of her gesture and the meaninglessness of her full name as a signifier of who she really is. This is underscored by the fact that she is the only character in the novel whose past and background is withheld from the reader in a self-consciously deliberate manner. Additionally, to everyone else around her in the novel, Phoebe is at most just another pretty face, indistinguishable from countless others. Hers is a curious form of self-alienation akin to the experience Aw depicts in his memoir when he reflects on how his own face is a signifier not of distinctive difference but of infinite meaning and nothingness simultaneously because of its malleability when it comes to shifting Asian contexts.

In contrast to Phoebe then, the reader is allowed to learn substantially more about the other Malaysian Chinese characters. Indeed, in the case of Gary, the accidental popstar suffering from a breakdown, it is tenacious reporters traveling to his hometown in rural Malaysia to remorselessly uncover his unpropitious beginnings and trace his unlikely path to stardom in Taiwan, who write his early life into a tragi-comic narrative for him. Gary's success in Taiwan also points historically to the way many Malaysian Chinese have, since the 1960s, been drawn to Taiwan for business, higher education, and the pursuit of various forms of literary and cultural production opportunities as a result of the postcolonial Malaysian state's policies which favored the Malay *bumiputra* (literally "son of the soil") ethnic group.<sup>7</sup> Holed up in his hotel room to escape his fans and the media following publicity about his disgraceful bad boy behavior, Gary becomes a reader of his own life narrative when he spends his time poring over the tabloid newspapers and magazines covering his story: "He kneels on the floor and looks at the patchwork carpet of papers and magazines strewn in front of him; all the words and images that sum up his entire life" (110). Besides Gary, the reader also learns comparatively much more about the privileged lives of Justin and Yinghui--how the former had been groomed from young to take over the lucrative family business while the latter had started out full of political ideals and anti-establishment views before being

driven by the scandal of her father's prosecution for corruption and death into re-inventing herself as a "bold businesswoman" (57) in China. About Phoebe however, the narrator relates, "She was not from any part of China, but from a country thousands of miles to the south, and in that country she had grown up in a small town in the far north-east" (9). Perhaps, as the text seems to teasingly imply from this rather coyly reticent description of Phoebe's origins, if Phoebe were a cipher, then she could be whoever she wanted to be as the self-help books which peddle constant renovation and re-invention suggest. But the narrative description of Phoebe's laborious efforts in the text to script and manage her life in the way the self-help genre would have her believe she can is striking for ironically foregrounding above all the slipperiness of reading for it is impossible for her to fully control meaning and how others read her.

The most telling instance of the unpredictability of reading occurs when Phoebe sets out to choose her most important accessory for her plan to get rich--a handbag. Arming herself with the requisite material goods that signify wealth even if they are fakes is a necessary prelude to owning the genuine article. In the section suitably entitled '改头换面' or 'Reinvent Yourself', the narrator gives voice to Phoebe's thoughts through free indirect discourse, "This is how people would judge her. From afar they would notice what kind of bag she was carrying, and would decide if she was a person of class or not" (79). With much effort and care, Phoebe then purchases a high-quality copy of "the coveted LV brand" (80), a counterfeit good distinguished from the other fake bags and kept separately by the store owner in a small inner room which serves as a symbolic inner sanctum for a select group of customers. Phoebe's new bag acquires an aura and an animating quality, unlike the "dead objects" (80)—relics of her past life in Guangzhou—which she tosses when she empties the contents of her old bag. In one of the novel's most ironically-wrought scenes, the perfect counterfeit bag is eventually stolen—so successful was she in selecting the right bag that it was mistaken for the real thing and purloined by the "rich" man with whom she had gone on a date. Like the victim of a cruel joke, Phoebe suffers the indignity of knowing that she was duped by another fake, a grasping upstart no better than herself.

The novel makes (mis)reading and deliberate opacity part of its conceptual and symbolic economy to undermine neoliberal globalization. Phoebe's propensity for misreading situations continues when she is invited back to Walter's posh penthouse apartment one evening as their relationship appears to be getting serious. At this pivotal moment when she is presumably within reach of her goal of attaching herself to wealth, she learns that he is the author of her favorite self-help book, *Secrets of a Five Star Billionaire*, from which "she had gained so much" (320). She had always imagined the author to be a woman. This scene, ostensibly about revealing character and dramatizing deeper romantic entanglement, registers instead the contingent nature of reading and the incompleteness of knowing. Walter has an intuitive sense of Phoebe's difference from other Chinese women yet he mis-identifies her as being from the Chinese mainland. At the same time, Phoebe is struck by the thought that she could have been happy with Walter because they were so alike and share similar pasts lived out in rural, small-town Malaysia. But the moment is fleeting and only a sense of belatedness is left as she thinks how "[t]he fake Phoebe had become too much a part of the real one; their histories were the same now, there was no difference between them" (322). She decides against telling Walter the truth about herself: "There was no way out for her—she had to continue being the Phoebe she had turned herself into" (322). This moment of mis-connection is echoed in the novel by yet another missed opportunity, this time between Phoebe and Gary, her pop idol, that underscores the emotional toll that variability in reading exacts. In a rather convenient coincidence, both these young characters had befriended each other online. Both had turned to virtual space where they could be safely invisible to sooth their feelings of loneliness. For Gary, communicating with a stranger in an online chatroom was the only way to escape from his fame and hypervisibility as a star. When he finally decides to reveal his real identity to Phoebe online however, she rebuffs him, thinking he is merely toying with her. The severance of that relationship leaves the reader frustrated and thwarted by the thought of what could have been.

If both Phoebe's calculated attempts at reinvention and her more inchoate desire for emotional understanding are repeatedly undermined in the text, Walter's narrative appears in contrast to suggest

effective self-scripting and control. The epitome of the successful and enterprising neoliberal subject who has turned his fortunes around, Walter has moved up the economic and social ladder as a result of his entrepreneurial ways to become the “five star billionaire” who can advise those who aspire to be like him. But more than just having control over his life narrative, he is also the puppet-master in a modern-day Vanity Fair, orchestrating events--in particular the lives of Leong Yinghui and Justin Lim--as part of an intricate plan for vengeful justice. In her chapter analyzing orphan characters in the neoliberal worlds of contemporary Anglophone fiction, Caren Irr identifies Walter as belonging to a class of vengeful orphans for whom “[e]ntrepreneurial strategies [...] appear as the only means for managing the dilemmas of a self organized around social failures” (253). Unlike the orphan characters of nineteenth-century realist fiction whose self-fulfillment tended to align with a re-integration into society, characters like Walter, according to Irr, “allow the fantasy of a vengeful settling of scores to thrive and in so doing empty out or negate any drive to examine the host of complex factors that might create or worsen loss” (253). In *Five Star Billionaire*, Justin’s family was “old money” (24) in Malaysia, “one of those overseas Chinese families that had risen, in little over a century, from dockside coolies to established billionaires” (24), and who were now ready to make their mark on the Chinese mainland with a large property development deal. Yinghui’s father was a minister in Malaysia who had worked his way up into the highest echelons of government, but who was eventually prosecuted for corruption, accused of enriching himself by accepting bribes and being overly close to companies like LKH holdings owned by Justin’s family. Justin had been attracted to Yinghui when she was romantically involved with his younger brother, CK. Both families played a role in accelerating the downfall of Walter’s hapless ne’er-do-well father. Yinghui’s father had spearheaded the government acquisition of a land parcel in Kota Bahru for redevelopment by the Lims. The Tokyo Hotel, owned by Walter’s father, stood on that plot; the building was acquired and demolished as a result of the land deal, leading Walter’s father to debt, humiliation and financial ruin.

As the novel unfolds, the reader only gradually realizes the reason for Walter’s machinations when the narrative takes an autobiographical turn and builds up to a climax when all is revealed about his

personal history and motivation. Indeed, Walter traces the start of everything back to an ordinary fateful moment, the moment he set eyes on Justin, the privileged heir of the family that ruined his father, in the section entitled ‘How Not to Forget – Property Case Study, Concluded’:

There were times when I remembered that fateful journey to KL. And curiously, what I remember most is not my father begging a complete stranger for one last chance before descending into total ruin. I remember, instead, that tall teenager and his good hair and colourful shoes, playing on his computer game.

He would never, I’m sure, be able to recall me.

But I remember him, always. (420)

The fact that Walter’s elaborate plot edifice is founded upon this one moment is significant for suggesting how the past overdetermines present and future action. This complicates the temporal logic of self-help or entrepreneurial subjectivity which often assumes that one’s past may be discarded or written over. As Walter asks Yinghui during a discussion about their proposed building project, “Are we trying to re-imagine an entirely new space – I mean create a completely new identity – or is it just a reinterpretation of an existing idea? You know, using what’s there as a template for a modern version of its predecessor?” (183) Walter’s words here are doubly meaningful here. On the one hand, they hint at his vengeful actions in the text even as he tries to seduce Yinghui, knowing her past interest in heritage preservation. On the other, the words also describe the novel’s narrative design which, with its emphasis on the past, evokes the element of circularity rather than strict temporal linearity. Both Walter and Yinghui are seeking in their own way to re-write their respective pasts even if the latter cannot at this point or for the rest of the novel ever know how she is implicated in Walter’s life.

Motivated by past grievances to write the present and future, we see how Walter schemes to ruin the Lim family’s foray into China for economic expansion and to wreak havoc on Ying Hui’s business

plans in Shanghai while courting her. Indeed, so successful is he in appealing to Yinghui's ambition and idealism that she thinks, after reading his business proposal, that "[i]t was as if he had managed to access the farthest reaches of her memory, all her long-forgotten yearnings, and condensed his findings into a few pages of concise, matter-of-fact prose" (175). With his property empire behind him, Walter proposes a partnership with Yinghui for acquiring 969 Weihai Lu, the property Justin's family had set their sights on. He encourages her to apply for bank loans before then absconding with the money that was placed in their joint business account. In the meantime, the Lim family also goes bankrupt as Justin suffers a breakdown. Walter's revenge appears complete as these two families had ruined his father through their corruption and greed. But while he may have succeeded in disrupting their economic plans, there are hints though that other matters such as the rekindled romance between Yinghui and Justin are beyond his control. Seeking to destroy them financially, Walter may have inadvertently brought them together. But perhaps the master-stroke against Walter's overweening authority to shape and write lives is reserved for Aw as author and ultimate puppet-master himself. For all his hubris, Walter becomes in the end the object of a (mis)reading by Phoebe. Thus instead of representing Walter as the free-wheeling mastermind and agent of manipulation, the novel takes its own revenge on him by insisting ultimately that he too, like Phoebe, is not in perfect control of destiny and the meaning of his life.

This climactic moment is carefully staged in the novel and bears detailed teasing out. Having decided to break off with Walter, Phoebe prepares to go back to Malaysia, but not before returning to her workplace, Yinghui's spa, for one last time to retrieve a trinket she had accidentally left behind, a free gift from a bowl of instant noodles Yanyan had given her on a whim as a good luck charm. It was a "keyring—a small cartoon cat with a blue face, lifting some noodles to its whiskery mouth with chopsticks" (410). On its own, the keyring has no market value but it represents a memory to Phoebe, reminding her of Yanyan's simple act of kindness when the two shared their first meal together in their rented room in Shanghai. The sentimentalism shown by Phoebe here marks a significant change in her valuation of material goods away from the performative ends she had made of objects in the past to script

her identity and advance herself socially and economically. It recalls a moment of transitory connection rare in a novel that foregrounds so many missed connections. At the spa, Phoebe runs unexpectedly into Yinghui and also spies Walter waiting in a car for the latter. Yinghui is the point of narrative focalization during the encounter so we read the action mediated through her. “Phoebe stood and stared at the car—apprehensively, Yinghui thought, as if it were a police car” (410). At this point, it dawns on Yinghui that Phoebe might be an illegal worker. While we are privy to Yinghui’s reading of Phoebe, we have no access to the latter’s consciousness. Phoebe’s unarticulated reading of the situation, its wholly private nature, reinforces the aesthetic narrative pattern of nested consciousness in the novel. The twist here is that it is Phoebe rather than Walter who occupies the position of the reader given privileged access to a scene in which characters are at different levels of knowing. In a move that underscores the fact that Walter’s authorial scripting and narrative policing has its limits, we see how he is oblivious to the fact that Phoebe has noticed him and has come to her own understanding of the situation. The description of Phoebe making her escape is telling:

Then she went out of the door, turned left sharply and walked briskly along the pavement, close to the row of buildings, like a mouse scuttling in the shadows, until she reached the corner, where she disappeared from sight. (411)

Phoebe literally blends into the darkness and sinks back into obscurity and invisibility. Unlike Walter whose initial mysterious identity and actions are finally explained and disclosed by the end of the novel, Phoebe seems to resist definite meaning as part of the novel’s ethic of unknowing. The reader is denied the chance of learning anything about her back story or history as she remains opaque as a character in this regard throughout the novel. We know precious little beyond the fact that she feels the tug of the past, and indeed, is the only one of the characters who goes back to where she had originally come from.

Phoebe's final repudiation of self-help occurs when she destroys her Journal of Her Secret Self, her diary of motivational writing and re-invention:

She had always planned that one day she would throw it ceremoniously into the Huangpu River. In her dreams she was rich and successful when she cast adrift the journal that contained her darkest fears and ambitions. But now that she was leaving—now that she was a failure—it seemed meaningless and empty to perform such a grand ritual. She took it from her bag and dropped it into a rubbish bin. (425)

Unlike Justin, Yinghui and Gary who find romance or achieve some kind of self-understanding and acceptance, both Walter and Phoebe's narratives skew teleological linearity as they simply disappear without a trace within the world of the novel. The last we hear of Walter is his false promise to Yinghui about their grand business plan and then her account of how he has tricked her as she tells it to Justin. Perhaps Walter and Phoebe's slipping away into an unknown future represents a freeing of the imagination, marking not only the moment the author shows his hand as the "principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning" (118) as Michel Foucault puts it, but the ultimate compensatory move by author to reader, a kind of gift that is at once more than just a refusal of closure. This ambiguous end to Phoebe and Walter's narratives also recalls literary and cultural theorist Pheng Cheah's argument in his book-- *What is a World?*—about literature's active world-making force, its ability to present alternative worlds that refute and refuse the one created by globalized capitalism. Insisting on the fundamentally temporal nature of a "world", Cheah's adaptation of Dipesh Chakrabarty's theory of "heterotemporality" (12) to mean "worldly ethics" or "the ethos or practice of inhabiting a world with others in a conjuncture where the world is constantly being eroded by global processes and revolutionary transformation is no longer a plausible alternative" (14) seems critically relevant to Aw's novel. Cheah writes how "[g]lobal capitalism [...] incorporates peoples and populations into the world system by tethering them to Western modernity's unrelenting march of progress and capitalist time and violently destroying other worlds and

their temporalities” (19). The open-ended nature of *Five Star Billionaire* as seen in its deliberately incomplete conclusion is one that resists rational calculation and stable totalizing meaning, just like Phoebe’s unexpected gesture of turning back to retrieve her keyring. As readers, we are thus compelled to inhabit a world haunted by the possibility of what might have been and what could be. In this way, we are subject to heterotemporalities or “alternative teleological times to that of capitalist modernity” (312), a crucial step to resisting the hegemonic world of neoliberal globalization.

Through its open-ended conclusion and use of metafictional strategies which place emphasis on the practice of reading and the vagaries of meaning, *Five Star Billionaire* thus attempts to subvert the logic of re-invention, self-authoring and full control exemplified by the self-help book that is promoted by neoliberal globalization and its competitive ethos. The deterministic nature of the past in the novel ultimately discloses as well the myth about re-invention. The last lines of *Five Star Billionaire* are reserved for Gary’s story as he takes the stage again, singing a song he had written in *Minnan hua*, the language of his childhood. “No one in the audience can follow the words, no one sings along” (435). It is a simultaneous moment of communication and non-communication that seems a fitting, final symbolic encapsulation of the text’s appeal for the possibilities of reading and multiple meaning to counter the monopoly on control in processes of authoring.

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Notes:

<sup>1</sup> See O’Brien and Szeman. In 2001, they sought to articulate a role for literature, arguing that the “significance [of globalization] can only be grasped through its realization in a variety of narrative forms” (62). See also Gupta.

<sup>2</sup> *The Face* is a non-fiction series established by independent, non-profit publisher Restless Books in which authors are invited to write their memoirs and personal stories in an extended essay format. Besides Aw, Ruth Ozeki and Chris Abani are two other writers who have written for this series.

<sup>3</sup> See for example Aw, “What Middle Class Means in Malaysia.” See also Tan for an interview with Aw.

<sup>4</sup> For an analysis of *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, see Gui, and also Poon.

<sup>5</sup> Shanghai was one of five treaty ports forced to trade with European imperial powers and America following Britain’s victory in the Opium Wars in the nineteenth century. Its heyday as a cosmopolitan commercial center and financial hub lay at the end of the nineteenth and in the early part of the twentieth century before the communist takeover of China and Hong Kong’s consolidation of its dominance in global finance and commerce in Asia. See Bergère.

<sup>6</sup> This migratory journey is a historical development explored in Chang, *Factory Girls*, a New York Times Notable Book about Chinese migrant workers that Aw has dubbed “inspirational” (*Five Star Billionaire* 437).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Chiu.

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