

# Absent Presence: The Absent Father and Postmemory in Tash Aw's *The Harmony Silk Factory* ❖

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## ABSTRACT

Tash Aw's *The Harmony Silk Factory* (2005) is a novel of war memories, dealing with the Japanese Occupation of Malaya and its aftermath. Longlisted for the Man Booker prize, this novel comprises three inconsistent narratives about the mysterious past of Johnny Lim, an ex-Malayan communist and later a Chinese tycoon in Kampar, Malaysia. The article suggests that the characterization of Johnny as a Malayan Communist and absent father can be read as an allegory of the repressed memory of the Malayan communists, who cooperated with the British to resist the Japanese invasion but ended up being "betrayed" by the British government and later by the Malaysian government. Belonging to the "postmemory" generation, Johnny's son Jasper learns about the Japanese Occupation through archival resources. His accusation against Johnny demonstrates how the historical event is only partially remembered by the one who was not there. This essay also points out that while on the one hand *Harmony* underscores the discrepancy between history and memory, and shows us how a postgeneration writer imagines and characterizes the Malayan Chinese of the 1940s, on the other hand the novel makes clear the risks Aw faces in attempting to revisit the now-absent past of his homeland. Writing about wartime Malaya outside Malaysia is, for this diasporic Malaysian Anglophone novelist, all about the politics of "post"ness in the senses of both postcolonialism and postmemory.

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Tash Aw set off on his transnational journey at a very young age. He was born to Chinese Malaysian parents in Taipei in 1971 but completed his high school education in Malaysia. After earning a law degree from the University of Cambridge, he worked as a lawyer in London for four years and took a creative writing course at the University of East Anglia. He is now a novelist by profession and travels back and forth between London, Malaysia, and Singapore. Reflections on immigration, identity politics, hybridity, and colonialism and its aftermath characterize his three novels so far, which include *The Harmony Silk Factory* (2005), *Map of the Invisible World* (2009), and *Five Star Billionaire* (2013).

Published outside Malaysia, *The Harmony Silk Factory* contributed to the flourishing of diasporic Malaysian Anglophone literature.<sup>1</sup> It deals with the traumatic period of Malaya's occupation by the Japanese during the Pacific War.<sup>2</sup> The novel's abundant references to the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) hardly discourage Western readers from reading it. In fact, this novel was long-listed for the Man Booker Prize in 2005, and won the 2005 Whitbread First Novel Award and the 2006 Commonwealth Writers' Prize for South East Asia and the South Pacific Region as Best First Book for his artistry in storytelling. Despite telling a story about a "Chinaman" in Malaya, *Harmony* refuses to reinforce Oriental exoticness. More than once Aw has said in interviews that he is attempting to regain the right to speak and to tell the true story of wartime Malay(si)a over against Somerset Maugham's short stories about "exotic Malaya."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Harmony Silk Factory* is hereafter referred to as *Harmony*. Beginning from the early 21st century, several novels about Malaysia by writers of Chinese descent have been published outside Malaysia. The diasporic Malaysian Anglophone literature on Malaysia includes Aw's three novels, Tan Twan Eng's *The Gift of Rain* (2007) and *The Garden of Evening Mists* (2012), and Madeleine Thien's *Certainty* (2006).

<sup>2</sup> Malaya gained her independence from the British on August 31, 1957. The term Malaya refers to the Federation of Malaya, which included nine Malay states and two former British Straits Settlements, Penang and Malacca. Before 1957, according to Wang Gungwu, "Malaya often referred to both the Federation and the colony of Singapore" (1). In 1963, the Federation of Malaya was joined by the Borneo states (namely, Sabah and Sarawak) and Singapore to form a larger federation—Malaysia. After the establishment of Malaysia, the States in the Malay Peninsula (namely Johore, Kedah, Kelantan, Malacca, Negeri Sembilan, Pahang, Penang, Perak, Perlis, Selangor and Terengganu) have usually been referred to as West Malaysia.

<sup>3</sup> Behind this anti-Orientalist ambition lies the greater ambition of writing a revisionist history. Aw came to the 2012 Taipei International Book Exhibition where he had an interview with the editors of EsLite Books. He said: "I have always been very conscious of the colonial history of Malaysia. It was written and interpreted by foreign colonizers; the reading experience was engaged in a sense of foreignness. Thus young Malaysians do not well understand the real history of Malaysia. I want to regain the right to speak and rewrite our own history" (Editorial board; translation mine).

The novel is composed of three parts, each of which partially narrates the life of the central but absent character, Lim Seng Chin/Johnny Lim, explaining how Lim, a tin miner and later an escaped convict, becomes a local tycoon in the little town of Kampar, Malaysia in the 1940s. The first part of the novel begins with Jasper, Johnny's only child, introducing us to his father's Harmony Silk Factory. As the first narrator, Jasper expresses his resentment of his father by showing how this shop house was no more than a cover for Johnny's "illegal businesses" (3). He goes on to accuse his father of being "a liar, a cheat, a traitor and a skirt-chaser" (4). To ensure the credibility of his version of Johnny's story, Jasper maintains that he has done his research based on government publications and newspapers. In accordance with the official perspective, Jasper's narrative suggests that Johnny had been an informer and a traitor during the Japanese invasion of Malaya, and had made a fortune through smuggling.

The second part of the novel is Snow Soong's diary, which records how she met and married Johnny and tells the story of their sinister honeymoon with a Japanese professor and two Englishmen in Seven Maiden Islands. Coming from a rich Anglophile Chinese family, Snow views Johnny as a very different kind of Malayan Chinese—quiet, docile and coming from nowhere, lacking both a family and a history. From Snow's perspective, Johnny seemed a part of wild nature, close to the jungles and the rain. She recalled how when she first saw him she was attracted by his skin that "spoke of a life exposed to the sun and the rain," and by his scent "of earth and wet leaves" (146). In the novel's last part Peter Wormwood, Johnny's British confidant, provides us with still another version of Johnny. Drawn by the tropical Far East, Peter develops a sense of brotherhood with Johnny; he, rather than Johnny's own family members, becomes the voice of Johnny's conscience and recounts the facts of the murder that took place in Seven Maiden Islands. The narrative inconsistencies of the three parts allow for diverse images and evaluations of Johnny. Through these complex (re)appraisals of the character Johnny, readers are brought back to a 1940s Malaysia torn by the forces of the British, Japanese and Chinese empires.

*Harmony* is set in approximately 1997, when 55-year-old Jasper comes home to attend the funeral of his father Johnny, who had passed away at the age of 77. Having left the Harmony Silk Factory at the age of 18, Jasper is forced by his father's death to return after nearly four decades to a place he had long

despised. His return prompts him to reawaken long-repressed memories, and he goes on to disclose to readers what he believes to be the real story of Johnny. In effect, then, Jasper's own narrative starts with the reconstruction of the absent father. The identity of this long-absent "Father" remains ambiguous, as does the question as to whether Johnny is Jasper's biological father.

This essay will suggest that Tash Aw's characterization of Johnny as a member of the Malayan Communist Party and as an absent father can be read as an allegory of the repressed memory of the Malayan communists, who cooperated with the British to resist the Japanese invasion but ended up being "betrayed" by the British government and later by the Malaysian government. The Malayan communists were violently oppressed, especially during the period of the State of Emergency from 1948 to 1960, and talking about them was taboo. A "normal" history of Malaysia could not include a "positive" evaluation of the Malayan communists.

Relying then only on what Marianne Hirsch calls "postmemory," Jasper learns about the period of the Japanese Occupation through archival resources. His accusations of his father demonstrate how the historical event is only partially remembered by the one who was not there. This discussion of the novel will emphasize how *Harmony* underscores the discrepancy between history and memory, showing us how a postgeneration writer imagines and characterizes the Malayan Chinese of the 1940s, while also making clear the challenge Aw faces in revisiting the past of his homeland from an external perspective. Writing about wartime Malaya outside Malaysia is, for a postgenerational diasporic Malaysian Anglophone novelist, all about the politics of "post"ness in the sense of postcolonialism as well as postmemory.

## **I. The Story of an Absent Father**

The metaphor of the absent father in *Harmony* includes three meanings: the death of Johnny, the muffled Malayan communists, and the uncertainty regarding Jasper's biological father. In addition to denoting the death of a witness to the trauma of the Japanese invasion of Malaya, Johnny's death has a more profound meaning with regard to his character. As a former Malayan communist, Johnny connects Jasper to a period of turbulence that he has been absent from. While the method Jasper uses to dig out the truth about Johnny relies on official documents, the way Tash Aw discloses Johnny's secret—by juxtaposing the other two versions of the "truth" about Johnny with Jasper's

version—allows readers to see how his character and his identity as a Malayan communist can be portrayed in diverse ways by narrators with different ethnic backgrounds, social statuses and genders. Aw mentions in an interview that he has been influenced by the narrative techniques of Gustave Flaubert, William Faulkner, and Vladimir Nabokov (Tucker 4-5). As many reviewers have noted, the narrative strategy in *Harmony* succeeds in presenting multiple voices and perspectives that give us a very different Malayan story from that found in Maugham's fiction, where white people are drinking gin while those of other colors are busy with their businesses on the tropical Malay Peninsula (Mukherjee; Sethi; Nayar; Hickling; Lee).

Jasper's side of the story is further divided into ten sections with an "Introduction" and a "Conclusion." In terms of the form, his narrative reads like a research paper, "biography," and "historical document" (Chen 6, 10; translation mine). The eight chapters in the middle describe how Johnny caused the death of the Darby mine's manager, became a fugitive and a communist, betrayed his comrades, and eventually became the rich owner of a silk factory. Only in the "Conclusion" do readers realize why Jasper said "[n]ow is a good time to tell [Johnny's] story" (6). Jasper's account of Johnny's life is made possible only after Johnny's death because while one is alive, one is living—not narrating—one's life. The representation of one's entire life can only take place after the closure of that life.

Returning to Johnny's shop house, which "was the most notorious establishment in the country" but is now "empty and silent and dusty," Jasper recalls what Johnny used to say: "Death erases all traces" (4). "[A]ll memories of lives that once existed" are erased "completely and forever," as the shop house now "stands empty and silent and dusty" (4). This shop house embodies the legacy of its owner, a metonymy of Johnny. Both are embedded with anecdotes and mysteries. Paradoxical as it may seem, it is because death erases all traces that the action of retracing is made possible. Johnny's death deprived him of the possibility of self-defense or self-affirmation; it annulled the possibility of any truthful account of the traces he left behind, even his own version of his story. Using three narrators to tell this story allows room for interpretation on the reader's part. The fact that Johnny cannot rise from the grave to verify or expose the rumors and myths in a sense enables his son to retrace and to engage himself in Johnny's past, and thus to participate in passing

on the collective memory of the Japanese Occupation by supplementing it with an individual memory.

Jasper says that “the revelation of this truth” of Johnny’s life brought him “a measure of calm” (6). All his life Jasper has sought for peace, and the ten-chapter research treatise on his father’s “terrible past” is what he believes to be the truth. Passing on this truth gives him peace. Although Jasper never hides his contempt for his father, his narrative can be read as an alternative form of eulogy for Johnny. By looking into “every single article in every book, newspaper and magazine that mentions [his] father,” Jasper retraces Johnny’s early life, especially his deeds before and after the Japanese invasion of Malaya (6). Jasper’s search for his father’s true story (his history) is a projection of Aw’s own return to the historical event through postmemory, as both their routes to the past are based on books and archives.<sup>4</sup> However, they are different in that Jasper believes in the “true story” presented in the documents he consults, while Aw uses Jasper to question such representations of history.

In the eyes of Jasper, Johnny was a rascal, a smuggler of “opium and heroin and Hennessy XO” (4), and worse still a “traitor” (114). He emphasizes that the “True Story” of the infamous Johnny comes from his several years of “sitting in libraries and government offices” (6). Jasper bases his credibility on the officially-approved archives found in government offices and state-run institutions such as libraries. However, while he tries to convince his readers of the truth of his story, he confesses: “As far as it is possible, I have constructed a clear and complete picture of the events surrounding my father’s terrible past. . . . [W]e all know that the retelling of history can never be perfect, especially when the piecing together of the story has been done by a person with as modest an intellect as myself” (6). Here Jasper implies that telling a story is no different from retelling history.

However, the term “story” may have two different meanings. A story may be a tale or legend, which can be fictitious or may simply be one’s own account of an event as what we call *shuofa* [說法] in Chinese. It may also be a chronicle, a written record of a series of events. Jasper is apparently inclined toward the latter view: he is not just telling a story but “retelling history” where this history is also his own story. However, when juxtaposed with Snow’s and Peter’s

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<sup>4</sup> Aw spent two years researching the history of World War II in the British Library before writing *Harmony*.

stories of Johnny, Jasper's story is no longer what he believes to be the retelling of history, but more like his own personal account [說法 (*shuofa*)] of past events or his own 故事 (*gushi*) involving Johnny.<sup>5</sup> The "True Story" of Johnny is in fact Jasper's own true account (insofar as he believes it) of Johnny rather than the actual series of Johnny's real-life events.

As far as Jasper is concerned, his story is the truth, regardless of other villagers' accounts of Johnny. Over against what the son calls the "rumors" about the heroic deeds of his father, who "miraculously escaped the Japanese ambush by fighting his way through a cordon of soldiers" or "tried to use his connections to prevent the massacre" (112), Jasper's story makes it clear that Johnny betrayed his country and comrades by cooperating with the Japanese soldiers and setting a trap. As a consequence, dozens of his communist comrades were either killed on the spot or arrested and then executed (112-13). Indeed Jasper insists that:

Only I among all these people know the truth. I have had the help of books, official records, memoirs; I have history on my side. If the poor uneducated people of the valley knew what I knew, Johnny's life would have turned out very different. (113)

Jasper is convinced of a version of history that the colonizers, the British or the Japanese, want their subjects to remember. He relies on written archives to retrace these past events, but ignores the fact that no representation can be free from ideology.

The image of Johnny shaped by the official archives reinforces Jasper's bias against him, while Jasper's resentment in return solidifies the credibility of the national archives. As the novel unfolds, we know that there was never much interaction between Jasper and Johnny. What Jasper remembers about Johnny as a kid is the latter's dirty business, which reinforces his distrust of his father. Jasper recalls that from his upstairs window, he "saw everything unfold" (4). However, it is doubtful that he really saw it. As the son says, "[w]ithout Father ever saying anything to me, I knew, more or less, what he was up to and who he was with. It wasn't difficult to *tell*" (4; emphasis added).

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<sup>5</sup> Translated into Chinese, "story" is 故事 (*gushi*); 故 (*gu*) as an adjective means "past" and 事 (*shi*) means "the event." "Story" in Chinese also means fictitious narrative. Thus *gushi* can mean not only "fictitious narrative" but also—which may seem a contradiction in terms—"past event."

The smuggling of opium and heroin was not something he saw but something he knew must be his father's business. Not by seeing it but rather by eavesdropping, he also knew that Johnny had illegally traded in diamonds with a Thai general. Or rather, even the fact of his eavesdropping is questionable because Jasper "could hear nothing except the faint clinking of glasses and the low, muffled rumble" (5). Before he had consulted any official records about Johnny, Jasper already believed he was untrustworthy. The son believes what he wants to believe, and sees what he wants to see in the official records, in which Johnny is an absent father woven into the national discourse.

## II. In the Name of the Nation

Johnny's behavior is filtered and represented through colonial discourse. Eddie Tay accurately points out that "the colonial text becomes a text of authority that shapes Jasper's narrative" (135). Tay compares the colonial stereotype of the Chinese in Florence Caddy's *To Siam and Malaya* with the image of Johnny. Compared with Caddy's representation of the Chinese as "a mass of undifferentiated bodies at work" (Tay 135), Jasper's representation of Johnny is "typical of the life of a small-village peasant" whose parents were "labourers of southern Chinese origin who had been transported to Malaya by the British in the late nineteenth century to work in the mines" (7, 10). Here the image of Chinese immigrants is constructed by characterizing them as manual laborers.

From Jasper's second chapter, "The True Story of the Infamous Chinaman Called Johnny (Early Years)," to his eighth chapter "How Johnny Became a God—In the Eyes of Some," we know that after Johnny escaped from the mine, he worked for Tiger Tan but later took over Tiger's business and the leadership of the MCP (dominated mainly by overseas Chinese communists). Jasper's narrative reiterates a stereotype, as Tay observes: "When a Chinese individual from a rural peasant background becomes a singularly prosperous and worldly merchant, there is a suggestion that his wealth and status were most likely to have been obtained through unscrupulous means" (Tay 135). Indeed, Johnny's fortune was made illegally, and he became a communist not because of his patriotic ambition to protect Malaya but because communists "offered Johnny more than an ideology; they offered a safe place to sleep, simple food and a little money" (36). In Tay's words, "the colonial subject is stripped of

ideological agency” (136). What Johnny did was simply to follow his animal instinct to survive.

The novel’s central trope of the absent father also refers to the status of the muffled Malayan communists. Leftist activities are essentially about class struggle; however, in Malaya they were conflated with the anti-colonialism that pre-existed the Pacific War. After Japan’s defeat and the return to British rule, communism became a racial marker attached to the ethnic Chinese. Before the Japanese invasion, British imperialism had strengthened its hold on Malaya by jailing or banishing to China the suspected communists, who were mainly of Chinese descent. However, during the Japanese Occupation of Malaya, the British army cooperated with the MCP, providing the MCP’s comrades—the Malayan People’s Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA) which was composed mainly of Chinese, a few Malays, and even fewer ethnic Indians—with the weapons and training necessary to fight the Japanese army.<sup>6</sup>

Nonetheless, after the surrender of the Japanese in September of 1945, the strategic cooperation between the British and the MCP came to a close. In 1948, British imperialist power was once again suppressing the MCP-derived Malayan People’s Anti-British Army and the Malayan National Liberation Army (formerly known as MPAJA), and declared that Malaya was in a State of Emergency. During the Malayan Emergency of 1948-60, the war became a fight against the ethnic Chinese, even though the Malayan National Liberation Army was composed of Malays and Indians as well.<sup>7</sup>

As some critics have pointed out, Johnny may represent the historical figure Lai Teck.<sup>8</sup> His role as a traitor and double agent further reinforces the stereotype that diasporic people lack a sense of loyalty. “Chinaman,” embodied by Johnny, is seen as being untrustworthy, one who would exchange his comrade’s life for protection from the Japanese. Jasper finds in the course of his research that Johnny curried favor with the Japanese by organizing “the Japanese-Malayan Peace Monument” and “smok[ing] cigars with Japanese generals” (113). The tendency not to trust Chinese immigrants is further

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<sup>6</sup> See more details in Chin Peng’s *My Side of History*.

<sup>7</sup> See more historical details on the Japanese Occupation, and on the cooperation and conflicts between the British and the Malayan Communist Party, in Joseph Kennedy’s *A History of Malaya*.

<sup>8</sup> Critics have noted that part of Johnny’s story is based on the story of a real-life figure, Lai Teck (Lee 11; Sim 298), a triple agent who served as the Secretary-General of the MCP from 1939-1947 and betrayed his comrades to the Japanese. For more details on Lai Teck, see Leon Comber’s “‘Traitor of all Traitors’ —Secret Agent Extraordinaire: Lai Teck, Secretary-General, Communist Party of Malaya (1939-1947).”

transformed into a fear, and then the suppression, of the ethnic Chinese in Malaya. Thus, although Malaya was made up of diverse ethnic communities (Malay, Chinese, and Indian), only the ethnic Chinese seemed to be a problem and were viewed as being hostile to the British.

The blaming of the insurgency on the Chinese was in fact based upon a simplified syllogism: the Malayan communist is a terrorist, the Malayan communist is an ethnic Chinese, thus all ethnic Chinese are terrorists.<sup>9</sup> This mindset was reinforced not only through news clips or documentaries made by the colonial government during the State of Emergency from 1948 to 1960, but also by the National Monument erected by the Malaysian government in 1966. For example, in a 1952 newsreel found on YouTube the caption reads: “The Fight Against an Unseen Enemy.”<sup>10</sup> Here we see how the communist guerrillas in the jungle were the enemies of the British managers of rubber plantations.

In the newsreel, communists are described as terrorists who were responsible for the murder of more than 2,000 civilians. This may be just one obsolete bit of footage from archives that will go largely unnoticed on YouTube, but the monument is still a tourist site in Kuala Lumpur. It was built in honor of those killed in the fight against the Malayan communists. The contrast between heroes and villains is accentuated by the epigraph on the monument: “Dedicated to the heroic fighters in the cause of peace and freedom.” Here the bronze sculpture portrays valiant soldiers waving the flag of Malaysia, showing a contrast to the statues of dead bodies piled up beneath them. The latter are the communist rebels who destroyed “peace and freedom.” Making explicit the connection between the Malayan communists and terrorism, these two examples show how the former are depicted negatively in the official version of Malaysian history. Jasper’s authority as a narrator over what he is narrating, the story of the dead communist Johnny may thus be read allegorically as a national discourse that suppresses the otherwise subversive voice of the Malayan communists.

Despite his reliance on the national discourse to support his own authority, his own bond with the grand narrative of the nation, Jasper remains uncertain of his own ethnic identity. His facial features and skin color are described as being not typically Chinese. His features are “angular, his nose “strangely large

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<sup>9</sup> For more details about the racialization of the Malayan Communist Party as a Chinese party, please refer to *Qingshan bulao: Magong de licheng (The Mountain Still Young: The History of Malayan Communists)*.

<sup>10</sup> This news clip can be watched on: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oAO9xqXZ6BQ>

and sharp,” and the color of his skin is “[n]ot brown, not yellow, not white” (9, 17). Jasper was even told that he had “the look of a Japanese prince” (7). Brown, yellow, and white are the skin colors of the Malay, the Chinese/Japanese and the British.<sup>11</sup> Although late in the novel Peter implies that Jasper is his son, readers are never definitely told that this is the case. On the contrary, the identity of Jasper’s biological father remains ambiguous, as is also suggested by the ambiguity of his skin color.

As a matter of fact, Jasper’s birthday also has an allegorical significance. He was born on September 1, 1942, when the British, Japanese and Chinese were competing with each other in Malaya. Although ostensibly the British army had retreated, they were secretly cooperating with the MCP guerrillas who were mainly ethnic Chinese and were fighting the Japanese troops. Thus Jasper’s birth can symbolize the hybrid Malaysian culture with its mixture of Malay, Chinese, Japanese and British elements. In fact any one of these taken alone cannot be said to embody the authentic Malaysian culture, and Jasper’s hybrid identity corresponds to the novel’s narrative strategy of multiple perspectives which, as Sharmani Patricia Gabriel observes, “undermines the notion of authentic origins” (1220).

However, despite the suggestion of hybrid origins, Jasper’s account of Johnny is already based on a biased version of the official text; Johnny’s identity as an immigrant, outsider, and communist is itself part of a larger national prejudice.<sup>12</sup> In the name of the nation of Malaysia, Johnny was alienated from his son Jasper because he was an untrustworthy communist according to the image of him found in the official documents and newspapers. In the name of Japan, the head of Japanese intelligence, Kunichika, reconnoitered Malaya for further penetration. The scenario that he would have raped Snow if Peter had not been there to intervene, could be allegorically read as the wrestling between Japan and Britain in Malaya. Given that we cannot be sure of which of these three—Johnny, Kunichika, and Peter—is Jasper’s biological father, we may regard each of them as both his father and not his father.

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<sup>11</sup> Jasper’s grandfather, TK Soong, was born to a Nyonya, a mixed-blood woman born to a Chinese father and a Malay mother. Since Jasper is a descendant of Peranakan, a Baba, it is possible that his skin could be light brown.

<sup>12</sup> As for the label “outsiders” that the ethnic Chinese have been bearing, see more details in Sharmani Patricia Gabriel’s essay. She traces the policies that have been executed in Malay(sia) to show that the attribution of the term “outsiders” to Chinese immigrants and their descendants in Malay(sia) is based on the “exclusionary assumptions that underlie the construction of the ‘national’ [identity]” (1212).

Although brought up by Johnny, Jasper never feels very close to him and even despises him. His other possible fathers—Peter and Kunichika—have been largely absent from his life. This ambiguous or indeed paradoxical status of these three (non-) fathers reinforces the complexity and ambiguity of the national allegory, that is, the ambiguity of the question as to who is Malaysia's true national father? Peter, Johnny, and Kunichika respectively represent the lingering influences of British colonialism, the taking root of ethnic Chinese in Malaysia, and the traumatic past of the Japanese Occupation. This portrayal of Malaysia reflects how Aw, being a contemporary diasporic Malaysian Chinese writer, conceptualizes Malaysia's national identity.

### III. Postmemory

The term “absent presence” clearly has a double meaning and is perhaps itself a paradox. In the first place absent presence may mean invisible presence: positive portrayals of Malayan communists are largely absent from Malaysia's officially-acknowledged version of history because of all the anti-communist-terrorist propaganda.<sup>13</sup> That is to say, here “being absent” may also be read as a form of “presence” because it already raises the question of presence: all that has once been present to us comes to us only in a state of “postness.” What is absent must have already been absent; what we now see as the present is what “remains” from what we can never have immediate access to. The historical period that Jasper must always remain absent from is, to use Marianne Hirsch's term, Jasper's postmemory. Yet here Hirsch puts more stress on the temporal marker “post” than on “memory.” Paradoxically, it is only through the impossibility of living through the survivors' memory that the postgeneration's postmemory is made possible.

As a child of Holocaust survivors, Hirsch has devoted herself to studying the intergenerational transmission of trauma. She is cautious about using the term memory, arguing that memory only belongs to those who experienced the trauma, so that it is unethical for those who did not encounter a traumatic event to claim that trauma as something they remember. Thus, she distinguishes the memory of survivors from the postmemory of the survivors' children. Hirsch

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<sup>13</sup> As Ngoi Guat Peng points out in her paper on Malay communists, for a long time members of the MCP have been “labeled as ‘traitors’ or ‘terrorists,’” and the communist party has been generally thought of as a group of barbarians, gangsters and villains (68). This demonizing of the Malayan communists has shaped people's historical understanding of the Party (68).

stresses, in her idea of memory, the dynamics of relationships rather than a static position. Thus postmemory “describes the *relationship* that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they ‘remember’ only by means of stories, images” (5; emphasis mine). Jasper in *Harmony* exemplifies a postgenerational son’s quest for a memory that is not his own. Alienated from Johnny, he learns to know his “absent” father and the traumatic past of the Japanese invasion from official documents, his mother’s diary, and a British man’s memoir.

In response to Eva Hoffman’s distinction between “the literal second generation in particular” and “the postgeneration as a whole” (187), Hirsch further divides postmemory into familial postmemory and affiliative postmemory. For her, the familial postmemory of traumatic experiences is part of the intergenerational transmission from parents to children. However, she also notes that this transmission may malfunction because survivor families are often fractured by alienation, the alienation between traumatized parents who returned home from the camps and traumatized children who survived in hiding. The ineffectiveness of the transmission could also be because the children will have a better command than the parents of the language of a new host country where survivor families have sought refuge.

Thus, although affiliative postmemory may be seen as a form of “intragenerational horizontal identification” based on a “generational connection with the literal second generation,” it is actually “no more than an extension of the loosened familial structure occasioned by war and persecution” (Hirsch 36). From this perspective, Jasper in *Harmony* presents us with a malfunctioning familial postmemory given that Snow died during labor, and Jasper hates his father Johnny. Hence, while we might have expected Jasper’s postmemory of the war to be transmitted within the familial network, it is actually constructed through a network of affiliation as Jasper gradually learns about Johnny and his role during the war from secondary sources.

Hirsch’s conception of how we may represent the Holocaust can also be applied to our view of the relationship between Aw and his novel, inasmuch as both authors are concerned about the genocide that occurred during their parents’ lifetimes. Aw is regarded as part of the postgeneration of the Japanese Occupation which again can be seen in terms of affiliative postmemory, and the character of Jasper in *Harmony* represents the postgeneration’s connection to the past, which is mediated by “imaginative investments, projection, and

creation” (Hirsch 5). The projection and/or creation of the war in *Harmony* are closely bound up with the theme of betrayal—Johnny’s betrayal of his comrades, Jasper’s of Johnny, Peter’s of Johnny, and Snow’s of Johnny. Betrayal is not only a major theme of this novel but also may remind us of the novel’s uncomfortable reception by its local Malaysian readers.

#### IV. The Problem of Representation

Although *Harmony* challenges the authority of the official version of history, its structure has led some critics to say that Aw is catering to his British readership. In spite of the discrepancies between and among the three parts of the novel, the Englishman Peter’s own narrative appears to be the solution to the riddles posed in the other two parts. For example, if Peter did not return Snow’s diary to Jasper, the latter could not see his mother’s side of story. In other words, Peter is the only character who holds the key to the past. Anna Godbersen notes the contradiction between the novel’s third part, narrated by Peter, and the brief introduction to *Harmony* found on the jacket: “an insider’s view of Malaysia, a counterpoint to the colonial literature of Conrad and Maugham.” She asserts: “Strangely enough, it is the third part . . . that feels the most atmospheric, and the most alive. Peter’s narrative makes the other two, occasionally plodding, sections work” (Godbersen). Thus, Peter’s narrative is “a narrative of revelation” (Tay 137). Peter, as Pauline Newton observes, “holds the reins of authority” (173).

As the last narrator, in the end Peter sits singing in a retirement home, asking himself: “Dove sono i bei momenti? [Where are the lovely moments?]” (362). This ending triggers our doubts, leading us to wonder if the novel is really to be read as an old Englishman’s recollections of wartime Malaya rather than as a Chinese Malaysian’s revision of Malayan history. If Aw partly succeeds in his attempt to regain the right to speak and to rewrite history through a novel, he also partly fails. Perhaps the popularity of *Harmony* in Britain suggests that Aw has succeeded in voicing his view of Malayan history. As the author mentioned in an interview: “British readers . . . were very surprised at the two novels [*Harmony*, and *The Map of the Invisible World*]. . . . The British were very fond of Maugham’s representation of Malaysia. They felt unfamiliar with the depiction of Malaysia in my novel because it differed so much from what they had imagined” (Shih; translation mine). However, *Harmony* also presents in the end a former colonizer’s nostalgia for the good old days.

In other words, *Harmony* has not been received in Malaysia as positively as it has been received in Britain. As Yu-cheng Lee points out, the geographical “dislocation” of the Cameron Highlands and Kampar in the novel arouses local readers’ doubts about Aw’s intended readers (12). Critics such as Moy Sook Chin and Eddie Tay have proposed that Aw’s intended readers are those living outside Malaysia and Singapore. Moy comments in her column in *Eye Asia*, the popular magazine of Sin Chew Media Corporation Berhad:

Aw was born in Taipei probably because his parents had studied in Taiwan. Before long, they returned to Malaysia and settled down until Aw finished his secondary education. Aw went to Britain for a degree in Law and practiced law after graduation. From then on, he settled down there, and probably won’t come back. With his background, even if his enthusiastic fatherland is willing to welcome and embrace him, is he willing to return to his fatherland—to the “One Malaysia,” which denies non-Malay works the status of “national literature”? (72; my translation).

Moy’s comments on Aw pinpoint a dilemma that Anglophone Malaysian writers need to face: whether or not their works are acknowledged or accepted is largely determined by the language they choose to write them in. Aw, who speaks fluent “Oxford English,” feels more comfortable writing in English than in Chinese or Malay, just as his works are more likely to be found in English-language bookstores outside of Malaysia, China or Taiwan.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to identifying Aw’s novels as being “directed at a community of readers located primarily in Anglo-American locales,” Tay criticizes Aw for his reiterating of Orientalism (144). Here Tay perceives a problem that is internal to the design of “incommensurable” narratives. He argues that when dealing with a riddle whose answer lies between or among three unreliable narrators, readers are assigned a position of omniscience inasmuch as they are able to listen to all three versions of the story. He reminds us: “We are not implicated in the historical reconstructions and amnesias. Rather, we are

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<sup>14</sup> However, as this novel was nominated for and winning some well-known literary prizes, it has been translated into both simplified and traditional Chinese, and published in China and Taiwan. Besides *Harmony*, Aw’s other works, *Map of the Invisible World* and *Five Star Billionaire*, have also been translated into Chinese and published in Taiwan.

*detached from* this assemblage of fictionalized archives, *self-satisfied* in our knowing position as readers of the assemblage” (138; emphasis added).

The point is that each section of Aw’s novel is partially factual and thus equally valid. Thus, unlike an individual narrator who only sees part of the whole, readers are allowed to approach all three sections, piece together the clues as well as the inconsistencies, and therefore know more than each narrator can know individually. As a result, although “Malaya may have been rendered unhomely, unfamiliar, and unknowable,” readers in this omniscient position are paradoxically able to read and grasp its unreadability (Tay 138). It is exactly because readers can read this unknowable Malaya that it “becomes the ‘inscrutable East’ that is familiar in the discourse of Orientalism” (Tay 138). This “inscrutable East” is evoked to solicit readers in search of the antique and the exotic. Echoing Tay’s observation is Moy’s conclusion that “after turning 362 pages, we found that *The Harmony Silk Factory* is another Rashōmon, only at a much lower level” (72; translation mine).

However, Tay may seem to be jumping to his conclusions when criticizing Aw for reimprinting Orientalism, because his inferences to a large extent depend on readers’ response to the novel. He assumes that readers will be able to identify the discrepancies between and among the narratives and reach the definite conclusion that Johnny is a victim rather than a villain. However, Peter’s side of the story about Johnny is clearly only a limited perspective. In defense of Aw, we could say that his intention is to show us how a given part of history is presented to us rather than what that history actually is. Any definite representation of the past needs to be challenged. Aw indeed succeeds in reminding his readers to stay alert to the limited perspective, and thus limited reliability, of any representation of history.

In *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Hayden White argues that no distinct boundary exists between history and literature. He claims that the way 19th-century historians approached history was not as objective and factual as they had assumed it to be. These historians were more like readers interpreting a narrative, readers who were finding metaphor, metonymy, satire, and synecdoche in a historical narrative which they thought they were taking as factual. White views these historical works as “a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse that purports to be a model, or icon, of past structures and processes in the interest of *explaining what they were by representing them*” (2; emphasis in orig.).

Furthermore, White maintains that the reason historians or philosophers of history become the model for historical representation and conceptualization “does not depend upon the nature of the ‘data’ they used to support their generalizations or the theories they invoked to explain them; it depends rather upon the consistency, coherence, and illuminative power of their respective visions of the historical field” (4). Historians, like novelists, select and combine various historical events to create their histories. As White says, “the historian is to explain the past by ‘finding,’ ‘identifying,’ or ‘uncovering’ the ‘stories’ that lie buried in chronicles; and that the difference between ‘history’ and ‘fiction’ resides in the fact that the historian ‘finds’ his stories, whereas the fiction writer ‘invents’ his” (6). Combining Tay’s and White’s observations, we may look upon *Harmony* as one sort of literary embodiment of White’s metahistory. The task of the reader is then like that of the historian, and vice versa.

Inspired by Tay and White, we can sense an undercurrent whirling beneath the well-fabricated web of various truths. Aw’s arrangement of his characters both represents and reiterates the division of economic activities under British control of colonial Malaya. Each of the three ethnic communities was assigned specific economic tasks. The Chinese were assigned the running of small businesses and mining, the Indians were sent to the rubber plantations, and the Malays were responsible for agriculture. Johnny’s transformation from a tin miner to the boss of a silk factory and his encounter with the Malay woman peddling fruit may also represent this division of ethnic groups under British rule. This arrangement can be seen as Johnny’s actual (historical, cultural, biographical) background or situation, but it also shows this novel’s limitations on representing the multiracial situation in Malaya. Not having many significant interactions with the other characters, this Malay woman exists just for making the setting of a story in Malaya more “authentic.”

## **V. Postgeneration and the Ethics of Representation**

Hirsch’s distinction between postmemory and memory is closely tied to her concern about the ethics of representation: memory cannot be duplicated; it can only be transformed into postmemory through imagination, projection, and creation. Hirsch focuses on a family photo album as the medium for connecting postgenerations with past generations, and uses a photograph of her parents taken during World War II to exemplify the performative characteristic of

photographs in general. She reflects: “No doubt, our determination to magnify and enhance the picture—to zoom in, blow up, sharpen—reveals more about our own projections and appropriations than about life in wartime Greater Romania. . . . [T]his picture’s indexicality is more performative—based on the viewer’s needs and desires—than factual” (Hirsch 60-61). Although she holds that “photography has functioned as one of the principal forms mediating the memory of [the Holocaust]” (Hirsch 61), she cares less about photographs as visual evidence than about their emotional connection with their viewers. Looking at archival photographs from the Holocaust, she urges postgenerations to search for “points of memory”—an image I would associate with Roland Barthes’ reference to *punctum*—“supplementing the accounts of historians and the words of witnesses, and signaling a visceral, material, and affective connection to the past” (Hirsch 61). In Hirsch’s model of postmemory, affective connection is the ethical core, as we see with the connection between her discussion of “points of memory” and Barthes’ idea of photography.

In *Camera Lucida* Barthes regards “ça-a-été [that-has-been]” as the core of a photograph (77). When the camera shutter clicks, the existence of the photographed object at that moment and in that place can be ascertained. A photograph enables the object to stay “in” that particular moment as well as in that particular space, as if it has always been there, and so also allows the viewer to be connected to it. However, Barthes’ reflection on the “that-has-been” of the photograph originates from his mourning for his beloved mother. The viewer’s emotional attachment or response to the photographed object is fundamental to Barthes’ analysis of the photograph.

If photographs are supposed to preserve family memories, then in *Harmony* the photo album fails to function. Inside Johnny’s tin box of secrets, Jasper found only one picture of Snow. It was torn in half, showing just Johnny and Snow against the backdrop of a ruined building. On Snow’s shoulder rests a man’s hand with a gold ring on his little finger. However, Jasper has no affective connection to his parents as he has alienated himself from Johnny and has not known his mother’s love since he was born. Jasper cannot identify the location of the photo. As he said: “Throughout the years I have looked at hundreds of books on ruins: houses, palaces, temples; in this country and abroad. Not one resembled the place in the photo. I do not know where it is. Perhaps it does not even exist” (80). This photo makes no affective connection with him and signifies nothing for him, except for the fact that Johnny once

stood by Snow. Without Peter's revelation of the photo's origin, its indexicality is only factual rather than performative. The intergenerational transmission of memory thus depends on Peter, the potential biological father of Jasper, rather than Johnny.

If the affective connection to the past is bridged by Peter rather than spontaneously triggered off inside Jasper, undoubtedly its Malaysian readers will find *Harmony* to be confusing, even sometimes obscure. By "enlightening" Jasper on his family secret, the Englishman Peter seems to remind us of the long-gone colonizers. This subtext then partly explains some local Malaysian readers' dissatisfaction, as mentioned earlier, with *Harmony's* intended British readership.

## VI. Conclusion

When we study history we learn mainly about the history of those who have been in power. To challenge the official version of history, novelists may resort to personal memories and to the private domain to fill in the cracks and crevices left in the course of archiving national upheavals. It is also in this personal and private domain that we mainly will find all those emotions that are the primary stuff of novels, such as trauma, betrayal, and distrust. However, as a literary work, *Harmony* does not intend to restore actual historical scenes, nor does it try to suggest one definite view on the Malayan communists. It mainly underscores the discrepancy between history and memory by showing us how its postgeneration author imagines and characterizes the Malayan Chinese of the 1940s. Each of the three sections about Johnny is only partially told, so there is no single, clear truth; rather, readers are expected to infer the multiple truths, the multiple aspects of the historical reality, from the scattered information each narrator reveals.

Although the novel is entitled *The Harmony Silk Factory*, the factory itself is hardly mentioned in it, except at the beginning of Jasper's narrative. However, the "silk" actually denotes its relationship to the novel; the former is made of numerous strands while the latter consists of threads of narratives. Although the silk factory is named Harmony, Aw expects readers to mainly experience the disharmony in/of the fictional archives he strings together to create the novel. Through his powerful use of the experimental styles, strategies, techniques, Aw reminds readers of Walter Benjamin's point in "On the Concept of History": "The true image of the past flits by. The past can be

seized only as an image that flashes up at the moment of its recognizability, and is never seen again” (390). Its (Chinese, Malaysian, British) readers’ perception of the inconsistencies as they read *Harmony* compels them to (at least to a certain degree) create their own version of the story, one based on the “recognizability” that a reader achieves by piecing all the bits and pieces of information.

Revisionist perspectives tend to “sanctify” Malayan communists to the extent that they view them as heroic and united, serving as a counter-discourse to the historical narrative of the Malayan Communist Party’s long-term official repression. However, Aw’s novel also presents us with the dilemma (or impossibility) of trying to represent this repressed side of history, just as Johnny may be kindly evil to Snow for representing a wild husband coming from the jungles, and meanwhile be evilly kind to Peter for cooperating with the Japanese to save his family from collapsing.

Despite the criticism of local Malaysian readers, *Harmony* does succeed in creating diverse images of the earlier Malayan Chinese culture, and in showing us the complex narrative techniques which a diasporic Malaysian writer might use in trying to approach the history of Malaysia. Aw may not go into the details of the Malayan Communist Party’s organization and anti-colonial/Japanese movements, but he depicts to British readers a communist different from the colonial government’s representation of communists as bandits and terrorists. Through each narrator’s presentation of his and her memories of war, this novel reveals the significance of revisiting the silenced history and its correlation with the construction of a Chinese Malaysian’s identity.

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