National and Diasporic Identity in Shirley Geok-lin Lim's *Among the White Moon Faces* and Tash Aw's *Five Star Billionaire*

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Abstract

Anglophone Chinese diasporic literature has historically focused on the sociocultural and political implications of the movement of Chinese subjects from the Middle Kingdom to the West, in particular the United States. In this representation of the Chinese diasporic experience, China symbolises political and economic "lack," compelling many Chinese to consider looking overseas for a better life.

Malaysia-born author Shirley Lim contributes to the corpus of Anglophone Chinese diasporic literature by highlighting the significance of Southeast Asia in literary representations of the Chinese diasporic experience. In *Among the White Moon Faces*, Lim emphasises the importance of the postcolonial experience in shaping the Southeast-Asian immigrant's choice of alternative national homelands. Choosing the United States instead of Great Britain as Shirley Lim's adopted homeland carries ideological implications for the postcolonial author.

Like Shirley Lim, Taipei-born Chinese-Malaysian author Tash Aw represents Malaysia as the starting point for transnational crossings. Unlike Lim, however, Aw portrays China instead of the West as the land of promise. In *Five Star Billionaire*, Aw imagines the possibilities of Shanghai as a city representing China's economic prosperity with all the problems that attend the pursuit of capital and dreams. Malaysian subjects of Chinese descent make their way to Shanghai in pursuit of their dreams. While courage and tenacity are valorised as attributes necessary for success, they do not always produce the desired result. *Five Star Billionaire* represents the fragmented and alienated nature of individual and social being fashioned by Asian capital.

Keywords

Shirley Lim, Tash Aw, Nanyang, Shanghai, cities, diaspora

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Malaya, made familiar to a Western audience through the writings of Joseph Conrad, Anthony Burgess and Somerset Maugham, was controlled by the British from 1874 (Pangkor Treaty) to 1957.[2] These authors represented Malaya from an expatriate perspective, often focusing on the colony's tropical setting, people, customs and way of life. The reader is given not only a view of local life but also expatriate living in the Malay Peninsula. The British author's writing of Malaya invites responses from postcolonial critics who study the Orientalist implications of literary representations of the East in Victorian England, the Edwardian era, World War I and World War II. These representations offer scope for analysing the colonial perspective brought to bear on the experience of cultural difference encountered in the colonies, an experience that may result in an expatriate or colonist "going native" or deciding there is little point of contact between the peoples of Asia's primitive backwaters and the superior culture of Great Britain.

The historical backdrop of nineteenth-century and twentieth-century Malayan life is Great Britain's colonial presence in Southeast Asia, established in the Malay Peninsula through the creation of a Crown Colony (the erstwhile Straits Settlements) and establishment of protectorates. This backdrop focuses on familiar themes: the relationship between colonial authority and colonised subjects; the coming of the Chinese to work in the tin mines; World War II and the Japanese Occupation; the rise of nationalism; and the achievement of Independence. It offers space and material for representing the intertwining of race and politics in Malaysia's development as a postcolonial nation. In this history, the Malaysian of ethnic Chinese descent is a citizen who belongs to a community that traces its origins to the early coming of the Chinese to the Malay Peninsula from China.

Remembering the ancestral country is one of the defining features of the diasporic experience. Remembering the past often assumes the form of nostalgia, which can over time decrease in intensity as the diasporic subject develops an accommodative relationship with the foreign land in which he or she has settled. Remembering exists in tandem with forgetting, with leaving behind, and with abjection, affected by time's passing and by the diasporic subject's absorption into the environment of the host country.

In Chinese-American literature, an important corpus of the Anglophone Chinese diaspora, China is the overseas Chinese's originary homeland and source of ancestral culture. Central to the writings of canonical Chinese-American authors such as Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan is the diasporic theme of dislocation and assimilation, an experiential tension that is played out between first-generation and second-generation Chinese-American subjects, and between ethnic culture and American culture. For Kingston and Tan, US-born citizens of

[2] In this essay, "Malaya" refers to the federated and unfederated Malay states together with the Straits Settlements controlled by the British, while "Malaysia" refers to Malaya after Independence in 1957.

Chinese descent, gain access to Chinese history and culture through the stories of experience narrated by their parents (mothers in particular) who came to America from China.

In this literature, the Pacific Ocean not only stands as a literal expanse that separates East Asia from North America, it also metaphorises the geopolitical and cultural distance that exists between East and West, a distance often viewed through Orientalist lenses. The violent encounter between China, Great Britain and other Western powers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries draws attention to the Pacific Ocean as the vast body of water that must be crossed to reach Gold Mountain (Gum Shan) and join in the search for riches in America. The transpacific crossing from Asia to America is central to the diasporic experience of sojourning, dislocation and assimilation, one in which "claiming America" for American citizens of Chinese descent constitutes an important motif in the narrative of migration and belonging.

Concurrent with the arrival of the Chinese (primarily men) in California in the nineteenth century is the influx of migrant workers from China to work in the tin mines of Malaya, an industry which developed as the result of discovering rich tin deposits in Perak and Selangor. The coming of the early Chinese to Malaya offers an important narrative of the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia, one that has not attracted the same degree of critical attention as the literature of Chinese sojourning and settlement in the United States. One reason for this is the presence of a sustained corpus of literary works that has come to be known as Chinese-American Literature, a subset of Asian-American Literature. But Malaysia has its own diasporic perspective, distinctively exemplified, for example, in the work of Malacca-born Chinese-American author Shirley Lim, which is read often enough through the interpretative lenses of the immigrant experience in America. When we consider the writing of the Chinese diasporic experience in Malaysia, we find that Shirley Lim's literary works derive cultural significance not only from the context of the immigrant experience in the New World but also from that of the Chinese diasporic experience in Southeast Asia. These works focus on two countries not usually considered together in writings of the Chinese diasporic experience: Malaysia and the United States.

Lim's focus on Malaysia foregrounds the phenomenon of the Chinese diaspora in Nanyang. Translated as "South Seas," Nanyang is an appellative used by China to designate the geographical region to its south (Southeast Asia), favoured by would-be Chinese immigrants seeking to escape the political upheavals of nineteenth-century China. In the history of the Chinese diaspora, most of the Chinese who left China because of war, poverty, overpopulation and political instability ventured to Southeast Asia instead of to the United States or any other country (*Writing the South Seas* vii-viii). For many Chinese, Malaya promised a better life than China.

The overseas Chinese (*huáqiáo*) who settled in Nanyang were not necessarily illiterate coolies or traders and merchants. They included "intellectuals, students, teachers, journalists, writers, political reformers, and dissidents" (*Writing the South Seas* ix). The Chinese who came to British Malaya in the latter nineteenth century comprised more labourers than merchants, their aim to work in the tin mines ("Chinese Migration and Entangled Histories" 80-81). The coming of the Chinese brought them into contact with local Malays and with the British colonial presence in Southeast Asia, an encounter portrayed as tension-filled interactions between local and foreign cultures across generations in Suchen Christine Lim's novel *A Bit of Earth* (2001).

In Nanyang, the *huáqiáo* became part of the society in which they found themselves by working hard and with grit and determination. Venturing into Nanyang involved the experience of alienation and acculturation, of working out the terms of one's identity as an ethnic and cultural Other in a foreign land. Setting up diasporic communities in Southeast Asia is difficult because of racism and discrimination. In 1967, for example, a presidential decree in Indonesia, aimed at forcing "Indonesians of foreign descent" to undergo "a process of assimilation," exerted tremendous pressure on Indonesian Chinese to change their Chinese names for Indonesian ones ("Class, Race and being Indo (Eurasian)" 230).

The Chinese in post-Independence Malaysia likewise found themselves living in a country in which national identity cannot be separated from the politics of race. In Malaysia, Malay was chosen to be the national language of the country while the launching of a New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1971 favoured Malays over citizens of other races ("Linguistic Diversity: Asia"). The NEP was a state-sponsored system of affirmative action set up to improve the economic condition of the country's bumiputra ("son of the earth"). For the Chinese in Malaysia, policies such as the NEP are prejudicial and transform the country's ethnic-minority subjects into second-class citizens. According to Pue Giok Hun, Malaysia's organisation of race into categories enforces "racial identification [that] influences people's life choices and choices at the individual level, via the implementation of various socio-economic policies that advocate affirmative action along racial lines, such as in education, finance and property" ("Our Chinese" 147). Viewing Malaysia's bumiputra policy as discriminatory because it privileges one racial group over others, ethnic minority subjects find themselves pressured into engagement with the cultural politics of identity in the nation-state.

The cultural politics of race and national belonging is central to the thematic concerns of Shirley Lim's *Among the White Moon Faces* (1996). A postcolonial and feminist bildungsroman, *Among the White Moon Faces* narrates the life of its author from her early beginnings in British Malaya through her university education to her journey to the United States and American naturalisation. Lim contributes to literature of the Anglophone Chinese diaspora by identifying Malaysia (and, by

implied extension, Nanyang) as the controlling point of reference for representing the Chinese diasporic experience. As a land that facilitated the development of a major Chinese community in Southeast Asia, Malaya's transition from British rule to Independence allows for interpreting the cultural politics of home and national belonging for the ethnic minority person.

Shirley Lim begins *Among the White Moon Faces* with a portrait of her mother who is identified as a "*nonya*" (24) and who exemplifies "peranakan female power" (25). The mother is described as "a native goddess [who] presided over an extended family" (25), the centre of its worship and reverence. She remained the family's presiding genius until Lim was eight years old when she abandoned the family. Foregrounding her mother's *Peranakan* identity directs the reader to the history of the early Chinese in the Malay Archipelago. Referring to peoples of mixed Chinese and Malay/Indonesian heritage, *Peranakan* signifies the condition of racial and cultural hybridity that developed as the result of interactions between early Chinese labourers and traders and local Malays. The coming of the Nanyang Chinese to Peninsular Malaysia to work as labourers led to contact between Chinese and Malays, resulting in cultural intermingling and miscegenation. Pue Giok Hun explains that "[t]he term 'Peranakan' is a Malay/Indonesian term derived from the root word '*anak*' which means child (offspring). When circumfixed with '*per-* … *-an*', Peranakan originally referred to the womb, but eventually evolved into a metaphor that refers to local-born of non-indigenous descent" ("Our Chinese" 149).

Lim's experience of Southeast Asian history is the experience of discrimination at all levels of social and cultural life. First there is the condescension of Malaya's British masters for whom the English language is only on loan to the colonial subject. English is Great Britain's linguistic possession and it serves in the colonies to distinguish rulers from ruled. In schools and at university, the English language reminds students of Great Britain's superior culture, proudly showcased in its literature. As Thomas Babington Macaulay (in)famously declared in his *Minute on Education* (1835): "I have never found one among them [Orientalists] who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia. The intrinsic superiority of the Western literature is indeed fully admitted by those members of the committee who support the oriental plan of education" (*Minute on Education*).

As an accomplished reader of English literature, Lim found that literary works allowed her an escape to foreign worlds and cultures through the imagination. However, the more she absorbed this literature, the more she thought about its cultural significance for her as a young Chinese woman in Malaysia. Thinking about the relevance of English poets such as Wordsworth, for example, to her own culture-specific positioning, Lim arrived at the conclusion that not only is English literature the prized possession of the British Empire, but

it also functions to denigrate the writings of other peoples as inferior (174-80). And, importantly, she realised that English literature could not address the cultural and political concerns of the local and the national. For all its pleasures, English literature could not engage in conversation with her experience as a Chinese subject living in Malaysia. Lim wants to read and write literature on her own culture. For literature to be relevant to a nation, it must come from the experiences of its own people and culture.

Born and raised in British Malaya, Lim did not register a desire to visit the United Kingdom in *Among the White Moon Faces*. In this respect, Lim's memoir departs from the familiar motif of the (post)colonial subject's desire for the political and cultural centre of empire. Lim does not reveal any interest in London, the capital of the British Empire, in the way that another Chinese-Malaysian author Lee Kok Liang does. In Lee Kok Liang's semi-autobiographical novel *London Does Not Belong to Me* (2003), London attracts the postcolonial and expatriate subject. However, despite its attraction, London seems to lack the energy for which it is historically famous. For expatriate characters like the narrator and others who come to England from places as different as Ireland, Australia and the United States, London represents loneliness and tenuous relationships, offering little material for meaning-making. Unlike Lee Kok Liang's narrator who goes to London only to experience emotional dislocation and alienation in the great city, Lim resists Great Britain's gravitational pull exerted by its imperial history, choosing instead the United States because she believed its academic culture would be more accommodating of her research interests in minority and non-canonical literatures. Choosing the United States amounts to a symbolic rejection of everything that the British Empire stood for.

Lim might have interrogated the hegemonic structures of her country's British-based education, but it is mastery of the English language that gave her the advantages of symbolic and cultural capital with which to navigate the challenges of America. When she flew to the United States for her doctoral studies, she brought with her an English language proficiency that first-generation Chinese-American immigrants, portrayed in the writings of canonical Chinese-American authors Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan, did not possess. This linguistic lack made it difficult for early Chinese immigrants to assimilate into American society and culture. Possessing symbolic and cultural capital facilitates ease of transnational mobility, replacing involuntary ejection from one's birth country with the capacity to choose between national homelands.

Arriving in America and finding she had to struggle with cultural dislocation and prejudice did not stop Lim from choosing to embrace American naturalisation. One reason given by Lim for the decision to be an American citizen is the importance of bestowing on her American-born son "the privileges of a territorial self" (123), ensuring he does not experience the instabilities of diasporic subjectivity. She wants to shield her son from pressures that can

"undermine the infant primacy of an American homeland," pressures entwined with nostalgia, regret and the inescapable "consciousness of another country" (287). Expressing confidence in America's ability to afford political and social stability, Lim identifies her maternal instinct to be close to her son in the land of his birth as an important reason for her decision to become an American citizen. The United States is a country that can give her son the advantages of a stable national homeland whose ideals outweigh its many problems and shortcomings.

Despite its imperfections, which include "instances of still invidious discrimination" (339), the United States is a far more accommodating country for the minority subject than Malaysia. Lim embraces the mythos of America as the land of the free and the home of the brave: "The U.S. Constitution, endowing every citizen with equal rights without regard to race, gender, religion, and national origin, protects individual freedoms, of speech, religion, public association, from the tyranny and prejudices of the majority" (339). American political and philosophical ideals are invoked by way of contrast to Malaysia. For Lim, Malaysia has far to go before it can hope to achieve the kind of political freedoms for self-actualisation afforded by America. In Malaysia, "merit was not the main criterion for professional status," and Lim, a young Chinese woman, "would always be of the wrong gender and the wrong race" (197). When she left Malaysia for America, she understood that she would henceforth view her native country through the eyes of a traveller and a visitor.

Lim's oeuvre is defined not only by the relationship between one's birth and adopted countries but by engagement with the experiences of expatriatism, exile, transnationalism and globalisation frequently invoked in discussions of the Chinese diaspora. As a concept, diaspora conjures up vast movements of people compelled by the throes of political upheaval. Beyond its classical definition as the forced sowing, scattering and dispersal of a people (the term is found in the Greek translation of the Bible), diaspora deals with political and social negotiations between originary homelands and host nations resulting from the experience of a people forced into foreign lands. Diaspora is a sufficiently broad theoretical concept. Its traditional definition focuses on the experience of forced uprooting and exile that involves the trauma of radical geographical and psychological dislocation. At the theoretical end, postcolonial thought and postmodern paradigms afford space for considering the liberational possibilities of diaspora, supported by the idea of hybridity that comes into play when diasporic peoples interact with host cultures.

Being forced to live in a foreign land in response to problems in one's birth country has sometimes been described as exile. Exile can be involuntary, or it can be voluntary. Involuntary exile refers to forced expulsion from one's native country, an experience that covers the possibility and hope of return. On the other hand, voluntary exile accommodates availability of choice in leaving one's home country. Associated with banishment from the ancestral country, the

experience of exile and self-exile can be distinguished from the experience of migration, which, as Rajeev Patke tells us, "blurs the distinction between choice and necessity" ("Diaspora as Translation" 118).

Shirley Lim emigrated to the United States pressured by social and political circumstance as well as empowered by education. *Among the White Moon Faces* contributes to Anglophone Chinese diasporic literature by bringing a postcolonial perspective to bear on representing the Southeast-Asian subject's emigration to the United States. The thematic concerns of Lim's writing signify in relation to both the context of late twentieth-century transnational mobility and the experience of diasporic Chinese communities in Southeast Asia. In this writing, we glimpse some of the historical experiences of these communities, experiences that have inspired people to cross the Pacific Ocean in the hope of joining the diasporic Chinese community in America.

Like Shirley Lim, Taipei-born Chinese-Malaysian author Tash Aw represents Malaysia as the starting point for transnational crossings. In *Five Star Billionaire* (2013), Aw considers the implications of transnational crossings between Southeast Asia and East Asia in the lives of five Chinese characters from Malaysia who find themselves drawn to the promises of twenty-first century China. It is possible to pursue one's goals not in the West but in China, the ancestral homeland of the Chinese diaspora. The apparent ease of transnational travel enjoyed by Aw's characters highlights China's contemporary appeal and the open relationship that exists between nations of the Asia-Pacific realm in the globalised twenty-first century. The Malaysian romancing of Shanghai does not take place at the expense of attachment to one's home country. In portraying the *huáqiáo*'s return to the ancestral country, Aw's novel expands the critical terrain for a theoretical consideration of the Anglophone Chinese diaspora, posing questions about the social and political conditions that might encourage thematic emphases such as those found in the novel. Narrating the overseas Chinese subject's return to China allows the diasporic Chinese author not only to reverse the familiar trope of East-West immigrant desire but also to revisit the development of Chinese history from the nineteenth century with China's defeat by the West in the Opium Wars to its current position as the world's second largest economy.

Shanghai symbolises twenty-first century Chinese modernity in *Five Star Billionaire*. As the controlling setting of the novel, Shanghai is a city in which the present is never disengaged from the past. Enjoying a reputation as the "Paris of the East," early twentieth-century Shanghai was a vibrant port and cosmopolitan city, boasting its foreign-built Bund (the waterfront area in central Shanghai), thriving commercial life, capitalist industrialisation and modern infrastructure. Famous people imprinted their presence on the historical canvas of the city, reinforcing its exoticism and mystique. Sir Victor Sassoon, a wealthy businessman and hotelier, made real-estate investments in Shanghai and transformed the cityscape with luxury hotels and apartment buildings. The Jazz poet Langston

Hughes, a social activist of the Harlem Renaissance, dined with Madam Sun Yat-sen, the young widow of the founder of the Chinese Republic, when he visited Shanghai in 1933. Hughes reported that Shanghai's "free port and its various International Settlements were wide open to all sorts of vices and corruptions," which included the drug trade, sales of children for sexual purposes, prostitution and kidnappings (*Autobiography* 14: 248-49).

This account reinforces Shanghai's association with "oriental intrigue, colonial greed… sex, money, power, opium, gangsters, and revolutionaries" (*Grand Strategies* 241). Shanghai also had the unenviable reputation as a "haven for radical intellectuals and home to the active underground Chinese Communist Party" ("Spies and Spiders" 29). It is no surprise that, in addition to its nickname as the "Paris of the East," the city also became negatively known as the "Whore of the Orient" because of its association with opium, gambling, commercial sex and interracial fraternisation (*Shanghai Nightscapes* 180-84). The city offers a rich historical setting for novels as diverse as Lisa See's *Shanghai Girls* (2009) and Kazuo Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans* (2000) as well as for films such as Ang Lee's *Lust, Caution* (2007), based on Eileen Chang's short story. Tash Aw's Shanghai is more than just a semi-colonial and cosmopolitan treaty port defined by Westerners in "concessions" granted by a battered Qing court, wealthy Chinese merchants, and bohemian artists all living in close proximity. Aw's Shanghai is a global city that promises success to men and women who are brave enough to take on the challenges of the new millennium.

Responding to Shanghai's allure, characters in *Five Star Billionaire* make their way to the city not to escape a dysfunctional society or oppressive political system in Malaysia. Given in snapshots in the novel's narrative movement between past and present, Aw's Malaysia is not a country that had recently secured Independence from colonial rule and rocked by race tensions, portrayed in Shirley Lim's *Joss and Gold* (2001). Malaysia is the site of familial memories, defined by daily activities such as family meals and the dispensing of parental advice to susceptible children.

In *Five Star Billionaire*, a factory girl named Phoebe travelled to China because of the promise of a (non-existent) job. Stranded in an unfamiliar city, she survives by taking on a false identity and by dating rich men. Gary from Kota Bahru has his dreams to be a celebrity star shattered when his involvement in a drunken brawl in a Shanghai bar was recorded and went viral. Another character, Justin Lim, is in China to help expand his family's real-estate business while Yinghui, the leftist-leaning daughter of a Malaysian government minister, is in the city to establish herself as a successful businesswoman. Finally, there is an elusive billionaire, entrepreneur and self-help guru Walter Chao, thrown into the mix.

Aw's characters come from different social backgrounds and are shaped by different experiences. There are shameful family secrets, abusive guardians, impoverished childhood and loss of family wealth, facts of life shared with

readers so they can assess the transformative change(s) and success(es), if any, brought about by the characters' encounter with Shanghai. These characters are connected by their presence in Shanghai, inspired by the understanding that a person can be whoever or whatever he or she wants to be in China. Malaysia's *huáqiáo* travel to Shanghai not in search of roots and ancestral culture but to experience the promise of a future that is anticipated to be dominated by China.

Venturing into Shanghai involves bringing self-determination to the city of possibilities. However, when characters find the city fast-paced, ruthless and impersonal, they are forced to navigate the many challenges that emerge or risk being crushed. Survival in Shanghai involves the individual capacity for self-invention, achieved through different pathways including forgery, dishonesty and lies. People are taken advantage of and human relationships involve mind-games and manipulation. People come into contact but in transient ways with not much promise of permanent relationships. If the reader begins with the premise that the struggles of various characters signify the virtues of determination, tenacity and hard work, any sense of the virtues associated with the work ethic is compromised by a lack of positive personal attributes that stand out. An important question posed by the novel is whether the success attained in pursuing one's dreams is influenced more by the values of an individual or by the conditions afforded by the external environment.

Five Star Billionaire grapples with the social and cultural implications of China's economic rise by looking at the phenomenon of Shanghai. Its portrayal of Shanghai complements familiar images of the city advertised in billboards, commercial advertisements, airline posters and film. In Sam Mendes's James Bond instalment *Skyfall* (2012), Shanghai makes its filmic presence felt as the representative megacity of the globalised twenty-first century. In *Skyfall*, Bond (Daniel Craig) swims in a penthouse rooftop pool set off against the backdrop of nighttime Shanghai. Mostly filmed in London, the scenes of Shanghai capture the wealth and vibrancy of the ultramodern city, which, with its fast-moving expressways and imposing skyscrapers, is nothing short of spectacular. If Shanghai is associated for some audience with the exotic Orient, the film projects images that draw attention to the city's self-conscious display of ostentatious modernity.

Aw's novel recognises the importance that images of a cityscape play in showcasing a country's prosperity. Gleaming high-rises, skyscrapers and swanky financial districts all contribute to projecting a city's and, by extension, country's economic success. In Southeast and East Asia, we are familiar with skyscrapers such as the Petronas Towers in Malaysia; Taipei 101 in Taiwan; Shanghai World Financial Centre; and the Shanghai Tower, China's tallest skyscraper in Lujiazui. Cities participate in a country's economic success in their re-creation of the physical and urban environment.

What does Shanghai's cityscape tell us about Asian capital and China's economic ascendancy? Viewed from a distance, Shanghai is an impressive city. However, close-up shots reveal an abundance of unsightly grit and grime. Shanghai is a constellation of dark streets, deindividualised inhabitants, dense markets and ceaseless noise (74-75). The view from Gary's apartment confirms the monotony of urban and city life. An apartment dweller can look directly into other people's apartments and observe his or her neighbours' daily routines. Such voyeuristic impulses are reciprocated as one's neighbours could very well return the courtesy by peering into one's own apartment and taking mental notes. The glamour of the city hides the mundane existence of men and women going about their daily chores. Claustrophobia is a commonplace experience in the global city.

Shanghai's inexhaustible energy eludes human attempts to harness the possibilities of the global city for profit and self-fulfilment. Phoebe finds that Shanghai "weighed down on her with the weight of ten skyscrapers" (9), a stifling and oppressive sense. While Justin Lin finds the Pudong skyline and skyscrapers of Lujiazui impressive at night, he also notes its contrast with day-time Shanghai "obscured by the perpetual haze of pollution" (22). Intertwining images of smog and skyscrapers direct readers' attention to the cost of China's political project of modernisation and economic development. Shanghai is immense, its impersonal character not only inscribed in the buildings and infrastructure that make up the cityscape but exemplified in the lives of foreigners who want to squeeze out as much as they can from the world without the burden of ethical responsibility.

Shanghai does not stand still but is always changing. Not appreciating the concept of present time, "[e]veryone is busy preparing for tomorrow" (217). Barely three months in his apartment, Justin notes that Shanghai "seemed to have changed completely, the points of reference in his world rearranged and repositioned in ways he could not recognise" (210). "Nothing," Phoebe finds, "ever stood still in China, nothing was permanent" (17), invoking the Heraclitean motif that all life is flux. For Phoebe, life in Shanghai is experienced as intense loneliness. Even Walter Chao struggles with loneliness, which is why he comes to meet Phoebe through internet dating.

Contrary to expectation, Shanghai does not readily support dreams and human aspirations: "People say it is the size of a small country, but it is not, it is bigger, like a whole continent, with a heart as deep and unknown as the forests of the Amazon and as vast and wild as the deserts of Africa. People come here like explorers, but soon they disappear; no one even hears them as they fade away, and no one remembers them" (381). This assessment suggests that China is a country inimical to the pursuit and fulfilment of dreams. Hope easily vanishes in China. Efforts made to embrace the promises of a vibrant Chinese economy are destabilised by Shanghai's impersonality as a city that hurtles into the future without a care for the individuals living in its midst.

Inscribing sociocultural and political significance, cities tell the stories of relationships between nations and empires. As major cities in China, Shanghai and Beijing are settings that draw us into important historical events of twentieth-century East Asia such as the Sino-Japanese War, the Chinese Civil War, the Communist Revolution and the Tiananmen Square Massacre. Beijing has been linked by émigré and exilic writers like Ha Jin and Anchee Min to the oppressiveness of Chinese communist rule while Shanghai has been invoked by Lisa See to portray the Japanese invasion of the city and its devastating aftermath.

Beijing and Shanghai bring focus to the Chinese totalitarian state and the disjunction between China's impoverished condition in the early decades of communist rule and its great economic transformation in the twenty-first century. Like other major cities of the world – London, New York, Paris – navigating the physical and existential space of this cosmopolis (from the Greek "kosmos" [world] and "polis" [city]), Shanghai encourages imagination, courage and tenacity. If Shanghai, the novel's synecdoche for China, functions as a gateway to the future, promising good things for those who have the courage to dream, it is also an alienating and "never-ending city" (261) in which "if you stop for one moment, you fall, you disappear" (291). China may stand for the promises of the new millennium, but it is also nihilistic.

If, according to conventional wisdom, the twenty-first century will be economically dominated by China, then *Five Star Billionaire* imagines the possibilities of this new world order replete with all the problems that attend the pursuit of capital and dreams. While courage and tenacity are valorised as attributes necessary for success, they do not always produce the desired result. *Five Star Billionaire* takes the opportunity to represent the fragmented and alienated nature of individual and social being fashioned by Asian capital.

In a book review, David Annand rightly identifies *Five Star Billionaire* as "a new kind of immigrant novel" that finds its significance in the context of an "increasingly multipolar world" (*The Telegraph*). He concludes that the novel affirms that China "is not America: there is no constitution to believe in, no sense they are helping to build a shining city on the hill. The country itself is living a lie: nominally socialist, it is nakedly exploitative, with an emblematic city that is cold and unforgiving. Each of [the characters] seems to contain within [him or her] a fearful knowledge: there is no conventional narrative for the immigrant in China" (*The Telegraph*). Finding China in *Five Star Billionaire* to be socially and economically exploitative, Annand suggests that Aw views China through lenses not too dissimilar from that of US President Donald Trump, who had responded to China's alleged unfair trade practices by imposing heavy tariffs on Chinese goods and starting a trade war with global economic consequences. While it may be true that Aw's China is exploitative and does not possess a conventional immigrant narrative, it must be said that China does not advertise itself as a country that would-be immigrants dream of coming to and settling down. It is nevertheless

conscious of its status as the world's second largest economy and a rising economic and political power. China's significance comes from its positioning in a globalised world defined by increased porousness of national boundaries and interconnectedness between peoples and cultures.

Aw's characters do not go to Shanghai as immigrants but as seekers of opportunity, enjoying the advantages of transnational mobility that is not dependent on the possession of symbolic and cultural capital. In their encounter with China, they participate in the conditions of Asian capital with all its contradictions and instabilities. The journey to China is not made at the expense of the Malaysian citizen's attachment to his/her national homeland.

The twists and turns of Chinese history that include the communist ascendancy of 1949, Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution, and the Tiananmen Square Massacre have afforded ethnic Chinese authors material for writing the diasporic experience, often highlighting China's political conditions that necessitate the search for alternative homelands. *Five Star Billionaire* contributes to writing the Chinese diasporic experience not so much by interrogating China's political system as by representing its promise and allure as well as its problems. Importantly it calls attention to Southeast Asia as a region of the world that must be accounted for in literary representations of the Chinese diasporic experience.

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