

Postcolonial History and National Identity in Shirley Geok-lin Lim's *Among the White Moon Faces, Joss and Gold* and Li-Young Lee's *The Winged Seed*

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Abstract

Malaysia-born Shirley Lim and Indonesia-born Li-Young Lee are first-generation Chinese American authors associated with the Southeast Asian diaspora. In their literary work *Among the White Moon Faces, Joss and Gold*, and *The Winged Seed*, Lim and Lee draw the reader into the world of early twentieth-century Southeast Asia, a world shaped by Malaysia's and Indonesia's emergence into the postcolonial condition. For both Lim and Lee, independence is the start of an often complex process of nation building and the creation of a national identity that cannot be extricated from the politics of race relations. In this essay, I analyse Lim's and Lee's representation of race politics in post-independence Malaysia and Indonesia, highlighting the importance of postcolonial history in the writing of Chinese diasporic identities.

Keywords

Shirley Lim, Li-Young Lee, Malaysia, Indonesia, race, postcolonialism

In Chinese American literature, Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Li-Young Lee come to mind when we think of authors who were born in Southeast Asia and who found their way to the United States to become naturalised American subjects. Both Lim and Lee represent their early years in the country of their birth, Malaysia and Indonesia, evoking memories to facilitate meditation on national and diasporic identities.² While Lim and Lee write on the diasporic subject's encounter with the United States, they also represent the historical setting of post-independence Malaysia and Indonesia in which the politics of race

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² In this essay, I use "Malaya" to refer to the pre-16th September 1963 federated 11 states of the Malay peninsula that achieved independence from British colonial rule on August 31 1957, and "Malaysia" as a general designation to refer to Malaya after independence. Technically speaking, "Malaysia" is constituted out of the 1963 merger of Singapore, North Borneo and Sarawak with the Federation of Malaya.

relations plays an important part in the construction of national and their own identity.

When writing on the history of Malaysia and Indonesia as they transition from the colonial condition to independence, Lim and Lee bring the reader into the world of their childhood and youth, reconstructed from memories that persist long after their migration to the United States. If remembering the country of one's birth is often tied up with nostalgia, it can also be associated with the inability of the diasporic subject to relegate to psychic oblivion experiences of the past that include racial discrimination and the trauma of political persecution.

Lim's and Lee's autobiographical works – *Among the White Moon Faces* (1996) and *The Winged Seed* (1995) – offer a close-up look at Malaysian and Indonesian society in the years immediately following the achievement of independence from British and Dutch colonial rule. Born in 1944, Lim witnessed Malaya's independence in 1957; Li-Young Lee was born in 1957 in Indonesia, which gained independence from Dutch colonial rule in 1945. Both Lim and Lee arrived in the United States close to one another, the first in 1969 and the other in 1964.

One might expect an author from postcolonial Southeast Asia to make the exhilaration of a nation's independence an important thematic emphasis in his or her autobiography but such does not appear to have been the case with either Lim or Lee. In *Among the White Moon Faces*, Lim portrays her childhood and young adulthood with reference to her encounter with the British-based educational system in her homeland, framing this encounter in relation to the Chinese female subject's quest for identity and self-determination. Even as she considers the relation of this educational system to British imperial history, she sets out to define her identity with reference to familial relations, interracial sexual encounters, the pursuit of individual ambition and imaginations of the Occident. If being female disadvantages one in patriarchal Asian society, being Chinese marginalises her in a predominantly Malay society in which she is always Other. In *The Winged Seed*, Lee portrays his childhood years with reference to the controlling figure of his father who is both the victim of a persecutorial government and the anchor of family life.

Among the White Moon Faces narrativises the development of the self in relation to the social and political environment in which the individual is located, whether in Malaysia or in the United States. In this work the author's quest for self-actualisation cannot be extricated from the writing of national identity. The ability of the individual to seek out space for personal development constitutes an important measure of a nation's political health. Malaysia's lack of space at both the sociocultural and political levels frames Lim's decision to travel to the United States for doctoral studies in 1969.

Lim's Malaysia is complex. As the land of her birth, Malaysia is where her family is, the indispensable context for the formation of the author's early consciousness and attitudes toward the world. Where family can inspire a sense of home and belonging, it can also be a source of anxiety, caused by unsympathetic parental figures censoring their children's perceived recalcitrant instincts. In *Among the White Moon Faces*, the narrator's relationship with her parents is complex: her father beats her and is susceptible to outbursts of rage while the mother abandoned the family when Lim was only eight years old. When the narrator thinks about the significance of her father and the impact of an absent mother in her life, she finds herself recounting her parents' early years in Malaya and experience of World War II.

Early in the book, Lim gives an account of how her parents met and married in "the peace and security of the British Straits Settlement" (*Among the White Moon Faces* 60), which was shortly after disrupted by the outbreak of the Pacific War that saw the Japanese Imperial Army defeating the British in both colonial Malaya and Singapore. More than offering a sketch of marriage rituals of Peranakan culture in British Malaya, Lim here summarises the primary events of the Japanese invasion of Malaya and Singapore:

The Japanese forces patrolled by the Kempeitai began a three-year era of pillage, killings, and terrorism at the time that my oldest brother was born. Word went around in February 1942 of the massacre of five thousand Chinese in Singapore.... I was conceived and born toward the end of the bleakest period of the war.... [T]he imprisonment, torture, and massacre of Chinese Malaysians, especially young men, continued unabated. The Japanese forces, having faced years of military struggle in their attempts to conquer China, equated every Chinese Malayan with the Chinese people, whose nationalist opposition had so enraged them that in a racist bloody orgy the Japanese Imperial Army had massacred three hundred thousand Chinese in Nanjing in 1937.... The Japanese Occupation was not a story my parents dwelled upon, yet it marked our beginnings as a family. (*Among the White Moon Faces* 60-62)

Besides highlighting the sufferings of the people in Malaya during World War II, Lim's invocation of the Japanese occupation of Malaya and Singapore also thematises the impact of the war on the Chinese in Southeast Asia.

The Japanese army's brutal treatment of the Chinese in both Malaya and Singapore has a larger historical context, tied to Japanese perception that the overseas Chinese sympathised with their countrymen in China with whom the Empire of Japan is at war. In her sketch of the Japanese occupation of Malaya and Singapore, Lim offers glimpses into a region of the world that does not enjoy the prominence given to China in Chinese American literature. She evokes motifs familiar to readers of this literature: the war waged by Japan

against China and the resultant animosity on the part of the Chinese toward the Japanese; racial discrimination; the not-always-straightforward relationship between the overseas Chinese and the ancestral homeland; and the often challenging relationship between a diasporic community and the host country.

For the Chinese in Malaya, problems took on a different dimension after World War II. In Lim's narration, the return of the British to Malaya after the defeat of the Japanese "ignored the horrors of Chinese Malayan wartime suffering and the courage of Chinese Malayan guerrilla fighters" (*Among the White Moon Faces* 63). Events such as the civil war taking place in China between Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist government and Mao Zedong's Communists caused the British to view Chinese Malaysians with suspicion, especially after a small poorly armed volunteer militia originally set up to fight the Japanese morphed into the Malayan Communist Party (*Among the White Moon Faces* 63). Fear of Communism led to the association of Chinese immigrants and Straits-born Chinese with "disorders and terrorism" (*Among the White Moon Faces* 63). Race becomes a marker of non-patriotism, untrustworthiness and even "evil" (*Among the White Moon Faces* 63). The problem for the British colonial government is that it is difficult to distinguish between loyal Chinese Malaysians and Chinese Communists.

Lim describes the colonial government's demonisation of the Chinese in Malaya in terms of representation, the creation of "a different war narrative" (*Among the White Moon Faces* 63) that overrides the narrative of wartime Chinese suffering and heroism. That narrative is a powerful one and the narrator finds herself growing up with stories of Chinese bandits and outlaws who terrorise and murder both British and people of the local population, stories lent support to by journalistic accounts in newsreels. Her response is to learn "to hate Chinese Communists, men with faces like my father's or my uncles'.... I could not distinguish among ordinary Chinese, Malaysians, the Kuomintang members – Chinese who considered themselves citizens of China – and the Communists – Chinese Malaysians who claimed to be struggling for national sovereignty" (*Among the White Moon Faces* 64). Even as the narrator recounts herself pressured to negotiate the implications of her identity as an ethnic Chinese and British subject born in Malaya, she is also aware that Straits Chinese Peranakans, a community to which she belongs, are viewed with hostility by some Chinese in the ancestral country for having lost their Chinese identity.

The figure of the Peranakan functions as a hybrid symbol of Chinese-Malay cultural interactions that transpired over a number of centuries, underscoring the point that the Chinese are not new immigrants in the Malay Peninsula but have a historical presence that can be traced all the way back to the fifteenth-century seafaring activities between the southern Chinese ports and Southeast Asia. "The Peranakan Chinese," writes Peter Wee, "are descendants of Chinese traders who settled in Malacca and around the coastal

areas of Java and Sumatra, as early as the 15th century. The oldest Chinese communities can be found in Malacca” (11). The Peranakan embodies the story of the Chinese diaspora in Nanyang, the Chinese reference to both the geographical region south of China and the large Chinese migrant population found in Southeast Asia.

The daughter of parents born in the historic city of Malacca, Lim was a British subject, “a position that conferred enviable status in a society of immigrants, transients, and undocumented laborers from China, India, and the Indonesian islands” (*Among the White Moon Faces* 58). To find gratification in one’s colonised status is ironic, and it will take some time for the narrator to recognise this, a recognition that only comes with the development of a postcolonial consciousness. Being a British subject does not immunise a person of Chinese descent against discrimination. In fact the history of Western colonial activities in China in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which led to the creation of China’s moniker as the “sick man of Asia,” shadowed the identity of the Chinese in foreign lands, Malaya, Singapore and the United States included.

The significance of the ethnic Chinese body is determined by political events in East Asia. When China was politically and militarily incapable of staving off the onslaught of Western imperial activities in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, its ineffectuality assumed the metaphorical dimensions of decrepitude, effeminacy and civilisational obsolescence. When China became Communist in 1949, overseas Chinese also became objects of political suspicion because of possible sympathy with the political ideology currently in the ascendant in the “motherland.” In Southeast Asia, the British response to the threat posed by Chinese Communism to the security of Malaya was to authorise “the military-patrolled resettlement of Chinese Malaysians, in the complete suspension of civil liberties, and in the establishment of a police state empowered to search, detain, and deport suspected Communist members and sympathizers” (*Among the White Moon Faces* 63).

The experience of marginalisation then constitutes an important motif in Lim’s portrayal of the living conditions of the Chinese in Malaya under British rule and after independence. For the politicians, the Chinese readily serve as both scapegoats and bogeymen. Enactments of discriminatory laws constantly remind them that they are marginalised subjects in the land. Lim recounts that when the British negotiated with UMNO (United Malays National Organization)³ for independence for the Federation of Malaya, UMNO “resisted accepting the large Chinese population into the federation as citizens of the new state” because of its determination “to maintain Malay ascendancy”

³ Malaysia’s largest political party, UMNO has played a dominant role in the country’s politics since independence.

(*Among the White Moon Faces* 81). Analogies of experience may be found between the Chinese diaspora in Malaysia and the Chinese diaspora in the United States, including American suspicion of the Chinese as potential Communist supporters during the period of the Cold War.

Among the White Moon Faces positions the individual at the centre of the text's rendition of the experience of culture, politics and history. As a Bildungsroman that captures the psychological development of the narrator from childhood to adulthood, from the world of small-town Malacca to the vast spaces of the United States, and from dependence on a not very effectual father to the freedom that affords seemingly endless possibilities for the process of individual becoming, the work invites comparison between the country of one's birth and the country to which one has migrated. In Lim's memoir, dimensions of size embed sociocultural and political meanings. When the new student arrives in Massachusetts to find that the guest-room closets of her host contain enough toiletry items to stock a stall in a Malacca night bazaar, she indicates the adventure that is about to begin as she transits from the experiential space of her familial upbringing and student life in British Malaya and postcolonial Malaysia to the land of plenty that is America.

If *Among the White Moon Faces* chronicles a young woman's transpacific crossing from Malacca to the United States, valorising the possibilities of the New World in facilitating dreams of individual fulfilment, Lim's novel *Joss and Gold* (2001) reverses the symbolic direction of the transpacific crossing by bringing the American to Southeast Asia. Part One of *Joss and Gold* brings together the motifs of race, miscegenation and East-West encounters at the level of the romantic encounter. We are introduced to Li An, a postgraduate English literature student who, married to scientifically inclined Henry, finds herself attracted to American Peace Corps volunteer Chester Brookfield. Set in late 1960s Malaysia, the novel portrays a group of friends from different ethnic backgrounds whose interactions bring to the fore the politics of race relations in a country that had only recently attained independence from British colonial rule. There is Paroo, an Indian boy, and Gina, a Chinese girl, whose attempt at a relationship ends tragically with the latter's suicide traceable to the pressures of social disapproval. There are also Samad and Abdullah, characters whose function in the novel is to give expression to the political view that "in Malaysia, rights of the ra'ayat must come first, like in the French Revolution and American Revolution" (*Joss and Gold* 105). Where Abdullah argues that Malaysia "is our country" (*Joss and Gold* 99), a nation in which ethnic Malays must be politically dominant, Li An imagines postcolonial Malaysia as a new nation moving in the right direction of building a healthy multiculturalism capable of accommodating difference. Li An holds the view that "you cannot be born and live in a place all your life without that place belonging to you. How could you not grow roots, invisible filaments of attachment that tied you down to a

ground, a source of water? If a tree were pushed off the earth it stood on, deprived of its water, it would die” (*Joss and Gold* 99).

By invoking the May 13 1969 race riots in Kuala Lumpur as the historical setting that disrupts Li An’s idealistic conception of a multicultural Malaysia, Lim represents the construction of the nation’s postcolonial identity as inextricable from the politicisation of ethnicity and the ethnicisation of politics. May 13 1969 is a traumatic event because of the communal distrust generated and sense of national belonging disrupted. For the American expatriate Chester, the night of the outbreak of violence between the Chinese and the Malays is also when he sleeps with Li An and makes her pregnant. Chester’s momentary presence in the local scene concludes with the outbreak of race conflict in Malaysia after which the reader is transported in Part Two of the novel to the American present focused on Chester’s married life with Meryl.

Where Part One introduces the reader to Chester befriending a small group of Malaysians in a casual way, Part Two brings us into the United States, Chester’s home country, and his private life. Part Two focuses on Chester’s life after leaving Malaysia many years ago. He is now married to Meryl who does not want children – she in fact pressures Chester into having a vasectomy – and has obtained his PhD degree in anthropology. When it becomes clear that his marriage to Meryl is in trouble, Chester starts thinking about Suyin, his and Li An’s daughter whom he has never met.

Where Malaysia is lived reality for Li An, Paroo, Samad and Abdullah, it is a geopolitical and cultural space momentarily encountered by Chester more than a decade ago. Where Malaysia accommodated Chester’s youthful idealism as a Peace Corps volunteer, it remains a space of difference for the American. His last experience of Malaysia is “the panic he felt when he saw the black smoke the night of the riots in Kuala Lumpur, a sensation of falling through space not knowing that there would be a landing” (*Joss and Gold* 132). Compared to 1960s Malaysia, American life, at least when focused on Chester and Meryl, is uneventful enough with discernible problems generally confined to the domestic sphere of family life.

Lim’s postcolonial temper finds expression on at least a couple of levels: that related to questions raised about Li An’s passionate attachment to British literature, and the anthropologist Professor Jason Kingston’s collection of ethnic artefacts that include “stacks of spears leaning against corners, brass cooking pots knocking against grass baskets, stone talismans falling off bookshelves, and intricate beadwork unravelling over punched-in armchairs and sofas” (*Joss and Gold* 183). Chester is himself a collector of artefacts, filling the rooms of his house with numerous objects obtained during his Peace Corps term in Malaysia and six months fieldwork in Bali.

Both Kingston and Chester are anthropologists, academics of a discipline that studies meaning-making in social patterns and cultural practices of peoples

in different places both past and present. In the novel their anthropological temper is evinced in their interest in societies and cultures, such as Malaysia and Indonesia, perceived as different from American life. Chester's sense of the difference represented by Southeast Asian culture and experience is highlighted in the following recollection:

The oppressive sensation [Chester] had suffered as he struggled to reconcile himself to living with Abdullah and Samad's soft wrist motions, the odd-shaped noses sitting on his Eurasian friends' almost Caucasian faces, and the unsettling smells of Indian sweat, Chinese soya sauce, and Malay spices – an oppressiveness he had not dared express for fear of being condemned as superior, gradually dissolved during Jason's delicate explication of the laws of difference. To be white, to know one was white, to find anything else peculiar and uncomfortable, was no sin – became, in fact, the basis for curiosity and inquiry, one's fate. (*Joss and Gold* 182)

When in Malaysia as a Peace Corps volunteer, Chester is forthright about his feeling that he does not belong in Malaysia and also about his conviction “that white people have no place in the East” (*Joss and Gold* 107). In the US he tells his wife Meryl that “America isn't Asia” (*Joss and Gold* 171). A character marked by his curiosity about the Asian Other and his capacity for voluntary distancing from matters of culture that generate unease, Chester finds it easy enough to forget about Li An when he is in America. When in the United States anxieties about Malaysia stem from concerns that Li An might make demands on him because of their daughter Suyin. But such is not the case and in Part Three of *Joss and Gold*, it is Chester who makes a journey back to Southeast Asia to reconnect with Li An and to meet his daughter Suyin.

Chester's return to Southeast Asia in 1981 is to Singapore where Li An now has a successful career and where Suyin, his daughter, lives. A city-state whose history has been intertwined with Malaysia's – it joined the Federation of Malaya together with North Borneo and Sarawak in 1963 but was expelled and became an independent nation in 1965 – Singapore is a symbolic setting in Lim's novel, functioning as a contrast to the world of Kuala Lumpur experienced by Chester in 1969. It is in Singapore that the career successes of not only Li An and Ellen but also Samad and Abdullah are given expression. While Singapore, described as “a stony paradise” (*Joss and Gold* 204) with an “excellent school system” that affords “best preparation for [a] competitive world” (*Joss and Gold* 257), is able to accommodate a Malaysian like Li An seeking a good career, it is not valorised as a society possessing all the positive attributes lacking in Malaysia. Like Malaysia, Singapore has to grapple with both the legacy of British imperialism and race relations. In *Joss and Gold* we read that 1969, the year of the race riots in Malaysia, “was the beginning of the debate on

a Singapore identity” (*Joss and Gold* 236). As in Malaysia, this debate is about the construction of statehood and the creation of national identity.

When Lim portrays Li An relocating to Singapore for work, she suggests that the island-nation offers opportunities for the Chinese Malaysian subject who might not find ample space for self-determination in the country of his or her birth. Linked to Malaysia by history and geographical proximity, Singapore is the closest place that the Chinese Malaysian can try to turn to for opportunities not available in the home country. Given the role played by race politics in Singapore’s separation from the 1963 Federation and the demographic fact that the Chinese constitute Singapore’s ethnic majority, it is possible to imagine a Chinese author from Malaysia thematising this politics in her representation of Singapore. Lim, however, does not quite do this. In *Among the White Moon Faces*, Singapore is associated with the absent mother whose occasional contact with the daughter is framed by gestures of perfunctory affection and reference to distinctive features of the Singapore setting such as Robinsons, a department store. In addition to its historical relationship with Malaysia, Singapore is also significant for Lim because she has family members, relatives and close friends living there.

Singapore reinforces Lim’s sense of her roots in Southeast Asia, affording opportunity for thinking about shared histories and departures in the construction of postcolonial identity and pursuit of national destinies. Singapore is where the past makes way for the present, a city-state that functions as a useful gauge for measuring the speed of Asia’s development, the capacity of its participation in the conditions of late twentieth-century modernity. It is in Singapore that she receives confirmation, via the formidable figure of Professor Edwin Thumboo at the University of Singapore, “that such a thing as Singaporean/Malaysian writing existed, and that I was to be a part of it” (*Among the White Moon Faces* 277). Like Singapore’s Edwin Thumboo, Lim, the postcolonial poet, will write poetry in English. However, unlike Thumboo who writes about Singapore’s development as a new nation in the English language, the lingua franca chosen by the country to facilitate national development and economic progress, writing in English marginalises Lim in the country of her birth because in Malaysia, “only writing in Bahasa Malaysia was considered national literature” (*Among the White Moon Faces* 277).⁴

In *Joss and Gold*, Lim does not elaborate on the reasons for Li An’s relocation to Singapore; she portrays instead her ability to pursue a successful career in the island. In this novel, we read about Chinese Malaysians establishing diasporic presence “all over the world” (*Joss and Gold* 204), particularly in countries such as Australia and Canada, countries that belong to

⁴ For a comparative reading of the relationship of poetry to nation-statehood in the work of Singaporean poets Edwin Thumboo and Arthur Yap, see Watson, “The Way Ahead.”

the Commonwealth with historical ties to Great Britain. Because Malaysia was once a British colony, Malaysians also instinctively look to Great Britain as a possible country for migration. For the Chinese in Malaysia, race politics inspires dreams of overseas migration.

Li An's choice of Singapore as the country to reside in complicates the familiar narrative in Chinese American literature that the United States is the dream of Asian immigrant desire. Chester is the link between Southeast Asia and the United States, for as the father of Suyin, he technically affords Li An, if she so desires, immigrant passage to the United States. Li An's response to Chester when he returns to Southeast Asia after an eleven-year absence is more than a woman's snubbing of the man who is the father of her daughter but who has played no role in her upbringing. Her refusal to reconcile with Chester can be read as a symbolic disruption of the narrative that reiterates the thematic idea that it is the East that desires the West, that it is Asia that seeks the promises of America. If Chester had earlier on teased Li An about her love for English literature, asking her the postcolonial question about the relevance of this literature to her identity as a Chinese Malaysian subject, his later desire to bring his daughter to the United States for a visit prompts Abdullah to make a reference to Chester as a colonialist: "You white people, Americans, believe you can claim all kinds of things that don't belong to you. Land, plants, tin mines, even other people" (*Joss and Gold* 291).

In *Joss and Gold*, Lim's disruption of the symbolic narrative that affirms it is historically the third-world East that desires the plenitude of the first-world West jostles with the Orientalist implications that Asia is by definition susceptible to unrest and political violence. In *Among the White Moon Faces*, the narrator affirms her decision to migrate to the United States by underscoring the difference separating Malaysia and the United States as societies:

Setting out from a nation that denied people like me an equal homeland, I find myself, ironically, making a home in a state that had once barred people like me from its territory. The United States, despite instances of still invidious discrimination, is now ideologically where Malaysia may yet be someday. 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. These are precious protections that humans long for, for love and plenty can only be assured when there is freedom from injustice. (*Among the White Moon Faces* 339)

In *Joss and Gold*, May 13 1969 functions as a concrete historical reference that qualifies this comparison made in *Among the White Moon Faces*.

Lim's *Among the White Moon Faces* and *Joss and Gold* are literary works that can be said to belong to the category of Anglophone diasporic Chinese

literature. Like other literatures of diaspora, Anglophone diasporic Chinese literature constantly engages with definitions of home and belonging. Home and belonging are abstract concepts that take their frame of reference from one's formal and legal positioning within the nation-state as citizen, permanent resident, expatriate, visitor, illegal alien or refugee. They are shaped by history, culture and politics; and they have a deeply personalized dimension. As an author of the Anglophone Chinese diaspora, Shirley Lim reminds us that choice of national homeland in the immigrant experience does not necessarily entail the necessary abjection of everything stood for by the country of one's birth. The persistence of the natal homeland in immigrant memory is often tied up with an existing network of family relations that lends support to the maintenance and continuation of transoceanic ties.

When asked by Mohammad A. Quayum in a 2003 interview whether Kuala Lumpur or California is her "home turf" (88), Shirley Lim responds: "Kuala Lumpur is definitely not MY home turf.... But neither is California" (88). Affirming that she is "a US citizen with an American family" (89), Lim is nevertheless sensitive to the fact that the idea of "home turf" is often shaped by the "imagination" that "refuses to stay in one or even two places" (88-89). In Lim's oeuvre, diasporic sensitivity inflects representations of immigrant subjectivity, and comparisons made between experiences of different national spaces must be alert to the importance of precise analogies between them. One's position as a minority subject in the United States is not the same as one's position as a minority subject in Malaysia. In the United States, Asian Americans may be a marginal community but they "do not face a constitutional restriction on their rights as citizens" (89); in Malaysia, Chinese Malaysians may not be "marginal to the nation, its history, culture, and economy the way that Asian Americans still are in the United States" (89), but Lim would find herself "a marginalized citizen" (90) there. For Lim ideas of home and belonging cannot be extricated from the politics of race relations in the historical development of the nation, a politics that is foregrounded in both *Among the White Moon Faces* and *Joss and Gold*.

The politics of race in the building of the postcolonial nation also constitutes the controlling theme of Li-Young Lee's *The Winged Seed*, focused on the author's references to his father Ba's arrest as an alleged spy by President Sukarno's military police (*The Winged Seed* 46). Wondering what made his father a threat to Indonesia's military regime, Lee could only think about Ba discoursing on "night and seeds" (*The Winged Seed* 46), vague topics from which it is difficult to extrapolate a discourse of seditious potential. In a descriptive moment, Lee reveals specifically that Ba was imprisoned because "charged with working for the CIA in plans to bomb military installations on the island of Java, and spreading discontent by preaching ideas from the West" (*The Winged Seed* 107). Here, however, the son leaps to his father's defense and informs the

reader that his father is a completely nonpolitical man. Lee attributes Ba's political persecution to his father's ethnicity and to the fact that, as vice president of Gamaliel University, he cultivated associations with teachers, scholars and ministers from the United States that were considered a threat to President Sukarno's efforts to ally himself with China and Russia (*The Winged Seed* 107-8). It is suggested that Ba was persecuted in part for his Western leanings by an anti-colonialist Sukarno.

Lee thinks of Sukarno's persecution of his father both in terms of the suffering experienced by his immediate family and of the larger discrimination in Indonesian society against the Chinese in Indonesia. When asked by Bill Moyers how he would respond if asked where he came from, Lee says without hesitation, "I say Chicago, then I tell them I was born in Indonesia, but I'm adamant about insisting that, although I was born in Indonesia, I'm Chinese. I don't want them to think that I'm Indonesian – my people were persecuted by the Indonesians" (258). One's location in the United States takes precedence over the country of one's birth because the latter, associated with pain and trauma, has little if anything to encourage feelings of nostalgia. For Lee, the significance of political persecution in Indonesia is not confined to the suffering experienced by the family under Sukarno; it also relates to the larger experience of the Chinese diasporic community in Indonesia.

Anglophone Chinese diasporic literature that engages with the experience of one's birth and upbringing in Indonesia finds it difficult to avoid the history of racial discrimination against the Chinese under the rule of both President Sukarno and President Suharto. In her book suggestively titled *On Not Speaking Chinese*, Indonesia-born Chinese Ien Ang meditates on identity and race politics in the country of her birth by distinguishing her father's experience of Indonesia from her own. As an ethnic Chinese, Ang's father had an easier and more secure life in Indonesia when it was under Dutch rule, an experience that made it impossible for him to remain in postcolonial Indonesia with its "fixed, state-related, national identity" that differentiates between "indigenous" natives and "non-indigenous" subjects (64). Unlike her father, Ang, who grew up in postcolonial Indonesia, found herself desiring "to be a full national subject" and identifying deeply "with the Indonesian people as a whole" (65). Whether these instincts signify the young author's naiveté in relating to the cultural politics of race and national identity cannot be verified by lived experience because Ang migrated to the Netherlands in 1966 as a result of her parents' decision.

Unlike her compatriot Li-Young Lee who finds his father's propulsion from Indonesia into the dislocating conditions of exile the logical consequence of the nation-state's anti-Chinese politics, Ang suggests that her personal experience of diasporisation in the West might not be the same as her father's because she had not quite experienced discrimination the way that he had. Even though she understands the Chinese Indonesian subject's inability "to

consider Indonesia ‘home’ in any comfortable, unproblematic sense” owing to Indonesian nationalism’s unsuccessful accommodation of “the presence of the Chinese minority in its construction of an imagined community” (56), she resists pressures to translate her sympathy with Chinese “victims of rioting, plundering and killing” in Indonesia “into a singular political and intellectual partisanship in favour of ‘the Chinese’ against ‘the Indonesians’” (59). Where Ang resists pressures to subscribe to an understanding of the Chinese struggles in Indonesia in terms of a “them” (*pribumi* or “natives”) against “us” (Chinese Indonesians) dichotomy, recognising that race relations in the country of her birth have a complex history that resists easy unpacking, Lee deploys a discourse of identification with the Chinese as a people and as a race, typified by the figure of the Chinese butcher – “this man/ with my face” – in the poem “The Cleaving” (77).

In *The Winged Seed*, Indonesia is Lee’s reconstruction of his childhood years in the multi-island nation as much as it is a site of stories carried over by adult immigrants to the New World. Indonesia is a space of magic – the haunting of Lee’s house by a spirit disturbing it with snow storms – and also the source of trauma generated by one’s encounter with a head of state’s dictatorial powers. If Indonesia inscribes memories of plays attended in village settings and of the existence the “corpseherd” (*The Winged Seed* 125), a person whose job is to look for corpses to be returned to families for proper burial, its impression is also informed by recollections of chaos, fire, bribery, prison and army vehicles. Indonesia is a life-sapping environment. Because of haunting, Lee’s house “looked as if something had been eating it”; in addition, Mu, Lee’s mother, “looked gnawed” and “was growing lighter” such that “we were afraid she might disappear” (*The Winged Seed* 129). If the trauma of slavery and the history of the past assume the symbolic form of the incarnate ghost of a slain daughter that returns to feed vampire-like on both her mother and the present in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), the experience of a dictatorial, hostile and superstitious society destroys both body and soul in *The Winged Seed*.

The full force of Lee’s father’s harrowing plight in Indonesia is underscored by Lee’s account of his father’s feigning mental disorder in order to be admitted to the hospital for the insane, where he at least has visitation rights not available in a prison. Toward the conclusion of *The Winged Seed*, Lee draws attention to the inhumane treatment of patients in the hospital – the brutal beatings and psychological tortures believed capable of having salutary and remedial effects. Insanity becomes an apt metaphor for the darkness of Sukarno’s regime as a whole, one that appears to constitute “a hopeless predicament” (*The Winged Seed* 194) for the Chinese community in Indonesia. Lee recalls the time when “escape was impossible, the purge had begun, weapons were being handed out to farmers as well as thugs, and all over the

island, agents of the president were preaching the evils of Chinese and other foreigners” (*The Winged Seed* 194).

Where President Sukarno reacts with hostility to things and ideas Western, it must be noted that one of Ba’s legacies to his son is his commitment to the Western literary and Hebraic theological traditions. Lee does not view the Bible, the great book loved by his father, as a culture-specific artefact inimical to his sense of identity. In fact, the stories of the Exodus and of Israel’s exile in Babylon function as archetypes of the experiences of the dislocated and diasporic subject in different cultures and historical contexts. He has no problems invoking Hebraic narratives of dislocation and exile to frame representations of his own experiential decentring.

If the diasporic subject can turn to the Bible for analogies of experience, the God of the Bible is neither affable nor intimate. God has absorbed the less attractive aspects – hardness and distance in particular – associated with Lee’s earthly father. A minister of the gospel, Ba embraces a Christianity that is not always comforting. Venting and criticising his father, Lee reminds the reader that Ba is a Chinese patriarch whose formidable body can only be approached by his children with fear and trembling. Hierarchical ordering is the norm of the Confucian family, or at least until the paternal body, battered by suffering and wasted by illness, needs to be bathed and taken care of by the son. The paradox of authority and vulnerability that defines the father’s body registers the son’s deep ambivalence toward the absent presence of the father in his life, capturing simultaneously the son’s dependence on his father and his desire to be freed from patriarchal authority’s spiritual haunting.

As Anglophone authors of the Chinese diaspora, both Lim and Lee are forced to grapple with the implications of language possession in the contexts of the colonial legacy and race politics in the country of their birth.⁵ For Lim, learning the English language underscores one’s inferior position within the cultural system of imperial politics and affords an important linguistic tool that can serve the purposes of empowerment. In *Among the White Moon Faces*, the narrator’s native proficiency in the English language empowers her to give shape to her dreams and ambition both in Malaysia and the United States as well as to critique Western imperial ambitions. By contrast, Lee spoke Javanese and Chinese (Mandarin) before coming to the United States. When Lee’s family arrived in America in 1964, his father was the only one with the ability to converse in English. Possession of English is tied to cultural assimilation in the United States; developing proficiency in English in the process of settling in the United States goes hand in hand with the gradual but unavoidable loss of proficiency in Chinese, Lee’s mother tongue. In his memoir, Lee describes his

⁵ For readings of government formulation of language policies in Malaysia, see Mauzy, “Language and Language Policy in Malaysia,” and Davey, “The Legislation of Bahasa Malaysia as the Official Language of Malaysia.”

sense of alienation working with the English language when growing up in the United States. He recalls that conscious of his accented English, he felt extremely uncomfortable whenever he was in the company of American English speakers:

And I could clearly hear each time I opened my mouth the discord there, the wrong sounds, the strange, unmanageable sharps and flats of my vowels and my chewed-up consonants. What an uncomely noise. More than once I was told I sounded ugly. My mouth was a shame to me, an indecent trench.... I still remember the feeling of being asked a question in English and, after a brief moment of panic, starting to move my lips, contort my tongue to make the sounds, and opening my mouth nervously to answer, too shy to move my hands to help and make the point, only hoping I made sense to my American listeners, teacher or schoolmate, who were sometimes patient, but whose ears were more often so baffled by my confounded din, they winced in annoyance and asked, *What did you say?* or, turning to someone else in complete exasperation, *What did he say?* (*The Winged Seed* 76-77)

In Lee's oeuvre, language possession affects one's existence in national and geopolitical spaces. Transnational movements involve the picking up and letting go of languages as the exilic subject migrates from one geographical location and sociocultural space to another.

The significance of Lim's and Lee's writing is defined not only by the Chinese immigrant experience in America but also by the authors' earlier life in Southeast Asia. For both Lim and Lee, the familiar topics of race discrimination and national belonging thematically central to Asian American literature also inform their writing of the Chinese diasporic experience in Malaysia and Indonesia. While China, the ancestral homeland left behind in East Asia, is often invoked as the controlling historical context of the Chinese American immigrant experience, countries in Southeast Asia like Malaysia and Indonesia are also important geographical sites from which the Chinese make their way to the United States.

For Lim, Malaysia's significance is tied to its geographical location in a region of the world that China had one time referred to as Nanyang, a position that made it one of the places of settlement chosen by late fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Chinese immigrants. The Peranakan, who we earlier saw is a descendant of this early Chinese in the Malay Peninsula, brings focus to aspects of Chinese overseas activities south of China in Southeast Asia during the Ming Dynasty. Both *Among the White Moon Faces* and *Joss and Gold* thematise the politics of Chinese settlement in foreign lands with reference to the experience of belonging and marginalisation and to the potentially fraught relationship that can exist between a diasporic community and the host country. Grounding the narrative presence of Malaysia in her work, Lim identifies this Southeast Asian

country as originary homeland and an important signifier in the construction of diasporic Chinese identity. Although she was born in Malaysia, she does not, as a subject of Chinese descent, enjoy the privileges of belonging, because politics has determined that the person who truly belongs is the “Bumiputra,” a Sanskrit word that has been translated as “son of earth,” “son of the land,” or “son of the soil”; in Malaysia, “Bumiputra,” which refers to the Malay race and to the indigenous groups in Sabah and Sarawak, is also an identification that confers political and economic privileges.

Unlike Lim, who does not focus on China as the ancestral country of the Chinese diaspora, Lee brings the reader into his parents’ privileged lives in China. Lee’s mother was the granddaughter of Yuan Shikai, the president of the Republic of China, and his father was a one-time personal physician to Mao Zedong. Reference to Lee’s family history underscores the magnitude of the distance that has opened up between past and present, between China and the United States. His work portrays this distance in terms of the experience of loss and restlessness attributable to a series of forced geographical displacements. After his migration to the United States, Lee finds that his new homeland cannot afford effective recuperation from the trauma of national and psychic dislocation, trauma in which the experience of the individual signifies as a microcosm of the larger historical phenomenon of exile represented by the archetypal Jewish diaspora.

Representations of the Southeast Asian diaspora draw attention to the existence of Chinese communities in societies in which they are considered marginalised subjects and ethnic Others, communities that over time find themselves also gradually losing a sense of identification with the ancestral country. When life in the host country becomes untenable because of discrimination but a return to China is no longer viable, the Chinese in countries like Malaysia and Indonesia may find themselves looking to the developed nations of the West for possibilities to accommodate their search for a better life. Lim’s and Lee’s literary work draw attention to the importance of the presence of Chinese communities in Southeast Asia in critical considerations of the Chinese diasporic experience, complexifying representations of the Chinese American experience by shifting the thematic focus away from ancestral China to Nanyang. In *Among the White Moon Faces*, *Joss and Gold* and *The Winged Seed*, the experience of Chinese settlers in foreign lands inspires the production of Anglophone Southeast Asian literature that brings into thematic conjunction the history of Western imperial activities, local politics and the Chinese American immigrant experience.

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