

# Dissection and Assembly: Malayan Imagery in Tash Aw's *The Harmony Silk Factory*

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**Abstract** Tash Aw, Malaysian Chinese author who resides in England, won the Whitbread First Novel Award with his monograph *The Harmony Silk Factory*, also known as *The Mystery of Silk*. Through intricate story plots, Aw aptly presents the mysterious past of an emerging Chinese merchant. Besides, the novel also portrays great perversion of human nature as well as the generally unpredictable fate of common people during the time of British Colonialism and the Japanese Imperialism. With puzzle-like narration, the author probably assumes the role of a spokesperson on behalf of his ethnic group, revealing through his novel certain historical truths that have always been denied by the Malaysian government and hidden away in the course of history.

**Key Words** Tash Aw; *The Harmony Silk Factory*; Malaya Colony; Malaysian Chinese Literature

Tash Aw, winner of 2006 Whitbread First Novel Award with his award-winning novel *The Harmony Silk Factory*, was born in Taipei. At the age of two, he moved to Malaysia with parents of Malaysian citizenship. Hence, he completed his primary and secondary education in Kuala Lumpur. At the age of 18, he studied law at Cambridge University. Subsequently, he became a practicing lawyer. Two years later, he furthered his studies at the University of East Anglia, majoring in creative writing. Ever since then, he devotes himself to the writing career.

Written in English, *The Harmony Silk Factory* is Aw's maiden work. Having won the award, the novel was translated into more than 20 languages and enjoyed worldwide readership. Chinese translations of the novel were published in year 2008. Its Taiwanese title was *The Harmony Silk Factory* (《和諧絲莊》) whereas its title in the Republic of China was *The Mystery of Silk* (《絲之謎》). Aw spent two years to carefully examine the history of Japanese occupation in Singapore and Malaya

during the World War II. Weighing through an extensive research references, Aw dived deeply into the understanding of the livelihood of Malayan Chinese during the Colonial period. As he was raised in this very land, Aw truly knew Malaysia. His perception is therefore steeply different from those by Western observers. Caricatures of Colonial Chinese in his novel inevitably carry distinct Oriental overtones (Wen 166).

### **Narration: Criticism and Sarcasm**

The setting of *The Harmony Silk Factory* is Malayan Peninsula<sup>1</sup> in the 1940s. The novel is sliced into three segments, with dissections of the main character by three persons closely related to him. Johnny, the main character, never actually appears in the novel. However, his presence is quite apparent between the lines. The first segment of the novel, "Jasper: The Notorious Harmony Silk Factory", is a memoir of Jasper Lim regarding his father, whom he regards as a villain. The second segment, "Snow: Honeymoon of Four" is the journal of Johnny's wife regarding her honeymoon in the company of three chaperones. The third segment, "Peter: Heavenly Garden" is a travel log of Peter, the main character's friend, regarding his excursion to the land of the Orient.

Each of the three accounts depicts a formed perception of its narrator regarding the past. As each narrator has his/her unique language features, variants in their event interpretations provide the reader with a new appeal each time a subject matter is retold. Since each narrator reflects on things differently, the puzzle images they put together turns out quite different as well. The true identity and factual aspects of Johnny become more labyrinthine than at the beginning of the novel. Upon completion of the novel, readers may relate with what the author was probably hinting: Given some differences in each reader's standpoint, a plethora of reconstructions could actually be made regarding the incomplete account of the history of Malayan national building.

Malaysia is a multi culture and multi ethnic country. A Malaysian reader of Aw's novel would probably revisit the idea of "harmony" with some time implications. People tend to have high hopes regarding racial harmony. During the 1940s, Malaya was a British colony as well as a paradise for explorers. Born a peasant, Johnny Lim left mainland China for Malayan Peninsula. Having enduring much hardship and striving all alone, he finally had an opportunity to establish the "Harmony Silk Factory". He then emerged as a renowned entrepreneur among the locals. His story is a symbol in itself. The book's title "The Harmony Silk Factory" is already quite cynical. The entire novel is further infused with huge dissonance. All the more, fights and conflicts in the novel are all related to personal gains.

During the World War II, the state of affairs changed unpredictably. Malaya was a British colony that unfortunately fell target to Japanese conquest. Sandwiched between the power plays of China and Japan, Chinese in Malaysia found themselves in awkward situations with unclear self-identities. Meanwhile, conflicts between father and son, husband and wife, father-in-law and son-in-law, friends, nations and political parties were all unfolded in a small town in Malaya. Deducting from the memoirs of those who lived in Malaya—a country strategically positioned as the hub of cultural exchange between the East and the West—the story reflects culmination of cultures at the Peninsula during the Colonial era.

Etymologically, the word “silk” in the title relates to China. It is a cue regarding the complex ties between Chinese in Malaya and Chinese in the mainland China. Because of the subtle cultural tie, Malaysian Chinese during the Colonial period inevitably came between the clash of international powers as well as local political upheavals. Their choice in the course of such tensions determines their future.

Internally, Colonial Chinese assimilate into local community and become an organic circle of connections. Externally, they network and socialize with foreign political and interest bodies. Often, these Chinese leaders take on multiple identities. To name, a merchant may be a cultural activist cum a political representative, and so forth. Their rise to power and fame is due to various factors. Some turn from rags to riches; others might be opportunists who finally made it. Their political affiliation ranges from the Communist Party to the Nationalist Party. Some of them are national hero; some collaborate with the British or the Japanese army. Some are defenders of nation’s independence but also enemies of the country. Some are victims; some others benefit from the situation. The life of Johnny Lim is a stereotype of many Chinese of the time. He experiences all kinds of trials. Yet with an extraordinary will to live, he never fails to thrive through crisis. For his very survival, he traded in his dignity, his family, good conscience and even honesty. In the end, what is left is that Johnny Lim, a successful merchant on the surface, is at the same time a nasty crook in the eyes of his own son.

The mystery of this “Mystery of Silk” conceals the complexity of human nature. The brilliance of the novel, however, lies within the mysteries behind the stories. Even when one slices it layer by layer, no satisfactory answer could be derived.

The first segment of the novel is Jasper’s account regarding his father Johnny Lim. Johnny’s real name was Lim Seng Chin. Like other Chinese immigrants, he had a typical Chinese name when he came to Malaysia from China. Later, he adopted an English name “Johnny”. Quickly wiped off his Chinese peasant imprint, he became active amidst the business community. Jasper recalled seeing some carefully preserved Tarzan magazine cuttings among things that his deceased father left behind.

As the name of the artist who played the character of Tarzan was also “Johnny”, Jasper concludes that his father’s English name was derived from that person:

He named himself after Tarzan. I know this because among the few papers he left when he died were some old pictures, spotty and dog-eared, cut carefully from magazines and held together by a rusty paper clip. In each one, the same man appears, dressed in a badly fitting loincloth, often holding a pretty woman whose heavy American breasts strain at her brassiere. In one picture, they stand on a fake log, clutching jungle vines; his brow is furrowed, eyes scanning the horizon for unknown danger while she gazes up at him. Behind them is a painted backdrop of forested hills, smooth in texture. Another picture, this time a portrait of the same barrel-chested man with beads of sweat on his shoulders, bears the caption, “JOHNNY WEISSMULLER, OLYMPIC CHAMPION” ( Tash 6-7 )

*The Harmony Silk Factory* employs a multiple-angle narration, resulting in multilayered effects. The fact that Jasper Lim chose to describe only past events suggests that he has merely presented a fragment of the history. He isolates the father’s past from its historical backdrop—it shows that his perspective is lopsided, and his point of view could not be justified. A good example would be regarding his father’s name “Johnny.” The rationale of having an English name should be out of a survival need, i.e., after an incident in the past of which the father, still a young man, accidentally stabbed a British mine owner to death. The inference to the Tarzan pictures is nonsensical.

The way Jasper reconstructs his father’s story deters the validity of his critique. Having decided to judge his father mercilessly, many of his detailed accounts were merely strenuous attempts to prove that the father was despicable. It undermines the meanness of capitalists during the Colonial period and the cruelty of the Japanese regime. Interestingly, his approach produces a reversed effect. The more he wants to paint his father black, the more it makes sense to the readers how the atmosphere of the time leads to such irrevocable fate and destiny for his father. Readers of the novel become more sympathetic with Johnny instead.

As the story goes, Jasper Lim was born during the Japanese Occupation; the first generation of Chinese born in Malaysia. He experiences the surrender to the Japanese, the strife of Malayan Communist Party (MCP), the emergency state, the process to attain Independence of Malay(sia), and so on. He and Chinese youths of his time received Malaysian national education. When they were growing up, the MCP -- the anti-colonial and anti-imperial body—had already ceased their forefront operation and withdrawn to the jungle. Under the strict enforcement of the Internal Security

Act (ISA), any involvement in MCP's activity is subversive to the country. Hence, the commoners (especially the Chinese) resorted to keeping a distance from members of the MCP, gradually accepting the official account of this segment of the Malayan history. The government gave MCP a rather grave image, that they are stumbling blocks for national progress and destroyers of the people's unity.

In order to uncover the "real story of what happened" regarding his father, Jasper read meticulously through each mentioning of his father's name in "books, newspapers and magazines." He spent a great deal of time in libraries and the bureaus to screen through all available information. Derived through systematic and rational analysis, he concluded that Johnny his father is a notorious "Chinaman". Hence, with what he considered as sufficient background search, he outlined the father's "sinful past" for his audience.

Young Lim Seng Chin (Johnny Lim) was exceptionally skillful in handling machinery. The British mine owners learned of his ability in machinery assembly and hired him to manage the dredger. However, the dredger was rather old and broke down constantly. The mine owners exploited Johnny shamelessly, making him work day and night. In order to cut expenditure, they were not willing to invest new parts for the machinery. One day, the dredger totally broke down. The big bosses used that as an excuse to stop the operation of the mine. Shifting all the blames on Seng Chin, they stopped the workers' payroll. Without any discernment, the workers beat Johnny up brutally. The mine owners ridiculed Seng Chin continuously. Having endured utter humiliation and abuse, Seng Chin finally acted out. He thrust a screwdriver on Sir No.2's thigh. As Seng Chin was still a youth then, the court judged it as a juvenile case. He received ten lashes of canning and was released after that. Sir No.2 died a year and a week after the incident. His death was thought to be caused by Seng Chin's stabbing. After the release, Seng Chin wandered from a place to another. In order to survive, he abandoned his past identity along with his skill in machinery operation. He adopted an English name and became Johnny Lim. He was sheltered by a local merchant cum communist leader "Tiger", and then inherited his business. Johnny eventually married Snow, the daughter of tin magnate TK Soong. When the Japanese invaded Malaya, he cooperated with the Japanese, betrayed his comrade-in-arms in exchange for the continuity of his prosperous business, until he finally founded the notorious "Harmony Silk Factory".

The first segment of *The Harmony Silk Factory* depicts the despicable life of Johnny Lim. However, the author's intention is not all about Johnny. Rather, he intends to restore the historical mapping of Malayan history though Johnny. Johnny's life encounters and some other truths of the story are hereby waiting to be unfolded at the second and third segments of the novel.

### Slicing Up: Memory and Imagination

The second segment of the novel is a journal written by Snow Soong, Johnny Lim's wife. It records the "Honeymoon of Four" experienced by the couple Snow and Johnny, along with their three chaperones: Japanese professor Kunichika, Johnny's good friend Peter, and British merchant Honey. The team went to the Island of Seven Maidens during September 24<sup>th</sup> to November 15<sup>th</sup>, 1941. Johnny lived with the Soongs after he married Snow. The trip was proposed by Snow's father TK Soong in the name of giving the couple some space for leisure. Against the couple's will, Soong arranged for Kunichika, Peter and Honey to journey along, resulting in a very unusual traveling team.

The main foci of Snow's journal are her acquaintances with all the three men and the happenings during the island trip. She delineates the complicated relationships among the team members. In Snow's account, Johnny Lim is the original choice of her heart. Her account is different from Jasper's, which suggests that marrying a rich man's daughter has always been Johnny's scheme in order to attain an easy and successful life. In Snow's eyes, Johnny has a child-like genuineness. She felt that Johnny, being raised in the farm, would be far more reliable than the playboys. Sadly, she discovered after married that her romanticizing of marriage was a mistake. Born a humble birth, Johnny was petty, uncultured, lack of courage, and knew nothing about Snow's marital expectations and romance by the standard of the West. When they slept together, Johnny would not even dare to touch her. Even though Snow did not elaborate further, the journal reveals her sense of loss in search for romantic love. The presence of Kunichika captured her spiritual and sensual needs.

Snow's journal contains the full account of how Kunichika crashed into their lives. The polished and erudite professor gained Snow's initial admiration. Then, their mutual affection developed secretly. The journal also records some private connections between the two, hinting that Johnny actually knew about Snow and Kunichika's shady relationship. There were a few times that Snow wanted to end her marriage with Johnny. Yet she was too sorry to raise the matter. From Jasper's narration, readers would know that Kunichika is not as innocent as Snow thought him to be. He is but the top special agent sent by the Japanese to Malaya. During the Japanese occupation, he was instrumental in cruel murders of many lives, known as the *daisa* (Colonel) by the locals.

The intention of Kunichika's acquaintance with Snow becomes clearer in the third segment of the novel—*The Heavenly Garden*. Narrated by Johnny's English friend Peter, this portion of narration is presented in a non-linear, back and forth manner between the present and the past. In Peter's memory, he came to the East due

to his search for the mysterious garden. Having met Johnny briefly in Singapore, Peter treaded a long way to the Kinta Valley to look for the man again. Upon his new arrival in Kampar, he coincidentally witnessed a scene of which in an explosion, Johnny rescued Snow's father TK Soong out of the danger. He then got to know Johnny's beautiful wife Snow. The "Honeymoon of Four" mentioned in Snow's journal is one of the most important memories of Peter. He admitted that he secretly fell in love with Snow. He also noticed the developing, shady relationship between Snow and Kunichika. He saw the malicious intention behind Kunichika's advances at Snow. Utterly despising such behavior, Peter felt the painful state of helplessness of Johnny.

Peter's memory is hardly a complete story. Nevertheless, those past experiences have turned into lifetime memories for him. 80 years of age, this old man has been looking for the dreamed "heavenly garden" his whole life. His narration presents another side of Johnny. Johnny has regarded Peter as his good friend. While getting acquainted, Peter learned of Johnny's childlike innocence. Johnny learned English and Western social etiquette earnestly in the hope to improve the communication with his wife and her family members, as well as the assimilation into the upper middle class. Even though he married Snow and inherited Tiger's business along with great reputation and status that come with it, his father-in-law who is well-versed in both Eastern and Western cultures despised him. The snobbish mother-in-law also dislikes him. Johnny thus developed a deep inferior complexity. Peter's version of Johnny enables readers to further understand Johnny's character. It provides some rationale regarding Johnny's move in submitting himself at the full disposal of the oppressive Japanese military.

Through Jasper's narration, one knows that during the Japanese occupation, many leaders of the Anti-Japanese People's Army were massacred. Johnny was the only survivor. Since then, the Harmony Silk Factory emerged as the only prosperous local business, with Johnny becoming the communicational bridge between the locals and the Japanese. He and Kunichika became interdependent. To secure safety and security for the locals, Johnny assumes the role of tax collector on behalf of the Japanese. Johnny then survived two assassination attempts. The first incident happened after the group execution of the people's army leaders in 1944. The second took place during the Independence of Malay(sia) in 1957, when Johnny was watching a live telecast in a coffee shop. Twice being targeted, twice a survivor. Jasper's narration suggests strongly that the murder attempts were plotted by the Communist party. More than a decade later, the Communist members were still seeking vengeance on Johnny. It shows how deep their hatred was against him. Jasper implies that Johnny has traded in his comrade-in-arms for personal gains. As the son, Jasper views his father's collusion with the Japanese as betrayal to his comrades as well as treason to the people and

the country. He therefore felt utterly shameful about the father. That was why he left his father at the age of 18, cutting the ties with the father, and breaking himself away from the history of the family.

The relationship between Johnny and Kunichika is clarified in Peter's memoirs. The sudden presence of Kunichika in the town before the invasion of the Japanese had caused Peter quite a sense of alertness and insecurity. He started to pry on Kunichika's moves. Not only he discovered that Kunichika was having an affair with Snow, there was also a big conspiracy against Johnny plotted by the Japanese Army. He saw clearly Johnny's role among the locals and his importance to the Japanese. Kunichika and Snow connected between each other shamelessly via intimate body languages throughout the honeymoon trip in the Seven Maidens. Even a spectator like Honey could tell about their relationship. Yet Peter concealed his anguish, not wanting to point out the known-to-everybody's secret to Johnny. On the day before they were leaving Seven Maidens, Johnny shared painfully with Peter that someone had betrayed him and revealed to Kunichika that he was a Communist member. Only then that Peter understood the actual reason of Johnny's permissiveness about the affairs between Kunichika and Snow. Threatening Johnny with Snow and the shop, Kunichika wanted his full service for the Japanese. Johnny is therefore trapped in painful dilemmas. Either helping the Japanese or acting against them -- once the secret is exposed, Johnny's life is at stake. Whether he succumbs to Kunichika or not, he knew that he would inevitably lose the wife Snow.

Both Johnny and Snow considered Peter as their most trusted friend. Before the evasion of the Japanese, both of them approached Peter for the favor of taking care of their better-half if any misfortune happens. Unfortunately, Peter and the other British people left Malaya hastily before the Japanese arrived. He returned to Malaya only after the Japanese surrendered themselves. Snow passed away during child labor on the second year of the Japanese occupation. She is survived by Jasper, who looks like Japanese. Peter did not keep the contact with Johnny after that. Rather, he chose to reappear only in Johnny's funeral.

Peter's narration reveals that he sympathizes with, and has great pity on Johnny. He could not help but to harbor a sense of guilt towards Johnny. As Peter's description is confined with what he could observe, it cannot confirm on Johnny's actual betrayal of his comrades. The only clue for one to associate with might be what Peter witnessed as he was leaving the town. In order to bid Snow and Johnny farewell, Peter went to TK Soong's house, only to realize that Kunichika and some Japanese soldiers were guarding the door, while Snow was nowhere to be found. As he treaded pass the construction site of the "Harmony Silk Factory", Johnny was busy giving instructions to the workers. When their eyes met in the dreadful second, Peter saw Johnny's

“open-mouthed face fell silent, the light in his widened eyes dying even as it flickered to life”. Peter gazed at some point in the distant as if he had not seen Johnny, and he left. They did not exchange any words, yet there was already an immediate, tacit understanding between the two. He knew the exact choice that Johnny had made.

At the end of the novel, Peter handed Snow’s journal—a journal that he had kept for over 40 years—to Jasper at Johnny’s funeral. That completes Peter’s portion of narration. At the conclusion point, readers would suddenly come to a realization that Peter was the elderly Englishman at the first segment of the novel, who handed a sack to Jasper after Johnny’s funeral. The sack which Johnny threw carelessly into the car boot contained Snow’s diary, and Peter secretly hid it away before the honeymoon team ended their trip on the Seven Maidens. The final entry of the journal contains elements of the emotional connections between Snow and Peter. Hence, all the fragments are put together like puzzles at the conclusion of the novel, bringing forth historical captions of great imagination.

Although the “real story” is now pretty clear after one assembles all the parts together, the entire truth is still questionable. Jasper’s narration was lopsided slicing of the real history. Snow’s diary was her own experiences, which in turn lacks objectivity. Peter’s narration is mixed with reality and some imaginations. All three are not ideal restorations of the history. Through these incomplete pictures put together by the three characters, a legendary and mysterious life of Johnny prevails. Since Johnny is not given a say in the story, ambiguities remain unresolved, and the man Johnny become more mysterious than ever.

### **Assembly: History and the Fragments**

The most interesting part of the novel is its “baffling” historical truth. The geographical description captured in the novel is vivid. The people and customs are also very authentic. Some of the imageries are but *déjà vu* for readers who are familiar with Malaysia historical backdrop. Younger generations growing up after the Independence of Malaysia, namely those who are immersed with the official account of national history would naturally consider the MCP as more fearful than the British colonizers and Japanese invaders. Many will not revisit the painful past of the previous generations, choosing rather to suffer “*demertia*” regarding that particular period of history (Lin 152-181). Although as the author has clarified, the novel is a mere fabrication, it did bring back to certain extent memories of specific segments of the Malaysian history. Some of the happenings during that era of time are still fresh in the memory of Chinese Malaysian. Those affected by related incidents of that time could not bear the pains of re-scratching the scars.

Kinta River Valley mentioned in *The Harmony Silk Factory* used to be a bustling

hub in the Southeast Asia. Rich with the mines and enchanted with vast tropical jungles, it once attracted numerous explorers and tourists around the world to come for a share of its wealth or other travel interests. Chinese settlers of poor living conditions dotted the valley. They are natural targets for the MCP campaign. There is definitely a historical reason for the MCP to be active in this specific area. The existence of traitors among MCP members, resulting in the massive slaughtering of MCP leaders by the Japanese is also a historical fact. Through novel writing, the author reconstructs this segment of history intentionally, recollecting the economic exploitation of the British colonizers in Malayan Peninsula as well as the tyrannous rule of the Japanese military against local Chinese.<sup>2</sup> Like many other overseas Chinese, Johnny Lim undergoes constant and stringent emotional struggles in the midst of his strife for survival.

Malay(si)a achieved independence in 1957, ending 450 years of colonial history. By the end of the 1920s, the British were still controlling the Malayan Peninsula and the Straits colonies. Large number of Chinese immigrants came from the mainland China to the Peninsula for commerce activities or as laborers. In the 1930s, the British developed mining and plantation activities extensively, rolling away a great amount of wealth. Having undergone years of exploitation by the Colonial capitalists, anti-colonial nationalism movement sprouted up. The MCP was founded in 1931. It was immediately condemned as a subversive, illegal party by the British. When the Japanese army occupied most territories in the Southeast Asia, the British government sought alliance with the Communists to fight against the invading Japanese. However, after the Japanese surrendered themselves, the British troupe recolonized Malaya and suppressed the Communists, forcing them to revolt in violence. After the Independence of Malaysia, the government which is comprised mainly of the Malays continued the British approach in treating MCP as the number one enemy of the country—in the name of ensuring national safety. They propagandized the violent activities of the Communists in the papers and cut off connection between the Communists and their supporters, resulting in dwindling Communist influences as time went by. After another 30 years of dismal operations, the Communist members finally surrendered themselves in 1989, leaving the jungle and rehabilitating at homes. The history of anti-British, anti-Japanese activities of the MCP becomes a taboo among Malaysian residents. Younger generations would not discuss this segment of the history. Moreover, most of them do not really know the history of the MCP. Those who happen to have some idea were usually having negative impressions about the subject matter.

The first segment of *The Harmony Silk Factory* was narrated by Jasper Lim about the life of his father Johnny Lim. Somewhat biased, he associates his father's life with

“crime”, denoting his father’s “sin” to the dark side of the inner man. Readers who are not familiar with the history of Malaysia may interpret that the novel is all about twisted personalities. However, readers who are well-versed with Malaysian Chinese history would be able to relate with the historical backdrop of the novel immediately. Each character has its own symbolism, carrying voices of the respective narrator, with their respective background and different understanding of the history. The author, a Chinese, is probably presenting to his non-Chinese readers some historical facts that have been deliberately hidden away in official, recorded history. The long period of time since the British colonization and the Japanese occupation, through the “State of Emergency” and the Independence of Malaysia, is a time when the Chinese suffer ambiguity and trauma regarding their cultural cum political identity.

History textbooks available in Malay(si)a are subject to the control of the government, with a biasness in degrading factual truths about the early contributions of the Chinese in national building and development. Often, the Chinese are ill-represented as proponents of gangsterism and subversive communist activities. The powerful controls the media. The MCP, having lost power, becomes unsung and unspoken of by the authorities. Swept away along with it is the history of the early Chinese in the land. Occasional mentioning of them could only be found in certain literature. In the 1990s, a great number of memoirs of MCP members were published. These literature provide valuable information about the MCP. The most significant of which is regarding MCP leader Chin Peng, with the book title *My Side of History*.<sup>3</sup>

Before writing *The Harmony Silk Factory*, Tash Aw labored extensively on research materials regarding the history of the colonized Malay(si)a. In the epilogue of the Chinese spin-off of the novel, he denies that his novel contains elements of a biography. Jasper Lim is not a personification of the author. To certain extent, the back-tracking approach of Jasper regarding his father Johnny’s past, namely reconstructing the “true picture” of a Chinese merchant through examining countless of books, official records and memoirs—that could be the actual process of Aw’s re-discovering the history of that period of time. Jasper considers the information he read (which are abstractions of local official records) as irrevocable historical truths that give him a strong rationale to breach the familial ties with his despicable father.

Aw strongly suggests that there is a methodological issue in Jasper’s research procedure in seeking historical facts. Jasper’s understanding of his father is mainly derived from his own imaginations. His educational background influences and limits his perception of history. As he separates the life of the father from the historical backdrop and reconstructs everything by his own presumptions, his version of the story becomes not entirely reliable. That is why exactly when Peter handed him the well-kept-for-40-year diary of his mother (Snow’s journal), Jasper tossed it casually

into the car boot, considering it but a worthless item.

To recover the truth, the author aptly includes the account of another two narrators, namely Snow's journal (an autobiography) and Peter's memoir (a personal recollection of the past) so as to compliment the insufficiencies in Jasper's narration.

The ties between the MCP and Malay(si)an Chinese is rather strong. Almost every Chinese family of the time has some dealings with the Malayan Communists or leftist idealism. Due to the unique political landscape of Malay(si)a, the Malay-majority government treated the MCP as a stumbling block in inter-racial unity in the national building of Malay(si)a. Acts and enactments were undertaken to eliminate Communist influences. Followers of the MCP are portrayed as violent, murderous, armed terrorists; or in other words, the number one enemy of the country. Therefore, discussion of the MCP becomes a "taboo" for Malay(si)an citizens. Younger generations barely bear any memory regarding the contributions of the MCP in the acquisition of the solitary of the land. In 1989, the MCP leader Chin Peng and the Malaysian government signed a peace treaty, after which the MCP was dissolved officially. Since its disbandment, related writings on the subject matter get published occasionally. Researcher Zhong Yi Wen, inducting from her research work regarding the MCP, states that such resources, especially biographies, oral history, historical events retellings, personal memoirs, etc., are not only "redefining" the roles of the MCP, but have also become dialectical materials that stand against the official history accounts of the authority (Zhong 4). These writings provide historical facts and perspectives that are beyond the history defined by the ruling authority. They enable readers to reexamine the history of Malay(si)an Independence with more reference points.

*The Harmony Silk Factory* is written with multiple narrations and literary forms, piecing the puzzles together regarding the real identity of a Malay(si)an Chinese merchant cum Communist member who once lived during the pre-Independence era. The approach taken is somewhat similar to an effort to "unearth" the MCP profile. Jasper Lim's description is derived mainly from official account by the authority. Snow's journal is also her biography. Peter's narration is a memoir. Aw must have read unofficial materials of such before penning his novel. It is therefore not surprising to have the novel presented in such approach.

The author asserts high passions in novel-writing. Meticulously, he presents every piece of information about Malaysia, i.e., Malaysian geography, cultures, history, traditions, social structures, and so on and so forth. Reading his novel is like having attended an informative lecturer on Malaysian history. Moreover, Aw's vintage point helps to chart Malaysia on a larger worldview. In *The Harmony Silk Factory*, Malay(si)a is not only presented as a multi-ethnic country, but also the gathering hub

of international cultures. The main characters in the novel are of different nationalities, with respective language and cultural background as well as lifestyle. Readers of the novel might truly be amazed by the diversity and openness of Malaya as a regional melting pot of cultures back in the 40s.

The author leaves ample rooms for imaginations in the novel. His success lies in the interpretive freedom provided by the story for readers of different background, countries of origin and cultures. Li You Cheng mentioned in the foreword section of the Taiwanese spin-off of *The Harmony Silk Factory* that Aw's creative endeavour would not end here. It is quite foreseeable that Aw would continue to produce novels with history of Malaysia as the backdrop, and that would be in line with the blueprint of his entire writing enterprise.

### Notes

1. "Malaya" is the pre-Independence name of Malaysia. Malaya attained its autonomy and achieved national Independence in year 1957, forming the Federation of Malaya. On September 16, 1963, Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore joined the federation, becoming the Federation of Malaysia. Singapore, however, seceded from the Federation in 1965. The official name of the country is changed to "Malaysia". For convenience of discussion, "Malaya" refers to the Malay Peninsula during the Colonial rule, whereas "Malaysia" refers to the country that achieved Independence in 1957.
2. Li You Cheng, "Who is Tash Aw?" *The United Daily Morning News, Supplement* (23-02-2006).
3. Chief secretary of the MCP, Chin Peng, published *My Side of History* in 2003 as a counter reference regarding the MCP as compared to the portrayal of the Malaysian government about them. (Singapore: Media Masters, 2003)

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