

# Chinese Bruneian Identity: Negotiating Individual, Familial and Transnational Selves in Anglophone Bruneian Literature

*Hannah Ming Yit Ho* \*

## ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the identity construction of the Chinese diaspora in Brunei Darussalam. It argues that social, cultural, national and global demands for integration the Chinese in Brunei face collectively shape their sense of self. Considering Wang Gungwu's claim that because "home is not here," ethnocultural roots inform the diasporic subject's sense of belonging. They maintain these roots through cultural customs, beliefs and values, and also historical routes to the host nation—where naturalisation signals localisation. Across generational gaps, Brunei's Chinese diaspora reflects the demands, dreams and desires for reconstructing individual, familial and transnational selves. This paper aims to provide insights into Chinese Bruneian identity by examining the tensions between these multiplex selves. An analysis of K. H. Lim's Anglophone Bruneian novel *Written in Black* (2014), offers a valuable lens through which to view the complex dynamics and internal structures of Chinese Bruneian families. While its representations are by no means representative of the entire Chinese Bruneian community, the novel provides a useful platform to discuss the roles, positions and experiences of the Chinese diaspora in Brunei. Many ethnic Chinese living in Brunei strive to conform to the successful image of "the model minority" at the expense of their individual desires for self-actualisation. Analysing the Chinese familial home as analogous to the Brunei national home, Chinese and Malay cultural demands for filialness simultaneously produce an anxiety among the localised Chinese diaspora that causes a transnational shifting of familial and individual selves.

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Hannah Ming Yit Ho, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Universiti Brunei Darussalam, Brunei ([hannah.ho@ubd.edu.bn](mailto:hannah.ho@ubd.edu.bn)).

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If “physical acts of journeying” (Ho and Amran 164) construct notions of the Bruneian home, then the diasporic communities within Brunei Darussalam (henceforth Brunei) instantiate that migration shapes belonging and identity. Whether in the historical past or contemporary present, migration leads people into new social environments, such as a national culture that is distinctive from an existing familial ethno-culture. Furthermore, demands to assimilate into the host society speak of implicit and explicit desires for localisation, desires even as fraught for those whom “[a]ccording to the Nationality Act of 1961” (Ho, “Localisation” 132) Brunei’s Malay identity has not subsumed. In addition, global cultures that further reconstruct a sense of self through 1) new global migration circuits, 2) the consumption of international texts, and 3) participation in social media may destabilise the localised diasporic identity.

An increasing number of studies on Chinese Bruneians (D. Ho and H. Ho; Deterding and Ho; Ang and Low) have made a significant effort to open up a scholarly dialogue about local Chinese diasporic identity. In Brunei, the Chinese “have contributed much to the development of Brunei as a society and nation, and are thus an integral part of its history” (Chin 598) despite encountering social marginalisation as a minority group in a Malay nation (Koh et al. 340). Along this line, ascriptions, such as “the model minority”—an identity marker that America also commonly uses to refer to the Chinese diaspora—reverberate in the Chinese diasporic communities of Brunei. This model minority myth refers to the stereotypical Chinese values centred on “bonds bound families,” “self-discipline” academic excellence and economic success, and the way such prescriptive limits gloss over self-actualisation (Ang and Low 43, 47, 39). Moreover, the model minority myth is harmful, as it dismisses individualistic aspects of the Chinese diaspora and is psychologically damaging (Alvarez et al. 478). It also obscures an “internal exclusion” (Chou 219) that marks their status as “perpetual foreigners” (Lee et al. 76; Wu 79) experiencing, in Brunei, “an aporia prompted by . . . inconsistencies and contradictions” (Ho, “Women” 149) in a predominantly Malay nation.

This paper discusses the negotiations between individual desires and familial demands that are delineations of both the Chinese family and the Malay nation. The suggestion here is that, based on their common patriarchal systems, the ethnic Chinese family resonates with the Malay national home. In both these homes, familial standards promoting social cohesion through self-discipline or self-control necessitate a submission to collective values under male leadership.

From this perspective, familial and national demands may hinder private ideals and dreams of an individual self, especially when the familial is at odds with the national. Even as the individual self (or private self) and familial self (or communal self) are different, the present argument stresses a departure from the idea of their contestation to one of their negotiation. This negotiation recalls an identity in flux experienced by Chinese Singaporean women (H. Ho and D. Ho) who do not lose their ethnic identity due to their exposure to global cultures. Nevertheless, global migration leading to displacement impinges into communal structures of the family and nation. Such global flows also create the transnational self as the product of a negotiation between the individual and familial selves that together signal a multilayered and multipronged Chinese Bruneian identity, which is a subjective and dynamic construct.

The term “diaspora” meets with some opposition and disagreement within the critical scholarship (Cohen 61; Tan, Introduction 3; Suryadinata, “Southeast Asian Policies”; Wang G., “Upgrading” 156-59). Thus, this article draws on M. Barry Hooker’s definition of the Chinese diaspora as Chinese migrants who became “long-term citizens of Southeast Asia and Western Pacific states in which they are concentrated” (1). Rather than debating the appropriateness of this label, the present intention is to engage with the diaspora discourse that deals with the “experiences of displacement, of constructing homes away from home” (Clifford 244). Central to this notion of home is identity or self, which socio-political, economic, cultural and physical positionings shape as they lead to multilayered identities.

### **I. Critical Framework: Self in the Family, Nation and Global Space**

This study applies Kuah-Pearce Khun Eng’s conceptual framework of the transnational self to deal with identity representations of Chinese Bruneians, while exploring the intricate factors contributing to their self-formation. In the *Asian Studies Review*’s special issue on “Locating the Self in the Chinese Diaspora” (2006), Kuah-Pearce discusses her theory of the Chinese diaspora’s transnational self. She explains the premise of a transnational self as the ways in which the “Chinese as individuals and as a communal social group perceive themselves and interact with the local society, their ethnic community and the global community” (“Transnational Self” 223-24). Thus, she identifies three social circles that not only compete with one another but also increasingly

provide key intersectional spaces for productive acts of negotiating different selves at various times.

The Chinese diaspora's transnational self is, nevertheless, continuously subject to some degree of discrimination as part of their direct and indirect status as outsiders whose ethno-cultural capital—which differs from the national culture—troubles their complete integration into the host nation. Kuah-Pearce highlights that “[Chinese] migrants’ adaptation to the host society, the glass ceiling and various forms of discrimination” (“Locating” 219) are social realities amidst the progress made to bar discrimination in Southeast Asian nations (Suryadinata, Preface ix). Social marginalisation based on racial differences may also translate into legislative and legal forms of exclusion (Kuah-Pearce, “Locating”; Chan). This paper will focus on the changing constructions of self through the social processes taking place within a diasporic community (intergenerational), host society (national), and global spaces (international). With an emphasis on identity construction, it also explores the ways in which these collective social experiences shape the Chinese Bruneian's sense of self.

Since social realities “govern how [the Chinese diaspora] locate themselves” (Kuah-Pearce, “Transnational Self” 224), diasporic identity accounts for both past and present experiences of the self, which anticipate future trajectories. Even as anthropologists and sociologists have identified “the empirical self,” “looking-glass self,” “interacting self” and “socially situated self” (Holstein and Gubrium 21-31, 35-37), this paper builds on Kuah-Pearce's idea of a dichotomy between the private and communal self that constitutes the social self. By using the additional terms “individual” and “familial,” it accentuates individual responses within dreams and desires, while also drawing attention to distinct but similar structural/familial systems operating within both the ethnic Chinese family and the local Malay nation, thereby locating the individual as a member of both an ethnic family and a wider nation.

Chinese Bruneians possess a Chinese cultural capital while also living in a Malay nation. Thus, their expected filial duty is to the Chinese father and Malay king, as the respective heads of the family and the nation, while the familial self submits to the authority of the male leader of both social units. At the same time, the Confucian origins of the Chinese ethno-cultural value of filial piety differs greatly from the Muslim cultural tenets of the Malay, which “male leaders” determine (Ho, “Women” 147, 155). While Confucian piety informs

specific roles in the ethnic Chinese family (Ang and Low 40), the Malay promote contrasting prescriptive socio-cultural norms to citizens of the nation.

Postmemory and affect are also relevant to examining familial members whose intergenerational ties inform their construction of self. In this respect, the application of Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory offers an understanding of the different textures of memories available not only through stories but also pictures handed-down to the next generation (103). Through the lens of postmemory one can trace a continuity of dreams and desires between generations. Likewise, affective responses—which account for “the role of emotions” (Sjoberg 106)—are important to this study because they elucidate upon the intrinsic mechanisms bearing on the shared experience of the Chinese diasporic, which is personal and intimate, even as it is communal.

Thus, the family and nation constitute social spaces inhabited by individuals whose affective states and subconscious dreams articulate a consciousness of self. Apart from the tensions arising between the family (cohesion) and nation (localisation), social fissures within each of these structural units also produces internal struggles between their members. In other words, the individual experiences and pressures within the changing organisation of the Chinese family conflict, on the one hand, with traditional ideas of cohesion and, on the other hand, with modern notions of the family structure that globalisation informs (Ho and Amran 170). In the same way, internal mechanisms challenge national structures, revealing the myth of a cohesive narrative and belying the multiethnic definition of Malay identity that dominant (Hussainmiya 69) and global cultures are influencing.

This paper interrogates the internal and intergenerational workings of the Chinese Bruneian family within their familial, national and global homes by discussing their historical, socio-political, economic and cultural status. Following that discussion, a literary analysis of K. H. Lim's *Written in Black* (hereafter referred to as *WB*) identifies the novel's multiple representations of the self as individual, familial and transnational. Using Kuah-Pearce's theory of the transnational self, these discussions map the dilemmas of Chinese Bruneian identity in the family and nation as a “subjective and dynamic” (Wang G., “Within” 4) construction. To this end, this paper examines a position “within and without” (4) the ethno-cultural community, locating social spaces of the nation and global culture beyond the Chinese family. These multifaceted identities alternately lay claim to the self by tapping into the various

social networks of the intergenerational diasporic community, host nation and global spaces.

## II. Status of the Local Chinese in Brunei: Through the Lens of the Model Minority

The Chinese in Brunei make up 10.3% of the national population (“Population”). They comprise the second largest ethnic group after the dominant Malays (65.8%). As early as the sixteenth century, traders from China began arriving in Brunei (de Vienne, “Chinese” 53). During the early twentieth century, Chinese arriving in Brunei were part of a global flow, a “migration fever” (Zhu 159; Wang G., “Patterns” 34). Chinese Bruneians comprise heterogeneous clans that their dialects distinguish. The Hokkien was the largest dialect group to arrive, migrating from Quemoy in 1918, known today as the Kinmen Islands (de Vienne, “Chinese” 33, 40). But Brunei is also home to Hakka, Cantonese, Hainanese, Teochew and Foochow speaking groups (Dunseath 284).

In Brunei, the Muslim Malay citizenry predominantly contributes to the national identity, promoting “an exclusive, fixed, and cohesive narrative of Malayness” (Ho, “Women” 148). Such an ideology inevitably downplays the ethnic diversity of the nation’s population, which Chinese, Indian, Iban, and Penan ethnicities also comprise. Furthermore, the tripartite ideology of Melayu Islam Beraja or MIB, the national philosophy of Brunei, points up “the construction of state policies, the propagation of cultural stereotypes, and the undermining of other value systems which hold potential, and alternative, appeal” (Daud 45). The MIB promulgates not only the cultural stereotypes that include the *rakyat jati*—the Malay indigenous tribes that subsume the seven ethnic groups (“Laws of Brunei: Nationality Act”) that the MIB ideologically assigns to Muslims—but also the restrictive stereotypes it ascribes to non-Malays. In the case of Chinese Bruneians, their model minority status limits and damages their sense of self.

To a large extent, ethnic Chinese in Brunei occupy economically inclusive spaces. Jonathan Rigg writes, “[t]his position of the Chinese, central in economic space, but marginal in social and national space, remains the problematic in both practical and conceptual terms” (112). Even though Chinese Bruneians may be business-oriented (Ang and Low 42), the attribution

of their economic success to their ethnicity belies their “internal exclusion” (Chou 219) as a minority. Upon national independence, one-third of the local Chinese was granted citizenship, while others lost their nationality and became stateless (Zhao). While stateless status in Brunei may apply to other minorities, such as Indians, Ibans, and Malays from neighboring states, it most often refers to the ethnic Chinese (Limligan 240-41; Boonchutima et al. 58), just as it does to ethnic Chinese throughout Southeast Asia (Tan, Introduction 8). It appears that the Brunei government either keeps no official numbers or lacks the will to disclose the size of its stateless population of ethnic Chinese (Daud 45). However, estimates suggest as much as 90% of the Chinese Bruneian population are stateless (Loo 151). The US State Department’s report on Brunei also highlights the status of ethnic Chinese living there, many of who are third-generation Brunei-born residents to whom the government has denied citizenship (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor).

As a Malay nation, Brunei’s Nationality Act of 1961 ascribes preeminence to Malay racial identity, language, and culture as crucial benchmarks for citizenship (“Laws of Brunei: Nationality Act”). Citizenship tests demand a high proficiency in Malay (Hussainmiya and Tarling 158). Although certificates of identity (COIs) still function as passports, “stateless” subjects have made much progress toward their recognition as “permanent residents” (Zhao). Often, the local Chinese diasporic community itself has begun mobilisation drives for the better inclusion of ethnic Chinese in Brunei. For instance, Lim Boon Hwa, vice-president of the Brunei-China Friendship Association, called for a reform of the nationality law, which now allows for those aged fifty years and above to take an oral exam instead of a written test (Kassim). Other eminent local Chinese, including appointed ministers, comprise the few Chinese (no more than two at any time) within Brunei’s State Legislative Council (“State Legislative Council Members”).

With their minority status in Brunei, the ethnic Chinese encounter tacit forms of internal exclusion, which other non-indigenous people also face because the state-constructed Malay identity for Bruneian citizenship excludes them. Thus, Brunei ineluctably incorporates “the image of the raced ‘other’” (Ho, “Violence” 56) into its national and social space. According to Bin Wang, “[t]he Chinese always remains the Other” (32). However, due to their economic success, familial cohesion and self-discipline (Ang and Low 39, 47, 43), the treatment of the Chinese in Brunei as a model minority signals their successful



assimilation into the family and nation, which offsets their social marginalisation. Despite denoting these levels of success, the model minority myth is nonetheless an alternative racism, “a signifier . . . to differentiate racial minorities within the space of cultural representation” (Chou 224). Their differences notwithstanding, useful parallels between White-dominant America and Malay-dominant Brunei illuminate the identity negotiations of Brunei’s Chinese diaspora. In both societies, the Chinese Other faces the combined reality of living within an ethnic Chinese family, while facing demands for local assimilation, and while experiencing global mobility.

Since William Petersen coined the term “model minority” (43) in 1966, scholars have applied it to the Chinese diaspora in America (“Success Story” 73). The term encapsulates prescriptions for the Chinese diaspora’s exemplary traits, including academic excellence, familial cohesion, and law-abiding citizenship (Petersen 40-41), which signal the successful assimilation of the Chinese into a larger social organisation. The model minority stereotype promotes “colorblindness [that] sustains existing social, political, and economic structures that provide White Americans with various privileges” (Kawai 65). For the Chinese Bruneian, it buttresses an otherwise colour-conscious ideology that maintains Malay privilege in Brunei. MIB serves both as a “hegemonic force of assimilation” (Sahrifulhafiz and Hoon 25) and to “hammer out a collective consciousness” (de Vienne, *Brunei* 267) that indirectly demands non-Malays into localisation through “Islamic conversion” within the Malay Muslim nation (Ho, “Localisation” 129). An accommodationist policy upheld in Brunei “restricts the manifestations of Chinese identity during official functions” (Gomez and Hsiao 45), which results in a further process of self-censorship within local literary and media spaces (Starrs 55), lending credence to the high assimilation rates of minorities that include the Chinese Bruneians as a model minority group.

Consequently, the literary status of Chinese Bruneians thus far aligns with their social and national positioning as a minority people occupying marginalised spaces. The marginal representations of the local Chinese in contemporary Anglophone Bruneian plays and in Chong Ah Fok’s Bruneian Malay novels reflects this alignment, depicting the local Chinese as minor characters and antagonists (Ho, “Localisation”). Analysing Bruneian plays, Boonchutima et al. conclude that Chinese Bruneians “are [portrayed as] caricatures and presented as negative individuals whereas the Chinese character

that has a central role manifests negotiations and ambivalence of her multiple identities” (58). Assigning marginal spaces to the ethnic Chinese associates them with racialisation (Li and Li 24). Furthermore, Chinese Bruneians do not merely possess multiple identities, or “as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize [them]” (Holstein and Gubrium 24); but rather, they embody individual desires, familial-cum-national demands, and experience global dreams that create their “multiplex identities” (Kuah-Pearce, “Transnational Self” 227).

### III. A Contemporary Novel by Chinese Bruneian K. H. Lim

As his name suggests, K. H. Lim is a writer of Chinese descent (*huayi* or *huaren*).<sup>1</sup> In view of Wang Gungwu’s statement, “[e]ach writer is a Self with regard to his or her immediate migrant community” (“Within” 1), it is small wonder that K. H. Lim draws inspiration from his own Chinese diasporic community (*WB* 239) to interrogate the complexities of the self. Indeed, “the writer is [also] likely to have a different Self in relation to other ethnic groups in the adopted country, especially toward the dominant majority that has the political power to define national identity for all minorities” (Wang G., “Within” 1). Therefore, the self is a complicated term for members of a diasporic community whose minority status feeds into their identity construction.

*Written in Black* (2014) is K. H. Lim’s debut novel. Within the growing field of Anglophone Bruneian novels, *WB* is the first by a Chinese Bruneian author that deals with an intergenerational Chinese diasporic family in Brunei. While Limbang-born Chinese Bruneian author Chong Ah Fok has written Malay novels featuring Chinese protagonists, such as Ah Siong in *Angin Pagi* (1990), he does so without providing a lens into intergenerational relations in the Chinese family. Moreover, Ho argues that his Chinese protagonist becomes frustrated when attempting to partake in the cultural and economic goals of localisation (“Localisation” 134), thus suggesting tensions that complicate his formation of a localised diasporic identity. While Chinese ethno-culture and Malay ethno-nationalist culture are different, this analysis explores their shared

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<sup>1</sup> *Huayi* denotes local nationals, while *huaren* is the ethnic Chinese (Wang G., “Chinese Revolution” 198).

emphasis on filial piety, and rather than delving into Chinese-Malay social interactions, it focuses on internal affective responses, familial dynamics, and the transnational self of intergenerational Chinese Bruneian figures.

In K. H. Lim's novel, the author presents an almost exclusively Chinese community of characters as he foregrounds the lives of three generations of the Lee family in Brunei through the eyes of his protagonist-cum-narrator, a ten-year-old Chinese boy named Jonathan Lee. Two Bruneian Malay characters play secondary roles, including Jonathan's best friend Radzi, with whom he attends the same state school. Jonathan also comes into contact with Radzi's uncle, called Mohidin Ali. Given its emphasis on Brunei's Chinese diaspora—"treated like immutable foreigners" in the novel due to "Brunei's racialised parameters of national belonging" (Cheong 203, 191)—the author concludes in a disclaimer that "this book is not meant . . . to be taken as a definitive description of day-to-day Bruneian life" (*WB* 239). Given that *cara Brunei* or the Brunei way of life aligns with "Bruneian Malays' collectivist traditions and cultural history" (Chin and Daud 103), it is not surprising that the author attempts to recalibrate his readers' expectations of this Bruneian novel, which is neither written in Malay nor addresses the Malay hegemonic identity that is the hallmark of the Malay Muslim nation. Instead, the novel is attentive to the Lee family, comprising Jonathan, his siblings, cousins, uncles, aunts and their parents who altogether constitute one big Chinese family in Brunei. This conscious choice by the author circumvents *cara Brunei* and offers an implicit critique of the state's treatment of the ethnic Chinese in Brunei, further intimating through the insularity of the narrative their status as immutable foreigners.

Crucially, the death of Jonathan's grandfather and the news that the former's mother has decided not to return to Brunei after a six-month hiatus in Melbourne drives the plot of the novel. Due to the sudden demise of the senior patriarch of the family, an urgency arises for the family to lay their male leader to rest, even without all the family members being physically present. As a result, the three generations of the Chinese Bruneian family come together for a reunion of sorts. The first generation includes the recently deceased *Ah Kong* and his wife *Ah Ma* who were migrants to Brunei.<sup>2</sup> The second generation includes their children *Ah Peh* (the eldest son), Seng (the second son) and Ming

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<sup>2</sup> Names refer to the status of the characters in the family and are italicised in the novel.

(the only daughter), as well as their respective spouses *Ah Em*, Mary and Uncle Ben. Finally, the third generation consists of *Ah Peh* and Mary's nine-year-old son Kevin and his older sister Frida, as well as Seng and Mary's sixteen-year-old son Michael, their fourteen-year-old daughter Jen, the ten-year-old protagonist Jonathan, and eight-year-old Aaron.

The physical setting is solely Brunei, which includes Muara town, described as inhabited by “old folk, many of them second-generation Chinese who'd settled down here all the way back in the 1920s and 1930s when their migrant parents had laid down the stepping stones” (*WB* 28). By featuring older folks, their young children, and younger grandchildren, generational differences play a role in the ways the characters assert or resist prescribed Chinese identity within the sphere of an MIB nation. The contemporary time setting and availability of social media facilitate the production of transnational selves. Over the concise span of two days, the novel begins with Jonathan taking a leave of absence from school to perform familial and funeral duties. The scenes shift from private homes to public spaces, such as Jonathan's school, Mohidin's shop-house and *Ah Kong's* gravesite. Much of the novel details Jonathan's impromptu leave, from his grandfather's wake to his attempts to locate his runaway brother Michael. The novel closes with laying the grandfather to rest and Jonathan resuming school.

#### **IV. *Written in Black*: Individual, Familial and Transnational Selves**

*Ah Kong's* death serves as a significant catalyst for individual members of the family to search for their identity within and beyond their family and the nation. With further news of Mary's permanent departure from Brunei unfolding, Jonathan and his father, Seng, respond affectively—the former through his expressions of *geram* and the latter through his anger.<sup>3</sup> Both of them encounter identity crises within the family, as the physical death of the male head—the defender of the Chinese “patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal-exogamous culture” (Yan Du 170)—challenges their cultural and familial orientations. *Ah Kong* is “the boy on a ship leaving China” who has suffered

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<sup>3</sup> *Geram* is a Malay word that is commonly translated as anger. However, in Jonathan's use, it denotes more than anger. He refers to an insatiable rage affecting him physically (“the itchiest bite that the itchiest mosquito could ever give you”) and affectively (“stirring up all your internal organs”). See *WB* 51.

“war, poverty and, above all, the trauma of having to bring up, and then put up with, this family for years” (*WB* 208, 217). While shifting familial roles reveal an attempt to counteract the absence of Mary and the loss of *Ah Kong*, they also expose internal fractures within the family, as the ethnic, local/national and global cultures determine the contending demands of the characters’ individual and familial selves. Thus, coupled with Mary’s migration, *Ah Kong*’s demise triggers disturbances, disruptions and divisions on individual and communal levels. This identity crisis within the family leads Jonathan on a search for belonging in situated locales and transnational sites that attest to the Chinese diaspora’s “multiplex identities” (Kuah-Pearce, “Transnational Self” 227), including their dreams, desires and postmemory.

### **A. Individual Self: Memories, Dreams and Personal Belongings**

Even if intergenerational, the memories and dreams of individual members of the extended family—a grandfather, his son, his daughter-in-law, and his grandson—are deeply personal. Collectively, their memories signal the reproduction of past experiences, while their dreams of individual success bear out processes of self-actualisation. *Ah Kong*’s dreams of a life away from economic hardship and the afflictions of war in China, Seng’s desires for local assimilation, Mary’s pursuit of her individualistic passion, and Jonathan’s postmemory and affective response to his individual need for his mother are all personal ambitions the novel manifests.

#### **A1. *Ah Kong*: Memory (Re)Production and Individual Dreams of a Better Life**

The “dialectics of remembering and forgetting” (Cattell and Climo 1) encapsulate first-generation migrant *Ah Kong*’s memories of China, which include his socio-cultural participation and the religious rituals performed in his Chinese diasporic home. In other words, he attempts to preserve these memories through his membership in social organisations structured around dialects and clans, such as the Kinmen Association; his “Goddess of Mercy idol” instantiates his religious belief; and his practise of ancestor worship by “making . . . prayers with joss sticks” (*WB* 214, 197, 214). As Jonathan reveals, the desire to escape “war [and] poverty” (*WB* 217) motivated *Ah Kong*’s dreams

of migration out of China, where “material deprivation and hardship” (Kuah-Pearce, “Collective Memories” 114) plagued the Chinese who first emigrated to Southeast Asia. *Ah Kong*’s personal decision to leave his Chinese homeland for a new home in Brunei also means that he performs the dual acts of preserving memories of his homeland and creating new memories in his adopted country. Subsequent allusions to his “foster family” and “foster father” (WB 208) in Brunei attest to the personal sacrifices he had to make when leaving his biological family to pursue his dreams of a better livelihood, which he gains by working his way up and opening his own shops (“buying his own shop, then two more shops, then four more . . .” [208]). At the same time, he acts upon the remembering of his Chinese cultural capital through his input in cultural economics, such as “the Chinese Chamber of Commerce” (77), to maintain a sense of his roots and the routes (Clifford) he followed to arrive in his new home.

## **A2. Seng and Mary Lee: Individual Dreams that Challenge the Model Minority Myth**

Similar to *Ah Kong*’s pursuit of his individual dreams, Jonathan’s father Seng and mother Mary exercise the “self-expression and actualization of [their] ideological thoughts and orientations” (Kuah-Pearce, “Transnational Self” 225). However, their actions cause social fractures within their marital home and family. First, Seng’s personal desires for local assimilation see him forsaking his family’s business. He relinquishes countless invitations and opportunities to work under *Ah Peh* (his older brother), who has inherited their father’s business. Rather, Seng is content with being a “civil servant,” explaining that “I was a teacher, so I should stay in education all my life” (WB 52). He thereby forsakes the Chinese value of “long-termism” (Low, “Way” 40) along with “teamwork and team spirit in family/relative owned business” (Ang and Low 47). In a “highly hierarchical and authoritarian Chinese [household]” (Kuah-Pearce, “Transnational Self” 225), Seng also encounters familial objections to an expression of his individual self. A cultural “hierarchy” (WB 213) guarded by *Ah Kong* determines his role as a son. With *Ah Kong*’s passing, *Ah Peh* preserves this cultural hierarchy by taking on his father’s economic successes and responsibilities. By contrast, Seng’s individual ambitions to continue as a civil servant exemplify his desire to “resist the

enculturation process, thereby creating a social and spiritual dissonance and emerging tensions between the two selves” (Kuah-Pearce, “Transnational Self” 225), i.e., his individual and familial selves. Hence, subservience within a Chinese family (*WB* 208) is replaced by an obedience to the nation’s request for teachers and “teacher education” (Koay 1031), as Seng personally chooses not to assume an entrepreneurial role in his family’s business.

Seng’s loyalty and his obedience to the nation are evident in his continual contribution of service to the state rather than family. Even after he is “finished [with] his bond” (*WB* 52), he resists the expectations of his older brother to join the family business, instead continuing as a state educator. While this choice reflects his personal desire and private dream to be an educator, one cannot disregard the state’s indirect hand, given the emphasis on teaching roles in the nation at the time (Koay 1029). In other words, the novel implicitly refers to Seng’s localisation by means of his persistent compliance with the nation’s call for teachers, which positions him as a loyal civil servant. Thus, Seng’s individual desires and the state’s calls to serve the nation rupture familial harmony. Seng’s brother views him as “too stubborn” and opines that “[t]here’s no helping a man like that” (*WB* 52). Familial fissures are apparent in the “tirade [that] left *Ah Peh* wheezing, [as] *Ah Em* began to brush his brow” (52). Such social fractures challenge the model minority myth and present Seng’s family as not a cohesive unit.

Second, Mary’s individual passion and individualistic pursuit of independence beyond her twin roles as wife and daughter-in-law, position her as a counterfoil to *Ah Ma*, Seng’s mother, whose status within the Lee family is her sole definition. Mary’s in-laws—who view her as a “no-good floozy”—oppose her “business plan for setting up a small dance class” (*WB* 200). Mary and Seng have a fraught relationship because, as Jonathan points out, his grandparents have been “poisoning [Pa’s] mind against Mum from the beginning” (200). Seng also reacts angrily to Mary: “Pa always got angrier when he called Mum, and this time was no exception; he had practically slammed the phone back in its place when the call had ended” (12). Given her further individualistic desires, Mary unsurprisingly harks back to memories of her independence, when she studied in Manchester under a government scholarship. During her university days in the United Kingdom, she “accumulated a wealth of experience partying and travelling, as well as getting into a string of relationships with numerous men” (200), thus embodying a

carefree lifestyle that clearly signalled her erstwhile lack of self-discipline, much to her in-laws' chagrin. Even though Mary is academically successful, her individualism challenges her model minority status. Once married to Seng in Brunei, she struggles with a private desire for autonomous self-expression on the one hand and being a good daughter-in-law on the other hand. By leaving her family in Brunei and going to "Australia" (16), she fulfills her individual dream of self-actualisation.

### **A3. Jonathan: Postmemory, the Affective Self and Object Attachment**

Considering the complexity of "Chineseness" (Davidson and Kuah-Pearce 3), the identity construction of the Chinese diaspora intricately intertwines past and present memories that the regional and ethnic identities of ancestral history inform. Jonathan's memories, which quickly descend into a nightmare, attest to the inner conflicts of his private consciousness. Being part of "a generation of postmemory" (Hirsch 103), he inherits *Ah Kong's* memories indirectly through oral stories and transmitted images. Thus, collective and cultural trauma are "transmitted . . . so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right" (103). Given "the function of gender as an idiom of remembrance" (Hirsch 103), Jonathan unsurprisingly identifies with *Ah Kong*, whom—in a vivid narrative—he meets as a boy in a dream (*WB* 208), indicating a patrilineal transmission of memories:

A boy about my height and my size, walking over to where I was standing, and I recognised him the instant he was close enough. The boy was me . . . .

. . . [P]ictures of that boy's life began floating through my head, flitting glimpses of the things that I'd been told about him. (*WB* 208)

Evidently, Jonathan has internalised stories and images of *Ah Kong's* past that his grandfather had previously shared with him. Drawing on these "pictures" and "flitting glimpses," Jonathan remembers his grandfather's journey as a migrant and his reality as a first-generation Chinese diaspora. Postmemory reproduces *Ah Kong's* reality in the deep recesses of Jonathan's individual consciousness. Intimately personal, Jonathan's third-generation memories are



the products of his internalisation of his grandfather's first-generation experiences, which now make up his own experiences and, hence, constitute a part of Jonathan's individual self as remembrances forged in his mind by postmemory.

Given that memories are subjective, Jonathan acknowledges an affective sense of unease as part of this intimate experience of his individual self. He speaks of his feelings of *geram*:

. . . [T]he worst itch in the world . . . stirring up all your internal organs and agitating them to the point where you're on the verge of clawing and tearing them out with your bare hands if only to make it stop . . . . It doesn't help; nothing helps. (*WB* 51)

This itch is inherently persistent and does not relent, even when he tries to eradicate it by screaming at the top of his lungs and breaking things. His use of a Malay word to describe his intimate emotions also attests to his "Bruneization" (Noor Azam and Najib 18), a process that marks his predominant use of Malay and intimately ties him to a state-endorsed local identity in Brunei. Even though it carries positive associations of a national affiliation, *geram* is a term loaded with ambivalence, for the primary use of one language may disadvantage other languages, not barring native tongues. Nonetheless, Jonathan shows no signs of such an affliction, admitting that "*geram* . . . describes a feeling that no English term I know could properly communicate" (*WB* 51). While displaying his lexical polyvalence and participating in the symbolic realm, in Lacan's sense of the term, his Malay utterance proffers an alternative way of self beyond his inherited postmemory. As both local language and postmemory shape his personal dreams and desires, Jonathan represents the third generation's identity formation through this productive tension. Even so, his agitation—due to his mother's absence—continues to overwhelm him, and his school grades decline (16). His unhappiness with his "Mum-situation" (58) extends to his family's disintegration. With *Ah Kong's* and *Ah Ma's* open dislike of his mother, familial demands to align himself with their misgivings challenge his yearning for his mother. Thus, *geram* entangles Jonathan's internal struggles to resolve his need for a maternal figure with his role as a grandson, two competing roles which are impossible to reconcile. At familial events, where an image of social

cohesion is of utmost importance, he experiences a personal nightmare in which he envisages the same boy in his dream mutating into a marionette, a “lifeless and inanimate” (209) body that he throws into the flames at *Ah Kong*’s vigil. As a sign of his deep agitation, the marionette’s immobility is suggestive of Jonathan’s helplessness amidst his individual needs.

Consequently, with Jonathan convincing himself that “dead bodies couldn’t really hurt anyone” (*WB* 31), he seeks safety and comfort in his personal belongings. The dead bodies here serve as a metonymy for the returning memories that haunt and trouble his private self. Preferring inanimate objects over the fluctuations of living relations, Jonathan turns to his G2 black pen to provide a sense of certainty—“[b]lack ink was so much stronger” (63). Black ink also looks “like the perfect representation of truth absolute” (64), thus pointing to his own desires for an objective reality amidst his great unease with and within his family. Jonathan associates black pens with “articles of wisdom handed down . . . from one generation to another, the kind of stuff we had to remember for life” (64), which explains the way he gravitates to the personal belongings that have helped him to retrieve memories, while also attenuating the uncertainty and agitation the loss of his mother and grandfather have caused within the family. Significantly, he personifies his beloved personal items, such as viewing his black pen as “one of my best buddies for all of five years and still counting” (63). This personification adds to his sense of emotional security through instrumental objects. In another instance, after the destruction of a birthday watch gifted to Jonathan by his father, he “picked up the watch’s remains and disposed of them in [his] cousin’s dustbin” (61). After completely shattering this watch, Jonathan explains that “[i]t felt as if I had just brutally murdered something that had lived, a thing that had a soul” (61); he has internalised his father’s anger and projected it on to the watch that he annihilates. This “massacred time-piece” (61) serves as a way of dealing with his growing dissatisfaction with his father’s anger and faulting him when he lets his individual self undermine the performance of his respectable familial duties at *Ah Kong*’s wake. Hence, Jonathan’s response to loss determines his emotional (dis)connections with personal objects as a desperate means to offset his feelings of *geram* in the wake of *Ah Kong*’s demise and his mother’s absence.

## B. Familial Self: Social Expectations, Communal Roles and Cultural Demands

This part of the analysis addresses the ways that the ethnic Chinese family resonates within a Malay national home. If the familial self serves as “a distinct buffering function” (Cai et al. 529), then Southeast Asian cultures comprising ethnic Chinese and Malay cultures alike place a significantly superior value on the affirmation they gain through rather than without the family. There are two ways in which the Chinese family and Malay nation reinforce the familial construct. First, common patriarchal values promote the filial piety that demands a high degree of respect for male leaders. In other words, despite clear distinctions between Chinese Confucian values and Malay Islamic ideology, a shared reverence for the patriarch (Abdullah et al. 133) forges the familial self. Second, model standards of success that encourage acts of collectivity provide high levels of familial cohesion, even if these standards are prescriptive and restrictive. The following analysis discusses the familial self as Jonathan, his father, his cousin and the women in the Lee family exemplify it.

Notwithstanding their cultural specificities, both the Chinese family and Malay nation uphold, expect and demand a common patriarchal system espousing filialness. The ethnic Chinese family adhere to the Confucian values of “filial piety” (Low and Ang 294; D. Ho and H. Ho 158). To instantiate, Jonathan’s relation with his father focuses on preserving the traditional role of the father as the male leader of the family. In the novel, Jonathan views his father as worse than a “live volcano,” a “steamroller” and a “soulless rock-face” (*WB* 53, 60, 51), thus encapsulating Seng’s capacity for wrath and steely resolve in dispensing punitive measures when his patriarchal authority comes under threat. Quick to punish Jonathan upon discovering his son trespassing into *Ah Kong*’s room during the wake, Seng angrily strikes him using the palm of his hand: “Pa’s hand came down so quickly that I realised I had been hit only after my head had snapped all the way to my right” (59). Seng believes this means of discipline exhibits not only his patriarchal authority but also a warranted response to a grievous act of transgression against the Chinese patriarchs—both father and grandfather. In “good old traditional Bruneian-Chinese fashion” (15), *Ah Kong*’s children and grandchildren attend his wake and respectfully perform their rituals. Upon discovering that Jonathan has left *Ah Kong*’s wake to seek out Michael, his cousin Frida naturally admonishes him when he returns.

She says, “[n]obody’s allowed to leave once the ceremony starts with the wake. You broke the rules, Jonathan” (181). Hence, the novel includes physical and verbal reminders of filial piety in terms of privileged son/grandson-father/grandfather relationships.

The Malay nation, being against any disloyalty to parents (Chin and Daud 102), likewise employs the trope of the unfilial child in cautionary tales. As the patriarchy undergirds Islam (Alexander and Welzel 249), a Malay nation achieves social cohesion by promoting an unfailing deference to the Malay king, who serves as a father figure. In Brunei, the Sultan’s constitutional status positions him akin to God, as one who “can do no wrong” (“Laws of Brunei: Constitution Matters I,” Article 84B [1]); the Malay patriarchal figure demands his citizens’ obligation as filial sons and daughters under his authoritative rule. In fact, *Ah Kong*’s mute response to his foster father intrinsically embeds and tacitly signals his acquiescence to such demands by patriarchal figures. Within the private sphere of the family, he gets “reprimanded . . . for not being subservient enough” (*WB* 208)—a phrase thrice repeated. As Jonathan describes,

I saw him getting reprimanded by his foster father for not being subservient enough. Getting reprimanded by customers for not being subservient enough. Getting reprimanded by soldiers for not being subservient enough. I saw him taking it all, patiently, not speaking a word in return. (208)

Consequently, this emphatic reiteration not only applies to his role as a son in his “foster family” (208) but also alludes to the wider social milieu in the national circle that he inhabits. Even though race and religion are not what distinctly identifies these customers and soldiers, they encompass not only those who belong to the dominant identity and patronise his foster family’s sewing business but also the local military personnel, who are necessarily Malay.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the focus on “subservience” resonates with the tripartite MIB ideology that promotes compliance with a Malay Muslim monarch’s authority. While Jonathan explains that *Ah Kong*’s foster father chides him for his lack of

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<sup>4</sup> Military personnel in the Royal Brunei Armed Forces are all required to be *rakyat jati*/Malay indigenous people. See “Laws of Brunei: Royal Brunei Armed Forces (Chapter 149).”

obedience, whether his adoptive Bruneian father is of ethnic Chinese and/or Malay origins remains ambiguous. Moreover, his adoptive father represents not just the familial head within the ethno-familial space, but also alludes to the Malay “father leader” (Low, “Father Leadership” 269) who adopts *Ah Kong* into the national home. Hence, the novels’ open references call to mind the shared expectations ascribed by the Confucian Chinese heritage and the Malay Muslim national values for a subservient familial self.

Before going on to discuss the familial self in the model minority, this analysis reflects on the prescriptive communal roles the Chinese family in the Malay nation ascribes to women. Dictated over by the patriarchy, *Ah Ma*’s silent role in the novel and “absence” denote her complete submission to “traditional Chinese hierarchy” (*WB* 212). As the paternal grandmother, she “partakes of patriarchal power by seeking recourse to her son, who [is] the representative of patriarchal authority” (Yan Du 172), especially when her husband passes on. *Ah Ma*’s faithful attention to her prescriptive role in the family also means that she occupies an inclusive position in contrast to her daughter-in-law, which instantiates the way “intergenerational bonds [are] more important than conjugal ties,” as the mother-son relationship is “[p]redicated on the ideology of filial piety” (171). *Ah Ma* thus secures her status while Mary remains a perpetual foreigner in the Lee family. Just as the Chinese diaspora are “forever foreigners” (Lee et al. 76) in their host nation, the Chinese minority rank below the dominant Malay group, due to their non-Malay identity. In a patriarchal Malay nation, women also belong to a subordinated group in terms of the inferior status ascribed to their gender (Chin 595). In effect, Mary’s parents-in-law chastise her about getting “into close physical contact with, strangers outside the family, especially strangers who were men” (*WB* 200-01), thus reverberating within a Muslim nation, where physical contact between unmarried members of the opposite sex is *haram* (prohibited by Islam). The first generation of Chinese diaspora typically hold strongly to traditions that help them preserve their identity. In addition, not only does the normative Asian society shape their conservative values but so also do the patriarchal laws of a nation. With her complete silence, *Ah Ma* does not give voice nor provide further insight into this additional layer of social prohibition. Nonetheless, her reticence does not undermine the national body politic as governed according to Malay Muslim ideology. In fact, her grandchildren are in the frequent company of Malays, Jonathan with “Radzi, [his] best friend”

and Michael befriending “Ahmad Ponteng” (81, 68-70) who becomes his band mate. As *Ah Ma* and Mary illustrate, the raced and gendered subjectivities of Chinese Bruneian women equate with the double work of negotiating the self beyond the dual markers that position them as a minority.

Held to model standards, the Chinese family’s assimilation into a Malay nation often presents as seamless. However, in reality, their localised diasporic identity presents tensions. When fulfilling his responsibilities at his grandfather’s wake, Jonathan points out “I went about my duties perfunctorily, and garnered little attention or comment from the guests” (*WB* 78). In a similar vein, the internalisation of the model minority is less likely to attract undue attention from the dominant Malay population. This internalisation speaks of Brunei’s assimilationist policies that serve to uphold national ideology and thus maintain an ethno-nationalist construction of citizenship that often leads to “internalized” processes of accommodation (Sahrifulhafiz and Hoon 24) and “systemic assimilation” (Hoon and Sahrifulhafiz 32). Jonathan’s concern “[t]hat [he] was going to fail” (*WB* 171) to reunite with his mother parallels with the undercurrent of anxiety he feels while journeying beyond ethno-familial spaces into Malay socio-cultural and national realms. For instance, he conforms to the social expectations of using the local language when meeting Mohidin and publicly responding to Malay men. He utters the rejoinder “*saya tidak sekolah*” (128), referring to himself with the formal “*saya*” instead of the vernacular “*aku*,” thereby illustrating his use of Standard Malay. In part, his recourse to using the Malay taught in school is a way of compensating for his outsider status as a non-Malay, of which meeting various Bruneian Malays makes him aware. Even though Mohidin code-switches (“*Mana you punya uniform?*” [*WB* 128]), Jonathan’s initial response is poignant in that it accommodates the former’s Malay utterances. Similar to his articulation of *geram* as an emotional register, Jonathan engages with Malay as a means of expressing himself and opening up a liminal space through which resistance and/or collusion can take place. In view of this productive tension, he constructs his identity through the simultaneous processes of social integration in a Malay nation and respect for the traditional customs of his Chinese family. Hence, he navigates between these contending, as opposed to conflicting, cultural demands to meet the double expectations of the family and the nation. Thus, he displays filial piety to satisfy not only his Chinese biological father and

grandfather but also the national prescriptions of Malay, the official/public language.

### **C. Transnational Self: Global Migration, International Texts and Online Media**

The tensions between the individual and familial selves, or “private” and “communal selves,” that demand negotiation (Kuah-Pearce, “Transnational Self” 223) produce a transnational self. The diaspora gains a semblance of self through a “space of places” (Ma 9), revealing that the transnational domain constitutes a spatial structure that transcends, yet intrinsically intertwines with its physical location. Participation in a global migration circuit taps into the dual trends of globalisation (cosmopolitanism) and nationalism (localisation) that constitute a transnational self. However, the risk of cultural homogenisation posed by both nationalism (Ho, “Localisation” 137) and globalisation (Ullah and Ho 1) may threaten the transnational self, necessitating multiethnic and multicultural lenses of identification within the family and nation, which Mary’s migration, Jonathan’s and Frida’s consumption of international texts, and Michael’s social media presence all exemplify.

For the Chinese diaspora, migration happened in response to the search for a better life (Chen 313). For Mary, her student migration or educational mobility first allowed her to pursue her university studies in the United Kingdom, fulfilling her aspirations for an internationalised higher education. Likewise, Seng, his sister Ming (*Ah Koh*), and her husband Ben, all studied abroad (*WB* 76). Such opportunities presented to the second-generation Chinese diaspora are possible through their naturalisation as Bruneians, which makes them eligible for government scholarships. Once returning to Brunei from her overseas studies, Mary continues to aspire to an autonomous freedom beyond the dictates of the Chinese family in a Malay nation. Thus, she is unwilling to simply stay assimilated within Seng’s family in a Malay nation (200-01), choosing instead to challenge her localised diaspora identity. Mary ultimately emigrates to Australia, “a viable strategy for . . . the Chinese in Brunei to reject and transcend their historical role as unassimilable ‘strangers’ outside of their homeland” (Cheong 191). As Jonathan explains, “especially around the time of [Mum] leaving home, the healthiest person I had ever known, . . . had been the unhappiest as well” (*WB* 14). Jonathan picks up on “the lie Pa told everyone”

about his mother suffering from “an unspecified malady that could only be treated across the seas and down under” (14), and subsequently links her physical departure to an overwhelming sense of social dis-ease that the Chinese familial structure creates (“Adults did love to talk about the same old thing again . . . I’d overheard this kind of talk before from our relatives after Mum had left” [WB 53]). Instead of abandoning intra-ethnic familial struggles by moving to another locale in the nation, Mary departs Brunei. Therefore, her affliction extends beyond her intra-ethnic dilemmas to the nation’s socio-cultural landscape that marks her as a Chinese female outsider in a Malay patriarchal nation. Although the ten-year-old Jonathan does not say much about the social challenges Mary faces in a Malay nation, he poignantly recalls hearing about her “carefree, independent li[fe] [as a] university student in England,” and that she “had seized the chance to make the most of her time there”; thus, he does not believe his “Mum would really refuse to come back home” (WB 199, 52-53). However, familial and national constraints do not inhibit Mary’s decision to travel to Australia to take up her new residence.

Subsequently, Jonathan describes learning of Mary’s permanent emigration to Melbourne as a painful experience, “a stab through my heart” (WB 166). Prior to this emotional repercussion, Jonathan noted that “[s]he’s glad to be out of Brunei” (66) due to various reasons, such as her existence in a fragmented family with patriarchal rules and a nation’s expectations to present herself as a model minority subject. In terms of her gender, marital status in her husband’s family, and as a racial other in Malay-centric Brunei, she experienced internal exclusion and harboured larger aspirations for transnational belonging and inclusion beyond the strict confines of a localised Chinese family in a Malay nation. Hence, Mary’s emigration to Australia, where Jonathan’s “Aunt May and her family” (17) have settled, demonstrates her pursuit of a transnational self—a desire she had first forged during her university days abroad—and her escape from marital strife by national relocation.

Moreover, Jonathan’s consumption of American and British novels, such as his reading of *Huckleberry Finn* and *Great Expectations*, and Frida’s publication of her poem “in an Australian teen magazine” (WB 10, 21, 43) exhibit the appeal of international texts and global culture. Regardless of the economic class divide between the cousins—Frida attends “an international school” while Jonathan and his siblings who are the “less fortunate cousins” go to state schools (43, 72)—the third-generation navigates toward their



transnational self by consuming print culture from the global North. With his Malay-English bilingual state education, Jonathan's predominant use of English over Malay underscores not only his lack of proficiency in Mandarin ("we didn't know any Mandarin" [WB 211]) but also a preference for English because of its status as a global language (Northrup 1; Melitz 583). Considering the dominant role of World English in various fields, including the economy and academe (Guilherme 72), English offers an education for cosmopolitan citizenship. Such a citizenship is at once multinational and multiethnic in its composition and form, which differs from living under a national ideology like MIB that promotes ethnic hegemony and cultural homogenisation, such as in Brunei (Ho, "Women" 151). Nevertheless, by consuming internationally distributed texts, Jonathan and his cousins have an opportunity to be "responsible cosmopolitan citizens, without implying the loss of [their] cultural and ideological roots" (Guilherme 72), which their Chinese fathers sustain with their life lessons in familial customs and traditions, such as respecting the rules and rituals at *Ah Kong's* funeral. In conversing with Malay Bruneians, Jonathan also dutifully switches to the national language, but quickly reverts to English upon discovering that "Mohidin's English was practically perfect" (WB 128, 139). Coupled with the consumption of English texts and magazines from the global North, their choice to use English at home and school, and in public spaces attests to a global cultural platform from which to construct a transnational self while they remain physically in Brunei.

Social media platforms are another way in which they forge their transnational selves. Jonathan's sixteen-year-old brother Michael is an active user of social media. By means of a comment thread on Michael's online post that Jonathan accesses with his cousin Kevin's mobile phone, he traces Michael's location. He runs "[a] search on the name of the place [that] directed [him] to an address: Unit 32, *Simpang* 64, Jln. Badir" (WB 71). Jonathan's individual desire to reunite his family and fulfill the familial expectations for Michael, as the eldest grandson, to return home to attend *Ah Kong's* funeral motivates his actions. Even when he eventually comes back home to perform his familial duties, the transnational self that Michael's has been exploring through his online media use complements his familial self. Through photos that he posts online, Michael's inclination for Western consumerism becomes evident. Dressed in jeans and "hugging a motorcycle or standing in front of a fast food restaurant" (70), Michael displays his globalised image in the

consumption of American fashion and fast food. His cosmopolitan identity is further signalled in an online photo with his local rock band members who “call themselves *Astragah*” (69), which is a derivative of the Malay word *Astagah* that signals dismay or exasperation. His joining a local rock band is symbolically an expression of his own frustrations with a familial self amidst the disintegration of his immediate family, inasmuch as it demonstrates his individual pursuit and personal choice to forge another kind of family that is multiethnic in composition. Under this media image, one of his Malay friends, Ahmad Ponteng, uses “barely discernible English” (70) to make a comment online. This reflects an effort on his part to use “English as a global language” (Guilherme 72) in the transnational realm of media communications. Hence, the multicultural and multilingual undertones of their online textual and visual discourses denote a transnational self born from a negotiation between individual and familial selves facilitated by social media.

## V. Conclusion

Both the Chinese family and the Malay nation inform Chinese Bruneian identity. However, transnational participation enabled by geographical, educational, and social mobilities also increasingly shapes Chinese Bruneian identity. By means of migration, international education and online media, Chinese Bruneians have continued to seek opportunities for a better life, learning and relational links that lead to their negotiation of multiplex selves. As *Written in Black* illustrates, individual, familial and transnational selves manifest themselves within their individual desires, familial roles and the (trans)national need for integration and inclusion. In searching for home, the Chinese diaspora to Brunei gain their sense of identity via their (inter)generational responses to social units of the family, the nation and the global village. By challenging the model minority that ascribes their successful assimilation into a Malay nation, the Chinese in Brunei reveal themselves as fraught with tension when forging identities beyond their national confines. The transnational self that becomes available may appear at odds with familial and national ideologies, but arriving at individual and familial selves through negotiation is also possible. In other words, the ethno-cultural Chinese heritage and Brunei’s dominant Malay identity are inevitable realities for the Chinese living in Brunei. However, Chinese Bruneians who navigate rather than resist

and contest these differences can partake in global and mobile cultures, too. Hence, a globalised identity beyond the internal structures of the Chinese family and the wider demands of the Malay nation provides a sense of the transnational, which transcends the localised Chinese diasporic identity.

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