



## Reframing Loss: Chinese Diaspora Identity in K. H. Lim's *Written in Black*



Hannah Ming Yit Ho\*

### [ *Abstract* ]

In analyzing the Chinese diaspora, this paper explores losses that are encountered within the family in the nation. It argues that increased social and spatial mobilities that contribute to losses can be reconfigured through the productive lens of supermobility, as Laurence J. C. Ma conceptualizes it. Supermobile identities are significant avenues to consider the way that losses traditionally associated with migration and assimilation are revisited in view of new flows of migration and identification. In examining K. H. Lim's debut novel *Written in Black* (2014), this study addresses pathways from debilitating losses to productive losses journeyed by the family from the child's perspective. It offers a critical analysis of the Anglophone Bruneian novel in terms of its exclusive portrayal of an ethnic Chinese family. Departing from a fixed notion of home as cultural and physical rootedness, it explores flexible identities that are tied to shifting concepts of belonging. Rather than a magnification of social and spatial losses, the analysis highlights the way that the literary imagination of ethnic Chinese in Brunei Darussalam accommodates progressive ideas of the agency

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\* Assistant Professor, Universiti Brunei Darussalam; Fellow, National University of Singapore, Singapore, [hannah.ho@ubd.edu.bn](mailto:hannah.ho@ubd.edu.bn).

and advancement of the Chinese diaspora as a supermobile community.

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## I . Introduction

With the recent rise of China (Ang 2021), Southeast Asia has increasingly witnessed Chinese presence and interest in the region. The nation of Brunei Darussalam (henceforth Brunei), situated on the northwestern coast of Borneo, is no exception to an influx of Mainland Chinese migrants and workers today. In fact, the migration fever in the nineteenth century resulted in a significant first wave of Chinese diaspora. Continuing migration flows have since contributed to the status of ethnic Chinese as the largest diaspora in the world (Tan 2013: i). At present, several generations of Chinese reside in Southeast Asia, including in Chinese-dominant Singapore (Ho and Ho 2019) and Malay-dominant Brunei (Ho 2021a). With its self-declared nomenclature of being “The Abode of Peace,” Brunei manifests itself as a harmonious society living within a rich tropical environment where forest makes up 81% of the land mass and its economy is heavily reliant on oil and gas. In the last decade, Brunei has attracted global attention for its Syariah legal code that has courted critical discussions about right ethics and gender conversations (Ho 2022).

Brunei is a small nation in size and number with a land area of 5765 square kilometers and a total population of 445,400 people (Department of Economic Planning and Statistics 2022). Comprising mostly of Malays, its Chinese diaspora community remains understudied. With a dominant Malay identity, Brunei’s ethnic Chinese language and culture play peripheral roles. The visibility of Brunei’s Chinese community members—both citizens and non-citizens—is subdued given the emphasis on upholding Malay identity in the nation. The first generations of Chinese diaspora arrived in Brunei with direct experiences of economic struggles, familial separations, and uncertainties of life. Their losses were compounded by generational challenges

encountered through a subsequent lack of cultural heritage transmission, such as a disuse of the Chinese language in state schools, further migration processes, and affective responses to cultural erasure.

This article focuses on a contemporary novel that was written by a Chinese Bruneian author which narrates the personal lives of the Chinese diaspora in Brunei. Set exclusively in Brunei, K. H. Lim's *Written in Black* (Monsoon Books 2014) emphasizes a contemporary child's perspective of personal encounters with losses, including physical, emotional, and generational losses. In this respect, the analysis aims to investigate the male protagonist's attempts to manage his losses as a third-generational child in the Chinese diaspora community. Using readily available resources, he navigates through the nation when physically traversing its natural and social landscapes and uses social media as one way to locate runaway family members—both his mother and brother. As the novel illustrates, his personal thoughts and actions are profoundly driven by physical and emotional vacuums caused by his mother's decision to migrate out of Brunei.

The focus on an Anglophone Bruneian novel aims to interrogate the extent to which the literary imagination in Chinese diaspora writings produced by Bruneians accommodate the concept of loss that has thus far defined the experience of the diaspora. Significantly, this study contends that contemporary notions of loss include a subscription to a productive reframing of nostalgia, anxiety, and grief using a progressive concept of mobility, which is also referred to as “supermobility” (Ma 2003) of the twenty-first century. To date, K. H. Lim's debut novel is a contemporary Anglophone literary work that features Brunei's Chinese diaspora in an extensive and comprehensive way through its narrative, which targets younger generations (children and young adults) via its narrative focalization using the first-person voice of a school-aged protagonist named Jonathan Lee, who is just 10 years old when his journeying across the nation takes place.

## II. Background: The Chinese Diaspora in Brunei Darussalam

The Chinese account for 9.5% of the total population and are the largest ethnic minority group in Brunei. They speak a range of Chinese dialects (D. Ho 2021) and practice Chinese culture, while also maintaining Chinese traditions that can be traced back to their ancestral roots in Mainland China (Ho and Ho 2021). The Chinese first arrived in Brunei as traders in the sixteenth century (deVienne 2015). Overseas Chinese (*huaqiao*) were sojourners. Since then, the Chinese overseas (*huaren*) have settled around the world because of the migration fever from the nineteenth century onwards. Today, Chinese entrepreneurial activities remain notable in Brunei with the Chinese Chamber of Commerce playing a prominent role in the society and nation. While several local Chinese have successfully gained citizenship in Brunei, there is an undisclosed segment of Chinese permanent residents who also remain stateless (non-citizens) and possess Certificates of Identity (CIs) rather than holding legitimate passports for identification and international travel purposes. Brunei's population census in 2022 indicated that there are 25,800 permanent residents, many of whom are likely to be ethnically Chinese.

Brunei's national philosophy of *Melayu Islam Beraja* privileges Malay through its official ideology of a Malay Muslim Monarchy (Ho 2019). Consequently, Chinese Bruneians are ethnically excluded from the national identity. Brunei's "*rakyat jati*" (indigenous citizens) comprise seven groups: Brunei Malay, Tutong, Kedayan, Dusun, Murut, Bisaya, and Belait. Thus, the ethnic Chinese are disqualified from Bruneian indigenous identity through its official and national creed. While Chinese Muslim converts are subsumed into the Islamic pillar of the nation's tripartite identity of *Melayu Islam Beraja* (Sahrifulhafiz and Hoon 2018), they remain institutionally precluded via their non-Malay ethnicity. These conditions contribute to push factors that led several stateless Chinese to migrate out of Brunei (Cheong 2017). Those who stay behind in Brunei assimilate into the nation with considerable efforts at localization (Ho 2021b).

### III. The Chinese Diaspora: Experiences of Intergenerational Loss

The term of diaspora has often been employed synonymously with migration. Its usage to denote an “(i)ncreasing spatial dispersal of transmigrants from different homelands” (Ma 2003: 5) identifies it as a central concept in studies of transmigration. Any tacit understanding of uniformity in the term diaspora must be challenged to account for diverse experiences and complex elements of migration (Skeldon 2003). Increasingly, formations of the diaspora are informed by “the idea of diasporic individuals as creative and mobile agents” (Ma 2003: 5). Their fluid and flexible status is encapsulated in the way that “diasporas are the exemplary communities of the transnational movement” (Tololyan 1991: 5). In view of contemporary flows of globalization (Ullah and Ho 2020), diasporas embody passages of transmigration across changing global landscapes.

Asian diasporas have resulted from specific migration flows of people from and to Asia (Chan 2020). With the Chinese oft subsumed under Asian diaspora, ethno labels that serve as prefixes are limiting in the sense that they may not necessarily “cover all those within the ethnic group or from a certain country” (Chan 2020: 3). In *Contesting Chineseness*, Chan and Hoon (2021) highlight challenges in the label of “Chinese” that encompasses an identity extending beyond race, nationality, and culture (1). Given dissonant diasporas due to circular migration (King and Christou 2011; Chan 2013), new migration flows have resulted in further nuances of the diaspora. Even though the term of the Chinese diaspora is highly debatable, it is employed in this paper to account for those whose families historically originate from China, as these diaspora individuals are delineated in K. H. Lim’s novel.

As part of their diaspora experience, the Chinese encounter losses that have impacted their sense of identity. First-generation migrants leave behind immediate family members and attenuate intimate physical connections to their homeland (Wang 2005). Subsumed as the old diaspora, they carry “negative characteristics of classic diasporas such as the loss of homeland, a collective memory of oppression and the gnawing desire for return [that] have been

suppressed” (Ma 2003: 6). Along with second-generation migrants, first-generation migrants in the early twentieth century tend to deal with significant pressures to build a secure livelihood in countries where they encounter continuous demands of assimilation due to different cultural norms and dominant identities (Liu 2015; Zhou 1997). Subsequent generations of immigrants often have their losses compounded by an intergenerational transmission of trauma arising from economic poverty, physical struggles of war or conflict, and other sociocultural plights of the diaspora. The losses encountered by diasporas who are ethnic minorities in their host nations can take on a pathological trait (Cheng 1997; Eng and Han 2000), which contributes to an impoverished sense of identity. In recent years, the depathologizing of diaspora identity has been a scholarly agenda (Doyle 2018; Ho 2013). This counter-concept of a depathologized racial identity crucially debunks the myth that “minoritarian subjectivities are permanently damaged—forever injured and incapable of ever being whole” (Eng and Han 2000: 693). A productive reframing of diasporic loss, as this paper argues, is further facilitated by mobility, including movement within and across national borders.

#### **IV. Supermobility: Reconfiguring losses of the Chinese Diaspora**

With transnational movements, supermobility plays an integral role to aid in reframing losses of the diaspora. Consequently, constructive pathways for a flexible identity that challenges conventional ideas of debilitating loss are opened up through continuous spatial movements. Supermobility, as applied to the diaspora community, is defined as “[one of many] positive connotations of diasporas” (Ma 2003: 6), and has been observed in the late twentieth-century onwards. Chinese diaspora scholar Laurence Ma points out the intricate relationship between diaspora and supermobility when addressing a “conceptual shift” (2003: 6) from negative to positive characteristics. Furthermore, he distinguishes between a new and old Chinese diaspora. In contrast to the old diaspora in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the new Chinese diaspora is defined by opportunities presented through globalization in

contemporary times. As Laurence Ma (2003) further writes, “[t]he new Chinese diaspora is far more complex and dynamic than the old one, always in a state of becoming and evolving in response to the changing conditions for emigration and immigration at the places of origin and destination while impacting both at the same time” (20). This dynamic identity is available to the Chinese diaspora due to their transnational and translocal or local-to-local mobility. Such connections are encapsulated in the term of supermobility, which is “driven by multiple modes of migration which include secondary migration: circular migration, and onward migration as well as internal migration around the country of migration” (Phillimore et al. 2021: 3). Thus, supermobility offers a crucial framework to rethink and reconfigure the diaspora’s personal and intergenerational losses.

In the twenty-first century, the diaspora gains avenues to supermobility that offer them transformational opportunities to develop a positive affirmation of self via confronting “the multi-dimensionality and complexity of the contemporary world” (Grzymala-Kazłowska and Phillimore 2018: 186). In Asia, supermobility is made possible by “particular political and economic realities [...] and the multifarious migration schemes drafted by various governments in and beyond Asia” (Chan 2020: 3). Necessarily, supermobility furnishes a sense of agency or at least “capacities to be agentic” (Leggett 2020: 210). Here, the “agentic imaginary—of one’s place in the world transforming into highly active engagement with the world” (Leggett 2020: 208) is brought to bear upon supermobility. In an age of globalization producing highly diverse communities or what social anthropologist Steven Vertovec (2007) terms as superdiversity—which is an inextricable facet of supermobility, the imaginative possibilities offered through migration are endless. In fact, “[t]echnologies of mobility and travel also shape ideas pertaining to the shift from ‘child to adult’; for children, especially youth, the possibility of mobility is transformational” (Leggett 2020: 209).

This is indeed demonstrated in the Chinese Bruneian community represented in K. H. Lim’s novel, which is a narrative about a young boy’s experience of “touching the ground with one’s

feet [and on] roads, velocity, and the conceptualization of moving” (Mrázek 2002: xvi). In *Written in Black*, the 10-year-old protagonist explores his agentic imaginary by travelling beyond bounded physical spaces of his Chinese familial home. He embarks on a road trip and then goes on foot to locate his runaway brother, which signals a form of supermobility. Crucially, his own desires for supermobility are fueled by his mother’s international migration to Australia, with its robust migration program that has attracted many Asian immigrants (Parliament of Australia 2010). Ultimately, Jonathan’s transformation opens up a constructive change in intergenerational relations, especially in relation to his father. Jonathan’s experience of the contemporary world and active engagement with those he meets while journeying through the nation facilitate a paradigm shift in his perception and treatment of loss with significant attempts to break its destructive cycle.

#### **V. A Chinese Diaspora Novel: *Written in Black* (2014)**

The Anglophone literary scene in Brunei is in its nascent stage with contemporary novels in English self-published or released with international publishers (Deterding and Ho 2021). In terms of the thematic subject of Brunei’s Chinese diaspora, there is currently one Anglophone novel that deals exclusively with Chinese Bruneians who serve as the main characters. Published in Singapore, *Written in Black* (WB) is sold in independent bookstores in Brunei rather than housed at the book shop at the National Language and Literature Bureau (*Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka Brunei*, DBPB). Its self-marketing strategies employ the description of it as “a darkly humorous coming-of-age novel set in Brunei” (Lim 2014: blurb). As an exploratory piece of diaspora fiction, it grapples with the raw and intense feelings of a young Chinese boy living in Brunei who deals with his grandfather’s physical death, father’s emotional detachment, and mother’s physical leave-taking of the entire family. This paper discusses literary representations of Chinese Bruneians that delineate their hopes, dreams, and actions to mobilize themselves against personal and generational losses. In examining his insistence to move forward physically, emotionally, and socially, it highlights



the child protagonist's agentic capacities. Through a literary analysis, it contends that diasporic losses are managed in conscious efforts to seek and enhance mobility using resources in the twenty-first century, thus effectively tapping into an exercise of supermobility.

*Written in Black* is a contemporary novel that traces the mobility of various family members in the twenty first century. As this paper argues, this novel does much to narrate the way that the diaspora is no longer definitively defined through their loss of attachments and attenuated Chinese roots. Rather, it points to a reframing of loss through flexible identities forged in new migration patterns and social movements. Therefore, the theme of loss will be evaluated through a positive affective turn, and investigated via the narrative lens of its child protagonist. In this novel, a negotiation of individual, familial, and transnational selves is apparent through the child's narrative (Ho 2021a). The child narrator addresses generational experiences of his grandfather's move from China to Brunei at the pivotal point of the latter's physical demise. He also deals with a loss of an emotional attachment with his father who intensely preserves his image as the strong male leader, a role that is ascribed to him through cultural prescriptions in the Chinese family. Compounding his sense of loss, his mother's sudden physical absence when migrating out of Brunei is a further struggle he encounters. Ho and Amran (2021) have analyzed this changing familial structure as "a construct of the modern home [in Brunei]" (163) that arises out of migration. Pushing past early signs of his depression, Jonathan builds on various opportunities opened up through his ease to travel or move in the nation. Journeying through the nation, the child begins to shift his frame of thinking to that of positive hope and constructive changes that offer alternative paradigms to loss. Significantly, his actions to mobilize himself in physical and spatial movements are stimulated by his mother's migration to heal herself from her own unhappiness that is suggested in Jonathan's description of "[m]um being unwell" because she "had been the unhappiest" (Lim 2014: 14) in the family while living in Brunei. Thus, supermobility "across the seas" (Lim 2014: 14) serves as a critical counteragent to loss as it promotes fluid

and flexible identities in a mobile world. Challenging fixed and rigid notions of identity, supermobility offers the diaspora an avenue to break the cycle of debilitating loss. Exciting new attachments that aid in their growth, development, and evolution are seen to follow.

The analysis will proceed by examining Jonathan's initial sense of a lost self due to losses in the family: a grandfather's death, mother's physical absence, and father's emotional absence. Importantly, it examines the ways that losses are reframed through the child's mobile experiences. Social attachments and an active engagement with a wider host of spaces and places extending beyond his Chinese cultural realm of the familial home are developed. Ultimately, the analysis seeks to debunk the myth of the diaspora as suffering from pathological losses through an emphasis on positive expressions of identity in various forms of supermobility. Their advancement as a supermobile community is suggested through the diaspora's movements and migration that create crucial connections with those in the nation and globalized world.

## **VI. Analysis: Supermobility as an Antidote to Loss**

Amidst losing his grandfather whom he endearingly refers to as "*Ah Kong*" (the Chinese term for the familial patriarch) and missing his mother, Jonathan begins to lose partial recognition of his self. In fact, he is at potential risk of suffering from a state of an impoverished identity, one that is defined by a highly vulnerable state that signals a permanent dwelling on the past that forecloses future progress. This is apparent when he discovers that his reflection in a mirror appears, as he describes it, "miserable" and "sullen" (Lim 2014: 49)—an account that attests to his declining mental and emotional well-being due to life stressors within the family. In fact, he observes that "the mirror stared back at [him] with an eerie sort of crazed glee" (Lim 2014: 49). His unnatural depressive facial countenance illustrates a negative affective turn that threatens to deform him into a "psycho kid" (Lim 2014: 49). Contemplating the extent to which his losses have caused him mental strain, he ponders on thoughts of craziness/mental issues

that are instigated by intergenerational trauma. For one, his flashbacks of his grandfather leaving China based on shared intergenerational stories (Lim 2014: 208) and his experiencing of “hellish nightmare(s)” (Lim 2014: 74) are classic symptoms of “traumatic awakenings” (Caruth 1995: 89). Along this line, Jonathan’s estranged relations with his mother whom he has not seen and spoken to in “six months” (Lim 2014: 11) relegates her place to the realm of his nightmares that is a telling sign of his traumatic loss (Lim 2014: 73). In his narrative, it becomes apparent that Jonathan’s “belated experience of trauma” (Caruth 2016: 73) informs his hauntings of loss due to “sudden” and “unexpected” (Caruth 2016: 167) events. In view of such traumatic losses, the past is seen to have a strong hold on Jonathan’s present as it dictates his actions and shapes his self-perception. From early on, Jonathan discloses that his present existence is weighed down by past events: the recent death of the first-immigrant patriarch in the family (Lim 2014: i 20), an “unhappy[y]” (Lim 2014: 14) mother’s migration, and loss of his older brother Michael from home (Lim 2014: 13). Jonathan’s “angry” (Lim 2014: 12) father who rarely converses with him compounds the child’s sense of loss as familial support systems are attenuated. Precisely because of these cumulative losses, Jonathan becomes thoroughly lost and feels unable to cope. His lowering threshold to tolerate familial and intergenerational loss without letting these affect his daily functioning is reflected in his declining school performance: his “not-yet-awful but still-noticeable drop in my grades” (Lim 2014: 16). However, to manage his losses productively, Jonathan’s subsequent choices to perform his agency in individual decisions and to exercise his own mobility underscore efforts to avoid self-inflicted stagnation in one space, place, and time. Instead of remaining overwhelmed with loss, he becomes determined to seek solutions by traveling within the nation.

Along this line, mobility aids Jonathan in recovering a semblance of his lost self. It provides him with a forward direction in life that helps in acquiring his confidence and self-assurance notwithstanding external circumstances of loss. Amid life’s vicissitudes, the mental spaces that he comes to occupy as well as physical places that he traverses are symptomatic of his personal

decisions to overcome his sense of loss in a constantly changing social environment. Jonathan's unhappiness, depressive symptoms, and anxiety are gradually replaced with a sense of certainty in his individual actions to take charge of, and find viable solutions to, his losses. For instance, the moment he decides to stow away on a truck that was used to deliver his grandfather's coffin, Jonathan displays his initiative to take control of a declining state of familial affairs. His sense of physical urgency to reach his brother is evident in his declarative statement: "I have to go!" (Lim 2014: 86) that lies in stark contrast to the hesitation of his older cousin called Kevin who, nevertheless, helps him locate Michael's physical whereabouts through his social media connectivity on his "brand new smartphone" (Lim 2014: 65-72). Kevin stumbles on a message thread "answered by a 'Michael Lee,' confirming that (a) meeting was to happen at Friendly Garden Pool Centre at 1.30pm. A search of the name of the place directed me to an address: Unit 32, *Simpang* 64, Jln. Badir" (Lim 2014: 71, original emphasis). However, it is evident that Jonathan's cumulative experience of losing his mother to migration, his runaway brother, and grandfather's physical death serves as collective impetus for him "to go anywhere" (Lim 2014: 87), in pursuit of his lost self with its familial orientations. Determined to re/discover his intergenerational attachments, he confidently exclaims "It doesn't matter [if his brother fails to show up]. I'm going to find him!" (Lim 2014: 87). This juncture marks an emergent stage of self-realization about his personal ability to seize opportunities and take on available spaces to him. His initial embarking into unknown places does not faze him as to deter him. Prospects of moving beyond his physical home, moving around different geographical spaces, and traveling within the nation excite and enliven him as such mobilizations offer "fortuitous discover[ies]" (Lim 2014: 88), just as the truck's company address printed on its inside base offers Jonathan a significant lead to discover Michael.

Mobilization provides a forward momentum to tackle problems, rather than allowing negative effects of loss to fester and deteriorate the self. However, this progressive motion is not a straightforward one as it takes on a spiraling pattern, which acknowledges Jonathan's continuous sadness at the absence of his

mother's affection, support, and physical presence during his formative childhood years. Despite an evasive maternal figure, his inner monologue is characterized by a tone of intervention rather than defeat. As he points out towards the end of his narrative, "I could do something about [my problem]. And sort it out I would" (Lim 2014: 237). Even as this positive statement is in direct relation to his solving a math problem in school, it is representative of his growing resilience and development of a persistent mindset. Jonathan's productive self-talk is an indicator of his increasing maturity once he is exposed to new spaces and places, and traveling beyond prescribed physical boundaries and meeting people from different cultures and races, including his experiences with dominant Malays in Brunei that signal his local knowledge and process of localization as a "Bruneian-Chinese" (Lim 2014: 15). For one, his journeying brings him to a "*durung*" (a Bruneian Malay word to describe a traditional store for local farm crops, especially harvested rice grains) that "indicated the existence of a past [Malay] settlement" (Lim 2014: 101). An abandoned house nearby also intrigues him. Its mysterious contents include "wooden figurines" (Lim 2014: 105) that seem to defy gravity as they hang from ceilings. Human loss seems to be signified in this deserted house situated on a desolate piece of land. The enigma that surrounds this house greatly emphasizes a liminal space between life and death as well as the present and past, which marks a significant transition period of uncertainty. Also, his journeying leads him to a gang of Malay youngsters who personify a distinctive Bruneian subculture in their local identification as "*poklans*" (Lim 2014: 119, original emphasis) characterized by a blending of their Malay origins and desires to emulate Western culture. On a similar note, the embeddedness and localization of Jonathan's parents who are both Bruneian citizens (albeit second-generation Chinese migrants to the nation) "sent on government scholarship" (Lim 2014: 199) for their further studies in the United Kingdom affect their supermobility to various degrees. Although his father continues to serve out his bonded employment in Brunei, his mother chooses to leave by deciding on her onward migration to Australia. These transformative sites of identity represented in various spaces, places and people expose Jonathan to further change, which he discovers via his own means of mobility

within the Bruneian nation. Precisely because of his familial circumstances, changing physical milieus and social relations, Jonathan learns to reframe loss by situating it within his worldly experiences of local society, even though limited to an intra-national mobility for now. In other words, the third generation's supermobility is illustrated in Jonathan's acquiring of an understanding and exercise of his own agency when traveling around the nation to manage his personal losses. This is evident through his positive self-talk via uplifting phrases to instill a calm mindset once he encounters these local experiences through his mobility in the nation. These include a series of validating statements and rhetorical questions such as "No need to panic," "That was doable," and "So why worry?" (Lim 2014: 237) to demonstrate his revised frame of thinking as he continues with life without certain familial members. A realignment of his expectations after experiencing mobility leads Jonathan to develop a positive attitude to manage and potentially break the destructive cycle of intergenerational losses within the family and nation.

During his journeying in Brunei, Jonathan further establishes a special friendship with a Malay shopkeeper called Mohidin who lends him personal assistance. Mohidin's willingness to offer Jonathan sincere aid to physically locate Michael results in the formulation of a new social relation through their shared experience of loss, specifically the threat of familial loss. Mohidin generously chauffeurs Jonathan to Michael's location using the former's car (Lim 2014: 175-176). This new attachment is predominantly attributed to Mohidin's rekindling of his own affection for his brother Mikhail (also called Michael, as "It's Arabic for Michael," Lim 2014: 176). However, Mikhail passed away in a motor accident at a time when he was Jonathan's age. Across different races and times, Jonathan reawakens Mohidin's trauma of surviving Mikhail following his fateful motor accident. Thus, there is a certain degree of precedence that both Jonathan and Mohidin place on recovering lost relationships. As Jonathan declares to Mohidin: "Thanks for trusting me. Anyone else would have refused to help" (Lim 2014: 177). Trust is built on their sharing of intimate experiences of loss, but also gains in terms of their friendship. Here, it is evident that

a recovery of old familial attachments and creation of new social relations become possible by their moving across spaces and places. On the one hand, Jonathan's physical mobility from one locale to another enables his physical reunion with Michael. On the other hand, it offers opportunities for new social formations with those whom he encounters. In going places, the child taps into social ties that are crucial for developing a network beyond his immediate family and school friends. Even while the Chinese diaspora arrived as strangers in a foreign land and were subjected to a process of "strangification" (Shen 2012: 35), Mohidin prompts Jonathan's ideas of establishing social attachments. For one, Jonathan recalls his grandfather's arrival on Bruneian shores in the early twentieth century that was greeted with this patriarch's predicament of being constantly chided by his foster family for not showing enough subservience (Lim 2014: 208). However, after several years, trust was earned that contributed to his exponential success in business ("buying his own shop, then two more shops, and then four more..." Lim 2014: 208). Nonetheless, this trust that enabled his first-immigrant grandfather to open up, license, and patronize his shops was not as forthcoming as Jonathan's more positive and hands-on experience with Mohidin. As the new diaspora, Jonathan signals a form of supermobility in which positive connotations of diaspora are forged through his tapping into technologies of mobility to facilitate social attachments within the nation, which is an important mechanism to counteract loss.

Jonathan's mother embodies supermobility in her migration to Australia. Self-betterment choices result in new migration flows of the diaspora. Even as the diaspora suffers a loss of attachments and attenuated Chinese roots through migration, it is evident that new patterns of migration shift the focus to new relational avenues produced through a conscious exercise of agency for a flexible, not fixed, identity in a global landscape. By moving to Australia and traveling halfway around the world to Dubai, Jonathan's mother exhibits open possibilities of the mindful choice of migration that teaches her children the value of a flexible identity. As the new diaspora, Jonathan and his siblings represent the younger generation with their hopes, "individual responses within dreams and desires

[for success]" (Ho 2021a: 5). These personal aspirations forge a mobile identity contrasted with the old diaspora's identity that is firmly defined through a communal preservation of a strong sense of cultural rootedness as demonstrated through their zealous performance of Chinese funeral rituals in the familial home. Among the new diaspora, a search for alternative belonging results in an eagerness to move across the nation. For one, Michael runs away to set up his Western-inspired rock band with his Malay band mates, thus fragmenting himself from the Chinese cultural center of his immediate familial home (Lim 2014: 69-70). Despite their mother's absence as an instigator of both Jonathan's depression and Michael's angst, the brothers are reminded of the lessons gleaned through her migration. As Michael states, "When I get to Australia, I'll finally have the space to do what I want" (Lim 2014: 174). Both siblings yearn for flexibility that has been modeled for them through their mother's act of migrating. Through this supermobility, the diaspora actively engages with wider cultural spaces and topographical places when traversing across intra-national and international boundaries.

Just as his education at school offers him opportunities to grow and develop, mobility serves as a channel for forging flexible identities that are attentive to a diverse set of orientations and evolving socio-physical environments. Significantly, Jonathan draws an analogy between what is learnt in school and his family's increasingly mobile networks as a Chinese diaspora living in an era of globalization. He points out school lessons in "facts and figures [that are treated] as articles of wisdom handed down since the dawn of civilization from one generation to another" (Lim 2014: 64). The fixity of factual history that teachers transmit becomes "the stuff we [the schoolchildren] had to remember for life" (Lim 2014: 64)]. Although this kind of education facilitates a development of Jonathan's knowledge, its fastidious nature is set in contrast with evolving intergenerational relations, desires, and changing demands of a globalized diaspora that embrace a notion of success within mobile identities. Rather than failure due to losses of migration, supermobility underscores a positive development of a child, especially in terms of Leggett's (2020) sense of a transformational



shift in maturity from a child into an adult. The first semblance of maturity is indicated through Jonathan's persistence and resistance in the safe space of the classroom situated beyond his familial home. On a symbolic level, his favorite black pen that he uses in class despite his teacher's disapproval ("Black ink was so much stronger, so much bolder than the crappy blue that Mrs. Yap preferred" Lim 2014: 63) suggests his formulation of his own voice and personal agency that governs his insistent actions. More than a pre-teen act of rebellion, he also listens to his growing inner voice that then encourages him to set off in search of his brother during his grandfather's wake at the patriarch's home (Lim 2014: 86-87). Breaking with Chinese cultural tradition, his calculated leave from Ah Kong's wake ceremony contravenes a familial conformity with fixed ways of dealing with loss established by the old diaspora. Furthermore, he implements an observation of a pet monitor lizard that has been placed in "a small enclosure" (Lim 2014: 80) in the house compound. Jonathan says, "There was something I liked about the way he carried himself; [...] he strutted around like the king of his own world, and without a care for whatever was outside the borders of his realm" (Lim 2014: 80). While this natural wildlife appears not to take heed of that which lies beyond its cage, this quote also suggests that this terrestrial animal has a mindset of living in a borderless environment as it positively reframes its experiences of restriction, constraint, and entrapment. Its demonstrably adaptable attitude adds impetus to Jonathan's zeal to travel and overcome the borders of the Chinese patriarch's home.

Knowledge of Jonathan's mobility triggers a positive transformation in his father too. Learning of his son's agency and independence in tracking down his other son, Jonathan's father named Chin Seng (Lim 2014: 76) begins to initiate conversations with Jonathan. This signals small, but vital acts of growing a closer relational bond with Jonathan. Raised by old diasporic conventions in the family, the father is expected to conform to prescriptive Chinese cultural norms including a preservation of reticence as a feature of strong leadership among men who typically uphold the motto of "actions are louder than words" (Low and Ang 2012: 121). In other words, Chin Seng subscribes to traditional ways of control

to prevent an attenuating or loss of Chinese roots, and such prohibitions also encompass male social bonds: “Confucian norms govern [sic] human relationships in male culture” (Mann 2000: 1603). Jonathan’s renewed relationship with his father is apparent at the end of the novel when the former expresses his surprise at the latter’s “unprecedented” attempt to communicate with him: “Was my father actually initiating a conversation with me? [...] Had I stumbled upon that rarest of prizes, getting treated like a normal person by my father?” (Lim 2014: 236-237). Jonathan’s implicit comment about his father’s presentation of communicative traits that humanizes the latter further demystifies and personalizes him. Jonathan, thus, learns that humanity is about living with and communicating losses. However, rather than being defined by loss, Chin Seng works through his loss productively when attempting to connect with Jonathan after the latter’s return from his journeying with Michael. Via an exercise of affectionate modes of verbal communication, the second-generation diaspora forges emotional attachments and opens up support systems for the third-generation diaspora. Personal growth is developed in social systems within the family, and supermobility aids this process to shift the discourse away from lost attachments in attenuated Chinese roots to a positive development of flexible identities. Herein, mobility in the twenty-first century reflects evolving needs and demands of the diaspora whose global lens precipitates challenges to cultural, social, and physical boundaries.

## **VII. Conclusion**

Following on from the analysis above, this paper highlights that the Chinese diaspora is a community that is fast advancing into supermobility through their various stages and articulations of mobility. In examining a Chinese diaspora novel from Brunei, it underscores the way that literary representations reframe intergenerational losses within a Chinese Bruneian family as productive, especially in their opportunities for growth that are opened up and not foreclosed in their diverse emotional, cultural, and social challenges arising out of travel and migration. In view of

transnational possibilities of existence instigated by new migration flows and independent travel in the age of globalization, flexible and mobile identities are assumed by younger generations precisely because of their experiences of loss in the diaspora family. As the child protagonist embodies, an exercise of agency in physical, spatial, and social movements leads to a positive shift in identity—renewed expectations, regulated emotions, and a recalibration of social attachments.

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