Pilgrimages: Memories of Colonial Macau and Hong Kong

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Contents

I teach and research cultural studies, an area that, in Ien Ang's analysis, "conceives of itself as a borderland formation, an open-ended and multivocal discursive formation." Certainly, the implied transcultural and transnational nature of intellectual borderlands appeals greatly to someone who grew up in one culture and nation and works in another culture and carries a different passport. Furthermore, borderland existence, to borrow Ang's term, promises liberation from a past perceived as burdened with the inauthentic baggage of colonial acculturation. Thus, I experience borderland existence both geographically and metaphorically. However, this liberation is short-lived when I start writing a memoir of my childhood and teenage years in Hong Kong, when past and present confront each other not as a series of teleological events but as territorial conflicts. Persistently, my impulse to write as-I-know-it is curbed by either a lack of architectural and physical evidence, or by finding my knowledge negated by another witness. The emotional need to "write back," if not postcolonially to the metropolitan centre, then to some personal psychological repository, is frequently checked by the life-long training of writing rationally. And I am forcibly struck by the irony that a postcolonialist should find herself indulging in a nostalgic journey to a lost colonial past. Life writing, then, as practised by an academic, becomes an anxiety-ridden borderland existence as one confronts one's past, a practice often giving the impression of slipping out of the control of intellectual debates and discussions.

Much of my present intellectual profile has been shaped by specific Hong Kong places in my youth, which I had considered to be a suitable starting point for recalling my early life. First and foremost is the Catholic convent I attended. Like other writers (for example, Edna O'Brien, Jean Rhys, Simone de Beauvoir), I find growing up under the influence of nuns and the rituals of the Catholic church of primal importance in my life. I am partial to clothes that have a flowing shape because they remind me of the habit of the nuns. I prefer the combination of black and white because, for years, those were the colours worn by my teachers. I enjoy choral music because we listened to it every morning at assembly. The sense of guilt and the need for

perpetual redemption have been indelibly ingrained in me. The ideal preparation to write my memoir would be to go back to the convent and experience a day-in-the-life-of again, in order to rediscover and reassess what growing up in a convent would be like from an adult perspective. Sadly, though the building is still there, it has been sold to some private and secular educational enterprise. No nuns, no morning assembly, no Wednesday-afternoon chapel, no Latin mass.

Apart from the convent library, I learned to love reading at two colonial outposts in Hong Kong in the 60s — the United States Information Service and the British Council Reading Room. In my memoir, I dwell with great affection on these places. They provided a sanctuary for a young girl who needed an escape — from family obligations, from the Chinese culture that she was alienated from because of her colonial and convent education, from a general philistine culture of trade that energized the city. In my memory, the books in the libraries blocked out the noise and reality from the outside world the way the cork-lined walls protected Proust as he sat in his bed to write. I took no pictures of these places, but I remember them well and with affection. Both libraries have been gone since the 90s or earlier. They might exist in other forms in the age of the internet; but gone are the rooms lined with book shelves and furnished with refectory tables and green-shaded lamps. How much, then, are these affectionate pictures a form of nostalgic indulgence, since I do not even have an existing architectural structure to compare them with?

As if finding no architectural witness to my memory were not enough to undermine my will to recall, my mother, the only living witness to my childhood, disagreed with me on certain key moments when we discussed them. My mother is in her eighties. Would her memory be more reliable than mine? Yet her collaboration would be welcomed and useful. Neither of us kept a diary. We have no written record to resort to as arbitrator. I decide to trust myself rather than her.

I don't trust my mother's memory; I find it harder to write about her. But how can one's memoir be complete without an analysis of the effect one's mother has on one? I wrote an essay on representations of the mother figure by ethnic Chinese writers. In it, I ar gue that it is

much easier to analyze one's mother if one writes in a language that is not the "mother" tongue, and even easier if one's mother cannot access the language in which the criticism is published. Thus, it should be easy for me to write about my mother, since I am not writing in Chinese and my mother will not be able to read the English text.

So what is hindering me from putting my life-long evaluation of my mother on paper? In John D. Barbour's essay, "Judging and Not Judging Parent," he suggests that being a parent might make a writer realize "how difficult it is to be a good parent, and therefore may make one more understanding or forgiving of a father or mother." I agree that being a parent oneself might provide insight into parenting, but I disagree that this insight should in any way stand in the way of evaluating one's parent. Perhaps I am putting too much faith in the trained academic's ability to remain objective. Yet if one is engaged in critical assessment, then experiencing what the object of the critical assessment, in this case one's parent, might once have experienced should not be an obstacle. One does not stop "panning" books just because one realizes that it is indeed difficult to write books. Similarly, a prosecuting lawyer does not stop prosecuting even though she notices in herself the same failings that are evident in the person being prosecuted.

In my case, the reluctance is a result of conflicting cultural influences and less a matter of experiential empathy. My Western education has inculcated in me, from the very first class exercise in explication and the first analytical essay, the habit of looking at people and situations objectively, even if they might be one's relations and the situations are personal ones. Thus, as soon as I have attained the faculty of critical analysis (as a teenager), I have both reacted emotionally to my mother and also analyzed her actions and decisions as if we were part of an anthropological project. Though I would not necessarily subscribe to Freud's theory that mother and daughter are engaged in sexual rivalry, I admit that the relationship between my mother and me is often tense. As an intellectual and as a daughter, I was and still am perpetually crossing and re-crossing the terrain of the trained academic and the emotional domain of a daughter resenting her mother for reasons that have been too well documented.

While my Western education provides me with the belief (or illusion?) that any personal bias could be overcome by intellectual analysis, my Chinese background teaches blind adherence to principles that could be traced back to the third century B.C. One of the most important and immutable principles in Confucianist teaching, to which all Chinese children are exposed, at home or at school, is that which concerns one's parents. The concept of filial piety is, as I admit in an academic essay on the subject of the mother, "an inalienable part of all ethnic Chinese subjectivities." Not only is one taught to respect, but one is led to believe that one must never refuse what is due to one's parents: unquestioning obedience, which is the opposite of the critical and individual mind so valued by Western education. This internalized belief that I owe everything to my parents, and that I should spend my life repaying this debt, unfortunately, coincides with the Catholic sense of guilt cultivated in me during my convent years, resulting in paralysis when I have to address the section in my life that deals with my mother.

While planning to write about my mother, I also consider the ethical aspect articulated in G. Thomas Couser's *Ethics and Life Writing*. Using John Bayley's *Elegy for Iris* as an example, Couser reminds the reader that "[i]n depicting his demented wife, Bayley is representing someone I would describe as a vulnerable subject." To Couser, Murdoch was both unaware of being represented and "without competence to consent to having her dementia so publicly portrayed." My mother is not mentally incompetent; but she is vulnerable in other ways. She cannot defend herself against any criticism levelled at her because of her educational background and her linguistic limitation. Having only achieved the equivalent of primary school education, my mother does not have the analytical training to express her emotions and thoughts in an articulate manner. One of the causes of our frequent disputes centres on her purely instinctive reactions to experience as opposed to mine as outlined above. It will be impossible to make her understand that what I attempt to do is not an act of betrayal and a gross transgression of what is acceptable filial behaviour. Furthermore, my mother does not have the linguistic ability to read what I might write about her; thus she cannot defend my representation of her and our lives together.

Yet, I can say with all honesty that the manner in which I w as brought up, acceptable in Chinese culture, would have been considered mildly abusive and questionable in Western culture. Public and verbal humiliation, relentless disciplining, physical punishment — those were all part of the family regime. I don't know the reason for my mother's ferocious need to assert her authority over her only daughter, but this need had virtually crippled me psychologically throughout my childhood and early adulthood. Thus, I also have to question my own motive: is it an act of personal revenge to write about my mother, or am I trying to speak for the many Chinese who have experienced similar familial oppression and repressions?

It is ironic that the impetus to write critically is a result of the education my parents chose for me. While xenophobic with regards to the colonial presence in Hong Kong, my parents did not question the ways the nuns were going to shape my intellect. (Friendship with non-Chinese was not only frowned upon but interdict when I was growing up. At least, that was my memory.) Because of this Western education of liberal humanism, I have developed the intellectual apparatus to question authority, history, and racial hierarchy, which ultimately leads to studying postcolonial culture and writing. In this way, my multiple-subjectivities and multiple-affiliations provide not only the metaphorical borderland existence Ang discusses, they also result in the actual geographical crossing and re-crossing necessitated by family obligations, emigration/immigration, and academic research.

Each time I revisit Hong Kong, I see it with a postcolonial lens: the physical remnants of colonial rule, the leftovers of colonial privileges, the marginalization of expat communities that used to be the cultural dominant and so on. But preparing and writing my memoir, based on my pre-emigrant life, my life as a Chinese living in Hong Kong, and my happy days at a convent school, was all about being part of the colonial culture. I can manage this borderland anxiety in various ways. The first is to take up an ideological position as a postcolonialist committed to criticize all that was colonial in my life. I can also rearrange materials so that the Chinese side of my Hong Kong life is privileged and the positive effects of the colonial aspects diminished. Or I can take this

project as a challenge, not only a personal one, but also one that interrogates the interstitial space that must have been encountered by many others in the age of mobility and shifting national identities. Maybe I can also turn the project into an attempt at voicing experiences for those who have, like me, an ambivalent colonial upbringing that is not so easily categorized and contained within ready-made theoretical frameworks. This can also be a project that articulates the borderlands not only as some "utopian site of transgressive intermixture, hybridity and multiplicity," according to Ien Ang, but also as a site of concrete and metaphorical examinations and negotiations. Finally, I should embrace borderland existence as part of my reality and write about it.

At first, I intended my early life narrative to be patterned on the classic *Bildungsroman* — a structure based on chronological developments. But I don't recall my childhood linearly; I see snapshots and remember situations. It was a revelation to read that Margaret Laurence, as Helen Buss reports, didn't want to structure her memoir, *Dance on the Earth* (1989) in novelistic form; that "'pages and pages' of chronological narrative […] left her 'bored silly'." Liberated from the tyranny of narrating one's life in logical sequences and vastly impressed by Orhan Pamuk's *Istanbul*, at once a memoir and a record of a place, I map out my early life in segments that could be comparable to a series of pictures of a journey, but not an itinerary married to time and dates necessarily. Again, this structure seems to fit in well with the idea that writing memoirs is an act of living in borderlands. Remembering and writing and revising involve movements, interior and exterior, metaphorical and practical. Remembering and writing also entail story telling.

I have a strong desire to romanticize my memories; but, as an academic, I have been trained to be honest in dealing with ideas and words. Every scenario is a result of rhetorical hesitation, self-examination, and reluctance. In the Macau section, I solve the problem of narrative veracity against narrative fancifulness by inserting fictional conversations and events, in order to highlight the difference between a life lived and the life imagined. I also ground my narrative in places. The narrator might veer from truth, however inadvertently; but the places

existed and some continue to exist. The first section "Porto" is an illustration of how I try to narrate through place. My memoir does not begin at the beginning. Nor does it begin with my birthplace. It begins with a journey I took to Portugal in 2004, in search of a cultural past that has nothing to do with my ethnic origin. I want to tell the reader that this is not a classical kind of memoir narrative.

Writing and Travelling

It can be said that I spent the first twenty years of my life — or at least the major part of these twenty years — wanting to be a different person. I didn't want to live in Hong Kong. I didn't like being Chinese. I couldn't imagine myself becoming established and growing old in this city. I couldn't get along with my mother and didn't really want to have much to do with any of the many relatives on both sides of the family. Even good friends disappointed me in that, though they received the same education, read the same books, attended the same lectures, and lived in the same cities, they didn't develop any of these symptoms. Colonial cultures didn't seem to affect them. I was the odd person out.

In reviewing my early life, I try to see my memories from the perspective of this perpetually sullen teenager within the context of the kind of life I led — a constant pattern of conflicting cultural information and an intelligent awareness that outstripped the conventional guidance that was available to me. I think the fictional character I related to most was Paul Morel in D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, although my father was not a violent man of the working class. And although young Morel doesn't want to become an East Asian!

(I can quite see, as an adult, that of course my mother could not explain to me the contradictions in my upbringing. I must be proud of my Chinese heritage; but I must learn to think like a Westerner. I could spend all my time at the convent; but I could not develop any non-Chinese friendship. I could imbibe the ideologies of the Catholic Church and American democracy; but I must always honour the Confucianist ethos. Even now, I can find life confusing.)

This childish desire to be someone else and to be somewhere else seemed to have nurtured in me a genuine fever to be on the move, counterbalanced by the need to have the security of a home. (Nothing speaks of this paradoxical state of mind better than someone who travels and moves a lot with thousands of books as part of her possession.) I have since lived a peripatetic life, both in reality and in my mind. As a child, I wanted to leave Hong Kong. Regular visits to Macau were not enough. For two decades, I lived in Vancouver and had moved home

twelve times, thus fulfilling a childhood dream in many ways — acquiring a university education, immersing in Western culture, living in interesting accommodations, spending money on books. Now I teach in southern Alberta and have a home there. I travel to Vancouver every long weekend, Christmas, and the summer months. I take my laptop and files with me when I stay for a longer period, so that I continue my research and writing wherever I am. I travel to Asia and Europe to give papers at conferences and to research. Once in a rare while I would take a holiday that did not involve giving a paper at an academic conference.

As I get older, each trip becomes more tiring. Flying has lost its glamour. The long duration going anywhere has become tedious. But each time after I have unpacked, I would start planning the next trip. To keep travelling seems to be an important way to affirm my own existence. The waiting lounge of any airport is a comforting space. If I am not travelling to remind myself of who I am, or am not, then I do it through writing.

Writing is not only essential to my profession. It sustains my imagination. I don't mean imagination as in fiction writing, but imagination as a person who participates intellectually in society, who absorbs ideas and processes experiences. Mapping one's life and retracing one's existence have various effects and serve several goals. As far as my project is concerned, writing is an analytical process; writing about my early years is a way to understand the person I am and am evolving to be. Unlike conventional autobiographies of earlier times, penned by great men (mainly) and occasionally women, my project isn't a testimony to goodness and greatness. Unlike victim memoirs, mine doesn't show that an individual can overcome obstacles to attain achievements. It is, instead, my own investigation of affiliations I formed and rejected in my childhood — familial, social, racial, religious.

I'd like to think that it is an affectionate portrait of a specific cultural world full of anomalies, a world that does not exist anymore. It is a way to acknowledge the benign and paradoxical influences in my first twenty years — parents who shunned Western society but were enamoured of Western education and religion; a convent education that

ensured that I grew up as an individual, in spite of its disciplinary nature; and cities that contrasted each other as co lonial outposts, cities that have since influenced the ways I react to natural and urban landscapes.

This project is a belated love letter to my childhood, which was not without problems; and a love letter to the colonial cities of Macau and Hong Kong.

It is my way of explaining to myself why I didn't want a family. Childhood and parents — not always a successful combination. Disasters in parenting can be averted, yet one doesn't want to take the chance of ruining someone else's life. To show love is important — psychological analysis is not all hogwash. But if one learns not to be spontaneously affectionate, then one doesn't have the knack. Obviously some scars remain from disappointments and fears experienced in childhood. Each person deals with these experiences differently. Otherwise, the world would be a worse place than it is now. Or a better place.

My life pattern is seemingly a cliché of Chinese-American/Chinese-Canadian blueprint — cultural conflicts, mother/daughter conflicts, home/in-exile conflicts. But I experienced a unique childhood. It made me a unique person.

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