

RETURNEE SCHOLARS: OUYANG YU, THE DISPLACED POET AND THE SEA TURTLE

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This paper focuses on the Chinese scholars who have returned to China in the current millennium. Of all the Chinese who have returned to China from abroad since the inception of the People's Republic, this group is the largest. Here, I focus on those that left Mainland China after the Cultural Revolution, more specifically those that left after the Tiananmen Incident of 1989. It was after this date that tens of thousands of young Chinese left to study in Anglophone countries such as America, Australia and New Zealand. There have been volumes written about the migratory behaviour of middle class Chinese from East Asia who have been variously described as 'astronauts' and 'parachute kids'. However, these epithets refer primarily to Taiwanese and Hong Kong business people and their families, rather than Mainland Chinese. These Mainlanders are so different in circumstances to other returnees that in the last three years the Chinese have coined a new term, '*haigui*' 海龟, to describe those who have recently gone abroad and are returning. In what follows, I would like to explore the various possible meanings of this key word '*haigui*', which translates as 'returnees from overseas' with its homophone meaning 'sea turtles' often used in its place.

Such ornate self-descriptions of the Chinese in the West are common. As mentioned earlier, in recent years, when they are from Hong Kong or other developed Chinese regions like Taiwan, they have called themselves 'astronauts', a metaphor for the way in which they travel between the host

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country and native place in rapid time. In Australia, the self-perceptions of many of these new arrivals have been recorded by a range of people such as Diana Giese and Shirley Fitzgerald.² Of course, in other Anglophone countries such as New Zealand, these people's lives have also been recorded by researchers such as Manying Ip and James Ng.³

Most of these accounts tend to be happy stories of successful people. However, they also tend to be people from Westernised regions like Hong Kong and Singapore that have little difficulty operating in the West. The old terms of sojourner and migrant seem inappropriate as these people are very different from the old sojourners such as the gold diggers and market gardeners described by Eric Rolls,⁴ who returned to China whenever they could. They are also very different from the ethnic Chinese who 'returned' from South-East Asian countries, particularly Indonesia, in the early days of the People's Republic.⁵ They are not refugees from poverty or political persecution; they are wealthy businessmen or successful professionals who seem satisfied with the ease with which they can cross national boundaries, a feat unimaginable only a generation ago. There are already a number of studies of this phenomenon, concentrating mostly on its economic and social effects.

Sociologists such as David Ip and Constance Lever-Tracy have produced interesting accounts of business people's networks and modes of operation.⁶ It is no accident that these studies have concentrated on the commercial angle, as the recently migrated Chinese from South-East Asian and East Asian places of origin such as Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore have tended to be businessmen and have indeed created many networks, not

² Diana Giese, *Astronauts, Lost Souls & Dragons*, St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 1997; Shirley Fitzgerald, *Red Tape, Gold Scissors*, Sydney: State Library of New South Wales Press, 1996.

³ Manying Ip, *Home Away from Home: Life Stories of Chinese Women in New Zealand*, Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 1994. James Ng, *Chinese Settlement in New Zealand, Past and Present: Ng Fon and His Family in New Zealand*, Dunedin: Amity Centre Publishing Project, 2001.

⁴ Eric Rolls, *Sojourners: The Epic Story of China's Centuries-Old Relationship with Australia; Flowers and the Wide Sea*, St. Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1992.

⁵ For a description and policies of treatment of Indonesians who returned, see Michael Godley, 'The Sojourners: Returned Overseas Chinese in the People's Republic of China', *Pacific Affairs*, 1989, Vol. 62, No. 3, pp. 330-352.

⁶ C. Lever-Tracy, D. Ip, & N. Tracy, 'From a Niche to a World City: Barriers, Opportunities and Resources of Ethnic Chinese Businesses in Australia', in T. Menkhoff & S. Gerke (eds) *Chinese Entrepreneurship and Asian Business Networks*, London and New York: Routledge-Curzon, 2002, pp. 267-292.

just throughout South-East Asia but the world.⁷ The group from China is different. They generally do not bring financial capital, but increasingly bring intellectual capital, and they are motivated by slightly different concerns. As I have indicated elsewhere, many in the Tiananmen generation who went to Western countries like Australia in the 1980s tended to be indignant on the whole that their cultural attainments were not recognized in their host countries.⁸ Despite this, more and more ‘students’ and scholars have gone abroad since the end of the Cultural Revolution.

A few figures will illustrate the sorts of numbers and changes involved. According to one set of statistics from official Chinese sources, from 1978 to 2004, China’s academic personnel that went abroad totaled about 815,000, with 198,000 or about 24%, returning.⁹ What is interesting about this set of statistics is that throughout these years, both émigré and returnee numbers have been increasing, slowly at first, and exponentially since the mid 1990s. This is especially the case for returnees. In the beginning, there was a real fear that a ‘brain drain’ from China would mean that the best and ablest would leave and not return. However, this did not eventuate. The increasing prosperity of China has meant that certainly by this millennium, many professionals found that there were more opportunities in China, and the numbers returning increased very rapidly. Indeed, it is now argued that with their ‘transnational capital’, the technical experience they have accrued from their overseas studies, China now benefits greatly from these returnees.¹⁰ The biggest change occurred between 2001 and 2002, when the returnee numbers grew by almost 100%.¹¹

Such statistics are interesting, and they seem to point to a successful bunch of professionals who have achieved the American, Australian or New Zealand dream. In fact, they seem to have rejected that option altogether and returned home triumphant. Most were young men and women with little wealth or knowledge before they set out. They are thus very different from the ‘astronauts’ from Taiwan and Hong Kong, who had made money before

⁷ For an excellent discussion of the ties that bind the Chinese abroad, see Leo Douw, Cen Huang and Michael Godley (eds), *Qiaoxiang Ties: Interdisciplinary Approaches to ‘Cultural Capitalism’ in South China*, London: Kegan Paul International, 1999.

⁸ Kam Louie, ‘Australian Lovers: Chingchong Chinaman, Chinese Identity and Hybrid Confusion’, in Alison Broinowski (ed.), *Double Vision: Asian Accounts of Australia*, Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2004, pp. 61-78.

⁹ Cited in Wang Cangbai, Huang Jing, ‘The Meaning of Return: Changing Relationship between China and Chinese Diaspora’, unpublished paper presented at the CSAA Conference 1 July 2005.

¹⁰ David Zweig, Chen Changgui and Stanley Rosen, ‘Globalization and Transnational Human Capital: Overseas and Returnee Scholars to China’, *China Quarterly*, 2004, Vol. 179, pp. 735-757.

¹¹ *Ibid*, pp. 740-741.

they became business migrants. Many of the returned students do so because they are able to find well-paid jobs in China and they want to resettle there.

The many excellent sociological studies of the recent returned-student phenomenon point squarely to the fact that most returned in pursuit of economic gain and a better career or livelihood. That to me seems to state the obvious. Instead of looking at the material manifestations of the *haigui*, I would like in this paper to analyse the psychological states under which they return. Obviously, this is a very complex task and there are probably as many psychological states as there are *haigui*. I want to focus on Ouyang Yu, a Chinese Australian writer who writes in both Chinese and English. He is interesting because he is not only a poet and novelist, but also a scholar who has done research and published on Chinese perceptions of Australia as well as Australian perceptions of Chinese.¹² He is also very prolific, and unafraid of expressing his feelings, making him an ideal source for a portrayal of one of the possible psychological states of the returnees.

As a poet, Ouyang Yu's descriptions of Chinese-Australian race relations are often quite confronting.¹³ The first few lines from one of his early poems about returning to China are sufficient to indicate the kind of verse that made many people uncomfortable:

when i was boarding the CAAC plane for home which is
of course china
i said through the arsehole of a window:
fuck you australia!
you thought i'd made myself a millionaire didn't ya
digging for gold in your cheap sunshine
you thought i'd wanted to get a kangaroo certificate
in order to live on the dole like a cheap unemployed fat man
you thought i'd wanted to learn your english that
called me names
that fucked, whenever it could, anybody, especially us.¹⁴

¹² See for example Ouyang Yu, *Representations of Australia and Australians in China and Hong Kong, 1985-1995*, Griffith University: Centre for the Study of Australia-Asia Relations, 1998.

¹³ For a discussion of his works, see Wenche Ommundsen, 'Sleep No More: Ouyang Yu's Wake-up Call to Multicultural Australia', in Tseen Khoo & Kam Louie (eds), *Culture, Identity, Commodity: Diasporic Chinese Literatures in English*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005, pp. 232-251.

¹⁴ Ouyang Yu, 'Fuck you, Australia: from a penniless gambler', in *Moon over Melbourne and Other Poems*, Upper Ferntree Gully, Vic: Papyrus Publishing, 1995, p. 79.

This poem comes from his first poetry collection *Moon Over Melbourne and Other Poems*. In language that is deliberately offensive, Ouyang Yu expresses the frustrations felt by the Tiananmen generation who came to Australia expecting a fulfilling life and found none.¹⁵ Of course, it is never easy to migrate to another country and culture. But we should remember that the context for this poem is based not just in Australia. Feelings of betrayal and disillusionment were common in the literature written in China after the Cultural Revolution. This was especially so in the so-called Root-seeking School of writing of the mid to late 1980s, in which former educated youth who were sent to the villages returned to the cities and wrote about their sojourns in the villages and their experiences back in the cities. They discovered that they did not feel at home in either setting. Ouyang Yu wrote in the wake of this literary trend and his writings, like those of many other writers based in Australia, and no doubt other Anglophone countries like America and New Zealand, have inherited this refusal to accept being undervalued, and aggressively assert a sense of superiority. Many feel the host countries treat them unfairly and coldly, and react with occasional outbursts of cultural chauvinism.

The collection *Moon Over Melbourne and Other Poems* has pieces that are more subtle and revealing than ‘Fuck you, Australia’ in their expression of this sense of alienation and displacement. In some, Ouyang Yu even makes allusions to traditional Chinese poets to directly express his dissatisfaction at finding himself in what then for him was a land devoid of culture.

Let me quote the first few verses of the title poem ‘moon over melbourne’:

in a night without time
 when I mourn over the loss of
 an ancient Chinese poem
 a thousand years ago about now

but moon over melbourne
 that knows nothing of *that*
 a young one just 200 seconds old
 with a man-made light that is only cold

¹⁵ I should note that Ouyang Yu has indicated that he was prompted to write this poem by the tragedy of the student Xing Jiandong. Xing was forcibly repatriated to Shanghai from Australia in 1992. In 1993, he ended up in a mental hospital. This incident caused quite a stir among the Chinese students in Australia (personal correspondence, Ouyang Yu 15 November 2005).

you mooch over melbourne
 in an air-conditioned mood
 how is it you look so bloody australian
 so I-wouldn't-care-less tonight

you have driven so many poets crazy in china
 over the centuries
 Li Bai with your nostalgic light at his bedstead
 Li Yu with emotions so entangled he could hardly cut loose
 because of you
 Du Fu with you surging in mid-stream of the yangtze
 Wen Tingyun with you on a frosty cock-crowing morning
 Wang Wei with you shining through the pine trees
 Zhang Ji with you down at midnight full of frost
 And the arriving of a passenger boat
 ouyang yu with you wandering lonely across a heavenly desert

moon over melbourne you bloody australian moon
 you hang on you all right you no worries mate
 you make me sick home sick for sure¹⁶

The sentiments captured here are repeated ad nauseam in his other poems. Namely, that China has a long civilization and Australia is a 'heavenly desert': 'heavenly' because life in Australia is easy, but a 'desert' in its 'absence' of culture. It has a history of only seconds compared to the thousands of years of Chinese cultural history. There is a sense, then, that 'home' is civilized but the place of sojourn is primitive. There is certainly the sense that the poet is an exile. All of the famous traditional poets such as Li Bai, Du Fu and Wang Wei have written most longingly about being away from home, and as this poem illustrates, Ouyang Yu sees himself very much as following in that tradition. These poets have also all used the moon as a reflection of their plight. One of the most recognizable poems for Chinese is 'Night Thoughts' by Li Bai (701-762), generally considered the greatest poet China has produced, and one that Ouyang Yu nominates first in the list of poets he recounts in the poem above. It captures the spirit of this sort of poetry, so is worth examining in the context of Ouyang Yu's plight:

¹⁶ Ouyang Yu, 'moon over melbourne', in *ibid*, p. 8.

静夜思

Night Thoughts

床前明月光
疑是地上霜
举头望明月
低头思故乡

Before my bed, the bright moonlight
Like frost upon the ground.
Lifting my head, I see the moon.
Lowering it, I think of home.

The first thing to note about this short poem is that while for over a thousand years its recitation has been encouraged by those in power as means for those who are not 'at home' to think of the native land, that is, to be patriotic, the native land is as abstract as the moon. The moon symbol has, as Ouyang's listing of all the famous past poets indicates, been used throughout Chinese history to comment on family, native place and nation. The beauty about the moon is that it is 'up there', bright perhaps, but never revealing what the native place or native nation is really like in the concrete. Li Bai dreams of 'home', or *guxiang* 故乡, 'native place', but we never know exactly what form that takes.

This imprecision has added to the poem's appeal, when 'native place' could be 'home', the village, the province, or the state or kingdom in traditional times. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when more people traveled outside China, *guxiang* came to represent China in its totality. For in most cases, China was not only a *guxiang* (a former village), a place that you come from. By virtue of the fact that there were no Chinese women in Western countries like Australia and most men that came still had families back in China, it was also *jiaxiang* 家乡 (home). *Jiaxiang*, which literally meant 'home,' as in wife and children, coincided with *guxiang* 'home'. Going back home was going back to China, a concept that allowed effortless slippage between 'home' and 'nation'. Thus, the identification of *guxiang* with nation was extremely common throughout the twentieth century.

The metaphysical nature of this *guxiang* or nation became starkly evident in the Communist period. Indeed, many of the Indonesian students who went to the People's Republic of China did so out of extremely idealistic motives, only to be horribly disillusioned during the Cultural Revolution.¹⁷ They were born in South-East Asia and had no idea what China was really like. Many would have seen themselves primarily as Chinese, going back to the motherland to help construct the socialist revolution. However, they were not 'returnees' as such, since they had never actually lived in China. Their attachment was different to the nostalgic sentiments promoted in Li Bai's *Si*

¹⁷ Michael R. Godley & Charles A. Coppel, 'The Pied Piper and the Prodigal Children: A Report on the Indonesian-Chinese Students who went to Mao's China', *Archipel* 39, 1990, pp. 179-198.

guxiang (Night Thoughts). Nevertheless, traditional poets such as Li Bai wrote so powerfully about missing home that the emotions of homesickness were aroused even in those who had never been ‘home’ at all. So strong were these emotions that people talked about ‘going back’ (*gui*) even though they had never actually set foot on the Chinese mainland. In contemporary times, such feelings are best exemplified by Chen Ruoxi 陈若曦, whose novel *The Execution of Mayor Yin* about the Cultural Revolution made her one of the most celebrated novelists in the 1970s and 1980s.¹⁸ The stories in this collection are episodic narratives of the absurdities and human tragedies of the Cultural Revolution.

Less well known, but more important for our purposes is that Chen Ruoxi wrote a semi-autobiographical novel *Gui* 归 (The Return), which relates the experiences of a Canadian Taiwanese woman and her family as they returned to China looking to contribute to the motherland. This was during the Cultural Revolution, when propaganda about creating a new utopia in China offered a goal that idealistic people both inside and outside of China were prepared to work for in the face of much personal hardship and setbacks. Millions of young people at that time were prepared to sacrifice themselves for the class struggle that was to result in a Communist society, but were not prepared for the hard political realities of manipulations by those on top or the social realities of extreme exploitation and indifference in the villages. Young urbanites in China had little idea of the backwardness of much of China. Idealists outside China such as Chen Ruoxi knew nothing of China except what the propaganda machine was churning out: an imaginary society where everyone smiled, working for the revolution. From Canada, it must have looked like the perfect and bright moon that poets like Li Bai have been describing for centuries. No wonder she was completely disillusioned when she did return. And the novel *Gui* is a good example of a rare returnee from those times. For us, it is interesting because the title consists of only one word: *gui*.

Gui of course forms the core character of the two-character key word *haigui* that we are considering. As Wang Cangbai and Huang Jing point out, the character *gui* has implied negative meanings. In compound words such as *guishun* 归顺, *guixiang* 归降, and *guifu* 归服, of which *gui* forms a part, it implies a conversion of allegiance and pledge of obedience.¹⁹ During the Cultural Revolution, the act of returning encompassed many of these implied

¹⁸ Chen Jo-hsi (Chen Ruoxi), *The Execution of Mayor Yin and Other Stories from the Great Cultural Revolution* (translated by Nancy Ing and Howard Goldblatt), Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978.

¹⁹ Wang Cangbai, Huang Jing, ‘The Meaning of Return: Changing Relationship Between China and Chinese Diaspora’, unpublished paper presented at the CSAA Conference 1 July 2005.

meanings of the word *gui*. Chen Ruoxi's novel *Gui* is also a good illustration of the fact that those who returned, who were willing to submit to the country, could still be totally undone by the treatment and life that existed in China. This was different from the experience of my grandfathers, who, like many of their generation, returned home to get married, have children, and, hopefully, retire. That was the ideal. Political changes in China meant that by the time of my father's generation, this was not such an easy possibility. And in Chen Ruoxi's time of the Cultural Revolution, *gui* was for naïve believers who had no idea what the real world was like. This was the case until the 1980s, when professionals slowly began to return voluntarily.

By the 1990s, returnees became a distinct trend, as we saw above. By 2002, the numbers of those returning to China doubled. The year 2002 was also when Ouyang Yu published his own version of return in his first English novel, *The Eastern Slope Chronicle*. The protagonist who returns in this novel, however, is a disgruntled scholar who has not had a good experience in Australia and is heading back in the hope of finding a better life. It could almost be read as a sequel to the poet's progress after he boarded the plane to go back in 'Fuck you, Australia', the imagined farewell to Australia he wrote nearly ten years earlier.

One year after the publication of this book, Yu presented a paper called 'Haigui: A Key Word for 2003'.²⁰ In this paper, he points out that one of the trends of border-crossing in 2003, and hence of writing as a reflection if it, was *gui*, that is, 'return'. This is in contrast to before, when people only thought of getting out and not returning. Subsequent events confirmed his claims. Throughout 2003 and 2004, '*haigui*' became a key word in many discussion sites on the web, and, soon after, we saw the emergence of terms such as *xiao haigui* 小海龟, *tubie* 土鳖, and *haidai* 海带 to respectively refer to children of the returnees, the professionals trained in China who competed for jobs with the returnees, and returnees who were unemployed. When Ouyang Yu wrote *The Eastern Slope Chronicle*, it was just before the emergence of the *haigui* phenomenon. However, it is precisely what the novel is about and its contents provide a very good literary illustration of this phenomenon. The novel is almost 400 pages long, and is therefore quite detailed in terms of what it says about the psychological state of the *haigui*.

Ouyang Yu has the perfect qualifications for writing this work of fiction, as he has the double identity of being both Chinese and Australian. I don't mean that he is one of the trendy so-called hyphenated hybrids, living in Australia but maintaining a Chinese façade. I mean that he literally lives half a year in Australia and the other half in China, being recently appointed professor of English at Wuhan University on a half-time basis. Even though

²⁰ Ouyang Yu, 'Haigui: A Key Word for 2003', in *Double Vision: Asian Accounts of Australia*, Alison Broinowski (ed.), Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2004, pp. 79-91.

the novel was written before this current appointment, it does have two protagonists which taken together make up this double identity. The first is a poet Warne, who stays in Australia, and the other is his friend Dao Zhuang, who goes back only to find it difficult to find a proper university teaching job. While back in China, Dao Zhuang carries a manuscript of verse written by his roommate Warne, trying to get it published. These are, therefore, almost schizophrenic identities, each contributing to the picture of what it is like to live in Australia and, not liking it, going back to China.

When Dao Zhuang is in China, the question of his identity (*shenfen* 身份) is paramount. He is constantly asked who he is. Accordingly, when he claims to be Australian, even his students question him, saying: 'People were telling me that you are an imposter. That you have actually got no qualifications overseas, that you have difficulty surviving there and so as a result you have come home trying to land a job to make up for the loss'. He has to tolerate such hurtful accusation and admit that while he wanted to be a hero by going back, in fact, people simply thought he was 'an imposter in China and a failure in Australia'.²¹

More humiliatingly, whereas not so long ago his identity, that is, his Australian nationality, could easily have landed him a new wife in China, he finds that so many people in China are now so wealthy and so particular that this is no longer the case. His economic status is below many of his class in China. Looking unkempt and out of place, he has real difficulties in finding a job, so that women only play with him and despise him. For example, his sister introduces him to a Chinese businesswoman as a potential marriage partner. However, this business woman takes him to a hotel and tells him she only wants to be 'fucked dead', saying 'I like the fact that you are an Australian for I can buy you a house in Melbourne where we can live together. Whatever you want I can buy you as long as you listen to me'.²² To the new rich in China, he is a curiosity to be toyed with, and to the businesswoman, he is a returned gigolo.

Not surprisingly, he is disappointed and dispirited being back in China. Unhappily for him, he also looks back to his Australian experience, almost with the kind of despondency expressed in the poem discussed above in which the poet leaves Australia with tremendous bitterness. For example, in the novel, his alter ego Warne back in Australia is constantly fighting with his wife and cannot find a decent job either. His experience in trying to find a potential mate represents a major change in China in the last ten years or so. Previously, those who left, even if they despised Australia and China, could feel superior economically, and flaunting consumerist success, justify their

²¹ Ouyang Yu, *The Eastern Slope Chronicle*, Blackheath, NSW: Brandl & Schlesinger, 2002, p. 233.

²² *Ibid*, p. 109.

sojourns abroad. Most returnees would have had little trouble in finding women to marry them. The novel seems to suggest, however, that now they are being literally ‘fucked over’ by successful businesswomen.

His status as returnee is also contrasted with those who stayed behind and who became successful. For example, one scene describes a dinner he has with an ex-classmate, Professor Zhong, and a business friend by the name of Ston. At the restaurant, Ston boasts as they are having a seafood dish of lobsters:

Great Lobsters of Australia . . . I had to admit to myself that I had never seen such huge lobsters, to say nothing of eating the . . . ‘So you come from Australia? I have been there before. Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, the Gold Coast, and many other places . . . Nothing to compare with America, though’.²³

The sense that Australia is a second-rate country that only those who cannot get to America would want to go to is one felt by many Chinese who have gone to Australasia. It is doubly insulting for our protagonist who feels thoroughly dejected in any case.

In career and community terms, the protagonist seems to have failed on every count as a returnee. His identity takes the biggest battering in the context of his family relationships. He goes back to China partly to see his father who is suffering from Alzheimer’s and dying. Significantly, the only thing that his father says to him is ‘What are you coming back for? You bastard!’²⁴ The narrator is hurt and tries to explain the insult away. This is not a random statement from a dying sufferer of dementia. It has, as all curses do, a totemic significance. The fact that the designation ‘bastard’ comes from the father makes it more than merely hurtful. It points to home truths that demand further exploration. I believe that in the use of the term ‘bastard’, Yu has captured the essence of the new keyword *haigui*: the fear of being rejected by the Father. There is no denying that the biggest reason for returning home has been invalidated by a dying father.

It is this accusation of returning to China as a bastard that has prompted me to reconsider one of the central connotations of *haigui* that is never discussed. In most contexts, *haigui* 海归 is used synonymously with its homophone *haigui* 海龟 (sea turtles). While this might seem to be simply another amusing expression like ‘astronauts’ and ‘parachute kids’ invented by the Chinese to label people, the implications of this expression seem to me to go further. The turtle is no ordinary animal in the Chinese cosmos. In colloquial Chinese, of course, a bastard is a *wangbadan* 王八蛋, a turtle’s egg. So turtles have always been associated with being bastards.

²³ Ibid, p. 40.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 300.

The crucial passage in the novel in which the father calls the protagonist a bastard is not the only time that Ouyang Yu uses the word ‘bastard’. In the poem on the moon in Melbourne discussed above, he ends by referring to the ‘bastard moon’.²⁵ He alludes to traditional poets whose moons were round and bright and reflected their nostalgic cravings for home and bitterly contrasts them with this ‘bastard moon’, which has lost its roundness and brightness, and mooches over an alien land.

How does one stop being a bastard? We may have to learn from the Tang poets and again gaze at the moon. It is never-changing, wherever you are. You can always romanticize about it – a memory, a hope, a perfection. You don’t have to go back. Back in the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD), home never changes, though you yourself may change. One of the most evocative poems from that time on this theme is by He Zhizhang 贺知章. He had left his homeland for over fifty years before returning in 744, when he was 86, and wrote in an almost bemused reflection of his changed state, more of a comment on himself than on home:

少 小离家老大回	I left home young, I return old
乡音无改鬓毛衰	My accent unchanged, but my hair grown thin
儿童相见不相识	The children I meet do not know me
笑问客从何处来。	Smiling, they ask: ‘Stranger, where are you from?’

It is common for migrants to hold to the belief that though they have changed, their homelands do not; that the homeland still has true values and simplicity of life while the adopted country is too modern, too chaotic or too wealthy for the good of its citizens. It is natural that both change: the traveler gets older, in many senses of the word, more conservative, more frail and losing memory. Those who stay behind are replaced by a younger generation that doesn’t recognize the old.

The failure to recognise changes in the world at large, and taking oneself as the centre of the universe has long been a subject of philosophical derision. One of the most well-known stories in Chinese illustrating this tendency is that of the sea turtle who has been to other continents, laughing at the ‘frog in the well’ 井底青蛙. Every Chinese child would know the idiom ‘the frog in the well’. It is based on a story brilliantly told in the ‘Autumn Floods’ Chapter of *Zhuangzi*,²⁶ and I cite it here:

²⁵ *Moon over Melbourne and Other Poems*, p. 10.

²⁶ My focus on *Zhuangzi* is not accidental. As Ouyang Yu notes, the name Dao Zhuang has been deliberately coined to refer to the *Zhuangzian* style of Daoism (Ouyang Yu personal correspondence, 15 November 2005).

‘I have a terrific life here!’ said the frog in the well to a turtle of the Eastern Sea. ‘When I go out, I hop along the railing around the well. When I jump back, I rest on a broken bit of the wall . . . I am in charge of all the water in this well. This is the greatest happiness! Why don’t you drop in, Sir, and have a look?’

But the turtle of the Eastern Sea did not even get his left foot in, before his right one got stuck. He withdrew a little and described the sea to the frog, ‘A distance of a thousand miles is insufficient to span its length; a height of a thousand fathoms cannot measure its depth. During Yu’s time, there were floods nine years out of ten, but the water level did not rise; during Tang’s time, there were droughts seven years out of eight, but its shorelines were not lowered. Showing no changes with the passage of time, nor raising or lowering the water levels regardless of the amount of rain – this is the ultimate joy of the Eastern Sea’. Upon hearing this, the frog in the well was so dumbfounded that it lost itself in bewilderment.²⁷

The idiom ‘frog in the well’ is meant to describe people who have never left their native place and thus have very limited worldviews. Most people seem to interpret the story as suggesting that the frog is the smug but deluded one. In Zhuangzi’s philosophy, however, the creature that is the target of ridicule is really the turtle. Zhuangzi is famous for pointing out that from the little sparrow to the roc, the giant bird that flies over continents, all things are relative and must rely on something else for their being. Thus, even though the roc flies over long distances, like the sparrow, it too relies on the wind to move, and, ultimately, all creatures need the Dao for their existence. Against the Dao (the basic, eternal principle of the universe, which transcends reality and is the source of being, non-being and change), everything is insignificant. Thus, the turtle may have traveled tremendous distances and have seen a lot, but his vision too is limited. Against the infinite and boundless Dao, the ocean is but a minute entity.

All the creatures in *Zhuangzi* that roam the great expanse of the universe, and who believe they have seen it all, really deceive themselves because the Dao is beyond them. Truth is beyond mere worldly experience. Students like the protagonist in *The Eastern Slope Chronicle* may have been abroad, but they really are like the turtle in *Zhuangzi*. Thus, the term *haigui* cuts two ways. First, they are deluded; second they are bastards. They are bastards because they are no longer East or West, are neither here nor there,

²⁷ Chen Guying (ed), *Zhuangzi jinzhu jinyi* (Zhuangzi annotated and translated into modern Chinese), Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983, p. 435.

with no certain claim to pure cultural bloodlines. These are the people who have illicit relations with foreign things (ideas if not people), and then find their way back to China to lay their illegitimate eggs, the *wangbadan*. Because they have also been transformed (or, if you like, reborn) as a result of their illicit relations with foreign things, they are, therefore, complicit in a kind of self-bastardisation.

The returned scholar who is seen as a fake is more despicable than bastards who are not responsible for their own production. Of course, this conclusion is a result of juxtaposition of several metaphors and not a literal interpretation of the situation. In the real world, turtles always return to the same spots to lay eggs and multiply, and they have done this for millennia. But industrialization in China could mean they will find their beaches and rivers polluted and changed. A different kind of animal will live there. Change is now the norm in the homeland. The turtles have in fact found that the habitats that they have used for millennia have in this new millennium become unusable. Their survival is now threatened.

Conclusion

In the human world, things are not so drastic, but fundamental changes are also occurring. It seems that when these *haigui* return home, dreams and ambitions are not fulfilled. Many, and possibly most, do find jobs and find plenty of reward. The rapidly changing China is the fruit of much of their vision. Look at Shanghai, for example, and one can see the post-modern in China. I should point out here that a lot of the frustrations felt by the *haigui* have been especially acute among those in the humanities. Transnational capital in general refers to intellectual know-how in the technical sense. China has for a long time talked about modernization, but the liberal arts and humanities have been seen more as spiritual pollution than useful knowledge. It is no wonder that some who have this knowledge feel that they are bastards. Although there are some positive signs such as the author Ouyang Yu's appointment to a half-time professorship at Wuhan University, many are like the sea turtles who find they cannot lay their eggs once they get home, because the old habitats are so changed. The beaches are lined with factories. Perhaps many will simply turn around and swim back to Australian shores.

This scenario indicates sharp contrasts between the traditional, the modern and these post-modern turtles. With information globalised to such an extent that one demonstration in Tiananmen can be seen and experienced simultaneously all around the world, and with people walking on the moon and seen immediately all around, these turtles do not crawl or swim, but live in a world that is instant and no longer contains any cultural myths. The

moon may be bright, but we know Americans have walked on it and that it has no mystery. It certainly does not reflect a space in which one can claim comfort and solace when one is somewhere else.

Zhuangzi may have laughed at the turtle for missing the point that everything is relative, so that being in the wide expanse of the ocean is only wonderful in relation to the frog in the well. But what is the ocean in relation to the 'Dao'? Nothing. However, Zhuangzi's game of relativities is culture-bound. In a world in which everything is being transformed so that both the ocean and the well lose their function as benchmarks for measurement, and where both frog and turtle have become bastards and do not recognize their habitats (in both senses of cognizance and allegiance), these relativities are meaningless. The bastard son may return home, but home is as much a place somewhere else as any other somewhere else. In the Zhuangzian scheme of things, there is no escape.

In the end, even though the *haigui* see themselves as special and unique, they face the same sort of dilemmas that displaced peoples face in all times and places. Having been somewhere else, especially a place like Australia or New Zealand with a completely different culture, people may return home believing that they have 'seen the world'. Feelings of superiority go both ways. The home country has changed, and is no longer the China one dreams about by looking at the moon. Depending on how fast things change at home, those left behind may laugh at the returning turtles for not being able to make the necessary adjustments to survive in the brave new world.

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