THE RISING ASIA REVIEW OF BOOKS

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Nostalgia: The Eternal Homecoming

Ching-hwang Yen, *While East Meets West: A Chinese Diaspora Scholar and Social Activist in Asia-Pacific* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2022), 400 pages, US$98.

At the outset, this book, *While East Meets West: A Chinese Diaspora Scholar and Social Activist in Asia-Pacific* by Ching-hwang Yen, an Emeritus Professor at the University of Adelaide, may seem like a cog in the machine of multitudes of autobiographies that are out there across the world's libraries and bookstores. But that would perhaps be a misreading of the book and the author's intent.

On the one hand, the words 'sincerity' and 'hard work' harmoniously capture the substance of the book. A poem by the Tang period poet, Li Shen (772 AD), "Min Nong" (or "Sympathy for the Peasants"), tersely encapsulates the author's life experiences:

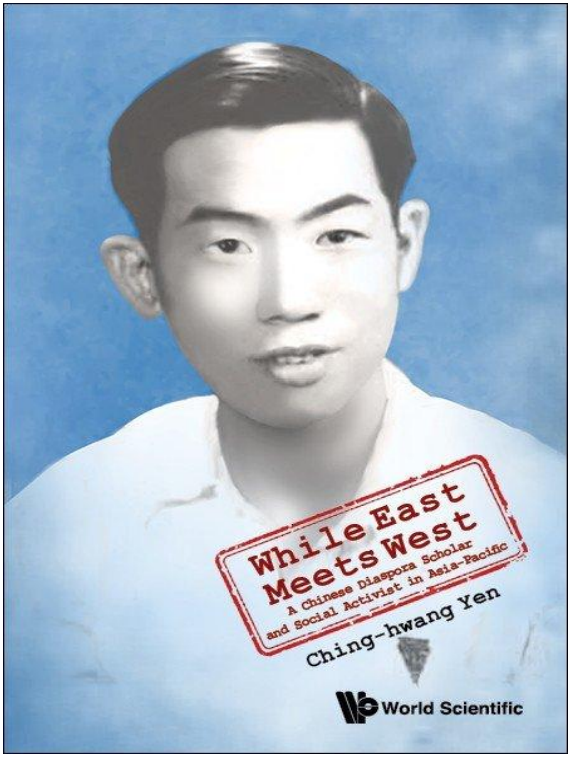
> Cultivating grains at noon,
> Sweat dripping into the earth beneath.
> Who would have thought the food on your plate,
> each and every grain, came from hard work?[1]

The aforementioned verses from "Min Nong" nicely echo the author's description of surmounting tribulations he had faced. In his own words, he states, "What motivated and sustained me for the research and writing was the spirit of Nantah (the spirit of Nanyang University [in Singapore]) which was instilled into my mind during my days at the Nanyang University" (p. 103). "The spirit," he adds, "was the product of circumstances under which the university was born and the way its graduates were treated by the governments of Singapore and Malaysia." He elaborates, "Most Nanyang graduates shared the spirit that they were going to prove their worth in the society through their study or work [...] Nanyang's academic standard was to be proved through the academic performance of its graduate(s)," and further admits, "In Singapore and Malaysia, a Nanyang degree was regarded inferior to the degrees of both the University of Singapore and University of Malaya. I was keen to prove that my academic achievements were not inferior to any of the graduates of these two universities"(Ibid.). And given the author's achievements, academically, personally, and socially, the aforesaid passages in this book evince the "spirit of Nantah."

On another level, however, there is something more than simple sincerity and hard work. The book also makes us reflect on modern political and socio-cultural events that have now come to color much of our perception about our place and identity as well as that of others in the world. The cosmopolitan world or multicultural outlook intensified by globalization has brought people from across the world much closer to one another, but it has also at the same time magnified xenophobia, evident in the author's own experiences in Australia (pp. 188-192; 221-

[1] Li Shen's *Min Nong* (or *Sympathy for the Peasants*) cited in HALIFAX Blogs, "Cultural Bridges Through Poetry (Asian Heritage)," Halifax Public Libraries, June 1, 2021. https://www.halifaxpubliclibraries.ca/blogs/post/cultural-bridges-through-poetry-asian-heritage-month/

224; 231-234; 309-319), across much of the developed and 'civilized' (as well as in the developing) world.[2] Something which we may have to live with, at least for the foreseeable future.



The book is also similar to the autobiographies of another eminent historian, and a near contemporary of the author, Wang Gungwu. Gungwu's compact two-volume autobiographies *Home is Not Here* (2018), and *Home is Where We Are* (2020), portray a similar line of narrative, with similar themes to *While East Meets West*.[3] Both the

[2] It certainly appears that to be part of the majority (be it in terms of racial group, language spoken, or religion practiced) seems preferable and beneficial. In a world that is highly economically and technologically advanced, it is an anomaly that a primal, cliquish outlook has permeated societies across the world today.

authors, children of migrants from China to Southeast Asia, speak of the challenges they had experienced during their formative years in Indonesia and Malaya, in the development of their identity, and also in creating that sense of belonging wherever they are or happen to be. In many ways, these books can be put under a similar genre.

While East Meets West is divided into eighteen chapters. Except for the first nine chapters which are written chronologically (from his early days in Fujian and Malaya to his second stint at the University of Adelaide), the rest of the chapters are arranged without any chronological or thematic order, which is not an issue or something to be critical about. Chapters 1 to 3 narrate the author's ancestry, his early childhood in Southern Fujian, his relocation to Pahang in British Malaya, where he attended the Chinese school system, as opposed to the English school system (p. 22), his schooling days, and his love for historical novels and Kung-fu books (pp. 21-29). These and other similar experiences, in many ways, left an indelible imprint that drove him to nurture a hardworking and resilient character that later went on to become his cornerstone in attaining academic, social, and personal success. Education forms a dominant theme, such as his early education in the Chinese school system, which was seen to be inferior to the English school system (pp. 18-39); or attending Nanyang University (Chapter 4), which was seen as inferior to the degrees obtained from the University of Singapore and University of Malaysia (pp. 41-50); or the challenges he faced, compounded by his humble or "inferior" educational history, during his early career (Chapter 5) as a school

[3] See, Wang Gungwu, *Home is Not Here* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2018); and Wang Gungwu, *Home is Where We Are* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2020).

teacher in Malaysia, as a tutor at Nanyang (Chapter 6), and in his initial years at the Australian National University (p. 76).

In Chapters 7 to 9, the author reminisces about his academic career, from his initial years as faculty at the University of Adelaide to his interlude at the University of Hong Kong, and back to the University of Adelaide for his second spell. These chapters are a validation of the sheer hard work, sincerity, and resilience that exhibit the "spirit of Nantah," as evident in the ebb and flow over his promotion to the readership (pp. 107-108), and over the founding of the Centre for Asian Studies and Teaching Chinese and Japanese Languages (pp. 108-112), as well as the problems in the History Department in the University of Hong Kong (pp. 119-123), and the testing events he endured over his early retirement (in Chapter 17), for instance.

In Chapters 10 to 13 and 18 the author outlines his involvement in various social associations, such as his two stints in the Chinese Association of South Australia (CASA), his involvement in the Police-Ethnic Liaison Committee of South Australia, Multi-cultural and Educational Co-ordinating Committee of South Australia, Immigration Review Panel of the Commonwealth, as well as his participation as an activist in many other socio-cultural events and as speaker at academic conferences even after his retirement.

The author, Ching-hwang Yen, speaks of his family, siblings, how he met his wife, and (was reunited with) his children and grandchildren (in Chapters 14 and 16). These are interesting, in the sense that, it depicts the many divergent worldviews between him and his children (who grew up or were nurtured with an outlook that was quite different from his). The author also divulges his conversion to Christianity. He speaks of how his interactions with the Bible study group, which he and his wife attended, led to their acceptance of Jesus Christ and how his eldest son's

struggle with religion (or more precisely, sects) drew them toward Christianity.

In Chapter 15 the author interestingly juxtaposes, in a brief manner, the diverging cultural values between the East (i.e., Chinese) and the West, or the "Confucian values of collectivism, social hierarchy and paternalism (p. 285)," and Western values of individualism, equality, and unilateralism (pp. 287-293). It is perhaps the author's good fortune that he found that fine balance between the home (where he was nourished and nurtured) and the host land (where he lives and where his children were nurtured). The quest for 'peace' is no doubt an essential element of most diasporic literature, for it defines the author's ability not to be alienated either from his home society or from his host society.

Since the book, as the author states, is an autobiography "that records the efforts and achievements of a Chinese diaspora scholar and social activist in the Asia-Pacific region" (p. vi), we must try to understand the value of this book and appreciate the author's sentiments in this context. And even though the author states that his memoir commences, "with 'seeking truth from facts' without exaggerations and concealment" (p. vi), we must nevertheless begin, as the historian E.H. Carr verily said, by "studying the historian before you begin to study the facts."[4] Doing so will place us in a better position to appreciate the nuanced contexts in which this book is written. Otherwise, we risk missing or not grasping the author's intent and the book's purpose.

At face value, one might be critical of the fact it misses all the key elements of diasporic literature, say for instance, the intense pathology of the pain of displacement. In other instances, this book appears more about a scholar's work experiences and achievements, rather than a

[4] E. H. Carr, *What is History*? (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962), 23.

proper autobiography, per se. But, at the same time, it is neither the former nor the latter. Then, what is it? The answer, perhaps, lies in the sentiment the author wished to convey, a sentiment that is integral, especially more so, in Chinese literature, culture, and history: Nostalgia.[5]

Nostalgia is the yearning to return home, not in its mundane interpretation of 'homesick,' but something deeper than simple homesickness. When we inquire into the etymology of nostalgia, we find that it is derived from two Greek words, *nostos* meaning "to return home," which is itself rooted in the Greek noun *nóos* meaning "mind."[6] The other word is *algos* meaning "pain."[7] So, nostalgia is the pain associated with returning home. But then, the concern here shifts not to 'the return,' but to where the 'home' is. This is especially poignant for diasporas, for ultimately, where is 'home'? The host country or society will not accept the diasporic person as one of them, yet at the same time, the diasporas do not feel connected to the country or society they (or their parents) have migrated from. This is pervasive in diasporic literature. Thus, in this case, where is 'home'?

Without meandering considerably on the philosophical and philological aspects of these words, 'home' and 'nostalgia', we find that for the author, perhaps unconsciously, 'home' is everywhere, where he

[5] Xiang Shuchen, "The Irretrievability of the Past: Nostalgia in Chinese Literature from Tang–Song Poetry to Ming–Qing San-Wen," *International Communication of Chinese Culture* 2, no. 3 (2015): 205–22. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40636-015-0027-9

[6] Douglas Frame, *The Myth of Return in Early Greek Epic* (New Haven: Harvard University Press, 1978).

[7] Eugene B. Daniels, "Nostalgia and Hidden Meaning," *American Imago* 42, no. 4 (1985): 371-383.

is and where he had lived. Home is not some specific physical place,[8] it is the entirety of the places he has lived and been to, and the experiences he has accumulated at different spaces and times of his life. It is the totality of his being that encompasses his 'home': it is perhaps more spiritual than physical. Hence, the author's nostalgia dots the entire book. The poem, "Thoughts in the Night Quiet," by Li Bai, a poet in the Seventh century Tang period, perhaps best encapsulates the author's sentiments,

> Moonlight reflects off the front of my bed.
> Could it actually be the frost on the ground?
> I look up to view the bright moon,
> And look down to reminisce about my hometown.[9]

The vivid nostalgic recollection of his experiences from his early days in China to his retirement in Australia is the author's way of reminiscing about his "hometown," i.e., his life that's past, that made his present, and that will indelibly shape his future. There is always a melancholic tone to nostalgia, thus the pain indissolubly associated with the 'return home.' There is pain and sorrow associated with nostalgia precisely because of the impossibility of the return. It is not possible to return to the past. The yearning to return (metaphorically, of course), while at that same instant being cognizant of reality that one cannot violate the cosmic law that dictates the non-returnability to the past, makes us experience our recollection of the past with a nostalgic, that is, melancholic, sentiment.

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[8] The author himself is a sojourner, a migrant from Fujian, China to Malaysia/Singapore, and then to Hong Kong and Australia.

[9] Li Po, *Selected Poems of Li Po*, translated by David Hinton (New York: New Direction Books, 1996), 120.

This is something akin to the sentiment associated with the account that the lover loves the beloved so much that it hurts, which is stimulated by the lover's nostalgic reminiscence about the beloved. Such kinds of sentiments dot the great romantic poems of Rumi, Omar Khayyam, and Islamic ghazals. Similarly, nostalgia is somewhat analogous to such experiences. Even though it is not possible to return to the past, this does not stop us from reminiscing about it—precisely because our very act of ruminating about the past (spiritually, at least) becomes a sacred act. In other words, nostalgia becomes a sacred act in which our rumination about the past becomes, according to Mircea Eliade, a sacred act in the context outside of history and outside of the linear notion of time.[10] It is a never-ending repetition of a sacred act (i.e., return to the past) in the eternally recurring realm, that is, the "Eternal Return."[11] This stands in contrast to ordinary and forgettable human experience, experiences such as what we ate yesterday for dinner and so forth, that exists in the context of history and in the linear notion of time.[12]

Likewise, the author's recurring return to his sacred past entails only those events and experiences—especially his early days in Fujian and Malaya, his university days in Nanyang, his early career in Australia and Hong Kong, and his involvement in various community associations—that continue to draw him to a realm of eternal recurrence that is but a never-ending repetition of a sacred act, just as a lover misses the beloved. Even though his memories and experiences are

[10] Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, translated by Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1987).

[11] Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of Eternal Return*, translated by Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper, 1985), 86.

[12] Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane.*

written down, the author will no doubt continue to return to the past (in an eternal return) with nostalgia.

Perhaps, in the final analysis, it is the author's way of suggesting that though a return to the past is not possible, we must nevertheless take cognizance of the importance of such nostalgic remembrance to enrich our understanding of what it is to be truly human. It is a book worth one's time and effort to read, not because it has something novel to tell, but rather because it makes us appreciate and not take for granted the varied experiences that make us who we are.

Note on the Author

Salikyu Sangtam is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at Tetso College in Dimapur, India. He teaches international relations theory (IRT) and political theory. His research focuses on Chinese thought, and non-western IRT and political theory. He has published papers ("All-Under-heaven" is Timeless: An Anthropology of Chinese Strategic Behavior" in *Rising Asia Journal*), and reviews books regularly for the journal. He has presented papers on Chinese strategic thought in international conferences, and has served as a resource person on numerous invited occasions delivering lectures (on political psychology, Indian Constitution, Ambedkar, Tourism, and non-western political theory) and in academic workshops. He was also invited to serve as a panelist on "Nagaland Special Development Zone" at the Business Summit at Nagaland International Trade Expo (NITEX) in November 2017.

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