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Do I Still Love China?

Xujun Eberlein
Inside-Out China

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In Sunday’s New York Times, Ha Jin reflected on his decision to remain in the West after graduate school and to write primarily in English:
That was when I started to think about staying in America and writing exclusively in English, even if China was my only subject, even if Chinese was my native tongue. It took me almost a year to decide to follow the road of Conrad and Nabokov and write in a language that was not my own. I knew I might fail. I was also aware that I was forgoing an opportunity: the Chinese language had been so polluted by revolutionary movements and political jargon that there was great room for improvement.

His piece resonated with another we’d just read at Xujun Eberlein’s blog Inside-Out China, particularly since Eberlein mentions Ha Jin in her piece. She agreed to allow us to republish it in its entirety here:

By Xujun Eberlein

Last week, Singapore reader Drifting Leaf asked how I see myself. If you read her letter, you will see this question was about cultural identity. She says:

When I see old CCTV/HK/Taiwan TV programs, it brings me back to my childhood. I’m not sure how far I should identify with or support China though. I love classical Chinese culture but the present China/government has quite a negative image.

And:

When we watched the 2008 Olympics, we were uncertain whether we should feel proud of China or not because we are foreign citizens and am not sure if we can lay claim to Chineseness. I believe you still love China despite all its political problems.

Her questions took me through some soul-searching. I moved to the US as an adult and I’ve been living here for 21 years; my American-born daughter has turned 20 this year. I’m used to the way of life in New England: to pull weeds and plant flowers in the summer garden, or to have five months of winter solitude in a snow-besieged colonial house. Looking back, I seldom thought of the question “What am I?” except that when I visited China in recent years I often felt like a foreigner. Occasionally I had to provide information on my ethnic background (“American Chinese” or “Asian American”) when filling out forms, however I don’t consider ethnic background the same thing as cultural identity.

In short, I’ve never really suffered the anxiety of identity loss. Drifting Leaf’s questions made me wonder why.

A couple of weeks ago during a library presentation on my book, someone in the audience asked if I’d like to move back to China. Without thinking I replied, “No, my home is here now.”

So, what role does Chinese culture play in my daily life in America then? Perhaps the answer lies in a corner of my garden (and yes, that’s where my blog header comes from):
This is what my husband and I call our “Chinese wall.” After we moved to our current home in the summer of 1998, the two of us spent three years of summer weekends building this garden wall with our own hands. Its style was modeled from the gardens of Sichuan, and the patterns of the reticulated windows were taken from the Ming Dynasty garden book <園冶>, which I found in a bookstore in Boston’s Chinatown. The inscribed characters on the maroon wooden board above the moon gate are “思蜀,” meaning “long for Shu,” where “Shu” is the ancient name for Sichuan.

Readers who are familiar with the Three Kingdoms period (220-280 AD) might be able to see this inscription makes a reverse use of the classical allusion “乐不思蜀” – “here is too enjoyable to long for Shu.” After the Shu Kingdom was conquered by Wei, the brainless last King of Shu, Liu Chan, was taken to Wei Kingdom’s capital Luoyang. During a banquet with Shu dancers performing, all the captured Shu officials began to weep, only Liu Chan giggled as usual. The King of Wei asked him, “Don’t you long for Shu?” “Here is so enjoyable, I don’t long for Shu,” Liu Chan replied. Thus, “too enjoyable to long for Shu” became an adage admonishing those forgetting their roots.

The inscription in my garden, however, is not an admonishment. It simply reflects my sentiment: whenever I see a Sichuan style garden, I’m emotional – thus the painstaking effort at building the garden wall shown above with the moon gate and the inscribed board. I had never gardened in China, yet in New England I became a diligent gardener. This emotional reaction is rooted in my upbringing in Sichuan, not much different from Drifting Leaf’s nostalgic sentiment when she sees traditional Chinese programs on TV.

I’m also fond of Japanese and English gardens, and have tried to make a corner with each style in my yard. However I long for “Shu” more than anything else, and only that part of the garden has sentimental value, thus deeper meaning, to me.

This is to say, the cultural elements from one’s upbringing are always there, in the chemistry of your blood, no matter which corner of the world you land in, no matter what you call yourself. That, to me,
is cultural identity. It is quite independent from political stance or nationality, as my friend Chiew-Siah pointed out.

I can’t help but mention again Ha Jin’s latest book, A Free Life, which is regarded as the author’s most autobiographic novel. Anyone who has read it can’t possibly miss the protagonist’s (thus likely the author’s) grudge against China and laud for America, which was why such a boring book was – quite amusingly – hailed by a NYT book reviewer as “a serious [American] patriotic novel” badly needed at a time of Americans’ serious protests against the invasion of Iraq.

Ha Jin’s book actually provides a good example of “乐不思蜀” – “here is too enjoyable to long for Shu.” Its political attitude is not really a surprise given that Ha Jin left China shortly after its most painful time, and his departure to the New World has fixed that old impression in a freeze-frame. Apparently he has been unable to update his view of China as the country updates itself. Despite the political grudge that confused the author, who in turn was confusing politics and cultural identity in his novel, as a realistic writer Ha Jin, perhaps involuntarily, illustrated the independence of the two: while the protagonist is determined to cut ties with anything Chinese, he involuntarily thinks in a Chinese way and applies the traditional Chinese value system in handling business, family and relationships.

Here is another little interlude: recently a library invited several of us to talk about our books. Among the speakers, another woman and I were Chinese. The order of speech was by last name alphabetically; as such I was the first to speak. In introducing my background, I mentioned how all schools were closed and books burned during the Cultural Revolution. When it was the turn for the other Chinese woman, who was originally from Hong Kong, she talked about the Chinese tradition of respecting teachers and books. “Even in mainland China, the CCP only chose the most diligent students as its members,” she said. I sort of expected her to acknowledge the practice in the Cultural Revolution as an exception, but she didn’t touch anything like that. I wondered if the two of us, each presenting a different aspect of China, had confused the audience. As if she had read my mind, when we were all finished and about to leave, she said to me out of the blue, “You have to talk positive to young readers.” Her book was a young-adult novel. Though disagreeing, I nodded understanding.

One could say both she and I share a cultural identity: the Chinese culture. But she had her upbringing in Hong Kong. I’m pretty sure that, had she also experienced the Cultural Revolution, she would have talked quite differently that night. This is to say, the culture one identifies with is more closely related to personal experiences than ethnicity.

Now, do I still love China despite all its political problems? This depends on what one means by the term “China.” When I think of China, what comes to mind are familiar shade of trees, fragrance of flowers, shape of landscape, smell of Sichuan cuisine, peculiar expressions of the Chinese language and intimate faces of relatives and friends. Those, I love. I care. Thinking of them makes me emotional. Thus, China is not an abstract concept to me.

This is also to say, I no longer have an abstract love of China, especially when the name means the state. And that’s okay with me. When I was a child, we were taught from the first grade on to “Love the Party, love the people, love the motherland,” as if the three were one thing. I had taken the concept of the three abstract and unconditional “loves” as granted, until the Cultural Revolution and my “insert” into the countryside disillusioned me and made me realize how those abstract concepts compromised individuals. In the early 1980s, there was a popular saying among those who were actively seeking migration abroad: “I love the motherland, but the motherland does not love me.” (This background might also help to understand the grudge in Ha Jin’s aforementioned novel.) I suspect Drifting Leaf’s situation now is quite similar to those people’s then.

Since my youth in the countryside I’ve grown averse to abstract political concepts. Having lived in two opposite countries has taught me many things, one of which is it’s often less wrong to go for the particular rather than the abstract. The world is being destroyed by abstract concepts and exclusive ideologies. But this is the topic of another long post so I won’t keep ranting here, but I, too, would like to cite the Beijing Olympics as an example: I enjoyed very much watching the Olympics, not because it lifted China’s international image, but because the performance was superb. On the other hand, I
still hold the opinion that the huge government spending on the Games could have found a better use in improving conditions for the Chinese population still in poverty.

So, unlike many "angry youths," I don’t unconditionally advocate nationalism, though it had also once been my position in my youth, and I still respect the many great nationalists in China’s history. But I will not let nationalism stand in the way of my issuing a critical opinion as a honest writer.

Before I end this piece, let me say a few more words about the style of my garden. Isn’t a Chinese garden wall absurd, or 不伦不类, as a companion to a New England Colonial house? Coincidentally, I find answers from a book I’m reading titled Has Man a Future? The book is a transcript of conversations between “The Last Confucian” Liang Shuming and Chicago University professor Guy Alitto. In the Foreword written by Prof. Alitto, he mentions that when he interviewed Mr. Liang in 1980, Liang often talked with assent about Buddhism and Daoism, and also praised Christianity and some parts of Marxism. At first Alitto found it hard to understand: how could one be a Confucian and Buddhist at the same time? How can one identify with both Christianity and Marxism? Eventually he realized that, to be able to fuse many seemingly conflicting thought schools, is a distinctive characteristic of traditional Chinese intellectuals. An excellent observation.