

Title

"Departure and Return - Tales from the Diaspora" by Denis Wong

Table of contents

1. An Incident
2. Liverpool, England
3. London, England
4. Hong Kong, China
5. Chongqing, China
6. Manchester, England
7. Return to China
8. Understanding an Incident
9. Last Days

Chapter Content

An Incident

A violent argument with my father took place one morning, several decades ago, during my university undergraduate days. I didn't understand the roots of it at the time – I have been curious about it ever since. It sets the scene because in hindsight, the events of my father's life suggest the reasons for that incident. In uncovering those reasons, the book will bring into focus a wider story of family, community and nation.

Some concepts are discussed in preparation for that wider story. These include notions of biography and of narrative, explained through examples from popular film and literature. They also include a notion of learning tied to the practice of science which on the one hand was instrumental to a historical conflicts between Britain and China and on the other, have led to prominent developments amongst the Chinese in Britain and amongst Britons in China.

Liverpool, England

Liverpool was a small muddy pool on the banks of the River Mersey when it was first settled in the 12th century. It rose to become the greatest port the world had ever seen at the turn of the 20th century. Such a port inevitably attracted migrants, one of whom was my grandfather, from Guangdong Province, China. He brought over a wife from the same province and my father was the first-born in 1914, out of nine children.

My father was an outstanding student and a keen sportsman and escaped the extreme prejudice that was prevalent against Chinese settlers at the start of the 20th century, indicated by a well-documented City Council meeting in 1906. My father earned that respect of his headteacher, who in 1932 recommended him for a place at The Polytechnic, London.

The circumstances of the Chinese diaspora and its Chinatowns are described through the story of Huang Yiguang, an adventurer and a Mexican Chinese who visited Liverpool before the war in Europe had begun. He is mentioned later in the book because he helped my father enter China before travelling to Nanking, the capital of Japanese occupied China.

London, England

Originally a ford enabling neolithic traders to cross the River Thames, London also became a great port and a capital city as well. Chinese sailors settled there in particular in the docklands area known as Limehouse. My grandfather's best friend, Uncle Goo, eventually settled in London but like many others, he moved out to the suburbs. My father stayed at his home as a student, in the comfortable district of Golders Green between 1932 and 1937.

The earlier "yellow peril" mania promoted by the lurid fictions of Thomas Burke and Sax Romer, based on the Limehouse community had died down by that time. My father appeared not to have suffered the kinds of prejudice described by the renowned Chinese writer Lao She in his novel "Mr Ma and Son", depicting London between 1924 to 1929.

My father continued to do well in his studies, moving into a job at Cossor Radio whilst he studied in the evenings, eventually leaving London to an apprenticeship at British Thompson-Houston in Rugby, Warwickshire. His goal was to work in Shanghai, China and he was helped towards his ambition by the Universities China Committee, a British organisation reflecting the global reach of the British Empire.

By chance, I recently met my distant Aunt Gwen in Hong Kong who originated from Limehouse, London. She described to me her early life in post-war Limehouse, where she met and later married Nobel Laureate in physics, Sir Charles Kao.

Hong Kong, China

Yet another great port, Hong Kong owes its origins to its deep water harbour, which persuaded British colonisers to seize the territory as a trading post during the First Opium War in the 1840s. By the time my father arrived there a century later, it was a major imperial outpost in the East, second only to Singapore. After sailing from Liverpool, he spent a short period of time there with my Aunts Lizzie and Emily who had also originated from Liverpool. They were named as part of the "Liverpool crowd" by a relative of Uncle Goo, whom I have adopted as Uncle Willy, whom I never met because he died during the defence of Hong Kong against the Japanese in 1941. My encounter with him was through archived letters to Uncle Goo, and to his son Uncle Harry. Uncle Willy had written whilst he was in Shanghai in 1937 and then in Hong Kong in 1941, shortly before his death.

My Aunts Lizzie and Emily survived the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong; they mentioned to my father when he returned to Hong Kong after the war that the overseas Chinese had put up heroic resistance against the invading Japanese.

Chongqing, China

Chongqing lies in central China at the confluence to two major rivers – the Yangtze and the Jialing River. It was the wartime capital of the Chinese Nationalists; it survived the attacks of the Japanese, including massive aerial bombing.

My father met the Mexican Chinese Huang Yiguang in Kunming, en route from Hong Kong to Chongqing. Huang had arranged a job for my father in the International Radio Station in Chongqing, which my father held throughout the war. After meeting my father, Huang departed for Japanese-occupied Nanking (Nanjing) to a failed assassination attempt on the Chinese puppet prime minister, Wang Jingwei. He was executed on 11 November 1940.

Whilst in Chongqing, my father met my mother, the daughter of a Christian pastor. They married after the defeat of Japan, departing for Hong Kong soon afterwards because my paternal grandfather in England had died and his ashes needed to be accompanied back to the family village. They had every intention of returning Chongqing but this failed to take place, due to the turmoil of the Chinese civil war in 1949. After a few months in Hong Kong, my father arranged a return to England, my mother pregnant with my elder brother. A promise that he would take her back to Chongqing was broken.

Manchester, England

Manchester also lies at the confluence of two rivers – the Mersey and the Irwell. It's importance, however, lay not in trade but in manufacturing. It therefore developed strength in science and engineering, at the heart of the Industrial Revolution.

My brother was born in Liverpool on my parents' return to England, but the family moved to nearby Manchester after my father had found work there. I was born before long and we settled into a comfortable suburban life in the shadow of the world famous soccer and cricket grounds at Old Trafford. My father's interest in sport had not waned and we lived in a neighbourhood of sports lovers. My childhood was typically localised, without much thought about my parents and their origins.

Interest in China grew with the arrival of Chinese students to Manchester, attracted by its reputation in science and engineering, who found themselves at home under the hospitality afforded by my parents. Charles Kao similarly found himself in a British Chinese home, that of my Aunt Gwen. He describes the life of an overseas student in his autobiography. The relationship between Chinese migrants and Britain has been described through the words "sea, soap, salt", signifying the professions of seafaring, laundering and food catering. "Science" becomes the fourth in this series, exemplified by the life of Charles Kao.

Return to China

The influence of those Chinese students was not just on me; through meeting the parents of those students, thoughts of return to China arose in my parents. Much had changed in China since my parents had left. Some details of those changes are described in the book of a British-based Chinese friend of my parents, Hsu Tao-ching.

After graduation in 1976, I went to work in Hong Kong at a time when the Cultural Revolution was drawing to a close. Conditions were becoming increasingly liberal and in 1979, my parents obtained visas for return to China, previously denied to them. I entered a few days before them, meeting my Chinese relatives whom I had never met before; my parents flew in to a welcome that was emotional, especially for my mother. I kept a diary, from which I relate events.

My father never returned to China; he died in 1983. My mother returned several more times before her death in 2006. In those intervening years, China grew from a poor backward third-world country into a global economic super-power.

Understanding an Incident

So what was that incident with my father all about? I think back in terms of:

Parent, Adult, Child (family)

Within relationships, thoughts and feelings reverberate, especially within families. These are often unspoken, leading to conflicts which take time to heal. Eric Berne described these in his book "Games People Play"; they are more graphically illustrated in popular films such as "Star Wars", in which a father, Darth Vader, and son, Luke Skywalker, fight on opposite sides in a galactic war.

Maturation and Gaze (community)

The shift from child to adult is usually gradual and subtle. Wrapped up in the maelstrom of life, shifts can often go unnoticed. Maturation and gaze co-develop; the novel "Lord of the Flies" by William Golding illustrates these points. Over years, the gaze shifts from a narrow family, into a wider community, into a view of nations and the globe.

Technology, Science and Objectivation (nation)

Two nations have been described in previous chapters: Great Britain and China. Both have undergone radical changes since the time of my grandfather; I've chosen a scientific viewpoint to understand those changes. A thread links Britain's "white heat of the technological revolution" in the 1960s to Charles Kao's groundbreaking research on glass fibre and to China's later rise to become the second largest economy on the globe.

The philosopher Pierre Bourdieu characterised the family as a "well-founded fiction". Such a characterisation might be adopted by an adolescent escaping from a traditional family environment, but also by a government, such as the newly formed Chinese Communist

government 1949, that deliberately obstructed traditional kinship relationships in order to establish a new nation. Dilemmas of fact versus fiction arise within families, communities and nations.

Last Days

The final chapter of Laurie Lee's best-selling autobiography, "Cider with Rosie", is called "Last Days". It's a model of poetic prose that nostalgically describes the older people and their way of life in the rural English village where the author grew up, whose time is up as the Second World War is about to start. At the same time, it describes exciting times ahead for youngsters, like the author, about to enter the wider world. In the old world: "The horse was king .."; in the new: "youths roared like rockets" referring to motorcycles and other vehicles appearing on the road. "Time squared itself, the village shrank, distances crept nearer", he continues.

In writing about a family and a diaspora, there is a similar sense of last days. My parents have passed on, but so has their way of life supported by the slowly maturing global cosmopolitanism of their era. There are exciting opportunities in the modern global village of today, supported by the internet and expanding travel options, but there are also dangers ahead just as there were in the 1930s. It is important to research and record how previous generations suffered and survived in a period which is not dissimilar to ours.

Denis Wong, Hong Kong

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