Vol. 1. (1), 2014, pp. 41-43

JNP | Journal of Narrative Politics

# Coming Home Again

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In the summer I turned twenty-one, I enrolled in a three month-long Teochew language course at the Poit Ip Huay Guan, a grand but desolate building in the heart of the city. It was the second summer that I'd returned to Singapore after leaving for college in New York, and I had just begun to feel the longing of being away from home. Somehow, learning my father's dialect had seemed the right response. The instructor was a jovial, rotund man who had once been a famous Teochew radio host. Now, he spent his evenings parsing the sing-song intonations of Teochew for his class of twelve. At the end of those three months, all I had retained was a popular folk song about chicken farming, and the phrase "I am a Teochew girl, living in America, and I am from Singapore." I had wanted to learn about my heritage, but nothing stuck except clichés. I quickly forgot the language once I returned to New York.

As a child, my bedtime stories were about my father's childhood days in the kampong, where my grandparents kept a small farm raising chickens, ducks, and pigs. One stays with me. My father was seven. Every morning before school, he would ride his bicycle up a hill to the nearby golf course. Hopping over the fence, he would gather freshly cut grass from the putting greens, and, when his rice sack was filled, bike home to his mother, who would mix it with oats for pig feed. One morning, however, the grass-cutters had not come. The fields stood defiantly in their pristine greenery. Not knowing what else to do, my father searched for cut grass on his hands and knees, pulling whatever he could find into his sack. He remembers a feeling of desperation. He wasn't sure for how long he had been looking when his mother came calling for him, running over the hill to tell him that the pig feed was not important; he was already late for school. He realized then, that he had been crying. My father always recounts this tale with some dread. "Imagine asking your child to gather scraps from the rich man's fields," he would say. "A life of poverty is a horrible thing." Just after my father married my mother, his kampong was torn down: all 118 houses, densely hugging a grassy hill, were leveled by the government, their residents given new lodging in the sky-high boxes of public housing that now suffuse the island. My father's brothers, brought up as farmers and thus left with no relevant skills, now go from block to block, selling medical equipment or health supplements on commission. There are no kampongs left in Singapore today.

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Years later, my father took my two brothers and me on a search for the spot where his old house had been torn down. We drove to a wealthy residential estate: large houses, palm trees, prim gardens. "There." My father pointed to a hill in the distance carved from the curve of the road. Except for a sign – "do not trespass: state land" – it was empty and well-kept, the grass cut frequently and kept tidy. We ran across the waves of traffic. Forged a large drain. Clambered up the hill. To our left, the expressway. To our right, the exit road. We spent the next hour picking our way through the denser foliage at the top of the hill. Then, we just sat, looking out at the long line of cars where there had once been his village. This time, my father had no stories.

Shortly after this, my father was on his first trip to China – to Swatow, where Teochew originated as a language – when he decided to look for his grandfather's old home. All he knew was the general area his grandfather had come from when he immigrated to Singapore in 1930. My father had no idea which particular town his grandfather had hailed from, let alone an address to start with. Only a village name near a town called Teng Hai, some fifty miles from Swatow, and nothing else. But try he would, my father decided. So he hired a taxicab for the whole of the next day.

After an hour of rambling through Swatow, they came upon a quiet flank of a smallish town, and the house of a particular Mr. Chua, who shared our family's last name, but said he was not related to my great grandfather. Mr. Chua led my father along an alleyway. A right turn after a wood-pile, and they entered a courtyard through a circular gateway. And there they were, standing in the middle of my great-grandfather's old house. There was a big hall, a living room, and one bedroom. There had surely been some simple furniture in each of the rooms when his grandfather had occupied it, but now my father found every room filled with looms and sewing machines, sitting on row upon row of wooden tables. Mr. Chua explained that the cloth-spinning enterprise churned out bolts of cotton that were sold to tailoring parlors in Beijing. "That was that," my father said, when recounting the incident to me. "No long-lost relatives making their home in that house after my grandfather left. Just a factory," he paused. "Just – commercialized."

I never met my great-grandfather, whose house my father searched for and found. My own grandfather had long been dead before it occurred to me to ask him anything about his past. My father tells me that for as long as he can remember, my great-grandfather was unemployed after he had come to Singapore. My father himself had never asked his old man about their ancestry. All that is irrecoverable now. My father has no uncles and aunts left to ask about it.

When, some months ago, I asked my father how he felt about all this lost history, he wrote this to me in an email:

> *"Sad or not about the desecration of my grandfather's house, I felt a gladness that I had come upon his home. I can't call it my ancestral land, as I am Singaporean, with neither love nor sense of belonging to China. But I was glad, having found his house, to see that my grandfather had been a person of some means. He had not been a peasant as I had thought he was. He had the financial resources to uproot himself from this comfortable place to a destination and circumstances unknown to him, not just by himself, but with his entire family. He was brave!"*

My father ended his email with this:

> *"All this makes me wonder how it is that I am capable of speaking the best English, practiced as a lawyer, and have a daughter who is pursuing a doctorate in Political Science in America.*
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> *Congrats on your ABD status. I'm very proud, as always. But the little girl I have been very proud of is far, far away. And will be indefinitely. But having regard to your aspirations, and having seen quite a few parts of the country you now call home, we do understand.*
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> *Love (seldom said),*
> *Dad"*

After 10 years in the United States, I still don't know what it means to long for home. I search for it in nooks and crannies; I try to grasp it in the moments of conversation I can steal with Chinese students in my mother tongue. Although I have read books and articles theorizing the problems of nostalgia, what I feel is a not very far away from what V.S. Naipaul has called "the play of a people who have been cut off."[1] Speaking perfectly a colonial language that never belonged to us, feeling more familiarity with daffodils, the English downs, and American mountains than I ever have with China or my own home, I have always felt a longing and discordance I have never quite been able to put forth in language.

I know that these days, when I find myself unwilling to give up on the nostalgia for home, I am holding on to my past for my father, who has now lost most of his hearing and can no longer have conversations without a pen and paper, and who now gives me a hug at the airport when I return where there were never hugs before; for the great-grandfather I never knew, who moved to Singapore from a little village in China only to become unemployed. And for my grandfather, who, in the last image I remember of him before he died, was sitting on a tiled bench by the Singapore River, watching the new year roll in with fireworks – whose legs were severed at the thighs from the gangrene that had eaten them away after 40 years of smoking. I am trying to understand the history and intimacy contained in the moment that he motioned to my father, and my dad took out a cigarette, put it into his mouth, and lit the end for him with a match.

[1] Naipaul, V. S., "East Indian" [1965] in Pankaj Mishra, ed., *Literary Occasions: Essays,* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 41.