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The Chinese Face in Australia

Two Prologues

Lucille Lok-Sun Ngan

*When I was just a little girl
I asked my mother, what will I be
Will I be pretty, will I be rich
Here's what she said to me.*

*Que Sera, Sera,
Whatever will be, will be
The future's not ours, to see*

*Que Sera, Sera
What will be, will be.*

Lyrics from 'Que Sera Sera'—first sung by Doris Day (1956)

In the song *Que Sera Sera (Whatever Will Be, Will be)*, the little girl wondered about her future and turned to her mother for answers. In a similar way, when I was growing up, I used to take my big question to my mother. My question so often was: “Am I Chinese or Australian?” I was born in Hong Kong and migrated with my family to Sydney, Australia, in 1988 when I was a young child. My father would fly back and forth between two homes in Hong Kong and Australia, while my mother, older sister, and I—the rest of the family—remained in Australia. Our family sustained a transnational existence and this phenomenon has been described in various guises in the migration literature: as astronaut fathers and parachute children, lone mothers in transnational families. Unlike my mother and other adult immigrants—those known as first-generation migrants—I was the 1.5 generation: born in Hong Kong and raised outside my country of origin, in Australia, and having a foot in the East and the West.

Until the mid-1990s and prior to the handover of Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1997, there were not many “real” Chinese kids in my school. Most of those who were around were Australian-born Chinese or what we commonly call ABCs—the ones who can't speak, or perhaps, write Chinese.

I remember my first day at school in the second year of primary school: everything seemed so strange to me, from the diversity of hair colors and amazing marble-colored eyes in contrast to the homogenous black; the vast green space where children could exhaust themselves in a world of fantasy and imagination in place of the small concrete playground at my school in Hong Kong; and the bland cold sandwiches Aussie kids had for lunch compared with the hot meals that I was accustomed to.

My first attempt at socializing at school was with a little Chinese girl in my class who I consciously picked as I felt a sense of commonality with her because of our similar physical appearances. We were both smaller than most other kids in my class and we were the only two with black hair. I recall myself uttering the words “Do you speak Chinese?” in my Chinese-accented English. She quietly said “a little” in Cantonese. I had gone to an English school in Hong Kong but since English was my second language it still required hard work to become fully competent. For the first few years after we arrived in Australia, my mother used to drive my sister and me to school every morning. Since my classes started later than my sister’s as she was in a higher year than me, my mother would park the car at the school entrance and we would recite spelling and learn vocabulary before I went to class. My mother encouraged me to go in earlier so I could have more time to play and socialize with other children and get to know them better, but I much preferred doing spelling tests with her in the car. I was always reluctant to leave until the last minute as going to a new school and making new friends in an Anglo-dominated environment was very daunting to a little Chinese girl, and teachers discouraged Chinese children from speaking in languages other than English at school as it was important that we integrated with Australian kids and mastered the local language. Like most children, naturally wanting to fit in, I spoke English at school (but I conversed in Chinese at home with my family) and insisted my mother make me sandwiches (although I actually enjoyed having delicious hot Chinese dishes for lunch).

Eventually, I got over my fear and integrated well with Australians as well as kids from all other ethnic backgrounds, and issues of race and ethnicity never seriously crossed my mind despite the occasional teasing and name-calling by western and also ABC kids. My best friend in primary school, an Australian of Greek heritage, used to call me “Ching Chong” but at that time, to me, it was just fun and games and we always enjoyed spending time together. I would laugh at her long and funny surname. I was always her really good “Chinese” friend. She was my “Aussie” friend. However, I recall being rather disturbed when the teasing was directed at me by some ABC kids who looked Chinese but who were Australian in all other ways, particularly in their Australian-accented English. They actually acted even more Australian than other children at school by choosing only western people as friends and only bullying new Chinese students.

There seems to be more tolerance toward people who are perceived as different, rather than those of their own kind. Abuse by the former is to a certain level expected and accepted but ill-treatment by the later is felt as an act of betrayal, disloyalty. As I look back now, though I was not conscious at the time, the way some ABCs disassociated themselves from other overseas-born Chinese kids was a deliberate undoing of their Chineseness. There is often a pressure for immigrants to integrate into

the mainstream society, but for children who are going through critical stages of individual identity development, the desire to conform to the dominant ways of life to affirm their belongingness to mainstream society is particularly intense. To a certain degree, while I was also trying to hide, disguise, and suppress my ethnic background in the public domain, the everyday small racial encounters reminded me that I was different from other western kids. I could never look the same as them. I was living in two cultures, maintaining a presence in both.

As I moved on to junior and high school, I somehow gravitated toward Asians who were mainly from Hong Kong and Taiwan as well as the locally born Chinese. There were a lot more Chinese kids at school by the mid 1990s, many more families leaving Hong Kong as the 1997 handover of the city back to China came closer. In the case of Taiwan, many families also emigrated around this period due to tense cross-strait relations with China. As a result the Hong Kong-born population in Australia grew from 27,793 in 1986 to 68,430 in 1986, a 41% increase in a decade, with New South Wales being the state with the highest Hong Kong-born settlement (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008). In my school, the growth was similar. I recall there were less than 10 Chinese children in primary 2 in 1989. By 1999 when I was in year 12, there were around 50 Chinese out of about 200 students.

Initially, I disassociated myself from new arrivals from Hong Kong as their behavior was different yet peculiarly familiar to me as I was culturally accustomed to a hybrid way of life. At home we ate Chinese food as well as Western food, and we celebrated Chinese New Year to the same extent as we would for Christmas. My family always called me “the little sister” in Cantonese. Anywhere else outside the home I was Lucille. I enjoyed Chinese movies as much as western ones. I could speak Chinese but can only read and write in English. My friends were made up of Chinese, ABCs, and Anglo-Australians.

These new arrivals from Hong Kong stood out oddly to me as they were “performing Chineseness” in a different way from what I was used to. They spoke Cantonese at school, brought thermo lunch boxes which had three compartments filled with hot steaming rice, soup and Chinese dish, and their topics of conversation at school were often about Hong Kong pop media which I was unfamiliar with and disinterested in. I was not used to people displaying their Chineseness in the playground, in the classroom, in public. Since my early childhood in Australia, an important stage of identity development, I had been practicing Chineseness only within the domestic sphere. As a child, it was necessary to conceal my Chineseness at school to successfully blend in with the mainstream and to find a sense of belonging and acceptance.

What drew me toward these new Chinese immigrant children might possibly have been our common migration experiences combined with a similar cultural background in terms of family values, family social networks, and academic aspirations. My parents had a few western friends but their closest social networks were maintained with other Chinese immigrants, mainly from Hong Kong, and whose family setups, like ours, were also divided between two places. Like other Chinese immigrant children at school, my attachment with Hong Kong was strong yet I always felt and thought my home was in Australia.

Like most Hong Kong students in my school, we were privileged to return to Hong Kong every year during the summer holidays. Although these visits became a routine, it was a yearly event that was never short of anticipation. My sister and I enjoyed looking forward to going to Hong Kong as we could spend valuable time with our father but there was something more—these holidays were always very exciting. Unlike Australia, Hong Kong had a unique cosmopolitan environment—in just one place you could meet overseas Chinese from all over the world. Hong Kong was about excitement, holidays, the festive season, shopping, whereas Australia was home, school, and the routines of daily life. At the same time I always felt I was different from the locals: I was an overseas Chinese who was westernized in my values, beliefs, and lifestyle.

When the number of Hong Kong immigrants began to increase in my school and in the community my initial feeling was that I didn't really feel I blended in very well with them, largely because I was unfamiliar with the way they displayed their Chineseness and feared being marginalized. However, our common migration experience, the everyday cultural practices, and the ambivalent emotional attachments associated with split Chinese families—all feelings that were not shared with my "white" Australian friends—made me feel at ease with the Hong Kong immigrants. They became and continue to be my closest friends. In Australia, I came to know myself as a Chinese inside and outside.

In 2008, I moved back to Hong Kong—my home town. And most of the Hong Kong immigrants' children that I grew up with have also returned there. Yet contrary to the general assumption of a smooth and easy resettlement of returnees and in a way that is similar to my early childhood experience in Australia, I am still trying hard to reconstruct and refigure my identity. I presumed that, with my established social network and understanding of local culture, upon my return I would easily fit in. In reality, differences stemming from all aspects of life—from the pace of walking, living space, mannerisms, topics of conversation, work culture, to social values—all at times lead to feelings of discommunity. While returnees in Hong Kong are similar in terms of their physical appearances to local Hong Kongers, they are nevertheless seen as outsiders due to their ineptness when it comes to behaving like a local who is trained to work in a high-power distance culture characterized by authoritarian hierarchy and conformity. Returnees have internalized characteristics of western cultures that thrive on creativity, innovation, equality and outspokenness. Local Hongkongers often see returnees as aloof, snobbish, candid, nonconformist, lazy, even crazy. Contrary to the myth of taking the best of both worlds, they are neither highly valued as western expatriates in terms of remuneration and social status, bestowed as they are with the status of "returnee," nor do they have the "Chinese characteristics" of language competencies and local knowledge of local workers, this lack putting them at a disadvantage. As a returnee, my awkward position is intensified due to my inability to read and write Chinese when I look and speak Chinese. By definition I cannot be a "real" Chinese because I do not possess the essential and essentialized quality of language competence. Overseas Chinese and returnees often see themselves as different from local Hongkongers whom they call "Hongkies"—a term which has connotations of

money-mindedness, class consciousness, materialism, rudeness, unworldliness, and submissiveness.

Within the workplace, there is a cultural expectation and demand that I, a Chinese person, should be, or become, literate in the Chinese language, despite the value placed upon my competency in English. Similar expectations would not be made about the non-Chinese and they would not be judged in the same way as is the hybrid returnee. The link between language, physicality, and race is a deeply internalized essentialist ideology that defines "being Chinese." Thus if one is identified as racially Chinese because of one's physicality, the expectations that come are that one must speak, write Chinese, and have internalized general or generalized Chinese values as well as the particular norms of the Chinese society in which one inhabits. Returnees, particularly immigrants' children who grew up overseas and thus are not fluent in the Chinese language, are jeopardized by a double demand that is only made of Chinese-looking people. The intersecting factors of gender and age along with race can result in a triple jeopardy for the returnees.

There is also a constant question about origin—where are you from? When living in Australia, I was often asked about my origin by locals. Hong Kong or China seemed the only acceptable answer for someone who looked Chinese, despite having spent most of my life in Australia and having only lived in Hong Kong for a number of years during the early part of my childhood. Even those with long-term residence—like the Australian-born long-settled informants in this book whose families have, for three, four, five and even six generations, lived in Australia—would be interrogated in the same way because of their physicality. The face is an inescapable reality that acts as a centering device for segregation and marginalization of ethnic Chinese.

Such questions stem not only from white people—Chinese people, too, have preconceived ideas about origins. Once, a colleague in Australia who came from Shanghai asked me where I was from. Not really thinking about governance, politics, or geographical boundaries, I simply uttered two words "Hong Kong." She corrected me, saying "China. Hong Kong is now part of China."

After my return to Hong Kong I am still being asked similar questions about my background by local Hongkongers as there is a kind of strangeness that marks my difference from them. Recently I was browsing around an up-market department store in Central Hong Kong and a saleslady at a counter tried to sell me a luxury bathing product. Her strategy to entice me was to chat casually while promoting the product. She started by asking me where I was from, and I replied "Hong Kong." In Australia, I was used to giving this reply, as that was usually the acceptable and expected answer. However, my reply did not prevent her from insisting that I must have come back from somewhere; that I was either educated overseas or was an expatriate in Hong Kong. Not until I said, "Australia," was she satisfied with my answer. To be fair, I noticed that most of the shoppers at this particular department store were English-speaking Chinese women and Mandarin-speaking mainlanders, so her question about my origin was based on her preconceived ideas about the cultural background of her customers. Nevertheless, this incident is one among many other similar situations that I have encountered and indicates the process of

in-group hierarchy of Chinese in Hong Kong including group stratifications based on categories such as overseas returnees, overseas-born Chinese, local-born Hongkongers who never migrate, mainlanders, etc. Returnees, like me, who are treated as outsiders are expected to negotiate a hybrid identity that combines the east and the west. Ironically, in Hong Kong, I could be an Australian.

When abroad, others see me as a Chinese. Two types of responses can result from encounters with strangers in a foreign country. For those who are less familiar with China, they often try, with kind intentions, to make a connection by saying “*ni hau*” (equivalent to “hello” in Mandarin), and some may even put their hands together and bow to demonstrate their knowledge of Chinese culture. This clearly reflects the racial discourse that unifies all Chinese-looking people as one homogeneous, unchanging group. A second type of encounter would involve questions about Hong Kong. In answering the “Where are you from?” question—a common inquiry posed to tourists, travelers, and outsiders—“Australia” never seems to be an acceptable answer and people would either show a confused expression or persist with their inquiry about where I originally came from. The subsequent conversation would usually be about Hong Kong and only rarely about Australia where I spent nearly 20 years of my life. In the context of simultaneous displacement and relocation, both the inherent ambivalence and ambiguity of migrants have become part of my everyday life—now internalized.

On several trips to London from Australia or Hong Kong, I have been confronted with encounters that point to the adverse implications of prescribed notions of race and gender. I particularly remember being held back by a white, British officer at the UK immigration desk with a series of racially provoked questions while a long queue was behind me. He asked, “who will you be staying with?” I answered I was meeting my boyfriend and will be staying with him. The next series of questions he asked was “Where does he work, how much money does he make, and is he British (meaning white, Anglo-Saxon)?” If I were a white man, I am quite certain that I would not be interrogated in the same way. It is clear that being perceived as a young single Chinese woman, I was in a doubly oppressed position—marginalized by both race and gender constructions.

The continual subtle changes in my name perhaps illustrate my own unconscious negotiation of my ethnic and cultural identity through the course of my life. From the time I immigrated to Australia hardly anyone called me by my Chinese name, “Lok Sun,” except my close relatives on my father’s side who were living in Hong Kong. My parents and grandfather named me “Lok Sun” because it represents happiness, energy, vitality, and liveliness, and so my Chinese name was certainly not given lightly as it was carefully crafted with much thought and with the feelings of my parents. My English name, which was given to me by Auntie Milan, my father’s sister-in-law was a derivative of my Chinese name. In contrast to the careful way in which my Chinese name was chosen, “Lucille” was picked because it sounded similar to “Lok Sun.” So “Lucille,” in a sense, came from “Lok Sun.” Similarly, I gave my half brother the name “Charlton” as it sounded similar to his Chinese name, “Chiu Yung.” Having an English name in addition to a Chinese name was common in Hong Kong as a British colony—western influences cause people to adopt west-

ern names. However, for most Hongkongers the given birth name is typically Chinese and the English name would be taken up later on at school or at work. Unlike most people, I was given both names at birth, although my English was born from my Chinese name. Prior to my time in Australia, I was known as “Ngan Lok Sun, Lucille.”

After arriving in Australia, my Chinese name became my middle name: “Lucille Lok Sun Ngan.” To conform to the Australian society, my parents adopted the western naming convention with the family name placed last, but kept my Chinese name to preserve my Chinese heritage. But as I mentioned earlier, my Chinese name was hardly used in Australia. As an author, I dropped my “middle name,” “Lok Sun,” in my earlier publications as I wanted to simplify and shorten my name. In consequence I was simply known as “Lucille Ngan.”

After my return to Hong Kong my Chinese name “came back to life” as I have been constantly reminded of it. People would insist on finding out my name in Chinese even when I told them my name is Lucille. Yet all through the years I was in Australia my Chinese name was hardly used, except within my home, and so I feel rather awkward hearing myself being addressed as “Ngan Lok Sun.” At the same time, and having lived in a more informal Australian social setting, I feel awkward calling others by their Chinese names as I am often unsure about the socially accepted way of addressing people. Do I call them by their full name (i.e., with their surname) or just the second and/or third characters of their names? To me, Chinese names have represented familiarity, closeness, intimacy, and domesticity so it has felt rather strange to address and be addressed by others in Chinese. The awkwardness is escalated by my Chinese illiteracy. Because I cannot read Chinese, I can only guess their names based on Romanized *pin ying* which I often embarrassingly mispronounce. While my Chinese name is to a certain extent foreign to me, since my return to Hong Kong, I have adopted “Lucille Lok-Sun Ngan” as I have come to know myself by both Chinese and English names. Since English renderings of Chinese names are often inaccurate, I have placed a hyphen to join the two characters of my Chinese middle name together, being worried that westerners may not know which is my surname. The journey of the changes in my name does not quite end here. Being recently married, as a woman, it is customary to adopt one’s husband’s surname. In this way, the transformations of my name allude to the continual negotiations of my identity as a migrant, and as a woman, through the course of my life.

During a lunch gathering with some close family friends in Hong Kong, there was an intense conversation about the diminishing respect shown by children brought up overseas because of their unfamiliarity with the Chinese culture. People were quite distressed that their grandchildren and children who grew up overseas have adopted the western social norms and are addressing them (their seniors) by their names instead of their Chinese family titles. These titles are practiced forms of address in Chinese families that represent the particular relationship and hierarchy for members in a Chinese family. One person confessed that he has accepted his son-in-law calling him by his first name since he is white, but his grandchildren who are Chinese and half-Chinese (mixed-race), as he put it, “must show respect for the older generations.” He insisted that even though they may have grown up overseas,

they are still Chinese. The family order regulated by generation, age, and gender has been an important Confucian ideology that has continued influence on Chinese families today. Cultural unfamiliarity of such sorts—of not having a full-fledged identity—situates returnees and their children in a peculiar position, leaving them estranged and having feelings of being misfits in their own culture.

As a sociologist, I can understand that the bemusement with regard to my identity has been due to the intersection between similarity and difference in the process of figuration and refiguration of Chineseness arising from the crossing of routes and roots. The Chinese identity is an “imagined” social construct and is inherently political. It is conditioned through a process of relational positioning by which individuals engage in identity construction, maintenance, and transformation in the social and cultural spheres of life. Paradoxically perhaps, my biography and feelings of liminality—of being suspended in between the East and the West—led to my interest in pursuing my undergraduate and graduate studies in sociology in Australia. My cross-cultural encounters compelled me to ask many questions. What happens to the identity of subsequent generations of early Chinese migrants whose parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents may have been born, brought up and raised in Australia? How do those with long-term residence in Australia “construct,” “do,” and “perform” Chineseness? How is Chineseness negotiated in different stages and generations of the immigrant’s life trajectory? Do Chineseness or racial relations dissipate in the course of long-term residence? How does the sense of identity of subsequent generations impact on their everyday experiences through the life course?

During my research in Australia, I was privileged to partake in the lives of long-settled ABCs where I met parents, siblings, friends and kin of my informants. My ongoing association with the community, enriched by sharing many leisure activities, including dinner parties, museum and heritage tours, lunches, coffee, seminars and talks, allowed me to understand their lives, their sense of identity, their hopes and aspirations. While learning about their lives, I became part of the discourse; ideas were exchanged like ping-pong, bouncing off each other. The wealth of knowledge and depth of insights gained from my engagement with the community have led to a greater understanding of myself as a Chinese Australian. This book has evolved from a child’s puzzlement and perplexed identity, to a sociological research that examines the multidimensional nature of identity formation in the lives of long-settled Australian-born Chinese in Australia.

Chan Kwok-bun

I was born in China in 1950. I grew up in Hong Kong and left the city in 1969 to study in Canada as an 18-year-old foreign student. My undergraduate and graduate studies in sociology were in three different Canadian universities, moving from Canada’s west coast to the east. Throughout my studies, I did not take a single course in migration or race and ethnic studies, perhaps evading these subjects and not wanting to know I could be and indeed was a victim of racism. I wrote my mas-

ters thesis on stress, illness, and coping within the disciplines of medical sociology, psychoanalysis, and psychiatry, and my doctoral dissertation was about wife abuse, which examines feminism and sociology of the family, marriage, and gender in North America in the 1960s and 1970s. Neither of these two academic exercises had anything to do with being Chinese or constructing Chineseness, the subject of this book. It was perhaps a case of selective inattention and intentional avoidance—at both experiential and intellectual levels.

Like all good, prodigal Chinese sons, I returned to Hong Kong to see my parents, brothers, and sisters, each and every time I got a university degree. In those days, for a poor, self-sufficient foreign student who left home for the first time in his life to study in a snow-clad country thousands of miles away (I bought in Hong Kong a one-way ticket as it was cheaper and I didn't expect to be able to come home within months, unlike thousands of Hong Kong students studying in Canada nowadays who would go home for Christmas or Chinese New Year every year), coming home was a luxury, but also a duty for me. Buying a return air ticket required me to wash dishes in a restaurant for at least one month. I was more than glad to do so though I was not conscious at the time that I was “performing Chineseness.” My father and my mother, whom I am very fond of, were happy to see me grow up and do something good for myself, perhaps also for the family.

My big family of two parents and eleven children (I am the youngest child) escaped in 1951 from mainland China to Hong Kong as refugees. My father was a self-made millionaire, a landlord, and a restaurant owner who, like thousands and thousands of land, business, and property owners, quickly became a target of persecution under the communist regime. Father was locked up by the same peasants he helped through dry and rainy days. Hong Kong then was a British colony. The bulk of its people were struggling to make ends meet. Not wanting to put all his eggs in one basket, father sent his two eldest sons in 1952 to his rich relatives (who owned casinos) in Vietnam to receive an education. My two brothers went to school, learned English and French, married local-born Chinese women, had children, and became settlers in an Indochinese country. Neither of them returned to Hong Kong. I remember I was forced by father throughout childhood to write letters to tell them the ins and outs of the Chan family in Hong Kong. I hated it, and so did my kid sister. Those letters were literally written in tears, with father holding a stick and threatening to hit.

In 1976, Saigon fell, Vietnam-turned communist and the ethnic Chinese took to the sea as boatpeople, which caught the world's attention. My two brothers wrote home, to Hong Kong, for money to buy tickets to get on an unseaworthy boat built by gangsters illegally in a village. Father wrote to me in Canada to help him to save his two sons (he did not say “my two brothers”)—a request I as his son could not decline although, when I last saw my brothers in Hong Kong, I was about 1 year old. In 1978, I got my doctorate and became an assistant professor of sociology in Montreal. Not aided by my siblings in Hong Kong, I alone sent money to my brothers who had fled Vietnam by boat and were sojourning in an Indonesian camp. I worked with the Red Cross to find them in the camp and bring them to Canada. Single-handedly and overnight, I became a sponsor of four adults (my two brothers

and their wives) and six teenage children. One Sunday afternoon, while holidaying in New York City, I received a long distance call from an immigration officer. He said my relatives had arrived in Montreal, Canada. I flew back on the first available flight. When I received them in a transit camp in French Montreal in a cold Quebec evening, they were total strangers to me. Still single myself, I had suddenly become a carer for ten people. Perhaps not surprisingly, in hindsight, I had the first car accident in my life—a seven-car collision on a Montreal highway on a cold Saturday afternoon.

Decades later, brothers' children grew up and received a Canadian education which was and still is an envy to the rest of the Chan family in Hong Kong. Like many Chinese children in North America, my oldest brother's son became a doctor and his daughter, an accountant. Life has treated them well, really well. In 1982, I decided to return to Hong Kong to get married and host a wedding banquet as this would please my aging and ailing mother and bring her luck—or so I believe as a Chinese. Weddings were and still are expensive exercises. I reminded my oldest brother of my loans to him. He was angry that I even asked, saying I read too many sociology books in English, received too much western education, and had stopped “being Chinese.” His point was that a true-blooded “real” Chinese would not ask his family to pay back. Money that is passed between hands in a Chinese family is a gift, an obligation, a sign of love and compassion, definitely not a loan, or a fake loan that does not need to be paid back. I should feel ashamed of having lost my “Chineseness” during my years in the West—to receive a white man's education; I got an education and a job, but I had lost my identity. Till today, the “loan” or, I should say, the “gift,” remains outstanding in a double sense, depending on whose side one is on and one's construction.

While I said in the above that I purposely avoided studying or writing things Chinese when as a university student, this did not prevent white Canadians, including my university colleagues in sociology and other social sciences, from reminding me I am Chinese and insisting on my race, ethnicity, or culture—on my face, my skin color. All those years in Canada, as a sociologist, I did not teach a single course that had anything to do with migration, race, and ethnic relations, China and things Chinese. Yet I was treated by Canadian society inside and outside the university as a Chinese first, a sociologist or even a male second or third. My race was my master identity. Everything else about me, good or bad, was secondary. Although I completed all my university studies in Canada, learning Canadian sociology to make sense of and to write about Canadian society, my colleagues did not seem to be able to resist the temptation of asking me all the time about things Chinese: the many Chinatowns that decorate the Canadian cityscapes, Chinese food, tea, Mid-Autumn Festival, Lunar Chinese New year, foot binding, male domination and female victimization, the Great Wall, communism, Chairman Mao—and the list continues and repeats itself, over and over again. I have become a China expert, even a sinologist, though my knowledge of things Chinese is probably no better than that of a cook, a grocery storekeeper, a laundryman in Chinatown. But all this doesn't matter, not at all. I am a Chinese, whether I want to be or not. Identity is socially prescribed, bestowed, imposed—never a matter of personal choice.

By the early 1980s, my sociological writings took an ethnic turn. I edited a special issue titled "Coping with Racism" for a journal, *Canadian Ethnic Studies*—my first venture into the field. I also published a host of journal articles on racism against the Indochinese refugees in Quebec. I wrote my book *Smoke and Fire: The Chinese in Montreal*, a historical and ethnographic study of racism, for Hong Kong's Chinese University Press. Beijing University Press put out a Chinese edition shortly after. So did Beijing's China Social Sciences Publishing House with any special issue, "Coping with Racism." It was a journey of no return. All these years of avoiding the subject and suppressing the consciousness of it came to an abrupt stop, followed then by an implosion, an eruption, like a pressure cooker that has blown its top.

As it happens, to my brother I am not a Chinese, a fake Chinese (even when I insist I am), but to Canadian society I am a real Chinese (even when I insist on being approached and treated otherwise).

My journey does not end there.

In 1987, I moved my family out of Canada. I taught at the National University of Singapore between 1987 and 2001 and became head of its sociology department. Singapore is 75% Chinese but being, displaying, doing, and performing Chinese in this small city-state is ethnic chauvinism. The English-educated Singaporeans have long constituted the city's economic, political, and intellectual elite. At the sociology department of the university, many staff and students of ethnic Chinese descent do not habitually read, speak, or write Chinese, at least not in public life. Chineseness in the public domain would need to be muted, subdued, joked about, played with, disguised, even hidden. One face, many masks. Chineseness is like a mask, to be put on and off, depending on the audience. Identity is for performing. It is relegated to the domestic sphere, almost forgotten, but if it is ever remembered and used, it is an afterthought, a kind of "by the way," a practice among the elderly, the working class, the new immigrants; in a grocery store, a restaurant, a coffee shop; during weddings, birthday parties, festivals.

I "returned" to Hong Kong in 2001 to take up a headship at the sociology department of Hong Kong Baptist University, then a chair professorship of sociology and a directorship at the David C Lam Institute for East-west Studies. David C Lam was a prominent politician in British Columbia, Canada, and his institute is a place in which to interrogate the popular discourse in ethnic and racial matters. Hong Kong, my hometown where I grew up, to my shock and suffering, is less free, less open-minded, less democratic, less egalitarian, than I thought. I experienced a shock of arrival, a myth of return. A comparison between Singapore and Hong Kong would make exciting writing in sociology, politics, culture, geography and political economy. More and more so since the British handover of Hong Kong in 1997 to China, the city is undergoing a process of resinification, which has its many intended and unintended consequences. One of such consequences relates to what it means to be Chinese in Hong Kong. For a sociologist like me who operates mainly within the university environment, being Chinese and behaving like a Chinese has everything to do with compliance, conformity, even obedience, and all for the sake of keeping peace, order, and harmony—yes that (in)famous word "harmony"—in a mainland Chinese manner. Or harmony with "Chinese characteristics." With its famous Chinese penchant for bureaucracy, managerial control, and hierarchy, a university

head of department, a dean, a director, a vice-president, and certainly a president preside over their professors and intellectuals—certainly also all the students because students are children to be taught by elders who know better. In Hong Kong, more so now than, I suppose, when I left it to study in the west as an 18-year old 40 years ago, being Chinese has much to do with reading the boss's mind, shining his (more likely a his than a her) shoes, and not rocking the boat. As it happens, creativity, innovation, independence of the mind, being critical, outspokenness, linguistic eloquence have become, as they say, academic—fit only for consumption in the classroom, in scholarly books, in seminars or conferences which have little to do with real life and real living. One violates these norms at one's peril.

At one moment the professor stands in front of hundreds of students in the lecture theater eloquently and self-righteously preaching that sociology's mission is to deconstruct the taken for granted, the status quo, the given. As he speaks, the students take copious notes so as to reproduce them in essays, term assignments, exams. The university is a factory that produces knowledge on an assembly line and students are its ever-obliging clients or consumers. Or, following the British psychiatrist R.D. Laing, it is a slaughterhouse that prepares standardized canned food for the market. Professors have become the frontline butchers. Students are their products, in uniform tins of meat. At another moment, once outside the classroom, deconstruction has its own costs, for professors and students alike. The flipside of the demise of sociology is the ascent of the Hong Kong and China versions of Chineseness and their respective political, economic, cultural, mental, even existential, connotations. Sociology, or at least the more progressive or radical version in the tradition of Marxism, which ironically is the only manifest (but not latent) ideology in town across the border of the city, is displaced by an administrative discourse on constructing, doing, and performing Chineseness. The university is a house of divided self, a schizophrenic personality, a split mind, or it is a place for pretending, hiding, saying one thing one moment, and doing something else another moment. Such switching is done rather smoothly, every day, on the campuses.

People in Hong Kong have thus learned to construct and do their Chineseness by taking hints from the north, from Beijing. Harmony has long become a hegemonic word that, borrowing Foucault, disciplines and punishes. As their colonial masters departed, in 1997, their "grandparents" up north arrived—in spirit, in ideology.

A revolving door of power, control, other-directedness keeps swinging.

There is also this question of where I am from, or, as people insist, "Where I am *really, really* from." While in Canada or the States, I was from China or Hong Kong, neither of these two places meaning much to the Americans, Quebecois, and Canadians then, even now, other than all those cheap products made in China they bought, used for a while, threw away, and bought again—and the cycle starts again—because they couldn't find better, cheaper products made elsewhere. In 1970, I was at the Vancouver airport in Canada, catching an onward flight from Edmonton, Alberta, to Los Angeles in the USA. I was to join my childhood neighbor there and work in his boss's Chinese restaurant for my summer job—a must if I were to live and continue my university studies. As always, I was in a long queue, watching pensively an American immigration officer, a white male, doing his routine

work of asking questions of where one is from, where one is going, why, doing what, staying for how long, and with whom—but only to the colored people. When it was my turn, the officer made me empty all my pockets, in public, saying he wanted to know how much cash in total I had on me. As an innocent, inexperienced 19-year old, I did the wrong thing: I asked him why I had to do that. My Canadian professors taught me to ask the “why” question boldly. He retorted: “Chinese would do funny things when they run out of money.” This short sentence of 11 words was uttered aloud in front of a long queue of passengers—white and not so white—then all as onlookers witnessing a spectacle. These words were burnt onto my mind, like an inscription, a red hot rod scathing my skin.

Two years later, in Toronto, Canada, while driving to York University, where I studied for my doctorate in sociology and lived (in the students’ hostel where I was a don), I was stopped by a policeman. He asked the inevitable question of where I was from, referring to my place of birth outside Canada. I had told him like I told many curious, well-intended Canadians, I was born in China, grew up in Hong Kong, came to Canada for my university studies, and became a landed immigrant of Canada in 1973 while finishing my masters degree in sociology at University of Western Ontario. He probably decided somewhere in my short biographical narrative that I was too much a “smart cookie” for him. He wanted to do a search of my car. Always naturally, I asked him why. He sharply retorted, “Have you heard of drugs? The Chinese have a big part in it. You are lucky I won’t turn your car upside down, though I have the power to do so. If I want to, I can rip open all the seats, I can do a body search on you.” Luckily, for me and for him, he didn’t.

In Singapore, the local Chinese remembered me as someone from Hong Kong. They asked me questions of all sorts about Hong Kong, and Hong Kong only—rarely about Canada where I had spent as many years as in Hong Kong: 18 years of my life. Singaporeans call people from Hong Kong “Hongkies”—a derogatory term which suggests clannishness, money-mindedness, cash hunger, capitalism, rudeness, even shrewdness. Rain or shine, the eternal questions for me while in Singapore were: Have you gone back to Hong Kong lately (not Canada) for your holidays? When will you return to Hong Kong (again, not Canada)? Then, when I left Singapore to return to Hong Kong in 2001 to teach and take up a headship at the Department of Sociology, Hong Kong Baptist University, I found that I was committing an act of betrayal in the eyes of a former colleague at the National University of Singapore: “Singapore has treated you so well all these years.” I was ungrateful, I had betrayed Singapore, and this was a sin to someone who is Chinese.

What happened upon my “return migration” to Hong Kong? Between 2001 and today, the same questions have been asked of me as when I was in Singapore, “Have you gone back to Singapore (not Canada) for holidays? When will you return to Singapore (again, not Canada)?” Oh, and I almost forgot another often-asked question: “Have you sold your house in Singapore?” You shouldn’t, you know house prices in Singapore have gone up. Hongkongers or, for that matter, the Chinese the world over, including mainland Chinese now, must ask questions about real estate, property, land ownership. Yes, they must.