



Journey to the Third Space

by Chen Tian

The construction of cultural identity takes place in a space of enunciation, what Homi Bhabha (1994) calls the Third Space. It is the in-between space that “carries the burden of the meaning of culture” (Bhabha 1994: 38). Third Space pays special attention to the in-between spaces in the global age which “initiate new signs of identity” as a result of “elaborating strategies of selfhood” (ibid.: 1). Bhabha conceives of the encounter of two social groups with different cultural traditions and potentials of power as a special kind of negotiation that takes place in a Third Space. This negotiation is not only expected to produce an intercultural dissemination of both cultural traditions that leads to a displacement of the members of both groups from their origins, but it is also supposed to bring about a common identity, one that is new in its hybridity; it is thus neither the one nor the other. Bhabha’s critical reflections on power relations in negotiations enable us to take into account the displacement and/or replacement of powerfully ascribed identities.

Journey to the Third Space attempts to capture the shifting identities of a group of Chinese academics in South Africa. The six poems are based on 16 months of field work, and are inspired by the experiences of six Chinese language instructors. For instance, in an interview with one of the Chinese language instructors, the interviewee, who was “born a crime” as the third kid in his family under China’s One Child Policy, shared his experience of reflecting on cultural differences between China and Africa: “People call me ‘question boy’ because I like reflecting on my observations and experiences. There are so many questions to ask.” The conversation later inspired “The Question Boy”. The poems reveal that the journey to the Third Space is very often an uncomfortable one, and composed by never-ending negotiations from many aspects in life.

The Seed of Curiosity

I don't know when and how
The urge to leave breaks out from the here and now
The eagerness to truly experience the globe
Is among my many hopes.

Family and friends try to stop me; they argue:
"It's too far."
"It's too dangerous."
"It's too unrealistic."

Now I plant this seed of curiosity into the African soil
Where a flower of discovery is about to grow
Let me watch this special blooming
Without touching it, without naming it; just simply embrace it.

Wonderland

It was the African sunset that first sent its welcome
The light that speaks from far away
Crossing mountains, oceans, clouds
Whispering the forthcoming plots.

A city with many gardens
And faces of many colours
"How are you?" becomes the most tricky question
Until one learns that there is a standard answer.

"Good good good!"
"And yourself?"
"I am very good!"
But really? The voices stay but the speakers have travelled away.

On African time things move to their own rhythms
Places, smiles, dinners and dreamers
On a Sunday morning the strange becomes familiar
And what was once intimate begins to disappear.

Dearest Forest

Along Cypress we walked into the Newlands woods
Passing Apple, Orange, and Strawberry Roads
The doors turn colorful and the fences go low
Our spirit high and the air smells pine.

In textbooks I once learnt about many trees
Putting my hands on them I set these names free
They are rough but they are strong
Rooting deeply into mother ground.

His extroversive hands full of rosin
She proudly waves her distorted stick
He squats leisurely on an ancient stump
She alertly watches every dog checking us out.

In our own ways we interact with this unfamiliar world
What is it that connects us all?
Not as intellectuals or Chinese nationals
But simply as humans, the very fundamentals.

Without an answer, to the woods we sing
For we know she has a key to everything
A mystery life will always be
Thank you, dearest forest, for giving us peace.

Looking Back from a Distance

We all come from a troubled past
A collective traumatized childhood
Of loneliness, hierarchies, and repressed yearnings
Without knowing much about what anything really means.

Did we write our own stories
Or did the county plot these tales for us?
From far comes clear the grand narrative
That fills up everyone's life.

It's the pressure from family values and expectations,
It's about everyone conforming to the same reasoning,
It's the story of sacrifice,
It's about becoming rich and successful in the age of ambition.

And beyond all
Is the consent that
There are things that cannot be talked about
Revealed in our unsettling laughs.

A Better Place

An invisible island is where I arrive
Isolated from all space and time;
This is a journey
That opens many new beginnings.
Never say goodbye, instead:
"A better you
And a better me
Will meet at a better place."

The Question Boy

His arrival is a long-expected relief,
His first sound a rebellious scream;
His steps soft but ambitious,
His curiosity locked in his dreams.

His red scarves light up the coldest winters,
His thick glasses reflect the greatest thinkers;
His white shoes land on the farthest beaches,
On his dazzling journey of searching

For destiny and where it leads,
For freedom and what it means,
For truth and how it springs,
For answers he never expects to receive.

Reference

Bhabha, Homi. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge.