Chapter 5:
"A Dream of China"

Introduction

"A Dream of China," a short story by Singaporean writer Ovidia Yu, is a unique kind of return narrative for a number of reasons. Unlike the other narratives in this study, the place travelled to and returned from--China--is not a western country and, in fact, is the narrator's ancestral home. In addition, the reasons for her journey are purely touristic, rather than educational or employment-related. Also, in terms of the frame of the story, "A Dream of China" is different from the other texts discussed in that the protagonist's actual return to Singapore hardly figures in the course of the narrative. Instead, only the three concluding sentences of the text mention how her journey to China has affected her once she is back in Singapore. What ties this story to the other ones I am looking at, however, are the issues of identity which the protagonist confronts as a result of returning home (Singapore) from overseas. These include feelings of belonging and alienation, as well as experiences of changed consciousness and new understanding that she has of herself, her family and her history.

Specifically, the main character's brief visit to China and subsequent return to Singapore result in a vivid clarification for her that her home is indeed Singapore, not China. This is in distinct contrast to her father who, after fifty years of living in self-imposed exile in Singapore, still considers Szechuan as his "home" (160),46 and who raised his daughter on stories of a beautiful, magical homeland. However, his daughter's visit to China creates for her a new understanding of her ancestral homeland, particularly with regard to her feelings about her relatives--feelings that are quite different from the "dream" that her father has of his home. These two different

46 All subsequent references to "A Dream of China" are from In Blue Silk Girdle: Stories from Malaysia and Singapore, ed. Mohammad A. Quayum (Serdang: Penerbit Universiti Putra Malaysia, 1998) 159-70 and will be referred to by page number.
"dreams" or experiences of China are especially significant in that—in contrast to the close relationship and shared dream of China that is established in the early part of the story—the very different identities of the father and daughter are thrown into relief at the conclusion of the narrative. In this regard, "A Dream of China," like The Return, explores the different experiences of identity that exist between first and second generation immigrants and, following a typical pattern, the father never truly lets go of the motherland and identifies himself largely in relation to it, whereas the daughter sees herself primarily in relation to the adopted country.

**The visitor or the returning exile?**

In "A Dream of China," the protagonist's identity is explored most extensively through her relationship to her father, a dynamic that is reminiscent of the relationship between Ravi and his father in The Return. It is also similar to the relationship between Amy and Bapak in Gold Rain and Hailstones, the text that I focus on in my next chapter. Also similar to The Return, the narrator's voice, character and perspective in "A Dream of China" are defined by the contrast made with the father's views and identity while there also remains a continued connection to the father in spite of these different identities. One significant difference between the father-child relationship in The Return and "A Dream of China," however, is that the protagonist in the Ovidia Yu story has a very close, comfortable and harmonious relationship with her father, not only before her trip to China, but also when she returns to Singapore. For instance, in the second paragraph of the story she says:

My father is a good man. My mother--his second wife--died soon after I was born and my father retired in order to devote his time to bringing me up. Until then, he had been a marine biologist in the University of Singapore. He still turned out an occasional article on sea worms in between teaching me the right way to hold a Chinese calligraphy brush or telling me stories. As I grew up and he grew older, his stories dwelt with increasing frequency on China. (159)

In this passage, the father's dedication to his daughter, as well as the "dream" of China that she inherits from him and which becomes central to her consciousness, are quite
apparent. In addition, the parallel syntax of the phrase "As I grew up and he grew older" conveys a clear sense of their parallel experience as father and daughter. Even at the end of the story, after her own dream of China and, consequently, her relationship to her father have changed, she repeats exactly the same phrase--"My father is a good man" (170)--highlighting her high regard for him in spite of the transformations that have occurred.

One of the most important aspects of the narrator's visit to China is that her own experience of the country quickly becomes quite different from her father's concept of the place he has always imagined as home. This difference is vividly marked by the terminology she uses. For instance, she frequently refers to her father as living in "exile"--albeit a self-imposed one--in Singapore, whereas she repeatedly refers to herself as a “visitor” to China and uses the word "home" in reference to Singapore. For example, she states:

But seeing the Chinese people I felt glad I was a tourist. China spoke to my mind. The idea that this land was the land my people had sprung from, had lived off in pre-history, warmed and stirred me. However, China had nothing to say to my spirit, if indeed land speaks to spirit. My spirit was as alien here as I was. It inclined towards a diamond city of trees and meaningful occupation, efficiently sparkling in the modern world. That was where I truly belonged, among skyscrapers with glass fronts and gold-encrusted orchids. When I finally met my uncle, it was as a visitor to a strange land, not as a returning exile. (167)

Here, the modern, meaningful and efficient Singapore is the "home" she claims and does not want to leave, an experience similar to that of many other diasporic individuals. This point is noted by William Safran in his essay “Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return”:

Some diasporas exist--and their members do not go "home"--because there is no homeland to which to return; because, although a homeland may exist, it is not a welcoming place with which they can identify politically, ideologically, or socially; or because it would be too inconvenient and disruptive, if not traumatic, to leave the diaspora. (372)

Also, in “A Dream of China”, the narrator focuses on "spirit" when she speaks about China, a word choice that highlights what is missing for her in her relationship to China and what is precisely the very basis of her father's connection to his homeland. In the
absence of a physical relationship, he is dependent completely on a spiritual one, drawn from memory and imagination, whereas his daughter, though she experiences the physical and immediate presence of China, concludes that her spirit does not belong there.

The idea that the father lives in "exile" in Singapore is central not only to his identity, but also serves as an important contrast against which the daughter defines her own sense of self. As Edward Said notes in "Reflections on Exile", one of the defining aspects of being in exile is that "homecoming is out of the question" (1979b: 361). This is clearly the case for the father who decides that "he would die in exile, never to return" (160) and who feels that "he did not deserve to see China again, much as he longed to. Instead he wrote poems in Chinese about living in exile, and in Singapore tried to live as he felt a true Chinese would" (162). In contrast, the daughter not only desires to visit China, but feels she can easily and willingly accept the opportunity to go on a two-week literary tour. Much as she shares her father's dream of a beautiful and magical place, she has none of his personal feelings of shame or guilt for leaving China and having "lived in ease away from his country instead of suffering with her" (162). Thus, her underlying sense of herself as a Singaporean, rather than as a Chinese living exile, enables her to make the physical visit to her father's homeland which is impossible for him.

In "A Dream of China", the fact that Singapore is the larger context for the daughter's relationship to her father is an especially significant aspect of the way she negotiates her identity. For her father, almost every aspect of his character fits clearly into a pattern of the lives of diasporic people, particularly, in this case, overseas Chinese. As David Yen-Ho Wu observes: "The Chinese . . . in the peripheral areas have embraced an unspoken but powerful mission: to keep themselves within the acceptable definition of Chineseness and to engage other members within the Chinese community in the preservation of Chinese civilization despite their non-Chinese environment" (162). This mission is clearly adopted by the father who teaches his
daughter "the right way to hold a Chinese calligraphy brush" (159) and who bemoans the "shallowness of the lives [of] his students" who "did not have the backbone and determination he thought characterized Chinese youth" (161). In addition, he keeps himself "within the acceptable definition of Chineseness" by "planting orchids, writing poems about exile, and drinking tiger bone wine", as well as by maintaining his interest in calligraphy (164).

These activities further demonstrate one of the defining aspects of exile, which is, that "nationalisms are about groups, but in a very acute sense exile is a solitude experienced outside the group" (Said 1979b: 359). For the father, this solitude comes from the fact that he does not see himself as fully or properly Chinese, largely because of his own shame and guilt that his younger brother, and not he, returned to China to take over the family home. This is a choice the father consciously decided on and believes that, especially as the elder brother, he should not have made. For instance, when he complains that his Singaporean students do not have the backbone and determination of Chinese youth, he in fact levels this same criticism at himself by saying that this quality is "that which his younger brother had and he lacked!" (161) This, along with similar comments such as "his younger brother had done right and he had done wrong" (161), convey the sense that the father, in certain ways, sees even himself as not being fully Chinese because of his "weakness".

For the daughter, this is important because so much of her identity is determined in relation to her father. The implication is that, because of his particular understanding of himself as "Chinese", he is relatively sympathetic to and unthreatened by his children's (as well as grandchildren's) changing identities. For instance, the daughter comments, "He was Westernised to a certain extent and did not demand unquestioning obedience from his children. It was not in that he remained staunchly Chinese, but in his calm, his respect for the 'face' of the servants, and his disregard for material gain" (162). In addition, the father's understanding of the challenges posed to one's identity in a diasporic and globalised context is apparent when the daughter mentions her sister,
who has moved to the United States, her Jewish husband, and their son "who smoked opium and wore a Jewish skull cap atop his Chinese-style plait" (162). This young man, however, has his grandfather's sympathy rather than contempt, and the grandfather argues: "Without the human experience of your forefathers before you it is hard to build a strong future" (162). The narrator also adds the important detail that, "we knew he was thinking not only of his Eurasian grandson but of his children who had never seen the graves of their ancestors in Szechuan" (162). For the daughter, this comment is important because it clearly indicates that her father is conscious of and even sympathetic to her non-traditional relationship to China, particularly her relationship to her paternal relatives, a fact that becomes central to the conclusion of the story.

This dimension of the father's identity is especially significant because when the daughter is confronted with the experience of China not speaking to her spirit (167), she is able to let go of this "dream of China", which has been passed down to her by her father, and instead claim her own identity and relationship to her ancestral home. With determination and lack of regret, rather than guilt or shame, she rejects her uncle's request that she take him with her to Singapore and she returns alone to her "modern little flat and . . . husband and babies" (159) in "a diamond city of trees and meaningful occupation, efficiently sparkling in the modern world" (167). The very fact that this is such an easy and unquestioned choice for her demonstrates how strongly she feels that she "belongs" in Singapore and how comparatively unimportant her father's vision of China is to her own sense of her identity. Also, this response would likely become highly problematised, complicated and emotional if her father had not passed on to her a view of his own and other identities as being created in part by the circumstances of history and personal choice. In particular, he describes his emigration to Singapore and his choice to remain there as having been decisions that were made without his knowing the profound impact they would have on his life. However, between the security of having a "home" to return to--one of the prerequisites of a tourist (Bauman 30)--and possessing a notion of identity which is neither inextricably tied to her father nor to a
belief in identity remaining static and unchanging, the daughter is able to develop a new relationship to China.

"A country is only as good as its men"

In the father's dream of China, what he most frequently and vividly relates to his daughter is its geography, nature and scenery for which he longs. These visions of China are vast, both imaginatively and spatially, as the father imagines himself physically present in "the most beautiful of beautiful lands": "In his youth he had wandered within her [China's] bosom and penetrated the depths of her heart. He had seen strange monkeys with white faces and snakes in the bellies of other snakes. He had shot white water rapids, climbed hundreds of steps to stone temples and trekked her forests" (160). Here, following a long tradition—particularly in the realm of exile literature—47—the nation and its geography are imagined as female and the nature of the longing is clearly erotic and the father's depictions of the landscape in this manner draw attention to the strong desire he feels for his homeland. He also describes his brother's and his own vision of China after the war, still referring to the nation as female, but this time adding an especially tragic dimension: "Bruised and savaged but nonetheless beautiful. Perhaps even more so, because now her pulse beat in their bodies and their blood soaked her rich but parched soil. It is hard to understand the allure of a beautiful and troubled land, but it was in China then" (161). This emphasis on the active and physical experiences with the land in these descriptions clearly reflects not only the father's emotional attachment to China, but also his sense of sadness at his physical absence from his homeland. Though he is still able to retain a psychological and spiritual connection to China when in Singapore, it is the actual bodily presence in the home space that is unattainable and which is, therefore, the focus of his longing. This is particularly apparent in his poem which the narrator names as her favourite:

Lovely silent carp
Circling my ornamental pond
Like a wise thought
Is all water your element
Or do you dream of wide brimming rivers
As I have a dream of home? (164)

The narrator comments: "Surely my father was content in Singapore after all these years? But it was still an ornamental pond and not the wide brimming river. Not home" (164). Here again, like the carp, the father cannot roam freely in his "natural" environment--China--and his experience is confined to a particular, limited place--a fact that constantly haunts him.

When his daughter does make the trip to China herself, she too is struck by the physical beauty of the country.

On a boat trip the day before, we had all been stunned by the breathtaking loveliness of the river, nearby mountains with caves of stalactites and distant mountains dreamy and purple in the vagueness. This was a China even my father had been unable to convey to me. It seemed a journey not just downriver but back through time into an age of timelessness. (166)

However, she soon realises that China very clearly is not only its geography, but also its people, and it is the people that considerably complicate her feelings towards the place. This fact is true not only for her, however, but also for the father. As noted earlier, his most vivid accounts of China centre on the geographical features of the place, and yet it is his relationship to his brother that is at the root of his choice to remain in exile and to never return to China. The story that the daughter first relates is as follows:

After the Second World War, when the Japanese surrendered Singapore and left China, my father and his younger brother faced a choice. They could stay in Singapore or they could return to build a new China. . . .

At that time, my father had a steady income from teaching, in Singapore. He had his wife and my eldest sister, who was already born. He elected to stay in Singapore. It was this decision that in his later years he regarded as his supreme act of cowardice. His younger brother returned to China to help repair the atrocities of the Japanese. He remained in Singapore. (160-61)

However, in her adulthood, the daughter learns more about her father's past from her husband:
[My father] confided in my husband things that he could not tell me, a girl child. My husband, however, had no such scruples and passed them on to me.

It was not only shame for ignoring the call of his country that had barred my father from China all these years, Heavenly Wisdom [the husband] said. There was also the letter which his brother had written to him when he had reconsidered and spoken of returning to China only months after his brother. . . . The letter said my father should not return if he had any regard for their family. He who had married without their parents' consent, whose wife was used to city life in Singapore. Would his wife pine to return to Singapore, causing their lands to be disrupted and sold to support her in luxury? My father could not say no with certainty. He felt shame that his younger brother would serve family interests far better than he could, and resolved not to displace such a dutiful son by returning himself. Since then, he had looked upon his younger brother as a paragon of virtue and dutiful good sense. (161-2)

This letter clearly embodies many of the typical notions of Chinese culture, including familial roles dictated by age and gender, as well as related feelings of duty, shame and virtue. So, although it is ostensibly the place China that the father is so attached to, it is apparent that the relationship he has with his homeland is in fact dictated, defined and created primarily by human relationships and culture. Nevertheless, it is the geographical dimensions of China that are most prominent in his stories and for which he longs. The feelings he has for the landscape are less problematic than those he has for his family in China.

By visiting her ancestral homeland, however, the daughter comes to realize that her father's vision of his brother is far from accurate and that the Chinese people she meets are, she feels, not nearly as attractive and easy to accept as the Chinese scenery. In fact, even before she meets her uncle, the "un-beautiful" human dimensions of China—and thus a challenge to her father's claim of it being "the most beautiful of beautiful lands"—are gradually introduced. Making the two-hour car journey to the town where her relatives live, she notes that "bamboo scaffolding obscured most of the small buildings" (166), a detail which, for the first time, indicates the presence of people in the landscape. When she eventually reaches her destination, this troublesome and troubling reality of people becomes even more heightened. She finds that her uncle is a poor, mean-spirited, ungrateful and bitter man, rather than the dutiful, deserving and courageous individual her father has made him out to be. "He was thin, shrivelled up. He spat noisily and conspicuously and, asked if he had any message for my father, said:
'Tell him to send money'" (167). The uncle's unpleasant character makes the narrator realise that her father's dream of China is, in fact, just that, and this dream has been possible for him to maintain largely because of his physical distance from China. As a result of this distance, he has not had to interact with his brother in person, but instead has been able to imagine a character that has kept his personal dream of China—as well as his own identity as an exile—alive and intact.

Confronted with a dramatically different view of her uncle, the narrator nevertheless is determined to maintain her father's dream, rather than rectify it. This is most apparent in the scene that frames the narrative when her uncle asks her to take him back to Singapore so that he can see his brother again. She says:

That sealed the matter. I did not want him to see my father again. If I had anything to do with it, he would never see my father again. The sad, sly eyes lost the watery hold they had gained on my sympathy. My mind, which has been wondering where an extra bed could be fitted, dropped the matter and began to cast about for a diplomatic way to say "No". (159)

Implied here is that, were her father to meet his brother again, his own dream of China—including his dream of his brother and the significance of his own exile—would be destroyed. Added to that, the fact that the uncle is desperate to leave China and return to Singapore further drives home the notion that China is not the idyllic place the narrator's father imagines it to be. The father's romantic vision is based on his own memories and longing, whereas, for his brother—as well as for his daughter—the modernity of Singapore with its material comforts and conveniences is very attractive. The narrator is determined to prevent this new and much less pleasant dream of China from reaching her father, as it would destroy his deeply rooted understanding of himself. Reflecting on her own notions of filial piety, she resolves:

No. I would not do this to my father. I wanted to return to Singapore to tell him my uncle was well in China. That he was too busy (not too lazy) to write himself. My father could then breathe easy, believe he had done a good thing and reap in his old age his reward for the good life he had lived and the children he had reared. This man must not be allowed to come and spoil everything! (170)
What she tells her uncle is that she will consider helping him get out of China once her father has passed away:

He understood. He thanked me and walked away weighed down by hopelessness and bad nature. I watched him through the gate. A drab old man in old worn clothes wandering from puddle to puddle of yellow light. It was as though he was the spirit of China, now broken and leaving me. Leaving me forever, for I could tell he would not outlive my father. If his wife did, I swore I would take care of her. (170)

By describing "the spirit of China, now broken and leaving me," the importance of the physical dimension in the narrator's relationship both to the place and people of China is foregrounded. By travelling to her ancestral homeland and meeting her uncle in person, the spirit of China--as embodied in her uncle--becomes "drab", "old" and "broken" and she willingly lets it leave her forever. And yet the dream of China--as embodied in her father, exiled in Singapore--will live on, because of the choices she has made. As the individual with whom the decision lies for who and what will be protected and aided, she very clearly chooses to uphold her father's dream above all else, privileging the perspective, needs and desires of her own lived Singaporean experience to which she knows she can and will return.

In addition to the narrator's concern for her father, however, there is also a distinctly personal edge to her lack of willingness to heed her uncle's request, an edge that is a significant aspect of her identity that seeks to protect her self-interest. This self-interest is identified as a Singaporean characteristic, for instance, when the narrator's siblings laugh at her father and say: "The youth of Singapore are practical . . . 'Do you want them to go around with slogans and Molotov cocktails when they don't see anything wrong with the country?" (161) The narrator herself also tends to think along these "practical" lines, as is apparent when she and her husband are discussing the reasons her father did not return to China.

"And he didn't go back after he decided to just because of a letter his brother wrote him? That doesn't sound like Pa. Are you sure? I would have gone back anyway, and claimed everything that was mine by right!"
"There's no point discussing the past. Living in China during the Cultural Revolution would have been no joke. It's a good thing your father didn't go back."

"But he could have gone back to China and taken everything and come back to Singapore and then he would be rich as well as free," I argued. (163)

At the conclusion of the story, this "practical" characteristic again comes to the fore, but is also complicated by the daughter's notions of filial duty and human compassion. In relating the story of her uncle's request, her very first reaction is that there is no physical space for him and, specifically, no ideal place for him to sleep. "I thought of my modern little flat and my husband and babies and I couldn't imagine the man sleeping on our Italian-leather sofa" (159). The adjectives in this sentence, "modern little" and "Italian-leather", however, are very telling. Her worry is not purely a practical one, but rather one which indicates a dread of her very unpleasant uncle corrupting her posh and comfortable life in Singapore, a dread which conveys a sense of concern for her sofa rather than for her uncle! Notably, however, when the same scene is repeated at the conclusion of the story, she thinks to herself: "There was little room in our flat too. I couldn't have him sleep on the sofa!" (169-70) At this particular moment, she associates very strongly with Singapore--which she has not done at any other point in the narrative--and the shift in concern from her sofa to her uncle is a subtle, but telling, example of her contrasting identities. On the one hand, her "Chinese" identity places a great deal of importance on familial--and especially filial--duty and, on the other hand, her "Singaporean" identity is concerned principally with self-interest and materialism.

This minor variation between the two considerations hints at a sense of subconscious confusion on the part of the narrator--is she worried about her uncle's happiness and comfort, her father's or her own? It would seem, at different moments, she is concerned about all three. However, it is her preoccupation with her own life and what would happen to it were she to grant her uncle's request which indicates that it is her "Singaporean" identity that ultimately prevails in her decision-making. She chooses not to ruin her father's dream and to privilege her status as modern woman living in
Singapore over her role of a dutiful "Chinese" girl who puts her elders' needs and desires before her own. This choice, coupled with the particularly adult decision she makes to protect her own father's nostalgic dream over her uncle's material comfort, is a moment of "suture" of her own identity. Clearly, her identity is one in which both her "Chineseness" and "Singaporeaness" are in conflict, but, in coming together, her identity is forced to obey what Stuart Hall calls "the logic of more-than-one" (1996: 3).

The conclusion of the story once again highlights the close relationship that exists between the narrator and her father. However, the two paragraphs that comprise the final section also demonstrate the difference between them, now that the dream of China belongs only to the father and not to the daughter.

My father's China no longer exists except in him and in other men who try to live true to the dream of China in their hearts. Perhaps like the heaven of Christian converts it is theirs both as an ideal to strive for and a vision of things to come.

I returned to Singapore alienated from the China I saw, but no less eager to listen to my father's stories of the most beautiful of beautiful lands. A country is only as good as its men. My father is a good man... whichever country can claim him as its own. (170)

With this conclusion, the narrator has made a definite shift away from conceiving of home in purely physical terms and instead focuses on the associations and significance of home as conjured by those who feel a sense of belonging to it. This concept is given further prominence by the fact that countries are personified in these final lines—they can claim people as their own, rather than people claiming them. Both as a result of her experience of physically travelling to and returning from China, as well as the resulting realisation that it is people who define a place, the narrator recognizes a more dynamic relationship between people and place and thus comes to understand both her father's identity—and her own—more clearly.

Conclusion

As well as realizing that, rather than geography, it is people and their relationships with each other that most define a place, the narrator also comes to
understand that her identity and her relationship to China are clearly different from her father's. For her, "home" is in the "new" country (Singapore) and she looks to that place as a centre from which to grow and expand, and therefore also a place to return to. She understands that the nature of her father's attachment to China is in fact "a dream" and is one that, as a result of her visit, she no longer shares with him. Yet, she clearly recognizes the tremendous importance of this dream to her father and is therefore determined to help him maintain it. In doing so, she invokes an especially self-interested "Singaporean" identity, but also does so in part to uphold a traditional "Chinese" duty of honouring (and, in this case, protecting) her father. Therefore, although her final conclusion is that she truly belongs "among skyscrapers with glass fronts and gold-encrusted orchids" (167), she does not "lose" her "Chinese" identity but instead adapts it into her particular circumstances.