

Into the Mirror

A Self-Reflection

by Mildred Lau

University of Alberta, Canada

for Lotta Kokkonen

University of Jyväskylä, Finland

Social Networks and Interpersonal Relations in a Multicultural World

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1. The Secret Life

My mother and father immigrated to Canada from British-controlled Hong Kong, so their struggle to settle down in Canada was facilitated by their existing knowledge of the English language and the equivalency of their professional qualifications. Also present in Canada are large, well-grounded Chinese populations – including a part of my mother's immediate family – in cities such as Vancouver and Toronto. This made it easier for my parents to adjust to the new environment and feel a sense of belonging.

Shortly after I was born, my family moved west to the province of Alberta, whose population at the time was primarily White and with few Asian communities. There I was raised bilingually and biculturally, and although I have visited Hong Kong several times, I felt that the Chinese parts of my cultural upbringing were always somewhat superficial and inauthentic – especially so since the adolescent formation of a self-awareness and desire for identity: “Developing a sense of Asian identity can be a source of strife for adolescents because its construction is relegated to imagination, via stories of the home culture as told by parents, rather than through adolescents' direct experience.” (Kim 169)

When I entered middle school, I observed my former playmates (who were mostly children of other Chinese immigrant families) become assimilated into the dominant Canadian culture – which, in my view, was just as superficial as Chinese culture. Worse yet, I felt that the Canadian culture was without substance, meaning, or tradition – too hedonistic rather than reflective, at least in the way these former friends made it appear. Though determined to not become like them, the composition of my carefully chosen social network became more and more disproportionately White.

But there was still the feeling of 'living in two worlds'; two worlds with different value systems that were at odds with each other. One common example of this conflict, though stereotypically based, would be that of what qualities parents believe children should develop through adolescence. While Western parents view adolescence and young adulthood as a period during which one seeks out one's sense of self and self-ability as well as a diverse social network, Chinese parents see these as a close secondary to gaining social mobility and future career prospects through education. Faced with this conflict, I first attempted to discuss the issue with my family, but I felt that although my parents were relatively liberal in comparison to other Chinese families, my views were not being understood. “Because

adolescents accord high status to the Anglo culture, they may feel frustrated when their attempts to resolve issues related to the Anglo culture are met with strain or trivialization....” writes Kim (179). When I approached counselling staff at my school for help and support, and they sent a 'multicultural liaison' to mediate discussions with my family, I was accused by my parents of “selling out to the new or dominant culture, of being corrupted by new friends, or of failing one's family” (Bennett 115).

And what is one to do when one feels unbearably alienated, marginalized, and misunderstood at home, where one spends most of one's time? One can't be at school all day. Always a voracious bookworm, I retreated into a “secret life led in a dream-like world untainted by the 'two worlds,'” which was “the world of books and literature” (Karakayali 337). Unsurprisingly, this was not well-received by my family, since reading fictional literature was not pragmatically productive; I was to “be reading non-fiction instead of these storybooks.” For a period of two weeks I was forcibly removed from my fantasy¹ novels and art supplies and forbidden to touch them; when this time was over I had lost most of my interest in fantasy literature. Left with the sources and inspirations for my secret world invalidated and deemed unacceptable, I was plunged into a number of years of depression.

2. The Sparrow and the Messenger

It was during this time of depression that we bought a brand new PC and a subscription to a broadband Internet service. I joined a number of online communities, and while chatting with some television enthusiasts on IRC, one Finnish user decided to send me a sample mp3 of the kind of music he listened to. The song that he chose was a metal version of a traditional Finnish Christmas carol², and when I listened to it, there was something essentially beautiful to it that I could not describe. When I found some translations of the song lyrics and other songs performed by the same singer, something about the stereotypical Finnish melancholy 'clicked' within me. It was not a sense of fatalism, but an essence of stoic freedom.

Though not a conscious decision, as I continued to interact on the Internet with Finnish users (among other users from all over the world), my secret life became encapsulated in one word:

1 Fantasy literature was seen by my parents as especially dangerous and damaging because of the popular themes of violence, vigilantism, and the supernatural (i.e. demons and evil).

2 For the curious, it was Viikate's version of 'Varpunen jouluamuna', with vocals performed by Timo Rautiainen.

Finland. I did not go forth to research its cultural traditions and history or love the country for any subset of its culture or cultural exports, but I watched Finnish films, read some classic Finnish novels in translation, listened to Finnish-language pop and heavier music³, and I absorbed all of it.

Here was a nation whose character and culture I could identify with. Here was a place where I would be valued as an individual. And since at this time it was only in my imagination I was comforted by the fact that Finland is a real nation, a real place on this Earth. I would receive no criticism for not reading non-fiction if I were reading books on Nordic history⁴. And to think that before this, I knew absolutely nothing about Northern Europe.

I wove a story of a heart torn away from its true home: a heart that must be repatriated and returned to Finland, a place that no one in my biological family and its ancestors have ever visited. And still coping with depression, repatriation was the one wish that kept me alive: no one should ever die without first having had a place to call home and a people to truly call family. This was the ultimate expression of commitment to a unique identity separate from either home or heritage cultures.

3. First Contact

Six years after the first song, I had the academic opportunity to travel to Finland to study for a month. I had personal interest in the courses, but no instrumental interest – I would not be granted any credits to my science degree for them. Regardless, this was going to be the quickest and easiest way to spend some time in Finland with the express purpose of *not* going as a tourist and *not* sightseeing.

Soon after I had received my acceptance letter, I met a young Finnish student at an orientation event at my university. Otto was a high school student in Canada as part of an exchange program with Rotary International and was nearing the end of his one-year term in Edmonton. He was the very first person of Finnish nationality that I have ever met and developed a relationship with, and who represents a major turning point in the development

3 Incidentally, the song in the previous footnote also became a motivation for me to pursue playing the piano by ear, instead of feeling 'caged' within the classical style in which I was trained. Also, it represented my first exposure to music beyond Classical and (American and Chinese) pop music.

4 Books on Finnish culture and history specifically are, naturally, difficult to come by around here. Perhaps the tendency is to be more interested in Sweden, which our high school curriculum uses as a case study of democratic socialism.

of my Finnish identity.

Though there were still two months to go in the high school term, my university term was coming to a close and I would have to move back to my hometown for the summer. In the few brief evenings we spent together and the subsequent communication via Internet, we discovered that one of the things we had in common was a sense of homesickness... for the same place. As he confided in me his feelings of burnout and longing and described to me his psychosomatic symptoms of it, I felt compelled to care for him and help him through this culture shock that had come too late for meaningful adjustment and growth from it.

It is unfortunate that my departure for Finland before him caused him more pain.

4. Into the Mirror

When I arrived in Jyväskylä, Matthieu, an online friend who is an immigrant to Finland, picked me up at the bus terminal and allowed me to spend the first night at his apartment with his (Finnish) wife and daughter. I was struck by the coziness of the home, and in the morning he helped me move into my student apartment. He also took me shopping and showed me the ropes of how things worked at the supermarket. Throughout my time in the city, he was of invaluable help because he was someone I already had a social relationship with and who had been through the cultural adjustment that I was braced to experience.⁵

During the first week of class, I was on an emotional high from being in Finland *at all*, but as the second week arrived I became keenly aware of the 'international student' label that was accorded to me and with it all of the international student culture that came along with it: experiencing the local nightlife and group trips to the sauna and walks around the lake; the international students forming their own social groups and organizing their own trips to the pub once or twice a week⁶; being asked “so, what it's like in *your* country?” at every turn. Often I felt unable to resist answering to the latter, but I resented doing so. Even during my courses I preferred to interact with the Finnish students over the international students.

In this mounting frustration I found solace in my Finnish roommate, who empathized with

5 He was also often available for me to talk to, as his office is actually a couple of floors above where our classroom was for the course this paper is being written for.

6 And students trying to find the liquor store. As an advocate of light to moderate alcohol use, I told them, “I know where it is, but I'm not telling you.”

my identity crisis, listened to my descriptions of Canada with genuine interest, and tried to give real answers to the questions I was asking about Finnish character and life. She and I spent a sleepless 'long night in Tampere' where we really bonded in friendship. When she left to visit her family in Imatra for three days, I felt bored and somehow incomplete, with nothing to lift the pressures of being around other international students. I needed the interaction with people of Finnish background to sustain my sense of place and belonging. Eventually, I think that the other students (especially the North Americans) understood my reasons for being in Finland, and they left me alone, though they did not always agree with those reasons.

Finally, after attending all of my courses, I spent a week travelling to Turku and Helsinki to meet other online friends who had offered me room and board – while other students would have either gone back to their home country or have spent some time visiting landmarks such as Lapland or nearby countries with their new international friends. I felt no such desire – my mission in Finland was not even cultural tourism but a hunger to experience the most mundane and banal everyday life of Finns without barriers or illusions of exoticism. I feel that my week in Espoo with a young student couple was the most valuable experience of all. We spent a rainy afternoon visiting the landmarks in central Helsinki, but the bulk of our time was spent at home, watching television, visiting with friends⁷, surfing the Internet, and going to sauna completely nude, the way it should be.

Though there were some aspects of Finnish social life that took me by surprise – the ubiquitous visible consumption of alcohol being the primary one – I am unable to judge these as either positive or negative; not because I do not wish to offend anyone, but simply because love for the home of one's heart is unconditional. What unconditional love does *not* mean is that I become complacent and choose not to do my part to try to change things. It is not blind acceptance. The alcoholism issue did not spoil my image of Finland because most of the friends I met there were either moderate or non-drinkers. Thus I know that, even though I feel uncomfortable and may choose not to be around heavy drinkers, there are others who do not form part of that stereotype with whom I can interact.

Nonetheless, Otto once told me that there is something about the way I think and my sense of aesthetic that is characteristically 'Finnish.' He could not articulate exactly what it was, but I

7 This part, for me, was more of an observational experience as I do not speak their language.

have realized now that it is a set of values: the values of independence; of 'live and let live;' of not wanting to be told how to act and behave in order to conform to surroundings and expectations; and the faith in our human ability to create, synthesize, and negotiate our own identity... precisely the opposite of Chinese values, and not quite what mainstream Canadian culture is prepared to accept.

Never for a moment did I feel homesick for Canada while in Finland. I hypothesize that homesickness manifests when one is away from the things one loves most – be it family and friends, or a favourite food. But what I value most are my Finnish connections and the Finnish music that I listen to almost exclusively⁸. And I did not go away from either; instead I went to them.

I look forward to being in Finland again, to be among people who do not make negative comments at my preferred manner of dress and who acknowledge silence and reflection as productive activities. One month has been far too short for anything, especially with those weeks spent in frustration. And though I have a large network of Asian-Canadian friends who help me cope with my Chinese-Canadian identity here in Canada, my heart is still on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean.

“...8000km päässä kaikesta, mitä rakastan, kaikesta, minkä tunnen.” ~ Otto N.

8 Right now as I write this, even.

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Into the Mirror: Directed by Lois Stevenson. With Jamie Bacon, Charles Streeter, John Sackville, Beatrice May. Daniel is a young man struggling with an inner identity that is desperate to be realised. After leaving his father to move to London, his subconscious desires begin to take control. Led by his new co-worker and upon finding London's Drag hotspot 'Lost & Found' nightclub, Daniel r Read allDaniel is a young man struggling with an inner identity that is desperate to be realised. "Into the Mirror" gets as close as any movie ever has to simulating the state of mind of someone conflicted, if no longer confused about his sexuality - the feelings, paranoia, decision making and resolve that takes one from the closet to the drag club. May 24, 2019 | Rating: 2.5/4 | Full Reviewâ€¦ Roger Moore. Into the Mirror moves fluidly through memory, present self-imprisonment, and future's promise with a majority of its information shared in the absence between cuts. May 30, 2019 | Rating: 7/10 | Full Reviewâ€¦ Into the Mirror (Korean: ê±°ì¸¸, ì†¼ìœ¼/4ë¼œ) is a 2003 South Korean supernatural horror film about a series of grisly deaths in a department store, all involving mirrors, and the troubled detective who investigates them. It was the debut film of director Kim Sung-ho. After accidentally causing the death of his partner during a hostage situation, Wu Young-min quits the police force to work for his uncle as head security of Dreampia, an immense shopping center. Movie: Into the Mirror. Revised romanization: Geoul Sokeuro. Hangul: ê±°ì¸¸, ì†¼ìœ¼/4ë¼œ. Plot. Former policeman Woo Young-Min (Yoo Ji-Tae) is emotionally crippled by the memory of a botched hostage situation that resulted in the end of his career and the death of his partner. Withdrawn and filled with self-loathing, he now works as a security guard in a department store that is set to reopen after a fire.