A MISSIONARY'S WELCOME HOME

Mung Yan Daniel Lam

INTRODUCTION AND PRECONCEPTIONS

It was the first morning of my weekend retreat when I descended into the sun lounge with hardly a soul in sight. A familiar figure sat waiting within, tapping a pen against her notebook while she looked out into an uncommonly gentle view of Blackpool, England. We exchanged greetings, and then stories, as I pulled out my own notebook and pen. What had started out as impromptu conversations with a retired missionary couple at a church in St Andrews eventually led on to a growing interest towards social reintegration difficulties that came along with their work, particularly upon retirement or the more temporary furlough. As a Protestant Christian myself, I was aware of the more popularized issues relating to missionary work, such as the social stigma associated with religious conversion or the distribution of church funding. The aim of my conversations, however, was to understand a returning missionary's feelings of alienation and disorientation, even if the aforementioned feelings were directed towards their own church congregation.

Before I had begun my fieldwork in earnest, I had a few preconceived ideas. Prior to my conversations, I understood missionaries as people largely disconnected from their native societies, and so I believed them to harbour a binary societal tension between an unfamiliar home environment and themselves. Additionally, because I conducted my conversations with missionaries from Fife as well as Blackpool, I was concerned over variations in responses that could have come about due to geographical differences. These aforementioned assumptions were ultimately corrected over the course of my conversations. The dichotomies of relational tensions were never so clearly defined or exaggerated in reality, and geography was not as relevant as I had expected; all of that became clearer as I restricted the scope of my conversations to the changes to the missionaries' relationships. Similarly, to how missionaries learned to manage the relational changes between environments, I also began to understand a little more about the disparity between theoretical generalities and appropriate representation.

Figure 1: Author's photograph of Pilgrim's Rest, one of the four properties listed in the rural area of Greenside, Fife.

REVERSE CULTURE SHOCK AND STRANGERS

Kalervo Oberg once theorized that culture shock was an 'occupational disease of people who have been suddenly transplanted abroad' (Oberg 1960: 177). The anxiety of losing familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse may trigger that occupational disease, leaving a sojourner in a world without the native means to verify ambiguous communication (*ibid.*). After the disease progresses from a stage of enjoyment to one of rejection of the foreign environment, the affected individual is 'characterized by a glorification of (…) the home culture' (Meintel 1973: 48). Negotiation with the foreign environment naturally follows during the period in which the individual begins to adjust within the environment (*ibid.*). A lesser-known but related phenomenon known as 'reverse culture shock' is defined as a more acute and abrupt disorientation that afflicts a sojourner upon their return home (*ibid.*: 52). The past glorification of a returning sojourner's native environment creates an idealized past that may contradict experiences in the present. Upon return, there is a realization that the traveller's home environment, and indeed their former world, has moved on without them (*ibid.*). Both culture

shock and reverse culture shock are phenomena that apply to travellers abroad in general but are clearly relevant to missionary work.

As missionaries undergo a significant degree of social immersion abroad, they immediately identify certain psychological factors within themselves that separate them from their native environment upon return. A twentieth-century missionary like E. T. William, for example, insisted upon expressing an inability to return to his former existence after being immersed in a foreign environment in his journals (Lazo 1982: 382). While familiar with both Chinese and American cities, he felt at home in neither, living 'in an ill-defined limbo between Chinese and American culture' (*ibid.*). While it cannot be said to be the same for all missionaries, identifying oneself as a stranger after return to a native environment is a recurring issue. As strangers, missionaries face the immediate psychological result of insecurity, due to being ignorant of the 'potential inherent in the situation, of the means to reach a goal, and of the probable outcomes of an intended action' (Herman and Schild 1961: 165). To familiarize themselves with the ever-changing signs and symbols of social intercourse, missionary families must then commit significant effort to the re-entry process.

FIELDWORK METHODOLOGY

Notwithstanding the two weeks during which I conducted theoretical research, I met and conversed with missionaries over the course of three weeks. Between the five missionaries I interviewed, I scheduled multiple, though irregular, conversation sessions that would last an average of ninety minutes each. Of the five missionaries I spoke to, there was only one with whom I was familiar before I began my fieldwork. Thanks to introduction from church members and fellow retreat acquaintances, I managed to meet the other four. They all generously agreed to vis-à-vis sessions, some of which included the addition of a family member.

Prior to each conversation, I would outline the theoretical premise of my research and share what I understood from my own Christian experiences. Out of concern for the political concerns surrounding missionary work, as well as the general ethics of interview procedures, I also

inquired if they would prefer to have their identities anonymized and if I had permission to transcribe our conversations into the pages of my notebook. There were two conversations during which I had an audio recording device present with permission, but I abandoned the device after considering the possibility of causing underlying pressures which might influence the thoughts and speech of the interviewee. In the end, I decided to engage in conversation with only a pen and notebook in hand.

Throughout these interviews, although I had a few essential questions prepared beforehand, I preferred to let the conversation take its course. The method of my conversational interaction was to distribute the essential questions about reverse culture shock experiences evenly throughout the exchange while inserting open-ended questions whenever appropriate. The reason why I preferred to let the conversation take on a more organic approach was that I desired to manipulate and create as few themes and motifs as possible. While the stories and descriptions discussed below have no doubt been organized accordingly to my interpretation, the fieldwork methodology used to produce such data was intended to be unambiguous and simple.

EMBODIED HABITS AND PLANNED ACTIONS

One of the key items from my theoretical research that I overlooked and did not initially apply when conducting interviews was the importance of a returning missionary's unrehearsed action and attitude. It soon became apparent to me that without adequate preparation and training, a missionary's embodied habits - their ingrained physical responses developed from abroad - can correspond to the marks of a stranger within their own native environment. Sofia Banet,[1] one of the missionaries who had attended the Blackpool weekend retreat, described an early incident in which her husband entered a bar in England after returning from a six-month experience in Serbia just before the Yugoslav wars. Mr. Banet had walked in, casually pushing his way to the front of the bar counter, and was very surprised to see someone nearly punch him for his actions. In Serbia, Sofia emphasized, it would be perfectly fine to take on a more direct and easy-going

[1] I have anonymized some of my informants' names upon request.

approach towards an objective, which could include a little harmless pushing against strangers. In that English bar, however, Mr. Banet's actions were seen as invasive and foreign. As it was one of Mr. Banet's first trips back from Serbia, he was not prepared to adjust his actions accordingly to a previously familiar environmental context.

That is not to say, however, that the embodied habits carried over from another environment are necessarily looked upon as unfavourable by the missionaries themselves. Although Mr. Banet later had to redevelop his social sensitivity towards his English peers, the fact that he had developed such habits demonstrated a successful attachment to a formerly alien environment. If he had aimed to maintain a so-called objectivity towards the world he attempted to reach, he would have lost 'the ability to interpret, to be a bridge between cultures' (Klausner 1994: 19). In a sense, the disorientation that comes with different social habits could very well be seen as a symbol of validation, if not a necessary consequence of a missionary's successful endeavours.

On the other hand, there were a few missionaries who also claimed that the embodied habits that came along with reverse culture shock were negligible, if not altogether non-existent. Susan Watson, a missionary who spent twenty years working in French West Africa, also spent two months each summer in the United Kingdom throughout those twenty years. She had kept in contact with her friends and family through technology even while abroad, and the months she spent in the UK proved invaluable in strengthening her bonds with her native environment. When it was time to return to Scotland, her mission organization also coached her through reintegration procedures, making sure that she knew what it meant to leave well and reintegrate well into Scottish society. Furthermore, the mission organization had assigned a six-month handover period, and so Susan claimed that it was quite possible for missionaries to go through a well-handled transition. There was little difficulty in orientating herself back into her native environment. Susan's case was remarkably straightforward and methodological, but a little too exceptional to be compared to with the general sentiments of the other missionaries who spoke to me.

FRIENDS AND CHURCHES

Changes in friendships, whether within or outside of the church, appeared to be a common pattern that I later found to be essentially relevant. Sofia Banet once noted in the course of our discussion that one of the hardest things she had to acknowledge after returning from Serbia was the fact that her old friends had moved on with their relationships and had become friends with different people. In essence, the social environment she had grown up in had moved on without her. Additionally, there were differences in English and Serbian social conduct that Sofia found somewhat inconvenient. For example, Sofia missed the fact that visits from her friends were spontaneous and averaged three times a week in Serbia, whereas her experiences were quite different with her friends in England, in which visits were much rarer and had to be scheduled well in advance. Although it was unreasonable to expect friendships and communal conduct to adjust accordingly to the returning missionary, the underlying social effects could not be easily brushed aside. 'With that,' Sofia concluded, 'we felt quite rejected.'

One common perspective that my informants emphasized with regard to their church congregations was the idea that, while members were generally quite welcoming towards returning missionaries, they were also admittedly uninformed in missionary matters. Victor George Walker, the proprietor of Pilgrim's Rest, was actively involved in the raising of funds for Romanian orphans and widows after Ceaușescu was overthrown. To give English church congregations an understanding of the pressing need for hospitals and orphanages, he utilized visual aids ranging from personal photographs to receipted bills in order to make his point. At one point in our conversation, I asked Victor if he ever felt significant pressure between him and the church congregation, but he denied it. He made himself accountable to anyone who wanted to look into his work, and he even enjoyed opportunities to inform others of the happenings abroad. Victor emphasized to me that although members may have a degree of ignorance in certain matters, it did not mean that they were uncaring. Although the church leadership would undoubtedly be aware of the finer details of a missionary's professional expenditure and expeditions, the general congregation could not be interested in what they did not know.

An aspect regarding missionary reintegration matters that I found necessary to note is the occasional aversion towards church buildings and congregations. Mr. Banet, often described as a steady man in mind and body, suffered an anxiety attack upon seeing an Anglican church of modest size after returning from Serbia after the war. As church buildings, and indeed Christian congregations in general, were not a common sight in Serbia during the war, Sofia believed her husband's anxiety to be related to a physical reaction against what he identified as anomalies that could not exist in his previous environment. Laura Simmonds, another missionary who had worked in Eastern Europe during Communist regimes, expressed a more modest, yet still relevant, version of this sentiment. Upon entering a congregation that averaged a hundred and fifty members, she believed herself to be afflicted by an overwhelming atmosphere of 'too many people'. Underneath the overwhelming atmosphere was not a sense of belonging, but one of strangeness and unfamiliarity that was eventually pacified through continual adjustment.

FAMILY AND GEOGRAPHY

Family is a relevant element that interrelates with a missionary's motivation to return to a native environment. Tim Forester, a missionary who had been in Ethiopia for eight years and Tanzania for nine, returned to Manchester partly for the sake of his children, who had grown up in Eastern Africa. His return to Manchester was a deliberate decision that went beyond the more conventional expatriate returnee motivations, like an expiration of contracts or a longing for home. Although I actively made an attempt to steer away from the topic of missionary children and third culture individuals – a subject I was yet to fully understand - the subject of family was one that could not be ignored.

It became apparent to me that the actions of returning missionary children, at least in some ways, spoke volumes of the unfamiliarity behind presumed social mechanisms. One of Sofia Bannet's sons, Aiden, returned to England just as he was of age to partake in pre-school playgroups. What Aiden did during the moments when he and his classmates were meant to gather up into their respective friendship groups was stand at a distance away from the others and take his time looking at his peers. He did not immediately join in with the rest of the children, but would instead

keep to himself until he felt he was able to 'suss out what was going on and how things worked,' as Sofia repeatedly remarked. Without adequate preparation or a means of societal validation, it would seem that no one member of missionary families was better equipped to deal with the disorientating and alienating effects of reverse culture shock than any other.

There were, however, varied responses to the question of what a missionary feels towards their native environment throughout a time of settlement, whether it be due to retirement or furlough. Laura Simmonds, for one, said that she had no interest in living out a normal life back in her native environment. Not only did she feel that there nothing interesting left for her to do or see, furthermore she could only be at peace with herself when she was back out in the mission field, interacting with those she had grown to care deeply about. Victor George Walker, for another, found himself taking up the position of President of the Rotary Club of Worthing, a humanitarian organization, for a year in 2012, as well as the position of the Mayor of Worthing in 2014, before he decided to retire in the rural areas of Fife, Scotland. He had no problems integrating himself back into his native society; rather, he held noticeable influence in his native environment's societal matters. The other missionaries with whom I conversed had expressed divided opinions in regard to their feelings towards their native environment throughout their time of settlement.

The explanation for the inconsistent variation in responses towards their country of origin is quite simple, although the concept did not come easily to me at first. Through the false assumption that it was the native geography itself that was the key to a missionary's allegiance or indifference, I initially misplaced myself in theory. The trigger for Oberg's occupational disease is the anxiety of losing familiar signs and symbols of social interaction (Meintel 1973: 48). When I asked the missionaries I conversed with about their work, only a few spoke of differences in the physical features of countries, while every one of them spoke of the differences in social interaction, political hierarchies, and religious education.

What was at the heart of missionary work was not differences in location, but the differences in people and relationships. For the missionaries I interacted with, an idealized home environment did not consist of certain geographical or architectural features, but certain relationships. Tim Forester, who expressed that while he felt no particular affiliation or allegiance to Manchester itself, gave a succinct reason for why he was quite happy to stay in one place at one time: 'It's about relationships, not the physical location'. The reason for the variation in responses towards their native environment is that for the missionaries, the division of worlds does not depend on geography, but on relationships.

CONCLUSION

After a long day of work, some individuals may have an instinctive trust in being able to return to the unchanging comforts of home. For the missionaries I spoke to, their expectations are rarely ever as simple as that. Old friends and fashion trends have moved on, and habits brought from abroad sometimes serve to further that distance. The preparations that can be made in anticipation of their return still acknowledge the prospective friction between idealization and reality.

Although the ideas of reverse culture shock and strangers upon return are compatible with my fieldwork, they fail to specify subject matters of significance. There was little theoretical material on embodied habits from abroad or aversions to anomalies between environments as corporeal responses to the disorientation of reverse culture shock. Even a topic as extensive as missionary children had little relevant material due to an oversaturation of theories about the third culture, a manifested and highly interstitial or mobile way of life. My fieldwork acknowledges and concedes the fact that there is no simple conclusion to be drawn from a missionary's social reintegration difficulties.

However, what can be concluded and reiterated is the idea that a returning missionary's hardships largely lie in changes in relationships rather than changes in place. It may very well be true that matters of architecture, weather, and food all contribute noticeable effects on a

returnee's constitution, but those matters do not mark a successful welcome home in themselves. Rather, it is the relationships by which individuals find familiarity and acceptance that make all the difference – even across worlds.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Herman, S. and Schild, E. 1961. The Stranger-Group in a Cross-Cultural Situation. *Sociometry* 24(2), 165-176.

Klausner, W. 1994. Going Native? *Anthropology Today* 10(3), 18-19.

Lazo, D. 1982. The Making of a Multicultural Man: The Missionary Experiences of E. T. Williams. *Pacific Historical Review* 51(4), 357-383.

Meintel, D. 1973. Strangers, Homecomers and Ordinary Men. *Anthropological Quarterly* 46(1), 47-58.

Oberg, K. 1960. Culture Shock: Adjustment to New Cultural Environments. *Practical Anthropology* 7, 177-182.