

Walking Backwards and Sideways: The Transmigrations of the Poet in Shirley Geok-lin Lim's Work

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Abstract

This article and interview unveil ways in which Shirley Geok-lin Lim addresses her status as a transnational wanderer in recent poetry, specifically in *Walking Backwards: New Poems* (2010), noting relevance to earlier fictional works such as *Joss and Gold* (2001). For the brief interview, I asked Lim in July 2013 to elaborate on and to clarify some of her statements in her poems that might prove cryptic to a reader unfamiliar with Chinese customs.

Keywords

Shirley Geok-lin Lim, poetry, transcultural, migration, cross-cultural, transnationalism

Walking Backwards: New Poems, released in 2010 by West End Press, echoes some of the flights and fancies that Lim's earlier works consider. *Joss and Gold* (fiction, 2001) retraces individuals' journeys in the US, Malaysia and Singapore in three sections, titled, "Circling," "Crossing" and "Landing" and, similarly, *Walking Backwards: New Poems* takes the reader from Whidbey Island (on the US northwest coast) to California, to Hong Kong to a plethora of places like Cambridge, Massachusetts and Katmandu. Lim labels places such as Whidbey Island "The Pacific Between" in a section of her collection.

Although *Joss and Gold* is a work of fiction, its sections allow its characters to puzzle out their cross-cultural heritages. Chester, an American, leaves his seed in Malaysia during his Peace Corps time, which results in a mixed race child, Suyin. Li An, who migrates from Malaysia to Singapore, faces her own shift in status when her daughter, Suyin, clearly does not resemble Li An's Chinese husband. The book's theme echoes that saying by Thomas Wolfe – "you can't go home again" (Wolfe 706) – but it reveals the complexities of racial

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undertones, given the race riots that broke out during the turbulent 1960s during which part of the novel is set.

In contrast, *Walking Backwards* is a different genre – a collection of poems. A number of its poems are based on the poet's experiences or observations, however fictionalised and narrated by a persona-poet they may be. Yet, in both texts, Lim successfully demonstrates the challenge of facing myriad crossings. She portrays the experience of the mixed cultures individual who consistently seeks home roots in multiple places. The wanderer finds pleasure and comfort in her travels, and yet disturbing echoes about displacement reverberate throughout *Walking Backwards*.

For example, in one poem, "Seaweeds (Puget Sound)," the poet remains at ease, on a leisurely stroll. She does not bring in references to China or to Southeast Asia, noting "This is the furthest out in the Sound I'll ever be, / The ebb tide so low I've walked a quarter mile..." (*Walking Backwards* 7). And yet, the reader becomes conscious of the poet's face turned toward China. She laments, "I cannot walk/ These flats endlessly. I must turn back/ And face the new houses built to look out/ To the Pacific" (*Walking Backwards* 7). She is almost as close to China as she can be from the contiguous US. Like the fictional American protagonist Gatsby, she's reaching out, not to a man (or a woman) however across the Sound, but for a heritage she's only partially excavated.²

Joss and Gold also uncovers the difficulty of excavating a heritage or culture from multiple perspectives. Chester notes that after a year as a Peace Corps volunteer, "your system can't take all that foreignness anymore" (75). And, as Leong Liew Geok notes in her Afterword to *Joss and Gold*, Suyin struggles with her identity as a child first with no father and then with two fathers (209). Li An chooses exile to Singapore. For Pin-chia Feng, author of "National History and Transnational Narration: Feminist Body Politics in Shirley Geok-lin Lim's *Joss and Gold*," *Joss and Gold* is "an example of narrating national history based on female bodily experiences" (113). Feng adds, "the tripartite form of the narrative that spreads out in temporal and spatial terms... can also be read as the metaphorical birth and growth of a national trauma and [is] embodied by the biracial Suyin, the offspring of an interracial liaison" (113). Additionally, Feng notes that Li An is the "key to unravelling the entanglement of Chinese Malaysian identification vis-à-vis the national discourse in the novel" (113). In contrast, Weihsin Gui is more guarded concerning views on Suyin's forthcoming role. Gui writes, "Suyin embodies the cross-cultural, cross-racial nightmare of cultural purists in Malaysia, Singapore, and America, but at the same time she also represents the logical outcome of the multicultural and

² In Francis Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Gatsby reached for his Daisy and his dreams of wealth and success as he looked across the Sound, from West Egg to East Egg, where Daisy's house resided.

melting-pot ideals these same purists uphold as an important part of their respective national consciousness” (152).

Yet both Feng and Gui recognise the complex layers of multiculturalism in *Joss and Gold*. Li An stands outside of the conventional norms – “outside of the traditional Chinese patriarchal structure,” as an orphan, but seems prepared, if not empowered, to shift cultural trends (Feng 120). Her financial and social poverty as a single mother, not to mention her ostracised role as a mother of an illegitimate child and Malaysia’s own identity struggles as an emerging postcolonial society that frequently revisits its decision to teach its curriculum in English or in Malay, impact her ability to deconstruct postcolonial boundaries. The novel ends with the suggestion that Suyin has all the tools with which to dismantle these boundaries: she has inherited money and a network of strong women, including Li An’s husband’s stepmother, Second Mrs. Yeh, Li An and Ellen, a family friend.³

However, I argue that such dismantling is difficult to master, and poses a lifetime process, as seen partially through the 13 or so years in which the characters interact with one another to uncover their diasporic identities, even allowing long gaps of time to lapse between their interactions. Chester travels to and from the US and Malaysia and Singapore. Li An migrates from Malaysia to Singapore. Still, Chester and even Li An demonstrate a comparatively superficial understanding of cultural layers in contrast to the seasoned poet in *Walking Backwards: New Poems*, who reveals a more retrospective look with multiple trans-Pacific crossings. In *Walking Backwards* it takes the poet her own lifetime to peel apart merged layers of Malaysian/Chinese/US identities, given her myriad crossings.

At one point the poet pauses in the midst of her many wanderings and reflects in “No Place,” a prose poem, “Touching down, I’ve touched a nerve from another life. Everywhere is new and strange-familiar when there is nothing to return to. Every house mine, every street my street, every man my husband, every place the last place I’d lived in.... Amnesiac, I sight ordinary inhabitants: not my own oneiric self, settling with no memory, an immigrant story” (68). She is metaconscious of her transiency and her submersion in each culture she encounters.

For another example, the poet sheds her Asian identity in “Woman Traveling (Katmandu).” This prose poem concludes, “No longer Asian I am free to move either way: honored by men, dishonored traveler without father, husband, or brother” (*Walking Backwards* 66). In this piece, gender trumps race as far as diasporic identities are concerned, and the differences in Asian feasts and other trends are so vast that the poet observes with awe the sacrifice of a

³ For a discussion of Suyin’s role, as impacted by such women, see Gui, “Not Monological, but Multillogical,” 151-55.

goat (67). This poem is placed in the third section, and if the poet is examining diasporic identities, this work emphasises how different parts of Asia – and its customs – can appear just as foreign to someone with Asian roots who is from elsewhere. The use of the prose form, both in “Woman Traveling (Katmandu)” and in “No Place” underscores the poignancy of the sometimes stark recognition of shifting shapes of identity.

In other words, if the lens of diasporic identities is bifocal in *Joss and Gold*, it's a kaleidoscope in *Walking Backwards*. Lim herself expresses this shifting awareness, and she playfully and deliberately offers her own insight into myriad cultures. For example, when she lived in Hong Kong in 2012-2013, she created a chapbook of poems, published by the City University of Hong Kong, about walks through a large, seven-level mall, Festival Walk (“Preface,” *Mall Ballads* 4). The unwitting reader who doesn't know about Festival Walk might assume that this is a botanical garden or a jovial pilgrimage until delving into the poems, which portray ice skating, mannequins and tight clothing.

In a brief preface to this chapbook, Lim explains,

During these walks [in Festival Walk] I have been reminded of William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge on their walks through the Lake District of England. Their *Lyrical Ballads* had been the focal apex of my undergraduate studies in English literature, and images of that landscape, of the humans that roamed in and made the hills, woods and fields into a living English habitus, the leech gatherer, the wandering child, and other characters, had inhabited my imagination for decades; and paradoxically had so ‘charmed’ my sensibility as to turn those Asian scenes and characters local to my life alien. (4)

In *Mall Ballads*, the poet takes herself, the wanderer, and explores a world, not of nature, but a place that is perhaps the most antithetical symbol of nature – a mall – using the traditional English ballad style to demonstrate how today's individual must live in a nature-less world, full of plastics and disposables. Lim explains that she writes these poems, her contemporary, diasporic spin on society, “in a language arrived at through colonial education” (4). She notes that her poems become an “intertext and subtext to the *Lyrical Ballads*, finding in the human characters and their actions within this Hong Kong urban landscape fitting subjects for a new 21st century transnational and metropolitan poetry” (4).

Throughout *Mall Ballads*, the poet becomes the receiving observer. The critic Weihsin Gui capitalises on the importance of recognising this submerged subjectivity, noting that studies focusing on postcolonial poems are few: “An aesthetic consideration of the lyric form in relation to subjectivity might foreground how the postcolonial lyric cherishes the concept of a bounded self while at the same time reshapes these boundaries...” (Gui, “Lyric Poetry” 264,

265). Gui examines this submersion of the self in Lim's "Mango," from *Passports and Other Lives* – "the poem brackets the speaking voice with a vivid description of a mango in a New York supermarket from which the speaker is absent..." (273). In this poem, and in Lim's poems throughout *Walking Backwards*, the "lyric 'I'... quickly dissolves into a series of sensory images and memories..." (Gui, "Lyric Poetry" 273). Gui recognises the shift of the subject to an "indirect object" (273). Throughout Lim's poems, yes, the subject, the poet, often takes a back seat to the crowds, to the observation; but perhaps this receiving stance suggests a valorizing of the significance of recognising someone other than and also prior to the subject. The poet's ability to view and understand multiple cultures and customs enables her to retreat so as to allow the reader to view the scene at hand.

Throughout her wanderings in Festival Walk, the poet disappears within the crowds. Her subjectivity itself becomes subject to the cultural "wonders" that she observes. Just as the poet in *Walking Backwards: New Poems* is unfamiliar with goat sacrifices, as a woman with Asian roots, the writer also is unfamiliar and fascinated with customs shared in her *Mall Ballads*. She watches one individual "chewing a bun wrapped in plastic/ like a cow chews its cud" ("Tableaux in a Mall," *Mall Ballads* 10). Here, Lim opens the kaleidoscope and shows the reader the refracted images within contemporary Asia. She allows the reader to view Hong Kong's citizens as they inhabit a mall.

As mentioned, "Woman Traveling (Katmandu)" appears in the third section of *Walking Backwards: New Poems*; by the time the reader shifts to this third section, titled "Keeping Your Distance" – the other sections are titled, "The Pacific Between" and "Walking Backwards" – the poet begins to reference Chinese customs that the non-Chinese reader may not recognise. The reader still has not seen all the layers the poet has exposed, and so must piece together his/her understanding of what the poet shares here; and thus almost forgets the poet in such descriptions.

To give an example of such opaque texts, Lim, born in 1944, introduces the reader to the concept of the sixtieth birthday in her poem "Your First Birthday (For a Chinese Matriarch)": "the first birthday you as a Chinese/ Woman can have.../ Everything before is not worth thinking of..." (44). She then cryptically mentions a tradition of drinking blood to satiation.

In *Chinese Wine*, Li Zhengpeng explains, "In ancient Chinese ideas about commemoration, sixty years was a full cycle, and for this reason the sixtieth birthday is accorded special importance and significance.... For these congratulations the most commonly used words are: 'May your happiness be as boundless as the Eastern Sea, may your years be as numerous as the southern mountains.' After that there is a burst of firecrackers and the banquet begins" (86). Li explains that "longevity wine" plays "an essential part of these birthday celebrations"; the guests should first toast the celebrants (86).

The poet in *Walking Backwards*, in turn, does not mention wine as a part of this custom, but instead references dishes with blood in them, suggesting that the celebrant is preying on those around her for sustenance.⁴ In other words, the poet adapts a Chinese custom – soaking foods in animal blood – to fit her own perspective, realising that the next generation must take care of its aging parents, particularly in a one-child society. This is one way in which the poet’s focusing on cultural layers becomes more refracted and empathetic with age. Chester may struggle with dealing with “foreignness” and Li An may not yet be ready to share Suyin’s complex history directly with her daughter, but the poet in *Walking Backwards* shows the shifting ways in which cultures can meld and clash as she narrows her eyes at archaic customs (celebrating sixtieth birthdays) and current customs (one-child policies).

Although Lim often writes in free verse, as in “Your First Birthday (For a Chinese Matriarch),” much of her style is formally constricted; and her use of poetic form often emphasises her focus on diasporic cultures. Poems like “Your First Birthday (For a Chinese Matriarch)” are riddled with enjambment, as if the poet must awkwardly bridge cultures at unexpected moments. Lim indents the second stanza, shifting to the history of Chinese women who often starved or failed to survive that long, from an explanation to what this rite of passage is. This alerts the reader to a change in topic; the third stanza then stretches to the present day, but with a twist on the custom itself, again suggesting the burden this heralded birthday places on one-child families.

In addition, Lim playfully includes a sonnet in *Walking Backwards: New Poems*. This poem, “Bird Sonnet (Pok Fu Lam Reservoir),” clearly is set on the eastern side of Hong Kong. The poet writes about butterflies, dragonflies and “putrid waters” (*Walking Backwards* 40) in this reservoir, nothing like a national park one might encounter in the United States. She deceives the reader first with bucolic descriptions and a lyrical tone, and then introduces the filthy waters “where lost and dead things/ Drift...” (40). The sonnet allows Lim, in the words of Coleridge and Wordsworth, to depict a “natural delineation of... human incidents” (Wordsworth and Coleridge).

Lim’s sonnet, however, does not follow the *abab* rhyme scheme perfectly, although the iambic pentameter form emerges. Lim’s alteration of the form demonstrates no lack of ability; instead, it emphasises the jarring smells that emanate from this reservoir, which holds “nectar pools” and “Red-gold dragonflies” in spite of itself (40). These jarring moments once again emphasise diasporic moments that surface without warning.

Lim also can play with form in a more Whitmanesque manner as she does in “Seminar Series (Hong Kong University, 5 p.m., Thursdays)” in which the poet mocks the inevitable train of monotony that accompanies reading seminar

⁴ See Lim’s commentary at the end of this paper.

papers in the late afternoon, lining up lines on the page like train cars in a station. Here, she shows her ability to tinker with a US poet's form, all the while addressing the mundanity academia can introduce, whether in the US or overseas. The US reader might become startled, however, at the turn the poem suddenly takes "into a twilight darker/ and darker into night" (45). A conflict – potential punishment for drowsing – emerges in the second half of this poem, just as Lim offers a modified intercultural perspective on the sixtieth birthday custom. Lim's pointed criticism of stringent customs, even as the poet "dissolves into a series of sensory images," again reveals the complicity needed for holding the kaleidoscopic images in place for study (Gui, "Lyric Poetry" 273).

Perhaps Lim's most accomplished poem, "Pantoun for Chinese Women,"⁵ published long before *Writing Backwards* emerged in print, reveals her deftness in crafting a poem to show a conflict within one's culture (or between cultures). In this poem, a girl child ("with two mouths" [Moyers 135]) is worthless, and must be suffocated in soot to meet the demands of a male-child-centric culture (Moyers 134). The powerful form circumscribes the horror of the scene, but allows Lim, as a female poet, to note that such a practice cannot be ignored. Just as Lim scorns a Chinese custom of celebrating sixtieth birthdays when dependency of the older generation burdens the younger, she brings controlled attention to another practice that marginalises the female gender.

The sonnet is a European convention, obviously brought to fame by Shakespeare, not to mention the pantoun, also known in Europe. However, the pantoun is initially attributed to Malay culture.⁶ By writing in a Malay form, the poet reclaims her Malaysian roots, and yet, she speaks of a Chinese custom, girl infanticide, in written English. In *Fooling with Words*, Lim says, "The pantoun has often been used for comic purposes because of the repetition and the structure. But I realized I could use the form to control my anger" about infanticide (133). Although "Bird Sonnet," discussed earlier, may not evoke as much emotion as does a poem about female infanticide, Lim clearly uses iambic pentameter to elevate her distaste at the putrid smells of the reservoir just as she shows her appreciation of natural beauty in a restricted environment. Further, as the poet makes light of the soporific effect of reading papers in the late afternoons, she expresses fear:

... everyone was afraid
to fall asleep
in case the fascist

⁵ Other spellings of this word are also used, including pantun. "pantun, n." *Oxford English Dictionary*, 8 August 2013, online.

⁶ "pantun, n." *Oxford English Dictionary*, 8 August 2013, online.

commandant threw you
out of the window,
staying awake to save our lives.... (45)

These formally restricted lines in *Walking Backwards* also allow Lim to control and to demonstrate emotions besides anger and fear. In “Seaweeds (Puget Sound),” the emotions are guarded. The poet concludes, after turning toward the houses, toward the US mainland, “Today I have said goodbye to my son,/ Let him go onto this shore of flags and gardens” (7). The poet-persona elaborates no further. She could be merely saying goodbye before launching on a trip to Puget Sound or beyond; perhaps the goodbye suggests a metaphorical departure: perhaps the poet leaves behind a son raised largely on US soil, and not in Asia, as she explores her transnational roots. The poet could have nonchalantly written this poem as she departed on a teaching assignment overseas – Lim served as Chair Professor in Hong Kong, for example. The focal point, again, is not the poet; the poem forces the reader to turn his/her attention to the subject of his/her own choosing.

In her concluding section of her second instalment of *Walking Backwards: New Poems*, Lim expresses that although she has spent two years in Hong Kong, she still seeks “Home,” whatever that may be: “The islands still rise above/ The South China Sea. I will never/ Explore more than three or four./ China bulks forbidding...” (48). The sheer mass of China suggests its impenetrability: the poet confesses that she has learned a few words of Chinese here and there (48) and yet, she feels that she has only covered a small bit of territory in her quest to find her Chinese roots. Other poems in this collection dramatise the poet’s views toward her largely distant mother and her feelings about not having a daughter, all the while swinging the reader to Innsbruck and Katmandu (largely in the last section, following the Hong Kong instalment). The ride is dizzying. The reader grasps at growlers that offer a peek at a new culture, thereby offering Lim success in portraying her admiration and her recognition that “One day we will be like we’ve/ never been born.../ finite ash” (“Three August Poems,” *Walking Backwards* 83). In other words, the poet-as-wanderer realises how fleeting moments on this earth are, and how temporary structures such as Festival Walk are. And perhaps, like Coleridge and Wordsworth in their *Lyrical Ballads* of a different century, the poet endeavours to bring to life an early twenty-first century style with language and descriptions lucid enough for the common reader. She aims for, in the words of Wordsworth, a “natural delineation of human passions, human characters, and human incidents” (Wordsworth and Coleridge). Wordsworth and Coleridge, too, hoped to provide a unique angle to everyday circumstances. They wished to offer “a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way...” (Wordsworth and Coleridge).

Even though Lim travels extensively, often looking through the lens of different cultures and then back at her own roots, she and her poet-persona are not confused by diasporic identities or myriad cultural trends. In an earlier interview with me, Lim explains, “I’m constantly dislocated. You asked me about my travels. I don’t know where to place my body. Everyone notices that about me. I’m very restless. I’m nomadic. Even when I’m a visiting professor here at the City University of Hong Kong, in this campus flat, I’m constantly getting up, sitting down, picking this or that up” (“Walking with her Muse”). Perhaps her muse urges her to wander, to seek new topics on which to write, and this very collection, *Walking Backwards: New Poems*, traces some of these wanderings and her reflections on the sights and sounds encountered. Even as the poet is recording she is imaging the refractions seen in her kaleidoscope.

Her explorations of new cultures, only some of which historically overlap with hers, underline the difficulty of understanding others’ customs. In *Joss and Gold* Chester struggles with his students’ lack of interest in woodworking, which he intended to teach in Malaya, and acknowledges, “I don’t belong here” (77). In contrast, Li An recognises her own pariah status, but throws her life into raising Suyin, as if to shield her from her painful past. The characters struggle and learn, Li An recognising that she must share her past with her daughter Suyin and Chester recognising his place in a colonial history that, despite any bright intentions to move forward, has marked him.

The next step forward in this education is to share, and the poet in *Walking Backwards: New Poems* does just this. As a writer clicks keys, she reflects further on her history and its intended message. The history may hold, and the message may change. The world may grow smaller with transnational crossings, but, as Lim explains, the “simulacra” of the “pixelated screen” cannot replace “actual border crossings.”⁷ (“Passport,” *Walking Backwards* 35). The more the reader reads, the more he/she wanders and the more others will wander, their interest piqued. They, too, can walk backwards – and sideways – into a transcontinental world.

This interview was conducted via email on 20 July 2013.

Shirley, I’m reading Walking Backwards: New Poems, and this chapbook emphasises how you redefine transnationalism. You write in “Passport,” “I am walking backwards into China/ Where everyone looks like me.../ On Causeway Bay, ten thousand/ Cousins walk beside me, a hundred/ Thousand brothers and sisters” (Walking Backwards 35).

⁷ See the interview at the end of this paper.

Travel alone does not define the transnational, although the transnational cannot be constructed without physical movement. The internet and other forms of social media have created what some have called a “borderless” world. But vivid though the myriad corners of the world appear on the pixelated screen, these simulacra cannot stand for the concrete and extant of actual border crossings, the dangers and opportunities in the trans that destabilises the national.

The poem I just quoted has the poet leaning toward China, and yet others, like “Seaweeds,” are based in Puget Sound. Still more focus on academic life. In one poem, “Disappointment of 2 o’clock,” the poet explains, “The class is clanking/ With cacophonous lines...” (Walking Backwards 15).

Almost all these “transnational” experiences that form the subjects of the poems have to do with scholarship and teaching; for example, I was an Institute of Southeast Asian Studies Fellow in 2008, which permitted me to work with Singapore scholars to co-edit *Writing Singapore*, a major historical anthology of English-language literature of the city-state. Just last year, I was the Inaugural Ngee Ann Kongsi Distinguished Visiting Professor at the University Scholars Program of the National University of Singapore, one of the most rewarding and delightful undergraduate teaching stints I’ve done in my several decades of teaching.

My residencies in Asia are always within a university bubble, and many memories are of libraries, department offices, campus environments and all manner of institutional signages. University architecture often shares a dull sameness, and even First-World English departments are characterised by approaches up aging, stained and worn concrete staircases as found in the buildings where humanities departments are housed in poor developing countries. That is, the humanities disciplines are often materially marked as disesteemed, particularly in top-flight research universities (rather like Virginia Woolf’s woman scholar in her brilliant and still resonant essay, “A Room of One’s Own”). In contrast, in small liberal arts colleges in the US, the humanities enjoy the respect that is afforded to those who participate in the examined life of the mind.

Perhaps my most transformatory years as a transnational were those spent in Hong Kong. As an émigré from a complicatedly postcolonial country, Malaysia, I was attracted by the invitation to take up the position of Chair Professor of English at the University of Hong Kong. The opportunity to help make some educational/cultural/institutional interventions in a place just newly “decolonised” after the 1997 British handover of Hong Kong to the People’s Republic of China was irresistible; it had the kind of “road not taken” appeal,

for I had felt the loss of my early identity as a postcolonial scholar after I left Malaysia and re-settled in the US.

Transmigrating to the University of Hong Kong in 1999,⁸ I was driven by unclear, even murky, motivations, but among them for sure was the probably hopeless desire to recuperate that earlier identity, to take up again that youthful ambition, as an Asian woman and in an Asian society. I could write a novel on those two years, but will stop here.

In a related move, I spent a summer as a visiting professor at the National Sun Yat-sen University in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, and again enjoyed a fascinating teaching experience, this time with Taiwanese graduate students in a seminar on US poetics and Chinese American poetry. The cross-cultural dynamics that such curricular materials call for and stir are profoundly complex and illustrative of larger transnational forces, but I have hardly had time to absorb and record them in a rigorously signifying document, although occasional brief autobiographical asides do appear in my academic essays and poems.

Going back to your mention of Hong Kong, perhaps you can explain how you were in touch with your roots, your home-culture, especially as you express it in "Your First Birthday (For a Chinese Matriarch)." This poem talks about the first birthday of a Chinese woman, at sixty, where she can "drink all the blood/ You can stomach, having become an eater/ Of young, a human, on your first birthday" (Walking Backwards 44). I know little about this practice, so perhaps you can explain this?

You are correct in noting that the poem refers to the peculiar Chinese high estimation of the sixtieth birthday. A woman may have been socially low in the family hierarchy, but surviving long enough to celebrate her sixtieth year endows an uncommon cultural capital on the subject. Gender ranking here is overthrown by ageism, one that values longevity. (Of course, these traditional and customary belief systems have long been set aside in capitalist Chinese societies, and that includes the People's Republic of China!) The poem is a satirical representation of a social system where respect for longevity, age, seniority and related generational structures leads to a cultural sensibility whereby an older generation lives off the sacrifices of the young. It ironises the standard, perhaps related to Darwinian notions of the survival of the fittest, that survival alone is the most admirable of human attributes. The poem takes a Chinese woman enjoying her sixtieth birthday bash, which is marked by feasts with the slaughter of young fowl and so forth, and juxtaposes that image of that lavish consumption with the echo of the Darwinian ethos of "Nature, red in tooth and claw" (Tennyson, "In Memoriam A.H.H."). The survivor is here transformed into a kind of vampire figure, drinking the blood of the slaughtered

⁸ Lim returned to Hong Kong in 2012-13.

fowl. The blood image is in fact fairly domestic, for Chinese culinary practice, as with Irish blood sausages, incorporates the use of animal blood in many of its dishes.

As an American, I have myself given a great deal of thought to the pressures on the younger generation as it has to support us older folks; and I am critical of my generation that takes this sacrifice for granted, especially of those who refuse to retire and thus to open opportunities to the younger adults who need to find employment.

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