

‘My Father’s Daughter’: Filial Dislocation in Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s Poetry

GRACE V. S. CHIN, Universiti Sains Malaysia

Introduction

In her award-winning memoir *Among the White Moon Faces: Memoirs of a Nyonya Feminist* (1996), Shirley Geok-lin Lim recollects with searing poignancy her difficult experiences as a young girl growing up in a patriarchal Chinese *Peranakan* (acculturated Chinese-Malay) family in Malacca. As the only girl in a household filled with the male presence of her father and brothers, Lim was made aware of gender difference at a young age. This consciousness is very much located in the body—in this case, the growing, formative body of Lim’s childhood years, which had experienced the “wild” freedom of “[running] around with boys and alone through the streets,” crowded and crammed household spaces, hunger and malnutrition, as well as the violence of her father’s blind rages.¹ The first time Lim’s father hit her marked not just a pivotal turning-point in their relationship, but also a profound shift within her psychical and subjective self. This was, after all, a father who had flouted patrilineal conventions by loving and favoring her, a girl child who should have been marginalized in a culture that traditionally glorifies the male descent; instead, he treated her as “a gift, a treasured child” (48). Lim’s early memories of her beloved father are not only associated with warmth and happiness, but are also anchored by a bodily sense of comfort and security: “As a child I adored my father’s body He was warm and solid; it made me happy to touch his flesh lightly with my fingers, then drift back into sleep” (58). Their relationship dynamic was however irrevocably shattered—as was her sense of physical and emotional well-being—when he hit her, a traumatic moment imprinted by very different embodied emotions and sensations, those of destabilization, abandonment, and intense shame: “The shame was like a hot stone I had swallowed, different from the pain of caning. It was inside my body, it went bruising, slowly, down my chest, and settled in my stomach” (60–61).

Relived as a “lifelong sense of the evening as the hour of abandonment,” this traumatic experience of a father-turned-“fearful stranger” in the dark should be considered as one of profound psychical and emotional rupture and dislocation: “I can mark that moment as the consciousness of another self, a sullen within, hating the father who beat me” (60, 60, 61). An embodied memory in which the physical and subjective states of pain, hurt, anger, abandonment, and shame coalesced in the moment of trauma, Lim’s early experience of rupture and dislocation not only left a profound and lasting impression on her body and consciousness, but is also replayed in her writing, notably in the poems that depict the father figure.² Written in the first-person voice of the daughter, these poems are deeply personal, even autobiographical, as they provide a glimpse into the “depth of [Lim’s] responses and the interiority of [her] feelings” towards her father in the exploration of themes that include memory, sacrifice, (dis)connection, and dislocation.³ Interestingly, some of these poems make effective use of space, especially geographical sites and places, to signify the heightened states of dislocation—physical, emotional, and psychological—that attend the filial relationship. It is this motif of filial dislocation that interests me, for it can be traced back to that defining moment of traumatic rupture in Lim’s childhood, which has since informed her negotiation with the father figure in poetic articulation. As Jennifer Harding and E. Deidre Pribram put it, “[g]endered subjects must live and *feel* the specificities of such emotional occurrences or events, and they must constantly re-enact—re-live and re-feel—those specificities as part of the ongoing performance and maintenance of their identities.”⁴

Drawing on the father figure in Lim’s poetry, and correspondingly the father-daughter dynamic in her poetry, I trace the motif of filial dislocation as well as the complex and ambivalent emotions and meanings it both evokes and troubles. Doing so allows me to examine Lim’s emotional response towards her father in memory, and how she engages the filial dynamic in the process. Studies on and interviews with Lim have explored her experience of dislocation in myriad forms, including political uprootedness and displacement (in Malaysia, her original homeland, where she felt she could no longer belong due to the politics that had marginalized her as a Malaysian English-speaking Chinese) and diasporic rootlessness (in America, where her sense of exile, alienation, and estrangement was exacerbated).⁵ Here however, I would like to examine how her traumatic experience of her father’s violence constitutes a subjective and psychological form of dislocation, one rooted in embodied emotional states of shame, abandonment, and destabilization. This sudden, and violent, experience with loss is also translated via the mnemonic loss of the warm solidity of her father’s body, which she had loved as a child and was also the source of her emotional well-being and security. In later years, geopolitical and diasporic conditions of non-belonging and rootlessness would reify her embodied memories and experiences of childhood dislocation (of which there are many, including her mother’s abandonment; the uprooting of home and family; and the constant insecurity of living with a father and his “pursuit of women, his gambling, and his rages”), affecting in the process her

emotional and imagined response towards her father in poetic articulation.⁶ This can be seen in the paradoxical way in which she seeks connection with her father by locating her writing in geographical spaces specifically associated with emotional familial and filial bonds, while simultaneously using geographical distance to deflect and vex, even dislocate, those very same bonds.

Generally defined as a “disruption” to the norm or established system, the term “dislocation” has been popularly used in diasporic studies in relation to states of exile, rootlessness, displacement, and non-belonging; however, “dislocation” also refers to an “injury” or “wound,” as when a bodily joint is out of place.⁷ Both meanings are relevant to my analysis, for they underline Lim’s diasporic identity while highlighting a wounded father–daughter relationship. While I coin the term “filial dislocation” to define this relationship, which is marked by the embodied emotions and memories of a ruptured interiority, I also find that using this term as a critical concept and strategy allows me to examine how Lim engages with the father figure in poetic representation, and the different emotions and meanings it articulates. In this manner, I can trace the trajectory of filial dislocation and the distinctive ways it unfolds in the internal drama of her poetic world. Linking the subjective interiority and the act of poetic articulation, my concept of filial dislocation is employed to illuminate the psychological, affective, and embodied relations between identity, emotion, and expression, as well as the intricate ways in which these relations are informed by the cultural bonds of filial piety and family.

To understand why the cultural discourse of filial piety is important to my analysis, I return to my earlier quote from Harding and Pribram as it informs my thinking in two significant ways. First, it illuminates how emotion—often linked to notions of interiority, or the inner, private realm, in everyday discourse—is not some mere spontaneous or universal experience, one “least subject to control, least constructed or learned,” as has been popularly perceived.⁸ Instead, Harding and Pribram and other theorists in contemporary cultural studies argue that emotion is given structure through the embedded epistemological systems of power, representation, and meaning.⁹ Emotion is therefore a significant discourse instituted in social practice, and constructed by contextual and contingent specificities of history, culture, society, and geopolitics. Although taken for granted and underrated in the rituals and routines of everyday life, emotion nonetheless powerfully constitutes our sense of identity and place of belonging in the world, for it operates through social and cultural bonds, interactions, and relationships that include the father-led patriarchal family—a point relevant to my analysis as I see in Lim’s poetic articulation the mediation of filial piety, a dominant ideology that defines the parent–child relationship in the collectivist, family-oriented, and gender-biased culture of the Chinese Peranakan in Malaysia.

Second, Harding and Pribram also raise the crucial point that the acts of reliving and re feeling are necessary to the performance and maintenance of identity. In Lim’s case, these acts are translated through writing, which can be understood as the symbolic site of negotiating identity—as a poet, a daughter, a woman, and an

individual—and filial performance. However, we should bear in mind too that while Lim's writing and poetic articulation have been informed by her past and personal history, they are nonetheless very much the acts of negotiated individual agency, and through which trauma and its attendant states of rupture and dislocation are turned into critical sites of investigation and interrogation of the self and its subjective interiority. This assertive and liberating act of self-determination is captured in Lim's memoir as she explains how she "learned to love" her abusive father again:

Hate does not explain love, but it sharpens love, in as much as it gives us the power to see the fragilities of the object of our hate. From the moment my father beat me, I became aware of his weakness rather than of his power. While I feared the pain of his canings, I never came to fear him; instead I came to acknowledge the depth of my responses and the interiority of my feelings ... I felt the power of my unhappiness, and therefore the power of my personhood. I learned to love my father again because I pitied him, and I pitied him because he gave me the power to hate him.¹⁰

This excerpt taps into the dialectic and relational ways in which emotion, subjectivity, and identity engage each other in the negotiation of responses, performances, acts, or expressions of feeling, whether by reinforcing or contesting each other, or simply by coexisting in ambiguous, ambivalent, or arbitrary states. Above all, it affirms that emotion can be deployed to resist, trouble, interrogate, deconstruct, and subvert the discursive specificities that inform the subjective self and identity. Lim's turning of her hatred and her awareness of it into a form of self-empowerment should be considered as yet another pivotal psychical shift in her subjective interiority, one that also lends insight into her writing and poetic articulation as an important site of intervention and negotiation inasmuch as it is the site of identity performance. My reading of Lim's poems has to take into account the meaningful ways in which her diasporic and feminist identity and consciousness have also contributed to her negotiation of filial identity and performance in writing.

With these arguments in mind, I now turn to a brief overview of Lim's family and cultural background, and the importance of filial piety in these spaces and in Lim's writing.

Writing Filial Piety and Cultural Identity

Lim's relationship with her father—and her negotiation with it in writing—can only be analyzed within the cultural context of the Chinese Peranakan, if only to help us to comprehend the discursive effects of culture on the poet's subjective interiority during the formative years of childhood. It should be noted that Lim's father was a Malayan

Chinese, while her mother was a Peranakan. Despite these subtle ethnic differences, their cultures converge in significant ways, one of which is the concept of filial piety. Unlike the “new” Chinese immigrants who arrived in Malaya during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the roots of the Peranakan (also known as *Baba-Nyonya* or the Straits Chinese) can be traced as far back as the fifteenth century, when Chinese male immigrants settled in Malacca and married local Malay women.¹¹ Centuries of racial and cultural intermingling have resulted in a uniquely hybridized identity and heritage: on the one hand, the Peranakan have adopted local Malay language, food, and clothes, but on the other, they have retained the majority of their ancestral Chinese customs. Despite the generations of acculturation in Malacca, the Peranakan community has retained a syncretic blend of “Chinese belief systems such as Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism,” including the Chinese cultural practices of filial piety (孝 in Chinese, or *xiào* in pinyin) and ancestral worship, both of which are deemed central to their identity.¹²

Premised on the Confucian values of hierarchy, loyalty, submission, and obligation, filial piety as a discursive trope and practice presupposes the “sacred” bond between parent and child, whereby the child—especially the eldest son—should always respect, obey, and care for the parent, especially in his/her old age. Underlying this concept is the “ethos of mutually caring reciprocity” whereby the children who are cared for in their youth should, in turn, give back or repay their parents’ love and nurture by taking care of them when they are old; however, such a practice has also been criticized for appearing contractual or businesslike, more of a quid pro quo transaction than of mutual care and reciprocity.¹³ It is not uncommon for children to give their parents an amount of money every month once they have entered the workforce; the money is more than mere utilitarian means for the parents’ upkeep, for it also symbolizes the child’s “repayment of kindness, as indicated by the Chinese adage ‘Raise children to ensure old-age support.’”¹⁴ Ideologically too, filial piety as a cultural concept is ideally extended to the wider community in which children’s obedient deference to the elderly, or those senior in rank or age, helps maintain the collective bonds of interdependence among family, kin, and community members; in this manner, family harmony and social cohesion are achieved. Within the collectivist cultures of the Chinese and the Peranakan, the individual self or “I” is thus conceived differently, since “it is circumscribed by the family order: ‘not me but us.’”¹⁵

In writing her memoir, Lim demonstrates an innate understanding of filial piety as a symbolic and performative act of “giving back,” one that articulates her identity as a filial daughter: “In writing the bank drafts I remained my father’s daughter, returning to Father the bargain we had made.”¹⁶ Interpellated by the collective body and bonds of the family, the individual self is rendered, as Lim describes it, “paltry, phantasmagoric; it leaks and slips away. It is the family, parents, siblings, cousins, that signify the meaning of self, and beyond the family, the extended community” (251). By imagining her family in a “serpent-like familial swim,” Lim also underlines the cultural self as materially and emotionally inextricable from the omnipotent body of the father: “all of us children extruded from my father like grown sperm, links in an unbreakable,

undrownable chain” (58). An important document of Chinese Peranakan life and culture in Malacca during the first half of the twentieth century, Lim's memoir discloses how the community has upheld the paternalistic-patrilineal traditions of the Chinese in which women are regulated and produced as marginal, inferior, and subservient other; within this system, the first-born son is usually “prized,” while a daughter is seen as a “despised female” (48).

Despite this sexist discourse, Lim had, as noted earlier, experienced otherwise; she held that rare “unequal position over [her] brothers” because of her father's love and favoritism (48). Distinctively “un-Chinese” (41), Lim's father is characterized as a man influenced by colonial and Western ideologies and images, and who had in his own way rebelled against Chinese cultural tradition by naming Lim after the famous American child actor, Shirley Temple, and speaking to his children in English—the language that the poet has claimed her own, and which has enabled her to “step out of the iron cage and into a voice.”¹⁷ Lim also shares her father's rebellious Western-inspired spirit in her use of English to trouble the Chinese cultural narrative of filial piety which she observes is changing in contemporary practice due to the discursive forces of postindependence developments, liberal (post)modernity, and the digitalized and tech-oriented world, not to mention the cultural flows engendered by globalization, including transnational and diasporic contact and movements. In her poem “Burning Gold Paper,” Lim reflects on how the second-generation diasporic Chinese in the West have lost touch with their cultural traditions as a result of being raised in a different time and space: “Ancestors deserve respect, and we deserve / The children we've raised in the West, / Unfilial.”¹⁸ This realization of the disappearing ancient custom in the West is seen in the framing of the last stanza, which ends on an ominous note, “Beware the child,” “straight into hell.”

If “Burning Gold Paper” cautions against the loss of cultural identity, the next few poems reveal otherwise, as they navigate the difficult and private terrain of father and daughter in Lim's poetic articulation and imagination. Tracing the motif of filial dislocation through the themes of memory, (dis)connection, and dislocation in these poems, I explore the trajectory of the father–daughter dynamic and its different representations: from the subjective interiority of the self and its embodied memories and emotions, to the private dreamscape and imagined world of father and daughter, and beyond—the exterior geographic sites and locations. Despite the movement and shift between these different spaces, I find there is a constant dialogue between interior and exterior geographies, which are intertextually linked by complex articulations of filial piety as a performance of identity. Towards the end of my analysis, I will consider how the gendered understanding of the father–daughter relationship further complicates the filial dynamic.

Filial Dislocation in Shirley Lim's Poetry

I begin my analysis with “My Father,” which provides a gendered take on what at first appears to be a conventional father–daughter relationship in traditional Chinese culture.¹⁹ First published in the award-winning anthology *Crossing the Peninsula & Other Poems* (1980), the poem presents a daughter's first-person viewpoint, and touches on her performance of filial and gender identity. It is also personal in tone, bearing Lim's autobiographical details in the allusion to domestic abuse: “Nervous, / I remember, as though he's raised his fist, / And I'm cowed again in misery” (231). This embodied memory establishes the emotional dynamic between father and daughter, both fixed in their respective roles and identities as strict parent and obedient child; this is seen when the persona seems to comply with her father's wish in the first stanza for her to “[p]lease finish your studies” with the reply: “I will, father, to make your heart swell, ... / You'll have a daughter to show the neighbours, / To wink at; to keep your years well” (231). Proper, deferent, the reply is one expected of a filial daughter who wants to make her father proud, and who acknowledges the inherent filial obligation to care for him, “keep your years well,” in his old age. The established parent–child relationship is however undermined in the final stanza, when the image of the stern, abusive father is complicated by the suggestion of his immense love for his daughter, albeit limited in its expression due to constrained financial or material means: “my father had wanted / Everything, if he could afford it, / To make me happy” (231). Of interest here is the subversive way in which the persona unsettles the filial narrative with the final two lines: “I am sorry / Then I had not learned enough to lie” (231). Does this mean that she has since learnt to lie? And that whatever she has said should not be taken at face value? Through the transgressive figure of a daughter who has learnt to deceive her father, and whose filial obedience cannot be counted on, Lim raises questions that resist and vex the established parent–child trope within the Chinese cultural worldview and dislocates the filial dynamic in place.

If “My Father” presents a subversive and resistant voice, the next poem, “My Father's Sadness,” captures a much more complex and nuanced emotional response towards the father figure.²⁰ This poem is an example of how Lim works through the embodied memories of her father, whose body is recalled in her memoir as “lean, muscular,” a young man who had, after nineteen years of age, “entered a world of breeding, of feeding hungry mouths, of struggle and failure, small pleasures, and modest hopes.”²¹ Evoking empathy and love, “My Father's Sadness” draws on the theme of a father's sacrifice for his family, and whose “sadness appears in my dream” and “masks my face” (282). Speaking for her father, the persona—a filial daughter—in her dream inhabits her father's body, feeling what the father feels, this man who has sacrificed his youth and dreams for his children. The persona laments his unfulfilled desires, which “drum in my chest,” and his lost dream of being “a young body / with only his life before him,” while his frustration is palpable in the lines, “tense like a young man with a full moon / with no woman in sight” (282). This father is aging,

“dying;” his “young body” is unable to cope with the “many men and women” emerging from him: his children (282). Financially, physically, and emotionally “broke / with each child,” the father still “claims paternity”; he cannot run away from his duty towards his family, just as the child cannot escape his/her filial obligation (282).

Tender, empathetic, and melancholic in tone, the poem nonetheless suggests that the father's inability to cope with so many children—his “young body is dying of responsibility”—is one of his own making (282). Depending on viewpoint and interpretation, the father can be seen as chained and burdened, “a bull under the axle;” a victim of forces beyond control, like “the mangrove netted by lianas”; or perhaps, as the final two lines suggest, “the host / perishing of its lavishness” (282). It is in these last two lines that the persona's veiled criticism of her father is discerned: an “oriental” patriarch living up to the stereotype of the Asian man who is unable to control his excesses, and stop producing children. By undermining the earlier images of the father's selfless sacrifice with the subversive critique of his self-centeredness, Lim subtly dislocates the filial relationship and her filial performance as she switches from the empathetic voice of a loving daughter to that of the critic in the last two lines.

Lim's embodied memories of her father are not just framed by her past and personal history, but also—as mentioned earlier—by her diasporic experiences of alienation and estrangement. Geography has always been important to Lim's writing and can be found in the representations of transnational and diasporic identity, subjecthood, liminality, roots and routes, homeland and belonging, as well as exile and displacement, among others. In the following poems however, I analyze how geographical sites are transformed by memory as emotionally resonant spaces in poetic imagination and expression. Informed by Asia as both the place and space of negotiating and articulating the complex meanings of family, roots, and home, the three poems—“Bukit China,” “Father in China,” and “Father from Asia”—are interesting examples of the spatial mediation of Lim's embodied memories as she relives and refeels her relationship with her father. These poems are for me some of Lim's most affective as they deal with the painful and difficult subject of a father's death and a daughter's attempts to come to terms with it. Both “Father in China” and “Bukit China” in fact allude to the time when Lim, studying in the US, received news of her father who had already died and been buried “two weeks ago,” while “Father from Asia” examines the father's continued hold on the daughter who emotionally tries to distance herself.²² Significantly, there is a kind of linear progression in thought and elucidation of the subject-matter, as a result of which all three poems can be read in dialogic relation, or intertextually, with each other. In all three poems too, filial dislocation is conveyed through the metaphors of geographical location and distance, which is used to great effect to comment on the performance of filial and gender identity.

In “Father in China,” a strained father–daughter relationship is communicated to the reader via one-sided letters from the father, who tells his daughter “Chinese medicine can also / calibrate blood-cells.”²³ Diagnosed with throat cancer, the father

refuses an operation in Malaysia, deciding instead to go to China for treatment, and from where he mails the persona a “frugal picture / black and white, two inches by / two inches, sent across two oceans” (309). The photo reveals a father all alone, “gaunt,” and bereft of family, standing “under a tree in China” (309). Displaced and alienated in China, “my father from Malaysia” is as “unhoused” as the persona is, “in yet another country” (309). Ironically, the parallels between father and daughter serve to highlight the distance and disconnection between them; he, trying to communicate with his daughter; she, unable to respond, until it is too late:

I do not know how to write
to him. I do not have his motherland
address. I do not pick up
the black coffin telephone.
No one tells me he’s dead
till he’s been buried.
Today I would call Canton
person-to-person. (310)

Regardless of how one might read the series of negative, or crippled, action in “I do not”—whether in terms of incapacitation, apathy, or disavowal, what matters here is the manner in which the daughter uses geographic space and dislocation to achieve emotional distance from her father, and in so doing reveals the fractures in their relationship. If her ambivalent silence speaks of an unspoken wound too great to overcome, news of the father’s death nonetheless releases her from it: “Today I would call Canton / person-to-person.” Belatedly, the daughter desires to reconcile with her father, to show him her daughter’s filial love, if only through the utilitarian imagery of “a ticket” to Sloan-Kettering, and “bank / accounts and dollar notes to save / your life here in another country” (310). The futility of this belated gesture is poignantly expressed in the final, terse line: “Instead I write this poem” (310). Subdued, matter-of-fact, and yet powerfully packed with inarticulate emotions, this line can be read as Lim’s belated filial attempt to give back, or “save,” her father’s life, if only in writing. However, this attempt is simultaneously thwarted by its unfinished performance and articulation of filial piety. The daughter can never fulfill her filial obligation, nor can her writing make up for her loss: “[T]he act of writing cannot truly resurrect the dead and a poem can never compensate for a lost life.”²⁴ Fifteen years later, the black-and-white photo of the father is still “preserved ... in plastic,” carried everywhere, between “student visas,” “check book / and dollar notes” (309); it is constant reminder of the daughter’s dislocated and unresolved relationship with her father, mourned from afar, both in time and place.

“Bukit China” continues the theme of (dis)connection and mourning with the daughter’s return to Bukit China (or Chinese Hill in English) in Malacca, where she pays respect to “my father’s bones.”²⁵ Based in Malacca, Lim’s birthplace and hometown

in Malaysia, Bukit China houses the world's largest Chinese cemetery outside of China—"A dead land," and serves as an iconic space for the representation of Malaysian Chinese identity and roots (283). In legend, Bukit China was a gift from Sultan Mansor Shah to the Chinese princess Hang Li Po, who married him in the fifteenth century. The princess and the five hundred Chinese youths who had accompanied her to Malacca lived in Bukit China, which has since become the symbolic birthplace of the Peranakan community, of which Lim is a descendant. By imaginatively locating her poem in Bukit China in Malacca, Lim symbolically returns to her family home and communal roots, and by extension, her original homeland, Malaysia. But even this idea of "return" is problematic, for the persona's journey is incomplete—"I am returning"—and suggests the ambivalent and unfinished project of the diasporic identity and gendered subjectivity, whose own emotional journey would always be articulated as a sign of incompleteness—echoing the motif examined in "Father in China." Already difficult and painful, the persona's journey of return to her original homeland is fraught with the emotional implications of identity, memory, and place, for the geographical site of return carries bittersweet memories of her father—"For nights, remembering bamboo / And bats cleared in his laughter"—inasmuch as it represents a repudiated past: "A dead land" (283). Alluding to the opening lines in T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" (1922)—"Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing / Memory and desire," Lim touchingly pays homage to her father by immortalizing him alongside what is considered the greatest modernist poem in English-language literary history—an act that also deepens the inarticulate interiority of this poem; but at the same time, the poem is culturally dislocated, as it does not carry the same significant meaning within the Malaysian Chinese and Peranakan context.²⁶

Of significance here is the juxtaposition of the material and the immaterial, in which the spiritual world and its material counterpart intersect in the performative rites of remembrance:

Bless me, spirits, I am returning.
Stone marking my father's bones,
I light the joss. (283)

The opening line establishes the intangible world; the second evokes the material space of the father's body, reduced to bones; and the third marks the start of cultural ritual and the performance of filial identity. The lighting of the joss is an important one in the cultural traditions of both the Chinese and the Peranakan. It is not the joss that matters so much as the incense smoke, which travels upwards; it symbolically links earth and heaven, and connects the supplicant who lights the joss with the gods or spirits in the otherworld, carrying his/her prayers to them.²⁷ This is why joss and incense are traditionally used to signify cultural and religious rituals, whether for ancestral worship, prayers, or funerals. The poem reflects this understanding with the crucial imagery of geography—"dead land"; "Country is important, / Is important."

Connoting territory, even in death, and the desire for a place / space to belong to, the intangible smoke of the joss conveys the material needs of the departed spirits in cultural imaginary (283). But at the same time, the emphasis on “Country” and its importance also points to Lim’s own unfinished diasporic and emotional journey. Repeatedly used, the imagery of smoke—“ascends,” “rise,” and “[b]earing sunwards”—reveals the insistent hope for a personal albeit belated connection with the father who now belongs to the spirit world (283). This hope, however, is transient, as “smoke ascends / Briefly”; it is further undermined by the uncertainty of whether—“[i]f”—her knowledge of place and belonging “will rise with smoke, with the dead” (283).

As in “Father in China,” the emotions in “Bukit China” are too painful to voice; it is in the action, or the lack of, where the articulation of the persona’s subjective interiority is located. Similarly too, there is a series of negative action, which can be found in the second stanza:

I did not put on straw, black,
Gunnysack, have not fastened
Grief on shoulder, walked mourning
Behind, pouring grief before him,
Not submitted to his heart. (283)

This series of action represents the Chinese funeral rites that have *not* been performed by the persona; this failure casts her filial obedience in doubt even as she makes the emotional appeal to filial bonds: “My father’s daughter, I pour / No brandy before memory” (283). Simultaneously carrying both a claim and a denial, these two masterful lines convey the conflicting states of attachment *and* detachment that underline the ambivalent interiority of the persona’s subjective and psychological states, reflecting the unfinished and unresolved process of “returning.” Her expression of filial piety lies not in the unperformed funeral rites, but in the imagery of the incense that carries her unspoken hope in the final line, “grave bitter smoke” (283). The clearest indication of the persona’s subjective response to her father’s death and memory, this emotionally laden imagery also painfully dislocates the filial hope conveyed in the very first line, “[b]less me, spirits, I am returning.”

Compared to “Bukit China” and “Father in China,” the final poem in the geographical grouping, “Father from Asia,” marks a distinct departure in its treatment of the filial narrative, exposing the emotional injuries and psychical dislocation that had never quite healed.²⁸ “Father from Asia” further develops the theme of (dis-)connection—and the attendant states of attachment and detachment—established earlier in “Bukit China” and “Father in China”; however, these conflicting states are aggravated by the poet’s own heightened emotions. Unlike the restrained tone and emotional response of the two earlier poems, Lim’s feelings here are eloquently expressed: angry, bitter, anguished, and ambivalent. “Father from Asia” opens with the familiar refrain—the father seeking connection with the daughter, the persona:

“Father, you turn your hands towards me” (313). However, the persona can only see in the gesture and those hands the painful memories of her past: “Large cracked bowls, they are empty / stigmata of poverty” (313). The daughter’s bitter denunciation of her father is clear: she has suffered impoverishment and wounds at his hands, and he has nothing to offer her; “father of nothing, from whose life / I have learned nothing for myself” (313). Adding weight to the already dislocated filial relationship is the gendered criticism of the Asian, and specifically Chinese, patriarch who is represented as the “Ghost / who eats his own children, father / who lives at the center of the world” (313).

Embodying paternalistic authority and consciousness in both the material and spiritual spheres, this omnipotent children-eating Ghost of a patriarch cannot be escaped from, either in cultural ideology and discourse or in the poet’s imagination. Time and again, she desperately tries to sever her ties with the father from her past, who is inextricably linked to the imagining of Asia:

I renounce you, keep you in my sleep,
keep you two oceans away. Ghost
who eats his own children, father
who lives at the center of the world,
whose life I dare not remember,
for memory is a wheel that crushes,
and Asia is dust, is dust. (313)

In these tension-filled lines, the structural pull-push movements of the poem dramatize the conflicted interiority of the persona as she struggles with her father’s memory. On the one hand, the persona repeatedly rejects him: “I must back away”; “I renounce you”; “keep you two oceans away.” But on the other hand, she wants to “keep you in my sleep.” The oscillation between the acts of keeping him “away” or of keeping him “in” her life reflects the difficulty of breaking filial ties, even in dreams and imagination. In her memoir, Lim makes this clear: “For years, I woke up nights, heart beating wildly. Oh Asia, that nets its children in ties of blood so binding that they cut the spirit.”²⁹ Despite the geographical and temporal distance and dislocation invoked by the metaphor of “two oceans”—echoing the imagery used in “Father in China”—between them, the father’s memory in “Father from Asia” is deemed “dangerous.” Likened to a Ghost that keeps haunting and consuming her life, a “wheel that crushes” the spirit, the memory of the past and her father must be disavowed at all costs, “I dare not remember.” The only possible avenue of escape from memory, then, is to lay waste to Asia in a willed act of imagination, symbolically crushing the geographic home of her father and childhood past, together with her wounds, hurt, and pain, to “dust.”

The final poem under analysis here is “Black and White,” which explores the filial dynamic through the struggle with memory.³⁰ As with the poems analyzed earlier, “Black and White” weaves past and present as it navigates the painful memories of the poet’s father, and her own troubled relationship with him. Recurring allusions—to

the “black and white” photo in “Father in China,” and the father’s dangerous “power to hold / his children in his power,” which reminds one of “Father from Asia”—intertextually link the poems, with the recurring imagery highlighting once more the relentless grip of memory, and the poet’s own inability, or unwillingness, to let go of her father’s memory. In “Black and White,” this theme is captured by the haunting image of the persona’s father, a “vulnerable” black and white “figure in a snapshot, / a specimen of cancer,” which “persists” in dogging her in her “middle-aged dream” (311). Unlike the angry, bitter persona who wishes to reduce Asia and the memories it holds to “dust” in “Father from Asia,” here the persona is more willing to walk down memory lane, recalling the different facets of her father, one who loved “American shows” and “John Wayne, Bill Haley, the American / Bandstand,” and whom she could talk to as a child, “openly, affectionately,” “about love” (311-12). She remembers too her own body, how she “fell asleep in front / of his black and white television,” feeling the earthy stability and security of her childhood home, and the comforting presence of her father’s television: “My body grew black earth” (312). This embodied memory speaks of the true meaning of home—captured by the fertile black earth in which roots can grow—that only a father’s love can provide.

However, the persona also remembers how their relationship changed once she began to develop, physically and sexually: “Between my legs a dangerous charm / I never showed my father” (312). From the open, artless child who can only innocently see her father as nothing else but a father, the growing “sullen daughter” takes a more cautious view, as the father has become a more threatening figure in her eyes: “a man” (311). The father, too, is shown to be perplexed by the transformations in his daughter’s appearance and body; as the persona observes, he does not “[seem] to understand who I was,” the young “girl doing the twist, / the cha-cha,” wearing “tight blue jeans / and give-away lipstick, / moving to the drums of the conga” (311). It is in this manner that the poem’s thematic subject is complicated by gendered insights into the kinds of barriers that take shape as the result of the persona’s burgeoning body and sexuality, as well as their effects on the filial dynamic. Refusing to perform her filial and gender identity as a “*Peranakan* / daughter” who “has tamed / her dancing body,” the daughter is likened by the father to a “black and white” image from television—someone unrelated and removed, “like an American” (312). This growing gap or distance between father and daughter marks the dislocation of their relationship, with the unspoken barrier of her sexuality between them. The poem ends with the persona quietly reflecting on their changed father–daughter dynamic. Dreaming she is a child again, open and affectionate with her father, and the barriers between them gone, she subtly acknowledges her filial love, described as “his power to hold / his children in his power.” At the same time, she also comes to terms with her feelings: “No secrets / about my love for him now” (312). Now in her middle age, the persona finds herself mourning her father all over again. However, her grief is not for the physical loss of her father, but for her “disappearing” memory of him:

for in my memory he is disappearing,
 pound for pound, into the photograph
 of a man, hardly middle-aged,
 with his good-bye smile, and I want
 to weep, to hold his body for once,
 as a woman holds a child,
 so her caring may be cleansed. (312)

The final lines are delivered with painful honesty as they reflect on the futility of regret. Unable to perform her filial duty of caring for her father in his time of need, the persona wants to, in a reversal of parent-child roles, “hold his body” as “a woman holds a child,” and find absolution and release in the act. Much too late, this deferred articulation of filial love is both heartbreaking and pointless.

Conclusion

In examining the father figure in Lim's poetry, I trace the permutations of filial dislocation as a motif and concept, and find that the trajectory it takes both navigates and traverses the interior and exterior terrains of memory and imagination, body and geography, and in ways that highlight the complex psychological, affective, and embodied dimensions that underline the articulations and performance of filial and gender identity. Ambivalent, painful, and contradictory, Lim's father-related poems attest to the persistence of memory and its continued effects on the poet's subjective interiority and (un)consciousness, as she keeps “returning” to the symbolic sites in which her father's memory lives: the recurring imagery of the “black and white” photo and “two oceans,” the insistent albeit belated desire for connection, and the repeated act of “returning” to Asia, the place associated with the father, and the site of an unresolved past. In translating her “personal history into poetry,” Lim relives and refeels in her writing the wounds of a damaged father-daughter relationship, which also mark the ruptured space of a traumatized subjectivity.³¹ These wounds live on in her poems in an unfinished and unsettled state that is visualized by the conflicting tension between attachment and detachment, and between connection and dislocation, as well as by actions not taken, and emotions not spoken. Time cannot heal this dislocated filial relationship; but neither can the persona in these poems reconnect with her father, or find release from his powerful hold.

While these poems enable Lim to work through her embodied memories of her father and the difficult emotions they carry, they must at the same time also be understood as her way of remembering her father, whose “undocumented, unrecorded, and therefore unvalued and unsaved” life is given voice so that it can be made “useful.”³² Constituting the symbolic site of recovering and recuperating paternal life and history, Lim's writing about her father can also be interpreted as the ultimate filial act of “giving back,” so that he may continue to live on in textual, literary, and cultural forms. Within this understanding then lies the central paradox of Lim's

negotiation with her past and her identity—as a feminist poet, a daughter, and a gendered individual, for her act of reconnecting and reconciling with her father’s memory can only take place through the articulations of filial dislocation.

Notes

¹ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces: Memoirs of a Nyonya Feminist*, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur: Times Books, 1996, 82.

² For Lim’s insight into how memory, including traumatic memory, is translated through the body and language in the writing of her memoir, read Shirley Geok-lin Lim, “Embodied Memory and Memoir,” *Biography* 26, no. 3 (Summer 2003): 442–44.

³ Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces*, 61.

⁴ Jennifer Harding and E. Deidre Pribram, “Introduction: The Case for a Cultural Emotion Studies,” in *Emotions: A Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Jennifer Harding and E. Deidre Pribram (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 13.

⁵ Studies include Mohammad A. Quayum, ed., “Special Issue on Shirley Geok-lin Lim,” *Asiatic* 8, no. 1 (June 2014): 1–208; Eddie Tay, “Hegemony, National Allegory, Exile: The Poetry of Shirley Lim,” *Textual Practice* 19, no. 3 (2005): 289–308; and Grace V. S. Chin, “The Anxieties of Authorship in Malaysian and Singaporean Writings in English: Locating the English Language Writer and the Question of Freedom in the Postcolonial Era,” *Postcolonial Text* 2, no. 4 (2006): 1–24. Interviews with Lim are similarly revealing about her ambivalent sense of belonging and place: see Mohammad A. Quayum, “Shirley Geok-lin Lim: An Interview,” *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* 28, no. 4 (2003): 83–100; and Mohammad A. Quayum, “The Apprentice Years: Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s ‘First’ Interview,” *Asiatic* 11, no. 1 (June 2017): 229–43.

⁶ Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces*, 57. For an analysis of how Lim invokes her mother in writing, see Andrew Ng, “The Maternal Imagination in the Poetry of Shirley Lim,” *Women: A Cultural Review* 18, no. 2 (2007): 162–81. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09574040701400239>.

⁷ “Dislocation,” *Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dislocation>.

⁸ Lila Abu-Lughod and Catherine A. Lutz. “Emotion, Discourse, and the Politics of Everyday Life,” in *Emotions: A Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Jennifer Harding and E. Deidre Pribram (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 100.

⁹ Harding and Pribram, “Introduction,” 1–23.

¹⁰ Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces*, 61.

¹¹ Malaya is the name given by the colonial British to the group of territories under their rule, known today as Peninsular or West Malaysia.

¹² Hanafi Hussin, "Bridging the Past and Present through Food Heritage among Peranakan Chinese of the Straits of Malacca," *Jati* 19 (December 2014): 219–20.

¹³ Edward. R. Canda, "Filial Piety and Care for Elders: A Contested Confucian Virtue Reexamined," *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Diversity in Social Work* 22, nos. 3–4 (2013): 215, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15313204.2013.843134>.

¹⁴ Canda, "Filial Piety and Care for Elders," 216.

¹⁵ Elisabeth Croll, *Changing Identities of Chinese Women: Rhetoric, Experience and Self-Perception in Twentieth-Century China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1995), 64.

¹⁶ Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces*, 251.

¹⁷ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, *Writing Southeast / Asia in English: Against the Grain, Focus on Asian English Language Literature* (London: Skoob Books, 1994), 6.

¹⁸ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "Burning Gold Paper," in *The Shirley Lim Collection: Passports and Other Lives* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2011), 338.

¹⁹ Lim, "My Father," in *The Shirley Lim Collection*, 231.

²⁰ Lim, "My Father's Sadness," in *The Shirley Lim Collection*, 282.

²¹ Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces*, 57, 58.

²² Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces*, 249.

²³ Lim, "Father in China," in *The Shirley Lim Collection*, 309–10.

²⁴ Tammy Lai-ming Ho, review of *Listening to the Singer*, by Shirley Lim, *Asiatic* 3, no. 1 (June 2009): 107.

²⁵ Lim, "Bukit China," in *The Shirley Lim Collection*, 283.

²⁶ "The Waste Land by T.S. Eliot," *Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47311/the-waste-land>.

²⁷ For more on the symbolic significance of incense in Chinese culture, see Scott Habkirk and Hsun Chang, "Scents, Community, and Incense in Traditional Chinese Religion," *Material Religion* 13, no. 2 (2017): 156–74.

²⁸ Lim, "Father from Asia," in *The Shirley Lim Collection*, 313.

²⁹ Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces*, 251.

³⁰ Lim, "Black and White," in *The Shirley Lim Collection*, 311–12.

³¹ Ho, “Review,” 107.

³² Lim, *Among the White Moon Faces*, 58.

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