

“UNCLE NEVER KNEW”:  
EXPLORING EDWIN THUMBOO’S POEM—CULTURAL  
ADAPTATION, IMMIGRATION, AND FAMILY TIES IN  
SOUTHEAST ASIA

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“Uncle Never Knew,” a poem by Edwin Thumboo, describes the life of one man, transplanted to Singapore from China. But, in a sense, while the poem is the story of many sojourners all over the world, it is a reminder that each experience is different, rooted in the background, the cultural, social, political inheritance of the individual. This experience is inevitably enormously varied—and valid—despite people’s differences. The nature substance and significance lies in what each person encounters, in that tension between resistance to the old culture and way of life on the one hand, and the inducement to compromise, adapt, and seek new configurations that will enable the start of a new life in a new location.

Thumboo is from an Indian background and a Chinese background. In an article entitled “Self Images Contexts for Transformations” Thumboo describes the waves of immigrants to Singapore in the early days, “to call them immigrants is an act of hindsight, for they saw themselves as sojourners, here to earn, live frugally, and remit what they could to China and India” Thumboo describes how the immigrants eventually brought brides, educated their families, and helped re-establish “the fuller rhythms of life, a fuller sense of family” (749).

According to Thumboo:

This Uncle belongs to the Chinese half who/which came to Southeast Asia i.e. Nanyang in three waves. The first came in the late 19th century, the second in the middle of the 19th century, both to Thailand and the Moluccas, better known as the “Spice

Islands" which formed a key part of the Dutch colonial possessions. The third wave settled in Singapore in the mid-19th century and were joined almost immediately by part of the family from the Moluccas. For various reasons the Thai as well as the Dutch branches of the family lost contact with those in Singapore and also with the family in Swatow where the ancestral home was located. The links between Singapore and Swatow were strong, while those between the Moluccas and Thai branches dissolved chiefly through marriage with non-Chinese. The Singapore branch provided refuge for the Swatow members who fled China because of the internal politics of China and the threat posed by the Japanese invasion. (Interview)

Some members of that side of the family came to Singapore not to join in the creation of an efficient and safe country, as later immigrants might have, but out of a necessity. There is a vital historic division in the self-perception, attitude, expectation and vision in migrant communities when they are in a colony and when that colony achieves nationhood. In a colonial setting, such communities adapt and flourish within a clear cut power structure in which they had no part. They were motivated by the search for a successful life within a colonial dispensation that provided political and economic stability. In the case of Singapore, the Chinese form almost 80% of the population, of which the four main communities are Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese and Hainanese, chiefly from Southern China with a sprinkling from the north.

The Uncle of the poem was in Singapore from the late thirties, just before the World War II, remaining to the early fifties when he returned to China, as did a number of Singaporeans who were attracted by the challenge of returning to build China into the great nation she had been at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Singapore was still a colony. The colonial government had sought to reestablish its primary function of development and maintaining Singapore as a thriving enteroport centre within the re-immersing and colony and commerce in a Southeast Asia still controlled by the British, Dutch, French and Portuguese. The Chinese merchants and reestablished themselves. Thumboo's Uncle had been sent some ten years earlier from Swatow to join his uncle, whose business was established in Minto Road. But as he was educated it was felt he could be better apprenticed in the more varied and sophisticated business organization of a close family friend who operated in North Boat Quay.

Like many crossed cultural poems, “Uncle Never Knew” puts a Chinese experience into English. To a reader who is familiar with the general substance of Chinese life and culture located in the Singapore context, the poem will yield more on the first reading. Such a reading will provide the reader with an inside view will have a fairly strong sense of what Uncle was like. He was a scholar, had strong communist leanings if not yet fully communist, more intellectual rather than business incline. The correlation will suggest this are provided in the poem: his familiarity with Li Po, Tu Fu, as well as Mao, Marx, Engle, Lu Shun, and T’ao Ch’ien. They indicate his familiarity with the Chinese classical literary inheritance, and the nature and flux of what energize contemporary China. He is not interested in trade. His focus lay elsewhere. He did not attempt to make a life for himself within a Singapore Chinese experience as exemplified by his uncle’s family and the Chinese community at large.

The poem begins:

He lived-if you could call it that-two streets off  
Boat Quay North. Tranquil as leaves left in a teacup.

The Uncle of the poem lives in Singapore, but his soul rests in China. His location is set off from the River, where Uncle contemplates the changing world.

In the poem, Thumboo continues:

Always alone but never lonely. The daily bustle  
Of barge and coolie ferrying rubber, rice and spice,  
All energy and profit, for towkays and Guthrie’s,  
Slipped past without a ripple, or a sound, or a promise.  
No enterprising cleverness to make his brothers  
Happy, as nothing drew him to our hot meridian.

Uncle was detached from the active, commercial life of the area. Living a mere two streets from the capitalist, commercial world, he chose instead an internal life with its own busyness/business. The geography of his residence is a key point in the poem, land and water being key metaphors that we would also find in the poetry of Li Po and Tu Fu. Uncle is rooted in the land, not the moving water with its barges and multi-cultural spices being moved quickly from place to place.

The Uncle of Thumbboo's poem is described as "fingering his father's piece of jade, intoning Li Po, Tu Fu, and reading Mao".

Thumbboo's reference to Li Po elicits the image of the ultimate estranged Taoist wanderer; Tu Fu, the poet and social critic, represents the Confucian worldview; and Mao represents the communal savior gone wrong. All of these figures represent a Chineseness that is idealized, like images of Emilio Zapata or Che Guevara or the Aztec warrior now emblazoned on the t-shirts of Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants in the United States. It also suggests that his sense of politics is combined with an appreciation of the aesthetic inherence in a quality of life represented by ink and brush, his father's piece of jade, intoning the two poets, sipping tea, feeding his carps, while waiting for his friends. In the fundamental sense, he is the product of the old leisurely, Mandarin China, representing a way of life that was later to be destroyed by the Cultural Revolution. It was the way of the leisure class, the chief enemy of any communist regime. After all, he was brought up in the tradition and there was no contradiction in him wanting to be a revolutionary that supported the reconstruction of China, one freed from feudal elements and corrupt war lords and politicians. The Chinese communist party, under the leadership of Mao at that time exemplified the purity of nationalism. Uncle was therefore isolated and detached from life in Singapore because he was preoccupied, in his imagination, with life in China.

In the poem, Thumbboo states, Uncle "spoke to clouds, not people and, communing with self, he was his favorite neighbor." Self knowing is the immigrant triumph. Immigrants who are fully integrated into a culture, however, fully engage both "sides" of themselves. Thumbboo's Uncle fully knows who he is. He loves China and will never lose China; however, he is not fully a part of Singapore.

Like many current immigrants to the United States from Latin America, Mexico, Africa, and Southeast Asia, Thumbboo's uncle was more comfortable with his own culture than the melded and blended cultures of the host country. In the United States today, immigrants (many illegal) have their own shops, restaurants, and neighborhoods. They may never need to speak English and infrequently, if ever, meet with United States citizens. They are comfortable in their own skin; listening to the radio, watching television, and reading in Spanish. Thumbboo describes certain immigrants as "continu(ing) to give the appearance of submission to authority" ("Self Images" 751).

The Uncle, according to Thumboo:

was the youngest grandson of (his great grandfather's) first wife, the collateral branch where learning had greater emphasis. For reasons which we the younger generation did not know in full, he was sent to be under the patriarch of the Singapore branch, my tau-ku, to prepare for a career in his business. But this Uncle in a sense was a misfit. Firstly, he was anti-business, very much the intellectual whose life was Chinese literature and leftist politics. He saw the Chinese Communist Party under Mao as offering salvation while the corrupt Kuomintang Government under Chiang Kai Shek had to be replaced. The Uncle was naturally, strongly anti Japanese. Given his combination of interests it was felt that Singapore would be a safe place for him. (Interview)

Like immigrants to the United States, Uncle found a home where he could read and think radically, but, as long as he did not "rock the boat," he could survive.

According to Thumboo, if his Uncle had stayed longer, he might have participated more freely in the creation of a multi-cultural Singapore. He might have learned more English and participated in his nephew's success. Perhaps, Thumboo feels, Singapore's "semi-socialist ways" of distributing wealth would have been something he could have participated in (Interview).

In the poem, Thumboo describes the dilemma of his Uncle:

Great houses are history, clan, essential unity; belief.  
 A way of life which brooks no breaking of fidelity.  
 Rooted comforts reaffirm; nothing is extinguished.  
 Memory is full and whole; he was ensconced; secure.  
 For a few it's the only pulse. Many need this bedrock,  
 This island, so little that Cheng Ho barely noticed

In this passage, Thumboo uses Cheng Ho, fifteenth century explorer that sailed the seas to India, as a metaphor for the largeness of China and the smallness of Singapore to Uncle. The house means more than a physical structure, it is hundreds of years of family and tradition that exist in China. The reference to root and fire ("nothing is extinguished") refers to the continuation of Chinese ness. Despite the fact that Cheng Ho was a eunuch, who had been

castrated, he explored larger worlds; his fire would not be in the propagation of a Chinese family, but in the exploration of worlds beyond China. He carried to these worlds a tradition, history, and culture which could not be extinguished.

Thumboo continues to describe his Uncle:

Post-astral, Uncle  
 Stoked his undernourished beard. Spoke to clouds,  
 Not people. The moon climbed roofs as he waited  
 For glow-worms to signify the darkening bamboos.  
 Communing with self, he was his favorite neighbor

Post-astral, according to Thumboo, refers to "a specific episode in the life of Li of the Iron Staff, one of the eight immortals. He was on one of his astral journeys when his body was mistaken as belonging to someone who was dead and therefore was disposed. When he returned, the only body that was available was that of a crippled beggar, which he took." Uncle's deep yearning to return to China, his thoughts that take him back is compared to Li's astral journey, which enabled him to travel, imaginatively, away from Singapore, even when he was physically there. The stroking of the beard refers to a spiritual and intellectual seeking, an external exemplification of an internal process. The immortality of Uncle's spirit is evident in his ability to continue on forever.

Thumboo describes how he used to learn from Uncle, who was studying English and read stories of the European expansion and subsequent humiliation of the Chinese. Thumboo was then studying about British colonialism and its effects. He learned about belonging to his heritage "in spirit" as well as by blood. According to Thumboo, Uncle was living in the "essential space" between one world and another (interview).

In the volume *Cultures in ASEAN in the Twenty First Century*, Thumboo states, "culture is probably the ultimate guardian of a nation". Thumboo's Uncle was fighting what he calls where "time is managed, condensed ... much of transient culture for the young, culture packaged for fast consumption, pushed. Mass media. Amoral, market driven, free from responsibility, and accountability" (xi). Indeed, this is the current dilemma of the American immigrant. In Thumboo's poem, Uncle inoculates himself from this globalization.

The world was hard language, felt daily, as heart,  
 And will, drop into soft releasing opium working  
 Up hungry lungs, as shadows flickered on the wall

The hard language is not only the new, physical language, but it is an internal language; the blood and water that do not mix. The line suggests the situation that the Uncle was in. The reality around was driven by the hard calculation of profit and loss, of commerce, the survival and prosperity of the family, the hassle and puzzle, the maneuvers, and applied strategies of trading. There were rules and accepted practices, within which you survived, prospered or lost, a game of commercial chess demanding focus, attention and all the skill provided by experience. That was the hard language which he refused to engage with, which encouraged the slipping into opium. It is felt, not always in a positive sense, but it is felt deeply. The opium in this passage does not have a completely negative connotation that it might have in our present day perceptions. At the time, opium was used for pain relief, like the anti-anxiety drugs of today. It provided a buffer of comfort in an alien land.

One can think of the *tias* and *tios* [aunts and uncles] of Latin American neighborhoods in the United States, only watching Univision and Telemundo television, going to the ethnic grocery, the Spanish speaking church, and the ethnic businesses in the neighborhood. Their perhaps idealized love of their home country resists Americanization, even with the changes that their nieces and nephews are going through.

Thumboo describes his Uncle's political and social role:

When Singapore fell to the Japanese in February 1942, Uncle had to lie low. His precious books had to be hidden away. Had the books been discovered by the Japanese secret police he would have been killed. Lau-ku junks sailed regularly between Singapore and Raiu Island. It was a route that had been used by retreating Australian troops to escape from Singapore, hoping to join the Dutch forces. That never materialized because the japans moved very swiftly. Lau-ku came under suspicion. One of the young workers who had taken an interest in my aunty-Engée-had been sacked. He reported Lau-ku to the Kempetai, who arrested him, tortured him. He died at their hands. (Interview)

Like the Japanese Secret Police that searched for Uncle's books, La Migra, or the Border Patrol in the United States is everywhere, deporting aliens. The fear causes more "retreat," solidifying the disunity, rather than making conditions better. Like Uncle's Mother, though, relatives in Mexico often feel that the United States is better off politically and economically, and, thus, many immigrants can not physically return for years.

Thumboo describes how his Uncle felt exiled:

He never knew our age in full; had no transplanted way  
 To name its joys, its follies. True exile, he denied our  
 Home, till life do us part, in '51, leaving companions  
 Marx, Engels, and Mao, Lu Shun, the Li Sao, T'ao Ch'ien

The political thinkers that are referred to in the poem represent the idealized vision that Uncle had China. Lu Shun, a famous revolutionary writer and considered one of the leaders of modern Chinese literature represents the span of Uncle's love of literature, from the ancient to the modern. "The Li Sao", or "The Lament," is a work of Chu Yuan, an ancient poet who was exiled by the King. Uncle, like Chu Yuan, was separated from his country that he so dearly loved. The T'ao Ch'ien, is, of course, the important spiritual treatise on the Tao, or the Way, representing balance and spiritual harmony for the Chinese.

Thumboo, in a published conversation with the premiere writer of the Philippines, Frankie Jose (F. Sionil Jose), calls national identity a "concept, a talisman, a mandala" (224). Although Thumboo can never really know how his Uncle felt, he can describe his tightrope walk between talismans, between the shifting sand mandalas of China and Singapore. Like immigrants to the United States, his Uncle was caught between the old and the new, holding his own psychic inheritances above the moving rivers and shifting identities of the diasporas.

Thumboo concludes the poem by stating:  
 When I am by you, river, I feel Uncle watching me.  
 I hear much from inside his spirit, his affirmations.  
 Old country stories re-surface, tell their tale.  
 That house I've never seen, tries to sketch itself.



The house is the stolid, age old China that Thumboo had not seen as a youth. The river is shifting, moving with a genetic and cultural current that Thumboo navigates and presents to the world as a scholar and a writer.

Today, Uncle may have integrated, as many immigrants do, retaining their essential souls and cultures, while fully participating in Singaporean or American culture. In Edwin Thumboo's soul and life, he exemplifies the melding and blending that is the potential for modern Singapore. As the premiere poet of Singapore he is, in a sense, the artistic, more modern version of the Uncle; for many aspiring poets, he is the country's literary uncle, one of Southeast Asia's literary Uncles, and, ultimately, one of the world's.

### Works Cited

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