

My Migrations – from Yangtze River to Fraser River

Gu Xiong

It has been 30 years since my immigration to Vancouver in Canada, a city by the Fraser River. Tomorrow, I will take a flight back to my hometown Chongqing, for my solo exhibition “Gu Xiong: Migrations,” which is about how I build up my cultural identity through my experience of migrations.

Airport is the place I keep entering and leaving each year. It has a gate that separates citizens from “the other.” After I walk out of the cabin and into the waiting area, I enter a new nation. The boundary between nations could be as narrow as a few steps. Yet this boundary, it could not cut off my thinking and memories, both of which expand beyond boundaries of nations and other sorts. As individuals cross all sorts of boundaries, all sorts of cultures and zones, they gradually build up and enrich their personal cultural identity.

On my first trip to Canada, all I had were a backpack and two suitcases. What I carried in the luggage was everything I owned in China from my first three decades of life, everything I relied upon to build a new life in Canada.

Nevertheless, my journey of migration doesn’t start in Canada. It started within China during the Cultural Revolution. After I graduated from junior middle school in 1971, I was sent down to countryside with millions of other urban youths in 1972, to receive re-education from the poor and lower-middle class peasants. “Roll in the mud, and practice a red heart.” Yet in reality, our passion and dreams of revolution were crushed in the countryside – the margin of reality. Every sent-down youth had to learn how to survive through labouring. My younger brother and I were sent down to Daba Mountain area in northeastern Sichuan, bordering on Shanxi province. Back then, Daba Mountain was a poor and desolate place. There was no roads or electricity. There wasn’t even radio reception in the mountains. We served at the Erlang Gully production team, under the Qingping People’s Commune in Xuan Han County. The village we lived at had a small population of around 200 and the households scattered on the mountains. We were assigned to live in a Chinese-style courtyard house with a few peasant families. It was the first time for the two of us to live away from home, so there was much to learn. Among others, we needed to learn how to burn barley straws to cook food. The mountain had already gone bare by the time we lived there, so fuels were scarce. We had to walk twenty or thirty kilometers of mountain roads to fetch firewood. Besides, farming was hard work. Everyday, we worked from sunrise to dusk. The deputy leader of our production team had a gong. He would beat the gong every day on the terraced fields, and shout either “time for work” or “end of work.” Among all, it was not the difficult living circumstances or the farming that I couldn’t bear; it was the empty mind and the bleak future. At the same time, I started to do sketches. During the day, I did sketches of the peasants. In the evening, I did sketches under the kerosene lamp, recording my memories and thoughts. Gradually, through the sketches, I found hope, and a genuine inner self. The worries and hopelessness towards the future was replaced by observation towards the environments, the people and things, as well as the growth of the self. This was the first time that art lifts me up from a low point in life.

During the four years of my countryside life, I filled more than twenty sketchbooks. Today, when I leaf through them, it feels as if they could bring me back to the old days, to my youthful days.

My first trip abroad was to Canada as an exchange artist. The Banff Centre for the Art selected me as an artist-in-residence for a year. I didn’t expect it, but it later proved to be a turning point in my life. Before the trip, my impression of Canada was limited to the Group of Seven and Norman Bethune. The latter I learned only through Mao’s essay “In Memory of Norman Bethune.” In 1975, the works of Group of Seven were on exhibition in Beijing and Shanghai. When I first read about the exhibition and saw photos of the paintings in newspaper, I came under their influence. I still remember the first time I saw the paintings of Lawren Harris. The blue sky and snowy mountains left a deep impression on me. Besides, the seven artists all have unique styles, which is something unseen in the art during the Cultural Revolution. At the time, the artistic standard was “Red, Bright and Shining”, “Tall, Big and Perfect.” I felt that I should become an artist like Lawren Harris, an artist with personal style.

I lived in Banff from September 1986 to October 1987. Banff National Park is a beautiful place. Yet for me back then, to live in Banff was like living in isolation. The language barrier led to me working in the studio all day long, focusing solely on my art works. Alvin Balkind, the chair of the Art Studio Department at Banff Centre gave me some advice. He said I should learn English and communicate more with other artists. In addition, he spent one hour teaching me English every day. The first time I saw Alvin, I said in broken English: “My English is poor.” He laughed and replied:

“My Chinese is poor, too.” It immediately drew me closer to him, made him feel like a friend. During my stay in Banff, there were 45 young artists from all over the world living and working there. Later, all of us went to New York to visit the museums and art galleries. My vision was broadened by the trip. Getting to see genuine works by the masters made an impact on me. All of these made me realize even more that I should do my own art. In the beautiful and isolating Banff, my idea of “enclosure” formed and I made a series of art works based on this concept. My art gradually grew from small-scale paintings to large murals, installation works and performance art. My year in Banff is the way to breakthrough in my art and life. By the end of it, I decided to return to China with what I had learned. Upon returning to China in 1987, unexpectedly, I went through cultural shock again in my own culture. That’s when I realized how much my trip to Banff had changed me. As an instructor at Sichuan Fine Art Institute, I decided to introduce installation and performance art into my classroom, expanding from the still life drawing and life model drawing. Students got to experience and participate in these contemporary art forms in my classes. The installation made by my students was put on display in the Museum of Sichuan Fine Art Institute. I also participated in contemporary art movements at the same time. Among others, I took part in the 1988 Southwest Art exhibition held in Chengdu, the November 1989 Chinese Modern Art Conference in Huang Shan, and the February 1989 China Avant-Garde Art exhibition held at the China National Museum of Fine Art in Beijing. My installation and performance art “Enclosure” – part of the group exhibition China Avant-Garde Art – was introduced in the English version of China Daily.

In 1989, Banff Centre for the Art invited me to be an artist-in-residence the second time. My journey of immigration thus started without my realization. When I was on board the plane, I looked outside the window; I saw how the plane took off and left the Yangtze River delta behind. My tears swarmed out, as it was also my parents, my wife, my daughter and my siblings who were left behind. I didn’t know when I would see them again.

The experience of immigration was far from romantic. The barriers of language and thinking patterns mean that I was confronted with a harsh reality. I decided not to use my art skills for a living. On the contrary, I worked low-paying jobs: car washing, making pizza and busing tables at a university cafeteria. I was struggling at the bottom of society, yet meanwhile I was experiencing life and culture of a different society. While striving to make a living, I persisted in making art. I used my art to portray my experience living in between two cultures, to search for a new space arising from the clash of these two cultures. The construction of cultural identity is made possible through the challenges of every day life, through changing myself, through learning about a new culture and reflecting on my own culture. It is a long process, a life-long process.

My art is record of my immigration. For the second time, it lifts me up from a low point in life, and allows me to rebuild myself. I feel that I finally become an independent person after the experience of immigration – with an ability to survive on my own and to think for myself. Being a contemporary artist in Canada is hard; one has to possess a genuine love for art and put much work into it. Only then, would it be possible to create original art works.

Looking back upon my experiences, I made a summary of what it takes to immigrate: Firstly, you must be courageous, don’t be nostalgic or hang onto the past. The past is irrelevant, and you have to start from scratch. Find your goals. Secondly, be open-minded, learn new things and promote understandings. If you reject the new culture, you are tying yourself down. The need for open-mindedness applies both to the immigrants and the local residents. Without it, there would be no merging of cultures. Lastly, do not give up on your ambitions. This is especially true for the first generation of immigrants, as they are most likely to give up on the career they had in the country they came from. In fact, the first generation of immigrants has the most to offer, as they bring with them values and culture of their home country. If the first generation of immigrants could merge into the new society, it would be the biggest encouragement their children could use. The inheritance and innovation of culture are achieved through the contributions of many generations. Cultural identity does not come out of idle talk. It comes out of unremitting persistence and the constant efforts made by an individual throughout years of adversity. It is forged by the conflicts, the clashes and crashes of two or more cultures; it is forged by the struggles of a person’s body and mind. It is not the extension of the original culture, nor a repetition of the strange new culture. It is what happens when a person is confronted put in purgatory but fights for a rebirth. It is a hybrid complex, yet it is more like a crystalline existence.

When I depart for Chongqing tomorrow, I carry with me my art works and thirty years of experience as an immigrant. The weight of these could no longer be borne by my two suitcases, nor would the borders or gates I will be crossing cut them off. For a person with a free mind, any place they’ve been to or lived in becomes a new home to them. The definition of home enriches and expands in their journey – the Four Seas are destined to be my home.

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