

UC Berkeley

UC Berkeley Previously Published Works

Title

The Enigma of Return

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2np133zq>

Author

Ong, A

Publication Date

2014-10-01

Peer reviewed

The Enigma of Return¹

Aihwa Ong

This summer, upon returning to Malaysia, where I was born, I was greeted pleasantly by immigration officers. I was surprised. Previously, former citizens, upon re-entry, could expect thinly veiled hostility for having left the country. Have Malaysian immigration authorities put into practice their motto of 'Malaysia, truly Asia', I wondered, by welcoming Asians of all shades, regardless of their citizenship? Things were different in the 1970s when I was a young (ethnic Chinese) Malaysian citizen attending university in New York. During my visits home, my stomach would churn as I approached the immigration counter. The display of my Malaysian passport did not deflect the barely concealed disdain of border officials. The resentment, perhaps, was of my privilege of having gone abroad for higher education. Class hostility was also tinged by ethnic and gender bias. In one startling reception, a customs officer searching my bags ripped open a box of Tampax and scattered tampons across his desk. To avoid possible vile encounters thereafter, I made sure to wear batik dresses and speak Malay when meeting immigration officials. Minimally, such performance of cultural citizenship, a token display to some ideal of nationalism, seemed to ease my transit through Malaysian airports, even after I became a US citizen in the early 1980s (Ong, 2003).

But on my most recent trip back, I was warned by relatives living abroad that ethnic Chinese returnees speaking Bahasa or wearing batik are more likely to incur scorn than smiles, and at the airport, a locally-born ethnic Chinese person acting 'foreign' may be more welcome than one acting 'Malaysian.' Immigration authorities seem to sift through a constellation of ethnic, legal, cultural and economic forces as they screen ethnic Chinese subjects for multiple associations, some desirable, others not. This politics of ethnic identification and performance at the arrival point induces disorientation in the former Chinese-Malaysian citizen who has to decipher and mirror the shifting perception and reception of the border guard.

As nodes of international passage, airports have a charismatic place in the semiotics of contemporary vertigo. Different accounts tap into a tension between a placeless cosmopolitan freedom of movement, or a site of national checkpoints through which identities are evaluated, vetted, or dismantled. Anthropologists give opposing views on airport arrivals and the experience of identity. Marc Auge (2001) paints a schematic picture of the modern traveller who, after moving through the anonymous 'non-space' of the airport, upon arrival regains his identity along with his luggage, and sense of

place. Ethnographic attention to specificity, however, reveals that for certain 'kinds' of persons, the airport arrival is the beginning of confusion or an unravelling of identity. Sara Friedman (2010) observes that mainland Chinese 'marital migrants' to Taiwan are interrogated by immigration officials as to the 'truth' of their claims. For travelers perceived to have ambiguous affiliations (for example where ethnicity blurs the link to citizenship), the immigration encounter dissolves identity into an enigma.

In postcolonial upheavals, multi-ethnic worlds created under colonialism were forcibly reshaped into the policed politics of new nationalisms. 'Ethnic' categories were re-constituted and incorporated as minority modes of national belonging. More than in other postcolonial countries, citizenship in Malaysia rests on maintaining a particular multi-racial composition, a set-up that still considers the diminishing Chinese minority as a political thorn in its side. In Malaysia, the national structure of feeling, favours, and fortunes is carefully calibrated to maintain and expand the demographic majority of ethnic Malays (*bumiputras*). The special status of Malay bumiputras makes Chinese, Indian and other racial minorities second-class citizens. Maintaining this ethnic ranking, the immigration regime screens the racial ratios of returns and arrivals. But compared to earlier forms of ethnic intimidation, today we find a slick, perhaps neoliberal style at play when it comes to managing the back and forth flows of Chinese persons.

What to make of the neutral or even cheery reception of previously disdained former citizens? Former citizens of Chinese ancestry once faced an icy welcome at Malaysian immigration counters, but a new calculation of political advantages shapes their welcome now. By emigrating, they are doing the country a favour, by reducing the size of the minority community, and they are welcomed back, not as visitors to a beloved homeland their ancestors played a major role in building, but as bringers of cash. Still judged as never Malaysian enough, the Chinese minority transmutes into a blur, between building a nation as citizens and building its economy as former citizens.

In these global times, Chinese ethnicity is glossed with wealth and recoded as potential human infrastructure for channeling resources. With China looming in the background as an economic giant, former hostility to returning citizens of Chinese ancestry has been supplanted by the welcoming of money associated with Chinese peoples (of various ethnicities and nationalities) from the world over. Next time I visit, I would be sure

to bring more dollars, and eschew Bahasa in favor of Mandarin. This intricate maneuver in flexible citizenship (Ong, 1999) illuminates the paradox that the impersonal and international style of airports does not banish the enactment of the personal and the particular required of travellers by immigration regimes.

As I rush through Asia's supermodern airports, I note that the Malaysian tourist map of 'truly Asia' is plaiting together ethnic and investment flows, and is not a political expression of genuine multiculturalism. This window dressing of Asian diversity shapes the ritual performance of ethnic citizenship in airports, while the ethnic belonging to the nation remains in doubt. Envisioning my next return home, I run through options for playing the 'truly Asian' game; brace for rejection or misidentifications; project a wealthy demeanor; or display the dubious identity of an overseas Chinese? It is the expectation of such historically-generated stereotypical rituals that strangely de-positions the returning person, thus extending her motion sickness into the existentialist realm.

Notes

- 1 I humbly invoke V.S. Naipaul's richly compelling novel, *The Enigma of Arrival* (1988). In this melancholy memoir, Naipaul ruminates on how the perceptions of the immigrant shape his sensitivity to new surroundings. The mysterious sense of self and belonging for the immigrant is further troubled by his love of a country that has been deeply transformed.
- 2 For a brief account of that fraught experience, see Ong (2003), xiii-xix.

References

Auge, M. (2001) 'Airports', in S. Pile and N Thrift (eds.), *Cities A-Z*, London: Routledge.

Friedman, S. (2010) 'Determining "Truth" at the Border: Immigration Interviews, Chinese Marital Migrants, and Taiwan's Sovereignty Dilemmas', *Citizenship Studies*, 14(2): 167-183.

Naipaul, V. S. (1988) *The Enigma of Arrival*, New York: Viking Press.

Ong, A. (1999) *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logic of Transnationality*, Durham: Duke University Press.

Ong, A. (2003) *Buddha is Hiding: Refugees, Citizenship, the New America*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

.....

