

Childhood memories, identity, and home in Kazuo Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans*

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Introduction

In Kazuo Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans*, Cynthia Wong asserts that one of the last scenes where Christopher Banks, the protagonist, finally meets his mother playing cards is a metaphor for the fate one has in life: "the individual is dealt cards—for good or ill—which founds an entire existence." She also points out that Christopher as an adult experiences a "mature bereavement and a push to move through an insufferable situation" (83). In a similar tragic vein, Ching-chih Wang in her study of the novel calls some of Ishiguro's protagonists "homeless strangers" in the title of her book and compares Christopher to Oedipus in his attempt to find his home and fight his destiny (73). The sense of inevitability and lack of control over one's destiny seems to permeate the novel. The relationships with others and the place one has in the history of one's country and the world surely does play a part that no individual can change at will despite Christopher's attempts to create a world of his own where good triumphs over evil. This rings true of his relationship with his best friend from childhood, Akira Yamashita, who can be seen as the catalyst behind Christopher's decision to return to Shanghai to rescue the parents he assumes are still being held hostage since the time of his separation from them.

Since much of the novel takes place in Shanghai in the early years of the 20th century, the appearance of Japanese characters like Akira is not surprising. Japan, like Great Britain, was an island nation with imperial ambitions that it was actively pursuing. Given also that Kazuo Ishiguro has set two earlier novels in Japan and he, himself, was born in Nagasaki but left Japan at an early age, provides an added dimension to this story of young friends growing up in a foreign land. Wai-Chew Sim in her study of Ishiguro describes the novel as one that "explores and articulates what transcultural or transnational fellow feeling might entail" (67). Christopher and Akira, two boys born in China but possessing British and Japanese nationalities respectively, grow up aware of their differences with the natives and indeed inhabit a foreign settlement shut off from their Chinese peers. In this paper, I will address the childhood memories of Christopher and the role of Akira in his life in *When We Were Orphans* and how their early lives in a foreign land affected their ideas of identity and home.

I. Foreign-born in a Foreign Land

As an adult, Christopher Banks, the protagonist of *When We Were Orphans* is a 20th century Sherlock Holmes, who has settled a number of cases that have established his career as a detective of some repute. Given a magnifying glass, a symbol of Sherlock Holmes, by his childhood friends in England, spurs his desire to be the quintessential English detective, complete with a quaint, Victorian-style apartment like his fictional hero. Christopher refers to his accomplishments with some pride, concentrating his efforts to fight evil in the world by solving crimes; however, Ishiguro does not go into any great detail about his cases and the reader is expected to take him at his word. The case of the most importance to him personally is that of the mysterious disappearances of his parents in Shanghai. These events necessitate his departure to England, the country of his parents but one that is unknown to him. His parents are both English but he was born and had spent his life thus far in China. Akira Yamashita, his childhood friend, is in a similar situation: born in and growing up in Shanghai but with Japanese parents. As children of powerful, imperialistic nations, they are taught by their parents to consider themselves English and Japanese respectively and they are kept at a distance

from the Chinese population. While Christopher and Akira possess different nationalities, their foreignness in China is the common ground that brings them together.

Both Christopher's parents and Akira's parents strive to keep them in the International settlement and they are not allowed to go beyond its boundaries. Christopher recalls being "absolutely forbidden to enter the Chinese areas of the city" and that Akira's parents were equally strict as "[o]ut there, we were told, lay all manner of ghastly diseases, filth, and evil men" (32). The one time that Christopher remembers traveling in a carriage along "the Soochow creek bordering the Chapei district... (I) had held my breath for fear the pestilence would come airborne across the narrow strip of water" (54). Akira, however, boasts about having secretly gone into the forbidden enclaves and Christopher recalls his description of the area:

There were no proper buildings, just shack upon shack built in great proximity to one another. It all looked, he claimed, much like the marketplace in Boone Road, except that whole families were to be found living in each 'stall'. There were, moreover, dead bodies piled up everywhere, flies buzzing all over them, and no one there thought anything of it. On one occasion, Akira had been strolling down a crowded alley and had seen a man—some powerful warlord, he supposed—being transported on a sedan chair, accompanied by a giant carrying a sword. The warlord was pointing to whomever he pleased and the giant would then proceed to lop his or her head off. (54)

The story may have some fact at least in the beginning but Christopher as a child believed every word, although Akira was clearly making the rest of it up to impress him. Descriptions like this, showed the way the children fantasized about the outside world as being fraught with violence, danger, and evil, and, although Christopher's mother shows amusement rather than fear about Akira's tales, Christopher chooses to believe his friend and feels angry with her for doubting the stories. Later, Christopher will find himself all alone in the Chinese streets, abandoned by his Uncle Philip but he is able to find his own way back to his home. Ironically, it is from that very home which should have been safe where his mother is abducted, and the man responsible is likely the powerful warlord Akira had described.

The insular worlds of the Banks and the Yamashitas contain elements of their home countries; despite being in a foreign land, they live as if they were "home." Ishiguro shows that both the Banks and the Yamashitas have brought their own cultures to China in their way of life. First, the Banks live in a house that was "a huge white edifice with numerous wings and trellised balconies" that had a "carefully tended 'English' lawn" and garden (51). This property, however, belongs to the company Christopher's father works for, Morganbrook and Byatt, and, as such, functions as the first place of residence for any new employee fresh out of England. These guests provide a chance for Christopher to meet up with young Englishmen who had the "air of the English lanes and meadows... or else the foggy streets of the Conan Doyle mysteries" so they were "figures to study closely and emulate" (52). Christopher gets a sense of what it means to be "English" from meeting these young men and reading fiction like *The Wind in the Willows* and *Ivanhoe*. On the other hand, while the Yamashitas' house was apparently built "by the same British firm" as the Banks', Christopher found most remarkable the "pair of 'replica' Japanese rooms" which were "small but uncluttered rooms with Japanese tatami mats fitted over the floors and paper panels fixed to the walls." Another interesting point that Christopher mentions is the doors to the rooms: that they were "especially curious" because the outer "Western" side were "oak-panelled with shining brass knobs" while the inner "Japanese" side was covered in "delicate paper with lacquer inlays" (72). The contrast between the external and internal in the doors seems to reflect the duality within Akira for he is a Japanese boy living in China growing up under the influence of Western ways. He has an English teacher, Mrs. Brown, and, although he makes mistakes in English with Christopher, calling him "old chip" rather than "old chap," Akira is "immensely proud of his position within his family as the expert English speaker" (52). In his relationship with Christopher, they communicate in English and Akira acquires some ideas of what it means to be English as well as Japanese. Home and identity for children like Christopher and Akira living in the International settlement is a unique blending of cultures, which makes them not entirely Japanese or English.

II. Foreigners Within the Home

Despite the efforts of the parents to keep their children away from the Chinese populace outside, both the Banks and the Yamashita employ Chinese servants. At the Banks home, Christopher mentions an *amah* named Mei Li who

functions as both a maid and a nanny. She oversees his studies and Christopher has some degree of respect for her. He sees her as benign except for a brief moment soon after his mother is abducted. When he returns home to find his mother gone, he perceives Mei Li to be laughing at first but actually she is merely crying. Akira, on the other hand, does not have a Chinese *amah* perhaps because he has Mrs. Brown instead; however, Akira tells Christopher “Japanese children don’t need an *amah* because they [are] ‘braver’ than Western children” (94). The Yamashitas also have Chinese servants but the only one described in detail is an old, male servant named Ling Tien towards whom Akira regards with fear. It is the adventure of the robbery of Ling Tien that has several repercussions on the lives of both boys.

Akira tells Christopher about Ling Tien’s “passion for hands” and what he had seen from the doorway of the old man’s room:

... [H]eaped upon the floor (were) the severed hands of men, women, children, apes. Another time late at night, Akira had spotted the servant carrying a basket into the house piled with the dismembered little arms of monkeys. We had always to be on our guard, Akira warned me. If we gave him the slightest opportunity, Ling Tien would not hesitate to cut off our hands. (91)

Given that Akira had also related a story of a warlord having his servant behead people in public, this story also seems a bit exaggerated and probably the product of Akira’s overactive imagination. When Christopher wonders why Ling Tien would want to have so many hands, Akira explains that the old man knew a way of turning the hands into spiders using a solution. Despite the terror that both boys feel toward the servant, their curiosity along with Akira’s desire to face the object of his fear compels them to sneak into his room when he is absent. To Akira’s disappointment and Christopher’s amusement, the old man’s room turns out to be far from the terrifying place of Akira’s fantasies and, in a desperate attempt to maintain the authenticity of his horrific story, Akira takes a bottle of lotion from the room before they can be discovered. He asserts that this solution turns hands into spiders but upon opening the bottle, they find some innocuous fluid that neither believes to be toxic but both pretend to believe in its magical properties in order to maintain the fantasy. Akira believes that this adventure has proven that he has conquered his fear of Ling Tien and he cannot stop himself from telling his older sister, Etsuko what they had done. Etsuko’s reaction is not what he had expected:

... [S]he had glared at him as though she expected him to curl over and die before her eyes. Then she had told Akira we had had the luckiest of escapes; that she personally had known of servants previously employed in the house who had dared to do what we had done, and who as a consequence had vanished—their remains discovered weeks later in some alley beyond the Settlement boundaries. (97)

It does not take much besides the authority of an older sister to scare Akira once again. The fear inspired by Etsuko’s story, however, is not one of the “other” or foreigner but instead seems to imply that Akira’s parents could have done something to their servants for their infractions. Parents in both the Banks and Yamashita homes appear to pose bigger threats to home and family than any Chinese servant can.

III. Where is One’s Home? (Part One: Japan)

Akira’s parents are prone to silence that make him uneasy. When he misbehaves, they do not scold him and he tells Christopher that “Mother and Father so very very disappointed.... So they stop talk.” Akira attributes his own parents’ behavior to his own failing: that “he had let down his Japanese blood” (73). Christopher reports this comment without giving any examples of how Akira may have let his parents down so the reader is left to surmise the causes. Christopher then describes how Akira attempts to explain his meaning:

... [H]e sat up and pointed to one of the slatted sun-blinds at that moment hanging partially down over a window. We children, he said, were the twine that kept the slats held together. A Japanese monk had once told him this. We often failed to realise it, but it was we children who bound not only a family, but the whole world together. If we did not do our part, the slats would fall and scatter over the floor. (73)

For such a young child, Akira seems to carry the weight of the world on his shoulders. This description is also reminiscent of Kurosawa’s film “Ran”, the Japanese version of Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, in which Lord Hidetora tells his sons that three arrows bound together are stronger than one arrow alone. The meaning could be of strength in numbers and the importance of having a sense of familial loyalty. This loyalty may extend to larger groups such as a race or a

nation.

The two boys, while friends, behave also as rivals, with Christopher representing Britain and Akira Japan. Although, at the beginning of their friendship, neither had been to their respective homelands, both take to defending them. Prior to being sent to Nagasaki for the first time, Akira begins to “endlessly harp on the achievements of the Japanese” in terms of “buildings in the business districts” and the “imminent arrival of another Japanese gunboat to the harbour” (78). Akira irritates Christopher by claiming that “Japan had become a ‘great, great country just like England’” and he even takes to question the manliness of Japanese men versus that of Englishmen in wondering “who cried the easiest.” He would then put Christopher into an arm-lock to see if he would cry or fight back. All of this talk has been brought about by the approach of Akira’s departure for Japan and his desire to believe what he had probably heard from his parents. He wants to believe that his life in Japan will be better than his life in Shanghai. Akira seems to be indulging in a fantasy to comfort himself just as he does later to comfort Christopher.

However, when Akira suddenly returns to Shanghai for a visit, which ends up being permanent for the foreseeable future, Christopher recalls Akira’s experience in Japan in the following way:

From his very first day in Japan, Akira had been thoroughly miserable. Although he never admitted this explicitly, I surmised that he had been mercilessly ostracised for his ‘foreignness’; his manners, his attitudes, his speech, a hundred other things had marked him out as different, and he had been taunted not just by his fellow pupils, but by his teachers and even—he hinted at this more than once—by the relatives in whose house he was staying. In the end, so profound was his unhappiness, his parents had been obliged to bring him home in the middle of a school term. (89)

By being born and growing up in a foreign country, Akira finds himself different from other Japanese children. Being of the same ethnicity could not erase the fact that his experiences were different and this made him a target for bullying. Akira’s unhappiness must have been extreme since his parents decided to return to Shanghai mainly for his sake as they “missed Japan badly” and his older sister, Etsuko, was “not at all averse to living in Japan.” He also “realised that he was alone in wishing the family to remain in Shanghai” and that he was what “prevented his parents packing their things and sailing for Nagasaki” (89).

Although Akira’s parents seem solicitous about their son’s feelings, Akira seems to live under the threat that if he does not behave properly, he would have to go back to Japan. Although he had worn Western clothes before his trip to Japan, upon his return to Shanghai, he wears a kimono. This outfit constricts his movements and he worries about tearing it, fearing that such a minor infraction may bring about the punishment of a return to Japan. Yet despite this fear, Akira chooses to take the bottle from Ling Tien’s room and becomes terrified from hearing his sister’s story. In addition, Christopher and Akira both leave their homes without permission to go to their favorite spot beside the canal where they agonize about what to do with the stolen bottle. At this point Akira and Christopher have the following conversation:

‘When parents find out... they’d be so angry. Then they not let us stay here. Then we all go to Japan.’

I still did not know what to say. Then staring at a boat going by, he murmured, ‘I don’t ever want to live in Japan.’

And because this was what I always said when he made this statement, I echoed, ‘And I don’t ever want to go to England.’ (98)

Akira has apparently voiced his distaste for living in Japan on other occasions, and Christopher seems to be simply, as he says, “echoing” Akira’s sentiments. But for Christopher, too, England is an unknown, foreign land which he only knows second-hand through his parents, the young men who stay at his home, and from fiction. His home in China is the only one he knows and his parents the only familial connection to England.

IV. Where is One’s Home? (Part Two: England)

When Christopher notices a marital rift between his parents by their silence towards each other, he seeks the advice of Akira, the friend whom he considers more “worldly” than himself. Akira responds based on his own experiences with his parents, telling Christopher that he was probably not “enough Englishman” (72). This brings to the fore the idea of what it means to be English. Akira’s response bothers Christopher to the point of him asking Uncle Philip, “How do you suppose one might become more English?” He believes that his lack of sufficient “Englishness” has caused the problem

between his parents since he believes in Akira's interpretation of the same kind of situation with his parents. Uncle Philip's comments do little to alleviate his fears:

... Well, it's true, out here, you're growing up with a lot of different sorts around you, Chinese, French, Germans, Americans, what have you. It'd be no wonder if you grew up a bit of a mongrel.... But that's no bad thing... I think that it would be no bad thing if boys like you all grew up with a bit of everything. We might treat each other a good deal better then. Be less of these wars for one thing.... (76)

Christopher, instead of finding comfort in these words, responds with the metaphor that Akira had used to him earlier regarding a twine tying a blind together breaking and the parts scattering as a result. After taking time to point out the potential benefits of having different foreign influences, Uncle Philip contradicts himself by saying that "People need to belong. To a nation, to a race. Otherwise, who knows what might happen? This civilisation of ours, perhaps it'll just collapse" (76-77). Belonging to something or somewhere and having a home gives a sense of wholeness and the lack of this can be problematic. The image of "collapsing" is presented in another childhood memory when Colonel Chamberlain, the man who escorts the newly orphaned Christopher back to England says to him:

My poor lad. First your father. Now your mother. Must feel like the whole world's collapsed around your ears. But we'll go to England tomorrow, the two of us. Your aunt's waiting for you there. So be brave. You'll soon pick up the pieces again. (25)

It is when Christopher finally goes to England for the first time that he realizes that he is different from other British children. Because he is an orphan, his only connection to England is an unknown aunt in Shropshire to whom he believes he is indebted to for his living. Osbourne, one of the students at the first school he attends, calls Christopher "an odd bird" and other classmates see him as a loner. He finds it difficult to assimilate and acclimate himself to his new life in England, mainly due to the sudden loss of his parents, the two key English people who were closest to him. To comfort himself, Christopher wanders around his aunt's home "during those first drizzly days in England", re-enacting the dramas he played with Akira of rescuing his father from the kidnappers, "muttering Akira's lines" for himself under his breath (112). He can only fantasize about reclaiming a home that he has lost through a reunion with his father. What has happened to his mother as well remains shrouded in secrecy to the end. Indeed, the Banks family even when they were living under the same roof had been divided all along.

One of Christopher's few recollections of his father relates to a moment of "boasting" which was what he considered unlike his ordinarily humble father. During dinner, his father makes it a point to mention repeatedly that his Chinese employees had complimented him as "an honoured hero" (82). In another incident, his father tell his wife loudly that "They know now I'm not one to back down" but his wife shows no interest or belief in her husband's rather defensive assertions of his courage. Their rocky marriage was caused in part to their disagreement about the morality of the company for which Christopher's father worked and his mother's objections to their role in the opium trade and its effect on the Chinese people. The very company to which the Banks owe their livelihood to is also responsible for the crippling effect of opium addiction on China that made it possible for countries like Britain and Japan to fulfill their imperial ambitions. It is on these grounds that Mrs. Banks objects and she becomes part of an anti-opium campaign, which is in effect going against her own interests. Christopher overhears an argument between his mother and a company health inspector in which his mother questions the morality of the British:

Are you not ashamed, sir? As a Christian, *as an Englishman*, as a man of scruples? Are you not ashamed of such a company? Tell me, how is your conscience able to rest while you owe your existence to such ungodly wealth? (66, italics mine)

Christopher admits to some ambiguity about this recollection as to whom his mother was addressing with such strong language; therefore he wonders whether the person to whom she expressed her outrage may have been his father instead. Mrs. Banks clearly has believes that honor is an essential part of being English and she feels horror that her country is involved in such shady, despicable dealings that are wreaking havoc on another country in order to control it. Her outrage drives her to also demand that her husband quit the company and that they all return to England. She desires a clean break from the company but does not realize the degree in which they are complicit and financially bound to the company. Christopher catches bits of the argument between them going on in his father's study. His father tells his wife in despair:

We can't do it, Diana. It'll be the ruin of us. I've looked at everything. We'll never get back to England. We can't raise enough. Without the firm, we're simply stranded.... I won't do it, Diana! My God, who do you take me for? It's beyond me, you hear? Beyond me! I can't do it. (86)

Christopher's father fails to live up to his mother's high expectations in regards to honor and the Banks family never returns to England together as their fates are deeply entwined with the company. In addition, as an adult, Christopher finally finds out that his father had not been faithful to his mother and instead had run off with another woman, leaving his mother vulnerable to being kidnapped. After the disappearance of her husband, Diana Banks admonishes in equally strong terms the actions of Chinese warlord, Wang Ku, to his face for betraying his own race and country and, as a consequence of her shaming him so publicly, she is forced into becoming his concubine. The final irony is that Christopher's schooling and charmed life as a successful detective in Britain has not been supported by his English aunt but by Wang Ku, the man who had humiliated and tortured his mother. Wai-Chew Sim points out the similarity between Christopher and Pip of Dickens' *Great Expectations*, as both young men's lives as English gentlemen are supported by criminals instead of genteel English ladies. Thus, Christopher's belief in his own Englishness and his view of London as home has been entirely made possible by a Chinese criminal and the self-sacrifice of his noble mother. Lastly, the man whom he asked how to be "more English" and whom he implicitly trusted—Uncle Philip—ends up being a villain, secretly lusting after Christopher's mother and in league with Wang Ku, allowing for her kidnapping, and taking vicarious pleasure in her humiliation. He discloses all these secrets to Christopher and he realizes that he has been living in a protective bubble his entire life; his fantasy of making a difference battling evil in the world as a famed detective is completely exposed and is as fictional as Sherlock Holmes. At the end, the middle-aged Christopher calls London his home but admits that he has moments of emptiness; he is still an orphan in a strange land.

Conclusion

After Christopher's ineffectual attempt to rescue his parents in Shanghai and spending time with a Japanese soldier whom he believes to be Akira, Christopher has a conversation with a Japanese colonel. Colonel Hasegawa describes England in a nostalgic way: 'England is a splendid country.... Calm, dignified. Beautiful green fields. I still dream of it. And your literature. Dickens, Thackeray. *Wuthering Heights*. I am especially fond of your Dickens' (276). This is the England that Christopher had imagined from his childhood. When the topic of Akira, Christopher's childhood friend comes up, the colonel describes childhood as something so far away and that "[o]ne of our Japanese poets, a court lady, many years ago, wrote of how sad this was. She wrote of how our childhood becomes like a foreign land once we've grown" (277). The idea of childhood as a "foreign land" draws a parallel between location and time—that the past and the present are distant and, as an adult, childhood is no longer familiar and exists in a different place. However, Christopher views Shanghai, his childhood home, quite differently. His response to the colonel is "it's hardly a foreign land to me. In many ways, it's where I've continued to live all my life" (277). This statement rings true as Christopher has lived in a world of fantasy of his own where dramas he enacted with Akira helped him to cope with the loneliness of his life and his lack of a spiritual home.

In *When We Were Orphans*, Kazuo Ishiguro shows the experiences of two young boys, Christopher and Akira, living in a foreign land and how this influences them both. It is not until they are forced to return to the native lands of their parents that they come to realize their differences with children who have never been outside of their homelands. They both undergo struggles with their identity and sense of belonging due to their foreign birth and upbringing, experiencing social isolation and loneliness. For them, the foreign land of China is the only home they know and once they are forced to leave it, they become orphans without a home because their parents' motherlands can never really be theirs. Childhood memories and fantasy are the coping mechanisms that both Christopher and Akira employ to accept their difficult situations. Christopher, the protagonist of the novel, says about his mistaken identification of a Japanese soldier, "I thought he was a friend of mine from my childhood. But now I'm not so certain. I'm beginning to see now, many things aren't as I supposed" (277). Christopher comes to see that life cannot be seen in simple absolutes such as good versus evil and that he must come to terms with the reality of the present. Akira and his comforting world of fantasies can serve him no longer. This realization sums up how childhood memory and assumptions about identity and

home are saddening and an inevitable part of adulthood.

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