

## CHAPTER FIVE

### FEELING AT HOME OUTSIDE

#### Embracing Out-of-Placeness in the Study of Law and Resistance

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床前明月光  
疑是地上霜  
舉頭望明月  
低頭思故鄉

Bright moonlight before my bed  
Seems like frost on the ground  
I lift my head to gaze at the moon  
As I lower my head, I yearn for home  
靜夜思 *Jing Ye Si* (Thoughts on a Quiet Night)  
李白 Li Bai

*Jing Ye Si* is probably one of the first poems that any child learning Mandarin Chinese will chant and one that they can recite by heart for the rest of their life. The verses are easy to read and roll off the tongue, one after another, in melodic cadence. English translations do disservice to the twenty words that elegantly capture the melancholy of the great Chinese poet Li Bai, his feeling of being out of place.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> I could not find a satisfactory translation and cobbled together parts of other translations, particularly one that several websites credit to a “Christopher Evan,” with my own modifications. Translating classical Chinese poems to English is a thorny task (or even to vernacular, contemporary Chinese), because single words or phrases in classical Chinese often embody complicated concepts or refer to entire historical events. It is also challenging to decide whether to translate the poem’s most superficial layer of meaning or its deeper layers. The former, a literal translation, leaves behind the embedded figurative meanings, which might contain political

My first exposure to *Jing Ye Si*, learning to recite it, and now (re) interpreting its beautiful verses and my initial encounter with it evoke many aspects of out of place – not feeling that I belong to a social group, or not being regarded as belonging, whether it was due to my ideas, or whom or what I might seem to represent. My being out of place is not a condition of being on one side of a binary vis-à-vis being in place. It slides in scales and shades, and shifts according to my relationships to things, locations, and people. Its one constant is that it is ever changing.

I have always been drawn to being, and have always been, out of place. As a child, I was educated as an outsider, grappling with unfamiliar languages as I moved through different school systems. In my teenage years at a Chinese independent school in Malaysia, I realized I was an ethnic minority living in a country with explicitly discriminatory racial policies. In graduate school, I was a “first generation” student, the first in my family to have attended college, and what’s more a PhD program. At home, constant rejection of my parents’ hopes and wishes pitched me against the traditional authority of the parent. I felt incredibly lonely, growing up with parents who love but do not know how to love me, and the expectation of convention to behave a certain way toward them.

My wariness of coercive state power as well as unquestioned, unquestionable authority of traditions and customs were intuitive, active long before I learned about structure, domination, or hegemony in university. From the struggles with language, ethnic identity, class, and parental authority, I also taught myself to embrace the ambiguities and contradictions of who I was becoming and would be. Looking back, I think these external and internal struggles also made me empathetic toward out-of-placeness and human agency in the face of power. With that empathy came a curiosity about resistance. I tried out different aspects of my out-of-placeness, and sometimes reshaped it, making choices and following my intuition that paved my own journey into academia.

Thus, choosing to *live* out-of-placeness, not simply manage it as a condition, inspires my scholarship and informs my study of law.

criticism or social commentary, whereas the latter approach may fail to convey the beauty of the superficial layer, which shows off the poet’s talent with words and rhythm, and skill at embedding the figurative in the literal. For this homemade translation, I settled for a superficial, literal translation.

I investigate law out of places – from the ground up, through fieldwork and empirical data – and try to understand people who are marginalized, seek belonging, and resist powers that try to put them in places that demean them. I have conducted ethnography on rights activism under and against authoritarian conditions in Singapore (Chua 2014) and Myanmar (Chua 2019), and I have recently begun to explore aging and the authority of family and state law. In Singapore, I found pragmatic resistance, nuanced challenges against legal power that sometimes play with, and other times play against, law itself. In Myanmar, I felt the intimate role of emotions in the manner by which activists made sense of human rights and used them to rally, organize, and claim for recognition and redress. Of late, I am poring over the love as well as hurt and manipulations in the intimate relationship between parent and child, and parsing through the power of family and state that purports to govern them as the parent ages and the child turns adult.

#### ROOTS OF OUT-OF-PLACENESS

I knew nothing of Li Bai's *Jing Ye Si* until I was seven and attended Primary One in my birthplace of Kuching on the Malaysian side of the world's third largest island, Borneo. This was where my out-of-place journey began. Unable to string together a sentence in Mandarin Chinese, much less a poem, I was immediately assigned to the "slow group." Unlike other children in the class who would have attended kindergarten in Mandarin Chinese before attending a public primary school that used Mandarin Chinese as the medium of instruction, I was an interloper from an English-speaking kindergarten, where I had also been out of place.

With a little luck, my parents had enrolled me in the kindergarten that catered to British expatriates, securing one of the few precious slots left for locals. They had worked hard to afford the high cost of tuition because they believed an early mastery of English would help me get ahead. But I could neither utter nor comprehend a word of English and started out, of course, as the dim-witted kid. At home, for the first four years of my life, I had conversed in Hokkien, a version slightly removed from other Hokkien diasporas, approximating the Minnanese in Taiwan and other variants across the South China Sea in Singapore and Penang. My father's ancestors had migrated from Fujian (Hokkien) province, China, and settled across Southeast Asia, at one point fleeing anti-Chinese purges on Sumatra Island. My mother's family, also laying

claim to Hokkien ancestry, were the sort of ethnically ambiguous folks who checked “Chinese” in the census box. Really, they were ethnic Chinese who had settled in Southeast Asia several generations ago and had a history of intermarriages with Malays and Europeans.

At the English-speaking kindergarten and the Mandarin Chinese primary school, even after picking up their dominant language, I could not stay in place. My parents did not win the ballot that gave locals the scarce opportunity to send their children to the English-speaking primary school affiliated with the kindergarten. That was how I ended up in the Mandarin Chinese public primary school. Six years later, they sent me to a Chinese independent secondary school (獨中), part of a network of community secondary schools set up by ethnic Chinese across Malaysia. Most of my primary school friends transitioned to public secondary schools where they took classes in Malay, the only language of instruction in the public system from Form One onward. I entered a new phase of life, the out-of-place girl, once again.<sup>2</sup>

Over the next six years, even though I made friends and found my footing, being an independent Chinese school student in Malaysia was to be out of place and to enact resistance by simply being so. The curriculum exuded almost an ethnocentric pride and adulation for an imagined cultural motherland. But it also heightened my sense of discrimination and marginalization. Probably from that time onward, I developed an acute awareness of overt and subtle forms of power and resistance. They were everywhere. The teachers spoke of racialized policies of the government, including university admissions, property, and employment, and we were urged to learn “our” “history” and “culture,” lest they perish quietly one day, their vitality slowly strangled, day by day, generation after generation. Looking back, I realized that students like me were steeped in everyday politics (Kerkvliet 2009) and asked to live out-of-placeness with resistance, not in open protest but in its everyday forms.

<sup>2</sup> In Malaysia, three kinds of primary schools in the public system, Primary One through Six, offer the same curriculum in three different languages: Malay, Mandarin Chinese, and Tamil. At the secondary school level, Form One to Form Six, all public schools teach in Malay only. Chinese independent schools offer six years of alternative secondary school education taught in Mandarin Chinese, culminating in a diploma that Malaysian public universities and government sectors refuse to recognize but universities elsewhere, including Singapore, the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand, have accepted as admissions qualifications.

At home, I was a child furiously insisting on stepping out of pace with her parents' hopes and aspirations. My parents had no opportunity to go to college. Their ambition was for my younger brother and me to earn college degrees that would help us advance economically in a world that they could only view as stacked against those who lacked the right paper qualifications, skin pigmentation, and spiritual persuasions. In me, they found an offspring who excelled academically but had little desire for a "practical" profession such as law, medicine, engineering, or accountancy. As I grew older, I saw the contradictions of our ambitions with sharpening clarity. I grew increasingly frustrated with the realization that they could never fathom my fears and desires, whereas I not only appreciated theirs but also understood their reasons and thoroughly disagreed with them. So, I lived in resistance against their suffocating love and incompatible dreams, their bundle of disappointment, squander, and might-have-been.

#### MOBILIZING GAY SINGAPORE: STEPPING OUT AS A SOCIO-LEGAL SCHOLAR

Contrary to *Jing Ye Si's* nostalgia, I wanted to yank myself from my birthplace. After finishing six years of secondary school, I left and did not look back to Kuching as my home. I studied journalism in the United States. I chose journalism probably because I love getting to know people and trying to understand their worlds and their world-views. But then the deadlines got to be too much. I had little time to sit down and think.

Eventually tired of chasing news stories, I decided to return to Southeast Asia to study law at the National University of Singapore. But I had no intention of practicing law, much to my parents' dismay. I saw no reason why I had to take up the profession for which I was supposedly trained, just because that was what most of my peers did. The more I read judicial opinions, scrutinized statutes, and thought about their implications, the more I wanted to expose myself to the workings and power of law.

In 2005, I wound up at the Jurisprudence & Social Policy (JSP) program at the University of California, Berkeley. I had no grand plan for an academic career. The choice was intuitive. JSP's approach to law stood out from other PhD law programs, such as Cambridge, Oxford, Harvard, and Yale, which many of my colleagues attended. At JSP,

I would learn to study law in a way that enabled me to investigate power and empathize with oppression and resistance.

At the same time, I also felt out of place at JSP. I assumed that most of my peers came from pedigree schools and had parents or family members who were academics or held advanced degrees. This was probably a wrong assumption. Surely, some of my peers felt just as out of place as I did. Nevertheless, I somehow formed the impression early in the first semester that everyone in my classes knew a lot more about our field of study and the whole business of being an academic, probably based on the confident way they critiqued the readings and discussed the authors. I was that doltish kid again.

Yet Berkeley was where I started to embrace being out of place. My reading of the giants in my field and newer works was unfiltered by preconceived ideas of what research ought to look like or how an academic career ought to develop. Passing remarks from two mentors were formative. "You know more than you think," said Catherine Albiston when I expressed anxiety about my seminar paper during the first semester of graduate school. "Lynette, you are in the zeitgeist," said Kristin Luker in her usual reassuring tone (I had no clue what she meant, but she made me feel great). These words helped me realize that being out of place was a gift.

Outside JSP, I was busily reshaping my appearance. After getting my first tattoo, I decided that I wanted more. I enjoyed the process, the sometimes painful, sometimes invigorating, sessions and the messy, inconvenient healing and scabbing of wounds. So, the tattoos came, one after another. Soon enough, I literally did not look like the same person who had entered Berkeley. When my parents saw me, they immediately worried that I would be rejected by respectable circles, let alone academia, despite their ongoing belief that I had thrown away the chance to be a lawyer to become "just a teacher." Whereas my parents reacted from a place of fear, I did what intuitively felt right to me. Soon, tattoos would become a significant part of conducting out-of-place fieldwork.

My ideas, unfiltered by how others think and how others think they ought to think about being a PhD student and a successful academic, made me fearless or, more likely, naïve. I picked a dissertation project that any savvy PhD student would shun for being too marginal – the gay rights movement in Singapore, a state known for its strict controls over activism, tight restrictions on civil-political freedoms, and conservative attitude toward homosexuality. I wanted to study how these

movement activists organize themselves, make claims under tough constraints, and whether and how rights matter to their efforts.

The project's inquiry makes it a classic law and society study, one that asks whether and how people make use of rights to achieve progressive social change. Nonetheless, the project was frequently treated as oddball. It focused on a society in which scholars might not expect a social movement around a tabooed issue. The typical response would be that there is little rights mobilization in Singapore, and there is nothing much to see, since the obvious answer is that rights and mobilization are suppressed. If you were to look for court litigation, a common site for the study of rights mobilization in the United States, you would agree. At the time of my study, the late 2000s, there was no constitutional challenge for gay rights, and, to date, no victory in the courts.<sup>3</sup>

The apparent absence of rights excited me. Rights mobilization and gay rights activism are out of place in Singapore. I did not start nor end at the courthouse. I searched for rights where they would have been experienced or put into action – by the very people struggling for belonging in their society. Intuitively, I was studying law out of place, doing what a socio-legal scholar should.

I interviewed 100 past and present activists and allies of the movement, some of them multiple times, observed their activities, and analyzed movement paraphernalia, media reports, and legal documents. I was not part of the movement, and I was not Singaporean. However, because I was Malaysian and had lived and studied in Singapore, neither was I a total stranger, a “Westerner.” I perceived that people were willing to go into detail about the Singaporean political context when they explained their actions or views, not because I was less of a threat, but because they thought I would better appreciate the political ins and outs. Few bothered to ask me about my sexuality (or gender, for that matter). I do not know why. Perhaps they presumed they already knew the answer. With my Berkeley credentials and tattoos, I probably looked safe enough not to be a right-wing infiltrator.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Several court challenges against the constitutionality of the law that criminalized same-sex relations between men have been filed since 2011, after my fieldwork for *Mobilizing Gay Singapore*. None of them has succeeded, and the highest court has upheld the law. I conducted a smaller ethnographic study and published an analysis on the first set of litigation: Chua (2017).

<sup>4</sup> For more details, see the appendix in Chua (2014).

Embracing the ambiguities and assumptions that stemmed from my being out of place, I welcomed whatever my interviewees were willing to share. I also paid attention to what might be missing or left out of their conversation. I watched and listened, and let my intuition about power and resistance guide me along with my formal training from Berkeley.

Although these activists did not always espouse rights openly, I noticed that rights formed an integral part of their motivation, hopes, and dreams. Rights emerged from and embodied their activism and responses to the authoritarian constraints. By toeing the line – written state law and its unofficial norms – and pushing the same boundaries, Singapore's gay rights activists engaged in a strategy of pragmatic resistance that enabled them to steer clear of state retaliation, carry out rights mobilization, and nudge forward their claims for gay rights. Having to come up with creative tactics just so that they could organize, gather, and speak out, that is, exercise basic civil-political freedoms to make substantive claims, suggests that rights remain largely aspirational. Rights mattered not as courtroom vindications, for those were yet to be attained. Rather, I found that rights lived in their movement as quiet motivation, pushing these activists to strive for the ultimate aims of rights – dignity, freedom, and equality.

Hence, rights mattered by producing snowballing, everyday effects for the movement. While socio-legal scholars had written about the individual, self-transformative aspect of rights, I showed that even in hard places, rights mobilization could bear collective implications. Singapore's gay rights activists imagined a brighter future as they turned to the aspirations behind rights to learn to accept themselves and reinterpret their relationships. Although they did not demand rights out loud, rights empowered them to take action, to question prevailing social institutions, and to band together. Drawn to an out-of-place movement, the out-of-place researcher in me identified the power of rights and the strength of human agency to forge resistance against the odds.

#### THE POLITICS OF LOVE IN MYANMAR: FINDING MY OWN PRACTICE OF SOCIO-LEGAL SCHOLARSHIP

Rereading the final chapter of *Mobilizing Gay Singapore*, I realized that my next project picked up a salient thread running through the former. *The Politics of Love* continues my exploration of law, power, and



resistance, but focuses much more intently on the intimate relationship between rights and the self, and its cumulative consequences for collective action.

*The Politics of Love* did not start out the way it ended up in final book form, an experience that many socio-legal scholars probably share. Being and desiring out of place can become wearisome. Trying to secure a university press for *Mobilizing Gay Singapore* was exhausting, not the least because some editors saw it as a book about an obscure movement in a tiny Asian country (i.e., not China). Moreover, my story about vibrant human agency was an unfamiliar one about Singapore, whose dominant Western narrative was that of an oppressive place with a strong economy and compliant population – Said’s Orientalism by another name.<sup>5</sup> Finally, Temple University Press’s Janet Francendese and series editors Janice Irvine and Regina Kunzel recognized the manuscript’s potential and took me on.

Fresh from signing the contract in 2012, the last thing I wanted to do was to pursue another out-of-place project. Around the same time, Myanmar’s transition from military to semi-civilian government was all over the news. I gave the ensuing academic chatter little heed because I could not imagine myself conducting research on anything related to Myanmar, an even more out-of-place proposition for me. I also did not plan on a second project on LGBT rights. I was fed up with queries from local reporters and the university’s corporate communications office on any legal issue that contained the word “sex,” such as sexual violence, sex work, and incest.

Then one day, I came across a news report about a celebration of International Day Against Homophobia (IDAHO) across five Burmese cities and towns.<sup>6</sup> The report mentioned that the organizers spoke about the violations of human rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people. My out-of-place intuition was tingled. Given the suppression of human rights and activism in Myanmar for decades, I was curious about how these organizers came into contact with and understood human rights. My training as a socio-legal scholar told me that their interpretations might not be the same as that of a legal scholar or international human rights activist from the Global

<sup>5</sup> Besides, other researchers have provided accounts of the use of law to achieve political control and social order in Singapore (see, e.g., Rajah 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Now this globally commemorated event on May 17 is known as International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia.

North. The IDAHO event looked coordinated and could not have popped up overnight simply because the country had supposedly liberalized. I suspected that something more far reaching was afoot.

As a self-described LGBT rights movement, this was a group of out-of-place people fighting to belong in a society that ranked heterosexual, cisgender men at the top of its hierarchy. Their efforts were also out of place in scholarship. Scholars of Myanmar mostly tended to study its constitutional law, civil-political liberties, (heterosexual, cisgender) women's rights, ethnic or religious minorities, land rights, or corporate and financial reforms. Sexual and gender minorities, and mobilization around their issues, received scant attention. Only a few scholars had written about *apwint*, often described as transgender women in Western parlance, or "spirit dancers" often mistakenly conflated with the former, and hardly anyone worked on rights mobilization by any sexual or gender minority group. In fact, this topic was considered to be so out of place that an old guard of Burmese legal studies lambasted my presentation in the early stages of my fieldwork. He opined that scholars should study "important" issues such as detention and forced labor, implying that sexual and gender minorities' concerns were insignificant.

The brusque retort startled but empowered me. With *The Politics of Love*, I would show that out-of-place, "insignificant" people can teach a lot about the ingenuities of human agency, and the strengths and deficiencies of rights mobilization. For nearly five years, I plunged headlong into fieldwork. Supported by two research assistants, I interviewed 125 former and current movement activists and allies, examined their movement documents, photographs, and videos, reviewed legal documents, and attended their workshops, meetings, and public events.

Even though *The Politics of Love*, too, focuses on rights and sexual and gender minorities, it is distinctive from *Mobilizing Gay Singapore*. The main plot in the Singapore text focuses on how activists overcame the repression of civil-political rights to mobilize and make claims, and, consequently, demonstrates how rights mattered in quiet, unobtrusive ways. The repression of rights activism is certainly a key element of *The Politics of Love*, but its storyline tracks how activists learned about human rights, adapted them, and cleverly used them to build a movement and make claims, in other words, how they practiced human rights.

The driving forces behind this group's human rights practice were emotions and relationships. People from far-flung locations connected with the movement and one another through ties of suffering and

political disaffection. They understood the meanings of human rights by feeling what it was like to endure the opposite: indignity and fear. Recasting their painful experiences as human rights violations, they transformed their self-identities, from feeling ashamed and afraid to feeling empowered and responsible for improving their circumstances. They cultivated an emotional fealty to human rights as they joined the movement and bonded as a community of solidarity known as LGBT rights activists. Through these emotions and affective bonds, a group of out-of-place people built a home in their hearts for what would have been an out-of-place discourse.

While conducting the fieldwork for *The Politics of Love*, I was even more aware of out-of-placeness, compared to my time spent with Singapore's gay rights movement. In the appendix to *The Politics of Love*, I reflected on my positionality, which most would describe as an "outsider" to Myanmar and the movement. However, the parameters of who is an outsider or an insider – like who is "out of place" in this book – are never entirely clear and always in relation to time, place, and other people. Usually, I was the outsider, clearly out of place in relation to Myanmar and the movement. Other times, maybe I was less out of place with the movement than Burmese who rejected sexual and gender minorities, or misunderstood their world. The activists spoke to me at length and shared their photographs and stories with me. I gave presentations on Singapore's gay rights movement, which the activists welcomed as useful information and lessons for their own endeavors. Maybe they also made assumptions about me based on my earlier research and my tattoos, just like their Singaporean counterparts had.<sup>7</sup> I also reflected on what it meant to be an insider. My two research assistants, a Karen Christian cisgender woman and a Burmese Chinese cisgender woman, live in a predominantly Burman Buddhist society. Does "insider" connote the same "in placeness" for a man who is

<sup>7</sup> One incident, however, vexed me for a while. After his interview, an ally of the movement repeatedly asked if he could come over to my lodgings to photograph my tattoos. After politely declining his self-invitation twice, I decided that this was definitely not a case of language or cross-cultural miscommunication. I flatly told him that I was unavailable, but tossed and turned for weeks. This interviewee was a highly connected person among human rights activists in Myanmar, and I worried that he would make the rest of the fieldwork difficult for me. Fortunately, that concern did not come to pass, and I continued to meet and talk to other people in the field.

cisgender and Burman – the dominant ethnic group – as it does for a woman, or an ethnic or religious minority?<sup>8</sup>

Being out of place but feeling comfortable with LGBT rights activists, I asked questions whose answers might have seemed obvious to an insider to the movement, such as the meanings of certain Burmese terms. The frank responses revealed why people who joined the movement could enthusiastically adopt “LGBT” identities – which human rights critics warned could sideline local cultures – while maintaining Burmese references to their sexual or gender subjectivities. The answer lay in the different feelings that they had for the different words, those associated with the human rights-based movement and those with social networks that they had maintained long before the movement. They moved fluidly in and out of these worlds with different emotional attachments.

Of course, these activists and their rights practices are fraught with human fallibilities. My out-of-place research assistants and I noticed that their movement was principally made up of Burmans and Buddhists, and dominated by those assigned the male gender at birth, whether they would identify as cisgender gay men, transgender women, or *apwint*. In spite of, and perhaps because of, the way they adapted human rights to gain emotional fealty and social belonging, they could not overcome and even perpetuated the faults and fault lines of sexuality, gender, and racism in Myanmar. Such findings would lend support to criticisms of human rights, but they also showed that human rights were far from achieving any hegemonic status. Instead, human rights were an additional discourse that Burmese LGBT rights activists had managed to inject with limited success into their political context.

When I was developing the book manuscript, self-doubt crept in every now and then. I was writing about out-of-place people, again, and compounding the challenges by daring to take emotions center stage. Legal scholars, sociologists, and anthropologists have studied emotions, but the segregation and denigration of emotions as irrational and difficult to study, compared to thoughts and actions, linger.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, reviewing my notes and data, I realized that the only story

<sup>8</sup> For more details on my fieldwork and reflections on my positionality, see the Appendix to *The Politics of Love*, and my responses to a series of commentaries on the book, Chua (2020).

<sup>9</sup> For more extensive discussion of the study of emotions in law and in social movements, see chapter 1 of *The Politics of Love*.

I wanted to tell with conviction was one where emotions belonged in the heart of rights mobilization. So, I took a deep breath and stepped out there.

## FILIAL RESPONSIBILITY, AGING, AND LAW

*The Politics of Love* transformed me. The fieldwork was draining, and it fueled me with boldness and passion in my research and writing. Writing *The Politics of Love* gave me the courage to confront the most intimate types of power and resistance, within the family and between parent and child.

For my third major project, currently ongoing, my starting point is parental maintenance laws enacted by governments in Taiwan, China, Singapore, and Vietnam. These laws require adult children to provide financial support, and, in some instances, emotional care, to their elderly parents. I want to find out whether and how parents would use these laws to sue their children.

At first, this project does not appear to be out of place, as it could be considered a rather conventional study of legal mobilization around a widely accepted concern for elderly care, a far cry from *Mobilizing Gay Singapore* and *The Politics of Love*. But I trusted my intuition, remembered my belief in studying law out of place, and let the fieldwork take me. And it did – to plural sources of power. What I call family power – patriarchal, filial responsibility norms in the guise of moral virtues – sometimes colluded with and sometimes contradicted state power in the arena of official law. The young and old, parent and child, participate in the everyday politics of family, living, resisting, and making what it means to be a parent and a child. These personhoods arise in relation to each other and to others, such as grandparents, grandchildren, siblings, and spouses, who are in enmeshed relationships with one another (Ingold 2011). Although scholars from a broad range of disciplines have explored aging, kinship, and filial responsibility, and legal scholars have considered parental maintenance laws, neither has approached the two together undergirded by questions of plural sources of power, everyday politics, and resistance.

The taken-for-granted, self-evident expectations of filial responsibility come to light in the hundreds of interviews I conducted with people from southeastern China, Taiwan, Vietnam, and Singapore, including judges, social workers, lawyers, village heads, and ordinary folks with little knowledge about parental maintenance laws. Children who defy

the overwhelming structures of family power are behaving in a manner that takes them out of place, deviants who have committed a great act of immorality. The norm to look after one's parents is so deeply rooted that interviewees often had difficulty explaining why it was critical or why they were adhering to it, and thought it was silly of me to even ask such a question. With parental maintenance laws, the state seeks to regulate out-of-place behavior. Meanwhile, like many other social orders, filial responsibility varies and changes with the relationships among people, and between them and things, creatures, and locations, notably, family structures, economies, governments, and population flows.

Journeying across seven cities and their surrounding areas for this project, I found that the sensation of being out of place was more nuanced than my previous experiences. The weight of filial responsibility could be so heavy that some interviewees started out cautious about what they really thought of their relationships with their parents or children. Maybe they worried about deviating from stereotypically exalted views, seeing that I was someone highly educated and thus supposedly possessing higher "moral" standards for filial responsibility. On my part, I held back my views of filial responsibility, careful not to fall out of place in the eyes of judges, elderly parents, and other guardians of "morality." For good measure, I wore long sleeves to cover up my tattoos. Between the interviewee and me, I detected passing moments of sussing each other out, before settling into a comfort zone of sharing the pain and joy of what it meant for them to be a parent or child or both.

The fieldwork is still unfolding, so I do not know exactly what kind of story I will tell in the end.<sup>10</sup> What I now know is that my out-of-placeness as a child seeded this intellectual curiosity. In the interviews and writings that I have collected, where others might see love, I see authority; what they might identify as morality, I discern as power; whom they might describe as immoral or disorderly, I feel for the differences in construction of personhood and empathize with resistant agency.

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<sup>10</sup> I have published an article inspired by the fieldwork thus far, "Interregna: Time, Law, and Resistance" (Chua 2021), but I am not sure where it fits in the overall, larger book project yet.

In *Jing Ye Si*, Li Bai was feeling out of place, because he longed for his hometown. Whenever I did visit Kuching, where I was born and raised, I would feel out of place. Or, maybe the provincial city seemed out of place in my present. The air tasted heavier, the buildings looked wearier, and my old schoolmates familiar strangers.

Growing up with out-of-placeness, I learned to recognize the human condition of feeling out of place, to embrace it when I encountered it, and to be curious about the power and resistance involved in its making. The desire to uncover oppression and to appreciate how people deal with coercion, from the most blatant to the most insidious, elusive forms, led me to socio-legal scholarship. Empathy and curiosity molded my approach to studying law, and I followed my intuition as I walked into the field, to understand law out of many places and human agency that rejoin and counter the out of place. Out-of-placeness threads through my research, the past, the present, and the unknown. Throughout this journey, I change as I travel to new lands and meet new people, and thus my out-of-placeness keeps on shifting its meanings and implications.

Maybe we are never fully in nor out of place, but always moving. Even as I continued to work on the filial responsibility project in 2020, the SARS-CoV-2 virus loomed, and would soon kill hundreds of thousands and fling billions of lives into disarray. Unable to travel for fieldwork, and, during two months of strict lockdown, forbidden from meeting anybody in person, I felt disjointed *and* stuck. Then a former colleague asked me to write a paper on law and the pandemic. Although I was initially reluctant because it seemed like an endeavor outside of my interests, I accepted the invitation. I was worried about the virus. But I was also terrified by the force of law and deployment of surveillance technologies to control its spread, and saddened by the disparities and inequalities, and by seeing how marginalized communities were disproportionately affected by the pandemic as well as its control measures. I started a new project, “Governing through Contagion,” to explore the patterns of out-of-placeness that both contagion and the strategies of control would reveal and exacerbate.<sup>11</sup>

Maybe our scholarship and its place in our lives will never be the same after the pandemic. Contagions have upended and continue to

<sup>11</sup> “Governing through Contagion” is still in the early stages of development, but I have since written a paper with a coauthor setting out the preliminary theoretical framework (Chua and Lee 2021).

upend human lives. Even as vaccines against SARS-CoV-2 became available at the time of writing this chapter, far more contagious strands were making their ways from continent to continent. What I do know is that I will continue to be an out-of-place scholar, to understand what it means to live law out of place and to give those who are out of place their own rooms in our writings.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Marc Galanter wrote an article entitled, "Justice in Many Rooms" (1981).