



Banana or Egg?

Where are you from?

Georges M. Halpern, MD, DSc
with Yves P. Huin



I have spent more than half of my life working in Asia, based in Hong Kong. It probably modified my genome; it definitely changed (for the better) my gut microbiota. But both my genome and my gut microbiome did also change my mind, my emotions, my *weltanschauung* – possibly my culture.

About eight years ago, a close friend, Hongkonger but who spent much time studying in Europe, told me: *“I could have become a banana, but you are now an egg”*. I should have looked puzzled, and he charitably explained: *Asians who morph into Westerners are yellow outside and white inside –like a banana. But you are white outside and yellow inside like an egg*. He might have exaggerated, but I know that there is some truth in this diagnosis.

Which brings me to a question: *Where do we belong?* Most people will immediately have a complete, complex answer: citizenship, location, family history, place of graduation, etc. I am not sure; in fact, I never knew, and –for me- it does not matter. Yes, I belong to a family: the one of my parents, and the one I created with my wife Emiko Oguiss. But that’s about it. This absence of roots has created many problems along the years, but I am not –initially- responsible for this geographical and cultural ‘homelessness’.

The (Mid)Western Story

I was raised in France, and my mind was fed with an aspiration to universality that transcends space and time. I learned that Plato taught that true knowledge rose above geography and our earth itself: everything our senses (sight, touch, etc.) delivers is an imperfect copy of forms that are timeless, placeless, eternal, unchanging. Plato does not pinpoint exactly what these forms are, but they reflect an ideal of knowledge that belongs to no land and culture.

Then Christianity adopted/adapted much of these in its quest for universality: religion was not any more national or tribal. *Canaan* promised to Isaac (and the Israelites) became the Kingdom of God for the family of Man.

Besides the strictly religious aspects, recent philosophers e.g. Bertrand Russell promoted a world government to transcend the nationalism that led to bloody war



after bloody war.

Universalism had also an ugly side: in the name of the *only* truth, Christian troops (under the banner and the blessing of the Church) conquered, enslaved or slaughtered those who were not of the *only true* faith; the warm universal embrace morphed into crushing, hegemonic iron grip –and the Inquisition.

Its ‘child’, Western philosophy, emerged with its narrow particular history and culture, ignoring (or denying any value to) Indian, Chinese, Islamic and African philosophy ‘*without any qualification*’ (Jay L. Garfield & Bryan W. van Norden), calling what is taught in Europe and North America *universal* –instead of European and American Philosophy.

It also shows the innumerable(s) obstacles to transcend nationality. We are first and foremost citizens of (parts of) the world; our local and global identities were and remain built on a myriad of daily details –with few differences with the people around us. We need as much common ground and purpose as possible, while somewhere is *home* and it helps to visit the homes of others *and* welcoming them in ours.

All our identities are multiple. We are (and should be) both citizens of our town or village, region, country *and* the whole world (and soon beyond).

The (Far) Eastern Teaching

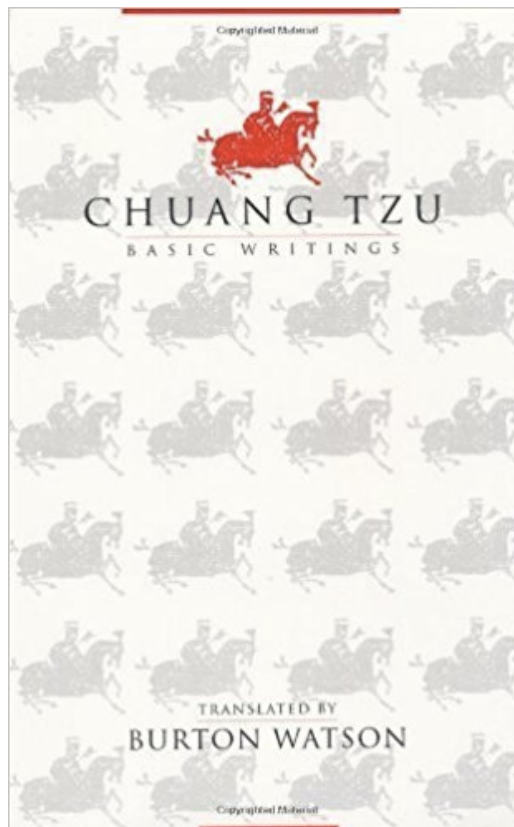
Contrast this Western (highly prevalent) view –e.g. United Nations, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, etc.- with the Eastern (mostly Chinese initially) one. In the East, our sense of national identity and of belonging are two sides of the same coin: we have both cultural and moral values that developed through our experience of our homeland(s). We, human beings, are social animals who form families, clans, communities, and eventually countries according to kinships, customs, traditions, creeds and ethics. These bonds create an identity that strengthens social cohesion, and isolating one group from another: we are (possibly) different, but **not** superior or discriminatory.

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Sweeping immigration restrictions, that propagate like modern Black Plague, isolate us. But recent immigrants in the US have developed an Americanness that strengthens their sense of camaraderie.

In the Daoist worldview (e.g. in *The Writings of Chuang Tzu*) '*Heaven, Earth and I were produced together, and all things and I are one*'. And in Buddhism '*all things can become enlightened*', with emphasis on the personal practice of mindfulness.



Global citizenship remains a distant ideal. All people are sharing the same planet (and can donate/receive organs): we have *a lot* in common. But that common ground and DNA are not firm enough to bind us together. Only if H.G. Wells' prediction –as described in *The War of Worlds*- becomes real might we see its citizens think and act as one.

The TCKs

Then last month I had to work at the Global Chef Academy *At-Sunrice* in Singapore, and I flew on Cathay Pacific. The October issue of the in-flight magazine *Discovery* center articles devoted to the *Identity* charade. One major article deals with multicultural youths educated in a proper environment, The TCKs. The following paragraph is very much issued from the article (referenced) by Adam White.

There are about 244 million Third Culture Kids. A TCK is a person who has spent a significant portion of his/her developmental years living outside the culture of his/her parents. TCKs grow up neither a part of their parents' culture nor a part of the culture they're living in. And so, a third culture springs up around the other two: a unique identity.

The term was coined by anthropologists John and Ruth Hill Useem in the 1950s, originally used to describe the children of American expatriates in India. It's a broad term covering everything from military brats to the children of missionaries, diplomats, business people and places like Hong Kong's own cultural mix. The best known TCK could well be Barack Obama, son of a Kenyan father and an American mother, who spent his childhood between Indonesia and Hawaii.



But TCKs are (much) more than a definition, or a category, or even a (past) President: they're a trend. A 2016 UN global population study found that the number of international migrants (i.e. living in a country other than where they were born) hit 244 million; in fact, their number has grown faster than the global population. We move faster than ever around the planet!

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What proportion of these 244 million are TCKs? It's hard to say; the number covers expats, refugees and immigrants alike. The lines are far blurrier than they used to be. In today's world immigrants go back and forth. They're having a more TCK life than the previous generations because they have more access. TCKs are born when people move to a new country.

What do TCKs look like? There is no standard, but there are a few elements many do share. TCKs are socially adaptable, more able to think outside the box and understand different points of view –essential skills allowing to thrive in new surroundings. They are often power players, highly educated and professionally successful. The TCKs are most at home in big cities where they're likely to find others with the same experiences. Homogeneity doesn't sit well with them. It feels regressive, a step backwards into a world they've moved beyond. TCKs share commonalities of experience with each other, not pop culture references. They recall similar travels, upbringing, people-and they always crave the food of the country they're not in!

TCKs have this elemental shared emotional space of what it means to move between countries and it transcends their cultural differences. I speak to audiences with 40, 60, 70 nationalities. I can't translate it culturally. But if you talk about the human heart, and what it feels like to not be known, to be the stranger, to say goodbye to a place you love –those things are human experiences. This experience transcends the traditional ways we name people.

There's a think piece or blog post that resides inside every TCK, and it runs along the following lines: What defines me? Where do I belong? Where are my roots? Can I *truly* say I have a *home*? I do not –yet- have the answers, but in one of the following paragraphs I'll try to address some of these queries.

What's next for the Third Culture Kid? Global domination, with luck. Technology and affordable travel mean we're living in a world that's continually getting smaller, and our flexibility and multiculturalism is an increasing asset. But the truth is that the last year or so, the world seems to have turned against our kind. I thought we were all –young and aging- swiftly careening towards a globalized, multicultural future; but the planet seems to have had other ideas. The rise of Donald J. Trump, of Brexit, of nationalist sentiment across the world: Turkey, the Philippines, Indonesia, Eastern Europe, came as a shock. It feels like a slap in the face.



Where Are WE From?

My family history was crafted by centuries of persecutions, wars, discrimination, famines, exiles, rapes and worse. Resilience and solidarity, literacy with respect and passionate love for knowledge, ingenuity and awareness, a visceral instinct of survival made us who –ultimately- we are.

It is difficult to sort the facts, the real truth after all those events: I had to grab mostly debris and slag of oral relations with their embellishments, selected half-truths, and truckloads of willingly forgotten sins. That's what I remember; much I also shed or buried.

My father was born on November 2nd, 1904 in Tarnoruda, a small community of Eastern Galicia, part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. After being the border town split in two between Poland and Russia (his house fell on the Polish side), then the Soviet Union, and now Ukraine, this small town was populated by uniates (Eastern-rite Catholics) and Ashkenazim Jews –my father's group. The 2 communities coexisted quite well; but hard times fell on the Jews quite regularly when the hordes of Asian horsemen unpaid by the bankrupt czars were sent to plunder the *shtetls* of the Western borders. They came and raped most women; the husbands were instructed to welcome the resulting offsprings, and raise them as good, faithful members of the family and the שול. Hence, I was told that we were –and are- quite Asians genetically; this was confirmed when my genome was carefully analyzed recently.

Life was tough in Tarnoruda. My grandparents grew corn (maize) and used the family's feces as fertilizer. My grandfather was very observant, muttering the multiple daily prayers while leaving all the tasks to his wig-wearing wife.

But education was critical and comprehensive. All the children could read and recite at a young age the prayers, much of the Torah; were fluent in Yiddish, Hebrew, German, Polish, Ukrainian and Russian. On top of that, my father studied with the local Uniate priest and, at age 10, was fluent in Latin and Greek; he mastered the writing of Hebrew, Cyrillic, Greek and Latin idioms. His brothers and sister were also multilingual (although they skipped the Uniate long hours).

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*The house in which my father was born, and
spent his childhood*



My father's parents in their corn plot

That multifaceted education did not square or fare well with the strict Hassidic credo of home. In his early teens, Bernard read about Louis Pasteur: here was his hero, his model, his inspiration; his words "*Guérir parfois, soulager parfois, écouter toujours*" became his –and until his last breath (that I attended at the Hôpital Cochin, watching on the scope the myocardial infarct grind his heart) he recited them.

There was no hope for him in Tarnoruda; he had to flee, and escaping only meant France, the homeland of Pasteur.

During the summer of 1921, the railroad running towards sunset was crowded by a procession of carriages taking home the German soldiers exchanged for Russians, after the 1918 armistice. These train were slow, and stopped often. Bernard, with no baggage, jumped in the train, a hobo precursor: *Go West young man*.

His father cursed and banished his name and existence from his and the family's memory. Bernard was on his own with one target: Paris where he would be a medical doctor. It was much tougher than he had ever imagined, but he ultimately succeeded.

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My father's family, with Philip's 2 older children (Rhoda, seated front, and Jack)

On this photograph taken in late 1925, my father is standing at the far left; his brother Philip is holding in his arms Jack, the Louis Block Distinguished Service Professor of Chemistry at the University of Chicago. The photo above marked the ONLY time my father was pardoned to go back to his hometown; he sensed that this was it.

The rest of his Odyssey is as long as Homer's poem –maybe longer! –, but his genes are now half of mine.

My mother was born in Warsaw, Poland on September 9th, 1909 in a well-to-do secular Jewish family; their large bourgeois house was located on the border, but still in the (mostly) Jewish part of the city (that was to be enclosed in the 'Ghetto of Warsaw'). She had a German governess and became fluent in that language at a young age.

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My mother's parents' house in 1944

But, at heart, she was an artist who excelled in colorful compositions. Her irresistible goal was to go to the magnetic pole of arts: Paris, France. She managed –from far away- to be admitted to ‘Arts Décos’ (the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs), on the Rue de Rivoli, inserted in the Louvre Palace. And she went. Alone, without any contact, trusting the School for her fate.

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Renée Halpern in 1946

Paris was –then still– welcoming foreign students who tended to aggregate on weekends according to their country of origin. My parents met through common friends, went to the beach on weekends, fell in love, and married.



My parents (center and right) on the beach in Deauville (1933)

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They lost a first son at a very young age of ‘green diarrhea’ (toxigenic *E. coli* infection), and were struggling to make ends meet. When my mother became pregnant again (I was in the works!), her father summoned her to Warsaw where he could pay for the best care, doctors, clinic, etc. and I was born there on September 7th, 1935, with a French citizenship that was the result of ‘*Chance and Necessity*’ (Jacques Monod).

But **our** (by now) story does not end then and there: I met Emiko Oguiss in Paris in 1969 where she was wearing –at age 23! - many hats: graduate student in linguistics at the Vincennes University, manager of a major art gallery, and translator in Japanese to French and vice-versa. She was born near Tokyo on February 26, 1946, in a country razed by the war, and followed her mother to Tokyo that had been burnt to the ground, with >100,000 of its inhabitants killed while injuring >1 million more, on the *Night of the Black Snow* (9-10 March 1945), by 334 B-29 US bombers directed by Curtis LeMay.

Her father, Takanori Oguiss (1901- 1986), who became the most important Japanese painter of the 20th century, the only one to be declared a “national living treasure” by the Emperor, had moved to Paris, penniless in 1927, only to be sent back to Japan by the racist Vichy regime in 1941. He met and married Miyoko Yokoe there; they got married during one of the many alerts, and there was their only child, my future wife. Oguiss (as he was called and is known) was the first Japanese subject to be issued a visa and returned to Paris in 1948. Miyoko and Emiko boarded “La Marseillaise”, a steamer that took weeks to reach Marseille, in 1950, to have the family reunited in the Paris’ artist studio. Emiko studied in Paris, with most summers in Japan after the jet age.

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Emilie, Georges & Emiko (Summer 2015)



Emiko & Emmanuelle in a Japanese restaurant (2017)

We were already TCKs –and the world was not friendly for our kin. We managed to survive, then strive, tanning our skin into hide (even leather), knowing that the dogs were barking at our passing, majestic caravan.

We are the luckiest parents of two beautiful, talented, successful TCKs; themselves proud mothers of (altogether 4) TCKs. The healthy trend continues.

The TCKs' multicultural outlook is a tool that brings us closer together, no matter how divided the world might seem. The more we know our own story, the more we can use it to connect to people.

After all, the only reason TCKs exist is because, at some point in their life, our parents made the choice to explore. To leave the comfortable slice of life they called home. They made new homes for themselves, and they spliced a new way of seeing the world into our DNA. We were forged as third culture kids –and we forged our own children as such. We are inclusive, open, accepting. We span the globe. The rest of the world is just playing catch up.



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I mentioned my main sources in the 'References'; I must also acknowledge Wikipedia, the indispensable source of information.

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